



Teaching Across Languages and Cultures: A Narrative Case Study of Addressing L1 Transfer and Cultural Gaps in Khmer EFL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

In Vietnamese public schools serving ethnic minority learners, English language instruction often unfolds in linguistically complex and culturally mismatched classrooms. This narrative case study explores how one Vietnamese English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher responds to the challenges of teaching English to Khmer learners in a rural secondary school in the Mekong Delta. Drawing on a written reflection composed during a professional development course, the study examines how the teacher makes sense of her learners' persistent grammatical difficulties, rooted in first language (L1) transfer from Khmer, and how she navigates the cultural dissonance between textbook content and learners' lived experiences. Findings reveal that the teacher reframes language "errors" as patterned responses to structural distance, and that she enacts responsive teaching through chunk-based instruction, visual scaffolding, and culturally localized tasks. Her practice illustrates how small, context-driven adaptations are reconfigured when English is learned through Vietnamese by Khmer-speaking learners, making visible the interpretive work teachers do to turn structural distance into pedagogical resource. By foregrounding the voice of a teacher working in a triadic language environment (Khmer, Vietnamese, and English), the study theorises teacher responsiveness in such settings and offers an empirically grounded account of multilingual pedagogy and teacher agency in under-researched Southeast Asian classrooms.

Keywords: culturally responsive teaching, ethnic minority education, Khmer learners, language transfer, Vietnamese EFL classrooms

INTRODUCTION

In the far reaches of Vietnam's Mekong Delta, where the rhythms of school life unfold in classrooms shaded by sugar palms and punctuated by temple drums, teachers are navigating a complex linguistic terrain. For many Khmer learners living in this region, Vietnamese is not their first language (L1), and English, often introduced in Grade 3, arrives as the third language (L3). By the time English enters the classroom, these learners have already acquired a system of sound, grammar, and thought shaped by Khmer, layered with varying degrees of exposure to Vietnamese as their second language (L2). This multilingual layering creates both richness and difficulty, and for the English teacher standing at the front of the room, it raises immediate, practical questions: What does it mean to teach English when neither its syntax nor its cultural reference points align easily with learners' linguistic world? Where does one begin when even the simplest phrase in the textbook resists direct translation?

These are not hypothetical dilemmas. They are daily realities for teachers working in rural and ethnically diverse areas of southern Vietnam (Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020). In schools serving Khmer communities, the English curriculum, designed for a nationally unified system, often assumes prior knowledge, learning behaviors, and cultural familiarity that do not fully align with the backgrounds of the learners it reaches. A lesson on daily routines, for example, may ask learners to describe brushing their teeth before bed, while their real bedtime routine might center around Buddhist prayer or caring for younger siblings. A writing prompt may expect the use of modal verbs or time clauses that have no direct equivalent in either Khmer or Vietnamese. And when learners fall silent, not out of defiance but of uncertainty, the teacher must interpret that silence and find another way in.

Within this gap, between what the textbook prescribes and what the learner brings, teachers improvise. Some rely on repetition. Others rephrase in Vietnamese. Still others draw pictures, use gestures, or allow stories to emerge in ways that feel closer to home. Yet these efforts often go unrecognized in discussions about English language teaching in Vietnam, where the focus tends to fall on curriculum standards, test scores, or urban pedagogical models (Ngo, 2024). The specific challenges and inventive strategies used in ethnolinguistically diverse settings remain largely undocumented, despite their importance for equitable, inclusive language education.

This study centers on one such setting. Drawing on the detailed classroom reflections of a Vietnamese English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher working with Khmer learners in a secondary school, it seeks to surface how language transfer issues and cultural discontinuities are understood and addressed from within the classroom itself. It asks how a teacher, confronted with the mismatch between curriculum and context, finds ways to make English learnable and meaningful for learners whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds are rarely reflected in the materials they are asked to master. In doing so, the study opens a window onto the quiet, ongoing labor of linguistic negotiation and cultural mediation that characterizes English teaching at the margins of Vietnam's public education system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English learning rarely begins in a vacuum. For many learners, it is deeply shaped by the linguistic systems already in place, such as the structures, sounds, and meanings formed in their L1, and, in multilingual contexts, often L2 as well. In classrooms where Khmer learners learn English through the medium of Vietnamese, this learning unfolds across linguistic layers, each one carrying its own set of rules and assumptions. Such contexts are rich with potential, but also marked by asymmetries: between the language of instruction and the language of home, between curricular design and cultural experience, between the expectations of policy and the affordances of place.

