

Extended Model for Integrating Culture into Teaching EFL: A Context of Vietnam

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Abstract

Intercultural competence (IC) has gained a better positionality in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Vietnam to enable young people to become effective global citizens. Accordingly, the development of comprehensive IC is considered to be an officially stated objective of the reformed EFL curriculum, and a great body of intercultural issues reflecting the cultural diversity of countries has been added to the English course books of the upper secondary level. To help EFL teachers with the exploitation of the coursebooks, this perspective paper aims to propose a model for Intercultural Language Learning and Teaching (IcLLT) to shed light on how to integrate culture into teaching EFL in a Vietnamese pedagogical teaching context. This model can be a valuable guideline for EFL teachers to go beyond the language skill-based lesson in order to promote learners' intercultural communicative competence.

Keywords: intercultural competence, EFL teaching, integrated culture, intercultural communicative competence

Introduction

As part of recent educational reforms in Vietnam, teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) undertakes a new mission: to contribute to the interculturality for Vietnamese to become capable global citizens (MOET, 2018). An experimental EFL curricula and coursebooks with more prominent intercultural objectives were introduced and have been applied since 2014. After four years of experimentation, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) of Vietnam issued an official EFL curriculum with the following stated intercultural objectives: (1) raising comprehensive intercultural awareness, (2) building positive intercultural attitudes towards self and others, and (3) reflecting the values of the home-culture in English language (MOET, 2018). Consequently, a body of English-speaking culture, Vietnamese culture, and other cultures has been added to mark a radical change in the new English coursebooks for grades 10, 11, and 12 (developed by Vietnamese MOET, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). The provision of such an upgraded curriculum does not suffice for the achievement of objectives. Teachers' IC and intercultural instructions are issues of discussion in many related studies (Gómez-Parra & Hà, 2021; Ho, 2011; Nguyen, 2013). Specifically, Hoa and Vien (2019) found that teachers' practices of intercultural integration in upper secondary education (grades 10 to 12) were insufficient for being knowledge-based, teacher-centered, and language skill-focused regardless of the change of the coursebooks and curricula.

As described in the official curriculum (MOET, 2018), the dominant pedagogical approach in teaching English in general education is the Communicative Approach (CA), also known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Though CLT does not disregard the role of culture, it mainly focuses on Communicative Competence (CC) (Richards, 2006). Out of the CC elements,

sociolinguistic competence is usually assumed to be related to Intercultural Competence (IC) or Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), but Byram (1997) confirmed that sociolinguistic competence encouraged the pursuit of native speakers' sociolinguistic norms rather than the achievement of mutually-agreed intercultural standards in cross-cultural communication. To the advocates of intercultural education, IC had its own dimensions and developmental framework, so it could not be an incidental outcome of EFL teaching or automatically built from the cultural knowledge transmitted from language skill lessons (Byram, 1997; Crozet et al., 1999; Deardorff, 2006; Liddicoat, 2002; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Newton et al., 2010; Newton, 2016). Therefore, an additional approach to integrate culture into foreign language teaching, which is defined as an intentional integration of (inter)cultural input to foster students' IC or ICC through intercultural language activities (Hoa & Vien, 2019), should be developed to satisfy the intercultural objectives set by MOET (2018).

From the view of intercultural language education supported by Byram (1997), Crozet et al. (1999), Deardorff (2006), (Fantini, 2000), Liddicoat (2002), Liddicoat et al. (2003), Newton et al. (2010) and Newton (2016), this paper suggests the Intercultural Language Learning and Teaching (IcLLT) model based on five Intercultural Language Learning (IcLT) principles (Liddicoat et al., 2003; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), as well as an IC developmental model of four linear and interdependent competences (Fantini, 2000).

Integrating Culture into Language Teaching in the Literature

In a foreign language education context, integrating culture into teaching EFL is a common issue, which has resulted in a variety of cultural concepts and frameworks for IC and ICC. Reviewing the

literature of relevant studies, Hoa (2019) states that the most prominent trend derives from the notion of dynamic culture, which shapes the conceptualization of culture, IC, ICC, and intercultural education.

