A critical analysis of intercultural competence development in 11th grade English textbook from the English as international language (EIL) perspective

Luong Thi Huong Thao- Nguyen Thi Thuy
University of Languages and International Studies – Vietnam National University

Abstract:
With the emerging role of English as an international language in Expanding circle countries in Kachru (1985)’s three concentric circle model of the spread of English, the native speaker norms in both linguistic and cultural competence are no longer appropriate. Instead, it is important to develop intercultural communicative competence that enables students to relativise their own cultural values, beliefs and behaviors, and investigate other cultures (Byram et al., cited in Aguilar, 2007). This study aims at critically analyzing to what extent the textbook “English Grade 11”, which was compiled and published by Vietnam’s Ministry of Education and Training in 2010, can foster students’ intercultural competence and critical awareness in the context of teaching English as an international language in Vietnam. The analysis reveals many limitations of the textbook in both cultural content and culture teaching methods. Regarding content analysis, the 11th grade textbook still portrays an excessive Anglo-centric focus and a stereotypical representation of both target culture and Vietnamese students’ culture. As regards culture teaching methods, the textbook is criticized for being a one dimensional textbook because cultural issues are presented in isolation, thus leaving few possibilities for comparison. It is hoped that this study will have some useful implications for English textbook development in Vietnam.
I. Introduction.

With Vietnam’s integration into the WTO and its opening policies, the chance to contact and negotiate with foreign business partners has spurred, which leads to the emerging need for proficiency in English. English is commonly used in Vietnam as a potential language for communication with both English native speakers and non native speakers, especially people from other Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea, etc. Thus, the role of English in Vietnam can be best described as a lingua franca. Despite the significant role of English in economic development, one of the pressing issues is that Vietnamese learners start learning English at grade 6th, but they can not communicate successfully in English after finishing high school or even after graduating from college. The series of English grade 10, 11 and 12 were designed in 2010, which was one of Vietnam’s Ministry of Education and Training’s several attempts to improve English teaching and learning at high schools. Nevertheless, few studies have been conducted to assess their effectiveness in developing students’ communicative competence and more importantly, intercultural competence so that they can become mediators between different cultures when being involved in cross-cultural communication. This study aims at critically analyzing to what extent the textbook English grade 11 can foster students’ intercultural communicative competence and critical awareness in the context of English as a lingua franca.

II. Body.

1. The need to develop intercultural competence in teaching English as a lingua franca in Vietnam.

Culture is often considered a significant component of communicative competence that EFL learners need to acquire because of the close relationship between knowledge of a foreign language and knowledge of the culture from which that language originated (Tang, 1999). However, the question of which culture to teach and "how necessary to learning a language is the learner's cultural integration?" is still under debate and is something that "troubles teachers, whether they work with students in classrooms far removed from the culture of the language they are learning or with students who are physically immersed in the culture but experientially and psychologically distant from it" Pica (1994, p.70). Although it is true that some learners have the integrative motivation that they learn English in order to become familiar with some aspect of its culture or even to integrate with the target language community, this is not necessarily the case. Instead of having integrative motivation, students may learn English for other purposes such as meeting the requirements for school or university graduation, applying for a job, or getting promotion. In addition, there are different communicative situations that learners may be involved in the future: between learners and the interlocutor who is an English native speaker or neither participants are native speakers with different languages and nationalities. In order to decide which culture should be introduced to English learners in Vietnam, it is necessary to take into account the role of English in Vietnamese context and learners’ needs.

Vietnam belongs to the Expanding circle in Kachru’s three concentric model (1985), where there is no local model of English since the language does not have official status and, has not become institutionalized with locally developed standards of use (McKay, 2002). Like other expanding circle countries, in Vietnam, the role of English is best described as a lingua franca because the majority of English speakers learn English
to communicate with other fellow non native English speakers rather than with native speakers from inner circle countries.

With the new role of English in Expanding circle, the native speaker norms in both linguistic and cultural competence are no longer appropriate. Instead, it is important to develop intercultural competence that enables students to relativize their own cultural values, beliefs and behaviors, and investigate for themselves the otherness - what is different to their “norm” (Byram et al., 2002, cited in Aguilar, 2007, p.69). According to Byram et al. (1994, cited in Aguilar, 2007, p.66), there are three purposes of foreign language learning as follows:

- to offer insights into the culture and civilization of the countries where the language is spoken;
- to encourage positive attitudes to foreign language learning and to speakers of foreign languages and a sympathetic approach to other cultures and civilizations; and
- to develop pupils’ understanding of themselves and their own culture.

