

Occupying the ‘Third Space’: Perspectives and Experiences of Asian English Language Teachers

Toni Dobinson

Abstract This chapter is drawn from a larger study which describes the experiences and perspectives of a group of Asian English language teachers who were also post-graduate students in a Master’s program provided offshore in Vietnam and onshore in Australia by an Australian university. Case study data were gathered from the two sites through semi-structured interviews, related documents and primary texts. Findings relating to one of the key interview questions, which investigated Asian postgraduates’ responses to Western educational discourses, form the basis of the chapter. Asian teachers reported feeling very influenced by pedagogical approaches which had originated in the West, and felt professionally inspired by them to search for new, innovative teaching approaches. They also recognised the benefits of a synthesis of Western and local approaches. Despite occupying this ‘Third Space’, however, Asian postgraduates reported feelings of inferiority, disruption, and frustration on both personal and pedagogic levels when attempting to work within Western discourses and, in some cases, when working alongside Western teachers. In this chapter I argue for greater recognition of what Asian teachers can offer in terms of their ability to ‘adapt’ rather than to ‘adopt’ (Li, *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(4):696), and ‘recast’ rather than imitate (Chowdhury and Phan, *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 28(3):311). This cultural and educational acumen could form the basis for more dialogue between language teachers in the Asia Pacific region.

Keywords Third space · Intercultural competence · Educational discourses · Transnational education · Asian English language teachers

1 Introduction

Carl Rogers starts his book *Freedom to Learn* (1969, pp. vi–vii) with a series of questions. He predicts the political implications of education as it was developing in his time and the move towards an alliance between education and profit-making corporations. He foresaw a world which was increasingly globalised and at the

T. Dobinson (✉)
School of Education, Curtin University and Graduate Research School,
University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia
e-mail: t.dobinson@curtin.edu.au

same time increasingly inward looking or localised: a world where education became a commodity and an export; a world where ‘schooling’ became the new world religion, necessary for participation in society (Illich 1970); a world of ‘pedagogic action’ in line with the interests of the dominant players (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, p. 9) which, in this case, is the Western world.

According to Milner, such a world requires teaching built upon knowledge and awareness of diversity, incorporating issues of race, cultural conflict and meritocracy, and conceptions of deficit. Freire (1970) argues for all teachers concerned with bringing down educational hegemonies in all forms, to be enfranchised or, as Milner says, ‘to have a seat at the table’ (2010, p. 122). Currently, many English language teachers for whom English is a second language are closer to the ‘Third Space’, or intercultural competence and the ability to work within varied educational discourses, than their counterparts who speak English as a first language. They are plurilingual, pluricultural and in control of what Phan calls ‘a harmonious combination of global and local pedagogies’ (2004, p. 52), but struggle to have their ideas valued by teachers with English as a first language. Much has been written about the need for second or foreign language teachers to be metaculturally aware, reflecting upon Self and Other (Bright and Phan 2011; Louie 2005; Milner 2010) and moving towards occupancy of what Bhabha calls the ‘Third Space’, an in-between position or ‘ambivalent space in which third perspectives can grow in the margins of dominant ways of seeing’ (1994, pp. 227–237). Being plurilingual and pluricultural is a step towards being in the Third Space, yet the voices of many Asian teachers of English go unheard when it comes to prevailing educational discourses. Western-generated, top-down syllabus designs often prescribe methodologies developed outside local contexts and do not reflect local voices, while Western expatriate teachers living in Asia sometimes do not give local teachers the respect they deserve (Widin 2010).

This chapter describes Asian and, in particular, Vietnamese English-language teachers’ responses to Western educational discourses, the influences these discourses have had on their teaching and learning, and the underlying feelings of deficit and difference that emerge despite successful adaptation to dual discourses and high levels of intercultural competence. Conclusions focus on providing greater recognition of the contributions of Asian teachers.

