

A STUDY ON IMPROVING CULTURAL AWARENESS FOR ENGLISH - MAJORED STUDENTS AT QUANG BINH UNIVERSITY

NGHIÊN CỨU NÂNG CAO NHẬN THỨC VỀ VĂN HOÁ CHO SINH VIÊN
CHUYÊN NGỮ TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC QUẢNG BÌNH

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TÓM TẮT: Mục đích của bài báo đưa ra sự cần thiết của việc dạy tích hợp văn hoá trong việc dạy và học ngoại ngữ cho sinh viên chuyên ngữ tại Trường Đại học Quảng Bình. Bài báo bắt đầu bằng việc nêu các thành tố trong khái niệm văn hoá. Bên cạnh đó, bài báo cũng tập trung nói đến tầm quan trọng của nhận thức văn hoá trong quá trình tiếp thụ ngôn ngữ. Ngoài ra, bài báo còn đề cập đến thực trạng của việc tiếp nhận kiến thức văn hoá trong quá trình học ngôn ngữ của sinh viên. Không những thế, bài báo đề xuất các kỹ thuật để nâng cao nhận thức văn hoá của người học, bao gồm năng lực nhận thức, năng lực thái độ/cảm xúc, và hành vi văn hoá. Bài báo kết luận bằng việc nhấn mạnh đến ý nghĩa của việc nâng cao nhận thức văn hoá cho sinh viên trong các lớp học tiếng Anh.

Từ khóa: Nâng cao, văn hoá, nhận thức văn hoá, sinh viên chuyên ngữ.

ABSTRACT: The purpose of the article is to outline the necessity of incorporating cultural aspects into foreign language teaching and learning for English – majored students at Quang Binh university. It begins with the components of concept of culture. Also, the importance of cultural awareness in language acquisition is focused. In addition, the article mentions the reality of students' cultural perception during language learning process. Furthermore, it proposes techniques to improve students' cultural awareness, including cognitive capacities, attitudes/affective capacities, cultural behaviors. The conclusion emphasizes the significance of improving student's cultural awareness in English language learning.

Key words: Improve, culture, cultural awareness, English - majored students.

1. INTRODUCTION

Given the indispensable relationship between language and culture, it comes as no surprise that the issue of teaching culture has attracted a great amount of attention of foreign and second language teachers and specialists. Liddicoat and Crozet [11] even admitted that communicative language teaching (CLT), even though it has thus far gained a lot of popularity in the language teaching world, somehow overlooked the link between language and culture and the

necessity to consider communication between language learners and native speakers as intercultural communication, rather than just communication in the target language in general. The two authors, subsequently, emphasize another approach to second/foreign language teaching, which is termed Intercultural Language Teaching (ILT), to address the above-mentioned shortcomings of CLT. This justifies the need to incorporate cultural content into foreign language teaching and

learning.

Although a variety of research on this topic were conducted, no detailed one is carried out for English – majored students at Quang Binh University. The paper, therefore, concentrates on improving cultural awareness for those participants.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Components of the concept of culture

It is important to be clear about the components of the concept of culture and what should be taught in the foreign language classroom to enrich students' understanding of the target culture. DeJaeghere and Zhang [3] collect and point out several dimensions that are necessary for culture teaching, including “cultural self-awareness or consciousness-raising (Cross et al. 1989; Bennett 1993; Gay 2000, 71); awareness and acceptance of difference, and others' cultural worldviews (Cross et al. 1989; Bennett 1993; Hammer and Bennett 2001); awareness of the social-construction of race, and prejudice and discrimination in historical and contemporary societal contexts (Sleeter 1992); knowledge of cultural patterns and culture specific knowledge (Bennett 1993; Gay 2000); knowledge of and skill in using different communication and learning styles (J.M. Bennett 1986; Gay 2000)” (p. 257). Meanwhile, Byram (2006), as cited in Ho [6] suggests another model of cultural content necessary for language teaching. In his viewpoint, a culturally enriching language plan is one that empowers learners to display a range of capacities about the target culture, namely cognitive capacities (knowledge, knowledge discovery, interpreting and relating, critical

cultural awareness); attitudes/affective capacities (acknowledgement of the identities of others, respect for otherness, tolerance for ambiguity, empathy); behavior (flexibility, communicative awareness).

