

# CULTURAL ELEMENTS AND THEIR POTENTIALS TO DEVELOP STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: A SURVEY ON ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS USED IN CLASSES OF LANGUAGE SKILLS AT UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, HUE UNIVERSITY

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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 in many different ways. Several studies have suggested that cultural elements incorporated in English textbooks can be of great significance in helping learners acquired intercultural competence. This paper presents the results of a survey on English textbooks used for teaching language skills at the Department of English and the Department of International Studies, Hue University of Foreign Languages. The findings reveal an inclusion of several usable cultural elements from both the inner circle and outer circle cultures in such textbooks; however, most of them reflect surface cultural values rather than deep cultural ones. Besides, although deep culture elements are incorporated, these are addressed at a pretty shallow level. It is suggested that in order to enhance students' intercultural competence, teachers and students need further effort to take full advantage of the available cultural elements. This paper also gives recommendation on effective use of such elements.

**Key words:** Deep cultural values, intercultural competence, surface cultural values

## 1. Introduction

The last few 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 (Council of Europe, 2001). Rather, it is 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" (Meyer, 1991, 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 in their interactions with others (Young & Sercombe, 2010). This definition, in fact, adds to the notion of communicative competence and enlarges it to incorporate intercultural competence. Here, a competent language user is characterised 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

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peoples) and in the process of developing interculturality. The linguistic and cultural competences 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 are perceptions that intercultural contact and interchange are greater than ever, necessitating approaches to understanding and brokering difference 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 (Risager, 1998).

At the Department of English and the Department of International Studies, Hue University of Foreign Languages, in order 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 were listed by CEF (2001) as seven categories that are considered characteristic of a particular European society and its culture which include everyday living, living condition, interpersonal relations, values, beliefs and attitudes, body language, social conventions and ritual behaviours. 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 department; 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 an in-depth survey of textbooks used for teaching language skills to identify the cultural topics included in them as the initial step towards effective usage of such elements in developing and enhancing students' intercultural competence.

There are five sections in the study. The introduction provides details on the context of the study. The sections on literature review and the method give definitions of the major concepts, description of instruments to collect data, participants and data analysis procedure. This is followed by findings and discussion which gives 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 defined by Alptekin (2002) 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, which requires several factors other than language competence. As suggested by Byram, 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 decentre and take up the other's perspective on their own culture, anticipating and where possible, resolving dysfunctions in communication and behaviour" (Byram & Zarate, 1997, p. 42). Intercultural communicative competence, as a result, can be formed on the basis of awareness, behaviour and action (Byram, 2008).

## 2.2. Objectives of teaching/learning culture

The interwoven relationship between language and culture can be summarized by Brown (2000, 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.” In order to communicate successfully across languages and cultures, one must understand culturally different norms of interaction and people’s values and thought (Saville-Troike, 2003). Sometimes linguistic correct sentences could cause misunderstanding or confusion when they are in a different cultural context (Schulz, 2007).

Tomalin and Stempleski (1993, pp. 7-8) listed such goals of cultural instruction as:

- To develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviours;
- To develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the way in which people speak and behave;
- To become more aware of conventional behaviour in common situations in the target culture;
- To increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language;
- To develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence;
- To develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture;
- To simulate students’ intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage 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. Theoretical views on culture

In “The Cultural Content in EFL Textbooks and What Teachers Need to Do about it,” Rodriguez (2015) listed the four following features of culture:

### 2.3.1. *Culture involves both surface and deep culture*

According to Hinkel (2001, cited in Rodriguez, 2015), the EFL field has generally focused on teaching elements of surface culture, that is, the easily observable and static elements that represent a nation. In other words, EFL materials often include holidays, tourist sites, famous people’s achievements, and food. However, these surface forms of culture are not sufficient for students to understand the target culture because they only entail the accumulation of general fixed information and do not provide opportunities to address the underlying sociocultural interactions that occur in different backgrounds (Rodriguez, 2015). In contrast, deep culture embraces invisible meanings associated with a region, a group of people, or subcultures that reflect their own particular sociocultural norms, lifestyles, beliefs, and values. These deep cultural forms are very intricate, almost hidden, because they are personal,

individual, possibly collective but multifaceted and because they do not necessarily fit the traditional social norms or the fixed cultural standards (Rodriguez, 2015).

