

# Understanding the Use of Intercultural Education in Foreign Language Teaching in the ASEAN Community and Some Suggestions for the Regional Integration of Vietnamese Higher Education Institutions

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**Abstract:** *Intercultural education is an area of research, study and application of knowledge about different cultures, their differences and similarities. Currently, intercultural education is a topic which increasingly receives much interest. This is mainly due to the rise of cultural studies and globalization. Culture has become an instrument for social interpretation and communicative action. Intercultural education and learning is primarily important in the context of the foreign language classroom. This paper has three objectives. The paper firstly provides a brief introduction of intercultural education. Secondly, it presents an overview of the current application intercultural education in the ASEAN Community. Thirdly, the paper provides an overall setting of the preparations of Vietnamese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and their students for the regional integration. Finally, some suggestions to enhance intercultural education in Vietnamese HEIs.*

**Key words:** *Culture, intercultural education, globalisation, EFL teaching, HEIs*

## Introduction

Intercultural education is based on respect for human diversity and is a philosophy that acknowledges and values the distinctive qualities of all cultures within the framework of universal human rights. It promotes a model of cultural exchange between different cultural groups within the multi-ethnic diverse modern society and promotes equality of access and tolerance of all cultural groups in a society. The Irish government has had a commitment to an intercultural model of diversity since the late 1990s. Intercultural education is aimed at increasing participants' intercultural competence. This is the ability to communicate successfully with people of other cultures. A person who is interculturally competent understands the culture-specific concepts of perception and is sensitive and conscious of the need for clear and transparent communication. It necessitates the understanding of other cultural

behaviours and ways of thinking. For example, a common misunderstanding is the use of eye contact in relation to authority. In many cultures, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, avoiding eye contact or looking at the ground when talking to one's parents, police, or one of higher social status is a sign of respect. In contrast, in Western Europe, this can be seen as evasive or deceptive. For example, an Irish teacher may misinterpret the lack of eye contact from a student as misleading or as a sign of boredom (Social Care Training Ireland, 2016). This paper provides a better understanding of intercultural education and the context of its application in the world. Then, the paper introduces the application of intercultural education in the ASEAN Community.

## What is intercultural education?

Intercultural education is defined by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment:

*At its core, intercultural education has two focal points:*

*It is education which respects, celebrates and recognises the normality of diversity in all areas of human life.*

*It sensitises the learner to the idea that humans have naturally developed a range of different ways of life, customs and worldviews, and that this breadth of human life enriches all of us.*

*It is education, which promotes equality and human rights, challenges unfair discrimination, and promotes the values upon which equality is built.*

(National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2005)

These two focal points are interdependent. In other words, intercultural education promotes knowledge, understanding, and respect for diverse cultural traditions and beliefs to the extent that these traditions and beliefs are consistent with social justice and human rights as operationally defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Thus, Cummins (2015) states that cultural practices that are sexist, homophobic, or discriminatory in other ways

would not merit respect within this conception of intercultural education.

However, many societies around the world have debates about the extent to which particular cultural practices are consistent with human rights and merit protection under the law. The banning of overt religious symbols from schools and government agencies in France and Quebec in recent years is one example of how particular societies can interpret elements of cultural distinctiveness as incompatible with the collective good. Another example is the common practice in many contexts of prohibiting multilingual students from using their home languages within the school (see for example, Agirdag 2010; Gervais 2012).

This is frequently rationalized as being necessary not only to create a coherent and unified society but also to enable immigrant-background students to learn the school language quickly and effectively. In Quebec, controversies surrounding the 'management' of diversity gave rise to a commission that examined the extent to which the society should extend 'reasonable accommodations' to the cultural practices of immigrant communities (Bouchard and Taylor 2008).

Potvin (2010) expressed the 'Us versus Them' character of much of the media discourse surrounding this issue:

*Distinctions are made between 'good immigrants' who 'want' to integrate into society (by becoming 'like us') and 'bad immigrants' who demand accommodations (thereby rejecting 'common norms'). Those who want to continue living 'as they did in their country' could never be one of us (p.82).*

This sentiment has been forcefully expressed by the leaders of several European countries who have identified 'multiculturalism' as the culprit in encouraging 'bad immigrants' to refuse assimilation into the wider society. Policies of multiculturalism, they argue, encourage immigrants to remain enclosed in ethnic enclaves separate from the societal mainstream. For example, in a speech in Potsdam, Germany, on 17 October 2010, German Chancellor Angela Merkel questioned the legitimacy of a multicultural approach to creating societal cohesion, saying that 'multikulti' has utterly failed. As reported by The Guardian newspaper, Merkel said the idea of people from different cultural backgrounds living happily side by side did not work and the onus was on immigrants to do more to integrate into German society (Weaver, 2010).

