

# EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PRACTICES OF INTEGRATING CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE INTO THEIR LANGUAGE CLASSROOM TEACHING

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**Abstract:** This study examines high school teachers' perceptions of their current practices in teaching cultural contents and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in the Vietnamese context. The research focuses on the teachers' perceptions of their practices of teaching knowledge of culture and ICC to the high school students by means of their report. The study was conducted with the participation of 60 EFL high school teachers from the Mekong Delta region using the questionnaire. For qualitative data, 06 participants were interviewed to gain further information about the ways that the teachers used to teach these contents in their teaching settings. The findings provide valuable insights into establishing ICC in high-school EFL teachers and serve as a reference for future research.

**Key words:** Intercultural communicative competence, EFL teachers, Vietnamese context, integration

## 1. Introduction

Culture has been well justified as an inseparable part of foreign language education. Intercultural communicative competence is essential for effective interaction with diverse cultural backgrounds (Tran & Duong, 2018). Developing students' knowledge of cultures and their intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become an ultimate goal of language teaching, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, integrating culture into language teaching is crucial for successful communication and minimizing misunderstandings. However, Gonen and Saglam (2012) highlighted the lack of emphasis on integrating culture into language teaching, despite its significance. They argued that teachers often focus on developing language proficiency rather than incorporating culture into lessons. To improve teaching quality, teachers should be introduced to effective methods of teaching cultural aspects and ICC, and perceptions of how these methods should be explored (Serçu, 2005).

In the Vietnamese context, there is a limited focus on integrating cultural knowledge into real-life teaching, causing learners to struggle with effective communication. This issue has been addressed through recent curriculum and textbook innovations which now prominently incorporate cultural knowledge. This initiative promotes learners' opportunities to acquire culture knowledge and develop their competence to communicate effectively in multicultural contexts, addressing the issue of language learning in the Vietnamese context. The present study investigates high school teachers' perceptions of their daily practices of teaching cultural contents and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) to students. It aims to explore teachers'

perceptions towards their practices of teaching these contents in their classrooms. The study seeks the answer to the research question: What are the EFL high school teachers’ perceptions of their current practices of teaching cultural contents and ICC in their classrooms?

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Defining culture

Liddicoat et al. (2003) have all contributed to the understanding of culture, a concept that encompasses various aspects of human life. In the Cambridge Dictionary, culture is defined as the art of illustrating or performing customs or ways of life of a specific group. They also highlight the importance of shared social spaces, history, and images within a cultural community. The six dimensions of culture are listed by Lahdenpera (2000) and Nieto (1999) including cultural objects, self-concept, communication, thinking, emotions, and repetitive behaviors. In Rahim’s (2014) study in teaching English as a foreign language, he offers a clear explanation of culture by concentrating on the traits of a particular society, such as language, religion, food, social customs, music, and the arts.

The Iceberg metaphor, first proposed by anthropologist Hall in 1976, is a crucial framework for understanding cultural components in research. It posits culture as a visible and undersea level, a concept used in intercultural education studies (Figure 1).

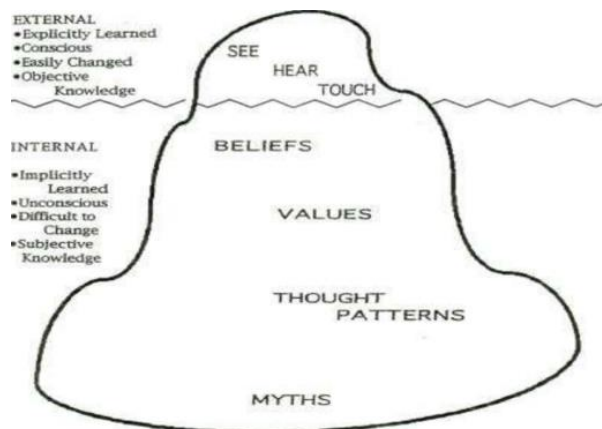


Figure 1. The iceberg (Weaver, 1993)

The study highlighted the significance of including cultural elements in language instruction, defining “culture” according to Rahim (2014) as the traits of a particular society that include language, music, art, social behaviors, cuisine, and religion. Learning about culture is an essential part of teaching languages since it facilitates efficient communication, prevents misunderstandings, and helps people from various backgrounds succeed in everyday interactions.

