

Education in Vietnam

HUYNH THANH TRIEU

Vice President
Ho Chi Minh City University of Pedagogy

Born in May 10 – 1953 in Ca Mau (Vietnam)
Graduate studies in Pyatigorsk Institute of Foreign Languages (French and Russian) – Russia
DEA and Ph.D in University of Rouen – France
Thesis : *The syntax complexity of french*
From 1977 to 2001: Teacher of French Department
From 2001 to 2004 : Director of French Department
Since 2005: Vice President of HCM city of Pedagogy



Summary

The so-called principle compelling « thousands of people must think as one person » inclines to oblige the community to unconditionally obey and practice the principle. In the domain of education and pedagogy, the establishment of and respect for such a sole standard does not always bring about positive results, especially when this standardized principle is to be used for a long time. Just because both education and pedagogy imply creation, and science never remains unchanged.

Encouraged by public opinion, the officials responsible for education in Vietnam are concentrating their efforts on examining the working process that has been practiced so far in their country. These efforts aim to achieve changes for an active and effective educational system.

To obtain the required results, it is important for the Vietnamese to determine the difference between the national tradition and scientific thinking. In other words, they have to decide which things are to be left off and those to be preserved.

National spirit and the love of one's nation are invaluable. Indeed, they are factors pushing ahead the progress of the community. In science, it seems that the thinking power unlimited while practice is always necessary. They permit humans to accurately know better the world around them in order to take appropriate measures to deal with problems it could arise.

I sincerely think that a pilot-project of educational system should embrace the above-said two factors.

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In 1986, eleven years after the end of the Vietnam War and unification, the “Doimoi Policy” proposed by the communist party triggered the economic development period.

In parallel with the liberalization that occurred in industry and commerce, Vietnamese education also gradually gained self jurisdiction. First, this manifested itself in the appearance of private schools that could operate with essentially independent planning of finances. Underlying the advent of private schools was the objective of transferring a portion of the burden for the educational mission that had been imposed on public schools to the private sector reducing state expenditure for educational activities.

However, I believe that independence from this financial perspective was possibly the only change in the basic level of education which was seen for several years following the beginning of reforms. As in the past, all other activities had to adhere to rules and regulations established by the Education and Training Ministry. In particular education programs and hours had to comply with Education and Training Ministry rules and regulations. For a long time (right to the present), the education program from elementary through secondary education, was not reformed, and was mandatory in spite of its criticism being excessively burdensome to students. This was an environment where teachers could not pursue personal interests or exercise individuality. This was because education rules and regulations were established based on standard teaching materials and training. Within the context of international exchanges progressing, it has become evident that Vietnamese education is very different compared with the education of other countries. Further, there are calls from everywhere within Vietnamese education to “Since it has existed since antiquity, let’s change what is not producing the desired results.” This is, however, no simple matter.

Vietnamese history is extraordinary being classified according to the countless wars over thousands of years. Even in modern times, 1975 was not only the end of the American invasion but the end of two eras of domination that had continued for 120 years. These eras of domination were triggered by the French colonial system.

It is said the war left posterity with (nothing but) the excessive destruction of people and property, and extensive impact on the national economy. And, the post war effect on the psyche and psychology of people has also been mentioned. However, not much is said about the influence of war-time ideology on the re-design and reconstruction of the nation. I feel that to a certain extent this case is applicable to Vietnamese society.

The solidarity of ethnic groups was a decisive factor during the war. The philosophy was “Without solidarity of ethnic groups there is no victory.” The longer the war continued, the more people had to align their way of living and thinking with this philosophy. The principle of “ten thousand as one” over thousands of years has given the Vietnamese the power to be victorious in repeated wars with their enemies. At the same time, as if according to some principle, even with war’s end Vietnamese can not readily accept individuality or independence with the passage of time serving only to steel this ideology in the hearts of Vietnamese. For several decades following the war, it was presumed that solemnly protecting the common rules and regulations in Vietnamese educational activities was the ideal behavior of educators and leaders. And, somehow even when concerns arose as to the inadequacy of the educational systems, these were presented conservatively and with caution. This may be that Vietnamese do not have confidence in the validity of their opinions, or it may be that they do not want to be responsible for disrupting the harmony in an established structure. This phenomenon is not only seen in elementary and secondary school education, but also in university education. This is the reason that Vietnamese education has for a long time lacked required flexibility and has been unrealistic.

It is important to understand that rigidity in education is in no way an innocuous quality. Rather, that calcification is detrimental to the development of the community. Education must be inextricably tied to life. Education must guide the intellectual activities of ethnic groups, spur science and technology progress, and as such must possess predicative functionality. It can be said that “if life changes, then education must also change.” And, it can also be said that “education changes to transform life.” If education does not reflect the requirements of life in a particular era, then education has not adequately fulfilled its stated mission, and thus, quite simply, becomes the cause of stagnation (in society).

The contradiction in education between tradition and flexibility is, I believe, regardless of the form assumed, a problem for society, all countries and all cultures. From several thousand years ago education was already an attempt at harmony between old and new. That is, it could be said that this is already a topic of old. However, I feel that this contradiction in Vietnamese education is serious, and that solutions that are applicable should be employed to abolish these. In a world where science and technology development is progressing rapidly, and where belated response to globalization is heavily penalized, problems are ever pressing.

