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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This dissertation is set in the context of the South of Vietnam. Vietnamese culture has long been influenced by Confucianism, which comprises high collectivism, large power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and long-term orientation (Thang, Quang & Warner, 2007). However, the economies in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam have recently witnessed a transitional development. After the economic reform “Doi Moi” was implemented in 1986, the Vietnamese government activated the country’s economic activities by reorganizing state-owned enterprises, encouraging private businesses, and attracting foreign direct investment (Weng, 2015). Because of the need to transform but still dominated by Confucian ideology, the Vietnamese economy has been in a mixed landscape, undergoing dramatic changes and struggling within the old and novel typologies simultaneously. This transformation brought in not only international practices but also international managers, since the current personnel were not adequately qualified to keep pace with the new trend (Weng, 2015). Local managers lacked the management knowledge to cope with the human-related issues arising in a market economy (Thang et al., 2007). McDaniel, Drew, Schermerhorn & Huynh (1999) suggested that the managerial competencies of those local managers must be upgraded to align with world levels of Human Resource Management in order to survive fierce economic competition.

Moreover, following the influx of foreign companies into the country, the call for more industry-ready graduates has been taken into account by many policy makers. Yet, it remains true that “many of the companies apparently found it difficult to find local employees that match their needs” (Weng, 2015, p. 82). According to a recent survey study (Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam, 2017), about 50% of the new graduates do not meet the expectations of the international employers with respect to language competence and communication skills. Imprinted by Confucian ideology, lecturing and rote learning still dominate throughout the educational system and because of this, skills development remains a big challenge for universities to overcome (Tran & Swierczek, 2014). Recently, various universities in Vietnam switched to a more communication-focused curriculum. Yet most studies are still struggling how to implement a communication-focused curriculum with more attention for intercultural competences. In spite of facing challenges to promote skills development, universities in Vietnam have insisted on their aims to enable learners to communicate effectively with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in an internationalized and multicultural world. This mission requires innovative and creative approaches from both the higher education institutions and educators that might provide the learners with the means and skills of accessing and analyzing a wide range of cultural practices and meanings (Barany, 2016). Therefore, this project was conducted in order to accomplish the goal of students’ skills development in higher education so that a new generation of students could confidently step into the internationalized labor market.

1.2 Conceptual framework

This study focuses on enhancing undergraduates’ intercultural communication skills through incorporating knowledge about differences in cultures (Western versus Vietnamese) into the English classrooms. Exploration studies were carried out for an overview of the intercultural context before the intervention studies in the English classrooms were implemented. Thus, the dissertation attempts to build on the differences between two cultures: Western and Vietnamese or Eastern culture, the

intercultural competence (IC) concept and the interrelationship between English Language Teaching (ELT) and IC