### 2.2 The importance of culture in language teaching

Language teaching and learning have evolved over time, with linguists recognizing the importance of culture in the teaching and learning process. Prior to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, learning a foreign language was primarily for reading and studying its literature. The communicative approach in the 1970s improved the quality of teaching language. However, many scholars argue that teaching culture should not be considered an extra skill, but rather a part of listening,

speaking, reading and writing. Teaching language without culture can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of situations based on individual experiences.

Linguistic competence alone is not enough for language mastery; cultural competence is crucial. Teachers should integrate teaching of culture into the English curriculum, teaching both language knowledge and cultural knowledge. This helps students understand native speakers' thinking and cultural differences, enhancing language learning.

Research into intercultural competence emphasizes the importance of preparing students to interact with people from different cultures. An ICC speaker possesses communicative competence, skills, attitudes, values, and knowledge about a culture, turning intercultural encounters into relationships. Tomalin (2008) emphasizes the importance of culture in teaching, promoting intercultural communicative competence and incorporating cultural tasks to promote this competence. This approach helps students accept differences and be flexible, fostering a more inclusive and effective language learning environment.

### **2.3 Culture teaching in language education**

Educators and researchers in second language (L2) and English as a foreign language (EFL) emphasize the importance of intercultural understanding and communication in multicultural societies. To promote mutual respect, some countries require L2 educators to teach tolerance and intercultural competence, expanding traditional communicative approaches to include this aspect. Sapir (1921) argued that language, race, and culture are not necessarily correlated, but this does not answer why culture teaching should be integrated into language teaching. Culture influences language teaching in two ways: linguistically, it affects language semantics and pragmatics; and pedagogically, it influences the choice of language materials, influencing teaching methodologies (McKay, 2003).

Within the Vietnamese context, English has become a dominant subject in Vietnam's education system since 1986 and turned into a key component of examinations for middle schools and senior secondary students. Good English proficiency is essential for employment, promotion, and further studies. However, enhancing Vietnamese students' ICC should be a crucial goal in ELT to prepare for intercultural interactions. The intercultural dimension was implicitly incorporated in the National Foreign Languages Project, but no reference is made to the ICC concept or its components. That is to say in Vietnam, teaching culture and English language skills are not always integrated, with ICC playing a less predominant role. It is found that 94% of the teachers agree that developing ICC through learning and using English, whereas they can face some challenges like time allowance, cultural knowledge, and English-speaking environment (Vo, 2017). This partially leads to the fact that Vietnamese students of English may master English in terms of its grammar and linguistics (Nguyen, 2013), but concentrate less on intercultural communication.

### **2.4 Instructional activities for promoting ICC in language teaching**

The comparison approach, highlighting both differences and similarities within a single culture, is a popular teaching strategy that compares native and target cultures (Hughes et al., 1986). It helps students grasp the dynamic nature of culture.

Cultural integration involves presenting learners with a significant incident that is likely to be misconstrued. Learners can choose which option they believe is correct among the various ones. The teacher should understand that disparities exist even within one culture (Eva, 2015). Cultural integration tasks can be used as a lead-in activity during the “input” step to promote students’ guesses, after which they will read the cultural information to confirm their selections.

Cultural islands are a simple but effective approach that affects learners subconsciously. Classroom walls should be decorated with contemporary posters, images, or videos of actors, singers, films, writers, books, and notable places. Their goal is to capture the learners’ attention, elicit comments, and establish a cultural milieu (Hughes, Van Beek & Wood, 1986). Cultural island technique can be used as a lead-in activity during the “input” process to encourage students and assist them in learning about the target culture.

Byram et al. (2002) demonstrated how to apply comparative analysis techniques to *role-play* activities. They suggested that learners can learn by performing a role-play of welcoming a visitor, where one learner acts as a foreigner and the other as a host. This exposure to different cultures helps learners understand similarities and differences.

## 2.5 Review of previous studies

Numerous studies have examined teachers’ opinions of intercultural integration in both international and local settings (Chau & Truong, 2018; Gönen & Sağlam, 2012; Hoang, 2014; Nguyen, 2013; Sercu et al., 2005; Zhou, 2011). It was largely established that teachers had favorable views of intercultural integration. Several other studies shown that explicitly incorporating cultures into education improves learners’ intercultural competence (IC) and communicative competence (CC) (Chau & Truong, 2018; Gönen & Sağlam, 2012; Hoang, 2014; Sercu et al., 2005; Zhou, 2011). According to Gönen and Sağlam (2012), Hoang (2014), Sercu et al. (2005), and Zhou (2011), intercultural teaching is not as effective as language teaching in terms of conveying intercultural knowledge.

