

The Intercultural Communication Analysis of Conversations in the Project ‘My Hanoi’ by Faculty of Tourism, Hanoi Open University

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ABSTRACT

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Culture is significant in the process of creating communication, and language is the key element of communication. More than ever, English and tourism have created opportunities for people from different cultures to exchange and share their cultural values directly. Therefore, intercultural communication skill is highlighted in the context of the thriving global tourism industry. When a group of 20 junior students from the Faculty of Tourism, Hanoi Open University, took two foreign guests on food tours funded by the project ‘My Hanoi’ to improve their communicative competence in English, the researchers had a great chance to observe such interesting phenomena of intercultural communication in their conversations. Those phenomena were then analyzed from the intercultural communication perspective to indicate the strengths and weaknesses of our students in communicating with people from other cultures.

Introduction

Today, tourism has brought the whole world closer, and in the global village where we all live, individuals, regardless of whether we are tourists or tourism staff, communicate in a multicultural environment. It has been and is becoming a more culturally diverse industry (Beydilli & Kurt, 2020). The present context brings about both distinctive linguistic and cultural challenges and precious learning opportunities for tourism staff (Nguyen, 2023). Tourism employees must consider cultural differences and enhance intercultural communication to better adapt to the international working environment (Liu, Liu & King, 2022). Many hospitality and tourism management graduates will be required to deal with customers from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, intercultural communication skills are essential not only for staff involved in the increasingly internationalized tourism industry but also for university students who will start their careers in the future (Milhauser & Rahschulte, 2010). Students' intercultural communication competence (ICC) or their ability to comprehend and adjust to different cultural situations and perspectives should help greatly determine tourist

satisfaction or the success of the tourism industry in general and their career fulfillment in particular. Vietnamese tourism and tourism training schools in Vietnam are also operated in this general context, so English teaching in Vietnam, especially at tourism training schools, needs to take ICC as one of the goals for learners (Nguyen, 2020). During the period of openness and integration, the involvement of foreign factors has led to dramatic changes in many aspects, from economy to language, culture or society (Tran, 2021). Students should be encouraged to engage in authentic intercultural communication to learn about the target language and culture. Schools need to create opportunities for their students to meet and talk with foreigners so that learners can not only improve their ability to use English but also increase their understanding of cultural differences to develop cultural communication skills (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). Accordingly, the 'My Hanoi' project model sponsored by Hanoi Open University to help the students from the Faculty of Tourism accompany foreign volunteers to explore Hanoi is considered a great opportunity to improve their ICC. The intercultural communication analysis of conversations should provide insight into obvious issues in ICC of those students.

Literature review

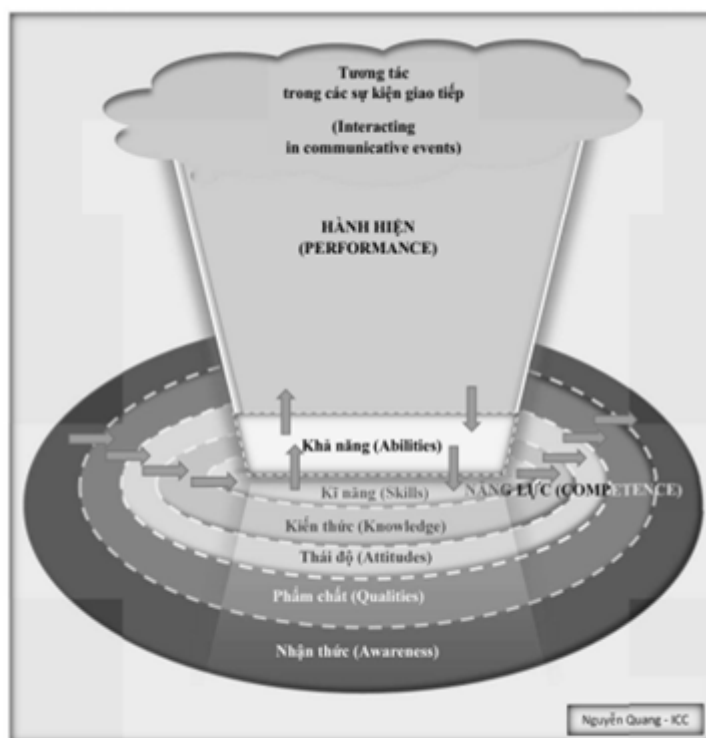
The intercultural communication analysis (ICA) is conducted based on the perspective of intercultural communication itself. The American anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1959) is considered the author who first introduced the concept of "intercultural communication" in the book "The silent language". Intercultural communication was indirectly defined as the interaction among people of different cultures. Although he mainly discussed non-verbal communication, his viewpoint about culture as a communication process helped open up further research directions on intercultural communication.

