



## An assessment of students' intercultural competence in public and private universities in Vietnam

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### APA Citation:

Pham, V. T. T., & Pham, A. T. (2022). An assessment of students' intercultural competence in public and private universities in Vietnam. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 18(Special Issue 1), 34-44.

Submission Date: 11/08/2021

Acceptance Date: 20/10/2021

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### Abstract

Intercultural competence has played an extremely important role in an increasingly globalised world where people are likely to communicate with people from different cultural groups or countries which have been greatly shaped by various values, practices and perspectives. In Vietnam, whilst several scholars mainly focus on intercultural competence in the context of teaching and learning language, a few publications have been found in terms of assessing the level of intercultural competence among students in tertiary education. To fill this gap, this paper aims to give an insight into students' intercultural competence in public and private universities. A nineteen questionnaire was undertaken with 336 participants that include 175 students from private universities and 161 students from public universities. The findings show that students' intercultural competence in both types of school was not high although that from private schools was proved to be more outstanding regarding attitudes and skills.

*Keywords:* intercultural competence; private universities; public universities; assessment; perspectives

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## 1. Introduction

In the 21st century, human has witnessed tremendous achievement in technology and transport which began the era of exchange and cooperation among various cultures and communities all over the world. Besides, globalization has occurred more and more powerful that creating opportunities for many people to participate in the global marketplace. Consequently, multinational corporations increasingly recognize that the ability to deal with cultural diversity is extremely important to success (Bremer, 2006; Dearnorff & Hunter, 2006; Hulstrand, 2008; Leo et al., 2010). Enhancing intercultural competence can facilitate the relations between people who have various cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it is apparent that intercultural communication has become an indispensable part of contemporary society.

In Vietnam, sending Vietnamese to work abroad is one of the major policies of the government. On average, over 80,000 Vietnamese workers leave their country annually to work overseas, taking over 5% of the total number of registered employment placements every year (Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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of Vietnam, 2012). Besides, due to the improvement of a working environment and economic development, the number of foreigners working in Viet Nam has gone up dramatically over the last decade. Hence, to compete internationally, people must equip themselves with knowledge and skills to work in a workplace with cultural diversity. In tertiary education, both public schools—which are established and monitored by the government through the Ministry of Education and Training and private universities – which are invested and managed by private individuals with the permission for setting up of the government, have taken enhancing students’ intercultural competence into accounts seriously than ever in response to the demand for working in the multicultural community. However, whilst the public universities focus on training their students practical and soft skills that can be applied to their future jobs, the public educational institutions tend to concentrate on giving students insights into theories and academic knowledge. That might lead to the differences among students not only the capacity for adapting to real jobs but also the competence that is necessary for cross-cultural interaction. Therefore, this study aims to provide an evaluation of the level of students’ intercultural competence in public and private universities in Vietnam and then it is suggested that the results of this study can serve as a springboard for further researches to improve learners’ ability to deal with intercultural encounters.

### *1.1. Literature review*

#### *1.1.1. Intercultural competence*

There have been different definitions of “intercultural competence”. Based on various perspectives, many theories have been elaborated to examine the characteristics of intercultural competence from individual-based models to more systemic and inclusive models as the conceptual model (Byram, 1997, 2003; Byram et al., 2001), more contextually-focused model (Kim et al., 2003, Hajek & Giles, 2003), intercultural interaction emphasis (Chen, 2002; Collier, 1996) and interethnic context focus (Chen, 2002; Collier, 1996; Hecht et al., 1992; Martin et al., 1994). Accordingly, many scholars denote various definitions of intercultural competence throughout time. However, most of them share the point that intercultural competence is one’s ability to deal with cross-cultural situations effectively and appropriately (Erdorff, Müller, Barret, in Crope et al., 2015). It is also apparent from those theories that the term “intercultural competence” was conceptualized based on fundamental concepts as motivation (affective, emotion), knowledge (cognitive), and skills (behavioral, actional), context (situation, environment, culture, relationship, function) and outcomes (perceived appropriateness, perceived effectiveness, satisfaction, understanding, attraction, intimacy, assimilation, task achievement) (Bloom, 1956; Havighurst, 1957; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984).

