

Vietnamese high school EFL teachers' perceptions of teaching cultural contents during the Covid-19 pandemic: A case study at Tra Vinh City

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ARTICLE INFO

DOI:10.46223/HCMCOUJS.soci.en.12.2.2291.2022

Received: May 12th, 2022

Revised: August 28th, 2022

Accepted: September 05th, 2022

Keywords:

Covid-19 pandemic; cultural knowledge; online teaching; Vietnamese EFL teachers

ABSTRACT

In the field of foreign language education, cultural knowledge is as important as language skills. To date, little research explores how Vietnamese EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers perceive cultural teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. To fill such gaps in the literature, this study was conducted on 64 EFL high school teachers in Tra Vinh Province with a questionnaire and 06 participants with an in-depth interview to explore their perceptions of cultural teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially when there is a reduction in the contents of the new curriculum. This article applied the framework of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) adapted from Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002) and the Cultural Iceberg framework to analyze Vietnamese EFL high school teachers' strategies in teaching cultural content. The findings revealed that teachers still have a positive view of the role of cultural teaching, and they still teach cultural knowledge despite the reduction of contents in English textbooks. Effective strategies applied when teaching online were also revealed.

1. Introduction

In the time of globalization, integrating the culture of foreign language classrooms becomes essentially important and teachers of English cannot separate two components: language and culture in the process of teaching a foreign language (Byram, 1997; Byram et al., 2002; Jing, 2010; Liddicoat, 2002).

In the Vietnamese context of teaching English, the knowledge about the culture of other countries is incorporated into the learning outcomes for secondary students in the new curriculum (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018). In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, however, there has been a significant reduction in content to be taught at Vietnamese high schools (Ministry of Education and Training, 2021). This entails the possibility that Vietnamese teachers and students of English will have fewer opportunities to work with cultural knowledge in the classrooms.

Such a change in the national curriculum for the academic year 2021 - 2022 posed a question to teachers' perspectives on teaching cultural knowledge in their lessons. Moreover, there has been little research conducted to explore how Vietnamese EFL teachers perceive the teaching of cultural knowledge in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Aiming to fill these gaps in the literature on teaching cultural knowledge in the Vietnamese EFL context, the

current study is intended to explore teachers' perspectives on the teaching of cultural knowledge in their lessons, especially when there is a reduction in the contents of the required lesson plans.

The present study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. How do Vietnamese EFL high school teachers perceive the teaching cultural contents in the English textbook according to the new curriculum distribution amidst the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What strategies are applied by Vietnamese EFL high school teachers in teaching cultural content according to the new curriculum distribution amidst the Covid-19 pandemic?

2. Theoretical basis

2.1. Definition of culture

Culture is a complex concept, and culturologists have defined it variously. According to Levine (1987), culture is the "blueprint" for human behavior, affecting their thinking and behavior as well as society. Baptiste (1988) simultaneously used the term "culture" as a period or place in which a person's manners, interests, and intellect reach their peak. That is, thoughts, habits, art, etc. of a certain group of people at a particular time. Ingold (1994) later defined culture as a convenient way of life that is comprised of a distinct set of customary behavior, institutions, and artifacts. It can be inferred from the above definitions that Cultural characteristics can be considered as all the components that make up the culture of a community, based on various ways of understanding this concept.

The Iceberg metaphor of culture is one of the most essential frameworks for understanding and studying cultural components in cultural research (Hall, 1976; Weaver, 1993). Hall (1976), an American anthropologist, was the first to propose the iceberg metaphor for culture. It was until 2000 that Weaver (2000) improved the model. This model has been utilized in various studies on intercultural education (Jing, 2010; Horie, 2014; Kintner-Duffy, Scott-Little, & Smith, 2021; Sasu, 2016). According to Hall's cultural iceberg hypothesis, culture is made up of two parts: the visible and underneath level (as shown in Figure 1).

