Student Perception towards the Importance of Cultural Knowledge in Intercultural Communication

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ABSTRACT	Published Online: November 18, 2023
A trend that is unavoidable in an era of widespread international integration across numerous professions is intercultural communication. Cultural understanding is crucial for assessing the success of communication efforts when interacting with people from different cultures. The purpose of this study, which was carried out at a university in Hanoi, was to ascertain the degree to which students recognised the value of cultural knowledge in cross-cultural communication. To gather information, a Google Form questionnaire was created and given to first- and second-year English language majors. The findings indicate that even though the students who responded to the survey believed they were competent in cross-cultural communication, their proficiency was still quite low. Although they grasp the significance of language, they fail to recognise the extralinguistic components of communication, such as social norms and nonverbal cues. In order to better prepare students for their interactions with the outside world, the author of the article suggests that cultural knowledge content be integrated into instructional programmes and that learners' understanding of the importance of cultural knowledge be further enhanced.	**KEYWORDS:** cultural knowledge, culture, intercultural communication, communication capacity, cultural barriers

1. INTRODUCTION

These days, a multitude of social shifts contribute to the growing prevalence of cross-cultural encounters worldwide. Individuals from many cultural backgrounds interact with one another on a daily basis both in their personal and professional life. These cross-cultural encounters don't always result in sympathy, understanding, and concord; occasionally, there are challenges, disputes, and inconsistencies. In order to prevent communication breakdowns with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, it is necessary to possess cultural sensitivity in order to act appropriately with them in cross-cultural situations.

When it comes to facilitating communication between speakers of various languages and cultures, English is seen as a bridge. Studying English as a second language involves

more than just picking up vocabulary and grammar; what matters most is being able to apply that information to successful communication tasks. berries. Since English speakers might originate from a variety of cultural backgrounds in communication activities, studying English should also emphasise how culture influences communication. Additionally, according to some academics, learning a foreign language entails helping learners understand the relationship between language and culture when speaking the language (Husein and Zairai, 2012).

It is undeniable that acquiring knowledge of cultural nuances is crucial for individuals wishing to study, work, or reside overseas, as well as for learners wishing to pursue careers requiring them to comprehend, interpret, translate, and create written and spoken texts. Conversely, the issues that result from a lack of cross-cultural understanding do not just affect spoken communication. Paralinguistic elements including acceptable behaviour, posture, standing, sitting, and sign language are just as crucial in demonstrating the communication skills of learners.

This topic is designed to determine students' awareness of the significance of cultural knowledge in intercultural communication, as culture plays a major role in intercultural

communication. The author of the paper offers some suggestions for instructors and students on how to incorporate cultural aspects into the teaching and learning of English at the university based on the findings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1. Theoretical background
2.1.1. What is culture?

There are dozens of distinct meanings for the vast and intricate idea of culture. According to Chastain (1988), culture is defined as a people's way of life from an anthropological standpoint. "A system that combines human biological and technical behaviour with his or her verbal and nonverbal expressive behavioural system beginning at birth," according to Trinovitch (1980), is what is referred to as the indigenous culture. This process, commonly referred to as "socialisation," readies people for the verbal and nonverbal cues that indicate acceptance by the community in which they reside.

Brown (1994) argues that language, which serves as a medium of communication among people in a culture, is the most overt and tangible manifestation of culture. Culture is intrinsic to what it means to be human. change that. As a result, cultural shifts have the potential to upend an individual's worldview, sense of self, and methods of acting, feeling, and communicating. Tang (1999) argues in a similar way that language is culture and culture is language. Because language and culture are inextricably linked, it is unnecessary to question whether or not culture is taught in foreign language programmes, or whether or not cultural integration occurs accidentally.

Culture, as defined by UNESCO, is the living culmination of all past and present creations and actions. These centuries of artistic endeavour have shaped a system of beliefs, customs, and preferences that characterise the distinctive features of every country.

In summary, it is clear that culture encompasses all facets of social life, including language, religion, ideology, historical landmarks, and picturesque locations within a nation or country. Serving the community's needs and interests has spiritual worth.

2.1.2. What is cultural knowledge?

Cultural knowledge, as defined by Collin's dictionary, is the ability to recognise the distinctions between oneself and someone from a different nation or culture, particularly with regard to variations in values and perspectives. delight. Culture is an intrinsic component of every individual's DNA, but language, which serves as a medium of communication within a society, is the most accessible and transparent way for culture to be expressed, according to Brown (2004). change that. One's worldview, identity, and modes of thinking, feeling, acting, and communicating can all be upset by cultural shifts. According to Tomalin and Stempleski (2000), cultural awareness also refers to the progressive

emergence of an internalised feeling of the equality of cultures, a rise in comprehension of one's own and other cultures, and an active interest in the similarities and differences between two cultures. Understanding social norms, language, symbols, worldviews, values, and beliefs are all components of cultural knowledge.

