

## Integration of Cultural Knowledge in Teaching Vietnamese as a Foreign Language

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**Abstract:** This paper presents some socio-cultural factors in the the formation of communication competence; some cultural content in teaching such Vietnamese language as greetings, compliments, showing an interest; lexical and ‘cultural’ meanings of words; as well as some techniques of cultural knowledge integration in teaching Vietnamese to foreign students, especially Japanese students.

**Keywords:** *Vietnamese language teaching, communicative competence, cultural transmission, culture and language*

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When learning a foreign language, learners are not only faced with obstacles due to differences between the source and target languages (related to phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar) but also due to diverse cultural differences and characteristics which are hidden in the language. The difference between the learner's own culture (home culture) and the culture in which the target language is used (target culture) can cause conflicts and misunderstandings when communicating. Because cultural values are expressed through language, it is inevitable that the learner's way of thinking and expressing language are influenced by the source culture and unconsciously transferred to the target language in intercultural communication. In fact, the difficulty for foreign language learners is not only due to language differences, but also due to cultural differences. Byram (1994) commented that (for foreign language learners) 'knowledge of the grammatical system of a language [grammatical competence] has to be complemented by understanding of culture-specific meanings [communicative or rather cultural competence]' [1: 4].

This article presents some cultural content and its method of transfer in teaching Vietnamese to foreign students; clarifies socio-cultural communicative information and typical utterances or behavioral patterns, as well as cultural characteristics reflected in Vietnamese vocabulary; and at a higher level, helps students express this socio-cultural knowledge in Vietnamese naturally.

## **1. The relationship between language and culture**

For the purpose of teaching foreign languages, culture can be divided into two categories: the first is called high culture, which is related to works of literature, art, education, philosophy, etc. In English, it is often referred to as 'big-C' culture (or Culture with a 'capital C), and is often considered the quintessence of a nation. The second is called popular culture, which is related to daily life including lifestyle, behavior patterns, beliefs, customs, etc. This type is considered by many people as basic cultural content in foreign

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language teaching. In English, it is often referred to as ‘small-c’ culture [see 5 : 24].

Regarding the relationship between language and culture, Wilhelm von Humboldt wrote: ‘The spiritual traits and the structure of the language of a people are so intimately blended... Language is the outward manifestation of the spirit of people: their language is their spirit, and their spirit is their language; it is difficult to imagine any two things more identical.’ [Humboldt (1907) cited in 15:39].

Language is the primary means of conveying and reflecting the values, beliefs, customs, etc. of a culture. It can be said that language in some sense represents a particular culture: it is ‘a key to the cultural past of a society’ [15:41 and ‘a guide to social reality’ [Sapir, 1929: 209, cited in 15:41]. On the other hand, culture is fundamental, and has a significant influence on how language is used: ‘If there is no culture, language will be like water without a source or a tree without roots.’ [20: 373].

Language and culture are intertwined: the boundaries between them, if any, are very blurred and difficult to identify. Obviously, everyday language is always ‘dyed’ by cultural ‘colors’. Social and cultural roles are ingrained in our way of thinking but are not noticed, in a subconscious form: ‘Interestingly, culture defines not only what its members should think or learn but also what they should ignore or treat as irrelevant’ [3:9]. This is also one of the obstacles for the parallel teaching of culture and language.

## **2. The development process of cultural transmission in language teaching**

Since the 1960s, the heyday of the audiovisual method, many educators have been interested in the cultural importance of foreign language learning. Brooks (1968) emphasized that: ‘the importance of culture is not only for the learning of literature but also for the language’. By distinguishing between ‘culture with a capital C’ (art, music, literature, etc.) and ‘culture with a lowercase c’ (patterns of everyday behavior and

lifestyles), Brooks showed that culture lies within the ‘structure’ of life and our interactions with it takes place on a subconscious level.

In the 1970s, the social role of language was emphasized, cultural content in foreign language teaching was given more attention, and the audiovisual method was replaced by the communication method, such that Canale and Swain claimed that in foreign language learning, ‘a more natural integration of language and culture takes place ‘through a more communicative approach than through a more grammatically based approach.’[3:31]. Teaching language is also teaching culture: ‘by teaching a language... one is inevitably already teaching culture implicitly’ [8: 212].

In the 1980s and 1990s, the advances in pragmatics and sociolinguistics made clear the nature of language - it was no longer a description or exchange of information; and researchers assumed that foreign language teaching should foster ‘critical awareness’ of social life, and at the same time, provide a cultural schema ‘to bridge the gap between culture and language in teaching’. In addition, Byram (1994) asserts that integrating the values and meanings of the target culture with the source culture can make learners change or ‘recognize differences (or opposites) in aspect of cognition’, and help students to tolerate and empathize with the target culture. Kramsch (1993, 1987a) also believes that culture should be taught as an interpersonal process and, rather than presenting cultural facts, teachers should assist language learners in coming to grips with the ‘other culture’ [see 3: 5].

