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# Improving the Teaching Quality of the Course “Cross-Cultural Communication” Employing CDIO Approach: A Case Study of Vinh University

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**Abstract:** Over the past decade which marked Vietnam’s deepening international integration, Cross-Cultural Communication has become a crucial and significant course in a large number of curricula at institutions nationwide. The present status of the teaching quality of Cross-Cultural Communication at higher education level in Vietnam and at Vinh University in particular, however, is raising some issues of particular concern, including imbalance between theory and practice of the course syllabus and lack of teaching materials, students’ background and motivation, among other things. By employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, this article attempts to look into the reality of the teaching quality of the course in terms of syllabus and sources, teaching staff, students, facilities and other relevant conditions to serve the training of the course, given Vinh University as a case study. A substantial part of the article digs out merits of CDIO (Conceive, Design, Implement, Operate) approach as fundamental solutions to the improvement of the course teaching. We find that to address the pressing requirements to address the aforementioned problems for better teaching quality of the course, it is vital in the first place to renew teaching methods and assessment and to design of a course book based on CDIO approach.

**Keywords:** Cross-Cultural Communication, Teaching Methods, Assessment, Course Book Designing

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## 1. Introduction

In the increasingly integrating world, cross-cultural communication is becoming crucial as from workplace to any type of cross-border communication settings, individuals find themselves in increased contact with others whose different cultural beliefs, values, communication styles, and so on, are here to stay. Inevitably, more and more training institutions across the globe have included the training of cross-cultural communication in curriculum to assist social human resources in achieving effective communication as well as avoiding unexpected culture conflicts in a “global village”.

In Vietnam, over the past decade, the teaching of cross-cultural communication course has become a crucial integral component of undergraduate programs in many educational institutions. The presence of the course in the training programs spells out the increasing awareness of the university administrators and educators as well as students to meet the indispensable requirements for the country’s robust international integration and for students’ job opportunities.

Against this background, the course training reveals many pitfalls, some of which lie in the teaching methods and the absence of a course book suitable with Vietnamese higher education context. Vinh University is no exception, involving problems arising from the course syllabus, lacking teaching materials, students’ background and motivation, teaching staff, facilities, and so on. Facing those problems arising from training practices, it is essential that how to apply a feasible approach in line with the educational context in Vietnam in general and in Vinh University in particular remains a burning question. Many research works and training practices prove that CDIO—which stands for Conceive, Design, Implement, Operate—be a successful approach worldwide because of its strong merits which gear towards learners’ competence-based training. In this sense, the aforementioned problems can be addressed by, first and foremost, the renewal of teaching methods and assessment, as well as designing of a course book based the CDIO approach.

## 2. The Role of the Course Cross-Cultural Communication in Curriculum

In Vietnam, cross-cultural communication lies in the top list of core courses at a number of institutions. At the University of Languages and International Studies– Vietnam National University (VNU-ULIS), Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities, FPT University, and Hoa Sen University, for example, the course is an integral part of foreign languages, international studies, culture and tourism management, and business administration programs for undergraduate students. The key target of the course is to help students grasp basic knowledge and skills of communication in intra-cultural and multicultural communication settings. Since the course was added to the curricula, it has always drawn an overwhelming percentage of students’ attention as compared to other courses, which sufficiently spells out students’ increasing awareness of the course significance to their communication across cultures in the present context of Vietnam’s international integration as well as to their future job opportunities.

At Vinh University, Cross-Cultural Communication has been the core course of undergraduate curricula for English Language and English Pedagogy majors. The course attempts to help English-majored students understand how cultural formation and how categorical dimensions in cross-cultural communication impact identities and relationships interpersonally, between groups, and even internationally. Also, it assists students in exploring how these theories exert impacts on different groups based on values, behaviors, region, ethnicity, etc..., causing culture shocks/conflicts and culture bumps as well as communication breakdown. Besides, it provides students with investigation in how cross-cultural communication is effectively used and applied in various environments, especially in multicultural workplace. This course has been at the center of students’ particular concern as most of the students coming from different corners of the country, especially from North central provinces of Vietnam realize that more and more international investors are coming to the region for investment and business opportunities, thereby requiring students to master cross-cultural communication knowledge and skills to seize such a competitive employment opportunity in first hand. Against this background, the reality of the course training remains fallen behind the essential requirements, especially learning standards/outcomes to meet the demands for a competence-based training program due to both subjective and objective reasons.

