

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

**INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION
WITH THE PROJECT-BASED LEARNING:
A STUDENT FEEDBACK REPORT****MAI VAN CAN* - NGO HUU HOANG****

ABSTRACT: The article is a report of students' feedback on the outcome of a pilot course taught with the 'project-based learning' (PBL) approach for the subject 'Intercultural Communication' (IC). The course had the participation of 32 students majoring in English linguistics at a university in Hanoi during the period from September to November, 2019. After the course, the majority of students who had participated in the course gave very positive feedback on the course, especially they managed to recognize the function of English as a global lingua franca for IC purposes. In turn, IC promoted competence in English used as a global lingua franca. However, PBL is potentially difficult to implement systematically in Vietnam because of the inherent "administrative" character of a traditional university classroom in Vietnam.

KEY WORDS: intercultural communication (IC); IC competence; project-based learning (PBL); English as a global lingua franca.

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1. Introduction

Intercultural communication (IC hereafter) has been widely taught in universities in Vietnam in recent years. Some universities teach it as a compulsory subject, others teach it as an elective subject in their training curriculum, especially in English-related majors (English linguistics, ELT methodology, etc.). IC is referred to as one of the new, interesting and useful subjects because, unlike the other subjects, it provides students (Ss hereafter) with communicative competence in the multicultural context of the globalized world.

However, as those who have been teaching and researching this subject for quite a long time, we notice that there is a phenomenon of inconsistent perception about the essence and purpose of this subject among teachers (Ts) and students (Ss) at some Vietnamese universities. This problem leads to a consequence that the teaching approach to the subject has still been the teaching style "Ts say, Ss listen", emphasizing theories like the other subjects, therefore, providing little practical knowledge of real life, real world.

As a result, in an effort to find an appropriate approach to teaching IC, we conducted a pilot 'project-based learning' course. In this course, two outcomes were emphasized at the end of the course: (1) the understanding of IC by Ss and (2) the progress of their IC competence. Also, two types of 'freedoms': (1) from sitting in a traditional classroom and (2) from having to use such a too 'standard' variety of English that makes no motivation. We managed to conduct this course and this paper is a report of a course feedback by 32 Ss who attended the course.

2. Background**2.1. IC and its basic characteristics**

In quite a simple way, IC can be understood both as a subject and a study of contexts of communication between people from 2 different cultures. Its salient feature is the way in which information and ideas are exchanged between people from different cultures so that it is clear with little misunderstanding, and especially as equal and respectful as possible, and of course through verbal and non-verbal cues. However, the problem of IC is that differences between cultures (beliefs, values, habits, customs, etc.) may lead to misunderstandings. Richards (2002, p.136) pointed out:

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'The study of similarities and differences in cultural norms for expressing and understanding messages, such as differences in the conventions for the realization of speech acts'.

For example, in individualistic cultures, it is easy to misinterpret a very cultural greeting in Vietnam *What are you doing?*. Hence, the provision of training of IC competence should emphasize understandings and solutions of cultural differences in the most appropriate way in terms of acquisition, acceptance and balance of intercultural processes. A two-way acculturation is encouraged rather than cultural exclusion or one-way acculturation. In other words, it should be noticed that IC has never emphasized the principle that a culture must speak and do the same as another culture does.

2.2. Some issues of teaching IC competence

In spite of such characteristics, yet it seems that IC in the English-related training programs in Vietnamese universities is still in limitation in deployment due to such causes as the personal views and perception of Ts. IC in their views seems to be a study of similarities and differences in communication only between native English speakers (Americans, British, Australians, etc.) and non-native English learners. They do not care or consider English communication between non-native English speakers to be a valid source of reliable use of English.

That tendency leads to the viewpoint in teaching IC in English that to say the way native speakers of English say and to do what they do is advisable. That is, for many teachers in Vietnam, English competence in today's IC means the ability to express oneself in English as close to a native speaker as possible. Whereas, undoubtedly, today's English communication in the world is mainly between non-native English speakers.

Some of our specific observations show that there are many Vietnamese English teachers trying to explain the reason and appropriateness of a compliment to women in American culture: *'You look so sexy today'*. It seems they encourage their students to learn to say that utterance to compliment a woman, wherever she comes from. Unfortunately, they forget that except for American culture, most other cultures, especially Asian cultures, can interpret this as a sensitive compliment. Therefore, there must be a potential culture shock. In contrast, Ts often advise Ss not to ask *'How old are you?'* to native English speaking people when communicating with them. This proves a one-sided view that their students should be willing to learn what's in the culture of native English speakers but avoids what's in Vietnamese-speaking culture when communicating with English speaking people for fear that they make a culture shock to English speaking people.

