

Impacts of Culture on Vietnamese Students' Willingness to Communicate in English Classes: An Implication for Teaching and Learning Activities

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Abstract—Cultural differences are believed to cause difficulties for learners in second language acquisition. As an Eastern country, Vietnam has its culture distinctively different from that of Britain and other Western countries, resulting in some differences in the way Vietnamese learners learn English. This study aims to identify some distinctive characteristics of Vietnamese culture and investigate the impacts of Vietnamese culture on the willingness to communicate in English of non-English major students in English classes and propose some solutions to mitigate the negative impacts of the local culture on students' willingness to communicate. To realize these objectives, the qualitative research methods are employed via the use of focus groups (conducted with 30 EFL teachers) and individual interviews (held with 30 non-English majored students) in different universities in Vietnam. The research findings indicate that the four distinctive cultural dimensions of Vietnam, including *high power distance*, *high collectivism*, *high feminism* and *low uncertainty avoidance*, have somewhat interfered in Vietnamese students' willingness to communicate, resulting in their reluctance to raise their voice when participating in speaking activities in English classrooms. On the basis of these findings, some solutions have been proposed to EFL teachers, education administrators and students to help improve students' willingness to communicate so as to enhance their speaking competence.

Index Terms—impacts, speaking competence, Vietnamese culture, Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

I. INTRODUCTION

English has become a language of cross-culture communication. It is used as a common language for business meetings, political events, sports competitions, air traffic control, computing and gaming among many others. English has become so popular that one may quickly feel disadvantaged if he has not yet mastered and been able to use it for information exchange.

In Vietnam, English is the most popular foreign language to be taught and learned. Well aware of its importance, the Government and Education Ministry have approved plans and strategies aimed at improving English proficiency levels of Vietnamese people. Specifically, English has been integrated into teaching curricula at all formal school levels, either as an optional (grades 1 and 2 at primary school) or a compulsory subject (from grade 3 at primary upwards). It is also a subject that students must sit for in high-school graduation and university entrance exams (Central Executive Committee, 2013; National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2014). Many projects have also been conducted, great resources have been invested in enhancing human resources and infrastructure to raise the quality of teaching and learning English in order to prepare students for global communication and future workplaces.

Thanks to these efforts, English proficiency levels of Vietnamese people has improved greatly. According to the English Proficiency Index (EPI) released by EF Education First in 2023, Vietnam ranks 58th in the list of countries with high English standards in the world. This is a positive indicator for the right policies of the country (EF EPI Education First, 2023). However, the report titled "Recruitment Trends in Vietnam, 2023" published by ManpowerGroup Vietnam reveals that the poor English level of workers remains a big obstacle in business environment when "30% of the surveyed

enterprises admit that less than 10% of laborers have sufficient English competence for jobs” (Manpower Group Vietnam, 2023). This demonstrates that more efforts are needed to raise the language proficiency of Vietnamese people.

Of the four language skills, Vietnamese people are particularly weak at speaking (ManpowerGroup Vietnam, 2023). This situation can be partly attributed to the inappropriate teaching/learning and testing methods. For a long time, Vietnamese teachers have made good use of the traditional teaching method of Grammar-Translation in their English classrooms, especially at primary and secondary school levels. Emphases are placed on learners’ command of grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension while little attention is paid to interactive skills like listening and speaking. Learners also feel safer doing exercises in written form than standing up and speaking in front of people (Dutta & Nguyen, 2019). School graduation and university entrance exams are also designed to test learners’ grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension rather than listening and speaking, thus reducing both teachers’ and learners’ motivation to improve learners’ communicative competence (Mai & Thao, 2022).

How to improve students’ language proficiency, especially their speaking ability, is therefore the top concern of both education administrators and teachers. Earlier researchers have shown that once students are willing to speak, their speaking competence improves accordingly (Yashima, 2002; Kim, 2004; Hang, 2009). It is also proved that culture is an influential factor to the learning habits of learners, thereby affecting their language acquisition (Huong, 2008). Therefore, it is of great significance to look into ways to increase students’ willingness to communicate so as to enhance their communication ability, especially from the cultural perspective.

This study aims to investigate the impacts of cultural factors on the willingness of Vietnamese students to communicate in English classrooms, on this basis propose some pedagogical implications to help improve learners’ speaking willingness, contributing to raising the speaking competence of Vietnamese people in particular and their English proficiency in general.

