

# **A Case Study of Constructivist Learning and Intercultural Communicative Competence in English-majoring Pre-Service Teachers**

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## **Abstract**

Vietnamese teachers of English are shifting away from their responsibilities as knowledge transmitters towards becoming intercultural agents. It is clear that when the teachers become sensitive to the learners' cultural backgrounds and identities, they can function as competent intercultural agents. However, teacher education programs (TEP) in Vietnamese higher education avoid equipping the pre-service teachers with the skills necessary to integrate cultural knowledge into their teaching practices. Further to this, no research has explored the effect that constructivist learning has on the undergraduate-level English-majoring pre-service candidates' intercultural communicative competence (ICC). In this paper, I wish to explore how this form of learning can support the formation of ICC in English-majoring pre-service teachers in the teacher education program situated in Vietnam. I analyzed data collected in TEP classes over 16 weeks, which illustrated opportunities and potential challenges regarding the integration of constructivist learning for teaching career preparation. I focused on the development of 71 student teachers' abilities to facilitate their roles as learners to observe linguistic and intercultural competencies, a combination to support their employability. Findings showed that, grounded on Byram's (1997) ICC framework, the pre-service teachers enjoyed their improved intercultural knowledge as well as exponentially enhanced skills in the areas of discovery and interpretation. They also expressed readiness and willingness to practice in classes. Through the study, I have learned that the TEP courses could be an avenue to help the pre-service teachers explore their changing identities and develop assumptions that their future classrooms will be culturally heterogeneous rather than homogeneous. Based on my study, Implications for the pre-service teaching participants' instructional pedagogies developed through the TEP courses will be presented, showing in what ways they could overcome challenges to foster professional growth in general, and how they developed ICC in particular.

**Keywords:** EFL; constructivist learning; intercultural communicative competence; pre-service teachers; teacher education programs

## Introduction

Vietnam is listed as a country of Confucian philosophies with a long tradition of “face values” (Tran, 2001) that translate into embedded education perspectives, which are somehow inappropriate in light of global education (Pham, 2010). Its appropriateness is demonstrated in a sense that learners fully respect their teachers, as they believe teachers are all-knowing and they should not critique what their teachers say. In other words, the learning environments in Vietnam have been primarily driven by one-way transmission of knowledge. Based on this series of cultural influences, Vietnamese locals feel it is important to continuously seek to advance their intellectual capabilities and positive facilitation of moral practice.

As a result of international integration, non-Western/non-English speaking countries are encouraged to import innovative technology to modernize their educational systems. Consistent with the massive demands of their status (World Bank, 2017), Vietnam participates in the international forums of socio-economic policies with the goal “to become an industrialized and modernized country by 2020” (MOET, 2013a, p. 1) so that Vietnam can be “a nation of competent language users with intercultural and communicative competence” (Dudzik & Nguyen, 2015, pp. 51). When considering English education in Vietnam, where English remains a foreign language, an increase in English learners is expected to continue as the younger Vietnamese generations are provided with more opportunity to improve language acquisition competence. Although strenuous efforts have emphasized modern Western-based approaches (Khoi & Noriko, 2012), students appear to show an interest in exploring at the surface level. Thus, there is pressure on policy-makers’ and academics’ shoulders to find the fastest road that enables citizens to adapt to the contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Grounded on the theoretical framework of Byram (1997), described in the following section, this study is a time-bound report to accentuate the shifting of instructional approaches, while unpacking under-examined studies on relationships between constructivist learning and intercultural interaction in the Vietnamese pre-service teachers, at a Vietnamese university. Although Vietnamese pre-service teachers have done quite an increasing number of studies in the field, literature informing what focus is put on what the pre-service teachers desire to be educated on, and what is needed for them to feel qualified to promote their intercultural communication and responsibilities is largely rare. The employment of constructivist learning illuminates a view that it enables the foreign language teachers in general to exercise their self-direction to a certain extent. Such learning is translated into practice by taking into account their learners’ academic preferences in inclusive curricula and pedagogy. From the views of their learners, the use of constructivist learning has tremendous benefits specifically for them in terms of intercultural development, intercultural sensitivity, and personal/professional identities. It can be then said that the integration of constructivist learning aims at not only

improving the teachers' sense of communicative language in order to teach that language effectively, but also creating an engaging platform for the teachers and their learners to practice that communicative language. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to establish more knowledge on ICC that can be employed to facilitate the teachers' understanding of how to develop the students' use of communicative language.

This qualitative research, grounded in Vietnamese higher education, will help widen the competence of intercultural communication among the English-majoring pre-service teachers as part of a teacher education program of the Vietnamese higher education institution. In effect, this study will propose a number of necessary pedagogical implications for teacher education programs at the undergraduate level, which has the potential to equip the undergraduate EFL pre-service with (1) a sense of awareness of ICC and (2) a sense of responsibility for their life-long learning progress that impacts their professionally intercultural responsibilities and intercultural identities.

## **Literature Review**

### ***English-language teacher education in Vietnam***

As a lingua franca, English is becoming increasingly important in the world. Particularly, in the entire Asian contexts, English seems to be predominantly widespread under the efforts of social integration of the nations as the de-facto language of communication across countries. In a same vein, the globalized mechanism has endlessly facilitated the Asian citizens to equip themselves with proficient English skills in order for them to be able to communicate with people around the world, or especially with those living in the neighboring and/or bordering countries. In another aspect of the Asian nations, it is hoped that the rising popularity of the English language in this large region has led a movement of important reforms to be successful, thereby increasing attention to developing the field of Education and, more specifically, the field of Foreign Language Education (FLE), in an appropriate way. From the point of view of FLE, it is advisable to put teachers into the forefront since they are holding the central role in these educationally developmental reforms (Hamid, Nguyen, & Baldauf, 2013).

