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RESEARCH

Teaching Methods in Singapore and Thailand: Proposals for Vietnam

Anita Clapano-Oblina, Trương Thị Mỹ Dung*,
Hồ Thanh Mỹ Phương, Trần Phước Lĩnh

Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization-Regional Training Center (SEAMEO RETRAC), 35 Lê Thánh Tôn, District 1, Hồ Chí Minh City, Vietnam

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Abstract: This article is part of the 2012-2014 Scientific and Technological Subject at the Ministerial level titled "Comparison in Secondary Educational Model in Singapore and Thailand: Lessons for Vietnam" carried out by the Vietnam-based regional training centre of SEAMEO (SEAMEO RETRAC), This research work has gathered the data from the Principals and Deputy Principals of the secondary schools in Singapore and Thailand. The research group has used the in-depth interview method and English is the language in use. In this article, the authors have got an insight into the effective teaching methods in the secondary schools in Singapore and Thailand in order to make the proposals for the teachning methods in the secondary education in Vietnam. The results show that the student-centered method, the experience-based learning method, the constructive learning method and the teaching method for each object, all have the results in the process of student's learning. More importantly, the results of the research show that "understanding the students" is the foundation of the selection and designing of the teaching strategies and techniques in the secondary education. The article has also put forth the proposals for the secondary education of Vietnam.

Keywords: Teaching methods, student-centered method, differences, experience-based learning, constructive learning.

1. Inroduction

Many psychologists and academicians claim that children make up of their own knowledge as long as they interact with their environment (Brooks and Brooks, 1999 [1]; Von Glaserafeld, 1995 [2]). Educational environments, however, do not generally reflect this idea. In this context, some teachers still follow learning and teaching methods that they took over from the past. That some educators claim that their past experiences and knowledge offer the best is quite natural. If the children are supposed to generate their own knowledge, some opportunities that are physically and mentally allowing them to move around should

* Corresponding author.: Tel: 84-949097584
E-mail: ttmdung@vnseameo.org

be provided for them. Thus, it can be provided for the children to use learning methods that are meaningful for them and to acquire problem-solving skills on this kind of problems by becoming aware of their own problems (Boyd, 2000 [3]). Therefore, in this context, the students should be directed to be more qualified learners, not only as passive and knowledge receivers. It means that they need to be active individuals who construct knowledge, think, do research, question and produce (Gültekin, 2004 [4]). Gardner and Lambert (1972) [5] showed the importance of attitude and motivation of the students in their studies. This requirement is obligatory to make use of various approaches and teaching strategies that work well in the learning process of the students. This article reports the main findings of the approaches to effective teaching used in the basic education schools in Singapore and Thailand and make recommendations to MOET, Vietnam.

2. Review of literature

Learning strategies are defined by Oxford and Crookall as "steps taken by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage and retrieval of information" (1990) [6]. Wenden and Rubin (1987) [7] in their definition of strategies point out that they usually refer to specific actions or techniques which may or may not be observed. According to them, some of the strategies are consciously used, and can be modified and learned. In addition, it is generally agreed that strategies are present in both informal and academic settings.

Daneman (1991) [8] states that learners can absorb new information only in relation to what they already know. For example, an individual who knows nothing about baseball would have trouble understanding a “sacrifice bunt.” However, an individual who understands chess and the strategy of sacrificing a pawn to improve board position could gain an understanding of a sacrifice bunt as a strategy for improving the chances of scoring a run. To make this analogy, the learner engages in a strategy to compare the two situations. A strategy can be thought of as a reasonably efficient and intentional routine that leads to the acquisition and utilization of knowledge (Prawat, 1989) [9]. It is possible that two people with the same advanced knowledge of chess but minimal knowledge of baseball might acquire knowledge about a sacrifice bunt differentially because of differences in how they use knowledge. Strategy used in the classroom is critical to educational success. Palincsar and Klenk (1992) [10] provided a framework for understanding the importance of learning strategies. Learners are encouraged to be purposeful, goal directed, self-regulated, and actively engaged. Thus, teaching strategy plays a vital role to engage students in the learning process.

3. Purpose

The purpose of this research was to identify the approaches to effective teaching in the basic education in Singapore and Thailand, and cite implications to improve the teaching approaches in the context of the basic education in Vietnam.

4. Method

4.1. Subjects

Interviews were conducted in two countries, Singapore and Thailand. The Ministries provided us the lists of schools and principals and vice-principals for the respondents. From our end, the copy of interview questions was forwarded before the interview was administered. The interview in Thailand was in May 2013 and in Singapore in July 2013.

In Singapore, interviews were carried out with 5 principals and 5 vice principals located in urban setting of Singapore. All were proficient English users. Their position as heads of the schools varied a considerable degree from one principal to another. It ranged from two years to over 10 years. In Thailand, interviews were conducted to 20 principals and/or vice principals in urban setting of Thailand. Most principals in Thailand had lack of command in English. So, in most of the interview settings, we worked with the interpreters. Their position as heads of the schools also varied considerably from one principal to another. It ranged from five years to over 20 years.

4.2. Materials

The data collection instrument used in the study was a teacher interview form. The interviews enabled us to gain explanations and information on material that is not directly accessible: perceptions, attitudes and values, matters which are difficult to obtain by alternative methods. The kind of interview process employed was described by Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) [11] as, the "semi-structured interview". Semi-structured interview allowed for focused, conversational, and two-way communication. The wording of the questions in the interview form was the same for the two sets of respondents, Singapore and Thailand, respectively, but in the interview process, the probe questions were worded differently to suit the flow of the interview and the different needs of the interviewees. This interview was divided into three main parts. The first section was a simple introduction explaining the purpose of the study. The second section, the central one, consisted of the elicitation from the subjects interviewed of the teaching approaches and strategies used that work well in their students learning. The last section was reserved for any further comments principals and/or vice principals wished to make or any questions they wanted to ask.

