



SHOULD VIETNAMESE EFL LEARNERS HAVE ENGLISH NAMES?

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Abstract. In this paper, I investigate the practice of selecting English names for Vietnamese EFL learners at a language centre. Although this naming practice is required at the institution for communicative convenience, there is negotiation and exceptions where learners refuse to use English names. Naming is believed to reflect one's identity, and those learners explicitly indicate numerous reasons for their acceptance or refusal of having English names. Observations and interviews with 15 participants in an EFL class were undertaken to explore the attitudes and reasons for their naming practices and their identity reflection through that practice. The findings reveal that most learners see English names to be more convenient for their native English-speaking teachers and make them feel more westernised, which is, in their belief, necessary in an EFL setting. On the contrary, some learners would show respect to their Vietnamese names, which they believe to be meaningful and should be maintained. Whether using an English name as an act of showing respect or not in EFL settings is also discussed. Also, regardless of genders, the paper reveals the age issue that strongly impacts the naming decision. The paper concludes with suggestions for the proper naming practice among EFL learners so as not to make learners feel discontent in their learning processes.

Keywords: name, identity, EFL settings, attitude, reflection

1. Introduction

"One does not fear if he/she has a bad fate; what one fears most is to be given a bad name," says Cheang [2008, p.197], a language educator with an interest in foreign names. It serves as an explanation for the traditional views on the values of names. It can be said that names are the very first impressions despite not being always sufficient to reflect a person. However, children's names do hold the wishes of their parents for a bright future and personal development [Lawson, 1987].

In this period of globalisation, intercultural communication has become much more popular in which people of different languages come together in a conversation where names are firstly addressed among interlocutors. Cheang [2008] concludes that the use of foreign names

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can create convenience in intercultural communication since names in some languages are far formal and hard to say, which can lead to mispronunciation causing negative impressions of disrespect when one's name is not correctly addressed. Hence, the use of foreign names, especially English names, is preferred as an indication of integration and modernisation.

In Vietnam, similar issues occur, particularly in multilingual settings where addressing names can be difficult for some, and if being mispronounced, it can lead to meaningless or insulting words. Therefore, foreign names have been highly popular among Vietnamese speakers when they work with foreign counterparts. At English language centres where Vietnamese learners have chances to study with foreigners, this case of foreign names seems to be unavoidable with the hope that the communication will flow more smoothly when people are not struggling with saying each other's names. Nonetheless, it should be noted that naming practice is greatly influenced by personal and cultural preferences and in some cases is not accepted by Vietnamese EFL learners. This paper, therefore, investigates the foreign naming practice of Vietnamese EFL learners at a language centre to address attitudes and reasons behind their naming act, and how that naming practice reflects their identities in the multilingual settings.

2. Literature review

Names and naming practices

The very first point to mention is the significance of a name. Studying names and their sociocultural aspects, Agyekum [2006] and Ainiala [2012] conclude that a name is not simply a label, but it contains numerous features representing the person given that name and the community that he or she belongs to. To illustrate, a name can commemorate a remarkable event or an important person to the name's holder [Guma, 2001]. Because a name represents its holder, it also creates some first impressions about that person. Kaplan and Fisher [2009] discuss names in the case of résumés, stating that readers may base themselves on the name given in the résumé to obtain first impression and initial understanding of a person, mostly about gender and ethnicity. Also, a name represents some reputations. In the case of work experience, prestigious institutions have their names known and respected by others; therefore, candidates who list those names in their CVs may have already been impressive to the employers. This example of Kaplan and Fisher [2009] has indicated how important and valuable a name is to not only an individual but also an organisation. Watzlawik et al. [2016] also see a name as a symbol of a person in association with their identity. Those researchers further comment that the changes of names may cause or be caused by the changes of identity. Names, in their opinions, are distinguishable and unique.

Because the significance of names is undeniable, researchers further investigate naming processes with an attempt to point out the reasons behind the choices of names. Most research-

ers working on naming processes tend to relate that to cultural aspects. Gerhards [2010], cited in Watzlawik et al. [2016], provides examples of children being named after their parents' wishes of their future prosperity or characteristics. Also, in some cultures, there is a source of common names for boys and girls. Watzlawik et al. [2016] study naming practices in Asian contexts and find out that children in Korea or China can be named with the assistance of fortune-tellers who are believed to know what names can bring good luck to the children.

