

## EXPLORING THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE INTERGRATION IN FOREIGN TEACHING AND LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

For more than 30 years, English has played a significant role in various Vietnamese contexts as a mode of international communication. At present, English is officially taught to Vietnamese learners from grade three onwards. Previously, English language teaching and learning had long focused on putting in great efforts to develop the functions and uses of English. The fact is that despite being proficient in English, most Vietnamese students who graduate from a university are unable to communicate effectively in English with co-workers from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the object of the current research is to analyze the viewpoints of the second and third year English major students about intercultural competence development in foreign language teaching and learning classroom at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. The research findings show that learners do not get sufficient cultural information and seldom or never take part in discussions about values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour of people living in other cultures. Obviously, the possibilities of developing intercultural competence are not yet fully exploited in foreign language teaching and learning classroom. Therefore, a considerably stronger focus on the English language teaching and learning process should be given to the increase of learners' intercultural competence in accordance with the present day requirements and goals of education.

**Keywords:** *intercultural communicative competence; intercultural competence; foreign language teaching and learning; English major students; School of Foreign Languages; Thai Nguyen University*

*Received: 20/02/2019; Revised: 26/3/2019; Approved: 07/5/2019*

## NGHIÊN CỨU SỰ TÍCH HỢP CỦA GIAO TIẾP LIÊN VĂN HÓA TRONG DẠY VÀ HỌC NGOẠI NGỮ

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### TÓM TẮT

Hơn 30 năm qua, tiếng Anh đã đóng một vai trò quan trọng như là một ngôn ngữ giao tiếp quốc tế ở Việt Nam. Hiện tại, tiếng Anh được dạy chính thức cho người học ở Việt Nam bắt đầu từ lớp ba. Trước đây, việc dạy và học tiếng Anh thường tập trung vào các chức năng và cách sử dụng của tiếng Anh. Thực tế cho thấy mặc dù thành thạo tiếng Anh nhưng hầu hết sinh viên Việt Nam sau khi tốt nghiệp đại học không thể giao tiếp bằng tiếng Anh hiệu quả với đồng nghiệp từ các nền văn hóa khác nhau. Do đó, mục tiêu của nghiên cứu này là phân tích quan điểm của sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh năm thứ hai và thứ ba về việc phát triển năng lực liên văn hóa trong dạy và học ngoại ngữ tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Thái Nguyên. Các kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy người học không có đủ thông tin văn hóa và rất hiếm khi hoặc không bao giờ tham gia vào những bàn luận về các giá trị, niềm tin, thái độ và hành vi của những người sống trong các nền văn hóa khác. Rõ ràng, khả năng phát triển năng lực liên văn hóa chưa được khai thác triệt để trong lớp học và dạy ngoại ngữ. Do đó, quá trình dạy và học tiếng Anh cần tập trung mạnh mẽ hơn vào phát triển năng lực liên văn hóa phù hợp với các yêu cầu và mục tiêu giáo dục hiện nay.

**Từ khóa:** *giao tiếp giao văn hóa; năng lực liên văn hóa; dạy và học ngoại ngữ; sinh viên chuyên ngữ; Khoa Ngoại ngữ; Đại học Thái Nguyên*

*Ngày nhận bài: 20/02/2019; Ngày hoàn thiện: 26/3/2019; Ngày duyệt đăng: 07/5/2019*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34238/tnu-jst.2019.06.330>

## 1. Introduction

One of the most significant changes over the past decades has been the recognition of the cultural dimension as a key component of language studies. This has transformed the nature of the experience of teaching and learning languages to a great extent and the traditional aim of developing linguistic skills modeled on the norms of native speakers has lost ground. According to the intercultural model, language are related to the cultures, communities and societies that use them for communication and language learners should be encouraged to become competent intercultural speakers [1].