Thus, the core of the issue in question is the need to train learners to have communicative competence, that is, to be able to achieve certain communication purposes by verbal or non-verbal means. Learners must know the appropriate way to address someone, show gratitude, make requests, express attitudes, and so on; that is, learners have to know how to combine language with culturally appropriate behaviors. Learning a foreign language is learning how to communicate in the target language, and communicative ability is acquired through the socialization of the learner. A person, from an innocent individual to a member

of society, must learn conversation knowledge and skills to adjust and train himself or herself as a member of society. This is the process of socialization of a person and it continues throughout his or her life. This is not only true of learning a native language, but also of learning a foreign language.

### **3. Goals, approaches, and models of cultural integration in language teaching**

#### **3.1 Goals**

The aim of teaching culture is ‘to increase students’ awareness and to develop their curiosity towards the target culture and their own, helping them to make comparisons among cultures’ [18: 19]. By comparing different cultures, students deepen their understanding of the target culture, improve their communication skills, and gain sensitivity to cultural diversity: ‘This diversity should then be understood and respected, and never...over (sic) or underestimated’ [18: 20]. Straub (1999) argues that ‘what educators should always have in mind when teaching culture is the need to raise their students’ awareness of their own culture, to provide them with some kind of metalanguage in order to talk about culture’[3: 12], and ‘to cultivate a degree of intellectual objectivity essential in cross-cultural analyses’[17: 5]. ‘What is more, another objective permeating the teaching of culture is ‘to foster...understanding of the target culture from an insider’s perspective—an empathetic view that permits the student to accurately interpret foreign cultural behaviors’ (ibid.: 5)’ [3: 12].

According to Tomalin (1993), the teaching of culture has the following goals:

- To help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors.
- To help students to develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak

and behave.

- To help students to become more aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target culture.
- To help students to increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.
- To help students to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence.
- To help students to develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture.
- To stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its people. [see 19 : 7-8].

### **3.2. Approach**

In language teaching, to integrate culture and language, there are three main approaches as follows:

- Teaching culture explicitly: equipping students with a basis from which to develop knowledge of the target culture. Its disadvantage is that the target culture content is only expressed at a relative level; the integration of teaching the language and teaching the culture has not been satisfactorily resolved.

- Teaching culture by the communication method: in this method, teachers can teach culture to students according to the motto 'study paired with practice'. Through emphasizing the communication function, culture is naturally integrated with language, it is not combined "artificially" as in the explicit teaching method above. During practice, teachers integrate cultural content into the use of language, helping learners acquire knowledge of the target culture through their own experience of using the language.

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- Teaching culture according to the method of intercultural communication: this method utilizes the advantages of the two methods mentioned above. Students not only learn the knowledge of the target language but also develop cultural awareness and competence in different cultures. This development is continuous and dynamic, from unknowns to knowns, from existing experience to new knowledge; at the same time the intercultural communication is conducted by students of different cultures.

### **3.3. Paradigm**

Byram (1994) proposes a model of teaching foreign language and culture with four basic components: language learning, language awareness, cultural awareness and cultural experience. First, students have to learn language knowledge. Then, through the cultural information provided, students can see the difference between the source language-culture and the target language-culture. Next, through practice, students will acquire the ability to communicate in the target culture.

Under this teaching model, students are encouraged to recognize what is relevant to the target culture, become tolerant, and accept the diversity and difference of the target culture. Learners who understand the target language's culture will have a more positive view of that culture and become more tolerant of other people's culture, exactly as Fleet (2006) stated: 'Establishing a tolerant classroom atmosphere in which all cultures are celebrated and explicitly teaching about the target culture enables language teachers to affect student attitudes towards the target language and culture in a positive way' [4:25]. By combining language use with the comparison and experiences of the source and target culture, as well as learning and practicing on the intersection of two such languages and two cultures, students will gain intercultural communication ability. This ability helps students to understand both the universality and specificity of the cultures, understand deeply the influences of culture on language, as well as respecting other cultures, easily integrating with the multicultural world of today [see 10:10].