Culture, IC, and ICC

Culture is generally defined as the combination of “big C” Culture and “small c” culture (Kramsch, 2015). While the former represents facts and statistics relating to the arts, history, geography, business, education, festivals, and customs of a target speech society, the latter is associated with a region, group of people, and language, such as communication styles, verbal and non-verbal language symbols, cultural norms, conduct, myths, legends, and so forth (Lee & Matteliano, 2009). In the same line, Liddicoat (1997) and Liddicoat et al. (2003) argue that culture is not only facts and artifacts or information and things but also actions and understanding. Supporting this view of culture, Browett (2003) and Sewell (2005) agree that culture is dynamic and ever changing, and so are the practices, behaviors, beliefs, and values of particular cultural groups of people.

From the dynamic view of culture, Fantini (2006) confirms that IC is not about knowing the facts and figures of one’s and others’ cultures but rather the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately within and across cultural and linguistic backgrounds in “one’s native language.” As a distinction between IC and ICC, Fantini (2006) defines ICC as the ability to perform such communication in “a language other than one’s native language.” In both definitions, IC and ICC are multiple competencies acquired and developed from personal experience and sociocultural contexts of communication in that one is actively engaged.

Common Models of ICC Development in the Literature

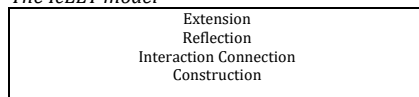
The constituents and pathways for IC development could be traced back to three models suggested by Byram (1997), Fantini (2000), and Liddicoat (2002). Byram (1997) develops the IC model of five different components or “Five - Saviors”: (1) “Savoir être” - attitudes, (2) “Saviors” - knowledge, (3) “Savoir comprendre” - skills to interpret and relate, (4) “Savoir apprendre/faire” - skills to discover and interact, and (5) “Savoir s’engager” - critical cultural awareness. Though Byram’s (1997) model is widely accepted in intercultural education, it has some drawbacks for not conveying the degree of IC development, level of integration, and interrelatedness among the competencies (Matsuo, 2015; Scardino, 2009). Importantly, it emphasizes national cultural competence, not IC (Matsuo, 2015; Risager, 2007), so the interculturality of communication among people of different cultures using EFL is not appropriately appreciated.

Putting more focus on interculturality, Liddicoat (2002) argues that IC acquisition and development is a non-linear, cyclical process of “Input,” “Noticing,” “Reflecting,” “Output,” “Noticing,” and “Reflecting” to foster intercultural acquisition. The outcome of the process is not target or second language (L2) culture but the higher level of IC, based on mutually-agreed values of various cultures involved. Nevertheless, this framework seems to have some limitations for not properly mentioning the relationship between intercultural, which is known as an in-between of the first language and L2 culture, and L2 culture. Also, the constituents of IC and their developing process are not properly specified.

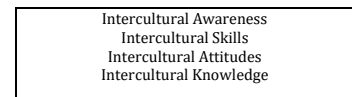
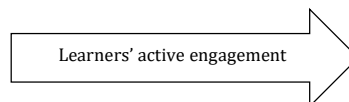
Compared to Byram’s (1997) and Liddicoat’s (2002) frameworks, Fantini’s ICC model (2000) is more likely to be applied in an EFL teaching context like that of Vietnam. According to Fantini (2000), ICC includes multiple constituents, dimensions, and proficiency in the host country’s language. The four IC dimensions of knowledge, (positive) attitudes, skills, and awareness evolve in a developing and continuous procedure (Figure 1).

Figure 2

The IcLLT model

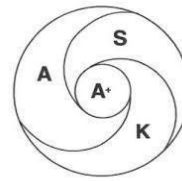


Adapted from the IcLL model (Liddicoat et al.,2003; Liddicoat & Scarino,2013)



Adopted from the ICC model (Fantini,2000)

Figure 1
Model of ICC



Source: Fantini, 2000

All things considered, IC development is an active and spiral process of the four competencies: intercultural knowledge, intercultural attitudes, intercultural skills, and intercultural awareness, in close connection to language proficiency. Therefore, integrating culture into EFL teaching should be aimed to facilitate learners to foster IC besides CC. A more detailed account of intercultural instruction with this target will be introduced in the following section, which involves a holistic model of integrating culture in language learning and teaching, the IcLLT model.

