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Culture teaching in English language teaching: Teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices

Thao Quoc Tran *, Department of English Language, Suranaree University of Technology, Thailand.
Hung Van Dang, Department of English Language, Suranaree University of Technology, Thailand.

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Abstract

The interrelationship between language and culture is not a new debate, and the integration of culture teaching into language education has been discussed for decades. However, the integration of culture teaching into English language teaching (ELT) varies from one place to another. Therefore, this study was conducted to explore English language (EL) teachers' beliefs about culture teaching in ELT and their classroom practices. It employed a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview to collect the data from thirty-eight EL teachers who were teaching English at a foreign language center in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam. The results showed EL teachers had positive attitudes to the culture teaching and believed that culture teaching played an important role in ELT. Yet, a mismatch was found between EL teachers' defining the objectives of culture teaching and their actual classroom practices. These preliminary findings are hoped to contribute to a better understanding the current practice of culture teaching in ELT so that implications should be made in order to enhance the quality of ELT in Vietnam in specific and in other similar contexts in general.

Keywords: Teachers' Beliefs, Culture teaching, English Language Teaching (ELT), Classroom Practice.

*ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Thao Quoc Tran**, Department of English Language, Suranaree University of Technology, Thailand. *E-mail address*: tranquocthaobmtc@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

It is no doubt that the English language (EL) has become an international language and a lingua franca as people have used it for cross-cultural communication with others around the world. In Vietnam, the EL has been in great demand for everyone since Vietnam opened its door to the world. This has resulted in a strong wave in English language learning (ELL) nationwide. EFL learners of all ages have a strong desire to possess English as a means of communication. However, despite the fact that, according to Le (2007), a lot of EFL learners have developed good linguistic competence, they still face communicative difficulties arising from the lack of sociolinguistic competence. In addition, they are not fully aware of the fact that each language differs in its ways of expressing feelings and constructing messages since many learners do not pay much attention to (inter)cultural elements in ELL. Consequently, learners usually transfer their native language expression inappropriately into the target language. This result must be a part of EFL teachers' responsibility because language teachers undeniably play a vital role in helping language learners acquire a language effectively (Thomas (1983; as cited in Wolfson, 1989) and pragmatic competence is a part of learning to communicate in an the target language. Moreover, research on teachers' beliefs has showed that teachers' beliefs play a critical role in affecting their teaching and the kinds of thinking and decision making that underlie their classroom practice (e.g., Richards, 1998; Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Trappes-Lomax & McGrath, 1999).

Thus, this study aimed at exploring EL teachers' beliefs about culture teaching in ELT and their classroom practices at a particular foreign language center in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam. In order to achieve these objectives, the following research questions must be addressed:

1. What beliefs about culture teaching in ELT do EL teachers hold?
2. How do they define the objectives of culture teaching? and
3. How do they incorporate culture teaching in their ELT?

2. Literature Review

It is widely admitted that culture is the most sophisticated words to be properly defined, so there has been so far a myriad of definitions of culture. Each one addresses a perspective on culture, but they all seem to reflect and offer insights into the complex phenomenon of culture. For the purpose of this study, the following operational definition is used:

Culture is a concept referring to ways of acting, believing, valuing, and thinking which are shared by members of a community (social group) and which are transmitted to the next generation. A culture is dynamic and open to change as a result of a change in living conditions or through contact with other cultures (Crozet & Liddicoat, 2000).

This definition has two parts. The first part contains a traditional and holistic conception of culture which is used at many points in the text by the writers, e.g., "…both learners' first and target cultures … are put under scrutiny in the language class so as to make visible the differences which can potentially prevent the two cultures from relating successfully" (ibid., p.3). The second part draws on a more recent discourse about a dynamic and contextual concept of culture. It is stressed that "culture is not a static, monolithic construct. It is dynamic, and both creates and is created by every attempt to communicate" (ibid., p.5).

The relationship between language and culture has been widely investigated and confirmed by many researchers. Galisson (1991) states that language and culture are naturally bound up with each other, and trying to separate them is artificial. It is Galisson who uses the compound word langue-culture, and he also talks about langue-culture-source and langue-culture-cible (Galisson, 1994). Other researchers also confirm that language and culture are closely interwoven or inextricably interrelated and interdependent, or that culture is language, and language is culture (e.g., Brøgger, 1992; Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan & Street, 2001). Clarifying the connection between language and culture, Roberts et al. (2001) argue that language is never

culturally neutral and 'cultural learning is language learning, and vice versa' (ibid., p.5), and they use the expressions 'language-and-culture learning' (ibid., p.6) and 'language-and-cultural practices' (ibid., p. 55). What is more, Brown (2007) claims that "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" (p.189).