## 3. The Present Status of the Course Training in Vietnam

Fact shows that the training of the cross-cultural communication course in most Vietnamese higher education institutions is not enjoying a deserving status for a number of

reasons. First, the theory of the course, according to its syllabus, greatly outweighs practical skills. In fact, the course is instructed with a vast amount of theoretical knowledge and terminology. This has resulted in students’ low motivation as well as obstacles in their learning and knowledge acquisition. In the meantime, the training of cross-cultural communication, as observed in foreign countries by the author, involves a balanced number, if not a majority, of credit hours for practice- and skill-based activities with a view to helping students apply in-class acquired theoretical knowledge in real communication settings to develop their skills. Furthermore, the setback to the quality of the course lies in the absence of a suitable cross-cultural communication course book. Both the students and teaching staff of the institutions in Vietnam have actually been facing the similar situation concerning this course partly because, on the one hand, it is a relatively new area and, on the other, none of the cross-cultural communication course books available on the market proves to be suitable with students’ level and learning context. A great number of books on the area have been widely used in linguistic schools and universities, such as *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication* by Condon, J. & Yousef, F. [1]; *Foundations of Intercultural Communication* by Chen, G., & Starosta, W. [2]; *Communicating Across Cultures* by Stella Ting-Toomey [3]; *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication: Identities in a Global Community* by Fred E. Jandt [4]; *Understanding Global Cultures: Metaphorical Journeys Through 28 Nations, Clusters of Nations, and Continents* by Gannon, M. [5], etc. These course books, though significant and popular at various institutions abroad, are too abstract and not adequate to the allotted time and syllabus, as well as the teaching and learning of the field in Vietnam in general. However, it should be discerned that they are quite useful for reference. With regard to course books used for English majors, the course book *Beyond Language: Intercultural Communication for English as a Second Language* by Levine and Adelman [6] has been employed at several institutions; nevertheless it was first published more thirty years ago and some parts are out-of-date, accordingly.

In Vietnam, there are quite few cross-cultural communication course books available both at institutions and on the market because of the fact that the teaching of cross-cultural communication is relatively nascent. Thus far, a number of books mainly written by Nguyen Quang, including *Intercultural Communication* [7], have been used at the College of Foreign Languages - Hanoi National University, Hoa Sen University, and Ho Chi Minh University of Social Sciences and Humanities. However, these works seem significant to students of cultural management and business administration majors. Moreover, due to different characteristics of each institution as well as different levels of students, such books appear not to be a ‘one-fit-all’ design as taking into account the learning and teaching context for English majors. Also, the books do not incorporate, among other things, teaching techniques as required for an appropriately designed course book for English majors. As a

result, the selection of teaching materials is completely left to individual teachers. This has triggered the problem that the instructors teach whatever they consider necessary or capable in terms of convenience and availability of materials.

It is common knowledge that the teaching quality could only be obtained if all the parties—the institution, the teachers, and the students—are involved. On the teacher's side, what can be done is to renew teaching methods and design a course book with a view to improving the learning and teaching of the course.

### **3.1. The Case Study of Vinh University: Situation Analysis**

It is discerned that a language program is normally carried out in a particular context. This brings the necessity of taking into account assessment of factors that may have impact on the success of the program. What follows is an analysis of the situation which covers the training institution, cross-cultural communication syllabus, students' background and motivation, teaching staff, and facilities.

#### **3.1.1. Training Institution**

The Foreign Languages Department of Vinh University follows the general curriculum framework set by Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training. The goal of the English curriculum is "to train Bachelors of Arts in English with adequate knowledge and skills, good political and moral qualities, good professional conducts and good health in order to effectively work in English-using fields and to meet the demands of society and economy in the process of international integration." This curriculum is applied for the training of both Bachelors of Arts in English Language and English Pedagogy.

