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Insights into Intercultural Competence among Vietnamese Business English Majors

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Abstract: Intercultural competence (IC) is an increasingly important topic, especially in English language education, given the diversity of the globe today. However, in Vietnam, particularly among Business English students, there is a lack of knowledge of IC, so this issue requires further attention and investigation. This study aims to gain insights into the IC of Vietnamese Business English majors. The study was conducted among 102 Business English majors through a questionnaire. With respect to data analysis, the quantitative data was analyzed by descriptive statistics. The values of IC are related to its sub-dimensions, intercultural attitudes, intercultural skills, and intercultural knowledge of students pursuing Business English in Vietnam. The result indicates that the level of IC among Vietnamese Business English was high; so were the Vietnamese Business English students' levels of intercultural attitudes, intercultural skills, and intercultural knowledge. More specifically, the highest level belonged to intercultural attitudes followed by intercultural skills and intercultural knowledge. To achieve a higher level of IC, in terms of intercultural skills, they had to analyze differences between cultures, evaluate foreign cultural perspectives and behaviors, seek opportunities to communicate with people from foreign cultures, adapt to new cultures flexibly, reflect when intercultural conflicts arise, and work out solutions when misunderstandings emerge. Additionally, in terms of intercultural knowledge, they had to acquire the knowledge of foreign cultures' manners, their artifacts (e.g., food, money), customs, behaviors toward foreign cultures, holidays and festivals of foreign cultures, their institutions (e.g., education, politics), foreign literature, their beliefs, history, and core values. These results are expected to help students increase their awareness, abilities, and understanding of IC.

Keywords: Culture, Business English majors, English language, intercultural competence.

1. Introduction

Studies have indicated the connection between language and culture in the foreign language classrooms has been explored [1, 2].

As rising worldwide variety, intercultural competence (IC) is a crucial ability, particularly in English language education. Therefore, competencies in intercultural communication are required in order to communicate successfully and thoughtfully with people from different cultural backgrounds. According to Stewart (2007) [3], the rapid transformation of society due to science, technology and

globalization requires students to have knowledge of other cultures.

Possessing IC will help students appreciate and respect their international friends, as well as foster effective management abroad. As a result of globalization and digitization, entrepreneurs are expected to interact with multiple languages and cultures and be part of various communities of practice, -in fact companies increasingly expect employees to quickly adapt to diverse cultures and be effective in multinational team work [4] - thus, IC will help business students better prepare themselves for the workplace. An increasingly diversified market and involvement in global business has raised the demand for IC among business students [5].

Studies in the Vietnamese context have confirmed and highlighted the role of cultural teaching and intercultural education in the current era [6, 7]. However, many educational settings in Vietnam are made to focus heavily on building comprehension abilities, such as vocabulary and reading which are required to pass the tests. Therefore, the teacher-centered model is still used in many EFL classrooms. On the other hand, Vietnamese teachers do not have enough time in class to convey the need for IC. Although universities offer some cultural subjects, such as British and American Cultures (Literature), these subjects are a minority of the total number of courses that students in EFL classes need to complete. As a result, the focus of IC development is frequently disregarded.

Within the research context, it is observed that students majoring in Business English do not pay much attention to the role of IC in their English language learning. In addition, there is a lack of research on the insights in IC. Once the research paper is completed, the business students will be reinforced about the importance of IC. Accordingly, the students will pay more attention to developing IC as well as applying this competence to future careers. The purpose of this study is to gain insights into IC among Vietnamese Business English majors. The study is guided by the following research question:

i) What is Vietnamese Business English majors' IC level?

It is expected that the initial results of this study will contribute to the body of literature on the relevance of IC for learning Business English and give an understanding of IC, revealing the attitudes of Business students regarding IC. Furthermore, this study aims to provide internal connections (e.g., instructors, learners, and administrators) with a valuable reference on the effort necessary to improve IC in the teaching and learning of Business English.

