

## INTERCULTURAL LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THE CONTEXT OF VIETNAM: A GAP TO BE FILLED

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### Abstract

Over the past years, there has been an increasing focus on the intercultural language teaching (IcLT), which results from shifting the ultimate goal of English language education from training learners to be native-like competent to educating them to be interculturally communicative competent in order to function effectively and appropriately in a multicultural world. However, not all English language educators are well aware of the importance of this change, and this situation is true in the context of Vietnam since IcLT is still quite alien to most of the English language educators in Vietnam. This paper endeavors to raise awareness of the importance of IcLT and the need to develop learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in the context of English language educators in Vietnam. A model of ICC development is identified to shed the light on what domains of ICC to be developed in learners so as to help them become intercultural speakers. Simultaneously, principles and approaches of IcLT are also taken into great account in order to facilitate the process of IcLT in an attempt to improve the current situation of English language education in Vietnam and in other similar contexts.

**Keywords:** intercultural language teaching (IcLT); intercultural communicative competence (ICC); English language education.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the current context of English language education, it cannot be denied that the focus on communicative competence and native-like proficiency is no longer suitable (Seidlhofer, 2004), but instead the ultimate goal of English language education is to educate English language learners to be competent in both English language and intercultural competence (IC) so as to be able to effectively and appropriately interact with people from different cultures in multicultural situations. Further, since language and culture are inseparable, English language education can hardly exclude the teaching of its culture. Nevertheless, English language has become an international language or *lingua franca*, so English language education should not involve just only cultures from English language speaking countries but should expand to diverse cultures around the world in order to help learners to become intercultural speakers –people who are “aware of both their own and others’ culturally constructed selves” (Roberts et al., 2001, p. 30). Therefore, English language education should involve “the teaching of global cultures, which will form the basis of intellectual education for the twenty-first century” (Tam, 2004, p. 21). In other words, intercultural language teaching (IcLT) which refers to the process of the integration of intercultural teaching into English language teaching (ELT) should be a strong focus in order to develop or enhance learners’ ICC.

However, it is not always seen that the role of culture in English language education is well acknowledged, resulting in the negligence of the integration of culture in English language education in different contexts. Gonen and Saglam (2012) point out that “teachers in different classrooms in different parts of the world still ignore the importance of teaching culture as a part of language study” (p.26). That is, teachers endeavor to promote only their learners’ language proficiency instead of endowing them with ICC in order to function well in multicultural situations. In the context of Vietnam, it is seen that English language learners often fail to interact effectively and appropriately with others from different cultural backgrounds despite their good proficiency of English language since their lack of IC causes misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication. This is mostly due to the practice of outdated and teacher-centered teaching methods which are still dominant in most of the English language classes. A further point is that a great number of teachers and learners in Vietnam, on the one hand, always try to teach and learn to be native-like, so they ignore the development of IC in the process of English language teaching and learning. Some others, on the other hand, have been struggling to integrate or incorporate culture teaching into their teaching practice; however, they are not clear how to conduct the practice of IcLT.

With the aforementioned issues in the context of Vietnam, a gap can be identified to be filled in English language education by seeking for more appropriate and effective alternative pedagogies. Therefore, this paper is aimed at raising awareness of the importance of IcLT and the need to develop learners’ ICC, and identifying a model of ICC development and the principles and approaches of IcLT that can be applied in the context of Vietnam.

## 2. CURRENT SITUATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

English language education in Vietnam is divided into main streams: English inside the formal education system and English outside the formal education system. The former refers to the English as a compulsory subject in education system from primary level to tertiary level. The latter is English as an extra course offered by English language centers in order to meet various demands of different types of learners.