Another case is also very widespread in Vietnam during the IC process or in other words the process of integrating into the world of Vietnam. That is, a lot of English-teaching teachers, mass media, and advertising often write their own names in a way that cuts out the diacritics so that they sound and look like English for nothing. A funny example is that there is a Vietnamese person whose name is Tô Sĩ Cư and who comes from Da Nang writes about himself in English as follows: *My name's To Si Cu. I'm from Da Nang.*

The above cases reflect the virtue of 'generosity' of the Vietnamese people, who are willing to save others' identities but to suffer the loss of their own identities. Or is it simply a matter of confusion while acquiring IC and English as its medium language?

2.3. The relationship between IC and English

The problem presented above easily leads to a question: What is the relationship between English and IC? In our opinion, it is a relationship in which English is the communicative instrument for the interactions between different cultures. In other words, English has become the global lingua franca used to communicate between countries and peoples of various cultures and languages all over the world in almost every field and aspect today. Thus, the fact that IC is taught in English lies in the following essence of English that is stated by McKay (2009, p.12): *'International English is used by native speakers of English and bilingual users of English for cross-cultural communication.'*

International English can be used both in a local sense between speaker of diverse cultures and languages within one countries and in a global sense between speakers from different countries'.

Given the above definition, what culture will learners of English as a means of international communication in the world have to learn? Accordingly, Will Baker (2009, p.567) pointed out: '*Given the multilingual and multicultural contexts of much ELF¹ communication, any attempt to propose a straightforward language-culture-nation correlation must be seen as a gross oversimplification*'.

Therefore, whether English is used to serve IC or IC is used to make English better is a controversial question in the approach to acquiring English to communicate with the world in Vietnam today.

3. The author's point of view

3.1. A traditional principle of learning a foreign language

There is a very basic principle in learning a foreign language is to learn according to the communication style of native speakers of that language. In other words, according to Tomalin (2008), culture is the 5th skill besides the 4 skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing of that foreign language. Indeed, in the world it was soon discovered that 'culture is communication and communication is culture' [Watzlawick, 1967]. Let's imagine a context in which Vietnamese people learn Thai. If they speak Thai the way Thai people speak, their Thai language is certainly regarded to be more than fluent. In a word, if you want to learn a foreign language well, you need to learn the culture of that language well.

3.2. Learning English as a global lingua franca

However, in our opinion, this point of view is difficult to apply to the acquisition of English as a language that is no longer a native language, a second language or a foreign language but has become a 'global lingua franca' because nearly the whole world communicates together among native speakers, between native speakers and non-native speakers, between non-native and non-native speakers. Indeed, anyone who comes to anywhere, not necessarily to native English-speaking countries, needs to use English. In fact, we learn English to study in Singapore, to work in Sweden, to do business in Dubai or to work as a tour guide who contacts a group of tourists with dozens of nationalities visiting Hanoi and the like.

Hence, because of the cultural over-diversity in communication in English, it is almost losing the so-called 'native culture', that is, the culture of people who speak English as a mother tongue or first language. It is observed that today's use of English emphasizes communication in real life and real world through real experience in which the presence of native speakers of English does not make a need anymore. It is completely easy to see that change everywhere, from a big resort city of Italy to a remote tourist place in Sapa of Vietnam where women who 'speak English' very 'fluently' just to do their purpose: selling goods and souvenirs to international visitors every day (Ngo Huu Hoang, 2010).

Overall, in our view, if English is really the language of global communication, then English speaking competence must serve the IC. And in turn, IC improves English in the way English is evolved and used nowadays in which the language rule competence such as grammar, phonology, vocabulary, etc. can bring 'little use'. Native English codification may be an approach to teaching Ss with English itself, not English used in the global context.

3.3. Whether there is a more appropriate approach to teaching IC

Nevertheless, it is a fact that the traditional teaching approaches and methods in Vietnam still stress the native-speaker-like English rules in the classroom, where Ts often fail to provide students the 'real' practice of language use. Consequently, how to teach IC the way it should be taught is still

¹ English as a lingua franca

being struggled for. It is a question always rising: Is there an appropriate approach to teaching IC in the Vietnamese universities so that it enhances students' IC competence?

The answer must be yes. Indeed, in an effort to find a better approach to teaching IC in a university in Hanoi, we managed to find a dynamic model: 'Project Based Learning' approach (PBL hereafter) and to apply it to our IC course. Although the model is not new in education in the world, yet in Vietnam, it can be a new teaching approach that helps change the pedagogical thinking in distinguishing between the performance of English in IC and the competence of English.

