

POWER DISTANCE IN UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT, MANIFESTED BY VIETNAMESE-TRAINED TEACHERS AND OVESEAS-TRAINED VIETNAMESE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigated power distance manifested by Vietnamese-trained teachers and overseas-trained Vietnamese teachers of English in the university environment. The study used the power distance dimension introduced by Hofstede (1991, 2001) as a framework to investigate the power distance manifestation in English classrooms. A mixed methods research design was employed. 28 teachers from both groups of teachers were chosen to take part in the research in the principle of the purposive sampling method. Meanwhile structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data on classroom environment, thematic analysis was the main data analysis method. The findings revealed that the chosen research participants displayed both high power distance and low power distance manifestation regardless of the official recognition of Vietnam as a high power distance nation. The findings suggested that English teachers' perspectives on power distance possibly form a foundation for competency-based education in Vietnam.

Keywords: Hofstede's cultural dimensions, high power distance, low power distance, competency-based education, power distance.

NGHIÊN CỨU VỀ KHOẢNG CÁCH QUYỀN LỰC TRONG MÔI TRƯỜNG LỚP HỌC CỦA GIÁNG VIÊN TIẾNG ANH ĐÀO TẠO Ở VIỆT NAM VÀ GIÁNG VIÊN ĐÃ ĐI DU HỌC

Nghiên cứu này sử dụng chiều kích văn hóa về khoảng cách quyền lực (Hofstede, 1991, 2001) để nghiên cứu cách các giáo viên Việt Nam sử dụng khoảng cách quyền lực trong môi trường lớp học tiếng Anh ở bậc đại học. Đây là một nghiên cứu theo phương pháp hỗn hợp kết hợp định tính với định lượng. Đối tượng tham

gia nghiên cứu là 14 giảng viên được đào tạo trong nước và 14 giảng viên đã từng có thời gian du học ở các nước phương tây. Dữ liệu của nghiên cứu được thu thập qua bảng khảo sát, phỏng vấn và phân tích qua phương pháp mã hóa theo chủ đề. Nghiên cứu kết luận rằng dù được đào tạo ở trong hay ngoài nước, cách các giáo viên tham gia nghiên cứu sử dụng khoảng cách quyền lực trong lớp học mang cả đặc tính cao của các nước có chỉ số khoảng cách quyền lực cao và đặc tính thấp của các nước có chỉ số quyền lực thấp. Kết luận của nghiên cứu này chỉ ra những đặc điểm mới trong văn hóa Việt Nam nhìn từ góc độ giao thoa văn hóa. Bên cạnh đó, nghiên cứu có giá trị tham khảo cho các nghiên cứu về dạy đại học theo định hướng phát triển năng lực của người học ở Việt Nam hiện nay.

Từ khóa: Lý thuyết về chiều văn hóa của Hofstede, khoảng cách quyền lực cao, khoảng cách quyền lực thấp, giảng dạy theo định hướng phát triển năng lực của người học.

I. INTRODUCTION

Haiphong University recently has employed competency-based education to improve teaching and learning quality. Literature shows that prerequisites for this approach include equity. However, there has been little research on equity in the context of English language teaching in Vietnam.

Research on cross-cultural communication plays a crucial part in English language teaching. In the field, there is a number of studies on the association between second language acquisition and cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1991) including power distance. Meanwhile most of the studies on power distance focus on behavioral research and employed contrastive analysis approach, there is a shortage of research that addresses classroom equity. Among the limited number of studies in this field, Wang (2022) found that high

power distance is destructive to classroom equity in second language acquisition classrooms.

According to Hofstede (2010), Vietnam is a relatively high power distance country compared to European and American countries, with a power distance index (PDI) of 70. Combined with the effects of Confucianism, these features are likely to impact classroom equity which would result in failures of the competence-based approach. This is because students' learning in English foreign language classrooms depends on teachers, and therefore teachers' attitudes and behaviors play a significant role in improving students' English skills. Therefore, this study is carried out to understand the power distance manifested by university teachers in English classrooms. This study particularly investigated the manifestation of power

distance of Vietnamese teachers who were trained in the local context and in Western countries such as Australia, the USA, and Britain. The researcher situated a hypothesis here that Vietnamese-trained teachers would behave in a way that a typical high power distance environment would follow. However, how Western-countries-trained teachers exercised the power distance in the same context remained unrevealed yet. The researcher held a hypothesis that the manifestation is likely to differentiate because of their overseas-training background from low power distance countries. In this study, overseas-trained Vietnamese teachers mean Vietnamese teachers who attained studies in Western countries. The study aims to understand how the manifestation of power distance is in the university environment, taking Vietnamese-trained teachers and overseas-trained teachers as research participants. From this aim, and based on the cultural dimension index suggested by Hofstede, the following research questions were developed:

