

Gap question: What kinds of cultural content should be included in English language textbooks for Vietnamese learners?

The fact that culture is often abandoned or treated as a “Cinderella” skill in ESL and EFL teaching has been mentioned regularly in contemporary research (Tang 1999; Lo Bianco 2003). This reality contradicts the long-accepted theories of the need for integrated teaching of both language and culture together. The question raised by both Tang (1999) and Lo Bianco (2003) “What and how culture should be taught?” has been a real challenge, especially when learners of English are global citizens under multicultural contexts. To Vietnamese learners, it is more important ahead of the high demand in language competence that comes with developing globalization. This essay focuses on Vietnamese learners of English with a view to clarifying three sources of culture, with four different aspects that must be embraced in ESL text books for Vietnamese learners; strengthening the idea of teaching language- teaching culture, and attempts to provide a detailed answer for the question of what should be taught for Vietnamese learners and links it with the Vietnamese TESOL context by the introduction of a cultural content checklist.

The close tie between language learning and culture has long been identified in prominent philosophies, linking language acquisition to socio-linguistic competence and paving the way to the highest level of language competence: communicative competence. Firstly formulated by Hymes (1967), then by Canale (1983), and later Celce Murcia et al. (1995) and most recently Celce Murcia (2008), socio-linguistic competence has always been one of the four major factors in communicative competence. Referring to the pragmatic knowledge necessary to perform properly in social and cultural contexts, it requires deeper understanding of social contextual factors, stylistic appropriateness, cultural factors and other variables (Celce-Murica et al. 1995; Celce Murcia 2008). Upon gaining cultural competence, learners will achieve communicative competence, enabling them to acquire language competence. In other words, culture competence takes the decisive role in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The launch of CEFR or the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is another support for the value of cultural competence. It establishes the criterion of socio-linguistic competence for evaluating learners’ language competence (The University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations 2011), officially recognizing the necessity of culture in language acquisition. With the common use of CEFR, culture has been of critical importance in language programs. In addition, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method has achieved growing dominance over outdated approaches like the Grammar-Translation method, the Direct/Berlitz method or the Audio-lingual method in language teaching (Brandl 2008). The method realizes the theory of communicative competence (Brandl 2008), so its popularity is likely to be the force driving language education to focus more on culture understanding for successful communication purposes.

Apart from socio-linguists, schema and cultivation theorists also promote the idea of teaching language, teaching culture. As for Anderson, Sapiro & Montague (1977) and An (2013), cultural background can affect learners’ ability to comprehend texts. Schema advocates believe that learning difficulties are the direct consequences of the scarcity of

cultural background knowledge, and what is learnt, in that case, is imperfect. On the other hand, cultivation scholars focus on the development of individuals in their relationship to the outside world. According to them, culture and cultural changes result in the re-organization and expansion of individual perspective. From this viewpoint, learning about culture helps learners understand how they “accept” and are “shaped” by cultural diversity (Tseng 2002, p. 13). In a nutshell, as Gao (2013) states that ‘Language is the carrier of culture’ (p.1429), culture content is vital in language materials to communicate successfully and to ‘increase comprehension’ (Tseng 2002, p. 13) in target language acquisition.

The first important component in materials for Vietnamese learners is the culture of the target language: English culture. Otto Jespersen (1904) as cited in Lo Bianco (2003) argues that the ultimate objective of language teaching is to help learners understand the culture of another society. Accordingly, teaching English culture will be the highest tasks for teachers of English to fulfill. As for Strasheim (1986), targeting culture can boost learners’ perspective consciousness and cross-cultural awareness. It strongly reaffirms the tenets of sociolinguistic authors about the cultural competence for the sake of language competence. Sariçoban & Çalışkan (2011) mention seven benefits of teaching target language culture, such as the promotion of convention and connotation understanding. It can be concluded that Vietnamese learners will yield merit from a knowledge of English culture.

As ESL learners, Vietnamese students will need to be equipped with national and international cultures. They will gain two big advantages when studying their homeland culture in English. Lesikin (2001) suggests that learners, with cultural background information, when challenged with grammatical tasks, will have advanced decision making ability. In addition, for Tseng (2002), despite differences among them, the interaction of Individual culture (IC), Social culture (SC) (both include mother tongue culture) and Target culture (TC) all embrace rethinking and self-adaption as a means for learners to ‘move forward’(p.15). On the other hand, for Byram (1997), cited in Aguilar (2008), the abandonment of a learner’s culture by blending it into other cultures may inexplicably result in a sense of schizophrenia in learners. Consequently, the lack of Vietnamese culture altogether should be avoided.

