

INTERCULTURAL TRAINING AND EFL STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN A HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT OF VIETNAM

Nguyen Thi Bich Ngoc^{1*}, Doan Thi Minh Tam¹, Tran Minh Thanh²

¹TNU - School of Foreign Languages

²TNU - University of Information and Communication Technology

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: 30/12/2023</p> <p>Revised: 02/02/2024</p> <p>Published: 02/02/2024</p>	<p>This paper discusses the effects of an intercultural communication course on the development of students' intercultural communicative competence, a crucial competence for language learners in the globalised world. Using a mixed method approach that combines survey reports with students' interviews, the study explored whether there were any changes in students' intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes before and after the course and to what extent the course contributed to the development. A total of 122 English-major students took part in an online survey and 10 of them voluntarily entered into semi-structured interviews. An adopted questionnaire from Huang (2021) was used as the primary data collection instrument. The findings indicated that while the course helped to improve all components of intercultural communicative competence, it supported more strongly the development of knowledge rather than the other aspects, especially the skills component. Several suggestions were given for the revision of course content and curriculum design.</p>
KEYWORDS	
Intercultural competence	
Intercultural training	
Culture courses	
Culture-language integrated	
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GIẢNG DẠY LIÊN VĂN HÓA VÀ NĂNG LỰC GIAO TIẾP LIÊN VĂN HÓA CỦA SINH VIÊN TRONG BỐI CẢNH MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC Ở VIỆT NAM

Nguyễn Thị Bích Ngọc^{1*}, Đoàn Thị Minh Tâm¹, Trần Minh Thành²

¹Trường Ngoại ngữ - ĐH Thái Nguyên

²Trường Đại học Công nghệ Thông tin và Truyền thông – ĐH Thái Nguyên

THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
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TỪ KHÓA	
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* Corresponding author. Email: nguyenbichngoc.sfl@tnu.edu.vn

1. Introduction

The “cultural turn” has affected foreign language (FL) education profoundly in such areas as reshaping the objectives of learning and teaching, revisiting the curriculum, and retraining the teachers [1]. Intercultural communicative competence (ICC), the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from other languages and cultural backgrounds [2], has become the main objective of FL teaching and learning [3]. Academic literature has proposed the integration of culture in English language classrooms, with a focus on ICC as a key goal [4].

1.1. The Concept of ICC

Numerous definitions of intercultural competence (IC) have been put forth in the literature, depending on scholars’ disciplinary orientations, ideologies, and personal experiences. Some of these include *intercultural effectiveness*, *transcultural competence*, *intercultural communication competence*, *cross-cultural awareness*, *intercultural communicative competence*, *intercultural competence*, *intercultural sensitivity*, and several others [5]. Within the discipline of foreign language (FL) learning, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is frequently utilized interchangeably with IC; the concept of ICC was introduced by Byram in 1997 as a capability to cultivate significant intercultural interactions using a foreign language [6].

This study employed Byram’s (1997) concept and model of ICC [6] for it has been well-established in the literature of intercultural studies and for its relevance to the context of language learning and teaching in general and of this study’s context in particular. The model proposes a framework consisting of five distinct components, referred to as “savoirs”. This term, derived from the French language, is utilized to encapsulate the essential elements of ICC. These components include knowledge (*savoirs*), intercultural attitudes (*savoir être*), interpreting/relating skills (*savoir comprendre*), discovery/interaction skills (*savoir apprendre/faire*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s’engager*).

1.2. Students’ ICC and Intercultural Training

In the global world, the practical implementation of the intercultural aspect in FL education has continued to pose challenges. The removal of culturally specific content from educational resources was a common practice, as publishers found it more convenient to market materials devoid of cultural references to cater to a wider international audience [7]. Additionally, integrated curriculum is still rare [1], and teachers lack experience and proper training in incorporating the intercultural approach into their teaching practice [8].

Most studies about students’ ICC have focused on investigating the effects of training interventions on students’ perceived ICC. The findings suggest that intercultural training and cultural immersion positively impact students’ perceived ICC, leading to an improvement in their ICC [9]. Studies also confirmed the effectiveness of studying abroad and telecollaboration [10], [11]. For example, Young and Schartner [12] investigated the effects of a curriculum centered on cross-cultural communication (CCC) on the ability of international students to adapt and adjust. They found that individuals pursuing a degree in CCC exhibited superior performance of academic success than those with a similar curriculum deemphasizing CCC.

