

NGHIÊN CỨU SỰ ẢNH HƯỞNG CỦA MỘT SỐ PHẠM TRÙ VĂN HOÁ ĐẾN VIỆC HỌC TIẾNG ANH TẠI TRƯỜNG CAO ĐẲNG Y TẾ THANH HOÁ

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Những kiến thức về văn hoá đóng một vai trò vô cùng quan trọng trong quá trình giao tiếp giao văn hoá do mối quan hệ không thể tách rời giữa ngôn ngữ và văn hoá. Với mục đích giúp sinh viên sử dụng tiếng Anh một cách hiệu quả hơn, tác giả tập trung nghiên cứu sự ảnh hưởng của ba phạm trù giao văn hoá: Chủ quan – Khách quan, Gián tiếp – Trực tiếp, Chính xác – Không chính xác đến việc học tiếng Anh tại Trường Cao đẳng Y tế Thanh Hoá thông qua hai mẫu phiếu điều tra. Nghiên cứu cũng rút ra một số ứng dụng trong việc dạy và học tiếng Anh với hy vọng sẽ góp phần nâng cao hiểu biết về giao văn hoá của sinh viên nhằm tăng khả năng giao tiếp.

Từ khoá: văn hóa, phạm trù giao văn hóa, giao tiếp.

Cultural knowledge plays a vital role in the cross-cultural communication process thanks to the inseparable relationship between language and culture. Therefore, with an aim to facilitate students' use of English, the study investigated the effects of three important cross-cultural dimensions: Subjectivity – Objectivity, Directness – Indirectness, Accuracy – Inaccuracy on English learning at Thanh Hoa Medical College through two questionnaires. Some implications for English teaching and learning English are also provided in the hope that they will help raise students' cross-cultural awareness in order to enhance their communicative competence.

Key words: culture, cross-cultural dimensions, communication.

A STUDY ON THE EFFECTS OF SOME CULTURAL DIMENSIONS ON ENGLISH LEARNING AT THANH HOA MEDICAL COLLEGE

I. Introduction

The growth of the use of English as the world's primary language for international communication has obviously been

continuing for several decades (Graddol, 2008). In correspondence to this trend, in almost all of schools, colleges, universities in Vietnam, English is a compulsory subject. Most of the learners have a desire to reach a goal of communicative competence after each English course. However, social

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interaction is about much more than language skills. It is assumed that the comprehension and knowledge on the phonological, grammatical and lexical aspects are not only the bridge to the English language teaching and learning. In fact, it is the differences in linguistics and communicative behaviors that cause obstacles to its teaching and learning tasks. People should bear in mind that things such as *the place of silence*, *appropriate topics of conversation*, *forms of address*, and *expression of speech acts* are different across cultures and the ability to use language appropriately plays a very important role in the communicative process (Vu, 2006).

Language is the key to the heart of a culture. Language and culture are so related that language holds the power to maintain national or cultural identity. Language is important in ethnic and nationalist sentiment because of its powerful and visible symbolism; it becomes a core symbol or rallying point. (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 139) Put simply, language is “a set of symbols shared by a community to communicate meaning and experience” (Jandt, 2004: 147). It cannot be separated from culture and it is through language that we construct and deconstruct our culture, learning who ‘we’ are and who ‘they’ are (Lull, 2000: 139). While it is one thing to learn another language, it is something different altogether to be able to apply that language within its cultural surrounding.

As Stevenson (1994: 59-60) has pointed out, dictionaries can tell us the literal translations of words, but they cannot tell us what those words mean within their cultural surroundings. For all words have at least two meanings, their denotative meaning, which is the word itself, as well as their connotative meaning, or cultural meaning (Hall, 1997). Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1983) argued that language operated through signs, which consisted of a signifier (the physical form) and a signified (the concept evoked by the signifier). Thus, the word “ox” is a sign composed of the signifier (its appearance, ie. the physical letters) and the mental concept (oxness) which one has of the type of animal. The mental concept depends on one’s cultural surroundings. An Indian farmer, for example, would likely have a very different mental concept of an ox than an English person would (Fiske, 1990).