1.2.1 Western versus Eastern or Vietnamese culture

In this dissertation, differences in values between Western and Vietnamese or Eastern culture are the main themes discussed throughout the studies. These dissimilarities are explained and analyzed in a way how they affect the communication and relationships between the interlocutors of the two cultures. Indeed, these cultural values of the two cultures might be the main elements that need to be firstly underpinned and seriously taken into account if an individual needs to survive in this globalized changeable era as culture is envisaged as an onion with many layers that one must peel back. Peeling back the skin of the onion is like tackling with the implicit beliefs and tacit values that differentiate one cultural group from another. Acknowledging cultural beliefs and values then provides a foundation for developing effective business practices in an international context (Taras, Steel & Kirkman, 2011). The context of this dissertation took place in a developing country, Vietnam where the two opposite cultural typologies cross in the intercultural workplace context. While differences do exist between nations in Asia, their similarities are undeniable because of the influence of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism (Kim, 2010). Accordingly, the typology of Eastern or Confucian culture has long been dominating Vietnamese people's communication and behavior patterns and practices. Confucian tradition encourages individuals to use "mind-to-mind" communication; in general, people from Eastern culture like the Vietnamese considerably value non-verbal communication and they are very ambiguous in their conversations. On the other hand, similar to many other Southeastern Asian countries, Vietnam is developing and a huge number of foreign companies are penetrating into the region. This means that the Vietnamese people with a Confucian mind now have to adapt to the new trend. However, this trendy wave is not easy for them to adapt because according to many studies delved into the Western philosophy, it is implied that Western people are direct, enthusiastic to talk, open to communication, competitive, confronting, demanding, assertive and aggressive (Kawar, 2012; Qingxue, 2003). Consistent with this mindset, previous cross-cultural communication studies observing assertiveness and argumentativeness proved that Asians are less assertive than Westerners (Kawar, 2012). Due to those considerable dissimilarities, studies about Vietnamese cultures have summarized some common cultural problems that expatriates face while working and living in Vietnam: nonverbal communication, sense of time, face savings, relationship building, negotiating, underestimation, overestimation, no attempts to understand Vietnamese working style. On the other hand, researchers also asserted problems that Vietnamese professionals face while working with Western workers such as: being treated as inferior, being requested immediate results, overwhelming straightforward command and feedback, etc. (Ashwill, 2005; Reeder, 1987; Tran, 2013). It is undeniable that miscommunications and misunderstandings can occur when these two cultures cross and an integrative way of communicating seems to be necessary for interlocutors from both cultures.

1.2.2 Intercultural competence

In recent years, the field of cross-cultural training becomes more and more prevailing due to globalization and internationalization and research has shown that cross-cultural training is useful for preparing people to work in another culture. Accordingly, intercultural competence training has evolved in many directions thanks to this trend (Bhawuk, 2001). Intercultural competence has been

rigorously examined and differently defined by many researchers and educationalists. In a review study, Griffith, Wolfeld, Armon, Rios & Liu (2016) summarized twenty-six intercultural competence constructs used in the higher education literature and these competences are believed to be connected with models used in education, training and research. The twenty-six IC constructs generally denote that “intercultural competence” always implies “communicative competence” and IC can be defined as the ability to develop and maintain relationships and the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations on the basis of one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes. All the parties being involved in training and doing research about intercultural competence have not yet reached the consensus on both the definition and all the underlying dimensions involved. Because of the discrepancies and variability of the intercultural competence models and dimensions, it is a big challenge for educators and trainers to opt for an appropriate model. However, in all the constructs formulated, there are three components of intercultural competence: *knowledge*, *skills* and *attitudes*, which are essential to be taken into consideration. *Knowledge* involves culture specific and culture general knowledge, knowledge of self and other, knowledge of individual and societal interaction and insight regarding the ways in which culture affects language and communication. *Skills* refer to the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture and relate it to documents or events from one’s own, the ability to discover or interact (skills of discovery and interaction), the ability to acquire new knowledge and to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction, the ability to direct own learning and the ability to evaluate critically perspectives, practices and products in own and foreign cultures (critical cultural awareness). *Attitudes* concerns to relativizing self and valuing other and positive disposition towards learning (Byram et al., 2002; Sercu, 2010). Within these three components, Byram et al. (2002) indicated that the purpose of instruction is not to change the learners’ values but to make the learners explicit and be aware of any evaluative response to others.

1.2.3 The interrelationship between English Language Teaching (ELT) and Intercultural Competence (IC)

For many decades, the integration of ELT and IC has evolved into a practical phenomenon in every corner of the English classroom as many educators, researchers and practitioners agreed upon the significance and value of culture and cultural aspects in foreign language teaching. Foreign language teaching does not only involve linguistic performance and verbal communication, but also intercultural awareness and intercultural skills (Atay, Kurt, Camlibel, Ersin & Kaslioglu, 2009; Funghomchoei & Kardkarnklai, 2016; Sercu, 2010). For this reason, the intercultural dimensions have become central keys for many ELT training programs and curricula. The intercultural dimensions defined by Byram et al. (2002) as a key set of competences referring to the linguistic and social skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for the learners to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural contact situations. In this sense, teaching English language cannot be separated from promoting the learners’ intercultural competence. Many educationalists have agreed that despite of being proficient in English, most students are unable to function properly in an intercultural context due to their shortage of IC knowledge (Funghomchoei & Kardkarnklai, 2016; Jackson, 2014; Mitchell, Pardiniho, Yermakova-Aguiar & Meshkov, 2015; Vo, 2017).

