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Cultural differences in Vietnam : differences in work-related values between Western and Vietnamese culture and cultural awareness at higher education

Tran, T.T.Q.

Citation

Tran, T. T. Q. (2018, September 19). *Cultural differences in Vietnam : differences in work-related values between Western and Vietnamese culture and cultural awareness at higher education*. ICLON PhD Dissertation Series. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/65633>

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Author: Tran, T.T.Q.

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Issue Date: 2018-09-19

SUMMARY

Culture has always been a salient component in English language learning. Cultural education is a key component of language instruction since learning a foreign language means learning a culture of the target language. This dissertation aims to get insights into how to integrate learning a culture into language teaching in higher education. It first reports on cultural distance in communication between Western employers and Vietnamese employees in foreign subsidiaries and joint-ventures in the South of Vietnam. Then it presents a study on the implementation of intercultural communication instruction by means of critical incident open-ended tasks in English classes at higher education using insights from the first part. This research project is conducted to serve the needs for the global-oriented development in the Mekong Delta and Ho Chi Minh city in Vietnam. With the excessive penetration of foreign trade and culture into Vietnam, the residents, especially the knowledgeable classes, should keep pace with this internationalization.

In this dissertation, the effects of differences in cultural values on communication and relationship between Western higher managers and Vietnamese employees in foreign subsidiaries and joint-ventures are studied. Acknowledging the dissimilarities and the problematic issues that these people encounter could help to uncover the resolutions not only to minimize but also to leverage the differences. Understanding the differences and gaining an insightful view into the communication concerns in this intercultural context could give way to a better design of an intercultural language training program as language is a cultural phenomenon that is best understood and transmitted within the scope of the culture that shapes it (Barany, 2016). The experimental studies of intercultural communication instruction using critical incident open-ended tasks in this dissertation aim to link the language and intercultural skills together in order to enhance future graduates' communication as well as intercultural competence (IC).

Chapter 1: Introduction

This introduction chapter offers an overview of the context of the research project, the theoretical framework for an inquiry into the differences between Western and Vietnamese culture, the concept of IC, the interrelationship between English Language Teaching (ELT) and IC and the structure of this dissertation.

In this chapter, first, the context of the project and the current issues of the shortage of a well-qualified workforce for the internationalized labour market are discussed. This research project is set in the context of the South of Vietnam in which an influx of foreign companies are entering the country and creating a great demand of industry-ready graduates. 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. In spite of facing challenges to promote skills development, universities in Vietnam keep 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).

Second, differences between Western and Vietnamese or Eastern culture are conceptualized and analyzed. These dissimilarities are explained 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 provides a foundation for developing effective business practices in an international context (Taras, Steel & Kirkman, 2011).

Third, the chapter provides the notion of IC and the interrelationship between ELT and 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 and learning. Foreign language instruction should aim at not only linguistic performance and verbal communication but also intercultural awareness and intercultural skills (Atay, Kurt, Camlibel, Ersin & Kaslioglu, 2009; Fungchomchoei & Kardkarnklai, 2016; Sercu, 2010). 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 (Fungchomchoei & Kardkarnklai, 2016; Jackson, 2014; Mitchell, Pardinho, Yermakova-Aguiar & Meshkov, 2015; Vo, 2017).

In short, 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, the communication and relationship between the Vietnamese employees and foreign employers or managers, particularly the Western higher managers, are explored 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 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 the workplace environment. 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?

For the third and fourth study, an intercultural lesson was designed 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 by means of 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?

Chapter 2: An exploration study into differences in work-related attitudes between Western employers and Vietnamese employees in foreign subsidiaries and joint-ventures in Vietnam.

Chapter 2 reports on a study of differences between employees and employers of Vietnamese and Western companies in terms of their work-related attitudes. The study aimed to answer the research question: “*To what extent do Vietnamese employees and Western employers/managers differ with respect to their work-related values?*” The author conducted the study with 94 Western and Vietnamese companies in two areas: Ho Chi Minh city and the Mekong Delta in the South of Vietnam. The study aimed to specify the most significant differences in work-related attitudes between Western and Vietnamese professionals.

