An intercultural perspective on teaching and learning in the Vietnamese EFL classroom

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ABSTRACT

Language and culture have an interdependent relationship. It follows that foreign language learners preparing to work or study in a multicultural setting need to be both linguistically and interculturally competent in order to be effective in intercultural communication. For this reason, intercultural competence has become an important goal of foreign language education. This paper reports on an empirical study of Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' and students' perceptions of the cultural dimension of language teaching and learning and their classroom practices from an intercultural perspective. Fourteen EFL teachers and two hundred EFL students from two universities in Vietnam participated in the study. The study used a questionnaire, classroom observations and interviews with teachers and students as data collection methods. The findings indicate that the teachers' and students' classroom practices of culture teaching and learning were greatly influenced by their perceptions of the cultural dimension of language teaching and learning. Some implications for EFL education are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Intercultural language learning has become an important goal of foreign language education that emphasizes the interdependence of language and culture and the importance of intercultural understanding in communication with people from different cultural backgrounds (e.g., Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993; Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino and Kohler, 2003). Although teachers and students have recently paid more attention to culture in language teaching and learning, research shows that culture teaching and learning still have a peripheral status in the language classroom (e.g., Castro, Sercu and Garcia, 2004; Chavez, 2002; Tsou, 2005). In order to foster intercultural language learning, it is important to investigate how EFL teachers and students perceive the cultural dimension of language teaching and learning, and how culture is taught in the EFL classroom.
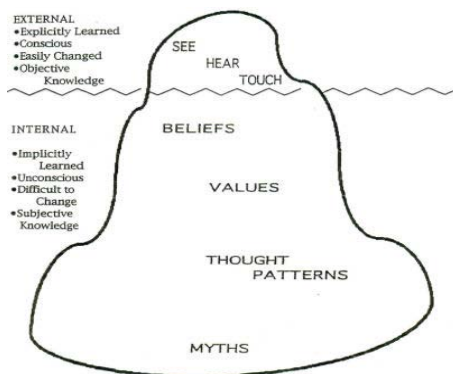
BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Concepts of culture

Culture is a highly complex phenomenon. There are more than 200 definitions of culture in the literature. Three important concepts of culture are important to this study. The first involves the metaphor of a cultural iceberg (Figure 1) (Weaver, 1993) that consists of two parts: a small part 'above the water' with elements that we can see, hear or touch such as dressing or cooking, and a large part 'under the water' with elements like cultural values, beliefs or thought patterns. The metaphor of the cultural iceberg implies that a large proportion of our own culturally-shaped perceptions is mostly unconsciously applied in our everyday interactions (Weaver, 1993).

   The second concept of culture is defined in relation to community, communication and individual (Figure 2) (Kaikkonen, 2001). According to Kaikkonen, culture can be approached from two angles: the social and communicative perspectives. The social perspective seeks explanation for cultural phenomena in the social

order based on values, appreciations or cultural standards. The communicative perspective emphasizes the individual's action through interaction with others within the community in learning the fundamentals of culture such as language, behavioural routines or communication rituals. Kaikkonen argues that there would be no culture without the three interactive components, i.e., the individual, communication and the community.

FIGURE 1
The Cultural Iceberg (Weaver, 1993)

EXTERNAL
• Explicitly Learned
• Conscious
• Easily Changed
• Objective Knowledge

SEE
HEAR
TOUCH

INTERNAL
• Implicitly Learned
• Unconscious
• Difficult to Change
• Subjective Knowledge

BELIEFS

VALUES

THOUGHT PATTERNS

MYTHS

(Source: http://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/iceberg.htm)

Using this concept, culture is defined as (Kaikkonen, 2001, p.81):

…a common agreement between the members of a community on the values, norms, rules, role expectations and meanings which guide the behaviour and communication of the members… [I]t includes the deeds and products which result from the interaction between the members.

The third concept of culture is defined in modernist and post-modernist perspectives by Kramsch (2006). The modernist perspective associates culture with the humanistic concept that refers to general knowledge of literature, arts, institutions, and philosophical achievements, and the sociolinguistic concept that

associates culture with the native speakers' ways of behaving, and their customs, beliefs and values. The post-modernist perspective refers to culture as Discourse, identity and power. Culture as Discourse with a capital 'D', i.e., "ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network'" (Gee, 1990, p.143, cited in Kramsch, 2006, p.16), is associated with utterance embedded in asymmetrical relations of power between interlocutors. When culture is placed in Discourse, the emphasis is put on the individual whose membership in a culture is linked to his or her social and political identity. It is the shift of the emphasis from culture to identity in language teaching that gives learners 'agency and a sense of power' (Kramsch, 2006, p.17).

