



Research Article

**EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICE
OF CULTIVATING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION
COMPETENCE FOR YOUNG LEARNERS
IN MOUNTAINOUS CENTRAL VIETNAM**

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, intercultural communication competence (ICC) has gained recognition as a crucial component of language education. However, research on the cultivation of ICC among primary school students remains limited. This study aims to explore the perceptions and practice of primary school teachers in cultivating ICC for young learners (YLS). Employing semi-structured interviews and classroom observations as data collection methods, the study involved 10 primary school teachers from a mountainous district in Central Vietnam. The findings indicated that while teachers demonstrated a basic understanding of ICC and its importance for YLS in the contemporary context, a substantial gap existed between their perceptions and practical implementation. In practice, ICC cultivation remained limited, with teachers mainly using simple, age-appropriate materials. Teachers adopted a proactive role in guiding and cultivating ICC, albeit through a minimal range of organized activities. Several factors influencing the cultivation of ICC were identified, which affected teachers' intention and effectiveness of cultivating ICC for YLS.

Keywords: EFL teachers; intercultural communication competence; young learners

1. Introduction

Developing intercultural communication competence (ICC) has been a growing concern among linguists and researchers over the past several decades (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2009; Fantini, 2020). Byram (2014) defined ICC as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, based on three core dimensions: attitudes, knowledge, and skills. In language education, ICC has been regarded as a fundamental goal, enabling learners to use their language skills effectively and maintain relationships across cultural boundaries (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2009). In the

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context of an increasingly globalized world, developing ICC is essential for facilitating successful interpersonal and professional relationships across cultural divides.

This study focuses on young learners (YLS) who present distinct developmental characteristics, such as heightened curiosity, openness, and sensitivity to acquiring a second language. Prior research has emphasized the interconnectedness of language acquisition and ICC cultivation for YLS (Lagou & Zorbas, 2020; Szuba, 2016). However, these studies also highlight gaps between theory and practice, with cultural elements often receiving insufficient emphasis in primary education contexts.

The theoretical framework for this study is based on Byram's (1997) model of ICC, which identifies five core components, or *savoirs*: knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. While this model was initially designed for older learners, who possess greater cognitive abilities to recognize cultural differences and develop ICC skills effectively, its adaptable components can be tailored to YLS. Introducing cultural elements early can foster an open attitude and provide a foundation for YLS to develop ICC, enabling them to use language more naturally in diverse cultural situations.

In the Vietnamese educational context, the development of ICC for YLS remains largely overlooked by researchers and educators, as it is perceived as challenging to implement. This study aims to investigate the perceptions and practices of EFL teachers regarding ICC cultivation for YLS. Specifically, it seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What are the EFL teachers' perceptions of ICC and its cultivation for YLS?
2. How have EFL teachers practiced cultivating YLS' ICC in their classrooms?
3. What challenges do EFL teachers face in cultivating ICC for YLS in their classrooms?

2.1. Research settings and participants

The present research was conducted at three primary schools in a mountainous district in Central Vietnam. The research involved the participation of ten primary school English teachers with more than two years of experience in teaching English at the research site.

2.2. Research approach

This research employed a qualitative approach, enabling an in-depth investigation into teachers' understanding of the concept of ICC and an exploration of their experiences in implementing strategies to cultivate ICC among YLS.

2.3. Data collection instruments

The present study combined classroom observations and semi-structured interviews to collect the data.

2.3.1. Classroom observation

In terms of doing qualitative research, classroom observations could be a good way to collect data in a naturalistic setting and gather sufficient data for gaining insights in real classroom settings (Cohen et al., 2017). In this research, classroom observations focused on collecting data regarding the frequency with which teachers carried out ICC activities, the types of activities commonly organized, the role of teachers in these activities, the materials teachers used to support the ICC development of their YLs and the barriers teachers encountered in the practice of ICC teaching. All the aspects in the classroom observation sheets were designed based on the literature grounded in Byram's model of ICC, which aligns with the current research.

