



INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF AMERICAN AND BRITISH CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN IMPROVING EFL STUDENTS' INTERPRETATION SKILLS

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Abstract:

Culture and language are inseparable from each other. Consequently, the integration of cultural content into language education becomes highly valuable, promoting the embracement of diverse cultures and intercultural understanding. This research aimed to explore the viewpoints of English major students on the importance of acquiring competence in American and British cultural competence for interpretation skills. A survey with two sections was employed to gather data from 32 participants, and descriptive statistics were used for data analysis. Overall, the study's findings indicated that EFL students had positive attitudes towards American and British cultures and the integration of these factors in interpretation courses. However, challenges arise when interpreting between Vietnamese and English due to unfamiliar cultural terms and concepts, as well as the lack of equivalent idioms in Vietnamese-English and English-Vietnamese interpreting. In the light of findings, the study provides essential recommendations for students and educators, emphasizing the need to enhance students' academic performance and intercultural competence as well as foster positive perceptions of the target cultures.

Keywords: interpretation, students' perceptions, students' perspectives, cultural competence, cultural awareness

1. Introduction

As a result of globalization and integration, cross-border interactions are becoming much more frequent. Nevertheless, cultural differences are significant obstacles to successful multi-cultural communication. Since language is an integral part of culture and reflects it, learning a language also involves learning its culture. It is obvious that interpreters

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cannot completely comprehend and convey the content of a conversation without sufficient understanding of the culture of the source language (SL). Brembeck (1977) had ever said humorously that to know another's language and not his culture was a very good way to make a fluent fool of one's self.

Many scholars stated that foreign language teaching cannot merely train language skills, but at the same time, learners need to equip themselves with an understanding of the target language (TL) culture (Nghiem, 2018). While more and more people are spending time studying English as a second language since it is considered as a way of international communication, acquiring American and British cultural competence is an essential step in the language learning process. Understanding the cultural factors and context behind the language surely helps learners communicate effectively and appropriately in various settings. It includes developing familiarity with cultural norms, values, customs, and beliefs existing in the U.S. and the UK. acquiring cultural knowledge also helps learners comprehend literature, media, and other forms of communication accurately. Therefore, incorporating cultural aspects into learning programs is crucial for learners to become proficient in English.

The objective of this research is to investigate the opinions of students majoring in English regarding the significance of being competent in American and British cultural in interpretation. On that basis, some solutions are suggested to aid students in enhancing their interpretation skills and to assist teachers in implementing more effective teaching techniques that can encourage students to take an interest in interpretation courses as well as to develop their American and British cultural competence, which can result in their both academic and professional achievements. The study concentrates on answering two questions:

- 1) What are students' perceptions of the role of American and British cultural competence in interpretation?
- 2) What solutions can be applied to enhance students' intercultural competence?

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition of translation and cultural competence

Pochhacker (2004) defines interpretation as *"a form of translation in which a first and final rendition in another language is produced on the basis of a one-time presentation of an utterance in a source language"*.

Tylor (1871) defined culture as *"that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"*. UNESCO (1892) also gives a definition of culture as a set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of a society or social group, encompassing all the ways of being in that society; at a minimum, including art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs (UNESCO, 1982). Hall (1976) suggested that culture can be compared to an iceberg, where only a small portion of it is visible above the surface, while the majority of it remains hidden beneath.



Figure 2.1: Hall's Iceberg Model of Culture

The visible part of the iceberg represents the tangible aspects of culture, such as language, customs, and behavior, which are easily observable and can be learned through explicit instruction or observation. The hidden part of the iceberg represents the more abstract and implicit elements of culture, such as values, beliefs, and attitudes. In order to truly understand and appreciate a culture, one must also pay attention to its hidden aspects, which can significantly impact people's perceptions and behaviors. The importance of cultural sensitivity and empathy in cross-cultural interactions needs to be noticed because differences in hidden cultural aspects can often lead to misunderstandings and conflicts.