As English inside the formal education system is concerned, although communicative language teaching (CLT) methods have been introduced to Vietnam for a long time, grammar-translation teaching methods are still in practice since some teachers still believe that learners are not really willing to engage in communicative activities (Tomlinson & Dat, 2004). Furthermore, the teacher-centered approaches are still applied in many Vietnamese classroom contexts, so the development of grammar and vocabulary is paid more attention than the promotion of English language skills and IC. Consequently, learners have to learn English a lot, but they cannot communicate in English well.

Nevertheless, cultural courses, namely American culture and British culture are included in curricula at tertiary level in order to introduce the target language culture mainly to English majors, but they are taught separately from English language skills. What is more, those courses are designed to provide learners only with knowledge of the target language culture (i.e., history, geography, political situation, festivals, etc.). It is, hence, seen that learners forget most of the knowledge of the course not long after they finish the course.

Regarding English outside the formal educational system, hundreds of English language centers have been established across Vietnam; however, prestigious language centers such as British council, International Investment Group (IIG), international Development Program (IDP), Cambridge International examinations, etc. are mainly present in big cities in Vietnam. It seems that English language centers focus heavily on the development of four macro English language skills to their learners meanwhile cultural content is not paid enough attention. This is due to the fact that most of the English language centers offer English language courses to learners cope with standard tests (i.e., TOEFL, IELTS, TOEIC, et.) and train learners to be native-like.

It is obvious that IcLT is not a current practice in English language education in Vietnam since culture teaching is not a strong focus in ELT, and the integration of culture in ELT is usually ignored. This situation can lead to the lack of IC in learners who can be fluent tools and cannot interact effectively and appropriately with other people from different backgrounds. It is imperative that there should be training programs, seminars or workshops on this issue to raise awareness of the importance of ICC and IcLT to language educators and train them how to conduct IcLT in the context of Vietnam and other similar contexts.

### **3. WHAT IS INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE?**

In the context of foreign language education, the concept of culture teaching is quite similar to foreign language teachers and educators. However, different concepts have come into existence as a result of the change of the status of many languages as international languages or lingua francas, and a new phenomenon in foreign language education is so called intercultural language teaching and learning which is the current trend in the field of language education. The terms culture, IC, communicative competence (CC), and ICC which are relevant to the intercultural language teaching and learning are discussed as follows.

It is widely admitted that culture is the most sophisticated words to be properly defined, so there has been so far a myriad of definitions of culture. Each one addresses a perspective on culture, but they all seem to reflect and offer insights into the complex phenomenon of culture. The definition given by Goode et al., (2000), researchers of the National Center for Cultural Competence, is that culture involves both visible and invisible aspects which are shared among group members, and it is not limited in one generation, nor is it changeable, but it can be passed from one generation to the others, and is quite dynamic because of social changes.

...an integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting, roles, relationships, and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations; is dynamic in nature.

(Goode et al., 2000)

In another aspect, the definition of culture given by Lugstig and Koester (2000) shows the crucial connection between culture and communication in relation with the improvement of one's ICC.

Culture is a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, norms, and social practices, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people.

(ibid., p.25)

From this definition, it is seen that culture is understood in five characteristics: culture is learned; culture is a set of shared interpretations; culture involves beliefs, values, norms, and social practices; culture affects behavior; and culture involves a large group of people.

The basic understanding of culture can lead to the understanding of a more complex term: ICC, which results from the combination of IC and CC. So, in order to explore this term, a brief discussion of IC and CC needs to be first taken into account.

The term of IC is variously defined by scholars (e.g., Byram, 1997; Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Sinicrope et al., 2007). Byram (1997) and Bennett and Bennett (2004) define IC as the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with other people from different cultures, which includes five elements, namely attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness/political education. Sinicrope et al., (2007), unlike previous scholars, argue that IC can be simply defined as the "ability to step beyond one's own culture and function with other individuals from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds" (p. 1).

