AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE TEACHING OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN CLASSES OF AMERICAN CULTURE AT HUE UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES: EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

Intercultural competence is an essential component that language learners need to acquire in order to communicate well. This paper presents an analysis of the data collected in an investigation into students' perception and opinions on teaching intercultural competence to EFL students in classes of American culture at Hue University of Foreign Languages. Data were collected from 120 EFL students by means of a questionnaire over the course of two months in 2016. The findings have revealed that the students were aware of the important role of culture in enhancing their intercultural competence regardless of their incomprehensive perception of the correlation between language and culture. Furthermore, despite limited number of techniques, a combination of multicultural and intercultural approaches was deployed by teachers in the classes.

Key words: teaching culture, American culture, intercultural competence, language and cultural acquisition

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, one of the most fundamental changes in language learning and teaching has been the recognition of the cultural dimension as a vital component. This change has largely transformed the nature of teaching and learning languages. In other words, the aim of language learning and teaching is no longer defined in terms of the acquisition and the transmission of communicative competence in a foreign language, which refers to a person's ability to act in a foreign language in linguistically, socio-linguistically and pragmatically appropriate ways (Council of Europe, 2001). Rather, it is defined in terms of the intercultural competence, which is "the ability of a person to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures" (Meyer, 1991, p. 138). This definition, in fact, adds to the notion of communicative competence and enlarges it to incorporate intercultural competence.

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At the Department of English, Hue University of Foreign Languages, in order to help students develop their intercultural competence, courses in British and American culture have been added to the curriculum for over the last 50 years. Despite intermittent changes in the textbooks used, these courses have consistently covered a wide range of topics that were listed by CEF (2001) as seven categories that are considered characteristic of a particular European society and its culture which include everyday living, living condition, interpersonal relations, values, beliefs and attitudes, body language, social conventions and ritual behaviors. While the use of culture as a way to enhance students' intercultural competence has been highly recognized and sought after by teachers and curriculum designers from the department; students' voice, which is just as important, has not been seriously and consistently taken into consideration in the process. The present study is an effort to shed light on students' perception and opinions on the significance of teaching intercultural competence, its practices and suggestions to make the practice more effective; which ultimately aims to improve the quality of language teaching in general and teaching culture courses in particular.

There are five sections in the study. The introduction provides details on the context of the study. The sections on literature review and the method give definitions of the major concepts, description of instruments to collect data, participants and data analysis procedure. This is followed by findings and discussion which gives in-depth analysis of the collected data. In the final sections, conclusions are drawn and implications are presented.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition of intercultural competence

Intercultural communicative competence is defined by Abdel (2000) as the ability of the learners to illicit and nourish communication; and thus plays a crucial role in communication effectiveness. In other words, it is the ability to attain a successful interaction, which requires several factors other than merely language competence. As suggested by Byram (1997) the success of interaction implies not only an effective interchange of information, as was the goal of communicative language teaching, but also the "the ability to decentre and take up the other's perspective on their own culture, anticipating and where possible, resolving dysfunctions in communication and behavior" (p. 42). Intercultural communicative competence, as a result, can be formed on the basis of awareness, behavior and action (Byram, 2003).

2.2. Objectives of teaching/learning culture

Kramsch (1993, p. 3) identifies three ways how language and culture are bound together. First of all, language expresses cultural reality - with words people not only express facts and ideas but also reflect their attitudes. Second, language embodies cultural reality - people give meanings to their experience through the means of communication.

Third, language symbolizes cultural reality - people view their language as a symbol of their social identity. Such a correlation between language and culture points to the necessity of teaching the target culture to language learners. Tomalin and Stempleski (1993, pp. 7-8) listed such goals of cultural instruction as:

• To develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors;

• To develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the way in which people speak and behave;

• To become more aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target culture;

• To increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language;

• To develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence;

• To develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture;

• To simulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its people.

Such goals of teaching culture can be seen as clear indicators of the vital role of teaching culture in enhancing language learners' intercultural [communicative] competence.

