

## Vietnam: Cultural Background for ESL/EFL Teachers

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*' Without the teacher, you sure can't be successful.'*

Vietnamese saying

### **Overview**

Covering an area of 128,000 square miles (332,800 sq. km.), Vietnam is a tropical, S-shaped country in Southeast Asia. It is bordered on the north by China, on the west by Laos and Cambodia, on the east by the South China Sea (Pacific Ocean) and on the southwest by the Gulf of Thailand. The country is metaphorically described as a bamboo pole with two baskets of rice at both ends. The native name *Việt Nam* refers to the ethnic *Viet*, who migrated into the Red River Delta of northern Vietnam from *Nam* 'southern' China. Vietnam has a population of about 77 million, excluding large immigrant communities in the United States, Canada, Australia, France and other countries. The majority of the people (about 90%) are the *Việt* or *Kinh* 'lowlanders' and the rest are comprised of 53 ethnic minorities, with the *Hoa* (ethnic Chinese) being the largest.

During the course of its long history, Vietnam has successfully withstood a thousand years of Chinese domination (111 BC - AD 939) and almost a century of French colonization (1858-1954) with a short period of Japanese occupation (1940-1945). The country was then devastated by a North-South war for two decades, ending with the fall of the American-backed South in 1975 and the proclamation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976. Post-war Vietnam was subsequently plagued by Cambodian and Chinese border disruptions as well as by the difficult process of reunification and a stagnant economy. Starting in 1986, the economy has begun to resurge as a result of *đổi mới* 'economic renovation' and open-door policies, although Vietnam remains one of the most impoverished nations in the world.

In general, Vietnamese culture, like that of many other Asian countries, is strongly influenced by Chinese ideologies and religious beliefs, namely Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Due to a thousand years of Chinese rule and assimilation, it was inevitable that Vietnam would be affected by Chinese civilization. Despite this, Vietnamese culture is not without its own national identity. In effect, Chinese cultural practices tended to coexist with, rather than to replace, traditional Vietnamese culture and language. The advent of French

colonialism and the American involvement in the South also added some Western elements to the traditional Vietnamese culture, as reflected in art, architecture, music, attire, schooling system, literature, sexual equality and social mores. Nevertheless, beneath the veneer of Chinese and Western thoughts, the indigenous culture has survived. Whereas foreign influence is unavoidable, nationhood, independence, unification and language preservation have always been uncompromising allegiances of the Vietnamese people.

The family is the center of one individual's life and the backbone of Vietnamese society. A typical family normally includes several generations that live together in the same household, although it is starting to change now. Vietnamese are strongly attached to their families and are deeply concerned with family welfare, prestige, reputation and pride. A misconduct of a Vietnamese is blamed, not only on that member, but also on the whole family, including relatives and ancestors. Filial piety is the most highly respected virtue in Vietnamese society. Thus, parents are always obeyed, respected, loved, and cared for by their children. Ancestor worship is common among Vietnamese of almost all faiths. The Vietnamese group-oriented tendency is explained by the desire to live and work in the same community or 'cultural/ethnic enclave', in contrast to the mobility of American people. Most uprooted Vietnamese left their country with great sadness because they were leaving behind families, friends, and a long-standing culture. With this strong attachment to their motherland, most Vietnamese immigrants wish to return to their homeland one day.

Respect is another key factor in the Vietnamese value system. One is expected to show respect to people senior in age, status or position, whether within or without the family. Respectful attitudes are expressed through politeness, obedience and a descriptive system of terms of address. Most Vietnamese tend to hide their feelings, avoid conflicts and reject confrontation, in order to avoid hurting or embarrassing anyone. For example, a 'Yes' may not only be a positive answer, but could also be a polite reply used to avoid hurting the feelings of the interlocutor. In addition, the Vietnamese usually smile when they do not want to answer an embarrassing question or when they do not want to offend the interlocutor. They will also smile when scolded by a person senior in age or status to show that they still respect the person scolding and do not hold any grudge. This pattern of behavior may be interpreted as challenging or insulting in the American cultural context.

