

Exploring Vietnamese English-major Students' Perceptions towards Intercultural Understanding

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Abstract: *This qualitative research investigates the perspectives of Vietnamese English majors on intercultural understanding. Twenty Vietnamese EFL students from a university in the south of Vietnam participated in semi-structured interviews. The majority of participants recognized the significance of intercultural understanding in language learning with various benefits. The participants also identified difficulties in communicating effectively across cultures, according to the study's findings. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of incorporating authentic materials and intercultural experiences into language instruction in order to enhance intercultural competence. Increasing cultural awareness, language proficiency, and challenging stereotypes and prejudices are strategies for fostering greater intercultural understanding. The result of this study suggests that Vietnamese foreign language educators should prioritize intercultural competence in language instruction and provide students with opportunities to engage in intercultural experiences. The findings may contribute to the literature intercultural education and language teaching methodologies, especially in the Vietnamese context.*

Keywords: Intercultural understanding; English as a foreign language (EFL); Language teaching; Authentic materials; Cultural awareness

1. Introduction

In the time of globalisation, with diverse cultures conjoined in interaction, interplay and collaboration, it is important to comprehend and respect the values of various cultures for facilitation of communicative exchanges and cooperative endeavours. In order to foster positive interpersonal relations and foster effective communication, it is necessary for individuals to understand and appreciate the diverse cultural values worldwide (Huynh, 2022). When studying English as a foreign language (EFL), learners often encounter various cultural transitions and practical encounters while cultivating their linguistic proficiency. Examining the standpoint on intercultural learning, the obtained knowledge can contribute to principles of EFL education as well as fostering intercultural understanding. Despite the fact that several exploratory studies have been conducted concerning the discernment and experiences of EFL students in non-native English-speaking countries, such as Vietnam, more research in this area is possible given the potential opportunities. The focal point of this research is to explore the opinions of Vietnamese EFL students with respect to intercultural understanding, to analyze the part language teaching plays in raising intercultural sensitivity, and to discuss the obstacles arising from intercultural interactions among Vietnamese EFL students.

Findings from this study may make meaningful contributions towards the teaching methods in the field of language education, e.g. English as a foreign language (EFL) in Vietnam, and different nations where English is not the principal language, and can also be employed for developing foreign language teaching curriculum. The present research findings can also be employed to supplement discussions on intercultural and language teaching approaches, supplying knowledge into the observations and intercultural encounters of EFL students in diverse cultural backgrounds.

Research Questions

Based on the research aims, this study sought answers to the following research questions:

- i. What are Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions towards intercultural understanding?
- ii. What challenges do EFL students face in intercultural interactions? And what strategies do they suggest for improving intercultural understanding?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definitions of Key Terms

Intercultural understanding involves both cognitive and emotive aspects (Hill, 2006). The cognitive component of intercultural comprehensive includes information about one's own culture and the others (Hill, 2006). This aspect also includes understanding of cultural similarities and variances. Although information is vital, it is not sufficient for intercultural understanding (Hill, 2006). Interculturality allows people to operate successfully and achieve interactional and conversational goals in contexts including cultural otherness and diversity (Barrett, 2008). Tolerance and respect are both required but not sufficient criteria for interculturality. Favorable attitudes toward different cultural backgrounds, including tolerance, inquisitiveness, and appreciation (Deardorff, 2006). Being open to, interested in, curious about, and empathic towards persons from various cultures constitutes interculturality (Barrett, 2008). Similarly, Meier (2007) suggests that intercultural understanding entailed deep connection, compassion, and admiration among people from other cultures. Interculturality entails using one's experience of otherness to analyse one's own cultural viewpoints and stances, in addition to tolerance and respect (Barrett, 2008). Short (2009, p.3) contends that intercultural understanding is the ability of students to:

- Explore their cultural identities and develop conceptual understandings of culture.
- Develop an awareness and respect for different cultural perspectives as well as the commonality of human experience.
- Examine issues that have personal, local and global relevance and significance
- Value the diversity of cultures and perspectives within the world.
- Demonstrate a responsibility and commitment to making a difference to, and in the world.
- Develop an inquiring, knowledgeable, and caring perspective on taking action to create a better and more just world.