Therefore, because English is taught as an international language, teachers of English in the expanding circle like Vietnam should not teach their students only Anglo-American culture - the cultural sphere shared by the United Kingdom and the United States- but it is also necessary to incorporate elements of students’ own culture and other cultures. Through a real representation of social and cultural aspects of target culture and home culture, and by means of comparison and contrast between these cultures, it is anticipated that students will become more open-minded and will be able to develop their critical cultural awareness (Aguilar, 2007, p.73).

2. Textbook analysis frameworks.
2.1. Existing problems of EFL textbooks:

Textbooks play a crucial role in the realm of language teaching and learning which have the great influence on teachers’ delivery of content, and serve as teachers' guide or references. Textbooks play such an important in English teaching; however, EFL textbooks in general have not caught up with the trend in teaching English as a lingua franca. Not only textbooks are still based on the native speaker model in pronunciation, grammar usage, conversations and interaction, but textbooks are also criticized for being stubbornly Anglo-centric in presenting cultural content and not fully recognizing English as an international language (Prodomou, 1988, cited in Baladi, 2007, p.39). In addition to the dominance of American and British cultures, textbooks are also criticized by Aguila (2007) for portraying an idealized image of these countries, thus perpetuating a number of stereotypes of the affluent, neocconservative, capitalist Western society (Pennycook, 1994, cited in Baladi, 2007, p.38). It is argued that such stereotypical representations in textbooks can make students overlook the linguistic and ethnic diversity within target culture and misinterpret the target culture as a perfect society in contrast with their own, which they experience as imperfect.

2.2. Content analysis and critical evaluation of teaching methods as the main framework.

Based on the above mentioned limitations of EFL textbooks, I will set a framework for the analysis of the textbook in this current study. Thus, the analysis will investigate if adequate attention has been paid to culture teaching compared to language
forms, if there is an excessive Anglo-centric focus and stereotypical representation of both the target and Vietnamese students’ culture. Moreover, I will consider the checklist for evaluating the treatment of cultural content of textbooks in Cortazzi and Jin (1999, p. 203) as follows:

- giving factually accurate and up-to-date information.
- Avoiding (or relativising) stereotypes by raising awareness.
- Presenting a realistic picture.
- Being free from (or questioning) the ideological tendencies
- Presenting phenomena in context rather than as isolated facts.
- Explicitly relating historical material to contemporary society
- Making clear how personalities are products of their ages

In addition to content analysis, I will also analyze the approach or teaching method of cultural content employed in the textbook English to find out if the textbook is a one dimensional or two dimensional textbook. While one-dimensional textbooks focus on the target language culture and leave few possibilities for comparison, “unless the teacher poses a question, such as, ‘This is what American do. What do you do?’ or ‘This is the American view. What is your view?’” (Dunnet, Dubin and Lezberg, 1986), two-dimensional textbooks adopt comparative approach and encourage cross-cultural understanding. They treat culture-related themes from two different perspectives, thus stimulating both comparison and contrast between the target and the source cultures.

3. Analysis.
3.1. Content analysis.

The most noticeable feature is the dominance of English speaking countries compared to other countries in the textbook English 11. The majority of topics for reading or listening passages in all units are the cultural issues in Britain, America or Australia. The topics range from past experiences of a Western girl called Christina (unit 2), birthday party and wedding anniversaries in US (unit 3), volunteer work by high school and college students as volunteer in the US (unit 4), London and Boston marathon (unit 6), Leisure activities British people often have and a collection of British Royal mementoes (unit 14). The number of topics related to Vietnam ranks second, including illiteracy eradication (unit 5), Vietnamese New Year celebrations (unit 8), several names of places in Vietnam, and Vietnamese competitions on TV, etc. The most marginalized cultures are those of other countries in the same region with Vietnam such as Japan, Korea, Thailand and China. Japan is mentioned once in unit 8 when students are introduced to some aspects of New Year celebration in Japan. Meanwhile, China is mentioned briefly in unit 12- The Asian Games and unit 15- Space conquest. The Anglo-centric focus of the textbook and the marginalization of other countries in the same region are detrimental for the development of intercultural competence necessary for Vietnamese students when they are involved in communication with other non native English speakers in Asia.