Friendships are highly valued, especially between close friends, who are often regarded as blood relatives. Vietnamese people are friendly and hospitable. Whether your visit is announced or unexpected, you will always be warmly received. The Vietnamese do not say 'thank you' very often, because this is considered insincere. When they do, they really mean it. This gratitude will last a lifetime and they won't feel at ease until they can somehow repay the kindness shown to them.

Self-respect and saving face are extremely important to the Vietnamese; therefore, public criticism and humiliation are considered extremely rude and should be avoided. Once their feelings are hurt, it will stay in their memories for a long while. By the same token, lost confidence is very hard to restore.

In general, punctuality is important to the Vietnamese, although many are notorious for using 'rubber time' (i.e., arriving between 10 to 30 minutes late) when involving parties, which is

very unsettling to Americans. It is important that physical contact between opposite sexes be avoided. Hugging or kissing in greeting is not usual in Vietnamese culture. Most Vietnamese strongly disapprove of public expressions of affection between males and females, although this, too, is becoming common among young men and women. Touching someone on the head is not advisable, yet acceptable with small children. Gesturing to call someone with the index finger is considered rude to the Vietnamese, but with the palm down is acceptable. Crossing the index and middle fingers is considered obscene.

Vietnamese names are written as Last Name + Middle Name + First Name (e.g., *Nguyễn Văn Nam*; *Trần Thị Tuyết*), which is opposite to the way people (including overseas Vietnamese) write their names in America. To address someone, the first name is normally used between equals in an informal context. The appropriate form of address in formal situations is a Title + First name, as in Mr. Nam – the Vietnamese do not use the last name to address someone. This accounts for the transferred mistake Mr. John, Mrs. Susan, or Teacher Mary. Out of respect, people are addressed according to family or social relationships by kinship terms or professional ones, but not by their first names. A married woman retains her last name, but children are given their father's last name. Often, when Vietnamese students call a teacher 'Teacher' as a Vietnamese vocative of esteem, it is sometimes misinterpreted or considered inappropriate in the American classroom.

Vietnamese immigration to the U.S. was nearly non-existent before 1975. Since then Vietnamese immigrants and refugees have come in different waves. They tend to live in states with mild climates (e.g., California, Texas, Virginia, Florida and Washington, D. C.) and also in New York. Often they have different levels of education. While some were well educated and familiar with Western cultures, others had little formal education or knowledge of Western lifestyles. A lot of senior Vietnamese immigrants have health problems (hearing and vision loss, chronic diseases, etc.) due to old age or being wounded during the long war. In the process of acculturation and assimilation into the mainstream culture, uprooted Vietnamese are deeply concerned with the demise of traditional culture and values – an issue that seems to have no ultimate solution.

### **In the Classroom**

- Some common problems facing Vietnamese learning English are: dropping of final consonant sounds; difficulty in pronouncing some consonant sounds such as /ð/, /θ/, /z/, /dʒ/, /S/ and /tS/ as well as some initial consonant clusters such as sp-, dr-, br-, fr-, pl-, and str-; inability to express stress; non-use of *be* in sentences consisting of subject and adjective ( She beautiful); and word-by-word translation, among others.
- Influenced by their traditional learning style, Vietnamese students usually keep quiet in class and wait until called upon to answer the questions asked by the teachers, instead of volunteering. This is often misunderstood as a passive or non-cooperative attitude.
- Vietnamese students tend to copy down, and hence rely on, everything written on the board. Free lecturing would handicap many students who have not familiarized

themselves with listening and note-taking skills. On the whole, their written English is better than their spoken English.

- Some Vietnamese students may not look in the eyes of the teacher; this is not because of disrespect, but out of fear or reverence, so to speak. It would be safe to avoid touching your students, and allow them to call you ‘Teacher’.
- Since keeping quiet in class is to show respect to teachers as well as to create a productive learning environment, being talkative, interrupting, bragging, or challenging the teacher are not typical of Vietnamese culture. Such behavior is strongly criticized and avoided.
- It is not offensive in Vietnamese culture to ask personal questions regarding age, marital status, salary, religion, etc. Don’t be shocked, but be prepared to explain to them a list of personal questions that make Americans uncomfortable. In this culture, a comment on weight gain is a compliment; on the contrary, a remark on weight loss is not complimentary.

