



STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND EVALUATION ON CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN NORTHSTAR TEXTBOOK SERIES TO ENHANCE INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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Abstract: Intercultural competence is one of the most fundamental components that should be developed among language users and can be attained differently. Several studies have suggested that the teaching and learning of intercultural competence can take place in certain settings with the use of different resources, including language textbooks. This paper presents the results of a survey on the use of cultural elements in the NorthStar textbook series to enhance intercultural competencies among students (from freshman to junior year) majoring in English. The findings reveal that most students are aware of the importance of developing their intercultural competence. Efforts have been made by both teachers and students to incorporate the development of intercultural competence for students by using available cultural elements in the NorthStar textbooks. However, several drawbacks are identified, among which the low frequency and the lack of deep cultural elements are the major ones. This paper also gives recommendations on the effective use of such elements.

Keywords: intercultural competence, language teaching and learning, second language acquisition, textbooks

1. Introduction

The present study is a part of a larger-scale project investigating the reality of developing students' intercultural competence in classes of language skills at the University of Foreign Languages, Hue University. Along with globalization, the last decades have witnessed one of the most fundamental changes in language learning and teaching – the recognition of the cultural dimension as a vital component. This change has largely transformed the nature of teaching and learning languages. In other words, the aim of language learning and teaching is no longer defined in terms of the acquisition and the transmission of communicative competence in a foreign language, which refers to a person's ability to act in a foreign language in linguistically, socio-linguistically, and pragmatically appropriate ways [7]. Rather, it is

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defined in terms of interculturality, which is “the ability of a person to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes, and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures” [11, p. 138]. Interculturality is seen here as a dynamic process by which people not only draw on and use the resources and processes of cultures with which they are familiar but also those they may not typically be associated with their interactions with others. This definition, in fact, adds to the notion of communicative competence and enlarges it to incorporate intercultural competence. Here, a competent language user is characterized as one who is both plurilingual (i.e., whose experience of language in its cultural context expands from the language of the home to that of the society at large and then to the languages of other people) and in the process of developing interculturality. The linguistic and cultural competencies in respect of each language used by the learner are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute towards intercultural awareness, skills, and know-how. An important motivation for the advocacy of interculturality is perceptions that intercultural contact and interchange are greater than ever, necessitating approaches to understanding and brokering differences through effective communication. From this position, language learning is the best place within the educational field for the learning of and about culture, reflecting powerful interrelationships between language and culture [13].

At the Department of English and the Department of International Studies, University of Foreign Languages, Hue University, to help students develop their intercultural competence, courses in British and American culture have been added to the curriculum since the very beginning. Despite intermittent changes in the textbooks used, these courses have consistently covered a wide range of topics that are listed by CEF [7] as seven categories that are considered characteristic of a particular European society and its culture. This includes everyday living, living conditions, interpersonal relations, values, beliefs and attitudes, body language, social conventions, and ritual behaviors. While the use of culture as a way to enhance students’ intercultural competence has been highly recognized and sought after by teachers and curriculum designers from the departments, the effort, in the researcher’s opinion, should be more rigorous. In other words, cultural elements incorporated in textbooks for other courses, especially those used for teaching language skills, should be actively employed as a means to enhance students’ intercultural competence from day one. As a result, the present study provides some insights into students’ perceptions and evaluation of the use of cultural elements available in the NorthStar series to develop students’ intercultural competence. More specifically, it aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are students’ perceptions of the significance of intercultural competence?

2. To what extent and how often have cultural elements in the NorthStar series been used to enhance students' intercultural competence?

