

DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS AND ATTITUDES OF VIETNAMESE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH: CASE STUDIES

Ho Si Thang Kiet

University of Foreign Language Studies, The University of Danang; kiet.ho@ufl.udn.vn

Abstract - This paper investigates the development of intercultural awareness and attitudes through four case studies of Vietnamese second-year students of English major in two different learning contexts of an English Speaking course over a nine-week teaching period at the University of Foreign Language Studies, the University of Danang. Data collection methods include the students' reflective journals and individual interviews. The findings show that the students who actively engaged in the intercultural learning process developed a better understanding of the target culture and cultural self-awareness than those in the normal class. In addition, these students were able to minimize ethnocentric views and develop their intercultural competence with ethno-relativism. It is expected that this study can be used as a reference for implementing a language teaching and learning methodology with an intercultural stance in order to help learners succeed in intercultural communication.

Key words - intercultural awareness; intercultural attitudes; intercultural competence; case study; ethno-relativism.

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, our world increasingly looks like a 'global village' where intercultural contacts between people from different cultural backgrounds are part of everyday life for many people. In our multicultural world, education for international understanding has become an integral part of school education in many societies. The possibilities for intercultural communication have become greater than ever and their benefits are visible in the foreign language classroom (Vogt, 2006). Intercultural competence has become an important goal of foreign language teaching and learning. In the country's international integration, it is important for Vietnamese EFL learners to develop intercultural competence in foreign language education in order to study and work in a multicultural world. This paper investigates how four Vietnamese learners of English as four case studies developed their intercultural awareness and attitudes in two different language learning contexts.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Concept of intercultural competence

The concept of 'intercultural competence' (IC) or 'intercultural communicative competence' (ICC) (Byram, 1997) has resulted from the refocusing of the goal of language education with culture at the core as opposed to a narrower focus on linguistic or communicative competence. The use of the term 'intercultural' reflects the view that EFL learners have to gain insight into both their own culture and the foreign culture, as well as be aware of the intercultural encounters that occur in communication situations in the foreign language (Kramsch, 1993).

There are different definitions of intercultural competence given by different authors. Byram (1997) defines intercultural competence as "the ability to

communicate and interact across cultural boundaries" (p.7). Deardorff (2004) provides a top-rated definition of intercultural competence as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2004, p.194). Most importantly, intercultural competence emphasizes learners' mediation between cultures to look at themselves from an 'external' perspective, and adapt their own behaviours, values and beliefs.

2.2. Intercultural awareness

Rantz and Horan (2005) refer to the concept of 'intercultural awareness' that places cultures in relation to each other. This relativism of cultures not only implies one's insight into the target culture and one's self discovery in the process of discovering the other culture but also the importance of moving beyond the surface behaviours and artefacts to the underlying beliefs and values. Such movement implies "a move from 'ethnocentrism' to 'ethno-relativism', the ability to 'decentre', to see things from someone else's perspective, to develop 'empathy' as well as an awareness of the intercultural process of change of both individuals and societies arising out of the dynamics of encounters between them" (Rantz and Horan, 2005, p.211). Shaules (2007) also offers a comprehensive account of intercultural awareness with an emphasis on cultural relativism. Cultural relativism means "understanding the limits of one's cultural perspective and appreciating the cultural perspective of others" (p.85). According to Shaules, intercultural understanding is necessary to mitigate potential conflicts that may be created from cultural differences.

Thus, the concept of intercultural awareness reflects the complex and dynamic definition of culture. Intercultural awareness posits cultures in relation to each other. This awareness of cultural relativism will help learners move away from their own cultural perspectives so as to see things from the others' perspective, and thus develop intercultural understanding in the deep cultural learning process.

2.3. Intercultural attitude

Intercultural attitudes are an inseparable component of intercultural competence which consists of five *savoirs* to be acquired by language learners including *knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction and critical cultural awareness* (Byram, 1997). Hamburg (2011) defines intercultural attitudes as openness, curiosity and readiness in individuals' behavioural and affective acts which overtly or covertly merge with others from various cultures. According to Byram, Nichols and Stevens (2001), intercultural attitudes are:

“...curiosity and openness, readiness enable us to suspend disbelief about other culture and belief about one’s own. This means a willingness to relativise one’s own values, beliefs and behaviours, not to assume that they are the only possible and naturally correct ones, and to be able to see how they might look from the perspective of an outsider who has a different set of values, beliefs, and behaviours. This can be called the ability to ‘decentre’ (p.5).

3. Research method

The study uses the case study approach as a guide to investigate the learners’ intercultural competence development as “[i]t offers rich and in-depth insights that no other method can yield, allowing researchers to examine how an intricate set of circumstances come together and interact in shaping the social world around us...(Dornyei, 2007, p.155).