2 Related Literature

2.1 *Western Educational Discourses and Local Contexts*

Critical pedagogy has urged deconstruction of long-standing Orientalist binary paradigms (Takayama 2008, p. 19) and arrived at the conclusion that ‘social, cultural and political contexts ... are so diverse, the educational systems so incommensurable that it has become very difficult to make any generalisations about the best way to teach’ (Kramsch 2009, p. 245). Despite this, Widin’s study (2010) of expatriate

teachers involved in university English language teaching projects in East and South East Asia describes the symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1984) of colonialism and aid often manifest in such projects. She talks about the undervaluing and marginalisation of host country Asian staff and teachers, even when they have more training and cultural capital than the teachers brought in to do the job. The result can be self-marginalisation and debasement of the host country's teachers (Widin 2010).

On the brighter side, the literature indicates that there has been some partial deconstruction of East/West teaching and learning paradigms (Takayama 2008). Educational trends and related philosophies can move like shifting sands, parts of the dynamic social, political and economic climates of their time. Just as one idealised set of educational principles has been established, another may emerge to meet the needs of a changing global economy. This is apparent in the way that American and Japanese educational systems are now developing very differently, with the former moving towards greater centralisation in its institutional and pedagogic beliefs and away from 'progressive' pedagogical theories to a neo-liberal focus on testing, standards and core curriculum, and the latter moving towards decentralisation, differentiation of curricula and a 'progressive' pedagogical ethos inspired by humanistic notions of *kosei* (individuality) and *yutori* (more room for growth) (Takayama 2008, p. 19). Such movement highlights the dynamic nature of educational discourse. In recent years, several authors have suggested a move towards a more context-based approach to teaching and learning (Bax 2003; Kramsch 2009), but Asian teachers continue to struggle with the low status of approaches not endorsed by current Western educational theory. Regardless of their ability to manage 'one community, two systems' (Liu and Fisher 2010, p. 180) and operate in at least two languages and cultures, they receive little recognition of the thirdness of perspective that this gives them.

2.2 *Thirdness*

The idea of being in a Third Space has captured the imaginations of scholars in many fields, including contributors to this volume (see McAlinden, Chapter, "Can Teachers Know Learners' Minds? Teacher Empathy and Learner Body Language in English Language Teaching"). It is referred to as a third 'culture', a third 'stance' or just 'thirdness' (Kramsch 2009). In cultural studies the Third Space is seen as critique which condemns the discourses of domination and 'occupies a space that is neither inside nor outside the history of Western domination but in a tangential relation to it' (Prakash 1992, p. 8). Bhabha (1994) calls this position 'hybridity' (p. 277), an in-between position; 'an ambivalent space in which third perspectives can grow in the margins of dominant ways of seeing' (p. 237). In the field of urban planning and design, Soja (1996) has suggested that the binary of 'same' and 'different' be replaced with 'both' and 'also'. The Third Space, according to him, is a place where there can be creative combinations and the provision of alternative ways of thinking which go beyond conventional borders and the status quo (Soja

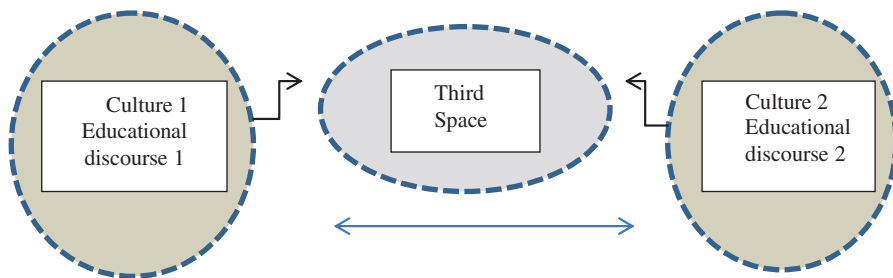


Fig. 1 The Third Space

1996). Similarly, in religious studies, Ingleby states that ‘we need to develop ways of cultural interaction, of forming community, that both destroy existing oppositions and create newness, resulting in hybridity or a Third Space’ (2006, p. 1). The Third Space provides not so much a new identity (all about me) but a new identification (all about me and another, or even the Other-someone different from me). Culture, he says, requires a non-sovereign view of Self.