4.3. Procedures

The interviews with principals and/or vice principals were carried out in Thailand, May 2013 and in Singapore, July 2013, respectively. The average duration of these interviews was from 45 minutes to one hour. All the interviews were conducted in their designated schools. The interviewees were interviewed in groups – principals and/or vice principals. At that stage of the project, it was felt that interviewing the heads of school in groups could favor their reflection upon the teaching approaches and strategies used that would make our interaction more spontaneous and natural.

5. Results

The interviewees appeared to be competent and adept of their use of teaching approaches and strategies and they articulated them clearly. In addition, the interview was a useful instrument to investigate the area of teaching and learning strategies as it stimulated principals and/or vice principals' reflection upon the teaching approaches and strategies they found effective in their school context. The teaching approaches and strategies reported were very meaningful and significant. The interviewees constituted a selected group from the Ministry of Education (MOE), so their attitudes towards this research study were extremely positive.

6. Analysis of results

The results of the interviews were summarized and analyzed to identify the approaches to effective teaching in Singapore

and Thailand, namely, the critical approaches to effective teaching.

The following four themes are recurring throughout the interviews in Singapore and Thailand as being critical approaches to effective teaching. They are as follows:

1. Student-centered approach

2. Differentiated learning approach

3. Experiential learning approach

4. Constructivist learning approach

6.1. Student-centered approach

Student-centered approach requires knowing your students. Understanding students is the foundation to choosing or designing teaching strategies that work well especially in basic education. In order to choose or design teaching strategies on how to teach the subject in an interesting manner a teacher needs to know what motivates the students, what background the students are bringing to the classroom, and what interest the students to learn. In Philosophy, students are changing cognitively, socially, and physically which all affect their learning. Students are also groomed by their culture, neighborhood, and peers. Knowing a little of this background helps the teacher understand students, and in turn, s/he can answer question, such as: "How can I help this student learn better?" Or "What in the student's life can I relate this topic to, so it is interesting?" Anyone can stand up and teach a class about any topic, but understanding the students completes a teacher.

But knowing each student requires effort and time (Singapore Interview, 2013 July). Principals set time for teachers to meet their students through friendly conversation. Friendly conversation is a goal oriented activity. Teachers are going to know each student more in terms of the learning style, competency, interests and preferences and others in a friendly way.

Here are some ways of knowing your students better in a friendly manner (Thailand Interview, 2013, May; Singapore Interview, 2013 July).

First would just be to talk to the students. The purpose of this would be to open the lines of communication between you and the students. A teacher is not going to learn anything from their students if the student does not want to communicate with the teacher. Simple verbal communication is a non-threatening way. Talking to your students can range from a conversation about their pet to something as simple as asking how their day is going. By talking, the students' personality starts to show through in the way they express themselves verbally and nonverbally. When a student responds to you verbally, there are also nonverbal cues the teacher can take, like body language. Is the student open and using hand gestures, confident in what s/he says, or maybe uncomfortable speaking out loud? Based on just talking to the students, the teacher can decide various teaching strategies to help the students. This is also a two-way communication. If the student shares something about himself, the teacher should share a little bit about himself in order to establish a connection.

Observing your students is another way for understanding students. The teacher can observe how the students interact with each other. This is important because the teacher can see where the divides are between cliques or who does not get along with who. Observing behavior is also a way to survey students' personalities. The more outgoing students will probably be more boisterous; the introvert students will probably be quieter. Observing how the students interact can help a teacher

plan a seating chart. For example, the teacher creates seating charts by reading level and observed behavior. S/he knows who gets along with whom. You do not want people that do not get along sitting next to each other or too many extroverts sitting together because they might feed off each others' energy and cause a distraction. Observed behavior is also important to understanding students.

In addition to this, *the teacher understands the students more by looking at their past school records or students' profile.* This helps the teacher project what the academic performance might be for the class. A teacher can see what subjects his individual student needs help with. For example, if a student received an A in Math, but a lower grade in English, the teacher could guess that the student is left brain dominant, good at logic but needs help with reading and writing. Looking at the students' profile helps the teacher understand what help the students might need and what is currently being done to help the students. Looking at the student's academic records helps the teacher understand what they may or may not need help with academically. This is important because there might be a pattern of what worked academically and what did not in past students performance.

Another important aspect to know your students better is to know the prior knowledge of the students.

What your students know. If your course is part of a sequence of courses, it is a good idea to find out what material has been covered in the course preceding it. You can do this by talking to a colleague who has taught the preceding course, or asking for a copy of his syllabus, assignments, and/or exams. Pay attention not only to what topics have been covered, but the extent to which students have been asked to *apply* particular skills and knowledge (for example, have they been required simply to identify theories or to do something more sophisticated, such as make predictions on the basis of different theoretical orientations? Have they been required simply to analyze aspects of stagecraft and lighting, or have they used these insights in creating designs of their own?). The extent to which students have been required to actively do something with what they have learned will determine how deeply they know it.

You might also talk to colleagues teaching "down-stream" courses (i.e., courses that come later in the sequence than your own) to determine what kinds of skills and knowledge they expect students to have leaving your course. This will help you determine the proper scope, pace of your own course, and importantly your teaching approach.

New knowledge cannot be built effectively on a weak foundation, thus it is important to determine where students prior knowledge is "fragile", i.e., where it contains inaccuracies, naive assumptions, and/or misunderstandings of the contexts and conditions in which to apply particular skills. There are a number of ways to assess student's prior knowledge. One easy way is to administer a simple diagnostic pretest during the first week of class. A well-designed pretest can identify areas of robust or weak understanding. If mastery of prerequisite skills is poor across the majority of the students, you may have to adjust the pace or scope of the course accordingly, and design or choose teaching approaches and strategies that you think would work well in the kind of class you have at hand. Knowing the extent of the students learning the previous course can be a helpful starting point for designing instruction or teaching strategies.