The second group of studies placed its focus on investigating the factors that affect teachers’ efforts to integrate cultural contents and ICC into their language classrooms and lessons. Accordingly, a number of crucial factors have been identified. Among these, one common factor reported was the teachers’ lack of firm grasp of ICC and the ways to integrate it into their teaching, as pointed out by an extensive number of studies (e.g., Ho, 2011; Lazar, 2007; Nguyen, 2013; Nilmanee & Soontornwipast, 2014; Zhou, 2011). These studies pointed out that although language teachers had positive views on ICC, they rarely integrated the cultural and intercultural dimensions into the classroom practices because they did not thoroughly understand the intercultural approach to language teaching and ICC. Without a firm grasp, most teachers teach culture in the traditional way simply by passing cultural knowledge or information onto learners which is not likely to help learners become intercultural speakers or acquire ICC (Barletta Manjarrés, 2009; Gu, 2016; Sercu, 2006). Another key factor reported to hinder teachers from fully adopting the intercultural approach to language teaching and integrating ICC into their teaching was that there is a lack of a consistent method or model for dealing with culture in language classroom (Garrido & Álvarez, 2006; Manjarrés, 2009). Garrido and Álvarez (2006) claimed that this lack of consistency in culture teaching methodology made it hard for teachers to set cultural objectives for teaching and learning in a language classroom.

Apart from the above factors, inadequate administrative support and learning materials that can be used to promote ICC in language classrooms can also be considered as major obstacles to ICC integration into language teaching (Manjarrés, 2009; Garrido & Álvarez, 2006; Gu, 2016). As also reported, ICC was still not viewed as a major goal for foreign language learning in the eyes of teachers, learners and their parents (Sercu, 2006) and that teachers did not have enough time to cover the cultural contents due to the heavy curriculum contents they needed to cover (Karbinar & Guler, 2013). As highlighted by the results of these previous studies, teachers in practice were still dealing with a plethora of factors that demotivated and hindered their attempts to promote cultural contents and ICC in language teaching. As such, unless close attention is drawn towards these factors, endeavors to encourage teachers to implement a more culturally integrated approach might not be fruitful as expected.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research design and participants**

This study utilized a descriptive design with both quantitative and qualitative data, using a mixed-method approach to gather the necessary data answering the research question. This study involved 60 EFL high school teachers in Mekong Delta. All these teacher participants were using *Tieng Anh Global Success* textbooks designed by MOET. Among 60 participants, 81.7% of the participants were female teachers, 18.3% were male teachers. In terms of teaching experience, 50% of the participants had teaching experience ranging from 1 to 5 years. It was the highest rate in the group. The teaching experience ranged from 6 to 10 years was 10% while the two ranges of teaching experience from 11 to 15 years and over 15 years had the same portion, which was accounting for 20%.

#### **3.2 Instruments**

The questionnaire and in-depth interviews were employed to collect the data. The questionnaire was designed based on the literature review and study purpose, which consisted of 38 items based on the 5-Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree to explore teachers' perceptions toward their current practices of teaching ICC. The questionnaire was first designed in English, then was translated into Vietnamese, which aims at helping the respondents to avoid any difficulties in understanding the questionnaire. The Cronbach's alpha of the questionnaire is .95, which means the reliability of the questionnaire was high. The interview guide was designed based on the questionnaire and study purpose. It has six main questions asking teachers' perceived practices of teaching ICC in their teaching context. Initially, the interview questions were designed in English. However, during the interview, the researcher used the Vietnamese version to encourage the participants to relate their stories in Vietnamese.

#### **3.3 Data collection and analysis**

Prior to data collection, firstly, the questionnaire was carefully transferred to a Google form, and then the link was distributed to the participants through email or Zalo application. It took the participants roughly 20 minutes to answer the questionnaire. There were 68 questionnaires returned, but 60 of them were valid for data analysis. One week after, the interviews were conducted with 6 teachers who were willing to participate. Each interview lasted

about 20 minutes. The researcher took notes during the interviews and the notes were transcribed and then coded according to themes or issues.