3.4. PBL and its features

The essence of the PBL method is a learner-based one, directing learners to acquire knowledge and skills through assigned plans, that is, learners solve problems according to their needs of real social activities. In addition, these plans are decided mostly by learners. Teachers only play the role of an advisor, helping learners when necessary, not a most-of-the-time interference like the traditional method of education in the past. In other words, it is an orientation of teaching and learning in which complex tasks are given based on questions or problems that require learners to design, solve and propose their own ideas. (Jones, Rasmussen, & Moffitt, 1997; Thomas, Mergendoller & Michaelson, 1999). We suggest a general definition as follows: *'PBL is a liberal pedagogy that uses a 'big task' that learners have to identify, pursue, and complete on their own. Presentation and cross-talk between individuals in groups and between groups on what is achieved in a "project" is considered the first outcome of the course. However, it is only the "necessary" result. The next aim PBL needs to approach is the second "sufficient" outcome: Gaining positive effects of what has been done in the project on the real life of learners'.*

4. A description of the PBL course of IC

The authors conducted a pilot course done by action research. It was named "Cultural Behaviors towards Environmental Protection". As mentioned above, this course was almost "freed" from the way traditional classes follow. It lasts 45 periods of 45 minutes each, distributed over 9 weeks with 5 periods per week. During those 9 weeks, we met in the classroom in the 1st week to discuss how to deploy, organize the class, group 32 students into 5 teams in which 2 teams consisting of 6 students each; two consisted of 5 students each; in the second week to be equipped with necessary theoretical knowledge of IC and the ninth week to summarize and evaluate the course. Its duration lasted from September to November, 2019.

The course required each team to come up with a specific plan to 'act' through which they would penetrate into the real contexts to study the social and cultural behaviors of people in specific areas where both foreigners and local residents often concentrated to visit, work or study.

The process of self-doing and self-experiencing would give learners real experiences instead of only receiving what was taught in class passively. Thereby, the results that were aimed for students were:

(1) Recognizing dangers of environmental pollution and how to protect their environment through research and learning how other cultures had done and succeeded. Since then, Ss became the "diffusers" of this awareness in the community

(2) Having communication skills in general and IC competence in particular by performing many manipulations, from communicating in the mother tongue with people in the community to using English to communicate with different respondents from native and non-native speaking cultures.

(3) Capable of independent research and cooperation with other members through critical thinking analysis, the process of exploiting independently or together with a project team to exploit research materials for the 'project' through the processing of books and newspapers including hard copies and soft copies of the internet and all other types of mass media.

Generally, this was an IC course following the PBL model that we did with great difficulty but with great success. In terms of *difficulty*, we had to overcome the rules of a college class that happen

in the classroom, not outside the classroom. That made us convince university officials to allow us to conduct class activities with a pre-designed *project* that did not resemble the traditional syllabus of the subject in the training curriculum. That is, instead of sitting in a classroom with a fixed schedule, students would be somewhere else during that time to take notes, observe, interview someone for data, practice interaction skills.

5. An account of 32-student feedback to an applied IC course in the PBL model

5.1. Survey questions

First of all, this was a course serving to train students majoring in English linguistics of a university in Hanoi. With a PBL teaching method in English, the course in a Bachelor's degree program provided Ss with knowledge of the different cultures in which people think, act, speak. Different cultural processing leads to different culture and communication behaviors, even the same language was used. This understanding, in turn, gives learners the skills of IC competence.

After the course, based on today's new student-centered principle, we conducted a questionnaire survey of students' attitudes and opinions according to the following questions to measure whether the course was successful: 1/Was the course innovative?; 2/Did the course create opportunities for Ss to participate in practice?; 3/Was the course interesting?; 4/ Was the course helpful?

5.2. Results and discussion of student feedback

a) Was the course innovative?

Out of 32 students, 26 thought the course was very innovative; The other 6 students commented that the course was innovative. These two groups said that the course offered activities that were very different from those in the classroom, it was demonstrated with:

- *Space*: Not as restrictive as in the classroom. The place where the course members worked could be at the Hoàn Kiếm Lake, Tây Lake and any tourist resorts where there were many tourists for Ss to observe the behaviors and to interview for the opinions of foreigners about preserving the environment.

- *Time*: Ss did not depend on the fixed schedules of the class because the "contracted" time of the course was 9 weeks to perform and they could meet any time during that duration. The problem that students had to overcome was their consensus arrangement of time in a day of a week to work together but had to avoid an overlap with the other subjects and jobs they got at that moment. In addition, to ensure the attitudes and progress of the teams, the team leaders regularly had to report their activities to the course instructor and advisor.

- *Interaction forms*: Students were encouraged to use whatever tools were available, especially informal contacts, formal and semi-structured interviews, survey questionnaires, note-takings about how the environmental preservation behavior of the informants/respondents.

