IMPLEMENTING INTERCULTURAL LANGUAGE LEARNING: A NEW CHALLENGE FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN VIETNAM

HỌC NGÔN NGỮ THEO ĐƯỜNG HƯỚNG GIAO TIẾP LIÊN VĂN HÓA: MỘT THÁCH THỨC MỚI ĐỐI VỚI VIỆC DẠY NGOẠI NGỮ Ở VIỆT NAM

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Abstract - Intercultural language learning has recently become an important approach in language education in response to the need for learners to study and work effectively in a multicultural world. Language and culture are seen as interwoven and inseparable components. Many foreign language programs around the world have adopted an intercultural pedagogy which seeks to integrate into the language teaching experience opportunities for developing intercultural competence for language learners. This paper discusses the current status of cultural teaching and learning in Vietnamese foreign language classrooms and proposes suggestions to implement intercultural language learning in Vietnam. It is hoped that the paper can inform the work of curriculum designers, education policy-makers as well as foreign language teachers and learners to make intercultural language learning feasible in Vietnam.

Key words - language education; language learners; intercultural language learning; intercultural pedagogy; intercultural competence

Tóm tắt - Học ngôn ngữ theo đường hướng giao tiếp liên văn hóa gần đây đã trở thành một phương pháp quan trọng trong việc giảng dạy ngôn ngữ nhằm giúp người học có thể học tập và làm việc hiệu quả trong một thế giới đa văn hóa. Ngôn ngữ và văn hóa là hai thành tố đan xen và không thể tách rời nhau. Nhiều chương trình ngoại ngữ trên thế giới đã áp dụng giáo học pháp theo đường hướng giao tiếp liên văn hóa trong việc dạy ngôn ngữ nhằm tạo cơ hội cho người học phát triển năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa. Bài viết này thảo luận việc dạy và học văn hóa trong lớp học ngoại ngữ ở Việt Nam và đề xuất các giải pháp để thực hiện việc học ngoại ngữ theo đường hướng mới này. Bài báo có thể làm cơ sở cho công việc của nhà thiết kế chương trình đào tạo, nhà hoạch định chính sách giáo dục cũng như giảng viên và học viên ngoại ngữ nhằm biến việc học ngoại ngữ theo đường hướng giao tiếp liên văn hóa trở nên khả thi ở Việt Nam.

Từ khóa - giảng dạy ngôn ngữ; người học ngôn ngữ; học ngôn ngữ theo đường hướng giao tiếp liên văn hóa; giáo học pháp; năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa

1. Introduction

In our multicultural world, education for international understanding has become an integral part of school education in many societies. Globalization and educational transformations have led to an increased need for the development of intercultural competence in education (Scarino, 2009). New concepts like 'intercultural education', 'intercultural understanding' or 'interculturalism' have become prevalent. Since Vietnam became a full and official member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2007, it has become important for Vietnamese students of foreign languages to communicative across cultural boundaries to meet the needs of the country's international integration.

With such a great need for intercultural education, foreign language (FL) teaching plays a central role in intercultural understanding as it mediates the interpretation and construction of meanings among people from different language and cultural backgrounds (Scarino and Crichton, 2007). Intercultural language learning is, therefore, promoted as a way to encourage language learners' tolerance, respect and empathy towards other peoples and cultures, foster their mutual and reciprocal willingness to negotiate meanings across languages and cultures and prepare them for life in a multicultural world. This is a new challenge for Vietnamese FL teaching in the 21st century.

2. The relationship between language and culture

Language and culture have an extremely complex relationship. As Agar (1994) states, "culture is in language and language is loaded in culture" (p.28). Kramsch (1998)

also mentions that language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality. Mitchell and Myles (2004) argue that language and culture are acquired together with each supporting the development of the other. Liddicoat (2009) demonstrates the interrelationship between language and culture with a model of the language-culture interface as a continuum across which both language and culture are integrally involved through their most apparent constructs regardless of the surface level appearance (Figure 1).
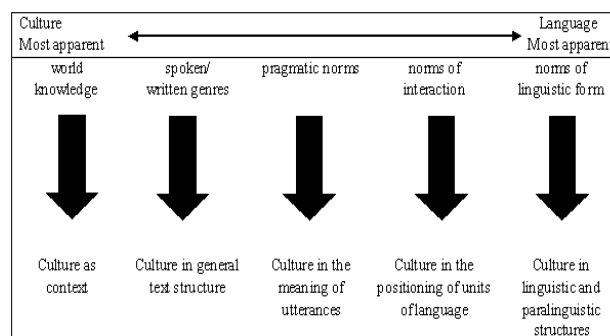