As the strong relationship between culture and language has been confirmed, it can be inferred that culture plays an important role and should be included in language education. Damen (1987; as cited in Graves, 2001) defines culture as "the fifth dimension" of language teaching in addition to the other four language skills. Furthermore, Kramsch (1993) asserts that culture is not just a fifth skill or even an aspect of communicative competence but the underlying dimension of all one knows and does.

Since culture plays such an important role in language teaching (e.g., Byram, 1997; Fantini, 1997; Kramsch, 2013), incorporating culture in language teaching seems almost inevitable. Teaching cultural differences along with the structural and typological differences of the language is vital because it helps learners prevent misinterpretation caused by the confusion of cultural differences. The aim of language teaching, according to Byram & Risager (1999), is to develop both linguistic and CC inasmuch as linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language, and language learners need to be aware of the culturally appropriate ways to address people, express gratitude, make requests and agree or disagree with someone.

However, it is not always seen that the role of culture in English language education is well acknowledged, resulting in the negligence of the integration of culture in English language education. Gonen and Saglam (2012) point out that "teachers in different classrooms in different parts of the world still ignore the importance of teaching culture as a part of language study" (p.26). That is, teachers endeavor to promote only their learners' language proficiency instead of endowing them with cultural competence in order to function appropriately in multicultural situations. A further point is that many English language-teaching programs do not offer courses in culture. This often leads to failure in English language learners' interaction with others from different cultural backgrounds since their lack of cultural competence causes misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication. The reasons behind teachers' ignorance of inclusion of culture in English language education have been that they are "more interested in practical aspects of communication" (Onalan, 2005, p. 217); teachers feel they do not have enough time to talk about cultural elements in their teaching practices due to the overcrowded curriculum (e.g., Gonen & Saglam, 2012; Hong, 2008); and teachers do not know how to incorporate culture in the language classroom because they lack adequate training how to incorporate culture in their teaching practices as well as how to measure learners' cultural competence and changes in their attitudes as a result of culture teaching (Gonen & Saglam, 2012).

Previous studies have shown that research on culture teaching in ELT has been done in different contexts in an attempt to understand teachers' culture teaching. Among many scholars (e.g., Han, 2009; Han & Song, 2011; Gonen & Saglam, 2012; Karabinar & Guler, 2012; Önalan, 2005) involved in culture teaching, Sersu, et al. (2005) carried out a research project on "foreign language teachers and intercultural competence" to understand how foreign teachers' perceptions regarding the teaching of intercultural competence in language education and their classroom practices were. They reported that the majority of foreign language teachers taking part in her study fell into two categories in terms of cultural teaching practices: excluding culture and including culture. Their findings showed that teachers tended to become intercultural competence ones and were "clearly willing to teach intercultural competence, yet in actual teaching appear not to move beyond a traditional information-transfer pedagogy (p. 170). In 2009, Han made an investigation of Chinese teachers' perceptions of culture teaching in secondary school in order to explore teachers' beliefs about the nature of culture and their classroom instruction. The findings about school teachers' perceptions of culture/intercultural teaching in language teaching showed that teachers gave definitions of culture which were problematic at school level, and this could be due to the educational background of teachers

and their life experiences in general, and the fact that their understanding of culture commonly referred to folklore, food, festival, and facts (including factual knowledge of history and geography) – small 'c' culture (p.293). Moreover, the results also suggested that teachers were currently teaching cultural awareness to arouse the interest of students in learning the language; they believed that the ultimate objective was to develop students' intercultural communicative competence; teachers were not entirely comfortable with the teaching of culture in the language classroom because the teachers themselves might not fully grasp the meaning of it. Gonen and Saglam (2012) conducted an investigation of culture and culture teaching in different contexts of foreign language teaching in Turkey. They found that although there were some differences about aspects of the target culture to give priority, teachers were generally aware of the importance of teaching, and integrate culture in the foreign language classroom. Moreover, teachers' foremost objective to teach culture was to develop an openness and tolerance towards the target culture. This was in accordance with what culturally responsive teachers did in the classroom.

This brief literature review indicates that foreign language education should not avoid the integration of culture teaching into its teaching process in order to help to develop learners' (inter)cultural competence, yet teachers' beliefs about culture teaching play an important role in this process. Furthermore, it has been reviewed that research on culture teaching in the context of Vietnam has not been, so far, much explored yet.

