

Students' Perception of Intercultural Communication Competence at Thai Nguyen University

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to investigate the students' awareness of intercultural communication competence (ICC) at Thai Nguyen University (TNU). The study was carried out among 90 students at College of Education, Thai Nguyen University and Thai Nguyen University of Technology. In order to collect data and identify students' perception toward ICC, a questionnaire was employed. The findings of the study revealed that the majority of students do not aware of the importance of ICC in their study.

INDEX TERMS -intercultural communication, intercultural communication competence, perception

I. INTRODUCTION

With the increase of globalization and international trade, English has been used as a means of communication among people of multicultural background in the 21st century. Integrating cultures in English language learning is crucial and indispensable for learners in order to enhance their intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Although the significant of ICC has been recognized by a number of researchers and a myriad of studies worldwide, the position of ICC in Vietnam has not always well recognized and the concept of ICC has still remained vague to most foreign language learners. Moreover, the restriction of popularizing intercultural communication course at universities has exacerbated this situation. It is undisputed that ICC is a vital skill for language learners to achieve effective and appropriate communication in the globalized community. Today, ICC is more than just being able to speak the native language in the communication process. It is rather to know as much as possible about the culture in order to increase the efficiency of international communication. This requires understanding the background of the people, where they are grown up, their habit and tradition, what they care for, how they react and so on. Dealing with people from different cultures requires more than that a language. Hence, study aims at exploring foreign language students' perception of ICC, and then implicate the importance of incorporating ICC in English language learning and teaching.

To achieve the above mentioned aims, the following research question was proposed:

- What is students' perception of intercultural communication competence at TNU?

II. METHODOLOGY

The mix method including quantitative and qualitative methods was used for data collection and analysis. To collect data, a questionnaire was carried out among 90 students from College of Education, Thai Nguyen University and Thai Nguyen University of Technology.

Data collection: The self-report questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part included questions about the participants' intercultural awareness such as their thought about culture and the importance of leaning culture. The second part contained statements about intercultural communication competence. The first 8 statements were to reflect students' intercultural awareness, basing on the investigation of Yilmaz, B. & Ozkan, Y. (2016). The other 20 statements were used to indicate students' intercultural communication competence, basing on the study of S., N., Penbek, E., S., D., Y., Ahin, N., Gu, A., & Cerit, L. (2012).

Data analysis procedures : The questionnaire was conducted at SFL-TNU. Participants were selected on voluntary basis and they answered the questionnaire through a survey paper. The data gathered during the research was kept securely and used only for the study purposes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perception

Perception is the process by which organisms interpret and organize sensation to produce a meaningful experience of the world (Linsay & Norman, 1977). In other words, a person is confronted with a situation or stimuli. The person interprets the stimuli into something meaningful to him or her based on prior experiences. However, what an individual interprets or perceives may be substantially different from reality (Pickens, 2005). A person's awareness and acceptance of the stimuli play an importance role in the perception process. Receptiveness to the stimuli is highly selective and may be limited by a person's existing beliefs, attitude, motivation and personality (Assael, 1995). In individuals will select the stimuli that satisfy their immediate needs (perceptual vigilance) and may disregard stimuli that may cause psychological anxiety (perceptual defense) (Pickens, 2005). With regard to the term 'perception', Hornby (2000:977) put in the form of a countable noun and defined it as "an idea, belief, or an image that you have as a result of how you see or understand something".

Culture : Culture is definitely the very first component that is extremely elaborate and need to be interpreted. There are countless elucidations of culture worldwide, and each convey divergent standpoint concerning culture. As claimed by Goode (2000), culture implies both visible and invisible aspects which are shared among group members, and it is not limited in one generation, nor is it changeable. However, it can be passed from one generation to the others, and is quite active because of social variations:

"an integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting, roles, relationships, and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious of social group; the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations; is dynamic in nature" (Goode et al., 2000)

According to Apte's (1994:2001), culture is captured in following definition:

"Culture is a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioral conventions and basic assumptions and values that are shared by a group of people, and that influence each member's behavior and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of the other people's behavior."

In another exposure, the meaning of culture specified by Lugstig and Koester (2000) presents the vital bond between culture and communication "culture is a learned set of a shared interpretations about beliefs, values, norms and social practices, which affects the behaviors of a relatively large group of people".

Communication competence : Communication is the interaction of individuals with each other for sharing information to achieve a common understanding. According to Chen (1990), communication competence is also defined as "the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behavior to elicit a desired response in a specific environment". In an intercultural communication process, the sender and receiver hold diverse cultural background differing in their values, beliefs and attitudes which affect their selection, categorization, organization and perception of messages (Auncion-Lande, 1977). According to J. Richards (1985), communication competence includes the following components: knowledge of grammar and vocabulary of the language; knowledge of rules of speaking; knowing how to use and respond to different types of speech acts; and knowing how to use English appropriately. As a result, communication competence is a crucial aspect intercultural communication process.

