

EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES OF IN-SERVICE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH AT LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOLS TOWARDS THE PRACTICE OF CULTURE TEACHING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: This paper looks into the experiences and perspectives of teachers of English at lower secondary schools towards the practice of teaching culture in their classrooms. Data were collected quantitatively and qualitatively through semi-open questionnaires and group interviews with 45 teachers of lower secondary schools in a city in the north of Vietnam. It was primarily discovered that, although most of the informants had many years of teaching experience, and the conditions for teaching cultural contents in their classes were believed to be rather favorable, these teachers found it hard for them to actually implement culture teaching due to the lack of skills at exploring cultural contents in textbooks and conducting suitable in-class activities. Recommendations are made regarding professional development programs for in-service teachers of English at secondary schools in Vietnam in the future.

Key words: In-service teacher perceptions, culture teaching, teaching cultural contents, ELT, secondary education

1. Introduction

The National Foreign Language Project 2020 of Vietnam is coming close to the promised deadline with huge achievements in the reformation and promotion of standardized teaching and learning of languages, especially English. One of the hundreds of significant projects was the introduction of the 10-year English textbook series into the modified national curriculum in 2012 under three official decisions of the Ministry of Education and Training (hereafter referred as MOET). Being used simultaneously with the 7-year series, the 10-year series is supposed to help Vietnamese students of general education to acquire both proficient communicative language skills and cultural knowledge of the world and Vietnam, as well as a positive attitude towards global and local cultures (MOET, 2018). Although the importance of culture teaching has been largely assumed in the language classroom, a nation-wide survey on more than 3700 Vietnamese teachers of English conducted by University of Languages and International Studies in 2015 for a government-sponsored project showed that knowledge of and ability to teach culture and use that to build empathy was the second most prioritized content in these teachers' demand regarding in-service training programs. Yet, there has been no reported training course specifically on culture teaching in addition to language proficiency promotion or general pedagogical skills. That is why it seems advisory that these teachers' experiences and perceptions of culture teaching be investigated.

Culture teaching in the English language classroom has been among the most frequently scrutinized issues in the last 40 years over the globe. In the recent international literature in

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general, the discussion of this issue has revolved around tertiary instructors and students of English, rather than the concerned in secondary education, such as in Al-Amir (2017), DeCoursey (2012), Li (2016), Liu and Fang (2017), Phan and Locke (2016), Tseng and Chao (2012), Vo (2014), Yilmaz (2016), and many more. In another fashion, other researchers like Godley (2012), Lefstein and Snell (2011), Norton (2013), Petraki and Nguyen (2016) look into culture teaching through a certain cultural aspect or product such as discourse genres, popular culture or a subject in a content-based English curriculum. In Vietnam particularly, a few studies have also tapped on the representations of culture in the national curriculum and curricular textbooks of general education and proposed some theoretical frameworks for cultural contents analysis (Dinh, 2012, 2014, 2016). What has not been seen is a rich literature body into what Vietnamese teachers have perceived of culture teaching in the language classroom apart from how important culture is. Also, what has not been examined thoroughly ever is what our teachers of English in general education levels have done in their classrooms to bring culture into an English lesson.

Inspired by this niche in research, this current study aims to answer two questions:

1. What do lower secondary teachers of English in Vietnam think about culture teaching in terms of the role of culture, the feasibility of culture teaching, the cultural contents in textbooks and the ultimate objectives of culture teaching in the English language classroom?
2. What strategies have these teachers used to teach culture, entailing their methods to analyze cultural contents, learning skills to focus and specific activities to be applied?

2. Theoretical framework

In order to answer the research questions, this study looks at the literature of perspectives towards culture teaching and the available approaches to teaching cultural contents as well as analysis of learning materials in the English language classroom.

2.1. Perspectives towards culture in language teaching

Research into perspectives towards culture in language teaching and learning started as early as in the 1950s and have proposed abundance of philosophy systems. Before the 2000s, culture teaching in foreign language education underwent such approaches like the conventional perspective, the systemic functional linguistics perspective, the practical perspective, the postmodernist perspective and the sociocultural perspective (Jebahi, 2013). These theories, on the one hand, approved of the importance of culture in the acquisition of a second language, and on the other hand, either viewed culture as a set of homogeneous, fixed and consistent systems separable from language or promoted imperialism in language teaching and learning (Jebahi, 2013).