Multicultural competence further enhances Vietnamese learners in language learning. Fleming (1998) in Soler & Joda (2008) views English learners as ‘Intercultural speakers’ (p.1), who have the knowledge of one or more cultures and social identities. Soler & Joda (2008) further expand Fleming’s statement by arguing that since contemporary learners belong to various speech communities, their interactions take place in a multicultural context and require multicultural cognition. This is supported by Aguilar (2008) who stresses that the interplay of at least two cultures is the very factor that helps learners function well. Multiculturalism is also the undeniable trend reinforcing the role of English as a lingua franca in globalization. Once communication takes place among non-native speakers more often than native ones (Thomas 1996; Alptekin 2002), and once the language and cultural-laden discourse samples are not restricted to Anglophone cultures (Mckay 2005; Alptekin 2002), Vietnamese learners should need multicultural competence.

Aguilar (2008) presented three cases in which only one cultural “backbone” is mentioned in the textbook. If only the target culture is mentioned, it causes ‘strangeness and detachment’ (p.72), leading to the rejection in students. If several cultures are mentioned, it

will result in 'unconnected topics and issue that makes no sense' (p.73), and if there is only homeland culture, the result is 'distortion' (p.73). The co-existence of the three backbones is important for a comprehensive understanding by learners. Consequently, the harmony of them will allow Vietnamese students to compare, contrast and reflect, leading to the development of 'critical cultural awareness', a concept introduced by Aguilar (2008, p.73).

A culture is a broad and complicated area (House 2008; Lo Bianco 2003), so it is necessary to select specific generic aspects to mention. Gao (2013) describes four key conditions to boost cross-cultural competence, from which four aspects of cultural contents can be determined and applied for language learners in general and Vietnamese learners in particular.

Non-verbal aspects: It is estimated to convey most of our communication (Wharton 2009). Non-verbal aspects and English language skill are contributory factors for a successful communication.

Traditional culture and custom: As for Gao (2013), misunderstanding in many cases is not due to words or pronunciation, but in contrasting view points within the same concepts. In this case, traditional culture and the customs of English speaking countries, Vietnam and other countries are definitely worth mentioning.

Social pragmatic communicative principles: It is understood that the speakers' real intentions cannot be based on literal meaning by the way of syntax or lexicon and phonology. Such knowledge is also a contributory factor behind effective communication.

Transition: Gao (2013) argues that this is based on the philosophy of "When in Rome, do as Roman do". It is supported by Kramsch (1993) in Aguilar (2008). He states that learners must be a mediator in a third place to harmonize the differences and contradictions of cultural diversity. In other words, knowledge of what to do, what not to do and what is safe to do in contexts allows learners to transit to and fro in a safe third place within communication.

If the textbooks pay attention to the four above aspects of cultures, Vietnamese learners will easily thrive in communication and make progress in language learning.

Cultural contents in textbooks are valuable sources for learners to improve their cultural understanding. If deliberately selected, cultural related components in textbook can promote language acquisition (Ahmed & Narcy-Combes 2011). On the other hand, materials with false cultural contents can result in discomfort and performance failure for both teachers and students. Gray's (2000) research shows that the badly-chosen images and content are detrimental. In the *Cambridge English Course 1*, badly-chosen images and content created a very 'negative picture of British childrearing' (Gray 2000, p. 279). In his opinion, such things can present false British stereotypes and affect the value system of learners, creating hostile attitudes towards Anglosphere cultures due to misconception. Teachers in Gray's (2000) research did show discomfort and disagreement towards such unsuitable contents and chose not to use them. Ahmed & Narcy-Combes (2011) concentrate on the misuse of pictures in Pakistan ESL textbooks, which were interpreted as presenting biased religious viewpoints. Their findings and arguments express a deep concern for Pakistanis students whose thoughts and concepts might well be challenged by the biased cultural stereotypes they are exposed to. As Ahmed & Narcy-Combes (2011) state that 'the cultural awareness mainly depends on textbook available to them' (p. 21), it will be impossible to dispel certain misconceptions among learners once they have been imprinted on students' minds. Moreover, because textbooks occupy crucial roles in syllabus, curriculum, learners' outcomes and instructional

process (Luu Trong 2012; Nunan 2000), any changes made to their contents are likely to have significant impacts on the whole process. In other words, teachers are not always free to alter inappropriate cultural contents; for fear that their adaptation could raise another problem. This puts stress on the task of choosing suitable material to avoid unintended consequences.