The challenging task to the ELT teachers, therefore, is how to assist students to cross the borders of different cultures right in their English classrooms. It becomes imperative to work out a training program so that both teachers and students can reach their ultimate goals. These goals are considered crucial in the 21st century and fit in the aims and guiding principles of language teaching of

the Council of Europe “Education for intercultural understanding”. These guiding principles include the following components: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, intercultural attitudes, and critical cultural awareness (Byram et al., 2002; Fungchomchoei & Kardkarnklai, 2016). Obtaining these skills, language learners become “intercultural speakers”, who will be successful not only in communicating information but also in developing a human relationship with people of other languages and cultures (Byram et al., 2002). The learners, accordingly, are expected to reach the level of both language and intercultural fluency. At all educational levels, this is the main responsibility of ELT training programs.

Given this situation, this dissertation focuses on the development of future graduates’ intercultural competence by incorporating intercultural communication into the English classrooms. In order to reach this goal, I firstly, explored how the communication and relationship between the Vietnamese employees and foreign employers or managers, particularly the Western superiors, are structured and organized in foreign subsidiaries and joint-ventures in the South of Vietnam. After the exploration studies, the author aimed at designing an intervention study of intercultural communication instruction utilizing “critical incident open-ended tasks” incorporated into the English classrooms with the view of enhancing the students’ awareness of intercultural communication. Accordingly, in this dissertation, four studies were conducted to answer four research questions.

The first and second study investigated work-related values that could affect the communication and relationships between Western employers and Vietnamese employees in foreign subsidiaries and joint-ventures in Vietnam. Holding an insightful view into the differences between employers and employees from different cultural backgrounds in organizations in Vietnam could improve workplace environment as well as assist higher education institutions in designing further cross-cultural training curriculum. Thus, the first two research questions addressed in this dissertation are:

1. To what extent do Vietnamese employees and Western employers/managers differ with respect to their work-related values?
2. What are the perceptions of Vietnamese employees and Western employers/managers towards communication in the workplace in foreign subsidiaries and joint-ventures in Vietnam ?

In the third and fourth study, the author designed an intercultural lesson to explore the effects of intercultural communication instruction with “critical incident open-ended tasks” on English non-majored undergraduates’ intercultural competence. Integrating culture instruction into the language lessons is a good preparation for students’ intercultural encounters. Then, the third and fourth research questions in this dissertation are:

3. What are the effects of intercultural communication instruction with critical incident open-ended tasks on English non-majors’ awareness of intercultural communication?
4. Do the English non-majors develop their awareness of intercultural communication over time during a ten critical incident task instruction course?

1.3 Overview of the dissertation

This dissertation aims to examine the communication and relationship between Western employers or managers and Vietnamese employees in foreign subsidiaries and joint-ventures in order to get an in-depth look into the challenges and problems that these professionals face in their daily work in an intercultural context in Vietnam. Afterwards, on the basis of the findings, I implement an intervention of intercultural communication instruction with “critical incident open-ended tasks” in which many

workplace scenarios are worked out by the students. The intervention is formulated to explore the effects of intercultural communication training by means of critical incident approach on students' awareness of intercultural communication and I also endeavor to enhance students' communication skills through the utilization of this intervention. The chapters (2-5) in this dissertation are organized in line with the aims presented. In chapter 6, summary of the main points of all the studies and practical implications as well as a final conclusion for the whole project are provided.