Helping students grow intellectually requires balancing the support you provide with the challenges you pose. In other words, it is important to push students out of their comfort zone, but to do so gradually enough, so that they do not panic or become discouraged. The principals reiterated learning is an ego-threatening task (not incidentally, so is teaching). Too much challenge to the ego and students rebel or retreat; too little and they don't progress: either way they don't learn. One of our tasks as teachers is to recognize the stage where our students (or most of our students) are and to help bridge the transition to the next stage - stretch the students (Singapore Interview, 2013 July).

Part of being a good teacher means actively building working relationships with students (Thailand Interview, 2013 May). Some students will achieve more when an adult has demonstrated a genuine concern and demonstrated caring about them. A more positive classroom experience can be had by all when the teacher has taken the time to be informed and aware of the issues that affect his students. Continue to make human connections with your students. Even if you do not have control over your course content, you do have control over the attitude and methods used to teach the content.

Working with teachers to make classrooms more student-centered, we set regular meetings with the teachers to monitor their successes and difficulties in engaging students in the learning process. During the meeting, (a) teachers are going to share their teaching stories and experiences infused with their values and cultural understanding. Then, (b) they share teaching strategies and authentic instructional materials they found helpful for learners to learn better, and (c) teachers in the subject areas design new teaching techniques to enhance student's learning in a student-centered instruction (Thailand Interview, 2013 May; Singapore Interview, 2013 July).

6.2. Differentiated learning approach

The diversity of students in our classrooms is increasing; the need to shape curriculum and instruction to maximize learning for all students is more urgent than ever. Educators are searching for methods that will allow us to accommodate the learning needs of all our students, so that all are challenged, but not overwhelmed, by the learning process. Many of these methods are incorporated in the general approach of differentiated instruction. Differentiation is an umbrella concept that incorporates many effective traditional methods and strategies as well as merging many aspects of critical thinking, brain research, interdisciplinary instruction, and constructivism. Its roots are in gifted and special education, but it has been developed as a means of accommodating the range of readiness levels, learning styles and interests of heterogeneous schools and classrooms (Singapore Interview, 2013 July).

Singapore employs differentiated instruction in its basic education. It is concept focused and principle driven (Singapore Interview, 2013 July). It is one of the most important tenets of effective teaching, but also one of the most difficult. The teacher pays attention to individual student needs by modifying *content* (what is being taught), *process* (how it is taught) and *product* (how the students demonstrate their learning) via an assortment of instructional and management strategies. Every student is an individual with different interests, abilities and deficits, and even personalities. The goal of an effective teacher is to have every student learns.

In Teaching, One Size Does Not Fit All: Principals illustrated the concept of differentiated instruction. Imagine being in a senior high literature class. The teacher decides to do a quick assessment of the class' understanding of the use of symbolism in poetry to determine whether students are ready to move on to the next objective. He hands out a piece of blank paper and a pencil to all students and asks each student to draw a picture to express his understanding of the novel's symbolism. How would the student respond? The gifted artists in the class would get right to work. The non-artistic might protest, saying that their product could not possibly represent their understanding of the content. Others might give it a try but fall short. Others might decide not to try at all. How fair would that task seem to you?

This scenario illustrates how using a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction, such as a lecture to the whole class or the same writing assignment for everyone, puts a number of students at a disadvantage. They are likely being taught and tested using a format at which they do not excel. In these situations, the presentation of the information, and the way mastery is assessed by the teacher, leaves some students looking like they have not understood the content (think about how most people's drawings would have turned out). Differentiated instruction (DI) is different in that it involves giving students choices about how to learn and how to demonstrate their learning. How would your senior high students have responded if they had been allowed to select from a menu of choices: drawing, essay, PowerPoint presentation, speech delivered to the class? Having choices helps boost student engagement in the task.

Differentiated Instruction is giving students multiple options for learning the information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn. A differentiated classroom provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of the ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively (Singapore Interview, 2013 July).

6.3. Experiential learning approach

Experiential learning is an approach to education that focuses on "learning by doing," on the student's subjective experience. The role of the teacher is to design "direct experiences" that include preparatory and reflective exercises (Singapore Interview, 2013 July).

Experiential learning cycle can be applied to all activities where students learn through doing. Students need to process content material in order to derive meaning from it and to construct knowledge associated with it. A common approach used to facilitate this is the experiential learning cycle, which "begins with activity, moves through reflection, then to generalizing and abstracting and finally to transfer" (Singapore Interview, 2013 July).

When designing activities, it is important to remember that the purpose is to create situations where students get to work with the relevant content. Teachers do not require students to provide correct answers to preconceived questions; rather, students are invited to delve into the topic, asking their own questions and gaining an insight into the process of constructing knowledge and understanding to find answers to their own questions. Teachers observe their students closely during each session and identify the gaps in their knowledge-base or skills in order to adjust the activity and their own teaching accordingly.

Experiential learning is described as a four-phase cycle (Singapore Interview, 2013 July).

1. Teachers select one or more activities (experiences) in order to demonstrate a concept or raise questions. The experience should enable students to engage with the topic in as many ways as possible.

2. In the reflection phase, students query and review what they have done. The focus is on facts, so students should ask questions that begin with "what". As they examine different answers, they develop skills for critical thinking.

3. In the generalizing and abstracting phase, students are able to examine the experience at a deeper level. They think about the meaning of the factual information they gathered from the questions they used in the reflecting phase. Students are encouraged to examine abstract concepts and make connections between ideas and their actual experience. They also look at what they have learned and hypothesize about where to go to next. Learners ask “how”, “what if”, and “so what” questions.

4. The transfer phase is when students begin to apply the knowledge they have gained to the next activity or to their daily lives. They should use questions that begin with 'now what'. At this stage, students may go on to take critical action.