FIGURE 2
Culture: community, communication and individual (Kaikkonen, 2001, p.80)
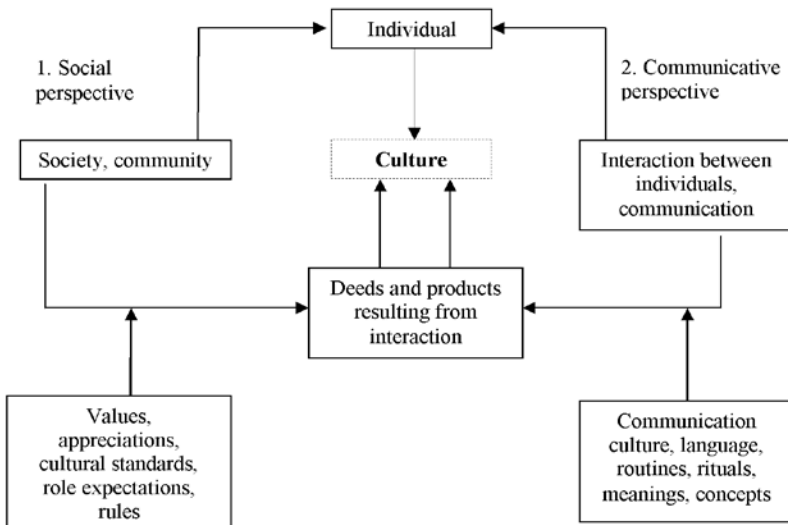
The concept of culture in language teaching and learning is being re-evaluated by contemporary linguists. This re-evaluation tends to deal with the hybridity and plurality of culture (e.g., Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993) that have underpinned the foundation for intercultural approaches to language teaching and learning.

Language and culture

Language and culture have an interactive and reciprocal relationship. This relationship is reflected in different terms such as *language-and-culture* (Liddicoat *et al.*, 2003), *languaculture* (Risager, 2005), or *culturelanguage* (Papademetre and Scarino, 2006). As shown in Figure 3, culture connects to all levels of language use and structures (Liddicoat *et al.*, 2003). The interdependent relationship between language and culture is also expressed through cultural connotations in semantics (Byram, 1989), cultural norms in communication (Kramsch, 1993) and social construction of culture through language (Kramsch, 1995).

FIGURE 3
Points of articulation between culture and language (Liddicoat *et al.*, 2003, p.9)
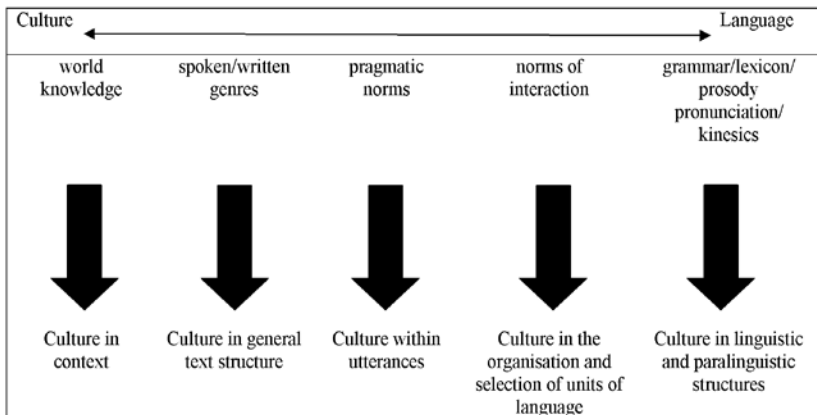
Culture teaching and learning in previous studies

A number of previous studies have investigated how foreign language teachers and students perceived the cultural dimension of language teaching and learning in different contexts. For example, Allen (2000) shows that teachers might find it difficult to teach culture in the same way they taught grammar or vocabulary. Castro *et al.* (2004) state that Spanish EFL teachers were conflicted by needing to prioritise culture teaching in language teaching. Sercu (2005) also shows that the traditional information-transfer pedagogy was prevalent among the teachers from different countries. Guntermann, Hendrickson and de Urioste (1996) find that very few French and Spanish tertiary students ranked culture first in relation to four language skills. Chavez (2002) also argues that students frequently failed to value the foreign language culture in language classes, while teachers tended to acknowledge it. Although culture has recently got more emphasis in EFL teaching and learning in Asian countries, culture teaching and learning in practices still have a peripheral status in these contexts (e.g., Tsou, 2005).