A closer look at the content reveals that Anglo-centric focus is not only reflected in the number of cultural issues but also in the content of reading passages or language expressions used in speaking activities. A typical example is the speaking task in unit 1. At first glance, the activity seems to focus on describing Vietnamese people’s physical
characteristics; however, some language expressions given to students are only suitable for describing western people: square face, a straight, crooked nose and eye colours. The teacher in charge of this lesson will have to provide students with other useful expressions to describe typical Asian features: flat broad nose, double or single eyelid and features that Vietnamese people consider to be attractive such as dimples and rosy skin. Another example is the reading on people’s most embarrassing experience in unit 2. Although the story is meant to be in Vietnam context, the character in the story uses US dollar when she buys a hat in a shop, which totally neglects the fact that the dollar is not used commonly in normal transaction in Vietnam.

Also, the discourse conventions in conversations or writing tasks strictly follow those of English speaking countries. In unit 4, students are required to write a letter to acknowledge the receipt of donation and express their gratitude. They are expected to read a sample letter and adopt the organization and styles in writing formal letters in English. Similarly, in the speaking task in unit 2, convention and structure of the talk is fixed and students are encouraged to underline the structure used in sample dialogue and make similar dialogues in pairs. The textbook imposes the western rhetorical style in writing without helping students to realize the differences in discourse conventions between Vietnamese and British/American cultures; in this way, it fails to give students chance to draw on their previous writing experience.

The second feature is the ideal representation of English speaking countries like Britain and America. The textbook portrays an ideal and cliché picture of British and American life where people are well dressed, have time for a lot of hobbies and leisure activities, communicate via email, or shop in department stores, have happy marriages with silver and golden anniversaries, have a lot of outdoor activities, generously do volunteer work and have a lot of achievement in science (Space conquest). All these features create an urbanized, affluent culture of middle class in those countries but do not accurately represent the complexity of the Western world, where unglamorous jobs and poverty are a daily reality (Canagarajah, 1999, cited in Baladi, 2007, p.38). Thus, it creates false impressions of Western cultures on students, and they are likely to perceive target culture to be superior to the realistic picture that they observe in their home culture everyday.

On the other hand, Vietnamese cultures, particularly the cultures of ethnic minority students in rural areas in Vietnam are unpresented in the textbook. English 11 is designed for use all over the country; however, this textbook only portrays the images of urbanized and rich people, who wear Westernized clothes, have a lot of leisure activities, can afford a camping trip and wants to dress like their idol pop stars. These features are all alien to students living in rural areas or coming from poor family, so it is difficult for them to relate what they learn in the lesson to their own real life experience.

3.2. Critical analysis of teaching methods.
Besides the above mentioned limitations of cultural content, English 11 also reveals some weaknesses in terms of teaching methods. Despite the inclusion of both target and home cultures, it is still a one dimensional textbook because cultural issues are presented in isolation and leave few possibilities for comparison. The students are not given a chance to reflect on their own cultures, become aware of the relativity of cultural values and develop the intercultural competence necessary for successful communication
with members of the other cultures. Moreover, the cultural issues are not presented explicitly and systematically in the textbook; there are few activities to help students avoid stereotypes and become aware that there are many ways of doing things and their way is not the only possible one. Students are required to passively read a reading and listening passages and then answer all factual questions. During the speaking activities, they are expected to imitate a sample dialogue and use prescribed language expressions. Thus, there are few chances for them to reflect and make a comparison and contrast between their home culture and other foreign culture. The activities in the textbook should move beyond practicing the new structures or vocabulary, and allow students to develop their critical cultural awareness by help develop discovery skills that will allow students to get the information necessary in each situation, not only during the learning period but also in future.

III. Conclusion.

This study focuses on critically analyzing the effectiveness the textbook English 11 in developing students’ intercultural competence and critical cultural awareness in the context of teaching English as an international language in Vietnam. The analysis has revealed many limitations of English 11 in both cultural content and culture teaching methods. It is hoped that this analysis will serve as a starting point for textbook compilers in Vietnam to take into account the role of intercultural competence and critical cultural awareness in the new era, thus it can encourage them to include greater diversity of cultural issues and design more activities that leaves opportunities for students to critically reflect on the target culture and their home culture.
References