## 4. Methods and content of cultural transmission in Vietnamese language teaching

### 4.1. Important factors in the formation of communication competence

- **Language-cultural information shared by the community:** For native speakers, this information is naturally absorbed in the process of ‘growing up’, but for foreigners, it comes from a long-term cumulative process via schools and social practices. Cultural communication pervades most daily interactions. This kind of cultural information is implicit, and manifests in linguistic acts such as greetings, apologies, compliments, dates, invitations, and so on; or in vocabulary which conveys cultural characteristics such as color words, kinship words, taboo words, etc.; or in the use and degree of euphemism, politeness, humility, reverence, etc.; words which express political orientation, sexism, religion, and so on; or notions of privacy, space, time, etc. These expressions create cultural differences and diversity, which can vary greatly from one culture to another. They are used in certain pragmatic and socio-cultural conditions.

In Vietnamese, it is necessary to pay attention to interpersonal relationships and the principle of politeness/respect: on the linguistic side, interpersonal relationships are expressed by variation in address, based on age and hierarchy (in the family and in society); while the principle of politeness is often expressed in the use of vocative pronouns and words of respect and politeness at the beginning of a sentence, such as *xin* or *đạ*, or at the end of a sentence, such as *ạ*, etc. To illustrate for this, we can take the following example:

... *Thu Thảo: Xin chào ông.*

Thu Thao: Good morning, sir.

*Giám đốc: Chào cô. Mời cô ngồi.*

Director: Hello. Please sit down.

*Thu Thảo: Dạ, xin cảm ơn ông...*

Thu Thao: Thank you...

(TV1, Lesson 4, p.77).



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In this conversation, there are two things that need to be explained: the personal addresses *ông* and *cô*, and the use of the words *xin* and *ạ* by Thu Thao. In the conversation, Thu Thao used *ạ* and *xin*, and the director didn't. If the teacher doesn't explain the principles of respect and politeness in Vietnamese language and culture, students won't know how to use correctly the words *ông*, *cô*, *ạ*, and *xin*.

- **Socio-linguistic norms:** are a set of verbal and non-verbal rules used in a given situation. Typically, they are patterns of sentences/utterances or behaviors used by the community in communication.

For example, some non-verbal aspects of greetings are that Americans often shake hands or hug, Japanese bow, Vietnamese smile and nod, and Thai people often nod and clasp their hands together. Some verbal aspects of such greetings are that American or Japanese people often use expressions that have a fixed pattern and are "positioned" according to time, such as "Good morning"/ おはようございます, "Good afternoon"/ こんにちは, and "Good evening"/ こんにちは, but Vietnamese people don't. Vietnamese greetings don't have a fixed formula but are customized according to the situation and relationship with the interlocutor. Vietnamese people also rarely say "thank you" or "sorry". Instead, the Vietnamese just smile, but each kind of smile expresses a different meaning, and to understand that difference, cultural competence is required.

- **Cultural images:** are images formed by different ways of viewing things in each culture. For example, the specific spatial structure of a glass is expressed differently in Vietnamese (a), English (b) and Japanese (c): (1) a. *Nước đầy đến miêng cốc* (The water is full to the mouth of the glass); b. *The water is full to the rim of the glass* (Nước đầy đến mép cốc), c. コップはいっぱいの水 (A lot of water is in the glass/ Nước hiều trong cốc/); (2) a. *Nước đầy đến lung cốc* (The water is full to the back of the glass), b. *The glass is over half-full of water* (Nước đầy đến nửa cốc); c. コップははんぶんの水 (Nước đầy đến nửa cốc/ The glass is half-full of water); (3) a. *Cốc này bị sứt ở đít* (The glass is chipped at

its butt); b. *The glass is chipped at the bottom* (Cốc này bị sứt ở đáy) ; c. コップの底が壊れる (*The glass is chipped at the bottom*) [7: 80].

In addition, the Vietnamese (a), the British (b), and the Japanese (a) have different ways of looking at certain objects and phenomena, such as: (4) a. Lỗ kim (the hole of a needle), b. the eye of a needle (mắt kim), c. 針の穴 (needle hole); (5) a. Sữa nóng có văng trên mặt (Hot milk with scum on it), b. *Hot milk with skin on it* (Sữa nóng có lớp da trên mặt), c. 温かいミルクに膜が張る (Hot milk with stretch membrane on it/ Sữa nóng có màng căng trên mặt).

Another example is the image of dragons and owls: Dragons in Eastern culture are generally a symbol of power, nobility and authority; in the West, they are often considered a fierce and cruel creature. And owls in Vietnamese culture are generally a symbol of bad luck; in Japanese culture, they are generally a symbol of good luck; and in Western culture, they are generally a symbol of paranormal wisdom and fierce intelligence, etc.

In general, the above factors contribute to the formation of communicative capacity, and the processes of both developing textbooks as well as teaching Vietnamese should focus on these points.