In order to analyze the data, the software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 was used to process the quantitative data in terms of descriptive statistics (Mean: M; Standard deviation: SD). The interval scale of the mean scores was understood as 1.00 - 1.80: Strongly disagree; 1.90 - 2.60: Disagree; M=2.70 - 3.40: Neutral; 3.50- 4.20: Agree; and 4.30- 5.00: Strongly agree. For qualitative data, the content analysis approach was employed. The qualitative data was identified in terms of familiarizing and organizing, coding and recording, and summarizing and interpreting. The six interviewees' names were numbered from 1 to 6 to preserve anonymity. To ensure the reliability of qualitative data analysis, the intra-rating was used. Three pieces of qualitative data were randomly chosen for re-analysis, and the convergent results were set at 95%.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

##### 4.1 Findings

###### *Quantitative data results*

The results of teachers' perceptions of their current practices teaching ICC to students, including Mean and Standard Deviation (M=3.96, SD=.846), are illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Teachers' reported practice of teaching ICC

Items	Mean	Std. Dev
1. I integrate authentic cultural materials from English-speaking countries into my lessons.	4.17	.740
2. I provide opportunities for students to compare and contrast the target culture with their own culture.	4.23	.722
3. I encourage students to consider the audience and context when using English in communication tasks.	4.38	.739
4. I design activities that allow students to practice communicating with people from diverse backgrounds.	4.00	.864
5. I assess students' ability to demonstrate cultural sensitivity and effective communication across cultures.	3.90	.915
6. My curriculum includes activities that expose students to different cultural perspectives.	4.07	.778
7. I regularly discuss the connection between language and culture in my lessons.	3.93	.954
8. Students have opportunities to learn about cultural norms and values in English-speaking countries.	4.03	.863
9. I encourage students to compare and contrast the target culture with their own one.	4.07	.821
10. Students are encouraged to use English to discuss cultural issues.	4.23	.789
11. I feel confident teaching about different cultures in my English lessons.	3.73	.989
12. My lessons involve activities that develop students' intercultural communication skills.	3.88	.825
13. My assessment methods consider students' ability to communicate effectively across cultures.	3.70	.830
14. I encourage students to reflect on the impact of cultural differences on communication.	3.88	.904
15. My school administration prioritizes the integration of culture in language learning.	3.65	.936
16. I feel well-equipped to help students develop their intercultural communication competence.	3.67	.968
17. My classroom environment promotes cultural appreciation and respect.	4.07	.733
18. There is a strong emphasis on developing cultural sensitivity in my English program.	3.72	.865
Total	3.96	.846

As seen in Table 1, the teachers confirmed that they remained unchanged in their current practice of teaching cultural content in a classroom environment and even took advantage of this new teaching model to integrate teaching cultural content into teaching language knowledge and skills for students. As seen from Table 1, the mean score of teachers' reports that they encourage their students to pay much attention to the people and context when drilling communication tasks using English was 4.38, which reflected a high level of agreement (item 3:  $M=4.38$ ,  $SD=.739$ ). It meant that teachers had totally agreed with the strategies they often use to teach cultural contents and ICC to students. Also, Table 3 shows that the teachers still maintained an agreement that "students are encouraged to make comparisons in terms of the similarities and differences between their own culture with the other ones" and "students are also encouraged to discuss the cultural problems with the language use of English", which were 4.23 (item 2:  $M=4.23$ ,  $SD=.722$  and item 10:  $M=4.23$ ,  $SD=.789$ , respectively). It indicated that in addition to teaching language skills and contents to their students, they also focus on integrating the cultural knowledge into their language classrooms in order to develop their students' ICC.

It can be seen that almost all teachers always pay attention to integrating cultural elements into their foreign language teaching practices. However, there are significant differences in how they implement this aspect of teaching when comparing the actual teaching practices of male and female teachers. Through the results of an Independent-Sample T-test conducted on both groups of teachers ( $\text{Sig.t-test} = .038 < .05$ ,  $df=58$ ), we find that with the same cultural content, each teacher will have a distinctive approach to deliver this content to the students within the context of their own teaching environment.

