

Cultural Diversity in English Language Teaching: Learners' Voices

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Abstract

The focus of culture in English language teaching (ELT) has traditionally been on the target culture of English speaking countries. However, the new status of English as international language (EIL) has led to significant changes in the practice of teaching and learning culture in ELT. Rather than relying on the paradigm of native speaker competence and target culture, the culture teaching in ELT now aims at cultural diversity to develop learners as intercultural speakers in a globalised context. Given the need to integrate diverse cultures into the ELT practice as a platform for learners to become intercultural speakers, learners' attitudes towards this issue are of paramount importance. This article will, therefore, discuss learners' perspective on cultural diversity that is integrated into the ELT practice in Vietnam. Based on data collected from learners' reflections, the article discusses the question of whether or not cultural diversity is feasible in the ELT practice in Vietnam.

Keywords: cultural diversity, culture teaching, ELT, intercultural approach, local culture, learners' perspective

1. Introduction

1.1 New Status of English Language

Since there is an intertwined relationship between language and culture, cultural components have been incorporated into language skills in foreign language education. In ELT, cultural content has been subsumed under language teaching so that learners would use the English language competently and have in-depth understandings of cultures embedded in that language. As the concept of native speaker (NS) competence used to prescribe all aspects of ELT, culture teaching was correspondingly constructed on the paradigm of target culture associated with the language being learnt. In accordance with that model, English as foreign language (EFL) learners were provided with knowledge about geographical and historical facts, life and social institutions of English speaking countries, mainly Great Britain and the United States. Nevertheless, the emergence EIL or English as lingua franca has challenged the ELT pedagogy because English is used by more nonnative English speakers (NNS) in the expanding circle than native speakers in the inner circle (Jenkins, 2012; McKay, 2010). The NS norms that previously determined the ELT pedagogy in general and culture teaching in particular are considered inappropriate with the English use in multilingual and multicultural contexts (Kramsch, 2008). Therefore, culture teaching must be in line with the new goal of ELT which trains learners not to become NSs, but "to use this language as a tool for interaction among many other languages and cultures" (Soler & Jorda, 2007, p. 1).

1.2 Changes in Culture Teaching and Learning

In response to the new status of the English language, culture teaching and learning in ELT has also been subject to change. Risager (2008), for instance, recommends the transnational paradigm for culture pedagogy which "rests on the recognition of linguistic and cultural complexity and on transnational flow" (p. 193). In both foreign language education and ELT, Corbett (2003) suggests the intercultural approach for teaching culture because it "trains learners to be diplomats, able to view different cultures from a perspective of informed understanding" (p. 2). Cultural content in ELT, according to this approach, is no longer confined to the paradigm of target culture, but to a variety of cultural content in the world. Diverse cultures are, therefore, advocated in this article to replace the dominance of English speaking cultures. This goal is congruent with Baker's concept (2012); that is, "the diversity and complexity of different local and national cultural groupings [will] lead to an awareness of the multi-voiced nature of cultural characterizations" (p. 68). To put it simply, EFL learners do not

necessarily study British and American cultures in English lessons which used to be treated as the target culture. Instead, a variety of cultural content from different countries is introduced to learners in the ELT practice in order that they can mediate and negotiate between cultures. By this way, EFL learners would become intercultural speakers endowed with values such as “open-mindedness, curiosity, tolerance of difference, and respect – for self and others” (Corbett, 2003, p. 209). In the same vein, Soler and Jorda (2007, p. 1) describe English learners as intercultural speaker “with knowledge of one or more cultures and social identities, and who enjoys discovering and maintaining relationships with people from other cultural backgrounds, although s/he has not been formally trained for that purpose”.

1.3 Learners' Beliefs of Culture Teaching in ELT

The ELT literature shows a growing body of work on culture teaching; yet they have been mainly concerned with conceptual models of and theories (Young & Sachdev, 2011). A small number of empirical studies (Corbett, 2003; Sercu, 2005; Young & Sachdev, 2011) investigated how the intercultural approach has been implemented in language teaching by exploring teachers' beliefs and practices of intercultural teaching. The imbalance between theories and practices leads Young and Sachdev (2011) to raise a concern that “the actual take-up of an intercultural approach in its application to classroom language learning has been the subject of very little investigation” (p. 82). Compared with research on teachers' beliefs and practices of teaching culture, learners' beliefs of this issue seem to be unexplored. In Sercu's study (2005, p. 174), the perspective of learners was investigated, but it was a “picture of the pupils through the teachers' eyes”. To fill this gap, research on culture in ELT is recommended to ‘start with an inquiry into pupils' perceptions’ (Sercu, 2005, p. 174) because learners are placed in the centre of the educational process.