Gary Weaver (1986) uses the image of an iceberg to explain these many layers of culture. Like an iceberg, part of a culture is “above water” in that it is visible and easy to identify and know. This part includes surface culture and elements of folk culture - the arts, folk dancing dress, cooking etc. But just as nine tenths of an iceberg is out of sight below water, Weaver explains, nine tenths of a culture is also hidden from view. This out-of-awareness part of culture has been termed “deep culture” although it does include some elements of folk culture. Deep culture includes elements such as the definition of sin, concept of justice, word ethic, eye behaviour, definition of insanity, approaches to problem solving, fiscal expression, and approach to interpersonal relationships. Ogbu (1988, p. 13) presents this essential idea more clearly when he states that “cultural tasks vary from culture to culture because different populations have worked out to solve different solutions to common problems in life, such as how to make a living, reproduce, maintain order within their borders, defend themselves against outsiders, and so on.”

### ***2.3.2. Culture is transformative, not only static***

The EFL field has considered culture to be a static entity that represents the main collective sociocultural norms, lifestyles, and values that are learned, shared, and transmitted by the people of a community (e.g., the British value punctuality, Americans are workaholics). However, these elemental visions not only tend to create stereotypes but are inaccurate in the current process of global communication given that culture is constantly in flux in multiple ways (Rodriguez, 2015). It is dangerous to generalize that all of the people of a community “share” and follow the exact same established sociocultural norms with homogeneous compliance. Likewise, it is a mistake to believe that each culture is unalterable with its own norms and traditions given that history itself has shown that one nation can indirectly or directly influence and change another and cause cultural alterations (Rodriguez, 2015).

### ***2.3.3. Culture is contentious, not only congratulatory***

EFL education has also focused on teaching culture in celebratory or neutral terms by emphasizing the most emblematic elements that define a cultural group and by spreading the idea that all cultures of the world happily coexist through mutual respect and tolerance. Therefore, learners create safe, celebratory opinions of the target cultures because they are never taught that defects in and deviations from the models of the “correct” cultural behaviour also exist. Learners are taught to appreciate positive characteristics of other nations, such as that Americans are well-organized, the British enjoy having tea every afternoon, and Japanese people are humble. Congratulatory views also underline the study of tourist sites, the lives of famous celebrities, the main human achievements of a country, and tips on how to survive as a tourist in a foreign country. Meanwhile, Graff (1992) and Hames-Garcia (2003) (cited in Rodriguez, 2015) state that teachers should avoid self-congratulatory approaches to culture, history, and identity in their pedagogy because celebratory discourses are one-sided in that they do not allow students to learn about the true conflictive sociocultural realities of a nation. Instead, approaches to culture and identity should promote a more critical approach through

“debates” and “models of controversy and conflict” (Hames-Garcia, 2003, p. 32) against oppression, injustice, and power. In this sense, culture should be taught in the EFL classroom from a contentious and controversial perspective in such a way that it explores the deep, complex elements of culture.

### ***2.3.4. Culture is heterogeneous, not only homogeneous***

Similar to the previous features, culture is seen in the EFL classroom as a homogeneous entity in which all of its components are studied in equal and generalized terms. Atkinson refers to this form of culture as “geographically distinct” and “relatively unchanging” and as a set of rules that regulate all individuals’ behaviour in a community uniformly as if they were identical (Atkinson, 1999, p. 626). As a result, learners have a tendency to create standardized generalizations of the target culture because they are never given the chance to consider that there are exceptions to the cultural norm. Consequently, it is important to recognize that there are also subgroups and subcultures within a particular society with their own values and ideologies that differ from those of the dominant group and that can help learners reflect on issues related to gender, ethnicity, identity, social class, and power, that is, to understand the heterogeneous and hybrid value that all cultures of the world encompass (Rodriguez, 2015).