### *Qualitative data results*

The primary aim of the interviews was to determine whether teachers considered cultural knowledge and ICC to be important teaching content components, as well as how much attention they had devoted to these in their current teaching, objectives, and what challenges they face. In particular, four senior teachers, who have more than 10 years of teaching experience (Participant 2, 3, 4, and 6) regardless of their current practice teaching ICC. From our interviews, Participant 2 emphasizes the importance of cultural elements in teaching English, recognizing that every language reflects the culture of its country. The participant said:

Due to implementing the 2018 general education program, paying attention to cultural factors in teaching is necessary. I realized that teachers also pay attention to this factor in teaching. (Participant 2)

Participant 6 has the same ideas that she pays much attention to teaching these contents in her teaching practice as evident below:

I care about culture and hope that my students have some awareness of other cultures, which will broaden their knowledge. (Participant 6)

The teachers agree that high-school teachers should incorporate cultural knowledge into their English curriculum for effective communication, avoiding mistakes, and better assimilation into diverse civilizations. This broadens their worldview and prepares students for responsible global citizenship. Participant 4 said:

In my opinion, the textbooks' "communication and culture" design aims to teach students cultural diversity in the context of globalization. As a result, I believe it is critical that educators create these materials. (Participant 4)

As they believed that the two textbook sections on "Culture" and "Communication" had nothing to do with one another, the teachers reported that they teach ICC to their students by using the similar process with the language competence lessons, focusing on the pre-, communication, culture, and post- sections in the textbooks. They believed that teaching culture effectively can be achieved through relevant images, real materials, films, and comparison techniques. Participant 3 stated:

I instruct students in the "Communication and Culture" part as well as other skills, such as lead-in, warm-up, and vocabulary instruction. Students will next read the section about culture after speaking and listening in communication. I'll go over the main aspects of the lessons with the pupils if I have time. Teaching at this period is challenging, yet there is no training available for doing so. (Participant 3)

In sum, from the four interviewing data sources, we can see that although teachers recognize the necessity to include cultural contents in their practice in teaching language knowledge and the reasons for this necessity, most of them do not know what methods or strategies to create a good lesson planning for these contents so that they could teach the cultural knowledge more effectively.

## 4.2 Discussion

The results show that although teachers hold a certain awareness of the importance of integrating cultural knowledge into the EFL language classrooms and the reasons that make them teach these contents, the teachers agree that they do not have any guidelines or do not know which effective strategies or methods they can employ to transfer cultural knowledge to the students better.

The current study concurring with the previous studies on teachers' perceptions of intercultural integration has shown that they generally have good perceptions, believing this integration contributes to learners' intercultural competence and cultural awareness (Chau & Truong, 2018; Gönen & Sağlam, 2012; Hoang, 2014; Nguyen, 2013; Sercu et al., 2005; Zhou, 2011). However, intercultural teaching is often considered inferior to language teaching and focuses on knowledge transfer. In Vietnam, EFL teachers are not fully aware of their responsibilities for intercultural teaching, and there is a discrepancy between teachers' perceptions and practices regarding intercultural teaching (Hoang, 2014; Nguyen, 2013). Further research is needed to understand the void of intercultural objectives and improve teaching practices.

In conjunction with this awareness, the teachers were also able to provide clear justifications for this integration. Accordingly, the teachers strongly emphasized the need to equip learners with good ability to communicate properly with other people from various cultures, develop their language skills such as speaking and writing skills, and avoid cultural breakdowns, which help them succeed in their future career. This common perception help by the teachers in the study appears to show a high level of resonance with the beliefs held by the teachers in studies conducted by Liaw (2006), Planken et al. (2004), and Popsecu and Iordachescu (2015). Teachers



in these studies were also found to hold a strong belief that intercultural competence could improve learners' English communicative competence, especially speaking skill. In this sense, like participants in other studies, the teachers in the current study appeared to advocate the inclusion of cultural contents and aspects of intercultural competence in language teaching as this has positive effects on learners' ability to communicate in a foreign language.

Another important finding is related to the teachers' strong perceptions towards the favorable conditions for integrating cultural contents in their language classrooms. This finding seems to run contrast to those reported from previous studies in Vietnamese context in general concerning the negative impact that contextual factors (Le, 2011; Le & Barnard, 2009; Hoang, 2010; Tomlinson & Dat, 2004) exert on the teachers' freedom and possibility to carry out innovative ideas in teaching or simply to apply the communicative language teaching approach properly. On the contrary to those previous findings, the teachers in the present study consistently reported on the conditions of facilitates, learners' levels and motivation as well as a great support from the administrative team to uphold their efforts in bringing in innovations in teaching practice. As such, the teachers believed that they all had the most favorable conditions for combining language and culture in their current practice.

