

# CULTURAL FEATURES IN ELT AT DALAT UNIVERSITY: CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

Tran Thao Uyen\*

Dalat University

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**Abstract:** Since Vietnam's National Foreign Language Project 2020 was approved by MoET in 2008, the view of making foreign languages an advantage of Vietnamese students has increasingly required improvements in language teaching. It is then essential to pay attention to cultural factors for the purpose of effectively communicating in multi-cultural and multi-lingual environment. In an attempt to identify challenges and suggest solutions to the matter of cultural training, this study investigates cultural features in the two textbooks used by non-English-major students. The study participants were 109 freshmen, 148 sophomores, and 19 English lecturers at Dalat University. Questionnaires and interviews played an important role in collecting data which were then analyzed statistically and descriptively. The finding results revealed three main challenges in ELT at Dalat University: arousing students' interest in cultural topics, orientating students towards unfamiliar culture, and instructing students in activities requiring certain knowledge of culture.

**Key words:** Language teaching, cultural features, challenges, suggested solutions

## 1. Introduction

In the society of the increasing globalization of trade and tourism, international communication has become an integral part. Mastering the English language, therefore, seems to be a key to meet the demands of international interactions. Consequently, improving the quality of English language teaching has been given a high priority for the last few decades. Since the National Foreign Language Project 2020 was approved by MoET in 2008, the view of making foreign languages an advantage of Vietnamese students has increasingly required improvements in language teaching. On the one hand, Johnson (2003, p. 194) affirms that "all communication, whether verbal or non-verbal, occurs in cultural frameworks." It is then essential to pay attention to cultural factors for the purpose of effectively communicating in multi-cultural and multi-lingual environment. Cultural factors, on the other hand, appear to be neglected or underestimated by many English lecturers at Dalat University. In this study, 109 questionnaires were distributed to 49 freshmen and 60 sophomores whose majors are neither English Studies nor English Education. The questionnaires were designed to examine the students' satisfaction with their English study at the university. Surprisingly, one-third of the participants accounting for 34 out of 109 considered their English learning at Dalat University to be ineffective. Furthermore, 69 out of 109 students making up 62.4% of the participants claimed that their English instructors paid no attention to cultural factors in their classes.

In an attempt to deal with challenges of cultural training, this study first investigates English instructors' attitude towards teaching cultural factors to higher education students. The study also aims at identifying the main challenges from cultural features in the two textbooks

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\* Email: uyentt@dlu.edu.vn

of *face2face* and *Life* for the purpose of suggesting possible solutions to the matter of teaching cultural factors to non-English-major students.

## **2. Research content**

### **2.1. Research questions**

Based on the aims of the study, three questions were posed to guide the research process:

- 1) What are instructors' attitudes towards teaching English cultural factors to higher education students?
- 2) What are the major challenges involving cultural features in the two textbooks of *face2face* and *Life*?
- 3) What might be potential pedagogical approaches to teaching cultural factors at Dalat University?

### **2.2. Research methodology**

This study adopted a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. First, quantitative approach played an important role in analyzing questionnaires and interviews. Meanwhile, the cultural features were analyzed qualitatively based on the lessons taken from two textbooks of *Face2face* and *Life* for the purpose of highlighting major challenges in practical teaching.

In accordance with the study's objectives, the sampling of the study was chosen randomly in order for each sample to be relatively fair. In the first stage, due to the time constraint, 109 students including 49 freshmen and 60 sophomores answered questionnaires to help form the initial hypothesis on which the study was carried out. In the following stage, 148 non-English-major students were offered to experience and evaluate the researcher's pedagogical approaches. These participants comprised 68 freshmen majoring in Oriental Studies and 80 sophomores majoring in Law. Since all of the participants already completed at least 45 periods of an English course at Dalat University, the participants initially rated their levels of satisfaction with the previous English courses that they joined at the university. Upon the completion of 5 stimulating periods delivered by the researcher, the participants also rated their satisfactory levels over the researcher's lessons. The evaluation of learning satisfaction is based on a five-point Likert scale, numbered from 1 to 5 (1 = very unsatisfied and 5 = very satisfied).

