Journal of Curriculum Studies Research
curriculumstudies.org

Open Access Journal

2019, 1(1): 43-53

Research Paper

Theoretical Constructs and Practical Strategies for Intercultural Communication: Informed Teaching Practices in Vietnam

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Article Info

Received: 26 October 2019

Accepted: 20 November 2019

How to cite

Vu, T. N. (2019). Theoretical Constructs and Practical Strategies for Intercultural Communication: Informed Teaching Practices in Vietnam. *Journal of Curriculum Studies Research*, 1(1), 43-53.

ABSTRACT

Delving into English language education in Vietnam, this theory-oriented article aims to generate a new debate on critical cultural awareness (CCA) in light of increasing literature on intercultural communication competence (ICC), thus offering practical implementations to academic agents. Once ICC is strongly considered indispensable within communication, CCA can strengthen the power of sociocultural and psychological relationships. This study specifies the role of intercultural communication, aiming to develop Vietnamese learners to reach beyond abstract linguistic features towards language awareness by engaging in cultural and societal plurality. Seemingly, they need use language that advocate the enactment of change, fostering their abilities in their civic life. Coupled with that, they are obliged for learning the power of positive attitudes in terms of intercultural engagement, such as sympathy towards and acceptance of differences. Critical cultural awareness as a contribution to intercultural communication drives two primary aspects, namely social and psychological dimensions. In addition to dragging learners out of traditionally perceived skills related to native-like competences, the framework application expands potential goals and instructional steps that cover learning based on learner voice reflected upon privilege and power. Apparently, it is relevant in response to learning environment driven by social mechanisms which focus on citizenship, expecting that they learn and possess knowledge for certain purposes relating to career goals and social needs. Comprehensively, this study will outline the short examination of language education in Vietnam as a way to understand existing hindrances to be resolved. It anchored this analysis in a theoretical paradigm: critical cultural awareness, which is then critically embedded to involve social and psychological pedagogies. This enables to shift learners' desire and willingness that hone their learning skills which influences academic success and communicative adaptability. Pedagogical implications are also suggested.

KEYWORDS

Intercultural communication, critical cultural awareness, English language teaching, Vietnamese learners, culturally responsive pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

Functioning the varieties of roles in a large number of social fields, English is widely shared as the common language that relieves difficulties in the cross-cultural communication. Also, bilingual or multilingual speakers of English have surged in quantity over the past decades, even higher than those in inner circle (the first-language English users). Estimates have showed that non-native English users are greater than that of natives in terms of population, meaning the rising needs of encouraging "dialogue across the boundaries of languages, countries, and cultures" (Mirzaei and Forouzandeh, 2013, p. 303). English fosters the social and racial harmony between people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. However, defining learning tools to justify the plurality of culture and language remains largely neglected in developing countries.

Amidst significant effects of culture, language education has been unstoppably challenged to inform critically several approaches which can accommodate the vast contacts of culture and language in communities of practice. Also, this has failed the consistency of native-like competence at the expense of learners' fluent and proficient response in sociocultural contexts. The study used a framework developed by Byram (2012), named as Critical Cultural Awareness (CCA), of which intercultural competence is developed. In the context of higher education as a central focus in this oriented study, educational "businesses" are more entitled to discern their willingness "towards more market-oriented and entrepreneurial models" (Nguyen, 2018, pp. 78).

In light of the significant body of literature on intercultural communicative competence (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), this study is significant to contribute towards the neglected concepts relating to CCA especially. In Vietnamese context, the necessity of embedding appropriate methods to develop speakers' ICC skills are progressively questioned. Byram (1997) claimed the clusters of knowledge, skills and attitudes are inextricably contributing towards the acquisition and changes of learners' intercultural competence. Therefore, this study is initiated to inspire more scholarly attention in the field, by elaborating on what is hindering English language education in Vietnam in light of the country's international expansion and intercultural integration. From that vantage point, this study is going to interpret the perspectives of Byram (2012) into the application of class-based ICC instruction.