2.2. The importance of cultural awareness in language acquisition

Nobody can deny the close mutual relationship between language and culture. Indeed, since Sapir (1949) and Whorf (1956) made the basic assumptions that there is a close connection between language and culture, and that the study of a language can give an indication of the world view considered by speakers of the language [5], many other specialists have carried out research into this area and the results obtained are quite universal. For instance, Fantini (1992) points out that “the development of a second language involves not only acquiring a linguistic tool, but also, and more important, developing a new world view embedded in the second language's culture” (as cited in Liu, 1995, p. 254-255). Also, Kramsch [7] concludes from her thorough research into the link between language and culture that “When it [language] is used in contexts of communications, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways” (p. 3). Therefore, without its embedded culture, a language would be nothing other than a set of linguistic devices that provoke little emotion or feeling; and if that were the case, would we human beings speak all different languages as we do. On the other hand, language, in its turn, is a lively display of culture and also reflects human beliefs and viewpoints. That is why it is not exaggerating when Tang [12], in his article

on the place of culture in the foreign language classroom, claims that “Language is culture”, and “every time we say something we are performing a cultural act”. These aforementioned reasons best show that language and culture are inextricably linked.

Also, as the issue of politeness is included in communication, it raises the awareness of how the same politeness strategies might be employed and thus viewed differently across cultures. This, moreover, brings to attention the fact that some of Vietnamese students may unnecessarily create the impression of being rude when communicating with native English speakers because they “speak English but act Vietnamese” [10].

Another aspect in English communication is a lingua franca. Even though it has become widely accepted that English is an international language, the varieties of Englishes have raised awareness of what decisions are left to be made by English teachers given the different varieties of English spoken in different parts of the world nowadays. The question of what English accent to adopt in teaching practices and how to define Standard English remains an ongoing discussion. One thing that can be agreed upon, however, is that the widespread use of English has amazingly connected human beings together, because in using English to communicate with each other, it has been observed that people from different countries tend to shift their own styles a little bit to fit in with others, thus create what Liaw [8] terms “a third space” where language and culture meet.

As Liddicoat and Crozet [9] state,

“Culture is not acquired through osmosis. It must be taught explicitly” (p. 126), it is therefore beneficial that foreign language teachers teach the target culture explicitly to students. Addressing the same issue, Tang [12] points out a fact that can be easily seen in many language classrooms and might also exist in the mind of many language teachers when it comes to teaching culture, yet is not always frankly admitted: “from my [the author's] (admittedly limited) experience with foreign language education, it would appear that the question of “culture” is often relegated to the end of a language teaching plan. It seems as if it is always something of a bonus if the teacher manages to find time to introduce a bit of the culture of the foreign language into the classroom - some music perhaps, or a traditional dance, in the final lesson of the course.” His comments might be a little blunt-sounding, but it is true indeed, since there were times cultural content should be as a bonus to classroom practice and come after all the other important parts of the lesson have been presented. Considering the inseparable connection of language and culture, this view is obviously too shallow and does not serve the ultimate purpose of empowering students through the teaching of culture. A closer look into this issue, therefore, has emphasized that in improving students' knowledge and understanding of the target culture, it is important that language teachers keep in mind the two following principles: first, the target culture should be taught explicitly; and second, cultural content should be considered an indispensable part of every language lesson, undetached from the

linguistic content, not an occasional bonus.

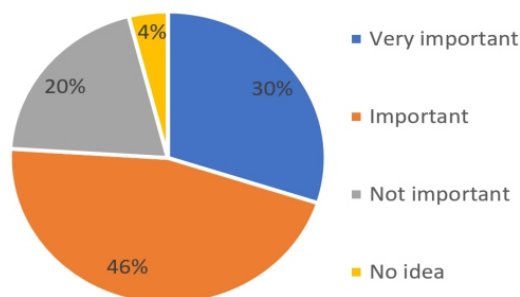
3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The reality of English - majored students' cultural perception during language learning process.

