

Grasping Vietnamese high school students' intercultural sensitivity in a rural EFL context

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ABSTRACT: *In the era of globalization, one of the ultimate goals in English language education is to equip learners with intercultural sensitivity (InS) to effectively communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds; however, EFL learners in rural contexts are supposed to encounter difficulties in achieving InS. Therefore, this mixed-methods study aims at exploring EFL students' InS in a rural high school where students have few opportunities to interact with foreigners in person. The study involved 185 EFL high school students in Lam Dong province, Vietnam, in answering the questionnaire, and 18 students in responding to the focus group interview questions. The results indicated that participants possessed a high level of InS. Among the five constructs of InS (e.g. interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction enjoyment, interaction attentiveness, & intercultural confidence), the participants were most aware of respect for cultural differences, had interaction enjoyment and attentiveness, and showed their intercultural confidence. Nevertheless, they were likely to have difficulties in interaction engagement. It can be implied that the EFL high school students could, to some extent, gain their InS except socially intercultural interactions.*

KEYWORDS: High school student, intercultural communication, intercultural sensitivity, rural EFL context.

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1. Introduction

Several scholars (e.g., Chen & Starosta, 1997; Hammer et al., 2003; Kapoor et al., 2000) have defined Intercultural sensitivity (InS) in different ways. Chen and Starosta (1997) defined the concept of InS as “an individual’s ability to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes an appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication” (p.6). According to this definition, interculturally sensitive persons always wish to be engaged in cultural differences by understanding, appreciating and accepting cultural differences, and have positive attitudes and behaviors while communicating with people of cultural difference. More specifically, the term InS is involved in “the discussion of cross-cultural adjustment, task effectiveness during assignments abroad, and the development and maintenance of good interpersonal relationships with culturally diverse others” (Kapoor et al., 2000, p.65). The undeniable role of InS has proved that interculturally sensitive persons “are able to reach the level of dual identity and enjoy

cultural differences by gradually overcoming the problems of denying or concealing the existence of cultural differences and attempting to defend their own world views, and moving to develop empathetic ability to accept and adapt cultural differences” (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p.4). In another aspect, Hammer et al. (2003) argued that individuals, on their own, have already equipped themselves with knowledge of diverse cultures and the ability to notice and experience cultural differences in intercultural situations. In fact, there are diverse views on the components of InS. However, within the scope of this research, the five components of InS (e.g., interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness) are employed in this study to categorize the participants’ InS.

In the context of Vietnam, English is a compulsory subject taught at different levels of education, from primary school to tertiary education. It is worth noting that cultural features have been explicitly embedded in the new series of English textbooks for high school students.

It is recognized as one of the ultimate goals of English language teaching (MOET, 2007). From the observation of one of the researchers who is an EFL teacher at a Vietnamese high school, nonetheless, most of the EFL teachers and students in rural and mountainous areas have underestimated the learning of culture in English language education, so they sometimes ignore this point in their teaching and learning process. Some studies (e.g., Ho, 2009; Tran & Seepho, 2016a, 2016b) indicated constraints in the teaching and learning of culture in EFL contexts such as students' low level of language proficiency or interest, lack of cultural knowledge, learning needs, and incompetence of cultural exposure in a language course. Strikingly, it is EFL learners' low level of InS that causes communication breakdowns in multicultural situations despite the fact that they are proficient in speaking the English language (e.g., Tran & Dang, 2014; Tran & Duong, 2015a, 2015b; Tran & Duong, 2018; Tran & Pham, 2017; Tran & Seepho, 2016a, 2016b, Tran & Tran, 2018).

In addition, Vietnamese education is still exam-focused, and intercultural competence is not included as an evaluation criterion in most of the exams, especially the national college entrance exam. Hence, EFL teachers have to put more emphasis on test-driven teaching and learning than the development of cultural/intercultural competence, i.e., cognitive, affective and behavioral skills for effective and appropriate communication with people from different cultural backgrounds (Deardorff, 2014). It is understandable that EFL learners, especially those in mountainous areas, find it hard to interact with foreigners in person in daily life. Therefore, the aim of this paper endeavors is to scrutinize the InS of EFL students at a Lam Dong province-based mountainous high school, Vietnam. The research question to be addressed is as follows:

To what extent do Vietnamese EFL high school students at a Lam Dong province-based mountainous high school self-evaluate their InS?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research setting and participants

This mixed-methods study was conducted

at a mountainous high school in Lam Dong province, Vietnam. McKim (2017) affirmed that "studies that use a mixed-methods approach gain a deeper, broader understanding of the phenomenon than studies that do not utilize both a quantitative and qualitative approach" (p.203). This school is located in a remote area where students did not have many opportunities to interact with foreigners or to get access to foreign language centers; however, some students chatted with foreigners via social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. The current English textbooks were designed by MOET of Vietnam. Each unit consists of five sections: reading, speaking, listening, writing and language focus, and the textbooks address various themes such as personal information, education, community, nature and environment, recreation, people and places. Students had three English classes per week, and they had to study different language skills for one unit. A cohort of 185 EFL students conveniently sampled from grade 11 (117 students) and grade 12 (68 students) took part in this study. One hundred and seventy-six participants (95.1%) have never traveled abroad and 96.8% of them have never stayed abroad, while only 9 students (4.9%) have already been abroad. There were 18 students invited for semi-structured interviews based on their willingness. They were from different classes in grades 11 and 12.