Intercultural competences refer to possessing pertinent knowledge about specific cultures as well as comprehensive knowledge about the potential challenges that appear during interactions between members from different cultures. It involves developing an open-minded and accepting attitude that fosters the foundation and sustainability of trust and connections with people from various backgrounds. Furthermore, it entails possessing the skills to utilize both knowledge and attitudes effectively while interacting with individuals from different cultures (UNESCO, 2013).

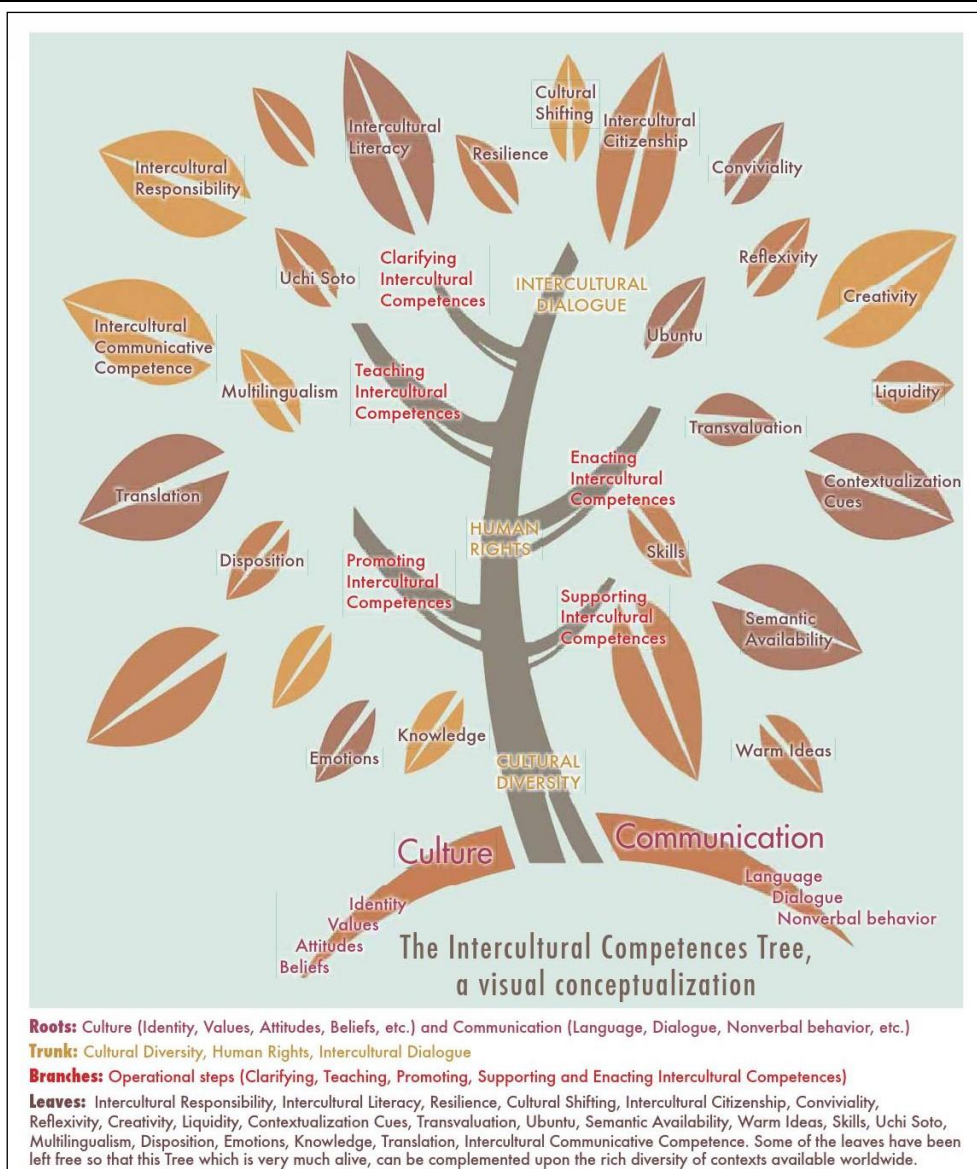


Figure 2.2: The intercultural competence tree, a visual conceptualization (adapted from UNESCO, 2013)