The research is done with the participation of 50 English - majored students at Quang Binh University, using questionnaires with ten questions (both multiple choice and open - ended ones).

As can be seen from the chart, two - thirds of participants admitted that cultural awareness was important and very important in language learning process. This means that a majority of the students see the necessity of incorporating cultural aspects in English language acquisition. However, up to 20 percent of participants do not think it is vital and 4 percent do not have any idea about this concept. In other words, the number of the students do not see the importance of culture.

Chart 1. Students' perceptions on the importance of cultural awareness



3.2. Techniques to improve students' cultural awareness

3.2.1. Techniques to improve students' cognitive capacities (knowledge, knowledge discovery, interpreting and relating, critical cultural awareness)

As the first dimension of culture teaching content, cognitive capacities, in

its broadest sense, includes knowledge of various aspects of the culture, such as knowing about the history of that culture, how people behave and react, what they eat and drink, how families are structured, how relationships are normally built, what is appropriate and what not when operating in that culture, etc. Basically, all of these refer to the aspects of culture that are visible; therefore, according to Tove and Robert [13], these are what can be most easily taught to language learners.

In order to enhance our students' knowledge of the target culture (British and American culture), there are some strategies that Vietnamese EFL teachers can use. The following strategies are taken and adapted from the Fleet's framework [4] for teaching culture in the EFL setting.

Use various culturally enriching materials. As Fleet [4] avows, in teaching language and culture to students, there are several strategies of which teachers may avail. Cullen and Sato [1] encourage an approach encompassing materials which are tactile, visual or audio-based in order to touch on many of the various learning styles of students. They suggest the use of newspapers, songs, videos and stories. For instance, regarding the use of audio-visual devices, in teaching how to make an invitation, teacher will show students a video extract in which two native speakers are conducting the act of inviting, and have them analyze for themselves the basic steps of invitation-making. A follow-up practice in which students work in groups or pairs to practice giving and refusing/accepting invitations is then conducted. Besides, as for a class of advanced learners who are learning the skill of speaking or listening, teacher will ask students to form groups, watch an English

movie or movie excerpt, and analyze the cultural features that they see being displayed. In that way students can practice their listening skill and consciously learn about the target culture at the same time.

As with visual aids, for young, lower-level students, it is advisable to establish a cultural corner in the classroom by asking students to collect and bring to class pictures about the target culture and stick to the walls of the classroom. According to Hughes (1986), this technique is known as *culture islands*, which aims at “attracting student attention, eliciting questions and comments” and creating an authentic environment for culture learning (p. 168, as cited in Ho [6]).

Use The Internet as a Resource. According to Hackett (1996), the usefulness of the Internet to language teachers can be summarized in the following statements about internet resources; that is, they “provide a direct, immediate link to the target culture” or can serve as “a multimedia mirror on the target culture” (p.3, as cited in Fleet [4]). To utilize this multipurpose tool, it is suggested that teachers can create an online Culture-talk forum in which students are active participants; or establish a connection between the class of English learners they are teaching with another one from a foreign-based university, and partner each of their students with one native student so that they can exchange emails and such. This may sound difficult to conduct, but it is not impossible, since Liaw [8] did the same thing with her Taiwanese students, and the effect of such online learning environment that she obtained was mostly encouraging. Her

students do not only improve linguistically but their cultural knowledge and behavior are very much enhanced through regular exchanges with their cultural partners.

Virtual Realia. According to Smith (1997), virtual realia are said to improve the quality and availability of culturally-based, authentic materials; and it was also designed with the belief that studying a foreign language is a means to a greater end - communicating meaningfully with another culture and its people” (as cited in Fleet [4]). For that reason, teacher should maximize the presence of realia in culture teaching and presenting. For example, in teaching the skill of reading, teacher will use authentic materials printed in English to familiarize students with the printing products of the target culture. In addition, real objects that relate to the target culture, such as pictures or souvenirs collected from abroad that are motivating to students will also be employed.