1.4 Research Question

The purpose of this article is to explore EFL learners' attitudes towards the diverse cultures as integrated into English classes. The following research question is addressed:

What is Vietnamese EFL learners' perspective on diverse cultures integrated into the ELT practice?

2. Method

2.1 Context of the Study

This article investigates Vietnamese EFL learners' voices regarding diverse cultures integrated into ELT. In Vietnam, English is taught mainly in formal settings, from primary to tertiary education, with a limited allocation of time for instruction. In classroom practice, teachers' first priority is to develop language skills and grammar for learners. In an attempt to develop both linguistic and cultural competence in ELT, culture has been integrated into English language instruction, but it is underpinned by two directions. One is the dominance of the target cultures in textbooks inherent in life, institutions and values of English speaking countries. The other is a factual representation of local culture in English textbooks written by Vietnamese authors who translate local sources from Vietnamese into English. Similarly to other Asian contexts, varied cultural content of different countries has been marginalised in the culture pedagogy. If multicultural content has a place in these sources (English textbooks develop by Vietnamese authors), African culture is, for example, represented as stereotypical as villages and wildlife parks.

2.2 Participants

In order to recruit participants for the research, an explanatory statement was sent to anyone who is interested in the issue of culture teaching in ELT. Among those who contacted the researcher for participating in the study, ten newly-graduated students, aged between 23 and 25, were selected as the participants. As their job and study are closely related to intercultural communication, their perspectives are expected to give in-depth understandings of teaching and learning diverse cultures in the Vietnamese EFL context. All of them have seven years of experience in learning English in secondary schools followed by four years at university. Their major at university includes business, arts and engineering. At the time of data collection, three participants were doing postgraduate overseas while the rest (seven) were working in business and service areas in Vietnam. During the stage of data analysis, pseudonyms were used for all the participants due to confidential purposes. In addition to the primary source of data collected from these learner participants, two teachers' ideas were used to clarify what the participants discussed about the practice of teaching and learning culture in English classes. These teachers were among the total number of participants (ten teachers and 20 students) of the whole project regarding culture teaching in ELT.

2.3 Data Collection

Data for the study was collected from the participants' reflective journals. Each participant wrote five entries during the three-month period of data collection for the large project of culture teaching and learning in the Vietnamese EFL context. For the scope of this study, the participants wrote two entries in the second month. The length of each entry was more than 500 words. To help them know what to write, some guided questions were given (e.g. how they studied culture in school time, their opinion of teaching diverse cultures, any problems they can find out in teaching varied cultural content). However, they were also encouraged to write freely and flexibly about anything related to cultural teaching and learning they experienced during secondary and tertiary education. The journals were submitted to the researcher through email. When any idea was not clear enough or needed elaborating, the participants were contacted for clarification through an extra writing or interview. The process of data analysis began with the researcher's thematic familiarisation with the raw data. All the writings were carefully read to identify prominent topics and code themes as presented in the section of findings below. Three themes are presented to answer the research question about learners' perspective on the integration of diverse cultures into the ELT practice.

3. Findings

There are three major findings, of which the first is concerned with the participants' positive attitudes to diverse cultures. While advocating an understanding of multiple cultures as the necessity for teaching and learning culture in the globalised context, the participants also acknowledge that the concept of diversity in ELT has to do with their home culture, marking the second finding. The third major finding is some constraints on teaching varied cultures as recognised by the participants, followed by their solutions for improving the teaching of cultures in the ELT practice of Vietnam. An in-depth analysis of each finding is presented and discussed as follows:

3.1 Diverse Cultures: A Window to Look Beyond Ourselves

All the participants think that it is crucial for diverse cultures to be addressed in the ELT practice. They use a number of positive adjectives to show their supportive attitudes such as "interesting, knowledgeable, useful, necessary, enthusiastic, inspiring, and encouraged". From their perspective, multiple cultures are windows "to look beyond our own culture and identity" even though specific reasons for support vary from individual to individual. They recognise, in essence, the benefits of studying diverse cultures as a starting point for them, Byram (2008, p. 68) says, "to see how different cultures relate to each other – in terms of similarities and differences – and to act as mediator between them, or more precisely between people socialized into them". It is easy to understand their desire to learn varied cultural content because culture was often ignored by most teachers in English classes during their school time. This phenomenon is still common throughout the country because both teachers and learners think that it is more practical and important to focus on language skills and grammar:

Cultural content was not a fundamental part in English teaching at high school. Teachers seemed to forget culture when they taught us English. They only cared about the main skills of English such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. (Duy)

Despite the neglect of cultural components in many English classes, some teachers are aware of culture as an integral part in foreign language teaching, so they make attempts to accommodate cultural elements with language skills. However, they still adhere to the model of NS competence which is criticised by Duy (a participant) as "'unilateral". Sharing this idea with Duy, Phuong recalls his experience:

In my school time, culture in English lessons was mainly about daily life of people in Britain. For example, they told me about when and how people get up, go to work, get back from office and meet their friends [...] I thought it was a little irrelevant to my daily life and interests.