2.3. The most common approaches in teaching culture

Throughout the history of language teaching and learning, different approaches to teaching culture have come into vogue and gained their momentums. Among these approaches, some had been and remained dominant. These approaches can be classified in different ways.

Saluveer (2004) divided he approaches into two broad categories: the mono-cultural approach and the comparative approach. While the former refers to those which focus only (or mostly) on the culture of the country whose language is studied, the latter points to those which are based on comparing learners' own and the other culture. Meanwhile, Risager (1998, pp. 243-252) described four approaches to the teaching of culture, namely, the intercultural approach, the multicultural approach, the trans-cultural approach, and the foreign-cultural approach. The intercultural approach draws upon the idea that culture is best learned through comparison of the target and the learners' own culture. Though the main focus is on the target culture, the intercultural approach pinpoints the relations between the learners' own culture. This approach is aimed at developing learners' understanding of intercultural and communicative competences, enabling them to act as

mediators between the two cultures. However, Risager (1998, p. 246) considers this approach inadequate as it is "blind to the actual multicultural character of almost all existing countries or states" and suggests that teachers should use the multicultural approach. The multicultural approach is based on the idea that in every country a number of sub-cultures exist within one culture. This approach not only includes a focus on the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the target country, but also on the learners' own culture. Similar to the intercultural approach, comparison is an important factor here. Risager (1998, p. 246) stresses that a balanced and anti-racist view of cultures should be involved. This approach emphasizes the principle that cultures are not monolithic.

The third approach put forward by Risager (1998) is called the trans-cultural approach. The fundamental tenet behind this is that due to mass communication, the World Wide Web, and globalization, the modern world cultures are intricately interwoven. Since a large number of people use the foreign languages as lingua-francas, this approaches considers the foreign language as an international language, so that it is not necessary at all to link the foreign language to any specific culture. However, Byram (1997, p. 55) asserts that although it is possible to introduce topics that are of universal significance in all cultures, such an approach leaves learners without topics which are characteristic of a particular country, that is the ones which "characterize its uniqueness for the language learner".

Foreign-cultural approach is shaped upon the concept of a single culture and focuses on the target culture. It solely focuses on the target culture and neither takes the learners' own culture into consideration nor does it compare the two cultures together. What is important here is to develop the target language's communicative competence and cultural understanding. However, this approach has been criticized on the grounds that it does not focus on the relations between the two cultures.

While Saluveer's (2004) classification provides some insights into how culture can be taught in general, that of Risager (1998) delves into more intricate relationships between/among cultures and sub-cultures. As a result, it is chosen to be used in this study.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of the present study were 120 randomly chosen 3rd and 4th year EFL students at Hue University of Foreign Languages. According to the results of the demographic questionnaire, 10.4% of the students were male, and 89.6% were female. English learning experience of the students was as followed: 3-5 years (11%), 6-10 years (22%), and over 10 years (67%).

3.2. Data collection instruments and procedure

Data in the study, which is descriptive in nature, were collected over the course of two months from mid-October to mid-November in 2016 through means of a questionnaire developed by Sercuet *et al.* (2005). The questionnaire, which was consisted of 8 sections, aimed to investigate students' opinions on the role of teaching/learning culture in enhancing their intercultural competence, the approaches their teacher used to teach culture as well as their evaluation on the effectiveness of the courses. The questionnaire was piloted with 10 randomly selected students for reliability purposes. Data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed by taking frequency counts for each question.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Students' self-evaluation of their intercultural competence