2.2 Cultural influences on interpretation

Culture has a significant impact on interpretation. To successfully convey ideas and meanings of the conversation, interpreters must possess adequate knowledge of both the SL and TL. The challenge of interpretation primarily stems from comprehending cultural context, which includes a range of fields such as art, history, geography, philosophy, science, and so forth (Choudhury, 2014). When it comes to unfamiliar cultural backgrounds, interpreters may struggle to understand the information they are listening. While simple pronunciation can help interpreters grasp the words, a lack of cultural knowledge can hinder their overall understanding. For instance, Americans use the phrase "like the sky of the 4th of July" to describe bright lights, but non-Americans may not realize that July 4th is the US Independence Day, when fireworks light up the night sky. On the other hand, when interpreters encounter familiar topics, such as news,

reports, or lectures on art, science, sports, or economics, even when faced with new vocabulary, they can guess the meaning based on cultural context.

2.3 Related studies

Substantial researches have already been devoted to examining students' difficulties in translation/interpretation as well as to clarifying the roles of cultural competence in learning EFL, or more specifically in interpretation skills. For instance, Tran (2021) conducted a study on "English majors' difficulties and expectations in written translation courses". The author found that due to the unique lifestyles, thinking patterns, and cultural norms that vary across societies, students may encounter difficulty in accurately translating cultural elements, particularly idiomatic or proverbial expressions. Students tend to interpret idioms in a literal or word-for-word manner, which leads to frequent errors. In addition, the research "Developing students' sociocultural competence in foreign language classes" was carried out by Vetrinskaya and Dmitrenko (2017). According to the researchers, the diverse practice of intercultural communication has demonstrated that possessing advanced knowledge of a foreign language does not ensure smooth communication and may not exclude misunderstandings and conflicts when interacting with native speakers. Therefore, it is imperative for students to prepare carefully to have successful intercultural encounters.

The study "Korean – Vietnamese and vice versa translation: The importance of the acquisition of socio-cultural background in the practice of translation" conducted by Nghiem (2018) shows that the task and requirement of translators/interpreters is that they must thoroughly understand the cultural context in the SL and convey it in a reasonable way to TL. Interpreters have to play a role of cultural mediator by adopting the precise understanding of the two cultures in the position of "intermediate culture" in order to minimize mistranslation.

Similarly, Köksal and Yürük (2020) did research on "The role of translator in intercultural communication". The authors state that interpreters play a crucial role as cultural intermediaries between individuals who need to communicate but lack a mutual language. As bridges in intercultural communication, it is required that interpreters possess not only exceptional language skills but also extensive knowledge of diverse cultural backgrounds. The significance of intercultural awareness in facilitating intercultural communication is emphasized and interpreters/translators should enhance their sensitivity not only to linguistic disparities but also to cultural differences to avoid misunderstandings and promote effective intercultural communication.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The researcher utilized a quantitative approach to conduct a descriptive study on how students perceive the importance of cultural competence in American and British interpretation. Based on the findings, the study proposes solutions to help students

improve their interpretation skills and assist teachers in implementing more effective teaching methods that encourage students to take an interest in interpretation courses and develop their American and British cultural competence.

3.2. The participants

There were 32 (23 females and 9 males) English-majored seniors at the School of Foreign Languages, School of Southern Khmer Language, Culture, Arts and Humanity, Tra Vinh University (TVU) who answered the questionnaire designed to collect data for this research. The study participants were chosen from the final-year students who had completed translation classes and specialized translation courses in the curriculum. As a result, these participants had a good understanding of the significance of cultural competence in oral translation, making the data obtained from them more dependable.