3. Methodology

3.1. Subjects and Research Setting

The subjects of the study were thirty-eight EL teachers, twenty-three of whom were Vietnamese teachers of English (VTEs) (60.5%) and fifteen were native English teachers (NETs) (39.5%). All of the thirty-eight EL teachers were qualified with a university B.A degree in TESOL, M.A degree or TESOL/TEFL certificate. They were all teaching General English at a particular foreign language center in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, which offers a variety of programs such as English for children, General English, Communicative Business English, TOEFL iBT, IELTS and TOEIC preparation, and so on. Each program has many levels from elementary to advanced, and each level has two or three modules lasting six or nine months respectively. This center possesses a variety of facilities. Each classroom is equipped with an air-conditioner, a liquid crystal display (LCD) television, and a computer with access to high speed Internet. All materials are digitalized for teachers to use on a computer. The number of learners in each class ranges from ten to no more than twenty, and all of them are roughly at the same level.

3.2. Instruments

The instruments employed in this study were questionnaire and semi-structured interview. Regarding the questionnaire, there were two parts: the first part asked about EL teachers' basic information; the second which was adopted and adapted from the CULTNET project (Sercu, Bandura, Castro, Davcheva, Laskaridou, Lundgren, Garcia & Ryan, 2005) and Han's research (Han, 2009) content of the questionnaire consisting of three questions (thirty-seven close-ended items). The total reliability, calculated by Cronbach, was .823.

Table 1. Questionnaire content

Question	Five-point Scale	Content
1 (7 items)	Strongly disagree -> Strongly agree	Teachers' beliefs about culture teaching in ELT
2 (8 items)	Not important at all -> Very important	Teachers' defining the objectives of culture teaching in their ELT context
3 (12 items)	Hardly ever -> Almost always	Teachers' activities for culture teaching

In respect to the semi-structured interview, eight questions were designed in accordance to the research questions in order to cross-check the information stated in the questionnaire.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

First, fifty copies of the questionnaire were directly distributed to subjects by the academic manager of the center, of which thirty-eight (23 VTEs and 15NETs) were returned. Classroom observations were then conducted in four different classes, each of which was observed once for one hour. Then, class observations (2 VTEs and 2 NETs) were taken into account. During each class observation, a structured observation checklist was used, and the note fields were filled out. Finally, with their permission stated in the questionnaire to interview, nine EL teachers (5 VTEs and 4 NETs) were invited to have informal face to face interviews. Each interview lasted between ten and twelve minutes. All of the interviews were tape-recorded for later transcription and analysis

In order to analyze the quantitative data from the questionnaire, the descriptive statistics were used. Qualitative data from interviews were all transcribed, coded, and put into themes of the study.

4. Findings

4.1. EL Teachers' Beliefs about Culture Teaching in ELT

As seen from Table 2 (Question 1), the total means scores of EL teachers' beliefs about culture teaching in ELT is 3.22 (out of 5), and the means scores for VTEs (M=3.322) and NETs (M=3.24) are quite similar. This means that both VTEs and NETs thought positively about the culture teaching in ELT inasmuch as they believed that it was important to include cultural information in ELT, learners could use English appropriately with the target language culture, and culture teaching should be included at different levels.

Table 2. Teachers' beliefs about culture teaching in ELT

Teachers' beliefs about culture teaching in ELT	N	M	SD
VTEs	23	3.22	.36
NETs	15	3.24	.37
Total	38	3.22	.36

This information was supported by the participants' comments in response to the interviews. Most EL teachers believed that culture teaching was an important component in ELT, and it played an important role in their ELT. They commented as follows:

> '…it is very important because it helps learners understand and use English better…' [VTEs 2 & 3 - translated]
>
> '…in some ways, culture is very important…'(NETs 1 & 2)
>
> '… culture is definitely important in ELT, and I think my job here is to help my learners become global citizens...' (NET 4)

VTEs also acknowledged that language and culture were interrelated and that cultural awareness was an indispensable skill that learners should possess. For example, VTEs 4 and 5 argued:

> '…because culture and language cannot be separated, it is very important to teach it to learners. Therefore, culture teaching plays an important role in my teaching…' [VTE 4 - translated]

> '…cultural awareness is very important because it is considered one of the skills in language teaching and learning…' [VTE 5- translated]

A further point is that EL teachers commented that culture teaching 'can be taught at any level' [NETs 1, 2 & 4], emphasized that 'as for beginners, cultural information should be briefly introduced, but for advanced learners it should be extensively introduced' [VTE 3 – translated], so they always tried to include cultural information in their ELT.