Since 2000, the world has been in the search for the reasons why foreign and second language education was not successful in outer and expanding circles despite the advent of communicative language teaching. Answers to the questions have led the literature to a number of new paradigms and frameworks of teaching language such as *teaching English as an international language* which considers the functions of English in intercultural settings (Matsuda 2009, Sharifian 2009, as cited in Dinh 2016), *intercultural communicative competence* presented by Byram (1997, 2008), *multidialectal competence* (Canagarajah, 2006), and

metacultural competence (Sharifian, 2013). Although differing in elaboration of taxonomies, these approaches share an encouragement of local and contextual needs of learners, a promotion of the legitimacy of language varieties, and an emphasis on the dynamic, heterogeneous and contradictory of culture. According to these perspectives and frameworks, teaching macro skills like speaking and writing or micro skills like pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary should not only focus on the inner circle's norms, which helps avoid learners' identity conflict (Dinh, 2016). Accordingly, teaching and learning materials of foreign language not only represent "different pronunciation features, but rather a much more encompassing manifestation of cultural, linguistics and other values." (Matsuda & Friedrich, 2012, as cited in Dinh, 2016).

2.2. Approaches to teaching cultural contents in the language classroom

In congruence with the pre-2000 period's perspectives towards culture teaching, two primary ways to handle culture in language education were promoted, namely *teaching culture as content* and *teaching language and culture*. In Zhu Hua (2014), the former approach advocates the explicit exploration of culture through a cross-cultural view, focusing on the 4Fs taxonomy (i.e., food, fairs, folklore, facts) proposed by Kramersch (1991), or Big C (i.e., the study of history, literary products, fine arts) and small c (i.e., features of daily life) by Brook (1960), or cultural core elements and themes by Nostrand (1967, 1974). This approach came up with four main teaching techniques as follows:

- *Culture capsule* focuses on explicit discussion of cultural differences
- *Culture assimilators* involve scenario-based questions and answers
- *Culture island* engages culture-based classroom decoration
- *Drama* encourages miscommunication interpretation and repair

Unlike the teaching culture-as-content approach which considers culture as another dimension of language learning and being separable from language, *teaching language and culture* approach calls for an integrated methodology to language and culture in language teaching and learning. Accordingly, perspectives on what is to be integrated and how to integrate it, as well as different teaching methods and techniques are considered (Zhu Hua, 2014). For example, it is recommended that the learner's native culture and language should be integrated into language and culture learning. The procedure of integration includes a needs analysis and discussion between target and native cultures. Another proposal is to integrate culture at all levels of language teaching. Following this perspective, the knowledge of how to use and interpret a language in a context-sensitive and culturally appropriate way is essential to successful communication. Therefore, it is necessary to teach culture together with language, not culture as supplementary. It is necessary to develop new materials which introduce the target culture and at the same time encourage students to reflect on their own culture. Revising teacher training pedagogies based on the integrated language and culture teaching approach is also needed. Lastly, this integrated approach also calls for the need to make cultural awareness an essential and integrated component of communicative competence. In this sense, culture is placed at central stage in language and culture pedagogy.

Both the *teaching culture-as-content* and the *integrated language-and-culture* approaches promote native-like performance of language learners while they do not place emphasis on the learners' own linguistic and cultural background. Meanwhile, many researchers believe that with *an intercultural approach of teaching culture through language*, the goal of language learning is not simply to develop excellent linguistic skills or a lot of cultural information, but to help the learner become an intercultural speaker who can shuttle between different cultures and different viewpoints (Zhu Hua, 2014). Accordingly, the objective of language and culture teaching and learning is to mitigate the target culture's norms and promote one's native culture. Learners are provided with platforms where their own and other cultures communicate with each other, whereby learners can expose to diverse perspectives and express their own, accommodate themselves to the communication context and develop empathy for others. Simultaneously, language is taught in parallel with the patterns of thoughts or thematic contents of the current lesson.

Apparently, the abovementioned approaches differ in the degree of importance attached to culture, in the ultimate goal of language learning and in how language and culture related to each other in language teaching and learning. On the contrary, all three approaches have their advantages that can benefit language teaching practices. The selection of one approach or the combination of different techniques depends on the specific lesson, the favorable conditions of teaching and learning, and the culture of learning in the particular classroom.