#### **3.1.2. Cross-Cultural Communication Syllabus**

The course is taught to the third-year students, and in the academic year training curriculum, it is provided in only one semester and lasts for 30 credit hours (two credits), each of which lasts 50 minutes. The course clearly states the objectives, course description, course details, references, lecture organizations, requirements by the instructor, and course assessment.

The syllabus states that the course aims to develop the students' cross-cultural communication knowledge and skills necessary for successful engagement in a multicultural/multinational business environment. In detail, the course is intended to provide the students with knowledge (understand how cultural formation and how categorical dimensions in cross-cultural communication impact identities and relationships interpersonally, between groups, and even internationally; explore how these theories impact different groups based on values, behaviors, region, ethnicity, etc..., causing culture shocks/conflicts and culture bumps; and investigate how cross-cultural communication is effectively used and applied in various environments, especially in multicultural workplace). In terms of skills, the course aims to help the students consider existing and potential strategies for enhancing appreciation and concern for different cultures,

recognize and address potential culture conflicts and bumps, including barriers to effective communications, and develop critical thinking regarding cross-cultural relations in order to better analyze and understand complex contexts.

The course is taught mainly in projector-equipped classrooms and conducted in two credit hours of contact time per week. Students are expected to spend considerable time accessing additional materials relevant to already-acquired knowledge of a previous class meeting and knowledge of/information about an upcoming lecture, in addition to assigned reading handout given by the instructor. This aims to assist them in getting necessary information to participate successfully in the classroom. However, these techniques actually cause hindrance for both the teacher and the student, one of which is unreliable information from the Internet that has made not little confusion. Besides, students are asked to engage in pair/group work-based prior-to-class and in-class activities in the form of interview, role-play, and report to develop their communicative competence through the acquisition of cross-cultural communication theories and cultural knowledge; however, it appears hard to cover all the activities and contents as well as the instructor's feedback-giving due to limited time assigned in classroom. Equally important, due to limited time, there remains absence of competence-based teaching methods; rather, teachers spend most of the time lecturing and giving pair and/or group work only sometimes in midway of their lecture.

#### **3.1.3. Students**

Students of the Department of Foreign Languages come from different provinces in the North and the North Central regions of Vietnam. Many of them are from mountainous and rural areas, thus their knowledge of English, learning styles and expectations are different. The fact is that the linguistic competence of students from the city is better than those from the countryside. Before taking the course, all the students have been equipped with basic language skills in writing, reading, speaking and listening courses. Students enrolling in this course are expected to have achieved considerable fluency in English, but their language competence remains below the linguistic level required for understanding long texts and terminology in cross-cultural communication. Also, since the course is instructed almost in English, their Listening skill is somehow poor to catch the contents of lecture. In particular, the shortage of a course book causes more obstacles for the students to follow the flows of the instructor's messages. Moreover, the students are not confident enough to take part in group role plays and/or presentations, and even in group discussions partly due to their linguistic competence and partly because of their lacking cultural background knowledge and the heavy load of contents as expected by the course syllabus, as well as, more or less, the instructor's methodology.

#### **3.1.4. Teaching Staff**

There are two instructors teaching this course, but in fact, only one teacher is in charge of the whole course for the

third-year students (another in charge of the course for Master’s students in English Theories and Methodology). Therefore, they rarely have opportunities to share teaching experience and to co-work when necessary. One more difficulty encountered by both the teachers and students is that textbooks and course books are not available, except for a reference book which is not very relevant to the course contents. As a result, it is always hard and takes too much time for the teacher to collect, read documents and compile them to use as teaching materials in class.

### 3.1.5. Facilities

The Department of Foreign Languages is said to enjoy a good physical condition with standard quality classrooms and modern facilities. Particularly, the English section has also received financial support from a number of organizations, including the National Foreign Languages Project and the U.S. Embassy. A resource corner of the University library has been equipped with a lot of valuable books, magazines, English newspapers, monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, encyclopedias videos, cassettes, a DVD, a VCD. There are also a number of well-equipped labs which enable the students to search and access a variety of valuable materials and online resources. However, there are too few books on Cross-Cultural Communication for both teachers and learners to read, and there is no course book, either. Besides, this course is hardly carried out in classrooms equipped with computers because such classrooms are not available for small classes under 40 students. Rather, the course is usually allocated in projector-equipped classrooms, but this is not the case in all semesters. This somehow causes not few obstacles for both teachers and students in carrying out teaching and learning activities, such as presentations, role play, etc., thereby partly reducing students’ interest and teachers’ motivation.

