

Intercultural Language Teaching: Rethinking the Objectives of English Language Education in the Vietnamese Context

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Abstract:

Within its new roles of an international language, a lingua franca, a world language, and a global language in the process of globalization, English has been used as a communication tool for different purposes such as business, travel, politics, etc. In such situations, English language users should be required to become intercultural speakers with intercultural communicative competence who can function effectively and appropriately in a multicultural world. It is, hence, imperative that English language education in Vietnam should shift its teaching approaches as well as objectives to intercultural language teaching (IcLT) in order to meet the increasing need of raising awareness of intercultural competence (IC). This paper endeavors to address the approach and objectives of IcLT in the context of Vietnam. Additionally, suggested principles of IcLT as well some implications are discussed in an attempt to improve the current situation of English language education in Vietnam and in other similar contexts.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence (ICC); intercultural language teaching (IcLT); Vietnamese context.

Introduction

In the context of globalization of the world economy and the regional integration, Vietnam has realized that “the foreign language is an efficient and effective tool in the process of global integration and development” (Vietnam National Assembly, 1998; 2005; 2009). Hence, English language has been officially adopted as a compulsory foreign language to be taught at schools throughout the country, and its place has been changed alongside with Vietnam’s history and economic growth. However, English language teaching (ELT) 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. Consequently, the focus of development of communication skills and intercultural competence is usually ignored. Furthermore, many English language teaching programs at tertiary level have set up their aims to prepare learners in terms of cultures. Such cultural courses, namely American studies and British studies are included in 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 (i.e., history, geography, political situation, festivals, etc.). What is more, achievement tests for those cultural courses are designed to assess only learners’

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knowledge of culture. Therefore, English language learners are not well aware of the importance of the role of culture in cross-communication.

Moreover, in the context of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), an ASEAN community will be established by 2020, and this community will consist of three pillars, namely the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). What is more, English will be used as the official language for business (ASEAN, 2009; 2011). Accordingly, a new era will be open for every person in the ASEAN community as they will be equally eligible to travel, work, and study at any country in the ASEAN community. This will be definitely a big challenge in English language education to every member of ASEAN community since the ultimate aim of English language education is no longer limited to train English learners to become native-like English speakers, but it extends its goal to help learners become intercultural speakers who can communicate and interact appropriately and effectively with people from different cultures.

From the reality of the importance of ICC, it cannot be denied that ICC plays an important role in helping one to successfully interact with other people from different linguistic and cultural background. Therefore, the paper aims at discussing current situations of English language education in Vietnam that leads to the IcLT approach. Apart from that, principles of IcLT are also pointed out in an attempt to improve the current situation of English language education in Vietnam and in other similar contexts.

Current Situations of English Language Education in Vietnam

English language education in Vietnam is currently divided into two main streams: English inside the formal education system and English outside the formal education system. The former refers to English as a compulsory subject in education system from primary level to tertiary level. The latter is English as an extra course offered by English language centers in order to meet various demands of different types of learners.

As far as English inside the formal education system is concerned, although the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach has been introduced to Vietnam for a long time, 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 (ELT) 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 IC 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.). What is more, achievement tests for those cultural courses are designed to assess only learners' knowledge of culture. English language learners are not, hence, well aware of the importance of the role of culture in cross-communication.

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Regarding English outside the formal educational system, many English language centers have been established across Vietnam; however, only language centers such as British Council, International Investment Group (IIG), International Development Program (IDP), Cambridge International examinations, etc. are present in big cities in Vietnam. It seems that English language centers focus heavily on the development of four macro English language skills to their learners, which means that CLT approach is widely deployed at those language centers. Meanwhile cultural content is not received enough attention. This is due to the fact that most of the English language centers offer English language courses to help learners cope with standard tests (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS, TOEIC, etc.) and train learners to be native speaker-like.

With the aforementioned situations in the context of Vietnam, it is obvious that ICLT is not a current practice in English language education in Vietnam since culture teaching is not a strong focus in ELT, and the integration of culture in ELT is usually ignored. This situation can lead to the lack of IC in learners who can be fluent tools and cannot interact effectively and appropriately with other people from different backgrounds. It is imperative that English language education should shift its teaching approaches and objectives to ICLT in order to educate learners to be able to function effectively and appropriately in the new multicultural contexts.

What is intercultural communicative competence?

