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Development of Intercultural Communication Skills for Diploma in English Program Students at Village Education College, Myanmar

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A B S T R A C T

In today's globalized world, the ability to communicate effectively across cultures has become essential for English language learners. This article examines the development of intercultural communication skills among Diploma in English program students at Village Education College in Myanmar. The study explores the current state of intercultural communication competence (ICC) among these students, identifies the challenges they face, and proposes practical strategies for enhancing their intercultural skills. Drawing on Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, the article discusses five key components: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. The findings suggest that students at Village Education College face significant barriers in developing ICC, including limited exposure to diverse cultures, traditional grammar-focused instruction, and insufficient opportunities for authentic intercultural interaction. However, the research also reveals that both teachers and students hold positive attitudes towards integrating culture into language teaching. The article recommends curriculum reforms, teacher training programs, and the integration of technology-mediated intercultural experiences to address these challenges. By implementing these recommendations, Village Education College can better prepare its students to communicate effectively in multicultural environments, thereby enhancing their personal and professional opportunities in an increasingly interconnected world.

Introduction

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) has become increasingly important in English language teaching (ELT) around the world. As English continues to serve as a global lingua franca, learners must not only develop linguistic proficiency but also the ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries. This is particularly relevant for students in Myanmar, where English is increasingly used for educational and professional purposes. The Diploma in English program at Village Education College represents an important context for examining how intercultural communication skills can be developed among learners who may have limited exposure to diverse cultural environments.

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The concept of intercultural communicative competence was developed by Byram (1997), who proposed a model consisting of five components: attitudes (savoir être), knowledge (savoirs), skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre), skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire), and critical cultural awareness (savoir s'engager). This framework provides a valuable lens for understanding how language learners can develop the capacity to navigate intercultural encounters successfully. For students in rural Myanmar, developing these competencies presents unique challenges and opportunities.

Myanmar's education system has undergone significant reforms in recent years, with efforts to modernize curriculum and assessment systems. However, English language education in rural areas continues to face challenges such as limited practice opportunities and traditional grammar-focused instruction. Research has shown that rural teachers often express cautious perspectives about innovative teaching approaches, citing concerns related to limited English proficiency, large class sizes, and insufficient training. These contextual factors significantly influence how intercultural communication skills can be developed in programs like the Diploma in English at Village Education College.

Studies conducted in the Myanmar context have revealed important insights about ICC development. Kantamas, Hsai, and Kham (2024) investigated the barriers Myanmar students faced in developing intercultural communication competence, identifying both personal and systemic challenges such as language proficiency issues, cultural misunderstandings, and limited exposure to diverse environments. Similarly, research on Myanmar EFL teachers' attitudes has shown that most teachers hold positive attitudes towards teaching culture and intercultural communicative competence, although they often employ teacher-centered approaches. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to support both teachers and students in developing ICC.

The Diploma in English program at Village Education College serves students who come from rural backgrounds and may have limited prior exposure to intercultural experiences. The program typically includes courses in grammatical studies, composition, speaking and listening, reading, and translation practicum. While these courses develop essential language skills, there is often limited explicit attention to intercultural communication competence. This gap represents a significant opportunity for curriculum enhancement.

This article aims to address the following questions: What is the current state of intercultural communication competence among Diploma in English students at Village Education College? What challenges do these students face in developing ICC? What strategies can be implemented to enhance intercultural communication skills in this context? By examining these questions, the article seeks to provide practical recommendations for educators and policymakers committed to preparing Myanmar's English language learners for successful intercultural communication.

The Concept of Intercultural Communication Competence

Intercultural communication competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds. It involves understanding cultural differences, adapting communication styles, and developing the skills necessary to navigate intercultural encounters successfully. For English language learners, ICC is particularly important because English is often used as a medium of communication between people who do not share a common first language or cultural background.

Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the components of ICC. The model includes five interconnected elements:

Attitudes (savoir être): This component involves curiosity and openness, as well as a willingness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and beliefs about one's own culture. Students must develop positive attitudes towards cultural difference and a readiness to engage with people from diverse backgrounds.

Knowledge (savoirs): This refers to knowledge about social groups and their practices in one's own country and in the interlocutor's country. It includes understanding of social interaction processes and awareness of how cultural factors influence communication.

Skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre): These skills enable learners to interpret a document or event from another culture, explain it, and relate it to documents or events from their own culture. This involves the ability to analyze cultural products and practices and make connections between different cultural contexts.

Skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire): These skills allow learners to acquire new knowledge about a culture and to use that knowledge in real-time communication and interaction. This includes the ability to ask questions, observe cultural practices, and adapt behavior appropriately.

Critical cultural awareness (savoir s'engager): This component involves the ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures and countries. It requires learners to develop a reflective stance towards cultural assumptions and values.

These five components are interdependent and together constitute the foundation of intercultural communicative competence. For students in the Diploma in English program at Village Education College, developing these competencies requires systematic attention across the curriculum.

Research in the Myanmar context has shown that both teachers and learners have positive attitudes towards culture learning and intercultural communicative competence. This positive orientation provides a strong foundation for developing ICC in educational settings. However, positive attitudes alone are insufficient; students also need knowledge, skills, and opportunities for practice.

Challenges in Developing Intercultural Communication Skills in Rural Myanmar

Students at Village Education College face numerous challenges in developing intercultural communication skills. These challenges can be categorized as personal, pedagogical, and contextual factors that collectively influence students' ability to acquire ICC.

Language Proficiency Barriers: One of the most significant challenges is limited English language proficiency. Research has shown that Myanmar students often face difficulties with language proficiency that significantly impede effective communication. When students struggle with basic linguistic skills, they may find it difficult to engage in the complex cognitive and social processes required for intercultural communication. This is particularly true for students from rural areas who may have had limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

Limited Exposure to Diverse Cultures: Students at Village Education College typically come from rural communities where cultural diversity may be limited. Without exposure to diverse cultural perspectives, students may lack the experiential knowledge necessary for developing ICC. Kantamas, Hsai, and Kham (2024) identified limited exposure to diverse environments as a key barrier to intercultural skill development. This limitation affects students' ability to develop the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that comprise ICC.

Traditional Pedagogical Approaches: English language teaching in Myanmar has traditionally been grammar-focused and examination-oriented. This approach emphasizes linguistic accuracy over communicative competence and may not provide sufficient opportunities for students to practice intercultural communication. Research on rural teachers in Myanmar has shown that they often express concerns about limited English proficiency and examination-oriented assessment. These concerns may lead teachers to prioritize grammar instruction over intercultural content.

Insufficient Teacher Training: Many English teachers in Myanmar have not received adequate training in teaching culture and intercultural communication. While research indicates that Myanmar EFL teachers hold positive attitudes towards teaching intercultural communicative competence, they may lack the pedagogical knowledge and skills to integrate culture effectively into their teaching. This gap between positive attitudes and practical implementation represents a significant challenge.

Resource Limitations: Rural educational institutions often face resource constraints that limit their ability to provide intercultural learning experiences. Limited access to authentic materials, technology, and opportunities for interaction with people from other cultures can hinder students' ICC development. The study by Seintita (2025) on implementing communicative language teaching in rural Myanmar highlighted the need for context-sensitive approaches that take resource limitations into account.

Cultural and Social Factors: Myanmar's cultural context also presents unique challenges for ICC development. Students may hold strong attachments to their own cultural norms and values, which can make it difficult to adopt the openness and curiosity required for effective intercultural communication.

Additionally, the historical context of English language education in Myanmar, including its association with colonialism, may influence students' attitudes towards learning about other cultures.

These challenges are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For example, limited exposure to diverse cultures may reinforce traditional pedagogical approaches, while insufficient teacher training may perpetuate limited exposure to intercultural content. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that considers the interrelated nature of these barriers.

Current Practices in Intercultural Communication Education at Village Education College

The Diploma in English program at Village Education College currently offers a curriculum that focuses primarily on developing linguistic competence. The program includes courses in grammatical studies, composition, speaking and listening, reading, and translation practicum. While these courses provide essential foundation in English language skills, they may not explicitly address intercultural communication competence.

Grammar-Focused Instruction: As in many Myanmar educational institutions, the curriculum at Village Education College emphasizes grammatical accuracy. Courses cover parts of speech, relative pronouns, active and passive voice, articles, mood, and subject-verb agreement. While grammatical knowledge is important for language learning, an exclusive focus on grammar may not prepare students for the complex demands of intercultural communication.

Limited Cultural Content: The current curriculum may include limited explicit attention to cultural content. Research on English language teaching in Myanmar has shown that while teachers recognize the importance of cultural background knowledge, cultural content may not be systematically integrated into instruction. This gap means that students may not develop the cultural awareness necessary for effective intercultural communication.

