

***Teaching English as an international language: Identity,
resistance and negotiation. Phan Le Ha (2008)***

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Phan Le Ha considers the status of English as a global language from an interesting and original perspective. As suggested by the title, she seeks to understand the resistance and negotiations implied in the process of identity construction in light of mobility and transnationality of Vietnamese English teachers.

In the Introductory chapter, she presents her point of view as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher and researcher, and gives a poetic and somewhat touching description of the emergence of her identity as 'one of them' (p. 20), a teacher of English and a lover of that language (p. 17). She defines teaching as the inseparable work of brain, heart and soul (p. 21). From the very beginning, the notion of morality is introduced – a notion which may only feebly resonate with the experience of Western educated teachers like me. The perception of morality coupled with the role of the teacher is justified by the 'care orientation' in Vietnamese culture which understands the human relationships as 1) the foundation of ethics, 2) respect of the other, and 3) responsibility for the other which may reach the point of 'self-sacrifice' (pp. 7–8). She paints a portrait of the teacher as a model who is also expected to behave as such. Thus, as a starting point for her research, she examines the notion of identity through different dichotomies such as being and becoming,

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the self and the other, the inferior and the superior, the non-native and the native teacher of English, center and periphery, Western-trained teachers of English and/or non-Western-trained teachers of English, 'hoping to enrich studies of identities in the context of globalization and transnationality' (p. 12). For that particular reason, she explores the issue of Viet-Nam as having been under the rule of colonialism and, because of it, pivoted between different languages to learn and teach. In this particular historical context, she points out the ambiguous position of English. Having been the language of the enemy, English was once very unpopular. However, English in Viet-Nam has gained in popularity, indirectly causing the quasi-abandon of French and / or Russian as the most taught /learned languages in Viet-Nam.

Chapter two examines the relationship between 'Language, Culture, and Identity' as 'closely interlinked' (p. 26) in the Western as well as in the Vietnamese literatures. Through the description of the notion of orientalism, Phan Le Ha criticizes several quite unflattering characteristics the West tends to attribute to eastern cultures. She observes that even Eastern people have started to believe in some of them, due to the conviction with which these strong stereotypes were imposed. Leaving those stereotypes aside, she then considers the formation of identity through mobility, transnationality and hybridity (p. 38), notions that she describes in detail. First, the author contests the romantic idea of transnationality which seems to come from the West. To her, this may emphasize the excessive generalization of Western views. She claims that 'a world without boundaries is not for everyone yet' (p. 43). Subsequently, the concept of hybridity is observed in the light of mobility and transnationality, and different beliefs are considered. One of them is the notion of 'third space' borrowed from Bhabha (1994: 38–39) as an 'in-between space [...] that carries the burden of the meaning of culture' (p. 46). She draws attention to the necessity of considering hybridity as a notion that celebrates 'difference and cultural creativity' instead of being a notion that 'denies the right to be different' (p. 49). For instance, the observation of Vietnamese identity reveals a strong sense of belonging (p. 62), which goes beyond the being and becoming cited above. This identity is anchored in a strong sense of continuity and connectedness. In sum, constantly in the process of being formed, 'identity is constructed, multiple, hybrid and dynamic' (p. 64) while undergoing processes of appropriation, resistance and negotiation.

In Chapter three, 'the politics of English as an International Language and English Language Teaching' are observed. Firstly, Phan Le Ha criticizes the 'tendency to assume the spread of English as inevitable and natural' (p. 71). The dichotomy used to defend that argument is the one of powerful/ powerless nations which may have contributed to reinforce the inferior/superior relationships between nations. Is English really the only channel through which

powerless nations can let their voices be heard? Indeed, as the spread of English is inseparable from the spread of its teaching, one must acknowledge the disadvantages of those who learn it as a foreign language, when compared to native speakers. As a matter of fact, when Vietnamese teachers have been trained in English-speaking countries, they soon consider Western pedagogical values as superior to Eastern values. They consider the English native-speakers and their methods as superior to what they had learned in Viet-Nam. This also raises the question of who owns the English language (p. 75). Is there one true English next to a variety of 'polluted' (p. 77) 'Englishes'? To elucidate that problem, Phan Le Ha uses the dichotomy between 'the superior Self' and 'the inferior Other' in the light of politics. She starts with reviewing the situation in several African countries, in which English as the official language has developed its own local variety. She then considers the situation in India, where English has been a way to maintain one's social status. Furthermore, she reflects on the emergence of two languages in Malaysia: standard English and Malaysian English, and in Singapore which differentiates Cambridge English from Singaporean English, respectively applying the same positive versus negative judgments. To further examine this problem, Phan Le Ha raises the question of the TESOL programs which, according to her, focus on specific knowledge of the language, instead of trying to enhance the teacher's ability to use the language (p. 85), and 'thus usually fails to meet the needs'. This ethnocentrism, as she qualifies it, would enhance the difference between Native and non-Native teachers and create cross-cultural paradoxes. According to her, those programs carry pre-assumptions and assumptions of the other cultures presenting themselves as 'colonizing forces' (p. 87). Above all, she draws attention to the communicative approach and its generalization, which, in her assessment, denigrates what she calls the traditional methods of teaching. According to Phan Le Ha, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) does not meet the cultural needs and expectations of the Asian student (p. 99). Considered old-fashioned, the 'traditional method' tends to be replaced by the CLT, which poses serious problems. What may be seen as communicative in the Western world, may be considered very rude and disrespectful in an Asian context. For instance, Phan Le Ha addresses the question of corrective feed-back, which may humiliate the student instead of encouraging him/her to speak in the target language, violating the principle of morality mentioned earlier. In her opinion, this conflict of values at least needs to be rethought in the complexity of each cultural context.