Language transfer, the influence of learners' L1 on their acquisition of L2 or L3, has long been acknowledged in applied linguistics, with both positive and negative effects (Odlin, 1989). When structures align across languages, transfer can facilitate learning; when they differ markedly, it can lead to interference (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). For Khmer learners, whose L1 lacks certain features of English such as articles, tense inflection, or subject-verb agreement, the potential for negative transfer is significant. Errors in word order, omitted copulas, and difficulty with pluralization are not mere slips. They are indicators of structural distance. Yet while the literature has explored transfer in many L1-L2 pairings (e.g., Diaubalick et al., 2023; McManus, 2015; Woore, 2014), far fewer studies have examined transfer in the context of minority languages like Khmer in relation to English, especially when mediated through an L2 such as Vietnamese. The triadic nature of this linguistic journey remains underexplored.

This journey does not only involve forms and functions, but it is also deeply cultural. The English textbooks used in Vietnamese public schools, though periodically revised, still carry assumptions rooted in majority experiences and globalized norms (Dang & Seals, 2018). Stories, idioms, illustrations, and conversational topics often presume cultural familiarity that Khmer learners may not share. Such gaps are not always linguistic; they may stem from different ways of seeing, knowing, or interacting. As Gay (2010) and Banks (2015) have shown, culturally responsive teaching requires more than adapting content; it requires teachers to recognize and build upon the cultural knowledge that learners bring into the classroom. In the Vietnamese context, where ethnic minority learners often occupy the margins of both linguistic and curricular visibility, such responsiveness is not just good practice. It is essential for equity.

Yet responsiveness is rarely straightforward. Teachers themselves often receive little preparation for working in ethnolinguistically diverse classrooms (Hieu & Thao, 2024). Pre-service programs may emphasize linguistic theory or standardized teaching methods without adequately addressing the sociolinguistic realities of minority learners (Thao & Mai, 2022). In practice, this leaves teachers to improvise to try, observe, adjust, and reflect. Their work becomes, in essence, a form of classroom-based inquiry: testing not hypotheses but pedagogical possibilities. What strategies support Khmer learners in recognizing and producing unfamiliar grammatical forms? How can vocabulary be introduced when semantic categories do not align? Which visuals or prompts resonate with learners whose home lives differ from those depicted in the textbook?

Some research in Vietnam has begun to document the linguistic and cultural challenges faced by ethnic minority learners more broadly (Le Ha et al., 2014; Vu, 2024), often pointing to limited exposure to Vietnamese, teacher-learner miscommunication, and curriculum inflexibility. However, few studies focus specifically on the experience of Khmer learners in EFL classrooms, and even fewer foreground the perspective of the teacher working closest to the problem. While national policies emphasize inclusive education and the reduction of ethnic disparities, how these aims translate into actual teaching practices remains uneven and under-researched.

It is in this context that the present study is situated. Rather than seeking to generalize across ethnic groups or schooling systems, it offers a close narrative account of how one Vietnamese teacher, working with Khmer learners in a secondary school, confronts and responds to the challenges of language transfer and cultural distance. Through this case, the study aims to illuminate not only the barriers that arise when teaching English in minority contexts, but also the subtle, adaptive strategies that emerge when teachers choose to meet those barriers with understanding, creativity, and care. Specifically, it asks: (1) *What language transfer and cultural challenges arise when teaching English to Khmer ethnic minority learners?* And (2) *how does the teacher respond pedagogically to these challenges in her classroom practice?*

METHODS

Participant

The participant in this study is a Vietnamese secondary school English teacher working in a rural district of the Mekong Delta, where a significant portion of the learner population comes from the Khmer ethnic minority community. At the time of writing, she had been teaching English for over a decade, most of those years spent in public schools where the challenges of multilingual education are a daily reality rather than an abstract policy concern. Her classroom, like many in the region, is modest in resources but rich in linguistic complexity: learners speak Khmer at home, use Vietnamese as the medium of instruction for most subjects, and encounter English in brief, prescribed sessions each week.