About the interrelationship between language and culture, in 1994, when the Australian linguist Michael Clyne examined the impact of cultural values on discourse, he claimed that language is the deepest expression of a culture and culture has a huge role in influencing the way not only the mother language but also foreign languages are used. Ting-Toomey (1999) emphasized that inappropriate encounters between people from different cultural backgrounds may lead to frustration and confusion. He reinforced that students have to learn to move effectively and appropriately through a wide range of transcultural situations by combining culture-specific knowledge with mindful listening and communication skills when building ICC. This could explain why there is one section about sociolinguistic competence in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) with descriptions of cultural awareness. This competence is concerned with the knowledge and skills required to deal with the social dimension of language use, and language is considered a sociocultural phenomenon. According to Ishii (2006), intercultural communication is the culturally interrelated cognitive, affective, and behavioral activity process of interactively sending and receiving verbal and nonverbal messages between or among people from mutually different cultural backgrounds in specific contexts.

Most noticeably, in 2010, Judith Martin from Arizona State University and Thomas K. Nakayama from Northeastern University, America, fostered an in-depth understanding of intercultural communication and ICA with six dialectics of intercultural communication,

including cultural – individual, personal – contextual, differences – similarities, static – dynamic, history/past – present/future, and privilege – disadvantages. This theory has made the analysis of intercultural communication more accessible and effective. Furthermore, in 2013, Bennett from the Intercultural Development Research Institute, Boston, America, proposed an approach to relations among members of different cultural groups that focuses on the recognition and respect of cultural differences and supports the development of intercultural sensitivity on the part of individuals to enable empathic understanding and competent coordination of action across cultural differences. Initially, those relations should be set up with one or two target cultures to avoid any stress or confusion among inexperienced English learners. English learners' target cultures tend to be the United Kingdom and the United States (Coperías, 2007; Baker, 2012; Li, 2016). Pennycook (2016) suggested the focus on these two countries in the integration with the awareness of the learners' own culture. Baker (2020) stated that ICA should incorporate the wider range of attitudes, skills, and knowledge needed for intercultural communication and could be conducted when learners are exposed to the complexity and flexibility of connections between language and culture in their natural environments outside the classroom. Lately, Jandt (2021) highlighted various aspects involved in ICA, including the awareness of intercultural competence, cultural identity, and conflict resolution. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2022) shared a similar view when they acknowledged the role of cultural identities, face-saving, and conflict resolution in intercultural interactions in the attempt of ICA.

In Vietnam, recently, Professors Nguyen Hoa and Nguyen Quang from the University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, have contributed two most comprehensive studies. Nguyen Hoa (2019) systematized the concepts of intercultural communication and affirmed that ICA has become an important research object of great interest. The intercultural aspect of communication is mainly revealed through interpersonal relations between individuals. Interpersonal relationships impact the form of discourse used to express culture and cultural values such as harmony, character, and politeness. Therefore, ICA is essentially a performative discourse analysis from an intercultural perspective, verbally and nonverbally. Nguyen Quang (2017) proposed the Intercultural Competence Model, including awareness, qualities, attitudes, knowledge, skills, and abilities.