A few months later (5 February 2011), British Prime Minister David Cameron attributed the

radicalization of Islamic youth to 'the doctrine of state multiculturalism,' which has 'encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and the mainstream.' He argued that young Muslim men find it hard to identify with Britain, 'because we have allowed the weakening of our collective identity' and 'have failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong' (Staff Blogger, 2011).

A few days later, French President Nicolas Sarkozy joined the chorus by declaring that the policy of encouraging the religious and cultural differences of immigrants was a failure:

*Of course we must all respect differences, but we do not want a society where communities coexist side by side. If you come to France, you accept to melt into a single community, which is the national community, and if you do not want to accept that, you cannot be welcome in France (Daily Mail Reporter, 2011).*

This discourse is identifiable in many societies. It appropriates the term 'multiculturalism' as a scapegoat to represent mythical state policies that encouraged immigrant communities to remain by their own volition outside the mainstream society. There is no acknowledgment of widespread housing segregation, job discrimination, and the failure of schools to educate students of immigrant background. Minority groups are solely responsible for their own failure to integrate. 'Multiculturalism' is code for 'being soft on immigrants' and the consequent solution is therefore to 'get tough' and force them to assimilate. The implicit wish is that assimilation will cause them to 'disappear', thereby removing the problem they represent for society. How can intercultural education (or 'multicultural education' in the terminology used by US researchers such as Nieto [2000] and Banks [1996]) be implemented in societal and educational contexts that are so fractured by dissent in relation to diversity? A more fundamental question is why should intercultural education policies be implemented in these societies? In what ways does intercultural education contribute to educational effectiveness and societal cohesion? Cummins (2015) argues that intercultural education contributes to societal goals in two ways. First, intercultural education promotes social cohesion and respect across cultural groups by identifying and challenging patterns of discrimination and exclusion within particular societies. Second, it will possibly promote academic achievement and equality of educational opportunity for students from marginalized communities who frequently experience much less success in schools than students from dominant societal groups. He

reviews many studies supporting that intercultural education promotes academic achievement for linguistically and culturally diverse students. He finally suggests the framework of intercultural education should be implemented in multilingual schools. He argues that the academic achievement of students in multilingual schools will be promoted if the framework is supported by the following propositions:

- *Societal power relations have historically played a significant role in the organization and outcomes of education and continue to restrict educational opportunities for marginalized group students.*
  - *The operation of societal power relations that affect marginalized group students' academic achievement can be conceptualized along a continuum ranging from structural/societal, through structural/educational to interpersonal.*
  - *Intercultural education initiatives aimed at affirming the identities of marginalized group students have successfully challenged coercive power relations operating at both structural/educational and interpersonal levels.*
- (Cummins 2001, 2015)*

#### **Establishment of ASEAN**

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, was established on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand, with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) by the Founding Fathers of ASEAN, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei Darussalam then joined on 7 January 1984, Viet Nam on 28 July 1995, Lao PDR and Myanmar on 23 July 1997, and Cambodia on 30 April 1999, making up what is today the ten Member States of ASEAN (ASEAN, Overview, 2016).

##### **• Aims and purposes**

As set out in the ASEAN Declaration, the aims and purposes of ASEAN are:

1. To accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region through joint endeavours in the spirit of equality and partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community of Southeast Asian Nations;
2. To promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries of the region and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter;
3. To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest in the economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific and administrative fields;
4. To provide assistance to each other in the form of training and research facilities in the

educational, professional, technical and administrative spheres;

5. To collaborate more effectively for the greater utilisation of their agriculture and industries, the expansion of their trade, including the study of the problems of international commodity trade, the improvement of their transportation and communications facilities and the raising of the living standards of their peoples;
6. To promote Southeast Asian studies; and
7. To maintain close and beneficial cooperation with existing international and regional organisations with similar aims and purposes, and explore all avenues for even closer cooperation among themselves.

##### **• Fundamental principles**

In their relations with one another, the ASEAN Member States have adopted the following fundamental principles, as contained in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) of 1976:

1. Mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all nations;
2. The right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion;
3. Non-interference in the internal affairs of one another;
4. Settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful manner;
5. Renunciation of the threat or use of force; and
6. Effective cooperation among themselves.

##### **• ASEAN Community**

The ASEAN Vision 2020, adopted by the ASEAN Leaders on the 30th Anniversary of ASEAN, agreed on a shared vision of ASEAN as a concert of Southeast Asian nations, outward looking, living in peace, stability and prosperity, bonded together in partnership in dynamic development and in a community of caring societies.