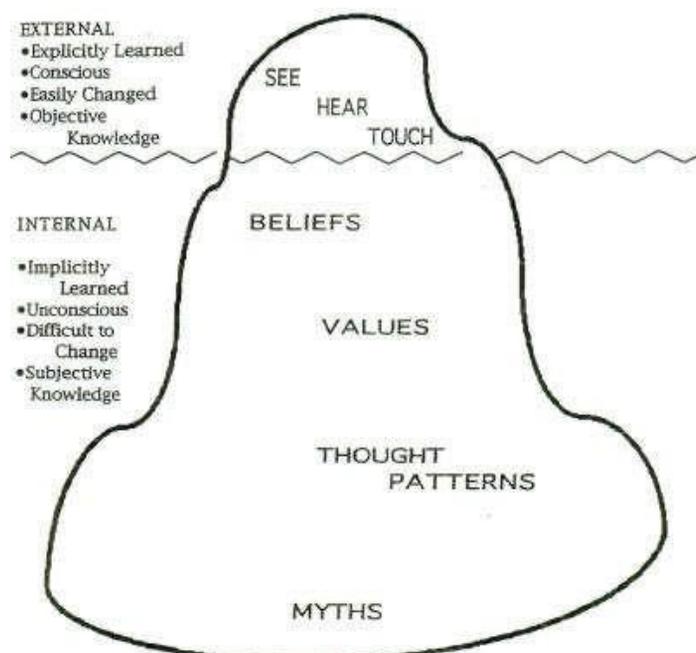


Figure 1. The cultural iceberg

Horie (2014) clarified the two components of cultures which are the visible and invisible components of culture. According to him, the surface elements of culture are made up of “architecture, dancing, music, meals, clothing, literature, arts, and so on,” whilst the invisible portion is made up of “ways and patterns of thinking, basic values, and standards, assumptions, beliefs, and so on” (p. 2).

Other scholars’ perspectives on culture and language education grouped cultures into two categories: big C cultures and small (little) c cultures. According to Brooks (1968), the instructors should have concentrated on both two vital cultural concepts. While big C cultures referred to a society’s goods and contributions such as politics, history, art, science, and geography, small C culture was thought to encompass everything relevant to human life (Chastain, 1988). Human beliefs, behavior, cuisine, holidays, everyday activities, customs, or traditional beliefs might all be factors of small C (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993).

2.2. Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

One of the well-known frameworks in intercultural instruction is Byram’s model for Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). This framework is a common model for incorporating cultural elements in foreign language education. As can be seen from Figure 2, there are five components of the ICC model: attitudes, knowledge, critical cultural awareness, abilities to explore and engage, and skills to understand and communicate.

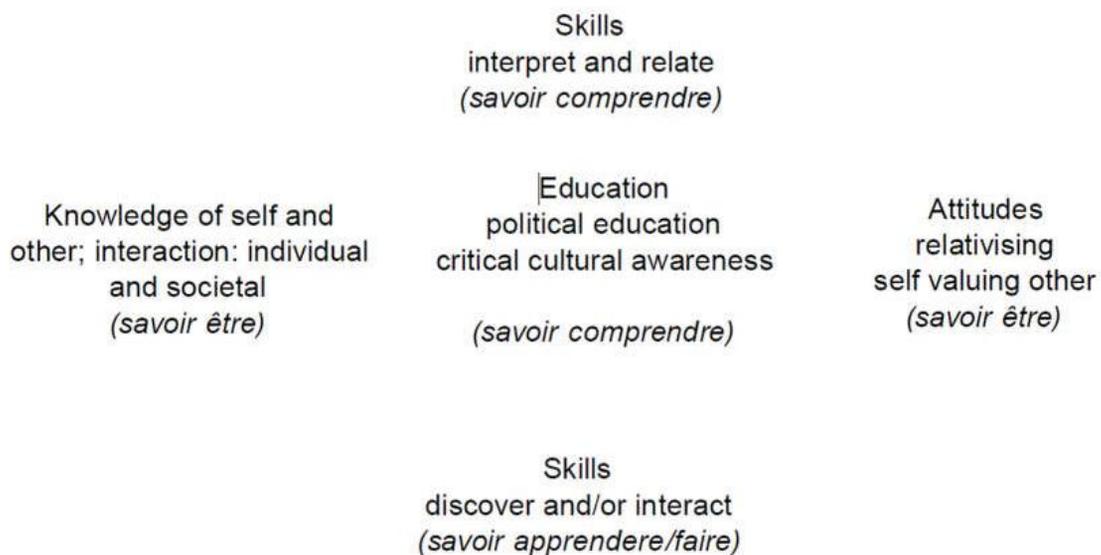


Figure 2. Factors in intercultural communication

Source: Byram (1997, p. 34)

The five factors are interconnected within the framework of ICC. According to Byram (1997, p. 34), attitudes of “curiosity and openness, of readiness to suspend disbelief and judgment for other’s meanings, beliefs and behaviors” are one of the conditions for mutual understanding in intercultural interaction. Knowledge in the ICC framework refers to the knowledge about social groups and their products and practices in one’s own country and other cultures. For Byram (1997), there are two types of knowledge involved in a successful intercultural interaction: (i) knowledge about social groups and their cultures in one’s society, and corresponding knowledge of the interlocutor’s country; (ii) knowledge of the processes of interaction at individual and national levels. Political education or critical cultural awareness is the ability to evaluate products, practices, and perspectives critically in one’s own culture and other cultures.