Intercultural Competence Model by Nguyen Quang (2017)

The author emphasized the significance of developing ICC in English teaching and learning and analyzing this competence in an attempt to modify training courses effectively. He also suggested that individuals from different cultures must create an adaptive culture to communicate successfully. Similarly, Nguyen Thi Thuy Lan (2020) phased the process of improving ICC, including awareness raising, skills development, production, and feedback. She also proposed some strategies for improving ICC, like using authentic materials, role-plays, interviews, or course-based activities. In 2023, the authors Tran Thi Thu Trang and Vo Tu Phuong, when analyzing the need for enhancing ICC among 628 tourism students, recognized their positive attitudes in intercultural communication and higher needs of tasks for improving discourse and behavioral competencies.

The studies by international and Vietnamese authors in both the world and Vietnamese context related to learning both general English and English for tourism have helped generalize the overall picture of intercultural communication and ICC as well as provide suggestions on directions for ICA.

Research gap and research questions

After reviewing various related studies on intercultural communication, ICC, and ICA, the researchers found that those studies mainly approached the topic from a theoretical perspective or ICA was often conducted in a broad context with little reference to changes in student's ICC over a period of time. Moreover, some directly approached tourism students, but mass research decreased the in-depth insight and detailed analysis of outstanding phenomena. Accordingly, we decided to analyze intercultural communication in conversations on the small scale of My Hanoi project at the Faculty of Tourism, Hanoi Open University (FOT-HOU).

Accompanying our students on their food tours with foreign guests in the My Hanoi project, the researchers have obtained a lot of interesting data. We have applied the theory of intercultural communication analysis (ICA) in a great attempt to find out outstanding intercultural communication phenomena among the participants' conversations and conclude their strengths and weaknesses. To fulfill the purpose of the study, the authors aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1. What are the outstanding intercultural communication phenomena among the participants' conversations?*
- 2. What are their strengths and weaknesses in intercultural communication?*

Methods

Setting and Participants

This research was carried out in parallel with the implementation of the My Hanoi project under the authors' scientific research funded by Hanoi Open University since June 2023. The project involved twenty students, two foreigners, and five English lecturers.

Twenty voluntary students who have finished their first academic school year at FOT-HOU were selected to participate in the project. They major in both tourism service and hospitality management and have completed two courses in English for tourism. Their English level is

more or less A2 according to the European competence framework and evaluated by the speaking pre-test designed for the project. Before the project, those students' real-life communication experience with foreigners was very limited. However, they have learned about different cultures in two courses of English for tourism and other English courses at their previous schools.

One American YouTuber and one British freelance registered for the project when its poster was shared on some social networks. They are various in educational background, occupation, their living time in Vietnam, or their level of exposure to Vietnamese culture. However, interestingly, all of them have backgrounds in tourism and hospitality as well as experience in contact with many different cultures around the world.

Five English lecturers at FOT-HOU majoring in English Teaching Methodology and English Linguistics have experience teaching English for tourism ranging from three years to twenty-nine years. We also participated in a number of training programs by the European Committee, the World University Service of Canada, and other organizations, which helped us become quite competent in intercultural communication.

The participants were scheduled for a general meeting to help them get to know each other. As a result, such a friendly environment was recorded during the tours, which helped promote natural communication. In the first meeting, the groups also discussed and decided on the topics of their tours. The selection of oriented topics based on the interests of participants ensured their motivation. Three other extra meetings were also organized to give the groups more time to practice English and exchange culturally. The training sessions on touring and communication were also conducted by two lecturers of specialized English for tour guiding to help the students be more confident in joining the tours as the hosts. Those supportive activities contributed to significant changes in students' ICC when participating in the project.