## 3.2. Student Need Analysis: The Survey

As suggested by Jack C. Richards, “need analysis may take place prior to, during, or after a language program” [8]. The survey was carried out after the course to dig out students’ evaluation on the teaching quality of the course.

### 3.2.1. Aims, Objectives, Participants and Procedures

The survey was conducted using a post-course questionnaire consisting of 35 items which are categorized into 7 groups of information: Course content and organization, student contribution, learning environment and teaching methods, quality of delivery, assessment, sources, and overall assessment on the course. The aims of the questionnaire were to gather the students’ reflections of the Cross-Cultural Communication course they had taken, and to look into the ways of improving the quality of teaching Cross-Cultural Communication course at the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Vinh University.

The questionnaire was piloted and then applied to 200 third-year English-majored students, who had just finished the Cross-Cultural Communication course.

### 3.2.2. Remarks on the Results and Implications

The general impression from the results of the questionnaire is that students were satisfied with the course they had just taken. 144 out of 200 students (72 per cent) stated that the course was well-organized with clearly stated syllabus and the course content is appropriate. In similar fashion, 138 out of 200 (69 per cent) expressed their interest in learning the course they stated that the course integrated theoretical course concepts with real-world applications and that the subject matters presented in the course have improved your knowledge of the subject and practical skills. This is also evident in the students’ level of attendance (the average percentage is well over 90 per cent). However, a large number of the students, 112 out of 200 students (56 per cent) stated the course workload was quite heavy, especially the theory part.

In terms of learning environment and teaching methods, a majority of the students, 128 out of 200 students (64 per cent) strongly agreed that the learning environment and teaching method encouraged participation, the overall environment in the class was conducive to learning with somehow adequate classroom facilities. However, there remains a large number of the students (36 per cent) gave the comment that ‘more interactive activities and diversification of teaching methods and techniques should be applied’ to stimulate their motivation and that ‘more issue-based communication situations should be employed’ to develop their communicative competence in multicultural settings.

With regard to assessment, the data shows that the majority of the students, 136 out of 200 students (68 per cent) was basically satisfied with the instructor’s assessment as formative assessment was based on students’ portfolio and in-class activities. In addition, the instructor’s delivery was stated to be understood and stimulating, with a variety of examples, real-world communication demonstrations, and quizzes as illustrations for theory. However, the remaining percentage of the students stated the present proportion given to formative assessment (accounting for 10 per cent of the course assessment) is unreasonable and does not encourage their engagement in in-class activities and beyond.

Concerning references and other sources, the findings from the study reveal that more attention should be paid to the course to make it more beneficial. That is, 65% of the students (112 out of 200) commented that more course materials should be provided because they found it hard to follow the flows of the course or to have a good preparation for the next lesson as they themselves normally had to search materials on the Internet, which are, more or less, at low level of reliability, validity, and relevance. This has caused not little confusion. It is therefore suggested by well over half of the students that the syllabus workload should be curtailed and, more importantly, a course book should be developed with a view to maximizing the benefits of the course.

The findings apparently indicate that some changes need to be made to create a more enjoyable course for the students. What can be done is renew teaching methods and assessment and to design a course book, along with reconsideration of

the course syllabus. By doing this, students will develop positive attitudes towards the course, and, in their turn, positive attitudes will take care of efficiency of the course.

#### 4. Solutions to the Improvement of the Course Teaching Quality

The aforementioned problems spark some questions of particular concern about what approach is employed to address the present situation of the course teaching, why such an approach is needed, what CDIO-based teaching methods and assessment are used to ensure students' learning outcomes/standards, and how to deal with lacking materials and unreliable sources. This substantial part endeavors to address the research questions.