### **Teacher Comments**

- Vietnamese is a tonal language with a Subject-Verb-Object structure. Because Vietnamese has no inflections, distinguishes word meanings by tones, and makes great use of word order to show syntactic relationships, Vietnamese learners often find English tenses, aspects, and moods hard to learn. The use of the Latinized script, however, makes it an easier start for Vietnamese to learn English spelling than for other Asian students. A foreign language (e.g., English, French, Chinese or Russian) is a required subject in most secondary schools in Vietnam.
- Vietnamese people are famous for their respect for education and love for learning. Parents have a heavy responsibility for their children’s education, even at their own expense. Hardworking and resourceful, Vietnamese students are usually studious and fare well in most American schools despite possible obstacles. Nevertheless, Vietnamese students are very traditional in their learning styles: they are quiet and attentive, good at memorizing and following directions, reluctant to participate (though knowing the answers), shy away from oral skills (being more comfortable with grammar and writing exercises) and from group interaction; they are meticulous in note-taking, they go ‘by the book’ and rely on printed information, and regard the teacher as the complete source of knowledge.
- Non-native students tend to turn to their native language or stick to their groups in the ESOL class, so mix them with students from different countries. Giving competitive quizzes among different groups may be effective. Because the classroom is where they can practice their English the most, discourage the use of native language – once back in their community, they will return to their mother tongue.

- Since students tend to help each other during exams, design practical activities that involve individual participation so that each is encouraged to take part and each has a turn, hence building their confidence in working independently.
- To deal with ‘cheating’, try the following: give the same tests with scrambled questions or even different tests; separate friends and isolate trouble-makers; assign group projects; or give open-book exams or quizzes, but restrict the time limit.
- Many students think that they are too old to learn or that adult learners can never be successful. It is useful to provide them, especially senior ones, with some practical learning techniques/strategies, or rules of thumb, as they don’t seem to have much of an ear for languages. Once motivated, they will go a long way.
- Because Vietnamese students believe in note-taking and memorizing, don’t neglect to put the major points or outline of your lecture on the board or in the handouts; random lecturing is not preferred.
- It is important to show students how to use particular learning strategies so that they can improve their language performance. I have had ample chances to observe how my students learn different skills at the same time. It seemed that those who had a good learning style for one skill also did well in another. The good learners, for example, usually varied their strategies according to why they were listening to or reading something. Having a reason for listening or reading – namely scanning or skimming – helped them to focus on what they needed or wanted to listen or read for. On the contrary, the poor learners I observed were usually at a loss when dealing with such tasks; they felt as if they had been overwhelmed with a vast amount of information and didn’t know what to focus on.
- When designing exercises or activities for classes with older learners, we should keep in mind that adults learn best not by rote, but by integrating new concepts and material into existing cognitive structures. Speed is also a factor that works against the older learner: fast-paced drills and competitive exercises and activities usually handicap them.

### **Student Comments**

- Vietnamese students are often shocked by some American teachers’ behavior, e.g., sitting on desks, wearing casual clothing, encouraging students to call them by their first names, talking about taboo subjects (e.g., sexual topics or personal hygiene). They are uncomfortable seeing American students sitting with their feet on the table or eating and drinking in class.
- Vietnamese students do not think that a seated teacher is very efficient. They love to study with active teachers who play an important role in their learning attitude.

- Vietnamese learners often remark that American teachers do not stick to the textbook or do not follow any outline when lecturing. Many students like to have structured lessons, rules to memorize and a summary of the lesson at the end of each class.
- Some notice that American teachers tend to pay more attention to what their students say than how they say something. Many like to be corrected while doing exercises or speaking, because they believe that they can learn from mistakes.
- Saving face is very important, especially to senior learners. There was a case about an older learner who dropped out after being criticized in public.
- Many express an urge to learn more about American culture and survival skills. Some adult learners just want to learn English to read to their offspring or understand what their US-born children say.

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 \* A first version of this paper appeared in a multicultural project at Northeast ABLE Resource Center (Ohio).

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