Names and identities

Researchers have concluded that names are closely associated with one's personal representations. Particularly, adolescence is extremely interested in showing their identities as their uniqueness, and the choices of names are seen as one of the most obvious ways to achieve this goal, which leads to a variety of choices of names [Erikson, 1968; Starks et al., 2012]. For example, people name themselves following their idols or favourite colours [Cheang, 2008]. In their study on adolescents' naming practices, Starks et al. [2012] realise the use of personal traits and characteristics to be highly preferred for nicknames, which may not always lead to positive impacts if being misused.

Starks et al. [2012] investigate naming practices through self-evaluation and peer influences, which means a person may create his or her own nickname or be given a nickname by peers. However, the study indicates that not in all cases, nicknames are positively accepted by those who own or are given the nicknames. Numerous cultural and linguistic aspects are involved in this naming process, and it is fortunate that most adolescents in the study are aware of how names can affect one's emotions in order that they choose or give nicknames more properly.

All of the points above refer to the traditional views of names and naming practices. However, in this period of globalisation, naming practice is changing in association with social changes.

Globalisation and naming practices

Cheang [2008] refers to cases in Macau where a person, besides his or her original name, adds another name in a language that can be easily said or remembered. In Cheang's view, this is seen as an act of integration where people make their names conveniently addressed by other interlocutors. Another illustration is in Hong Kong where people use English names to assist their communication with Westerners [Fischer, 2015; Watzlawik et al., 2016]. Besides, in Western settings, Asian students, despite introducing their original names, quickly introduce their English names so that their peers can easily address. Cheang [2008] adds that Western names can create harmony because they tend to be less formal than the original names, and they limit

the cases of mispronunciation. However, it is also reminded that not all cases are English names applied, names in different languages or origins can be used as long as they can serve the convenience of communication among interlocutors [Cheang, 2008].

Previous literature has shown the meaning and significance of names to an individual [Cheang, 2008; Guma, 2001; Lawson, 1987]. Naming practices are highly influential to one's behaviours and emotions [Cheang, 2008; Starks et al., 2012]. Therefore, the choice of names should be carefully considered since it is one of the very important aspects of communication and personal presentation. The paper will further investigate how Vietnamese EFL learners perceive English naming practice and the reasons for their choices of names.

3. The study

Research context and participants

The current study takes place at a language centre in a city in Southern Vietnam. One of the requirements of the centre is that learners should have their English names and be called by the English names as an indication of English-only policy. Therefore, on the first day of class, the learners were introduced to the course outline, materials, and required to select their English names. These English names would be used during the program and in all conversations at the centre. However, in their certificates of completion, both Vietnamese and English names would be printed.

The study was undertaken in an English for Communication class at the intermediate level in accordance with learners' successful completion of the previous pre-intermediate course or the placement test. In this study, 15 participants were involved including 8 high-school students aged 16–18, 3 university students aged 22, and 4 high-school teachers aged 30–33. The purposes of learning English as reported by the centre include studying overseas, passing future English language tests, and learning for pleasure.

Research questions

The study was to address the following issues:

- How do the Vietnamese EFL learners feel about having English names?
- What are the reasons for their choices or refusals of English names?

The aim of the paper is to find out the attitudes of a group of Vietnamese learners' towards having English names in their EFL class and their naming processes.

Research methodology

In this study, both classroom observations and interviews were undertaken to address the issues stated above. It was observed that the learners in this study adopted the English names by themselves, and the English names were then noted in the class diary to inform the centre staff. Also, each learner was given a name tag to write his or her English name because the teacher could not remember those names at first.

The researcher observed how the learners used their English names in communication with their teachers and peers. The class took place three times per week on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday for a total of three hours, and the researcher spent two weeks for classroom observations to see how the English names were used through time. Classroom observations allowed the researcher to collect data immediately and directly as well as not to influence classroom activities since the learners and teachers had not been explicitly told about the focus of the observation [Gray, 2004]. Semi-structured interviews, each of which lasts no longer than 15 minutes, were also carried out with all participants after two weeks of observation to gain insights into the English naming practices. From the interviews and the notes, the researcher selected parts that focused on the reasons for choosing certain English names and attitudes towards using English names in their class through qualitative analysis [Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dörnyei, 2007]. The use of semi-structured interviews would help the researcher in probing learners' opinions towards that practice. Besides, this kind of interview would allow the researcher's flexibility in raising follow-up questions based on the information given by the participants and help the participants to expand their answers [Gray, 2004]. The interview questions were indicated in the Appendix.