Traditionally, Asian teachers in general and Vietnamese teachers of English in particular have been stereotyped as passive transmitters of knowledge, although they are always considered with the highest social respect. However, in light of the socioeconomic and sociocultural changes that reflect on global connectedness, the roles of teachers have been enormously challenged. Thus, the teachers are required to shift their roles, moving from those as knowledge providers or examination setters to those as educationally inquiring agents. In this change, the teachers are responsible for the initiation of educational resources and critical translation of the global agenda into communicative practices which can be applied in their school and classroom

context. Without this critical change, the learners are unable to perform well academically. This is to suggest that those learners who cannot progress academically are partly confronted by a wide range of problems, one of which is from their language teachers who are not good at controlling the educational quality and navigating the educational resources.

In the context of Vietnamese education, despite the enormous financial investment to develop the quality of English language education in the country which is aimed at generating the highly employable workforce that is proficient at English language (Project 2020), there is the problem that a large number of Vietnamese learners of English language cannot progress academically in a level that was expected because they are socially inept and seemingly short of initiative (Le, 2007). Some reasons are discussed in current literature. For example, Nguyen (2011) states that teacher supplies and teacher quality are primarily a cause. Nguyen (2011) also touches on the activities that Vietnamese teachers tend to use for their teaching since their chances to develop professionally thanks to professional development are very limited, hence they are undeniably unable to apply knowledge into practice. Particularly, they cannot take into full consideration the learners' backgrounds while they design what to teach, so what tends to be presented in the Vietnamese EFL teachers' curriculum appears to be usually socially irrelevant and educationally unreasonable in both depth and width.

### ***Constructivist Learning and Intercultural Communication***

According to Elliott et al. (2000), constructivist learning refers to “an approach to learning that holds that people actively construct or make their own knowledge that reality is determined by experiences of the learner” (p. 256). Consistent with Fosnot (1989) and Piaget (1977), they discuss that the profound implementation of constructivist learning can be understood as an active construction of meaning in the context that the learners play various roles, ranging from autonomous learners, inquisitive thinkers, to critical investigators. Theoretically, it is clear that the learners are not just the uncritical consumers of knowledge, but as active makers of knowledge and critical users of knowledge. This is true, as Fosnot (1989) explains, because the application of constructivist learning in teaching constitutes an educational intervention to motivate learners in order to reflect on their knowledge that they may grapple with, from which they can construct new knowledge. During this process of learning, they are not simply to accumulate facts and figures mechanically. Instead, they use current knowledge to identify and negotiate conflicts which may arise, before they can be gradually familiar with a source of new knowledge and subsequently bridge the old and new knowledge together. Regardless of the old or new sources of knowledge, it is factual that culture is a vital component, which can drive the learners' sense of interest and curiosity. That sense of interests and curiosity can help them determine whether they decide to intake that source of knowledge or not.

It is true that the teachers and learners should be able to inspire each other to participate in the social world, including the academic settings. In the social world, they are seemingly placed to “feel for the game”, meaning that they hold a wide range of social positions to accommodate the requirements of the fields where they are engaged. In terms of the fields, they represent the cultural community, thus it is noted that the fields are influenced by cultural practices in those cultural communities. Broadly speaking, in any cultural community, there are a specific set of required characteristics, personal traits, expertise, skills, and dispositions which then allow the individuals in those cultural communities to interact effectively with people of diverse backgrounds. This is well documented, according to the theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1990). The inclusion of this theory can help explore and understand how the learners attempt to use different ways in order to internalize their source of old and new knowledge, translate knowledge into practical skills, and acting in different social positions. Therefore, according to this study, it is important to recognize that knowledge and culture cannot be separated when it comes to teaching the learners in any disciplines. In the context of English-language disciplines, it is similar to say that language and culture should be intertwined. This relationship reflects on the emergence of intercultural communicative competence which will be proposed below. Evidently, when engaged in EFL-class learning communities with the integration of teaching pedagogies that facilitate ICC, the learners seem to play as “the integral part of those circumstances” (Jenkins, 2002, p. 70). Back to the theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1990), when exposed to the familiar fields, learners likely present their “habitus,” understood as embodying speakers’ social practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) in which “familial and personal experiences over time” help communicators interact with others. Otherwise, they need to make a concerted effort to familiarize themselves with the experience and act similarly to the familiar fields. To make it possible, the learners are challenged to enhance themselves in terms of knowledge, attitudes and behaviors, which Bourdieu (1977) calls as “the art of necessary improvisation” (p. 8), based on learners’ journeys through life (Jenkins, 2002, p. 71). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) advise that the positive outcomes shape communicators’ abilities to transform the field where they are acquainted.

How can intercultural learning be facilitated? It is suggested that culture-embedded analytical learning is an innovative approach that supports teaching in order for students to master making meaning from context-based knowledge (Notar, Wilson, & Montgomery, 2005). To master the learners’ abilities to make meaning from their learning of language contents, it requires learners to stay away from the perspectives that English language is owned by the native language speakers, then to give themselves space to foster their personal development and freedom. This process is very important because without it, the learners cannot seemingly achieve effective learning. At the same time, the roles of teachers should not be neglected. By that, teachers should employ a range of cultural representations to suit the understanding of

the learners based on their cultural backgrounds. With this employment of the teachers, the learners can improve their deep inquiry into their own and others' perspectives "in their minds, hearts and behaviors" (Kohn, 2011, p. 80).

There are some studies on the relationship between the interaction between the employment of constructivist learning and the development of ICC. Firstly, Vu (2017) emphasizes the facilitation of pre-service teachers' intercultural experiences in learning communities that are alike social games, as they experience diverse cultural manifestations, including their local contexts and that of languages being studied. To accomplish intercultural learning, Vu (2017) suggests including speakers' native languages, meaning that students' L1s and cultural perspectives are welcomed into the class, in addition to the target language (L2). Nevertheless, it involves tailoring classroom objectives and instructional materials based on culturally responsive pedagogy. In this regard, teachers are encouraged to create synergy between the required set of curriculum and wide-ranging cultural backgrounds to achieve engaging and meaningful learning. Therefore, the study demonstrates the effectiveness of engagement in their cultural backgrounds as learners, which enables teachers to translate pedagogically in order to empower and reinforce learning. In other words, it is imperative for teachers to guide learners to enact certain levels of agency and creativity to construct new sources of knowledge.

