ENGLISH TEACHERS' ADDRESSING OF CULTURAL ASPECTS IN THEIR CLASSES AT HA LONG HIGH SCHOOL FOR GIFTED STUDENTS

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Intercultural content has been paid due attention to in current teaching and learning English in Vietnam and integrated into English coursebooks of high school education. With a view to examining teachers' incorporating culture into their teaching, this study used an ethnographic method including class observations and post-observation interviews with the teacher participants at Ha Long High School for gifted students. The findings show that culture teaching is now integrated closely with linguistic competence in the curriculum. The teachers exploit different forms of intercultural learning to provide students with intercultural knowledge, among which project-based learning activity, discussion on cultural differences and role plays are of extreme preference. Noticeably, most of those forms are based on the input available in the set English textbook. In the practice of culture teaching, the factors preventing both students and teachers from achieving their culture-intaking were also explained, among which time constraint was the key reason. In short, the study is expected to raise language teachers' awareness of the cultural components in EFL teaching and learning with some pedagogical recommendations provided to help EFL teachers address cultural aspects in their classroom more effectively.

VIỆC TIẾP CẬN CÁC KHÍA CẠNH VĂN HÓA CỦA GIÁO VIÊN TRONG GIỜ HỌC TIẾNG ANH TẠI TRƯỜNG THPT CHUYÊN HẠ LONG

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
	Nội dung liên văn hóa đã và đang được quan tâm trong dạy và học tiếng Anh ở Việt Nam hiện nay và được lồng ghép vào sách giáo khoa tiếng Anh phổ thông. Với mục đích tìm hiểu việc giáo viên đưa văn hóa vào giảng dạy, nghiên cứu này sử dụng phương pháp dân tộc học bao gồm quan sát lớp học và phỏng vấn sau quan sát với các giáo viên và học sinh trường THPT chuyên Hạ Long. Kết quả cho thấy việc giảng dạy văn hóa hiện được tích hợp chặt chẽ với năng lực ngôn ngữ trong chương trình giảng dạy. Các giáo viên khai thác các hình thức học tập liên văn hóa khác nhau để cung cấp cho học sinh kiến thức liên văn hóa, trong đó hoạt động học tập dựa trên dự án, thảo luận về sự khác biệt văn hóa và đóng vai được ưu tiên hơn cả. Đáng chú ý, hầu hết các hình thức này đều dựa trên đầu vào có sẵn trong sách giáo khoa tiếng Anh. Trong thực hành giảng dạy văn hóa, các yếu tố cản trở cả học sinh và giáo viên đạt được việc tiếp thu văn hóa của họ cũng được giải thích, trong đó lý do chính là hạn chế về thời gian. Tóm lại, nghiên cứu được kỳ vọng sẽ nâng cao nhận thức của giáo viên ngôn ngữ về các thành phần văn hóa trong việc dạy và học tiếng Anh cung cấp một số khuyến nghị giúp giáo viên có thể giải quyết các nội dung văn hóa trong lớp học của họ một cách hiệu quả hơn.

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1. Introduction

In the age of globalization with its resulting economic, technological, social and educational transformation, there is an increased need for the development of intercultural competence (IC) in education. In order to fully understand and effectively learn a foreign language, learners need to know its culture [1]. According to Larzén-Östermark (2008) the teaching of culture aims at preparing students for future intercultural encounters. [2]

Hoang (2016) stated that the purpose of learning the language in modern time is using language elements like pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar and four language skills to reach the target of developing students' IC. This enables students to understand foreigners and communicate with them in real life [3].

In order to develop learners' IC, culture is regarded a core element and strongly linked with language. In this sense, culture plays a critically important part in language teaching which is acknowledged by the English teaching circle [4]. Culture tends to be relegated to a specific section in textbooks or to be the subject of readers. Wandel (2003) suggested that textbooks should contain materials allowing and provoking diverging opinions and discussions on cultural stereotyping [5].

To get a comprehensive picture of the target culture from many angles, we need to present our students with different kinds of information. By using a combination of visual, audio and tactile materials, we are also likely to succeed in addressing the different learning styles of our students, [6].

There have been a number of studies on the role of culture in language teaching, culture input, and techniques of teaching culture. Jerrold Frank (2013), although well aware of the urge to provide language students with certain culture knowledge, is concerned about how we could combine knowledge and cultural understanding in the context of a language class [7]. Therefore, according to Palmer (2007), there is a need to incorporate socio-cultural elements into language classes [8].