#### **4.2. Notes on cultural content in teaching Vietnamese**

As mentioned, language teaching content must be associated with cultural content. In order for students to be aware of the cultural features expressed in the language, the teacher can bring up a discussion topic about cultural characteristics related to the target language form. Linguistic content (phonetics, vocabulary, grammar) and cultural content must be selected and combined together to serve the performance of a communicative act; for example, when teaching the structure of asking someone's age, it could be explained to students that in Vietnam, people may ask someone's age at the first meeting. Lessons in the textbook should help students to perform the communication acts with topics such as *greetings*,

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*asking directions, eating, buying and selling*, and so on. All the requirements of the lesson must be expressed in terms of the standard of language knowledge and communication skills.

Cultural content related to language is often considered important in teaching Vietnamese, for example in the following cases:

- **Greetings:** When meeting acquaintances, Vietnamese people often ask questions, such as: *Chị đi đâu vậy?; Em đi học hả?; Chà, lâu quá không gặp! Mới đi đâu về đây?* (Where are you going?; Are you going to school?; Wow, long time no see! Have you just gotten back from somewhere?) For the Vietnamese, the above statements are very normal greetings. However, many foreigners find them surprising and intrusive instead of friendly and interested. Teachers should explain this in order for students to know how to respond in this situation.

- **Compliments:** To a compliment, Westerners, such as Americans, politely respond with ‘Thank you’. But Vietnamese as well as Japanese often respond with a refusal: *Không, không phải vậy đâu/ そんなことないです* (No, that isn’t true) or sometimes: *Cám ơn, nhưng không phải vậy đâu/ ありがとうございます。でもそんなことないです* (Thanks, but it isn’t like that). When a compliment is rejected, Americans feel confused because they gave a wrong assessment, or they may think that a refusal is a strategy to receive more praise. This indicates that when Americans try to be friendly with Vietnamese people, and Vietnamese people express their modesty to Americans, the conversation could end awkwardly. Teachers should explain that refusing is seen as a sign of humility in Vietnamese culture.

Japanese rarely give a negative comment. For example, when close friends or relatives, etc. are asked to comment on a certain dish that has been cooked: if a dish is really not delicious, Vietnamese often say *Món này không ngon lắm* (This dish isn’t very delicious),

but Japanese often say この料理は美味しいです (This dish is delicious) or この料理はとても美味しいです (This dish is very delicious).

- **Expressing interest/care:** When meeting a foreigner, Vietnamese may ask the questions: *Em đã có gia đình chưa?* (Are you married yet?), *Lương cô bao nhiêu một tháng?* (How much is your salary per month?), and so on. Faced with such questions, foreigners may feel uncomfortable, even shocked, because the above questions seem to delve into their private life. For this situation, teachers should explain to students that the above questions are indirect language acts which just express caring and regard for the interlocutor. This can mitigate the culture shock a student might feel when asked such questions. The teacher can also explain that the answer depends on the relationship between the speakers: if they are close, s/he can answer, but if not, s/he need not answer the questions.

- **Lexical and ‘cultural’ meanings of words:** There are many Vietnamese words with meanings associated with culture and conveying cultural information, as follows:

**Personal pronouns:** Vietnamese and Japanese have more kinship words than English: *ông nội/ 父方の祖父* (grandfather on the father’s side), *ông ngoại/ 母方の祖父* (grandfather on the mother’s side), *bà nội/ 父方の祖母* (grandmother on the father’s side)/ *bà ngoại* おばあちゃん (grandmother on the mother’s side), *bác/ chú/ cậu/ dượng* (uncle) and *cô/ dì/ thím/ mẹ* (aunt). In Japanese, although *bác/ cậu* (uncle, being mother’s older brother or mother’s younger brother) are written as 伯父 or 叔父, they are both pronounced ‘oji’. However, *ông bà nội/ ông bà ngoại* (paternal/maternal grandparents) are all written as 祖父母, while both *dì* and *cô* are 叔母. So, when introducing them, the speaker usually begins by explaining ‘father’s side’ or ‘mother’s side’; for example, *ông bà nội* (paternal grandparents) will be 父方の祖父母 (father’s side grandparents), and *ông bà ngoại* (maternal grandparents) will be 母方の祖父母 (mother’s side grandparents).

It should also be noted that when teaching personal pronouns, teachers should emphasize

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the difference in usage between the pronoun *tao* 俺 (<sup>13</sup>) and *tôi* わたし (<sup>14</sup>), or *chúng ta* 我々 (*we - including the listener*) and *chúng tôi* わたしたち (*we – excluding listeners*), as this is a distinction that many other languages don't have. Addressing others in Vietnamese is one of the difficulties for foreign students.