The growing needs of English in Vietnam

In light of political and cultural changes, Vietnam has made multiple attempts relating to foreign language education. The time 1954-1975 was the period when English and French were required foreign languages in the South of Vietnam (the capitalist South) and Russian and Chinese in the North (the communist North). However, right after 1985, Russia as the main foreign language for instruction was unprecedented in the nation-wide education as a sign of close collaboration with the Soviet Union. In 1986, the economic reforms led to various plans to house the communicative needs with foreign investors and customers, resulting in increasing needs of English as a vehicle for communication. In addition, that Vietnam was officially a member of ASEAN in 2015 and TPP in 2016 incentivized Vietnamese citizens to care more about their language competence to satisfy a wide range of purposes, such as study, employment, immigration and so on. Especially in terms of higher education sectors, English started to be included in curriculum as a compulsory subject and was seen as a required component in entrance exams and for HE graduation. English has been normally designed to teach both as

General English for English-majoring and non-English-majoring students in all levels and as English for Specific Purposes.

The nature of language acquisition in Vietnam was predominantly developed by Grammar-Translation method, asking learners to memorize and employ accurately the grammar rules, vocabulary, syntax and morphology. Heavily driven by the deep-rooted Confucian traditions, current efforts were obviously based on hierarchical knowledge transmission (linear instruction) and out-of-culture languages. The overlooked Vietnamese mother tongue in EFL classes, albeit its own inevitable benefits in some cases, has lowered students' access to knowledge of target language and culture. In parallel to them, while required to teach and learn English with 'native-like' quality without any consideration of learners' cultural background, assuming the dominant communicating needs between natives and non-natives, it is directly linked to withdrawing the students' curiosity and interest in real-life intercultural contacts. Thus, various innovative approaches have been introduced because it was reported that foreign language education in Vietnam was inappropriate in terms of direction. Before pedagogical implications are presented, the Byram's model will be described and linked to other pertaining areas. It is highlighted that this study is of paramount importance to leave a powerful platform for prospective scholarly attention in order that theories are crucial practices and implementation plans to be rendered in Vietnamese classrooms.

The use of intercultural communicative competence in Vietnam EFL classrooms

After joining ASEAN, Vietnam is home to numerous FDI investments from numerous continental countries. Beyond educational purposes, English as a Lingua Franca was needed to assist locals in effectively communicating in settings where intentions, assumptions, beliefs and goals of people exist variously. Therefore, intercultural communication is critically such a target that Vietnamese speakers of English can qualify in the multicultural education (Government of Vietnam, 2008). As referred to teaching settings, Moeller and Nugent (2014) indicated that ICC appears to be practically implemented. In parallel with instructional implementations of ICC is advocated by National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (NSFLEP) that "the true content of the foreign language course is not the grammar and the vocabulary of the language, but the cultures expressed through the language" (1999, p. 43).

Teaching culture involves a series of dynamic processes to save learners from "becoming a fluent fool" (Bennett, 1997, p. 16), making them "conscious of their own perspective, of the way in which their thinking is culturally determined, rather than believing that their understanding and perspectives is nature" (Byram, 2000, p. 10). In other words, it is to help learners recognize that culture is dynamically changing, not stable. Moreover, culture in language classes is necessarily beyond 4Fs (cultural facts, festivals, food, fairs) towards human beings' behavioural and attitudinal aspects (Liddicoat and Scarino, 2013; Dema & Moeller, 2012) widely seen as learner identities, that is, who they are in distinctive settings.

Empirically, this application has led to manifold benefits among both teachers and learners. Nguyen, Harvey and Grant (2016) explore Vietnamese teachers' perceptions regarding teaching culture in language classes. They claimed that teaching is no useful in some reasons (lack of cultural knowledge, lack of teaching techniques, lack of student abilities and commitment) though they attempted to describe and analyze cultures in a certain extent.

Differently, Tran and Duong (2018) suggested that intercultural teaching is generating manifold positive impacts among Vietnamese EFL learners. They introduced a framework, entitled Intercultural Communication Language Teaching. In addition to positive effects on

student attitudes, knowledge and awareness were on the rise, implying that learners increasingly engage in learning environment which is more culturally diversified. They further support that intercultural learning can develop learners' critical thinking on seeing cultures equally. Academically, learners can enhance their learning progress in two productive skills.

In well a similar vein, Truong & Tran (2014) researched on how to implement ICC teaching and learning. They informed the impacts of using digital artefacts on learners in terms of cultural recognition and intercultural understanding. It is well stated that delving into learning environments if they are authentically embedded with cultural views and learning voices would be a profound interest of Vietnamese language learners. More importantly, they are willing to reconsider themselves in addressing existing stereotypes to undertake as many positive viewpoints as possible.