Two types of skills proposed in the model of ICC are skills to discover and/or interact, and skills to interpret and relate. The former refers to the ability to acquire new knowledge and operate knowledge, attitudes, and skills in real intercultural communication under a time constraint (Byram, 1997).

Byram's model of ICC has been widely applied as a theoretical framework by researchers to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of ICC and integrate cultural information into their practices (Ghavamnia, 2020; Huynh, Thomas, & To, 2020; Sercu, 2006), this study adopts Byram's model of ICC as a theoretical framework to investigate perceptions and strategies of Vietnamese EFL teachers at high school level on teaching cultural contents, especially in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.3. Previous studies on EFL teachers' perceptions of integrating cultural content in classrooms

Researchers from all around the world have done studies to assess teachers' attitudes and opinions regarding culture and how to incorporate it into their language lessons to facilitate the instructors in EFL classrooms (Carter & Doyle, 1995; Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991). For many years, teachers' perspectives on cultural teaching, as well as their cultural practices in EFL, have been increasingly popular in the field of integrating cultural teaching. In particular, the number of research undertaken on EFL instructors' attitudes and practices of incorporating cultural information in various situations has increased (Chau & Truong, 2019; Nguyen, Harvey, & Grant, 2016; Oranje & Smith, 2018; Sercu, Méndez García, & Prieto, 2005; Stapleton, 2000). These studies reveal information on the fundamental features of ICC as well as instructors' opinions of how they might approach the ICC objectives in their classrooms.

One typical finding in EFL instructors' perspectives on cultural content teaching is that EFL teachers tend to give less attention to teaching cultural content in their courses despite the vital role of cultures (Ghavamnia, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2016; Stapleton, 2000). Stapleton (2000), for example, conducted research in Japan with twenty-eight English teachers as participants. Even though they were aware of the critical function of culture in their classrooms, the Japanese instructors introduced cultural components in their classrooms randomly, according to the findings. Cultural contents, according to this study, serve a secondary and supporting function in language proficiency. Similarly, teachers tend to undervalue the teaching of intercultural information in their courses, according to research done by Czura (2016). Although the instructors feel that language and culture are inextricably linked, in instances where time is limited, they are ready to forego cultural instruction (Czura, 2016). These findings are consistent with those reported by Ghavamnia (2020), who found that "despite believing that it was necessary to incorporate 'culture teaching' in English classes and that language and culture could not be separated, the Iranian EFL teachers' number one priority in class was to teach language rather than culture" (Ghavamnia, 2020, p. 325). In the same vein, Nguyen et al. (2016) found that practically almost all Vietnamese EFL teachers did not put significant emphasis on teaching culture. As they had to address conversational language skills in their lectures, the instructor participants considered it unnecessary to teach cultural material. These data show that EFL teachers may not have paid enough attention to cultural material.

Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, little research has been conducted on EFL teachers' perspectives on the teaching of cultural content in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the effect of the pandemic, most government policies relating to educational activities require online learning which results in teaching and learning from home (Allo, 2020; Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Sugianto & Ulfah, 2020). This also entails various challenges for EFL teachers. In Indonesia,

for instance, Sugianto and Ulfah (2020) are concerned that the Covid-19 pandemic may prevent EFL instructors from teaching cultural content because the teaching mode is moved to an online setting. In particular, it was reported that EFL teachers believe that they faced challenges in terms of internet access and students' psychological aspect such as attitudes toward intercultural language teaching and learning conducted in an online classroom (Sugianto & Ulfah, 2020). For example, some teachers revealed that they used Youtube and WhatsApp to introduce the contents related to cultures, but several learners had some problems accessing the materials from the applications, and some experience loss of Internet connection. To address these issues, the teachers had to either download the materials for their students to learn about cultural content or repeat their instructions again and again. This makes the students think that learning is a kind of burden and results in teachers' burnout (Sugianto & Ulfah, 2020).

Specifically, in the Vietnamese EFL context, very few studies were conducted to explore how Vietnamese EFL teachers perceive the role of teaching cultural content in their lessons during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is unknown whether, at the time of the pandemic, Vietnamese EFL teachers will neglect the cultural contents in their lessons to cope with the current context. Therefore, this study aims to fill such a gap in the literature on the teaching of cultural content in the Vietnamese EFL context amidst the Covid-19 pandemic by investigating several Vietnamese EFL teachers' beliefs and perspectives towards culture and ICC classes during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research approach