2.3.2. Semi-structured interview

In this study, the semi-structured interview questions were designed to address the three research questions, focusing on teachers' perceptions, practices, and challenges related to fostering ICC in YLs. Additionally, the interview delved into teaching practices, examining the types of activities implemented, the frequency of such activities, the role of teachers in organizing these initiatives, and the materials used to cultivate ICC (Appendix 1).

2.4. Data analysis

The data analysis followed a comprehensive three-stage procedure including transcription, coding, and interpretation. Classroom observation notes were systematically recorded, highlighting key points and categorizing them into relevant themes to facilitate in-depth analysis. Similarly, the semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed into written text. Finally, the findings from both instruments were organized and presented in the form of text to support a clear and systematic interpretation of the results.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Teachers' perceptions of cultivating ICC for YLs in EFL classrooms

3.1.1. Teachers' perceptions of the importance of cultivating ICC for YLs

The majority of the participants emphasized the significance of ICC, highlighting its numerous benefits for students, particularly YLs. Among the reasons given, "*developing an open mindset and readiness to embrace and learn from different cultures*" was mentioned by many teachers (7/10). Ranked second in total mentions, with 5 out of 10 responses, is the view that developing ICC can also help students "*understand and respect the culture of your own country as well as that of other countries*" and "*improve communication and interaction abilities in intercultural and situations.*" With 4 out of 10 responses from the participants, ICC was also emphasized as important for helping students to "*establish a connection between this new cultural knowledge and the culture of their own country*" and "*support the development of skills for students.*" However, a few teachers emphasized that developing ICC can "*create more interest and novelty in the lesson.*" As a result, the students can learn

to adapt to different situations and environments, which helps them “*better prepare for future study and work in a globalized environment.*”

3.1.2. Teachers' perceptions of the definition of ICC

The findings show that teachers' perceptions of the definition of ICC are divided into factors corresponding to the five *savoirs* in Byram's model of ICC. All of the teachers perceived ICC as having sufficient knowledge about cultural factors, including customs, traditions, and other aspects related to the culture of the group. Additionally, the teachers emphasized the importance of skills, including skills of interpreting and relating (10/10 mentioned) and skills of discovery and interaction (9/10 mentioned). Regarding the aspect of attitude, ICC was perceived as building openness, developing, and maintaining a respectful and sensitive attitude towards cultural differences by four teachers. However, none of the teachers participating in this study addressed the *savoir* “critical cultural awareness” clearly.

3.1.2. Teachers' perceptions of factors influencing the cultivation of ICC for YLs

The teachers identified several factors influencing the development of ICC in YLs, emphasizing specific elements. Notably, seven out of ten teachers highlighted the importance of teachers' knowledge of cultural aspects and ICC. Teacher 2 remarked, “Teachers need to be active and sensitive in researching, understanding, and engaging with different cultures to effectively convey this knowledge to students.” Additionally, five teachers noted that the appropriate use of teaching aids and methods plays a vital role in helping students recognize the importance of understanding, respecting, and interacting effectively within a multicultural environment. Teacher 3 emphasized, “The materials should include examples, images, and stories that are easy to understand, helping students access and comprehend various cultural concepts.”

Learner-related factors also emerged as significant, with eight out of ten teachers indicating that student characteristics influence their decisions about incorporating ICC. Regarding curriculum-related factors, most participants identified textbook content and curriculum requirements as the most influential considerations for integrating ICC. Teacher 7 stated, “The end-of-term and end-of-year learning outcomes for students must ensure that they acquire the knowledge required by the Ministry and the school.” Additionally, one teacher highlighted time constraints as a challenge, explaining, “For primary school students, most of the time available for using the language is spent in class, so delving deeply into intercultural knowledge can be challenging.”

In summary, the findings suggest that while teachers have a foundational understanding of the definition and importance of ICC, they also recognize various influencing factors, including teacher expertise, teaching resources, learner characteristics, curriculum requirements, and time constraints.

3.2. *Teachers' practices of cultivating ICC for YLs in EFL classrooms*

The study has combined semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to gain a deeper understanding of the teachers' practices of cultivating ICC to answer the second research question.