- How do Vietnamese-trained teachers of English exercise power distance in the university environment?
- How do overseas-trained Vietnamese teachers of English exercise power distance in the university environment?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents the theoretical background for the whole research. Firstly, a review of Hofstede's cultural dimensions displays with attention to the power distance index of Vietnam. Later, previous related studies on the manifestation of power distance would be conferred; hence, the data collection instrument for this research was justified.

2.1. Power distance in Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Hofstede (n.d.) proposed six cultural dimensions including power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term versus short-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint. According to Hofstede, power distance regards the agreement of less powerful individuals to the fact that power is unequally distributed. Hofstede (1991) figures out the differences between high power distance (HPD) and low power distance (LPD) societies regarding general norms, family, school and workplace issues. Hofstede's (2001) also suggested that on a basis of a definition of power distance, power distance in the classroom should include, but is not limited to, students' acceptance and expectations of unequal power distribution as a relatively disadvantaged group in school, teacher, or group work settings.

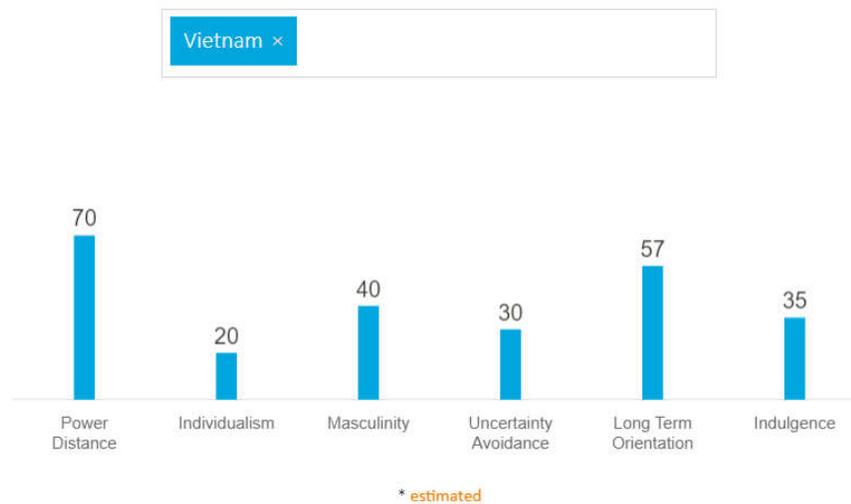


Figure 1: Cultural dimension index of Vietnam (Hofstede, n.d.)

As can be seen from the chart, Vietnam scores 70 for power distance index. Because the score is much higher than the average score of 50, this high index places Vietnam in the group of HPD countries (Hofstede, n.d.).

2.2. Related studies on the manifestations of power distance

The following section reported findings from some studies on the manifestation of power distance with regard to education equity and Vietnamese context. Wang (2022) examined the effect of power distance on classroom equity in English language teaching in China. The study reported that power distance is destructive to classroom equity in second language acquisition classrooms. In particular, teachers were unable to allocate resources in a truly equitable manner.

Furthermore, students were afraid to express their opinions, which affected the production of creative and critical thinking. This study was conducted in China which has index score as high as Vietnam, therefore the study raised a question on how Vietnamese teachers manifested power distance currently.

Truong & Nguyen (2002) conducted a study on power distance in Vietnamese context. The authors concluded that the HPD characteristic manifests in both the daily life and business. In terms of family, children have to obey parents' orders. In terms of organisations, there is a clear subordinate-superior relationship regardless business organisations or administrative-career ones. Titles, status, and formality are very salient in Vietnamese society.