There is no doubt that we are living in time of great change. As we educators prepare our students for the 21st century, we are aware of many changes occurring globally. Population mobility continues throughout the world at an all-time high in human history, bringing extensive cross-cultural contact among diverse language and cultural groups. Policy makers include intercultural objectives in curricula, and teachers find themselves faced with the challenge of promoting the acquisition of intercultural competence through their teaching. This is true for teachers of a diversity of subjects. It is definitely true for teachers of foreign languages. Foreign language education is, by definition, intercultural. Bringing a foreign language to the classroom means connecting learners to a world that is culturally different from their own. Hence, all foreign language educators are now expected to exploit this potential and promote the acquisition of intercultural competence (IC) in their learners. Therefore, the purpose of the present research is to focus and analyze specifically on the second and third year English major students' viewpoints of intercultural competence development in foreign language teaching and learning classroom at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University (SFL, TNU).

## 2. Literature review

Understanding the nature of the relationship between language and culture is central to the process of learning another language. In actual language use, it is not the case that it is only the forms of language that convey meaning. It is language in its cultural context that creates meaning: creating and interpreting meaning is done within a cultural framework. Learning to communicate in an additional language involves developing an awareness of the ways in which culture interrelates with language whenever it is used [2].

The notion of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been developing since the 1990s. Significant studies on FLT with respect to ICC can be found particularly through the multi-layered work of Michel Byram and Lies Sercu. As pointed out by Byram et al. [3], language teaching has been profoundly influenced by linguistics and there is still lack of good practice and inadequate attention is paid to the intercultural element in teacher education. Correspondingly, as stated by Sercu Sercu et al. [4], foreign language teaching is, by definition, intercultural; therefore, foreign language teachers face the challenge of promoting the acquisition of IC in their practice.

In order to establish effective intercultural competence (IC), one must be able to predict how their interlocutor tends to behave and accordingly send appropriate verbal and nonverbal messages. This means that successful communication with the members of different cultural groups requires a certain degree of communicative competence. There are different theories on what IC consists of. These theories have changed depending on the context or one's point of view. According to Byram et al. [3], the components of IC are knowledge, skills, and attitudes, supplemented by values that are part of one's multiple social identities. According to Byram's intercultural model, language, which

people use for communication, is intertwined with culture, community, and society. Consequently, in order for their students to become competent intercultural speakers, teachers should promote ICC among English language learners [5]. This process becomes an essential responsibility of English teachers who enable their students to succeed when communicating in English with people from different cultural backgrounds.

### 3. Methodology

The participants of present study were 178 students of the second and third year English-majors at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University in 2018. Data for the present study, which is descriptive in nature, were collected in 2018 academic year by means of a questionnaire adapted by Sercu et al. [4]. The questionnaire aimed to investigate the students viewpoints of the development of intercultural competence in English language learning. Data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed by taking the frequency counts for each question.

### 4. Findings and discussions

In the first questionnaire, students were asked to indicate their viewpoints about the development of intercultural competence in English language teaching and learning and the statements are ranked on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 'always' to 'never'. The data of the students' questionnaire indicate that development of intercultural skills received less attention of the learners indicated 'very often' about developing intercultural skills in the foreign language teaching/learning classroom and most of the students stated that they rarely developed intercultural skills in the foreign language teaching/learning classroom. 'Looking for solutions of intercultural conflict situations in the foreign language classroom' (61.2%) was ranked most and 'getting new information about your own culture in the foreign language classroom' (40.4%) was ranked least. The research data reflected the unfavourable situation for the development of learners' intercultural competence (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Students' viewpoints of skills dimension of intercultural competence development

<i>Students' viewpoints of skills dimension of intercultural competence development</i>	<b>5</b>		<b>4</b>		<b>3</b>		<b>2</b>		<b>1</b>	
	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
1. Do you look for solutions of intercultural conflict situations in the foreign language classroom?	0	0.0	19	10.7	45	25.3	109	61.2	5	2.8
2. Do you learn to handle intercultural conflict situations in the foreign language classroom?	0	0.0	14	7.9	36	20.2	108	60.7	20	11.2
3. Do you speak about the etiquette of other cultures in the foreign language classroom?	0	0.0	16	9.0	42	23.6	102	57.3	18	10.1
4. Do you learn to handle intercultural contact situations in the foreign language classroom?	0	0.0	24	13.5	56	31.5	88	49.4	10	5.6
5. Do you get new information about your own culture in the foreign language classroom?	5	2.8	29	16.3	64	36.0	72	40.4	8	4.5
6. Do you perform reflection on cultural differences orally in the foreign language classroom?	0	0.0	16	9.0	58	32.6	89	50.0	15	8.4
7. Do you perform reflection on cultural differences in writing in the foreign language classroom?	0	0.0	14	7.9	62	34.8	91	51.1	11	6.2