In the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, [ACARA], 2020), students gain intercultural awareness as they learn to value their own cultures, languages, and beliefs, as well as those of others. They learn about how personal, collective, and national identities are formed, as well as the varied and evolving character of culture. Intercultural awareness entails students learning about and participating with different cultures in ways that recognize similarities and differences, connect with others, and build mutual respect. According to the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2020), in the learning continuum, the major points for intercultural understanding are divided into three

interconnected parts involving recognising culture and developing respect, interacting and empathising with others, reflecting on intercultural experiences and taking responsibility.

In the Vietnamese context, it is hard to overestimate the importance of intercultural communication competence (Hoa, 2011). There are various types of intercultural communicative competence research in language instruction (Ho, 2011; Huynh, 2023; Nguyen, 2013; Tran & Seepho, 2014). Nonetheless, there was a little research on measuring intercultural sensitivity among university students (Pham & Pham, 2022). Therefore, this study aims to investigate the perception of students at higher education towards intercultural understanding, particularly a group of English majored undergraduate students.

This study focussed on exploring the intercultural sensitivity of Vietnamese English-majored undergraduate students because unlike other Vietnamese students, the participants of this study have various opportunities to develop their intercultural understanding. These opportunities include the nature of the training curriculum which consists of various intercultural content and knowledge, the chances to interact with international friends and scholars visiting the university and their chance to use English as means to communicate with people of other nationalities and cultural backgrounds.

2.2 Related studies on intercultural understanding

Researchers on intercultural understanding of EFL students agreed that students could overcome challenges to grow cultural awareness and develop intercultural communication competence (Jhaiyanuntana & Nomnian, 2020; Huynh, 2022; Vu & Dinh, 2022). According to Quyen (2018), most students believed that by participating in intercultural communication activities, they were able to learn not only English language skills including speaking, listening, reading, and writing, but also intercultural competence such as understanding other cultural background, explaining other cultures, making comparisons between cultures, discovering new cultural knowledge, and communicating with foreigners. However, their comprehension of intercultural knowledge varied. Students' difficulties in growing intercultural exchange activities were caused by both internal and external problems, including their poor ability for language abilities, time constraints, unpopularity of intercultural programs, and a restricted multicultural community. Stress was clearly another component influencing student growth of intercultural communication competence (Lantz-Deaton, 2017). First-year students of typical age are probably to have lived away from their families for the first time. As students are expected to adjust to different living arrangements and create new social circles, the transfer from home to university necessitates a number of personal modifications. As a result, cultural shock occurs, producing tension. This tension may have hampered their capacity to gain knowledge from their cultural encounters (Lantz-Deaton, 2017).

Perry and Southwell (2011) suggests in the research that the comprehensiveness about how intercultural competency may be achieved is limited. It is important to have a better knowledge of the numerous ways in which intercultural competence may be promoted. Walton et al. (2013) states that if students' views toward persons from other cultural origins are not directly addressed and properly explored, gaining cultural knowledge and cultural awareness will have little if any influence on attitudes or behaviors, and may even strengthen misconceptions.

Penbek et al. (2012) contended that the degree of participation in cultural exchanges increases learners' awareness of various cultures. Thus, there is a need to promote the ability of teachers in intercultural understanding to enhance intercultural development in students (Walton et al., 2013). In the Vietnamese context, it is hard to overestimate the importance of intercultural communication competence (Hoa, 2011). There are various types of intercultural

understanding research in language education (Ho, 2011; Nguyen, 2013; Tran & Seepho, 2014). Nonetheless, there was a little research on exploring perceptions of Vietnamese English-majored students in higher education towards intercultural understanding.

2.3 The theoretical framework

Although there are various frameworks that could be used for research on intercultural understanding. This study applies intercultural communication theory and intercultural competence as the theoretical frameworks. Intercultural communication theory postulates that, in order to ensure effective communication between individuals from different cultures, a comprehensive knowledge of the respective cultural norms and values must be acquired (Huynh, 2022). This hypothesis accentuates the significance of creating intercultural competency, which incorporates not exclusively language aptitude but in addition comprehension of social contrasts and the capacity to adjust to various social settings (Deardorff, 2006). Deardorff's (2006) theoretical framework contains three components: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The cognitive aspect necessitates ascertaining divergences and similarities in cultural contexts. Awareness of one's own cultural identity and an understanding of the cultural identity of others, coupled with the capacity to empathise with people of other cultures, constitute the affective component. The behavioural aspect necessitates the capability to alter one's conduct in intercultural interactions. Since the goals of the present study is to explore Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions regarding cultural diversities and similarities, their attitudes towards the cultures of various nations, and their capacity to adjust their conduct in intercultural interactions, Deardorff's (2006) theoretical framework is appropriate for the current research.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