The study consists of 6 main parts: The Introduction presents the rationales for our study; the Literature review presents some fundamental concepts related to the research topic; the Methodology describes the methods used to answer the research questions; the Results and discussion presents the main results of the research; the Implications and proposals presents some suggested solutions for relevant parties and the Conclusion recaps the highlights of the study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

As a topic of research, the relationships between language and culture have drawn great attention from scholars. Lots of research has been done on the impacts of culture on language study and language acquisition. This part reviews the studies related to the influences of culture on learners’ willingness to communicate and presents some concepts related to culture and its effects on willingness to communicate with focus on the language teaching contexts.

A. *Willingness to Communicate (WTC)*

For language learners, to acquire the four language skills, frequently practicing using English to communicate is essential. Concurring with a broadly held conviction within the language learning (L2) division, WTC plays a noteworthy part in L2 communication behavior and, as a result, contributes to L2 competence. WTC is a pivotal construct in the field of communication and applied linguistics. Rooted in social psychology and language learning theories, WTC reflects an individual’s predisposition to initiate communication when given the opportunity (MacIntyre et al., 1998). The concept has ended up a critical concept in understanding moment dialect securing; thus, it has garnered significant scholarly interest due to its relevance in various contexts, including interpersonal communication, language learning, and intercultural competence.

For its importance to humans in both their daily and academic life, WTC has been an interest among researchers. In terms of definition, each scholar has their own viewpoint. WTC was first conceptualized in interpersonal communication studies by McCroskey and Baer (1985) as a stable personality trait predicting communicative behavior. This trait-oriented perspective emphasized the role of an individual’s communication apprehension, self-esteem, and personality traits, such as introversion and extroversion. MacIntyre et al. (1998) introduced a situational perspective to WTC, particularly in second language acquisition, which is defined as the readiness to enter discourse at a particular time, with a specific person or persons using a second language. The authors suggest that communication readiness is the willingness to engage in conversation at a particular time, with a particular person or people, using a second language and being perceived as competent. WTC is also defined by MacIntyre et al. (2003, p. 538) as “...the predisposition toward or away from communicating, given the choice”, which is not only in line with MacIntyre et al. (1998) but also presents a more comprehensive view about the WTC among language learners. The scholars proposed a "pyramid model" where WTC is influenced by enduring, contextual, and situational factors. The pyramid model integrates six layers, ranging from enduring influences, such as personality and intergroup attitudes, to situational factors like topic familiarity and interlocutor characteristics. This multidimensional framework underscores the dynamic nature of WTC, emphasizing how internal and external factors interact to shape an individual’s WTC in a specific moment.

In later years, Kang (2005) explains WTC as referring to an individual’s behaviour and predisposition towards positive communication behaviours in certain environments. In this definition, WTC is considered an excellent predictor of communication frequency, involving factors such as the learner’s personality and motivation, as well as social factors.

This approach is partly consistent with MacIntyre et al. (2003), emphasizing good attitudes towards communication of language learners.

B. Factors Influencing Willingness to Communicate

Earlier researchers have listed several factors that contribute to learners' WTC in classrooms which are shown as follows.

Communication anxiety: McCroskey (1996) refers to communication anxiety as communication apprehension, characterizing it as fear or anxiety related to actual or projected conversation with another person or persons. Communication apprehension, according to Horwitz et al. (1986), is the uneasiness that a person experiences when speaking in a foreign language.

Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC): self-perceived communication competence, or SPCC, is known as one's assessment of their own capacity to communicate effectively in a given circumstance (McCroskey, 1982). Similar to this, MacIntyre et al. (1998) describe SPCC as the perception of one's capacity for effective communication at a given time. An individual's readiness to speak will thereafter decline when he feels uneasy in a given situation, with a specific person, or when he believes he is not competent enough. On the other hand, WTC will improve if an event lowers anxiety or raises perceived competence.

Motivation: Motivation is another important factor that has been shown in the research to have a considerable impact on a person's level of communication willingness. According to MacIntyre et al. (2003), motivation has a beneficial impact on WTC in L2, which leads to an increase in L2 communication frequency.

Personality: According to Cetinkaya (2005), personality (introvert vs. extrovert) plays a significant role in determining a person's level of communication readiness. It was shown that students who are more outgoing perceive themselves as having more communication skills, which will increase their propensity to talk.