Extended Model for Intercultural Language Learning and Teaching

The IcLLT model is grounded on the basis of five principles of Intercultural Language Learning (IcLL) proposed by Liddicoat et al. (2003) and Liddicoat and Scarino (2013). The five principles are “Active construction,” “Making connections,” “Social interaction,” “Reflection,” and “Responsibility.” The “Active construction” involves the meaningful construction of knowledge within a sociocultural context to enable learners to develop a personal and intercultural space from their own views. The “Making connections” relates to engaging in constructive analysis of linguistic and cultural similarities and differences between home and target language and culture. “Social interaction” is referred to as communicating across linguistic and cultural boundaries and engaging with new conceptual systems through language. The “Reflection” indicates learners’ underlying process of conscious awareness and consideration of intercultural issues from their views. Finally, “Responsibility” inspires learners to involve themselves in successful communication across language and culture to develop intercultural awareness. The five principles represent a complete model for intercultural language learning and teaching in a chronological and logical procedure of acquiring, processing, practicing, reflecting, and awareness-raising about a variety of cultures.

However, to make the model fit in the sociocultural and pedagogical context of EFL teaching in upper secondary education in Vietnam, modifications are made to the two steps of “Social interaction” and “Responsibility.” First, communication involving real-life interactions across linguistic and cultural boundaries is not common in an EFL teaching context, so the “Social interaction” in IcLLT is limited to meaningful interaction about intercultural issues happening in classroom settings. To ensure the authenticity of the “Interaction” and stimulate active engagement, students could be asked to share their own cultural or intercultural knowledge and experiences. Second, the “Extension,” which is meant by “Social interaction” in the original IcLL, is added to replace “Responsibility.” In this model, “Extension” could be conducted in the form of extracurricular intercultural activities to engage students in simulated or real intercultural communication. In the five IcLLT steps of “Construction,” “Connection,” “Reflection,” “Interaction,” and “Extension,” learners actively engaged in social interaction and critical reflection to foster their own IC, as is shown in Figure

As a complete and general description of the IcLLT model, its five steps can be described as follows. "Construction" refers to the intercultural language activities that encourage learners to construct their own intercultural knowledge and experience through exploring cultural resources and exploiting their own prior knowledge and experience about culture. The "Connection" encourages learners to make implicit or explicit comparisons and connections between home and other cultures. Active participation in the two steps enables learners to gain intercultural knowledge. While the "Interaction" engages learners in meaningful communication, the "Reflection" also refers to a similar kind of interaction with deeper and more critical discussion on intercultural issues. The "Extension" allows learners to practice intercultural communication with people from other cultures. In this step, learners have more choice and independence due to a variety of intercultural communications that can happen in extracurricular activities. By participating in intercultural social interactions, learners are expected to build positive intercultural attitudes and skills. Intercultural awareness, the highest IC level, requires learners to metacognitively reflect on their long-term engagement in real-life intercultural communication (Byram et al., 2017; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Hence, the attainment of comprehensive IC at all four levels is rather ambitious for EFL education, especially at the upper secondary level due to the limited access to genuine intercultural communication.

In response to the intercultural learning process, teachers can implement intercultural instruction relevant to the five-step model of "Construction - Connection - Interaction - Reflection - Extension" as follows:

The "Construction": asking learners to explore cultures from their prior background knowledge, experience, or from teaching materials.

The "Connection": allows learners to make comparisons between home culture and other cultures implicitly or explicitly.

The "Interaction": encouraging learners to share what they know and do in their own culture (and other cultures if possible).

The "Reflection": encouraging learners to share how they feel and think about an intercultural (and give reasons for their judgments if possible).

The "Extension": having learners practice in simulated or genuine intercultural communication, which can happen in or out of classroom settings.