Thus cultural meaning cannot be simply translated, as its meaning is specific to the culture it operates within (Stevenson, 1994: 60). It could be argued that, for an outsider, it is impossible to understand a culture without first knowing the language, but the appropriate use of the language will also depend on the level of cultural knowledge. Haarmann (1999: 64) has noted that language is “a major marker for many local groups around the world, and there have been historical periods when language was assigned an ideological role as the marker par excellence of ethnic identity”. As an

example, Haarmann cites the 18th and 19th Century idea of a national language being the bond which unites individuals. If language is a marker of culture, it should be possible for us to trace certain uses of language back to cultural conditions. In other words, "what is considered polite in one cultural society may be considered impolite in another" (O'Sullivan, 2007, p. 47).

Obviously, as the very phrase suggests, intercultural communication is about cross-cultural competency rather than about language only. *Inter-*, comes from the Latin word for "between", and the dictionary defines "communication" as "exchanging information". It can be said that Vietnamese culture still has certain influences on English acquisition. The interference of the native culture, to some extents, may limit students' ability to acquire the second language comprehensively (Nguyen Quang, 2002). Moreover, the researcher's work also confirmed that students get many difficulties in recognizing errors caused by the interference of their own Vietnamese cultural thought patterns. The most common mistakes made by Vietnamese students are in greeting routines, politeness, and indirectness – directness. For example, many English speakers complain that Vietnamese are very nosy and inquisitive when they ask questions such as "Where are you going? Have you had lunch? What are you doing?" To many Vietnamese, however, these are common questions and people

regard them as part of the greeting formula. In addition, English speakers often remark that Vietnamese do not greet and address them properly. They often get annoyed or even feel frustrated with such questions. The foreigners are not aware that it is cultural differences that cause them unpleasant feelings. At the same time, Vietnamese people do not know that they have violated the others' privacy and caused "culture shock" to the foreigners. As a result, the two parties may fail to communicate effectively due to the cultural differences out of their expectation (Do Mai Thanh, 1999).

There are many factors which can cause difficulties to learners in L2 acquisition namely their ability, age, attitudes. It will be insufficient if cross – cultural categories are not mentioned. There are some major cultural categories that greatly influence the process of learning and using English language by the Vietnamese learners, namely Subjectivity – Objectivity, Directness – Indirectness, Accuracy – Inaccuracy. Nguyen Quang's work in Foreign Language Journal (2002) allows him to draw the conclusion that there are fourteen major Anglo-American-Vietnamese cross-cultural categories as followed:

1. Subjectivity – Objectivity; 2. Directness – Indirectness; 3. Accuracy – Inaccuracy; 4. Positive and Negative politeness; 5. Self-abasement and self-assertion; 6. Abstractness – Rationality; 7. Sentimentality – Equality; 8. Hierarchy – Equality; 9. Introversion – Extroversion;

10. Deduction – Induction; 11. Group orientation – Individual orientation; 12. High context – Low context; 13. Redundancy – Economicality; 14. Staticity – Dynamicality.

All or some categories may exist in many languages. However, one culture may have the preference to one side of certain category to another. For instance, in terms of accuracy – inaccuracy category, there is difference in using passive voice among cultures. Anglo people consider passive voice a symbol of formality and they tend to use it in formal speech and in written documents. There is no dissimilarity in speaker or writer's attitude to the issue in active and passive voice. On the other hand, passive voice with the clear distinction of “bị” and “được” (to be in passive voices) becomes a barrier to Vietnamese learners during the process of English language acquisition. “Bị” refers to negative meaning whereas “được” implies the opposite.

Hôm qua tôi bị 8 điểm (*I got mark 8 yesterday*) → under the speaker expectation

Hôm qua tôi được 8 điểm (*I got mark 8 yesterday*) → above the speaker expectation

Or some passive verbs in Vietnamese do not exist in English.

Tuần trước tôi có vinh hạnh được gặp thầy hiệu trưởng.

(*I was met by the Headmaster last week*)

Was met denotes the pleasure not passivity.

Therefore, English language teachers should be aware of these distinctive features to help learners overcome the psychological and cultural barriers in the teaching and learning process. However, it is a tradition that in Vietnam English teaching process focuses on only linguistic competence and cultural knowledge is not inserted. Teachers report that traditional practices are still used in classrooms across the colleges and universities in Vietnam (Lillian Utsumi & Doan Thi Nam Hau, 2009).