In pedagogy, Kramsch favours the term Third Stance rather than Third Culture, as the former suggests more of a process or ‘oppositional way of being’ than a permanent or static place (2009, p. 248). Culture, and the ontology and epistemology associated with it, she argues, needs to be seen as ‘a mode, but not a place, of belonging’ as ‘imagined as it is real’, as a move away from teaching, learning and research conceptualised through traditional dichotomies, and towards dynamic, emergent phenomena which disassemble binaries in culture (2009, p. 248). Such a position is socially constructed and produced through social interaction and discussion (Bhabha 1994; Gutiérrez 2008; Moje et al. 2004). To be in a state of thirdness requires collaboration and innovation (Bhabha 1994), sense-making (both joint and individual), shared understandings and practices (Gutiérrez 2008) and intercultural competence (Crozet et al. 1999).

The idea of thirdness has given rise to Kramsch’s ‘ecological culture’ and Bax’s context-based approach. Both of these teaching approaches are highly ‘context-sensitive and adapted to the demands of the environment’ (Kramsch 2009, p. 247). Such an approach to language education means focusing attention on de-territorialised communicative practices (Blommaert 2005). This perspective is not without its stresses, involving the building of new practices and ontologies which may be historically and socially complex and untidy (Gutiérrez 2008). Teachers in a globalised world may have a new skill set and increased intercultural competence, but at the same time they may experience ‘dislocation and disjuncture’ (Nielsen 2011, p. 19), states which are by-products of operating in the Third Space. In short, thirdness sits outside Western educational discourses and in opposition to them, even as it is defined and influenced by their existence. Thirdness in this chapter is referred to as a ‘space’ (Bhabha 1994) rather than a ‘stance’ (Kramsch 2009) because ‘stance’ could be seen as a perspective or viewpoint anchored within Firstness, a situation represented more accurately by a Venn Diagram, while ‘space’ suggests that effort and movement are required to reach this position, as represented above (Fig. 1):

Table 1 Profile of the Asian postgraduate participants taking the MA Applied Linguistics onshore in Australia

Pseudonym	Age range	Gender	Nationality
Yin	20–30	F	Chinese
Lisa	20–30	F	Indonesian
Andee	20–30	M	Indonesian
Yoko	40–50	F	Japanese
Sahar	20–30	F	Bangladeshi
Wong	30–40	M	Chinese
Nguyen	20–30	M	Vietnamese
Mansour	30–40	M	Saudi Arabian
Ravinder	30–40	F	Indian
Jane	20–30	F	Taiwanese

3 Research Method and Design

In 2000 Medgyes observed that relatively little had been written about the experiences of non-native English-speaking teachers (Medgyes 2000). Berns et al. had noted this a year earlier, calling for more voices and views from the periphery to be heard (1999). Global discourse on English language teaching (ELT) has focused more recently on the experiences of non-native English speaking teachers (Hayes 2009), including personal biographies (Braine 2010) and research into perceived identities (Inbar-Lurie 2005), yet relatively few studies have explored the experiences of these teachers in depth.

The case study reported in this chapter was designed to investigate the world views of Asian postgraduates studying in Vietnam and Australia. It sought to discover how they live, work and make subjective meanings of their teaching and learning experiences. A qualitative research method was employed, in the conviction that realities are holistic, constructed and multiple, interacting in a state of 'mutual simultaneous shaping' without any separation between the knower and what is known (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p. 37). The study was also aligned with postmodern interpretivist interactionist approaches which try to focus on revealing informants' 'self-concept' and 'emotions' as well as notions of 'power' and 'ideology' (Denzin 1992, p. 74).

Participants comprised two groups of people across two different sites. The first group consisted of Asian postgraduates studying onshore at an Australian university, all English language teachers in their own countries. The second group was Vietnamese postgraduates from Vietnam studying at the same institution but offshore, in Ho Chi Minh City. All had at least three years of English language teaching experience. All were enrolled in the one-year, eight-unit, coursework MA (Applied Linguistics) offered both offshore in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam and onshore in Australia. A profile of the participants is given in Tables 1 and 2.