Content and Context: According to Kang's (2005) findings, students feel more comfortable speaking with those they know well. Furthermore, the participants' sense of security declined as the number of participants in a chat increased. Additionally, it was discovered that when the interviewer listened to the participants intently and smiled, the participants felt more comfortable. Finally, if the other person spoke more fluently than they did, the participants felt uneasy. One additional significant finding of the study was the influence of the topic. It was discovered that participants were more willing to participate in a discussion on a topic they were interested in, knew a little about, and felt comfortable discussing. Additionally, they prefer to converse with someone who can assist them become more proficient in English.

Gender and Age: MacIntyre (1994) looked into the differences in communication willingness between sexes and age groups. Research indicates that men become more open to communication as they get older. In contrast, as women age, their willingness to converse decreases. Generally speaking, women were more open to communicating than men were.

Culture: Huong (2008) explores some causes rooted in traditional Vietnamese cultures that result in Vietnamese students' hesitation in communicating in English and concludes that students are reluctant to speak because of their habit of being good listeners to teacher's talk, their fears of causing teachers to lose face due to students' disagreement or criticism, which means the teachers' imperfection and above all, it is due to Vietnamese custom to be modest and showing knowledge when being asked or saying little is more admirable to being talkative. These findings are confirmed in the study of Mai and Thao (2022) on the internal and external factors related to Vietnamese cultures that influence learners at tertiary institutions in Vietnam.

C. Culture and Vietnamese Culture

Culture is a broad concept that is defined differently from different angles. According to Tylor (2001), culture is "...that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p. 13). This definition addresses and emphasizes the thoughts and behaviours of a single person in relation with others in the society. Nguyen (2008) defines the culture of a nation as a complexity including what that nation creates and absorbs (both tangible and intangible) and the ways in which that nation behaves in different situations. This complexity helps distinguish one nation from another not only in terms of the presence or absence of those products and actions, but also in terms of their manner of expression. Generally, the two definitions seem to be different but share the same approach to the issue, in the way that culture is of individuals and the community they belong to. However, the latter is an expansion of the former, which considers culture in a wider scope, showing distinguishing features between different countries.

Culture is deeply embedded in people's mind and affects the way they do things, including their ways of learning a new language. To analyze the impacts of culture on the speaking willingness of learners in language classrooms, Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimension model is chosen. The model uses cultural indexes to compare different cultures in the world. In this study, the 4 distinctive dimensions of culture are presented, together with their interpretation in the teaching-learning contexts.

The first aspect is **Power Distance Index (PDI)**. Power distance is defined as the degree to which less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a people expect and accept the unequal distribution of power. Vietnam scores high on this index (70 points), meaning people accept a hierarchical system in which everyone has their place and no further justification is needed. As a result, Vietnamese people tend to express their ideas less directly, rather than going straight to the point, unlike the way Westerners often do in their daily communications. In the school contexts, a high PDI

implies that Vietnamese students feel that they are supposed to listen to and follow whatever their teachers say and stay away from any disagreement or criticism. Also, students often defer to authority figures and may be hesitant to express opinions or challenge teachers in classroom settings. This deference can reduce willingness to speak, as learners fear making mistakes or appearing disrespectful (Nguyen, 2019).

The second one is *Individualism Versus Collectivism (IDV)*. The fundamental issue that concerns this perspective is the degree of interdependence that society maintains among its members. Vietnam, with 20 points, is a collectivist society. Such a society fosters strong relationships where everyone is accountable to their group members. In a collective society, insulting each other will lead to shame and loss of face. This results in indirect verbal communication among people in collectivist society. The collectivist orientation of Vietnamese culture places a strong emphasis on maintaining group harmony and avoiding actions that may disrupt social cohesion. This can result in learners being reluctant to speak in class, particularly in group settings, due to fear of embarrassment or negatively affecting the group's dynamics (Tran, 2020). Therefore, in classroom context, it is a custom for students to be modest and show knowledge only when being asked, as they fear that if they say something wrong, they may be laughed at and looked down on by their classmates.