This study is qualitative research and the data were obtained from personal semi-structured interviews with selected participants. An audio-recording of 20 semi-structure interviews conducted in Vietnamese, with the participants' consent, was performed and subsequently translated into English by a competent translator. The interviews were centered on the research questions mentioned above and were structured by a set of ten open-ended questions. The interview questions were adapted from relevant research on intercultural communication, for example, the value of a positive attitude towards intercultural interactions, cultural awareness, using language learning to support intercultural understanding, and tactics for enhancing intercultural proficiency.

3.2 Participants

We conducted a descriptive study using a qualitative approach. Participants were 20 Vietnamese EFL undergraduate students who are majored in English language studies (8 males and 12 females). At the time of conducting this study, these participants were studying at in a small university in the southwest of Vietnam. The participants were selected through purposive sampling. We conducted semi-structured interviews s to collect data. The obtained data were then analyzed using qualitative method namely thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At the time of conducting this study, the selected 20 participants were those who meet the following criteria:

- English -majored undergraduate students who currently enrolled in an EFL program at a university in the south west region of Vietnam;

- Experience with intercultural interactions: Participants may have had some experience interacting with people from different cultures, either through their studies, personal experiences, or travels;
- Willing to participate in the study.

3.3 Data Analysis

In the present study, an analysis of the obtained data was conducted using thematic analysis, which is a commonly utilized for analysing and interpreting qualitative data. Braun and Clarke (2006) present a six steps for thematic analysis: First, the researchers collect qualitative data analysis, then get acquainted with the content of the data. Then, the researchers formulate preliminary concepts, identifying themes, validating them, labelling them and develop the final report. The particular stages are: Firstly, the investigator acquires an understanding of the data through examining and re-examining the transcripts. Then, the researcher can leverage this to acquire an overall understanding of the content and to recognize any primary perceptions or concepts. In the subsequent stage, the researcher produces primary codes by assigning labels and arranging components of the data that are linked to a specific concepts. In the third stage, the researcher can try to identify topical patterns by organizing related codes and examining the data for regularities. In the fourth stage, the researcher reviews and modifies the themes by cross-referencing them with the data and adjusting or combining them as required. In the fifth phase, the researcher identifies and labels the themes through the formulation of explicit and concise articulations which encapsulate the crux of each individual theme. In the last stage, the researcher develops the report by arranging findings in a logical and systematic manner.

3.4 Ethical considerations

The study will be conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Informed consent will be obtained from each participant prior to the interview, and their anonymity and confidentiality will be ensured throughout the study. During participating in this study, the participants will have the right to withdraw at any time and any stage in the research without any risk or harm from other people. The interviews with participants in this study was conducted under the appropriate circumstances and setting. Additionally, the participants will not be asked for personal or sensitive information in a public setting. Instead, the related information was collected in a private space where the third party cannot see or overhear. Furthermore, only the information that is necessary for research purposes was collected, and only once informed consent will be obtained from the participant. Besides that, the chosen participants in the interview was given pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy in public. All the data collected from the interviews of this study be kept confidentially under secured protection.

4. Findings

4.1 Positive attitudes towards intercultural interactions

The positive attitudes expressed by the students in this study towards intercultural interactions are encouraging. For example, one participant stated:

I think it's important to interact with people from other cultures because it helps us to broaden our horizons and to learn about the world. When I meet foreigners coming to work at our university, I always feel excited because I know that I will learn something new from them. It's a great way to expand my knowledge and understanding of the world. (Participant 10)

This suggests that the participants of this study recognize the value of diversity and are willing to engage with people from different cultures. This is an important mindset for promoting cultural awareness and intercultural understanding, as it requires an openness and willingness to learn from others. Holding the same point of view, another participant asserted:

I believe that interacting with people from different cultures is essential for personal growth and development. It allows me to break down barriers and to create a more interconnected world. By learning about different cultures, we can gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. (Participant 12)