Nguyen and Hall (2017) analytically argue about the shift of thirty Vietnamese student teacher's perspectives of English language teaching and learning. After they experience the four-month action research named 'Learning to Teach English', which employs constructivist learning, they appear to place themselves in various professional roles. It shows that they assume themselves not only as traditional receivers of knowledge and active agents, but also as empowering teachers to extend the nature of student-teacher relationships. Inspired by the educational reforms in Vietnam, which seem to pay insufficient attention to teacher training, Nguyen and Hall (2017) recommend that they should be significantly more well-trained in order to master the conceptual and practical understandings of the reform-related objectives and implications. Equally, they should be upskilled to "[understand] the new teaching ideas sufficiently and [model] the changed pedagogies effectively" for their future EFL learners to be open to and interested in new ideas (Nguyen & Hall, 2017, p. 253).

In keeping with what is suggested to improve the quality of teacher education programs in the Vietnamese higher education institutions, the EFL teachers' sense of ICC and responsibility should be largely integrated, which encourages them to challenge their stereotyped attitudes and skills in a way that the challenge they may possess in their teaching performances can result in their sense of how to enhance their pedagogical approaches. However, in current literature, studies on the English language teachers' competencies and how to improve them in the context of Vietnam are largely neglected. It is evident that constructivist learning goes beyond the traditional method of

instruction that focuses on transmission of knowledge from the teachers to the learners. Therefore, the application of constructivist learning in the Vietnamese-based classrooms serves as a challenging, but pivotal, design in that it can support the Vietnamese EFL teachers to consider their EFL learners' cultural backgrounds and personal voices to express their thinking, beliefs, and knowledge with their class/social peers (Nguyen, 2008). In terms of voices, their learners are encouraged to confidently raise their ideas, question their concerns, compliment their feelings, and defend/critique the status quo. Similarly, the teachers who employ the constructivism-related practices will be expected to become highly motivated and self-directed. They are likely agentive to analyze, categorize, and tailor academic English and soft-skill outcomes that differ from class-to-class and time-to-time (Nguyen, 2008).

The widespread popularity of constructivist learning in educational research is evidently supported in an attempt to construct the learner-centered classroom environments instead of the teacher-centered counterparts. Regarding how to develop language competence in the learner-centered classrooms, Applebee (1993) advises the learners not to simply memorize "someone else's interpretations, but constructing and elaborating upon one's own within the constraints of the text and the conventions of the classroom discourse community" (p. 200). Therefore, during the process of EFL learning grappled with constructivist learning, it can be understood that given linguistic facts and features, it is necessary for the EFL teachers to make sure that the learners are unlikely to memorize them, but they do develop a package of knowledge, skills, and dispositions when interacting with a number of others within and out of the classroom setting. Similar to the definitions of constructivist learning described earlier in this section, learner autonomy is also emerging to be highly valued while the learners can negotiate their knowledge (Cook, 1992). The learners should co-plan with the teachers to develop the task of establishing learning goals, drawing out learning activities, and designing learning assessments. In addition to learner autonomy, student empowerment is also a valuable product. It is of value that the learners can facilitate their own learning, given that they are welcomed to raise their own voices. For example, the learners are entitled to partaking in dialogues that enable them to practice questioning in order to challenge their existing knowledge. In light of the democratic learning environments, knowing how to question is a promising vehicle to regulate and take charge of learning in an effective way. In this regard, the learners should experience a variety of times to practice decision making and shared responsibility in different ways, such as working individually, in small groups or with the whole class (Dewey, 1916). These listed benefits of the employment of constructivist learning in teaching are a good contribution to the learners' ICC. In terms of knowledge, interactions benefit the learners not only to reflect on their own culture, but also to develop their knowledge of cultures for which they have potential blind spots. When provided with autonomy, the learners also undertake a learning

process that helps them to be authentically curious about other perspectives on specific cultural situations. In sum, it can be repeated that constructivist learning and ICC development would be key to improving the EFL teachers' ICC. On the contrary, not many studies investigating this correlation can be found in the Confucian Cultural Heritage context of Vietnam. As is widely discussed above, it is important to understand how this pedagogic implication directs the EFL teachers' affective engagement concerning the use of EFL and measures the levels of knowledge and skills to be increased. Therefore, grounded on a qualitative method, this study is a useful contribution to unfolding this literature gap.

### ***Theoretical framework***

Moller and Nugent (2014) indicate that speakers with a proficient level of ICC are better in managing complex interactions in person. Their abilities are contributed to by "self-study, foreign language proficiency, and analysis of one's own culture and that of those who speak the target culture" (Moller & Nugent 2014, p. 3). ICC presents itself in several varieties of English, as the English language is used in different forms around the world. English, which enables ICC, has an important role in assisting multilingual and multicultural interlocutors and is enacted to mitigate communication obstacles in Vietnam. However, in the Asian educational contexts, while the top-down approach is commonly used to assemble native-speaker ideologies and to discourage the assessment practice which effectively judges the Vietnamese EFL learners' communicative competence and language use, I recognize that the resulting conditions where Vietnamese learners are unable to communicate with other non-natives in daily communication. In the context of this study, ICC refers to the ways that work for Vietnamese interlocutors to "gain the capacity to use a foreign language independently" (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2008b, pp. 1), echoed by the goal to interact appropriately and effectively with multicultural and multilingual speakers (Byram, 2011; Moeller & Nugent, 2014).