At the 9th ASEAN Summit in 2003, the ASEAN Leaders resolved that an ASEAN Community shall be established.

At the 12th ASEAN Summit in January 2007, the Leaders affirmed their strong commitment to accelerate the establishment of an ASEAN Community by 2015 and signed the Cebu Declaration on the Acceleration of the Establishment of an ASEAN Community by 2015.

The ASEAN Community is comprised of three pillars, namely the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Each pillar has its own Blueprint, and, together with the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Strategic Framework and

IAI Work Plan Phase II (2009-2015), they form the Roadmap for an ASEAN Community 2009-2015 (ASEAN, Overview, 2016).

- The APSC shall aim to ensure that countries in the region live at peace with one another and with the world in a just, democratic and harmonious environment. The APSC Blueprint was adopted by the ASEAN Leaders at the 14th ASEAN Summit on 1 March 2009 in Cha-am/Hua Hin, Thailand (ASEAN, 2009).
- The AEC in 2015 is a major milestone in the regional economic integration agenda in ASEAN, offering opportunities in the form of a huge market of US\$2.6 trillion and over 622 million people. In 2014, AEC was collectively the third largest economy in Asia and the seventh largest in the world (ASEAN, 2008, 2015).
- The ASCC, its strategy, planning mechanism and blueprint substantially implemented from 2009 to 2015, aims to contribute to realising an ASEAN Community that is people-oriented and socially responsible with a view to achieving enduring solidarity and unity among the peoples and Member States of ASEAN. It seeks to forge a common identity and build a caring and sharing society which is inclusive and where the well-being, livelihood, and welfare of the peoples are enhanced. The ASCC is focused on nurturing the human, cultural and natural resources for sustained development in a harmonious and people-oriented ASEAN (ASEAN, 2014, 2016).

After the arrivals of ASCC and AEC, the educational sector of many ASEAN countries as well as their HEIs have prepared for their broadly and deeply regional integration. There is a difference in the use of English language in the ASEAN countries. Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines are considered to belong to the outer circle, and the six other countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam are seen to belong to the expanding circle (Kachru, 2006). Thus, their preparation for the regional integration is obviously different. Among all the member nations in the ASEAN Community, it seems that Thailand and Indonesia have better preparations for their educational systems to be involved into the regional integration.

- Thailand has made a 15 year-long-term plan for developing its higher education (2008-2022) to prepare for the ASEAN integration. This important plan is classified into three

objectives: (i) to increase the quality of graduates with international standards; (ii) to empower its HEIs for the development of the ASEAN Community, and (iii) to promote the role of Thailand's HE in the ASEAN Community. Specifically, Objective One aims to developing Thai students' English language competency in work and developing cross-cultural professional and working competency. Objective Two has six targets: develop the international competency to teachers, promote the creation of knowledge and innovation concerning ASEAN in HEIs, improve the curriculum development and teaching in international quality standard, develop the infrastructure development in international quality standard, develop academic and research excellence, and develop the ASEAN's higher education. Objective Three targets to promote the leadership role of Thailand's HEIs related to the three pillars of the ASEAN Community building, especially in the ASCC pillar, to raise the awareness of Thai and ASEAN identity and the role of HE for promoting friendship activities, to promote Thailand as well as its HEIs as educational and informational centres in the region.

- Indonesia: The Indonesian Government seems to have a more slowly preparation for its educational development strategies to face the regional ASEAN integration than the Thai Government. Some Indonesian analysts stated that their local workforce were less competent than the workforce of Thailand and Malaysia. The Indonesian Central Statistics Agency stated that of the 52 million people in the Indonesian workforce who had at least a primary school education, only 17.84 million had a high school education, and only 7.57 million had a university degree. Nearly half of its workforce (47 %) is categorized as low-skilled labor. Many Indonesian analysts say that in order to meet the implementation of AEC in 2015, the Indonesian government must prioritize its budget on improving workers' educational qualifications, including ensuring that a higher proportion of workers have at least a high school education. Meanwhile, the 80 percent of the workforce of Singapore and Malaysia have at least a high school education. Therefore, these Indonesian analysts suggested that their government must prioritize its budget on improving workers' educational qualifications, including ensuring that a higher proportion of workers have at least a high school education. The analysts added that an increase in the number of Indonesian workers with higher educational qualifications can make Indonesia a stronger nation in terms of

the regional and global labor market. They concluded that without any clear improvement in education, Indonesian workers will remain unprepared in facing the free labor market of the AEC in 2015 (Jakarta Globe, 2015).