This has inspired me to do research on cross-cultural communication with the focus on the three cultural dimensions based on Dr. Nguyen Quang's framework, namely: Subjectivity – Objectivity, Directness – Indirectness, Accuracy – Inaccuracy. These cultural dimensions exist in every language but differ from culture to culture. It is impossible to list all cross – cultural categories here. What is more, the investigation into influences of Vietnamese cultural dimensions on English learning is the mainstreams of this study. As a result, the research will go into details with three cultural categories which may have prominent influences on the English learning process at Thanh Hoa Medical College.

The investigation provides an insightful awareness of the influences of some cultural practices in Vietnamese communication styles on their learners of

English. As for students, identifying what influential dimensions is a good way to better their English usage. It should be noted that not all cultural dimensions can be considered to cause the interference on the use of English. However, by the suggested implications, the research is expected to reveal some practical ways for students to practice their English and improve it.

As for teachers, this is a good chance for them to reconsider the role of cultural dimensions in learning English. Through the research, they can make use of some implications in order to improve students' competence in English. The study is also expected to generate a serious issue on cross-cultural studies. Subsequent researches can develop the idea raised in the research.

It can be affirmed that the study was carried out with two main aims.

Firstly, this investigation aims to find out some cultural practices in Vietnamese communication styles which affect the English learning process.

Secondly, it is hoped that some pedagogical implications for the English teachers will be drawn out.

II. Development

The background knowledge of related issues with a critical review is presented in the study. The understanding of Culture – Language - Communication in general as well as the relationship between culture

and language, language and communication, communication and culture, the influence of native culture on English learning are taken into consideration as key concepts. After that, potential influences of cultural dimensions are also investigated.

Questionnaire for students

A survey questionnaire for students is designed to research the interference of some cultural dimensions on the medical students, as seen from cross-culture and communication.

The Vietnamese student respondents are 300 in number. They are second year students of nursing at Thanh Hoa Medical College.

The survey conducted from April to June, 2017 consists of two main parts. In the first part: students are asked what to say in the following situations:

1. Situation 1: You meet your English friend(s) in the street.

2. Situation 2: You want to borrow your friend VND 200,000 for some reasons.

3. Situation 3: Your friend says to you: "What a beautiful dress you have!"

4. Situation 4: You want to refuse your friend's invitation to his/her party for some reasons.

In the second part, students are asked to translate four sentences

1. Vào Nam ra Bắc.

The aim of this sentence is to investigate how students use prepositions to translate (“to” or other prepositions).

2. Mặc dù thời tiết xấu nhưng họ vẫn đến đúng giờ.

This sentence is aimed to look into how students use “although”/“but”.

3. Bởi vì trời mưa cho nên tôi ở nhà.

This sentence is to investigate if Vietnamese students use both “because” and “so”.

4. Hôm qua tôi bị thi trượt.

The aim of this is to check whether Vietnamese students know the difference between English and Vietnamese passive voice.

However, the following factors are not covered in the survey:

- Students’ language proficiency – what their English levels are. All of the students are in their second year and their supposed English level is pre-intermediate.
- Students’ communicative competence – this is a survey questionnaire and students are asked to express their use of English in written form. Although there are questions to test their communicative competence and spoken language, the author cannot access 300 students to measure them individually.

After the survey, the questionnaire results show:

+ Due to the influences of culture and language, Vietnamese students have the tendency of imposing their cultural thought patterns on their English expressions. In using prepositions, they are likely to reveal their subjective points of view to the surroundings, e.g. they say “go in South” or “go out North” instead of “go to the South, go to the North.” Their subjective thought patterns can also be realized in the way they translate the word “bị” in the sentence “Hôm qua tôi bị thi trượt.”: “I was failed the exam yesterday”.

+ Notably, when borrowing money, they use many Vietnamese-style address forms such as “my best friend”, “my good sister/brother”. This is understandable and acceptable for Vietnamese people but it should not be used to talk to foreigners, for many of whom may feel annoyed when being called “sister” or “brother”. They also tend to use indirect strategy to borrow money with lengthy reasons. When complemented, many of Vietnamese students are “in the habit of refusing” by saying “No”, “Not at all”, “I don’t think so”, etc...

+ Most of the students use both “although” and “but”, “because” and “so” in a sentence.

The factors causing interference for Vietnamese learners may be explained as the followings:

- “Lack of first language and second language equivalence.

