

Original Paper

Developing Vietnamese Learning Courses for International Learners: Lessons Learned from Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

Educational institutions have placed increasing importance on internationalizing their curricula over the past few decades as a determining strategy to prepare their learners for employment in the global economy. Internationalization of curriculum, particularly at the level of course development, provides an opportunity for teachers to infuse an international dimension into their courses to increase learners' interest and motivation, and more importantly, to engage learners in authentic and critical regional and global issues that help them understand and analyze their place in this complex interconnected world. At the Center of Foreign Languages of Can Tho University in Vietnam, the program of teaching Vietnamese is designed to offer Vietnamese language courses to foreigners and overseas Vietnamese. This descriptive study was conducted with a group of 7 teachers at the Center who are teaching Vietnamese to international learners from various nationalities with the aim to understand the teachers' perceptions of an effective internationalized course and to identify successful strategies to internationalize the courses. The results from the survey and a semi-structured interview revealed that localization and standardization are two significant factors affecting the success of internationalizing Vietnamese learning courses.

Keywords

course development, foreigners, internationalization, Vietnamese learning

1. Introduction

Internationalization is not a new concept in education, particularly in the past few decades when the international relations in educational institutions have expanded significantly as a necessary response to increasing globalization and regionalization of different fields in the society (De Wit, 2019). The digital era has made the world ever more interconnected and interdependent, and in this context, international education can enable people to produce global citizens and is able to be more effectively engage people

across borders (Chang & Gomes, 2022).

In response to the challenge to prepare learners for employment in the global market where they may work internationally, many educational institutions have adopted a strategy of course internationalization. The goal of an internationalized course is to help students to develop global perspectives in their learning process. A thorough understanding of teachers' perceptions about their involvement in internationalizing a course is very useful for both educational managers and teachers to make appropriate adjustments to enhance teaching quality. This preliminary study was undertaken with a group of teachers who taught Vietnamese to foreigners of various nationalities in the academic year of 2021-2022 at a center of foreign languages in Vietnam. The insights from this study could provide a valuable reference for teachers to implement appropriate strategies for course development as well as to evaluate the course quality.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Internationalization of Education and Its Benefits

Internationalization has been the key trend in educational world for the past few decades. International of education is “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” (Knight, 2003, p. 2). The positive benefits of internationalization generally include improved academic quality, internationally oriented students and staff, international citizenship for students and staffs, and brain gain (Jibeen & Khan, 2015).

Academic quality is obviously affected with internationalization. Educational institutions generally maintain standards of practice for their quality assurance, and these standards vary from one country to another. With internationalization, higher education institutions are exposed to different practices and may adapt appropriate practices to help improve academic quality. Also, these institutions can share their good practices to other higher education institutions in need of improvement and guidance. Higher education institutions can better explore these through strategic partnerships.

In the context of internationalization, students and staff who have been exposed to international standards and practices should inspire their classmates and colleagues to learn and achieve more. When students and staff are exposed to globally competitive educational training, this helps toward building a stronger global community.

With increasing internationalization, students and staff around the world have become more mobile and that higher education is becoming more global. International students and staff can represent a valuable asset to universities in the form of increased revenue and more diversity. More importantly, students and staff who have received education in foreign countries generally tend to be better prepared to face the current and future global world.

Internationalization can help to increase brain gain. Internationalization generally helps to upgrade a higher education institution's way of operating, and as the institution improves, it can attract talents from all over the world. With good human capital resources, regardless of nationality, not only the

institutions but also the community can enhance international cooperation and capacity building for life-changing benefits as it connects them with the global environment.

2.2 Internationalization of Course Development

For the past few decades, education has become more international and in order for internationalization to succeed, an educational institution can undertake various internationalization activities and strategies at different levels. At the basic level, course internationalization is crucial to provide an opportunity for teachers to infuse an international dimension into their courses. Ensuring that courses and program activities include global perspectives is central to the development of an internationalized university. Course internationalization is ‘a process by which international elements are infused into course content, international resources are used in course readings and assignments, and instructional methodologies appropriate to a culturally diverse student population are implemented’ (Schuerholz-Lehr et al., 2007, p. 70).

Depending on expected outcomes of course internationalization, teachers can choose different strategies to internationalize their courses including strategies for content, teaching methods, and assessment (Leask, 2005). Internationalized content generally requires including reading and learning materials that explore course topics from various cultural perspectives. It is reasonable for teachers to select and incorporate articles related to the teaching topics from international journals. It is also practical to use examples and case studies from different countries and cultures. As a guide to prepare for internationalized content, teachers can ask a common question such as “What international content will students need in order to develop international perspectives?”