In Vietnam, it was not until after 2008, with the mark of the National Foreign Language Project (NFLP), that IC gained its attention in EFL [13]. Since then, EFL policies in Vietnam have supported the development of ICC among learners (e.g., The National Foreign Language Project, the Higher Education Qualification Framework, and the National School Curriculum). Although the macro policies support intercultural language teaching and the importance of culture teaching has been stated in foreign language classrooms, studies have suggested that the actual practice of intercultural language teaching in Vietnam is still under a lot of struggle [14].

With regards to ICC in teachers’ perceptions and their pedagogical practice, Vietnamese English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction tends to focus on providing students with

linguistic knowledge, while cultural knowledge integration is limited [15], [16]. Although teachers are aware of the significance of culture in foreign language education, culture has not received much attention in English classrooms [17]. In addition, most studies on ICC in Vietnam tend to focus on teachers' perceptions and practices or the representation of culture in English textbooks; few have investigated students' ICC and their perceptions of ICC training at the university level [18], [19].

Responding to the changes in macro policies and recognising the importance of ICC in higher education, the university, which is the context of this study, has included explicit intercultural training in its curriculum since 2018. The university has included an intercultural training course (the Intercultural Communication course) which aims to develop students' ICC. The course content was based on course designers' perspectives guided by Byram's [6] and Deardorff's [20] theory of ICC. The course covers 15 weeks, with a 3-hour class per week, and is delivered as a compulsory course for third-year students. The pedagogical approach combines lectures with students' presentations, written reflections, and group projects on explaining cultural differences, reflecting on one's beliefs and values, or explaining cultural problems and suggesting solutions. Although the course has been implemented for several years, to date, there have not been any attempts to investigate the effectiveness of the course in developing learners' ICC, especially from the viewpoints of the students, a crucial stakeholder in any educational process.

This paper discusses the results extracted from a larger study that examines the impact of an intercultural communication course (now called IC course) on students' perceived intercultural communicative competence. This study hopes to fill the existing literature gap and tackle the local context's inherent challenges.

2. Methods

The study seeks the answers to the following questions: (1) What are the students' perceived ICC levels before and after their participation in the IC course? (2) To what extent does the IC course affect students' ICC? To address the questions, both quantitative and qualitative data were utilized following the sequential explanatory design [21]. The pre- and post-ICC questionnaires were delivered to 122 English major students, and the follow-up interviews were done with ten students.

The survey items were adapted from Huang's [22], which was used to gauge students' perceived levels of ICC before and after the training. In his original survey, Huang [22] rearranged the ICC components and blended the *awareness* component into the *knowledge* one. The survey in this study followed the same arrangement with 25 statements on a Likert scale of 1-5. The 25 statements were divided according to the three-dimensional model: knowledge (9 statements), skills (9 statements), and attitudes (7 statements). Mean scores and standard deviations were utilized in descriptive statistics. Afterward, paired-sample T-tests were used to analyze the relationships between the pretest and post-test scores. The measurement was interpreted as very low (1.0-1.5), low (1.51-2.50), moderate (2.51-3.50), high (3.51-4.50), and extremely high (4.51-5.0) basing on Paige et al.'s guidelines [23]. In the qualitative phase, student interviews were designed based on the qualitative findings, aiming to explain the results of the previous phase. Students were asked to justify the reasons for the differences in their perceived levels of different ICC components reported in the questionnaire, their perceptions of the contribution of course to their ICC as well as their wishes and suggestions for future training related to ICC.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Students' ICC before and after the IC course

Students' ICC before the course

Concerning the *knowledge* component (Table 1), students expressed their high ICC knowledge ($M = 3.60$). Especially, students have a high score on knowledge about their own culture (item 6: $M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.85$) and the recognition of differences in cultures (item 8, $M =$

3.84, SD = 0.80; item 7, M = 3.75; S.D = 0.75). However, they demonstrated moderate knowledge of other cultures (item 5, M = 3.0, SD = 0.73). The results indicated that students already possess a good understanding of their own culture, and they know, to a certain extent, other cultures in the world.

In terms of the *skills* component, students expressed their moderate ICC skills (M = 3.20). The lowest scores fell into item 12 (*communicating with people from other cultures easily*; M = 2.83) and item 13 (*interpreting cultural practices, beliefs, or values of other cultures*; M = 2.73). The highest score went for the *skill of telling people about your own country and culture* (item 18, M = 3.66, SD = 0.83). These results are also in line with those regarding students' knowledge in which students were more confident with issues related to their own culture.