Figure 1. Points of articulation between culture and language in communication (Liddicoat, 2009, p.117)

There has been some distinction between the links of language and culture among scholars. Kramsch (1995) distinguishes three types of links between language and culture through the history of language teaching: universal, national and local links. The universal links between language and culture are effectively captured in the canon of world literatures. The national links between language and culture convey a national perspective in which

language teaching is separated from the teaching of literature and the teaching of culture. Thelocal links between language and culture place a focus on the pragmatic functions and notions expressed through language in everyday life. Risager (1996) states three different perspectives on the relationship between language and culture in a different way. The first perspective is about the embeddedness of culture in the pragmatics and semantics of language, which reflects the traditional way of cultural teaching from a linguistic viewpoint. The second perspective sees culture as the macro context of language usage. The third perspective is concerned with culture as the thematic content of language teaching in which there is no given connection between the language use and the spoken and written content.

In brief, language and culture have an inextricable and interdependent relationship which is expressed through the way they interact with each other. Language has the mediating role that socially constructs culture, which can be recognized in language teaching. The relationship between language and culture is made meaningful in language learning as "the person who learns language without learning culture risks becoming a fluent fool" (Bennett, Bennett and Allen, 2003, p.237).

3. Approaches to culture in foreign language teaching and learning

Culture in language teaching has undergone many changes, each of which can be seen as a reconceptualization of culture and the role of culture in language teaching (Crozet, Liddicoat and Lo Bianco, 1999). Through the history of culture pedagogy, Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino and Kohler (2003, pp.5-7) identify four broad approaches to culture in FL teaching and learning as follows:

*High culture:*This is the traditional way of teaching culture that focuses on an established canon of literature. Cultural competence is measured through the breadth of reading and knowledge about the literature. This approach to culture minimizes the use of language for communication with native speakers and sees culture residing primarily in the text itself.

*Area studies:*This approach to culturefocuses on knowledge about a country which is often presented as background knowledge for language learning. Cultural competence is particularly viewed through the depth of knowledge of the history, geography and institutions of the target language country. Culture in this approach is something to be observed with the learner constructed as an external observer of culture rather than as an internal practitioner.

Culture as societal norms: This approach views culture as the practices and values that typify them. Cultural competence is measured by one's knowledge about things that a cultural group is likely to do and understanding of cultural values by certain ways of acting or beliefs. As in high culture and area studies approaches, the view of culture in this approach is considered static and homogeneous and easily leads to a possibility of the stereotyping of the target culture.

*Culture as practice:*This approach views culture as sets of practices or the lived experience of the individual (Geertz, 1983). This 'cultural turn' as a breakthrough in language pedagogy in the 1990s provided a foundation for intercultural language learning (Risager, 2007). In this approach, culture is seen as an "interactionally constructed product" (Liddicoat, 2004, p.57) that engages language learners in developing an intercultural perspective in which their own culture and the target culture are involved. With such a perspective, learners are able to reach an intercultural position where they continuously develop intercultural communicative skills during the process of language learning.

From these four broad approaches to culture, Liddicoat*et al.* (2003) distinguish two main views of culture: the static view and the dynamic view. The static view of culture assumes that culture contains factual knowledge or cultural artifacts to be observed and learned about. This view of culture does not link language and culture and simply consists of transmitted information. The static view of culture, therefore, does not study culture as a process in which the learner will eventually engage. The dynamic view of culture, on the other hand, requires learners to actively engage in cultural learning, rather than merely learn about the target culture in a passive way. This view of culture also requires learners to have knowledge of their own culture and an understanding of their own culturally-shaped behaviours. The culture as practice approach is regarded as a dynamic view of culture as teachers can help learners decentre from their own culture (Kramsch, 1993) with sorts of exposure to the target culture and the skills and knowledge they need to achieve decentring.

4. Intercultural language learning

In the early 1980s, communicative language teaching prevailed as the main goal for language learners to learn how to use language appropriately in different situations (Canale and Swain, 1980). Since then, this teaching approach has become popular in many countries in the world, including Vietnam. In spite of its popularity, this approach has been criticized by some scholars. For instance, Crozet and Liddicoat (2000) argue that communicative language teaching did not lead to intercultural understanding, tolerance and harmony between different cultures as it did not fully recognize the links between language and culture.They claim that "[a] learner who knows some of the language but none of the culture risks being fluent but socially incompetent in any attempt to communicate with nativespeakers" (p.14).

