

FOREIGN LANGUAGE LECTURERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHING CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY AT TRA VINH UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM

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Abstract – *In the era of modernization and globalization, it is crucial to promote cultural integration and intercultural awareness in foreign language classes. The study investigates the perspectives of contractual and visiting lecturers of a tertiary education institution in Vietnam on teaching cultural elements in the foreign language classroom. This study aims to determine the perspectives of language instructors about intercultural knowledge in language curriculum, as well as their views toward the development of interpersonal skills and cultural openness and adaptability. The descriptive statistics of forty responses to a questionnaire from the participants show that the lecturers evaluate the current training program as having rich content of cultural knowledge of various countries, enabling lecturers to cultivate their cultural understanding and apply it to teaching effectively. The participants also believe that understanding different countries’ cultures helps improve teachers’ language proficiency and the ability to work effectively in various cultural contexts. In addition, the significance of foreign languages in the global context is considered an influencing factor in teachers’ motivation to teach a foreign language. These results highlight the value of intercultural competence and shed light on the perspectives of foreign language lecturers in conveying cultural content in their classes.*

Keywords: *English teaching, foreign language classroom, foreign language lecturers, intercultural awareness.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In today’s world, teaching and learning foreign languages involves more than simply language skills but also requires thorough comprehension of the cultural elements of the respective countries. According to a conference paper by Achieng in 2023 [1], teachers and students can lessen the possibility of misunderstandings resulting from cultural differences and enhance their communication skills in various contexts by fostering intercultural competency. It can be said that integrating cultural material in the language classroom can help students have a better grasp of the language they are learning and help them build the capacity to communicate with people from diverse cultures.

University lecturers’ viewpoints on integrating cultural factors in foreign language teaching are becoming increasingly essential in educational research. With the growing effect of globalization, teachers need to foster the unique characteristics of intercultural competency in their cultural education practices. Hinkel, cited by Hsueh et al. [2], said that the way foreign languages are taught nowadays differs greatly from their conventional forms. The learning of culture is an integral part of language learning and education because culture crucially influences the community’s values, everyday interactions, speech and behavior norms, and the sociocultural expectations of an individual’s roles. This is something that foreign language teachers in the modern world should be aware of.

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Received date: 25th April 2024; Revised date: 23rd July 2024; Accepted date: 01st August 2024

In research on global citizenship education in 2016, Nguyen Tien Hung [3] stated that global citizenship education is understood as a model structured to equip and develop the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed by citizens to ensure the building of a more just, peaceful, tolerant, safe, and sustainable world. It involves equipping knowledge and cognitive skills to build values, soft skills, and attitudes for citizens to facilitate international cooperation and sustainable social change. Besides, during the teaching process, it is observed that students need to improve these aspects to meet the output standards of the higher education training program according to the 17th circular of the Ministry of Education and Training in 2021 [4].

This study aims to understand how university lecturers integrate culture into their teaching and its impact on their views and teaching methods. It explores the importance lecturers place on teaching the cultural aspects of English-speaking countries and their contribution to students' understanding of other cultures. Within the framework of this research, emphasis will be placed on collecting and analyzing lecturers' perspectives on cultural content in the current English training program, practical skills, and lecturers' attitudes toward acquiring and teaching culture in the foreign language classroom. This reflects the awareness and value lecturers place on cultural aspects when teaching English and reveals how they stimulate students to develop communication skills in a multicultural context. Therefore, this research is critical because it helps improve the quality of English teaching at a multidisciplinary, autonomous university in Southern Vietnam and explores cultural integration in teaching, preparing students for culturally aware participation in the workplace and international cooperation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Definition of culture

According to Luu Thi Thanh Tu [5], culture is a product of human labor (both intellectual and manual) that is shaped by the surrounding

environment (natural and social) and the characteristics of each ethnic group. It is through culture that humans distinguish themselves from other animal species; and because it is shaped by the surrounding environment and the characteristics of each ethnic group, culture will have its unique characteristics in each ethnic group.

B. Teaching culture through language

Seelye [6] argues that learning a language without understanding its cultural roots is incomplete. Language teaching should include cultural context to help learners understand the social, political, religious, and economic systems associated with that language.