The process of selection and data collection for the case studies is as follows. First, four Vietnamese second-year students of English major from two different classes of an English Speaking course at the University of Foreign Language Studies, the University of Danang, were randomly selected for the case studies over a nine-week teaching period. Two students were selected from the first class called “the Standard Class” (SD class) which used the course material; two other students were selected from the second class called “the Intercultural Class” (IC class) which adapted the course material of the SD class with the teacher’s intercultural input and the students’ active involvement in intercultural learning. The pseudonyms used for the case study students include An and Phuoc (the SD class) and Thanh and Dat (the IC class). As it was impossible to measure all of the four components of intercultural competence in a nine-week teaching period, the two components, intercultural awareness and attitudes, were chosen as the scope of the study to explore the nature of the learners’ intercultural development in detail. To deal with the issues above, the study aims to answer the following research question:

To what extent does the development of intercultural awareness and attitudes of the case study students of the IC class differ from that of the case study students of the SD class?

The case studies were conducted using two methods of data collection: (1) reflective journals and (2) individual interviews. Each case study student (CS) wrote three reflective journals and was also interviewed every two weeks over the nine-week teaching period. The data from the interviews (I) and reflective journals (J) will support each other to produce a more precise picture about each case study student’s development of intercultural awareness and attitudes across the lessons (L).

4. Findings

The four case studies provide insight into the development of the students’ intercultural awareness and attitudes at the three levels of IC: low level with facts, medium level with understandings of the target culture and

high level with communicative awareness and ethno-relativism. The findings report on data from each case study student’s reflective journals and individual interviews. Due to the limited space of this paper, only some typical examples are given to illustrate each case study student’s main insight into intercultural awareness and attitudes.

Case study 1

The first case study involved An who belonged to the SD class. In terms of intercultural awareness, An developed this competency across the lesson topics in a limited way. She had some generic comments regarding differences between boys and girls and things to learn at school, which did not show any evidence of intercultural awareness. At the low level of IC, she stated general facts about festivals, interpersonal communication, and animals. In making comparisons about different festivals, she highlighted the importance of traditional values. When making comparisons about the rules in kindergarten education, An was more concerned about the commonality rather than cultural differences across cultures. At the medium level of IC, An showed some understanding of the target culture in the topics of ‘animals’ and ‘kindergarten education’. At the high level of IC, An showed limited communicative awareness and no evidence of ethno-relative awareness.

With regard to intercultural attitudes, An also developed this competency in a very limited way. She was more likely to express ethnocentric attitudes in some topics. Talking about the roles of women across cultures, for example, she considered that there was a lack of family care for women in the target culture. She also denied cultural differences in the way of greetings in the target culture which made her feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. She was also more concerned about the value of her own culture rather than the value of the target culture in the treatment of the elderly:

I completely agree with the way elderly people are treated in my country. We are responsible for looking after our parents and grandparents who have nurtured us. It is not acceptable to see the elderly live in nursing homes in the USA (CS1, J3, L9).

In brief, An demonstrated intercultural awareness and attitudes in a limited way across the topics. She stated general facts, had little recognition of cultural differences, and was more concerned about traditional values and commonality among cultures. She was more likely to demonstrate awareness of her own culture than understanding of the target culture. She showed limited communicative awareness and no evidence of ethno-relative awareness. Her intercultural attitudes were still underdeveloped with more ethnocentric attitudes than openness, which tended to keep her away from developing ethno-relative attitudes towards the target culture.

Case study 2

The second case study involved Phuoc who belonged to the SD class. In terms of intercultural awareness, Phuoc developed this competency across the topics beyond the

low level of facts. However, she only made some simple cultural comparisons about kindergarten education and the treatment of the elderly at this level. At the medium level of IC, although she demonstrated her intercultural awareness with some understanding of the target culture about animals and communication styles, she tended to have more generic comments about interpersonal communication. At the high level of IC, Phuoc demonstrated some communicative awareness without any evidence of ethno-relative awareness.

With regard to intercultural attitudes, Phuoc developed this competency in a limited way. She did not demonstrate much evidence of positive attitudes. The only evidence of her positive attitudes was found in her interest in discovering other cultures through different uses of body language across cultures. However, she was more concerned about preserving her own cultural values than being open to new things from other cultures:

It is not recommended to quickly grasp new things from other cultures and distort our own cultural values that have been inherited from our ancestors (CS2, J1, L2).

In brief, Phuoc developed some intercultural awareness, but not much intercultural attitude. Although she moved beyond the factual level and showed some understanding of the target culture, she was more likely to demonstrate awareness of her own culture. Her intercultural attitudes were quite limited with little evidence of openness and respect towards the target culture.