Research. Cullen and Sato [1] advocate having teachers involve students in research, especially university students, as they feel this activity can lead to “long-term interest in the target-culture”. At college level, the use of culture-based research projects is plausible and can be very rewarding. One example of this type of assignment is to have groups of students choose a state or city in the United States or United Kingdom to research and then present their findings to the class (in a Speaking class). Also, in teaching Writing, the same type of research can be applied, with a difference in the mode of delivering the findings.

Cultural Presentations and Presentation of Cultural Misunderstandings. This strategy mostly focuses on the teacher being a

representative of the target culture. A class period can be dedicated to a cultural presentation made by the teacher, in which he/she shares with students about his/her own cultural experiences and allows time for questions from the student audience. In an EFL setting, apart from the culture-based learning materials, the teacher is the only connection to the target language that students frequently have. Therefore, cultural presenting sessions done by the teacher himself/herself will benefit students more than any video-watching.

Also, Shumin [11] suggests presenting situations that involve cultural misunderstandings, which in real life would make one or more of the speakers confused, angry or even offended. The purpose of this is to prepare students for problematic situations that they are very likely to encounter when communicating across cultures. After the presentation, a role-play activity in which the students work together to find a culturally suitable solution to the problem will be interesting and useful. Additionally, to create fun situations, teachers can examine aspects of non-verbal communication, since this is usually a source of intercultural misunderstandings.

Apart from the strategies within Fleet's framework, EFL teachers can also adopt many other methods to incorporate cultural content into their teaching to improve students' knowledge of the target culture. At tertiary level, one of them can be to follow the content-based approach and design a culture-based syllabus in teaching the four skills. That is to say, students will practice Listening, Speaking, Reading, or Writing using materials that highly relate to

the target culture. The focus of the course, therefore, will be both on language use and the cultural content.

3.2.2. How to improve students' attitudes/affective capacities (acknowledgement of the identities of others, respect for otherness, tolerance for ambiguity, empathy)

According to Tove and Robert [13], the affective components relate to the attitudes and feelings that one has about the target culture. This involves a deep understanding of the culture from the inside, and identification with it or parts of it. These two authors also claim that this dimension of intercultural competence is "something that cannot be taught. It has to be acquired by lived experience" (p. 63), especially in the EFL context where students learn the language in their home environment and thus do not have direct contact with the target culture in order to have a deep understanding of or feel identified with it. While it is true that an immersion is essential in gaining a thorough understanding of a culture, it is, to a certain extent, possible for EFL teachers to develop students' attitudes towards and feelings about the target culture. One way of doing this is to give students a chance to compare and contrast several aspects of the target culture with those of their own culture. In understanding more about the culture of their own, students will gain deeper insight and develop more objective attitudes toward other cultures. Hence, the sense of self and otherness will be strengthened. For example, in learning about British table manners, the teacher can have students make a list of some similarities and differences between the eating codes in two cultures, as well as explore the reasons underlying these features, thereby deciding

an attitude for themselves. When doing this, it is also important that teachers point out to students that there are no right or wrong feelings or attitudes toward another culture, as long as ethnocentrism, stereotyping and prejudice are kept to a moderate level.

3.2.3. How to improve students' cultural behaviors (flexibility, communicative awareness)

“Behavioral competence is the ability to act in culturally appropriate ways with members from different cultural groups” [13]. It is believed that there are two types of intercultural behaviors that derive from two layers of cultural understanding. Normally, one can act interculturally based on his /her superficial knowledge of the norms of the target culture, yet it is deep understanding that enables genuinely appropriate cultural behaviors. The latter is the ultimate goal of foreign language teachers in improving students' cross-cultural competence. To avoid faulty imitation of intercultural acts, one of the things teachers can do is to raise students' awareness of and develop their understanding of the use of speech acts across cultures. In teaching speech acts, apart from the linguistic content, again comparison is needed to mitigate the incidence that students transfer behaviors

from their own culture while many of them might not be appropriate. For example, when conversing in English, Vietnamese learners of English rarely use backchannels such as *hm*, *uh-uh*, *yeah*, etc. to show the other speaker that they are listening, since in our culture remaining silent while others are speaking is an expression of politeness. However, as this is not the case in Western culture, a Vietnamese may seem unintentionally rude if he/she transfers this behavior into English conversations. To reduce communication breakdown teacher should make an effort of drawing students' attention to such features of speech acts. Other conversational strategies such as turn-taking and wait time will also be taken into consideration.