<i>Students' viewpoints of skills dimension of intercultural competence development</i>	<b>5</b>		<b>4</b>		<b>3</b>		<b>2</b>		<b>1</b>	
	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
8. Do you learn to reflect on cultural differences in the foreign language classroom?	0	0.0	17	9.6	52	29.2	100	56.2	9	5.1

*5-always 4-often 3-sometimes 2-rarely 1-never*

Learners were asked to answer eight questions aimed at discovering to what extent classroom practices regarding knowledge dimension of intercultural competence were carried out in foreign language teaching/learning classroom in the second section of the questionnaire (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** *Students' viewpoint of knowledge dimension of intercultural competence*

<i>Students' viewpoint of knowledge dimension of intercultural competence</i>	<b>5</b>		<b>4</b>		<b>3</b>		<b>2</b>		<b>1</b>	
	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
1. Do you provide information about shared values and beliefs in the foreign language classroom?	8	4.5	7	3.9	22	12.4	14	7.9	127	71.3
2. Do you discuss values and beliefs of people living in other culture in the foreign language classroom?	0	0.0	5	2.8	6	3.4	135	75.8	32	18.0
3. Do you discuss the significance of values and beliefs in one's life in the foreign language classroom?	0	0.0	2	1.1	8	4.5	122	68.5	46	25.8
4. Do you discuss the impact of foreign culture in the foreign language classroom?	20	11.2	28	15.7	42	23.6	68	38.2	20	11.2
5. Do you get information in the foreign language classroom about daily life and routines of the foreign country?	11	6.2	22	12.4	52	29.2	83	46.6	10	5.6
6. Do you get information in the foreign language about the political conditions of the foreign country?	0	0.0	6	3.4	15	8.4	53	29.8	104	58.4
7. Do you get information in the foreign language about the geography of the foreign country?	0	0.0	0	0.0	24	13.5	92	51.7	62	34.8
8. Do you get information in the foreign language classroom about the history of the foreign country?	0	0.0	6	3.4	15	8.4	102	57.3	55	30.9

*5-always 4-often 3-sometimes 2-rarely 1-never*

The students' answers reveals that the classroom activity that happens most in the EFL classroom was 'the impact of foreign culture in the foreign language classroom' with 11.2% and that takes least was the 'information about shared values and beliefs in the foreign language classroom' with 71.3%. Getting 'information in the foreign language classroom about daily life and routines of the foreign country' and providing 'information about shared values and beliefs in the foreign language classroom' comes second and third among frequent classroom activity in knowledge dimension aspect. Discussing 'values and beliefs of people living in other culture in the foreign language classroom', 'the significance of values and beliefs in one's life in the foreign language classroom' and getting 'information in the foreign language about the political, geography and history of the foreign country' takes least attention of the frequent activity in EFL classroom with

0%. Most of the students' answers points out that providing 'information about shared values and beliefs in the foreign language classroom' takes the first rank as seldom or never classroom activity. Following is getting 'information in the foreign language about the political conditions of the foreign country' with 58.4% and 'information in the foreign language about the geography of the foreign country' with 34.8%.

The analysis of the research data revealed the learners' viewpoints of attitudinal dimension as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** *Students' viewpoint of attitudinal dimension of intercultural competence development*