In the first section of the questionnaire, students were asked to rate their intercultural competence on a five-point scale, with 1 for 'Very poor' and 5 for 'Very good'.
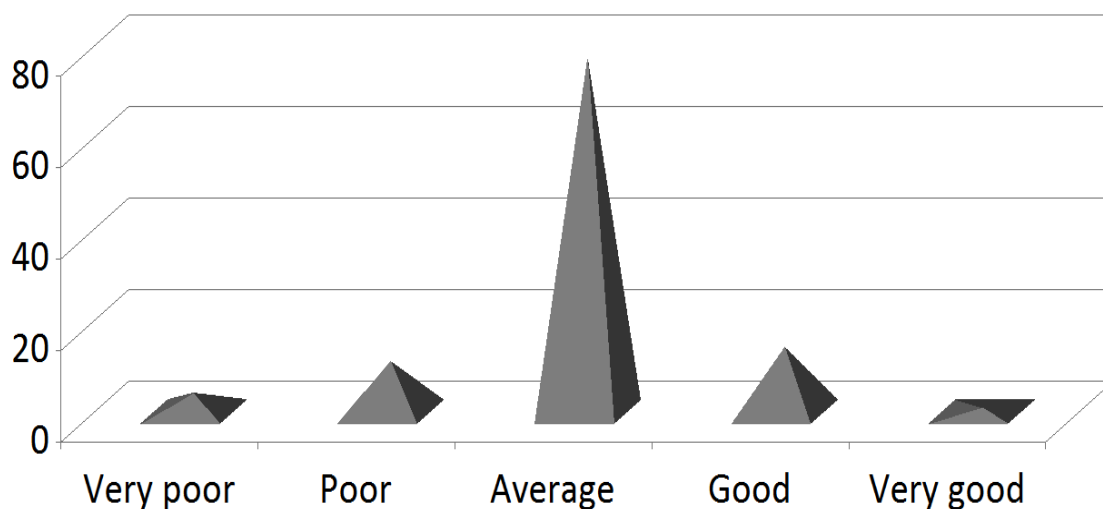

Figure 1. Students' self-assessment of their intercultural competence

The results showed that well over 70% of the surveyed students graded their intercultural competence as 'Average', 7% 'Poor', 9% 'Good' and only 1% rated theirs as 'Very good'. It can be inferred that the majority of the students who took part in the survey were not very confident of their intercultural competence. At the same time, very few students thought that theirs were poor or good. This speaks to the fact that intercultural competence has been an important component in English teaching and that students managed to acquire a certain degree of this competence despite the unsatisfactory level of their competence.

4.2. The significance of teaching intercultural competence to EFL students of American culture

Students were also requested to reflect on their perception of the significance of teaching intercultural competence and on whether doing it via teaching American culture is a good way.
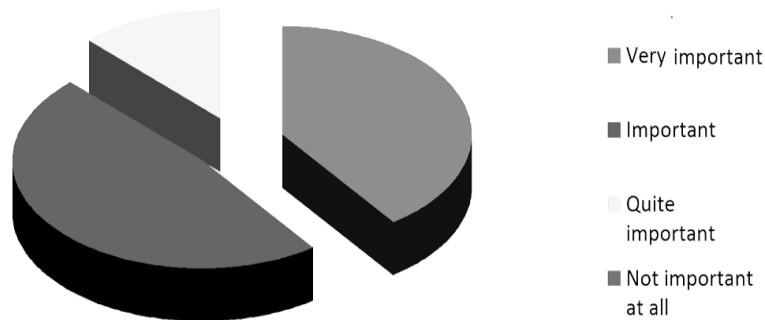

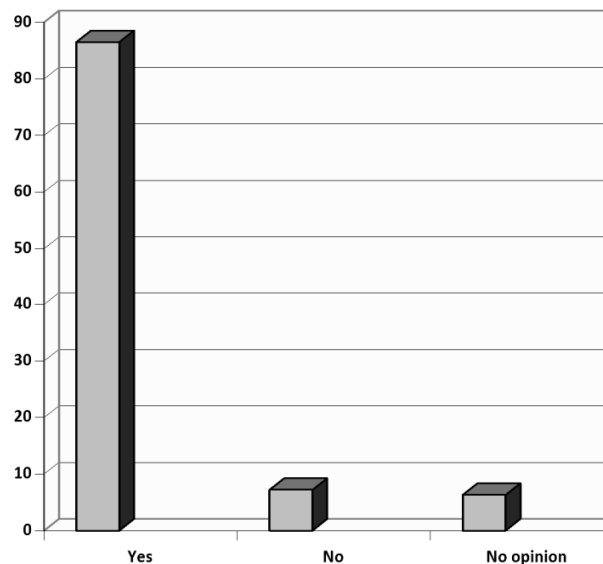Figure 2a. The importance of teaching intercultural competence to EFL students