Byram's Critical Cultural Awareness

Educational learning environment has existed fruitfully in a wide range of forms regardless of learner geographical distance, background, and financial and non-financial capacity. It is meant that language learning is no longer beyond reach, through information-seeking processes and under-surface exploration. From the lens of a hermeneutic view of self, culture not only involves surface-level cultural aspects but also reflects on intercultural meanings among people who perceive interpersonally (Dema & Moeller, 2012). They can talk about their assumptions, show emotions, acquire cognitive competences, possessed understanding, exercised practices, and so on. Intrinsically, it is common to manifest cultures in layers comprehensively and logically. As those are articulate through human interactions, the nature of learning language neglecting the cultural understanding presents numerous obstacles, leading to learners being unable to cite worldviews in their intrinsic knowledge" (Kramsch, 1993; Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Tran & Vu, 2017).

Currently, learning goals in Vietnamese EFL classes are to a certain extent equal to efforts in addressing to overcome stereotypical views inside pedagogical mechanism. There is a positive change among Asian students who were found to actively seeking chances to achieve personal growth while accommodating learning challenges in developed nations (Ryan, 2011; Tran 2013a). This is a consequence of sociocultural impacts directly training Asian learners to activate abilities and exercise sufficient agency in order to reflect on knowledge weaknesses towards potential achievements. Also, it is a reversed misconception that Confucian philosophies are eliminated in a sense that the elimination would contribute to linguistic and cultural awareness optimism. Baker (2012) associated with intercultural awareness theory, asserting that "a conscious understanding of the role culturally-based forms, practices and frames of reference can have in intercultural communication" (p. 63).

Literature on intercultural communication is specifically motivating this theoretical initiative on critical cultural awareness (CCA) to transform university-level students' perceptions on intercultural competence. Byram (1997) refers to critical cultural awareness (CCA) as "an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram and Guilherme, 2000, p. 72). Schumann (1978b) supplements with acculturation which is defined as "the social and psychological integration of the learner with the target language group" (p. 29). It means that beyond engaging in cultural manifestations is learners to become critical of communities where engagement takes place. It is comprehended that they are critical in a way to particularize the certain perspectives, which enable them to succeed in meaning-making interactions. However,

it is not without communication conflicts when social power and hierarchy are encountered on a frequent basis. In such, intense engagement with CCA is involved adequately in not dealing with We and They, rather involved continuously in constructing surface-level and interpersonal level knowledge. Apparently, accomplishing it requires them an acceptable level of cognition, attitude and behavior (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). In terms of involvement in CCA, learners need to beware actively of politically civic skills. In fact, they would be able to figure out how to see and understand others' language and culture in their stand, so it can be called as effective skills to participate in multicultural interaction (Bennett, Bennett, & Allen, 2003; Houghton, 2013; Kramsch, 1993; Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Mirzaeil & Forouzandeh, 2013). However, how can we teach with how to design that curriculum which showcases? It is rarely developed in Asian studies.

It is critical that attitudes and knowledge should be initially a central focus. As stated above, in addition to the framework of 3Ps (NSFLEP, 2006): practices, products, perspectives of both target and national cultures, social dimension and psychological dimension are now come into play.

Social dimension

To a certain extent, it is centered on a place of pilgrimage that offers students space to conduct spatial analysis by reflecting over how language is socially and culturally influenced in particular settings. Therefore, integrating the learning of English means providing knowledge for identifying and grasping social reality (Kramsch, 1993) around learners, especially for knowledge which seems neglected in traditional classes, such as determining learners' values, learners' beliefs, learners' attitudes, learners' behaviors and learners' ideas (Ozdemir, 2017). In other words, no learners' particular culture is the key to classroom's opportunity structure as any culture is believed to be progressing in different ways to evaluate its own level of competence and acceptance. Besides that, providing knowledge for learners' intellectual voices to be heard extends the exploration of how learners approached and handled interpersonal conflicts which influences their personal growth. Therefore, it might enable learners to adapt holistically in variously defined cultures. This is similar to empirical findings by Le & Tran (2013). Interesting, that it demonstrates learners' sense of belonging to a classroom context, or broadly immediately surrounding societies influencing their daily interactions (including family, relative network, schools, neighbors, communities and so on) can promote their self-efficacy towards interests in, trusts in and understanding about the common good.

To be specific, learning English in Vietnamese EFL classrooms is strictly based on the transmission of linguistic forms which neglects intellectual skills, so learners' engagement in CCA could be an active way to help them notice systematically linguistic differences in response to cultural manifestations (Lamber, 1967). Thus, it is hoped to combine communicative competence with intercultural competence to interact successfully in intercultural settings among learners with others (Trofimovich & Turuseva, 2015). They can show their identities freely with political skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving and analytical analysis.