The experiential learning cycle process encourages learners to think more deeply, develop critical-thinking skills, and transfer their learning into action through successive phases of the cycle. The learning cycle may develop into a spiral. The phases are revisited, and students' conceptual understandings and strategies for change are developed further each time. They discover more about both the practical limits and the wider applications of their new knowledge as they begin to take what they learned in one situation and use it in another, demonstrating what they have learned.

This approach has the following advantages:

- Students develop their critical-thinking skills as they move through and repeat the phases (rather than being expected to have and use these skills at an advanced level in the first few activities).
- It allows teachers time to develop the generalizing and abstracting phase, and the transfer phase, as well as encouraging students to reflect on what they have done.
- Building on experience in this way can lead students to a greater understanding of the socio-ecological and health promotion concepts. Both teachers and students ask increasingly sophisticated questions, and their understanding becomes deeper as they gain expertise.

Through this cycle, then, teachers can encourage their students to develop their critical-thinking skills (for example, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating). When they repeat the cycle of experiential learning, students can increasingly engage in higher level thinking and take action based on such thinking.

6.4. Constructivist learning approach

Constructivism is an approach to teaching and learning based on the premise that cognition (learning) is the result of "mental construction" (Bednar, A. K., Cunningham, D., Duffy T. M. & Perry J. D. 1995 [12]). In other words, students learn by fitting new information together with what they already know. Constructivists believe that learning is affected by the context in which an idea is taught as well as by students' beliefs and attitudes.

The constructivist theory gets its name from students taking information and constructing their own meaning. Allowing students the opportunity to construct their own meaning will lead students to taking ownership of their learning. A constructivist approach to learning is one in which students are actively learning in

a student-centered environment helping each other to gain knowledge on a specific topic. This strategy can be applied at the elementary and secondary grade levels (Singapore Interview, 2013 July).

How children learn about the world in which they live in is by constructing schemas, background knowledge, and through their own experiences. A student-centered approach to learning allows students to construct meaning and take ownership of their own learning through a collaborative effort. Teacher can use top-down and bottom-up approaches. The top-down approach is when students are given complex problems in order to figure out which basic skills are required for the specific task or problem. The constructivist approach utilizes the top-down process, which unlike the traditional bottom-up process, uses more complex problems for students to discuss and solve. The bottom-up process starts with basic skills and then moves to more complex skills. Often, students will work together in cooperative learning groups which enable students to discuss the problem with one another. The constructivist approach to learning concentrates on a student-centered approach, which allows students to construct meaning by direct experiences rather than the traditional lecture from the teacher. The learners will develop meaning through their own experiences enabling them to acquire an understanding of the material.

The teaching is a "hands-off" approach; therefore, the teacher acts as a facilitator providing the students with the necessary tools and then observing and assessing the students (Interview, 2013 July Singapore). The teacher's main responsibility is to supply the students with the necessary tools and then let the students explore. While observing, the teacher is assessing the students' knowledge and the application of the knowledge on the specific topic.

Applying the four approaches in teaching

In Singapore and Thailand, Ministry of Education (MOE) provides the schools with teaching pedagogy. But, schools are responsible to make the learning process effective. In this regard, teachers incorporate the four critical approaches to effective teaching, namely, *student-centered*, *differentiated instruction, experiential learning*, and *constructivist learning approaches* in the teaching-learning process among the students in basic education (Thailand Interview, 2013, May; Singapore Interview, 2013 July).

Below is the list of teaching strategies incorporating the four approaches that are found to be effective among schools in basic education in Singapore and Thailand. These teaching strategies are drawn from the in-person interviews with the teachers in Singapore and Thailand.

1. Show and tell. This is a reversed technique. The role of the student is that of a teacher. The basic premise of this technique is that if one can explain the concept to someone else's then s/he truly understands the concept.

2. Observations. Observations that students can make outside of class can help demonstrate basic principles being currently studied in class. The examples can be carried out as take home assignment where students are required to go and observe the phenomena that they can readily see, feel, hear, and smell, and later summarize their observations. The students bring their observations to class, and the instructor leads the discussion of what the students observed and what those observations mean. This will not only help the students understand of the new concept or basic principle, but teaches the student to observe a phenomenon before trying to analyze it.

3. Demonstration. The demonstration example can be done either as an experimental

exercise carried out in class with experimental models, or as a mathematical exercise carried out on the "chalkboard" to explain the physical phenomena. This can be particularly instructive when the students are aware of the phenomenon, but are not able to explain the science behind it.

4. Sensing. Sensing is a technique to let the students "feel" the science behind the phenomena. The goal here is to allow the students carry out experiments that allow them to sense the different parameters that enter into the theory. Teachers provide the students "experience"; students use their senses to stimulate learning. Then, teachers ask the students the "what" and "why". A primary principal cited, in a Science class, I teach "Heat". I bring my class in the Science Lab; I let them touch the hot cylinder. My students feel the hot cylinder by the tip of their fingers. Then I ask, what and why - and more questions that provoke their deep thinking and critical thinking - It works well. Clearly the emphasis of this technique is not to teach a new concept or theory. But to give a known concept more meaning by having the students sense it.

5. Case studies. Bringing real-life scenarios into the classrooms. Cases are accounts of real-life events that would help students to better relate theory to the real-world. In addition case studies promote discussion in class and feedback from students. Students are usually given materials and asked to read it and answer a series of questions pertaining to various aspects of the case. The students can be required to work either individually or in groups. Some tips to remember in using case study.

- The case study may increase the amount of work the students have to do outside of class. Care must be taken to balance this extra workload against other homework assignments.

- When using case study found in the library, do not stick to the given questions. Generate new questions that directly fit the topics covered in the class.

- While the questions assigned forms the basis of discussion, be prepared with other questions in order to guide the discussion.

- The goal of the discussion should be kept in mind at all times. Keep the discussion from drifting away from this goal.

- Above all, be thoroughly prepared for the discussion. Poor preparation will lead to frustration among students.