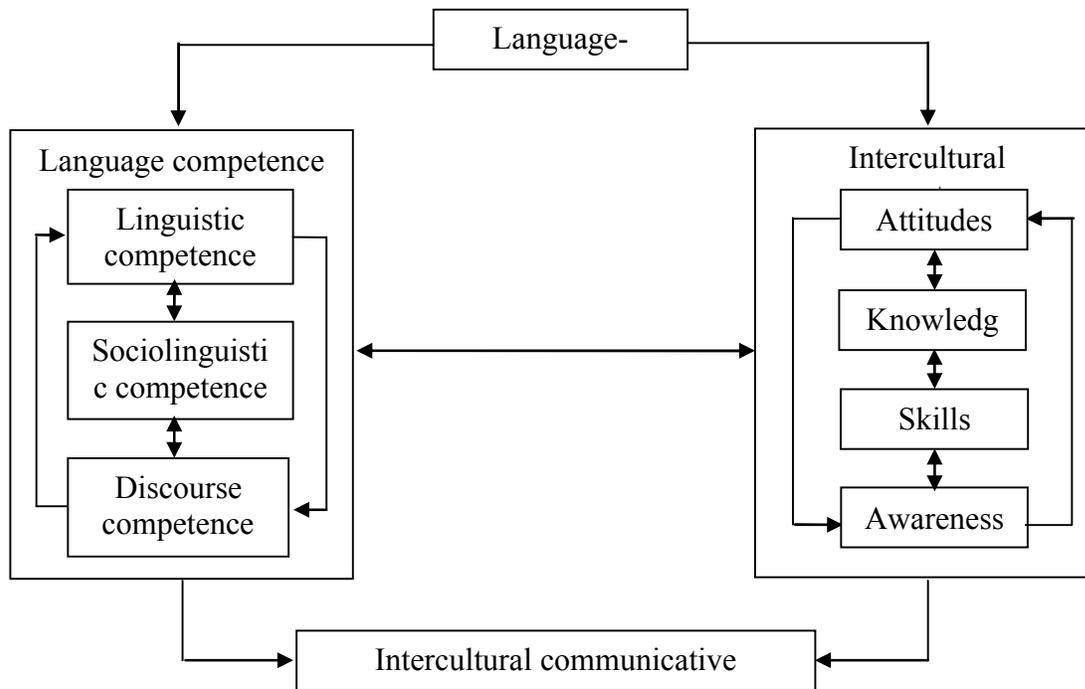
Regarding the term CC, it was first introduced in 1970s by Hymes (1972) who developed and defined CC as not only grammatical competence but also sociolinguistic competence, which is the ability to apply grammatical competence appropriately in social interactions. It was later further developed into a fundamental concept in the development of communicative language teaching by Canale and Swan (1980) and Van Ek (1986). Canale and Swan (1980) defined CC in the context of foreign language education, which was composed of grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. Canale (1984) added one more component, discourse competence, some elements of which were transferred from sociolinguistic competence. However, Van Ek (1986) proposed a framework for comprehensive foreign language learning objectives, which included six components or sub-competencies, namely linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, sociocultural competence, and social competence that constitute communicative ability.

Although the term ICC is coined from IC and CC, it has been interchangeably used with other terms, e.g., intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication competence. This unclear difference sometimes causes confusion in addressing the right phenomenon. Among some scholars who have tried to differentiate IC and ICC, Byram (1997) points out that the former is a competence which enables one, among other things, to interact in one's native language with people from other cultures; the latter is a competence that enables one to interact in a foreign language with people from other cultures. To sum up, ICC can be understood as the ability which enables one to effectively and appropriately interact in a language other than one's native

language with others from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. ICC consists of language competence (linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, & strategic competence) and IC (attitudes, knowledge, skills, & awareness) that help one to be able to successfully integrate in a multicultural society (e.g., Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2001; Sinicrope et al., 2008).

#### 4. MODEL OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT

From different views on ICC, different models of IC/ICC development have been suggested in order to promote learners' IC/ICC. However, the model of ICC (Figure 1) which is adapted from model of ICC development suggested by Byram (1997) can be proposed for ICLT in the context of Vietnam since it appears to be one of the most comprehensive and appropriate model to be used in the context of English language education.