Table 1. Students' ICC knowledge before doing the IC course

ICC knowledge	N	Min	Max	M	S.D
5. I know about other cultures in the world.	122	2	5	3.00	0.73
6. I am aware that my culture influences the way I interpret the behaviors of people from other cultures.	122	2	5	3.84	0.85
7. I know that although someone may look different from me, we may share a lot in common.	122	2	5	3.75	0.75
8. I know there are cultural differences in nonverbal communication.	122	3	5	3.84	0.80
Overall knowledge	122	2.78	4.78	3.60	0.44
ICC skills	N	Min	Max	M	S.D
12. I can communicate with people from other cultures easily.	122	1	5	2.83	0.80
13. I can interpret cultural practices, beliefs or values of other cultures.	122	1	4	2.73	0.80
18. I am confident in telling people about my own country and culture.	122	2	5	3.66	0.83
Overall skills	122	2.11	4.11	3.20	0.47
ICC attitudes	N	Min	Max	M	S.D
20. I am interested in learning about and understanding other cultures.	122	2	5	3.36	0.80
22. I respect the values of people from other cultures.	122	2	5	4.02	0.86
23. When I meet someone from another country, I show an interest in understanding his/her culture.	122	2	5	3.32	0.81
24. When people from other cultures behave differently, I can respect the differences.	122	2	5	3.93	0.83
Overall attitudes	122	2.14	4.86	3.62	0.63

With respect to the *attitudes* component, students demonstrated high ICC attitudes (M = 3.62). Noticeably, students expressed their high attitude toward respecting the values of people from other cultures (item 22, M = 4.02, SD = 0.86) and respecting the differences when people from other cultures behave differently (item 24, M = 3.93, SD = 0.83). However, the attitude of being interested in learning about and understanding other cultures (items 20 and 23) received the lowest mean scores of 3.36 and 3.32, respectively.

In short, descriptive findings indicated that students had moderate to high levels of ICC components before the course. Of these, the most significant was students' ICC attitudes (M = 3.62), followed by their ICC knowledge (M = 3.60) and skills (M = 3.2). Students demonstrated high perceived levels of knowledge about and performance in issues related to their own culture; however, they were not as confident in their knowledge about other cultures and their skills to perform smoothly with cultural otherness. While they showed high levels of respect for cultural differences, they did not demonstrate a strong desire to learn more about their culture and other cultures. These findings could provide useful reasons for training, particularly in areas of equipping students with more cultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes regarding other cultures.

Students' ICC after the course

As depicted in Table 2, students illustrated their high ICC knowledge (M = 4.16). Like the pretest, students expressed their highest level of understanding of their own culture (item 1, M = 4.34, SD = 0.65) and the lowest level of knowledge about other cultures in the world (item 5, M

= 3.61, SD = 0.77). In addition, students also expressed their high awareness of the differences in nonverbal communication (M = 4.40, SD = 0.63) and the challenges and benefits of cultural diversity (M = 4.32, SD = 0.67).

Table 2. *Students' ICC after the course*

ICC knowledge	N	Min	Max	M	S.D
1. I know about my own culture.	122	3	5	4.34	0.65
4. I am aware of the challenges and benefits of cultural diversity.	122	3	5	4.32	0.67
5. I know about other cultures in the world.	122	2	5	3.61	.077
8. I know there are cultural differences in nonverbal communication.	122	3	5	4.40	0.63
Overall knowledge	122	3.00	5.00	4.16	0.49
ICC skills	N	Min	Max	M	S.D
11. I can recognize cultural rules and biases different from those of my own.	122	2	5	3.97	0.76
12. I can communicate with people from other cultures easily.	122	2	5	3.43	0.84
17. I am confident in my abilities to adapt to a new country or culture.	122	1	5	3.49	0.87
18. I am confident in telling people about my own country and culture.	122	3	5	4.20	0.69
Overall skills	122	2.78	5.00	3.67	0.56
ICC attitudes	N	Min	Max	M	S.D
19. I like spending time exploring my own culture.	122	2	5	4.14	0.71
20. I am interested in learning about and understanding other cultures.	122	3	5	3.88	0.64
21. I enjoy interacting with people from other cultures	122	2	5	3.87	0.86
22. I respect the values of people from other cultures.	122	3	5	4.40	0.60
23. When I meet someone from another country, I show an interest in understanding his/her culture.	122	2	5	3.91	0.74
24. When people from other cultures behave differently, I can respect the differences.	122	3	5	4.36	0.63
25. I don't immediately draw negative conclusions when people from other cultures do or see things differently.	122	1	5	4.12	0.85
Overall attitudes	122	3.00	5.00	4.10	0.49