The third index is *Masculinity Versus Femininity (MAS)*, which evaluates the values in society they care for. Vietnam scores 40 on this index and is therefore considered a Feminine society. In Feminine countries, conflicts in communication are avoided while emotion and harmony are prioritized. That is why, from linguistic perspectives, Vietnamese people often use words cautiously to avoid hurting others and consider the use of descriptive language to express their opinions. In foreign language classrooms, this is partly the reason why many Vietnamese students are in the habit of taking time to arrange what they are going to say before uttering in order to make sure that what they say is appropriate.

The fourth one is *Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)*, which concerns how society deals with the anxiety caused by ambiguity. Vietnam scores 30 out of 100 and therefore has little desire to avoid ambiguity. Societies low on this index maintain a more relaxed attitude towards changing environments or unstructured situations. High uncertainty avoidance can lead to anxiety about speaking in unfamiliar or ambiguous situations. Vietnamese learners often prefer structured activities and clear guidance, as ambiguity in communication may heighten apprehension and reduce their willingness to speak (Le & Pham, 2021). They are also open to discussions and tend to accept different viewpoints. In a language classroom, Vietnamese students seem more willing to speak in unofficial situations like in their own groups but become reluctant when they need to present in front of the whole class.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

The literature reviews reveal that WTC is a fundamental facilitator to students' speaking competence. WTC is affected by various factors, including the culture. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the impacts of cultural factors on students' WTC in English classrooms and see what can be done to mitigate the "interferences" – the negative impacts - of local culture on students' WTC so as to encourage students to speak more. The two following research questions need to be answered in this study:

1. *How does Vietnamese culture impact Vietnamese students' willingness to communicate in English classrooms?*
2. *What can be done to mitigate the interferences of Vietnamese culture into Vietnamese students' willingness to communicate in English classrooms?*

B. Research Methods

As suggested by Saunders et al. (2012), in order to examine the perceptions of participants, the qualitative method should be used. Therefore, to see how Vietnamese culture affects the willingness of Vietnamese students in speaking English and what can be done to reduce the negative impacts, in-depth interviews were conducted with both teachers and students. The interview protocol was used to help the interviewers. The list of themes and questions were prepared beforehand, but questions in the interviews did not strictly follow the outlined plan; i.e., some questions were omitted, added or rephrased depending on the flow of the conversation, based on the specific situations. The interviews took around 2 months, in June and July 2024, and were held online to make it convenient for all participants.

The interviews were carried out in two ways. With teachers, interviews were held in the form of focus groups with the researchers acting as the moderators. Eight focus groups were organized with the number of participants (excluding the moderator) ranging from 2 to 4. Focus groups were chosen because they helped the researchers get multi-faceted answers from teachers when they discussed the topic with each other. Participants in the focus groups included EFL teachers with teaching experiences ranging from 4 to 12 years, working in 9 different universities and colleges in Hanoi. With students, interviews were held individually as it was not convenient to join them together. There were 30 students from 12 Hanoi-based universities invited for the interviews. They were all non-English major students in different academic years and have different English-learning timespan. The non-majored were intentionally chosen as the subjects of the interviews because these students learn English as a tool for communication in their future job, rather than specializing in English as their career path, so they do not have as strong motivations as the majored students to overcome some barriers in communication. The demographic information of the research participants is presented in the following table.

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Characteristics		Number	Percentage (%)
Teachers			
Genders	Male	4	13.33
	Female	26	86.67
Working experience	1-5 years	8	26.67
	5-10 years	18	60.00
	Over 10 years	4	13.33
Qualifications	Bachelor	0	0.00
	Master	26	86.67
	Doctor	4	13.33
Total		30	
Students			
Genders	Male	18	60.00
	Female	12	40.00
Year at university	First year	6	20.00
	Second year	8	26.67
	Third year	10	33.33
	Fourth year or more	6	20.00
Years of learning English	1-5 years	6	20.00
	5-10 years	22	73.33
	Over 10 years	2	6.67
Total		30	

Source: researchers' data collection

The focus groups and interviews were held in Vietnamese for convenience. They were recorded at the approvals of the participants, the answers were then transcribed and translated into English to be presented in the Results and Discussion.

To analyse the qualitative data, the step-by-step procedure was used: the collected data was preliminarily read through, organized, coded and classified. To make it convenient for finding presentations, each research participant was given a code with teachers being coded T-01 to T-30 and students S-01 to S-30.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The use of in-depth interviews with both teachers and non-majored students has helped the researchers to gain useful information on the researched topics. In this part of the article, the results of the interviews are presented in two parts to answer the two research questions posed in part 3.