- *Informants*: They were divided into types of informants from many different cultures: four main types of interactions: domestic, Western, Eastern people and those who were identified as neither Eastern nor Western people.

b) Did the course offer many opportunities for the students to participate in practice?

Out of 32 students who answered this question, 24 said that the course highly created opportunities for practice, 4 said that the course created opportunities, 2 students had no opinions, 2 students had opinions that it is create few opportunities.

The ratio above indicates that the students acknowledged the opportunities to practice the subject through, first of all, drawing up a specific plan to "act". That plan was to interact with real people, real things to study the social and cultural behaviors of foreigners in comparison and contrast with the people's behaviors in the source culture. In other words, the students working in group had to do it themselves and experience the realities to gain experience instead of merely receiving what was taught in class passively. Thereby, the course basically brought the following results:

- Recognizing the dangers of environmental pollution and ways to protect the environment through learning how other cultures had done and gained. Thereby, the students became the "diffusers" of this awareness in the community in Vietnam.

- Thanks to the interaction, to a certain extent, Ss gained IC skills, from communicating in their mother tongue with people in the community to the "flexible" use of English to communicate with those who were both native and non-native speakers of English.

- Doing independent research, group work, critical thinking through the process of collective work and/or exploiting research materials to serve the project report.

c) *Was the course interesting?*

The answer was 20 students said very interesting, 5 said interesting, 5 said Ok, and 2 said uninteresting. The responses were very encouraging because they denoted the success of the course. Indeed, when having to get out of the "safe zone" of the traditional classroom, after 10 weeks of working on the project, most of the students felt as if they had crossed an "invisible obstacle" and then they started to enjoy the course and its activities.

d) *Was the course helpful?*

For this question, there were two options for 'helpful':

- Helpful in developing English ability: 18 students selected very helpful, 7 students helpful, 5 students Ok, 2 not helpful.

- Helpful in developing the IC competence: 20 students chose very helpful, 07 helpful, 5 Ok, no student commented that the course was not helpful.

Ss said the course was *very helpful* and *helpful* for the development of English language and IC competence pointed out that there was a balance between language competence and IC competence. These two competencies, in our opinion, are complementary to each other for the output of the subject. The students who had a positive opinion of the course implemented by the PBL method were the main factor in order to confirm the success of the course.

We found that 2 students who thought the course uninteresting were also the students who felt that the course did not provide "practice opportunities" and so it was "not useful" for development of English. There was no solid evidence to explain this, yet we speculate that it might be due to limited ability to deal with the difficulties of the course in a new way of teaching and learning over the PBL model, or it could be personal reasons.

6. Conclusion

IC is actually an interdisciplinary subject integrated by many disciplines, mainly communication, culture and language skills (English). The real goal of the subject is to understand and acquire the IC competence. It also leads to the fact that Ss' English skills also develop naturally and effectively to serve global communication. In order to create that good output for the IC, it is necessary to have suitable methods. Thereby, after implementing the course using PBL, we believe it is one of the most effective and appropriate methods for this subject. However, there is a big drawback for Ts who want to use PBL. That is, in terms of university curriculum development, IC is only oriented as a "traditional" subject in the classroom. It hardly avoids the "endemically administrative" feature of a university in Vietnam. Therefore, the difficulty lies not in a deployment of PBL for IC teaching but a persuasion to the university authorities for permission to carry out the PBL model for IC.

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Báo cáo phản hồi của sinh viên trong việc học môn Giao tiếp Liên văn hóa bằng phương pháp học theo đề án

Tóm tắt: Bài viết là một báo cáo về hoạt động của một khóa học được dạy thí điểm theo phương pháp "học theo đề án" (project-based learning) cho môn "Giao tiếp liên văn hoá" (Intercultural Communication). Khóa học có sự tham gia của 32 sinh viên chuyên ngành Anh ngữ học (English linguistics) tại một trường đại học trên địa bàn Hà Nội trong thời gian từ tháng 9 đến tháng 11 năm 2019. Sau khóa học, đa số sinh viên tham gia đều có ý kiến phản ánh tích cực về khóa học, đặc biệt nhận thức được chức năng của tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ toàn cầu phục vụ cho mục đích giao tiếp liên văn hóa và ngược lại giao tiếp liên văn hóa thúc đẩy cải thiện năng lực tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ toàn cầu. Tuy nhiên, phương pháp "học theo đề án" có khả năng khó áp dụng một cách có hệ thống vì đặc tính "hành chính" cố hữu của một lớp học truyền thống ở trường đại học ở Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: giao tiếp liên văn hóa; năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa; học theo đề án; tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ trung gian toàn cầu.