Intercultural language learning

Language and culture are placed at the centre of the learning process as these elements are fundamentally interrelated (Liddicoat *et al.*, 2003). Intercultural language learning (IcLL) is defined as follows (Liddicoat *et al.*, 2003, p.46):

> *Intercultural language learning involves developing with learners an understanding of their own language(s) and culture(s) in relation to an additional language and culture. It is a dialogue that allows for reaching a common ground for negotiation to take place, and where variable points of view are recognised, mediated, and accepted.*

The ability to reach the common ground between interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds is referred to as the ability to *decentre* (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993). In the process of decentring, the learner tries to find a negotiated interactional space between the interlocutors or the 'third place' (Kramsch, 1993, p.236). In this

process of IcLL, language learners need to develop some essential qualities such as intercultural sensitivity, ability to see things from the others' perspective, empathy, respect for diversity and tolerance (Kaikkonen, 2001) in order to be successful in intercultural communication.

To my knowledge, IcLL is still new to many Vietnamese EFL teachers and students. One reason for the neglect of IcLL in Vietnamese EFL classes lies in the teacher and student perceptions and their classroom practices. This is the gap this study attempts to fill.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The current study investigates Vietnamese EFL teachers' and students' perceptions of the cultural dimension of language teaching and learning and their classroom practices in order to address the following research questions:

How is culture in language teaching and learning evident in:

1. the perceptions and classroom practices of Vietnamese EFL teachers?
2. the priorities and views of Vietnamese EFL students?

Participants

Fourteen EFL teachers and two hundred EFL students from two universities in Vietnam participated in the study. Most of the teacher participants have been teaching English for 5-10 years. The student participants were studying English as a major subject and they included students from first-year to fourth-year studies.

Data collection and analysis

The study used a questionnaire, classroom observations and interviews with teachers and students as data collection methods. Twelve classroom observations were first conducted with eight EFL

teachers in two American culture lessons and ten language skills lessons. The American culture lessons involved American people, languages in the US and the geographic information of the USA, whereas the language skills lessons dealt with different issues of daily life. To ensure reliability, every lesson was observed with a systematic observation scheme based on the same criteria including goals, input, task, teacher role, student role, setting and kind of task (Nunan, 1989) with a focus on the cultural dimension. Twelve teachers, including the eight observed ones, were then interviewed with structured questions (Appendix A). Two hundred student participants completed a questionnaire (Appendix B), and fifty-three of them participated in focus-group interviews. The questionnaire was analysed with descriptive statistics, and thematic analysis was used for the teacher and student interviews.

RESULTS

Teachers' perceptions of the cultural dimension and classroom practices

This section reports on data from the classroom observations and the teachers' self-reports to address the research question:

How is culture in language teaching and learning evident in the perceptions and classroom practices of Vietnamese EFL teachers?

Teachers' definitions of culture

The majority of the interviewed teachers (9/12 teachers) defined culture as 'small c' culture that involves native speakers' manners, customs, beliefs, behaviours, moral values, habits, lifestyle, etc., whereas only three teachers defined culture as 'big C' culture, which is characterized as characteristics of a nation or particular features of an ethnic group. The teachers also defined culture in relation to language contrast that includes verb formation, sentence making, tense differences, voice differences, particles, intonation; culture in language use that involves vocabulary use, formal, informal and colloquial language, speech acts, cultural concepts; and culture in

communication that refers to ways of communication, directness, indirectness, norms of interaction, non-verbal language and taboos.

Teachers' beliefs about culture teaching

Three teachers considered that culture teaching was topically dependent. As one of them argued, the topics in her advanced reading course involved only general knowledge (e.g., globalisation or astronomy). Another teacher stated that it depended on a topic that may carry cultural meaning (e.g., superstition). With the same belief, an observed teacher argued that she would not deal with culture in the lesson *healthy life*, but in the lesson *manners* as she thought the latter topic was likely to provoke potential culture shock for language learners.