Though trained in a teacher education program that emphasized English-Vietnamese instruction, she has spent much of her career adapting that knowledge to suit learners who are navigating not two but three languages, each with its own rhythm, structure, and cultural logic. Her reflection, which forms the core of this case study, was submitted as part of a British Council professional development course aimed at encouraging teachers to apply learner-centered methods and reflect on their practice. Unlike many course participants who focused on general classroom techniques, she chose to write in detail about the unique challenges she faced with her Khmer learners, focusing not only on their grammatical difficulties but also on the cultural disconnects that made language learning feel unfamiliar and, at times, exclusionary.

Her voice stands out not because it claims expertise, but because it reveals the quiet, sustained work of a teacher thinking through difficulty: trying one approach, then another, reflecting on what seemed to help, and adjusting again. It is precisely this process, observing, adapting, and making meaning in context, that makes her an ideal participant for a narrative inquiry into the intersections of language transfer, cultural relevance, and pedagogical decision-making.

Research Design

This study adopted a narrative case study design, grounded in the belief that meaning in education is not merely found in patterns across data but in the lived experiences of individuals navigating specific challenges in context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Rather than aiming to produce generalized claims about ethnic minority education in Vietnam, this research turned its attention to a single teacher's account of working with Khmer learners, a story that is both particular and profoundly resonant.

The choice of a narrative approach is shaped by the nature of the data itself. The teacher's reflection, submitted voluntarily through a professional development course, was not prompted by research questions or structured interview protocols. It was a self-authored account, written not for publication but as a moment of pedagogical introspection. As such, it offers insight not just into what the teacher did, but how she saw her classroom, how she framed problems, and how she made sense of her own responses. These features align with the central assumptions of narrative inquiry: that people make meaning through stories, and that those stories are shaped by cultural, institutional, and personal contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Riessman, 2008).

By focusing on a single teacher in a specific Khmer-majority setting, the study embraced what Stake (1995) had referred to as the "instrumental case," not because the teacher is exceptional, but because her story serves as a window into the broader and often invisible labor of teaching at the intersection of multiple languages and cultures. Her reflection is treated as a rich, situated text: not a set of data points to be extracted, but a narrative to be read with attention to voice, structure, and intention.

Rather than seeking causality or comparison, the aim of this design is to explore complexity, how one teacher experiences and responds to linguistic and cultural dissonance, and what that tells us about the hidden

curriculum of multilingual teaching. It is in the specific moments, such as the misinterpreted instructions, the culturally unfamiliar examples, the quiet breakthroughs, that pedagogical knowledge is made visible. In this sense, the study does not aim to speak for all teachers of Khmer learners, but to amplify one voice that helps us think differently about what it means to teach English where the language of the classroom and the language of the learner do not fully align.

Data Collection

As mentioned, the primary source of data for this study is a written reflection composed by the participating teacher as part of her coursework in a British Council professional development program. The course encouraged participants to describe how they had applied newly learned strategies in their own classrooms and to reflect on what worked, what did not, and why. While many participants focused on classroom routines or broad instructional adaptations, the teacher at the center of this study chose to write specifically about her experiences teaching English to Khmer ethnic minority learners, a decision that foregrounded a set of challenges often absent from mainstream discourse on English language teaching in Vietnam.

The reflection, approximately 1200 words in length, was submitted in Vietnamese and later translated into English by the research team for analysis. Care was taken to preserve not only the accuracy of meaning but also the tone, phrasing, and contextual nuances of the teacher's original voice. The text reads less like a report and more like a letter, an honest account of struggle, adaptation, and hope. It captures moments of confusion, breakthrough, and insight, and is rich with classroom detail: how learners reacted to certain grammar points, how visual aids were used to support comprehension, how chunk-based teaching was introduced to counteract common L1 interference, and how cultural unfamiliarity sometimes derailed engagement with textbook topics.

Although the reflection was not written for research purposes, it holds significant value as a pedagogical artifact. It offers a window into the teacher's thought processes and reveals how professional development content was interpreted and reshaped to meet the needs of a very specific learner group. Unlike responses to structured interviews or surveys, this reflection emerges from the teacher's own initiative, framed in her own terms, and directed toward the questions that mattered to her in that moment. It is this authenticity, this voice speaking from within the classroom rather than about it, that gives the text its analytic weight.

To ensure ethical use of the reflection, the teacher's identity has been anonymized, and identifying details about her school and learners have been removed or altered. Her consent was reconfirmed prior to the study, and she was invited to review the translated version of her reflection for accuracy and comfort. In treating the reflection as both data and dialogue, this study affirms that what teachers write, when given space to write freely, can offer deep insight not only into classroom practice, but into the pedagogical values, cultural sensitivities, and linguistic negotiations that underlie that practice.