Psychological dimension

It is overlapped with social dimensions that psychological dimension attaches importance to learners' identities, discerning learners' motivations and willingness to fulfil political skills that helps them act rigorous inquiry and thoughtful reasoning. Therefore, their confidence is enhanced in culturally unfamiliar contexts that is socially changing. Morgan (2007) confirms that

learners are enhancing political skills, meaning that their identities become clearer and dynamically formed as a way to succeed in future communication. It is explained under the perspectives of sociocultural identity and constructionist theories that identity is not fixed, it is dynamic given timely manner and interaction mechanism which leaners participate in to perceive emotions differently. It is also supported by Norton (1997) that identities are mutually struggled which seemingly reflect learners' roles and positioning. With language instructed in EFL classes, they tend to choose identities either inferior or superior to others' learners or teachers to make them feel comfortable, which promptly enables their exercise of proper agency to decide cognition, attitude and behavior linguistically (Garcia, 2010, p. 524).

When it comes to psychological properties, it is unnecessarily neglecting the learners' psychological well-being because it is advantageous to tackle developmental needs of intercultural sensitivity and self-esteem which were absent in traditional classes. EFL classrooms now should nurture learners' collaborative attitudes to work with others to make contributions to others and pleasant views of cultural recognition with empathy and openness, practice of newly conceptual knowledge which would be transforming them into skilled intercultural communicator. It resonates with opinion of Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman (2003) that an increase in intercultural sensitivity helps learners become familiar with their skills to observe and judge their communication partners in a positive way. This would facilitate their strong wills to articulate language use more sufficiently. Theoretically, it is true that Krashen (1985) explicates the progress of language acquisition when he involves the effective filter as an indispensable part. Accompanied by learners' prior knowledge, surrounding learning experience (e.g. with materials or social environments) is input hypothesis for learners' knowledge supplements. The effective filters make up learners' emotional and attitudinal influences to contribute towards their knowledge output. In sum, teachers are recommended to put in mind language users who would allow the simulation of personal values and the continuing formation of identities during their experience of language acquisition. As long as they have a sense of belonging to learning environments or an exercise of agency in terms of learning tasks or activities, they can find positive pathways to civil life.

Pedagogical discussions

The perspectives of Byram (2012) are well articulated concerning the aim to develop intercultural development skills among language learners. In addition to linguistic skills, to the forefront of Vietnamese learners' language-related goals is intercultural competence replacing native-level competence. In light of the Byram (2012) theory, insights into students' patterns of learning acts and personal thoughts are unpacked in the conditions in which students are granted to make informed learning, coupled with exercising agency and power. As a consequence, they are not only entitled to employ identities appropriately but also attend to self-initiation and effective participation of others' initiated interaction where involving cultures qualifies interlocutor's different roles and positions (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999; Winslade, 2003). I can tell why awareness is a key driver in developing knowledge for intercultural learning. Critically, students could appear insufficient to have concerns for and have responsibilities in addressing other issues than theirs, without being made them aware of what issues are occurring and why addressing these issues is important. By doing so, this leads to the development in three areas: cognition, attitude and behavior.

In order to justify pedagogical implementations, it is central in Byram (2012) that is a range of relevant discussions highlight how learning skills are constructed based on experience socially

and psychologically, for instance undertaking knowledge for and reflection on multiple purposes. Learning with experience would provide knowledge – that knowledge is ultimately for the purpose of intercultural learning or, broadly, intercultural advocacy. In this extent, without experience as a primary agent in curriculum, learning would likely fail to help learners understand the depth and truth of how knowledge is evolving and students thus would employ practically to make certain achievements. Reflection is plausible in learning constructs thoroughly when it comes to a number of lucid forms, as an example, through allowing learners to feel empowered to explore the question regarding stereotypical viewpoints that they hold kinesthetically. Another form is taking an account of actualizing learners' self-efficacy and identity formation and of the otherness. They are not disconnected to favor differences, in addition to frequent commonalities.