2. Literature Review

It can be found that the definition of IC is defined in a number of ways by scholars [8-10]. The articles by these researchers resulted in a consensus on the definition of IC. IC is described as the capacity to think and behave in culturally acceptable ways. Similarly, Johnson et al., (2006) [9] indicate IC as an individual's ability to successfully work with individuals from different backgrounds and national cultures at home as well as abroad using a combination of knowledge, skills, and individual qualities. In a similar vein, IC refers to a person's capacity to interact well throughout different cultures [10]. In this study, IC is known as the ability to understand and work well with others despite different cultural backgrounds.

Depending on a wide variety of studies in the subject matter and the different theoretical frameworks that have been produced. In this research, there are three specific components of IC: attitudes, skills, and knowledge:

i) Attitudes: they are considered the basic starting point for developing IC. Barrett (2011) [11] believes that attitudes refer to respect, curiosity, and openness toward people from other cultures. In addition, attitude can be expressed through a willingness to learn, suspend judgment, and accept the ambiguity of other cultures. Equally important is appreciating cultural diversity;

ii) Skills: the skills mentioned here generally include observation (e.g., observing, collecting, and discovering information about different cultures), interpretation (e.g., interpreting culture), analysis (e.g., analyzing differences between cultures), evaluation (e.g., assessing cultural viewpoints, behaviors), and relation skills (e.g., facilitating intercultural interactions). These skills are vital not only to gain competence but also to interpret that insight and adapt it in particular cases;

iii) Knowledge: cultural self-awareness, profound understanding and knowledge of culture (including settings, function and influence of cultural backgrounds, and others' international perspectives), culture-specific knowledge, and social languages consciousness are all components of knowledge.

When it comes to IC, international scholars frequently focus on the theoretical foundations of IC, such as IC's definition and assessment. However, in the Vietnamese context, researchers often focus on language skills, specifically intercultural communication competency (ICC) which is analyzed more than IC.

Regarding the concept of IC, Chen and Starosta (1996) [12] emphasize that internationally competent people are those who can communicate successfully and responsibly with others who have multilayered cultural identities. When given with multiple definitions of IC, participants in this survey chose the following summary definition as the best suitable to their institution's internationalization strategies such as knowledge of others; knowledge of oneself; the ability to investigate and/or engage, and so on. As in the study of Leung et al., (2014) [13], the study investigated current theoretical and empirical advancements in the literature on intercultural skills, and modern models. In addition to research articles on the definition and composition of IC, there are also research articles that clearly indicate the factors that affect IC, thereby providing ways to develop IC. Cui (2016) [14] conducted a quantitative study that explored individual scale components using the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS) as an instrument and multiple regression tests with 184 responses. This research found that perceived proficiency in a non-native language or culture, frequency of engagement with persons from other backgrounds, and teaching experience were all important factors of pre-service teachers' levels of IC.

In the Vietnamese context, there have been a number of research studies on the topic of IC. In Vo's (2018) [15] research, two research instruments were used including students' reflections and questionnaire. The survey included 66 Vietnamese English-major freshmen. The findings demonstrated that student participants had helpful information, interpersonal abilities, and mindsets toward intercultural communicative competence (ICC) practices. These arguments are similar to the study of Tran and Duong (2022) [16]. At a multicultural higher education institution, the study investigated EFL graduate students' perspectives of intercultural language learning and their degree of IC. The surveys were completed by 91 EFL graduate students from several countries (Cambodia, China, Thailand, and Vietnam). According to the data, EFL graduate students viewed international language learning positively and had a high degree of IC. To add more information about the levels of IC, the research by Mai et al., (2020) [17] is mentioned. This research included 40 non-English majors from several faculties at the University of Economics. Quantitative methods and in-depth interviews were utilized as instruments. The degrees of IC on which students judged themselves were shown to differ by the following elements based on the data gathered and analyzed in this study: attitudes, behavior, and knowledge.