> '…whenever I encounter a piece of cultural information, I always try to understand it by searching on the Internet or asking colleagues for help....' [VTEs 1, 2, 4 & 5 –translated]

> '…I include almost any piece of cultural information in the textbooks I am using….' (NETs 1, 2 & 4)

Nevertheless, some EL teachers thought that it was not important to include cultural information in ELT. They argued:

> '…I don't see any benefits in including cultural information in my teaching. It doesn't help learners learn English much except for making the lessons more interesting…' [VTE 1- translated]

> '… I don't think it is useful for students…' (NET 3)

In another aspect, EL teachers shared that they sometimes encountered some difficulties that hindered them from incorporating cultural information in their ELT. Two of the most common difficulties were 'time limitation' [VTEs 1, 2, 4 & 5-translated] and 'inaccurate cultural information in the textbooks' (NETs 1 & 3).

4.2. EL Teachers' Defining Objectives of Culture Teaching

Regarding the teachers' defining objectives of culture teaching (Question 2), eight possible objectives (Not very important to Very important) of culture teaching were randomly appeared in three aspects: the cognitive dimension, the attitudinal dimension and skills dimension, and the results in Table 3 show that EL teachers defined the objectives of culture teaching rather differently in terms of the order of importance. Specifically, VTEs set the skills dimension (M=4.07) as the most important objective of culture teaching among three dimensions while NETs defined the attitudes dimension (M=4.27) as the most important objective of three. This can be interpreted that VTEs believed that culture teaching should develop learners' skills of interpreting documents in the target culture and acquiring new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices meanwhile NETs believed that culture teaching should develop learners' curiosity, openness, and readiness to other cultures.

Table 3. EL teachers' defining objectives of culture teaching in the order of importance

Ranking	VTEs (n = 23)			NETs (n=15)		
	Dimension	M	SD	Dimension	M	SD
1	Skills	4.17	.65	Attitudes	4.37	.89
2	Attitudes	3.91	.85	Skills	4.22	.64
3	Cognitive	3.90	.50	Cognitive	4.05	.38

However, the qualitative data gained from interviews did not back up this information as it was found that most respondents supported the objectives of culture teaching in the cognitive and skills dimensions. For example, VTEs 2, 3, 4, and 5 said:

> '…it helps learners understand English more and use it better and more appropriately….' [VTEs 2, 4 & 5 – translated]

NETs 1, 2, and 4 also shared the same viewpoint on this issue, and they mentioned:

> '…culture teaching helps learners understand the language and avoid misunderstanding people from other cultures….' (NETs 1, 2 & 4)

4.3. EL Teachers' Classroom Practices

Question 3 included eleven possible cultural teaching activities which were designed in a five-point scale (Hardly ever to Almost always) were structured in three aspects (cognitive dimension, attitudinal dimension, & skills dimension). It is noticed from Table 4 that both VTEs and NETs seemed to employ activities for culture teaching rather differently. VTEs foremost used activities to develop cultural attitudes (M=3.37) while NTEs most often utilized activities to enhance cultural knowledge.

Table 4. EL teachers' teaching activities for culture teaching in the order of frequency

Ranking	VTEs (n = 23)			NETs (n=15)		
	Dimension	M	SD	Dimension	M	SD
1	Cognitive	3.47	.64	Cognitive	3.21	.70
2	Skills	3.30	1.16	Attitudes	3.10	.89
3	Attitudes	3.09	.79	Skills	2.84	.99

Sharing about activities for culture teaching during the interviews, EL teachers stated that they employed activities relating to the cognitive dimension most frequently during their teaching time.

> '…I often give learners culture exercises to do at home so that they can understand the language better….' [VTE 2 - translated]

> '…it depends on cultural aspects. I can use pictures, photos, explanation, body language, or I can invite a native English teacher to class….' [VTEs 3, 4 & 5-translated]

> '…I explain cultural information and show pictures…. I talk about my own culture ….' (NETs 1 & 2)