Trung (2013) investigated power

distance manifestation in the university environment, among undergraduate students from Vietnam and Australia as research participants. The author employed a questionnaire and interviews to study two aspects in the classroom including group work and classroom environment. The findings show no difference compared to Hofstede findings on Australian students' manifestation, i.e., Australian students were likely to behave in low power distance way in both group work and classroom atmosphere. However, there are both similarities and dissimilarities between Trung (2013)' findings and Hofstede's. Whereas Vietnamese students only followed high power distance behaviors in the classroom environment, they manifested low power distance behaviors in group work. Trung (2013)'s study inspired me to look at the issue of classroom environment from teachers' perspectives. I hoped that the findings of the current study may contribute to an overall view of the manifestation of power distance in an English classroom context. Thus, I employed the data collection instruments from Trung (2013) and adapted them to be appropriate for the participants of teachers.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed methods research design because this research aimed at exploiting the manifestation of power distance in a part of university teachers of English only via both quantitative data and qualitative data. The researcher would like to see if the manifestation was different from what Hofstede and other researchers

mentioned or not. Because qualitative research presents the investigated phenomena in a natural and holistic way (O'Donoghue, 2007) and fewer participants taking part in than quantitative research, no generalisation would be made in this study.

A total of 28 teachers participated in the current research. 14 Vietnamese-trained participants and 14 overseas-trained Vietnamese ones were chosen to be the sample for this research. In this research, the purposive sampling method was employed. The researcher recruited the participants based upon their education location, capacity, and willingness to participate in the research (Tongco, 2007).

In terms of data collection methods, the current study adapted the data collection instruments from Trung (2013). Questions in the section of the classroom environment in the structured questionnaire and semi-structured interview were adapted. The questionnaire was delivered via Google Forms. The interviews were conducted via Zalo call or Messenger call and recorded. The questionnaire delivered to Vietnamese-trained teachers was in Vietnamese. The one distributed to overseas-trained Vietnamese teachers was in English. However, interviews were conducted in English for both groups of participants. There were two Vietnamese-trained teachers taking part in interviews (GV1 and GV2). Two overseas-trained teachers participating the interviews were Teacher 1 and Teacher 2. The data collection procedure was carried out as follows. After asking for help from acquaintances, I sent the questionnaires via

Google Forms to participants. In response to my invitation for an interview, four teachers agreed to take part in it. As soon as I attained their acceptance, I set up appointments via Zalo or Facebook Messenger upon their choice, and carried out semi-structured interviews. In terms of data analysis, the method is thematic analysis. Data analysis coding based on the questionnaire which was constructed by three analysis units, namely teacher-student communication, perception of teacher's role, and perception of criticism on teachers. For each of the questions in the questionnaire, answers were arranged into two categories, namely HPD and LPD.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research investigated power distance exercised by teachers in a

classroom environment which is suggested by three indicators including teacher-student communication, perception of the teacher's role and perception of criticism on teachers. This section presents the findings in three themes accordingly.

4.1. Teacher-student communication

Questions 1, 2, 6, and 7 in the questionnaire addressed issues of teacher-student communication. Responses to question 1 showed that 100% of both Vietnamese-trained teachers and overseas-trained teachers often initiated communications in the class. This result revealed that communications in Vietnamese classrooms are established in a strict order which is a prominent feature of a HPD classroom environment.

		Vietnamese-trained teachers	Overseas-trained teachers
Q2: Often cope with unexpected questions	TRUE	71.40%	78.6%
	FALSE	28.60%	21.40%
Q6: How a teacher would allow students to interrupt his/her speaking?	Raise hands, wait until you call him/her to raise questions	78.6%	85.7%
	Call the teacher's name and go straight into a question	21.4%	14.3%

Responses from both two participant groups to question 2 apparently show a contradiction to their responses to question 6 in their practice of power distance. Regarding the question 2, a majority of both

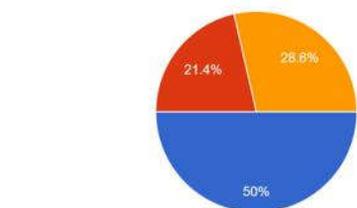
Vietnamese-trained teachers and overseas-trained teachers, 71.40% and 78.6% respectively stated that they often coped with unexpected questions from their students. These high percentage numbers

indicated LPD because in the LPD classroom environment, uninvited interventions in class are expected and questions can be raised at any time. Nevertheless, 78.6% of the Vietnamese-trained and 85.7% of the overseas-trained participants answered that they allowed their students to interrupt their speaking by raising hands and wait until they call them to raise questions. These high figures showed that both groups of participants exercised HPD in teacher-student communication. To address this confusion, the researcher sought answers from interviews.