With 95% confidence level and a sample size of 257 out of the population of 2043 non-English-major students, the confidence interval was 5.72. (The figures were calculated based on the guide in the website of <http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm#one>)

## **3. Theoretical background**

### **3.1. The notion of culture**

Zimmermann (2017) explains that the word “*culture*” is a French term having its Latin origin. In Latin, “*colere*” means cultivation and nurture. In social sciences, however, the concept of culture has been discussed in a variety of perspectives.

According to Barnouw (1973, p. 6), “a culture is a way of life of a group of people, the configuration of all of the more or less stereotyped patterns of learned behavior which are handed down from one generation to the next through means of language and imitation.”

From the discourse perspective, McCarthy & Carter (1994, pp. 151-152) state that culture is the “social knowledge and interactive skills which are required in addition to knowledge of the language system”.

Spencer-Oatey (2000, p. 4) defines culture as “a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioural conventions and basic assumptions and values that are shared by a group of people, and that influence each member’s behaviour and each member’s interpretations of the “meaning” of other people’s behaviour.”

More recently, it is claimed by Piller (2007, p. 211) that:

It is obvious that culture is somehow tied to group membership; it is undisputable that culture is complex, and, given that people have been thinking about culture and group membership for millennia, probably since the dawn of time; it is also clear that different thinkers have come up with a great many different understandings.

In this study, culture consists of general beliefs, ideas, art, customs, lifestyles, and communication systems of a particular group of human beings.

### **3.2. Relationship between culture and language**

It is undoubted that culture never exists apart from language. Through language, culture is transmitted day by day, from generations to generations. “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” (Brown, 2000, p. 177).

Since culture is closely interconnected to language, every language conveys the meanings which are not always in the same sense of interpretation. In other words, people of different cultural norms may interpret differently. Let’s take the word *dog* as an example. In Western culture, not only are dogs a domesticated mammal but they are also regarded as a pet or a good companion. In contrast, Asian culture mainly refers dogs as guards protecting houses from thieves and burglars.

### **3.3. Culture and cross-cultural pragmatics in foreign language education**

As language reflects culture, it is essential for language learners to be aware of cultural features in communication so as to minimize barriers for the effective intercultural communication. Furthermore, English communication is linked to cross-cultural as it involves speakers coming from different countries with various cultural values, perceptions and assumptions. As a result, cross-cultural differences have been appealing more and more researchers. Nelson, Batal & Bakary (2002) carried out a study on directness and indirectness between Egyptian Arabic and US English communication style. The study found that the American refusals were longer than the Egyptian refusals and that Egyptian males made use of more direct strategies than the Americans. Cutrone (2014) examined backchannel behavior and its effect on intercultural communication between Japanese and American participants. The

study results showed that the differences in backchannel conventions between cultures can contribute to miscommunication, negative perception, and stereotyping. In Vietnam, Nguyen (2005) conducted a study investigating Vietnamese English learners' use of criticism and responding to criticism. The author came to four conclusions stating that (1) Vietnamese English learners performed their criticism and response to criticism differently from native speakers, (2) the learners' English proficiency showed little effect on their use of the two speech acts, (3) the students' production of these two speech acts provided clear evidence for pragmatic transfer, (4) there were four main sources of influence on learner's pragmatic decision making.

As cultural factors play an important role in language learners' acquisition, English instructors are expected to be aware of the importance of cultural teaching. This view is strongly confirmed by Yang and Chen (2016, p. 1130) stating that "if you don't teach culture, your students still can speak the language but would act in totally wrong ways". For higher education, it is inevitable to emphasize the role of teaching cultural factors to ensure better quality of communicating in multi-cultural environment.

## **4. Findings and discussion**

### **4.1. English instructors' attitudes towards teaching cultural factors**

In order to identify lecturers' attitudes towards teaching cultural factors, interviews were conducted with 19 English instructors at Dalat University. All nineteen lecturers had an agreement on the importance of cultural component in language acquisition. Nevertheless, the majority of the interviewees admitted that they really lacked time for preparing lessons with cultural elements embedded in them. 5 out of 19 instructors preferred focusing on grammatical structures and vocabulary to paying attention to cultural factors. These lecturers believed that students could communicate only if they had sufficient knowledge of the target language. As a result, they rarely required their students to do homework or assignments that were related to culture. There were eight other instructors who blamed the current textbooks for causing students difficulties in absorbing cultural knowledge. It was then concluded that English lecturers at Dalat University are dealing with challenges of teaching cultural features in their foreign language courses.

