

*Ta Tri Duc*

*Graduate Academy of Social Sciences*

*Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City*

*Le Tieu Ngoc Lien*

*University of Social Sciences and Humanities*

*Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City*

*Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City*

*Phan Minh Ha*

*Union for Economic and Education Development*

*Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City*

**PROBLEMS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS FOR  
STUDENTS IN VIETNAM**

*Abstract: This study will focus on intercultural communication problems between Vietnamese and English speakers. In reality, there seem to be two major sources of problems. First is the foreign language itself, as well as the distinction between the mother tongue and the foreign language; second is culture, which determines communication. The goal of this study is to identify problematic areas in the English and Vietnamese languages that could lead to misunderstandings and to find out which of these areas is causing the most serious communication problems for Vietnamese students. This study is divided into two parts: theoretical and practical. The theoretical segment will discuss intercultural contact, its context, and its challenges. The theoretical section will conclude with a brief overview of the key areas of language that can cause misunderstandings or difficulties during communication and learning English as a foreign language. The practical part, using a questionnaire, determines which area is the most difficult for students.*

*Keywords: Intercultural communication, Cross-cultural communication, Problems for students, Communication, Vietnamese students*

## **I. Introduction**

Understanding people from various cultural backgrounds is becoming increasingly relevant in the twenty-first century. Trade has crossed national boundaries, immigration is on the rise, and we are coming into contact with people who are different from us. They can speak different languages, have different habits, practice various religions, and hold various opinions. We should encounter these individuals on a daily basis, and in order to prevent misunderstandings, we must learn how to effectively deal with these differences.

This study provides a clear and straightforward description of intercultural communication, but more significantly, it compares the two languages and cultures from an intercultural perspective, paying special attention to the realistic application and problems associated with this form of communication. It may be useful for Vietnamese students.

## **II. Literature review**

Community is an evolving collection of interaction rules and communication codes. Culture is passed from generation to generation in a community of people who feel part of the group, and culture is internalized in this way. People in a community are often unconsciously influenced by their culture in their behavior and worldview. [5] Culture is more than just language, customs, and etiquette, as is commonly stated in intercultural training programs, but also values, beliefs, and assumptions; this forms a recognizable cultural case. Culture manifests itself through language, feeling, and behavior. [8]

People not only recognize that they belong to a certain culture, but they also want to be a part of it. [5] They're extremely proud of it. Such patterns can be identified in various cultures since each culture has its own set of behavioral guidelines.

Intercultural communication is more complex than communication between people of the same culture since different cultures got different behaviors. In reality, every communication is influenced by a variety of factors that distinguish it and set it apart when viewed by people from other countries.

Intercultural communication is the exchange of ideas between people from different national cultures. The boundaries of intercultural communication do not correspond to the borders of the state. Multiple cultures may exist within a single state, or one culture may cross national boundaries and impact many nations.

The essence of Sapir-Whorf theory is founded on two fundamental concepts. The nature of the language we use influences how we think, perceive, and understand the world around us. [6] The similarities between languages are thus reflected in the various perceptions of the world, including fear of other people, by speakers of a specific language. Speakers from different cultures can never fully understand each other because their fear of the world is determined by their languages, making them more or less different. Nonetheless, sufficient research have not proved this theory, and it has been refuted not just by the existence of intercultural contact, but also by numerous treaties signed by various nations that would never have been signed if there was no complete understanding.

Historical research and historical linguistics demonstrate how people in ancient cultures differed based on different languages and complex prejudices towards other ethnic groups and their languages. Intercultural communication is clearly an ancient phenomenon; however, it was not described and called by anyone until the twentieth century.

Scientific research on intercultural communication was revived for practical purposes following World War II, when the United States began its great expansion to other states and continents. There have been numerous contacts between Americans and people from other cultures, especially Japanese, Germans, and people from other European countries. [1] It was important to inform language teachers, ambassadors, and entrepreneurs about the specifics of other countries' cultures and languages. The Vietnam War (1964-1973) increased the role of intercultural contact in the training of translators.

Intercultural communication challenges will arise. Perception, verbal processes, and nonverbal processes are the three troublesome fields. The verbal processes are the most important, but people should pay attention to all of these areas because all of them can lead to misunderstandings.

Obstacles in verbal processes are the most common and evident. The most important obstacle to intercultural interaction in verbal processes is a lack of comprehension of the communication language.