Interestingly, both groups of participants shared that the unexpected questions included lesson-related questions and irrelevant questions to lessons. However, there were more irrelevant questions for various purposes, for example “to get information about the teacher’s personal life” (Teacher 1) or “for fun” (GV2). These data suggested that the students in Vietnamese classrooms became getting acquainted with LPD behaviors. These actions might have resulted from

globalisation of Vietnam in all sectors including education. They contributed to Vietnamese culture progress. This evidence suggested an out-of-date aspect of the conclusion that Vietnam was officially recognised as a HPD country (Hofstede, 1991). However, interview answers from both teacher groups went appropriately with Hofstede’s findings. A majority of participants in both groups choosing the first option in question 6 indicated a HPD in teachers’ perception of student-teacher communication. Explaining reasons for accepting the first option for students to interrupt their speaking, both Vietnamese-trained and overseas-trained participants stated that they monitor the class communication by allowing speaking in turn. In addition, a Vietnamese-trained teacher elaborated that the mode for students to raise their hands and wait sometimes helped her to restrain irrelevant questions from students and complete the lesson in time (GV1). Therefore, findings on questions 2 and 6 revealed HPD exercised by both groups of teachers.

What language do you prefer your students address you?
14 responses



- "Teacher" + your given name. E.g., Teacher Chinh
- Your given name. E.g., Chinh
- Title (Mr., Mrs., Ms., etc) + teacher's surname name. E.g., Mr., Mrs., Ms., Dr. Le

Bạn muốn sinh viên gọi tên của mình thế nào?
14 responses



- "Thầy/cô" + tên chính của thầy/cô. Ví dụ: Cô Chinh
- Tên chính của thầy/cô. Ví dụ: Chinh
- Chức danh (Ông, Bà, Cô, etc) + tên họ. Ví dụ: Cô/Tiến sĩ Lê

Chart 1: Addressing a teacher

Regarding language to address teachers, LPD language was apparently

chosen by most participants in both groups. 100% of Vietnamese-trained teachers preferred to be addressed by their given name whereas the figure for overseas-trained participants accounted for 50%. However, a close look at the language mode showed strict order of the language which suggested a HPD aspect. Noticeably, the teachers preferred to be addressed by their given name plus the word “Teacher” prior. Explaining this way of addressing in the interviews, participants claimed that this way showed a certain respect toward the teachers; and this way of a teacher addressing had been used for years already. Additionally, 28.6% of overseas-trained teachers chose the

option of the title along with their surname. Overall, the language used to address Vietnamese teachers showed a HPD culture in Vietnam.

To sum up, it could be drawn out from the theme teacher-student communication that teachers were likely to behave in the HPD way regardless of their education locations. This finding on the theme is appropriately proper to Hofstede’s research results in Vietnam.

4.2. Perception of teacher’s role

Different from HPD indicators on teacher-student communication, indicators from the questionnaire on perception of teacher’s role showed LPD perception from both two groups of participants.

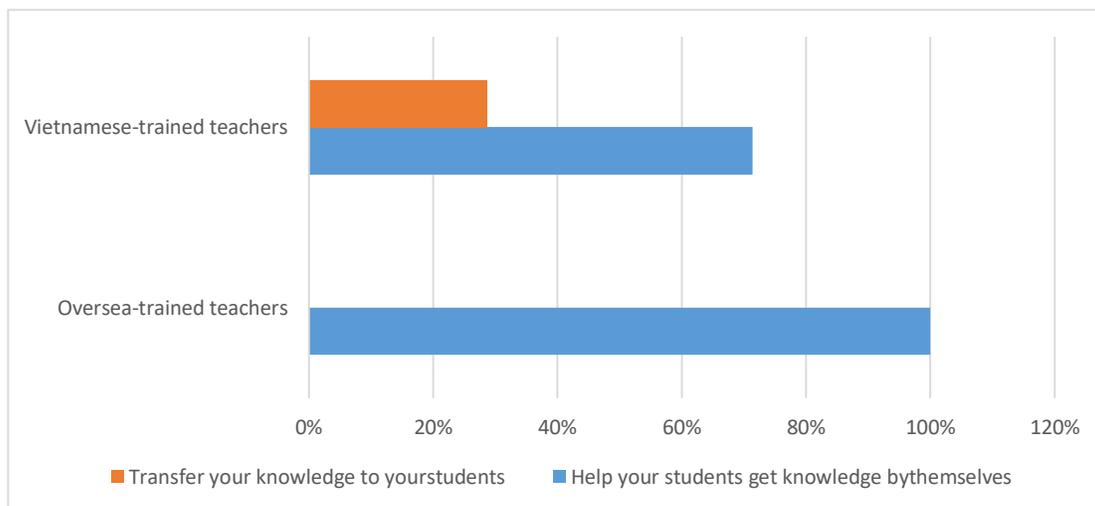


Chart 2: Teacher’s role

Regarding question 5, 100% of overseas-trained teachers thought that they were in charge of helping students to get knowledge by themselves while the figure for the Vietnamese-trained teachers accounted for 71.4%. Such high percentages suggested the teacher