It has been observed that the results aided in providing people with theoretical insight. However, research indicates that this theoretical knowledge is still inadequate in light of global advancements and corporate reality. Companies and enterprises are currently dealing with globalization and, more especially, cultural diversity. Students graduating from universities must have not only fundamental theoretical

foundations but also additional skills. When undertaking internships and taking on positions, Business students in particular will be required to work, communicate, and interact with people from other cultures. As a result, it is critical for Business students to have a thorough grasp of IC, because knowing IC will be a strength for students to have the possibility to develop in accordance with current diversity. This research paper needs to be done to add not only to the topic of IC among students but also the insight of business students about IC.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Setting and Participants

This research was conducted at a University in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, which specializes in teaching the Aviation industry. The Faculty of Foreign Languages is divided into three main majors: Business English (14 credits), English for tourism (14 credits) and Aviation English (14 credits). Among the three majors mentioned above, the major in Business English is chosen by the majority of students. In this Business English major, students focus on learning business correspondence, logistics as well as business communication skills. The participants in the research were students studying Business English. During their Business English major, these students had to take courses such as business letters, business communication skills, and logistics. All of these courses demand cultural knowledge and abilities. A thorough grasp of culture while learning English is essential for students to effectively finish these subjects and understand clearly why it is necessary to develop IC.

3.2. Research Instruments

The questionnaire was utilized to gather data. With a Cronbach Alpha at 0.97, the reliability was deemed to be very high. Furthermore, out of the 110 questionnaire copies that participants returned, only 102 were accepted as valid.

Regarding questionnaire design, a portion of the questionnaire was adapted from the research conducted by Barrett (2011) [11].

Based on the theory in Barrett's (2011) [11] research paper, a total of 29 questions were created to answer this research question. The questionnaire includes background information, part 1 (Attitudes), part 2 (Skills) and part 3 (Knowledge). In the background information section, personal information of participants was collected. More specifically, this section includes gender, age, number of years' studying English, and level of interaction with foreigners. The Likert scale is used in the creation of these questions: include "5" for Very true of me, "4" for True of me, and "3" for Neutral, "2" for Untrue of me and "1" for Very untrue of me. The benefit of this Likert scale is that they enable people to reflect on whether the views are true or not. To increase the measure's reliability, the questionnaire's construction process was established. Before starting the survey with students, the English version of the questionnaire was produced. After that, the questionnaire was examined by a specialist in English language studies before being given to the study participants. The researcher subsequently translated the questionnaire into Vietnamese. Additionally, SPSS 25.0 was utilized to assess the questionnaire's reliability.

The pilot survey was also conducted with 10 students in the research setting where the wording and clarity of the questionnaire needed to be improved. Subsequently, in response to student concerns over sentence length and redundancy, the questionnaire was changed.

3.3. Procedure for Data Collection and Analysis

3.3.1. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection took place from early January to early February of the 2023-2024 academic year. Regarding data collection, the questionnaire was constructed using Google Forms, and the link to the Google Forms was distributed to 120 students in 4 Business English major classes. There were 110 questionnaire copies returned, and 102 were valid. Before conducting the questionnaire survey, students were provided explanations as

needed. Every student spent at least 15 minutes filling out the questionnaire.

3.3.2. Data Analysis Procedures

The researchers employed both questionnaire tools and SPSS. Dörnyei (2003) [18] states that they "can handle quantitative and qualitative questionnaire data in an integrated way" (pp. 118).

To verify validity, quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed with SPSS 25.0 for Windows. Descriptive statistics were employed to examine the questionnaire data, providing a straightforward summary and allowing researchers to better comprehend the data set [19].