##### 4.1. Employing CDIO Approach in the Course Teaching

CDIO is an initiative of engineering disciplines at Massachusetts Technical University (USA), in collaboration with Swedish universities. This is a solution to improving the teaching quality to meet social requirements on the basis of identifying the learning standards/outcomes to design training programs and methods. CDIO is built scientifically, logically and consistently to ensure a competence-based program. Though it is initially designed for engineering, its generalized methodologies can be applied to many different training areas other than engineering [9].

Specifically, the feasibility of employing CDIO in training programs is for the following reasons.

First, the world is now in the age of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 with many opportunities and challenges. The outstanding features of this revolution compared to previous times are presented in its core values: Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT) and Big Data. Industrial Revolution 4.0 focuses on research to create leaps in productivity, creating socially rich and diversified development demands. Meanwhile, the structure of the training program, the practical skills of learners are almost unchanged compared to the past. Therefore, CDIO can help educators integrate training programs without increasing the cost and training time. In particular, the two factors that CDIO attaches great importance to forming the quality and competence of learners after graduation are knowledge and skills (both core skills and soft skills). These are crucial for students to correspond to the constantly changing working environment.

Second, the current trend of globalization and international integration involves the training of intensive labor force and global citizens to meet the 4 pillars of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)—*Learning to know* which means providing learners with cognitive tools to understand the complex world and to equip the appropriate knowledge background for learners to continue learning and discovering knowledge throughout their lives; *Learning to be* which means providing each individual with analytical thinking, social skills so that

they can optimize psycho-social qualities as well as physical health to become an all-round global citizen; *Learning to live together* which means autonomizing each individual to understand the values that contain the framework of human rights, democratic principles, the value of human culture, respect, and harmony, interpersonal relationship human society, thereby each individual can live harmoniously among relationships; and *Learning to do* which means equipping people to learn knowledge, skills and attitudes so that each can practice his/her profession successfully and effectively participate in the socio-economy in a global context [10]. These four pillars can be reached by CDIO approach.

Third, one of the highlights of applying CDIO is the integrated curriculum. According to the CDIO official website, CDIO's vision is to "Integrate professional skills such as teamwork and communication; Enhance active learning and experience; Require continuous improvement through high quality assurance process; Enrich the course with student-designed projects. In this sense, the CDIO approach aims to train students for mastery of comprehensive development of knowledge, skills, attitudes and practical capacity (called CDIO competence) and a sense of responsibility to society [11].

Fourth, employing CDIO in training is linked to the needs of employers, thereby narrowing down the gap between the institution's training and the requirements of the human resource users; at the same time, it helps learners develop comprehensively with core skills and soft skills to quickly adapt to a constantly changing working environment. What's more, CDIO helps training programs to be built and designed according to a standardized process.

By virtue of its merits, the network of universities applying CDIO in the world is increasing, especially in the United States. There have been more than 100 worldwide institutions applying CDIO to the subjects of Physics, Electronic Engineering and Machine Engineering [12]. Also, more than 1,000 relevant international research and publications have worked on the successful story of CDIO [13].

In Asia, Singapore is the first country to apply CDIO. The country has successfully applied at 5 universities and 15 specializations since 2007. In 2010, Singapore was awarded the Excellent Training of Chemical Engineering by IchemE (S'pore) (Excellence in Education and Training in Chemical Engineering) for its achievements in applying CDIO approach. In Vietnam, in order to study and apply CDIO-based teaching methods in implementing the goal of "Training to meet social needs" (Ministry of Education and Training 2008), the new CDIO application process is taking crucial steps, starting with HCM National University and Hanoi National University. In recent years, a number of institutions have applied CDIO in some selected training programs, including Thai Nguyen University, FPT University, Dong A University, Duy Tan University, Institute of Post and Telecommunications, and Vinh University. This is to say, CDIO proves to be a successful and feasible

approach to be applied in a large number of majors, apart from engineering.