### **4.2. Three main challenges involving cultural features in the two textbooks of *Face2face* and *Life***

Comparing and analyzing 109 questionnaires of non-English-major students, the researcher came to a conclusion about major challenges in culture teaching at Dalat University. The first challenge is arousing students' interest in cultural topics. The second one is difficulties in orientating students towards unfamiliar culture. The last barrier is instructing students in activities requiring certain knowledge of culture. This section targets describing three main challenges related to cultural features in the two textbooks of *Face2face* and *Life*.

Since 2001, lessons in the books of *Face2face Pre-intermediate* and *Face2face Intermediate* have been chosen as the core materials for all of the 3 English courses at Dalat University. Since 2015, *Life Pre-intermediate* has replaced the former textbook, becoming the core material during 105 English periods at the university. The latter material offers students

with a diversity of online assignments that are believed to encourage students' ability of self-learning. However, the current books still contain cultural features that need covering.

#### **4.2.1. Arousing students' interest in cultural topics**

One of the first challenges for English instructors teaching cultural factors is arousing students' interest in cultural topics. In the context of EFL teaching, especially in Vietnam where students do not have opportunities to expose to native language and language environment, cultural knowledge addressed in class seem to be difficult for students to absorb.

A typical example is taken from the book *Face2face Pre-intermediate*. Unit 10A (pp. 76-77) focuses on an auction with valuable items in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical structures, English students are expected to know more about the memorabilia business as well as the auction culture. However, young students know neither about the phrase "going, going, gone!" nor the art which used to be well known in the previous century. All they know are a few scenes of an auction broadcasted rarely in foreign movies. As a matter of fact, non-English-major students are not excited about discussing the cultural topics which native speakers often find popular.

Another example can be found in the book *Life Pre-intermediate*. Unit 2b (p.24) and 2f (p. 31) briefly introduce unusual competitions in the world. The two sections provide students with a great deal of information about different customs from The Idiotarod race, Mud Bowl Championship to Combine Harvester Fight and Cheese rolling. Unfortunately, not many students at Dalat University are attracted by these competitions, resulting in distracted discussions later on.

#### **4.2.2. Orientating students towards unfamiliar culture**

The cultural features that do not appear in learners' regional culture are also a barrier for English instructors in orientating their students. For instance, section 1B (*Face2face Pre-intermediate*, p. 7) is about super commuters. To many people in the world, commuting to work is a common way of life, whereas the Vietnamese hardly commute to work. Those who have to work or study far from home usually rent a room near the location instead of travelling by public transportation for long hours every day. Thus, it is not easy at all to help language learners understand the notions of "commute" and "commuters" in English. Similarly, section 6c (*Life Pre-intermediate*, p. 74) challenges teachers and learners with the "rite of passage", an important festival when Masai teenagers turn into mature men. As an African tribe, Masai's culture is completely different from Vietnamese's culture. It is then the instructor's responsibilities to explain the beliefs, unique terms, and customs of the Masai unless Vietnamese students can understand the real meaning of hair cut at "Eunoto".