For ICC skills, students also expressed their high ICC skills (M = 3.67). Compared to the knowledge component, the overall score for the skills component was lower. The highest scores were for item 18 (*telling people about my own country and culture*) and item 11 (*recognizing cultural rules and biases different from those of my own*), with a mean score of 4.20 and 3.97, respectively. On the other hand, the lowest scores were seen in items 12 (*communicating with people from other cultures easily*) and 17 (*adapting to a new country or culture*). Compared to the pretest result, students seemed better at recognising cultural rules and biases.

In terms of the attitudinal component, students depicted their high ICC attitudes (M = 4.10). Specifically, participants highly agreed with three items: item 19 (*I like spending time exploring my own culture*; M = 4.14, SD = 0.71), item 22 (*respect the values of people from other cultures*; M = 4.40, SD = 0.60), item 24 (*respect the differences in behaviors of cultural others*; M = 4.36, SD = 0.63).

In summary, after the IC course, students' ICC levels were marked "high" in all three components, of which the knowledge component showed the highest scores (M = 4.16), followed by attitudes (M = 4.10) and skills (M = 3.67).

3.2. The effect of the IC course on students' ICC

Results from the questionnaire

A paired-sample t-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of the IC course on students' ICC on three components; the most significant results are shown in Table 3.

As can be seen from table 3, concerning the ICC knowledge, overall results indicated that there was a statistically significant increase in students' ICC knowledge from phase 1 (before doing the IC course) (M = 3.58, SD = 0.40) to phase 2 (after doing the IC course) (M = 4.16, SD = 0.44), $t(121) = -10.58$, $p < 0.000$ (two-tailed). The mean increase in IC knowledge was 0.58,

with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -0.42 to -0.83. Among the items mentioned, the most obvious increase was seen in students' knowledge of their own culture (item 1, MD = 0.83), knowledge of the challenges and benefits of cultural diversity (item 4, MD = 0.62) and knowledge of other cultures in the world (item 5, MD = 0.62). Compared to the pre-survey results, where students expressed the lowest perceived levels of knowledge about other cultures, the post-survey findings showed that students felt more knowledgeable about this aspect.

Table 3. Results from pair sample t-test

ICC items	Before IC course		After IC course		Mean Diff	Sig. (2-tailed)
	M	S.D	M	S.D		
Knowledge	3.58	0.40	4.16	0.44	-0.58	0.000
1. I know about my own culture.	3.51	0.83	4.34	0.65	-0.83	0.000
4. I am aware of the challenges and benefits of cultural diversity.	3.70	0.74	4.32	0.67	-0.62	0.000
5. I know about other cultures in the world.	2.99	0.73	3.61	0.77	-0.62	0.000
9. I am familiar with my own cultural rules and biases.	3.51	0.75	4.14	0.82	-0.63	0.000
Skills	3.16	0.47	3.67	0.56	-0.52	0.000
12. I can communicate with people from other cultures easily.	2.83	0.76	3.43	0.84	-0.61	0.000
13. I can interpret cultural practices, beliefs or values of other cultures.	2.73	0.78	3.39	0.87	-0.66	0.000
14. I can change and adapt my way of thinking according to the context.	3.32	0.96	3.95	0.77	-0.63	0.000
15. I am confident in conducting conversations with people from different cultures.	2.87	0.85	3.43	0.84	-0.57	0.000
Attitudes	3.62	0.63	4.10	0.49	-0.48	0.000
19. I like spending time exploring my own culture.	3.60	0.90	4.14	0.71	-0.54	0.000
20. I am interested in learning about and understanding other cultures.	3.36	0.79	3.88	0.64	-0.52	0.000
23. When I meet someone from another country, I show an interest in understanding his/her culture.	3.32	0.81	3.91	0.74	-0.59	0.000

Likewise, respondents' overall ICC skills mean score increased from phase 1 ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.46$) to phase 2 ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.56$), $t(121) = -8.30$, $p < 0.000$ (two-tailed). The mean increase in ICC skills was -0.52, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -0.32 to -0.61. Though there was modest growth in the mean score of students' skills, the most remarkable improvement was shown in areas in which students perceived themselves as the weakest in phase 1, i.e., *communicate with people from other cultures easily* (item 12), *interpret cultural practices, beliefs or values of other cultures* (item 13), and *change and adapt my way of thinking according to the context* (item 14). Therefore, it can be seen that the IC course helped to boost students' confidence in maintaining appropriate communication with those from other cultures.