2.1.3. What is intercultural communication?

Cross-cultural communication, also known as intercultural communication, is communication between cultures, different cultural communities with different ways of life and the world. different authorities. Kramsch (1993) defines intercultural communication competence as an individual's ability internal abilities, can handle important issues in intercultural communication, such as the unfamiliarity of cultural differences, cultural attitudes within groups, and the psychological pressure of the communicator next,…

The three basic elements of all forms of intercultural communication include: verbal communication, non-verbal communication and social norms.

- Verbal communication is communication conducted through intra-language. This is considered the clearest way of conveying information from one person to another, so knowing how to speak different languages will help people connect across cultural divides in a way that is easy to understand. most clearly. Once the language barrier is overcome, the biggest obstacle to free communication is removed. Verbal communication includes vocabulary units, grammatical rules, phonetic rules and rules of language use.

- Non-verbal communication is realized through paralanguage and extra language. Paralinguistic features include vocal features (speed, pitch, intensity, vocal quality), vocal elements (clearing throat, hum, uh, ah...) and silence . Extra-language includes body language (eye contact, appearance, gestures, posture, touching behavior...), physical language (costumes, jewelry, accessories, makeup, flowers, gifts...) and environmental language (location, distance, time, light...).

- Social norms are explicit or implicit rules that determine what type of behavior is acceptable in a society or group of people. Different cultural norms lead to different communication styles. For example, in high-context cultures like Japan and China, people talk around a topic cautiously rather than getting straight to the point. In contrast, low-context cultures such as the United States and Germany often prefer forms of communication that approach problems more directly.

2.2. The importance of cultural knowledge in intercultural communication

Since they think that communication is just the application of grammatical rules in speaking and writing practise, some teachers still undervalue the significance of imparting cultural information in the context of teaching foreign languages. Additionally, understanding the target culture may occasionally be viewed as a threat to regional values.

Opportunities for students to interact closely and converse with individuals from other cultures, particularly those speaking English, were quite uncommon in our nation in the past, which affected both teachers and students. Until they travel abroad and face challenges because of cultural differences, students do not realise how important it is to study cultural components of communication.

The importance of cultural knowledge in intercultural communication is undeniable, and is an important part of foreign language teaching (Lin, Gu & Lu, 1990). The great advantage of cultural awareness is that it allows us to communicate effectively with people of different cultures. Barna (1997) pointed out five main causes of failure in intercultural communication.

The first is speculation about similarities, which means we tend to think that the way we behave and act is a universally accepted rule of behavior. When someone is different, we have a negative view of them.

The second is the difference in language, which leads to the communicator not being able to understand what the other person is saying because different languages are being used. Speaking the same language itself can sometimes lead to differences as some words have different meanings in different contexts, countries or cultures.

Third is misinterpreting nonverbal communication. The way we dress, express ourselves through body language, eye contact and gestures also has informational value. A simple gesture like nodding means 'yes' or 'agree' in one culture but means 'no' or 'disagree' in others.

Fourth is the evaluation trend. Humans tend to understand other people's behavior and communication by analyzing them from one's own cultural perspective without taking into account why the other person behaves or communicates in a certain way.

Fifth is high anxiety. Sometimes facing a different cultural perspective will create a state of anxiety in an individual who does not know how to act or behave and what is considered appropriate.

From the above analysis, it can be affirmed that along with language, understanding a person's culture when communicating with them is the key to ensuring success in communication. That once again affirms the importance of integrating culture teaching in English teaching to cultivate students' knowledge of culture and raise students' awareness of the importance of knowledge. culture in intercultural communication.

2.3. Overview of research situation

Culture has long been a focus of discussion for second and foreign language educators and researchers. Many countries, such as Canada, Australia, the United States, and some European countries, have culturally diverse populations, which promotes the need for cross-cultural understanding and communication. To promote mutual respect and understanding in multicultural societies, some countries have

required foreign language educators and curriculum developers bring about tolerance and understanding through language teaching (Larzen - Ostermark, 2008). Teaching intercultural competence is highly valued in this regard. Researchers have called for expanding traditional communication methods so that learners can acquire intercultural communication competence (Byram, 1997; Crozet et al., 1999).