perceived the education process as student-centered which was one of the LPD classroom features. However, findings on teacher’s authority in the classroom revealed HPD aspect in the teacher’s role. Meanwhile half Vietnamese-trained teachers claimed

that they had authority over their students, one-third of overseas-trained teachers stated similarly (35.7%). An explanation for the dissimilarity in findings between the two questions might be that Vietnamese teachers changed their perception of their teaching role to an instructor due to the

application of the communicative language teaching approach. Nevertheless, the culture of a HPD country like Vietnam might have restrained the teachers treated themselves as equally as other students in the class as revealed by responses to the question 8 on teacher's authority.

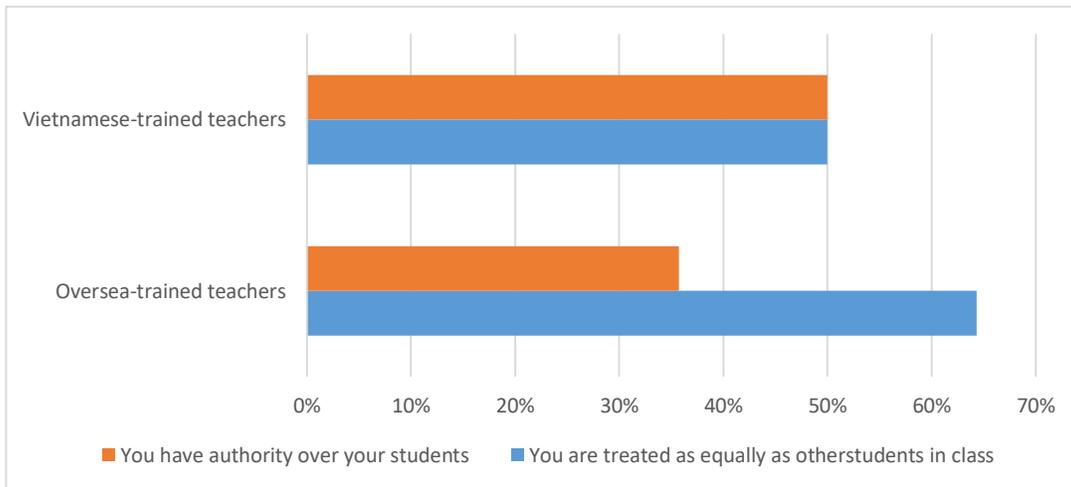


Chart 3: Teacher's authority

4.3. Perception of criticism on teachers

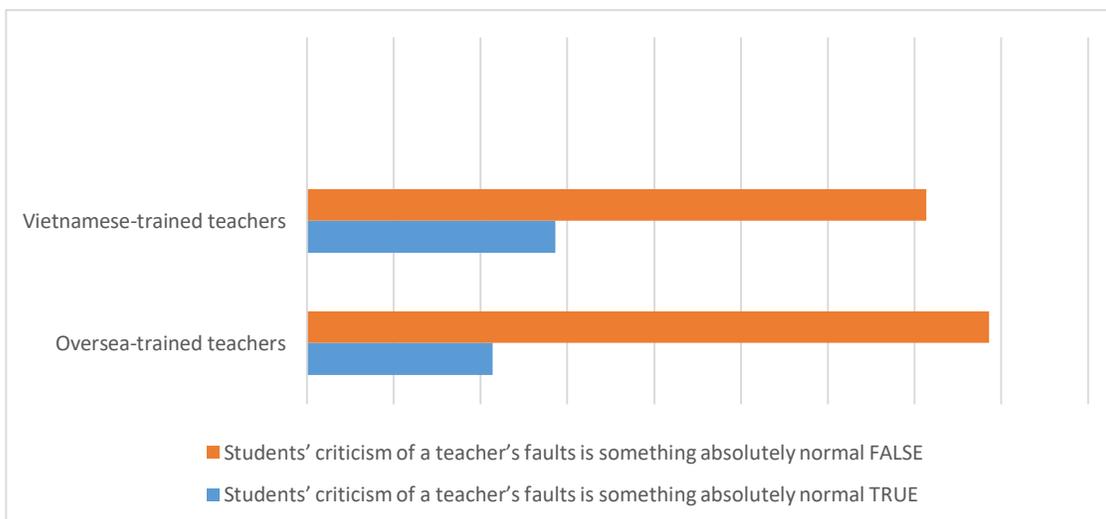


Chart 4: Students' criticism of a teacher's faults

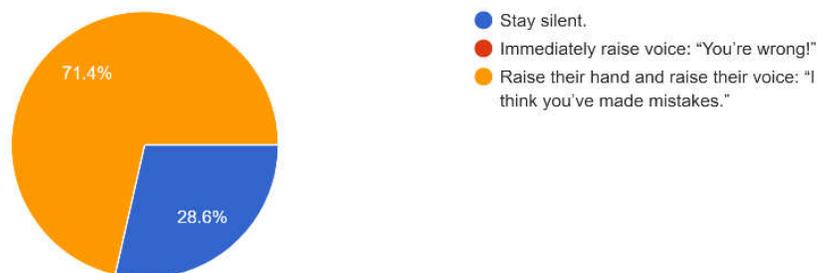
Among the three indicators, perception of students' criticism on

teachers was also the one to have LPD answers mostly chosen. Responses from question 4 showed that a large number of participants in Vietnamese-trained group and overseas-trained group regarded students' criticism of a teacher's faults as a normal action (71.4 % and 78.6% respectively). When the researcher further

exploited this issue via interview, GV2 said that teacher was no different from other people, thus making a mistake and being criticized were common. Her idea was agreed by Teacher 2 who claimed that *"I have no hesitation to say sorry to a student for a mistake and correct it as soon as possible."*

Your students realized you made a mistake. How would you accept their reaction?

14 responses



Sinh viên nhận ra bạn mắc lỗi sai. Bạn chấp thuận phản ứng nào của sinh viên?

14 responses

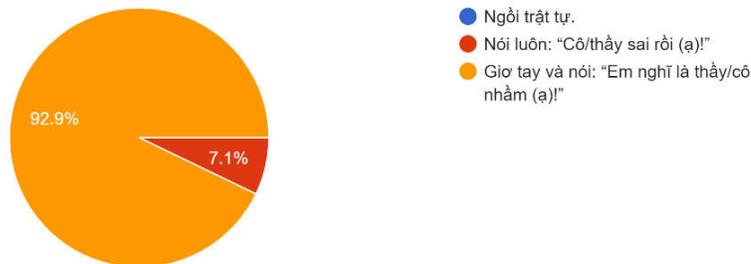


Chart 5: Acceptance on students' criticism

Criticism on teachers was also investigated via the way the teachers accepted the students reactions to their mistakes (question 3). Although about two-third overseas-trained teachers accepted their students to disclose their mistakes, the rest preferred the students