Design of the Study

In order to collect designed data, we employed conversation analysis, which is an inductive, micro-analytic, and predominantly qualitative method for studying human social interactions (Hoey & Kendrick, 2017). Conversation analysis allows the researchers to study the structures of interaction at a micro level, focusing on how the participants make sense of each other in conversation through shared interactional norms (White, 2019). In other words, this method sees activities and identities as constructed by participants in and through social interaction, so it greatly contributes to the understanding of intercultural communication (Zhu, 2015). In addition, participant observation is selected as a secondary research method. This method helps the researchers immerse themselves in a particular social setting or group, observing the behaviors, interactions, and practices of the participants. This can be a valuable method for any research project that seeks to understand the experiences of individuals or groups in a particular social context (George, 2023). The combination of conversation analysis and participant observation is suitable to describe outstanding intercultural communication phenomena in real conversations between our students and foreign guests. Besides helping us understand our students' ICC, this study type helps us generate ideas for improving this skill amongst a bigger number of tourism students in the future.

Data collection and analysis

All the data was collected in the natural setting of the tours. The authors applied the three-stage procedure proposed by Chen (2020). In the first stage, the authors referred to related previous studies to identify four elements that should help detect outstanding intercultural communication phenomena. Those categories of awareness of cultural types, awareness of politeness, awareness of cultural values, and cultural pragmatics acted like data filters so that the process of both data collection and data analysis was simplified and more focused. The tours took place in an authentic environment of food places in the Old Quarter with all existing disturbances of daily life; without those selected categories, the researchers could not efficiently get expected data while still playing their other roles assigned by the project. In the second stage, the recorded data was analyzed and generalized to find outstanding intercultural communication phenomena while the communication patterns that had a low frequency were eliminated. In the final stage, the insights into the gathered data and highlighted phenomena were applied. The personal exchanges with participants related to the data and the reference to the data from the participant observation played a significant role in explaining the identified phenomena, thereby concluding the strengths and weaknesses of students in intercultural communication.

During the tours, the researchers worked as participant observers. As guided by George (2023), we participated in the groups' activities while observing their behavior and interactions. There was flexibility in the level of participation, ranging from non-participatory to intensive participation. The goal was to gain a deep understanding of their cultural communication practices from an insider perspective. During the observation, the researchers expanded the notes on the categorized cards. Both data from the conversations and observations were used for the detailed description of the results and discussion.

Results and Discussion

After observing four tours and with the application of conservation analysis, the researchers collected useful data that provided the resources for answering the study's two research questions.

Outstanding intercultural communication phenomena

The analysis of conversations and results of the participant observations were combined, which helped highlight significant intercultural communication phenomena related to awareness of cultural types, awareness of politeness, awareness of cultural values, and cultural pragmatics.

Awareness of cultural types

Every culture has a dominant communication style formed by specific values, social norms, and standards. The high and low context cultures refer to how important contextual signals are in understanding a message. High-context cultures have a communication style based on body language, tone, and overall context, while low-context cultures are more straightforward and explicit in communication (Peterson, 2004).

Both the British and American volunteers come from low-context cultures, so their

communication was explicit, and there was very little dependence on non-verbal communication. However, Vietnamese students growing up in a high-context environment tended to use body language to convey their messages or information during conversations. This contradiction led to their misunderstanding and lack of comfort on their first tours. Some examples were given to illustrate this phenomenon.

On the first tour, the British volunteer expressed his displeasure about what one student in his group did when she was late for the tour. He expected her to say *'I'm sorry'* or explain why she was late. Nevertheless, the student just smiled and joined the group. Actually, in Vietnam, we all would get her message. She felt guilty and embarrassed, then smiled at him as an expression of apology. The American volunteer experienced a similar situation; when one student helped him mix the salad, he politely said *'Thank you'*. He was a bit confused when that student just smiled but did not say *'You're welcome'* or *'My pleasure.'*

On the other tour, the British volunteer felt uncomfortable when one student insisted, *'You eat more spring rolls.'* He explained, *'I had a heavy breakfast'* – which is typical for a British, but she, even the whole group, tried to persuade him to eat more. The students did not have any bad intentions, but they failed to recognize his refusal while he was still smiling because they relied on the body language more than what was spoken.