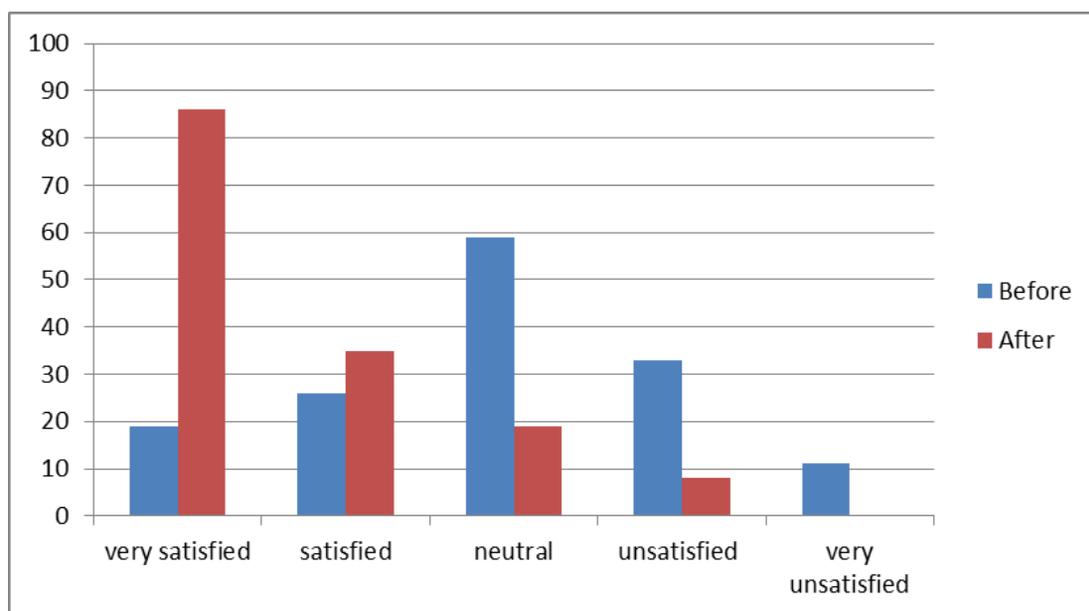
#### **4.2.3. Instructing students in activities requiring certain knowledge of culture**

Nowadays, some tasks designed in textbooks require certain knowledge of a particular culture. Those who lack of cultural knowledge will find impossible to complete the task naturally and proficiently. Unit 6C (*Face2face Intermediate*, p. 48) clearly demonstrates this argument. In the first task of Vocabulary and Listening, students are asked to read about some British superstitions and fill in the gaps with given words. The task can be completed only if

students know about the superstitions in the UK. In other words, it is impossible to do the task without this knowledge of culture. Unit 7f (*Life Pre-intermediate*, p. 91) also supports the view. Lacking knowledge of butlers and the butler school, non-English-major students fail to make a conversation about experiences on a course at butler school.

### 4.3. Pedagogical approaches to teaching cultural factors at Dalat University

As an English lecturer, the researcher has put forwards a lot of effort in helping language students acquire English and communicate effectively in a multi-cultural and multi-lingual environment. Figure 1 presents a comparison of the study participants' satisfaction before and after experiencing 5 periods of stimulating lessons.



**Figure 1.** A comparison of participants' satisfaction before and after stimulating lessons

It can be seen clearly from Figure 1 that there was an improvement in the levels of satisfaction rated by non-English-major students. Surprisingly, 123 out of 148 students (83.1% of the total) confirmed their satisfaction towards learning cultural topics given by the researcher. Listed below are some educational strategies that the researcher used in her classes.

#### 4.3.1. Applying more fun activities to arouse students' interest

Answering questionnaires, more than 90% of the participants confessed to their fear of learning English. Not only do they tend to ignore cultural factors but they also have negative attitude towards language acquisition. There is no doubt that changing someone's mind is hardly possible. But it is entirely possible to offer students funny activities which can both arouse their interest in cultural topics and encourage them to participate in group work.

Fun activities, informally known as games, are important to reduce the high pressure of academic learning and to motivate students. Many high school teachers are using games for warm up, but fun activities are strongly recommended to be applied throughout the lesson, especially in reading periods. Because the success of fun activities does not solely depend on students'

participation, a professional instructor needs to design suitable activities based on the lesson's aims and objectives. In this study, some fun activities which were carried out quite often comprised Magic wheel, Bang the board, Fastest hand, Run and Write, and The best memory.