In Vietnam over the past decade, intercultural communication or intercultural communication has attracted a lot of attention from researchers and educators. However, most research focuses on understanding cultural teaching in foreign language teaching. Ho (2011) studied the status and presence of cultural content in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) and the influence of intercultural language learning on learning English as a foreign language. learner's language. The results show that most respondents 'sometimes' and 'rarely' participate in so-called intercultural communication activities in the English classroom.

Research by Tran and Duong (2015) has shown that in Vietnam, teaching culture and teaching English skills have not been integrated. Intercultural communication is said to play a less prominent role in Vietnam's English curriculum (Ho, 2011; Ho, 2014; Nguyen, 2013).

Vo (2017) investigated English lecturers' perceptions of intercultural communication competence in teaching English at six universities in the South of Vietnam. Nearly all participating faculty (94%) agreed with developing intercultural communication competencies by improving their understanding of other cultures through learning or using English. However, lecturers' views on developing intercultural communication competence and teaching practices are still quite far apart. Instructors face a number of constraints such as time, the instructor's cultural knowledge, and the English-speaking environment. This partly leads to the fact that Vietnamese English students may be fluent in English in terms of grammar and linguistics (Nguyen, 2013), but have little focus on cross-cultural communication.

The above studies mostly focus on the content of integrating cultural elements in English teaching, or recognize the necessity of developing intercultural communication competence through the perspective of teachers. without focusing on understanding learners' awareness of culture and intercultural communication. Therefore, this topic was conducted to supplement research on the same topic but viewed from a different perspective - the perspective of the learner.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Purpose and scope of research

English is taught to language majors and non-language majors in all majors at the university. However, the article only focuses on studying the awareness of language students, specifically English language students, about the importance

of cultural knowledge in intercultural communication. To achieve the above goal, two research questions are raised, specifically:

1. What is the level of intercultural communication competency of English Language students?

2. How do English Language students perceive the importance of cultural knowledge in intercultural communication?

3.2. Research design and research subjects

This study uses a descriptive quantitative method to collect information about students' awareness of the importance of cultural awareness in intercultural communication. 90 first- and second-year students participated in this study, of which half were second-year students and 40% of the students were male. First and second year students were purposively selected because this is a target group of learners who have just completed the first 1-2 years of the training program, and have 2-3 years left to complete. All subjects in the bachelor's degree program in English language. Understanding the perceptions of this group of students is valuable for lecturers and curriculum designers in considering integrating cultural content into the teaching content of English subjects.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

The data collection tool is a questionnaire designed by the researcher and divided into two parts. Part 1 includes 15

statements with Yes/No options to assess the intercultural competence of the research subjects. Some statements may be about situations that students have not experienced, and students will imagine how they would act in such a situation. Part 2 includes 1 multiple choice question and 1 question designed on a 5-level Likert scale to find out students' awareness of the importance of cultural knowledge in intercultural communication. The survey questionnaire was designed in the form of a Google form. The survey link was sent to students via email and Zalo and the response rate was about 74%.

The results obtained will be processed through SPSS software version 20.0 to calculate the average value of the responses and perform descriptive analysis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Research question 1: What is the level of intercultural communication competence of English Language students?

To evaluate the intercultural communication competence of English language students in general, 15 statements were given for respondents to respond by ticking the corresponding Yes/No box. The more questions answered "Yes" means the English language students' intercultural communication skills are good, and vice versa. The results obtained are shown in the table below.

Table 1. Intercultural communication competence of English language students

Statements	Yes (Number of responses - percentage %)	No (Number of responses - percentage %)
1. I have knowledge about Vietnamese culture.	69 – 76.7%	21 – 24.3%
2. I have knowledge about the cultures of other countries around the world	53 – 59%	37 – 41%
3. When talking to a person, I pay attention to their body language	42 – 46.7%	48 – 53.3%
4. When I communicate with foreigners, I think it's a good thing to discuss each other's cultural habits	65 – 72.3%	35 – 27.7%
5. When I'm abroad, I try to learn what behavior is appropriate in each specific situation in that country	79 – 87.9%	11 – 12.1%
6. When talking to foreigners, I pay attention to their personal space	34 – 37.8%	56 – 62.2%
7. When working in groups, I like to work with people from the same culture, because cultural differences can create problems.	61 – 67.8%	29 – 32.2%
8. When I am new to a group of people from another country, I try to learn the rules in the group through observing their behavior.	38 – 42.3%	62 – 47.7%
9. When the behavior of people from my culture makes me feel alienated, I will still try to communicate with them.	25 – 27.8%	65 – 72.2%
10. When people from a different culture populate behave in a way that I don't understand, I'll try to find it	40 – 44.5%	50 – 54.5%

From the results table above, it can be easily seen that 9/15 (60%) statements received over 50% "Yes" answers; and the

remaining 40% of statements received less than 50% "Yes" answers. The results obtained show that English language

students have communication ability, but the level is still limited. This result is similar to the research results of Pham & Pham (2022) that students in both public and private schools do not have high intercultural competence.