**Figure 1** Adapted model of ICC development (Byram, 1997)

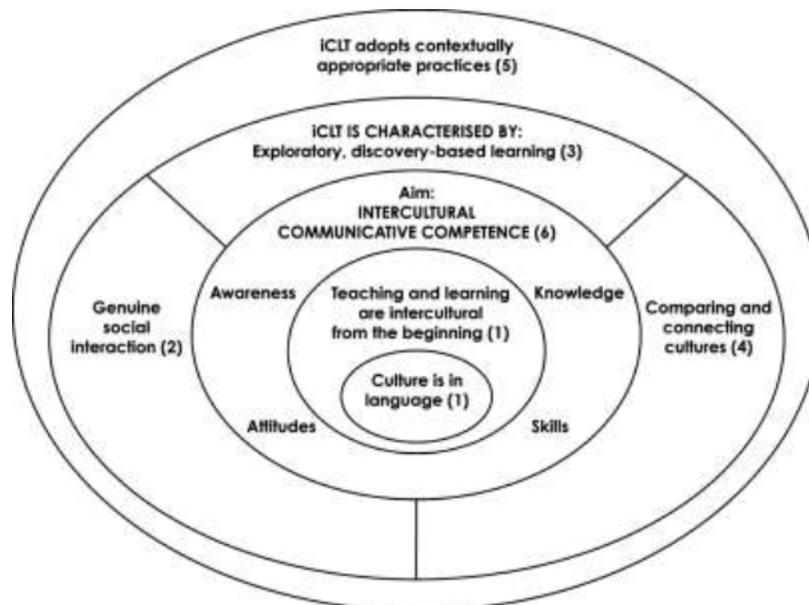
This model starts from the view of language and culture which are closely related, and it has two main components: language competence and IC. The former consists of linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and discourse competence; the latter includes four elements: attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness. These two components are strongly interrelated and support each other in order to attain the ultimate goal of ICLT to help learners to become intercultural speakers with ICC. The elements of ICC are defined by Byram (1997) as follows:

- *Linguistic competence*: the ability to apply knowledge of a language to produce and interpret spoken and written language.
- *Sociolinguistic competence*: the ability to give to the language produced by an interlocutor – whether native speaker or not – meanings which are taken for granted by the interlocutor or which are negotiated and made explicit with the interlocutor.

- *Discourse competence*: the ability to use, discover and negotiate strategies for the production and interpretation of monologue or dialogue texts which follow the conventions of the culture of an interlocutor or are negotiated as intercultural texts for particular purposes.
- *Intercultural attitudes*: curiosity, openness, and readiness to learn about other cultures, and relativize one's own.
- *Intercultural knowledge*: conscious and unconscious knowledge of social groups and their products and practices, and the general processes of societal and individual interaction in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country.
- *Intercultural skills*: abilities to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices, and apply the knowledge and attitudes to interpret documents/events in the target culture and relate them to one's own.
- *Intercultural awareness*: ability to be critically aware of culture and cultural practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's.

## 5. Principles of Intercultural Language Teaching

In order to fulfill the ultimate goal of IcLT, there should be specific principles of IcLT that serve as guidelines. A set of six principles of IcLT suggested by Newton et al. (2010) is adopted to enhance learners' ICC in the context of Vietnam. These six principles of IcLT are evidence-based, and visually presented as in Figure 2 to depict the relationship among them.



**Figure 2** Principles of IcLT (Newton et al, 2010)

The six principles are that IcLT:

1. integrates language and culture from the beginning
2. engages learners in genuine social interaction

3. encourages and develops an exploratory and reflective approach to culture and culture-in-language
4. fosters explicit comparisons and connections between languages and cultures
5. acknowledges and responds appropriately to diverse learners and learning contexts
6. emphasizes ICC rather than native-speaker competence.