An internationalized course should not only be international in content but should utilize instructional methods including designing intercultural learning activities, allowing for student reflection, facilitating encounters with difference, and creating appropriate environments to inspire advocacy, engagement, and curiosity. A common question to check the appropriateness of teaching methods in developing an internationalized course can be “What learning activities and tasks will assist learners to develop international perspectives and prepare for the assessment?”

Internationalized assessment generally requires students to self-evaluate their development of international perspectives. Students are asked to reflect on their own culture as well as engage with other cultures. Students are asked to present information to a real or simulated international/cross-cultural audience. A common question can be “*What assessment task(s) could students complete to demonstrate achievement of international perspectives?*”

2.3 Important Strategies for Course Internationalization

There are various strategies of internationalizing a course from establishing expected outcomes and developing course content to designing appropriate activities for learning and for assessment. According to Barker (2011), some of the common strategies can be implemented as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of a Standard Course and an Internationalized Course

In a standard course:	In an internationalized course:
Student learning outcomes focus on general context.	Student learning outcomes focus on global, international and intercultural context.
Classroom learning contexts are traditionally established.	Multicultural experiences outside the classroom are prioritized.
Local context of the discipline or profession is developed.	The context of the discipline or profession is developed in an international setting.
Communication and language development is developed.	Language or cross-cultural communication is emphasized.
Independent classroom activities are developed.	Interactive activities to engage students with others from diverse multicultural backgrounds are developed.
Standard lectures and tutorials are developed.	Include multicultural workshops, round-table discussions, other interactive group activities in the classroom.
Student work in groups.	Students work in culturally diverse groups.
National textbooks and readings are selected and used.	Reading materials relevant to culturally and linguistically diverse students are encouraged.
Teachers can speak normally and loudly.	Teachers should speak calmly, clearly, and at a moderate pitch to ensure that students understand your accent world usage and meaning.
New information or concepts can be presented verbally.	New information can be presented in a range of verbal and visual modes and, if appropriate, use drawings, maps or illustrations to provide extra non-verbal information.
Students are assumed to understand the lesson unless they ask questions.	Students' understanding should be frequently checked by asking them to repeat key messages and clarify when necessary.
Using verbal humour can be normally acceptable.	Humour and language are highly specific to each culture, so slangs, jargons, or verbal jokes are carefully selected.
Individual assessment tasks are developed.	Individual and group projects are developed so that students are assessed for their ability to work effectively in multicultural, multilingual and/or global settings.
Field-trips are organized.	Field-trips to ethnic communities to work with interested community partners are organized.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Setting: CFL and Its Policies of Internationalization

The Center of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University (hereafter referred to as the Center or CFL) was established in 1991, under the management of Can Tho University and has been providing courses of

English, French, Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese to the community for over 30 years. Internationalization has been an important policy for the Center's strategic development, which has been pursued since very early years of its foundation to respond to growing demands of teaching and learning foreign languages, particularly English. The Center has prioritized to develop international relationships with different partners in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Japan, Korea and Thailand. Annually, the Center received a number of volunteers who visited and worked as teachers or trainers. These opportunities of various cultural exchanges have benefited both the volunteers and the local learners who can experience "being international" in this era of integration.

The development of Vietnamese language courses is also an important policy of internationalization of the Center. Thanks to the movement of globalization and international integration, Vietnam has attracted increasing number of foreign investors and visitors, boosting Vietnamese forward as a must-know language to learn. With its use of the Latin language and a tone system, Vietnamese is considered a language of beauty to study. At the Center, the demand for learning Vietnamese of foreigners has risen in recent years with various sources of learners in different countries. As a response to the educational internationalization, a study examining teachers' perceptions of internationalizing a Vietnamese language course for international learners is necessary, not only for teachers but also for educational institutions to make appropriate adjustments to enhance the quality of the program.

3.2 Research Design

In this study, a descriptive online survey together with semi-structured interviews was employed with a small group of teachers of Vietnamese language courses. Questionnaires are considered a low-cost research tool that can help to collect data in a short period of time (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012) and interviews are a useful method to collect qualitative, open-ended data.

3.3 Participants

All the seven teachers of Vietnamese learning program at the Center were invited to participate in this study through completing an online survey and attending an interview. The basic characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 7)

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Female	5	71.4%
Male	2	28.6%
Experience of teaching Vietnamese		
1-2 years	-	-
3-5 years	2	28.6%
More than 5 years	5	71.4%

3.4 Research Instruments

The teaching staff were invited to respond to an online questionnaire and attend an interview. The survey questions consisted of four sections. In the first section, the participants were asked to indicate the number and nationality of learners in the past academic year from September 1st 2021 to August 31st 2022. The second section asked the participants to select given factors of course internationalization. In the third section, the teacher participants were asked to select appropriate strategies for internationalizing a course. The last section asked the participants to select the percentage indicating the extent of the course internationalization.