Data Analysis

The teacher's written reflection was analyzed using a narrative thematic approach, a method that attends both to the thematic patterns embedded in what is said and to the structure and sequencing of how those ideas are told (Riessman, 2008). Unlike more fragmentary forms of thematic analysis that isolate codes across a dataset, this approach maintains the integrity of the narrative, allowing meaning to emerge from within the unfolding arc of the teacher's account. It values not only the content of the reflection but the voice, rhythm, and logic with which the teacher constructed her pedagogical story.

The analysis began with several close readings of the full text in both the original Vietnamese and the English translation. These initial readings focused on understanding the overall narrative arc: how the teacher introduced the classroom context, identified the challenges she faced, experimented with strategies, and

reflected on their outcomes. Particular attention was paid to moments of tension or surprise: where learner behavior conflicted with curricular expectations, where instructional routines broke down, or where new understanding seemed to emerge through trial and error. These narrative pivots were treated as meaningful points of interpretation rather than problems to be solved.

Emerging from these readings, a series of thematic patterns were identified and annotated in the margins. These included issues related to language transfer (e.g., consistent omission of articles, misordering of adjectives, confusion around tense), cultural gaps (e.g., learners' unfamiliarity with textbook scenarios, discomfort with classroom participation), and teacher adaptations (e.g., use of chunk-based instruction, visual scaffolding, simplified prompts, cultural substitution). Rather than categorizing these into discrete variables, the themes were traced as they appeared and evolved across the teacher's narrative, highlighting how the teacher herself moved between noticing a challenge, interpreting its cause, and devising a pedagogical response.

Throughout the process, the teacher's language was preserved wherever possible to retain the texture of her reflection. Quotations were selected not only to illustrate themes but to evoke the voice of a practitioner thinking through practice. The goal was not to extract a list of best practices but to illuminate how one teacher made sense of complexity, how she learned to see her learners differently, and how she taught them more responsively.

To support analytic trustworthiness, the reflection and thematic interpretations were shared with two Vietnamese teacher educators familiar with multilingual and ethnic minority education. Their feedback helped refine the analysis and confirmed that the themes identified resonated with broader patterns observed in similar educational contexts.

Ultimately, the analysis sought to honor the reflection not merely as a record of what happened, but as a window into the intellectual and emotional labor of teaching across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In doing so, it offers a textured understanding of what it means to teach English not in the abstract, but in a place, with particular learners, under very real constraints.

FINDINGS

Language Transfer and Cultural Distance in the Khmer Learner's English Classroom

In her reflection, the teacher did not begin with an abstract description of error types or contrastive linguistics. She began with a feeling: a classroom full of quiet learners, eyes lowered, hesitant to speak, even when the questions are simple and the stakes are low. *"They often avoid answering,"* she wrote, *"not because they are lazy, but because they are unsure of what I am asking or how to answer in the way the book expects."* This silence, she came to realize, was not apathy. It was the audible weight of linguistic and cultural dissonance.

The most immediate challenge she observed was structural interference from the learners' L1, Khmer. Many learners struggled to form even the most basic English sentences, often omitting articles, auxiliary verbs, or the copula "be." Instead of *"She is a learner,"* a learner might say, *"She learner."* Adjectives were sometimes placed after nouns, and past tense markers, especially the "-ed" ending, were frequently dropped. These patterns, the teacher noted, were not random. They followed the grammar of Khmer, a language that does not require articles, does not inflect verbs for tense, and structures noun phrases differently. She began to see her learners' *"mistakes"* not as failures of effort, but as echoes of a grammar they had learned long before English arrived in the curriculum.

Yet the linguistic hurdles were only part of the difficulty. Equally striking were the cultural gaps that emerged between the content of the English curriculum and the lived experiences of her Khmer learners. Lessons on leisure activities assumed access to movies, malls, and school clubs; writing prompts asked learners to describe birthday parties or fast food restaurants, settings unfamiliar or irrelevant in many Khmer households. *“When the book shows a family eating pizza together,”* she wrote, *“some learners look confused. They have never eaten pizza, and they rarely eat together in that way.”* In moments like these, comprehension faltered not because of vocabulary, but because the social world behind the language felt foreign.