3. Methods

The current study was conducted in a mixed approach in which the data were collected quantitatively and qualitatively. Forty-five teachers of English at lower secondary schools in a city in the North of Vietnam participated in answering a questionnaire and two group interviews in the summer of 2018. Forty-four of these teachers, who have acquired an English proficiency equal to B2 level in the CEFR, have more than ten years of teaching experience at lower secondary schools. They have to strictly follow the national curriculum and syllabi for each grade, and are dependent on the unified teaching materials passed by the MOET.

The questionnaire consisted of two main contents, namely the teachers' perspectives towards culture teaching in the English language classroom, and what they have done to bring cultural contents into their lessons. There were nine questions dealing with these teachers' opinions about the importance of culture teaching, the feasibility of culture teaching in their context, their preferences for which cultures to teach, the objectives of culture teaching, and the role of theories in the application of culture into teaching a foreign language. The other eight questions addressed the participants' experiences in their culture teaching practice, including teaching topics, focused skills in class, the methods for analyzing cultural contents in the textbooks and the specific activities conducted for culture teaching.

Two group interviews focused on the participants' clarification of their answers to the questions in the questionnaire. Through the interview, data about the factors that affect the possibility and effectiveness of in-class culture teaching and the methods these teachers have applied to conduct culture teaching were revealed, using content analysis.

4. Findings

4.1. Teachers' perspectives towards culture teaching

In terms of *the importance and feasibility of teaching culture in ELT*, there is a big difference between the level of importance that teachers place on teaching cultural contents and the feasibility of this aspect in their opinions. While all teachers acknowledge the importance of teaching culture in English language teaching, nearly 54% of the teachers doubt the feasibility of cultural content integration, considering this “infeasible”. To explain for their choices, the teacher participants attribute the degree of feasibility to different factors such as time allocation, students' language competence and cognitive level, teachers' culture teaching competence, curricular materials, policies and so on.

Table 1. Factors that make integrating cultural contents into ELT feasible at secondary schools

Adequate time allotment	13.3%
Students' sufficient language proficiency & cultural cognition	8.9%
Adequate training of culture teaching for teachers	26.7%
Recognizable cultural contents in curricular materials	66.7%
School authorities' encouragement of culture teaching	31.1%
Teachers' sufficient cultural knowledge & experience	31.1%
Others	15.6%

Table 2. Factors that make integrating cultural contents into ELT infeasible at secondary schools

Inadequate time allotment	31.1%
Students' insufficient language proficiency & cultural cognition	40.0%
No training of culture teaching for teachers	31.1%
Unrecognizable cultural contents in curricular materials	17.8%
School authorities' lack of encouragement of culture teaching	8.9%
Teachers' lack of confidence in cultural knowledge & experience	11.1%
Others	8.9%

Tables 1 and Table 2 describe the factors making integrating cultural contents into ELT feasible or infeasible at secondary schools. Among the factors that make the integration feasible, explicit cultural contents in the textbooks currently in use, the school authorities' encouraging policies of culture teaching, and teachers' sufficient cultural knowledge and experience are the top three factors. Qualitatively, some other factors mentioned by the respondents include students' interest in exploring cultures and their needs for learning about familiar cultural contents to enrich their knowledge. Meanwhile, students' insufficient language proficiency and cultural cognition to acquire new knowledge, teachers having not been trained to teach culture and inadequate time allotment in class are mentioned as the three biggest barriers to integrating cultural contents into ELT. Interestingly, the follow-up interviews also reveal that one main reason that leads to teachers' lack of time for culture teaching is the seemingly too demanding requirements of the officers from the education divisions of the city or districts, which does not seem to promote the teaching of culture. Three teachers from the same school respond:

“We are asked to conduct pre- and while- and post- activities for every text and skill. But the number of activities and inputs in the book is already too many to handle. And we have to guarantee that every lesson uses technology, whereas the projector sometimes breaks down and it takes so much time to prepare the machine.”

Regarding *the cultural contents of the curricular textbooks*, the qualitative results reflect positive perceptions of the cultural inputs in the 10-year textbook series of 25 informants who have one to five years of experience of teaching this series. They report the cultural contents in these textbooks are abundant, updated, useful, based on various cultures and explicitly represented. However, the same teachers also maintain that the included vocabulary amount is too much, and the topics are not relevant to students in remote areas.

