

The Teaching of Cultural Component among Teachers of English at High Schools in Vietnam



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ABSTRACT: The first purpose of the paper is to explore the actual teaching practice of cultural components in language teaching classrooms in some schools in Hanoi, Vietnam. The second purpose is to better understand the teachers' perceptions towards the integration of cultural teaching in their foreign language teaching practice. A qualitative research approach was selected to answer the research questions. Five observations were conducted along with semi-structured interviews with teachers who had been interviewed. The findings show that not many activities were employed to teach cultural components in these classes. The cultural features were mainly dealt with through facts, visual images and some brief connotation explanation. However, it was surprising that most teachers believed that the teaching of culture is useful for students in developing their communicative competence.

KEYWORDS: integration, teaching cultural component along with teaching language.

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

While education has attempted to address the needs of a changing society with varying degrees of success for decades, concepts related to intercultural understanding and competence remain on the margins, rather than central to the institutional mission. Integration and globalization have benefited aspects of social life enormously. However, the process imposes many challenges upon us. Individuals all over the world have to find their place in new, pluralistic societies that comprise people of different cultural and language backgrounds, representing various hues, nations and religions. Language teaching, especially English should reflect itself upon these changes and make some moves to streamline the new needs of learners in meeting the high demands of the integrated world of work.

It is a matter of fact that teachers of English at schools are reluctant to add-on cultural knowledge in their teaching practices. This is because of many reasons such as; the lack of culture understanding of the target culture, the limited vocabulary to describe cultural aspects, the pressure on time-frame. Zarate (1986) argued that the teaching and learning of culture in language education had been problematic because insufficient attention had been given to considering what is to be taught and how.

The Vietnamese educational settings, the EFL classrooms tend to be more teacher-centered with an emphasis on test training and structural teaching approaches. Classroom teaching methods, lessons and forms of interactions were found to be influenced by textbook design and curriculum goals. In English classes where I observed students can be painfully reticent to answer the teacher's questions, speak in front of the class, or perform a role for an audience. They are only asked to recite grammar knowledge to do grammar exercises assigned by teachers. What prevents students from effective communication in the target language is a lack of familiarity with the target host culture that inhibits their efforts at blending in and, often results in misunderstanding the behaviors and life-style of the target culture. This lack of awareness regarding appropriate social conduct results in an inability to effectively navigate in their new environment. Not surprisingly, these factors often result in reduced motivation to further improve and expand English language skills. In some cases, the continued frustration and negative experiences can even give rise to an aversion for the target culture.

The cause of the problems is identified as the failure to teach cultural communication skills in the classroom. Many researchers in foreign language teaching agree that culture must be explicitly taught as a central element and integrated with the teaching of language to enhance intercultural competence (Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999, 2000; Liddicoat, 2002; Newton & Shearn, 2010).

Statement of Problem

Observations from teaching practice in EFL classrooms show that the issue of cultural competence is largely confined to promoting pupils' familiarity with those aspects of the foreign culture that are dealt with in foreign language textbooks, leaving aside less

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visible aspects, such as norms, values or attitudes, while language is defined as “a system of signs that is seen as having itself a cultural value” (Kramsch, 1998, p.3). Le Roux (2002) argues that in a context of cultural diversity, communication is a critical component of school success because it is the “means and indeed the medium of education” (p. 37); communication is the primary tool by which instructors accomplish their teaching objectives. Therefore, a focus on communication in responding to diversity within the classroom is not only fitting but of fundamental importance. Bringing a foreign language to the classroom means connecting learners to a world that is culturally different from their own. Therefore, all foreign language educators are now expected to exploit this potential and promote the acquisition of intercultural competence in their learners (Lies Sercu, 2005, p.1). The application of the concept of intercultural communication competence may be useful in addressing some of the problems regarding multicultural teacher education research. Banks (1996) commented on the lack of connection between research on multicultural teacher education with established theory and research in the social sciences, which still persists.

Purposes of Research

This paper attempts to determine aspects of (inter)cultural communication teaching practices that teachers of English involve during their English language teaching to improve intercultural communication competence for the students. The primary purpose is to explore how teachers are willing to envisage intercultural aspects during their teaching practice aiming at bridging the gap between communicative competence teaching with a cultural add-on and the integrated teaching of language-and-culture towards intercultural competence. The secondary purpose of the study is to examine teachers’ perceptions towards the integration of cultural teaching into the everyday teaching practices.

Research Questions

With the above-mentioned purposes, the study addresses the following research questions:

- How do teachers demonstrate their cultural teaching practices along with language teaching?
- What are their perceptions towards the integration of teaching language and culture?