6. Drama technique. Using drama to teach English results in real communication involving ideas, emotions, feelings appropriateness and adaptability; in short an opportunity to use language in operation which is absent in a conventional language class. Such activities add to the teachers' repertoire of pedagogic strategies giving them a wider option of learner-centered activities to choose from for classroom teaching, thereby augmenting their efficiency in teaching English.

An attractive alternative is teaching language through drama because it gives a context for listening and meaningful language production, forcing the learners to use their language resources and, thus, enhancing their linguistic abilities. It provides situations for reading and writing. It is very useful in teaching literary texts as it helps in analyzing plot, character and style. It also involves learners more positively and actively in the text. As Wilga Rivers (1983) [13] states, "the drama approach enables learners to use what they are learning with pragmatic intent, something that is most difficult to learn through explanation." By using drama techniques to teach English, the monotony of a conventional English class can be broken and the syllabus can be transformed

into one which prepares learners to face their immediate world better as competent users of the English language because they get an opportunity to use the language in operation. Using drama techniques also fulfills socio-affective requirements of the learners. Moreover, this learner centered approach makes the syllabus personally fulfilling.

7. Games-based learning strategies. Along with high levels of engagement, the use of games in classrooms offers exciting, powerful vehicles that can stimulate collaboration, problem solving, creativity, innovation, critical thinking, communication and digital literacy to satisfy contemporary curriculum goals and cross curricular approaches to student learning. Math uses games based approach using manipulative or even digital games to get the students interest in the subject.

8. Inquiry-Based lLearning is an approach to teaching that relies on student-centered activities and questioning, rather than the traditional teacher-centered approach, relying on textbooks and lecturing. The instructor's role is more as a mentor than authority; she uses well-crafted problems and the minimal amount of information the students will need, leading them to discover the answers and come to their own understanding of the ideas.

The focus is on "how we know" rather than "what we know", with students actively involved in the construction of their own knowledge through active involvement. There is a shift away from a content driven approach towards one that provides children with the skills and resources to discover knowledge for themselves. Children are posed a question and given the skills and resources to explore, investigate and search for answers. They plan and carry out their research, come to some conclusions and decide how they could make change happen. They convert information and data into useful knowledge. Ultimately, the importance of inquiry learning is that students become life long learners and learn how to continue learning. Science uses inquiry-based learning approach.

9. Cooperative and/or Collaborative learning is a team process where members support and rely on each other to achieve an agreed-upon goal. It is interactive; students develop and share a common goal, contribute their understanding of the problem, questions, insights and solutions, and respond to, and work to understand, others' questions, insights and solutions. Each member empowers the other to speak and contribute, and to consider one's contributions. It develops team-building skills the students will need later in life.

10. Integrated approach to learning and teaching. Learning through an integrated studies approach is enhanced when students are actively engaged in meaningful and relative topics. Learners construct and produce knowledge by solving problems, conducting inquiry, engaging in reflection and building a repertoire of effective strategies. Integrated studies help students to become life long learners and allow efficient coverage and delivery of curriculum in terms of expertise, resources and time.

Singapore basic education believes that there is a difference in focus between primary education and secondary education. Secondary schools focus on leadership development and challenge the students to perform well – teenagers are independent in their school work. Teachers are more a bit detached and left students to do a lot of independent work. On the other hand, primary schools focus on building the foundation of literacy and numeracy - and character development. Teachers must have a personal interest in the

students, and to really see into the details. Teachers act like surrogate mothers to them.

Teachers inspire students by responding to their needs - The age level of students matters in the learning-process. Primary 1 (P1) to Primary 6 (P6) have different levels of focus in terms of time span. In doing a seatwork, for example, P1 cannot stay focus on one thing for a longer time compared to P2, and so on. So, activity wise, it would depend on age level of the students. Teachers find strategies on how to fit in time according to the age level of the students. Think of what kind of strategies best fit that age.

Singapore basic education identifies strategies that fit the subjects. With this premise, drama techniques is used to best teach language; games based approach using manipulative or even digital games is used to best teach math; inquiry based approach is used to best teach science with a lot of experiments; inquiry approach, cooperative and collaborative approach, process approach, and participatory approach are used to teach other subjects. Provide variety of strategies to engage students in learning. Importantly, teaching strategy evolves to stretch up students' competency to maximize their potentials. It implies frequent review of the teaching strategies and design innovative approaches for quality teaching and learning, and for lifting students to the next level.

Principals unanimously said, "No one strategy is best".

Teaching strategies work well when they address to the students characteristics and proficiency levels. One strategy may work well in one class, but not in another class. Knowing your students, their characteristics, their level of proficiency and their learning styles is the entry point of teaching effectively. Care and understand the students are half the battle of the students' learning process; teachers and students' rapport is very important. When students feel cared and understood, they surface beyond limit. They are empowered.

Methods of teaching are flexible in terms of pacing and the depth of the lessons that the teachers want to explore. For instance, for social and emotional learning, the teachers might use media, which takes much time than using other teaching strategies. In building student's competency, teachers might need more time for cooperative and interactive activities. In some subjects, blended learning mode of teaching is used. Weekdays are f2f learning mode and weekends are ICT assignments, and to keep the students engage in learning, constructivist model is used. Due to learners multiple intelligence, teachers use various teaching strategies, instructional media and instructional materials.

The school has sufficient, instructional materials (e.g. textbooks, syllabus, lesson plans, etc.), budget for supplies (e.g. paper, pencils), school buildings and grounds, instructional space (e.g. classrooms), special equipment for handicapped students, computers, library materials, audio-visual resources, laboratory equipment and materials (Singapore Interview, 2013 July).

There is a proper balance between theory (classroom) and practice (laboratory, field demonstration). There is sufficient supply of tools and equipment for grade level instruction. There is adequate learning resources (i.e. print media, audio-visual materials, etc.) provided for grade level instruction to actively engage students. Frequently, teachers develop instructional activities and learning materials to ensure students understand the lessons well.