There are five sections in this paper. The introduction provides details on the context of the study. The sections on literature review and methods give definitions of the major concepts, description of instruments to collect data, participants, and the data analysis procedure. These are followed by Findings and discussion, which gives an in-depth analysis of the collected data. In the final sections, conclusions are drawn, and implications are presented.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Definition of intercultural competence

Intercultural communicative competence is a concept that seems to be transparent, universally accepted, understood, and (ab)used but has received several different definitions inside and outside academia. Over the course of research on the concept, several phrases have been used (often interchangeably) to describe it: "cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural sensitivity, multicultural competence, transcultural competence, global competence". In this study, the phrase 'intercultural communicative competence' is used as the operating term.

The most exhaustive and prominent definition is offered by Byram [3]. He has defined five *savoirs* [3, pp. 50–53], or components of intercultural competence, which are complementary to a language learner's communicative competence. The five *savoirs* are: 1. *Savoir* (knowledge), 2. *Savoir Comprendre* (interpreting/relating skills), 3. *Savoir s'Engager* (critical cultural awareness), 4. *Savoir Apprendre/Faire* (discovery/interaction skills), and 5. *Savoir Etre* (attitudes).

As suggested by Byram [3], the success of interaction implies not only an effective interchange of information, as was the goal of communicative language teaching, but also the "the ability to decenter and take up the other's perspective on their own culture, anticipating, and where possible, resolving dysfunctions in communication and behavior" [4, p. 42]. Intercultural communicative competence, as a result, can be formed on the basis of awareness, behavior and action.

Likewise, intercultural communicative competence is generally defined as the ability of learners to illicit and nourish communication and thus plays a crucial role in communication effectiveness. In other words, it is the ability to attain a successful interaction that requires several factors other than language competence.

Both of these definitions emphasize the importance of cultural awareness among learners.

2.2. Objectives of teaching/learning culture

The interwoven relationship between language and culture can be summarized by Brown [2, p. 177], "A language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture." To communicate successfully across languages and cultures, one must understand culturally different norms of interaction and people's values and thoughts [14]. Sometimes, linguistic correct sentences could cause misunderstandings or confusion when they are in a different cultural context [15].

Tomalin and Stempleski [17, pp. 7, 8] listed such goals of cultural instruction as to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors, to develop an understanding that social variables, such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence, influence how people speak and behave, and to become more aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target culture. They also stated that cultural instruction also helps increase students' awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language and the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence. Furthermore, the teaching of culture is believed to assist students in developing the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture as well as their intellectual curiosity about the target culture. Last but not least, cultural instruction, according to Tomalin and Stempleski, encourages empathy towards its people.

Such goals of teaching culture can be seen as clear indicators of the vital role of teaching culture in enhancing language learners' intercultural [communicative] competence.

2.3. The importance of textbooks in English language education

Although several debates have centered around whether textbooks can serve as the best medium for delivering language learning materials, they continue to dominate the language teaching market [18]. Textbooks play a vital role in foreign language education, one that most scholars believe that should not be underestimated: they control a major share of classroom teaching. More specifically, they can have the role of a teacher, a map, a resource, a trainer, an authority, a deskiller, and an ideology [6]. The significance of textbooks is emphasized to the extent that learning programs might have no influence without them [12]. Indeed, it is not the actual reality that students learn through textbooks, but it is the reality created by the texts [5].

2.4. Cultural and intercultural issues in English textbooks

Although textbooks have been a subject of interest for scholars for several decades [1], they had not been systematically studied until the 1990s according to Elomaa, cited in

Lappanailen [10]. Since then, several studies have analyzed the presentation of culture or intercultural elements in English textbooks [1, 8, 9, 19, 20]. The studies comprise analyses of the dominant textbooks published by well-known publishing houses, such as Oxford, Longman, and Express Publishing. The findings indicate that the culture reflected in these textbooks is dynamic and not limited to British or American culture. However, strong cultural biases and tacit goal to acculturate language learners to the target language culture are also found. Moreover, in some textbooks, essentialist notions of culture are presented in such a way that they are considered as national entities, leading to overgeneralization and stereotypes of foreign societies.