Significance of the Study

Theoretically, the involvement of cultural aspects during foreign language teaching practices will greatly participate in the development of communicative competence for language learners. The lack of an intercultural competence leads, at best, to poor English communication skills or, at worst, to aversion to learning English altogether. Practically, the teaching of (inter)cultural knowledge in foreign language classroom brings fun and encouragement for language learners in many ways. It jettisons the burdens and rigidity of ordinary lessons.

Knowing how teachers are currently teaching and how they perceive the called for innovation will certainly help teacher trainers to select the right kind of approaches and curricula for their training. Showing teachers ways to depart from and build on their current teaching is the line to take, rather than provide the impression that intercultural competence teaching requires them to revise their teaching principles they have believed in and better prepare for language learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture in Language Education

The concept of language learning has never been put aside from that of culture. While language is defined as a method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols (Sapir, 1968), culture is seen as a way of life, as the context within which people exist, think, feel, and relate to others, as the “glue” that binds groups of people together. It can also be defined as the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools that characterize a certain group of people in a given period of time. (Brown, 2007). Bernaus et al. (2007, p.10) state that “for today’s individual it is important to interact with people of other languages and cultures. Indeed that is what language education is all about: making languages a means of communication in the sense of a mode of openness and access to otherness: linguistic otherness, cultural otherness and otherness of identity”. Young et al. (2009, p.150) point out, language is a component of culture, it acts as a transmitter of culture and as the main tool for the internationalisation of the culture by the individual.

In the context of foreign language education, the concept of culture teaching is quite similar to foreign language teachers and educators. However, different concepts have come into existence as a result of the change of the status of many languages as international languages or lingua francas, and a new phenomenon in foreign language education is so called intercultural language teaching which is the current trend in the field of language education in order to educate learners to become intercultural speakers with intercultural communicative competence. The term intercultural communication is variously discussed and defined many different ways. Byram (1997) defines intercultural communication as the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with other people from different cultures, which includes four elements, namely attitudes, knowledge, skills (ability of interpreting, relating, discovering and interacting), and critical cultural awareness/political education. According to Bennett and Bennett (2004), intercultural communication is “the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts” (p. 149). They argue that the ability to communicate effectively stems from a combination of concepts, attitudes, and skills that can be learned and acquired through training and contact with others from different cultures. However, the

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quality and quantity of the acquisition and learning of other cultural concepts, attitudes, and skills depend on one's experience and readiness. Sinicrope, Norris, and Watanabe (2007) argue that IC can be simply defined as the "ability to step beyond one's own culture and function with other individuals from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds" (p. 1).

The Integration of Culture into Foreign Language Teaching Practice

Research on the integration of the cultural component in the English language teaching has been initiated when the communicative approach was introduced. However, there have been controversies upon the issue. Those who are supported the integration unanimously favoured the British the North American culture, with the increasing profile of the Canadian and Australian cultures in recent decade. Cao (2007) argues that culture is the essence of language, and language learning should be placed in the social framework of the target culture. Brown (2007) pointed out the interrelatedness of language and culture, in which language is a part of a culture, and culture is a part of the language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. The acquisition of a second language, except for specialized, instrumental acquisition (as may be the case, say, in acquisition of reading knowledge of a language for examining scientific texts), is also the acquisition of a second culture" (pp. 189-190).

Among those who are opposed of the integration of culture into language teaching and learning agree that culture can be separated from language when it comes to the foreign culture teaching. This school of thinking, taking a pragmatic and instrumental view, considers culture as the amalgam of idioms, social customs and practices, and other rituals of a target culture, that can be conveyed through language but is not necessarily the language itself (Hu, Gao, 1997). Though researchers adhering to the second idea have yet to develop a coherent definition of culture and its relationship to language, this view implies and possible alternative in foreign language culture teaching and learning. Compared with the native speakers, the foreign language learners have grown out of a totally different social environment; thus it is impossible for students to acquire the foreign culture or second culture in a short space of time even though they would have opportunity living and studying in an English-speaking country, for cultural learning does not seem to have a positive correlation with the linguistic advancement.