Even the social norms embedded in classroom talk presented difficulties. Group work required learners to speak up, give opinions, and offer feedback, practices that ran counter to the more hierarchical, deferential communication patterns observed in many Khmer families and temples. *“They hesitate to correct their friends,”* the teacher noted, *“especially when the friend is older or louder.”* These were not only challenges of language, but of interpersonal positioning, shaped by cultural norms about age, respect, and social harmony.

One recurring image in her reflection was that of misalignment. The book asked for one thing; the learner understood another. The teacher said, *“I used Vietnamese to explain, but the learner filtered it through Khmer.”* A single sentence in English became a three-language puzzle, with each code offering partial but imperfect access. In these moments, the teacher found herself not only translating but decoding, trying to understand what her learners were thinking, how they were interpreting tasks, and what linguistic habits might be shaping their responses before a word was even spoken.

These layered challenges made clear to the teacher that teaching English in this context was not just about bridging L1 and L2, but about navigating a triadic linguistic landscape in which Khmer, Vietnamese, and English intersected in complex, often invisible ways. Her reflection reads less like a catalog of difficulties and more like a gradual coming-into-awareness, a recognition that her learners were not underperforming, but operating within a linguistic and cultural logic that had simply not been accounted for in the curriculum.

It was this realization, grounded in daily observation and shaped by a deepening empathy, that set the stage for the pedagogical responses she would begin to experiment with. These are the responses explored in the second finding.

Pedagogical Responses to Linguistic and Cultural Misalignment

Faced with a classroom shaped by multiple languages and divergent cultural reference points, the teacher did not turn to elaborate reform or wholesale redesign. Instead, she turned inward, observing her learners more closely, listening more carefully, and adjusting her teaching through small but deliberate acts of adaptation. Her reflection captures this process not as a linear shift but as a series of responsive decisions, each rooted in her understanding of what her learners needed in that moment, and what the curriculum failed to provide.

Her first and most consistent strategy was a move toward chunk-based instruction. Noticing that grammar explanations often confused her learners, especially when built around abstract metalanguage, she began teaching English in prefabricated, meaningful units. Instead of isolating verbs or noun phrases, she introduced complete expressions such as *“I want to...”*, *“She is good at...”*, or *“Can I...?”* These chunks, she found, allowed learners to bypass the confusion of syntactic construction and instead focus on use. *“When they learn the whole phrase,”* she wrote, *“they use it with more confidence. They do not need to stop and think about each word.”* By treating grammar as something embedded in speech rather than dissected into parts, she offered her Khmer learners a way into English that felt more intuitive, more rhythmic, and, importantly, less error-prone.

She also incorporated visual scaffolding as a key tool. When teaching vocabulary, she paired words with hand-drawn illustrations or real objects brought from home. During writing lessons, she encouraged learners to draw before they wrote to sketch out the scene they wanted to describe, or to visualize the characters in a story. For learners who struggled to form sentences, drawing provided a concrete reference point, allowing them to

access meaning before searching for the right English words. *“Their pictures help me see what they want to say,”* she explained, *“and I can guide them from there.”* In this way, visual tools became not just supports, but bridges, linking ideas, languages, and learners across gaps that neither words nor translations could easily cross.

Culturally, the teacher took quiet steps to localize the curriculum. When textbook topics felt too distant, such as describing a Western-style birthday party or narrating a trip to a shopping mall, she adapted the tasks. Instead of describing *“a holiday in another country,”* her learners were asked to write about *Chôl Chnăm Thmây*, the Khmer New Year. Instead of ordering food at a fast-food restaurant, they practiced dialogues based on local markets or family meals. These substitutions were not acts of resistance but of realignment, efforts to make the content of English instruction more legible, more relevant, and more affirming to her learners’ identities. *“When the lesson includes something they know,”* she wrote, *“they speak more. They even smile.”*

She also rethought the dynamics of classroom interaction. Aware that many Khmer learners were hesitant to speak in large groups or to correct peers, she structured speaking activities around pairs or small groups, often assigning roles in advance to ease participation. In group writing tasks, she allowed quieter learners to contribute through idea-mapping or drawing, and she praised these contributions publicly to signal their value. Over time, she observed subtle shifts: more eye contact, more raised hands, more follow-up questions. *“Not everyone speaks yet,”* she admitted, *“but they are not afraid of English in the same way.”*

Underlying these pedagogical choices was a consistent theme: responsiveness. The teacher did not position herself as a deliverer of content, but as an interpreter of classroom signals. When a strategy faltered, she adjusted. When a learner hesitated, she waited. When a textbook task fell flat, she reshaped it. This was not innovation for its own sake; it was care enacted through attention. *“I cannot change the curriculum, but I can change the way I teach it for my learners,”* she concluded.