#### **4.2. Applying CDIO-Based Teaching Methods and Assessment**

The teaching methods of cross-cultural communication should be interactive with a focus on a balanced consideration between theories and practice. Nunan (2012) asserts that the teaching of cross-cultural communication “[needs to] involve [s] the combination between lectures about information/knowledge approach and role play, group discussion, case analysis, and field work” [14]. This means that if students are exposed to such cultural knowledge and information, then they will develop a cognitive understanding of other peoples’ customs, beliefs, and values which are important in cross-cultural interaction. Allowing open discussions rather than mere lectures will, in return, enhance the student perspective of communication.

In similar fashion, Suneetha (2009) contends that educational approach on cross-cultural communication “should equip learners with the means of accessing and analyzing a broad range of cultural practices and meanings and assist them in developing an understanding of the processes involved, as well as afford [them] opportunities to analyze and reflect on their encounters, identify any conflict areas, and describe them, thereby changing [their] future actions or behavior” [15]. The teaching of the course is therefore primarily based on a particular set of values such as learner-centredness, the teacher as facilitator, learning by doing, verbalization, peer interaction, self disclosure, and group work. Also, the instructor needs to help students develop a positive cultural attitude and cultural awareness. It is important that students have a positive attitude and be mindful of the differences. In addition, the instructor needs to assist students in developing appropriate cultural attitudes and improving their intercultural communication competence so as to meet the demand of the globalized world. This will develop not only students’ cultural criticality but also the dynamic, process approach.

Based on the aforementioned language experts’ contention in line with CDIO approach, the author proposes the employment of a broad range of teaching methods to ensure the English-majored students’ cross-cultural communication competence as follows:

##### **4.2.1. Brainstorming Method**

The method of brainstorming is defined as a way to apply each person’s experience and initiative in the minimum amount of time required to maximize the best data [16]. Brainstorming is a method that helps students in a short time to develop many ideas and assumptions about a certain issue, including many creative ideas. To implement this method, lecturers need to provide a system of information as a premise for the discussion. This method can meet the learning standards/outcomes under CDIO criteria, such as creative thinking and problem-solving skill, etc.

##### **4.2.2. Think-Pair-Share Method**

This method is done by having students read the same material or think about a topic, then the students sitting next to each other can talk about each other’s ideas and experiences in a certain period of time, then get students to share with the whole class. This method is easily conducted and encourages interaction among students as they can participate in sharing their ideas, building their confidence, helping them focus on the topic they are learning, knowing what they are learning and measure how they understand the problem, even raising new issues for lessons. This method can help achieve the learning standards according to CDIO criteria, such as communication skills and critical thinking, etc.

##### **4.2.3. Problem-Based Learning**

The goal of problem-based learning (defined as in-depth research on a learning topic) is to learn more about a topic rather than just finding the right answers to the teacher’s questions. In the problem-based learning method, students can gain new knowledge, grasp the method of acquiring knowledge, develop active and creative thinking, and prepare a capacity to adapt to social life, timely identify problems and propose reasonable resolution of problems arising. This method can help achieve the learning standards according to CDIO criteria, such as identify and formulate problems, propose solutions; exchange, judge and balance in a solution.

##### **4.2.4. Group-Based Learning**

For cross-cultural communication class meetings, the class is divided into small groups of 5 to 7 students each. Depending on the purpose and requirements of the learning problem, groups are randomly or deliberately divided, maintained or changed in each part of the course, and assigned to the same task or other tasks together.

When working in groups, members must work according to the rules set by the teacher or by the group itself. Members must work proactively, not relying on a few more knowledgeable and active students. The group members help each other to understand the identified problem in the competitive manner with other groups. When a group makes a presentation, the remaining groups have to ask critical questions or ask questions to clarify the problem. This method mobilize groups to help members of the group share their concerns, experiences, and build new awareness together. By exposing thoughts/ideas, each student can clearly identify his or her level of understanding of the topic and see what he or she needs to learn. In this sense, the lesson becomes a process of mutual learning, not a passive reception from teachers. This method can help achieve the learning standards under CDIO outline, such as teamwork skills and communication skills, and so on.