2.2. Research instruments

This study employed a closed-ended questionnaire and focus group interviews for data collection. The questionnaire adapted from the questionnaire of Chen and Starosta's (2000) aimed at investigating students' InS. It included two parts: Part A involving the participants' background information and part B addressing their InS. The questionnaire consisted of 24 closed-ended items designed with the five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true of myself, 2 = slightly true of myself, 3 = about halfway true of myself, 4 = mostly true of myself, 5 = true of myself). This questionnaire was divided into five sections: (1) interaction engagement (items 1-6; $\alpha = .83$), (2) respect for cultural differences

(items 7-11; $\alpha = .89$), (3) interaction confidence (items 12-16; $\alpha = .79$), (4) interaction enjoyment (items 17-21; $\alpha = .85$), and (5) interaction attentiveness (items 22-24; $\alpha = .88$). The questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese in order to reduce the language barriers. The Cronbach's Alpha of the whole questionnaire was 0.86, which means that the reliability of the questionnaire was very high.

With respect to the interview, the two focus group interviews of nine students were employed for in-depth information. There are five core questions based on the five constructs of InS. The interview questions were asked in the respondents' mother tongue so that they did not have any language barriers in answering the questions.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

Regarding data collection, before answering the closed-ended questionnaire, the respondents were informed about the research purpose and instructed on how to complete it. They spent at least fifteen minutes completing all the questionnaire items. Two hundred copies of the questionnaire were administered to the intended participants in person, but 185 were returned. After the raw data from the questionnaire had been screened, 18 students were invited to take part in the focus group semi-structured interviews (9 students from grade 11 and 9 students from grade 12). Each interview lasting for 30 minutes was recorded for data analysis. Simultaneously, notes were taken during the interviews for later cross-check.

As regards data analysis, the data were statistically analyzed using SPSS software in terms of mean (M) and standard deviation (SD). The interval mean scores were interpreted as: 1.00 – 1.80: not at all true of myself, 1.81-2.60: slightly true of myself, 2.61-3.40: about halfway true of myself, 3.41- 4.20: mostly true of myself, 4.21 – 5.00: true of myself. The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed utilizing content analysis. The interviewees were labeled from the first informant (S1) to the last informant (S18).

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Results

The results revealed that the average mean score of the participants' InS was 3.70 out of 5.0 (SD=.22), i.e., the participants believed that their level of InS was quite high. It was evident that the EFL high school students had a high level of respect for cultural differences (M=3.86; SD=.35) and interaction enjoyment (M=3.82; SD=.44). They also possessed a high level of the interaction attentiveness (M=3.79; SD=.64), followed by intercultural confidence (M=3.58; SD=.41) and interaction engagement (M=3.47; SD=.40).

Interaction engagement

As shown in Table 1, the participants agreed that they “[got] engaged in situations where [they] will talk to foreigners” (item 5: M=3.75; SD=.78), and “often [gave] positive responses to foreigners” (item 4: M=3.71; SD=.88). Moreover, they “often [showed their] understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues to foreigners” (item 6: M=3.44; SD=.77), and they were “eager to start a conversation with foreigners” (item 2: M=3.40; SD=.83). Nonetheless, they were not sure if they were “interested in talking to foreigners” (item 3: M=3.35; SD=.59), and they were not sure of “what to say when talking to foreigners” (item 1: M=3.23; SD=.89).

Table 1: EFL high school students' IS in terms of interaction engagement

Interaction engagement	N=185	
	M	SD
5. I get engaged in situations where I will talk to foreigners.	3.75	.78
4. I often give positive responses to foreigners.	3.71	.88
6. I often show my understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues to foreigners.	3.44	.77
2. I am eager to start a conversation with foreigners.	3.40	.83
3. I am interested in talking to foreigners.	3.35	.59
1. I know what to say when talking to foreigners.	3.23	.89

Interaction engagement	N=185	
	M	SD
Average	3.47	.40

Regarding the qualitative results, the interviewees who answered the interview questions admitted that it was not easy to talk with foreigners because of the lack of vocabulary and grammar; however, they were eager to interact with them.