Chapter four, 'Identity Formation: Negotiations of Apparently Contradictory Roles and Selves', illustrates the concepts presented in Chapter three by giving voice to several Western-trained Vietnamese English teachers. Phan Le Ha explains the contradiction between the personal and the professional, the moral guide and the teacher of English. She describes those teachers with a

strong sense of context-dependent belonging. For instance, one of the teachers describes the three bases of a future teacher's identity: the image that they have of their own teachers, their own families, and their conscience. Once again, the alliance of conscience and morality is emphasized.

Chapter five, 'Identity Formations: The Teacher and the Politics of ELT', examines the image of English teachers in the theoretical literature. She compares them with the professional and national identities that the interviewees display of themselves. Through their testimony, Phan Le Ha examines how morality is related to the Asian culture in combination with, for instance, the influence of communism on the Vietnamese culture. Together with 'the rise of English [which] meant the fall of Russian', the status of teachers of English was very much driven by political and economic pictures' (p. 130). It emphasizes the fragility of the status of the language and thus the fragility of English as a global language. It highlights as well the fragility of the teacher of one particular language in the political context. Interestingly, four of the teachers that she interviewed were first teachers of Russian who became teachers of English, responding to the growing need for those teachers. She then points out the imperialism of stereotyped images to which they have been exposed when studying abroad: each of those teachers wants to be seen as a teacher of English rather than a 'servant of English' (p. 134). Teachers of English trained abroad want to be able to speak English on a native level of competency without being obliged to be an English person and alter their identity. However Phan Le Ha identifies another 'they' in the discourse of Vietnamese teachers of English trained in Vietnam. Since they lacked the experience of studying abroad, they felt rather distrustful of the methods that their colleagues brought back. This suspicion suggests social prejudices against the West, anchored in the country's past history. Vietnamese people seem to have a need to keep social and cultural values safe from foreign influences. This may cause resistance against new teaching methods associated with the West. However, Phan Le Ha shows that a stay in an English speaking country may change one's beliefs. It may also influence the identity construction, for instance creating more open-mindedness to self-evaluation. This new created openness might be seen with caution since future teachers of English abroad are learners and not teachers, a position which has certainly influenced their vision. Therefore, they might have completed the teacher-evaluations without risking any danger to themselves. Phan Le Ha does not only interview the teachers. She also tries to raise awareness of stereotypes such as 'the good and modern Western education' and/or 'the bad and old fashioned Eastern education'. For instance, she points out the teachers' potential in Viet-Nam and in the West as 'fostered by facilities and resources' (p. 151). Doing so, she observes in the interviewees the construction of 'a national and a professional identity'. As a result, the enhanced awareness allowed the teachers

to choose among the different characteristics of one or the other professional culture: for instance, they claimed to be 'open-minded' as Western teachers without losing their moral teachers' role as is expected from Vietnamese teachers (p. 153). A hybrid identity is created, which does not exclude their Vietnamese identity marked by a strong sense of national belonging. Phan Le Ha confirms the definition of identity previously described by others, as 'constructed, multiple, hybrid and dynamic' (p. 157).

To illustrate this proposition, in Chapter six, 'An EIL Teacher's Identity Formation: Kien', the author details the case of a Vietnamese teacher/learner of English. His experiences in Australia during a period of training give testimony to his growing consciousness of the social realities and the softening of his judgment about for instance Vietnamese students. The author notices the evolution of her interlocutors' identities depending on the social and cultural contexts as noted earlier by others, which is also 'shaped by the context within which we express them' (p. 176). Nevertheless, his identities 'shaped, negotiated and reconstructed' (p. 177) seem to find a stable base established in the before-mentioned sense of belonging.

In Chapter seven, 'Teacher Identity and the Teaching of English as an International Language', Phan Le Ha reaffirms this sense of belonging. She brings forward other support, for instance by discussing the perceptions of Vietnamese English teachers of their role as moral guides which remains through the whole process of the interview 'more or less non-negotiable' (p. 184). Having started her book on that surprising concept, morality comes back to enlighten our Western vision of it. She contests the possibly negative image attached to the term of 'morality' while placing it in the heart of Vietnamese teachers as a philosophy. She also returns to the notion of the 'third space'. The identity 'fastening, unfastening and refastening' (Reed 2001) seems to create a new awareness, which transforms those third spaces subjected to constant formation and reformation (p. 186). Finally, Phan Le Ha illustrates the 'high degree of control' (p. 188) expected from Vietnamese teachers with the image of the Vietnamese daughter in law who needs to please her in-laws: teaching is seen as a hard task and the difficulty is multiplied by the number of students encountered.

In this book, Phan Le Ha rehabilitates the non-native teachers of English through an inquiry anchored in the specific Vietnamese context. Her careful and detailed argumentation gives an interesting insight into the Vietnamese culture and the contradictions encountered when facing globalization. Phan Le Ha, on this highly relevant subject, expresses her true love for the English language. Her strong concerns do not seem to be the internationalization of English but a haphazard internationalization of teaching methods which may not be culturally adapted to, at least, the Eastern cultures. This book is of

high interest for language teachers and policy makers, as well as for anyone concerned with the formation of multilingual identities. The book contains the interesting results of thorough research, sometimes presented in a poetic style through which the identity of the author is palpable. The main lesson to be learned is that differences, even when profound, do not always equal incompatibility.

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