The highlight of the students' responses is that 100% of students affirmed that they always try to avoid using unclear or ambiguous language when talking to foreigners, which means they highly value The role of language in communication.

Besides, students do not really pay attention to non-linguistic aspects in intercultural communication with the "Yes" response rate reaching 28 - 47% such as paying attention to body language (item 3). , personal space (item 6), communicator's behavior (item 8). In addition, students do not consider communication as a channel for cultural learning (item 13) and do not tend to learn the causes of failure in intercultural communication (item 14). This also means that students do not really pay much attention to cultural aspects in communication.

4.2. Research question 2: How do English Language students perceive the importance of cultural knowledge in intercultural communication?

Figure 1. The importance of language knowledge and skills and cultural knowledge in intercultural communication
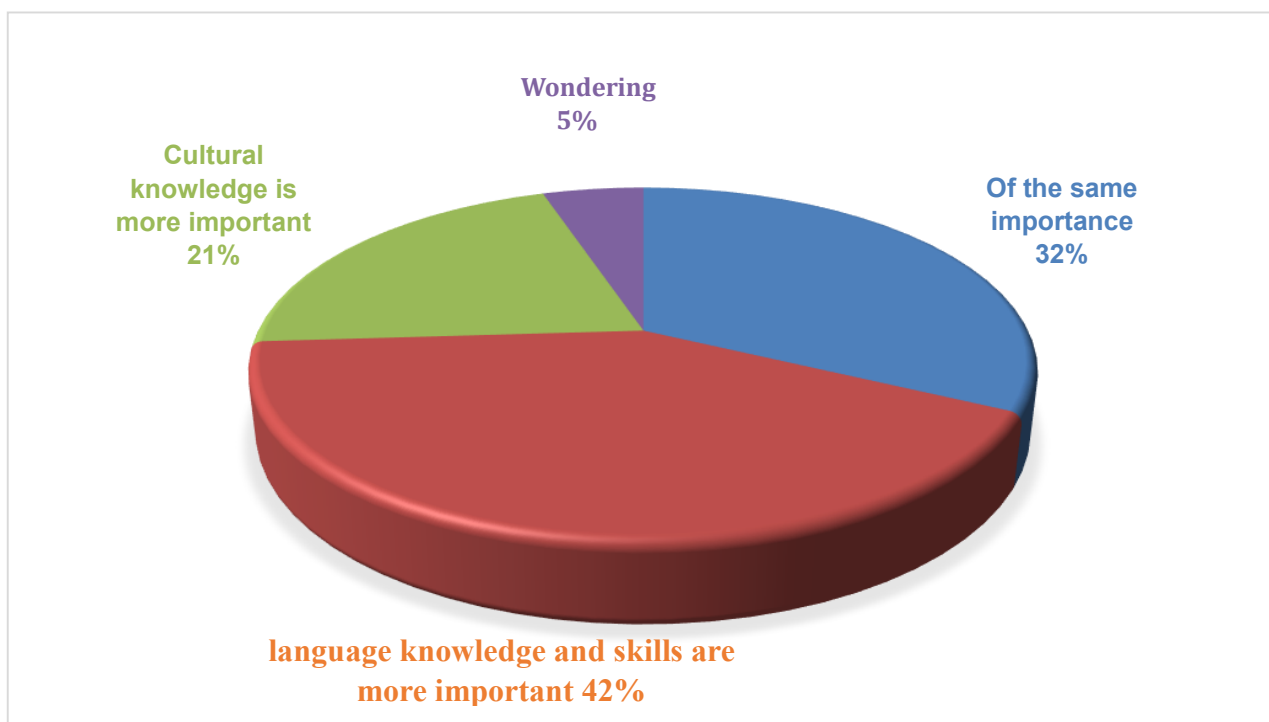

Figure 1 shows that the majority of students think that in intercultural communication, language knowledge and skills play a more important role (42%), while the majority of students think that cultural knowledge is more important than just half as much (21%). Nearly 1/3 of the students surveyed evaluated the roles of language and culture as the same (32%). Maybe in the subconscious of students, they do not really appreciate the role of culture in intercultural communication. This can be partly explained by the current situation in Vietnam, where opportunities for students to study and interact with foreign teachers and students are very few. Most students practice communicating in English with native teachers and classmates, so there are few problem situations caused by cultural differences.