This research contributes to the understanding of local contexts in educational reformation towards intercultural integration. It also explores teachers' awareness of teaching cultural knowledge and ICC to high school students in their teaching settings. This is crucial for successful implementation as intercultural teaching is more contextualized than centralized.

## **5. Conclusions and recommendations**

This study has revealed that educators have been conscious of the importance of imparting cultural sensitivity and intercultural competency, and they have even developed their own strategies for incorporating ICC into the classroom. Every teacher who took part in the discussion acknowledged that they had come to understand the value of ICC and cultural knowledge in language instruction. As a result, teachers have a variety of approaches in their classrooms to teach their students about cultural topics; yet, each teacher integrates ICC differently when it comes to teaching and learning languages. Put differently, every teacher employs unique methods to impart cultural awareness and intercultural communication. Aside from that, the interviews demonstrated the absence of a cogent and consistent strategy for promoting ICC in these kinds of high school settings. These results imply a few things. The development of learners' ICC is directly correlated with the function that culture plays in English teaching and learning. Teachers play a crucial role in curriculum implementation since they are the ones who educate and know their learners best, which helps them achieve both cultural and pedagogical goals. Instructors are the ones who instill students with enthusiasm and drive. In order to increase students' interest in learning English and to meet curriculum objectives, English teachers are recommended to fully utilize all available teaching strategies, including electronic teaching and learning materials. It is of importance for teachers to have a well-prepared lesson plan before class to integrate culture into language teaching effectively. A well-prepared lesson should include the cultural issues in English classes explicitly. Preparing various sources such as posters, pictures, newspapers, authentic materials or social networks related to cultural issues are good examples of effectively integrating culture in teaching.

The educators themselves must adopt a new perspective on language instruction and devote more time and resources to enhancing their cultural acuity and instruction. They can look up cultural materials from reliable sources and develop their ICC teaching competences from professional development activities. The Ministry of Education and Training should organize more training activities and seminars to broaden EFL teachers' knowledge of ICC, its components, and objectives in teaching ICC; raise teachers' awareness of the importance of including culture in language teaching, enrich their teaching experiences, reduce the pressure of testing and paperwork; and enhance teachers' knowledge of various teaching methods with the goal of improving the quality of teaching and learning. If possible, the curriculum can be altered to give teachers more time to teach the "Communication and Culture" section.

Last of all, administrators of the institution should provide teachers with richer, additional access to teaching resources such as books, videos, and online materials that are relevant to teaching cultural content and promoting ICC development for learners.

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# NHẬN THỨC CỦA GIÁO VIÊN VỀ VIỆC TÍCH HỢP NỘI DUNG VĂN HOÁ VÀ NĂNG LỰC GIAO TIẾP LIÊN VĂN HOÁ VÀO THỰC TIỄN GIẢNG DẠY

**Tóm tắt:** Nghiên cứu này nhằm xem xét thực tiễn giảng dạy nội dung văn hóa và năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa (ICC) trong bối cảnh Việt Nam của giáo viên trung học phổ thông hiện nay. Nghiên cứu tập trung vào thực tiễn giảng dạy kiến thức văn hóa và ICC của giáo viên cho học sinh trung học thông qua báo cáo của họ. Nghiên cứu được thực hiện trên 60 giáo viên tiếng Anh bậc trung học phổ thông ở khu vực Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long bằng bảng câu hỏi khảo sát. Đối với dữ liệu định tính, 06 người tham gia đã được phỏng vấn để biết thêm thông tin về cách giáo viên sử dụng để dạy những nội dung này trong môi trường giảng dạy của họ. Các phát hiện này cung cấp những hiểu biết sâu sắc có giá trị cho việc hình thành ICC ở giáo viên tiếng Anh ở trường trung học phổ thông và dùng làm tài liệu tham khảo cho nghiên cứu trong tương lai.

**Từ khoá:** Năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hoá, giáo viên tiếng Anh, bối cảnh Việt Nam, tích hợp