3.3. Research instruments

This research was designed based on the quantitative method, with data collected through the use of a questionnaire. Questionnaires are frequently used as a data collection tool in research (Marshall, 2005). The questionnaire used in this research was adapted from a review of the literature. There were 20 questions divided into two parts. The first part is about the students' self-assessment of cultural competence and conditions for studying culture at the School of Foreign Languages, School of Southern Khmer Language, Culture, Arts and Humanity, TVU with 8 items. The second part presents 12 items that identify students' perceptions about the importance of cultural competence in American and British interpretation. The respondents read the questions and answered them by ticking in the scale box (from 1 to 5 in order, from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

3.4. Research procedures

Firstly, the researchers designed the questionnaire, adapted from Rasmussen studies (2015, 2021) on cultural competence, Belly (2018), Ly (2022), and then some new questions were added to the questionnaire to match the current situation of students at TVU. Since the participants were English majors, the questionnaire was written in English. Then, the questionnaire was dispatched and received feedback from a prestige English lecturer. After several times of corrections, the questionnaire was delivered to 32 participants of the class DA19NNAB. The aims of the study were clearly explained and the participants were shown how to complete the questionnaire. Finally, the completed surveys were collected by the researchers for data analysis.

3.5. Data processing method

The authors utilized the SPSS software to analyze the responses. The SPSS was used to obtain descriptive statistics and means, which enabled the researchers to determine respondents' perceptions of the role of American and British cultural competence in

interpretation. Microsoft Excel was employed to create charts that presented the gathered data in a clear and concise manner.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. The reliability of the questionnaire

A group of 32 English-majored seniors completed the questionnaire. All the data collected from the questionnaire were computed to check the frequency and the internal reliability coefficient. The result indicated that the questionnaire which was used in this study was ideal with a significantly high Cronbach Alpha's coefficient of .781 for 20 questions in total (see Table 4.1)

Table 4.1: The reliability of all items in the questionnaire

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.781	20

4.1.2. Students' perception about American and British cultural awareness in English language classrooms

4.1.2.1. The role of American and British culture in English interpretation

The majority of the participants believed that the role of American and British culture was fairly or very important in English interpretation. Specifically, 28% of the participants found it to be "important", while 28% found it to be "fairly important", and 38% found it to be "very important". Only a small proportion (3%) of the participants believed that the role of American and British culture was not important at all, and another 3% found it to be slightly important.

Overall, it seems that most participants believe that American and British cultures play a significant role in English interpretation.

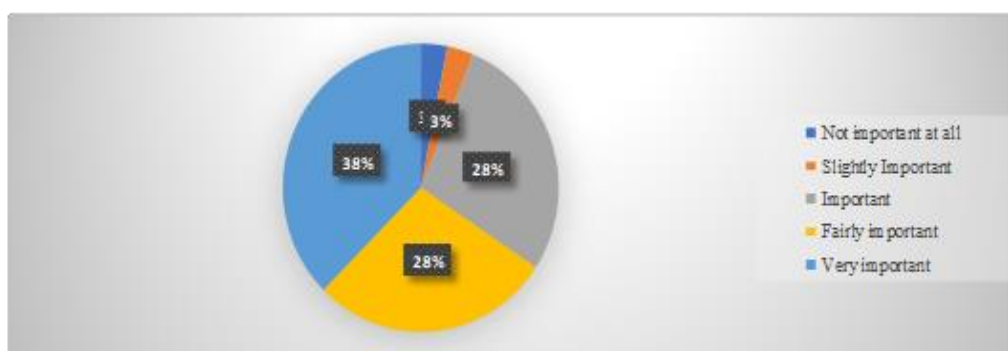


Chart 4.1: Students' perception of the role of American and British culture in English interpretation