Table 2. English language students' awareness of the importance of cultural knowledge in intercultural communication

Knowledge/ understanding about	Mean	SD
1. Language includes vocabulary and grammatical rules	4.60	0.63
2. phonetic rules	4.60	0.41
3. rules of language use	4.60	0.41
4. vocal characteristics (speed, pitch, intensity, vocal quality)	4.00	0.52
5. Body language (eye contact, appearance, gestures, posture, touching behavior...)	3.72	0.55

6. physical language (costumes, jewelry, accessories, makeup, ...)	2.63	0.55
7. communication environment (location, distance, time, lighting)	2.78	0.41
8. communication contexts (high- and low-context cultures)	3.14	0.75
9. Taboos in communication	4.45	0.55
10. Cultural habits (respect for punctuality, giving gifts, etc.)	4.12	0.75
11. Human values and beliefs come from cultures (respect for personal freedom, respect for elders, belief in God, Buddha...)	3.20	0.52
12. Power distance in communication	3.36	0.41

Interval meaning according to the 5-level Likert scale:
1.00– 1.80: Completely unimportant
1.81 – 2.60: Not important
2.61 – 3.40: Confused
3.41 – 4.20: Important
4.21 – 5.00: Very important
Items 1-3 are verbal communication; 4-7 are nonverbal communication and 8-12 are social norms.
From the above survey results, it can be seen that students evaluate intra-linguistic factors as playing a very important role in intercultural communication with the average value for all 3 contents being 4.60. This result once again confirms learners' views on the position of language in intercultural communication shown in Table 1 and Figure 1.
For nonverbal communication, students rated paraverbal and body language factors at an important level (M=4.00 and M=3.72, respectively). However, students are confused about the importance of physical language and environmental language (M=2.63 and M=2.78).
Regarding social norms, students said that cultural taboos and habits are very important and important (M= 4.45 and M=4.12, respectively). Meanwhile, the factors of communication context, values and beliefs, and power distance received mixed answers.
After analyzing the descriptive statistics, it can be seen that although students are aware of the role of cultural understanding in intercultural communication. It shows that they do not appreciate the role of nonverbal communication and social norms in intercultural communication. However, they completely agree that language is an indispensable part of intercultural communication.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
5.1. Conclusion
The study was conducted at a university in Hanoi to evaluate intercultural communication competence and find out students' awareness of the importance of cultural knowledge in intercultural communication. The author uses a research tool such as a questionnaire to collect data and SPSS software version 20.0 is used to process descriptive information. The study obtained three important results. First, English language students self-assess their intercultural communication ability, but it is still at a limited level. Second,

students emphasize the role of language, specifically language knowledge and skills versus cultural knowledge. Third, students do not really appreciate the importance of nonverbal factors and social norms for success in intercultural communication.

5.2. Recommendations
To communicate successfully with people from another culture, especially one that has many differences from the local culture, language knowledge and skills alone are not enough. The message we want to convey sometimes even transcends the language we use through paraverbal elements, body language, the way we dress... and our understanding of perspective. , values, habits, and behaviors of the communication object. Therefore, further raising awareness among English language students about the importance of cultural knowledge is necessary. To accomplish this task, the author would like to make some specific recommendations as follows:
- For lecturers: It is necessary to be aware of the importance of integrating cultural elements in teaching activities, especially in the current era of cross-cultural exchange, which is becoming more and more popular. , cultural expressions are also diverse, rich and complex. For this teaching activity to be truly effective, teachers must constantly improve their knowledge of language and culture as well as apply appropriate and positive teaching methods to integrate cultural content. into teaching English effectively, creating excitement for learners. Teaching activities that integrate cultural elements can be carried out in a variety of forms such as role playing, solving situations, describing pictures, telling stories, building cross-cultural corners,... through a variety of different documents containing knowledge about cultures, countries, and people in countries around the world.
- For the curriculum: It is necessary to add content about improving cultural awareness and intercultural communication capacity of learners after completing the subject to the output standards and objectives of each English program. are taught to help guide curriculum development and selection of teaching materials. Program content should contain elements of indigenous culture as well as other cultures and should be arranged in a reasonable and systematic manner to contribute to the transmission of

knowledge and the formation of cultural competence for students. methodically and effectively.

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