In terms of the research approach, a descriptive design consisting of both quantitative and qualitative data was exploited in this current study. To collect both forms of data, the researchers based a mixed-method approach, which helps to comprehend thoroughly the topic. According to Creswell (2015), a mixed-method study is considered a superior tool as it is founded on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative data. Creswell and Clark (2018) claimed that a mixed-method study combined the processes of gathering qualitative and quantitative data and evaluating it sequentially. By employing qualitative follow-up data to assist and validate a quantitative database, the combination of the two methods is to compare and comprehend additional information about two datasets. Moreover, Miles and Huberman (1994) believed that researchers will obtain reliable and significant databases when they combine both quantitative and qualitative data. Furthermore, seen as the benefit of a mixed-method design, the ability to triangulate data to add breadth and depth to the data sets is the reason for the researchers using this method. It also contributes to the increase in confidence in the outcomes (Bryman, Bell, & Teevan, 2009; Halcomb & Andrew, 2005).

3.2. Data collection and participants

The current paper is part of the Master's thesis titled "An investigating into Vietnamese EFL teachers' perspectives on integrating cultural contents in EFL classes amidst the Covid-19 pandemic" conducted by the first author. Ethical approval was obtained by our institution before collecting data for the study.

For data collection, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. First, a questionnaire consisting of 28 questions was designed based on the Likert scale (McLeod, 2019) to explore teachers' views on integrating cultural content into foreign language

lessons in secondary schools. Following the questionnaire is a semi-structured interview to increase the reliability of the data collected from the questionnaire.

In particular, the questionnaires have two main clusters: Teacher's acknowledgment of cultural role in foreign language teaching in the context of online teaching due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Teachers' perceptions), and teacher's suggestions in cultural practices and strategies for teaching cultural content in the current English textbooks. To guarantee participants' comprehension, all the questionnaire items were written in both English and Vietnamese.

Based on the research questions and purposes of this study, the purposive sampling technique was adopted to select sources of data for the present study. The number of 64 teacher participants for the study was decided based on the purposive sampling technique (Coyne, 1997; Palinkas et al., 2015; Suri, 2011). The purposive sampling technique is often used in both quantitative and qualitative studies to gain an in-depth and detailed understanding of the researched topic.

In this case, the participants partaking in this study should have qualified by some criteria:

- (1) They are EFL high school teachers teaching in Tra Vinh City;
- (2) They are teaching the 10-year English book series;
- (3) They are teaching online during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Moreover, the participant's information was conducted under the appropriate circumstances and setting. The participants were not asked for personal or sensitive information in a public setting. Instead, the related information was collected in a private space where the third party did not see or overhear. Furthermore, only the information that was necessary for research purposes was collected, and only once informed consent was obtained from the participant. Besides that, before being interviewed, a consent form was sent to the interviewees and the chosen participants in the interview were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy in public.

3.3. Data analysis

For the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires, the current study used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). For checking the reliability of the questionnaire, the Scale Test was run by the SPSS. Two sources of data (surveys and interviews) in the current study were obtained and interpreted by the content analysis approach. According to Moretti et al. (2011), content analysis is a method for classifying written or oral materials into identified categories of similar meanings (as cited in Cho & Lee, 2014). These characteristics of content analysis make it suitable for the research interest in the present study. Therefore, teacher participants' responses to the questionnaires and interview questions were interpreted for achieving the two research questions. Specifically, the model of Deductive category assignment (Mayring, 2014) was applied to the process of data analysis and interpretation. Figure 3 illustrates the specific steps in the data analysis of the current study.