In terms of vocabulary, Tracy Novinger (2001) highlights some of the main areas where difficulties occur. The following items were selected from the Novinger list as the most significant.

Competency – In order to encourage contact, people prefer to avoid dealing with people they know or believe may have poor command of a language that is familiar to all parties. It's uncomfortable and embarrassing not to understand what someone is saying or not to be understood by them. People often tend to interact with outsiders in a language that is foreign to all parties, rather than their mother tongue. The explanation is self-evident. Where there is a great variation in the capacities of one language, there is a risk of misapprehension; however, when speakers speak a language that is not a mother tongue for either of them, the degree is sometimes more or less equal, and the probability of misapprehension is therefore lower.

Connotation – The connotative sense is associated with tradition. When people learn words in a foreign language, it is difficult to learn and comprehend the meaning of the word as a native speaker understands it. While certain words have the same meaning, not all meanings evoke the same emotion. Others are considered impolite, while others are considered positive, and those who study a foreign language are unaware of the distinction because the connotative meaning is difficult to understand. Novinger uses the words lie and fib as examples of English words. Both terms may be used interchangeably, but saying someone lied is considered more derogatory than saying someone fibbed.

Idiom – When communicating with a non-native speaker of any language, avoiding idioms, slang, and a plethora of metaphors can significantly improve comprehension. The simpler the language, the more likely it is that it will be understood.

Communication appears to be solely based on language, but this is not the case. According to touch experts, two-thirds to three-fourths of our communication occurs nonverbally through behavior. Nonverbal communication often reveals the relationship between the communication's parties and is extremely difficult to monitor. It defines the communication's context.

In the field of nonverbal communication, it is distinguished between low context and high context societies. Communication in low-level cultures is structured, with everything said simply and directly, while communication in high-level cultures uses nonverbal messaging and can also be informal. [1]

### **III. Problems in intercultural communications for students**

A questionnaire was used to conduct the study, which is a quantitative type of research. The research goal is to determine which areas of learning and speaking English are the most challenging for Vietnamese university students, as well as to establish some effects of the Vietnamese language on learning and speaking English.

The questionnaire contained eight questions, some of which were partially completed. Respondents were actually expected to choose an answer and explain why they chose it. There was also one issue that demanded evaluation of specific parts of English language learning and speaking, followed by two open questions about perceptions and perception of the essence of intercultural communication.

The questionnaire was distributed to two different classes. Students of English Linguistics attended the first group at Ton Duc Thang University's Faculty of Foreign Languages in Ho Chi Minh City. Since most students have been studying English for more than a decade, all students should be at the

advanced stage. The majority of them are studying English and want to teach it. They have between eight and ten 45-minute English lessons a week.

International business students from the Faculty of Business Administration were present in the second group at Ton Duc Thang University in Ho Chi Minh City. These students are at the upper-intermediate level, and the majority have been studying English for more than ten years. They research English for specific purposes, with a focus on economy words. Students at this school must study English as well as at least one other foreign language. They have two 45-minute English lessons a week.

The first group was chosen because these students are studying English Linguistics and can learn it both practically and theoretically. Students in the second group are supposed to know the language only technically, but to be able to equate it to another foreign language. Nonetheless, some Ton Duc Thang University students should be able to equate it to another language, as many study English as well as another foreign language, most often Chinese, Japanese, or French.

Giving the questionnaire to students who learn English from various backgrounds and for different reasons was thought to yield more unbiased results than giving it to a specific group of students. It was anticipated that the questionnaire sent to these various groups would show insightful details and diversity in their opinions on learning and speaking English.

The questionnaire was distributed via email to approximately 60 students from the Faculty of Business Administration's International Business Department and approximately 100 English Linguistic students from the Faculty of Foreign Language. The first party received twenty-five replies, while the second received forty-one.

The questionnaire's first segment dealt with languages. Respondents were asked to write down which foreign languages they are studying and how their language experience aids their ability to learn and speak English.

Learning another language, according to 77 percent of respondents, made English easier to understand. The reality is that the majority of them study French, which is similar to English either because of grammar similarities or because of words, as respondents have said.

The second section of the questionnaire addressed the effect of the Vietnamese language on English-language learning as well as its contentious aspects.

According to 51% of respondents, the Vietnamese language has a negative impact on English learning and speaking. The majority favored the I-don't-know response, and only 8% said it had a positive impact.

Differences in sentence syntactic structure and grammar diversity were viewed as having a negative effect, while the fact that the respondents could see the differences, allowing the language to be compared and, as a result, better memory, was considered to have a positive effect.