Professional learning team In general, teaching strategy has changed over the years. Currently, each school forms a Professional

Learning Team by level - subject teachers. The team meets one hour every week to share, discuss, find more ways to create and design innovative teaching strategies/ techniques to accomplish the desired outcomes of the curriculum. The *data base of teaching strategies tools* is available for teacher's use.

Professional Learning Team also forms action research group to conduct a research whether the strategy used is effective using hard data, not jut "gut level" to substantiate the findings; the action research group undergoes action research training. Action research training is also staggered, for example, P1-P2, P3- P4, and P5 - P6. Each school in Singapore has professional learning team which is its avenue for professional growth and development.

In the primary schools, for instance, before, teaching Math was through pictorial. Now, teaching Math is through concrete/ authentic materials, for example, the topic is Clock - teachers bring a Clock and use the clock to ask students the long hand and short hand, and the time. They can operate the materials (long hand and short hand) to move from time to time. Teachers can use authentic wall clock to allow students to demonstrate the movement of time. In this way, students understand better that time is moving. Time wasted cannot be taken back. Another example, if the topic is Fraction, teachers bring the whole pizza in the class and ask students to cut it to several fractions. Students learn the meaning of fraction in the real sense. Why is this slice a fraction? Students understand.

In teaching Oracy in the past, teachers used passages, pictures and questions. Now, teachers use video clips. Students watch the video-clips, and say something about it - maybe ideas, insights, imagination, and thoughts that enhance their creativity.

Now in teaching Science, teachers use sensing and inquiry based approach. For example, in teaching the concept of heat, teachers bring the students to the Science Lab, and allow the students to touch the heat. Then, ask, why is it hot? And so on. In the Inquiry Approach, teachers offer the students experience, and then allow them to think why and how things look or happen that way and let them find answers to their own questions. There are lots of resources; teachers need to be creative and resourceful.

In Laboratory, teachers observe how the students learn using a video. In Art, students engage in choral reading and stage performance. Presently, the schools work on building a reading culture among students. This is one national education agendum of Singapore - building a reading culture among Singaporeans. There are two strategies to enhance reading skills of the students. One is DEAR - Drop Everything and Read; an hour a week is assigned for DEAR. Students can bring the reading materials they like to read, and they can squat on the floor while reading. Another is silent reading after the flag ceremony. A ten-minute silence while students are reading is allocated. Then, students are encouraged to share their thoughts, ideas, and insights about their reading materials.

Learning support program MOE Singapore provides 3 to 5 supports to assist classes in English and Math. Learning support teachers help the teachers facilitate the learning activities of the students and enhance student's knowledge and skills in English and Math by conducting remedial classes making the teaching learning process accessible especially the slow learners.

Developing teaching strategies Principals stressed, we started developing teaching strategies in 2010. We pulled in local experts

and overseas experts to train our teachers. We staggered the training. We worked with Singapore Polytechnics to record the video clips of the training. After that, we looked at the schemes of work and infused the techniques into the schemes of work. Teacher should know that technique. Couple with that, we had lesson observation with reporting officers. We monitored on how the teachers would implement the techniques in the class. Currently, the new hired teachers will view the video clips and demonstrate the techniques. Principals and vice principals with the reporting officer observe classes to find out whether teachers are conversant with the techniques for feedback and evaluation.

Academic staff developer At the beginning of the school year, the academic staff developer from the MOE Singapore comes to school and facilitates the planning for the school year in terms of the needs of the students by cohorts. For example, based on last year cohort data P3 is weak in English and Science, teachers in English and Science meet and discuss on what other learning gates and how can they press them to scaffold the learning skills of P3 cohort in English and Science. Then, they decide on what is their focus for that year. They would do literature review - implement and at the end of the year, there is a big sharing - every team will present their year accomplishments and challenges.

MOE Singapore has internationalization program. It allocates budget for each school every year. The budget is downloadable. Schools visit China and Taiwan to learn about reading, and develop the reading journal back in the school. They visit Cambodia to learn the value of service. They visit Indonesia to learn the meaning of adventure. They also visit the local people in the community to understand their own people and immerse to their own culture.

"At the top, we strive to assess our school vision: To form students to be creative thinkers, lifelong learners, and value-based leaders*",* principals declared.

Some Challenges Principals emphasized that before, MOE both Singapore and Thailand recruited teachers in basic education. Now, principals can recruit and hire teachers**.** This system minimizes problem of unqualified teachers. But, still there are always challenges because there are also underperforming teachers. In Singapore, **MOE** conducts training on **A Skillful Teacher**. This training helps teachers enhance their skills on teaching pedagogy, class management, time management, class motivation, leadership, and more. **NIE** (National Institutional Education) conducts training to beginner teachers on TP (Teaching Practice) for 10 weeks. In Thailand, teachers are required to attend seminars and workshops for improved teaching performance from local and international experts. During class implementation, teachers are observed to check their application, but the observation is developmental; it is helping the teachers to grow and improve - Teachers know it; they feel comfortable when observed in their classes.

For underperforming teachers, they are closely monitored and helped to find out where they are good at; where their passion is. They are given time to discover their potentials, and with the help of the school they would be able to make a sound decision to stay or to leave the teaching profession (Singapore Interview, 2014 July). In Thailand, underperforming teachers are encouraged to attend training, seminars and workshops for improved teaching performance (Thailand Interview, 2013 May).

In Singapore, teachers training and development by MOE, clusters, schools, and subject areas are available and implemented year round. Close supervision and monitoring

by principals and vice principals help a lot. Teamwork and friendly relationships with the teachers encourage teachers to give their best.

One Principal echoed his concern about his school. His school has small enrolment rate. Before the enrolment rate was 400 students, and now is 900 students, yet it is still small compared to other schools, which have more than thousand enrollees. Students in this school come from lower family income. One reason of the increase of enrolment now is over few years the school has established its name. Most of its students have passed in the national examinations. National examinations play a vital role in course content and teaching strategies. Principal and vice-principals continue to upgrade the school to attract more students (Singapore Interview, 2013 July).