Students should be aware that age is very important in choosing a vocative or personal pronoun. For this reason, many Vietnamese people may ask the age of new acquaintances in order to address them properly.

**Words indicating position or location:** In Vietnamese, the words *trên* (on), *dưới* (under), *trong* (in), *ngoài* (out), among others, can be used from both an objective view and the subjective view of the speaker. Compare the way of speaking among (a) Vietnamese, (b) British and (c) Japanese: (5) (a) *Chim bay trên trời* (Birds fly 'on' the sky), (b) *Birds fly in the sky* (Chim bay "trong" trời), and (c) 鳥が空を飛ぶ (Birds fly Ø the sky); (6) (a) *Cá sống dưới nước* (Fish live 'under' water), (b) *Fish live in water*, and (c) 魚が水のなかに住んでいます (Fish live in water). The British determine the location based on objective criteria: around the birds is the sky, around the fish is the water, so 'in' (*trong*) is used; and Vietnamese people determine the location based on subjective criteria (the position and perspective of the speaker), so 'on' and 'under' (*trên, dưới*) are used.

This can be clearly seen in the two following utterances: (7) *Phòng ông ấy ở trên tầng 2* (His room is on the 2nd floor), (8) *Phòng anh ấy ở dưới tầng 4* (His room is on the 4th floor) (TV2, lesson 6, p.62). Utterance (7) informs us that *His room is (up) on the 2nd floor* and the speaker's current position is lower than the 2nd floor; and utterance (8) informs us that *His room is (down) on the 4th floor* and the speaker's position is currently higher than the 4th floor.

Japanese students are often unable to distinguish *trên* (on) from *bên trên/ phía trên* (above

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<sup>3</sup> Used with close friends, family members or in casual, informal situations.

<sup>4</sup> Used in polite or casual situations.

/上の方にあります), as in, for example, the sentences (9) *Bức tranh ở trên bàn* (The picture is on the table) (TV2, Lesson 6) and (10) *Bức tranh ở bên trên bàn* (The picture is above the table), which can both be said as 絵が机の上にあります。 Similarly, the sentence (11) *Ông ấy ở trên quán cà phê* (He is (up) in the coffee shop/ 彼は上のカフェにいます), is usually misunderstood by Japanese as *Ông ấy ở bên trên quán cà phê* (He is above the coffee shop/ 彼はカフェの上にあります).

Another example is that many Japanese students will take the sentence (12) *Anh ấy ở ngoài sân* (He is (outside) in the yard/ 彼は庭にいます) to mean *Anh ấy đang ở bên ngoài cái sân* (He is outside of the yard/ 彼は庭の外にいます.) Or the sentence (13) *Nhờ anh mang giùm hành lý của tôi ra xe* (Please carry my luggage outside to the car for me/ 荷物を車に運んでください) is usually misunderstood as *Nhờ anh mang hành lý của tôi để bên ngoài xe* (Please carry my luggage to outside of the car for me/ 荷物を車の外に運んでください).

Another interesting example is that the English sentence (14) *He is walking in the rain*: can be said three ways in Vietnamese:

(14a) *Anh ấy đang đi trong mưa* (He is walking in the rain/ 彼は雨のなかを歩いている).

(14b) *Anh ấy đang đi dưới mưa* (He is walking 'under' the rain/ 彼は雨の下を歩いている).

(14c) *Anh ấy đang đi ngoài mưa* (He is walking outside in the rain).

However (14c) is usually misunderstood by Japanese as 彼は雨のそとを歩いている (He is walking outside of the rain/ Anh ấy đang đi bên ngoài cơn mưa).

**Pure/Native Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese words:** For expressiveness, it is necessary to pay attention to the group of pure Vietnamese words (with common and informal, concrete, active features) and Sino-Vietnamese words (with formal, abstract, static features). And a common mistake made by many students is incorrectly using pure

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Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese words in certain situations.

Regarding the informal vs formal features, it is necessary to explain to students the difference in meaning of word pairs such as *đàn bà* (女の人)/ *phụ nữ* (女性) - woman; *chết* (死ぬ) - to die/ *hy sinh* (犠牲になる) - to sacrifice for one's country; *nhà khách* (ゲストハウス)/ *lữ điếm* (宿) - inn; *ở lại* (止まる)/ *trú chân* (滞在する) - to stay;... among many other similar pairs.