Since the 1990s, based on the deeper understanding of the interdependence between language and culture, intercultural language teaching has emerged as a new approach to language teaching that teaches culture as an integrated part of language (Crozet and Liddicoat, 2000). This approach implies "an acknowledgement and understanding of the links between language and culture as well as an understanding of how communication works

across cultures" (Crozet and Liddicoat, 2000, p.1). According to Liddicoat*et al.* (2003), language and culture are placed at the centre of the learning process as these elements are fundamentally interrelated. Intercultural language learning (IcLL) is defined as follows:

Intercultural language learning involves developing with learners an understanding of their own language(s) and culture(s) in relation to an additional language and culture. It is a dialogue that allows for reaching a common ground for negotiation to take place, and where variable points of view are recognized, mediated, and accepted (Liddicoat*et al.*, 2003, p.46).

Liddicoat*et al.* (2003) set up the goals of IcLL at both global and individual levels. At the global level, language learners develop an understanding and valuing of all languages and cultures, an understanding and valuing of their own language(s) and culture(s) and their target language(s) and culture(s) as well as intercultural sensitivity as an ongoing goal and are able to mediate between languages and cultures. At the individual level, language learners are able to communicate interculturally, using multiple perspectives to understand and create meaning, i.e., to become an intercultural language user. In this sense, learners' intercultural space and identity are emphasised in their dynamic engagement in intercultural interactions.

Kaikkonen (2001) mentions some qualities that language learners need to develop in IcLL. According to Kaikkonen, "[t]he ability to be sensitive to both familiar and foreign phenomena, the ability for empathy, seeing things from the others' points of view and to share feelings with others are essential for intercultural foreign language learning" (p.101). Other important qualities include respect for diversity and tolerance. These essential qualities can be acquired through the process of IcLL.

With such importance of IcLL in language education, there has been an international trend in the practice of IcLL worldwide. In North America, the *National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project* (Standards for Foreign Language Learning, 1996) is a framework for second language learning that places "cultural learning at the forefront of language instruction" (Phillips, 2003, p.162). Culture is one of the Five Cs alongside Communication, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. In Europe, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*(CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) is a common basis for language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines and assessment across Europe. The emphasis on culture is one of the main purposes of the CEFR that helps language learners to become *plurilingual* and develop *interculturality* (Council of Europe, 2001). In Australia, the *Intercultural Language Teaching and Learning in Practice*(ILTLP) (University of South Australia, 2007) has helped teachers increase their knowledge and understanding of intercultural language teaching and learning and how to integrate them into classroom practices and assessment. In New Zealand,the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) emphasizes that the Cultural Knowledge strand in the

Learning Languages area is given an equal status with that of Language, focusing on the interrelationship between culture and language and on cultural learning in which students are required to compare and contrast different beliefs and cultural practices of their own and the target culture in order to understand more about themselves and become more understanding of others. In Asia, intercultural awareness in language education in China has also received more attention since the beginning of this century and the recent reform in English education in China has adopted cultural awareness as one of the five objectives of English teaching and learning(Newton and Shearn, 2010).

The international trends of IcLL continue to spread at a global level. In order to prepare Vietnamese learners to study and work effectively in a multicultural world, language education in Vietnam needs to catch up with this trend of IcLL.

5. Cultural teaching and learning in Vietnamese FL classrooms

Recently, the importance of cultural teaching and learning has been highlighted in the FL classroom in Vietnam (Dinh, 2005; Pham, 2001). According to Dinh (2005), a mastery of the linguistic system of a FL is not sufficient for learners to understand the culture embedded in the target language. Dinh argues that FL teaching needs to help learners become better integrated into a large society and get used to cultural diversity, willingness to communicate and empathy. Pham (2001) also stresses the importance of cultural competence in intercultural communication as it can help speakers accurately express their intentions and understand the information perceived as well as avoid misunderstandings that may lead to communication breakdown. Pham argues that the efficacy of language use in communication would be much reduced if teachers are only concerned about developing learners' skills based on the linguistic system of the FL.