Intercultural competence: Byram (1997) and Bennett (2004) see intercultural competence (IC) as the ability to come into contact effectively and appropriately with other people from different cultures. IC includes elements as attitude, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness/political education. Sinicrope (2007: 01) mentioned that IC can be simply defined as the "ability to step beyond one's own culture and function with other individuals from linguistics and culturally diverse backgrounds." IC, which is the capacity to change one's knowledge, attitudes and behaviors so as to be open and flexible to other cultures, has become a critical issue for individuals to survive in the globalized society of the 21st century (Byram, 2002). Learning to deal with different cultures effectively requires cultural awareness, communicative competence, personal attitudes including empathy and flexibility, self-awareness, and understanding others values, norms and beliefs.

Definition of Intercultural communication competence: ICC is the ability to interact with other people but the interaction takes place between people from different cultures and countries using a foreign language, the knowledge of the participants of another culture is linked to their language competence through their ability to use language appropriately and their awareness of the specific meaning, values, and connotations of the language (Aguilar, 2010). Furthermore, ICC is composed of linguistics competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and intercultural competence (Byram, 1997).

From Byram's view point, a person who has developed ICC will be able to build relationships while speaking in the foreign language; taking into consideration his own and the other person's viewpoint and needs; communicating effectively with people of different backgrounds. ICC is defined by Chen and Starosta (1998) as the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other's identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment. ICC can be perceived as the ability which helps one to effectively and properly interact in a language rather than one's native language with others from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. ICC comprises language competence (linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence) and IC (attitudes, knowledge, skills and awareness) that help one to be able to successfully integrate in a multicultural society.

Model of Intercultural communication competence : From dissimilar frame of reference on ICC, different models of IC/ICC development have been suggested in order to promote learners' IC/ICC. However, the model of ICC which is adapted form model of ICC development suggested by Byram (1997) materialized to be one of the most inclusive and pertinent model to be used in the context of English language education. As stated by Galante (2015:33) "Byram's model of ICC is one of the most influential and widely cited models that guide language teachers interculturality in the classroom." This model begins from the perspective of language and culture which are in close proximity. It has two main components: language competence and IC. The former is composed of linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and discourse competence; the latter embraces four elements: attitudes, knowledge, skills and awareness. They are expanded to include the following elements: *linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, intercultural attitudes, intercultural knowledge, intercultural skills, and intercultural awareness.*

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Students' intercultural awareness

Table 1: Measure students' intercultural awareness

| No. | Statements | Percentage | | |
|-----|---|----------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| | | High (Strongly agree & Agree) | Moderate (Neither Agree or Disagree) | Low (Disagree & Strongly disagree) |
| 1 | In the language classroom, learning about culture is important. | 40% | 10% | 50% |
| 2 | The more I know about other cultures, the more tolerant I am. | 25% | 20% | 55% |
| 3 | All students should acquire intercultural competence. | 30% | 30% | 40% |
| 4 | Teaching English should focus on helping students to develop an open mind towards unfamiliar cultures. | 25% | 35% | 40% |
| 5 | Learning about other culture enhances my motivation to learn English. | 20% | 10% | 70% |
| 6 | Culture teaching should be integrated into English language teaching. | 35% | 25% | 40% |
| 7 | Students should learn about intercultural competence only when there are foreign students in the classes. | 60% | 20% | 20% |
| 8 | Learning intercultural competence is importance only if it is necessary (e.g. travelling). | 60% | 15% | 25% |

The table shows the percentage of students with different level of intercultural awareness. As can be seen from the table, the majority of students were in low level of intercultural awareness. In terms of item 1, 40% of the participants agreed that learning about culture is important in the language classroom. While 50% showed their disagreement with this idea. For item 2, the majority of students (55%) believed that culture's awareness does not help us to have a positive viewpoint at other people or event. Not many students thought that intercultural competence should be acquired by all foreign language learners. There was only 30% of the participants agreed with this item, 30% gave neutral option and 40% disagreed. In statement 4, only 25% of the students thought that learning English should focus on helping learners to develop an open mind towards unfamiliar cultures. The neutral side was a bit high – 35%, and 40% of the students did not think that learning foreign language has a tie with open mind perspective towards different cultures. 70% of the students strongly disagreed that learning about other cultures enhance their motivation to learn English.

It seems that for them, there was no relation between culture and motivation of learning English. Participants also showed their uninterestedness to culture and language integration. 40% did not think it is a good idea to integrate the two, other 35% have opposite idea and 25% of them had no idea. There was 60% of the participants who thought that they should learn about intercultural competence only when there are foreign students in the class (item 7). Only 20% gave positive answer to this item. For the last statement, another 60% agreed that learning intercultural competence is important only if it is necessary (*e.g. travelling*). 25% disagreed and 15% chose neutral answer.

Students' ICC : For the second part of the questionnaire, questions regarding culture, reaction of students when they encounter people from different culture were used. In order to have a clearer look at the results of opposite meaning statements and avoid any miscalculation leading to inaccurate assessment, the questionnaire was divided into two clusters: positive and negative.