Case study 3

The third case study involved Thanh who belonged to the IC class. In terms of intercultural awareness, Thanh mainly developed this competency at the medium and high levels of IC. At the medium level, her understanding of the target culture and her own culture involved awareness of a variety of issues such as gender differences and gender roles, the equality of men and women in family and society, holiday preferences, cultural norms of interaction in intercultural communication, animal protection and the values of kindergarten education. At the high level of IC, Thanh showed much communicative awareness for intercultural communication. She also showed an awareness of adaptability to the target culture. For example, she tried to maintain eye contact in communication with English people although it was not her habit. Especially, Thanh was able to demonstrate her ethno-relative awareness from her understanding of the relativity of cultures. For instance, learning from the cross-cultural communication situations in the lesson, she understood the relativity of indirectness and directness as a cross-cultural communication style:

It is often assumed that English people are direct and Vietnamese people are indirect. This is not true when I learn from the cross-cultural communication situations in which people do not mean what they say. Indirectness is still used in both cultures in different contexts in a different way, especially to avoid hurting other people's feelings (CS3, I4, L9).

With regard to intercultural attitudes, Thanh showed much openness, respect, and tolerance towards the target culture across the topics. Her positive attitudes were about the smoking behaviour of women in the target culture, the prejudice against American businesswomen, the unfamiliar gestures of people from other cultures, and the different treatment of pets in the target culture. Thanh also showed evidence of ethno-relative attitudes. She expressed respect towards the treatment of pets in the target culture by considering different ways of keeping pets in each culture:

People in Vietnam normally have dogs to look after the house. These animals have a more practical meaning than pet dogs in English-speaking countries where they are often treated as family members. We, therefore, need to respect the way pets are treated in those countries (CS3, J2, L6).

In brief, Thanh developed her intercultural awareness and intercultural attitudes at the medium and high levels of IC across the topics. She showed an understanding of the target culture and her own culture in relation to various topics. She demonstrated communicative awareness with adaptability and ethno-relative awareness. She showed positive intercultural attitudes consistently across the topics.

Case study 4

The fourth case study involved Dat who belonged to the IC class. In terms of intercultural awareness, Dat developed this competency at the medium and high levels of IC across the lesson topics. At the medium level of IC, his understanding of the target culture and his own culture involved awareness of gender roles, the underlying values of receiving guests in America, the treatment of pets as family members and the values of kindergarten education in the target culture. He also acknowledged the values of training children in the target culture with self-reliance and critically evaluated the way children are educated in his own culture. At the high level of IC, Dat developed both communicative awareness and ethno-relative awareness across the topics. His communicative awareness involved the ability to suspend judgment about others' unfamiliar behaviours and the ability to deal with cultural misunderstandings. He was also concerned about the other's attitudes and feelings in communication with English people. He highlighted the ability to observe the other's attitudes to deal with potential cultural misunderstandings in intercultural interaction. Particularly, Dat demonstrated the ability to mediate between cultures when his cultural values were found to conflict with those of the target culture. Dealing with the different treatment of pets in the target culture, he tried to mediate between the two cultures by not treating pets like target culture members, but in his own way, with responsibility. He also tried to mediate between the two cultures in dealing with cultural differences in the treatment of the elderly. Dat also showed ethno-relative awareness in some topics. Reflecting on different ways of entertaining guests in Japan, Spain and America, he relativised the values of hospitality in his own culture to those of an American potluck:

The ways of receiving guests in each culture have their own values. I am very interested in the hospitality in Japan as Vietnamese people are also very hospitable in receiving guests. The pot luck in America is also very interesting although we do not have potluck. While Vietnamese people tend to treat the others with their cooking meals to show their hospitality, the potluck in America shows the concern of the invited people who contribute their food to the party (CS4, I1, L2).

In addition, Dat demonstrated positive intercultural attitudes quite consistently across the topics. He became tolerant, for example, towards the different treatment of pets in the target culture. Particularly, Dat showed ethno-relative attitudes and took the others' perspective into consideration. For example, he expressed empathy towards the smoking behaviour of women in the target culture and unfamiliar norms of socializing in the target culture. By learning different norms of interaction and ways of communication in the cross-cultural situations in the lesson, he addressed the issues of directness and indirectness with an ethnorelative attitude:

Attitude is an important factor for me in intercultural communication. While frankness is a virtue for many American people, it is not appropriate for Vietnamese people to address an issue directly. I may ask others some questions that seem natural to me but intrusive to them. We need to consider the other's point of view before we can understand them. We should not jump to any conclusions so quickly (CS4, J2, L5).