For the semi-structured interviews, teacher participants individually attended a 15-minute session, presenting their perceptions on the three given questions: “What are learners’ purposes of learning Vietnamese?”, “What suggestions do you have to help enhance the course quality?”, and “What lesson or experience have you learned from internationalizing the Vietnamese language course?”

4. Results and Discussion

The results and discussion are presented based on a detailed analysis of the data resulting from the survey and interview.

4.1 Results of Survey

In the first session of the survey, the participants were required to indicate the number and nationality of the learners during their Vietnamese language courses in the past academic year 2021-2022 as shown in Table 3. Learners from Cambodia and Laos have the highest percentage of the total number of 25 learners during the past year. It is explainable that these learners from Vietnam’s neighbouring countries need Vietnamese language learning as a requirement to enrol in many Vietnamese tertiary programs.

Table 3. Number and Nationalities of Learners in the Academic Year 2021-2022

Nationalities	Number	Percentage
Cambodian	7	28%
Laos	5	20%
Korean	4	16%
American	3	12%
Japanese	2	8%
French	2	8%
Chinese	1	4%
Thai	1	4%

The participants were also asked to indicate important factors for internationalizing a Vietnamese language course. Of the four given factors, the statement “Include course aims or objectives that focus on developing intercultural knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours” had the highest percentage of responses as reported in Table 4. It is reasonable that when conducting a Vietnamese language course for international learners, the teachers expected to include international factors in the course. The statement “Combine individual and group projects so that learners are assessed for their ability to work effectively in multicultural, multilingual and/or global settings” had the lowest percentage of responses. It is possible that in the current study, individual and group projects are not yet emphasized in international context.

Table 4. Factors of Course Internationalization

Factors	Number (Percentage)
Include course aims or objectives that focus on developing intercultural knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours.	7/7 (100%)
Include materials relevant to culturally and linguistically diverse learners.	6/7 (85.7%)
Use flexible and blended learning methods that combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction.	6/7 (85.7%)
Combine individual and group projects so that learners are assessed for their ability to work effectively in multicultural, multilingual and/or global settings.	4/7 (57.1%)

In the survey, the teacher participants were also asked to indicate different strategies for internationalizing their Vietnamese language courses. Most of the participants indicated their using the given strategies as shown in Table 5. It is worth to note that the statements “Remember that humour and language usage are highly specific to each culture. Avoid using slang, jargon or verbal jokes” did not have very high percentage of usage. This strategy is advisably useful for both teachers and learners, requiring people to be more open in a multicultural context (Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015).

The two statements “Use technical tools such as Google Translate to aid your teaching” and “Use teaching assistant (who can speak learners’ native language) to help your teaching” had the lowest percentage of answers, under 50 percent. It is possible that in this study, most teacher participants had sufficient confidence and skills and knowledge to master the teaching and learning process. However, this speculation needs further investigation with a larger sample size.

Table 5. Teaching Strategies for Course Internationalization

Strategies	Number (Percentage)
Speak calmly and clearly to ensure that learners understand your accent, usage and meaning.	7/7 (100%)
Present information in a range of verbal and visual modes and, if appropriate, use drawings, maps or illustrations to provide information.	7/7 (100%)
Check learners' understanding of what you have said by asking them to repeat key messages and clarify when necessary.	7/7 (100%)
Ask learners to discuss and compare the impact of an issue / topic on their home country and Vietnam.	7/7 (100%)
Organize off-campus field trips to ethnic communities to work with interested community partners.	7/7 (100%)
Use individual assessments such as paper-pencil tests/exams, essays and research papers in conjunction with team projects such as group presentations or collaborative reports.	6/7 (85.7%)
Ask learners to compare how social, economic, political, legal and environmental systems vary between their home country and Vietnam and different mega-cities around the world (e.g., New York, Paris, Tokyo, Bangkok ...).	6/7 (85.7%)
Remember that humour and language usage are highly specific to each culture. Avoid using slang, jargon or verbal jokes.	4/7 (57.1%)
Involve learners in multicultural extra-curricular events to increase their knowledge and appreciation of social, cultural, and religious diversity.	4/7 (57/1%)
Use technical tools such as Google Translate to aid your teaching.	3/7 (42.9%)
Use teaching assistant (who can speak learners' native language) to help your teaching.	3/7 (42.9%)

In the last part of the survey, the participants were asked to indicate their perceived extent of course internationalization in the three aspects of course content, teaching methods, and assessment. Generally, the participants indicated relatively high level of internationalization in their Vietnamese language courses; however, it is important to note that about 14.2% of the participants perceived the relatively low extent of course internationalization at 10% as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. The Extent of Course Internationalization

	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
Course content		1			1		2		3		
Teaching methods		1					1	3	2		
Assessment		1			1		2		3		

4.2 Results of Interview

After completing the questionnaire, all the 7 participants were invited to attend a 15-minute session of semi-structured interview. In responding to the first question about the learners' purposes of learning Vietnamese, the participants indicated seven main reasons including learning to travel, to understand Vietnamese language and culture, to engage in a marriage life, to apply for a job, to support work, and to study or research in Vietnam. The results are relatively in line with a previous study (Luu & Sui, 2019), indicating common reasons for foreigners to attend a Vietnamese language course.