The studies, while providing in-depth analysis of cultural elements in the textbooks, do not highlight students' reactions as well as the practice of using these elements to enhance students' intercultural competence. This, as a result, gives way to the present study.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

The participants of the present study are 120 randomly chosen 1st (freshman), 2nd (sophomore), 3rd (junior), and 4th (senior) year EFL students at University of Foreign Languages, Hue University, Vietnam. The researcher contacted her students and requested them to participate in the survey prior to giving them guidelines for completing the questionnaire online. The link to the questionnaire was subsequently sent to the students via emails.

3.2. Data collection instruments and procedures

Data in the study were collected from mid-May to mid-September 2019 by using a questionnaire developed by Sercu et al. [16]. The questionnaire with 3 sections aims to investigate students' perception of the importance of intercultural competence, their feedback on the use of cultural elements in enhancing their intercultural competence with details on the approaches employed by their teachers, and their evaluation of the utility of such elements in terms of effectiveness. The questionnaire was piloted with 10 randomly selected students for reliability. The final version of the questionnaire was then delivered electronically to the informants for data collection. The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed by taking frequency counts for each question.

To assist the students in the survey, a framework of cultural element categorization was provided in the instructions of the questionnaire. Accordingly, all of the static aspects, such as

holidays, geographical sites, food, and important people (personalities), were classified as surface culture, and all of the invisible aspects that appear to be complex to approach (values, norms, or customs) were classified as deep culture; whereas, all of the recently emerging values due to the process of globalization were classified as universal. In addition, all of the cultural themes were examined according to the following features:

- Topics of surface culture: characterized as being static, congratulatory, neutral, and homogeneous.
- Topics of deep culture: characterized as being transformative, complex, contentious or congratulatory, and heterogeneous.
- Topics of universal culture: characterized as being applicable to a wide range of different cultures.

Furthermore, countries in which English is used as the first language, such as the UK, the USA, Australia, and New Zealand, are referred to as those in the inner circle, while those other than these are referred to as ones in the outer circle.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Students' perceptions of the importance of intercultural competence

In the first section of the questionnaire, students were asked to indicate their understanding of the significance of intercultural competence in language acquisition on a five-point scale, with 1 for 'Very important' and 5 for 'Not important at all'.

The results in Figure 1 indicate that the majority of the surveyed students are aware of the essential role of intercultural competence in language teaching and learning, with 30.1% choosing 5, 44.1% choosing 4, and 16.1% choosing 3. The remaining 8.8% and 1.1% opted for 2, and 1 respectively.

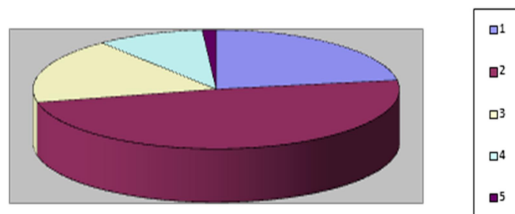


Figure 1. Students' perception of the importance of intercultural competence

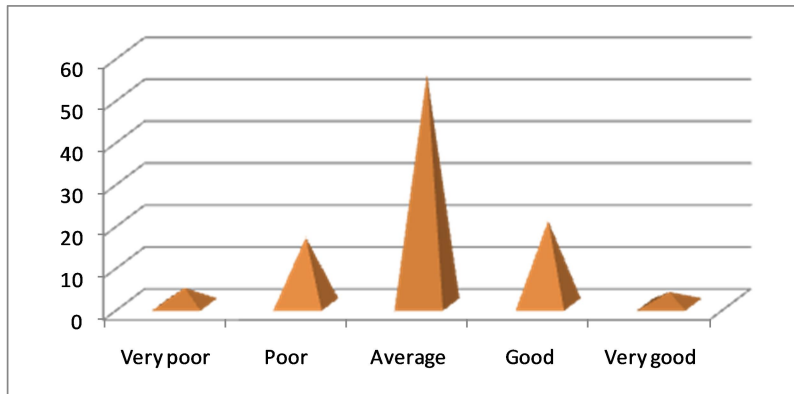


Figure 2. Students' self-evaluation of their intercultural competence

4.2. Students' self-evaluation of their intercultural competence

The surveyed students were asked to rate their intercultural competence on a five-point scale, with 1 for 'Very poor' and 5 for 'Very good'.