<i>Students' viewpoint of attitudinal dimension of intercultural competence development</i>	<b>5</b>		<b>4</b>		<b>3</b>		<b>2</b>		<b>1</b>	
	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
1. Do you learn to empathize with people living in other cultures in the foreign language classroom?	0	0.0	25	14.0	46	25.8	72	40.4	35	19.7
2. Do you take part in discussions about your own culture?	0	0.0	21	11.8	35	19.7	89	50.0	33	18.5
3. Do you take part in discussions in the foreign language classroom about respecting other/different culture?	0	0.0	29	16.3	42	23.6	76	42.7	0	0.0
4. Do you take part in discussions in the foreign language classroom about respecting own culture?	0	0.0	54	30.3	78	43.8	107	60.1	0	0.0
5. Do you take part in discussions in the foreign language classroom about different cultural values?	0	0.0	34	19.1	98	55.1	46	25.8	0	0.0
6. Do you take part in discussions in the foreign language classroom about stereotypes?	0	0.0	33	18.5	87	48.9	58	32.6	0	0.0
7. Do you develop attitudes of openness and tolerance towards other people and cultures?	0	0.0	56	31.5	98	55.1	24	13.5	0	0.0

**5-always 4-often 3-sometimes 2-rarely 1-never**

As the most favourable classroom activities related with teaching culture in the attitudinal dimension, the students indicated 'discussions about attitudes of openness and tolerance towards other people and cultures' (31.5%), 'discussions about about respecting own culture s' (30.3%). As the second favourite classroom practices, 'discussions about the foreign language classroom about different cultural values' (19.1%), 'discussions about the foreign language classroom about stereotypes' (18.5%) and 'about respecting other/different culture' (16.3%) were chosen. According to the respondents' opinion, least attention during EFL classes was paid to 'discussions about about your own culture'

(11.8%). According to the research data, it seems obvious that the possibilities of developing intercultural competence are not fully exploited in foreign language teaching/learning classroom. A comparison of the research data by form showed no statistically relevant differences in the development of attitudinal dimension. The research data analysis also revealed some important insights into the development of learners' skills dimension of intercultural competence. The respondents' answers showed that classroom practices in the skills dimension carried out in the foreign language teaching/ learning classroom. Such research data show which activities should receive

more attention from teachers in order to strengthen the learners' abilities to manage intercultural situations better. The results of the study clearly reveals that there is a lack attention of the second and third year English major students at SFL on the intercultural competence development. Therefore, the students' understanding of cultural elements should be integrated more in the curriculums in order to raise the students' awareness of the role of intercultural competence in their study and career. Learners' cultural awareness can be shown as their perceptions and deep understandings of both the target language culture and their own culture. EFL teachers should incorporate classroom activities and projects that stress the importance of integrating intercultural communication aspects to dealing with different cultures and respecting all the diversities. Teachers can mention aspects of both the target language culture and the source culture, and the culture of other countries in their language classroom. It is suggested that the deep understanding of intercultural issues will then make a significant contribution toward developing EFL curriculums from an intercultural perspective.

### 5. Conclusion and recommendations

The present study aimed to investigate the opinions of English major students at SFL, TNU regarding the role of teaching culture in foreign language education and the extent to which they incorporate cultural activities into their classroom practices in order to train competent intercultural speakers. The results we have presented here suggest that intercultural dimension in English teaching has not been fully endorsed by the teachers. While teaching IC is a part of planning, teachers do not seem to implement it as an explicit task in their classroom practice. Given the complexity and significance of IC in the English language teaching, to understand the dynamics involved in the

concept of IC, teachers need to be familiarized with the theory and available framework that is at an advantage in examining and clarifying the issue. They generally prioritize language teaching objectives over culture teaching objectives. They try to favor the development of openness and tolerance, but they still define culture teaching more in terms of passing on knowledge than providing intercultural skills.

The results show that there are opportunities. First of all, culture teaching requires a critical dimension. Therefore, teachers and students need deeper knowledge of the cultural aspect in FLT that should be anchored in the available theories and frameworks. Secondly, policy documents should include a clear and applicable definition of IC and should clarify the assessment criteria. At the moment, the concept of IC is being left for individual interpretation by a teacher who applies this interpretation into his/her classroom practice. For that reason, teachers should be familiarized with the recent research concerning IC and encouraged to problematize the curriculum content about culture teaching. Lastly, educational authorities cannot simply introduce teachers to "new theories" but should invest in an in-service teacher training that builds on the acquisition of IC and supply a teacher with the skills, abilities and reflective attitudes that are indispensable in teaching of IC.

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