As Byram (1997) conceptually defines five clustered saviors along with intercultural communicative competence (ICC): attitude, knowledge, skills of interpreting, skills of discovering and critical awareness, the very last one is influentially reliable to inform teaching practices in association with the learning strategies: social and psychological. In the social aspect, engaging in open learning environment can reinforce learners' understanding of spatial and social relations, widening their network in and outside the traditional classes. Explicitly, it is about to necessarily assist them in finding connections and building rapport, thus developing their belongingness. For the university-level English learners in Vietnam who are trained to become social agents in workforce, given broad learning space, they can enjoy with interdisciplinary exposure. It can be said that teamwork can beautify their minds as it is an empowering way of developing bravery and confidence to reflect on their voices. It is not important that they take passive or active roles in communities of practice, instead they are given more power and the authority necessarily to exercise agency to employ identities fitting certain circumstances. It is valuable that helping them take small steps can make impacts. These resulting conditions are a great contribution to synthesize how knowledge are differentiated, but mutually connected within relations, and insights across multiple disciplinary fields is needed to solve any social problem.

Teachers of college-level students with interdisciplinary domains would be more concerned with current learning cultures. However, the majority of observations point out that Vietnamese tertiary learners appeared to be largely influenced by Confucian-tied values to formative exams and labelled as passive learners, so moving their attentions to be active intercultural agents not only helps them find out possibilities to seek alternatives underpinning effective learning choices, but also builds a co-learning space conducive to motivational and autonomous learning. This opinion is, moreover, depicted to serve solutions to learners' poor motivation while they found little to no learning motivation and nonsense learning inputs that they do not have chance to make themselves heard of what is important or now.

Learning CCA, inextricably, is to embrace learners' growing competence in three areas of focus: cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral. Firstly, referred to cognitive engagement, intercultural learning should be inherently implemented by learners' expression freedom in physical and mental conditions. They know what their sense of language entails itself among those whose living cultures shape their voices with regards to perceptions, thoughts, saying and actions. Considering learners' physical and mental conditions and creating conducive environment can make teachers clear of hidden barriers that learners have while coping with learning constraints. As a result, besides attention to required knowledge of language being made, we should regard leaners' voices as curriculum inclusion. Specifically, following

Vietnamese students' familiarity with either individual or collective culture, this is a starting point for teachers to attend to authentic artefacts demonstrating learners' conventionally intimate living and newly goal-oriented cultural values tasked with new learning behaviors and philosophical learning orientations. Thus, learners can engage cognitively to thrive on usual and unusual interactions, deconstruct new knowledge, and falsify ethnocentrisms based on their open interpretation of learning ends. In this regard, it is implicit that flexibility and responsibility should be essentially reaching an acceptance level to help them achieve certain successes.

With this sense, we are unnecessarily transforming learners' preferred and familiar patterns in a complete way shortly, far more fundamental is a number of innovations to help customize learners' active participation in facing unavoidably prejudiced beliefs in cultural exchange and common lack of understanding regarding their practice of roles following sociocultural positions, hence contributing to evolving attitudinal and behavioral engagement towards valuing other people's ways to embody life experience as well as clustered identities. As teachers, we should be aptly competent at brining consistently courage and great determination into teaching zones, thus learners are feeling divulging of information and the beauty of culture where interactions happen.

CONCLUSION

The study elaborated on the importance of intercultural communicative competence by Byram (1997) and his extended framework of critical cultural awareness (2012). Based on a clear understanding English language education which takes place in Vietnam, it is positively seen that the development of social skills alone does not reveal adequately the well-rounded intercultural growth. Much attention to shift learners' attitudinal motivation is radically added as a critical value to help them become confidently involved in civilized world with good intercultural communication and interpersonal skills. Collaboration and decision-making skills are also the consequences of integrating intercultural learning in EFL classes and out-of-class activities. They are supposed to not only yield developmental skills in cognitive domains, but also promote competence which highlights courageous attitudes and good effects of behavioral intervention that influence their academic outcomes. The higher quality of effects invested by academic stakeholders, the better outcomes gained among students in learning progress.

Indeed, the rapidly increasing number of research on the field of intercultural communication was recorded in the past decades, in tighter connection to the larger complexity of learning needs of English language education. Back and forth, by examining a series of intercultural pedagogy that helps design culturally responsive pedagogies, this corresponding study is impeccable that assumes a hypothesis that bears a positive relationship between the Vietnamese college-level learners' critical cultural awareness and intercultural competence. Future empirical studies are needed to validate the impacts of critical cultural awareness on learning outcomes among higher education students. Besides that, descriptive studies can be supplementing instructional steps to make these expected goals possible in various settings.

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