The participant teachers place great emphasis on the need to introduce Vietnamese culture and cultures of countries speaking English as the official language in the English textbook and English curriculum at secondary level (88.9% and 84.4% of respondents respectively). Information about cultures of South East Asian countries, cultures of Asian countries and cultures of countries using English as the first language receive less attention from the teachers (66.7%). As a result, nearly 60% of participants think that information on the above-mentioned cultures should be introduced unequally in the textbook. Responses from the follow-up interviews reveal that Vietnamese culture should be most focused when integrating cultural contents into ELT.

Table 3. Purposes of teaching culture in ELT classrooms at secondary schools

Improve students' language skills	57.8%
Encourage students to learn a foreign language	57.8%
Improve students' knowledge about the world	100.0%
Provide a multi-perspective approach in problem-solving skills in communication	80.0%
Build up & promote Vietnamese cultural identity	80.0%
Other purposes	0.0%

According to the participants, teaching culture in ELT classrooms serves various purposes; however, the primary purpose is to improve students' knowledge about the world (100%). Building up and promoting the Vietnamese cultural identity and providing a multi-perspective approach in problem-solving skills in communication rank second with 80% of responses.

4.2. Teachers' practice of culture teaching

The participants have different priorities in selecting topics to teach cultural contents. Family, festivals, customs and traditions, and education are the most widely chosen, while science and technology, press and media as well as law are among the least likely selected topics. The main reason for not choosing certain topics to teach culture is that teachers do not know how to explore and integrate such contents in their class. Some teachers inform in the interviews that some topics in the curricular textbooks require broad background knowledge which does not seem to meet the communicative needs of lower secondary school students.

Table 4. Topics in English textbooks usually selected to teach cultural contents

Family	88.9%	Science and technology	17.8%
Ethnicity	66.7%	Education	66.7%
Language	66.7%	Health and healthcare	44.4%
Geography	40.0%	Social relationships	62.2%
History	46.7%	Law	35.6%
Festivals, customs & traditions	100.0%	Press and Media	22.2%
Daily habits	80.0%	Famous people	44.4%
Energy sources and environment	40.0%	Other topics	0.0%

As for the channels that teachers employ to teach culture, illustrated pictures and cultural information included in the text are mostly used (44.4%). It should be noted that students' cultural knowledge and experience is a much more widely used channel than teachers' knowledge and experience, with 35.6% and 8.9% of responses respectively.

Table 5. Languages skills usually integrated with cultural contents

Listening	44.4%
Reading	95.6%
Speaking	82.2%
Writing	53.3%

Table 6. Reasons for choosing certain skills to teach cultural contents

Texts for taught skill have explicit cultural input.	48.9%
The skill allows easier conduct of learning activities with cultural contents	88.9%
Others	0.0%

Tables 5 and Table 6 describe the percentage of language skills teachers usually use to combine with teaching cultural contents and the reasons why they choose such skills. In practice, most teachers usually integrate cultural content into teaching Reading and Speaking (95.6% and 82.2% respectively), while about half of the participants also choose to teach culture in their Listening and Writing lessons. The main reason for choosing certain skills to integrate cultural contents is that such skills seem to be more easily to be combined with cultural contents than the other skills do. However, 100% of respondents do not apply any cultural and intercultural theories in teaching cultural contents, claiming they do not know any of them. A majority of teachers are not sure about the necessity of using cultural/intercultural frameworks in their teaching while a third think such frameworks are needed. Therefore, training sessions on how to explore cultural contents in English textbooks are most anticipated (93.3% of responses). Procedure to teach culture, cultural information about specific cultures and cultural/intercultural theories come next with 75.6%, 71.1% and 57.8% of responses respectively.

As to the specific techniques that these teachers use to explore cultural contents in the textbooks and to conduct culture teaching, the follow-up interviews document tens of in-class activities such as “brainstorming”, “showing cultural video clips”, “discussion on cultures”, “predictions”, “students associating lesson contents with their own culture”, “quiz”, “question and answer”, “what and where”, “pair work”, “group work”, and many more. What is noticeable is that these answers seem very ambiguous in terms of dealing specifically with culture. Moreover, there is no answer to what techniques or methods have been used to analyze and explore cultural contents in the textbooks.

5. Discussion and implications

As clearly stated in the findings of the study, despite the teachers' absolute agreement on the importance of culture teaching, the majority of them find it impossible to properly conduct a culture-integrated English lesson due to the lack of resources like time, encouraging policies or teachers and students' readiness. This seems to reflect the perspectives of teaching foreign language before 2000, which considered culture as separable contents from language. Because of this view, both teachers and their direct supervisors either think it is too much to teach culture or neglect cultural contents altogether.