## **3. Methods**

### **3.1. Material**

Led by the model suggested by Gary Weaver (1986), 2 English textbooks (NorthStar 1&2 Reading and Writing) were analyzed in order to identify the level of surface and deep culture elements incorporated in their content. The analysis of the textbooks was guided by the following question: Which surface or deep cultural topics do EFL communicative textbooks contain?

The criterion for the selection of the textbooks was based on their usage. At Hue University of Foreign Languages, NorthStar series have been used for several years. The series include 5 sets with 10 textbooks (labeling from 1 to 5, each set is consisted of 2 books - 1 for reading and writing and another for listening and speaking). The textbooks have been implemented as a means to prepare EFL students to become future teachers and interpreters/translators in the country.

Within the limit of this paper and as a component of a much larger project, only NorthStar 1&2 Reading and Writing were chosen for analysis.

### **3.2. Data collection instruments and procedure**

Data in the study, which is descriptive in nature, were collected over the course of two months from mid-June to mid-August in 2018. To answer the question that led this analysis, every single page and unit of the two textbooks was examined to identify those activities in which culture was incorporated. Each topic was classified into two categories: surface or deep culture. 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 appeared to be complex to approach were classified as deep culture; whereas all of the more universal

values were labelled as unclassified. 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

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

##### 4.1. Cultural elements in NorthStar 1 Reading and Writing (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) by Haugnes and Maher (2007)

**Table 1.** Cultural elements in NorthStar 1 Reading and Writing (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) by Haugnes and Maher (2007)

| Aspects                                  | Classification             |  |   | Origin              |                     |
|--|----------------------------|--|---|---------------------|---------------------|
|  | <i>Surface culture</i>     | <i>Deep culture</i>  | <i>Universal /Unclassified</i>                          | <i>Inner circle</i> | <i>Outer circle</i> |
| Internet                                 |                            |  | Facebook, friendship websites/social networks           | Australia           |                     |
| Grooming and presence<br>Ownership       |                            | attitudes towards individuality  |   | US<br>US            |                     |
| Arts                                     | graffiti                   |  |   | US                  |                     |
| Personalities                            | local figures in art field |  |   | US                  |                     |
| Aesthetics                               |                            | how people enjoy the TV show about the antiques and collections and the meanings of the collectibles |   | US & England        |                     |
| History                                  |                            | Social movements against juvenile delinquency  |   | US                  |                     |
| Attitudes towards economic globalization |                            |  | Multinational corporations versus family-owned business | US, Australia       | Korea               |
| Attitudes                                |                            | Attitudes towards traffic problems and solutions   |   | US                  | Thailand            |
| Marriage                                 |                            | giving birth and raising children  |   | US, Canada          |                     |
| Personalities                            | sports figures             |  |   | US                  |                     |

Findings from the analysis show that there is a combination between surface and deep culture elements with surface ones being the dominant. At the same time, aspects reflecting deep culture are not comprehensively discussed.

Values that reflect surface culture include arts, and personalities; and the majority of them originate from countries of the inner circle (the USA, Canada, the UK, and Australia) with just a few coming from those of the outer circle (Korea and Thailand). These elements match the

description of surface culture as being congratulatory, neutral and homogeneous. For example, when graffiti is mentioned (in Unit 3), it is addressed as an art form that is “for everyone” without an explanation of its origin and its association with class struggle and social issues. In reality, this form of art is utilized with different purposes by different groups of people in transmitting their cultural messages. In this case, however, arts in general and graffiti in particular are viewed from a very celebratory perspective. Likewise, other aspects such as sports figures, attitudes towards traffic problems and solutions are mentioned in pretty neutral manner.