Data were collected using a questionnaire with separate versions for the employers and the employees. Questionnaires were delivered to 763 Vietnamese employees, 43 Vietnamese employers/managers and 33 Western employers/managers. The items of the questionnaires measured professionals’ attitudes towards work-related values. Both questionnaires were divided into two parts: the “preference” part and the “importance” part. The “preference” part asked the participants to indicate their preferences regarding the items while the “importance” part asked the participants to indicate how important the items were. The questionnaires were divided into the preference and importance part because the author would like to make a distinction between (1) what the employers expect from their employees and vice versa and (2) how important the issues (policies in the company) are for both the employers and employees. A five-point Likert scale was used in both parts of the questionnaire. In order to explore underlying dimensions, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the employees’ questionnaire data (using Principle component analysis and Varimax rotation), separately on the preference and importance part of the questionnaire. After establishing the seven factors of work-related values for Vietnamese employees, this structure was also employed for the employers’ data.

The findings showed that Western employers exhibited higher mean scores than Vietnamese employees in all work-related values. Significant differences were also found between Vietnamese employers and Vietnamese employees, with higher scores for Vietnamese employers, except for the value: *being on time with a condition*. Additionally, three significant differences were found between Western and Vietnamese employers, with higher scores for Western employers: *being on time in a direct way*, *being on time with a condition* and *face-concern*. The author did not find any significant differences between the Vietnamese employees working in foreign and Vietnamese companies. The differences between Western employers and Vietnamese employees were more significant than the differences between Vietnamese employers and Vietnamese employees. Therefore, the differences between Western employers and Vietnamese employees: *sense of time* and *face-concern* seem to be caused partly by cultural aspects and partly by status differences between employers and employees. In conclusion, the largest differences between Western employers and Vietnamese employees and between Western and Vietnamese employers were found in *sense of time* and *face-concern*, which indicates that these two aspects may indicate the most significant differences between Western and Vietnamese professionals. The findings provided insight into what differences are the greatest between the two cultures and implied the significance of arousing people’ awareness of these dissimilarities, specifically the future graduates who are going to work with Western professionals. The findings also

signified the importance of culture instruction along with language instruction so that intercultural communication training could be centralized and conceptualized within those differences.

Chapter 3: A qualitative exploration study into communication concerns between Western employers and Vietnamese employees in foreign subsidiaries and joint-ventures in Vietnam

This study was conducted in order to validate the findings from the questionnaire data in Chapter 2. An in-depth exploration of the problematic issues with respect to intercultural communication between Western employers/managers and Vietnamese employees in the same foreign subsidiaries and joint-ventures from the first study was carried out. Issues that Western employers/managers and Vietnamese employees face when they share the same working environment were examined. These insights might be used to improve and optimize the communication between Western higher management and the host-national employees in those institutions as well as to provide input for higher education educators to adapt their programs to support the prospective graduates in the development of intercultural communication skills at the workplace. 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 carried out to explore what and how professionals from two cultures experienced in their cross-cultural communication in work situations. The study aimed to gain an insightful view into the problems they encountered when interacting with their cross-cultural counterparts. The interview were set up with probing questions including two introduction questions, one main question and four follow-up questions. All the questions were employed to assist the participants to relate their experiences comprising of (1) their interests when working in the current company, (2) their opinions about intercultural communication with their cross-cultural counterparts, (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. A checklist was used in order to address some topics that the interviewee missed to relate in his/her conversation. The interview transcriptions were coded in within-case manner first and then in across cases. The following six cultural dimensions that are based on study one were used as start for the analysis: 1) *sense of time*, 2) *participation in decision-making*, 3) *open relationship with employers/managers*, 4) *face-concern*, 5) *accountability* and 6) *work performance orientation*. Each within-case matrix included all text segments that were coded in these six dimensions. Then from each within-case, two cross-case matrices were extracted, one for the employers and one for the employees. Eventually, the extracted representative cases were put in a table with six themes of the cultural dimensions for comparing the differences between the employers and employees. Cross-case analysis was selected since this way of analyzing the data enabled us to aggregate across cases and draw out generalizations or common communication problems that the participants faced.

Both perspectives (from employers and employees) on communication between the Western managers and the Vietnamese employees seem to complement each other, in which the differences are due to both cultural and status differences. There were many concerns and problematic issues from the Western managers' viewpoints centralizing around (1) *lack of communication* and (2) *lack of autonomy in getting work done and motivation in professional development*. The Western expatriates complained that while working with the Vietnamese, they encounter several issues that they do not face when collaborating with their home-country partners. Nevertheless, from the Vietnamese

employees' side, there were not many concerns brought about and the negative points were not frequently mentioned. They clearly stated that they have good and satisfying relationships with their higher managers. Accordingly, it seems that there are contrasting perceptions from the interlocutors of two distinguished cultures.