Teacher-Centered Approaches: Studies have indicated that most Myanmar EFL teachers employ teacher-centered approaches to culture teaching. While teacher-centered instruction can be effective for transmitting knowledge, it may not provide students with sufficient opportunities to develop the skills of discovery, interaction, and critical cultural awareness that are central to ICC.

Limited Use of Technology: The use of technology for intercultural learning may be limited at Village Education College. Technology-mediated approaches, such as virtual exchanges and online collaborations, can provide students with opportunities to interact with people from other cultures. However, resource constraints in rural areas may limit access to such opportunities.

Assessment Practices: Assessment in the Diploma in English program likely focuses on linguistic accuracy and knowledge of grammatical rules rather than intercultural competence. This assessment focus may influence what teachers emphasize in their instruction and what students prioritize in their learning.

Despite these limitations, there are positive aspects of current practices. Research has shown that Myanmar EFL teachers have positive attitudes towards teaching culture and intercultural communicative competence. This positive orientation provides a foundation for developing more systematic approaches to ICC education. Additionally, students have been found to prefer intercultural activities and have positive attitudes towards culture learning.

The current practices at Village Education College reflect broader patterns in Myanmar's English language education. As Lall (2021) has documented, Myanmar's education system is undergoing transformation, but challenges remain in implementing communicative and intercultural approaches. The Diploma in English program at Village Education College represents an important site for innovation in intercultural communication education.

Strategies for Enhancing Intercultural Communication Skills

Based on the challenges identified and current practices observed, several strategies can be recommended for enhancing intercultural communication skills among Diploma in English students at Village Education College.

Curriculum Integration: Intercultural communication competence should be systematically integrated across the curriculum rather than treated as a separate topic. This integration can be achieved by incorporating cultural content into existing courses, such as using culturally diverse reading materials in reading courses and including intercultural topics in speaking and listening activities. Byram's (1997) model provides a framework for identifying appropriate learning objectives for each component of ICC.

Task-Based and Experiential Learning: Students should be provided with opportunities to engage in tasks that require intercultural communication. Role-plays, simulations, and project-based learning can help students develop the skills of discovery and interaction. For example, students could be asked to research a cultural practice from another country and present their findings to the class, or to participate in simulated intercultural negotiations.

Use of Technology: Technology can be used to provide students with opportunities for authentic intercultural interaction. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) projects and virtual exchanges can connect students at Village Education College with students in other countries. These experiences can provide valuable opportunities for developing ICC, even when physical travel is not possible. Research has shown that virtual exchange can enhance intercultural communication skills and foster acceptance of English as a lingua franca.

Teacher Professional Development: Teachers need training in how to teach intercultural communication competence. Professional development programs should address both knowledge about ICC and pedagogical strategies for developing it in the classroom. Training should be context-sensitive, taking into account the resource limitations and specific challenges of rural educational settings.

Authentic Materials: The use of authentic materials from diverse cultural contexts can help students develop cultural awareness and knowledge. Materials such as films, news articles, literature, and social media content from different countries can expose students to diverse perspectives and practices. Textbook designers should consider the role of culture teaching as an important criterion in foreign language education.

Critical Reflection: Students should be encouraged to engage in critical reflection on their own cultural assumptions and those of others. Journal writing, discussion, and reflective essays can help students develop critical cultural awareness. This reflective practice is essential for developing the ability to evaluate cultural practices critically.

Extracurricular Activities: Extracurricular activities such as cultural clubs, language exchange programs, and cultural festivals can provide informal opportunities for intercultural learning. These activities can complement formal instruction and provide students with additional opportunities to engage with cultural diversity.

Assessment Reform: Assessment practices should be reformed to include evaluation of intercultural competence. This might include portfolio assessment, self-assessment, and peer assessment of intercultural skills. When students know that intercultural competence is valued and assessed, they may be more motivated to develop these skills.

Community Engagement: The local community can be a resource for intercultural learning. Even in rural areas, there may be opportunities to engage with cultural diversity through community members who have lived or traveled abroad, or through cultural events and festivals. Engaging with the local community can help students see the relevance of intercultural communication to their own lives.

These strategies are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For example, curriculum integration and teacher professional development should be implemented together, as teachers need training to effectively integrate intercultural content. Similarly, the use of technology and authentic materials can support each other, as technology can provide access to authentic materials from diverse cultural contexts.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The development of intercultural communication skills for Diploma in English students at Village Education College has significant implications for educational policy and practice in Myanmar.