When we took note of and received plenty of similar indirect feedback, we reminded the students in both training sessions and tours. Basically, by the last tour, the students gradually had the habit of expressing communication content in verbal language despite their limitations in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. They were not reluctant to say *'Thank you'* when assisted or responded to this thank promptly.

Awareness of politeness

From the perspective of sociolinguistics, English is considered the language of politeness. There are many phrases that show politeness in English communication, such as *'please,' 'thank you,' 'could you...?'*, and *'Would you mind...?'*. Besides, structures for different levels of certainty, such as *'maybe,' 'could,' 'would,' 'should,' 'possible'*, and so on, appear more frequently in English. (Gomez, 2021). At the end of the second tour, the British volunteer said, *'Could you possibly consider scheduling our next tour before next Friday?'* instead of the more direct way of saying: *'You have to schedule our next tour before next Friday.'* Perhaps the students were not used to expressing politeness verbally or due to their limited English level, they missed using polite words in many conversations. Some showed their politeness through nonverbal acts such as gestures, smiles, or postures.

On the first tours, the students were criticized for their lack of using words to express politeness. They even did not have the habit of using the most common word like *'please'*. For instance, when a student needed a pair of chopsticks, she asked, *'I need chopsticks,'* and pointed at the holder. Whereas she should have said, *'Could you please pass me/ get me a pair of chopsticks?'*. The failure to say *'thank you'* in their communication was also noticeable as mentioned above. Fortunately, the foreign volunteers, with their experience and high level of cultural adaptation, set great models for polite communicators. They continuously thanked the group for the food and the information during the tour. At the end of each tour, they thanked the whole group for

the tour and wished them a nice weekend. The lecturers reminded the students, then gradually felt less embarrassed and said ‘*thank you*’ more in appropriate situations.

How to take turns in a conversation was also of great concern. While the volunteer exposed excellent polite language by saying, ‘*Excuse me, but may I jump in here?*’, ‘*So sorry to interrupt, but may I ask a question?*’ our students just jumped straight into a conversation.

On the other hand, the students did a good job when applying some Vietnamese polite strategies for social etiquette. They made arrangements so that the seniors, including the lecturers and the volunteers, could have a nice seat. However, they did not say, ‘*Please take a seat*’ in that case. For a tour, each group of 6 people was funded 500,000 VND, which covered all the expenses on food orders and traveling, if any. The group was required to try three dishes on a tour. Therefore, they often ordered a few portions for each type of dish and then shared the food. When it was time to experience the food, they often invited the seniors to try it first. Sadly, they did not say, ‘*Would you like to try it?*’ or ‘*Please try some.*’ Normally, they said, ‘*You can start first.*’ or ‘*Your turn.*’

Awareness of cultural values

Noticeably, both students and volunteers were eager to share the cultural values of their countries. For example, on the final tour, the students were excited to learn the British afternoon tea customs, while the British volunteer was enthusiastic to be trained in how Vietnamese people invite other family members to family meals. In another conversation, the atmosphere was really joyful when the whole group tried to explain how they should address him in different contexts as a teacher or a senior and had him practice pronouncing Vietnamese words. At the A2 level, the students still lacked lexical resources to describe what they wanted to express and frequently paused to search for words. They also had the habit of thinking in Vietnamese and then translating the information into English. Many times, when they tried to express a point, they discussed it with other members and built up the content in Vietnamese, then translated such information into English. For example, when the American volunteer asked one student about the ingredients for the filling of spring rolls, she understood the question but turned to the group, ‘*Làm nhân nem bằng gì nhi?*’ – ‘*Thường là thịt băm, nấm hương, miến dong và cà rốt*’, another student suggested. That student confirmed, ‘*Nhân nem làm từ thịt băm, nấm hương, miến dong và cà rốt.*’ She continued, ‘*Thịt băm tiếng Anh là gì?...nấm là mushroom, thế nấm hương là gì? Miến dong nói thế nào nhi?*’ The complexity of the Vietnamese language and their habit of word-by-word translation hindered their pace of speaking.