In her classroom, the act of teaching English to Khmer learners became more than linguistic transmission. It became an act of cultural mediation, of pedagogical translation, and of human responsiveness. Through chunking, drawing, localizing, and listening, she crafted a practice that met her learners where they were, not by lowering expectations, but by rerouting the path toward understanding. These were not grand reforms, but quiet shifts, deliberate, grounded, and deeply respectful of who her learners were.

DISCUSSION

In recounting her classroom experiences with Khmer learners, the teacher in this study offers more than an account of difficulty. She offers a window into the layered terrain of multilingual education in rural Vietnam, where the language of schooling, home, and curriculum do not always speak to one another. Her reflection shows how English enters the classroom not simply as a subject to be learned, but as a language filtered through Khmer and Vietnamese, shaped by gaps in familiarity, asymmetries in power, and tensions between global standards and local lives. While the linguistic errors she describes, such as missing copulas, unmarked tenses, restructured word order, are well documented in the literature on L1 transfer (Odlin, 1989), what is distinctive in this case is how they are reframed and acted upon within a triadic language ecology. Rather than treating errors as individual shortcomings or as simple Khmer-English interference, the teacher reads them as patterned responses to the cumulative structural distance across Khmer, Vietnamese, and English. This interpretive stance does not merely align with recent calls to see transfer as a cognitive and cultural negotiation (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008), but it shows how such a stance is operationalised in day-to-day pedagogical reasoning, as the teacher continually asks what kind of linguistic and cultural work a particular “mistake” is doing.

In this sense, the study’s contribution is not the identification of novel techniques, but the theorisation of triadic pedagogical responsiveness: the way a teacher in a Khmer-majority classroom connects her noticing of

patterned responses to structural distance with small, situated adaptations of the curriculum. Chunk-based instruction, visual scaffolding, and culturally localised tasks are well established in the literature, yet here they are assembled and justified through the lens of a three-language pathway: Khmer (L1) through Vietnamese (L2) to English (L3). By tracing this pathway in the teacher's own words, the study shows how familiar strategies are reconfigured when they are used to mediate not one, but two layers of linguistic and cultural translation.

Her move toward chunk-based instruction illustrates this point. The strategy itself has long been advocated as a way to ease cognitive load and boost fluency (Nation & Webb, 2011). What is novel here is how the teacher arrives at chunking, not through a methodological prescription, but through listening to her Khmer learners' hesitations and recognising that rule-based explanations are being filtered through Vietnamese into a grammatical system that does not mark tense or articles. Chunking becomes, in her practice, a way of aligning English with the rhythms and affordances of this triadic environment. It is, in other words, not only an effective technique, but an expression of empathy and agency in a setting where the textbook offers little guidance for teaching across three languages. The teacher's strategies are not implemented for effectiveness alone, but for the sake of keeping her learners engaged and unafraid. In doing so, she joins what West (2016) called the adaptation of communicative approach, common in Asian contexts where teachers reshape communicative language teaching principles to better suit local learner identities.

Perhaps the most striking contrast between this study and prior research lies in how knowledge is framed. Much of the literature on ethnic minority learners in Vietnam has focused on systemic barriers, such as policy constraints, curricular uniformity, and assessment inequities (Le Ha et al., 2014; Vu, 2024). These studies, while important, often treat teachers as responders to policy, not as originators of insight. In contrast, the present study positions the teacher as a theorist of her own practice. Her reflection offers what Clandinin and Connelly (2004) called "personal practical knowledge," a form of theorizing grounded in action, shaped by context, and revealed through story. She does not draw on academic terms, but she narrates the challenges and adaptations with a clarity and precision that advance our understanding of what it means to teach English in multilingual, under-resourced, and culturally plural settings.

In this way, the study contributes to both research and practice by making visible what is often invisible in policy reports or evaluation frameworks: the everyday, situated judgment of teachers working in spaces of linguistic and cultural difference. It does not offer scalable models or fixed strategies. Rather, it shows how responsiveness is enacted, in decisions to simplify a prompt, sketch a picture, pause a lesson, or revise a grouping, all of which emerge from watching learners closely and caring enough to shift course.