The participants say that culture was not favoured in the ELT practice at secondary and tertiary education. However, the emergence of EIL and the spread of globalisation help them find it necessary to study different cultural contexts. One of the participants, Viet mentions the contexts where English is used as a second language, so the scope of diverse cultures is extended to countries of the expanding circle rather than the target countries in the inner circle: "India, Singapore and Hong Kong are using both English and an official language at the same time. Teaching and learning cultures of these countries is essential". Other participants, Truong and Vu, suggest that English should be approached as a means for learners to explore different cultures, and they expect to utilise this empowered language for inquiry into countries where English is not the first language. As compared to their peers, these participants have novel ideas due to their cooperation with foreigners through exchange programmes

at university. Furthermore, intercultural contact has reinforced their beliefs of multicultural teaching in ELT:

I think English is a global language, so it is a good thing that we can teach and study cultures of other countries whose mother tongue is not English. We can learn the way people live around the world. This practice makes us more understandable of each other. (Truong)

The world is becoming smaller and smaller, so understanding diverse cultures is an undeniable need. It should be fine if English class can make student become more knowledgeable in different cultures of the world. (Vu)

Bao, a participant who is studying in Australia, has a different view on the benefits of cultures transferred through the English language. He takes his own motivation and interests as practical evidence to support the teaching of a variety of cultures. Bao has made the best use of this language to appreciate norms and values of human civilisations other than learning English for merely communicative purposes: “I often use English to learn various systems of beliefs and values. For example, I read English books about French revolution, Islam, Shakespeare plays, Greek mythology”.

Another participant, Nhi thinks that teaching diverse cultures in English classes “is not necessarily a bad thing” and “not too novel a phenomenon”. The following paragraph is her observation of English textbooks that deal with multicultural content:

I have seen a couple of texts that utilize examples from different cultures rather than the American or English and it is not too novel a phenomenon. Texts for Taiwan kids would have names of people from Taiwan, for instance. Sometimes textbooks in Vietnam would include general knowledge of world cultures (food, architecture, geography, history, etc.) but the Western values are still the dominant.

Regarding the popularity of the internet and media in our modern life, Hanh, a participant, notes that one substantial advantage of multiple cultures presented through English lessons is to help learners become “wise consumers of television, newspapers, movies and advertising industry” in the era of globalised media.

3.2 Cultural Diversity Includes Home Culture First

Diverse cultures in ELT, according to the participants, include knowledge of their home culture in the first place and then an understanding of different cultures. Their belief is congruent with Corbett’s emphasis on intercultural elements of second language education that require “teachers and learners to pay attention to and respect the home culture and the home language” (2003, p. 4). All the participants support the place of local culture under the umbrella of cultural diversity in the ELT practice as they believe that learners can compare and contrast values and identity of their own culture with those of other cultures:

To open their knowledge to a variety of cultures, firstly Vietnamese students must master the own local culture, and of course, be able to present it to people from other cultures. (Hanh)

Each country has its own language and culture. To learn a new culture, we ourselves have to get the background knowledge about Vietnamese culture. If we not have a tough grasp of our culture, how can we know the differences between ours and other countries and how can we compare our culture with others? (Anh)

The participants show their positive attitudes of the teaching of local culture in ELT, but they also think that this kind of teaching, when implemented in classroom, would be both stimulating and challenging. On the one hand, teaching Vietnamese culture will be at an advantage because “teachers and learners would find themselves familiar with things said on the texts” (Nhi). Thao also shares her own experience in English classes that deal with topics of Vietnamese culture: “We were motivated by familiar objects, ideas or things around us when they are transmitted in another language [English]”. On the other hand, they believe that teaching home culture does not motivate learners because they already know every detail of the sociocultural content about their own country. While expecting to explore something new and meet their interests and curiosity, learners may feel fed up with this kind of practice in classroom:

When my teacher said that the English lesson was about Vietnam, we were very excited. But then we knew that it was just general information that we could easily find on internet. All the students in class were a little bit bored. (Truong)