4.1.2.2. Students' self-evaluation on their intercultural competence

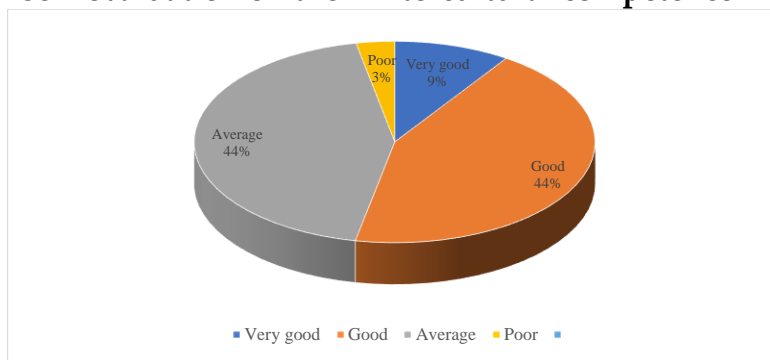


Chart 4.2: Students' self-evaluation of their translation skills

As the results from Chart 4.2, most participants had a positive self-evaluation of their intercultural competence, with only a small proportion feeling that they are not competent. The majority of students (97%) felt they had at least an average level of intercultural competence, with 44% rating their competence as "average", 44% as "good" and 9% as "very good". Only 3% of students who answered the questionnaire rated their intercultural competence as "poor".

4.1.2.3. Kind of interpretation that students feel more difficult

Table 4.2: Kind of interpretation that students feel more difficult

Which do you think is more difficult?	Percentage (%)
English-Vietnamese translation	25
Vietnamese-English translation	75

From Table 4.2, three-quarters of students thought that Vietnamese-English translation was more challenging than English-Vietnamese translation.

According to Ly (2022), students' primary challenge was the insufficiency of English lexical resources to convey the meaning of Vietnamese words, particularly in Vietnamese idioms and proverbs. Transferring the intended meaning from Vietnamese into English proved to be a difficult task for the learners.

4.1.2.4. Students' frequency of learning about American and British cultural elements after class and their referred sources

Table 4.3: Students' frequency of learning about American and British cultural elements

How frequently do you learn about American and British cultural elements after class?	Frequency	Percent (%)
Hardly	2	6.3
Sometimes	12	37.5
Often	16	50.0
Always	2	6.3
Total	32	100.0

From the table, we can see that out of the 32 participants who responded, 50% indicated that they often learn about American and English cultural elements after class, while 37.5% responded that they sometimes learn about these elements. Only 6.3% of participants indicated that they hardly learned about these elements after class. Overall, the majority of participants reported that they frequently or occasionally learn about American and English cultural elements after class, suggesting a relatively high level of interest in cultural competence.

The students were asked to point out from what source they could absorb American and British culture better. The majority of students (69%) believed that they could absorb American and British culture better through self-study or through interactions with foreign teachers. The relatively low percentage of students (12%) who indicated that they absorbed culture better from foreign friends may be due to a lack of exposure to such individuals or few opportunities to interact with them. The percentage of participants who indicated that they absorbed culture better from Vietnamese friends (19%) might suggest a preference for learning about American and British culture in a more familiar cultural context.

4.1.2.5. Students' perception about conditions to develop intercultural awareness at Tra Vinh University (TVU)

When asked to assess the frequency at which their teachers explained cultural elements in the classroom, students reported that their teachers provided such explanations frequently (often: 50%, sometimes: 38%), which might indicate a focus on promoting cross-cultural understanding and awareness in EFL classrooms. However, the relatively small percentage of participants who indicated that teachers always (6%) or hardly (6%) explain cultural elements might suggest some variations in teaching practices or a lack of consistency in how cultural elements are addressed in EFL classrooms.