Different learning styles of the students. Principals argued,

We do have weak students because we don't screen our P1, P2 and P3 students. We abide to MOE's goal, which is Education for All. We accept all students. But we have very good support from parents. Parents are involved in teaching the students English, Chinese, Math and other subjects that our students are weak back to back with our teachers. The number is not huge, so we offer one-to-one support, for our autistic children for example. Our class size is also limited; over the last 2 years, our class size ranges from 30 to 40 students. (Singapore Interview, 2013 July).

They further attested,

We see to it that our students are ready to learn. In Singapore basic education, students are put in cohorts. Each cohort has its strengths and weaknesses. In the beginning of the year, teachers in that cohort review the cohort profile record, and share ways on how they can help that particular cohort based on what they lacked in the previous academic performance. For instance, the current cohort lacks mathematical skills; teachers in math will sit down and find ways on how to teach math in the manner that students understand better. Importantly, the **academic staff developer** from the Ministry of Education will come to the school and sit down with the school heads and teachers of that cohort and find ways on how the Ministry of Education can help address that problem. Teachers on that cohort will be sent for training on that field.

In primary schools, students are mixed from P1 to P3. P1 to P3 schools accept all students. At the end of P3, students take the screening test for Gifted Education Class. From P4 to P6, students are classified based on their intelligence and skills. Gifted Education Classes are handled by gifted education teachers. Teachers prepare the extra materials for this class. In P4-P6, students can use subject-based banding, for example, if the students in P6 are weak in Math, they can take extra class in P5 Math.

To accommodate different learning styles of the students, teaching strategy employs student-centered approach. Teaching strategies, like collaborative learning, projects, dramatization, role play, simulation, and production enhance students' competency and skills addressing their preferred learning styles. Importantly, these teaching strategies allow *quality experience*, *quality relationship* and *quality learning* among the learners and their teachers. These three layers - experience, relationship and learning are essentials for learning process (Singapore Interview, 2013 July).

A diverse range of pedagogies continue to be promoted to meet diverse student needs, enhance their learning experiences and engage them in learning. There are certain pedagogies such as inquiry-based and experiential learning that will be more actively promoted to ensure

students finding deeper meaning in their learning.

MOE provides support for schools to use a wider variety of pedagogies to support syllabus delivery. Teachers are encouraged to share pedagogical expertise through participation in learning communities through Professional Learning Team. At various MOE and external platforms, schools' efforts and successes in the use of engaging and effective pedagogy are showcased.

Parents. Parents are our partners and support (Thailand Interview, 2013 May; Singapore Interview, 2013 July). Parents are involved to bridge the gap of learning in some subjects. For example, parents help weak students to learn Math and English. For weak students, parents offer voluntary service to conduct remedial sessions. Parents are also very active to support school activities. They offer assistance in any way to help the school and the students accomplish what have been set for, such as volunteering for school projects and programs, ensuring that their children complete their homework, or notifying the school about academic-related concerns of their children and vice-versa.

7. Vietnam basic education

Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has been working on quality education, but to keep the quality of basic education is a great challenge (Quoc Thai, Director, General Education Department). There is a gap of quality primary education between regions in the country. The rate of teachers who are not yet qualified is rather high at 15%. In some provinces in North West and Central Highlands, this rate amounts up to 30-40%. Teachers of Arts, Singing-Music, Physical Education and optional subjects such as Computer, Foreign Languages are strongly needed. Although the number of teachers meeting training standards is increasing, their professional skills and methodologies are still weak. Lecturers in the pedagogical institutions for training primary teachers have not yet been highly qualified and particularly lack practical experience. Classrooms are insufficient, meeting only 50% of demand and the number of three-shift classrooms is 2,026. Most of them have not been well equipped. The amount of average schooling hours for primary pupils is still low in comparison with those of other countries. The relevance of curriculum, teaching methodologies and assessment methodologies needs more consideration. The system of education and finance management is still weak. There is a shortage of primary education managers and they lack high qualification. The education information management system has not been exact and updated. The method of allocating educational finance has not been satisfactory.

8. Implications

The research findings show ways to help develop and improve the teaching approaches in basic education in the context of Vietnam. Thus, a few teaching implications are as follows:

8.1. Teachers set time to know their students

No one strategy is best. Teaching strategies work well when they address to the students characteristics and proficiency levels. One strategy may work well in one class, but not in another class. Knowing students - their characteristics, their level of proficiency and their learning styles - is the entry point of

teaching effectively. Care and understand the students are half the battle of the students' learning process. When students feel cared and understood, they surface beyond limit. They are empowered.

8.2. Shift from a conventional to a learner-centered approach with an emphasis on self-learning to promote lifelong learning relevant to real situations in daily life

Singapore Learner-Centered Approach starts from knowing the students. Invest time and efforts to know the students through setting time for teachers to know their students. Another is using a *Cohort System*. Each cohort (group of students) is reviewed through the student's profile to ensure that its needs are met. Next is *Subject-Based Banding.* Subject-based banding ensures that each student is given a place in the learning process. For example, a P5 student is weak in Math - say his Math level is P4 Math, he takes P4 Math to reinforce his foundation skills. Singapore applies the *experiential learning* and the *constructivist learning* in the learner-centered instruction.

In Thailand, *autonomy* of secondary education to offer additional subjects to respond to the learner's needs in a specific community of the country is a learner-centered approach. Thailand is reinforcing its principle of experiential learning through adjusting the time spent between classroom and activities. By this year 2013-2014, OBEC (Office of Basic Education Commission) will implement the policy of more time in learning by doing than a lecture in the classrooms.

8.3. Adopt differentiated instruction

Differentiated Instruction is giving students multiple options for learning the information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn. A differentiated classroom provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of the ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively.