Based on the previous theoretical framework, Huber and Reynolds (2014) state intercultural competence is the ability that one applies attitudes, skills, knowledge, and understanding through actions in situations that involve people who come from different cultures to achieve harmonious and successful communication that is described as (a) understanding, appreciating and valuing people who have different cultures, (b) responding appropriately and achieving the objectives in interaction when communicating with those people, (c) establishing positive and constructive relationships with them, (d) understanding oneself and one’s multiple cultural affiliations through intercultural interactions. This definition includes both respecting people who have cultural differences and their actions that do not contravene fundamental human rights, democracy and rules of law. However, it is important to note five salient components of intercultural competence. First of all, people are not required to abandon their cultural affiliations and adopt other cultures’ values. It involves the willingness to learn about other cultures as well as being able to understand and interpret different beliefs and practices in intercultural interaction. Also, it enables people to get engaged appropriately and mediate effectively in

intercultural encounters. Secondly, people can reflect on their cultural affiliations through encountering intercultural situations. Thirdly, language plays an essential role in those situations because it is an important means that allows people to share their cultural perspectives and values. Fourthly, it is necessary to understand that intercultural competence is not the necessary and sufficient condition to help people succeed in intercultural communication. Finally, notwithstanding being able to be enhanced by a range of experience on cultural encounters or intercultural education and training, people may not acquire intercultural competence spontaneously by individuals simply through interacting with people who have different cultural backgrounds without suitable conditions.

It is also important to note that intercultural competence can be increased through kinds of education as informal education, non-formal education and formal education (Council of Europe, 2010). The first type is defined as a lifelong process in which people can acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes from family, friends, media, work, etc. through interpersonal encounters in their social environment and daily experience. The second one refers to deliberate educational programs outside the formal educational settings as volunteer work, local communities, social work, clubs, and so on to facilitate developing a variety of skills and competence. The last one refers to planned education with a specific curriculum whose learning outcomes are defined in terms of intercultural competence components and it takes place in educational institutions and schools. However, planning to pursue the growth of intercultural competence inevitably is under consideration of several facilitators as experience (exposing to real communication from different perspectives), comparison (comparing and evaluating different values and behaviors), analysis (explanations for the differences of practices, values and belief), reflection (time and space to reflect the development of cultural awareness), and action (engagement and co-operation with others in intercultural interactions) (Huber & Reynolds, 2014).

In light of factors that can affect the growth of intercultural competence, it was still inclusive to define them. Although some factors were mentioned as being immersed into the host culture, length of stay, prior experience overseas and the ability to use language (Graf 2004; Littrell & Salas, 2005; Paige et al., 2009; Vande Berg et al., 2009), other publications reveal that intercultural learning does not automatically occur because of studying or volunteering abroad (Jones, 2010; Berg et al., 2012). Additionally, an international classroom was mentioned as a strategy to enhance students' intercultural competence (Harrison & Peacock, 2010; Thom 2010). However, Leask (2009) stated that it is not the diversity of cultures in the classroom but in the campus that can develop intercultural competence. Many scholars agree with this finding although students have perspectives, and the desire to work in their cultural group (Krzaklewska & Krupnik, 2006; Montgomery, 2009; Kimmel & Volet, 2012). Nevertheless, exposure to cultural diversity to some extent can give students in universities sufficient intercultural competence to be able to adapt in an international context.

### *1.1.2. Intercultural competence components*

Many scholarly researches have produced the details of intercultural competence components which can be named differently. However, within the framework of this study, the model of intercultural competence from Huber and Reynolds (2014) was applied because of its clarity and consistency with the previous theoretical rationale. Accordingly, intercultural competence components comprise four main factors: attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills, and actions.