Concerning practices of teaching culture, it is found out by a number of researchers that most of the cultural content comes from the course books. One typical finding is presented in a study by Sercu et al. (2005) [9]. He states that most of culture input the teacher resorts to is provided in the set textbook.

In Vietnam, the introduction of a newly added section - Communication and Culture- is a good example of overt intercultural integration of the new English textbooks. Consequently, this study is carried on with a hope to have an insight in the practice of teaching culture among Vietnamese teachers, more specifically those teaching at high school.

2. Methodology

2.1. Ethnography

In order to find out the forms of intercultural learning and the teachers' utility of culture input to develop students' IC, the author adopted ethnography methodology as the theoretical approach. Ethnography is a qualitative research approach where behaviour is observed in its natural setting for an extended period of time.

In the present study, Vietnamese EFL teachers who work in the same school over a certain period of time are considered to be a cultural group. These teachers share a cultural behavior - that is teaching culture to their students.

The data sources comprise both individual interviews with the teachers of English and class observation of their teaching in grade 12. The data from class observation notes and post-observation interviews will be qualitatively analyzed also to discover the forms of intercultural learning and teachers' utility of culture input to develop students' IC.

2.2. Participants

The participants involved in this study were five female teachers of English who were teaching grade 12th students, ranging from 29 to 46 years old. All of the teacher participants have

had a Master degree and at least seven years of English teaching experience. Table 1 provides demographic information about the participants, appearing in their pseudonyms.

Table 1. *Demographic information about participants*

Participants	Teaching experience	Gender	Class in charge
T1	7	Female	English major class 12A1
T2	8	Female	English major class 12A2
T3	16	Female	Physics major class 12 L
T4	11	Female	Maths major class 12 T
T5	22	Female	Literature major class 12 V

The participants include five experienced English teachers of Ha Long Gifted High School who teach students of different majors. Interestingly, they all gained their first-hand experience abroad for at least three weeks and at most two years, resulting in their perspectives on their teaching beliefs and decision making that underlie their classroom practice.

2.3. Data collection

In this study, the data were collected during the school year 2018-2019 from two different sources: classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with teachers of English.

2.3.1. Classroom observation

Class observation was employed as the major source for data collection. In this study, observation aims to record the culture-related teaching activities of the teacher participants.

To well obtain the information for analysis, for every class hour of observation, the researcher focused on information such as the class observed, time, location, facilities, teaching materials, classroom management, lesson outcomes and most importantly, the teachers' culture-related activities. Also, all around teachers' teaching practice, for instance, the teachers' and students' mood and behaviours, the classroom climate, etc. were noted. Two classes per participating teacher were carried out and in total, there are ten samples for observation activities

2.3.2. Semi-structured interviews

Another crucial tool to gather information in this study was semi-structured interviews with the teachers of English. The interviews included three main questions and some possible probes with both open-ended questions and close-ended ones designed in accordance to the research questions and guided by an interview guide to keep them focused on the desired line of action.

Concerning the participants, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five teachers in charge of teaching English for different 12th classes including two major English classes, one literature class, one physics class and one Maths class.

2.4. Data analysis

In this study, two approaches were used to analyze the data. The qualitative analysis of the interviews and class observation were somewhat deductive and somewhat inductive, where some categories were pre-existing, based on theory, and some categories emerged from the data. The data analysis for this study was done in three procedural steps, beginning with the analysis of class observation (step 1), then the analysis of the teacher interviews (steps 2), and ending with an integration of the two data sources (step 3).

3. Findings

The major findings were based on the analysis of ten classroom observation notes and five post-observational interviews. It mainly deals with the forms of inter-cultural learning that gifted high school teachers of English provide for their students and the way the teachers use culture input to develop their students' IC.

3.1. Forms of intercultural learning provided by the teachers

Through the classroom observations and interviews, the teachers used three forms of intercultural learning to assist the students' learning of culture: Project-based learning, Discussion on cultural differences, and Role-play.

3.1.1. Project-based learning

The Grade 12 English Textbook used for students of Ha Long high school for gifted students is structured with one section for culture learning followed by one for project plan for every unit.

The popularity of project was clearly observed in half of the class hours (five out of ten). To make it more specific, the summary of the project-based learning activities related to culture is presented in table 2.