This study derives motivation from the cultural concept in EFL classes in which language and culture are mutually constitutive. In terms of cultural norms, culture should be viewed as multilayered and open to be negotiated between people of holding different cultural values (Byram, 2011). As language is reflective of culture in which it is used, it can be used to help the language users express their cultural practices while building their relationships with others. In an opposing sense, the neglect of cultural integration in language use is similar to asking the EFL speaker to become a "fluent fool" (Bennett, 1997). However, ICC is meant to be automatically developed as a result of the EFL users who interact with other EFL speakers occurring in the culturally homogeneous or heterogeneous settings. This is also true in the EFL classrooms. In reality, the developed ICC is not a result of the learning of both language and culture, but as culture that is studied simply in a way that the EFL learners know about the cultural facts and memorize them. On

the contrary, the enhanced ICC requires a series of educational training that provides the EFL learners with opportunities to expose themselves to enthusiastically exploring, comprehensively identifying, and critically evaluating a number of cultural similarities and differences between their and others' cultural products, practices and perspectives (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2006). Moreover, literature also shows that to teach culture effectively while teaching EFL in the classrooms, becomes an essential but challenging task. For example, Byram and Feng (2004) discuss that it is a process of socialization, which assists the learners' sense of acculturation. In order to enact this process, the EFL teachers are strongly advised to teach culture based on the employment of ethnographic and critical perspectives which are aligned with the lived experiences of those in another country and specifically explaining what those lived experiences refer to any cultural practices. More than that, the EFL teachers can utilize the availability of curriculum, use their sense of agency to re-design learning inputs, and encourage their EFL learners' focus on intercultural exchange and understanding rather than passively memorizing what really exists. In this way, the EFL learners are able to develop their level of consciousness and appreciation of other cultures if those cultural practices are too different from, or even conflicting, their own or their communities' cultural practices.

Byram (1997, 2012) defines five constructs that incentivize the dynamic and socially enacted culture for the concept of ICC. They are practical in developing EFL classroom goals (Byram, 2012). The constructs include attitudes (*savoir être*), knowledge (*savoirs*), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir faire*), and critical cultural awareness - CCA (*savoir s'engager*).

Empirical studies on English-majoring teacher education based in Vietnam are not adequate in terms of intercultural communicative competence. Notably, there appears to be a lacuna to research in relation to the educational impacts of constructivist learning on the EFL pre-service teachers' ICC development. Not only should learners obtain a wide-range of abilities to succeed in social interaction, but they should also be provided with opportunities and challenges to promote the negotiation of identities, through which they become better aligned and connected. The research question would then be: "To what extent does the employment of constructivist learning facilitate Vietnamese pre-service teachers' intercultural communicative competence for their future teaching practices?". This case study allows the researcher to explore the in-depth insights within a real context showing how pre-service teachers negotiate identities and decide pedagogical practices in their classes (Creswell, 2012).

## **Methodology**

### ***Setting, participants, and project outline***

This research was conducted through the teacher education program at a Northern Vietnam university. The project included 71 participants of similar language proficiency who were enrolled in three distinctive classes, had prior tutoring experience, and practised public-speaking in their part-time jobs. Classes were held in the second half of the academic year, between February and May 2019. The project was clearly described in the first-class session with regard to the project goals, expected outcomes, length, and responsibilities. Consent forms were distributed at the end of the first class and collected on the second day. However, eight students refused to consent. There were 21 students in each class, placed into seven groups of three, and they agreed to be audio-recorded for research purposes during the project implementation. They were informed that participation would not be counted towards their final course grades, so they should feel free to not participate in the project. In the post-project, the electronic invitation letters were sent to the researched participants, and nine participants agreed to partake in the semi-structured interview. During the 12 three-hour classes, students were taught major-related knowledge as well as practised speaking about various topics in English. By the end of the course, all groups were asked to share well-prepared 20-to-30-minute story-telling videos displaying the students' speaking and their thoughts on the experience and what they had learned most from throughout the class. The videos were posted on the class Facebook group with the teachers' comments, and were open for class discussion.

### ***Data collection and analysis***

The project relied on three forms of data, such as learning journals, class observations, and semi-structured interviews. According to Moon (1999), coupled with the benefit of manifestation related to cognitive development, reflection offers the observers opportunities to indirectly notice subtle differences in terms of the participants' attitudinal and behavioral abilities. The interviews were spoken in Vietnamese over Zoom, which occurred following the pilot study that had participants who were not in this study and showed that English could potentially hinder interviewees' abilities to fully express their attitudes and behaviors. The researchers transcribed and read reflective journals and interviews alongside a background of observation notes. This was done multiple times on NVIVO (v.12) by doing sentence-by-sentence coding and categorizing by color, which subsequently encouraged me to carefully discuss the significant themes revealed, to be listed. Despite a concerted effort on the careful analysis of the theoretical framework, my openness to the significant emergence of other themes was critical to allow the identification of three themes. Despite a few on-going discussions on the

capability to comprehend the data in different ways, I come to conclude three themes which will be revealed in the following section.

At the conclusion of each class, the participants had 20 minutes to prepare a reflection note to help improve their writing skills, with suggested questions:

1. How much did you know about the cultural knowledge of today?
2. How can you link your cultural background while creating your new knowledge?
3. How much did you participate in classroom activities?
4. What can we do to improve your intercultural communicative skill?

The interviews were supposed to preserve the participants' curiosity to allow them to express freely what they did through the class. Some follow up questions, including four main questions were completed.

1. What was your team responsible for, and how did you find your team to collaborate for a shared goal?
2. What conflicts have you and your team encountered? Please specify any situations.
3. How has your project so far supported you in virtue of cultural knowledge, language skills and English learning experience?
4. What did you find yourself improved in most?

## **Results and Discussion**

This section is aimed at illustrating the benefits of constructivist learning in three months' time. The inclusion of constructivist learning in this educational research served as a line of reliable evidence that this form of learning provided sufficient space to help the EFL pre-service teachers overcome their past language learning experience in their classroom contexts, where they were unnecessarily supposed to rely too much on grammatical competence at the expense of strategic, sociocultural, and discourse competencies. The interview data suggested that students were exposed to different cultures as responsible agents of learning and career-related processes. They evolved their intercultural responsibility and felt content with the approaches that employed constructivist techniques.