Table 1. The selected names of the participants and their meanings

Participants	Self-selected names	Meanings/Reasons
1	July	The name July was chosen because it was the month of birth of the participant
2	Kate	Reported by the participant, the name Kate was selected because it was pronounced quite similarly to "cake" which was the participant's favourite snack.
3	Robert	Robert was chosen by the participant because it was one of the very common English names, which in his thoughts would be easy for people to remember.
4	David	Like Robert, David was selected because of its familiarity with both native and non-native English speakers.

5	Elsa	Elsa was the name of the main character in a cartoon favoured by the participant.
6	London	There were two reasons for the choice of this name. Firstly, it was the name of the participant's dream city. Secondly, it was the name of a character in the series of Disney Channel "The suite life of Zack and Cody" in which the participant really adored the character London Tipton.
7	Justin	The participant named himself Justin after the famous singers Justin Bieber and Justin Timberlake.
8	Rose	The name "Rose" came from the participant's favourite flowers.
9	We	This was a quite interesting case since the participant's Vietnamese name was pronounced as "we" /wi/, so the name was selected.
10	Anthony	Anthony was chosen because the participant liked the name. No further information was provided.
11	Harry	The name Harry came from the character Harry Potter who was the fictional idol of the participant.
12	Lan	Lan was the original Vietnamese name of the participant; no English name was chosen.
13	Phú Quý	Similar to "Lan", the participant did not choose an English name, so the Vietnamese name remained.
14	Maria	Maria came from the participant's religious name.
15	Trang	This participant did not choose an English name, so her Vietnamese name remained.

From the table, it is noted that the first 8 names were from the high school students, while numbers 9–11 referred to university students, and the remaining 4 participants were high school teachers.

4. Findings and discussions

Classroom observations

All participants in the study and their teachers used the selected names mentioned in Table 1 in their communication. Even for the staff, they also used these names when they addressed the participants. They understood that the names they had selected would be their representatives throughout the program at the centre. Even, some of them stated that they enjoyed being called by these names outside their classroom settings.

Interviews

Theme 1: Learners' names and representations

In alignment with Cheang [2008], Fischer [2015], and Watzlawik et al. [2016], most participants were happy with having English names as a convenience in communication with English speakers. Some of them, despite having no specific reasons for their choices, tended to choose common names so that their peers and teachers can call and remember easily. Notably, a consensus was found between the participants' choices of names and the ideas of self-representation proposed by Cheang [2008], Watzlawik et al. [2016], and Starks et al. [2012]. In detail, the selected names reflected the participants' identities through their personal preferences such as their idols, characters, food, birthday, places, and flowers (Participants 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11) and religious belief like Participant 14. The interviews with these participants also indicated that the selection of names was mostly based on two issues, namely their self-representations and the familiarity of the names.

I choose July because I am [was] born in July. So, people can remember my name and my birthday. I think the name July is very easy to say and to remember. (Participant 1)

I am Christian, so I was given, I think the holy name, as Maria. I think this is a very beautiful and meaningful name. It is popular, too. So, I choose this name. (Participant 14)

Most participants admitted that they had never used English names before; hence, to make it easy for themselves and the people they talked to, choosing names that could mark their features can make people remember them better, and familiar names would also ensure accuracy in name calling and memorising.

I actually do not know what name in English to choose, but I usually see the name David in many English books. So, I choose it. I think it is a popular and simple name. (Participant 4)

Although much research has been performed into naming practices, little has been known about cases where some adaptations or negotiations in naming are made. For example, Participant 2 named herself on the basis of her favourite food (cake) with a slight change to make her name become more usual to the interlocutors. When being interviewed, she comfort-

ably expressed that the meaning of her English name would be so memorable to her teachers and peers.

I love cake, but I cannot use it for my name because it is so funny, so I change to Kate. I think when we say it, it is similar to "cake".

Participant 9 also got his name based on the Southern Vietnamese pronunciation of his name, i.e., "Quy" with its homophone in English. Explained by him, "We" was a perfect choice because both Vietnamese and English speakers could say the name easily, and it seemed that he did not change his name in terms of the pronunciation of Southern Vietnam accent. He believed that his Vietnamese identity remained with this name.