5. Discussion

The findings have indicated some significant points. First, most of the EL teachers (both VTEs and NETs) had positive attitudes on culture teaching in ELT, were aware of the important role of culture, and believed that language could not be taught without including its cultural information. This finding may be attributed from the viewpoint that 'language and culture are closely interwoven or inextricably interrelated and interdependent' (Roberts et al., 2001). However, some EL teachers did not think that culture teaching was very important in ELT. One of the possible explanations may be from seeing the language as a communication tool that does not have anything to do with cultures (Risager, 2007). Alternately, they viewed English as an international language that 'belongs to no single culture, then it would seem that it is not necessary for language learners to acquire knowledge about the culture of those who speak it as a native language' (McKay, 2000). Consequently, those EL teachers might aim to develop only language knowledge and skills in their learners. This might cause learners to use English inappropriately and lead to misunderstandings or communication breakdown in cross-cultural communication due to their lack of cultural competence, which can help learners to interact effectively and appropriately with other people from different cultures. Moreover, it was realized that the difficulties which affected VTEs and NETs' willingness to include cultural teaching in their ELT were 'time limitation' and 'inaccurate cultural information in the

textbooks.' These difficulties may drive VTEs and NETs to focus more on language knowledge and skills than cultural awareness in their ELT. This finding is in alignment with previous studies done by Gonen and Saglam (2012) and Hong (2008) who find out that teachers feel they do not have enough time to talk about cultural elements in their teaching practices due to the overcrowded curriculum. This is true as it is discovered that difficult conditions and heavy workloads have a powerful impact on the pedagogical decision that teachers make (Crookes & Arakaki, 1998).

Second, both VTEs and NETs defined the objectives of culture teaching rather differently. VTEs chose the development of cultural skills as the most important objective of culture teaching, but NETs opted for the development of cultural attitudes. This finding may imply that EL teachers had different perspectives on the objectives of culture teaching in ELT. VTEs may believe that focusing on developing cultural skills in learners more than cognitive and attitudinal dimensions could help learners to interact appropriately and effectively with other people from different cultures; NETs may think that enhancing learners' openness, curiosity and readiness to other cultures could play a more important role in multicultural interactions than skills and cognitive dimensions. However, a confusion was found between the quantitative and the qualitative data in EL teachers' defining the culture teaching objectives. This may infer that EL teachers could lack knowledge on culture teaching in ELT, resulting in uncertainty in setting up the goals of culture teaching in their ELT. This finding is supported by the previous study carried out by Gonen and Saglam (2012) who concludes that teachers do not know how to incorporate culture in the language classroom since they lack adequate training how to incorporate culture in their teaching practices as well as how to measure learners' cultural competence and changes in their attitudes as a result of culture teaching.

Third, the findings from both quantitative and qualitative revealed that EL teachers most often employed cognitive activities of culture teaching during their teaching time. This may mean that EL teachers tried to pass cultural knowledge onto learners most frequently. This finding may be attributed the fact that transmitting cultural information to learners would not consume much time in comparison with developing cultural skills or raising cultural attitudes to learners. Another possible explanation may be that EL teachers focused on the activities about which they were highly knowledgeable.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown EL teachers believed that culture teaching played an important role in ELT, and their classroom practices, to some extent, corresponded their beliefs since those EL teachers who believed the important role of culture teaching tried to integrate culture teaching into their ELT at any level, and vice versa. However, there was a mismatch between EL teachers' defining objectives of culture teaching and their cultural teaching activities as they foremost defined skills dimension (by VTEs) and attitudes dimension (by NETs), but in reality they attempted to enhance learners' cultural information most often.

The findings of this study would lead to some implications. First, there here should be regular training sessions or seminars relating to this topic in order to help EL teachers gradually understand how to define culture and cultural/intercultural awareness and how to integrate culture in ELT. Moreover, they need to understand why they should integrate it, for what purposes, and with what benefits. Second, EL teachers should have opportunities to be exposed to different kinds of culture teaching activities and provide learners with cultural information and knowledge which is suitable for learners' language proficiency levels and age. Third, in order to deal with the time limitations, EL teachers should be required to decide what cultural information to introduce briefly and what cultural information to introduce extensively during their teaching time. Regarding the inaccurate cultural information in the textbooks, EL teachers should be supplied with additional cultural materials relating to the textbooks to have more references about the cultural contents. Forth, EL teachers should be reminded that including the target culture does not mean imposing the target culture values or changing the learners' value

systems. It would be ideal for EL teachers to create a classroom atmosphere in which there are questions and discussions about the target culture, as well as comparisons between the learners' own culture and the target culture in order to develop attitudes of openness and tolerance toward other peoples and cultures and promote increased understanding of the learners' own culture.

However, this study still had many limitations as this study was conducted with a small sample size at one context. Therefore, it is suggested that further research should be carried out with a larger sample size in different contexts in order to generalize the findings and triangulate the finding, respectively.

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