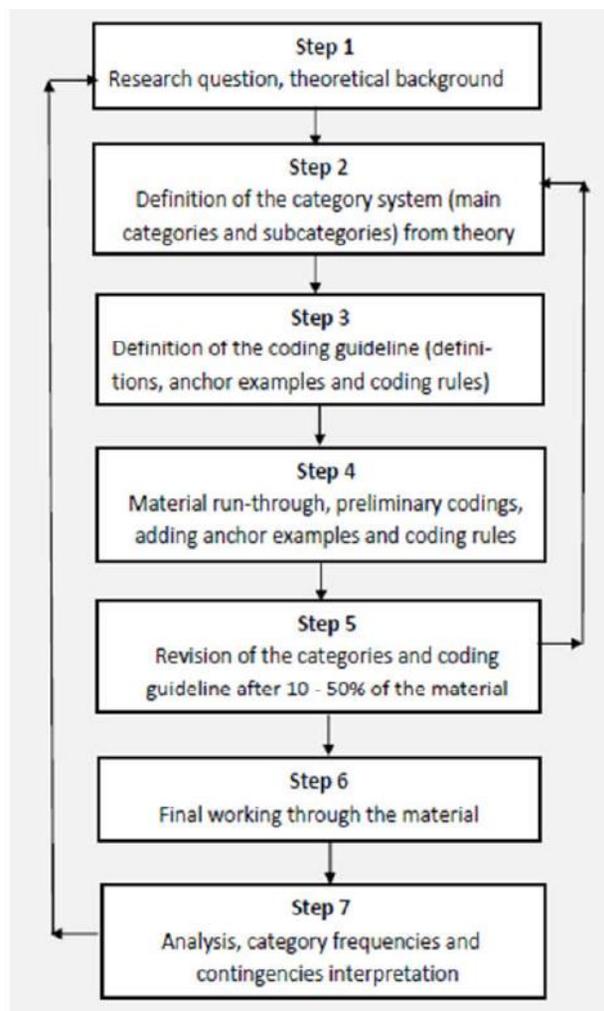


Figure 3. Steps of deductive category assignment

Source: Mayring (2014, p. 96)

According to Mayring (2014), “the procedure is deductive because the category system is established before coding the text. The categories are deduced from theory, from other studies, from previous research” (p. 96). As for this study, the researchers drew on Byram’s model of ICC and the theory of Big C cultures - small c cultures as guidelines for category development.

4. Result and discussion

4.1. Results

The results below are combined from qualitative and quantitative findings to triangulate the data of the questionnaire and the interview.

4.1.1. Vietnamese high school teachers’ perspectives towards cultural teaching role in EFL classroom and their preference activities applied when teaching cultural content online

To answer the research question on Vietnamese high school teachers’ perspectives on the cultural role of cultural teaching in EFL classrooms and their preference activities applied when teaching cultural content online, 64 responses from the participants were run by descriptive statistic test for the mean scores, the standard deviations to indicate the degree of agreement about the role of culture in EFL classroom as well as the role of teaching cultural contents in the English textbooks amidst the pandemic.

The results of the first cluster in the questionnaire were presented under two sub-themes: Teachers' perspective on the role of culture in the EFL classroom; Teachers' perspective on the role of teaching cultural contents in English textbooks amidst the pandemic. In this category, it was grouped into 02 clusters which were supporting cultural teaching in the EFL classroom regardless of the changing in teaching mode and the reduction of teaching distribution; another group was against cultural teaching in the EFL classroom due to the difficulties in new teaching distribution and online teaching methods.

Along with the survey questionnaires, six in-depth interviews with the teachers (who had taken part in the questionnaires) referred to by pseudonyms Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, Participant 4, Participant 5, and Participant 6, were practiced to gain rich data on their views on the teaching of cultural content after they had completed two semesters teaching from home due to the impact of Covid-19 pandemic. Their responses could best represent Vietnamese EFL high school teachers' experiences with teaching cultural content during the Covid-19 pandemic in Vietnam, especially when they had to switch from face-to-face teaching mode to online teaching mode amidst the pandemic.

In the interviews, the participants were asked to share their viewpoints on the roles of teaching cultural content in their lessons, the advantages and challenges they encountered when teaching from home during the Covid-19 pandemic, and their understanding of cultural elements represented in the textbooks. Each interview lasted for 45 - 60 minutes. The language of the interviews was Vietnamese and the interviewer created the most comfortable conditions so that the interviewees felt free to answer the questions during the interviews. The interviews were decoded and qualitative data analysis was performed by thematic analysis.

To support the interpretation of the quantitative data analysis, the mean scores were interpreted based on the scale of agreement of Oxford (1990) as in Table 1.

Table 1

The scale of agreement of Oxford for interpreting the data analysis and the mean scores

Levels	Range
Very high	4.5 - 5.0
High	3.6 - 4.4
Medium	2.5 - 3.5
Low	1.0 - 2.4

Source: Oxford (1990)

4.1.1.1. EFL teachers' perspectives on the role of cultural teaching in EFL classrooms before and amidst the Covid-19 pandemic

This section aims to provide descriptive statistical data on EFL teachers' perspectives on the role of cultural teaching in EFL classrooms before and amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

EFL teachers' perspectives on the role of cultural teaching in EFL classrooms before and amidst the Covid-19 pandemic

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Teachers' perspectives on the role of cultural teaching in EFL classroom	64	3.25	4.13	3.5996	.27475
Supporting cultural teaching amidst the pandemic	64	2.33	5.00	3.4740	.76244
Against cultural teaching amidst the pandemic	64	1.00	4.00	2.3438	.65390
Valid N (listwise)	64				

As can be seen, most EFL high school teachers remained unchanged in their perceptions of teaching cultural content in a virtual classroom environment and even take advantage of this new teaching model to integrate teaching cultural content into teaching language knowledge and skills for students. As seen from the table below, the mean score of teachers' perspectives on the role of cultural teaching in EFL classrooms was **3.6** (which reflected a high level of agreement according to Oxford (1990)). It meant that teachers had a positive perspective on the role of cultural teaching in EFL classrooms. Also, Table 2 reflected that the teachers still maintained a positive attitude as well as supported cultural teaching via online mode during the Covid-19 pandemic, which was **3.5**. It indicated that despite the challenges in shifting teaching mode (from face-to-face teaching to online teaching), teachers remained unchanged in their cultural awareness of virtual teaching mode.