The results in Figure 2 show that well over 50% of the surveyed students grade their intercultural competence as 'Average', 20.2% 'Poor', 16.2% 'Good', and only 4.3% rated theirs as 'Very good'. It can be inferred that the majority of the students who took part in the survey are not very confident with their intercultural competence. Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that intercultural competence has been an important component in English teaching and that students managed to acquire a certain degree of this competence despite the unsatisfactory level of their competence. This also means that more efforts from both teachers and learners are needed to enhance students' intercultural competence.

4.3. Students' opinions on how intercultural competence can be developed and enhanced

The findings in Table 1 show that although there is a sizeable percentage of those who opt for using extra sources from the Internet or available databases, the majority of the surveyed students are in favor of having their intercultural competence developed and enhanced while studying language skills and by being directly exposed to native speakers. This speaks to the fact that there is a need for the integration of teaching cultural elements into language classes.

So far, the priority in the classrooms has still been placed on developing and enhancing students' language skills rather than communicative competence. As a result, it is understandable why the surveyed students insist on having on-site teaching of intercultural competence. Furthermore, while the Internet and the available resources on British and

Table 1. Students' view on how intercultural competence can be developed and enhanced

Value	Count
Through courses in culture (such as British and American culture)	39
Through the incorporation of teaching cultural elements in teaching language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing)	71
By inviting foreigners to classes for direct contact	69
By using extra sources from the Internet or available databases (movies, documentaries)	53
Other	2

American culture (magazines, movies, and documentaries) can be of great convenience for students, direct interactions, and one-on-one instructions from foreigners and teachers can be far more effective as learners can adjust their behaviors and attitudes in the communication process.

4.4. Students' initial assessment on the cultural elements in the NorthStar textbooks

To assist the surveyed students, as mentioned in the section on methodology, the researcher included a brief section on ways to categorize the cultural elements according to deep or surface culture, inner or outer circle.

When asked to give their feedback on whether the NorthStar series is a good collection to teach intercultural competence, 33% of the surveyed students opted 'Yes', 13.3% chose 'No', while up to 53.2% chose 'Maybe'. The uncertainty among students can be explained by the fact that these textbooks have been mainly used for teaching language skills and cultural elements have not been used frequently, resulting in students' failure to come up with a precise evaluation. Another explanation is that perhaps the teachers do pay attention to explaining cultural elements but do not make their purpose clear. Whatever the case is, the findings reveal that students need further development on not only their intercultural competence but also the ability to recognize different kinds of cultural values and elements.

In this section of the questionnaire, students were also required to comment on whether the cultural elements incorporated in the textbooks reflect a balance of cultures from both the inner circle (the USA, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, etc.) and the outer circle (countries other than English speaking ones). Although the surveyed students were provided with a framework for assessment (which is mentioned in the section on methodology), the collected data suggest a relatively bleak reality. More specifically, almost half of the surveyed students (representing

just under 45%) chose 'Maybe', which implies that many of them were not able to identify which cultural element belongs to which circle. This speaks to the need of enhancing students' intercultural competence in settings other than classes of American and British culture, and the classes of language skills are possible options.

The collected data show that a sizeable proportion of the surveyed students (45%) contended that the cultural elements in the textbooks do not reflect a good balance between deep and surface cultural values. In fact, the balance of deep and surface cultural elements is of great significance in providing students with a thorough understanding of the target cultures, as well as their own culture. This, in turn, enables students to develop and enhance their capacity to communicate more efficiently in different settings in which cross-cultural communication is involved. However, the remaining 55% suggested that the balance is ensured, which gives good assurance for the choice of this series. The discrepancies in students' feedback may also reflect their mediocre level of this competence.