In addition, it is important to note that IcLLT is an open and flexible model that could be varied to different EFL teaching contexts. That means one step could be skipped and included in another. The following pairs: the "Connection" and the "Interaction", and the "Interaction" and the "Reflection" could be embedded in single activities. The "Connection" and the "Interaction" can be merged into one activity if the comparison and connection of cultures are conducted orally and require learners' cultural knowledge and experience. The "Interaction" and "Reflection" could happen in one activity if the discussion covers a wide range of learners' cognition levels. The "Extension" is least likely to be implemented in EFL education due to the requirement of elaborate preparation and the lack of an intercultural environment. To familiarize teachers with intercultural integration, some IcLLT strategies are recommended in the next section.

Strategies for Intercultural Language Teaching

The listed intercultural language teaching strategies and activities are theoretically and empirically grounded on Byram et al. (2017), Corbett (2010), Newton et al. (2010), and Stern (1992).

Creating an intercultural environment physically and socially: displaying culture artifacts from foreign countries, celebrating cultural events, inviting guest speakers from other cultures, etc. (Stern, 1992).

Exposing to a variety of cultures: using media, social networks, and internet applications; making use of different authentic materials from other cultures; having pen pals from other countries, making Facebook friends, etc. (Corbett, 2010; Stern, 1992).

Making use of learner differences in cultural identity and local cultural community resources: comparing cultural experiences and practices, talking about festivals and celebrations, discussing

dos and don'ts, traditions, and customs, etc. (Corbett, 2010; Newton et al., 2010).

Engaging in meaningful intercultural interactions: exploring, presenting, and reporting cultures, participating in role-plays, doing problem-solving tasks, giving reflections on intercultural issues, doing community-based projects related to culture etc. (Corbett, 2010; Newton et al., 2010; Newton, 2016)

Conclusion

This paper has recommended the implementation of the IcLLT model as a supplementary teaching approach to the current EFL teaching context of Vietnam to enable learners to pursue "comprehensive intercultural competence". It facilitates EFL teachers to teach intercultural issues embedded in EFL lessons to build learners' IC through learners' personal engagement in social interaction and critical reflection. On the basis of IcLLT steps with characterized intercultural language activities, teachers can develop their lessons prescribed in the coursebooks to engage learners to develop their IC at different levels, namely intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

There are a number of concerns that teachers need to consider when implementing this model. First, the representation of intercultural content in coursebooks is a sine-qua-non condition because, without appropriate intercultural input, teachers cannot conduct proper intercultural language activities towards IcLLT due to the rigidity of general education in Vietnam. Hence, it is recommended that cultural content about a variety of specific cultures should be a critical standard for choosing the applied EFL coursebooks. Based on the provided input, teachers can design appropriate intercultural language activities to enable learners to engage in social interaction and critical reflection to work for their IC. Second, it is common to find a gap between the general curriculum objectives and teachers' classroom practices, so intercultural outcomes should be a mandatory part of teachers' lesson plans to guide the conduction of classroom activities and the assessment of learners' IC achievement. Regarding the statement of IC outcomes, it is not necessary to include all IC dimensions in a single lesson. That means focusing on two or three dimensions of competencies could be considered. However, it is worth noticing that building intercultural knowledge should not be the sole intercultural objective because intercultural knowledge itself is just a basic level of IC and cannot automatically lead to the formation of more comprehensive levels of IC. Third, intercultural education should be contextualized to foster personal engagement of different cultural identities and to increase students' IC (Kramsch, 1993). No EFL coursebooks can be fitted in diverse teaching contexts throughout Vietnam, so teachers should be the ones to be acknowledged and skillful at conducting intercultural language teaching to make use of the provided language and culture input and design appropriate intercultural language activities to activate learners' participation. As a consequence, teacher training in intercultural instruction is crucial to ensure the success of intercultural education. Last, IcLLT is a flexible model. It can be broken down into different steps, which can be applied to conduct language skill-based activities in CLT lessons, aiming to build learners' ICC.

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