3.2.1. *Some activities implemented to promote ICC*

The findings indicate that the majority of primary school teachers participating in the study rarely organized activities specifically aimed at developing ICC for YLs. Teachers generally reported implementing such activities "sometimes" or "rarely" for an academic year. One teacher, responsible for instructing both Kinh and ethnic minority students, described the challenge of balancing multiple demands, stating "(...) I am responsible for teaching both Kinh and ethnic minority students (Pako-Van Kieu), so it's quite overwhelming to have enough time for preparing lessons for vocabulary development, skills, and ICC" (Teacher 10).

Data from the interviews identified the two most frequently employed strategies as providing intercultural knowledge to students (10/10 teachers) and using additional visual aids to introduce cultural information (9/10 teachers). Some participants (5/10) also reported engaging students with questions based on images, videos, or songs containing intercultural elements. Conversely, less common methods included organizing games, group work, projects, and decorating classrooms with cultural materials, which were mentioned by only one teacher.

The classroom observations further corroborated the infrequent implementation of ICC-related activities, with only 5 teachers integrating such activities during 5 out of 19 observed sessions, primarily within the final 2 textbook topics. Observed activities predominantly focused on providing intercultural information, organizing games, and prompting learners to respond to questions or share opinions based on presented materials.

3.2.2. *The role of teachers in implementing activities to cultivate ICC for YLs*

Data obtained from the semi-structured interviews show that all the teachers (10/10) agreed that in cultivating ICC for YLs, teachers were the ones who actively provided information related to intercultural aspects to students. All the participants believed that, unlike students of other ages, YLs often had limited knowledge and experience. Additionally, some teachers mentioned that they took the initiative to guide students through each activity due to the need to prevent chaos and disorder.

The data obtained from the observations also indicated that teachers were predominantly proactive in organizing activities and providing information to students to develop ICC. In observations 1, 6, and 17, the teachers took an active role in introducing the content to students and ensuring that they could clearly understand the information presented.

3.2.3. *Useful materials for cultivating ICC for YLs*

The data from semi-structured interviews highlighted the materials the teachers utilized when implementing ICC activities. According to the findings, the most frequently used materials were videos (9/10 teachers), picture cues (8/10), games (5/10), and songs (4/10). In contrast, other teaching resources, such as textbooks, guest speakers, and audio recordings, were mentioned less frequently, with only one teacher reporting their use. Classroom observation data revealed that ICC-integrated activities (observations 1, 3, 6, 12, and 17) commonly employed visual aids, particularly pictures, to illustrate concepts clearly. These materials provided students with concrete input and facilitated their understanding of the targeted knowledge. Additionally, games were used as an engaging strategy to introduce students to new topics, such as “Top 5 Quiz” in observation 1 and “Guess the Animal Sound” in observation 17.

3.3. *Several challenges facing teachers when promoting ICC for YLs in EFL classrooms*

3.3.1. *Lack of cultural elements in the textbook*

The findings indicate that cultural elements are often underrepresented or overlooked in primary-level textbooks, posing challenges for teachers aiming to foster ICC among YLs. For example, Teacher 1 remarked, “The textbooks also lack cultural content, so if I want to incorporate intercultural elements into the lessons, I need to carefully choose the right time to apply them.”

3.3.2. *YLs’ proficiency and developmental limitations/short attention span*

The participants highlighted that YLs often lack the cognitive and linguistic skills needed to understand and analyze complex cultural concepts. Teacher 8 noted, “I encounter many issues with developing ICC for my students, as they are still quite limited in their skills and vocabulary. Their experiences are also limited, so it's challenging for them to connect everything on their own.” Furthermore, their short attention spans and limited experiences hinder their ability to engage deeply with intercultural topics.

3.3.3. *Lack of teaching resources*

The lack of appropriate teaching resources, particularly in remote or mountainous areas, was another significant challenge. The teachers reported difficulty in sourcing materials that represent cultural elements from diverse cultures, which impedes their ability to teach ICC to YLs.