In Vietnam, the grammar-translation teaching approach is still in practice since some teachers still believe that learners are not really willing to engage in communicative activities (Tomlinson & Dat, 2004). Furthermore, the teacher-centered approaches are still applied in many Vietnamese classroom contexts, so English language teaching in many Vietnamese classroom contexts is found to focus mainly on the development of reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar for the purposes of passing the final exams. Hence, the focus of development of communication skills and intercultural communication is usually ignored. However, many English language teaching programs at tertiary level have been set up to prepare learners in terms of cultures. Such cultural courses, namely American studies and British studies, are included in the curricula in order to introduce the target language culture mainly to English majors, but they are taught separately from English language skills. Those courses are to provide learners only with knowledge of the target language cultures (e.g., history, geography, political systems, festivals, etc.). From what teachers are currently doing in their classrooms and with how they perceive the pupils they are teaching. We can conclude that, at present, intercultural competence teaching is largely confined to promoting pupils' familiarity with those aspects of the foreign culture that are dealt with in foreign language textbooks, leaving aside less visible aspects, such as norms, values or attitudes. It is believed that innovation is inherently threatening and can only succeed when teachers support it and when the method of implementation takes account of what they are currently doing and how they conceive the called for innovation. Information regarding teachers' views of the future is particularly relevant for teacher educators preparing in-service or pre-service programmes centring on bridging the gap between communicative competence teaching with a cultural add-on and the integrated teaching of language-and-culture towards intercultural competence.

METHOD

Research Design

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches to the research design were adopted. As this was a classroom-based study, it was decided that a combination of both approaches could integrate the generated data with each other to produce a more complete analysis (Creswell, 2002). The qualitative approach involved classroom observations, and teacher interviews. By using the qualitative approach, the dynamic nature of events as well as the trends and patterns over time can be better represented (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). The qualitative approach also provides deeper insight into the personal, interpersonal or contextual factors (Sercu, 2005). The quantitative approach was used with the questionnaire as it is more appropriate to describe, compare and attribute causality (Gall, Gall and Borg, 2005).

Participants

In order to collect data to answer the research questions, the researcher asked for permissions to observe five foreign language lessons conducted by teachers of English at four high schools in Hanoi, Vietnam. The teachers participated in the study are quite experienced. They have been teaching English for at least 7 years. Two of them have been teaching for more than 10 years. Their ages ranged from 29 to 35. They are quite familiar with the teaching syllabus.

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Research instruments

Classroom observation, and semi-structured interviews were research instruments to collect information from respondents. Classroom observation was chosen for the study as it helps to gather 'live' data from naturally occurring social situations (Cohen et al., 2007). These 'live' data enable the researcher to look afresh at everyday behaviour (Cooper and Schindler, 2001) that takes place in the classroom. According to Dornyei (2007), classroom observation is invaluable for providing descriptive contextual information about the setting of the targeted phenomenon (p.185). Teacher interviews were used to investigate the EFL teachers' perceptions of culture in language teaching. A qualitative interview was used as it could describe the life world of the interviewee and interpret the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale, 1996). Sercu (2005) only uses a survey for teachers' perceptions of language and culture and suggests using teacher interviews. She argues that the use of teacher interviews has potential to lead to a better understanding of teachers' conceptions of the integration of language and culture teaching. Teacher interviews were therefore adopted in the study for this purpose.

Data Collection Procedures

Having been approved by schools' administrations, the researcher made appointments with the selected teachers and talked about the research project. Some of the teachers at first showed reluctant as to be observed during class time. However, after some in-depth talking with persuasion they agreed that the researcher may observe their class provided that their identities must be anonymous. After the classroom observation, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain insights opinions about the integration of cultural component. The qualitative data of classroom observations and the teacher interviews were translated into English and coded using thematic analysis.

FINDINGS

The findings of the research through classroom observations and semi-interviews could be summarized in the following conclusions.

Observation 1

The first observation showed very some involvements of cultural teaching. The lesson was about life stories of famous people (Unit 1, Tiếng Anh 12, tập 1). The teacher asked students questions about people in the lesson (Steve Job, Michael Jacksons). Some students gave information that they knew about the people. The teacher then gave students facts about famous people in Vietnamese culture so that the students can make questions and answers about them. As homework, students were asked to look for famous people in Vietnam and all over the world to make a short presentation about the people.

Interview 1

The researcher asked the first teacher some questions about the lesson that she had just taught. She expressed concerns about students limited cultural background knowledge. Three teachers found it hard to teach culture when students did not have enough cultural background knowledge. Their students usually lacked cultural knowledge on topics either in the world or in their own culture. She also commented that a lack of cultural background knowledge on a topic may make students reluctant to learn about it. She suggested that teachers' knowledge input would then be important to equip students with more cultural background knowledge for culture learning. She totally agreed that the teaching of culture was equally important as teaching the language. It makes the lesson more interesting and fascinating learners.

