



The influences of cultural features in constructing shame, embarrassment, and anxiety in the Vietnamese context

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Abstract

Like other Asian Confucian-heritage cultures, such as China, Korea, and Japan, Vietnamese culture is heavily influenced by Confucian ideas on social standards and evaluation. These are related to the concept of face and face loss. Studies on the concepts of face and the relationship between the notion of losing face and good teaching have been investigated. Teaching and learning processes are strongly influenced by traditional Confucian beliefs about the role and position of teachers, the effects of peers on students' emotional reflection, and the relationship between teachers and students. Emotion has been found to play an important role in English language learning. This study focuses on the impact of cultural features on shaping and constructing students' particular emotions such as shame, embarrassment, and anxiety. The findings of eight students' interviews and written narratives from second-year students in the Vietnamese tertiary contexts contribute to the literature on emotion by illustrating how some negative emotions were associated with features of the Vietnamese culture, in particular with the local Confucian heritage.

Keywords: Cultural features, emotions, face-saving

Introduction

This paper reports the effects of social and cultural features that shaped, constructed, and impacted students' emotions. These findings contribute to the literature on emotion by illustrating how emotions were associated with features of the Vietnamese culture, in particular with the local Confucian heritage. For example, the construction and display of anxiety and shame were, in some particular cases, influenced by the notion of saving and losing face.

Emotion in English language learning

Emotion in English language learning was previously focused on negative emotions with the predominant focus on anxiety in many studies such as in ^[1, 2, 3]. Anxiety was mainly investigated in the past ten years in second language learning. When only "anxiety" is examined as the most dominant factor in second language learning, it reflects an incomplete picture of the learning classroom. Recent developments in the study of affective factors have given a more balanced view that requires a wider perspective on emotion research, including both negative and positive emotions such as enjoyment of learning. Chronologically, there have been several studies on both anxiety and enjoyment in the language classroom, such as ^[4, 5].

Emotions in this study are negative emotions including shame, embarrassment, and anxiety. Shame and embarrassment are categorised as self-conscious emotions, and they are associated with failure. Shame involves 'an individual's perception of their actions or characteristics negatively evaluated by others' ^[6]. Foreign language anxiety is associated with "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" ^[1].

The notion of face and face-saving in Vietnamese culture

The concept of face, which is defined as "the ideal image a person claims for themselves" ^[7], and its features in some

particular cultures have been discussed in previous studies. The concept of face plays a part in social interactions in many collective, 'Confucian-heritage' cultures such as Vietnamese and Chinese cultures. The concept of Face is viewed as an important 'constraint on behaviours' that are characterised by the culture ^[8].

One outstanding feature of the Vietnamese culture that constructed the students' notion of face-saving is the fear of negative social evaluation such as judgment by other people. Vietnamese people are afraid of "eyes" around them and negative evaluations from other "eyes" ^[9]. Vietnamese people often feel free to give comments, and evaluations on others' appearance, behaviours, actions, and even on outfits. Body shaming might be a common source of making fun. They might ridicule others' actions that might be thought to be inappropriate. Therefore, children are affected by those perspectives. Thus, in class, if students make mistakes, or do anything that is below the social norms or cannot meet the social demands, it seems to bring the possibility of negative evaluations from their teachers and peers. They will likely face and suffer from others' looking down on them. This will be a potential cause of anxiety, shame, and embarrassment. Thus, students' fear of negative evaluations can be considered as an explanation of learner apprehension or an illustration of anxiety ^[8].

The study

Research questions

The present study aims to answer two main research questions.

Research question 1: What is the notion of face loss self-reported in English language learning?

Research question 2: How are anxiety and shame affected by cultural factors?

Participants

Eight students in the second year of three universities in North Vietnam were invited to participate in the written narrative process, then they took part in the individual interviews. Participants were non-English major studies. They were studying finance, business, and engineering. These participants were selected at random and in social relationships with the researcher.

Research methods

Participants who took part in the process of written narratives were invited to write two types of stories, which were designed with suggested questions. They were suggested to write their short stories in either Vietnamese or English. They were informed of the data collection procedure in which all their information would be kept confidential and used only for this study.