Although the students have a great interest in cultural stories, they did not spend much time searching for their volunteers’ cultural values or cuisine. This perspective made them quite passive in intercultural communication. Normally, it was the volunteers who started this type of exchange.

Interestingly, the students were more motivated to participate in intercultural conversations involving real experience. On one tour, when the British volunteer brought the ingredients for making his favorite cake named scones and taught them how to enjoy it, all students were excited and comfortably practiced both the expressions for a recipe and how they could respond politely when someone helped serve the cake.

Cultural pragmatics

Cultural pragmatics refers to the way in which language is used to express what somebody really means in particular situations, especially when the actual words used may appear to mean something different, and the knowledge about the culture of the speaker should help understand the message (Alexander, 2006). People who speak English as a foreign language often struggle with pragmatics, especially in the context of intercultural communication. Some examples of unsuccessful communication were recognized in the researched conversations.

On one drink tour organized on a hot day, after finishing the sweet soup orders, the leader of the group asked the American volunteer, *'What else would you like to have?'* When he responded, *'I am fine, thank you!'*, the student continued, *'What about a passion fruit juice? It's best for summer.'* The student failed to communicate with the foreign guest due to his low awareness of pragmatics. He supposed the volunteer did not get his question since to English learners, *'I am fine'* should be a response to *'How are you?'* and culturally, Vietnamese people may consider this question as an offer, then expect a refusal or acceptance.

As another example, once the group was talking about local food, one mentioned half-hatched eggs and asked the British volunteer, *'Have you tried this food?'* – *'Well, not yet. I'm a vegan.'* When the group continued to discuss how delicious and nutritious half-hatched eggs are, he sat still, confused, and a bit shocked. The communication situation was unsuccessful because the students did not understand the message when the volunteer said, *'I'm a vegan.'* Supposing that they learned the word *'vegan'* in the second English course but forgot it, the teacher asked for their confirmation and even asked one to define the word. It was disappointing that they all knew the word. They were just less sensitive about vegan culture.

In another conversation, when the British volunteer invited the group to attend the upcoming UK festival, one responded, *'Next weekend, I'm planning to visit my grandparents in the countryside.'* *'What a pity, but have a great time with your grandparents!'* responded the volunteer. Clearly, his cultural pragmatics competence was great, and the conversations ended successfully.

To conclude, the recorded intercultural communication phenomena show both negative and positive aspects of the students' ICC, which will be classified and further discussed in the next finding.

Student's strengths and weaknesses in intercultural communication

The above intercultural communication phenomena illustrate some strengths and weaknesses of the students in intercultural communication as generalized in the following table:

Table 1. Student's strengths and weaknesses in intercultural communication (My Hanoi Project, 2023)

<i>Indicators of ICC</i>	<i>Student's strengths</i>	<i>Students' weaknesses</i>
Awareness of cultural types	- Most students' ICC was improved when their existing problems were notified, and both the lecturers and the volunteers trained them.	- They lacked the awareness of other culture types. If they communicate with people from opposite types (high-context culture), there could be cultural conflicts resulting in discomfort or broken communication. - They lacked the awareness of risk, then applied their communication styles comfortably but did not acknowledge the differences between theirs and the volunteers'. This may cause culture shock without timely professional intervention and direction.
Awareness of politeness	- The students were aware of politeness in their own culture and competently expressed them in Vietnamese. - They were able to enhance their awareness of politeness in other cultures, beginning with building up the habit of using English polite expressions.	- Initially, the students rarely used polite English expressions in their communication. The frequent use of short phrases or too direct sentences did not affect comprehension seriously but may make them appear impolite to people from low-context cultures or may offend the ones with a low level of adaptive culture.
Awareness of cultural values	- They had a good awareness of their own cultural values and were interested in learning other cultures' values.	- The self-awareness of other cultures' values was still limited. They should have spent more time improving their knowledge and demonstrating greater effort regarding recognizing the values of other cultures to promote interpersonal relationships.
Awareness of cultural pragmatics	- If they were already exposed to modes of conversation based on cultural pragmatics, the application was possible, especially for students of higher English levels.	- They had great difficulties in understanding other uses of expressions more than the situations in which they learned to apply them. Therefore, the risk of conversation failure was very high when it came to the need for cultural pragmatics.