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 (ICC). The term ICC results from the combination of IC and communicative competence (CC) (e.g., Arévalo-Guerrero, 2009; Byram, 1997; Aguilar, 2007; Sercu, 2005; Wen, 2004) that are discussed as follows:

The term of IC is variously discussed and defined in a myriad of ways. Byram (1997) defines IC 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. Likewise, according to Bennett and Bennett (2004), IC 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 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), unlike previous scholars, 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). This general definition focuses only on some vague ability and does not mention specific attitudes or knowledge as in many definitions of IC, but it seems to summarize what most

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definitions of IC have in common. In a nutshell, although IC can be differently defined, it can be commonly understood to have four key elements: attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness, which help one to effectively and appropriately communicate with other people from different cultures.

Regarding the term CC, it was Hymes (1972) who first introduced CC and defined it as not only grammatical competence but also sociolinguistic competence, which is the ability to apply grammatical competence appropriately in social interactions. It was later furthered and developed into a fundamental concept in the development of communicative language teaching by Canale and Swan (1980) and Van Ek (1986). Canale and Swan (1980) defined CC in the context of foreign language education, which was composed of grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. Canale (1984) added one more component, discourse competence, some elements of which were transferred from sociolinguistic competence. As a result of adding discourse competence, his proposed framework of CC consisted of four main components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. However, Van Ek (1986) proposed a framework for comprehensive foreign language learning objectives, which included social competence, the promotion of autonomy, and the development of social responsibility. He argued that foreign language teaching aimed at training not only in communication skills but also with the personal and social development of the learner as an individual. The six components or sub-competencies that constitute communicative ability are linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, sociocultural competence, and social competence. In short, CC or language competence can be defined as the ability not only to apply the grammatical rules of a language in order to form grammatically correct sentences but also to know when and where to use these sentences & to whom (Richards & Rodgers, 2000), and its components can be grouped into linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence (Byram, 1997). Although the term ICC is coined from IC and CC, it has been interchangeably used with other terms, e.g., intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication competence, and even IC. This unclear difference sometimes causes confusion in addressing the right phenomenon. Among some scholars who have tried to differentiate IC and ICC, Byram (1997) points out that the former is a competence which enables one, among other things, to interact in one's native language with people from other cultures; the latter is a competence that enables one to interact in a foreign language with people from other cultures. He pinpoints that ICC is an umbrella term that covers many components including linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and IC. By proposing a model of ICC, he explains the term ICC which is the ability which enables one to interact effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures in a foreign language. Similarly, Chen and Starosta (1999) define intercultural communication (or communicative) competence as "the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other's cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment" (p. 28). IC, they argue, consists of three key components of intercultural communication competence: intercultural sensitivity (affective process), intercultural awareness (cognitive process), and intercultural adroitness (behavioral process), all of which are defined as verbal and nonverbal skills needed to act effectively and appropriately in intercultural interactions.

To sum up, the understanding of culture helps to explore more about what ICC is, and the term ICC which is a complex term coined from IC and CC is defined in a variety of ways.

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However, ICC can be understood as the ability which enables one to effectively and appropriately interact in a language other than one's native language with others from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It consists of language competence (linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, & discourse competence) and intercultural competence (attitudes, knowledge, skills, & awareness) that help one to be able to successfully integrate in a multicultural society (e.g., Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2001; Sinicropo et al., 2008).

Intercultural language teaching Approach and its objectives

It has been widely agreed by many scholars (e.g., Deardoff, 2009; Jæger, 2001) the ultimate aim of English language education is no longer limited to train English language learners to become native-like English speakers, but it expands its goal to prepare them with ICC in order to appropriately and effectively communicate with others in multicultural situations. In other words, English language education shifts its teaching approach from communicative language teaching to IcLT. Accordingly, English language education in the context of Vietnam should redefine its teaching approach and objectives in terms of IcLT in order to prepare English language learners to become intercultural speakers who can function effectively and appropriately in the 21st century.