3.3.4. *Time constraints*

Time limitations were frequently cited as a barrier to integrating ICC into lessons. The teachers expressed challenges in balancing core language skills such as vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, while also incorporating cultural elements. Teacher 2 explained, “The program's limited duration makes it challenging to balance teaching skills with integrating ICC.”

3.3.5. Lack of training

A lack of professional development opportunities in ICC integration was identified as a key issue. The teachers reported feeling unprepared and insecure when attempting to include ICC in their lessons. Teacher 6 stated, “Because I haven't had much exposure or training, I often feel insecure as changing the structure of a lesson to include ICC significantly impacts the teaching objectives and the allotted time.”

Some of the challenges mentioned in the interviews were corroborated by classroom observations. For example, observations 3, 6, and 17 highlighted issues with students' attention spans and the difficulty of managing class time effectively to address all aspects of the lesson. Observations 1 and 12 revealed challenges arising from students' lack of prior knowledge and experience, which hindered their ability to respond to questions about cultural features.

3.4. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal notable similarities and some differences when compared to prior research on teachers' perceptions and practices in cultivating ICC. Most of the teachers defined ICC in alignment with Byram's model, emphasizing four of the five *saviors*—knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, and skills of discovery and interaction. The teachers highlighted that ICC involves adjusting attitudes, fostering openness, respecting cultures, and interacting effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, consistent with the definitions provided by Huang et al., (2003), Issa (2016), and Smakova and Paulsrud (2020). Furthermore, they stressed that ICC development could help students connect their own cultural experiences with new knowledge, facilitating mutual respect for their own and other cultures. These findings align with previous studies (Cheewasukthaworn & Suwanarak, 2017; Estaji & Rahimi, 2018; Lagou & Zorbas, 2020; Osman, 2015). In practice, this study confirms a common gap between teachers' perceptions of ICC and their classroom implementation, a pattern observed in Lagou and Zorbas's (2020) research. The teachers in this study integrated ICC only when time allowed, primarily through activities such as providing information, asking questions, games, and visual aids like pictures and videos. This is consistent with the findings of Curtain and Dahlberg (2010). Additionally, the proactive role of teachers in organizing and delivering ICC activities aligns with Osman's (2015) work and broader theories of teaching YLs, such as those proposed by Piaget (1970) and Vygotsky (1962). Regarding materials, teachers preferred using picture cues, videos, games, songs, and stories while minimizing reliance on textbooks and classroom decorations, echoing observations from earlier studies.

Despite these similarities, this study identified key differences and challenges, particularly in the unique context of primary schools in underdeveloped areas. The teachers reported that textbooks lacked integrated cultural content, a limitation noted in other studies,

such as Bon (2022), but exacerbated by geographic and economic constraints in this study's context. Accessing suitable materials for ICC activities was particularly challenging in remote areas, further complicating efforts to provide rich intercultural learning experiences. The teachers also encountered developmental limitations among YLs, such as insufficient cultural knowledge, limited vocabulary, and short attention spans. These issues were particularly pronounced among ethnic minority students. While these challenges are broadly consistent with Shin and Crandall's (2014) findings, this study underscores their compounded impact in geographically disadvantaged regions. Curriculum constraints and limited instructional time (40 minutes per lesson) emerged as significant barriers to balancing ICC integration with other learning priorities. These findings align with Bon (2022), Nguyen (2013), and Vo (2017). Yet, the current study highlights how these constraints disproportionately affect underdeveloped educational settings. Finally, the lack of ICC training for teachers was a major concern, leading to hesitancy and a lack of confidence in promoting ICC among YLs. This issue parallels findings from Young and Sachdev (2011) and Roiha and Sommier (2021). However, this study emphasizes the urgent need for tailored training programs specifically designed to address the needs of teachers working in disadvantaged contexts, where resources and support are often limited.

4. Conclusion

The present study highlighted that the teachers had a fundamental understanding of ICC as well as recognized its importance in teaching YLs. The teachers identified several factors influencing the cultivation of ICC, which can be grouped into teacher-related, student-related, and curriculum-related aspects. The findings revealed a significant gap between teachers' perceptions of ICC and their practical implementation of activities aimed at fostering ICC in the classroom. Only a limited number of teachers reported successfully integrating ICC elements into their lessons.