Semi-structured individual face to face interviews were used to gather reflections and responses to the interview question: 'How have theories of teaching and learning, established mostly in the West, influenced your views on teaching

Table 2 Profile of the Vietnamese postgraduate participants taking the MA Applied Linguistics offshore in Vietnam

Pseudonym	Age range	Gender	Nationality
Tina	20–30	F	Vietnamese
Una	20–30	F	Vietnamese
Vera	20–30	F	Vietnamese
Hilda	20–30	F	Vietnamese
Tracy	20–30	F	Vietnamese
Tom	20–30	M	Vietnamese
Andrew	20–30	M	Vietnamese
Hannah	20–30	F	Vietnamese
Valerie	20–30	F	Vietnamese
Nina	20–30	F	Vietnamese

and learning?’ Findings were analysed using an approach described by Miles and Huberman as ‘transcendental realism’ (1994, p. 4). The three main stages of this are data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions. As students related their experiences and ideas, some of their responses were in the form of ‘narrative’ (Labov 1972, 1982). These narratives were preserved in order not to fracture participants’ ways of constructing meaning (Reissman 1993). Analysis of the narratives provided by participants complemented the segmented analysis and the analysis of related documents and primary texts used to triangulate the study.

4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Responses to Western Educational Discourses

The meaning that the Asian postgraduate students/English language teachers made from their teaching and learning encounters ranged from constructive to less constructive. Western learning theories and approaches had influenced participants in their classroom practice both explicitly and implicitly. Out-of-classroom encounters had also exercised considerable indirect influence over how participants responded to Western educational discourses.

On the one hand, the postgraduates shared a common view that exposure to Western teaching and learning theories, and approaches arising from these theories, had enthused and inspired them to try ‘different ways’ of teaching. They reported that they had discovered approaches to teaching which were beneficial for their learners, and felt liberated from the tedium of the traditional approaches to which they had become accustomed. They talked about increased ‘good relationships’ with students after implementing the new methodologies. They felt inspired to search for

new teaching styles and more competent approaches to their teaching. To varying extents, both onshore and offshore participants reported that exposure to current learning theories emanating from the West had led them to a new understanding of the 'good teacher' as someone who is 'flexible' and knowledgeable, gives positive feedback, provides strategies for independent learning, has a sense of humour and is prepared to embark upon lifelong learning. On the other hand, there was common feeling among the onshore group in particular that traditional Asian approaches to teaching and learning were equally as effective as those imported from the West. They drew on Eastern approaches to teaching and learning when they claimed that a 'good teacher' needed to be a controller, a role model, a counsellor, a knower of the students, a surrogate parent or care-giver and a builder of dreams. They felt that students needed to believe in the teacher but at the same time the teacher needed to be very strict. There was shared agreement that a teacher's role is to guide students away from 'dangers' and 'evil', and to model moral virtues not only in the classroom but in life generally. Such responses resonate with the work carried out by Dung (2005), Phan (2004) and the guidelines set down by the Constitution of Vietnam which state that 'the aim of education is to form and nurture the personality and moral qualities' (Constitution of Vietnam, Article 35) and that a teacher is 'an engineer of the soul' (Phan 2008, p. 9). Furthermore, they suggested that being an Asian teacher operating within the local context allowed insights into Asian students' behaviours and learning approaches. It provided them with insider perspectives on occurrences of plagiarism, and on phenomena beyond the classroom such as the degree of parental input in the lives of their students (even adult students).

Asian postgraduates also recognised the necessity to form a synthesis of Eastern and Western educational discourses in their roles as English language teachers, and to operate on many levels in the globalised world. For example, the idea of the teacher as a parent or care-giver needed to be married with the idea of the student as an independent learner. Strategies for memorisation needed to be provided alongside strategies for more creative learning approaches. Overall, they agreed that it was possible for Western-endorsed approaches to teaching to be interpreted and practised in equivalent but different ways in the East, a view in line with the observations of Phan (2004).