CONCLUSION

In the small classroom where this study takes place, there are no high-tech tools, no curriculum designers observing from the back, and no specialized training in multilingual pedagogy. What there is, however, is attention, sustained, reflective attention to how Khmer learners experience English. That attention, carried in one teacher's decision to slow down, to simplify, to draw, and to rephrase, is what makes the difference between learning that merely proceeds and learning that connects.

This study has followed a teacher who chose to respond, not react. She did not discard the textbook or abandon the curriculum. Instead, she softened its edges, making English less foreign by rooting it, whenever she could, in what her learners knew, saw, and lived. In doing so, she enacted something profoundly practical: the idea that good teaching for ethnic minority learners in triadic language environments begins not with new methods, but with new ways of seeing how learners' patterned responses arise from structural distance across their languages.

Her classroom reminds us that pedagogical change does not always require systemic overhaul. It can begin with shifting the unit of instruction from grammar rules to meaningful chunks that reflect how language is used

in context. It can begin with choosing a cultural reference that resonates with learners' lives, rather than defaulting to one that travels easily from page to page. It can begin with changing the shape of participation, not asking reluctant speakers to perform in front of the class, but creating safer, quieter spaces for them to build confidence over time. These choices do not require special resources. They require responsiveness, which is a resource teachers already possess when they are trusted to use it.

For teacher education programs, this case suggests that future teachers, especially those serving diverse regions, should be invited not only to learn language teaching methods but to develop a habit of noticing: noticing who their learners are, how language intersects with identity, and when a mismatch between materials and context becomes a learning barrier. In rural or ethnolinguistically diverse settings, this habit may matter as much as any methodology taught in coursework.

For curriculum developers, the implications are also clear. A one-size-fits-all approach to English education risks silencing or alienating learners whose linguistic and cultural realities are not reflected in textbook narratives. More flexible, localized content, paired with space for teachers to adapt, can make room for learners who too often remain invisible in national standards.

Ultimately, what this study offers is not a toolkit, but a way of thinking. It affirms that the smallest pedagogical moves, when rooted in care and contextual knowledge, can create some of the most meaningful learning opportunities for ethnic minority learners. And it reminds us that in classrooms shaped by linguistic asymmetry and cultural distance, equity is not delivered from above. It is handcrafted, moment by moment, by teachers who decide that teaching begins with understanding, and that understanding, when it is deep and sincere, is a practice of justice.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

As with any story drawn from a single classroom, this study carries its limits openly. It offers a close, detailed portrait of one teacher's thinking, shaped by her particular context, her learners, and her own professional journey. It does not claim to speak for all teachers of ethnic minority learners, nor to account for the full range of Khmer learners' experiences across Vietnam. The insights that emerge here are grounded in one narrative, in one teacher's words, and in the meanings she made through reflection. That specificity is the study's strength, but also its constraint.

Because the data came from a self-authored reflection, the study does not include triangulated perspectives from learners, observers, or other educators in the school. We see the classroom as the teacher saw it: through her interpretations of learner behavior, her understanding of their struggles, and her efforts to respond. While this perspective is rich and instructive, future studies might deepen and expand the view by listening also to the learners and to how they experience the cultural shifts, the linguistic challenges, and the moments when learning feels either close or out of reach.

There is also much to explore beyond a single case. Other teachers, in other regions, may be navigating similar challenges with different strategies or encountering barriers this study has not touched. Comparative case studies, especially across ethnic groups or between urban and rural schools, could help uncover patterns in how language transfer and cultural gaps are perceived and addressed by teachers across Vietnam's diverse educational landscape.

In addition, the pedagogical insights raised here could benefit from longitudinal inquiry. How do these small adaptations, such as chunking, drawing, and cultural substitution, play out over time? What happens when a

learner who once fell silent begins to speak with confidence? And how might these changes shape not only language learning outcomes, but learners' broader sense of belonging in the classroom?

Finally, while this study has centered classroom-level practice, it leaves open questions about institutional and systemic support. What kinds of training, resources, or policy shifts would allow more teachers to respond flexibly and thoughtfully to multilingual, multicultural realities? Future research might examine how professional development programs, curriculum reforms, or assessment redesigns could better support equity for ethnic minority learners, by recognizing, rather than erasing, the differences they bring.

This case, then, is not an end point. It is an invitation: to look more closely, to listen more carefully, and to study not only what teachers are told to do, but what they are already doing, quietly, resourcefully, and with an eye toward the learners who might otherwise be left behind.

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