Regarding to the second question in the interview: "What suggestions do you have to help enhance the course quality?" the participants emphasized the importance of updating teaching content and personalizing the teaching content according to individual learner's needs. Some of the comments were as follows.

Teaching content needs to be renewed regularly, particularly reading materials.

In terms of teaching content, it would globally serve different learner's needs by including many ways Vietnamese is used in different countries; also it should aim at increasing communication.

Teaching content should be developed to meet the learner's learning purposes, providing specialized words and promoting communication skills.

Being flexible in teaching methods is also a suggestion for increasing the course quality, indicated by several participants. Teachers should choose appropriate teaching techniques such as using images for teaching vocabulary, or using grammar-translation method to check comprehension.

Teachers' ability to use the learner' languages is also advantageous in teaching process. Some participants also suggested using teaching tools such as Google Translate as a teaching assistant to increase teacher-learner interaction, particularly at the basic level.

To enhance the Vietnamese language course quality, most of the participants indicated extra-curricular activities such as field trips as being practical and effective. In addition, learners should be encouraged to participate in social, cultural events to strengthen their knowledge of language and culture. Some common comments were as follows.

During the course, we should have more time for fieldtrip study for language exposure.

Learners should attend more local events or they should be guided to watch YouTube or read books for increasing knowledge of Vietnamese culture and language.

In response to the third question: “What lesson or experience have you learned from internationalizing the Vietnamese language course?” most of the participants commented indicated the two important factors for successfully internationalizing a course: standardization and localization. By the former, the participants referred to the Vietnamese Language Competency Framework for Foreigners (VLCF), which was approved and issued by Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training on the first of September in 2015 (On et al, 2019). The framework describes fundamental elements for developing a curriculum and assessing the six levels of Vietnamese language proficiency for foreigners. The framework is also an important guideline for teachers to plan and implement teaching activities, teaching techniques, assessment and evaluation techniques in order to assist students with achieving the targeted learning outcomes and being able to conduct self-assessment of their abilities.

As assessment is an integral part in the process of teaching Vietnamese as a foreign language, it is therefore after the release of VLCF, the Ministry of Education and Training continued to sign the Decision No. 2097 /QD-BGDDT on the 21st of July in 2016 to specify the test format to assess Vietnamese language competency for foreigners. The official format of the complete test consists of four skills including listening, reading, writing and speaking. The listening, reading and writing tests are computer-based within 60 minutes long for each test; the speaking test is 15 minutes long. In the current study, the participants all recognized the importance of using a nationally standardized test to measure the Vietnamese proficiency of foreign learners. Some of the comments were as follows.

Standardization is necessary so as to guarantee the quality of teaching and assessment of Vietnamese language program.

It is important to develop our course or program based on the proposed framework of Vietnamese language proficiency.

A course based on standardized criteria can be widely accepted and nationally recognized among institutions.

Discussing the effectiveness of internationalizing a Vietnamese language course, the participants emphasized the importance of the factor of localization. “Think globally and act locally” is a practical experience many participants shared in this study. By localization, the interviewees generally referred to the use of local materials and resources for course development, which can meet individual learning needs. More importantly, localization will also involve making the local culture and linguistics an integral part of the internationalized curriculum (Laeen et al., 2019). Some of the comments were as follow.

We need to teach learners both standard language and dialects to enhance their communication.

Localization is very important in course internationalization as it aims to satisfy personal needs and purposes in their learning process.

Internationalization and localization are not in contrast, but they can be complementary. Localization generally enables internationalization to be relevant and meaningful in specific contexts.

5. Conclusion

Course internationalization is a basic and practical way to achieve the goal of institutional internationalization in the context of globalization. For the past decades, Vietnam has affirmed its position in the world and many foreigners from various nationalities have come to this country for learning Vietnamese for different purposes. Understanding teachers' perceptions of a course internationalization is very useful for identifying necessary teaching strategies as well as experiences of course development. This study, although undertaken with a relatively small number of participants and limited in one center of foreign languages, has provided a valuable reference for both educational managers and teachers to make appropriate adjustments to enhance teaching and learning quality.

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