Table 2. *Summary of project-based learning activities*

Ob.	Class	Unit	Project-based activities
**Project-based learning**			
1	12 A1	Unit 5. Cultural identity	A poster presentation on cultural identity of ethnic groups in Vietnam
5	12 L	Unit 2. Urbanization	A presentation on an international city
8	12 T	Unit 6. Endangered species	A presentation on an endangered species
9	12 V	Unit 1. Life stories	A speaking contest about a famous person
10	12 L	Unit 5. Cultural identity	A quiz show on cultural diversity in Singapore

As noticed, in almost every project-based activity, the students were quite well-prepared for their tasks and they showed engagement and interest in the activities. Each group had their own ways of getting their messages across. It was also noticeable that for classes with students of higher level of English proficiency like English major classes, students were required to perform more challenging tasks. For those students from non-major classes, the tasks assigned were less challenging. For example, in case of observation 5, the task for students was only to design a poster describing the international city that their group chose and presented their product in the way of listing prominent factors of each city so that the class could have an overview of it.

However, it was noticeable in all five lessons with project-based activities, the shortage of time seemed to be an obstacle in their teaching of culture. The teachers were trying to finish the linguistic learning sections sooner than expected to spare more time for students' presentations, quizzes, etc. The students were similarly in a rush to finish their tasks before the bell rang. Consequently, sometimes, both linguistic parts and culture learning parts were half-way finished.

Later in the interviews, four out of the five teachers mentioned time pressure as a constraint for their project activities, they stated that for the project lessons, they did not have enough time for elaborating on other linguistic sections.

3.1.2. Discussion on cultural differences

Besides project-based activities, in some of the lessons observed, teachers used the questions available in the textbook for in-class discussion on cultural issues.

Table 3 outlines the discussion activities carried out in different classes.

Table 3. *Summary of discussion activities*

Ob.	Class	Unit	Discussion questions
3	12 A2	Unit 2. Urbanization	*- What are the similarities and differences between the urbanization in Bangkok and that in Hanoi?*
6	12 L	Unit 9. Choosing a career	*- What factors affect young people's decision on their career in Vietnam and European countries?*
7	12 T	Unit 3. The green movement	*- What should people in big cities in Viet Nam do to make their city become a green city like Copenhagen?*

It is apparent that all teachers used the questions presented in Communication and Culture lessons in the textbook for class discussion. Interestingly, for Maths major students, such

questions appealed to them, therefore, they discussed effectively in groups and many students came up with a lot of interesting ideas. However, the Physics major students found discussion activity boring and they were not actively involved in the topic of choosing a career. The teacher of the class, T3 said her students were not good at English and they were quite passive in class activities. For these students, a lack of motivation for English in general and certain cultural aspects was a factor leading them to integrate culture only minimally in their language teaching.

However, as the teacher added, it was not always possible to provide them with a seemingly interesting discussion question related to the given topic. Therefore, she had to encourage them to cover the tasks presented in the book with incentives like high marks, small gifts for those with excellent ideas. T1 also stated that for her class, using discussion was an effective way to develop their students' cross-cultural knowledge. She reported that her culture teaching was typically focused on making comparisons of cultures and cultural practices and to discuss cultural issues with her students. For her, all these were aimed at helping her students to see cultural differences.

3.1.3. Role-play

Role play activities in a culture learning section seem to be an uncommon choice for English teachers at Ha Long school for gifted students as they were used only in the two English major classes.

Table 4 summarizes the role-play activities performed by English major students.

Table 4. *Summary of role-play activities*

Ob.	Class	Unit	Role-play activities
2	12 A1	Unit 5. Cultural identity	Perform marriage ceremonies of three countries: Viet Nam, China and England.
4	12 A2	Unit 8. The world of work	Take part in a job interview role-play.

In both role-plays, students were given a period of time to prepare for their roles. During that time, they would work together to search for information, contribute ideas and practice. The teachers provided them with guidance if necessary. With the students' thorough preparation and the teachers' careful guidance, they had amazing performance. Performers received a standing ovation at the end of each play.

In the interviews, the teachers (T1,2,4) also mentioned role-play activity as a common form of inter-cultural learning, three of whom showed their preference for this activity and believed that of all culture-related teaching activities, students were most interested in doing role-play. From the teachers' responses, it is obvious that they found role-play activities useful in building up their students' confidence, communication skills and intercultural competence. However, when asked why Giang did not let students do role play despite her awareness of its benefits, she admitted that it was due to time constraints, her students' lack of motivation and their low English proficiency.