The above quantitative finding is consistent with qualitative data from the interview. The six participants claim that cultural teaching was as important as teaching linguistic knowledge (vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation) and skills (reading, speaking, writing, and listening). Therefore, all of the participants showed positive attitudes toward teaching cultural content in the EFL classroom. In particular, in our interviews with teacher participants, two senior teachers, who have 20 years of teaching experience (Participant 1 and Participant 6), confirmed that regardless of teaching modes (online or offline), teaching cultural content is vital to language learners. For instance, Participant 1 asserted that cultural knowledge is a means for her students to communicate. This participant said:

I think teaching cultural content is necessary. Since the final goal of learning a foreign language is to be able to communicate in that language, would be very disadvantageous for my students if they do not know about the culture of people using that language. (Participant 1)

Expressing her positive attitude toward the cultural context in the English textbooks for Vietnamese high school students, Participant 6 contended that:

I find the intercultural knowledge designed in textbooks very good and very interesting. Not only my students can learn new things, but I can also have more cultural knowledge for myself when preparing lessons. (Participant 6)

Similar to their senior colleagues, two participants (Participant 4 and Participant 5) who have been teaching English for more than 10 years (but less than 20 years) believed that cultural

knowledge is highly important to their students, and it is inseparable from teaching linguistic skills. For example, Participant 4, who is teaching English at a specialized high school, asserted that:

All parts of the current English textbook for Vietnamese EFL students are related to each other. There are no separate parts, which are culturally related and which will not be culturally related. So teaching culture is just as important as we teach students about grammar knowledge or other skills. (Participant 4)

4.1.1.2. Teachers' perspectives on the types of cultural knowledge taught during the Covid-19 pandemic

The feature discovered in this category was the teacher's understanding and viewpoints on types of cultural aspects contained in English textbooks for Vietnamese EFL high school students. The results of descriptive statistics are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3

EFL teachers' perspectives on the role of the types of cultural knowledge taught during the Covid-19 pandemic

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Mean big C cultures	64	2.00	5.00	3.2031	.70553
Mean little C cultures	64	2.50	4.50	3.6719	.68556
Valid N (listwise)	64				

Table 3 showed that the mean score of small C cultures outperformed the one of the small C group (M.bigC = 3.2; M.littleC = 3.7). It could be inferred that the majority of the participants believed that culture is the product of customs, habits, lifestyle, cuisine, and other aspects related to people's traditions and beliefs, which reflected little c cultures. They, therefore, tended to be confident in teaching cultural content relevant to these aspects rather than big C cultural aspects.

Our interpretation of interview data also supported and aligned with the above finding. Specifically, most of them claimed that they would rather integrate cultural contents, which belonged to cultures, customs, beliefs, etc., than the ones belonging to politics, economy, science, or geography. One of the interviewees stated:

It depends on the topic a teacher is going to teach. For example, the topics belonging to religious beliefs, food and drink, regional costumes and traditions, etc., are easier for me to integrate into the lesson. (Participant 4)

Holding the same viewpoint, Participant 5 and Participant 6 asserted that:

Not all the topics in the book can be integrated cultural elements into the lesson. For example, talking about the identity of ASEAN countries, I can introduce more about the culture of Southeast Asian countries in general, and Vietnam in particular. It is familiar to not only teachers but also students. (Participants 5)

When talking about the preferred types of cultural aspects to be integrated into her lessons, Participant 6 explained below:

My students are often interested in cultural topics related to national costumes, and cultural festivals of different countries. These topics are also easy for teachers to integrate cultural content as I have more materials and more confidence relating to my own experience. (Participant 6)

In sum, with the results from 02 data sources which are both qualitative and quantitative, the article identified the group of cultural content related to customs, habits, lifestyle, and cuisine (small c cultural aspects) is easier for teachers to teach and easy for students to participate in the lesson. The follow-up finding was about teachers' practices in integrating cultural knowledge in virtual classrooms.