Attitudes refer to valuing cultural diversity, respecting, empathy, tolerance, being open and willing to get engage with individuals who perceive different cultural affiliations. This description is concerned with Byram's point that attitudes are a person's willingness to get involved in an equal relationship, communicate with members of different cultures, and reflect several aspects of his or her own culture (Kim, 1992; Byram, 1997).

Knowledge and understanding are combined as a component of intercultural competence. Accordingly, knowledge is related to beliefs, values, practices, discourses and products used by people from a culture that is consistent with several descriptions in previous researches (Byram, 1997; Wiseman, 2002). Understanding implies the awareness of the considerable variability in cultural groups, various attributes of a culture, and the impacts of language and cultural affiliations on the way a person perceives the world around and other people as well as the processes of interactions and social construction on the nature of knowledge.

Skills, according to Byram (1997), can be described in two terms: interpreting and relating skills and discovery and interaction skills. The prior one refers to the ability to interpret the internal and external values from relevant documents and event from the other culture and relate it to one's own that can help a person to identify and explain the differences based on cultural diversity. The latter one is being able to acquire and utilize cultural knowledge, practices, and relevant skills in real-life interaction that can assist a person on verbal and non-verbal communicating with people in another culture (Hymes, 1972; Ruben, 1989; Gudykunst, 1994; Fantini, 2000). Huber and Reynolds (2014) then generated them in a set of competence such as multi-perspectivity, discovering, interpreting, empathy, cognitive flexibility, critical evaluating, adapting, linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse skills, plurilingual skills and mediating.

Actions include the outcomes like looking for chances to interact and collaborate with people from different cultural identities, achieving the communication's purpose, and challenging the attitudes and behaviours which repudiate the human rights by interfering and expressing the opposition to discrimination or prejudice, considering cultural conflicts as mentioned in previous studies. (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006)

In a Vietnamese context, there are several kinds of research on intercultural competence in language teaching (Nguyen, 2007; Ho, 2011; Nguyen, 2013; Tran & Seepho, 2014; Vo, 2017; Chau & Truong, 2019) and education programs (Leo et. all, 2010). However, there have been a few studies on assessing the intercultural competence among students in public and private universities.

## *1.2. Research questions*

The study aims to find out the answers to the following questions.

1. To what extent do students perceive intercultural competence in their universities?
2. Are there any differences in students' perception of intercultural competence between public and private universities?

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Participants and contexts*

There are 336 students (175 students from private universities and 161 students from public universities) were invited to participate in the study. They come from different provinces and cities in the South of Vietnam. All of them have had from one to two years to study at their universities. Besides compulsory subjects that are included in the curriculum of their majors, the participants join various extra activities outside the classroom. Students from the private universities have more opportunities to take part in a variety of activities that are mostly related to their aptitudes or hobbies through exclusive clubs with the aims to improve their intellectual skills or pursue their passion such as music, drawing, martial arts (Vovinam), photography, dancing and charity. Specifically, those activities are maintained during the year, so students with various fortes and interests can easily find suitable activities to optimize their knowledge, skills and autonomy whenever they want. Meanwhile,

in public universities, students often join activities that are mainly held by an organisation named Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union. These activities mainly focus on serving the community or aim to celebrate special national events, so they often take place during certain periods of the year. For instance, “Green Summer Campaign”, an annual activity in July, is one of the most popular activities in which many students in public universities go to the rural areas in the country to help local people through meaningful activities as cleaning the river, teaching English for the poor children, helping to rebuild the roads. Besides, on some special occasions like Vietnamese New Year, Communist Party of Vietnam Foundation Anniversary or Reunification Day, students often join competitions on sports, music performance, and learning about history. These help to remind them about the history and create an opportunity to make friends and show their ability.