Teaching strategy evolves to stretch up students' competency to maximize their potentials. It is flexible in terms of pacing and the depth of the lessons that the teachers want to explore. It implies frequent review of the teaching strategies and design innovative approaches for quality teaching and learning, helping the weak and lifting them to the next level.

8.4. Train teachers to be conversant in using teaching approaches and strategies in a student-centered instruction

Strengthen the training of teachers in content mastery and teaching approaches, namely, experiential learning and constructivist learning using teaching strategies such as, cooperative, collaborative, project, scientific inquiry and other learning-centered teaching strategies and techniques. Teachers should be conversant of using these teaching approaches and strategies in their subject areas.

Training and development should be strengthened to ensure that all teachers have a good grasp of effective teaching approaches and strategies that can be applied across subjects as well as those that are specific to the subjects they teach so they can teach with confidence. Importantly, they can teach better.

To ensure that teachers have a good grasp of curriculum content and upgraded teaching approaches and strategies, the Ministry should place priority on strengthening in-service training for all teachers year round. This will ensure the continuous improvement of teaching practices in the classroom, which is the key to realizing the desired outcomes of education. Train, develop, and empower the teachers.

8.5. Set regular time for teacher's meeting

Working with teachers to make classrooms more student-centered, principals set regular meetings with the teachers to monitor their successes and difficulties in engaging students in the learning process. During the meeting, (a) teachers are going to share their teaching stories and experiences infused with their values and cultural understanding. Then, (b) they share teaching strategies and authentic instructional materials they found helpful for learners to learn better, and (c) teachers in the subject areas design new teaching techniques to enhance student's learning in a student-centered instruction.

8.6. Establish mentoring system

The schools will use the mentoring system to assist new teachers learn the culture of learning and teaching, and classroom management. Senior teachers mentor the new or beginner teachers through class orientation, program orientation, and course and syllabus orientation. Senior teachers will walk through until the new teachers perform well.

8.7. Develop teaching Strategies

School Heads of the Departments (HODs) and the teachers design core teaching strategies to be used per subject, such as Language uses drama, Math uses games-based, Science uses inquiry-based, so as other subjects. Due to learners multiple intelligence, teachers use various teaching strategies, instructional media and instructional materials in addition to the fundamental teaching strategies.

8.8. Develop a strong teaching force

Teachers in basic education should be trained and formed to be good and even excellent in their own field. Create multiple channels for teacher's training throughout year cycle. In Singapore, these are the Ministry of Education though Academy of Singapore Teachers, Cluster Training, School-Based Training, and Professional Training Team. The Academy of Singapore Teachers provides a list of training topics available for teachers' professional advancement year round. Once the teacher needs the training, s/he can get the training anytime. Aside from training, other very important factors of developing a strong teaching force are the culture of team work and the culture of faculty assessment. Due to these, Singapore has a very strong teaching force that makes its schools a world-class education provider.

9. Conclusion

The research study reveals that knowing students is the foundation of choosing or designing teaching strategies that wok well in the learning process of the students importantly in basic education. Findings of this study indicated that both countries, Singapore and Thailand, have pointed out the approaches and teaching strategies that work well in their own context. Thus, Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnam can make a policy for its basic education schools to review their teaching approaches and practices, teaching strategies, and design a new model of teaching approaches and strategies they think would work well in the context of Vietnam. Moreover, the research findings reveal the need for conducting further research into the learning strategies of students in basic education to verify and obtain a deeper meaning of their learning preferences. It would be extremely interesting to investigate several variables (sex, age, learning style, motivation, social background), which may affect students' choice of learning strategies. In turn, teachers can choose or design teaching approaches and strategies that fit to students learning

preferences derived from the hard data, not just from the "gut level".

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Phương pháp giảng dạy ở Singapore và Thái Lan: Các đề xuất cho Việt Nam

Anita Clapano-Oblina, Trương Thị Mỹ Dung,
Hồ Thanh Mỹ Phương, Trần Phước Lĩnh

Tổ chức Bộ trưởng Giáo dục các nước Đông Nam Á (SEAMEO),
Trung tâm Đào tạo Khu vực của SEAMEO tại Việt Nam (SEAMEO RETRAC),
35 Lê Thánh Tôn, Quận 1, TP.HCM, Việt Nam

Tóm tắt: Bài viết này là một phần trong Đề tài Khoa học và Công nghệ cấp Bộ năm 2012-2014 về "So sánh Mô hình Giáo dục Phổ thông ở Singapore và Thái Lan: Bài học cho Việt Nam" do Trung tâm Đào tạo Khu vực của SEAMEO (SEAMEO RETRAC) tại Việt Nam thực hiện. Nghiên cứu này lấy số liệu từ các Hiệu trưởng và/hoặc Phó Hiệu trưởng của các trường phổ thông ở Singapore và Thái Lan. Nhóm nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp phỏng vấn sâu và ngôn ngữ sử dụng là tiếng Anh. Trong

bài viết này, các tác giả tìm hiểu các phương pháp giảng dạy có hiệu quả trong các trường phổ thông ở Singapore và Thái Lan nhằm đưa ra các đề xuất phương pháp giảng dạy trong giáo dục phổ thông ở Việt Nam. Kết quả cho thấy phương pháp lấy học sinh làm trung tâm, phương pháp học tập bằng kinh nghiệm, phương pháp học tập kiến tạo và phương pháp dạy học theo từng đối tượng, có hiệu quả trong quá trình học tập của học sinh. Quan trọng hơn, kết quả nghiên cứu chỉ ra rằng "hiểu biết học sinh" là nền tảng của việc lựa chọn và thiết kế các chiến lược và kĩ thuật giảng dạy trong giáo dục phổ thông. Bài viết cũng đưa ra các đề xuất cho giáo dục phổ thông Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: Phương pháp giảng dạy, lấy học sinh làm trung tâm, khác biệt, học tập bằng kinh nghiệm, học tập kiến tạo.