Elements representing deep culture comprise of marriage, aesthetic, and grooming and presence. However, it is noticeable that regardless of being incorporated in the textbook, deep culture values are not rigorously elaborated, which may result in a scanty and shallow interpretation of such elements from the learners. As an example, the concept of giving birth and child rearing is presented alongside with the concept of multiple births (in Unit 10). This presentation literally shifts the focus from a cultural practice namely birth giving and child rearing to the phenomenon of multiple births, which ultimately leaves little room for further interpretation of the supposedly critical and useful element in providing students with much deeper insights into underlying cultural values of this cultural practice from a Western society (the USA).

It is also noticeable that several universal cultural aspects are included in the textbook, and such are associated with the process of economic and cultural globalization. With social networks (Facebook and friendship sites) and the competition between transnational corporation and local business being the two dominant themes the universal components help reflect a changing world in both positive and negative ways.

#### 4.2. Cultural elements in *NorthStar 2 Reading and Writing (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)* by Haugnes and Maher (2007)

**Table 2:** Cultural elements in *NorthStar 2 Reading and Writing (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)* by Haugnes and Maher (2007)

| Aspects                       | Classification             |  |   | Origin                       |                            |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------|--|---|------------------------------|----------------------------|
|                               | <i>Surface culture</i>     | <i>Deep culture</i>  | <i>Universal /Unclassified</i>                    | <i>Inner</i>                 | <i>Outer</i>               |
| Rewards & Privileges          |                            |  | job expectations and motivation                   | US                           |                            |
| Modernization                 |                            |  | city or country life                              | US, UK                       |                            |
| Ethical Values                |                            | attitude towards honesty<br>counterfeiting<br>attitude towards crime<br>attitude towards crime and restorative justice program |   | US                           |                            |
| Gestures & Kinesics<br>Taboos |                            |  | attitudes towards politeness<br>sub-way etiquette | US<br>US                     | Japan<br>Malaysia          |
| Attitudes                     | Traffic means of transport |  | computer games<br>protecting indigenous people    | US<br>Ireland<br>New Zealand | N.West<br>Africa<br>Mexico |
| Health and medicine           |                            | how a person reacts to medicine and various kinds of treatment   | healthy lifestyle                                 | US                           | Africa<br>Vietnam          |

Data from Table 2 indicate that unlike the elements incorporated in *NorthStar1 Reading and Writing*; those in *NorthStar 2 Reading and Writing* address a far wider range and a much deeper level of people's ways of life in different parts of the world with the majority of the cultural elements reflecting either deep culture or universal cultural values. The components include rewards and privilege, ethical values (honesty, attitudes towards counterfeiting, crime, and restorative justice program), health and medicine. Universal culture components comprise of attitudes towards politeness, computer games, healthy lifestyle, job satisfaction and motivation, modernization, and subway etiquette. Moreover, such elements originate from countries of both the inner and outer circles (Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, North West Africa, and Mexico). As a whole, this set of cultural elements is supposed to provide learners with a more diverse and pretty well-rounded understanding of the cultural practices around the world. In other words, the topics in this textbook are meant to equip EFL learners with the basic skills to become critical intercultural citizens of the world.

However, the in-depth analysis of these culture notes suggests that they are more oriented to explaining the meaning of new vocabulary that appears in the readings than actually teaching salient cultural facts. For instance, the concept of counterfeiting (unit 3) is presented with reading passages and writing activities that mainly cover the ways in which and how to identify if something (money, consumer products and software) is counterfeit. As a result, the moral codes associated with this practice are overlooked. Another instance is related to the justice system in the USA (unit 4). With this topic, a fact sheet about justice is presented to the learners in the form of a reading addressing crimes and victims of crimes. However, an explanation based on the economic and socio-cultural factors leading to the reality is nowhere to be found in the text. As a result, the learners may end up having few, if any, clues about the roots of the problem which are race, class and gender discrimination and the flaws in the US social structure.