Out of the 32 participants who responded, the majority (62.5%) answered "yes" for the question "Are there American/British cultural contents in the curriculum being used that are not suitable for Vietnamese culture?", indicating that there are American/British contents in the curriculum being used that are not suitable for Vietnamese culture. The remaining 37.5% of participants answered "no", indicating that they did not believe that there were any unsuitable contents. These results suggest that a significant proportion of participants perceive that there are elements of the curriculum that may not align with Vietnamese cultural values. Nguyen (2007) stated that sometimes the cultural context presented in the textbooks may not be familiar or even unsuitable to learners' cultural backgrounds. In such cases, learners may feel disconnected or disengaged from the material, as they have not had the opportunity to develop a solid understanding of the culture being presented.

The response to the question "How does the educational environment at TVU affect the study of American and British cultures in the process of learning English?" is presented in the form of a frequency distribution table.

Table 4.4: The status quo of the educational environment
 at TVU's impact on the study of American and British cultures

How does the educational environment at TVU affect the study of American and British cultures in the process of learning English?	Frequency	Percent (%)
Needs improvement	8	25.0
Meets expectations	13	40.6
Exceeds expectations	7	21.9
Outstanding	4	12.5
Total	32	100.0

The majority of students (40.6%) indicated that the educational environment at TVU meets their expectations regarding the study of American and British cultures while learning English. Additionally, 21.9% of participants felt that the educational environment exceeded their expectations, and 12.5% of participants rated it as "outstanding". However, the fact that 25% of participants felt that the educational environment "needs improvement" indicated that there may be areas where the university could improve to facilitate the study of American and British cultures better.

4.1.3. Students' perception about the role of American and British cultural competence in interpretation

The descriptive statistic test was run to determine the mean score of students' perceptions about the role of American and British cultural competence in interpretation. The mean scores are illustrated in the table below (Table 4.5).

This table presents the mean and standard deviation for 12 items related to the interpreter's cross-cultural competence in interpreting between Vietnamese and English. The responses were collected using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The items covered a range of topics, such as the interpreter's awareness of their own cultural biases (Item 1), the challenges of interpreting cultural terms and idioms (Item 4 and Item 5), and the importance of cross-cultural competence in effective communication (Item 6 and Item 8). The mean scores range from 3.38 to 4.25, which implied a generally positive attitude towards the importance of cultural competence and the challenges of interpreting in a cross-cultural context.

Item 4 and Item 5 received relatively high mean scores ($M=4.06$), indicating that unfamiliar cultural terms and idioms are the most significant challenges in interpreting. Item 7 ($M=4.16$) and Item 12 ($M=4.25$) received the highest mean scores, suggesting that rich vocabulary and cultural proficiency are critical to conveying ideas effectively and students agree that focusing on exploring cultural aspects that fit their interests and profession is important.

The item with the lowest mean score was Item 1, "Unconsciously, I bring my own cultural frame into interpretation" ($M=3.38$), suggesting that some students might struggle with overcoming their own cultural biases when interpreting.

Overall, the answers suggested that the respondents had a good understanding of the importance of cross-cultural competence in both interpreting and communication.

Table 4.5: Students' perception of the role of
 American and British cultural competence in interpretation

Items		Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Unconsciously, I bring my own cultural frame into interpretation.	3.38	.907
2	I accept the fact that ambiguity in conversation is inevitable.	3.84	.574
3	Interpreters have to be aware of taboos in both SL and TL to avoid communication breakdown.	3.91	.777
4	Unfamiliar cultural terms/ideas bring great challenges for me to interpret from Vietnamese into English and vice versa.	4.06	.840
5	It is hard to find out equivalent idioms for Vietnamese-English interpreting and vice versa.	4.06	.982
6	Cross-cultural competence is essential to avoid misunderstandings or mistakes in my interpretation.	3.91	.995
7	Rich vocabulary and cultural proficiency can improve my ability to convey ideas/meanings clearly and logically.	4.16	.987
8	Cross-cultural competence helps me to interact effectively and confidently with people from different cultural backgrounds.	4.00	.718
9	Cross-cultural attitudes allow me to develop skills for better engaging with people from many kinds of cultures.	3.84	.847
10	Tolerating and respecting cultural differences are the keys to developing cross-cultural competence	3.87	.871
11	I should find reliable sources of information for learning about American and British cultures.	4.06	.759
12	I should focus on exploring cultural American and British aspects that fit my interests and are helpful for my profession.	4.25	.803
	Valid N (listwise)		