***Pre-service teachers: exposed to both linguistic as well as cultural job-related knowledge, and uplifted to stand in communicators' shoes***

By learning with colleagues of different cultural backgrounds, the participants were immersed into the world of cultural diversity. When it comes to their participation, there were two unique tasks involved in the project. The tasks included (1) working collaboratively to select the most appropriate topic in a designated field, and (2) working independently on the assigned responsibilities. Not only did they express their optimistic and positive

thinking towards personal responsibilities and flexible body languages, but they were also inspired to share their work with others as a way to recognize, understand, and emphasize if others chose ideas differently during the process of brainstorming ideas and resolving emergent problems as revealed in the excerpts below:

Well, I felt very interested in exploring the exciting knowledge. Well, it's like I was re-living as a little learner in places ... [Laughing] ... In those places, I may start without any prior experience of language learning (Interview)

I have three words to describe our project: More than Amazing. We learned about Festival ... I love traveling more than ever. I learned that traveling is not simply a sightseeing activity, but a chance to reflect and understand myself better. (Learning journal)

The participants were also observed to stay proactive in seeking advice on various dimensions of culture to see how others exhibited their internally relativized beliefs while answering various social events of the chosen phenomenon. In other words, it questioned whether the participants were willing to adopt the positives in cultural meanings that were presented by their colleagues. From the data, it was noticed that the “others versus us” dichotomy existed, meaning that they recognized they and their colleagues were different culturally and they needed to figure out how to mediate those existing differences. This is in keeping with the views of a few well-known scholars of ICC (Crozet & Liddicoat, 2000; Kramsch, 1993). Crozet and Liddicoat (2000) and Kramsch (1993) are certain that those who have cultural differences or similarities should grapple with the privilege to achieve academic access as well as intra-cultural respect (*savoir faire*). Therefore, it is imperative to recognize that intercultural communication is intimately related to the expressive mediating roles of linguistic and cultural boundaries between two people or cultural parties (Byram, 2000). Given the obvious rise in recognition that the relationship between language and culture nurtures learners' thoughts of comparing and contrasting cultural representations, some participants reported to challenge the consistently traditional perceptions regarding culture as useless artifacts. Expressed differently, they no longer perceived that cultures are static, or unchanging, because this perception does not reflect well on the nature of the EFL teaching which aims to promote communicative and intercultural practices.

According to the observations, students displayed their viewpoints on scaffolding values of cultural changes. Sharing their viewpoints allowed them to become increasingly aware of the others' viewpoints and understand the reasons behind changes of perceptions. It is evident that their growing critical perception of culture was attributable to engaging activities that asked them to see culture with their affective engagement and recognize how language

reflects culture where it is used. Thus, these behaviors were obvious to show that the participants were able to widen their intercultural awareness as the excerpt below illustrates:

No ... we were not always going to ignore the facts of culture because they are contemporarily intense and fundamentally rich.  
(Observations)

Alternatively, cultural facts were able to show numerous interesting insights into how the EFL users should take full account of people's manners. The abilities of EFL users to succeed in presenting the cultural features are equal to the fact that they fully understand the rules and regulations in terms of language use and affective reactions to cultural differences (i.e., respect and empathy). Combined with what was written in the participants' reflection journals, it was seen that their enjoyment of collaborative and culturally diverse tasks implies the participants to become increasingly interested in both appreciating cultures which are dissimilar and raising their personal consciousness. The observed growth of these participants appeared to concur with the perspective of Bennett (1998). Bennett (1998) underlines the importance of language learners to understand themselves and label themselves as ethno-relative language users. These ethno-relative learners are skillful at analyzing and leading initiatives that challenge stereotyped norms. As reflected in the participants' current and past experiences, they not only became confident users of language, but also were likely to see that knowledge they would like to learn should reflect on any particular culture. In this case, that knowledge was about what they explored in their team's selected topics. With the increased ethno-relative perspectives, the participants also reported that they could learn well from both individual and collaborative work, besides learning well from their engagement with other teams' presentation on different topics that they were not familiar with. Therefore, it seemed that the participants appeared capable of developing their sense of personal thinking and understanding, which would in turn improve themselves academically as the excerpt below illustrates:

My mind is enlarged enough for me to admit that every puzzle of information is true ... certainly, it is true. (Learning journal)

In the two points of discussion that follows, the participants delineated how they developed their standpoints and interpreted their skills to promote intercultural communication. To specify, they were newly interested in discovering where their personal culture lies (*savoir faire*) in order to figure out alternative ways to understand the features of others' culture (*savoir comprendre*). This finding is in keeping with Bennett's (1998) ethno-relative views as indicated above that both learners and teachers should take a step beyond to become increasingly aware of how to classify cultural stances and

eliminate long-lasting prejudices. Evidence showed that the pre-service teachers were excited about not feeling against others who shared cultural values different from their own, but showing enormous desire to expand their ideas and build on individual and group input. The excerpt below can help explain this:

We were encouraged by the teacher to find out what should be done to address our team conflicts (*Learning journal*);

Observations showed that the participants were clever to classify different types of culture, which necessitates their discussions with openness to diversity and sensitivity. This categorization of cultural types was fundamental because it assisted the participants in handling the expectations of their diverse listeners. To a certain extent, cultural barriers were demolished as a result of the accelerating enactment of constructivist learning that they were engaged in. As supported by Elliott et al. (2000), the exercise of constructivist learning likely facilitates authentic communication, which is an interaction that can bridge people's differently cultural senses. The participants judiciously repositioned themselves to indulge the various tasks of meaning making to construct new knowledge by using a lot of helpful reading materials (concerned with topic-related videos, books, and magazines), working on the group presentations, and observing others' group presentations. Those acts helped the pre-service teachers achieve a grasp of standardized knowledge, and be able to express linguistically in a comprehensive and understandable way, coupled with their levels of flexibility to make the language expression sound interesting and breakthrough according to their decisions on their learning preferences.