Rivers [7] emphasizes that language education needs to go beyond learning simple information to help students experience and understand deeper levels of the target culture. This includes stimulating activities that help students internalize cultural content, allowing them to perceive the world through the cultural lens of those who speak that language.

Kramsch [8] introduces the concept of a 'third space' where language learners create an intercultural cultural identity that connects their native culture and the target culture. This third space is where learners navigate and define their cultural understanding as they learn a new language.

From the above statements, the definition of teaching culture was derived through language as an educational method that combines language teaching with the introduction and exploration of the culture of the community that speaks that language. The goal of this method is to help learners not only master the structure and vocabulary of the language but also gain a deeper understanding of the values, beliefs, customs, and cultural behaviors of the community that uses that language.

C. Related studies

In the current era of integration, national economic development is associated with exchanges and cooperation among countries. For the information exchange process to take place quickly

and effectively, language is an extremely important bridge. It is known that teaching and learning foreign languages is currently a trend in many countries around the world. Nowadays, the process of teaching foreign languages does not only focus on teaching phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar but also is integrated with cultural elements, so that learners can have a deeper understanding of the relationship between language and culture and perceive the influence of language and culture on the process of economic and social development.

Many studies taking place in Vietnam and other countries have mentioned aspects of teaching culture in foreign language classrooms [5, 9–17]. In an article about culture in foreign language teaching by Kramsch [9], the relationship between culture and language, the influence of learners' culture in foreign language learning, and absorbing cultural knowledge of other countries were mentioned. In addition, the study shows how to avoid cultural bias and develop learners' intercultural competence without affecting their perspectives of the cultures of their mother country and the other country. According to Street, cited by Tran Thi Phuong Thao [10], integrating intercultural competence training not only helps develop communication skills and enhance ethical values, cultural understanding, openness, and empathy for the culture and people of the language being studied but also meets the foreign language learning objective of developing cultural perspective and behavior. Therefore, the curriculum must include both linguistic elements and introduce aspects of the target language's cultural life.

Tang [11] takes as its object the cases of Chinese teachers and volunteers teaching Chinese abroad to investigate the teaching of cultural elements in these classrooms. In the research article, the author mentions some challenges in the teaching process and proposes some cultural teaching methods in these Chinese classes. For example, teachers need to improve their intercultural teaching capacity, select appropriate cultural content for teaching, and improve students' intercultural

competence. In addition, the research of Wang et al. [12] and Liu [13] also analyzed the challenges that exist in teaching intercultural knowledge to undergraduate English students. Subsequently, they proposed effective foreign language teaching methods and models for students.

In Nguyen Tran Uyen Nhi's study [14] on the attitudes of lecturers and students majoring in business English and tourism English towards intercultural understanding, data collected through questionnaires shows that according to students' opinions, intercultural knowledge is rarely intentionally included in the teaching process. Although the majority of teachers (21 out of 26) support the inclusion of intercultural expertise in classroom teaching content, in terms of teaching practice, the frequency of providing intercultural knowledge to students varies among teachers. Although those teachers acknowledge that intercultural understanding is important in foreign language teaching and learning, they need more time to teach their students regularly.

In addition, in the study of cultural factors in the teaching of Vietnamese to foreigners at the Faculty of Vietnamese Studies, University of Foreign Languages, Hue University, Pham Thi Lieu Trang [15] concluded that cultural factors are still not considered a component skill of communication skills, so they have not been taught systematically and comprehensively in Vietnamese language communication skills classes. Teachers in the teaching process pay too much attention to the language ability goals of learners, so they ignore cultural factors in communication. Moreover, reference materials and textbooks also follow the general model of focusing on language structure content and language functions. Therefore, cultural factors should be given more attention and should be considered. In addition, teachers have not invested in and researched teaching methods that integrate cultural factors.

Luu Thi Thanh Tu [5] conducted interviews with lecturers and observed English-major and non-English-major classes at the university. The survey results showed that 100% of the teachers believed that foreign language teaching cannot

be separated from cultural factors. The most common way that teachers use to convey the cultural content of the target language to students is through explanation and reading comprehension. The author proposes several teaching methods that integrate cultural elements into lectures through activities such as role-playing, demonstrating, listening, and action; or requiring students to participate in learning and exploring cultural differences through problem-solving, cultural assimilation, or presenting about cultures.