Quantitative data were employed in the analysis. Means, standard deviations, and frequencies were all analyzed using SPSS software. To examine the data, the researchers utilized an established method, namely the Likert scale, which ranged from "Very true of me" to "Very untrue of me". The following is how the value of the mean scores was explained:

i) M=1.00 – 1.80: Very true of me;

ii) M=1.81 – 2.60: True of me;

iii) M=2.61 – 3.40: Neutral;

iv) M=3.41 – 4.20: Untrue of me;

v) M=4.21 – 5.00: Very untrue of me.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Results

Getting insights into IC of Business English majors including three aspects: attitudes, skills, and knowledge. It can be observed in Table 1, the mean scores are 4.53 (SD=0.85) for Attitudes, 3.88 (SD=0.99) for Skills, and 3.37 (SD=1.08) for Knowledge. On a general basis, this can be understood that Business students had a high level of IC. Specifically, they had very positive intercultural attitudes and a high level of intercultural skills, but they were unsure about their intercultural knowledge.

Table 1. IC's levels

No.	Aspects	N = 102	
		M	SD
1	Attitudes	4.53	0.85
2	Skills	3.88	0.99
3	Knowledge	3.37	1.08
	Average	3.93	0.97

Vietnamese Business English majors' IC in terms of attitudes.

As can be seen in Table 2, the results showed that the total mean score of Besiness English majors' intercultural attitudes was high (M=4.53; SD=0.85).

Table 2. Vietnamese Business English majors' IC in terms of attitudes

No.	Attitudes	N = 102	
		M	SD
1	I respect foreigners' cultures when communicating with them.	4.71	0.85
2	I like to learn more about foreign cultures to communicate with foreigners more effectively.	4.37	0.94
3	I accept cultural differences.	4.47	0.79
4	I appreciate cultural diversity when communicating with foreigners.	4.58	0.80
	Average	4.53	0.85

This might show that Business English majors had a positive attitude in viewing culture as an important part of IC development. Specifically, they respected foreigners' culture (Item 1: M=4.71; SD=0.85), and "[appreciated] cultural diversity" (Item 4: M=4.58; SD=0.80) when communicating with foreigners. These

students also accepted cultural differences (Item 3: M=4.47; SD=0.79). Furthermore, they liked to learn more about foreign cultures so that they could communicate effectively with foreigners (Item 2: M=4.37; SD=0.94).

Vietnamese Business English majors' IC in terms of skills.

Table 3 showed that Vietnamese Business English majors strongly agreed that they were able to observe information about the different cultures (Item 5: M=4.29; SD=0.93) and to discover information about foreign cultures (Item 7: M=4.27; SD=0.90). Based on this data, it could be understood that there were two skills that students thought that they could enhance their IC: observating and discovering. Additionally, students also agreed that they were able to collect information about other cultures (Item 6: M=4.13; SD=0.97) and to understand the underlying meanings of foreign cultures (Item 8: M=4.00; SD=1.01). It could be said that in the process of gathering information about other cultures, students were able to understand the underlying meanings within these cultures.

Therefore, self-study also plays an important role in not only learning new cultures but also penetrating the true meaning within each culture. It can be easier to absorb and understand. The remaining opinions have also been found true to them, in detail, they were able to analyze differences between cultures (item 9: M=3.74; SD=0.96), evaluate foreign cultural viewpoints and behaviors (item 10: M=3.74; SD=1.-8), find opportunities to communicate with people from foreign cultures (item 11: M=3.95; SD=0.97), adapt to new cultures flexibly (item 12: M=3.71; SD=0.97), reflect when intercultural conflicts arise (item 13: M=3.45; SD=1.03), find solutions when misunderstandings occurred (item 14: M=3.56; SD=0.99).

Table 3. Vietnamese Business English majors' IC in terms of skills

No.	Skills	N = 102	
		M	SD
5	I am able to observe information about the different cultures.	4.29	0.93
6	I am able to collect information about other cultures.	4.13	0.97
7	I am able to discover information about foreign cultures.	4.27	0.90
8	I am able to understand the underlying meanings of foreign cultures.	4.00	1.01
9	I am able to analyze differences between cultures.	3.74	0.96
10	I am able to evaluate foreign cultural viewpoints and behaviors.	3.74	1.08
11	I am able to find opportunities to communicate with people from foreign cultures.	3.95	0.97
12	I am able to adapt to new cultures flexibly.	3.71	0.97
13	I am able to reflect when intercultural conflicts arise.	3.45	1.03
14	I am able to find solutions when misunderstandings occur.	3.56	1.09
	Average	3.88	0.99

Vietnamese Business English majors' IC in terms of knowledge.