##### **4.2.5. Role-Playing**

Role play is a method designed for students to practice certain behaviors in a hypothetical situation. The role-play method has such advantages as enabling students to be trained to practice behavioral skills and express attitudes in a

safe environment before practicing in real life, inspiring and drawing students' attention, facilitating students' creativity, encouraging the changing attitude and behavior of students according to ethical and political-social behavior standards, helping them immediately see the impact and effectiveness of utterances and action of their roles in a play. This method can help achieve the learning standards under the CDIO outline, such as critical thinking, recognizing knowledge, skills and personal attitudes of each learner.

#### 4.2.6. Case Studies Method

Although case studies have been widely used in law, commerce and medicine education, they are equally relevant to the cultural field. The key component of this new training method is based on real situations of both students and lecturers. The main purpose of situations is to describe, exchange experiences about how to solve problems and conflicts while performing assigned tasks. By different situations that need to be addressed in a fixed time with limited resources, students are put in a position to make decisions or call for support from members of the same group to find directions and reasonable resolutions. The diversity of situations is brought up not only to encourage students to take initiative and creativeness, but also to bring comfort and mental refreshment when attending class. This factor makes students able to absorb the content of lecture lessons more easily and deeply than traditional teaching methods and

#### 4.2.7. Experiential Learning

feasible to teaching cross-cultural communication. This method can help achieve the learning standards under the CDIO outline, such as proposing solutions, qualitative estimation and analysis, etc.

##### *Project-Based Learning*

The project-based learning method is to organize teaching and learning through practical projects. The project here is understood as complex tasks from questions or problems that stimulate learners to learn and explore [17]. That solution may include design-implementation experiences from which learners can participate in designing, making decisions or surveying activities related to the project. With this method, students will have to work in groups and explore the problems associated with life, then present them to the class and share what they have done in their projects. During the presentation, audiovisual media, a play, a handwritten report, a website or a product can be used. Project-based learning focuses on interdisciplinary and interdisciplinary learning activities and is often associated with problems arising from current life. Besides, the project-based learning method also creates opportunities to help students pursue their interests, and make decisions about their own answers or find solutions to problems. This method can help achieve the learning standards according to CDIO outlines, such as making assumptions, design - implementation skills, written communication skills, and presentation skills, etc.

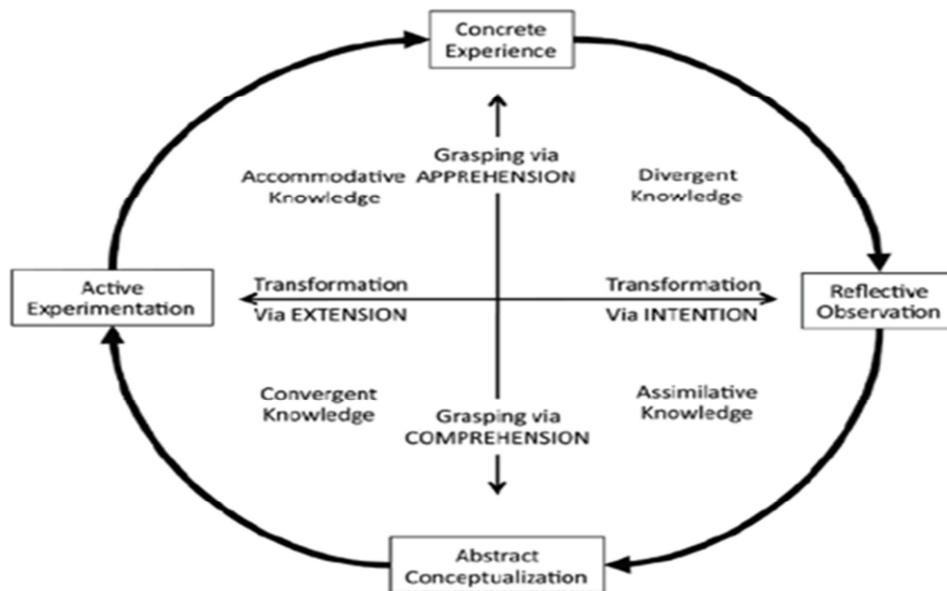


Figure 1. Model of Experiential Learning [18].