According to Byram, as cited in Moeller et al. [16], intercultural speakers may successfully communicate and build meaningful connections by using their skills in discovery and engagement to recognize the similarities and contrasts between their home and other cultures. An effective intercultural communicator looks for chances to interact with people from other cultural backgrounds so that they may exchange knowledge by speaking with them in a foreign language.

Meanwhile, in research on culture, cultural exchange, and foreign language teaching, Levine et al., cited by Nguyen Quang [17], stated that one of the factors that lead to culture shock and conflict in cultural exchange is ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is presented as follows. In cultural exchange, communication partners often tend to believe that what they and those with the same cultural background believe is right is sure to be right. In very few cases of cultural interaction, partners are always aware that what is considered right/nice/good in one culture may be wrong/awful/bad in another culture, because, in general, people tend to believe that what they have is best, the way they think is best and the actions they take are most appropriate. Therefore, they often elevate their culture's values, beliefs, behaviors, and communication styles and consider what is different from those 'norms' to be 'non-normative'.

The above-mentioned studies have explored the relationship between language and culture and emphasized the importance of integrating cultural elements into foreign language teaching

along with the role of intercultural elements in teaching foreign languages in the current stage of globalization. Thereby, an overall picture of university lecturers' perceptions and opinions about the practice of teaching cultural elements in the classroom is created as a reference for foreign language lecturers designing appropriate teaching methods in teaching culture-related content.

D. The novel of the study

In the process of collecting research materials related to the topic, it was found that research related to the perspectives of lecturers is still limited, and students are mainly focused on those studies. The main point of the topic is to explore the perspective of university lecturers on the importance of developing intercultural communication skills through foreign language learning, instead of focusing only on language as a system of symbols and grammar.

The gap in previous research and teaching often lacks a strong link between language and culture, making foreign language learning sometimes rigid and unrealistic. This study is conducted not only to reflect the new trend in foreign language teaching in Vietnam but also to propose specific methods to improve and develop intercultural communication skills for foreign language learners, in line with the trend of globalization today.

The study's authors are foreign language instructors for language majors and non-major students at a higher education institution. In the process of teaching and researching, the relationship between language and culture, along with the importance of integrating cultural elements in teaching has been observed. The study 'Foreign language lecturers' perspectives on teaching cultural elements in the foreign language classroom: A case study at Tra Vinh University' was conducted by surveying lecturers' opinions using questionnaires to answer two research questions.

1. What are lecturers' perspectives on cultural integration, skills, and openness in language education?

2. What are lecturers’ perspectives on global awareness and intercultural competence?

III. RESEARCH METHODS

A. Research design

This examination intends to provide insights into language education and its linkage with culture. It emphasizes how those lecturers’ instruction, backgrounds, and experience levels shaped their views of intercultural communicative competence. The world transition begins to be focused not only on developing proficiency in the target language but also on the complexity of culture. Via those instructors’ viewpoints, this examination strives to contribute to bridging the communication gap in efforts to enhance foreign language services in an increasingly intertwined community.

A quantitative research method was implemented using a Google Form containing 19 questions that explored teachers’ views on cultural knowledge in the language curriculum, interpersonal skills development, attitudes toward cultural openness and adaptability, globalization, and intercultural awareness [3, 4]. The questions used in the survey were constructed in the following forms: multiple choice questions, scaled questions, 5-level Likert scale questions, and short answer questions.

The perspectives of foreign language teachers at primary schools, secondary schools, and foreign language centers on teaching cultural elements in foreign language classrooms are beyond the scope of the study. The basis for this choice is that inviting university lecturers as the research subjects might help to evaluate the approaches to teaching cultural elements in higher education environments, which require a deeper and more complex understanding of culture than other levels of education. It highlights the importance of integrating culture in upper-division foreign language courses at universities, those levels that attend to professional requirements, and include a greater number of students preparing for careers involving international activities. Students were not chosen as participants in this research. This

issue might be discussed with students for further research to provide a comparative viewpoint on the two subjects’ perspectives.