As ICC is defined to consist of two main components, namely language competence and IC, IcLT should involve the development of an understanding of the target language and target language cultures as well as other cultures to learners. Language competence, according to Byram (1997), includes three components: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence, which are in relation to the IC, and they are defined as follows:

- *Linguistic competence*: the ability to apply knowledge of the rules of a standard version of the language to produce and interpret spoken and written language;
- *Sociolinguistic competence*: the ability to give to the language produced by an interlocutor – whether native speaker or not – meanings which are taken for granted by the interlocutor or which are negotiated and made explicit with the interlocutor;
- *Discourse competence*: the ability to use, discover and negotiate strategies for the production and interpretation of monologue or dialogue texts which follow the conventions of the culture of an interlocutor or are negotiated as intercultural texts for particular purposes.

(Byram, 1997, p. 48)

With respect to IC, many scholars (Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2001; Sinicropo et al., 2008) have defined that IC should deal with four elements: attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness. The objectives to educate IC, in Byram's (1997) viewpoints, are defined as follows:

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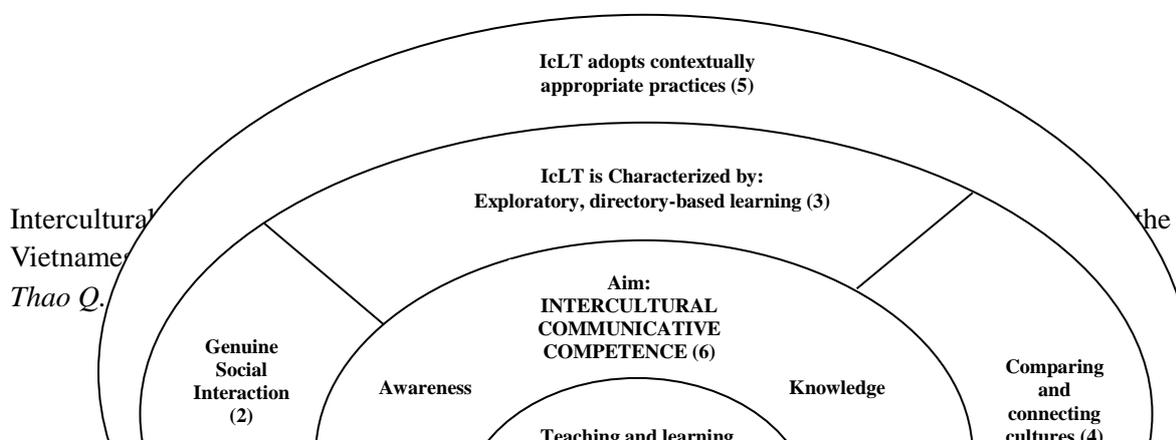
- *Intercultural attitudes*: to develop learners with curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about of their own;
- *Intercultural knowledge*: to provide learners with information on social groups and products as well practices in different cultures as well as in their own. Cultural information should address two types of knowledge: conscious and unconscious. The former may be more or less refined, but always present in some degree, whereas the latter (about concepts and processes interaction) is fundamental to successful interaction but not acquired automatically (Byram, 1997).
- *Intercultural skills*: to train learners to be able to interpret documents/events in the different cultural perspectives and relate them to their own. Moreover, learners should be trained to be able to acquire new knowledge of other cultures and cultural practices as well as to be able to apply their knowledge, attitudes and skills so that they can establish an understanding of a new cultural environment and interact with people from different cultures.
- *Intercultural awareness*: to help learners to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria for perspectives, practices, and products in their own and other cultures.

Therefore, in order to educate learners to be interculturally communicative competent, the IcLT approach should focus on both the target language and different cultures by teaching language through teaching cultures, and vice versa. Moreover, training learners to be proficient in the target language is advantageous for their intercultural learning since language serves “as a road map to how one perceives, interprets, thinks about, and expresses one’s view of the world” (Fantani, 2000, p. 27). In the context of a foreign language class, educating learners to be competent in intercultural communication is a long term process, and all these above objectives are not always easy to be covered in foreign language lessons. Therefore, foreign language teachers can integrate activities that enhance the improvement of both learners’ linguistic skills and their IC at the fullness within the limitations of the context of the class.

Principles of Intercultural language teaching

In order to fulfill the ultimate goal of IcLT, there should be specific principles of IcLT that serve as guidelines. A set of six principles of IcLT suggested by Newton et al. (2010) is adopted to enhance learners’ ICC in the context of Vietnam. These six principles of IcLT are evidence-based, and visually presented as in Figure 1 to depict the relationship among them.