Five other teachers also believed that there should be a primary focus on language rather than on culture in EFL classes. According to one teacher, the material content showed a focus on language functions. The other two teachers also emphasised that students needed to learn types of communication as the basis and the first purpose to achieve in language learning. In addition, one observed teacher believed that her method to teach *TV firsts* (e.g., the inventor of TV, first TV programmes…) was appropriate in terms of language teaching as the goal of her lesson was the use of the simple past tense, whereas it was ineffective in terms of culture teaching. Another observed teacher argued that the importance of her lesson was to teach students how to communicate through a topic rather than dealing with culture even it involved some cultural differences (e.g., different school time in Britain or Australia).

Five teachers also commented on the inadequacy of cultural exposure in language courses for culture teaching. One teacher mentioned the limited and scattered cultural content of materials; the other two teachers stated the broad concept of culture in language courses. The last two teachers did not think culture was deep enough in the content. With this belief, they suggested that culture should be taught in culture courses for comprehensiveness, depth, logicality and systematicity of culture learning.

In addition, the interviewed teachers also believed that various constraints could restrict culture teaching. For example, according to eight teachers, students' low level of language proficiency could affect culture teaching. Nine teachers were also concerned about students' lack of cultural background knowledge and two other teachers were concerned about students' unwillingness to engage in culture learning. Three teachers believed that teachers' cultural knowledge was important for culture teaching, but two other teachers were more concerned about the effectiveness of native English speakers rather than non-native teachers in culture teaching. Eight teachers also considered that time spent for culture teaching depended on the lesson content, students' level of language proficiency or interests. Seven teachers also referred a constraint in culture teaching to a linguistic focus with the native-speaker standard in language testing. None of the teachers were aware of the importance of culture teaching in education policy.

Teachers' classroom practices of culture teaching

The classroom observations revealed two main ways of culture teaching in the EFL classes: teaching cultural connotations and teaching cultural facts/knowledge.

The teaching of cultural connotations in the observed lessons mainly involved vocabulary and expressions. For example, in one lesson, a *smile* was explained to mean a kind of embarrassment or shyness in some cultures. In another lesson, the expression *the early bird [catches the worm]* was compared with the Vietnamese equivalent *gà lên chuồng* (*chicken get back to their house* – literal translation) for the advantage of the 'early' concept.

The teaching of cultural facts/ knowledge was quite popular in the observed lessons. In one lesson, only facts about famous people in the target culture and the learners' home culture were provided. In another lesson, the students just learned some facts about Britain (e.g., Union Jack, Boxing Day) through quizzes. In the same vein, in two other lessons, the teachers checked the students' comprehension about *important firsts* (e.g., the first man on the moon, the first World

Cup finals…) and *TV firsts* by asking them questions about these facts. In the two American culture lessons, the students also mainly acquired cultural knowledge about American people, languages in the US and the geographic information of the USA. It was only in the speaking lesson *family life* that the students were given opportunities to make cultural comparisons among different family models between their home culture and the target culture.

Moreover, the teachers also recalled their past culture teaching that involved the localisation of unfamiliar topics, simulations, comparisons, sharing intercultural experience and use of visual aids. For example, one teacher localised English table manners (e.g., the placement of cutlery) to a discussion on the use of chopsticks in the learners' culture. A simulation exercise engaged students in a situation in which they were going to spend a holiday abroad when it was snowing in order to learn about the verb *go skiing*. However, these ways of culture teaching were more likely to depend on each teacher's personal experience.

In brief, the teachers prioritised language teaching over culture teaching. They believed that culture teaching was restricted by topical dependence, a primary focus on language, the inadequacy of cultural exposure in language courses and other constraints. A facts-oriented approach to culture teaching was popular in the observed EFL classes.

Students' priorities and views of culture learning

This section reports on data from the questionnaire to address the research question:

How is culture in language teaching and learning evident in the priorities and views of Vietnamese EFL students?

Students' priorities in EFL learning

Table 1 reports on data that indicates students' priorities for learning English. A sum of scores (SS) was used to rank their priorities (*most important* weighting of 3; *very important* 2; *important* 1).