To compare the concrete and active features with the abstract and static features, it is necessary to explain the difference of word pairs such as: *cỏ/thảo* (grass), *bển xa/viễn phớ* (far-off shores), *trẻ chăn trâu/mục từ* (child cowherder), etc. Pure Vietnamese words give us something specific and clear; Sino-Vietnamese words give us something vague and fuzzy. This can be seen through the analysis of the pure Vietnamese word *cỏ* (grass) and the Sino-Vietnamese word *thảo* (grass). Referring to the word *cỏ*, we can imagine it, it has meaning in itself. The word *thảo* isn't like this. First of all, *thảo* doesn't usually stand alone, and doesn't exist independently; and so in Vietnamese, it has a flickering character - sometimes it is hidden and sometimes it appears. It is *cỏ* but it isn't *cỏ*, because in real life people see *cỏ* and walk on *cỏ* but never see or walk on *thảo*. Figuratively speaking, *cỏ* doesn't remind us of any image other than itself. Conversely, *thảo* exists only as a word-forming element: we often associate *thảo* with concepts such as *cam* (sweet), *thu* (autumn), or *phương* (fragrant) which are elements that often go with *thảo* to create words, and we associate these with *vị ngọt/ sweetness* (*cam thảo* - sweet grass), *mùa thu* - autumn (*thu thảo* - autumn grass), *hương thơm* - fragrance (*phương thảo* - fragrant grass), etc. These associations create a 'field of alliance' around *thảo*. This is why Sino-Vietnamese words can be said to have fuzzy and abstract characteristics [see 12:20], and this feature of Sino-Vietnamese words is extensively exploited in literary language.

Similarly, Japanese also has many Sino-Japanese word associations, as seen, for example,

in *lửa* (火) / *hỏa* (火) - fire; *nước* (みず) / *thủy* (水) - water; *núi* (やま) / *son* (山) - mountain; *cỏ* (くさ) / *thảo* (草) - grass; and so on.

**Expressiveness of words:** Vietnamese has many synonyms but they are different in cultural expressiveness. It is very difficult for students to choose words that are correct in both meaning and sentiment. Take color words, for example: even for the same color, Vietnamese has a rich array of words with a variety of expressions for each shade. For instance, to describe the color red, Vietnamese has: *đỏ au*, *đỏ bình*, *đỏ chét*, *đỏ chomé*, *đỏ chói*, *đỏ gay*, *đỏ hoe*, *đỏ hoét*, *đỏ hồng*, *đỏ ké*, *đỏ lì*, *đỏ lụng*, *đỏ ngẫu*, *đỏ quạch*, *đỏ rần*, *đỏ thắm*, etc. These words differ in color, tone, and in the speaker's perception: all are red, but *đỏ loét*, *đỏ lòm* are disgusting; *đỏ tươi*, *đỏ ửng* are beautiful; *đỏ rực*, *đỏ ói* evoke strong feelings, etc. [see 10:22].

Another example is expressions for death. Teachers should explain to students how to choose suitable words, according to the following criteria: manner of death: *tự tử*, *hy sinh*, *bỏ mạng* (suicide, sacrifice, perishing); status/class of the deceased: *băng hà* (for a king), *viên tịch* (for a high-level Buddhist monk), *quy tiên* (for an elderly person); attitudes and feelings towards the dead: *yên giấc ngàn thu* (rest in peace) / *về với tổ tiên* (return to ancestors) / *khuất núi* (disappear from the mountain) / *qua đời* (pass through life) / *mất* (pass away) / *chết* (die) / *hầu Diêm Vương* (serve the King of Hell) / *tắt thở* (stop breathing) and so on [see 10:26]. Similarly, the word 'die' in Japanese can be said many ways, depending on the situation, such as 私のお父さんはなくなりました (My father passed away/ Ba tôi đã mất); 彼は死にました (He died/ Ông ấy đã chết); 彼は犠牲になりました (He has sacrificed his life for his country/ Ông ấy đã hy sinh) – just as the verb たべます (eat/ ăn) can be used in a casual situation but one should use 召し上がります (partake/ dùng) in a formal situation, etc.

Through the above examples, we see that the lexical and cultural meanings of words are very important: Teachers must equip students with both the lexical and the cultural



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meanings of words.

- **Linguistic - cultural information:** Teachers should clarify the content of this information, and help students understand and express it through language. More specifically, teachers should help students understand appropriate social communication, the ‘act meanings’ of words, appropriate or inappropriate behaviors, etc. The following examples could be examined to clarify this:

Example 1: Lan asks Chi about her boyfriend’s family

... Lan: *À, chị hiểu rồi. Thế, gia đình anh ấy có mấy người?*

Ah, I see. So, how many people are there in his family?