Figure 1 Principles of IcLT (Newton et al., 2010)



The six principles are that IcLT:

1. integrates language and culture from the beginning
2. engages learners in genuine social interaction
3. encourages and develops an exploratory and reflective approach to culture and culture-in-language
4. fosters explicit comparisons and connections between languages and cultures
5. acknowledges and responds appropriately to diverse learners and learning contexts
6. emphasizes ICC rather than native-speaker competence.

(ibid., pp. 64-74)

Principle 1: IcLT integrates language and culture from the beginning

On the viewpoint that culture is dynamic and culture is in a dynamic interplay with language, this principle suggests that language teachers should integrate language and culture from the beginning in order to guide learners' conceptualizations of culture from the beginning of the language learning process. In other words, culture and language are closely interdependent, and should not be treated as separate strands in everyday language classroom. Culture, hence, is a salient part of teaching of all language macroskills (reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing and presenting), rather than a separate macroskill.

The way in which this principle can be applied to teachers' teaching practice is related to principles 3 to 5: teachers encourage learners to be experientially involved with other languages and cultures through *communication* and *interaction* (principle 2); to *explore* culture-in-language (principle 3); and to discover connections with other cultural worlds through *comparison* (principle 4). Two approaches to integrate culture and language into classrooms more easily are 'communicative language teaching' and task-based language teaching' (Ellis, 2003; 2005), as these teaching approaches require learners' active participation and experiential learning.

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Principle 2: IcLT engages learners in genuine social interaction

This principle highlights that our social lives and language are culturally shaped, so the term ‘culture-in-language’ (Carr, 2007) is used to depict the relationship between language and culture. Within this aspect, for language learning is a social process in which learners not only observe cultural and linguistic representations and behaviors, but experience them first hand as well, language teaching must provide learners with both cultural and language opportunities which are dynamic, experiential, and interactive.

IcLT engages learners in interaction in two ways. First, it engages learners in interaction through exploring linguistic and cultural boundaries, and raising awareness of one’s own and others’ ways of communicating and maintaining relationships as well as dealing with cross-cultural misunderstandings and communication breakdowns. Second, it engages learners in interaction through directly exploring the topics about cultural worlds, beliefs, values and attitudes of one’s own and others, which provide opportunities for explicit discussion of cultural comparisons. From an intercultural perspective, interaction is not simply a tool for learners to develop their fluency, but it helps them to confront their culturally constructed world and cultural assumptions, and learn more about themselves.

Principle 3: IcLT encourages and develops an exploratory and reflective approach to culture and culture-in-language

This principle takes the viewpoint seeing culture as an iceberg that consists of small visible part (e.g., traditional arts, conventional practices) and large less visible part (e.g., values, beliefs, thought patterns), and indicates that “the iceberg metaphor can be applied equally to culture-in-language” (Newton et al., 2010, p. 68) because culture is manifest in language in obvious ways such as in overt politeness forms (e.g., Thai forms of address), and it is also deeply embedded in language in less obvious ways such as the requirements for polite and formal language. Language teaching focuses extensively on learning about visible culture without concentrating much on less visible culture, resulting in learners’ much lack of cultural experience. To address this issue, the intercultural language teaching and learning approach should shift its focus from the transmission of cultural knowledge to the exploration of both visible and invisible culture and, most importantly, to the exploration of culture-in-language. Exploring culture involves learners in the construction of knowledge from experience and reflection by starting exploring their own culture and cultural identity, raising self-awareness, and examining their attitudes toward the target language and culture.

Furthermore, this principle indicates that the process of exploration of culture involves both teacher and learners as teachers themselves are learning while allowing their learners to explore and discover aspects of culture, and make comparisons with what they already know, and teachers are not the source of all knowledge.

Principle 4: IcLT fosters explicit comparisons and connections between languages and cultures

This principle highlights that the comparison of languages and cultures is a fundamental process in IcLT, and points out that the primary goal of IcLT is to encourage learners to reflect an experience in their own culture before getting them to interpret a new experience in another culture into an equivalent one in their own culture. Hence, in order to make the

learning effective, ICLT should make comparison reflective and interpretive so that learner can draw on their current knowledge as well as the new knowledge.

The comparison of cultures should be a practical focus for language teaching in order that learners can develop more complex concepts of culture and avoid cross-cultural prejudices, and that the comparison of languages and cultures should be explicit in order that language teaching can avoid a negative effect on learners' intercultural attitudes if they are not explicitly guided.