Figure 2b. Whether teaching American culture is a good way to teach intercultural competence

The data indicated that a majority of the students (83%) were aware of the importance of intercultural competence in English teaching and learning, and that using American culture to help students enhance their intercultural competence is a good way to do so (with about 85%). However, it is worth noticing that 12% did not think it is important for EFL students to have intercultural competence and that 15% said no or expressed no opinion on

whether using American culture to help students improve their intercultural competence is a good way. As little proportions as the figures may look, they speak to the fact that quite a few students took American Culture courses because it is a compulsory subject and did not actively engage in enhancing their intercultural competence.

4.3. Students' opinions on the objectives of teaching American culture

Table 1. Students' view on objectives of teaching American culture to EFL students

Value	Count
Motivating Ss to learn English	39
Helping Ss gain knowledge and skills necessary for both other subjects and life in general	71
Helping Ss be open and positive to other foreign cultures	69
Helping Ss gain learning skills necessary to learn different foreign languages	53
Helping Ss to use English for practical reasons	30
Helping Ss understand their own cultures and identities better	68
Helping Ss be aware of the cultural differences	67
Increasing students' awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language	35
Stimulating students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its people	34
Helping students become more aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target culture	72
Other	2

It can be inferred from the data that most students did not have a comprehensive understanding about the correlation between culture and language. While the majority of them are aware of dimensions of intercultural competence provided by culture such as social skills, knowledge and attitude; very few of them were able to pinpoint the relationship between learning about a target culture and sharpening their linguistic skills. More specifically, over half of the surveyed students contended that the objectives of teaching culture were to help them understand their own culture and identify better, and be more aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target language. Meanwhile, only around a quarter of them thought that the objectives of learning culture

were to help them use English for practical reason, or increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words or phrases used in the target language.

4.4. Approaches used by teachers in teaching American culture

Table 2. Approaches used by teachers in teaching American culture

Value	Count
The teacher(s) share what they hear/read about foreign cultures with Ss	86 =
The teacher(s) ask Ss to do some research about foreign cultures	26
The teacher(s) show CDs/movies about foreign cultures in class	90
The teacher(s) talk about their own experiences with foreign cultures	90
The teacher(s) invite people having lived abroad to the classroom	13
The teacher(s) ask Ss to talk about your own culture in English	30
The teacher(s) discuss the prejudices towards the foreign cultures with Ss	38
Other	2

As shown in Table 2, teachers in classes taken by the surveyed students used a variety of approaches but they predominantly combined intercultural approach and multicultural approach. In particular, around 90 students indicated that their teachers would share what they learn/hear about other cultures, show CDs, movies and talk about their own experiences with foreign cultures to their students. Such a combination of approaches is highly valued and considered as appropriate by scholars in the field.

4.5. Students' self-teaching of intercultural competence outside the classroom setting

Table 3. Ways for students to enhance their intercultural competence outside classroom

Value	Count
Through media (TV/radio/newspaper)	99
By communicating with foreigners living in your area	38
By communicating with the native speaker teachers at my school	21
By communicating with visiting foreign teachers/students	34
Other	6

The data showed that students did actively look for convenient ways to enhance their intercultural communication skill outside the classroom. The one chosen by most students was through media (with 99 out of 120 students), followed by communicating with foreigners living in their areas, communicating with visiting foreign teachers/students and communicating with native speakers at their school with 38, 34 and 21 students out of 120 students respectively. It can be inferred that students not only acquired knowledge of the target culture but also put into practice what they had learned by means of communication. However, with the media as the main point of contact with a foreign culture, students' knowledge about the target culture could be biased and twisted due to the distorted representation that the media tend to provide, which could negatively affect students' acquisition of intercultural competence.

