



ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE



VIETNAMESE FLAG

Vietnamese Language and Student Behavior

The sound systems of English and Vietnamese differ greatly. Vietnamese is a tone language, which means that pitch changes distinguish word meaning. Most words in Vietnamese consist of only one syllable. This can cause difficulty for Vietnamese speakers who are trying to produce the longer words of English with appropriate stress patterns. Vietnamese learners' English may have a staccato-like rhythm. Vietnamese has fewer consonants than in English and there are no consonant clusters. Words with consonants in final position may be hard for the English listener to hear. For example, 'beat' may sound like 'bee.' 'P' does not occur in the front position in Vietnamese, and 'b' or 'f' may be substituted. Speakers of Vietnamese do not experience as much difficulty with English vowels. The non-use of *be* in sentences consisting of subject and adjective can result in sentences such as, *She beautiful.*

Some Vietnamese students may display the following:

Vietnamese students who are influenced by their traditional learning style tend to keep quiet in class and wait until called upon to answer the questions asked by the teachers, instead of volunteering.

Vietnamese students tend to copy down and rely on everything written on the board. Free lecturing, which relies on listening and note-taking skills, may present challenges.

Out of respect to the teacher, some Vietnamese students may not make direct eye contact with the teacher. It is also common for Vietnamese students to address their instructors by 'Teacher.'

Since keeping quiet in class is to show respect to teachers as well as to create a productive learning environment, traditional Vietnamese students will be less talkative in class. Challenging the teacher is not typical of Vietnamese culture. Such behavior is strongly criticized and avoided.

It is not offensive in Vietnamese culture to ask personal questions regarding age, marital status, salary, religion, etc. In this culture, a comment on weight gain is a compliment; on the contrary, a remark on weight loss is not complimentary.

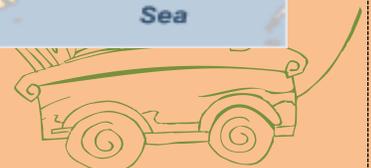
(Taken from Vietnam: Cultural Background for ESL/EFL Teachers and Teaching American Pronunciation)

Exploring Vietnam

*Vietnam, sometimes spelled Viet Nam, and officially the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, is the easternmost country on the Indochina Peninsula in Southeast Asia. It is bordered by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to the north, Laos to the northwest, Cambodia to the southwest, and the South China Sea, referred to as East Sea (Vietnamese: *Biển Đông*), to the east. With a population of over 89 million, Vietnam is the 13th most populous country in the world.*

The Vietnamese became independent from China in AD 938 after their victory at the battle of Bạch Đằng River. Successive dynasties flourished along with geographic and political expansion deeper into Southeast Asia, until it was colonized by the French in the mid-19th century. Efforts to resist the French eventually led to their expulsion from the country in the mid-20th century, leaving a nation divided politically into two countries. Fighting between the two sides continued during the Vietnam War, ending with a North Vietnamese victory in 1975.

Where is Vietnam?



Meet JSRCC Chemistry 111 Teacher Thutrang Nguyen

About a month ago, I was walking down the hall on the Parham Road Campus when a young woman approached me. "Are you Laurie? Do you remember me? I was your student in ESL." Imagine my surprise when I learned that Thutrang Nguyen was now teaching Chemistry here at the College!

Thutrang came to the U.S. in 2002. She holds a 4-year degree in Chemistry from Vietnam and worked as a high school chemistry teacher for 7 years in her native country. Even though she had studied some English in Vietnam, she lacked confidence in her speaking and listening skills when she arrived in Virginia so she enrolled in ESL classes at Reynolds. Thutrang started at our high intermediate level of instruction and completed courses in reading, writing and oral communications classes in the ESL program.

While taking her last ESL writing class, Thutrang took the TOEFL exam. Disappointed not to earn the scores required to enter the Master's program at VCU as a full-time student, she was not deterred, as she was permitted to enroll as a part-time student. This turned out to Thutrang's advantage since she was pregnant with her first child and this allowed her greater flexibility in juggling her school and family responsibilities. She completed her Master's degree in Chemistry in an impressive 3 ½ years, finishing in August of 2010.

Upon completing her degree, Thutrang responded to an ad for a part-time teaching position in Chemistry here at JSRCC. While she was back in Vietnam visiting family, she received a call asking her to come in for an interview. She was so excited by the opportunity that she cut her trip short to come in for the interview. Thutrang started teaching at the College last fall. She vividly recalls her first day teaching at Reynolds. She remembers being really nervous about whether or not her students would understand her. She quickly discovered, however, that she had, in fact, prepared adequately for the class. She had practiced her pronunciation at home to make sure that she would be understandable, and she did fine. Thutrang continues to use internet videos to practice and improve her pronunciation skills, and she says that sometimes her students even help her with her pronunciation.

Thutrang told me that prior to teaching at Reynolds, she took time to learn how American students learn math since it is so different from the methodology in Vietnam. She has also studied how teachers organize classes here and how they communicate with students. And she doesn't hesitate to approach more seasoned teachers about how to deal with any unexpected classroom problems that might arise. According to one of her students, Nino Ballesteros, Thutrang has all the qualities that make for an excellent teacher. She structures her lessons so that students can easily follow the challenging material. Ballesteros appreciates how she really makes the difficult subject matter easy to understand through the pace of instruction and by her ongoing monitoring of students' understanding of the material.

Thutrang says that she always strives to let her students know that she's trying to help them understand and do something good for them. Additionally, she wants them to see that she's prepared for each class. She loves being in the school environment and loves her students. Thutrang credits her father for her choice of becoming a teacher, a highly respected profession in Vietnam. She adds that, in Vietnam, women have the most respect in the family, and being teachers helps them learn many valuable skills – skills that seem to run in her family, as three of her siblings are also teachers.



Thutrang Nguyen
Former ESL Student now Chemistry Teacher at JSRCC

Near the end of our conversation, I asked Thutrang what she recalled about her experience in the ESL program. She reported learning many things about different cultures from her classmates and teachers. Her writing and reading courses helped her a lot in her career, and even though she feels like she will always be working on becoming a more confident speaker, her ESL teachers made her much more comfortable with the language overall. Being a student at Reynolds taught her much about the American school environment, which has been useful in her teaching here at the College.

Thutrang recalled a paper that she had written in my writing class. In sorting through my files recently, I came across a copy of this paper. Below is a paragraph from this 2004 essay, entitled *My Clock*, which I believe captures a common and touching sentiment of the immigrant experience.

The most important reason for me to always keep my clock beside me is that it is the only gift from my mother that I brought with me to America. My mother had given me many gifts, especially on every birthday. When I moved to America, I could not bring everything with me, so I chose the clock. When I miss my mother, I look at it or hold it in my hands. Every morning, when it wakes me up, I have the feeling that my mother woke me up to go to school when I was a little girl.

Her mother would certainly be proud to see how far Thutrang has come in her new country. How fortunate we are at Reynolds to have one of our very own ESL students giving back to the College in her new role as a teacher.

ESL Staff: Laurie Weinberg (Coordinator); Jinky Davis (Advisor);
Shiela Kenney, Niki Ballesteros (Work Study Students)