Although the importance of cultural teaching and learning has been stated in the FL classroom, the issue of IcLL is still very new to many Vietnamese teachers and students. The lack of attention to IcLL in language education in Vietnam may be due to two main reasons. Firstly, the neglect of IcLL lies in the design of FL curricula. It can be observed that culture has a very modest place in the FL curricula. The Ministry of Education and Training has control over two-thirds of the tertiary FL curriculum, which reduces the flexibility of the entire curriculum. In addition, the curriculum is usually linguistics-based and exam-oriented, and consequently culture tends to be treated as a peripheral goal in language teaching. Ho's (2011) review of the National Higher Education Curriculum Framework of English and the curriculum frameworks of two EFL (English as a foreign language) programs at a university in Vietnam reveals that the designation of culture to separate culture courses in these curricular documents establishes a separate status, construct and treatment of culture and cultural learning rather than integrating it into language learning. Ho (2011) also shows that culture in these curriculum frameworks is

constructed as knowledge about a particular culture rather than with an exploratory and reflective approach to culture and culture-in-language.

Secondly, IcLL is given little attention in the practices of language teaching and learning in the Vietnamese FL classroom. Based on observations and direct interviews with both language teachers and learners, Dinh (2005) argues that many language learners still believed that the mastery of vocabulary and grammatical rules would help them learn a FL well, let alone all socio-cultural rules that affect the use of language in communication. Dinh adds that the focus on the testing of vocabulary, grammar and translation has relegated culture to a subordinate status. Phan (2004) argues that many Vietnamese teachers of English were not aware of the socio-cultural dimension of FL teaching, which leads to the neglect of cultural teaching and learning in the FL classroom. A recent study by Ho (2011) about Vietnamese teachers' cultural teaching practices in the EFL classroom at a university in Central Vietnam shows that facts-oriented approach was dominant in their cultural teaching practices which were topically dependent and that their beliefs about the constraints on cultural teaching (e.g. time allowance for cultural teaching, students' language proficiency and degree to receptiveness to cultural learning, curriculum and testing constraints) restricted their opportunities to address culture in their EFL classes. Nguyen's (2013) ethnographic study about the Vietnamese university EFL teachers' integration of culture into language teaching at a university in Northern Vietnam echoes Ho (2011) in that the teachers had limited goals in addressing culture in their language teaching practices and that they prioritized the provision of cultural knowledge through the cultural content of their teaching materials. Furthermore, students were not given enough opportunities to recognize the interculturality in language learning. Ho (2011) reveals that cultural learning was not seen by Vietnamese EFL students as a valued end in itself and that they prioritized the linguistic dimension over the cultural dimension of language learning.

With a linguistic focus in language learning, culture courses, i.e., British and American culture courses,are more likely to become the main source that provides students with cultural knowledge about the target language culture. Although students can develop their cultural knowledge of the target language country in these courses, this receptive aspect of cultural competence is not sufficient (Lessard-Clouston, 1997). In addition, this kind of cultural learning tends to deal with transmission of cultural facts. Tseng (2002) believes that culture should be learnt in a process rather than through a collection of facts.

From the current status of cultural teaching and learning in Vietnamese FL classrooms as discussed above, it can be seen that there is a lack of an intercultural dimension in FL teaching and learning in Vietnam, which needs to be filled in.

6. Conclusions

This paper has discussed challenges of implementing IcLL in language education in Vietnam. The inextricable and interdependent relationship between language and culture proves that culture should be made meaningful in FL teaching and learning. Intercultural competence has become an indispensible competency for FL learners to be successful in intercultural communication. In order that Vietnamese learners can meet their learning needs for intercultural encounters, language education in Vietnam should consider the importance of developing intercultural competence for learners through IcLL.

In order to implement IcLL in Vietnam, the following suggestions can be made:

• An intercultural stance should be adopted in the existing FL curricula. The culture strand should be given an equal status with the language strand in the curricula.

• Both FL teachers and learners need to enhance awareness of the relationship between language and culture and the interculturality in FL teaching and learning.

• An approach to culture as practice should be adopted for language teaching and learning in the FL classroom with an emphasis on the dynamic view of culture that engages learners in a learning process of acquiring intercultural competence. Byram (2009) advises that "language teachers should plan their teaching to include objectives, materials, and methods that develop the specific elements of intercultural competence" (p.331). Vietnamese FL teachers should also be given opportunities to participate in teacher professional development programs related to intercultural language teaching and learning so that they can bring this approach into their classroom practices.

• The assessment of learners' language proficiency needs to be geared towards the assessment of their intercultural competence together with linguistic competence.

With a number of challenges to deal with, it may take more time for Vietnamese FL teachers and learners to get familiar with IcLL. Nevertheless, when the country is geared towards multilateral and diversified international relations, and the National Project of Foreign Languages 2020 sets up its specific objectives of preparing language learners to study and work in an integrated, multilingual, and multicultural environment, there is an urgent need for language education in Vietnam to move towards intercultural language learning which would potentially help learners to fulfill their goals.

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