When ICC activities were implemented, the teachers prioritized sharing intercultural information through engaging methods, such as incorporating visual aids, posing questions to prompt students' predictions based on their experiences, and organizing interactive games. However, the teachers generally assumed a leading role in these activities, taking primary responsibility for conveying ICC-related knowledge to students. The study also identified several barriers to the effective implementation of ICC activities, including insufficient teaching resources, a lack of cultural content in textbooks, limited professional training in ICC integration, the developmental characteristics of YLs, curriculum regulations, and restricted class time. These challenges were particularly pronounced in the underdeveloped geographic and economic context of the study.

Despite its valuable insights, the study faced some limitations. These include a small sample size, a focus on a single, economically disadvantaged region, and constraints related

to the research timeline. To address these limitations and build upon the current findings, future research should consider three key directions: expanding the sample size to obtain more comprehensive data, broadening the geographic and economic scope of the sample to include diverse contexts, and conducting longitudinal studies spanning multiple stages of the school year to capture more varied and detailed data.

❖ **Conflict of Interest:** Authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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**NHẬN THỨC VÀ THỰC HÀNH CỦA GIÁO VIÊN TIẾNG ANH
VỀ VIỆC BỒI DƯỠNG NĂNG LỰC GIAO TIẾP LIÊN VĂN HÓA CHO HỌC SINH
TIỂU HỌC Ở KHU VỰC MIỀN NÚI MIỀN TRUNG VIỆT NAM**

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TÓM TẮT

Trong những năm gần đây, năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa (ICC) đã được công nhận là một thành phần quan trọng trong giảng dạy ngôn ngữ. Tuy nhiên, các nghiên cứu về việc phát triển ICC cho học sinh tiểu học vẫn còn hạn chế. Nghiên cứu này nhằm khám phá nhận thức và thực hành của giáo viên tiểu học trong việc phát triển ICC cho học sinh nhỏ tuổi. Sử dụng phương pháp phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc và quan sát lớp học để thu thập dữ liệu, nghiên cứu đã thực hiện với 10 giáo viên tiểu học từ một huyện miền núi ở khu vực miền Trung Việt Nam. Kết quả cho thấy mặc dù giáo viên thể hiện sự hiểu biết cơ bản về ICC và tầm quan trọng của ICC đối với học sinh nhỏ tuổi trong bối cảnh hiện đại, nhưng vẫn tồn tại một khoảng cách đáng kể giữa nhận thức của giáo viên và thực tế việc bồi dưỡng ICC cho học sinh nhỏ tuổi. Trong thực tế, các nghiên cứu về việc bồi dưỡng ICC còn hạn chế, với việc giáo viên chủ yếu sử dụng các tài liệu đơn giản, phù hợp với độ tuổi. Giáo viên đảm nhận vai trò chủ động trong việc hướng dẫn và phát triển ICC, nhưng chỉ thông qua một số lượng hạn chế các hoạt động được tổ chức. Nghiên cứu cũng xác định một số yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến quá trình phát triển ICC, tác động đến ý định của giáo viên và hiệu quả trong việc bồi dưỡng ICC cho học sinh nhỏ tuổi.

Từ khóa: giáo viên tiếng Anh; năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa; học sinh tiểu học

APPENDIX 1*List of interview questions*

- (1) What are your teaching objectives when teaching English for YLs?
- (2) Do you think teaching culture is essential for YLs? Why or why not?
- (3) In your viewpoint, how do you define ICC? Do you think cultivating ICC for YLs is significant?
- (4) In your opinion, what are some influential factors when promoting ICC for YLs?
- (5) Have you ever implemented any activities to cultivate ICC for your students? If yes, could you please share some activities that you have organized?
- (6) What is your role when cultivating ICC for your students?
- (7) What are some useful materials that you have ever used to cultivate ICC for your students?
- (8) Have you ever faced any challenges in the process of cultivating ICC for YLs? Can you share more details about them?