4. CONCLUSION

To sum up, it is vital for English - majored students at Quang Binh University enhance their cultural awareness in order that they can master English at the highest level. As a result, it is advisable that lecturers of English understand the important role of culture in second language acquisition, and incorporate enriching cultural content into language lessons so as to provide the students with a window into a fascinating aspect of English, undetached to the language itself.

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Tác phẩm: **Mùa Chim Hòa Bình**

Họa sĩ: **Nguyễn Chiêu Sinh**

Chất liệu: **Tổng hợp**

Kích thước: **140 x 140cm**

Năm sáng tác: **2024**

Tác phẩm là một cấu trúc sự kết hợp giữa các biểu tượng hiện thực và ngôn ngữ hội họa biểu hiện để lột tả sự xung đột gay gắt giữa sinh tồn và hủy diệt.

Tác phẩm được chi phối bởi hệ thống đường nét chằng chịt, tạo nên một “ma trận” thị giác ngột thở. Những sợi sắc đỏ đan cài dày đặc không chỉ gợi nhắc đến huyết quản hay quỹ đạo đạn đạo của tên lửa hiện đại, mà còn đóng vai trò là những mạch liên kết hình thể, giam cầm không gian trong một trạng thái nén cực độ. Tại tâm điểm thị giác, hình tượng “con mắt” xuất hiện như một điểm tụ nội tâm, mở trường giữa tầng tầng lớp lớp bạo lực, đóng vai trò là nhân chứng hiện sinh cho những biến động thời đại.

Tác phẩm được sử dụng thủ pháp đối lập sắc độ mạnh mẽ: giữa sắc đỏ nồng cháy của sự hy sinh và xung đột là sắc xanh thanh khiết của bầu trời - nơi cánh chim bồ câu trắng nỗ lực bứt phá khỏi sự ràng buộc của hình khối. Những chi tiết hiện thực như chiếc mũ cối và giải băng cảnh báo được tích hợp vào ngôn ngữ biểu tượng, tạo nên một lớp thực tại tâm lý đầy bất an. Với bút pháp mạnh bạo và giàu tính biểu cảm bề mặt “Mùa chim hòa bình” không chỉ là một thông điệp nhân văn mà còn là sự tôn vinh bản chất bất diệt của sự sống, một thực tại tinh thần luôn tìm cách xuyên thấu mọi rào cản nghiệt ngã nhất để hướng tới sự tự do tuyệt đối.



Tác phẩm: **Vững tin Chiến thắng**

Tác giả: **Trần Công Thoan**

Chất liệu: **Acrylic**

Kích thước: **60 x 80cm**

Năm sáng tác: **2026**

Bức tranh khắc họa chân dung Võ Nguyên Giáp với gam đỏ rực và nét cọ phóng khoáng, làm nổi bật thần thái điềm tĩnh, nụ cười hiền hậu mà kiên nghị của vị tướng huyền thoại. Sắc màu mạnh mẽ gợi lên nhiệt huyết cách mạng và niềm tin tất thắng. Thông qua ngôn ngữ tạo hình hiện đại, bố cục bán thân và ánh nhìn hướng về phía trước, “Vững tin Chiến thắng” truyền tải thông điệp về niềm tin son sắt vào lý tưởng, vào sức mạnh đoàn kết dân tộc và vào tương lai tất thắng.

Tác phẩm tôn vinh trí tuệ và bản lĩnh của người đã góp phần làm nên những thắng lợi vĩ đại của dân tộc, được thế giới ghi nhận là một trong những nhà chiến lược quân sự xuất sắc thế kỷ XX. Qua ngôn ngữ tạo hình giàu cảm xúc, bức tranh truyền đi thông điệp về ý chí quật cường và niềm tin bền vững vào tương lai.

Đây không chỉ là sự tri ân đối với một danh tướng huyền thoại, mà còn là lời nhắc nhở thế hệ hôm nay về truyền thống anh hùng và ý chí quật cường của dân tộc Việt Nam.