Byram (1997) further argues that it is necessary for multilingual and multicultural English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) speakers to be capable of interpreting verbal and non-verbal communicative cultures by considering their contextual knowledge base. Similarly, Crozet, Liddicoat, and Bianco (1999) show an effort to bridge two lines of perspective on particular issues between two or more communicators, which mediates cross-cultural communication. Therefore, EFL teachers should be aware of how that bridge is made. Engaged in differing forms of constructivist learning, the pre-service teachers in this study enhanced their recognition of the multiple interpretations of the same words by different cultures. It was critical that the participants became more bilingually proficient and more competent English teachers who can ably manipulate their subjective views towards several of the realities that trigger mutual understanding. In addition to teaching appropriate linguistic knowledge, it is also important to employ suitable strategies to develop their linguistic and intercultural capabilities to facilitate their levels of accuracy and fluency.

In another aspect, Kramsch (2009) and Byram (1997) shed light on symbolic competence as well as communicative competence. According to them, the learner's success is equivocally dependent on their cultural

integration and their background knowledge on how to flexibly adopt grammatical patterns acquired from their learning. This is important because there are many prolific changes in the Vietnamese context in terms of economic, cultural, and educational aspects. Thus, the priority is to prepare the future workforce with sufficient English skills and intercultural competence to foster work-related skills and develop their chance of mobility, allowing the future teachers to work well in different academic environments. Moreover, it is understandable that EFL teachers with an increased responsibility and appreciation of diverse ethnicity in their communities of practice implemented themselves with higher levels of motivation. Therefore, these responsible minds are able to engage enthusiastically and inspire other teaching fellows to become ethno-relative proficient language speakers like how they are. One of the methods to help the EFL teachers to practise their teaching in an inclusive manner is to encourage them to utilize various learning platforms which are digitally mediated. These platforms are equitable, which profoundly constitute a trust-worthy global community where languages and cultures are diverse and encouraging. The scaffolding experiences which are readily available can provide the EFL teachers with experiences to increase their contributions as the active learners in the formation of learning experience in constructivist learning. In this study, the participants' engagement in digital platforms to explore cultural knowledge could bring manifold benefits to develop their communicative competences. One of them is that the participants seemed to be dedicated to shared goals. Another noticeable issue is the acts of participants who were willing to step back, listen to others' thoughts respectfully, and build bridges for cultural distinctions for the purpose of achieving communicative goals. The mutual interactions among the participants in the context of team-based projects in which they could learn to address personal conflicts as well as support weaker students than them, warranted their attention to exercise responsible learning and autonomy at remarkable levels. All in all, their engagement in those platforms can result in them becoming intercultural, responsible, and autonomous agents.

In tandem with how intercultural critical awareness can be put forward, Byram (2000) highlights that solely having personal understanding about culture does not automatically give rise to communication success. In this sense, language communicators are critical of expressing language in a way that language expression sounds culturally familiar to their interlocutors. Furthermore, they show determination to play as sensitive communicators who respond competently to interactional goals by fulfilling both culture-general and culture-specific knowledge (Byram, 2000; Swain, 2006). If critical cultural awareness is emphasized, it is recommended that the EFL teachers should be advised to mediate meaning-making processes to allow the betterment of the learning experience and identity negotiations. It is assumed that EFL teachers are apt to translate their beliefs into practice. In response to this assumption, the qualitative findings indicated that constructivist learning served as an educational driver to organize their classrooms in a way that

promotes inclusion and fairness based on English as an international language or a lingua franca, similar to a view seen in Mai (2018) who examines the EFL teachers' beliefs on the status of English as international and intercultural language. Also, another similar study by Gyogi and Lee (2016) suggests that classes are regarded as engaging spaces where learners expect to learn from mistakes, build lived experiences, and enhance crucial skills that matter in their professional lives. Such gained benefits lead teachers to exercise the agency needed to successfully meet instructional goals and professional development.

In summary, the pre-service teachers in the project reflected that all of the mentioned learned skills above were of much help in enabling them to become active agents to mindfully assist their construction of knowledge based on their interaction with others in the intercultural settings, and readily become a part of the qualified labor force. These findings are similar to those voiced by Le (2007). Those skills were altogether helpful to facilitate their career prospects. These pre-service teachers, according to Le (2007), should be able to enact their sense of agency and personal growth in a sufficient, productive, and sustainable manner.

***Pre-service teachers: motivated to practise English skills through authentic learning and to foster professional identities and responsibilities***

It was broadly noted that this execution of constructivist learning could address the participants' future instructional goals which would address their experience with traditionally teacher-centered approaches failing to develop potentially them and their future EFL learners. In evidence, in those traditional pedagogies, the most popular type of EFL instructional pedagogy primarily relied on modeling inner-circle cultures that were of English-native speakers, thus preventing them and their learners from a sense of cultural immersion. In this study, some participators reflected on what they experienced, showing why they had no room to learn, recognize, and appreciate cultural diversity in traditional classes. In another word, their learning had been just a spoon-fed delivery from teacher to student and involved very limited understandings between them. Therefore, this form of inactive learning had demotivated them to actively learn. However, later on, I observed some advantages associated with the use of constructivist learning as the innovative approach that facilitated the popularity of cultural learning, life-related skills, and social orientation in order to motivate the EFL teachers to nurture their career commitment. Those purposes are well documented by Dewey (1916) who promotes that learners' knowledge construction should be largely based on their existing knowledge rather than passive absorption of new language knowledge that cannot give them any sense of recognition. In this regard, the theorization of Applebee (1993) ought to be put into practice. According to Applebee (1993), language teachers should not over-rely on linguistic goals in the EFL classrooms and the roles of teachers should be openly discussed in a

sense that learning cannot be authoritatively guided by teachers when they decided what the learners need to learn. On the contrary, the learners' voices are equally important, who can guide their teachers with better decisions on what should be taught.