3.3 Constraints on Teaching Diverse Cultures in ELT as Perceived by Learners

The participants point out challenges of the integration of diverse cultures into ELT. Truong is concerned about Vietnamese students’ limited opportunities for access to multicultural socialisation:

In other countries like Europe or in Singapore next to Vietnam, citizens are frequently exposed to diverse cultures, so they are not only aware of cultural differences but also actively engage with these cultures. In Vietnam, we

don't have such an advantage. (Truong)

This disadvantage prevents learners from committing to learning cultures and developing intercultural competence because the participants and other learners strongly believe that first-hand experience or enculturation is more influential than studying indirectly through textbooks and teachers.

The limited amount of class time allocated to English, usually three periods (45 minutes each) per week, is another obstacle to teaching cultures effectively; hence, teachers often give priority for language skills and ignore cultural content. However, a more serious problem that most participants recognise is teachers' lack of diverse experience and in-depth knowledge of cultures to raise learners' interests: "They lack cultural experience and sensitivity to multiple cultures. This makes lessons boring and theoretical, and demotivates students" (Hanh). This constraint also happens in other ELT contexts of Europe and America as Sercu (2005, p. 162) states that "teachers tend to take little account of their pupils' abilities, needs and interests, and adopt teacher-centred approaches to culture teaching". Some are keen on teaching cultures, but not given much autonomy in adapting the materials and curriculum. To justify this constraint, two teachers were contacted for providing further information. One confirmed that "I have no experience about these things [cultures]; I only search information on internet or books". The other reflected a reality: "I do not have chance to know about cultures. The curriculum doesn't require the teacher knowledge about diverse cultures, so we don't introduce them to students though we wish".

Concerning the content of local culture in English textbooks compiled by Vietnamese authors, Khuong gives critique of "propagating the government policies and describing local festivals". To do this job, textbook writers often literally translate words and phrases that are specific of Vietnamese culture into English. However, many things and concepts exist in Vietnam, but not in other cultures. As a result, learners find it confusing to use these words to tell foreigners what is typical and distinctive of their own culture. Khuong gives examples of some English words literally translated by textbook authors to describe Vietnamese holidays and food in some learning units at high school. He studied these words and expected to use for intercultural communication in real life contexts; but unfortunately, people from other cultures were unable to understand what he meant:

A reading passage in Year 11 textbook introduced Tet holiday (Chinese New Year) in Vietnam with different customs as well as kinds of food served in this important event. The writer translated their name into English; and my Western friends said they sounded confusing and bizarre. (Khuong)

3.4 What We Want to Learn

In efforts to make the teaching diverse cultures possible, these participants have made some practical suggestions based on their learning experiences. They hope that researchers and teachers would take their voices into account. All of them are particularly concerned with the teaching and learning methods. They expect that diverse cultures should be taught in varied approaches rather than traditional methods many that teachers are currently using in the ELT practice. The teachers' role is, therefore, addressed as "inspiring their students, using any technique possible, and textbook is only one of many resources to draw on" (Nhi). Phuong suggests that lessons of cultures should be interactive rather than a "fixed formula" taken by most teachers; that is, a reading passage followed by simple practice activities.

These participants say that students now want to discuss and exchange ideas with their classmates and teacher. Ideologically, English learners recognise that the objective of foreign language learning is not only acquiring the language skills, but also familiarising them with "a new pattern of thinking" (Phuong). They also want to be involved in debate, discussion, critical reading and writing, media and text analysis. It is worth regarding Nhi's advice as high aspiration of most learners for learning home culture in the mainstream of cultural diversity:

A lesson should not be a mere depiction of everyday life and facts but need to create space for critical thinking and inquiries. For example, if the text addresses cartoon and comic in Vietnam, it could contain questions of why there are tons of Japanese manga [Japanese comic] in the Vietnamese market but not the other way around. Cultures are more interesting in comparison and contrast.

Learners' interests should be a priority as Bao says: "I believe it's a good point for teachers to care about learners' interests. Sometimes they let students choose the topics they like". Likewise, Phuong gives a practical suggestion that meets the needs of young learners in modern life: "Lessons should be more relevant to students' life. For example, the content may be about well-known idol or hot shows on television such as Taylor Swift or the voice".