Observation 2

In the second observation, the lesson itself (Unit 2, Tiếng Anh 10, tập 1) did not involve many cultural traits. Learners' cultural awareness was raised through the use of personal questions in a first meeting between a Vietnamese and an Englishman. The teacher emphasised that asking personal questions for Americans is considered impolite, whereas it expresses concern among the Vietnamese. The students practised a yes-no drill with personal and non-personal questions provided by the teacher. The teacher suggested which questions could be asked and those to be avoided when meeting Americans for the first time. The classroom observation demonstrated that the teacher provided the students with her own personal cultural knowledge rather than giving them opportunities to develop their own cultural awareness about the use and misuse of personal questions between the Vietnamese culture and the target language culture.

Interview 2

The second teacher believed that the teaching of cultural awareness is not easy for students in terms of developing oral skills as well as understanding the lesson. However, she mentioned that students' level of language proficiency could restrict opportunities for culture teaching. She quoted "it is not necessary to teach the cultural element as they cannot understand the nature of vocabulary and it may influence the learning process. Incorporating culture should be done whenever students have attained a considerable level of English, for example from the pre-intermediate level onwards. The teacher's view in the above quote indicated that culture could be taught separately from language at the beginner's level.

Observation 3

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In the third observation, there were many topics related to cultural features (Unit 2, Tiếng Anh 11, tập 1). The lesson dealt with many festivals in English speaking country such as Halloween, Thanks Giving, Christmas). The teacher spent more than 15 minutes to present her own understanding about the events. After that some short video clips were shown to the learners so that they could imagine activities English speaking people usually do in the day of the events. This activity helped the students notice that every culture has particular activities on particular festivals. The teacher argued that this rule of localisation facilitated the students' learning about unfamiliar topics.

Interview 3

The teachers considered that it was important to incorporate culture learning right from the beginning. Incorporating culture should begin right at the time when students come to school. This will help students to develop their awareness of cultural differences and communication skills. She noted that the students' level of English was not a problem for their cultural acquisition as teachers could provide additional cultural knowledge through the learners' first language. If the students' level of English was limited, there was other ways to help them to understand about the target culture such as using the mother tongue. This does not influence their receptive ability. However, the use of students' mother tongue has to be appropriate with what teachers are dealing with in the lesson.

Observation 4

The lesson on the fourth observation was about sport activities (Unit 3, Tiếng Anh 11, tập 1). The teacher used visual images to show cricket, ice hockey, and base-ball. Along with these demonstrations, the teacher briefly explained the rules for playing these games. She commented that the use of visual images and video clips was the most effective way to teach culture about sport games. The teacher then provided some facts related to the champions of the games throughout Olympics Games through time.

Interview 4

The teacher suggested how to incorporate culture at the beginner's level. She raised the role of teachers in teaching cultural awareness "For beginners, culture should be incorporated in a simple way. Teachers should explain some vocabulary, encourage students to speak to develop their ability for language use. Then they can give comments, extend the lesson and explain more about the cultural elements. However, she mentioned the receptiveness of the students when came up with cultural component during teaching language. Many students were not interested in culture because they were worried about exams and their opportunities to universities.

Observation 5

The lesson for the fifth observation mentioned the creator of Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle (Unit 1, Tiếng Anh 12, tập 1). The teacher explained in detailed the setting of the story, the characters, and the endings of each episode. Also she mentioned the benefits of bed-time stories for children. She explained the connotation of vocabulary which appeared in some of the episodes of the series of Sherlock Holmes. She commented that many of the vocabularies need further explanation and contexts to make sense for language learners.

Interview 5

The teacher was in favour of teaching culture along with teaching language. However, she highlighted the importance of teachers' cultural knowledge for culture teaching. In this teacher's view, language teachers needed to be well-informed, have profound cultural background knowledge, and be able to explore the target language culture themselves. She noted that the lack of cultural knowledge could prevent teachers from organizing cultural activities to explore the target culture. Also, the teacher reported that time allowance for their culture teaching was unsatisfactory. It was hard for her to present cultural knowledge under time pressure.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the actual demonstrations of cultural aspects during language lesson were not much. Teacher attempts to deal with cultural features limited in cultural awareness and visual demonstrations. A few teacher mentioned cultural facts and connotations during their teaching. In terms of their perception towards the integration of cultural components, teachers reported that they believed that culture should be taught along with language teaching. The approach to culture teaching can foster the learners' ability to interact in the target culture in informed ways and develop an intercultural perspective in which their own culture and the target culture are involved. They suggested that the integration of language and culture should be enhanced in the curriculum and classroom experience.

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