It is advisable to inform these education practitioners of such modern paradigms as English as an international language, intercultural communicative competence, multidialectal competence and metacultural competence, since they see culture as inextricably intertwined with language, implicitly implied or explicitly embedded in grammar, vocabulary, and discourse. These paradigms can provide teachers with pluricentric approaches to explore and teach culture. Moreover, an appropriate evaluation of the 10-year textbook series is also necessary for these teachers and their supervisors so as to help them get rid of confused and intimidated feelings when exposed to the densely displayed contents of the books. In fact, it is not necessary to conduct pre-, while- and post- activities for every text or skill because the abundant activities available in the books per se have been designed for exactly these same purposes. What teachers need to do may be to approach a lesson in a different way from the book itself.

On the contrary, it is also implied that these teachers start to realize the important relevance and legitimacy of local cultures to the Vietnamese learners in their support of the surpassing content of Vietnamese culture compared with the culture of English-speaking countries and their perceived objectives of teaching culture to promote the Vietnamese identity and students' communicative competence. This is a sign of teachers' readiness that undergirds the establishment of in-service training programs dealing with culturally responsible pedagogies.

The practice of culture teaching of the participants so far on the one hand indicates that the approaches of teaching culture-as-content and teaching language-and-culture have been applied in their classrooms. The culture-explicit topics and skills, the techniques of cultural capsule and cultural assimilators are the most frequently applied. This reality implies another perspective to culture teaching of the informants: they prefer to have a ready-to-use tool or culture-explicit materials to support their lessons, and some even have the tendency to select what is convenient for their job and what they are confident in to teach instead of working on what is advantageous for their students' intercultural competence.

On the other hand, it is also shown from the data that these teachers really need official training about theories of intercultural communication, cultural linguistics and their application in cultural studies and culture teaching. Without suitable theoretical frameworks and hands-on experience in materials analysis and culture teaching activities, these teachers can neither evaluate the importance of cultural theories in their job nor assess if they have conducted an effective lesson which helps improve their students' language and cultural competence.

6. Conclusion

This study has looked into a group of lower secondary school teachers in the North of Vietnam as to their perspectives toward culture teaching and their experiences in teaching cultural contents in the English language classroom. The results of quantitative and qualitative data indicate that although the participants appreciate the importance of culture in language teaching and believe that there are favorable conditions for culture teaching, it is still challenging for them to integrate culture in language, especially when it comes to culture-implicit lessons.

Although this study has not managed to actually observe what really happens inside the classrooms of English, and the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all lower-

secondary school teachers of English in Vietnam, it is highly recommended that in-service training sessions on culturally appropriate pedagogies should be conducted on a yearly basis, focusing on theories of linguistics, culture and intercultural communication and their applications in materials analysis and exploitation.

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KINH NGHIỆM VÀ NHẬN ĐỊNH CỦA GIÁO VIÊN TIẾNG ANH BẬC TRUNG HỌC CƠ SỞ VỀ GIẢNG DẠY VĂN HÓA TRONG LỚP HỌC TIẾNG ANH

Tóm tắt: Bài viết nghiên cứu kinh nghiệm và nhận định của giáo viên tiếng Anh bậc trung học cơ sở về thực tiễn giảng dạy văn hóa trong các lớp học tiếng Anh. Dữ liệu được thu thập từ bảng khảo sát và phỏng vấn nhóm đối với 45 giáo viên tiếng Anh cấp THCS tại một thành phố ở miền Bắc Việt Nam. Kết quả cho thấy, mặc dù hầu hết giáo viên tham gia nghiên cứu có nhiều năm kinh nghiệm giảng dạy, và họ tin rằng các điều kiện hiện có là thuận lợi cho việc tích hợp dạy văn hóa với dạy tiếng Anh trên lớp, các giáo viên vẫn thấy việc này khó thực hiện do giáo viên thiếu kỹ năng khai thác nội dung văn hóa trong sách giáo khoa hoặc giáo trình và kỹ năng triển khai hoạt động phù hợp trên lớp. Bài viết đưa ra một số đề xuất liên quan đến các chương trình bồi dưỡng nghiệp vụ sư phạm cho giáo viên tiếng Anh bậc phổ thông trong tương lai.

Từ khóa: Quan điểm giáo viên, giảng dạy văn hóa, dạy nội dung văn hóa, ELT, giáo dục phổ thông