4.2. Discussion

After analyzing the data, the author recognized some new results and information from the answers. Sharing with the result from a previous study of Cao (2020), while the instruction and acquisition of American and British cultural elements are noticed by both teachers and students, there are instances where teachers may not fully explain cultural components. This is understandable as the priority of such courses is usually to improve students' language skills.

The findings indicate the role of interpreters is crucial, as they need to have a deep and sufficient understanding of the cultural taboos and sensitivities in both the SL and TL to prevent any communication breakdown. This is in line with the result from Nguyen and Khau (2022) who proved that a lack of effective integration of two cultures can cause communication breakdown and result in frustration for both parties involved. This study emphasizes the importance of intercultural competence in the interpretation process, which involves not only linguistic proficiency but also an understanding of the cultural nuances and customs of both the SL and TL. Interpreters who lack the knowledge of cultural taboos and norms can potentially cause misinterpretation or offense that leads to a loss of trust and credibility in the communication process.

A considerable number of participants hold the view that certain aspects of the American/British cultural contents in the curriculum do not conform to the values of Vietnamese culture. The managerial and teaching staff should take notice of this fact for curriculum design and the process of adapting or choosing textbooks for future courses.

The absence of comparable idioms in two languages can bring a considerable challenge for interpreters. Arono and Nadrud (2019) highlighted the fact that students often struggle with translating idioms due to a lack of equivalence in the TL. This can create uncertainty in conveying the linguistic characteristics of idioms from the SL into the TL. To deal with this matter, students need to find out alternative ways of expressing the intended meaning while preserving the tone and context of the original message.

Unfamiliar cultural terms and idioms pose the most significant challenges for interpreters in both Vietnamese-English and English-Vietnamese interpreting. Therefore, interpreters have to be mindful of cultural differences and adopt decent strategies to guarantee effective communication (Sun, 2003). This includes identifying culturally specific expressions and adapting them to the TL as well as avoiding the use of language or gestures that may be considered offensive or inappropriate in the TL. By employing these strategies, interpreters can erase the cultural gap and facilitate successful communication between the two parties.

5. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to examine the perceptions of English major students regarding the importance of having proficiency in American and British cultures in interpretation as well as their attitudes toward the incorporation of cultural elements in their language learning environment. To achieve these aims, a questionnaire was dispatched to collect data from students and their responses were analyzed to gain deep insights into the topic.

Based on the study's findings, it can be concluded that most students exhibited a favourable attitude towards integrating culture into language learning, as evidenced by their frequency of learning about American and British cultural elements, self-assessment of their intercultural competence, and responses to conditions to develop intercultural awareness at TVU.

Another conclusion that was reached based on the responses of students is that cultural awareness plays an important role in creating positive attitudes towards people with different cultural backgrounds. The majority of students expressed a preference for learning about the target culture to gain awareness and effectively communicate with individuals from different cultures as well as to improve their proficiency in the TL. However, unfamiliar cultural terms and concepts bring significant challenges for students when interpreting between Vietnamese and English, especially from Vietnamese to English. Moreover, finding equivalent idioms for Vietnamese-English and English-Vietnamese interpreting is a challenging task for students.

Conflict of Interest Statement

We, Nguyen Thanh Tan Phat and Thach Son Le, declare no conflict of interest to this paper. We agree to submit our paper with the above title to the European Journal of Foreign Language Teaching.

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