A. Impacts of Vietnamese Culture on Students' Willingness to Communicate

It is a widely-accepted idea that *"as culture is deeply imbedded in our life, it has a profound effect on our attitudes, behaviour and habits"* (T-09). The ways we respond to things are shaped by our perceptions that are formed and nurtured by cultural values, so how we act in many situations just comes naturally even *"without our being aware of"* (T-13). Therefore, culture certainly has influences on the way students learn a foreign language, as a teacher put it:

"Based on my observations in the classrooms, I see that the behaviour of my students is subject to what they are taught by their grandparents, parents, teachers since their childhood. That comes from the culture of the country as well as of their family" (T-21).

Regarding the specific influences of Vietnamese culture on students' willingness to speak in English classrooms, participants in the research have mentioned various aspects of the national culture that they believe have impacts on students' attitudes in the speaking lessons. Based on the theoretical grounds related to the four aspects in the cultural dimension model proposed by Hofstede (1980), the opinions of the participants are organized into 4 themes as follows.

Power Distance Index (PDI)

Hierarchy is among the most distinctive cultural features of Eastern countries, Vietnam included. In a society of high hierarchy like ours, it is a norm that juniors, i.e., students in the educational setting, have to follow what the seniors, i.e., teachers, say. Criticizing teachers or showing suspects of what they are saying are considered a clear sign of disrespect that may involve students in lots of trouble.

Teachers participating in the interviews mostly agree that they enjoy *"great respects from students inside and outside the classrooms"* (T-11). Teachers are rarely questioned or challenged by students, who take it for granted that *"everything teachers are saying is correct and reasonable, and we just have to take notes and follow"* (S-08). Testing and assessment also contribute to this behaviour among students, as one recalls *"in the exam, we just need to present exactly what teachers have taught, and that's enough to get high scores"* (S-26) and *"we usually try to learn by heart the knowledge in the books or the lessons of the teachers"* (S-02).

In that way, a society with a high PDI does not create room for students to get used to practicing and promoting their innovations and creativity. One teacher provides a detailed illustration:

"There seems to be no encouragement for new ideas. Students don't have the motivation to think differently. They only try to learn what is taught. It is safer and more convenient. They also don't have the motivation to share their ideas voluntarily. Thus, they tend to keep silent in the class, except when they are asked" (T-20).

A student shares his opinion on this matter, explaining that *“we feel safe sitting quietly in the class and writing notes of the lessons. If we say something, other classmates think that we want to show off, that may make us unfavourable to our friends”* (S-29). This reluctance grows in English classes as students need to express their ideas in a new language rather than their mother tongue, which means that *“the likelihood of making mistakes is far higher”* (S-06).

Individualism Versus Collectivism (IDV)

According to Hofstede’s cultural dimension mode, Vietnam is a highly collectivist society where people attach great importance to keeping face, especially in the public. People avoid doing things that result in shame and loss of face of their own as well as their partners. In students’ eyes, saying something wrong is *“a signal of being weak, being incompetent”* (S-23) and making mistakes is *“very serious”* (S-19) as it may show that the students do not fully understand the lessons or are not as talented as other classmates. This way of thinking has resulted in students feeling reluctant to share their opinions in the classroom. As a teacher explains it in detail:

“I realize that when I ask my students to present their ideas on a topic, if I give them a few minutes to prepare, many students then raise their hands to share their opinions. If not, hardly anyone says anything. I also realize that when I give them time to prepare, students usually write their answers in full sentences, then they speak them out. This is because they are afraid that if they say something without preparation, they may make mistakes and are laughed at. I encourage them a lot but many are still reluctant” (T-29).

A collectivist society also means that people feel safer and stronger when they can do things in groups rather than individually. This is why Vietnamese students tend to be *“more willing to speak when they are asked to work in groups of 3 to 5 than to speak in front of the class”* (T-03) and *“prefer to make group presentations rather than to speak individually”* (T-30) because working in groups brings people the feeling that there are some others to share the responsibilities, or in some cases, to take blame for, as explained by a student: *“knowing that there is someone standing beside makes me feel less worried than when I need to stand there alone, in front of so many people”* (S-19).

Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS)

Hofstede’s model reveals that in a feminine culture like Vietnam, people tend to be very selective in using words so as to avoid hurting others. As one student expresses:

“I always feel afraid that I may say something not appropriate in the situation, especially when my English is not good enough. I don’t know whether what I say is ok or it may sound bad or have some meanings that I don’t intend to mean” (S-07).

A teacher shares this view by describing her teaching experience:

“I have talked to some of my students. I ask them why they don’t voluntarily raise their voice, as I know that they know the answer, because when I call their name, they give me an adequate answer. They tell me that they are not confident to share their opinions in English because they don’t know whether their use of the language is suitable. Anyway, English is not their mother tongue. So, they feel uncertain. And they choose the safe solution – that is to keep quiet” (T-02).

Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)

Hofstede’s model shows that Vietnam is grouped into societies with a quite low UAI. Citizens of this society are open to discussions and often feel more relaxed in unstructured situations. In a language classroom, having to stand in front of the class to share opinions may make students quite tense, as described by a student in the interview: *“I am often scared when I have to speak in front of the class. I feel as if everybody is looking at me. That makes me confused and sometimes I forget what I intend to say”* (S-10). For this feeling, students become much less willing to speak in the English classrooms, especially when they *“do not receive rewards for their efforts”* (T-18).

An interesting thing to note is that while students feel stressed when presenting their ideas in front of the class, they become much more willing to speak in some “informal situations” like in their small group, as they *“feel closer to and familiar with”* other team members, so they become more relaxed to share their ideas (S-08).

To recap, it can be seen that given its distinctive features as shown in high Power Distance, high Collectivism, high Femininity and low Uncertainty Avoidance, Vietnamese culture has some interference to students’ WTC as they tend to be shy when asked to speak for fear of being judged or criticized of some mistakes they may make. They are also reluctant to share their ideas in public while they become more confident to raise their voice when working in smaller groups or when being given time to prepare for what they are going to say. These findings are the grounds for some pedagogical implications to be made at the end of this article.

B. How to Reduce the Interferences of Culture on Students’ Willingness to Communicate

The impacts of national culture on the way students learn a foreign language may be unavoidable, but if teachers and learners are aware of the impacts, they may actively adjust their teaching/learning methods and behaviour so as to minimize the interferences.

Teachers participating in the focus groups have provided deep insights into the techniques they often use in their English-speaking classes, which demonstrates the advantages of focus groups as a method of qualitative research. Teachers mostly agree that they should play the central role in changing the teaching methods to deal with obstacles in the learning setting as *“teachers are better trained”* (T-21) and therefore should guide and facilitate students to be more willing to communicate. A teacher particularly proposes that as it is impossible to change the culture, teachers should *“base on the nation’s distinctive cultural features to adjust their teaching approaches”* (T-14).

Specifically, to deal with the problem that students are not willing to raise their voice for fear of making mistakes, it is a good technique to “*give them some time for preparation before organizing the speaking activity*” (T-29) as it helps students to “*feel more confident*” (S-19) so that their willingness will be raised. Although this might partly affect the practice of students’ responses to questions, with time when students get used to communicating in public, they can overcome their reluctance and become more willing to speak without preparation.

In addition, as an experienced teacher suggests, it is necessary for both teachers and students to change their mind-sets about mistakes. Mistakes should not be considered as the evidence of inability or poor proficiency, and teachers “*should reconsider the way they correct mistakes*” (T-25) and try not to jump in all mistakes that students make but “*accept it as part of the learning process*” (T-28) as students may feel uncomfortable if all their mistakes are corrected when they are speaking, as one student expresses:

“I know that mistakes should be checked and corrected, so that I won’t repeat them in the future, but somehow, I still feel ashamed when so many mistakes are corrected by my teacher. It makes me feel that my speech is very bad, very erroneous. And I don’t dare to speak the next time” (S-02).

Organizing students into small groups in the speaking class is also a useful teaching method as it helps to reduce students’ anxiety when speaking in front of a big-size class and it fits the distinctive features of a collectivist culture like Vietnam’s. When working in small groups, students feel “*less stressed and pressurized,*” so they become more willing to communicate their ideas, as explained by one student:

“I feel much less anxious when I work in a small group of 4 to 5 members, especially when I know all of them. I know that they are quite the same as me. I become more confident and happier with this arrangement” (S-19).