The results indicate the main concerns in intercultural communication between Western higher managers and Vietnamese employees, which is a significant source for the improvement of intercultural communication in outsourcing companies and joint-ventures. The findings also confirm the results from the questionnaire data in which, *sense of time* and *face concern* are cultural differences which might cause problematic issues for the communication and relationship between Western employers and Vietnamese employees.

Chapter 4: An experimental study of effects of intercultural communication instruction by means of critical incident open-ended tasks on the intercultural competence of English non-majors

Chapter 4 addresses the third research question in this dissertation. The study aimed to explore the effects of intercultural communication instruction with critical incident task on English non-majored undergraduates' intercultural competence. This study sought for answer to this question: "*Do intercultural communication instruction with critical incident open-ended tasks enhance English non-majored undergraduates' awareness of intercultural communication?*" Critical incident tasks are communication situations that the participants (or one participant) consider as problematic and confusing. Typically, critical incidents consist of examples of situational clash events - situations where unexpected behavior occurs. Flanagan (1954, p. 327) defines the critical incident technique as... "a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles". The purpose of the critical incident technique is to develop one's ability to see interaction situations from perspectives of different cultures. Critical incidents might be quite an effective strategy to promote cross-cultural awareness because they highlight the differences and misunderstandings from a cultural perspective, and create chances for learners to think critically and analytically about these critical situations.

A pretest-posttest control group design was used to examine the effects of intercultural communication instruction with critical incident tasks on students' awareness of intercultural communication. The intervention group and the control group attended the same instructional course designed for English non-majors with their majors in the technical domain. The intervention was the implementation of the integration of intercultural communication instruction with 10 critical incident tasks added to the course instruction. Students in the experimental condition and control condition completed the pre- and post-test.

Participants were 322 second-year English non-majors in 6 classes of Technical Engineering (131 females). The participants were of the same age of 19 years old. The students' classes were randomly divided into experimental (4 groups with 234 students) or control (2 groups with 88 students) condition.

Data were gathered via students' answer sheets. In the answer sheet, respectively, there is an instruction for the students to do the task, the critical incident in the form of a workplace scenario with a conversation among characters and a table with four questions. The students were asked to read the scenario in five minutes and then discuss the scenario and work out the solutions to the problem in pairs in twenty minutes. Afterwards, they wrote down their answers to the four questions in the table

individually. The four questions were formulated in line with three indicators: (1) *students' understanding of the scenario (scenario understanding)* (question 1); (2) *students' understanding of the miscommunicated points in the scenario (miscommunication understanding)* (question 2); (3) *students' awareness of effective communication in Western or Eastern (Vietnamese) culture (awareness communication Western or Eastern)* (question 3 and 4). These three indicators represented an ascending level of difficulty requiring first a basic analysis and then some higher critical thinking.

In order to examine the effect of intercultural communication instruction with critical incident tasks on learners' awareness of intercultural communication, a multivariate analysis of covariance with the condition (critical incident task or regular education) as independent variable, the three indicators of awareness of intercultural communication at the posttest as dependent variables, the pretest scores on the same indicators as covariates was performed.

A multivariate effect for condition was found, which showed a significant difference between both conditions on the posttest scores on students' awareness of intercultural communication. Students from the experimental condition generally showed significant higher scores on the posttest on awareness of intercultural communication than the students from the control condition. The test of between-subjects effects with three indicators as dependent variables showed a significant difference of three indicators in the posttest's results between the experimental and control condition. The largest difference was found in *awareness communication Western or Eastern* (indicator 3). A smaller but still significant effect was found in *scenario understanding* (indicator 1) and *miscommunication understanding* (indicator 2). The study proves that the integration of teaching cultural general knowledge with critical incident open-ended tasks and student pair work generally enhances students' intercultural competence in terms of awareness of intercultural communication and provides a basis for further cross-cultural learning.

Chapter 5: An experimental study to gain further insights into the effects of intercultural communication instruction with critical incident open-ended tasks on students' awareness of intercultural communication

This Chapter 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 teaching cultural general knowledge with ten critical incident open-ended tasks. The author focused on answering the following research questions: 1) *What are the effects of intercultural communication instruction by means of 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?* This study looked for an in-depth perspective of the effects of intercultural communication training with critical incident open-ended tasks throughout the ten-task instruction and among three ability groups of students: low, middle and high-ability students.