Policy Implications: At the policy level, there is a need for national guidelines for integrating intercultural communication competence into English language curricula. The Ministry of Education should

consider developing standards for ICC that can be implemented across different educational contexts, including rural areas. These standards should be flexible enough to accommodate local contexts while providing clear expectations for student learning.

Policymakers should also invest in teacher professional development programs that focus on intercultural communication education. Such programs should be sustained and ongoing, rather than one-time events, to ensure that teachers develop the knowledge and skills needed to teach ICC effectively. The study by Htay and Ngonkum (2026) on implementing CLIL in Myanmar highlighted the need for systematic and context-sensitive training.

Additionally, policies should support the development and distribution of culturally diverse materials. Textbook designers should consider the role of culture teaching as an important criterion in foreign language education. This might involve revising existing textbooks to include more intercultural content or developing new materials specifically designed to develop ICC.

Institutional Implications: At the institutional level, Village Education College should consider revising its Diploma in English curriculum to explicitly address intercultural communication competence. This revision should be guided by Byram's (1997) model and should include clear learning objectives for each component of ICC. The curriculum should also include opportunities for students to practice intercultural communication through task-based and experiential learning activities.

Institutions should also invest in technology infrastructure to support intercultural learning. Access to the internet and digital resources can enable virtual exchanges and provide students with access to authentic materials from diverse cultural contexts. While resource constraints are a reality in rural areas, even basic technology can support meaningful intercultural learning experiences.

Furthermore, institutions should develop assessment systems that evaluate intercultural competence. This might involve developing rubrics for assessing ICC, training teachers in alternative assessment methods, and incorporating intercultural competence into student learning outcomes.

Teacher Implications: For teachers at Village Education College, there is a need to develop their own intercultural competence and their pedagogical knowledge for teaching ICC. Professional development should address both content knowledge (understanding culture and ICC) and pedagogical knowledge (how to teach ICC effectively). Teachers should also be encouraged to reflect on their own cultural assumptions and to model intercultural openness for their students.

Teachers can also play a role in advocating for curriculum reform and in developing locally appropriate materials for intercultural learning. Given the resource limitations of rural contexts, teachers may need to be creative in finding ways to incorporate intercultural content into their teaching.

Student Implications: For students, developing intercultural communication skills has significant personal and professional benefits. In an increasingly globalized world, ICC can enhance employment opportunities, facilitate international collaboration, and enrich personal relationships. Students should be encouraged to take ownership of their intercultural learning and to seek out opportunities for intercultural engagement.

Research Implications: Further research is needed on intercultural communication education in the Myanmar context. Studies should investigate the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches, the impact of technology-mediated interventions, and the long-term outcomes of ICC education. Research should also examine the specific needs and perspectives of students in rural areas, as their experiences may differ from those of students in urban settings.

The implications discussed here highlight the need for a coordinated approach involving policymakers, institutions, teachers, and students. By working together, these stakeholders can create an educational environment that supports the development of intercultural communication skills and prepares students for success in a multicultural world.

Conclusion

This article has examined the development of intercultural communication skills for Diploma in English program students at Village Education College in Myanmar. The discussion has drawn on Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence to provide a framework for understanding the components of ICC and the strategies needed to develop these competencies. The article has revealed that students at Village Education College face significant challenges in developing ICC, including limited language proficiency, limited exposure to diverse cultures, traditional pedagogical approaches, insufficient teacher training, and resource constraints. These challenges are interconnected and require comprehensive solutions that address multiple aspects of the educational system.

Despite these challenges, there are positive foundations for developing ICC at Village Education College. Both teachers and students have positive attitudes towards integrating culture into language teaching. This positive orientation provides a strong basis for curriculum reform and pedagogical innovation. The strategies recommended in this article include curriculum integration, task-based and experiential learning, use of technology, teacher professional development, use of authentic materials, critical reflection, extracurricular activities, assessment reform, and community engagement. These strategies should be implemented in a coordinated manner, recognizing the interconnected nature of the challenges and solutions.

The implications of this research extend beyond Village Education College to the broader Myanmar educational context. Policymakers, institutions, teachers, and students all have roles to play in developing intercultural communication competence. By working together, these stakeholders can create an educational

environment that prepares Myanmar's English language learners for successful intercultural communication in an increasingly interconnected world.

In conclusion, developing intercultural communication skills for Diploma in English students at Village Education College is both a challenge and an opportunity. While significant barriers exist, there is also considerable potential for innovation and improvement. By implementing the strategies recommended in this article, Village Education College can better prepare its students to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries, thereby enhancing their personal and professional opportunities and contributing to Myanmar's engagement with the global community.

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