I use Facebook and have made friends with foreigners. Sometimes I really want to chat with them despite my limited range of vocabulary and grammar. (S4)

I had ever had a chance to talk to a foreigner, and I was afraid of making mistakes during the interaction. However, I feel like talking with them because it may be fun. (S10)

Once I talked with a foreigner, I did not get me understood due to having to think before talking with him, which leads to some misunderstandings between the speaker and the listener. (S18)

I know that it is not easy for me to speak English with a limited knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Nevertheless, I still want to try talking with foreigners as it may be useful for me to improve my English. (S12)

Similar to the responses from the questionnaire, the informants were relatively unsure about the topics that they were going to talk about if they interacted with foreigners.

Talking with foreigners is unlikely to be simple. If I talk about common topics that I have learned, I will feel comfortable. On the contrary, I may get embarrassed when I deal with unfamiliar topics. (S5)

I have never interacted with foreigners, so I am a little unsure of topics I should talk about. (S8)

Respect for cultural differences

The respondents' respect for cultural differences was evaluated by five measured items. As can be seen in Table 2, they respected foreigners' "cultural values" (item 8: M=4.29; SD=.75) and "behaviors" (item 9: M=4.29; SD=.72). Moreover, they agreed that "foreigners

[were] open-minded" (item 7: M=3.65; SD=.78) and "[accepted] foreigners' cultural differences" (item 10: M=3.60; SD=.61). They also "[thought] that [their] culture is equal to other cultures" (item 11: M=3.49; SD=.79).

Table 2: EFL high school students' InS in terms of respect for cultural differences

Respect for cultural differences	N=185	
	M	SD
8. I show respect to foreigners' cultural values.	4.29	.75
9. I show respect to foreigners' behaviors.	4.29	.72
7. I understand that foreigners are open-minded.	3.65	.78
10. I accept foreigners' cultural differences.	3.60	.61
11. I think my culture is equal to other cultures.	3.49	.79
Average	3.86	.35

From the data generated from the interviews, the EFL high school students showed high respect for cultural differences regarding cultural values, behaviors, and equality of cultures. The interviewees gave comments as follows:

Everyone has his/her own behaviors; therefore, I respect them. (S9)

Every culture has distinct values and many good things for me to learn. (S15)

When we respect someone and his/ her culture, he/ she will also respect us and our culture. (S14)

Respecting people from different cultures helps us learn new things, and perhaps we know more about both the good and bad things of those cultures. (S7)

Furthermore, in respect of open-mindedness, the interviewees were not really confident whether they were open-minded as they have rarely experienced interacting with foreigners.

As I am living in this rural area, I have never experienced a real-life situation talking to foreigners. To be honest, although I am open-minded to my friends, I am not sure whether I talk to people from different cultures in a similar way. (S8)

I like chatting with foreigners on Facebook, and I find it quite interesting. However, I am not sometimes open-minded to cultural differences. (S16)

Interaction confidence

The results in Table 3 indicated that participants “[found] it very easy to talk with foreigners” (item 13: M=3.82; SD=.93), “[were] sociable when interacting with foreigners” (item 14: M=3.62; SD=.81), and “[were] extroverted when interacting with foreigners” (item 15: M=3.50; SD=.86). What is more, they “[did] not get discouraged when talking with foreigners” (item 16: M=3.57; SD=.77) and “[were] confident in interacting with foreigners” (item 12: M=3.44; SD=.82).

Table 3: EFL high school students’ InS in terms of interaction confidence

Interaction confidence	N=185	
	M	SD
13. I find it easy to talk to foreigners.	3.82	.93
14. I am sociable when talking to foreigners.	3.62	.81
16. I don't get discouraged when talking to foreigners.	3.57	.77
15. I am extroverted when talking to foreigners.	3.50	.86
12. I am confident in interacting with foreigners.	3.44	.82
Average	3.58	.41

Qualitatively, the interviewees shared that they seldom interacted with foreigners directly, but they sometimes chatted with them on Facebook. However, they seemed confident in communicating with other people from different cultural contexts.

Perhaps I may not feel confident when I interact with foreigners in person, but I feel quite comfortable when I chat with them on my Facebook. (S13)

I do not meet foreigners in my neighborhood, but from my understanding, I think people from different cultures are sociable and open-minded for me to get acquainted with. (S2)

Although I have never communicated with foreigners, I feel like talking to them. (S9)

Interaction enjoyment and attentiveness

As for interaction enjoyment, Table 4 demonstrated that the participants “[enjoyed] cultural differences” (item 21: M=4.20; SD=.91), “[enjoyed] talking to foreigners” (item 17: M=4.19; SD=.95), “[liked] to be with foreigners” (item 18: M=3.70; SD=.64), and “[did] not get upset easily when talking with foreigners” (item 19: M=3.70; SD=.96). Moreover, they “[were] not useless when talking with foreigners” (item 20: M=3.34; SD=.88).

