

TEACHING VIETNAMESE CULTURE TO FOREIGN STUDENTS AT HUCFL: SOME SUGGESTED TECHNIQUES

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Abstract. This article aims to highlight the importance of teaching Vietnamese culture to foreign students at HUCFL. Teaching a language implies teaching a culture, thus Vietnamese culture is supposed to be taught to foreign learners during the process of teaching Vietnamese language. Accordingly, some suggested techniques are put forward by the writer in the hope that learning Vietnamese culture will be an exhilarating experience for foreign students at HUCFL. The techniques proposed include cultural islands, culture capsules, dramas, media/visuals, celebrating festivals, quiz, mini researches and presentations and last but not least: music.

1. Definitions of culture

Culture is such a broad concept that encompasses all respects of human life that it is hard to give a comprehensive definition of culture. There has been a series of ways to define culture such as [9]:

Kluckhohn, C., & Kelly, W.H. (1945). The concept of culture. In R. Linton (Ed.). *The Science of Man in the World Culture*. New York. "By culture we mean all those historically created designs for living, explicit and implicit, rational, irrational, and nonrational, which exist at any given time as potential guides for the behavior of men" (pp. 78-105).

Useem, J., & Useem, R. (1963). *Human Organizations*, 22(3). "Culture has been defined in a number of ways, but most simply, as the learned and shared behavior of a community of interacting human beings" (p. 169).

Hofstede, G. (1984). National cultures and corporate cultures. In L.A. Samovar & R.E. Porter (Eds.), *Communication Between Cultures*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. "Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another" (p. 51).

Damen, L. (1987). *Culture Learning: The Fifth Dimension on the Language Classroom*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley. "Culture: learned and shared human patterns or models for living, day- to-day living patterns. These patterns and models

pervade all aspects of human social interaction. Culture is mankind's primary adaptive mechanism" (p. 367).

Lederach, J.P. (1995). *Preparing for peace: Conflict transformation across cultures*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. "Culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them" (p. 9).

From the above definitions, it can be understood that culture includes everything people have learnt and shared within each community. These shared patterns help to identify the members of a culture group and simultaneously distinguish those of another group. Culture also shapes our thoughts and actions as well as the way we perceive and interpret our surroundings. Among its several meanings, two are the most significant to teachers when dealing with cultural teaching:

“Little-c”: Culture is seen as everything in human life (also called culture BBV: Beliefs, Behaviour and Values).

“Big-C” Culture: Culture is the best in human life restricted to the highbrow (also called culture MLA: great Music, Literature and Art of a country).

The "big-C" Culture is already taught in the classroom, so the "little-c" one needs to be paid more attention to in the foreign language classroom.

It is argued that “bilingualism is not in itself the answer to cultural understanding among people”. Knowledge of the language must exist with knowledge of the social, religious and economic attitudes of a people. (Seelye 1993, p. 6). Indeed, learning a language without caring about its culture is just like going in the streets without noticing the traffic lights and signposts. As a consequence, misunderstandings and conflicts obviously arise, which hinders the communication and cooperation. It is reasonable to admit that “The study of language cannot be divorced from the study of culture and vice-versa.” (Seelye, 1993, p. 22)

2. A glimpse of Vietnamese culture

Vietnamese culture is one of the oldest in East Asia with an agricultural civilization based on the cultivation of wet rice. It is once influenced by Chinese and French civilization. Some distinctive characteristics of Vietnamese culture are: ancestor worship, collectivism, respects for family values, handicrafts and manual labour and passion for study. Important symbols in Vietnamese culture embrace dragons, turtles, lotuses and bamboo. Several typical features of Vietnamese culture are briefly presented as follows [12], [13], [14], [15], [16], [17], [18], [19], [20]:

As for societal levels of organization, the two main units are *làng* (village) and *nước* (country). Intermediate organizational units are *huyện* (district) and *tỉnh* (province).

Kinship plays such an important role in Vietnam that there is a complex hierarchy of relationships which results in the extensive use of varying pronouns in Vietnamese language. This is what puzzles any foreigners.

One of the most important Vietnamese customs is the traditional Vietnamese wedding. Generally, there are two main ceremonies (betrothal and wedding ceremony) with special rituals (including decorations, offerings, procession...) to connect two people together.

Another important occasion is the funeral. The date and time for the funeral procession, *lễ đưa tang*, must be carefully selected. The funeral procession is accompanied by the dead's relatives, friends and descendants along the way to the burial ground. After three days of mourning, to worship the opening of the grave (*lễ mở cửa mả*), the family visits the tomb again. After 49 days, *lễ chung thất*, the family stops offering rice for the dead to the altar. Lastly, after 100 days, the family celebrates *tốt khóc*, or the end of the crying. After one year comes the ceremony of the first anniversary of the dead and after two years is the ceremony of the end of mourning.

Religion in Vietnam has been largely considered as the mix of Tam Giao (triple – religion): Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. In addition, Catholicism is also practiced in modern Vietnam. Among a variety of religions, Vietnamese Buddhism has been the most popular one so far.