- Semantic nuances of foreign language difference.
- Discourse and cultural patterns from first language do not carry over entirely into the second language. Students may trip up occasionally over difficulty in expressing their ideas.
- Despite using English, they do not share the same culture background."

(Do Mai Thanh, 2000: 28)

Besides, the more years the students had studied English, the fewer mistakes they made. Students from rural areas made more mistakes than those from urban areas. It may be explained by the fact that students in urban areas have more opportunities to be exposed to English books, magazines, newspapers, films, music...

Question 2: Which do you focus on when you teach English?

Linguistic knowledge	Communicative skill	Both linguistic knowledge and communicative skill	Others
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Question 3: Which **techniques** do you use to insert cultural factors in language lessons?

English newspapers	Comparison	Visual aids	English films	Role play	Cultural assimilator	Others
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Question 4: Do you find it difficult to insert cultural knowledge into English language lessons?

All the teachers are aware of the importance of cultural background to the English use of Vietnamese students. However, many of them say that they do

Most of sentences that the students made bear a lot of cultural mistakes due to the interference of cross-cultural dimensions.

Questionnaire for teachers

The survey questionnaire for teachers is designed to investigate their awareness of cross-cultural dimensions in teaching English, their focus in teaching, the ways they insert cultural knowledge and their difficulties in English lessons.

The number of Vietnamese teachers is ten. All of them come from Thanh Hoa Medical College, English Department. They have been teaching medical students for at least 3 years.

The survey includes four questions.

Question 1: Do you think it is necessary to make students aware of cultural differences while teaching English?

not prepare carefully their lessons which include cultural knowledge. Culture, in fact, is not taken into consideration in their real teaching. Some teachers add that they only pay attention to explain cultural factors when they are really essential to understand the content of contexts. Others

attribute their lack of cultural knowledge in English lessons to the cultural poverty of textbooks, unavailable reference, difficulty in organizing such lessons, their own limited experience. However, none of these teachers thinks that it wastes time to talk about culture while they teach linguistic knowledge.

Some implications for Vietnamese ELT teachers are suggested in the research.

Teaching the target culture to students

“We cannot say about the success in English language learning without full knowledge of cross-cultural differences and without a certain extent in acculturation.” (Nguyen Quang, 1997:5)

As it has been stressed by a number of writers, learning target language cultures is of great importance. However, in English classes in Vietnam, linguistic learning seems to be separated from culture learning. Until recently the emphasis of teaching and learning English has been the grammatical, lexical and phonological components of the foreign language. Many Vietnamese teachers of English consider the grammatical correctness of utterances to be the most important purpose of language teaching. In their lessons, grammatical competence is the top priority. Thus they concentrate on *“linguistic competence in the achievement of successful communication rather than the knowledge of social norms and values, roles and relations between individuals.”* (Ha Cam Tam, 1998:2). As

a result, learners may achieve grammatical and vocabulary proficiency but not pragmatic competence. They do not acknowledge that besides grammatical correctness, what they say must be contextually appropriate in order to reach communicative purposes.

In Nguyen Van Do's point of view (1996: 67, 67), the relationship between learners and teachers provides an insight into cultural attitudes and assumption about knowledge and learning. In Vietnam, teachers are expected to transmit knowledge to students for digesting passively. In English lessons, students listen to their teachers, trying to remember what they are being told. Such lessons restrict communicative skills; therefore, they do not help develop students' communicative competence. Not until students directly have contact with English native speakers do cultural problems arise.

There have been various language methods and approaches to language teaching such as Grammar – Translation, Direct, Audio lingual, Functional – Notional... Still, these methods were unsatisfactory because *“there was a tendency to separate the learning of a language as grammatical system from the provision of information about one or more countries where it is spoken. Learning the grammar of American language remained the important focus and the rest was “background”*” (Byram. M and Flemming. M, 1998: 2). Due to a greater emphasis on language learning for

communication, more importantly, for social interaction, the concern with the cultural dimension has emerged and a fresh perspective is really necessary.