## 2.2. Instruments

A quantitative descriptive research design was used to learn about the insights of intercultural competence of students in public and private universities. A nine-teen questionnaire was designed that based on five components: attitudes (item 1, 4, 7), knowledge and understanding (item 2, 8, 10, 12, 14, 19), skills (item 6, 9, 11, 15), actions (item 3, 5, 13, 16, 17, 18). The questionnaire items are scored from 1 to 5 on a Likert scale (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree.

## 2.3. Data collection procedures and analysis

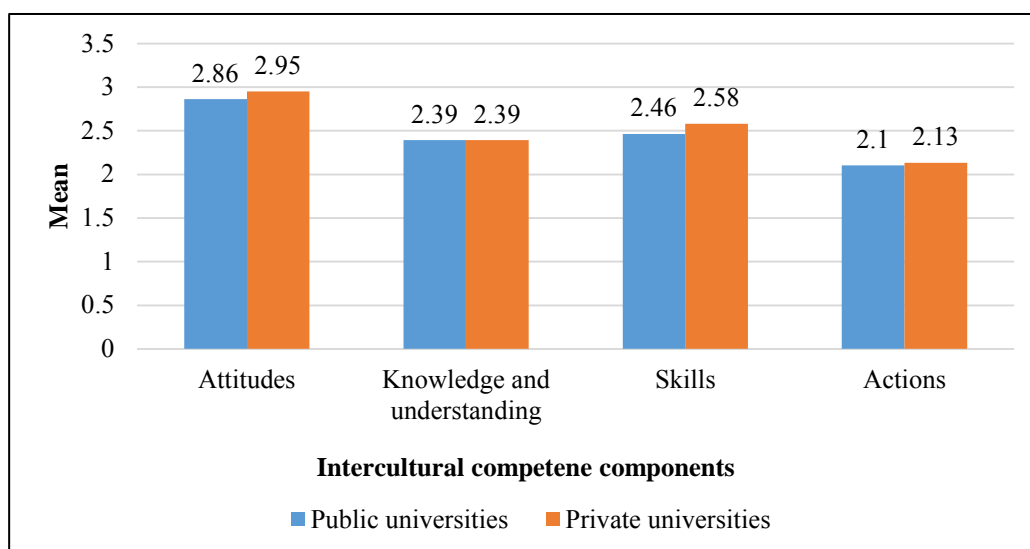
The questionnaire was piloted to 25 students who were randomly selected among those who had a similar background with the participants of the current study. The data was then computed by SPSS. The Cronbach's alpha of .7 indicates the reliability of the questionnaire. Because of the different levels of English proficiency among students, the questionnaire was designed in Vietnamese to make its meaning clear as well as put respondents at ease. Students were asked to indicate their responses to the statements in the questionnaire by choosing one of the five alternatives.

## 3. Results

**Table 1.** Intercultural competence in public and private universities

	Types	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
<b>Intercultural competence (ICC)</b>	Public universities	161	2.45	.31
	Private universities	175	2.51	.26

As can be seen from Table 1, the means of ICC in public and private universities are over 2.0 (the value for neutral ideas on a 5-point scale) ( $M=2.45$  and  $M=2.51$  respectively). That means many participants in both types of schools did not have high intercultural competence. However, an independent t-test reports a significant difference between the means of ICC in public universities and private schools ( $p = .026$ ,  $t = 1.93$ ,  $df = 311.74$ ). Therefore, it can be noted that the students from private universities perceive a higher level of intercultural competence compared to those from public schools.