The design, participants and data collection of this study are similar to the previous study, Chapter 4. In order to examine the effects of intercultural communication instruction with critical incident open-ended tasks (research question 1), a multivariate analysis of covariance was performed with the condition (intercultural communication instruction with critical incident task or regular education) as independent variable, the three indicators of awareness of intercultural communication at the posttest as dependent variables and the pretest scores on the same indicators as covariates. Next,

the analyses of co-variances for two, three and four binned groups were repeated to examine how many ability groups could be distinguished based on the pre-test scores. The analysis for three binned groups was selected. In order to answer research question 3, the original scores of the ten tasks were plotted, both for the total scores and for the three indicators. The analyses that were used for answering the second research question but now with the total score and three indicators for each task as dependent variables were repeated to answer research question 4.

Students instructed with intercultural communication training with critical incident open-ended task showed a strong positive development of their awareness of intercultural communication compared to the students in the control condition. Significant differences of answers on critical incident open-ended tasks on students' awareness of intercultural communication between the experimental and control group were found on the three indicators: (1) *understanding of the scenario*, (2) *understanding of the miscommunicated points in the scenario*, (3) *awareness of effective communication in Western or Eastern culture*. The largest effects were found in indicator 3: *awareness of effective communication in Western or Eastern culture*. Accordingly, teaching cultural general knowledge in combination with critical incident open-ended tasks generally enhances students' awareness of intercultural communication. The effect of intercultural communication instruction by means of critical incident open-ended tasks on students' awareness of intercultural communication in three awareness groups was also explored (students with low, middle and high scores on the pre-test). A significant interaction effect was found between intervention and awareness groups for all the indicators indicating that the intervention explained most variance in students' awareness of intercultural communication at the post-test for students with low and moderate initial awareness. Additionally, the students' development of awareness of intercultural communication over time in ten tasks was studied within the experimental condition showing large fluctuation in scores on the different tasks. Finally, differences between the three awareness groups within the experimental condition on the ten tasks were tested and the findings showed significant differences on only some indicators of three out of the ten tasks. The latter means that the effect of intercultural communication training with critical incident task is rather stable across initial levels of awareness, although a bit stronger for students with low and moderate levels initial awareness of intercultural communication. Intercultural communication instruction using critical incident open-ended tasks seems to be an effective method to promote learners' awareness of intercultural communication and the intervention seems to work better for students with a low or moderate initial level of awareness than for the other students.

Chapter 6: General conclusions and discussion

This Chapter provided summaries of the four studies, reflections on the methods and the findings and discussions of each study. Additionally, practical implications and suggestions for further studies were also discussed.

The findings from the exploration studies made it clear that cross-cultural training is needed to train the students in higher education. The questionnaire and interview method in study 1 and 2, despite their limitations, seem to be appropriate approaches for data collection. However, in future research, observational tools could be developed to get further information about intercultural workplace culture. An experimental study of intercultural communication instruction with critical incident open-ended tasks was set up to find out effects of the training of intercultural skills in higher education. Different from previous studies utilizing critical incident technique with close-ended tasks (Bochner & Coulon, 1997; Collins & Pierterse, 2007; Cushner, 1989), the experimental studies (study

3 and 4) in this dissertation have used the open-ended approach that proved its effectiveness to enhance the students' communicative and critical thinking competence. These critical incidents could help learners to look for appropriate ways to deal with real-life scenarios afterwards. However, in future research, it is recommended that a combination or an alternation of different cross-cultural training approaches should be used together with critical incident tasks in order to optimize the effectiveness of the training.

Cultural differences might bring several issues to the workplace if there is no preparation for the consequences. Cultural distance has been recognized not only by its disadvantages but also its benefits. In fact, multinational organizations may enjoy many benefits when entering the world market if people understand the ways to manipulate those precious assets (Hasan, Mehmet and Demet, 2014). This research project is conducted to meet the demands of the global-oriented development in the Mekong Delta and Ho Chi Minh city in Vietnam. An inquiry into workplace culture and operation of foreign subsidiaries and joint-ventures in the area is propitious for intercultural communication training of EFL students in the region. With the information collected in the studies in this dissertation, contribution to the intercultural communication research body can be made by creating standards for composing intercultural communication curricular not only for higher education training but also for employer and employee coaching.