TABLE 1
Students' priorities for learning English

Purposes	N	Most important	Very important	Important	Not Chosen	Sum of scores
Getting a good job	200	124	43	9	24	467
Communication with foreigners	200	39	69	45	47	300
Reading English documents	200	18	43	53	86	193
Studying in a foreign country	200	10	35	54	101	154
Acquisition of cultural knowledge	200	7	7	13	173	48
Travelling to a foreign country	200	1	3	12	184	21
Others	200	0	0	15	185	15

Notes: N=Number of students (200=124+43+9+24); Sum of scores: 467=124*3+43*2+9*1

The results show that *getting a good job* (SS=467) was the students' top priority for learning English, followed by *communication with foreigners* (SS=300), and *reading English documents* (SS=193). Interestingly, *acquisition of cultural knowledge* (SS=48) was well down the list of priorities in fifth place. The results indicate that the students mainly learned English as an instrument for jobs but they did not consider culture learning as an important purpose for learning English.

TABLE 2
Students' priorities in language learning

Aspects	N	M	SD
Vocabulary	200	3.04	.96
Grammar	200	2.92	.96
Phonetics	200	2.63	.98
Culture	200	1.43	.75

Notes: M=Mean; SD=Standard deviation; M and SD calculated on 4-point scale (1-4)

Table 2 reports on data that shows students' priorities in language learning. It points out that *culture* (M=1.43) was considered the least important in relation to *vocabulary* (M=3.04), *grammar* (M=2.92) and *phonetics* (M=2.63). The lowest standard deviation of *culture* also indicates little difference in the students' choice. The results indicate that the students prioritised the language component over the cultural component in language learning.

TABLE 3
Students' priorities for topics in language learning

Topics	N	Most important	Very important	Important	Not chosen	Sum of scores
Types of verbal communication	200	96	48	13	43	397
Daily life and routines	200	39	48	44	69	257
Cultural values and beliefs	200	18	29	37	116	149
Types of non-verbal communication	200	12	32	28	128	128
History, geography, political system	200	20	12	19	149	103
Festivals and traditions	200	5	11	30	154	67
Music, drama, art, literature	200	6	12	12	170	54
Cultural images and symbols	200	3	9	17	171	44

Note: Same calculations as Table 1

Table 3 reports on data that represents students' priorities for topics in language learning. It shows that *types of verbal communication* (SS=397), *daily life and routines* (SS=257), and *cultural values and beliefs* (SS=149) were the students' three top topics for learning. *Cultural images and symbols* (SS=44) was the lowest preference. The results indicate that the students preferred language-

related topics to culture-related topics, i.e., they prioritised language learning over culture learning.

Students' views of culture learning

Table 4 reports on data that indicates students' purposes for culture learning. It shows that behavioural capacities (M=4.19) was considered the most important, followed by cognitive capacities (M=3.59), and affective capacities (M=3.26). The results indicate that the students may not value affective capacities much in culture learning.

TABLE 4
Students' purposes for culture learning

IC components	N	M	SD
Behavioural capacities	200	4.19	.95
Cognitive capacities	200	3.59	.80
Affective capacities	200	3.26	1.00

Note: M and SD are calculated on a five-point scale (1-5)

Table 5 reports on data that involves students' culture learning activities in the classroom. The students were asked to choose any activities they often learned in the classroom. The mean scores are used to interpret the usefulness of each activity, but should not be used for direct comparisons. The results show that the activities related to cultural facts were the most frequent (98% for *learning cultural facts from reading texts*; and 76.5% for *answering teacher's questions about cultural facts*). *Learning cultural facts from reading texts* was also considered very useful (M= 4.05). Interestingly, *solving cultural dilemmas* was the second least popular (28.5%) and was not considered very useful (M=3.46). The results indicate that the facts-oriented approach to culture learning was the most frequent, whereas intercultural skills might be overlooked in the classroom.

TABLE 5

Students' culture learning activities in the classroom

Culture learning activities	# responses*	M	SD
Learning cultural facts from reading texts	196	4.05	1.01
Answering teacher's questions about cultural facts	153	3.71	.96
Discussing cultural similarities and differences	132	4.01	.99
Doing exercises about cultural facts	97	3.62	1.11
Exploring values and beliefs of the target culture	78	3.97	1.07
Sharing experiences about the target culture	75	3.85	1.01
Solving cultural dilemmas	57	3.46	1.46
Watching videos about the target culture	44	3.91	1.01

Notes: * responses based on 200 students; M, SD calculated on five-point scale (1-5)

Table 6 reports on data that represents students' culture learning activities outside the classroom (refer back to the narrative for Table 5 results for data explanation).