Some interviewees argued that the instructional approaches related to constructivist learning influenced the needs of the EFL teachers to reflect on interactions with their learners when it comes to the learners' voices being well heard. The participants admitted that the English varieties must be well-respected. In contrast to the Vietnam's past EFL teacher-centered instructional pedagogies as indicated above, rather than focusing on British or American English forms, there should be more discussions on how to encourage the future EFL teachers to passionately revise and update their cultural concepts in teaching through a lens of the educational forms in relation to constructivist learning. There is a uniquely positive point in terms of the non-native English speakers' "habitus" presented by Bourdieu (1997). According to Bourdieu (1997), it means that each learner comes to the class, brings very culture-born characteristics, and performs distinctively with their cultural acts. This resonates with Nguyen (2008) who notes that the promotion of linguistic diversity should happen in a milieu within which learners are welcomed to foster their ways of expression based on privileged accents, patterns of thought, and communication strategies. In this study, the participants attempted to become the qualified teachers with communication skills. Not only did they speak better with others through skills they acquired from their classrooms, but they also conveyed their ideas better as illustrated by the excerpts below:

I am attentive to other people's preferred ways to communicate effectively. (Interview)

My pronunciation sounds much better. I try to prepare my presentations carefully, seeking a couple of words with similar sounds so that others cannot understand wrongly. (Interview)

Furthermore, it was positive that the EFL pre-service teachers had optimistic opinions on this educational experience based on constructivist learning. They believed there were no values to neglect the contribution of non-native speakers because those varying forms of constructivist learning granted them opportunities to make meaning based on individual and joint goals. This is consistent with the idea of fostering the privilege of being a non-native learner (Vu, 2017) and the potential learning tasks raised by Cook (1992). In the learning tasks, they should be organized in the contexts of authentic communication when the topics taught in the class are outside of their knowledge base. In the contexts of authentic communication, it is a presentation of a multi-layered and multi-negotiable meaning-making process. Connected to the findings, as reported in the interview findings, the

participants' positive thoughts revealed that constructivist learning informed the EFL participants of what pedagogical practices were realistic and what teacher attitudes were needed to make those practices possible. Emphasizing this necessity, Mai (2018) shared similar advice. According to Mai (2018), it is beneficial to push EFL teachers to define what real usage of English language looks like in students' lives, thanks to understanding their cultural backgrounds and learning motivations.

In response to this theme, it was necessary to refer to a line of developed research by some researchers (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Kramsch, 2009) who advocate the development of the EFL learners' cultural capital. Linked to this study's findings, this study's constructivist learning augmented the participants' cultural capital in a way that this form of learning could give rise to their excitement and growth of interactional reciprocity with colleagues, which were potential to help them develop their sense of ICC directly happening in the classroom contexts. Through the findings, it seemed positive that constructivist learning inspired a broad range of academic values and working skills that consisted of their cultural voices. Specifically, some interviewees emphasized that their mindset and growth of motivation to communicate in the intercultural settings would be a positive effect of this form of learning, from which both individual tasks and collaborative projects required the participants to utilize various forms of verbal and non-verbal communication. Along with the help of the instructor, the participants had one of the greatest chances to co-construct knowledge and learn from each other by connecting themselves with their peers' personal strengths and potential. Regarding each participant's strengths, the participants were represented as the carriers of unique knowledge relevant to their personal interest and preference to explore knowledge of any disciplines other than the English language teaching. Learned from the practicality in terms of the prompt use of constructivist learning, the participants found themselves helpful to fuel their peers' academic strengths and ICC as illustrated by the excerpts below:

I am happy that I could have my opinions cherished and have immense appreciation from different parties, including their instructor and their colleagues. I would like to thank them. (Interview)

I am ok when hearing someone mispronounce. I can tell them after they finish speaking. I politely ask them to notice it for future speaking. (Interview)

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned points, Notar, Wilson, and Montgomery (2005) support that EFL teachers involved in educational forms inspired by constructivist learning feel empowered when having plans to reinforce their students who can maintain flexibility and autonomy and reshape their identities. With that being said, initially, identities were a surprising observation. The two excerpts that follow revealed that the

participants played a pivotal role in diversifying the experiences and helped their prospective students to become accustomed to understanding learning tasks from a variety of angles. This is to suggest that working collaboratively increased their responsibility to decipher what their allocated tasks were, and what identities they needed to fill. That was, as they said, because the more people they worked with, the better results they had. Obviously, in this case, the instructor appears to have played a very big role to help the participants' identification of learning needs and to make appropriate arrangements, so that students were able to easily access learning resources and familiarize themselves with their learning difficulties. The excerpts below can help illustrate this:

During the activities, our teacher was so serious, but I still prefer it to work because she is knowledgeable and she can facilitate us to explore cultural manifestations before we could arrive at deeper analysis of culture, instead of remaining conscious of cultural facts and artifacts which are rich sources. (Interview)

My teacher was so inspiring. She showed us what to improve with much care. She gave us a better insight into how English is used in different locations. My colleagues were increasingly more helpful because they deeply realized that doing it with others is better than doing it alone. (Learning journal)

In addition, the constructive feedback method was necessary as part of the project implementation with these EFL teachers. The process of feedback delivery was conducted in a way that the teams were required to review the randomly allocated project of another team. The team members discussed the quality of that designed videos according to a list of expected aspects, involving some work-related strengths and weaknesses. In terms of this method of feedback delivery, the researched participants' learning progress was carefully analyzed by both the instructor and the peers, so that each team member can grasp a sound understanding of how beneficial their shared work was, thus getting to know how they could improve their sense of achievement over a few months as well as how their achievement could enable them to develop a basic knowledge of cultural practices which were critically and creatively presented in the video-recording products. Also, when it comes to the feedback delivery, this is such a useful practice that the student participants could learn to support their future students. Evidently, this served as an empowering space to identify a lot of potential related to the fact that the researched participants would like to apply their learning experience acquired from this project into their future teaching practice. Expressed differently, the assessment-related outcomes were representative of the participants' favorable plans to translate their learning experience to make their teaching plans as engaging and interesting as possible. In this regard, learning experience was

facilitated as a chance for their students to enact their good sense of agency and response to their regular bi-/multicultural encounters effectively, thus concretely strengthening the students' proper use of language later on. Besides the benefits that were generated by the peer support, it was meaningful to recognize the growing importance of the impacts of the instructor on the participants. It was learned that there were required tight connections between the instructor and the participants, clear messages of the learning process, and reciprocal responsibilities for achieving classroom consensus on tasks and evaluations. With the assistance of the instructor, they quickly realized it was necessary to take on other roles, such as assisting one another by respecting their colleagues' working styles so as to reach the shared decisions. Following those aforementioned benefits, it can be said that the researched participants, following their engagement in constructivist learning, were also aware that they needed to act different roles accordingly, although they were not deeply required by their instructor, as Nguyen and Hall (2017) insist, exercising different roles seems to be prevalent during their learning with constructivist learning.