Table 2: Measure students' ICC (Using positive statements)

| No. | Statements | Percentage | | |
|-----|--|--|---|---|
| | | High (Strongly agree & Agree) | Moderate (Neither Agree or Disagree) | Low (Disagree & Strongly disagree) |
| 9 | I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures. | 40% | 20% | 40% |
| 10 | I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures. | 45% | 20% | 35% |
| 11 | I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures. | 30% | 40% | 30% |
| 12 | I can be as sociable as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures. | 35% | 20% | 45% |
| 13 | I respect the values of people from different cultures. | 80% | 20% | 0% |
| 14 | I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures. | 50% | 25% | 25% |
| 15 | I am open-minded to people from different cultures. | 60% | 20% | 20% |
| 16 | I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures. | 60% | 15% | 25% |
| 17 | I respect the ways people from different cultures behave. | 65% | 20% | 15% |
| 18 | I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures. | 80% | 10% | 10% |
| 19 | I often give positive responses to my culturally different counterpart during our interaction. | 60% | 15% | 25% |
| 20 | I often show my culturally-distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues. | 65% | 20% | 15% |
| 21 | I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally-distinct counterpart and me. | 35% | 20% | 45% |

From question 9 to 21, we can see that the majority of students have a high level of intercultural communication competence. For item 9, the same percentage of students gave positive and negative answer. 40% of the students enjoyed interacting with people from different cultures. Other 40% was not interested and 20% had neutral option. The majority of learners felt confident when interacting with people from different cultures (45% for item 10). 40% of the participants gave neutral answer when they were asked what to say when interacting with people from different cultures. 30% agreed and 30% disagreed. Many students disagreed that they could be as sociable as they want to be when interacting with people from different cultures. 35% agreed with item 12 and 20% neutral. A large number of learners showed their respect to the values of people from different cultures (80%). Especially, there was no students who disagreed with this item. 20% left gave their neutral viewpoint. Another large part (50%) showed that they felt confident when interacting with people from different cultures, and only 25% disagreed. There was 60% of the students who thought they were open-minded to people from different cultures, and 20% did not feel the same. The same percentage of students (60%) believed that they were very observant when interacting with people from different cultures, and 25% of them did not share the idea from item 16. 80% of the participants respected the way people from different cultures behave, and only 10% disagreed. For item 18, 75% of the students tried to obtain as much information as they can when interacting with people from different cultures. 15% of them did not share their idea and 10% gave their neutral position.

60% and 65% of agreement for item 19 and 20, they gave position responses to their culturally different counterpart during their interaction. They also showed their culturally-distinct counterpart their understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues. 29% and 15% of disagreement respectively. For the last statement of the positive statement cluster, only 35% of the students enjoyed differences between their culturally distinct counterpart and them. 45% disagreed with the item and 20% kept their neutral position.

Table 3: Measure students' ICC (Using negative statements)

| No. | Statements | Percentage | | |
|-----|--|----------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| | | High (Strongly agree & Agree) | Moderate (Neither Agree or Disagree) | Low (Disagree & Strongly disagree) |
| 22 | I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded. | 65% | 15% | 20% |
| 23 | I find it hard to talk in front of people from different cultures. | 55% | 20% | 25% |
| 24 | I don't like to be with people from different cultures. | 75% | 25% | 0% |
| 25 | I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures. | 75% | 25% | 0% |
| 26 | I often feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures. | 55% | 15% | 30% |
| 27 | I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures. | 50% | 20% | 30% |
| 28 | I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with person from different culture. | 60% | 20% | 20% |

In terms of the item 22, there was 65% of the students who disagreed with the statement that people from different cultures are narrow-minded. Only 20% expressed opposite idea. For statement 23, 55% did not find it hard to talk in front of people from different cultures, whereas 25% had the opposite idea, and 20% left have their neutral position. A great number of students of students (75%) liked to be with people from different cultures, and 25% did not feel the same. The same percentage of participants (75%) did not get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures, and only 25% gave the opposite answer. For item 26, 55% of the learners disagreed when they were asked to interact with people from different cultures. The other 30% expressed their agreement. There was 50% of the students who disagreed with the statement that they would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures. However, 30% thought differently and 20% chose neutral option. For the last item of the negative statement cluster, a large number of students counts for 60% did not avoid those situations where they will have to deal with person from different cultures. 40% of them did not share the same idea and had neural opinion.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is the fact that intercultural communication competence is a significant skill for everyone in order to be able to survive and grow in this globalized and multicultural world. In response to the need of integrating in the universal situation, there should be a thorough improvement in the domain of English language education to make intercultural communication competence process happen in every single English language classroom. Additionally, there should be training programs and seminars on this matter for teachers to know about integration of intercultural communication in their teaching process. Educators also need to amend the material and curriculum so that the knowledge regarding intercultural communication is suitable and realistic in the Vietnam context. Last but not least, it is urgent for policy makers to have more incentive policy to motivate educational institutions and English language centers to include intercultural communication components in their training programs.

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