Vietnamese literature is made up of two chief constituents: folk literature and written literature, both of which developed concurrently and are profoundly interrelated.

Traditional Vietnamese art is practiced from ancient times (including the meticulously designed Dong Son drums) to post-Chinese domination art which was strongly influenced by Chinese Buddhist art. Later on came the art of Champa and France.

Calligraphy has appeared in Vietnam for a long time, previously using Chinese characters along with Ancient Vietnamese script (Chữ Nôm). Today, instead, Vietnamese calligraphy widely uses the Roman-character based (Chữ Quốc Ngữ).

Two of the most widely known genres of music in Vietnam are (1) imperial Court music: an elaborate form of music performed by musicians and dancers dressed in splendid costumes and (2) Ca trù: an ancient form of chamber music played by female musicians to entertain wealthy and powerful men such as scholars and bureaucrats.

Theatre: (1) Hát tuồng (also known as Hát bội): a theatre form strongly influenced by Chinese opera, (2) Cải lương: a type of folk opera originating in South Vietnam and (3) Hát chèo: a theatre form traditionally performed by Vietnamese peasants in northern Vietnam.

Water Puppetry is a particular Vietnamese art which made its first appearance in

the 10th century. Puppets, which are made from quality wood and carefully carved, stand in water and are controlled by people who hide themselves from the audience.

There are a few traditional dances widely performed at festivals and other special occasions, such as the lion dance. Also, there are court dances such as the imperial lantern dance, fan dance, platter dance...

Vietnamese cuisine is really diversified, which can be clearly divided into three main styles according to three main regions of the country (north, central and south). It uses many vegetables, and is predominantly based on rice, fish sauce and soy sauce. Its typical flavors are sweet (sugar), spicy (peppers), sour (lime) and salty (fish sauce).

The Vietnamese national costume is the Áo Dài. Áo Dài was once worn by both genders but today it is worn mainly by women at school, office, or on special occasions.

Vietnamese martial arts are strongly developed as the country has a long history of warfare and endeavours to defend itself from foreign invasion. It is based on the "Viet Vo Dao" (philosophy of Vietnamese martial arts).

Vietnam celebrates many holidays, including traditional holidays which have been celebrated in Vietnam for thousands of years, together with modern holidays imported from western countries. Among the former, the most important and widely celebrated is the Lunar new year (Tết), which is carefully prepared by most families in Vietnam.

Vietnam has a number of UNESCO-listed World Heritage Sites as well as intangible cultural heritage. These are divided into three categories: 1. Cultural heritage sites include Imperial city of Huế, Hội An and Mỹ Sơn; 2. Natural heritage sites comprise Phong Nha Cave and Hạ Long Bay; 3. Intangible cultural heritage includes Nhã nhạc, Space of Gong culture in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, Ca trù and Quan họ.

To be brief, Vietnamese culture is really diverse and distinctive with multifarious aspects such as customs, religions, performing arts, cuisine, heritage... For this reason, teaching and learning Vietnamese culture is what teachers and foreign students at HUCFL in particular are supposed to do. It is interesting to see foreign students have insight into Vietnamese culture and get into the passion of exploring the "hidden beauty" of our country.

3. The need to teach and learn Vietnamese culture

Language and culture have such an intertwined relationship that one "cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture." (Brown, 1994). Therefore, teaching a language is supposed to aim at teaching a culture. It is significant that Kitao (2000) points out several benefits of teaching culture: 1. Studying culture gives students a reason to study the target language as well as make the learning

of L2 meaningful (Stainer, 1971); 2. Learning culture, aside from providing students with cultural aspects of language, would help them relate the abstract sounds and forms of a language to real people and places; 3. Since learners enjoy culturally based activities such as singing, dancing, role playing, doing research on countries and peoples, high motivation can be well achieved, which is strongly expected by teachers; and 4. Teaching and learning culture also plays a helpful role in giving students information and knowledge of various fields such as history, literature, art, geography, etc of the target culture. (Cooke, 1970).

In the same token, teaching and learning Vietnamese culture is important in a classroom of Vietnamese as a foreign language. The responsibility of HUCFL in general and Department of Vietnamese studies in particular is to teach Vietnamese language and culture to foreign students. The ultimate aim of the training process is to popularize Vietnamese language and culture, which is essential in this age of globalization as it promotes the understanding and cooperation between our country and others. US senator, Paul Simon declared: "*Knowledge of the world's languages and cultures is more vital than ever. In order to compete in the global community, we must be able to communicate effectively and to appreciate, understand, and be able to work in the framework of other cultures*" [10]. His statement serves as a guideline to foreign learners who wish to live, study, work and do business in our country.

4. Suggested techniques in teaching Vietnamese culture

In order to raise foreign learners' awareness of Vietnamese culture, teachers need to equip themselves with some effective techniques so that students will be highly motivated. With a view to achieving this goal, some techniques are suggested as follows:

4.1. Cultural islands

It is a good idea that since the first day of class, teachers should prepare a cultural island in their classrooms. This means that they need all kinds of things such as posters, pictures, maps, signs and realia, which are important in shaping a mental image in students' minds. Thus, all visual things related to Vietnamese culture are to be collected and displayed in the classrooms. Also, giving the foreign students Vietnamese names can promote their interest in Vietnamese culture. In addition, teachers can make a presentation on a topic of interest with suitable illustrations like pictures or slide show to reinforce the mental image for students.