Chi: *10 người. Bố mẹ anh ấy sinh 8 người con, 2 trai, 6 gái. Anh ấy là con cả trong gia đình. Em út anh ấy năm nay mới 6 tuổi.*

10 people. His parents gave birth to 8 children, 2 boys and 6 girls. He is the eldest child in the family. His youngest brother is only 6 years old this year.

Lan: *Quê anh ấy ở xa quá! Gia đình anh ấy đông quá! Em không sợ à?*

His home town is so far away! His family is so big! Aren’t you afraid?

Chi: *Không. Tại sao phải sợ, hả chị?* [TV1, bài12, tr.159]

No. Why would I be afraid ? [TV1, lesson 12, p.159].

In this conversation, the utterances have simple vocabulary and structure. However, students will not understand why Chi should be afraid if they don’t understand that in Vietnam, when the parents are old, the eldest child often takes care of the younger ones on behalf of the parents.

Example 2: Sandy just came to Vietnam to practice Vietnamese. She is talking to a Vietnamese friend.

Sandy: *Chắc tôi phải về nước sớm thôi. Tôi không thể ...*  
I must go home soon. I can't...

Mai: *Sao vậy? Chị định ở đây 6 tháng mà.*  
Why? You were going to stay here for 6 months.

Sandy: *Chỗ tôi ở trọ không tốt. Bà chủ nhà trọ quá tò mò. Ông chủ nhà trọ cũng vậy.*  
*Ho luôn luôn hỏi tôi: “Cô đi đâu vậy?”*

My accommodation isn't good. The landlady is too prying. So is the landlord.  
They always ask me: ‘Where are you going?’

Mai: *Ồ, cái đó không phải là tò mò đâu!*  
Oh, that's not prying!

Sandy: *Còn đi ra đường, tôi thường bị hỏi: “Bao nhiêu tuổi? Có gia đình chưa?” Tôi*  
*luôn luôn tự hỏi tại sao người ta tò mò quá vậy.*

And when I go on the street, I am often asked: ‘How old are you? Are you married?’ I always wonder why people are so inquisitive.

Mai: *Ồ, không phải như chị nghĩ đâu.*  
Oh, it isn't what you think.

Sandy: *Ở nước tôi, người ta không hỏi tuổi phụ nữ hay hỏi về chuyện gia đình một cách*  
*tọc mạch như vậy. Người ta cũng ít khi hỏi “Đi đâu đấy?”.*

In my country, people don't ask a woman's age or ask about her family matters in such a nosy way. People rarely ask ‘Where are you going?’

Mai: *Ở Việt Nam, câu hỏi “Đi đâu đấy?” thường được dùng thay cho lời chào khi*

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*gặp nhau, chứ không phải tò mò đâu.*

In Vietnam, the question ‘Where are you going?’ is often used instead of a greeting when meeting someone; it isn’t nosiness.

Sandy: *Thú thật, tôi thấy khó quen được với cách chào hỏi kiểu như vậy. Chính vì thế mà tôi định về nước sớm.*

Honestly, I find it hard to get used to these kinds of greetings. That’s why I’m going to return home early.

Mai: *Cố gắng thêm một, hai lần nữa, chị sẽ quen ngay thôi mà.*

Try one or two more times, you’ll soon get used to it.

Sandy: *Tôi cũng mong như vậy. Thôi, chúng ta đi ăn tối đi.*

I hope so. Well, let’s go to dinner.

Mai: *Được, nhưng hôm nay chúng ta sẽ trả tiền theo “kiểu Việt Nam.” Tôi sẽ đãi chị bữa ăn tối nay. Đồng ý không?* [TV4, bài 9, tr.93].

Okay, but today we will pay the bill in the Vietnamese style. I’ll treat you to dinner tonight. Agreed? [TV4, lesson 9, p.93].

The above conversation is a typical example of cultural integration in teaching Vietnamese. After clarifying the differences between Vietnamese culture and Sandy’s own culture, teachers can expand the topic and relate it to each student’s own culture. The class can also discuss what they would do or how they would feel if they were Sandy, or the “Vietnamese style” of payment, etc.

In general, when encountering words and phrases containing cultural information, teachers should explain, provide relevant cultural knowledge, and help students understand what the writer really wants to express. In this way, students have a basis to understand the entire

text.

### **4.3. Methods of transmission of cultural knowledge**

Firstly, teachers should use real resources from the target language community to help students have authentic cultural experiences. Of course, teachers need to select and adjust materials to suit the age and level of students. In addition, teachers should use different types of learning activities including exercises, discussion-problem solving, games, quizzes, role plays, etc.