According to Table 4, the statements with student responses that were close to the level of agreement can be seen as follows, Business English majors had cultural self-awareness (item 17: M=3.92; SD=1.02), and basic knowledge about cultures when communicating with foreigners (item 15: M=3.77; SD=1.03), knowledge about art forms of foreign cultures (e.g., music, clothes) (item 26: M=3.72; SD=1.07). For the remaining statements, students did not completely agree; specifically, they had knowledge of manners (item 16:

M=3.46; SD=1.05), artifacts (e.g., food, money) (item 28: M=3.45; SD=1.01), customs (item 27: M=3.43; SD=1.01), behaviours (item 22: M=3.42; SD=1.09), holidays and festivals (item 24: M=3.40; SD=1.04) of foreign cultures. However, they were unsure about the knowledge about institutions (e.g., education, politics) (item 29: M=3.25; SD=1.15), literature (item 25: M=3.24: SD=1.09), beliefs (item 21: M=3.17; SD=1.17), history (item 19: M=3.07; SD=1.07), and core values (item 20: M=3.03; SD=1.14) of foreign cultures and their profound understanding of foreign cultures (item 16: M=3.11; SD=1.09).

Table 4. Vietnamese Business English majors' IC in terms of knowledge

No.	Knowledge	N = 102	
		M	SD
15	I have basic knowledge of cultures when communicating with foreigners.	3.77	1.03
16	I have a profound understanding of foreign cultures.	3.11	1.09
17	I have cultural self-awareness.	3.92	1.02
18	I have knowledge of the manners of foreign cultures.	3.46	1.05
19	I have knowledge of the history of foreign cultures.	3.07	1.07
20	I have knowledge of the core values of foreign cultures.	3.03	1.14
21	I have knowledge of the beliefs of foreign cultures.	3.17	1.17
22	I have knowledge of the behaviours of foreign cultures.	3.42	1.09
23	I have knowledge of the body language of foreign cultures.	3.17	1.17
24	I have knowledge of holidays and festivals of foreign cultures.	3.40	1.04
25	I have knowledge of the literature of foreign cultures.	3.24	1.09
26	I have knowledge of the art forms of foreign cultures (e.g., music, clothes).	3.72	1.07
27	I have knowledge of the customs of foreign cultures.	3.43	1.01
28	I have knowledge of the artifacts of foreign cultures (e.g., food, money).	3.45	1.01
29	I have knowledge of the institutions of foreign cultures (e.g., education, politics).	3.25	1.15
	Average	3.37	1.08

3.2. Discussion

The purpose of this study is to obtain a thorough grasp of IC among Business English majors in Vietnam. The research participants demonstrated good intercultural attitudes and skills, but uncertainty of intercultural knowledge.

More specifically, when it comes to attitude, students almost had a very positive attitude toward culture in study as well as in communication. These favorable views are seen in their respect for cultures, especially while speaking. This appreciation applies not only to culture in general but also to cultural varieties in particular. They accepted cultural differences since they appreciated the cultures of other countries. Because of these favorable attitudes, individuals developed a desire to learn more and explored new cultures, allowing them to efficiently communicate with foreigners while avoiding cultural problems. As stated by Caligiuri et al., (2000) [20], some personal and personality qualities, such as optimism, openness, and extraversion, may be connected with higher degrees of IC. That is, in order to obtain greater IC, Business students must not only have skills and knowledge, but they must

also be conscious of the value of IC from their inception. In the same vein, Bagui and Adder (2020) [21] have found that improving cultural awareness will help develop students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) insight.