## 5. Conclusion and implications

The findings reveal an inclusion of several usable cultural elements from both the inner circle and outer circle cultures in such textbooks; however, most of them reflect surface cultural values rather than deep cultural ones. Besides, although deep culture elements are incorporated, these are addressed at a pretty superficial level, which does not yield much interpretation of the underlying economic, socio-cultural factors that form such elements. Furthermore, there is a lack of even representativeness from different cultures/regions across the globe. As a result, learners are not likely to be equipped with a comprehensive understanding of the target cultures and other cultures across the world, which definitely pose a lot of obstacles to students' enhancement of their intercultural communication competence. Given the focus of these textbooks is on honing and perfecting students' language skills, the manner in which such cultural elements are incorporated can partly be justified.

Nevertheless, that does not necessarily mean that teachers and learners should stay inactive in their usage of the textbooks in general and of the cultural aspects in particular. In contrast, they need to make further efforts to take full advantage of the available cultural elements. More specifically, cooperation from both teachers and learners before, during and after each class should be sought after in order to tackle the available cultural elements from a



multi-faceted perspective, and thereby enhancing students' intercultural communication competence.

In order to fully take advantage of the cultural elements incorporated in the textbooks, recommendations to help teachers and students develop and enhance intercultural competence through English-skill practice classes are suggested as followed:

- Teaching culture through language skills development can be both challenging and interesting. It is challenging because this is not the main focus of the reading and writing classes. However, it will be useful for teachers to integrate cultural teaching into their lessons so that the reading and writing assignment can become more vivid and be completed in a more effective way, which ultimately results in students' improvement of their intercultural communication competence.

- For more effective classes, teachers can request students to prepare some aspects on 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. This way, students can be more engaged in the classroom, and more importantly, they are well-informed of both surface and deep culture.

- Teachers of such classes should keep themselves constantly updated with newly added cultural values to be able to facilitate learners in their intercultural communicative competence (ICC) attainment process.

- Teachers should also raise students' awareness about the importance of accumulating knowledge of different cultures as this is essential for students majoring in foreign languages.

- 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.

- Students should put into practice what they learn about the target culture more frequently by engaging in any form/opportunity of communication, especially with foreigners, in order to sharpen their communicative skills and thereby improve their intercultural competence.

- Students should filter and diversify the ways they use to enhance their intercultural competence outside the classroom. With the media, students should be more selective in choosing the channels to enrich their knowledge about the target culture.

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## **YẾU TỐ VĂN HÓA VÀ TIỀM NĂNG TRONG VIỆC PHÁT TRIỂN NĂNG LỰC LIÊN VĂN HÓA CHO SINH VIÊN: KHẢO SÁT GIÁO TRÌNH ĐƯỢC SỬ DỤNG TRONG CÁC LỚP THỰC HÀNH TIẾNG TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC NGOẠI NGỮ, ĐẠI HỌC HUẾ**

**Tóm tắt:** Năng lực liên văn hóa là một trong những thành tố cần được phát triển ở người sử dụng ngoại ngữ. Nhiều nghiên cứu chỉ ra rằng các yếu tố văn hóa trong giáo trình tiếng Anh có ý nghĩa quan trọng trong việc giúp người học lĩnh hội năng lực này. Bài báo trình bày kết quả khảo sát giáo trình thực hành tiếng tại khoa Tiếng Anh, Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Huế. Kết quả khảo sát cho thấy các giáo trình được sử dụng có nhiều yếu tố văn hóa từ các nước sử dụng tiếng Anh như tiếng mẹ đẻ và những nước khác. Tuy nhiên, các yếu tố này chủ yếu phản ánh văn hóa bề mặt (surface culture), và việc đề cập các yếu tố văn hóa mang chiều sâu (deep culture) tương đối sơ sài. Vì vậy có thể kết luận rằng giáo viên và sinh viên cần nỗ lực nhiều hơn nhằm khai thác được tiềm năng của các yếu tố văn hóa này. Nghiên cứu cũng đưa ra những kiến nghị nhằm nâng cao hiệu quả việc sử dụng các giáo trình trong việc nâng cao năng lực liên văn hóa của sinh viên.

**Từ khóa:** Giá trị văn hóa chiều sâu, năng lực liên văn hóa, giá trị văn hóa bề mặt