Interviews were carried out and each student was interviewed once. Each interview lasted approximately an hour. Data was collected, translated, then thematically analysed.

Findings and discussion

The impact of cultural factors on constructing shame and embarrassment in English language learning in Vietnamese contexts

In social constructionism, the manifestation of the feeling of loss of face has cultural variations in their typical display and they “are associated with problems of social status, cooperation, and reciprocity across cultures”^[10]. Shame is a good example of such a case. Shame in Western cultures has been found to be different from that in Confucian heritage cultures. As Bedford (2004) asserts: “the literature on guilt and shame in Western countries cannot provide a complete picture of the roles and functions of guilt and shame in Chinese culture”^[11]. Like other Confucian-heritage cultures such as Japan and China, shame and self-criticism are considered as strong socializing forces in childrearing in Vietnam^[10] and shame is related to the feeling of losing face.

Shame that was triggered in the English language learning in the Vietnamese context in this study was often associated with students’ perceived laziness. This can be explained by the fact that in Vietnamese culture, a student is supposed to be hard-working; and to have good behaviour and attitudes. In the Vietnamese learning context, students do not have the right to refuse to do the work. If they cannot complete their tasks, cannot perform the class activities well, or receive low scores, they will be criticised as “lazy students”. Like other Asian cultures such as Korea, people work hard to meet others’ expectations and to save face^[12]. Reported shame in this study also appeared as the result of low scores and low English performance. This finding is in line with that of the study by Chen and Brown^[13].

Sang, Kha, and Kim were ridiculed by peers for incorrect English word use, low English competence, or poor English pronunciation. This was another source that triggered students’ embarrassment and shame. This reflected Vietnamese cultural features because it is an acceptable reaction in a Vietnamese class and teachers at that time did not try to prevent it to protect students’ face within the class, and as a result, these students felt a loss of face.

In this study, shame was found to derive from failure in achieving goals, and it was related to a feeling of loss of

face. The findings have also indicated that embarrassment is closely linked to “face” and feeling of loss of face. Choe^[7] investigated the display of the students’ embarrassment in an adult English classroom which emerged from classroom interactions and pointed out that students’ embarrassment resulted from making a mistake or contributing an incorrect answer in front of the class. Goffman^[14] also asserts that “embarrassment has to do with unfulfilled expectations”^[14] and embarrassment is linked to individuals’ responses to protect their face in social interactions where their face is threatened. Additionally, feelings are attached to face, so ‘losing face’ can be seen as originating from embarrassment^[15].

In Vietnamese culture, loss of face is considered painful, as Borton and Ryder^[16] noted: “Loss of face is painful in any society, but unbearable in Vietnam. The Vietnamese have an expression: “Better to die than to lose face”^[16]. Some Vietnamese sayings demonstrate the strength of feeling associated with losing face: “I can find no place to hide myself away”, “I want to dig a hole to bury myself”, or “If there were a hole in the ground, I would have crawled into it”. In some written narratives, students described how they experienced negative emotions similar to these. For example, Ly reported her reactions to shame as: “I did not know how to hide my shame away”.

The impact of cultural factors on constructing anxiety in English language learning in Vietnamese contexts

Anxiety was an emotional response to the events in which students felt their face was not protected. In this study, communication apprehension was a source of the students’ anxiety in foreign language classes. Their communication apprehension originated from a fear of making mistakes and being negatively judged by the teacher and students. As a result, this caused their feeling of loss of face. The students reported their experiences of anxiety, trembling, panic, nervousness, and fear when they were called on by name to communicate with their English teachers or to give answers to the teacher’s questions in English classes. Similar negative emotions were described clearly by one participant in Cohen and Norst’s^[17] study. The reason for Vietnamese students’ communication apprehension was explained in Tran *et al.*’s^[18] study:

In Vietnamese high school context, both male and female have not been trained to present confidently and logically in front of people yet. Therefore, when starting their new stage of education in the university, they have the same conditions and experiences to adapt in the new environment^[18].