In terms of skills, the results demonstrated that Business students could observe, gather, investigate, and comprehend different cultures. However, they found it challenging to analyze foreign cultural attitudes. Furthermore, they had not fully embraced and executed their skills of assessing cultural differences. Finding ways to communicate with foreigners was also seen as an ability they lacked. The skills to adapt to new cultures flexibly were still limited and it is clear that Business English majors still did not really possess these skills. Cross-cultural adaption strategies are vital for overcoming challenges or barriers in intercultural communication. As mentioned in Turistiati's (2016) [22] study, these adaptive strategies may be executed through empathy, which increases communication flexibility. It is also practical to form personal contacts with people from various cultures, study other cultures, and engage in cultural events. Because Business English majors lacked the

necessary abilities to adapt to foreign cultures, they were unable to reflect on the cultural issues that arose. As the findings of this research, they were unable to resolve cultural misunderstandings. The results of Holubnycha et al., (2019) [23] show that if one wants to interact effectively, he must overcome cultural ignorance.

However, according to the findings of Singh's (2020) [24] research, having a high level of intercultural awareness is an important component in resolving any sort of conflict in a new context, including intercultural communication issues. Although the students participating in this study were not able to come up with plans to resolve the problem when a conflict in communication occured. However, thanks to a positive attitude they will gradually be able to find suitable ways to resolve intercultural conflicts.

It is clear from this study that the Business English majors lacked sufficient knowledge of IC. Basic knowledge of culture, awareness of culture, and understanding of art forms of culture (e.g., music, clothes) are considered as knowledge that the findings suggested that people are likely to agree with the possession. In addition to this knowledge, the remaining types of knowledge are almost not enough for IC development. Specifically, a profound understanding of foreign cultures, manners, history, core values, belief, and behaviours, body language, holidays and festivals, literature, customs, artifacts, and institutions of foreign cultures were identified as something students needed to add to their knowledge to upgrade their IC. In accordance with Byram's (2000) [25] study, knowledge is the most important part of IC, so any individual with intercultural competence must be culturally aware. They must also have knowledge of their own social groupings and those of other cultures, as well as their conventions, values, and behavioral standards, and be able to compare them to their own. Because knowledge is such an important feature of IC, the participants in this study should pay special attention to it. They might use this information to compare and contrast their culture with other cultures.

4. Conclusion

The study concluded that Business English majors had positive intercultural attitudes and skills, but lacked sufficient intercultural knowledge. Some pedagogical implications are suggested.

To emphasize the concept of IC, Bagui and Adder (2020) [21] advised that instructors take active roles in the classroom. They should use suitable peaceful approaches and processes to culturally integrate education by incorporating intercultural and cultural issues. Moreover, they should teach students to be more tolerant and empathic while engaging directly or indirectly with persons who speak different languages, identities, or cultures.

Moreover, to overcome this problem, the school leadership and specifically the faculty in charge should select and design appropriate mid-term and final assessments so that students have the opportunity to develop these skills. However, students also need to be autonomous in finding opportunities to communicate with more people of different cultures. Because during this process of self-study, they can acquire additional skills that they lack. In terms of knowledge, most students are familiar with entertainment topics such as music, sketching, and so on. Students are largely unfamiliar with societal knowledge such as politics, institutions, and artifacts. This can lead to not having enough cultural knowledge to solve problems when students later work in intercultural companies. Specifically, students will have many difficulties when implementing communication skills when they do not clearly understand politics, literature, etc. For this reason, students consider acquiring more of the missing knowledge mentioned above. Administrators should create more conditions such as adding more subjects related to this knowledge.

There might be some limitations to this study. The first restriction is that this study solely collected data through a questionnaire. As a result, future studies might collect data using other research techniques, such as pre- and post-tests, reflections, and learner observations. Furthermore, rather than focusing just on IC among business students, future study is planned to include students from other majors.

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