In brief, Dat developed both intercultural awareness and attitudes quite consistently across the topics at the medium and high levels of IC. He showed understanding of the target culture and his own culture. He also demonstrated communicative awareness and was able to mediate between cultures while maintaining his own cultural identity. He also had ethnorelative awareness about different values of each culture. Additionally, he showed positive intercultural attitudes towards the target culture and empathy towards the target culture.

5. Discussions

The following dimensions of the learners' development of intercultural competence emerged from the findings of the four case studies.

Learning about the 'other'

The two case studies in the IC class tended to show a deeper understanding of the target culture as they were more aware of cultural differences across the topics. This deeper understanding was expressed by the students' awareness of the underlying cultural values in the target culture. These students also developed awareness of cultural stereotypes as a way of understanding other cultures by moving beyond the cultural facts. Such awareness was found to be beneficial as it helped students become more aware of the ever-changing nature of cultures and enabled them to avoid generalizing individual behaviours to the whole culture to develop a better understanding of other cultures.

Understanding of the other is important, but moving beyond cultural differences towards diversity in cultures is even more essential. Such a perspective contributes to developing learners' interest and curiosity as well as their openness in learning about other cultures. There was such evidence in the case study students of the IC class when they showed interest in discovering the diversity of cultures through different norms of interaction in intercultural communication.

Learning about the self

Learning about the other cannot be separated from learning about the self in intercultural language learning. Bennett (2009) argues that cultural self-awareness is a necessary precursor of intercultural learning as students will find it difficult to recognize and manage cultural differences without a mental baseline for their own culture. The two case studies in the IC class showed a better cultural self-awareness about their home culture as they had a deeper understanding of the target culture than the two case study students of the SD class.

Learners, however, need to go beyond cultural self-awareness. They need to get out of their own *cultural shell* (Kaikkonen, 2001, p.64) in order to engage in learning about another culture. The present study shows that the case study students of the SD class were more likely to demonstrate awareness of their own culture, which means they are still in their own cultural shell, and consequently, their own cultural perspective was at the centre of their judgment about other cultures. The case study students of the IC class, on the other hand, became more aware of the impact of their cultural perspectives on understanding other cultures. This awareness was particularly important for them to gradually decentre from their own culture (Kramsch, 1993) before being able to engage in comparing, contrasting and reflecting on different cultural values in the target culture.

Overcoming ethno-centrism

The findings of the study show that ethnocentric attitudes were prevalent in the case study students of the SD class across the topics as they put the worldview of their own culture central to all reality (Bennett and Bennett, 2004). Bennett and Bennett (2004) argue that ethnocentric views would form stereotypical attitudes towards the target culture. Ethnocentrism occurred in the SD class due to a lack of student understanding of the target culture. As ethnocentrism is an obstacle to intercultural competence, learners need to overcome ethnocentrism, move away from their culturally-shaped assumptions, and consider the other's perspective. An attitude change is, therefore, essential for students to develop intercultural perspectives towards other cultures.

Developing ethno-relativism

There was no evidence of ethnocentric attitudes in the case study students of the IC class. This suggests that a focus on developing learners' intercultural awareness and attitudes at the beginning of language learning is essential as it can largely help them minimise ethno-centric attitudes and develop ethno-relative awareness and attitudes towards other cultures.

The ethno-relative attitudes enabled the case study students of the IC class to minimise culture shock in contact with other cultures. Culture shock is a kind of discomfort someone may experience in a new cultural environment. Learners may encounter culture shock when their cultural values are found to conflict with those of the target culture. The movement away from culture shock resulted in the students' positive intercultural attitudes towards the target culture. Students with ethno-relative attitudes are also able to judge another culture from the others' perspective and develop empathy towards members of the target culture. When the students were able to develop this competency, they were able to develop an intercultural perspective that enabled them to become inter-culturally competent.

6. Conclusions

The study has provided positive findings about the learners' development of intercultural awareness and attitudes in the EFL classroom. The two case study students of the SD class mainly developed their intercultural awareness at the low and medium levels of IC with more generic comments and little recognition of cultural differences, and they were more concerned about traditional values and commonality among cultures. They also had limited intercultural attitudes and were likely to demonstrate prevalent ethnocentric attitudes. On the other hand, by actively engaging in the intercultural learning process, the case study students of the IC class showed a much better development of intercultural awareness and attitudes. They were able to learn about the 'other' and the 'self' to develop a better understanding of their own culture and the target culture, developing communicative awareness with adaptability and acquiring ethno-relative awareness about values across cultures. They also had prevalent ethno-relative attitudes towards the target culture. The study concludes that whenever language learners are given opportunities to actively engage in intercultural learning in the EFL classroom, they can be empowered with intercultural competence. With such an

outcome of the study, a language teaching and learning methodology with an intercultural stance can be beneficial for language learners to become inter-culturally competent in inter-cultural communication.

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