The responses of teachers and students indicate that there should be changes in the mind-sets of teachers and students towards mistakes as well as the way class activities are organized so as to create a stress-free atmosphere in the classroom to raise students’ willingness to raise their voice. These are the foundations for the proposals to teachers, educators and students below.

V. CONCLUSION

The research findings reveal that Vietnamese culture is distinctive. Vietnamese culture is characterized by a high hierarchical system (as reflected by a high Power Distance Index), high collectivism (as shown by a low Individualism Index), high femininity (as demonstrated by a quite low Masculinity Index) and low uncertainty avoidance (as indicated by a low Uncertainty Avoidance Index). These features should be taken into account by relevant parties. Based on the research findings, the following implications are proposed to help reduce the “interferences” of Vietnamese culture on Vietnamese students’ WTC.

Firstly, EFL teachers should be aware of their central role in making and administering changes in the way their classes are run to promote students’ willingness to speak. Teachers should understand that it is hard, if not to say impossible, to change the behaviour of the students if they do not change their teaching methods. Culture is something deeply imbedded in students’ minds, so rather than changing the culture, teachers should adjust their techniques so that they can make use of the distinctive cultural features to gain the expected learning outcomes. Specifically, when organizing speaking activities, teachers should give non-English major students some minutes for preparation before calling for opinions, so that students can have time to arrange their language. Besides, teachers should divide students into small groups and assign speaking tasks for the groups rather than asking students to work individually, this is expected to help students be more confident in expressing their ideas. Other communicative teaching techniques also do wonders for students, such as the use of communicative games and activities during class time as this helps to create a favourable atmosphere that makes students feel more relaxed and comfortable. Moreover, teachers should also adjust the way they deal with mistakes students make in speaking. Rather than correcting any mistakes that students make, they should only focus on some that are detrimental to the communication purposes and instead of correcting along the way students are speaking, they should take notes of the mistakes and make constructive comments afterwards. Regarding mistakes, teachers should also make it clear to students that mistakes are merely the evidence that students are trying to learn to make progress rather than the evidence that they are not up to the required standards. Furthermore, it would also work if teachers offer some motivation to students who actively participate in the speaking activities. An incentive scheme proves effective in any situation, also a small bonus of marks or gifts can encourage students to raise their voice in the language class.

Secondly, education administrators and teachers involved should reconsider the way testing and assessments are administered. Currently, in many higher education institutions of Vietnam, due to the oversized English classrooms and time limits, most English tests and exams organized for non-English major students are in the written forms, which means that students’ communication competence is not directly assessed, resulting in students’ lower motivation to improve this skill. The inclusion of speaking in the tests and exams would impose pressure on students, which is linked to their stronger motivation to participate in speaking activities in the classrooms and increase their WTC. Besides, professional training for EFL teachers is highly needed, as only when teachers are equipped with adequate knowledge of skills to do their tasks can they know of and actively fully exploit advanced teaching methods to improve students’ learning outcomes. Short-term and long-term training courses should be organized by central authorities and the academic institutions to help teachers update the pedagogical information so that they can come up with effective teaching initiatives.

Finally, students should also make greater efforts to change as they are both the beneficiaries and the subjects of the changes. While culture cannot change itself, students can change their perceptions and attitudes. They should create self-motivation and understand that if they do not better their oral communication competence, their academic performance and job prospects would suffer. Only by fully understanding the importance of speaking practice, can students adjust their behaviour in the speaking classes and become more willing to participate in speaking activities, thereby improving their communication proficiency.

Culture goes hand in hand with language. When learning a foreign language, one would be affected by his national culture. For Vietnamese learners of English language, the impacts of Vietnamese culture on learners' learning attitude seem to be considerable due to the big differences between the two cultures. The study looks into the influences of Vietnamese culture on the WTC in English of non-English major students. Using qualitative research methods via focus groups and interviews conducted with EFL teachers and non-English major students, the study finds out that the four distinctive cultural dimensions of Vietnam, including high power distance, collectivism, feminism and low uncertainty avoidance, have somewhat hindered Vietnamese students' WTC, resulting in their reluctance to raise their voice in speaking activities in English classrooms. Based on these findings, some implications and proposals have been made to EFL teachers, education administrators and students to help improve students' WTC so as to enhance their speaking competence.

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