4.1.1.3. Activities and strategies applied in teaching cultural contents

Amidst the pandemic

To seek the actual situations of the current methods used in cultural teaching at public high schools as well as their strategies used in teaching cultural content, a descriptive statistic test was run and shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Teachers' strategies in teaching cultural contents during the Covid-19 pandemic

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Mean synchronous activities	64	1.75	3.75	2.7852	.44066
Mean asynchronous activities	64	1.20	2.00	1.5031	.20468
Mean textbook reference	65	2.0	5.0	3.18	1.103
Mean ICT application	64	1.33	3.33	2.7188	.42505
Mean teaching strategies	64	1.50	3.50	2.4453	.77724
Valid N (listwise)	64				

As seen in this table, it showed that the mean score of synchronous activities was 2.8 ($M = 2.8$), greater than the mean score of the extra-curricular activities after class ($M = 1.5$). This revealed that synchronous activities were more exploited by teachers than asynchronous ones. As for the usefulness of information and technology, results from these descriptive statistics showed that when teaching online, teachers could design many activities and exploit information technology as a means of effective means of teaching ($M = 2.7$).

Regarding the strategies they applied in teaching culture, the teachers admitted that they did not receive the proper training on how to teach cultural content in the English textbook under the new curriculum. They only relied on textbook references ($M = 3.2$) and their own experiences, compared and related to cultural contents. With the mean score ($M = 2.44$), this finding indicates that to teach cultural content, teachers often use comparing and contrasting strategies, related to the local culture and the target culture.

When asked about activities they applied for teaching cultural content via online mode, six participants said that they often use synchronous activities in their lessons when teaching cultural knowledge. They explained that they did not prefer using asynchronous activities in their lessons for teaching cultural content due to the special context. According to these teachers, they were concerned that asynchronous activities seemed to be a burden for students when they had to learn online during the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the participants explained:

The passage in the Culture section of the textbook is in form of reading comprehension tasks to help students practice their reading skills. After class, students may have a reflection on a cultural topic they liked corresponding to one test score. However, I do not ask them to write regularly because the other homework is already too much for them. (Participant 1)

Also, they believed that they had profited from the multimedia resources on the internet such as you-tube videos, short films, or animated pictures to make their lessons more vivid, and easy to illustrate cultural aspects and language as well. In addition, they also regularly let their students play games and solve puzzles on websites to learn foreign languages and cultures such as Kahoot, Quizzes, Bamboozle, etc. In our interviews, they revealed the usefulness of information and technology when teaching online. One of them contended:

When teaching culture, I often show students pictures, videos, or songs related to the content. Sometimes it can be a game about regional cuisines or traditional clothes, which helps students learn better and more visually. After that, students will have group discussions and presentations about what they learned from the lessons. (Participant 2)

Holding the same viewpoint, Participant 3 also highlighted the advantages of information technology support when teaching cultural content. This participant revealed:

I often take advantage of foreign language learning websites to create online games related to cultural knowledge for students to learn while they are playing games. It will motivate them as they like playing and competing. (Participant 3)

As well as this, it revealed that teachers often use comparing and contrasting strategies, related to the local culture and the target culture. It was verified by qualitative data obtained from 06 participants that the way they usually taught cultural content in books was to compare and contrast the local cultures and the target cultures.

I usually introduce the cultural content of the lesson first. Afterward, they compare it to the Vietnamese culture so that they can easily absorb new knowledge. For example, talking about the identity of ASEAN countries, I can introduce more about the culture of Southeast Asian countries in general, and Vietnam in particular. It is familiar to not only teachers but also the students (Participant 4)

This is also the opinion of participants 2 and 3. They believe that the method they are most confident about when teaching cultural knowledge is to compare the cultural points of the lesson and the Vietnamese cultures. Besides, they sometimes ask their students to do other activities as Participant 3 said:

I sometimes ask my students to prepare a cultural point they were appointed to, then, they make a group and present it online. However, due to the limited time, I just let one or two groups present. (Participant 3)

Another strategy that teachers often use in teaching culture is role play, as participant 6 said:

I often have my students give presentations or role-play. For example, on the topic of "Cultural diversity", I let them role-play and present the culture of each region, from its costumes, and religious beliefs to the cuisine of that region. I noticed that my students were very excited when participating in these activities. (Participant 6)

In sum, from two data sources, we can see that with synchronous activities, teachers have made good use of information technology and applications to support the teaching of cultural content. Nevertheless, due to some objective and subjective reasons mentioned in the interview

data, teachers have not yet exploited the effectiveness of asynchronous activities so that students can absorb cultural content more deeply. This is also one of the concerns of teachers when teaching language knowledge with cultural content.

4.2. Discussion

This paper aims to reveal the perspectives of EFL high school teachers on integrating cultural knowledge in their virtual foreign language lessons. The results show that although teachers still have certain difficulties when teaching online, they still hold a positive perspective on the importance of cultural teaching when learning foreign languages. Not only that, although the duration of the lesson has been shortened (from 45 minutes to 30 minutes/period), most teachers do integrate cultural content corresponding with language knowledge and skills.