Teachers' role in teaching the target language culture to students

When learning English in Vietnam, students do not have a native language environment to learn English language and culture. At the same time students do not have enough access to authentic language as well as "real culture". In this situation, the role of language teachers is significant because they are themselves the first source from which the students learn the second culture. Thus, the teachers should pay attention to both correctness and appropriateness, and help students understand the relationship between thought, culture and language. More importantly, they should encourage students develop appropriate cultural and thought patterns of the target language as Roberto Politzer pointed out about the teachers' role in a Georgetown University report of the Fifth Annual Round Table meeting on Linguistics and language teaching as follows:

"As language teachers, we must be interested in the study of culture (in the social scientists' sense of the word) not because we necessarily want to teach the culture of the other country but because we have to teach it. If we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates, we are

teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning; for unless he is warned, he receives cultural instruction, he will associate American concepts or objects with the foreign symbols." (1959:100-1)

Teaching goals of cultural knowledge can be divided into three categories:

- Developing a greater awareness and a broader knowledge about the target culture.
- Understanding differences between the target culture and the student culture.
- Understand the values of the target culture.

(Valette, 1986: 181)

To achieve these goals, teachers themselves are required to have both linguistic competence and cultural knowledge. They must, therefore, take seriously the responsibility to educate themselves in this important aspect. *"Future teachers of foreign language should be provided not only with careful training but with guidelines on how to continue their studies in order to keep abreast of the rapid changes in cultural patterns which are taking place in many areas in this century. They should study, travel, discuss. The more informed and discerning the teacher, the more likelihood there is that his students may achieve some measure of international understanding."* (Rivers, 1968: 271,272)

How to incorporate cultural knowledge in classroom

The problem is: How can teachers insert cultural dimensions into English lessons?

The first step in teaching about a culture is increasing the students' awareness of the nature of that culture. They should inform students the basic differences between the two cultures to reduce students' negative reaction. More importantly, it is students who should develop in their study of a second culture the concept that people in various cultures respond to life needs in variety of different ways.

"The study of culture of a language should bring it home to the students the realization that there are many ways of doing and expressing things, and that differences do not necessarily represent moral issues of right or wrong". (Rivers, 1968: 269)

To raise students' interest in cultural understanding, it is necessary for teachers to motivate students in the classroom in many ways. Teachers should conduct some activities in classroom to provide students opportunities to have a look at the second culture. Here are some suggested techniques for teachers of English:

Penpals

Foreign penpals can increase students' interest in language learning. Individual students may have their own penpals or

the entire class may decide to exchange letters with a class in the target country.

Comparison

Knowledge of another culture should be absorbed in the relation with students' own culture. While teaching cultural factors, teachers should link the understanding of other and native cultures through the notion of comparison:

Michael Byram and Michael Flemming assert:

"It is the comparison of own and other cultures which begins to help learners to perceive and cope with differences. It provides them with the basics for successful interaction with members of another cultural group, not just the means of exchanging information" (1993:4)

In this way, students arrive at a deeper understanding of both another culture and their own and they are better prepared to communicate with native speakers and handle the everyday situations they are likely to encounter in their country.

Role play

The teacher can create situations in the classroom which provide students opportunities to play roles. This technique is cultivated most easily in the early stages in the dialogue type of lesson. *"The dialogue should be constructed around an experience compatible with the age and interests of the students, which will clearly demonstrate behaviour culturally appropriate for speakers of the languages. As students memorize the dialogue and act*

it out, they learn through role playing, as they did in their own culture in childhood games and experienced relationships.” (Rivers, 1968: 274)

III. Conclusion

This research has dealt with the problem of the cultural and language interference of their mother tongue on the use of the target language by the Vietnamese students and some implications for Vietnamese ELT teachers.

Chapter I reviews the relationship between culture, language and communication as well as the overview of some Vietnamese cultural dimensions which have influences on the English learning of Vietnamese students: Subjectivity – Objectivity, Directness – Indirectness, Accuracy - Inaccuracy. To investigate the real situation at Thanh Hoa Medical College, the author designed the two survey questionnaires for teachers and students. In chapter II, by analyzing the results of the survey questionnaires carried out among 300 students of nursing department, most of them are at beginning or pre-intermediate level of English proficiency, I identify that three cultural dimensions really affect Vietnamese students at low level in the way they use English because of the interference of their mother tongue. Therefore students should be provided with cultural knowledge about these dimensions in their

English lessons. The results of teacher survey also reveals that although teachers know the importance of cultural knowledge in English proficiency, few of them insert cultural dimensions in their lessons. Chapter III suggests some implications for Vietnamese ELT teachers.

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