Sheldon (1988) and Ur (2012) develop two checklists for textbook evaluation. However, Ur's (2012) checklist only considers the cultural acceptability of the approach to a book with only one criterion. Sheldon (1988) mentions only cultural bias in general conceptions of stereotype philosophy without discussing cultural value or cultural safety or transition. More importantly, they are not designed for Vietnamese learners specifically, but for ESL learners as a whole. It leads to the emergence of a typical checklist for assessing cultural contents in ESL materials for Vietnamese learners. Basing on what is needed for Vietnamese learners, a checklist could be formulated as follow.

The checklist (see Appendix) assesses the contents by criteria of cultural sources, cultural aspects and cultural values. Therefore, cultural contents can be considered as sufficient if they include three sources of culture (English speaking countries, Vietnam and other countries) and explore the four aspects (non-verbal aspects, traditional culture and custom, social pragmatic communicative principles and transition) necessary for achieving cultural competence in learners, as mentioned above. Their appropriateness can be measured by their compatibility with the distinctive characteristics or norms of Vietnamese culture. Le Van (2015) summarizes and suggests five characteristics of Vietnamese cultures: Patriotism; National Spirit; Compassion, Love and Humanity; Collectivism and Subtlety. For example, Patriotism and National spirit can be the love of the country, landscape and people, willingness to sacrifice for the country, self-recognition of being Vietnamese. Compassion, Love and Humanity can be hierarchy and respect towards senior family members. Collectivism can be seen in solidarity and cooperation. Subtlety can be the creativity and flexibility. If the contents do not violate those typical features of the country's culture, they can be considered as suitable or acceptable to be taught for Vietnamese learners.

The checklist is open to all themes and topics, even to those which are viewed as very sensitive, like religion or national history. The reason is if the content under the themes conforms to the norms of Vietnamese culture, it will be acceptable. For example, although religion is not included in many ESL textbooks (Ndura 2004), textbook authors can discuss the philosophy of humanity or patriotism, or introduce "safe" topics for transition like the food the Muslim eat or the clothes worn by Buddhist monks and nuns. The checklist also provides a blank item labeled "Others". If there is another aspect mentioned in the textbook, it can still be judged similarly. Another function of the checklist is to support material adaption. Teachers can utilize available criteria to replace unsuitable cultural content and carefully check their selection. On the other hand, authors can use the checklist to compile textbooks and decide what can be included to ensure appropriateness for Vietnamese learners.

As defined by Alptekin (2002), teachers have the duty to integrate language and culture in educational processes for Vietnamese learners. They must understand, at least, the Anglophone culture and Vietnamese culture to ensure a measurable level of language competence is achieved. Because learners must become mediators among cultural

differences (Kramsch 1993, cited in Aguilar 2008), teachers' knowledge of a "third place" or culturally accepted norms is also necessary to support the process.

For textbook authors, Cortazzi & Jin (1999) as cited in Ahmed & Narcy-Combes (2011) suggest that they must share the same cultural values with teachers and learners. Compiling materials for Vietnamese learners requires authors to understand the local culture as well as the Vietnamese context. A cooperation between native speaking authors, Vietnamese educators, teachers and Vietnamese learners will ensure the success of the materials.

As for Lo Bianco (2003), culture does exist in every move of language teaching and learning everywhere. He demonstrates a circle of ignorance where 'linguistics often ignores culture, inter-cultural study often ignores language' (p. 27) and claims that teaching is ignored by both. However, socio-linguistic, schema and cultivation theories all prove the vitality of teaching language –teaching culture. It is accepted that the cultures of English speaking countries, the homeland and other countries must be included in the textbooks for Vietnamese learners. Their detailed contents must be explored in four aspects and assessed against five characteristics of Vietnamese culture. The checklist, which incorporates all these things, will serve as a useful tool for teachers and textbook authors in conveying cultural contents in ESL materials in Vietnamese context. Such carefully evaluated textbooks will really be the "cultural artifacts" required by Gray (2000).

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APPENDIX

Checklist of cultural contents in ESL materials for Vietnamese learners

Sources	Aspects	Characteristics				
		Patriotism	National spirit	Compassion, Love and Humanity	Collectivism	Subtlety
English culture	Non-verbal aspects					
	Traditional culture and custom					
	Social pragmatic communicative principles					
	Transition					
	Others					
Vietnamese culture	Non-verbal aspects					
	Traditional culture and custom					
	Social pragmatic communicative principles					
	Transition					
	Others					
Other cultures	Non-verbal aspects					
	Traditional culture and custom					

	Social pragmatic communicative principles					
	Transition					
	Others					
Conclusion						