(*ibid.*, pp. 64-74)

*Principle 1: IcLT integrates language and culture from the beginning*

This principle takes the viewpoint that “culture is dynamic, and in dynamic interplay with language” (Newton et al., 2010, p. 64) and emphasizes the interwoven relationship between culture and language, and suggests that language teachers should integrate language and culture from the beginning in order to guide learners’ conceptualizations of culture from the beginning of the language learning process. In other words, culture and language are closely interdependent, and should not be treated as separate strands in everyday language classroom. Culture, hence, is a salient part of teaching of all language macroskills (reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing and presenting), rather than a separate macroskill.

The way in which this principle can be applied to teachers’ teaching practice is related to principles 3 to 5: teachers encourage learners to be experientially involved with other languages and cultures through *communication* and *interaction* (principle 2); to *explore* culture-in-language (principle 3); and to discover connections with other cultural worlds through *comparison* (principle 4). Two approaches to integrate culture and language in classrooms more easily are ‘communicative language teaching’ and task-based language teaching’ (Ellis, 2003, 2005), as these teaching approaches require learners’ active participation and experiential learning.

*Principle 2: IcLT engages learners in genuine social interaction*

This principle highlights that as “our social lives are culturally shaped, so also is language” (Newton et al., 2010, p. 65), so the term ‘culture-in-language’ (Carr, 2007) is used to depict the relationship between language and culture. Within this aspect, for “language learning is a social process that flourishes when learners not only observe cultural representations and behavior, linguistic or visual, but also experience them first hand,” language teaching must provide learners with “language opportunities that are themselves dynamic, experiential, and interactive” (*ibid.*, p. 66).

IcLT engages learners in interaction in two ways. First, it engages learners in interaction through exploring linguistic and cultural boundaries, and raising “awareness of one’s own as well as the other’s ways of communicating and maintaining relationships, and of dealing with cross-cultural misunderstandings and communication breakdowns” (*ibid.*). Second, it engages learners in interaction through directly exploring “the cultural worlds, beliefs, values and attitudes of others through topics which provide opportunities for explicit discussion of cultural comparisons” (*ibid.*). From an intercultural perspective, interaction is not simply a tool for learners to develop their fluency, but helps them to confront their culturally constructed world and cultural assumptions, and learn more about themselves.

*Principle 3: IcLT encourages and develops an exploratory and reflective approach to culture and culture-in-language*

This principle takes the viewpoint seeing culture as an iceberg that consists of small visible part (e.g., traditional arts, conventional practices) and large less visible part (e.g., values, beliefs,

thought patterns), and indicates that “the iceberg metaphor can be applied equally to culture-in-language” (Newton et al., 2010, p. 68) because culture is manifest in language in obvious ways such as in overt politeness forms (e.g., Thai forms of address), and it is also deeply embedded in language in less obvious ways such as the requirements for polite and formal language. Language teaching focuses extensively on learning about visible culture without concentrating much on less visible culture, resulting in learners’ much lack of cultural experience. To address this issue, the intercultural language teaching and learning approach should shift “focus from *transmission* of objective cultural knowledge to *exploration* by learners of both visible and invisible culture and, most importantly, to exploration of culture-in-language” (ibid.). Exploring culture involves learners in the construction of knowledge from experience and reflection by starting exploring their own culture and cultural identity, raising self-awareness, and examining their attitudes toward the target language and culture.

Furthermore, this principle indicates that the process of exploration of culture involves both teacher and learners as teachers themselves are learning while allowing their learners to explore and discover aspects of culture, and make comparisons with what they already know, and teachers are not the source of all knowledge.