Vietnamese teachers, who have had access to advanced education with the opportunity to further understanding (education) and all educational administrators even now, exhibit apprehension about the activity format that must be practiced daily. This is because they feel these kinds of activities do not always deliver the expected results and, they are acutely aware of having fallen behind compared to colleagues in other countries. Every time they recall that they hold in their hands the generation responsible for the future of the nation, the apprehension mentioned a moment ago looms large. Against this backdrop, those that put their hearts and souls into education have adopted a policy of working hard at educational activities that produce the greatest results. On the other hand, where rules and regulations for education are inflexible and alternative methods are not permitted, we jointly decided "to patiently wait for the right opportunity." That is, in Vietnam once an educational issue has been officially taken up, the whole of society develops an interest, and it is investigated and solutions are sought.

Fortunately, along with proactive stance from foreign countries, in Vietnam democracy is gradually increasing. And through these, people involved in education and otherwise are enthusiastically joining the debate on education. In recent years in Vietnam the mass media has become a forum for debate for all people that have an interest in educational issues. It is possible to get the views of university professors and researchers, educational leaders, teachers, sociologist, educational administrators, guardians, and students in this forum. Further, it is also possible to get the views of foreign researchers and experts who, through observing the Doimoi period in Vietnam, decided that they would like to contribute to the development of education in this country in this forum. Issues most discussed include reducing the load of regular educational programs, increasing elective subjects, innovation of teaching method, practical application of teaching content, independent thought, mental stimulation, respect for individuality of learners, elimination of emphasis on the score malaise, simplification of evaluation examination regulations, and change in the way students are accepted into university. During this time the newly appointed minister for Education and Training was inundated with suggestions from people-opinions of the general masses-wanting to contribute to the establishment of education that was active, effective, and aligned to the developmental needs of the nations, and seeking to make proposals to this end.

Interestingly, when radical reform was required in a field that is extremely important to the nation, Vietnamese displayed an incredible conformity-"ten thousand as one." However, conformity in this case does not imply the kind of power that moves heaven and earth; it is the kind that brings about changes in awareness, ideas, and procedural methods. Put in another way, this is a "revolution" of thought, quite simply devotion of the whole country and all citizens.

The difficult aspect of this revolution is how to discard the "culprit" that is tradition and customs responsible for this environment of stagnation while protecting the individuality and characteristics of ethnic groups, and the essence of education. Liberating the soul is extremely important for imbibing knowledge. This is because with an open mind, various problems in life can be readily defined, mistakes are readily acknowledged (without hesitation), and it becomes easy to close in on the truth. However, life is not all intellectual. Although science and technology helps promote a better lifestyle, it could be said cultural value is fundamental to humans. No matter to what extent human society develops, the relationship between people can never be replaced with any kind of scientific invention. We cannot replace ourselves with imperceptive and insensitive machines which deal with each other based on the principles of best and absolute fairness. On the one hand, it cannot be emphatically stated that the results of several thousand years of ethnic tradition only bear simple historical value, and has no role in modern life. In reality, there are numerous cases proving that ethnic individuality and characteristics have provided strong impetus for national development, and proving that self-esteem in ethnic groups has been the origin of community development. That is, with respect to education, educators have the task of discerning things that are comparable to the individuality and characteristics of ethnic groups, traditions and customs that are out dated, educational elements and that which are merely rituals etc. As an example, although Japan is regarded by everyone as a country that boasts a high level of science and technology, it is also a country that protects

its traditions and has a unique ethnic culture. When talking about Japan, there are those that say the many great achievements made by Japanese are the results of a unified mentality-an ethnic and single mentality for a common purpose. This is one proof that ethnicity and modernity are not contradictory.

To those present,

I believe that by comparing with the education in other countries, various problems at this stage in Vietnamese education are clarified. Through the reality of having to protect the power of the ethnic group, we Vietnamese have been able to survive even after several thousands of years. However, this is indicative of the fact that we have to accept a liberal philosophy (science) and reality essential to our lives. Supposing that ethnic emotions are sacred and needed be uniform, scientific thought would, conversely, need to be diverse as it has existed around the world. When enhancing uniformity to implement large projects, all opinions need to be respected. Vice versa, when there is a different opinion, that opinion needs to be taken as an expression of individuality with the same orientation as the prevailing opinion. Finally, there is an extremely important issue that we must not forget. That is, ethnic individuality and characteristic occurs besides a common human culture, and that there are codes for the common development of human communities. In the final analysis, no ethnic group can be cast off from the world at large being "part of the world" -nobody can exist independently. I believe that in our times cherishing individuality and individual characteristics, and at the same time mutually enhancing cultural value is the principled way (of nature and society). That is, for those of us in Vietnam that are carrying out educational activities, to recognize the dialectic of traditional value and scientific thought-awareness of the dialectic of results gained over several thousands of years and that required by modern life-is most important. Based on this mentality, and with opinions from this symposium, I hope we gain valuable lessons that result in a common principle (policy) for our activities as educators in the near future.

Finally, I would like to sincerely thank Professor Hideki Miyazaki of Hyogo University of Teacher Education and the executive committee of the symposium for the opportunity to speak here and to have been able to meet University professors working in the same field.