#### ***4.3.2. Using visual aids to explain unfamiliar cultural factors***

A variety of teaching methodology should be used to help non-English-major students thoroughly understand unfamiliar cultural factors. Pictures, maps, video clips together with short stories are considered useful in this case. In the experimenting classes, the instructor always explained new words with a demonstrated picture and asked students for a sample sentence. By looking at the picture, students could guess the meaning and remember new words longer. Furthermore, making sentences is a good way to practice using the target language in communication. In addition, maps and videos are necessary for language learners to know more about different cultural features. Watching short video clips and listening to stimulating stories enhanced students' eagerness to absorb unfamiliar cultural features.

#### ***4.3.3. Integrating students' native cultures and the target language culture***

Learning foreign languages would be a bad burden if learners feel stressful, for they are not able to use the target language in practical situations. Like normal classes, non-English-major students in experimenting lessons were asked to work in pairs and do the role-play. The only difference was the topic. Each of the topics was changed a little bit to create stimulating situations for practical role-plays with characters of different cultures and regions.

For example, section 6b (*Life Pre-intermediate*, p.72) focuses on Mardi Gras celebrations. As usual, for the first stage of presentation, the participants finished small tasks to remember new words. For the next stage of practice, the participants read through the passage before doing group-work activities about the world culture. They also listened to an interview for question answering and reviewed future forms. In the last stage of production, all participants were asked to work with their partners, describing a festival or celebration that they had attended before. This was supposed a good chance for non-English-major students to combine the target language and their own cultural knowledge into a communicational task.

### **5. Conclusion**

“Intercultural communication is not only a need, but a requirement for success in today's pluralistic society. Being able to communicate cross-culturally increases the success in international business, enables productive interpersonal contacts and decreases mutual misunderstanding” (Teng, 2005). At Dalat University, teaching cultural features in English language classes has never been an easy task. Three remarkable challenges were arousing students' interest in cultural topics, orientating students towards unfamiliar culture, and instructing students in activities requiring certain knowledge of culture. To deal with these challenges, it is suggested applying more funny activities to arouse students' interest, using visual aids to explain unfamiliar cultural factors, and integrating students' native cultures and the target language culture.

No matter how generalized the study tried to be, there were some certain limitations. First, the study samples should have been more various in terms of ages and language levels.

Unfortunately, the study participants were only freshmen and sophomores. Second, the participants only attended five periods of stimulating lessons, which was considered rather limited. Third, the pedagogical approaches to teaching cultural features were applied objectively by the researcher without any assessment from professional experts. Thus, it is necessary to conduct another study in this area for the purpose of confirming the stability of teaching strategies as well as the satisfactory levels of English learners.

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## YẾU TỐ VĂN HÓA TRONG GIẢNG DẠY NGOẠI NGỮ TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC ĐÀ LẠT: NHỮNG THÁCH THỨC VÀ GIẢI PHÁP ĐỀ XUẤT

**Tóm tắt:** Từ khi Bộ GD&ĐT phê duyệt Đề án Ngoại ngữ Quốc gia 2020, việc dạy và học ngoại ngữ ngày càng được chú trọng, đòi hỏi sự đổi mới và cải tiến trong phương pháp giảng dạy. Để người học có thể giao tiếp tốt trong môi trường đa văn hóa và đa ngôn ngữ, người dạy không thể xem nhẹ các yếu tố văn hóa. Quan tâm đến vấn đề văn hóa trong giảng dạy, một nghiên cứu đã được thực hiện tại trường Đại học Đà Lạt với đối tượng nghiên cứu là các đặc trưng văn hóa trong hai giáo trình tiếng Anh mà sinh viên không chuyên ngữ đang sử dụng. Tham gia nghiên cứu có 257 sinh viên và 19 giảng viên. Mục tiêu nghiên cứu là làm rõ những thách thức và đề xuất giải pháp. Dữ liệu nghiên cứu được thu thập thông qua phỏng vấn và phiếu khảo sát. Kết quả phân tích cho thấy ba thách thức lớn là: kích thích hứng thú của sinh viên đối với các chủ đề văn hóa, định hướng cho sinh viên hiểu đúng những nét văn hóa khác nhau và hướng dẫn sinh viên thực hiện hoạt động về văn hóa.

**Từ khóa:** Dạy ngoại ngữ, đặc trưng văn hóa, thách thức, giải pháp đề xuất