B. Participants

The research location chosen was Tra Vinh University, a university in Southern Vietnam. The study was conducted with forty full-time and visiting foreign language lecturers at Tra Vinh University, without age, gender, and work experience restrictions. The questionnaire was sent to the lecturers from the 17th to the 19th of December 2023. Research subjects participated in the survey cooperatively and voluntarily. The authors (currently full-time lecturers teaching foreign languages at Tra Vinh University) chose the above research subjects because they are the ones who directly teach cultural elements through teaching the content of the English training program at the university for language majors and non-major students. No one else can better understand the way of teaching, student qualifications, and the requirements students need to achieve.

C. Data collection and analysis

The questionnaire was sent to the participants via a Google Form link within three days. The research uses data collection and quantitative research methods. The author group searched and collected information from research works related to the topic, combined with synthesizing and analyzing data using SPSS based on the Google Form answer statistics table to come up with conclusions and recommendations for foreign language teaching activities that integrate cultural elements in the classroom.

Table 1: Reliability statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.771	19

Cronbach’s Alpha, a measure of data reliability, yields a moderate to high reliability (0.771). The measurement includes 19 elements, resulting in a substantial sample size for reliability analysis. This indicates that the data has strong

internal consistency and that the measurements are reliable for further study or interpretation.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Lecturers’ perspectives on cultural integration, skills, and openness in English Teaching

Table 2: Lecturers’ perspectives on cultural knowledge in language curriculum

Items	N	Min.	Max.	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. The current curriculum includes information about foreign countries’ cultures.	40	2	5	151	3.78	.768
2. The current curriculum includes information about Vietnamese culture.	40	1	5	139	3.48	.905
3. The current foreign language learning program is effective in teaching learners about different cultures.	40	1	5	151	3.78	.832
4. The foreign cultural content in the foreign language curriculum is conveyed accurately.	40	1	5	143	3.57	.813
5. Teachers can effectively apply the content of the training program to teach students knowledge about different cultures.	40	1	5	151	3.78	.832
6. The foreign cultural content in the foreign language curriculum contains biased elements.	40	0	1	3	.08	.267
Valid N (listwise)	40					

The findings from Table 2 offer useful information on how university lecturers’ expertise is impacted when cultural components are incorporated into foreign language instruction. This point is particularly highlighted by the answers to the questionnaire’s first two items. It appears that lecturers are routinely exposed to and involved with this topic as part of their teaching responsibilities because a sizable portion of lecturers confirmed that the curriculum includes substantial content on other cultures ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.768$). They also said that their current foreign language learning program is effective in teaching learners about different cultures and the foreign cultural content in the foreign language curriculum is conveyed accurately with the average score of $M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.832$, and $M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.813$, respectively. This exposure may improve their comprehension and assimilation of cultural information pertinent to

the languages they instruct. Likewise, most of the replies suggested that the curriculum included aspects of Vietnamese culture as well ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.905$). The lecturers also stated that they can effectively exploit knowledge of different cultures in the training program’s content ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.832$). The lecturers’ grasp of their own culture in a globalized setting is strengthened by this inclusion, which also aids in offering a comparative viewpoint while teaching different cultures.

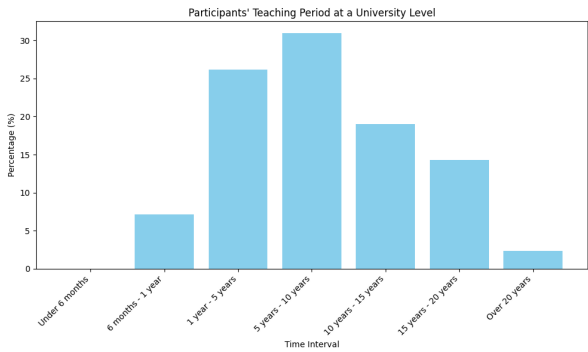


Fig. 1: Lecturer’s teaching time at a university level

However, the extent to which teachers exploit cultural factors in English teaching may vary depending on each individual’s background and teaching experience as instructors. Based on Figure 1, this research’s participants have varied teaching experiences at the university, ranging from two months to 27 years of working.

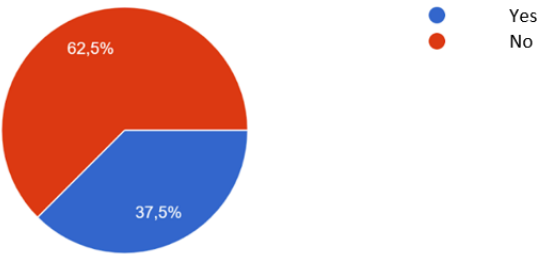


Fig. 2: Lecturer’s experience of living, studying or working abroad

Additionally, Figure 2 shows that among the survey respondents, only 37.5 percent of lecturers reported having lived, studied, or worked abroad. This leads to a range of responses about how they evaluate the cultural content in current training programs.