*Principle 4: IcLT fosters explicit comparisons and connections between languages and cultures*

This principle highlights that the comparison of languages and cultures is “a fundamental process in intercultural language learning” (Newton et al., 2010, p. 69), and points out that the primary goal of intercultural language learning is to encourage learners to reflect an experience in their own culture before getting them to interpret a new experience in another culture into an equivalent one in their own culture. Hence, in order to make the learning effective, ICLT should make comparison reflective and interpretive so that learner can draw on their current knowledge as well as the new knowledge.

The comparison of cultures should be a practical focus for language teaching in order that learners can develop more complex concepts of culture and avoid cross-cultural prejudices, and that the comparison of languages and cultures should be explicit in order that language teaching can avoid a negative effect on learners’ intercultural attitudes if they are not explicitly guided.

*Principle 5: IcLT acknowledges and responds appropriately to diverse learners and learning contexts*

IcLT needs to recognize and embrace learners’ diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in the classroom, and it is advised that teachers should manage the representation of and participation in cultures that are new to learners, and show an appreciation of and respect for the culture(s) that learners bring to the classroom. IcLT responds to the relationship between cultures and languages in two ways: the first way IcLT “responds to relationships between cultures and languages is through seeking to connect learners to the target language culture, and thereby to facilitate learning opportunities through interaction and cultural experience” (Newton et al., 2010, p. 73); The second way that IcLT “responds to relationships between cultures and languages is by treating these relationships as topics to be explored and learnt about as part of language learning” (ibid.).

*Principle 6: IcLT emphasizes ICC rather than native-speaker competence*

This principle addresses the goal of language teaching and learning, which shifts from the native-speaker competence to ICC. It is pointed out that from an intercultural perspective, native-

speaker model for CC is still incomplete because “it is concerned only with speakers within a *speech* community” (Newton et al., 2010, p. 74), and ICC “broadens the goals of instruction to include the knowledge, skills, awareness and attitudes which enable learners to meet the challenges of communication across language and cultural boundaries” (ibid.).

## 6. APPROACHES OF INTERCULTURAL LANGUAGE TEACHING

Apart from the principles necessary to make the intercultural language teaching and learning effective, there should be approaches that can be applied to an intercultural language classroom. The four approaches of IcLT: culture as high culture, culture as area studies, culture as societal norms, and culture as practice (e.g., Liddicoat, 2002; Liddicoat et al., 2003; Newton et al., 2010) are suggested as follows:

### (a) *Culture as high culture approach*

This approach focuses on the study of arts and traditions (i.e., cultural expressions of literature, art, music, and performance). Within this approach, learners are encouraged “to reflect on the origins of and values associated with cultural artefacts, and to make explicit comparisons with arts in their own culture” (Newton et al., 2010, p. 43). Furthermore, this approach encourages learners to view culture as belonging to all people, and to consequently explore a wider range of cultural artefacts” (ibid.).

### (b) *Culture as area studies approach*

This approach focuses on the knowledge of a society or country (i.e., a country’s history, institutions, transport, famous figures, and geography), which serves as background knowledge to language learning (e.g., Liddicoat et al., 2003; Newton et al., 2010). This approach aims to raise learners’ respect and understanding of the cultural experience of others.