4.2. Culture capsules

When teachers and students know one another quite well, culture capsules can be applied in classroom as a method of teaching culture. A Culture capsule comprises a paragraph of explanation of one minimal difference between Vietnamese custom and

that of foreign students, using several illustrative pictures or photos and relevant realia. Firstly, teachers give a brief lecture on a chosen cultural point such as Vietnamese national costume or Vietnamese Lunar New Year. Of course, visual aids like handouts, pictures, flash cards to support the lecture can be used. Then, they lead the discussion on the differences between cultures, for example, the difference between “áo dài” of Vietnam and “sườn xám” (cheongsam) of China. It is the students who provide the contrasting information. With this activity, students can learn both language and culture at the same time.

4.3. Drama

Drama is an exciting way for students to apprehend Vietnamese culture, providing that they have already been advanced Vietnamese language learners. It is quite true that students will release the inhibition and feel more excited if they forget themselves and play the role of someone else. Hence, dramas are great for them to learn more about Vietnamese culture. Teachers should encourage students to read Vietnamese short stories and especially Vietnamese folk humour stories first and then act out the roles in those stories. It is the teacher's responsibility to make everything clear to students and help them prepare for the dramas (decorations, costumes, artifact...).

4.4. Media/ Visuals

Magazine pictures, slide presentations and videos are very useful for teachers in teaching culture. With this method, teachers can present a number of pictures and photos or a video so as to explain any aspect of Vietnamese culture such as education, architecture, cuisine, clothing, tourist attractions... Before each explanation or presentation, teachers can pose some questions to attract students' attention as well as get students well-prepared for the oncoming cultural elements. This can be carried out during the stage of vocabulary introduction that leads to the reading comprehension one. As pictures speak louder than words, this is an effective way to teach Vietnamese culture indeed.

4.5. Celebrating Festivals

This activity takes a lot of efforts to carry out but it is really meaningful to students. As learning by doing is realistic, students' insight into Vietnamese culture is well achieved after they have done this task. Teachers can help students in preparation for the Tet holiday like buying decorations, flowers and plants; cooking special foods, decorating homes... Since this method of teaching Vietnamese culture is rather time-consuming, it is suggested that Celebrating Festivals be held in extracurricular sessions. This activity not only gives students fun but also enables them to actively join in the cultural heritage of Vietnamese people.

4.6. Quiz

Quiz is one of the most successful types of activities to teach culture since it is interesting and keeps students involved and learning. With quiz, teachers can test students' acquisition of the materials they have previously taught. Besides, they can also use quiz to provide students with new information about Vietnamese culture. Quiz can be made in the form of questions or multiple choice, true/ false or the odd one out. It is good if the quiz is made according to topics such as history, geography, literature, cuisine so that students can get information and knowledge systematically. Quiz can be held at the beginning or at the end of the classes to get students well-prepared for new knowledge or help them review what they have learnt.

4.7. Mini research and presentation

Students should be encouraged by teachers to do a small research after class. The research can be carried out into any aspects of Vietnamese culture that interest students. They can search for information from any source such as the internet or the library. It is helpful to students if they do this research with their friends in groups of different topics. They can discuss and share information together in their own groups and get a deep insight into their favourite Vietnamese cultural aspect. After that, each group take turns to present their chosen topic to the class. Teachers' feedback and comments from other students are to follow the presentation. Further questions and discussion should also be raised to give students more understanding of Vietnamese culture. This activity should be repeatedly done throughout the learning programme to ensure that foreign students do learn Vietnamese culture.

4.8. Music

It would be a shortcoming if music is not employed in teaching Vietnamese culture. Music has the magic power of bringing people together, so students might feel more sympathetic to Vietnamese culture and people when they are engulfed in Vietnamese music. Vietnamese songs can teach students many things, not only words or grammatical points but also knowledge of Vietnamese culture such as history, geography, celebrities, ways of thinking, life, people, clothing, traditions, customs... To be short, the soul of Vietnam is embedded in Vietnamese music, hence, music is a great way to teach culture and therefore music can be used anytime in the classroom.

5. Conclusion

It goes without saying that teaching a culture is the ultimate aim of teaching a language. Just like a body which cannot function properly without a soul, a foreign student cannot learn Vietnamese language in isolation with Vietnamese culture. Vietnam has such an attractive culture that foreign students are supposed to learn. For the purpose of facilitating foreign learners to integrate into Vietnamese culture to enrich

their experience, it is advisable that teachers should apply these above-mentioned feasible techniques in the classroom: cultural islands, culture capsules, dramas, media/visuals, celebrating festivals, quiz, mini researches and presentations and lastly but not at all less important: music. With this done, it is hopeful that foreign students are highly motivated to learn more about Vietnamese culture.

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