The fear of making mistakes during an oral class performance such as in pronunciation, grammatical structures, or intonation, made a student feel shy in combination with anxiety and as a result, led to their reluctance to speak in class. They thought that reluctance to speak was a safe way to avoid making mistakes. These findings are similar to those of King^[19] and King and Smith^[20], who investigated learners studying under Japanese culture and society. King^[19] explained that “socio-cultural values, norms, and expectations all help to shape anxiety within social situations”^[19]. In these two studies, language classroom anxiety is viewed as social anxiety because students’ fear is “related to a socially anxious individual’s belief that his or her social performance is not of an acceptable standard and will likely be judged harshly by others”^[20].

In this study, students' anxiety was also related to fear of negative evaluation and being criticised by their teachers. Failure to communicate with teachers also caused students disappointment, upset, and shame. These findings align with those in Pham's ^[21] study, which indicates that when participant students spoke in front of their teachers and peers "they might have felt embarrassment and vulnerable for the fear of negative evaluation [sic]" from their teachers and peers, and "their concerns for loss of face might have made them feel more anxious" ^[21]. As a result, choosing to reduce talk in class is a safe way that may have helped students to avoid these negative emotions. The findings around the reduction in oral production were in line with the cognitive model of silent L2 learners' social anxiety in King and Smith ^[20]. These findings around the relationship between shyness, anxiety, and willingness to communicate align with the results of other studies, such as in Mohammadian ^[22], Oflaz ^[23] and Gregersen and Horwitz ^[24]. Thus, the data indicating shame as a result of fear of face loss, or failure to have their face protected within the Vietnamese culture are close to the findings of shame in Li, Wang ^[26], Kam and Bond ^[25] and Bedford ^[11] within the Chinese cultural context. These findings in the present research are close to those in McGregor and Elliot ^[26], which found that "shame is the core emotion of fear of failure" ^[26].

Anxiety associated with the impact of power distance in the classrooms

Another factor that affects students' emotions in the classroom is the power distance. The power distance of the Vietnamese culture affected the shaping and constructing of students' emotions. Vietnam is considered a large power-distance country where people tend to accept the unequal distribution of power in their social positions ^[27]. According to Nguyen ^[27], the high power distance of Vietnamese culture is reflected in general norms, family, workplace, and school. At school, "the inequality between teacher and student is manifested by high respect for teachers and the dependence of students on them" ^[27] because of "the teacher's dominant role as a knowledge source" ^[27]. In classrooms, students rarely speak up until they are singled out by their teachers because "arguing and discussing with teachers, parents or elder people is often considered as *rude* and *disrespectful*" ^[28]. They show their respect to their teacher by listening to lessons in an orderly fashion without discussions or interactions ^[29, 30].

The social gap between the teacher and students can make the students feel uncomfortable communicating. The existence of fear in foreign language classrooms in the Vietnamese context partly originates from the features of teachers' classroom management. Students are required to sit quietly in the class; they can talk only when they are summoned to give the answers. They rarely make arguments or raise questions during class time, and they avoid arguing and debating with their peers about the disagreement of ideas because "if they think differently from other people they often do not write or say their thoughts and they seem to be expected to do what the majority think and value" ^[28]. Thus, the power distance in Vietnamese culture impacts students' ability to communicate in the classroom and the power distance leads to high levels of anxiety in the classroom ^[18]. In this study, students often experienced anxiety, even fear when being singled out by their teachers,

or when discussing something because they tended to want to protect their face and avoid feelings of loss of face.

Conclusion

The displays of emotions described above show that reported emotions may be mediated by social expectations ^[31] because "the social structures help shape the way emotion is experienced and expressed" ^[31]. The findings in this study indicated the close relationships between cultural features, such as the notion of saving face and losing face, and the displays of particular emotions, in agreement with Goetz and Keltner's ^[10] research. The findings of the study also showed that features of Vietnamese culture imbue all the data. These findings contribute to the knowledge of the significance of cultural features in constructing and shaping emotions. They also contribute to the literature on the influence of Vietnamese cultural aspects on emotions in the field of applied linguistics, which has thus far received limited attention.

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