4.6. Students' suggestions to improve the teaching of intercultural competence

Table 4. Students' suggestions

Value	Count
Creating an authentic classroom environment (techniques include, for example, displays and exhibitions of realia)	65
Cultural problem solving (for example, culture assimilator)	44
Behavioral and affective aspects (for example drama and mini-drama)	45
Cognitive approaches (for example student research)	14
Literary reading and watching films	53
Visits to the class by native speakers, pen-pals and visits to other countries	64

According to the data, students seem to be in favor of having visits to the class by native speakers, pen-pals or visits to other countries, having an authentic classroom environment and reading literature or watching films about the target culture with around 50% of the surveyed students choosing those options. Meanwhile, a very small proportion of the surveyed students opted for doing projects about other cultures on their own (only 16%).

5. Conclusions and implications

The present study reported data collected from an investigation into the practice of teaching intercultural competence to EFL students in classes of American culture at Hue University of Foreign Languages. The study was conducted over the course of two months, from October to November of 2016 with the participation of 120 randomly chosen 3rd and 4th year-EFL students. The survey showed that despite the low satisfaction with their own intercultural competence, students were well aware of the importance of acquiring

intercultural competence in language learning through courses of culture, especially American culture. The data also revealed that along with an incomprehensive perception of the correlation between language and culture, students had the tendency to enhance their intercultural competence outside the classroom setting by predominantly relying on the most convenient but not necessarily the most effective source – the media among other ways. Inside the classrooms, the statistics indicated that there were a limited number of techniques but a combination of intercultural approach and multi-cultural approach was utilized by teachers to conduct courses of American culture. Such conclusions give way to some implications to teachers and students as followed:

To teachers:

• Teacher should equip students with a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between language and culture.

• In order to help students to be more successful with their out-of-classroom activities in enhancing their intercultural competence, teachers should give them guidelines to look for the best sources possible.

• Teacher should diversify their techniques in teaching culture, especially such which attract students as having visits to class by native speakers or creating an authentic classroom environment.

To students:

• Students should be more aware of the correlation between language and culture.

• Students should put into practice what they learn about the target culture more frequently by engaging in any form/opportunity of communication, especially with foreigners, in order to sharpen their communicative skills and whereby improve their intercultural competence.

• Students should filter and diversify the ways they use to enhance their intercultural competence outside the classroom. With the media, students should be more selective in choosing the channels to enrich their knowledge about the target culture.

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NGHIÊN CỨU VỀ GIẢNG DẠY NĂNG LỰC LIÊN VĂN HÓA TRONG CÁC LỚP HỌC VĂN HÓA MỸ TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC NGOẠI NGỮ, ĐẠI HỌC HUẾ: NHẬN THỨC CỦA SINH VIÊN NGOẠI NGỮ TIẾNG ANH

Tóm tắt. Năng lực liên văn hóa là một thành tố quan trọng mà người học ngoại ngữ cần phải có để giao tiếp một cách hiệu quả. Bài báo trình bày kết quả điều tra nghiên cứu về nhận thức và quan điểm của sinh viên trong việc giảng dạy năng lực liên văn hóa ở các lớp Văn hóa Mỹ tại Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Huế. Dữ liệu thu thập từ 120 phiếu điều tra được phát cho sinh viên trong khoảng thời gian 2 tháng của năm học 2016-2017. Kết quả cho thấy dù chưa nhận thức đầy đủ về mối quan hệ mật thiết giữa ngôn ngữ và văn hóa, đa số sinh viên ý thức được tầm quan trọng của của văn hóa trong việc nâng cao năng lực liên văn hóa. Bên cạnh đó, tuy còn hạn chế về phương pháp, các giảng viên đã có sự kết hợp nhuần nhuyễn giữa phương pháp đa văn hóa *(multicultural)* và liên văn hóa *(intercultural)* trong việc giảng dạy.

Từ khóa: giảng dạy văn hóa, văn hóa Mỹ, năng lực liên văn hóa, quá trình lĩnh hội ngôn ngữ và văn hóa