However, the overall feedback from the surveyed students regarding their opinion on the cultural elements incorporated in the NorthStar textbooks goes in line with the findings from other studies on textbooks on language teaching in general [1, 9, 19, 20]. More specifically, the fact that students could recognize cultural elements from both outer and inner circles, as well as the imbalance of surface culture and deep culture in the textbooks, indicates that the eminence, as well as limitations, in the NorthStar series echoes those in the other textbooks. This begs the question of how to benefit the advantages and minimize the disadvantages in this series to enhance students' intercultural competence.

4.5. The frequency of teaching of cultural elements in language skill classes

In the next section of the questionnaire, students were asked to recount the reality of using cultural elements in the textbooks.

The collected data illustrated in Figure 3 and Figure 4 indicate a relatively positive picture of the teaching and learning of intercultural competence, with 67% of the surveyed students claiming that their teachers explain cultural elements in the textbooks frequently (60.1% indicated that their teachers *always* do this). However, with 33% choosing either 'No' or 'Maybe', it is clear that in some classes or some lessons, cultural elements were not/not fully addressed and explained, which can be understandable because these classes geared more towards developing students' language skills.

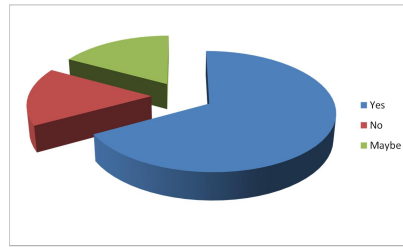


Figure 3. Whether teachers explained cultural elements in the textbooks

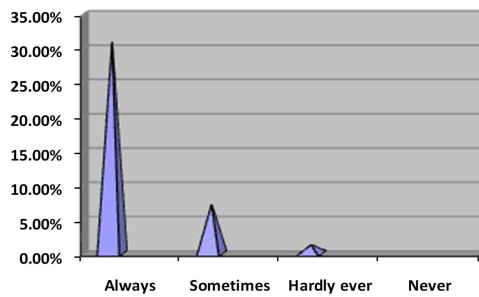


Figure 4. The frequency at which teacher explained cultural elements

5. Conclusions

The goal of the paper is to investigate students' perception of the importance of intercultural competence, their feedback on the use of cultural elements in enhancing their intercultural competence with details on the approaches employed by their teachers, and their evaluation of the utility of such elements in terms of effectiveness using a questionnaire. The results indicate that although most students are aware of the importance of intercultural competence in language learning, they evaluate their intercultural competence as average. This is well illustrated with their evaluation of the cultural elements incorporated in NorthStar textbooks. A majority of the surveyed students are unable to decide whether the elements are suitable to help them develop their intercultural competence. However, they mostly agree that the books do not contain a good balance of elements that come from both inner and outer circles, with the dominance of the inner ones. Furthermore, most of the elements reflect aspects of surface culture. The findings also reveal that although teachers pay attention to developing students' intercultural competence, this practice is not carried out very frequently.

6. Implications for teachers and students

In order to fully take advantage of the cultural elements incorporated in the textbooks, teachers can increase the frequency of explaining the cultural elements by incorporating this activity into the teaching of language skills. Teachers can equip students with an understanding of basic cultural concepts such as deep culture, surface culture, inner-circle countries, and outer-circle countries. In the classroom, teachers can request students to prepare some aspects of cultures around the world that are related to the relevant topic(s) of each lesson. Students can then be required to present those cultural elements to the whole class as a warm-up activity. In this way, students can be more engaged in the classroom, and more importantly, they are well-informed of both surface and deep culture. Students should be more aware of the correlation between language and culture and be proactive in preparing their lessons at home by consulting different sources for knowledge of other cultures and develop the habit of reflecting upon their own culture.

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