TABLE 6
Students' culture learning activities outside the classroom

Culture learning activities	# responses	M	SD
Reading English newspapers/magazines	165	4.13	.98
Watching English TV channels (BBC, CNN…)	143	4.07	1.09
Searching for cultural information on the Internet	128	3.87	.95
Communicating with native English speakers (NES) in public	117	4.33	1.05
Meeting NES visiting your school	104	3.84	1.03
Reading English literature	74	3.46	1.17
Participating in cultural exchanges with NES	67	4.21	1.02
Exchanging emails with NES	38	3.76	1.02

Note: Same calculations as Table 5

The results show that the media was the main cultural source for the students (82.5% for *reading English newspapers and magazines*; 71.5% for *watching English TV channels*, and 64% for *searching for cultural information on the Internet*). Interestingly, *participating in cultural exchanges with native English speakers* (NES) was the second least popular (33.5%) but was considered very useful (M=4.21). The results indicate that the students mainly learned about the target language culture through the media due to the lack of contact with NES but considered such contact very useful for them.

TABLE 7
Students' perceptions of the value of aspects of culture learning

Perceptions	N	M	SD
I need to understand my own culture first before learning about other cultures.	200	4.32	1.054
Learning about culture is as important as learning about language in an English class.	200	4.12	.957
I need to learn about the language first before learning about the target culture.	200	3.98	1.252
I need to abandon my own cultural identity while acquiring English. *	200	3.81	1.420
Learning about culture helps me become more tolerant and open-minded towards other peoples and cultures.	200	3.80	1.086
My own culturally-shaped knowledge does not influence much the way I interact with people from other cultural backgrounds.*	200	3.57	1.205
I can acquire both additional cultural knowledge and intercultural skills in the classroom.	200	3.33	1.148
Misunderstanding in intercultural communication is mostly due to language problems rather than cultural differences.	200	2.85	1.445

Notes: *The mean scores in these sentences are calculated in a reverse manner to be comparable with other mean scores; M and SD are calculated on a five-point scale (1-5)

Table 7 reports on data that reflects students' perceptions of the value of aspects of culture learning. It points out that the students agreed that their understanding about their own culture was important when learning about other cultures (M=4.32) as well as interacting with people from other cultural backgrounds (M=3.57), and cultural identity was salient to them (M=3.81). However, the students still believed that language could be learned separately from culture (M=3.98), although both culture learning and language learning were important (M=4.12) for them.

Moreover, Table 8 and Table 9 show that the students found culture learning beneficial for their language learning (M=2.48), but did not completely support the teaching of language and culture in EFL classes (M=2.76) as a number of students still believed that a variety of constraints restricted culture learning. These constraints will be discussed in the next section.

TABLE 8
Students' evaluation of the benefits of culture learning

N	Very much	To a certain extent	Not at all	M	SD
200	97	102	1	2.48	.511

Note: M and SD are calculated on a three-point scale (1-3)

TABLE 9
Students' opinions about the teaching of language and culture

N	Yes	With Limitation	No	M	SD
200	152	48	0	2.76	.428

Note: M and SD are calculated on a three-point scale (1-3)

Students' views on the constraints in culture learning

The students believed that various constraints restricted culture learning. Ten students believed that there should a primary focus on language rather than on culture in language learning, and for seven others culture learning only provided additional cultural knowledge with little impact on language learning. Three students were concerned about the time limit for culture learning, whereas three other students argued that too much time for culture learning would affect the lesson objectives. Six other students believed that the broad

concept of culture in EFL learning was difficult for them to understand. For five students, the low level of language proficiency affected students' cultural understanding, four other students were unwilling to engage in culture learning as they were afraid of being distanced from their home culture and becoming 'westernised' or 'denationalised'.

In brief, the students prioritised language learning over culture learning. They mainly learned cultural facts in the classroom, and the media was their main cultural source outside the classroom. The students found culture learning beneficial but did not completely support the teaching of language and culture.

DISCUSSION

This section only discusses some key points from the results. The findings show that the Vietnamese EFL teachers' and students' perceptions of the cultural dimension and classroom practices correspond with some previous studies. For example, the teachers prioritised language teaching over culture teaching, which was similar to Allen (2000) and Castro *et al.* (2004). The teachers' traditional information-transfer pedagogy echoes Sercu (2005). The students' ranking of culture far below aspects of language also matches Guntermann *et al*. (1996) and Chavez (2002).