#### **Vietnam's regionally educational integration**

As a country member of the ASEAN community, Vietnam has some initial steps to prepare for the regional integration, especially for its educational integration. For instance, to learn some Vietnamese HEIs' preparations on the threshold of ASEAN labor competition, a prestigious Vietnamese daily newspaper – ThanhNien News carried out to interview HE institution managers and students in southern Vietnam to know about preparations of institutions and their students for the regional integration. HE managers were asked to know about their institutions' preparations and their views on students' knowledge. There were two HE institution managers giving opinions on their institutions' preparations for the regional integration. They included a vice rector of the HCM University of Finance and Marketing, and a chief of the HCM City University of Agriculture and Forestry's Training Department. There were four interview respondents sharing their ideas on students' knowledge, and they compared Vietnamese students' competence with that of other Southeast Asian students. These interviewees comprised a vice rector of the HCM University of Finance – Marketing, the managing director of Navigos Search, the general director of the Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi in HCM City, and the deputy director of HCM City centre for workforce demand and labor market information. The reporter of this newspaper interviewed two students to explore their understandings of the ASEAN integration and their preparations for this regional integration (ThanhNien News, 2013).

#### ▪ **Viewpoints of HE managers**

As mentioned above, there were two respondents who provided their opinions on the preparations of their universities for the regional integration. The first interviewee said that he had heard about aspirations of “broad and deep integration” in Southeast Asian region by 2015, but the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) had not yet given any instructions to universities about detailed plans to prepare for the integration. The second interviewee stated that his institution had not had plans to improve the quality of education and training after 2015 yet (ThanhNien News, 2013). Four interviewees provided their opinions about students' competence. The first interviewee, the vice rector of the University of Finance – Marketing, said that there were around 60 – 70 percent of the students in his institution who were

not able to communicate in English. In comparison between Vietnamese workers and other Southeast Asian workers, the second interviewee stated that the foreign language skills of Vietnamese workers were much worse than those of Thai and Filipino workers. She added that Vietnamese workers also lacked other soft skills such as presentation, team spirit, listening and expression. Additionally, they were often embarrassed of asking questions, and thus could not learn much from their colleagues or bosses. On commenting Vietnamese students' disciplinary knowledge, the third interviewee told Vietweek that Vietnamese students had good disciplinary knowledge, but they had difficulties turning that knowledge into work skills and applying it in reality. He added that most foreign companies were not pleased with Vietnam's workforce because Vietnamese people generally lacked communication and teamwork skills. Finally, the fourth interviewee said that students were unaware of what employers need from them. Providing a survey result of 5,000 students from three universities in this city, he stated that students thought that professional knowledge was the most important thing when applying for jobs, followed by foreign language and IT skills, soft skills and practice. However, this interviewee commented that the employers, in practice, regarded soft skills as important as professional standards.

#### ▪ **Voices of students**

The first interviewee, a student of the HCMC University of Technology graduating in 2016, admitted that her English skills was average, and she did not have any plans to learn another foreign language. The second interviewee who was the first interviewee's classmate stated that he had just attended the first low-level English class in his third year study. Based on the statements of the two student interviewees, the ThanhNien Newspaper reporter considered that Vietnamese students themselves were mostly not aware of “ASEAN integration” and of the need to study foreign languages. It was concluded in the article of this newspaper that limited English command was among the biggest challenges for Vietnamese students.

#### **Suggestions for the promotion of the Vietnamese HEIs' regional integration**

Intercultural education has widely been applied in teaching foreign languages in the world. Especially it is broadly used in Europe and North America where many immigrants come to live and study. Recently, some ASEAN nations have begun to pay attention to intercultural education in foreign language teaching policies to prepare for their regional integrations. However, intercultural

education is still quite new to the Vietnamese educational system and teachers of English at different educational levels. At recent time, there have been some major changes in the ASEAN Community. For instance, the ASEAN Community has established three pillars: AEC, APSC, and ASCC, which enables all member countries to integrate into the region broadly and deeply. Thus, it requires ASEAN's HEIs and their students to be more actively involved in the regional integration. For this reason, it is important that intercultural education should be considered as a subject that is

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- learned at tertiary level in Vietnam. Then, it will soon become a subject taught at general education level in Vietnam's education system. Vietnamese HEIs should enhance lecturer and student exchange programs with other HEIs in the ASEAN community. They also expand their academic and research networks in the region to improve their staff's learning professional development in ASEAN studies and intercultural education. By doing so, Vietnamese HEIs may enable Vietnam to turn its ambition – to become a nation in the top four nations of the region – to become true.
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