Chapter 2 relates to the first research question. The study investigated the differences between employees and employers of Vietnamese and Western companies in terms of their work-related attitudes. This study aimed to answer the question: *"To what extent do Vietnamese employees and Western employers/managers differ with respect to their work-related values?"* The study was conducted with 94 Western and Vietnamese companies in two areas: Ho Chi Minh city and the Mekong Delta in the South of Vietnam. Questionnaires were delivered to 763 Vietnamese employees, 43 Vietnamese employers/managers and 33 Western employers/managers. I performed an exploratory factor analysis on the employees' questionnaire data and used the same procedure analysis for the employers' questionnaire. The study specified the most significant differences in work-related attitudes between Western and Vietnamese professionals.

Chapter 3 addresses the second research question. This study was conducted in order to validate the findings obtained from the questionnaire data in study one. I explored in-depth the problematic issues with respect to intercultural communication between Western employers/managers and Vietnamese employees in the same foreign subsidiaries and joint-ventures that the questionnaire data were collected. Two research questions guided this study: 1) *What are the perceptions of Vietnamese employees towards communication in the workplace in foreign subsidiaries and joint-ventures in Vietnam?* 2) *What are the perceptions of Western employers/managers towards communication in the workplace in foreign subsidiaries and joint-ventures in Vietnam?* Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 Western employers/managers and 33 Vietnamese employees. Many probing questions were used to assist the participants to relate their experiences of their communication with their cross-cultural counterparts. These experiences included 1) their interests when working in the current company, 2) their opinions about intercultural communication with their cross-cultural interlocutors, 3) the problems or incidents they faced during the interactional process, what was done and how they fixed the problems and 4) their expectations from their cross-cultural partners. Six cultural values from the first study were adopted as a base for the interview analysis and then cross-case matrix was applied to code all the interview protocols into these six dimensions.

Chapter 4 regards to the third research question in this dissertation. The study aimed to explore the effects of intercultural communication training by means of critical incident task on English non-majored undergraduates' intercultural competence. This study sought for answer to this question: *"Do intercultural communication training with critical incident open-ended tasks enhance English non-majored undergraduates' awareness of intercultural communication?"* In order to examine the effect of intercultural communication instruction with critical incident open-ended tasks on learners' awareness of intercultural communication, we performed a multivariate analysis of covariance with the condition (intercultural communication instruction with critical incident task or regular education) as independent variable, the four indicators of awareness of intercultural communication at the posttest as dependent variables, the pretest scores on the same indicators as covariates. The study proved that intercultural communication instruction with critical incident tasks could provide a basic foundation which can serve many needs and from which further cross-cultural learning may develop.

Chapter 5 provided further insights into the effects of intercultural communication instruction with critical incident open-ended tasks. The study was targeted to develop English non-majors' awareness of intercultural communication throughout the teaching of cultural general knowledge with ten critical incident open-ended tasks. This study focused on answering the following research questions: 1) *What are the effects of intercultural communication instruction with critical incident open-ended tasks on English non-majors' awareness of intercultural communication?* 2) *Is this effect different for students who differ in their ability in awareness of intercultural communication?* 3) *Do the English non-majors develop their awareness of intercultural communication over time?* 4) *Do students who differ in their ability in awareness of intercultural communication score differently on different critical incident tasks?* In order to examine the effects of intercultural communication instruction with critical incident tasks, I performed univariate analysis of covariance with the condition (intercultural communication instruction with critical incident task or regular education) as independent variable, the posttest scores as dependent variable and the pretest scores as covariate. Next, I performed a multivariate analysis of covariance with the condition (intercultural communication instruction with critical incident task or regular education) as independent variable, the four indicators of awareness of intercultural communication at the posttest as dependent variables, the pretest scores on the same indicators as covariates. Afterwards, I examined how many ability groups could be distinguished based on the pre-test scores. The analysis of covariances for two, three and four binned groups was also repeated. In order to observe how the students develop their awareness of intercultural communication over ten tasks, I plotted the original scores of the ten tasks, both for the total scores and for the four indicators. All these analyses were done in order to grasp an in-depth view of the impact of the intercultural communication instruction with critical incident open-ended task between the experimental and control group and also among the three ability groups of students over ten critical incident open-ended tasks.

Chapter 6 brought about a general discussion of the whole project, provided practical implications and a short summary to conclude all the points presented.