The facts-oriented approach to culture teaching in the teachers' classroom practices could be beneficial in Vietnamese EFL classes, a context where learners have limited exposure to otherness (Byram and Feng, 2004). However, this approach is criticised as inappropriate by many critics (ibid) because it ignores the fact that culture is "a social construct, a product of self and other perceptions" (Kramsch, 1993, p.205). On the other hand, Sowden (2007) argues that teachers' success does not depend on the approach or method but rather on their integrity as a person and the relationships they are able to develop in the classroom. He argues that "the ability to build and maintain human relationships…is central to effective

teaching, as it is to true intercultural communicative competence…" (p.308).

The teachers' belief concerning the importance of teachers' cultural knowledge for culture teaching does not reflect an intercultural perspective. In intercultural language teaching, the teacher does not need to become a cultural expert but a mediator or a *go-between* (Kramsch, 2004) who gives priority to the development of knowledge, attitudes, skills and awareness in learners. In addition, the teachers' belief about the effectiveness of NES rather than non-native teachers in culture teaching also needs to be reconsidered. Non-native teachers as intercultural teachers might be in a better position than native speakers as they can move between cultures easily, help students connect their own culture with others and raise curiosity about differences and otherness (Coperias Aguilar, 2009). Kramsch (2003) also argues that non-native speakers have the privilege of a 'unique multicultural perspective' (p.252) that makes them valuable for intercultural language teaching.

In terms of the constraints, the beliefs of the teachers and students regarding the restriction of culture teaching and learning due to students' low level of language proficiency are contrary to the principle of intercultural language learning. According to Liddicoat *et al.* (2003), "culture is taught from the beginning of language learning and is not delayed until learners have acquired some of the language" (p.24). Kramsch (1993) also argues that culture "is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them" (p.1). In addition, the native-speaker standard stated as the main goal of language assessment in Vietnamese EFL classes is an unrealistic goal as it is assumed that the students have to ignore their own sociocultural identities and adopt a new one (Kramsch, 2006).

The students' unwillingness to engage in culture learning as another constraint is also opposed to the aims of intercultural

language learning which suggests that learners need to develop an understanding of their own culture in relation to the target one (Liddicoat *et al.*, 2003). However, students need to grow out of their cultural shell (Kaikkonen, 2001, p.64) in order to be able to learn about the target culture.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Although it is impossible to generalise with a limited number of participants, the present study has provided some insights into the teacher and student perceptions and their classroom practices. The findings indicate that the Vietnamese EFL teachers and students treated culture teaching and learning as a subordinate goal in EFL classes as their classroom practices were greatly influenced by their perceptions of the cultural dimension of language teaching and learning.

Some implications for EFL education can be drawn. Firstly, because of the linguistic focus in language classes, culture needs to be incorporated into the goals of every lesson at the beginning of language learning as well as into language assessment. To minimise the language barrier for beginners of English, culture may be first addressed in a simple way, such as through greetings and language use in daily life, then more extensively when students reach higher levels of language proficiency.

Secondly, teachers need to move beyond the transmission of cultural facts, explore alternative ways of culture teaching and deal with culture more systematically. They should develop a dynamic view of culture and an integrated approach to culture teaching and learning that engage students in culture learning cognitively, behaviourally and affectively. For example, students can actively engage in a problem-solving situation of an English family in which they consider solving the problem from the others' perspective rather than from their own cultural perspectives on family life.

Thirdly, learners' willingness and motivation to engage in culture learning need to be fostered. With motivation and willingness,

students can develop cultural self-awareness and eliminate the fear of being distanced from their native culture. More genuine social interaction and cultural exchanges with people from other cultural backgrounds should be also encouraged in order to enhance students' curiosity and interests in culture learning as well as developing their intercultural skills necessary for effective intercultural communication.

Further research is still required into the relationship between language and culture and how these two components are manifested in language learning at different levels of language proficiency. The correlation between learners' linguistic competence and intercultural competence also needs to be further investigated so that the cultural component can be given the same status as the language component in the curriculum. It is by developing both linguistic competence and intercultural competence that language learners will be likely to succeed in intercultural communication.

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APPENDIX A: TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In EFL teaching and learning, what do you understand the term 'culture' to mean?

2. Please look at some topics for learning below. Which topics do you consider most important for your students to learn? Please choose one or two of them and briefly describe how you have taught it/them in the classroom.