Another surprising observation showed that EFL teachers enacted intercultural responsibility in an autonomous way. Though they had no experience to work with their teammates before the project, they gradually felt open to constructive comments from others because of their recognition of essence and potential to develop academically. This position converges with Bennett's (1993), who states that the state-of-the-art EFL learners are prompted to turn from ethno-centric to ethno-relative thinkers as they step up and interact with someone of distinctive cultural backgrounds in an intercultural setting. Those learners are strongly advocated to make continuous efforts to enhance their ability to observe deeply and analyze critically the cultural stances. Back to what constructivist learning could offer, findings suggested that in order to enhance their base of essential knowledge, peer-learning helped them proactively seek learning experiences which are not offered in their current EFL classes. Peer learning, according to Cook (1992), was very helpful in a sense that the students can support someone that is less competent as a fruitful way to review and sharpen their knowledge, defining how understanding of knowledge differs between them.

To recapitulate, when finishing a project, the pre-service teacher participants saw a lot of benefits related to their stimulation regarding linguistic awareness. In fact, they were able to communicate more effectively and appropriately with people of different cultural backgrounds, to remove the barriers which prevent them from navigating their communication strategies, and to generate deep empathy and respect for others' cultural positions. They propounded the idea that the EFL pre-service teachers could benefit from their high exposure to authentic learning as soon as they engaged themselves in ushering modern classes and progressing in their life-long learning in school and life. These components could bolster the EFL pre-service teachers' critical thinking and intercultural competencies, as well as encourage them to support

their future EFL learners' aspirations for genuine and accessible goals. Theoretically, they cogitated about how to implement intercultural skills and CCA (*savoirs' engager*) (Byram, 1999).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has shed light on the development of ICC in an EFL teacher education program in Vietnam as an observed consequence of the integration of constructivist learning. After a few months of the project, it was found that constructivist learning seemed to have facilitated the EFL pre-service teachers' professional responsibilities and intercultural sensitivity via mediating cultural understanding. From the findings, there were two observations to be learned. Firstly, the pre-service teachers could acquire both linguistic and cultural knowledge in order to understand other English speakers with intercultural sensitivity. Also, they were positive about internalizing intercultural competence effectively in classrooms, to which students agreed, referred to as authentic communities. Through the class observations and interviews, the pre-service teachers' cultural acts were attentive to a willingness to be mobile and flexible in order to face numerous cultural encounters and achieve personal/professional goals. As quantitative data was not included, additional research is welcomed in order to quantify the developed ICC dimensions. Due to this limitation, a series of observations and semi-structured interviews were not adequate enough to explore the EFL pre-service teachers' objective voices and personal anxiety to tell the truth. As far as prospective research goes, thoughtfulness is critically needed to figure out what research method can be more developed to fit the research objectives. The current employed method was a subjective reflection of me stepping back and looking from different angles at how the EFL pre-service teachers could investigate this research problem, and how well the research was established in order to make a clear plan of gathering reliable data.

This research also challenged the Byram's (1997) framework with its theoretical limitations which impacted on the recent studies, in terms of the techniques of differentiating between "selves and others". I highly value the findings presented by Gyogi and Lee (2016) who challenge the overuse of Byram's ICC framework which has the potential to limit the recognition of cultural differences between one's and others. However, the present study significantly contributes to the present line of literature as it examined issues of fluidity and ambiguity emerging in the EFL classes and moves to "go beyond conventional connections between language, nationality or culture at the same time" (Gyogi & Lee, 2016, p. 25), where I framed homogeneous and heterogeneous perspectives. More importantly, I believe this research is enriching the field by connecting EFL teachers' language use and identities, which is substantial to help exert agency (Gyogi & Lee, 2016, p. 25). Beyond what is clearly portrayed in the study, I am pleased to move forward by referring to more scholarship on affective and behavioral abilities towards

intercultural acquisition in a non-linear process. In some stances, past literature scrutinizes that a search for culture in an authentic context is thought-provoking for the EFL teachers to surpass their cultural, cognitive, and behavioral experiences, thus arguing that such experiences can transform from their cultural prejudices to cultural indiscrimination. Having said that, the designers for teacher education programs ought to pay more attention to developing the particularly Asian EFL pre-service teachers' capabilities to teach confidently and competently in various mainstream and underserved cultural settings where their EFL students can choose to study for different purposes. Also, they are urged to express necessarily positive attitudes, seek learning opportunities to grow cultural knowledge of self and others, find numerous ways to explore and interact with learners, and comprehend multiple opinions through critical eyes. Although it is not a key account of what the current study presented, more attention can be paid to encourage the exploration of attitudinal change in the EFL pre-service teachers as described above. From this line of view, the findings drawn from the present study suggested the far-reaching academic outcomes in the researched participants. Those outcomes were observed to outweigh those which were expected, but in subjective viewpoints based on qualitative data. That is why the newer surge of attention, especially in objective observations based on quantitative data, should be utilized for the purpose of extending the theoretical and empirical investigations on demonstrating various positive and negative influences of constructivist learning benefiting the EFL teachers' beliefs, motivation and professional decisions. As a result, this study has seemingly pointed a direction to help other researchers exploring numerous future plans to understand the EFL teachers' perceptions on and participation in developing their levels of ICC. These developmental observations can be attributed to an array of relevant educational projects which can be inspired by and built on the characteristics of constructivist learning. Those projects should take place in a wide range of educational contexts worldwide. Especially, they should be conducted extensively in marginalized cultural groups, such as Asian nations and ultimately including Vietnam.

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