I like my English name because it is special. I have never thought of anyone named We. I did not choose this name, but I just remember there is a word in English with the same sound. When people call me in my English and Vietnamese names, they are similar. So, it is interesting.

However, unlike what previous research concludes on being content with having English names [Cheang, 2008; Watzlawik et al., 2016], there were still some participants who were not interested in this English naming.

I think my name is easy to say already, and I do not know what English name to choose. I think we do not need to have an English name. Vietnamese name is okay, too, because we need names to know that people are calling us. I am not comfortable when I use an English name with Vietnamese people, why not a Vietnamese name? (Participant 12)

Interviewed about not choosing an English name, Participants 12, 13, and 15 commented that they thought English names would be more appropriate for teenagers, not for adults. This idea is similar to what Starks et al. [2012] mentioned about adolescents' great concern about having nicknames representing their identities.

I think young people can have English names. I think it is popular now. I see that many young people have English names on Facebook and they call their friends in [by] English names. But, I think it is not good for old people because I think people will laugh [at] us if we have an English name. They think that we are trying to be young. We are old now. (Participant 12)

In fact, EFL adult learners' naming practices have not been deeply investigated, and the matter of age in naming practices needs further exploration. In this study, they reminded that there was no need to have English names since trying to say other people's names in their mother tongue was an indication of respect. Therefore, those participants would like to be called with their Vietnamese names by both the teachers and peers. In addition, Participant 13

believed that his name meant “Prosperity”, which was so meaningful that it should not be changed.

My name is very meaningful, and I love it. So, I don't think I should change my name. I think we just use Vietnamese names, it is enough.

All three participants further declared that their Vietnamese names were not too difficult to say. Hence, maintaining their Vietnamese names would be much preferred.

Theme 2: EFL learners' perceptions of English names

When being asked about whether having English names is a good practice in EFL settings, a consensus was found among the participants. All of them agreed that English names should be optional or only personal preferences in EFL settings.

I like to have an English name, but I am okay if people call me by English or Vietnamese names because I will know they are talking to me. Some people in class do not have English names, maybe they don't like them. But no problem because we can call by their Vietnamese name (Participant 3)

The primary point was that people should be able to use the names that they are comfortable with, and respect should be paid to whatever names they have. In communication, it is the responsibility to correctly remember and speak out the names of the interlocutors, which is much better and preferred than suggesting changes in names for better communication.

I think we already introduced our Vietnamese name and I see that my English teacher can say our Vietnamese names. We do not need to change it because I do not think we ask people [to] change a name just because we cannot say it. In my class at school, there are some ethnic students, their names are hard to say but I need to learn, too. I cannot ask them to change names. (Participant 15)

5. Conclusion and suggestions

Having English names is popular and preferable for most learners to make communication more convenient for both the teacher and the learners. In addition, the refusals of having English names of some participants highlight the influences of ages and the respect for Vietnamese names, which previous research has not widely investigated. In terms of the reasons for English name choice, this study indicates a relationship between names, identities, and cultural. Because the names, both original and adopted ones, are so meaningful to learners that they think naming practices and name addressing is an indication of the respect in communication.

On the other hand, previous research emphasises on identity reflection in choosing names; the study points out the choice of names thanks to the names' familiarity and popularity with no references to identity, which is an addition to the diversity in naming practices.

The study demonstrates Vietnamese EFL learners' naming practices in an EFL setting and the reasons. Although not all participants agreed to pick English names for themselves, it is obvious that names, in many languages and to some extent, are meaningful to them and represent their identities. Since the requirement on having English names is not completely satisfied at the centre, the suggestions to make are the respect to learners' selection of their names and the need to address their preferred names properly regardless of their languages. This is a way of showing respect to the learners and their identities and to provide them with comfort in their study and communication. The current study also raises the issue of age in naming practices and the negotiation between the meaning and familiarity of the names to the interlocutors. Further research may focus on these issues for a more complete view of naming practices.

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Appendix. Interview questions

1. How long have you learned English?
2. Do you have an English name?
 - If Yes, please explain why you chose that name.
 - If No, please explain why you do not have one.
3. Do you think we should use English names in our English classes? Why (not)?