Despite these insights and positions of thirdness, however, the postgraduates intimated that they sometimes felt they were not valued by their colleagues in the West, or accorded the respect they deserved in terms of their experience managing 'one community, two systems' (Liu and Fisher 2010, p. 180), two educational discourses and two or three languages and cultures. As a result, deficit and difference underpinned much of the meaning they made from their teaching and learning encounters both in Asia and Australia. This led to a certain amount of fear of, and scepticism about, Western educational theory and related approaches. Participants claimed to feel afraid, inferior, looked down upon, different and as though they were living in colonial times, even though they are considerably closer to thirdness than most of their counterparts in the West.

4.2 *Colonial Legacies*

Reference to colonialism was prevalent in participants' responses to Western educational discourses, particularly those of the Indian and Bangladeshi postgraduates, with comments also made by the Vietnamese postgraduates. Sahar diverted from the interview question slightly to observe how Bangladeshis, even now, were unable to break free of the effects of colonialism, feeling 'overwhelmed' by a 'white skin' and 'acting in a servile manner' at Western teaching conferences. She added quite vehemently, 'I am not your servant any more. We are not in the colony'. She attributed ignorance about research, and a dearth of expertise in academic theorising in Bangladesh, to the Western colonial forces in her country's past: 'in our country there is not much of a new theory or new research ... everyone is following the Western thing ... we have no other way but to ... follow Western research'. Such sentiments recall those of Prakash (1992, p. 8), who spoke of a Postcolonial state of being as the 'aftermath' or feeling of having been 'worked over' by colonial forces, and Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic violence' mentioned earlier (1984). Some Vietnamese postgraduate students continued this line of thought, talking about 'aggressive' Westerners not caring about Vietnamese people but just wishing to colonise them.

There was an overall sense of a postcolonial residue which left many Asians feeling sub-standard and under the impression that the West still sees them as child-like and dependent. As former Indonesian President Sukarno said at his opening speech at the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, 'colonialism is not dead ... in its modern dress it is a form of economic [and] intellectual control' (1955). More recently, Mahbubhani, an Asian academic, has pointed to a covert Western belief in its own moral superiority. This, he feels, is changing, although slowly, with the 'unwrapping' of the numerous layers of Western influence and the questioning of Western attitudes by many living outside the West (2008, pp. 129–130). Asians are no longer inclined to accept an educational theory just because it comes from the West, it seems.

4.3 *Inadequacy*

Beyond the classroom but related indirectly to the topic of the research, the picture painted by most Asian postgraduates was one of Western perceptions of Asians as 'not as fast or quick thinking', with the speed of social, political and educational change being much slower than in the Occident. They felt they were still seen as 'old-fashioned', 'not smart', 'underdeveloped', 'left behind', 'more primitive', 'not competent' or 'independent', unable 'to come up with [their] own things' particularly in the area of teaching and learning. The general feeling was that Westerners perceive Asians as inferior and 'look down on' them often because of human rights issues (the words 'inferior' and 'looked down upon' appeared 11 times in the transcripts), but also because they are too ready to follow 'regulations', too 'disciplined'

and principled, and not ready enough to show 'initiative' or 'creativity'. There was a suggestion that Asians were too compliant and diligent for their own good, moving to new approaches in education merely because they are told to do so by researchers in the West. Such findings are in line with studies which have reported Asian students' feelings of 'worthlessness' and 'inadequacy' (Aspland 1999, p. 37) and even of being devalued and marginalised by Western expatriate teachers (Widin 2010).