**Figure 1.** Intercultural competence components regarding types of university

It is clear from Figure 1 that in both types of schools, even though the means of all components were not high, over 2.0 and lower 3.0, it was more outstanding for the private than public universities. The results from the Independent t-test show that there was a significant difference between public and private universities in terms of the means of attitudes ( $p = .00$ ,  $t = 3.39$ ,  $df = 239.90$ ) and skills ( $p = .01$ ,  $t = 2.59$ ,  $df = 204.55$ ), which were also the highest means among the four components. However, the means of other two components, knowledge and understanding and actions – the lowest one, were proved to be the same between two types of school ( $p = .50$ ,  $t = .17$ ,  $df = 334$  and  $p = .98$ ,  $t = .36$ ,  $df = 334$  respectively). Thus, it can be concluded that a large number of students in both types of the university did not have a high awareness of various aspects of culture and reacted with low confidence in cross-cultural situations, although students from private universities showed more willingness and skills to participate in intercultural communication compared to public universities.

A Chi-square group difference between types of school and the “attitudes” and “skills” component indicated a significant association of weak effect,  $X^2(5, N = 336) = 12.9$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\phi_c = .196$  and  $X^2(8, N = 336) = 15.5$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\phi_c = .215$  respectively. It means that learning in different kinds of school can impact more on the students’ attitudes towards people from different cultural settings and necessary skills to deal with that rather than the other two components of intercultural competence.

The findings of the study indicate that the level of intercultural competence among students in public and private universities was not high. Although many students from these universities show their openness, respect, as well as the willingness to get engage with individuals who have different cultural orientations, to some extent they did not behave appropriately or effectively because of lacking knowledge about the diversity of culture and necessary skills to deal with those circumstances. This can be explained by the short length of time - only one or two years-that students have encountered in a multi-cultural context on their campus. Moreover, because most students come from various provinces and cities but still in the same region, the South of Vietnam, the cultural diversity is limited to some extent. This is consistent with the previous researches that less exposure to how people interact and communicate from their perspectives can limit cultural learning through experience (Leask, 2009; Harrison & Peacock 2010; Thom 2010; Huber & Reynolds, 2014).

Regarding comparing two types of schools, students from private universities were proved to be more remarkable in terms of positive attitudes towards values, practices, and different cultural perspectives as well as essential skills to put into practice in multicultural settings. It is also noticed

from the results that there was a weak effect of the types of school on students' attitudes and skills. These can be influenced by various factors. However, as described in the theoretical framework, informal education with implementing planned activities with less formality can facilitate students' intercultural competence in both intuitive and unconscious ways through conversations, exploration, and enlargement of experience (Council of Europe, 2010; Huber & Reynolds, 2014). In reality, it can be seen that private universities have provided a more active environment that can aid their students in encountering intercultural interaction by a wide range of clubs and extra activities outside the classroom.

#### **4. Discussion**

The findings of the current research provide insights into the learners' intercultural competence in public and private universities. They give some pedagogical implications for parents, teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers. First, parents must create conditions for their children to have more experience in dealing with intercultural encounters in their daily lives through various degrees of deliberate activities. Most importantly, parents themselves need to be a model for their children to acquire attitudes, knowledge, and skills to improve intercultural competence. Second, it is indispensable for teachers to reflect and integrate a wide range of activities both inside and outside the classroom into their teaching process to encourage students to engage with people from different cultural groups. Thirdly, considering planning and developing educational programs across the explicit and implicit curriculum to enhance learners' intercultural competence is extremely important. Besides, it is urgent to adjust macro policy to help people recognize the vital role of intercultural competence in the modern workplace. This study has shown the levels of participants' capacity for encountering people who are from different cultures as well as the relation of its relevant components. However, intercultural competence is a lifelong process, so no individuals and a single method can help to fully achieve it. Thus, further researches can be conducted a wider community or different approaches to increase intercultural competence among students.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The result of this study reveals that the significant difference in terms of intercultural competence between students from public and private universities. Despite the low level of intercultural competence among students, those from private universities were proved to be more remarkable in light of the open-mindedness and necessary skills to deal with intercultural situations. It also indicates that studying in public or private universities, to a lesser extent, can impact students' attitudes and skills that are related to cross-cultural interactions.

#### **6. Ethics Committee Approval**

The author(s) confirm(s) that the study does not need ethics committee approval according to the research integrity rules in their country.

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