This current study concurred with the previous studies (Chau & Truong, 2019; Chen, 2004; Jing, 2010; Nguyen et al., 2016) in the result of participants' awareness of cultural roles. All of them showed that the participants were aware of the important role of cultural learning in the EFL classroom. For instance, in Chen's study (2004), the researcher surveyed teachers' and students' attitudes toward cultural teaching and learning in EFL classrooms in China. All the participants rated the role of teaching and learning as culturally important and very important. In 2010, Jing (2010) surveyed learners' perceptions and attitudes toward cultural learning with 96 students from Jiangxi University. The result was that all the participants had positive attitudes toward the importance of culture and cultural learning. Nevertheless, this study was different from those in terms of the participants' perspectives on cultural practices. In face-to-face teaching and learning, although EFL teachers consider cultural content important, they tend to pay less attention to teaching cultural content in their lessons. For instance, a study conducted by Czura (2016) reported that teachers tend to undervalue the teaching of intercultural content in their lessons. In particular, although teachers believe that language and culture are inseparable, in situations where there is not much teaching time, they are willing to give up cultural teaching. The findings conducted by Ghavamnia (2020) revealed that "even though the Iranian EFL teachers believed it was necessary to incorporate 'culture teaching' in English classes and that language and culture could not be separated, their number one priority in class was to teach language rather than culture" (Ghavamnia, 2020, p. 325).

The result from this study was different from Jing's study (2010) in the finding of the preferred kind of culture. Jing Xiao found that the participants preferred cultural factors belonging to the visible aspect (Big C) whilst the opposite was found in high school EFL teachers. They were confident in teaching cultural contents belonging to invisible cultural aspects (Small c) rather than visible aspects (Big C).

It aligned with Chau and Truong's study (2019) in finding that the participants were interested in cultural activities fostering their cultural awareness at a high level of thinking, for example stating their own opinion, chatting with foreigners, and discussing, and debating cultural issues.

Compared to the studies conducted amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, some researchers claimed that cultural integration was partly negatively affected by the shifting in teaching modes, from face-to-face to online teaching (Allo, 2020; Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Sugianto & Ulfah, 2020). For instance, Sugianto and Ulfah (2020) are concerned that the pandemic may prevent EFL instructors from teaching cultural content because the teaching mode is moved to an online setting. In particular, it was reported that EFL teachers believe that they faced challenges in terms of internet access and students' psychological aspect such as their attitudes towards intercultural language teaching and learning conducted in an online classroom. These factors hindered them from teaching cultural elements in the virtual classroom. However, the

current study revealed that EFL high school teachers still maintain positive awareness of integrating cultural contents into their virtual lessons despite certain challenges of teaching online. They take advantage of information technology, multimedia, and virtual learning resources to create more engaging and vivid cultural lessons for their students.

5. Conclusions & recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

In conclusion, the results obtained from the analysis of survey data and semi-structured interview data have answered the research question about EFL high school teachers' perspectives on the integration of cultural teaching through online teaching amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Most of the interviewees showed a positive perception not only of the role of culture in foreign language teaching but also of their cultural practices when teaching online. It is also considered a positive feature in changing teaching modes apart from the certain difficulties in this new form of teaching. With this result, it can be inferred that teachers may also be able to accept and apply new teaching methods flexibly and adapt them as an inevitable part of traditional teaching methods. In addition, it is undeniable that certain challenges of this new teaching method may affect the integration of cultural teaching in their virtual lessons. Those challenges come from both teachers and students. However, these challenges are mostly overcome by teachers and gradually improve in their online teaching process.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the results of the study, several recommendations were made for EFL high school teachers and stakeholders to further promote cultural teaching in addition to imparting language knowledge and skills. For teachers, they proposed, first of all, to improve online teaching methods, improve the ability to use information technology, and take advantage of online learning support software such as Quizzes, Bamboozle, Azota, Zalo, Facebook, or Kahoot to increase interaction with students in the virtual classroom apart from the English textbooks as the main source of teaching reference. It helps students be more motivated and absorb the lesson more effectively. In addition, EFL high school teachers, as facilitators for students' self-study after class, can create asynchronous activities to encourage students to interact and review lessons with their peers.

As for administrators, they advise first to change the perception of how to impart knowledge to students through a new form of learning, which is not only language knowledge and skills, but also cultural elements. Above all is the mental and psychological health of teachers, which are factors that directly affect the effectiveness of their lessons. Therefore, administrators should pay more attention and reduce the amount of paperwork and teaching hours for teachers. Since then, teaching online in general and teaching culture, in particular, is no longer a burden for teachers.

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