As can be seen clearly in the above table, the students' weaknesses in intercultural communication in English outweighed their strengths. They were evaluated better regarding their awareness of Vietnamese culture, but their perceptions of British and American cultures, as well as the application of those perceptions in intercultural communication, were still very limited. This led to their inappropriate encounters, resulting in discomfort, conflicts, and failed conversations as mentioned in the studies by Ting-Toomey (1999), Nguyen Quang (2017), Jandt (2021), and Ting-Toomey and Chung (2022). The researchers also paid attention to the students' general communication skills and mindful listening. While their limited communication skills affected their effort to express themselves politely, their word-by-word translation both slowed the communication down and prevented them from the practice of mindful listening. In addition, since intercultural communication is the culturally interrelated cognitive, affective, and behavioral activity process (Ishii, 2006 & Baker, 2020), the limitation of their perceptions of the volunteers' cultures affected their problematic participation in the conversations both verbally and nonverbally. Fortunately, the volunteers' empathic understanding and coordination throughout the project were highly appreciated; this came from their recognition and respect for cultural differences (Bennett, 2013).

However, the student's progress recorded by both the lecturers and the volunteers in the final tours was clear proof that with appropriate guidance and practice, they could completely overcome their limitations and improve their ICC. This recognized better ICC was related to their created cultural adaptiveness (Nguyen, 2017). As suggested by Nguyen Thi Thuy Lan (2020), the feedback from both the teachers and volunteers helped complete the process of improving the participants' ICC.

The results have covered all the answers to the research questions. Outstanding intercultural communication phenomena were identified in terms of awareness of cultural types, awareness of politeness, awareness of cultural values, and cultural pragmatics. This classification supported the clear indication of students' strengths and weaknesses in ICC. The results are discussed with the explanations referring to the previous studies.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Developing intercultural communication competence is significant to all tourism students so that they can become confident in both their personal lives and future careers with the high possibility of intercultural interactions. Through this small-scale quantitative research on 20 students participating in the My Hanoi project funded by Hanoi Open University, we discovered interesting intercultural communication phenomena related to awareness of cultural types, politeness, cultural values, and cultural pragmatics. The conversation analysis, together with the data from the participant observations, reflected a variety of their intercultural communication situations. The students showed few strengths but a number of weaknesses in their intercultural communication skills. They had a good awareness of Vietnamese cultural values and competently practiced them in Vietnamese. However, they lacked the awareness of other cultures and then made a lot of mistakes, especially regarding their limitations in using

polite expressions and controlling the flow of discourse. Actually, they did get noticeable improvement in their ICC toward the end of the project thanks to their better cultural perceptions and adaptivity as well as the instructions from both the teachers and the volunteers. This not only confirms the effectiveness of the project model in improving the participants' ICC but also helps suggest directions to help improve tourism students' ICC in the future.

Recommendations

Although the small-scale quantitative research was suitable for the intercultural conversation analysis, which is the focus of this study, we recommend *further large-scale studies* on ICC of larger numbers of students at FOT-HOU or even in other tourism schools so that the results are more collective rather than the insight into some typical phenomena. Moreover, if other research tools like *survey questionnaires or interviews* are applied, the reliability of the data should be improved.