The participants suggest alternative ways of learning cultures such as project learning, field trips, studying overseas rather than only relying on textbooks. They think that enculturation in multicultural contexts, especially

studying overseas is the most effective way to experience different cultures and enhance intercultural competence. However, not all students can afford to do that, so the participants (e.g. Truong, Vu, and Viet) expect that education leaders in Vietnam would cooperate with foreign organisations to invite volunteer teachers and international students through exchange programmes with local students. This kind of international cooperation not only better learners' intercultural learning but also improves their English language skills.

4. Discussion and Recommendations

In this study, the participants' reflections shed light on the culture teaching and learning in the EFL context of Vietnam. The most significant thing is their enthusiastic welcome to the integration of diverse cultures into the ELT practice. Based on the findings of the study, the following suggestions are made in order that the teaching of diverse cultures would be effectively implemented in the Vietnamese EFL context.

In the first place, the role of teachers must be critical for change. Learners all expect to engage in critical thinking, progressive ideas and values in the culture pedagogy. However, teachers are not well-prepared, and they do not have the knowledge and experience to meet learners' needs and act as an agent of change. Living in the era of technology and media, students find it hard to accept that their teachers lag behind themselves in terms of inquiry into cultures. It is, therefore, foremost to change teachers' beliefs and practices of culture teaching in accordance with the new culture pedagogy and reconceptualised paradigm of ELT. In this respect, teachers' role is:

...not to provide comprehensive information or bring the foreign society into the classroom for learners to observe and experience but to develop in students the competence that will make them relativise their own cultural values, beliefs and behaviours and investigate for themselves the otherness, what is different to their norm. (Aguilar, 2007, p. 69)

To help teachers have such a role, innovation should begin in teacher education (both pre-service and in-service) by addressing issues to date including EIL, diverse cultures, intercultural competence, and interculturality (Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005).

Secondly, to raise students' interests and motivation in culture learning, material development should not be overlooked. Despite strong resistance from researchers and language educators concerning the dominance of target cultures and stereotypical representation of Asian and African cultures in English textbooks used in many ELT contexts (Yuen, 2011), many teachers and learners prefer these sources because there are a variety of communicative activities, interactive orientations, and high quality of images and illustrations. If cultural diversity including local culture is actually added to ELT materials, it is necessary to include emotional, critical and reflective elements instead of informative and factual presentation. Collaboration in material development is welcome so that that home culture under the umbrella of cultural diversity will be treated by both local and international authors and publishers. In this way, learners find what they study in lessons of culture relevant to real life communication. This is what they all look forward to, namely a close connection between culture learning in schools and intercultural communication in real life contexts.

Last but not least, the efficacy of culture teaching in ELT would be strengthened if L1 education is taken into account. What students are taught in L1 in subjects such as history, geography, literature and culture will promote or hinder their culture learning in EFL classes. However, the ELT literature indicates that attention has been paid to the influence of L1 on the acquisition of L2 skills rather than to culture learning. In this study, participants recall their experience of studying cultures in L1 as "biased and boring"; thus, it is not surprising for many students' indifference to culture learning in ELT. Ideologically, the participants imply political and institutional constraints in their home country and look for progressive values such as democracy, freedom, equality, and tolerance in other cultures in attempt to become "critical and committed citizens" (Guilherme, 2002, p. 1). Their voices show critical cultural awareness; that is "a critique of their own communities and societies and to the communities and society of those other countries" (Byram, 2012, p. 10). While there is an overwhelming number of studies on learners' preservation of their cultural identity during the process of learning a new language, little research has been done on the positive impact of diverse cultures presented in ELT on personal and social change within the community where they are living, as Norton and Toohey (2011) suggest for research on language learning, culture and identity.

5. Conclusion

The study has examined EFL learners' perspective on the issue of integrating diverse cultures into the ELT practice in Vietnam. The participants think that diverse cultures represented in ELT would enhance their cultural understanding and intercultural competence. According to them, EFL learners have to study their home culture in

addition to the mainstream of cultural diversity. Their positive attitudes help to confirm that diverse cultures are possible and appropriate in the Vietnamese ELT context. However, to make this teaching practice feasible, stakeholders including education leaders, language educators and teachers should consider the constraints as raised by the participants in the previous section so that a realistic approach would be found out to make it appropriate with this ELT context.

Qualitative data of this study was collected from ten participants who have just finished tertiary education. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to the whole ELT context of Vietnam. Instead, this study is highly recommended as a starting point for a more comprehensive study that investigates learners of different levels, both secondary and tertiary education throughout the country. In the same vein, this study should be approached as a reference point for studies concerning culture teaching in similar EFL contexts. Methodologically, a mixed method would give more insight into the issue being studied. To be more specific, quantitative data would be collected by doing survey, followed by qualitative data through interviews or reflective writings.

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