4.4 Unfamiliarity and Ignorance

Many participants provided comments during the interview which suggested that, even in a globalised world, there remains quite a gulf between West and East, Westerners and non-Westerners, Australians and Asians, Western teachers and Eastern teachers, Western educational discourses and Eastern educational discourses. This was attributed in part to a lack of meaningful contact, as well as to cultural and educational unfamiliarity. Nguyen said that, in his experience, volunteer teachers from America found it very difficult to teach in a Vietnamese context because of their lack of understanding and knowledge about 'the cultures and ... concepts'. Wong, although not referring to teaching and learning directly, summed up the situation aptly:

I have the kind of feeling many ... Australians and Westerners ... do not know much about China but they talk ... a lot about China ... I give an example ... from China's family plan ... when I talking with someone here ... [they say] your government is stupid ... it's terrible ... people have the right to give birth to kids but ... I think it's reasonable ... you are put in that situation it is quite different ... it's a very big population ... too big ... you seldom can find a city bus ... when you go to the downtown... such a population it's not easy for the government to feed them ... to clothe them ... there should be more communication otherwise there's a lot of misunderstanding.

Westerners tend to perpetrate the image of Asia as 'exotic', slipping into what has been referred to as 'a tourist approach' to cross-cultural education (Schoorman 2011), according to participants. This is not to say that Westerners are not interested in knowing about Asia; as Nina stated, 'they want to explore and want to find out more about Asian people, the history, the war time, something like that', but currently exotic images resound with Orientalist and colonial overtones (Said 1978) and do not add to metacultural knowledge. These images impact upon Western educational discourses and find their way into the teacher education courses.

4.5 Emulation

A commonly shared response to Western educational theories was the notion of trying to 'fit in with', or 'imitate' in some way, Western approaches to teaching and learning. This can mean that on a personal level Asian teachers end up caught between cultures, as described by Yin:

Back in China they have a word for people like me ... it's just something like we ... don't fully belong to Asian culture or fully belong to Australian, but we kind of half/half because we're not born here but we have grown up in China.

Similarly, Mansour explained that he was 'in the middle' with no desire 'to follow the whole Western culture' but at the same time not wanting 'to follow the ... extremists ... in Islam', sentiments also expressed by an Indian nurse in a study by Xu (2007). The participant reported feeling as if she had 'a foot here, a foot there, a foot nowhere' (Xu 2007, p. 259). Such feelings of 'Otherness' or lack of belonging and inability to 'fit in', due to inadequate cultural knowledge or perceived cultural differences and linguistic challenges, are well documented in research (Chen and Shorte 2010; Gu 2011; Lewthwaite 1996; Skyrme 2007; Xu 2007; Yue and Le 2010).

In their roles as English language teachers, the participants admitted that they 'try to ... learn from the Western ... lifestyles' and 'be equal with them', and to show that their ability is the 'same as [a] Westerner' and using what they term 'the reliable method'. Sometimes the desire to assimilate produces Asian teachers who neither attain a new skill set successfully nor retain their previous skill set, according to some of the postgraduates. The inability to meet top-down 'standards' can lead to a lack of confidence in teaching and learning and sow seeds of anxiety and fear—from which can arise feelings of lability, a form of instability talked about by Mercieca, Chapman and O'Neill (2013) and by Mercieca in Chapter, "Changing Perspectives of Literacy, Identity and Motivation: Implications for Language Education" of this volume.

4.6 *Fear*

Some of the comments provided by participants were oblique to the interview question but very relevant to it. For example, many conveyed a sense of fear of some kind, which went beyond the classroom but had implications for it. Andee and Wong spoke of their fear of their governments and incarceration, ending up in a 'big grave' if they spoke out or did something like having satellite TV installed in their homes. They also confided fear of their parents and of transgressing cultural and social norms; Wong related how he was regularly beaten with a flower pot by his parents for misdemeanours. Yoko spoke of the psychological fear she felt that Westerners would view her in the same negative way as they do other Asians.

In terms of teaching and learning, participants reported a fear of entering a staff-room full of expatriate teachers and joining in conversations with them. As a corollary, Hannah admitted being very afraid at first of 'contact with foreigners' (as were her Vietnamese colleagues) and, as a child, running away when foreigners spoke to her.

Other forms of fear among the postgraduates in their roles as English language teachers were not directly linked to the influences of Western theories of teaching and learning, but again were related. For example, they expressed fear of their own education systems, fear of their managers or immediate superiors, fear of not



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