It was also reported that learning foreign language are beneficially for the participants of the current study. As undergraduate students of English language studies, the participants of this research have courses not only in English, but also in another languages such Chinese, French, and Korean. This helps to create opportunities for the student participants of this study to contact, communicate, and learn about various cultures around the world. Participant 6 recalled this:

When I learn a new language, especially at the school of foreign languages at our university, I also learn about the culture that speaks that language. For me, learning English, French, Chinese, and Korean at the school of foreign languages have enabled me to communicate effectively with people from different backgrounds, both from Asian and Western cultures. (Participant 6)

Similarly, another participant highlighted this advantage of being a students of English-majored at the university in terms of developing their intercultural understanding:

I believe that language is a bridge that connects people from different cultures. When we learn English at our faculty, I can learn English and other common foreign languages. Thanks to this, I and my friends are able to communicate with others in a way that is respectful and meaningful. (Participant 9)

Thus, it can be interpreted that the students in this study recognized the importance of language learning in promoting intercultural understanding. Learning foreign language learning allows them to explore new cultures and to expand their understanding of the world. As one participant noted:

When I learn a new language, I also learn about the culture that speaks that language. (Participant 2).

In sum, being a student of a English-majored program provides learners with the tools to communicate effectively with people from different cultures and to understand the cultural contexts of the language they are learning. The ability to communicate effectively is essential for promoting intercultural understanding, as it enables people to exchange ideas and perspectives.

4.2. Challenges in intercultural interactions

The challenges identified by the students in this study are common in intercultural interactions. For example, one participant noted:

Sometimes it can be hard to understand cultural differences and to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries, we need to meet and learn a lot from people of various cultural backgrounds". (Participant 7)

However, it is important to recognize these challenges and to develop strategies to overcome them, such as increasing cultural awareness and language proficiency. As another participant noted:

I think it's important to be aware of cultural differences and to try to understand them. This can help us to communicate more effectively with people from different cultures. (Participant 16)

The majority of participants in this study admitted that one of the biggest challenges in intercultural interactions is misunderstanding. As Participant noted:

Sometimes, I and my friend find it hard to understand cultural norms, values, and beliefs, which can lead to conflicts or misunderstandings when we talk to or work with international friends. From my experience, it's important to be patient and open-minded in these situations, and to try to understand the other person's perspective". (Participant 4)

Another challenge is dealing with stereotypes and prejudices. This source of misunderstanding is highlighted by Participant 5:

Sometimes, people may have preconceived notions about other cultures, which can lead to negative attitudes or behaviors. It's important to challenge these stereotypes and to promote a more positive image of different cultures". (Participant 5)

The above findings highlight the common challenges that arise in intercultural interactions between Vietnamese EFL students and international friends. In particular, the participants in the study identified misunderstandings, cultural differences, language barriers, and dealing with stereotypes and prejudices as some of the major obstacles in effective communication with people from different cultural backgrounds. To overcome these challenges, participants suggested several strategies, which will be reported in the following section.

4.3. Strategies for improving intercultural understanding

The strategies suggested by the students in this study for improving intercultural understanding, such as improving language proficiency and being open-minded and respectful towards different cultures, are practical and effective. As one participant noted:

I think it's important to learn the language of the culture you are interested in, because it shows that you are interested in their culture and want to understand it better. (Participant 14)

Being open-minded and respectful towards different cultures is important for building positive relationships with people from different cultures. As another participant noted:

I think it's important to respect other cultures and to be willing to learn from them. This can help us to build friendships and to learn from each other. (Participant 19)

These strategies highlight the importance of developing intercultural competence, which is essential for living and working in a globalized world.

I think one strategy is to learn as much as possible about the culture that you are interacting with. This can involve learning the language, customs, traditions, and values of that culture. By doing so, we can show respect and appreciation for their culture, and build positive relationships with them. (Participant 7)

Another strategy is to be open-minded and respectful towards different cultures.