stay silent. Interestingly, 100% of Vietnamese-trained participants allowed students to disclose their faults via either raising their hands and voice (92.9%) or immediately raising their voice in the class (7.1%). Overall, a majority of participants in both groups show LPD

perception of their students' criticism of their mistakes. In brief, among the three indicators for power distance in the classroom environment, LPD prevailed with the most answers for the perception of criticism on teachers. This highly suggested that although Vietnam was officially recognised as HPD country by Hofstede (1991), this fact did not fit in the context of the 28 teachers who were chosen to participate in this research.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The current study sought the answers to two research questions on how Vietnamese-trained teachers and overseas-trained teachers exercised power distance in university environment. The study addressed two research questions via the findings on three indicators including indicator of teacher-student communication, perception of teacher's role and perception of criticism. The indicator of teacher-student communication shows HPD manifestation in the classrooms of both Vietnamese-trained teachers and overseas-trained teachers. However, a majority of answers in the indicators of perception of teacher's role and perception of criticism on teachers fell into the category of LPD. Furthermore, there were a certain number of common perceptions between the two groups of participants. As a result, it could be concluded that although Hofstede (1991) recognised Vietnam as a HPD nation, this research found that the chosen research participants still displayed LPD manifestation regardless of their locations of education training. The findings

suggested that English teachers' perspectives on power distance in Vietnam possibly form a foundation for competency-based education. In terms of limitations, the results of this study cannot be generalised because of small sample and purposeful sampling of the qualitative method. Moreover, the lack of data may contribute to the shortcomings of this study because although 28 teachers returned the completed questionnaire, only four of the participants agreed to take part in the interview.

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