### (c) *Culture as societal norms approach*

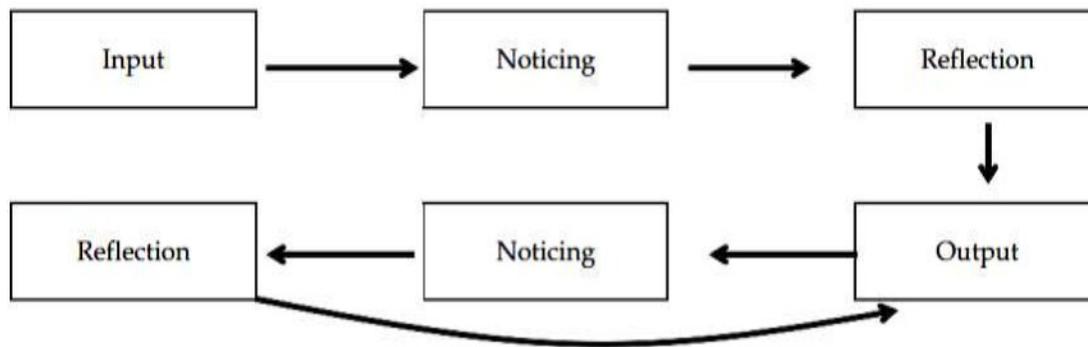
The culture teaching focuses on typical topics such as pragmatics of politeness and directness, respect, non-verbal communication, and speakers’ religious and societal beliefs. Newton and his colleagues (2010) point out that this approach “easily presents learners with stereotypes of the target culture and individuals within that culture” (p. 44). Nevertheless, they suggest that this problem can be dressed by encouraging learners to pay attention first to stereotypes of their own culture, and then to the constructed and subjective nature of stereotypes.

### (d) *Culture as practice approach*

This approach sees culture as a set of practices in which people engage to “live their lives and which are continually created and re-created by participants in interaction” (Liddicoat et al., 2003, p. 7). Newton and his colleagues (2010) note that this approach is the most suitable one of the four approaches of intercultural language teaching and learning, and point out that culture as practice is viewed from the intercultural perspective in three aspects: exploring self, exploring culture, and comparing cultures.

\* *Exploring self*: Learners are encouraged to be aware of their own culture, which is a crucial starting point for developing ICC since this self-reflection helps learners understand “how their culture influences their use of language, and how their communicative interactions reflects their culture” (Newton et al. 2010, p. 45). They then use this self-reflection to “as the basis for being able to understand cultural otherness, and for making sense of intercultural interactions”.

\* *Exploring culture*: Liddicoat (2002) propose a pathway for assisting learners to explore culture in language (Figure 3).



**Figure 3** A pathway for developing IC (Liddicoat, 2002)

The six steps in the pathway are explained as follows:

*Input:* The starting point is exposure to a wide range of authentic texts and sources (including oral, performative, visual and written texts and sources) or opportunities for interaction with speakers of the target language.

*Noticing:* Learners are encouraged to notice features about the communication that are unfamiliar. This requires learners to draw on their knowledge of their own culture, and make comparisons between the observed communication and their own.

*Reflection:* They discuss the reasons for these features as well as their personal response to them.

*Output:* Learners practice the communication, trying out new forms, expressions or strategies derived from the earlier input.

*Noticing:* Learners attend to how ‘comfortable’ these feel and how successful the communication was interpersonally.

*Reflection:* They reflect again on what they have learned.

(Newton et al. 2010, p. 45)

\* *Comparing cultures:* Learners in the IcLT approach are encouraged to compare between their own and other cultures, using their own culture as the starting point. Comparing cultures should be a practical focus IcLT because it allows learners to develop more complex concepts of culture (ibid.).

## 7. CONCLUSION

It cannot be denied that ICC is an important skill for people to survive in a multicultural world, and IcLT plays an important role in helping learners to become intercultural speakers who can function well in multicultural situations. In response to a call to fill in the gap of IcLT in Vietnam, there should be a comprehensive reform in the field of English language education in order to make IcLT happen in every English language class. In addition, it is imperative that there should be trainings, seminars, and conferences on IcLT and relevant issues for in-service and pre-service teachers so that they know how to conduct the integration of intercultural teaching into ELT and how to assess learners’ ICC. There should be adjustments on materials and curricula so that the integration of intercultural teaching into ELT is feasible and realistic in the context of Vietnam. What is more, policy makers should have more incentive policies to encourage educational institutions and English language centers to incorporate IcLT in their training programs.

Therefore, the above model of ICC development, principles and approaches of IcLT should be disseminated and applied across educational levels inasmuch as they are the lodestars for the integration of intercultural teaching in ELT in Vietnam as well as in other similar contexts.

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