All of these answers point to the effectiveness of the university’s foreign language training program in providing lecturers with a broad cultural background that includes both Vietnamese and foreign viewpoints. The program content of the chosen tertiary institution also includes elements of cultural life that meet the goal of integrating intercultural competency training in foreign language training as mentioned in a study by Street, cited by Tran Thi Phuong Thao [9], in the literature review above. Besides, as Tang said in 2023 [10], a teaching method that teachers should use in the classrooms is selecting appropriate cultural content, the data collected from this survey also expresses the instructor’s opinion that the current training program is culturally accurate and largely free of bias.

Table 3: Lecturers’ perspectives on interpersonal skills

Items	N	Min.	Max.	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Teachers and students can practice searching skills for new cultural information through the foreign language teaching and learning process.	40	0	1	39	.97	.158
2. Teachers and students often interact and communicate with native speakers.	40	0	1	20	.50	.506
3. Understanding the culture of other countries helps teachers and students improve language proficiency skills.	40	3	5	169	4.23	.530
Valid N (listwise)	40					

The data collected from Table 3 shows that the majority of participants agreed with the idea that they could use their searching skills to acquire new culture-related information during the process of teaching a foreign language (The average score is 0.97 with SD = 0.158). This shows that through the teaching process in foreign language classes, both teachers and students have the opportunity to practice information-searching skills, especially information related to the culture being

studied. In addition, understanding the culture of other countries is also very helpful in improving language proficiency skills, as shown by the average score of 4.23 (SD = .530).

Byram, cited by Moeller et al. [16], stated that an effective intercultural communicator looks for chances to interact with people from other cultural backgrounds so that they may exchange knowledge by speaking with them in a foreign language. Speaking with a native speaker is a vital component of intercultural teaching because it helps students build intercultural competency, which is one of the main goals of this type of education. Meanwhile, the average score received for teachers’ and students’ opportunities to interact and communicate with native speakers was only 0.50 (SD = 0.506), showing that the level of interaction and communication with native speakers is not much. Although it is important to develop cultural information-seeking skills through foreign language learning, given this situation, teachers and students need more opportunities to improve their level of communication and interaction with other native speakers in foreign language classes.

In the short answer questions, when asked if they encountered any difficulty in explaining or relating to cultural contexts in their classes, most instructors stated that they had difficulty explaining or giving examples of cultural contexts in the classroom because they lacked practical experience and didn’t have much time to research other countries’ cultures. Presenting and analyzing abilities are also affected by cultural variations in terms of music, cuisines, communication, customs, place names, idioms, proverbs, etc. between nations. Furthermore, some cultural points of other countries are not mentioned in detail in the existing curriculum, leading to a situation where students feel unfamiliar with the lesson content and uninterested in studying.

Survey results from Table 4 demonstrate that developing an attitude of curiosity and openness to the differences between varied cultures in the foreign language classroom is also very important (M = 4.05, SD = 1.131). During the teaching

Table 4: Lecturers’ attitudes towards cultural openness and adaptability

Items	N	Min.	Max.	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
2. It is important to develop a curious and open attitude towards other cultures in the foreign language classroom.	40	1	5	162	4.05	1.131
3. Teachers have considered changing some personal views about the cultural characteristics of other countries to better understand those cultures.	40	2	5	137	3.43	.712
4. Teachers might encounter situations where they react to different cultural perspectives or customs in their foreign language classes.	40	0	1	7	.18	.385
Valid N (listwise)	40					

process, some lecturers said they sometimes have to consider changing some personal views about the cultural characteristics of other countries to better understand those cultures (M = 3.43, SD = 0.712).