A very good way to learn is ‘immersion’ in the target culture: ‘From the first day of class teachers should have prepared a cultural island in their classrooms ... students want to feel, touch, smell, and see the foreign peoples and not just hear their language’ [13:3]. So to some extent, the classroom must become a “cultural island”, in which students will experience culture in a quasi-native environment. That is, the teacher has to create a “third culture,” or an intermediate environment in which students are both observers and participants, and create the conditions for students to discover and reflect on this culture, and the characteristics of both the source and the target culture and language.

Some ways to integrate cultural content into lessons are as followings:

1. Explaining and comparing: The teacher introduces the topics from the target culture, and presents similarities and differences between the target culture and the students’ culture.
2. Discussion and Problem Solving:
  - 2.1. Teacher gives one or more situations related to culture and asks the students to solve them. Each student makes their own decision, then discuss in groups to exchange ideas.
  - 2.2. Students briefly present a specific topic or idea about the difference between the source and target culture (e.g. cuisine, wedding customs, etc.), then give a series of questions for the class to discuss.

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3. Role play: This activity can be used after learning a conversation. Students imagine themselves in a communicative situation related to culture. For example, after learning the vocative words, students role-play a dialogue with inappropriate addressing. Other students observe and detect mistakes, then role-play the same situation, this time using the appropriate addressing words.

4. Culture assimilators: The teacher gives a cultural situation that can cause misunderstanding. Students choose 1 out of 4 response options, and then explain their choice. A similar approach is cultural assimilation through 'cultoons'(pictures/visuals): Students are provided with a series of photographs that highlight some misunderstanding or culture shock that can occur in the target culture. Students assess the characters' reactions (whether it is suitable in the target culture or not), and explain why such a misunderstanding might occur. Cultoons generally promote understanding of cultural facts and some understanding, but they do not usually give real understanding of emotions involved in cultural misunderstandings. [see 21].

5. Sharing cultural resources: Students often come from different cultures, so they can share practical insights from their own country as well as the cultural life of Vietnamese people.

6. Participating in Ethnographic Studies: Students interview native speakers, take notes, record audio and video. It could be the stories of family history which are told directly by native speakers, or interviews with artisans of a craft village, etc. The student acts as an ethnographer, exploring the target culture. In this way, students gain empathy and an understanding of the target culture. Teachers must allow students to observe and explore the culture from their own point of view. It should be noted that this activity requires a lot of time from teachers because they will have to support and supervise students continuously.

7. Literary texts: Literary texts often contain a lot of cultural information and evoke

memorable emotions in the reader. A text which is carefully selected for specific groups of students will help students gain profound linguistic-cultural knowledge.

8. Audiovisual media: Film, video, television, etc. can present cultural themes directly and memorably, and help students vividly perceive cultural acts: ‘Film is often one of the more current and comprehensive ways to encapsulate the look, feel, and rhythm of a culture... Film also connects students with language and cultural issues simultaneously’ [16: 22]; at the same time, this type of media is very useful for teaching culture related to non-verbal forms of communication such as typical gestures, attitudes, facial expressions, etc. in the target culture.

## Conclusion

Learning a foreign language is learning how to communicate in accordance with a foreign culture: ‘if we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates, we are teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning...’ [14 :100-101]. However, it is debatable as to how best to integrate this in language teaching; so it is necessary to heed Kramsch’s statements:

‘Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them.’ [5:1],

and ‘After all, communication requires understanding, and understanding requires stepping into the shoes of the foreigner and sifting her cultural baggage, while always putting [the target] culture in relation with one’s own’ [5:205].

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The intercultural communication approach in foreign language teaching is considered to be the most appropriate one today. It shows how language is constructed to convey cultural content, as well as how culture affects language use. This method requires a lot of teacher effort: firstly, teachers must master professional knowledge of Vietnamese language and Vietnamese culture, which may be hidden behind language factors; secondly, when explaining language issues, teachers should provide relevant cultural knowledge at the same time; thirdly, to help students understand culture more deeply, similarities and differences between Vietnamese culture and students' home culture should be compared. In particular, teachers shouldn't prejudice or judge the differences between the two cultures, and at the same time, they should remember that the goal of teaching is to improve both language knowledge and communication skills.

Thus, teachers must have an understanding of the characteristics, similarities and differences between the students' home culture and Vietnamese culture to integrate in their teaching content. Culture is a very large and diverse field, and teachers need to distinguish the main aspect to introduce to students, and provide students with a suitable approach to self-discovery from a learner-centered perspective. Teachers must also realise that students from different socio-cultural backgrounds will bring their own values and ideas to the classroom, and so it is impossible to create content in which "one size fits all". In fact, the integration of cultural factors into Vietnamese language teaching is very complicated, so that at present there is no one way that can be considered the most appropriate.

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