Topics:
- history, geography, political system
- daily life and routines
- music, drama, art, literature
- cultural images and symbols
- festivals and traditions
- values and beliefs
- types of verbal communication
- types of non-verbal communication

3. Think about the cultural content in your English textbooks. What are your opinions about it? Please explain.

4. Consider the following ways of culture teaching. Discuss which of these (if any) you often use in the classroom and comment on how you use them:

Some ways of culture teaching:
- using videos about the target culture
- teaching cultural facts from reading texts
- asking questions about cultural facts
- giving tasks about cultural facts
- discussing cultural similarities and differences
- exploring cultural values and beliefs
- solving cultural dilemmas
- sharing experience about the target culture

Can you recall other ways of culture teaching that you have used in your English classes?

5. Think about your culture teaching approach. Why do you take that approach? What are the benefits of your approach for your students' learning of English?

6. How much time do you usually spend on your culture teaching? Do you think the time is adequate? Please explain.

7. Are you aware of any emphasis on culture in the curriculum, educational policy and assessment in your educational institution? If any, how is that emphasis represented?

8. Do you think the target culture should be incorporated into English classes or should be taught in separate culture courses? Please explain.

APPENDIX B: STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Why do you learn English?
Please choose three purposes and rank them in order of importance (3=most important; 2=very important; 1=important).
  Reading English documents
  Getting a good job
  Communication with foreigners
  Acquisition of cultural knowledge
  Studying in a foreign country
  Travelling to a foreign country
  Others, please specify: ……………………………………………………
2. What is your priority in language learning?
Please rank the following with your priority (4=most important, 1=least important)
  Phonetics
  Culture
  Grammar
  Vocabulary
3. Which topics are important for you to learn?
Please choose three topics and rank them in order of importance (3=most important; 2=very important; 1= important).
  History, geography, political system
  Daily life and routines
  Music, drama, art, literature
  Cultural images and symbols
  Festivals and traditions
  Values and beliefs
  Types of verbal communication
  Types of non-verbal communication
4. How important are the following purposes for your culture learning?
Please circle the level of importance for each statement below:
      Least important   1 2 3 4 5 Most important
  Acquiring knowledge about the target culture
  Developing the ability to interpret events of the target culture and relate them to one's own culture
  Developing cultural awareness of one's own and the target culture
  Acknowledging the value of the identities of others
  Showing respect for otherness, empathy and tolerance towards other peoples and cultures

  Developing communicative awareness of rules appropriate for intercultural
communication
  Adapting one's behaviour to different requirements and situations
5. What is your experience of culture learning in the classroom?
Please tick any activities you often DO in the classroom. How useful are they for your
culture learning?
   Least useful   1   2   3   4   5   Most useful
  Watching videos about the target culture
  Learning cultural facts from reading texts
  Answering teacher's questions about cultural facts
  Doing exercises about cultural facts
  Discussing cultural similarities and differences between your culture and the target
culture
  Exploring values and beliefs of the target culture
  Solving cultural dilemmas
  Sharing experience about the target culture
6. What is your experience of culture learning outside the classroom?
Please tick any activities you often DO outside the classroom. How useful are they for
your culture learning?
   Least useful   1   2   3   4   5   Most useful
  Watching English TV channels
  Reading English newspapers/magazines
  Reading English literature
  Searching for cultural information on the Internet
  Communicating with native English speakers (NES) in public
  Exchanging emails with NES
  Meeting NES visiting your school
  Participating in cultural exchange activities with NES
7. What are your perceptions of the value of aspects of culture learning in your English
lessons?
Please give your opinion for each statement below:
   Strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly agree
  Learning about culture is as important as learning about language in an English
class.
  I need to learn about the language first before learning about the target culture.
  I need to understand my own culture first before learning about other cultures.
  My own culturally-shaped knowledge does not influence much the way I interact
with people from other
  cultural backgrounds.
  Learning about culture helps me become more tolerant and open-minded towards
other peoples and cultures.

  I need to abandon my own cultural identity while acquiring English.

  I can acquire both additional cultural knowledge and intercultural skills in the classroom.

  Misunderstanding in intercultural communication is mostly due to language problems rather than cultural

  differences.

8. To what extent does culture learning help you with your EFL learning?

Please tick ONE option and give reasons.

Very much   To a certain extent   Not at all

Your reasons:

…………………………………………………………………………………………

9. To what extent do you agree with the statement: 'The target culture should be taught together with the target language in EFL classes in Vietnam'?

Please tick ONE option and give reasons.

Yes   With limitations   No

Your reasons:

…………………………………………………………………………………………