Furthermore, respondents were asked to compare different aspects of English learning ranging from simple - grade 1 to very difficult - grade 5. Reading, listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, pronunciation, and word order were among the topics covered. English grammar was the most difficult for students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, with an average grade of 2.3, while pronunciation was the simplest, with an average grade of 1.5. The only reason for their pronunciation is that they take a two-semester course in Phonetics and Phonology. Business Administration Faculty students rated listening as the most difficult, with an average grade of 2.9, and pronunciation as the least difficult, with an average grade of 2.6. Word-order and a speaking score of 1.8 are ideal for them. The largest discrepancy between the two research samples occurred in the field of pronunciation, as previously stated, and then in the field of words, which can be attributed to the fact that students at the Faculty of Business Administration learn vocabulary from the economic sector and pay more attention to words than students at the Faculty of Foreign Language.

After measuring all of the grades that the students provided to all facets of the language, the resulting grade for students of the Faculty of Foreign Languages was 1.9, while the grade for students of the Faculty of Business Administration was 2.2. It suggests that students from the Faculty of Foreign Languages are much more comfortable in English than students from the Faculty of Business Administration, which may be due to the fact that students from the Faculty of Foreign Languages study English as their main subject and have more English lessons than students from the Faculty of International Business.

Part three was all about stereotypes. Respondents were asked to write down some characteristics of Vietnamese and English people, as well as explain whether the characteristics of English people are based on personal experience or widely known information.

The widely used stereotypical characteristics of the English people were gentlemen, high-principled, reserved, and conservative, while personal experience based characteristics were completely different. The most common words to describe them were polite, laborious, logical, perfectionist, and helpful.

On the other hand, based on personal experience, the Vietnamese people's characteristics were often negative. The most frequently used terms were cynical, calculative, envious, and sad. Good characteristics included friendliness and cleverness.

Finally, one open voluntary question was raised. The informants were asked to write whether they had ever been perplexed by differences in their culture or language when interacting with English people.

Other factors that contributed to misunderstandings included intonation, which yielded different meanings than intended, idioms, and incorrect sentence structures that are appropriate in Vietnamese but incomprehensible or have a different meaning in English; and translating the Vietnamese language into English, which resulted not only in confusion but also in lengthy interpretation



of what the respondent said. The responses of the two groups of respondents were hardly diverse.

Students in the Faculty of Business Administration were aware of the importance of intercultural communication and understood what it entailed, as their university offers intercultural communication courses. On the other hand, not all students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages understood what it meant.

According to research, the problematic areas found in bibliographical sources and identified in the theoretical section are problematic for Vietnamese students, particularly the pronunciation of sounds that do not exist in Vietnamese or the use of words that would be suitable in Vietnamese but have slightly different meanings in English. The hypotheses listed have been supported by evidence.

It would be immensely beneficial if all students understood the importance of intercultural communication and cultural diversity, rather than just the simple differences between their native language and the foreign language they are studying, because only then would their communication be fruitful and free of unnecessary misunderstandings.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This study addressed the intercultural communication issues that Vietnamese English-speaking students often face. The aim of this research was to recognize some of the problematic areas in this form of communication as well as the most obvious differences between English and Vietnamese culture and languages. Theoretically, this has been accomplished.

According to the findings in the theoretical section, there are three types of obstructions during intercultural communication of perception, verbal processes, and nonverbal processes.

Language aspects of English and Vietnamese have also been reported, such as grammar or different sentence structure, which can complicate communication, pronunciation, or words, and these findings have been verified in practice.

The realistic section focused on the languages in use, the effect they could have on one another, the challenging areas of English for Vietnamese students, and stereotypes.

The results of the questionnaire, which was used as a research tool, revealed that the Vietnamese language has a negative impact on English-language learning and conversation. The hypothesis about the Vietnamese language's negative effects seemed to be right.

In the theoretical portion, various aspects of the English language have been identified that may trigger problems and misunderstandings, and research has shown that the most troublesome field of the English language for Vietnamese students is grammar and pronunciation.

It is important for foreign language students to recognize that learning a foreign language is not the only practice required to communicate effectively. Other factors influence contact as well. Culture is most likely the most powerful and dominant factor. When people learn English, it is not obvious that they would be able to communicate without difficulty if they are not aware that their English-speaking communicative partners can think differently in a way influenced by their culture, which is different from that of the Vietnamese.

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