Regarding interaction attentiveness, the participants were “attentive in talking to foreigners” (item 23: M=4.10; SD=.84), “observant when talking to foreigners” (item 22: M=3.95; SD=.71), and “sensitive to foreigners’ underlying meanings” (item 24: M=3.35; SD=.94).

Table 4: EFL high school students’ InS in terms of interaction enjoyment and attentiveness

	N=185	
	M	SD
Interaction Enjoyment		
21. I enjoy cultural differences.	4.20	.91
17. I enjoy talking to foreigners.	4.19	.95
18. I like to be with foreigners.	3.70	.64
19. I don't get upset easily when talking with foreigners	3.70	.96
20. I am not useless when talking with foreigners.	3.34	.88
Average	3.82	.44
Interaction Attentiveness		
23. I am attentive when talking to foreigners.	4.10	.84
22. I am observant when talking to foreigners.	3.95	.71
24. I am sensitive to foreigners’ underlying meanings.	3.35	.94
Average	3.79	.64

Qualitatively, it was apparent that interviewees liked to communicate with foreigners, although

they had never experienced talking to them in person. They explained:

I enjoy chatting with foreigners on Facebook because I want to discover distinct cultures. (S1)

I prefer speaking to people from different cultures to get some experience, knowledge and information which will bring some benefits for my future job. (S15)

I think communicating with foreigners helps me improve my pronunciation and broaden my vocabulary and knowledge, so I love to talk to them. (S17)

Additionally, the interviewees shared that they were positive when interacting with foreigners; therefore, they tried to get as much information as they could when communicating with them. Some of the extracts were as below:

When interacting with foreigners, I often observe their gestures and behaviors to guess what they really want to talk about in case I can't understand their whole words. (S3)

I just concentrate on their talk to get information without observing their behavior. (S12)

I don't feel sensitive to my culturally distinct counterpart's subtle meanings because I respect their culture. (S6)

3.2. Discussion

This study indicated that the EFL high school students achieved quite a high level of InS. Remarkably, the participants had the highest level of respect for cultural differences. One of explanations for this may be the fact that people who have high level of InS may get a positive emotion and behavior towards people from different cultural backgrounds (e.g. Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Chen & Starosta, 1997), which leads to a feeling of wishing to experience cultural differences (Hammer et al., 2003). With respect to interaction enjoyment, the EFL high school students reported that they enjoyed interacting with foreigners. This may be inferred that the research participants preferred discovering distinct cultures and talking with foreigners to obtain intercultural knowledge that would be useful for their job in the future. In addition, most of the students in the research context did

not have extra classes at language centers and opportunities to interact with foreigners in person apart from chatting with foreigners through social networks. Therefore, interacting with foreigners directly may arouse their curiosity and interest.

As the participants had enjoyment in intercultural interaction, they had a high level of interaction attentiveness and interaction confidence. As reported earlier, they interacted with foreigners mainly via social media platforms, which means they attempted to look for chances to talk with foreigners by themselves; therefore, they may be inspired in intercultural conversations. Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) confirmed that people with a high level of InS are interested in and get engaged in learning about other cultures. Nevertheless, the participants' level of interaction engagement was lower than the other four constructs of InS. Some possible explanations can be proposed to justify this finding. Firstly, they may lack vocabulary and grammatical structures to communicate fluently with foreigners, so they may not know what to say. Secondly, they may not have chances of getting exposure to real intercultural environments, so they may not feel easy to communicate with people from different cultures. Therefore, the students may encounter difficulties in functioning appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations.

4. Conclusions

This study revealed that the EFL high school students' InS in this research context was of a high level as they had experiences chatting with people from different cultures via social networks. Among the five components of InS, the participants showed most respect for cultural differences but least fluent in interaction engagement. Based on the results of this study, some implications are suggested. Firstly, EFL high school students should be offered more chances for practicing and experiencing intercultural situations. Therefore, organizing intercultural competence activities is imperative in the teaching and learning process. With the development of technology, social networks may be an optimal option for providing students with

chances to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. Secondly, in order to help students to avoid being shocked in real intercultural situations, teaching cultures should be explicitly embedded in the school curriculum. Next, EFL high school students should be encouraged to interact with foreigners online to overcome the fear of incorrect pronunciation and anxiety of misunderstanding between them and their counterparts or to increase their motivation for communicating with people from distinct cultures.

Concerning recommendations for further research, it is recommended that future research include more participants and instruments

in collecting data, such as journals/diaries or observations. Additionally, an experiment with a focus on the development of InS should be conducted in this context to foster EFL high school students' intercultural communication competence. Finally, EFL teachers' perceptions and teaching practices of InS are worth exploring in future research.

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