It can be seen from the results that several instructors encounter situations where they react to different cultural perspectives or customs in their foreign language classes (M = 0.18, M = 0.385). This issue can be related to the statement of Levine et al., cited by Nguyen Quang [17] that people frequently elevate the values, beliefs, actions, and communication styles of their culture and label everything that deviates from these ‘norms’ as ‘non-normative.’ In addition, when asked to give examples of those situations in a short-answer question, teachers mention the differences in wedding customs, ways of addressing family members, school culture, ethnic and gender discrimination. This shows that lecturers need to be careful in integrating cultural knowledge into lectures to avoid mixed reactions.

Table 5: Lecturers’ perspectives on globalization and intercultural awareness

Items	N	Min.	Max.	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Globalization affects teachers’ views on teaching and learning foreign languages.	40	3	5	170	4.25	.588
2. The importance of foreign languages in the global context affects teachers’ motivation to teach and learn foreign languages	40	3	5	168	4.20	.464
Valid N (listwise)	40					

B. Global awareness, intercultural competence, and lecturers’ cultural teaching in language classes

The average score data from Table 5 shows that lecturers’ views on teaching and learning foreign languages are greatly influenced by the current globalization trend (M = 4.25, SD = 0.588). Besides, the importance of foreign languages in the context of globalization also greatly affects their motivation to teach and learn foreign languages (M = 4.20, SD = 0.464). The research results also confirm that lecturers have an awareness of the urgency of cultivating and developing intercultural competence to be able to communicate appropriately and effectively with people of different cultures.

It can be said that globalization and intercultural competence are closely related to each other. Globalization has brought many opportunities for Vietnamese people to participate in intercultural communication with people from many countries around the world. To prepare a solid foundation for learners in communication situations with international friends, lecturers need to improve students’ intercultural communication skills through learning and extracurricular activities. In addition, it is necessary to integrate cultural elements into foreign language teaching, because language and culture are two inseparable categories.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the era of globalization, foreign languages have gone beyond the borders of the countries that use them and become a language to connect people from different cultures. In that context, foreign language teaching in Vietnam needs to take intercultural communication competency as one of the learning goals for learners. In summary, the research results emphasize the views of university lecturers on the need to develop language learning proficiency and increase intercultural interaction in a modern international environment. It is important for instructors to flexibly use pedagogical methods with linguistically and culturally appropriate content in their classrooms to help students acquire both language and cultural knowledge.

The article mentions the lecturers' perspectives on the importance of the ability to work effectively in different cultural contexts. Also, it addresses the concerns of foreign language teachers about the direction of intercultural language teaching for foreign learners in Vietnam. The main result obtained from the research is that foreign language teachers demonstrate a positive attitude towards improving knowledge, practicing skills, and attitudes, and increasing cultural awareness in foreign language education. Additionally, those teachers demonstrate a willingness and active interest in interacting and communicating with foreign cultures. As globalization becomes more prevalent, this trend greatly influences teachers' perspectives and understanding of the nature of language and culture. In terms of language education, cultural integration and positive intercultural awareness must continue to be key elements of the curriculum structure. Ultimately, these findings point to the need to acknowledge cultural knowledge as the driving force of language teaching and a key factor in facilitating intercultural understanding across disciplines.

Some suggestions will be mentioned below for universities, and lecturers looking to improve their foreign language teaching skills focusing

on including cultural elements. Firstly, more specialized seminars or workshops in Vietnam and abroad should be organized to train lecturers on integrating cultural components into foreign language instruction. Secondly, educational institutions should provide more opportunities for teachers to study and work overseas to broaden their cultural knowledge of other countries. Thirdly, cultural knowledge of different countries should become required content in teaching materials so that lecturers do not overlook cultural integration in lesson design. In their foreign language classroom, lecturers need to pay attention to enhancing intercultural awareness and motivation to learn the foreign languages of their students in the context of globalization. Additionally, educational institutions should prioritize the development of an interactive learning environment with native speakers by arranging more diverse exchange activities with volunteers and cooperating with foreign companies inside and outside the region to organize sharing sessions. Throughout the process of students engaging in the activities listed above, lecturers should be the observers and mentors of their students. Finally, further research on this issue should include surveys from the perspectives of students to gain a more thorough understanding of the importance of acquiring intercultural awareness when learning a foreign language. This article is useful for language policymakers and teachers to revise existing policies and innovate foreign language teaching methods. Thereby, some reforms in teaching, testing, and assessment can be implemented to develop intercultural competence for foreign language learners in Vietnam.

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