Regarding *strategies to improve students' intercultural communication competence*, the authors would like to give our personal suggestions in the actual context of English training programs at FOT-HOU, referring to the model by Nguyen Quang (2017) and the existing strengths and weaknesses of our students recorded in this study. In order to help students achieve the expected improvement in their ICC, both students and lecturers are recommended to follow the process of enhancing students' *awareness, qualities, attitudes, knowledge, skills, and abilities* as follows:

Awareness

Students should improve their ability to perceive the key differences between their own culture and the cultures of English-speaking countries and later cultures of their future target tourists both emotionally and rationally. This effort can start right in English courses at FOT-HOU. When implementing each lesson content, the lecturers can proactively integrate or emphasize cultural differences. Besides the time for intercultural communication, the lesson also aims to achieve other goals. Therefore, both lecturers and students must also be realistic; instead of trying to learn deeply about culture, introducing stereotypes may be a suitable approach. However, lecturers need to emphasize that in low-context cultures, when individuals are highly recognized, these stereotypes are only relative. Furthermore, in role-play activities, students need to be encouraged to use learned expressions to demonstrate their awareness of intercultural communication.

Qualities

Based on the analysis of the students' present weaknesses and strengths in intercultural communication, the researchers suggest a focus on receptiveness, flexibility, and sensitiveness. For everyone, especially students with low-level English proficiency, *receptiveness* is a necessary quality to accept new things and to adjust appropriate behavior in an intercultural environment. To enhance this quality amongst our students, in addition to their own internal motivation, we can organize activities to help students realize the significance of ICC in their future career development. Real cultural stories could be a great idea to illustrate the unfortunate consequences that can occur from the limited ICC. By constantly being aware of the existence

of intercultural communication and making efforts to improve corresponding qualities, students will gradually be able to be more *flexible* and handle situations in effective intercultural interactions. *Sensitiveness* is the target and highest quality to strive for ICC because it helps students see the relevance of intercultural communication interactions without much effort.

Attitudes

All students at FOT-HOU have been taught about appropriate attitudes since their early days. Suitable attitudes in intercultural communication are of great importance since they affect what their partners in a conversation receive, both verbally and nonverbally. They should be respectful, sincere, unbiased, and optimistic when communicating with people from other cultures.

Knowledge

Students must have communication, cultural, and intercultural communication knowledge. While communication knowledge is the initial foundation, cultural knowledge about values, concepts, virtues, and communication styles of both their own culture and other cultures will help the intercultural communication process take place more fluently. Intercultural communication knowledge will help increase the effectiveness of the communication process. Because most students refer to online sources to get knowledge, in addition to helping students receive knowledge through lessons, lecturers need to suggest reliable sources for students to improve their knowledge on their own. The lecturers' instruction on reading skills should enable students to absorb knowledge more easily.

Skills

Both technical skills and interpersonal skills should be developed for a better ICC. Technically, the skills of using both verbal and nonverbal elements or the awareness of communicational contexts should be built up and developed throughout English lessons. Lecturers set a specific objective for each lesson, design guided practice, organize free practice, and give feedback on their achievements at the right time. Interpersonal skill is at a higher level in which students know how to use and combine elements of technical skills and implement communication strategies to achieve different communication goals. Students need to know how to start and participate in conversations interestingly and positively, discuss things that others are interested in, listen attentively, respect other people's opinions, and avoid negative criticism.

Abilities

The ability to apply knowledge and skills about language and culture based on awareness, qualities, and positive attitudes in intercultural communication events will help students connect their ICC and performance. As a result, they can communicate effectively in a multicultural environment.

A clear awareness of the journey and the essential factors for developing ICC needs to be closely linked to practice in hypothetical situations and then real situations. Participation in activities outside the classroom is essential; activities such as English clubs and projects like My Hanoi are great opportunities for students to practice English and intercultural communication in English.

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