Principle 5: IcLT acknowledges and responds appropriately to diverse learners and learning contexts

IcLT needs to recognize and embrace learners' diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in the classroom, and it is advised that teachers should manage the representation of and participation in cultures that are new to learners, and show an appreciation of and respect for the culture(s) that learners bring to the classroom. IcLT responds to the relationship between cultures and languages in two ways: the first way IcLT responds to relationships between cultures and languages is through helping learners to contact the target language culture through interaction and cultural experience; the second way IcLT responds to relationships between cultures and languages is through topics on these relationships which facilitate learning opportunities in which learners explore and learn cultures as part of language learning.

Principle 6: IcLT emphasizes ICC rather than native-speaker competence

This principle addresses the goal of language teaching and learning, which shifts from the native-speaker competence to ICC. It is pointed out that from an intercultural perspective, native-speaker model for CC is still incomplete because it involves only speakers within a speech community, but ICC expands the instruction goals to educate learners with attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness which enable them to meet the challenges of communication in a multicultural environment.

Conclusions

Educating language learners to be intercultural speakers in the multicultural world is vital but very demanding; however, the approach of IcLT is still alien to English language instructors in Vietnam. It is, therefore, imperative that some changes should be done as suggested below:

- *IcLT Model and guidelines for IcLT approach:* In order to make the IcLT approach happen in the context of Vietnam, an IcLT framework as well as its guidelines should be developed so that English language instructors can know how to integrate IC into English language lessons effectively and how to balance the teaching time between culture teaching and language teaching appropriately.

- *Materials and content:* As the AEC 2015 is coming to be established, understanding each other's culture is of importance. Nevertheless, most of the commercial English textbooks used in ASEAN countries for teaching English are found to cover mainly language competence, and some are found to include cultural content which is not specific to the context of ASEAN cultures. It is advisable that English textbooks used in ASEAN countries should be developed based on the view of intercultural language education, i.e., the learning of culture is explicitly embedded into the learning of language. Intercultural content in new English textbooks should focus on not only culture from English speaking countries but also other cultures around the world, yet diverse cultures of ASEAN community should be strongly emphasized. Furthermore, both visible and invisible cultural content should be taken into equal account in new English textbooks instead of only visible cultural content which is seen in some current commercial English textbooks.

- *ICC assessment tools:* Since ICC consists of language competence and IC, ICC assessment tools should be constructed or designed appropriately in order to assess learners' ICC effectively. ICC assessment tools can be direct or indirect. Direct ICC assessment tools can be performance assessment (the elicitation of an individual's ability to display ICC in his or her behavior, whether in real-time situations); portfolio (reflections and collections of work); interview (one-on-one conversations with interlocutors); observations (noticing and recording others' behaviors relevant to ICC); case studies (exploration of a person or group's behaviors relevant to intercultural competence); self-evaluations (the process in which an individual rates the quality work or activities relevant to intercultural competence); and peer evaluations. Indirect ICC assessment tools can be self-assessment inventories. However, it depends on a specific context, so English language teachers can use direct or indirect ICC assessment tools or both to assess their learners' ICC.

- *English language teacher training:* English language teachers play a vital role in improving the quality of English language teaching and learning, so it is important to have various training programs, workshops, and seminars on intercultural language education for both in-service and pre-service English language teachers in order to

raise their awareness of the importance of ICC and to be interculturally communicative competent. Long-term schemes for training and developing English language teachers at all levels should be built in order to ensure the balance of quantity and quality of intercultural language education between city and country, and between inside the formal education system and English outside the formal education system.

- *Policy makers*: More incentive policies such as salary, training, workplace etc. should be made for English language educators in order to encourage them to promote the quality of English language education. There should be more cultural exchange programs for English language learners to different countries so that they would have more opportunities to use English in real situations and simultaneously experience cultural differences. In addition, policy makers should encourage establishing intercultural language institutions / centers which aim at teaching English language and ASEAN cultures in ASEAN countries in order to support English learners to develop their English proficiency and IC as English will soon become the official language in the ASEAN region.

The shifting of the current teaching approaches to the IcLT approach in ELT may take time, but it may be fruitful. Therefore, not only people in the field of English language education but also others in relevant sectors in Vietnam should have action plans in order to raise English language instructors' awareness of the importance of IC in ELT and implement new objectives in English language education.

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