Regarding ICC attitudes, the overall mean score witnessed a rise from phase 1 ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.63$) to phase 2 ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.49$), $t(121) = -6.75$, $p < 0.000$ (two-tailed). The mean increase in IC attitudes was -0.48, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -0.38 to -0.59. Although the overall statistics indicated a small change in learners' attitudes, this does not deny the effectiveness of the course on students' attitudes. Instead, this could be explained by the fact that students already possessed quite high levels of ICC attitudes before the course; it is not possible to expect remarkable changes. A mean score of 4.10 at the end of the course reflects impressive students' ICC attitudinal levels. In addition, when compared to the pre-questionnaire results, students indicated more interest in learning about and understanding other cultures, as these are the areas where the most significant score increases were observed (items 20 and 23).

In sum, the results from the questionnaire indicated that there were improvements in learners' perceived ICC levels in all three components. After the course, all the students' levels of ICC components were seen at high levels; specifically, their levels of ICC knowledge were the highest, followed by attitudes and skills. The general findings of the study are in line with previous studies [12], [10], [11] that intercultural training has positive effects on students' ICC, supporting the applicability of IC training on expected learning outcomes related to ICC.

Results from semi-structured interviews

Results from semi-structured interviews almost confirmed the quantitative data and helped explain them in more detail. Due to the volume of the article, the researchers only reported briefly the major themes from the interviews without detailed analysis and quotes. The themes include (1) the overall impacts of the IC course on students' ICC, (2) the reasons for the differences in the development of students' ICC components, and (3) students' expectations for more similar courses. First, when asked about the course's overall contribution to their IC, all the interviewees stressed the positive impacts of the course. They expressed that involvement in class activities such as doing readings, previewing documents, or working on group projects helped them to develop their IC. Regarding the particular ICC components (knowledge, skills, and attitudes), most tended to admit that knowledge was the area in which they felt the most significant improvement, while skills were the least. They appreciated the course content that provided theoretical background on classifying cultures and helped them have a systematic view of cultural differences. They also provided the reasons why they did not feel confident with their IC skills. Some stressed the importance of communicative competence in addition to intercultural competence; some blamed the course duration and activities as inadequate in preparing them for the necessary skills. Finally, all interview participants expressed their hope to have similar courses in the future as they thought that using English appropriately was important for their jobs.

In conclusion, the findings from the interviews confirmed the results from the questionnaire in that the course positively impacted students' ICC and that knowledge was the area with the most significant improvement. At the same time, ICC skills remained challenging for the course to develop. Short course duration and lack of activities for international exchange were mentioned as the reasons for little IC skills development.

4. Conclusion and Implications

This paper discusses the effectiveness of cultural training on the development of learners' ICC. Combining quantitative and qualitative data, the research shows that students' perceived ICC levels improved after completing the IC course in all three ICC components. While the knowledge component received the most improvement, the skills component remained the most challenging for a cultural training course to develop. As pointed out by the students, the possible explanation for this is that the duration of a course is not enough to result in a significant change in students' ICC skills and that the course did not provide enough genuine interactions for learners to practice their skills. It is, therefore, recommended that the university consider creating more opportunities for students to interact with cultural others. In addition, the university and its instructors should pay attention to the integration of ICC elements in all courses possible, not just relying on a single IC course.

This study is subject to certain limitations with respect to its methodology and scope. The study exclusively recruited and examined a singular group of participants, which may impact the changes between the pretest and follow-up assessments. In terms of scope, the research could reach only 122 senior English-majored students in an academic year. Forthcoming research should incorporate a control group of students who do not partake in the intervention or utilize a Double Pretests – Post-test design to mitigate the potential influence of maturation. The data should be collected from several academic years (the longitudinal design) to yield more consistent findings regarding the effects of the IC course on students' ICC.

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