3.2. Teachers' utility of culture input to develop students' intercultural competence

This section describes discusses the way teacher presented culture input to their students using the mentioned two sources, as presented in table 5 below.

Table 5. *Summary of how culture input utilized*

No	How culture input used	No. of teachers
1	Teachers' use set teaching materials	5
2	Teachers' use of supplementary culture input	3

3.2.1. Teachers' use of set teaching materials

The term "set" in the context of this study refers to the teaching materials that EFL teachers at Ha Long High School for gifted students has agreed on to teach English for all students of the school: Grade 12 English Textbook.

It was observed that all the teacher participants relied on the topic, and instructions provided in the set teaching materials. However, the level of dependence was decided by which classes

they teach. For those who were in charge of English major classes, the students' language proficiency and activeness in English learning allowed the teachers to provide more culture input outside textbook including a video, students' presentation, a culture quiz, etc.

This fact was further confirmed by all the five teachers in the interviews that they used set teaching materials as the basis for their classroom EFL teaching practices, including cultural content. Further resources were provided only for strong students of English major classes.

Also, as observed, the teacher usually followed the same template: providing culture input; supporting students' target language acquisition and practice; and providing explicit instructions for culture teaching.

3.2.2. Teachers' use of supplementary culture input

As discussed above, through class observations, the two teachers in charge of English major classes used other resources of culture input, including supplementary materials from the internet, and three of them (two from English major class and one from Literature major class) used their own accumulated cultural knowledge from authentic environment, and books.

For the two teachers in charge of English major classes, in all their 4 class hours, they exploited the internet for images, videos, culture quiz to use in different stages of the lessons.

In the post-observational interviews, both teachers freely shared that when they were to teach a new topic in the textbook, they searched for information and gained cultural knowledge from websites for the purpose of either enriching their own cultural knowledge or using it as a source of culture input for their students.

The supplementary sources mentioned in the previous part enabled teachers to support their students' target language acquisition in one or all of the following ways.

- Lead-in to the topic.
- Providing background knowledge
- Providing tasks and input for students to practice the target language skills:

4. Discussion and recommendations

The findings from the study were presented under categories related to forms of intercultural learning provided by the teachers and teachers' utility of culture input to develop students' cultural competence.

Concerning the forms of intercultural learning, projects such as presentation, speaking contest, quiz show, and talk show were of biggest preference, followed by discussion on cultural similarities and differences. The least popular form was role play due to students' low language proficiency.

In terms of the way teachers use culture input to provide and reinforce students' IC, the set English textbook for grade 12 students was the main source. In case the culture input in the set materials were not sufficient or interesting enough, the teachers had to resort to other supplementary sources in the stages of leading in to the topic, providing background knowledge and providing tasks and input for students to practice the target language skills.

As analyzed in the findings, students showed more interest and involvement if there were presentations, quiz shows, talk shows, experience sharing, videos, etc. Therefore, in order to appeal students to learning culture, there would be following suggestions for both the teachers and the educational administrators.

4.1. Professional dimension

In order to equip themselves with the skills, knowledge, and ability to take the role of the cultural mediators, EFL teachers should attend regular IC workshops, seminars and training courses to develop them to be a conscious, devoted and ideal language-and-culture teacher and observe their colleagues' class to share problems, solutions, knowledge and experience. Also, teachers should build up more interesting supplemental activities besides the tasks available in

textbooks, and make full use of the internet which provide a various source of authentic cultural materials such as movies, songs, articles, news, fairy tales, folklores and pictures.

4.2. Providing teachers with more professional support

To lead the objective of developing of learners' intercultural communication competence to success, teachers need a lot of professional help from MOET.

Firstly, teachers should be provided with more supplementary materials relating to the new textbook being taught. Secondly, training courses delivered by well-qualified and leading language experts are necessary for every teacher who is struggling to find effective approaches to foster students' intercultural communication ability. Thirdly, it is advised that more and more qualified teachers should be sent to study abroad or encouraged to participate in teacher exchange programs abroad to gain first-hand experience.

5. Conclusion

This research obviously does not allow us to generalize, but it is important to note the following insights gained from the study of Ha Long gifted high school teachers' addressing of cultural aspects in their classes.

The participating teachers showed evidence of some conscious efforts – with varying degrees of success in their implementation – to incorporate the intercultural dimension during their teaching practice as well. Teachers of English should be aware of the correctness and suitability when introducing new information, as well as which methods and practices should be adopted.

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