It's important to listen to others and to try to understand their perspectives, even if they are different from our own. By doing so, we can create a more inclusive and tolerant society. (Participant 10)

All participants agreed that authentic materials are essential in developing intercultural understanding. They stated that exposure to authentic materials helped them to understand the culture and customs of English-speaking countries, which in turn helped them to communicate more effectively with native speakers. Most participants also mentioned that authentic materials helped them to improve their language skills as well as intercultural understanding. One of them, Participant 8 recalled:

I believed that by studying authentic materials, I am exposed to real-life language use, which allowed them to improve their vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Also, when we are taught with materials that accurately represented the culture and language of the target English-speaking countries. I feel more respect the cultures of those countries. (Participant 8)

They believed that materials that were designed specifically for language learners were often too simplistic and did not reflect the complexities of real-life language use. Therefore, the participants of this study suggested that incorporating authentic materials into language learning activities could make the learning process more engaging and enjoyable. As Participant 1 said:

I think that when the teachers use real-life materials, such as news articles or films, our lessons become more relevant and interesting. I can understand the content of the lessons easier. (Participant 1)

In sum, reports from participants of this study suggest various benefits and challenges for teaching and developing intercultural understanding in EFL classrooms. From their personal points of view, the participants also suggested several strategies to improve intercultural understanding in their classrooms.

5. Discussion

The study findings suggest that the participants have positive attitudes towards intercultural interactions and recognize the value of diversity. This aligns with the concept of cultural competence as defined by Deardorff (2006), which involves the ability to understand, appreciate, and effectively interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. According to Deardorff, cultural competence is a dynamic process that involves continuous learning and adaptation, and can be developed through a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Language learning is also seen as an important tool for promoting intercultural understanding by the participants. This aligns with the idea of linguistic and cultural competence, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of language and culture (Byram, 1997). In particular, it is

argued that language learning involves not only the acquisition of linguistic knowledge but also the development of an awareness and appreciation of the cultural values, beliefs, and norms associated with the language (Lien & Hoa, 2022).

The challenges identified by the participants in intercultural interactions, including difficulties in understanding cultural differences and communicating effectively across cultural boundaries, can be explained by the concept of cultural distance (Gudykunst, 2003). Cultural distance refers to the degree of difference between two cultures, and can manifest in various forms, such as differences in language, values, beliefs, and communication styles. Overcoming cultural distance requires the development of intercultural communication skills, which involve the ability to understand and adapt to cultural differences, and to effectively communicate with people from different cultures (Deardorff, 2006). The strategies suggested for improving intercultural understanding, including improving language proficiency and being open-minded and respectful towards different cultures, interacting with authentic learning material. Most of these strategies align with the concept of intercultural sensitivity (Huynh, 2022).

Overall, the study findings suggest that the participants' perceptions of intercultural understanding are consistent with key theoretical concepts in the field of intercultural competence, such as cultural competence, linguistic and cultural competence, cultural distance, and intercultural sensitivity. The findings also highlight the importance of language learning in promoting intercultural understanding and suggest that improving language proficiency can be a key strategy for overcoming intercultural communication challenges.

6. Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions towards intercultural understanding. Our findings suggest that educators should prioritize intercultural understanding in language learning and provide opportunities for students to engage in intercultural experiences and authentic materials.

By doing so, students can develop the skills needed to communicate effectively in diverse contexts and build relationships with people from different cultures. Also, the opinions of Vietnamese EFL students in this study highlight the importance of authentic materials in developing intercultural understanding. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, intercultural competence is becoming a vital skill in various contexts, including education, business, and social interactions. It is, therefore, crucial that language educators recognize the significance of intercultural understanding and design learning experiences that foster it. The use of authentic materials in language learning provides an opportunity for students to engage with real-life language and culture, promoting intercultural competence and effective communication. Language educators should consider incorporating authentic materials in language learning activities to create an environment that promotes intercultural understanding. By prioritizing intercultural understanding in language learning, Vietnamese EFL students can develop the skills needed to communicate effectively in diverse contexts, build relationships with people from different cultures, and contribute to a more globally competent society.

In addition to incorporating authentic materials in language learning, educators should provide opportunities for students to engage in intercultural experiences. This could include cultural immersion programs, language exchanges, and cross-cultural collaborations. Through these experiences, students can develop a deeper understanding of cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors, and gain a greater appreciation for the diversity of the human experience. Moreover,

it is essential for language educators to recognize and address any biases or prejudices that students may have towards different cultures. By acknowledging these biases and promoting a positive attitude towards cultural diversity.

One point of limitation in this study is the sample of participants, which is quite small and locally located at one particular university. Therefore, further research can increase the number of participants with survey and interviews. Furthermore, EFL teachers' perspectives should also be considered for future studies so as to gain more general findings on this topic, especially in the Vietnamese EFL context.

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