Experiential learning is defined as the students' learning process of undergoing practical, highly practical and highly applicable simulations, such as projects design - implementation, and case studies from which students draw into experiences for themselves, shedding more light on learned theories. Learning processes can be divided into four

basic groups in accordance with the four different learning styles: (i) Observation of reflection: learning through observation activities performed by others or contemplating themselves and summarizing experiences; (ii) Conceptualization: learning through the construction of concepts, synthesis, interpretation and analysis of

observations; (iii) Practical experience: learning through specific activities, behaviors, and actions; (iv) Experimenting: learning through experiments, proposing solutions to solving problems and making decisions. This method is crucial for cross-cultural communication as it can engage students to communicate with foreigners from different corners of the world to dig out practical cultural experiences and contemplate what they have learned in practice. In this experimental learning process, each student will apply this process in different ways and at uneven levels, depending on psycho-physiological characteristics, levels and

cognitive abilities, and social experience of each student. Often in the traditional way of teaching, teachers often start lectures from concepts that are general or abstract before giving students practical activities. However, for an active teaching approach, experience is considered the first activity in the learning process and supportive to personalization in such a learning process. The model of learning through CDIO experience is illustrated in Figure 1.

The merits of those CDIO-based teaching methods are summarized as below:

*Table 1. Summary of CDIO-based approach teaching methods and respective students' learning outcomes.*

Or.	Method	Description	Learning outcomes
1	<i>Brainstorming</i>	- Teachers raise problems to be solved, set time and ways to work - Students work individually, quickly list ideas	- Creative thinking - Proposing solutions and suggestions - Communication skills
2	<i>Think-pair-share</i>	- Teachers raise issues to discuss, regulate time and ways to share - Students work in pairs, listen and present ideas, defend their ideas and refute	- Communication structure - Critical thinking - Reflection - Identify and formulate problem
3	<i>Problem-based learning</i>	- Teachers raise “problems” related to teaching content. - Students give answers to “problems” on an individual or group basis	- Proposing solutions - Exchange and judgment - Balance in solutions
4	<i>Group-based learning</i>	- Teachers organize classes in groups and prepare learning tasks. - Each group receives a learning task and cooperates to do it - Teachers suggest “scripts” with content related to the module.	- Teamwork skills - Communication skills - Critical thinking
5	<i>Role playing</i>	- Assign students to perform “scripts” of their own. - The remaining students play a role as audience and reviewers - Teachers build “case” related to teaching content	- Recognizing knowledge skills and - Forming personal attitudes - Proposing solutions
6	<i>Case studies</i>	- Students are assigned to analyze and answer “case” on an individual or group basis	- Estimating and analyzing in qualitative approach - Making assumptions - Developing Design-Implementation skills
7	<i>Project based learning</i>	- Teachers prepare requirements and content of projects - Students are assigned to implement projects on an individual or group basis	- Written communication skills - Presentation skills - Analytical skills
8	<i>Experiential learning</i>	- Teachers set out contents and objectives of experiment related to the teaching contents - Students are assigned tasks during experiment (observe, act, assess, reflect) and after experiment (reports, presentation, judgment)	- Observation and Assessment - Information collection - Creative thinking - Communication skill - Written and presentation skills

In terms of assessment, there needs to be a wide range of assessment tools, including formative assessment (defined as process-based or continuous assessment) and summative assessment (defined as final learning outcome assessment). A number of formative assessment methods applied to the course Cross-Cultural Communication should not be left unmentioned are students' portfolio. That is, formative assessment on students' performance in in-class activities, which need to be in line with the aforementioned teaching methods, including students' active engagement in brainstorming activities, teamwork, think-pair-share activities, their performance in analyzing case studies and problem-solving. Formative assessment on students' performance beyond classroom includes assessment on project-based process, teamwork, presentation, and assessment on the quality of students' reports and presentations in experiential learning. The teacher's assessment needs to be designed in the format of rubric and checklist with clear instructions, especially for reports and

oral presentations, so that students can set goals right from the beginning in the learning process. For summative assessment, it is of no good to apply multiple choice questions because it is impossible to testify students' performance in cross-cultural communication skills, thereby falling behind the learning outcomes. Rather, it needs to gear towards practical assessment tools, such as cultural projects or at least paper-based written tests.

Currently, at Vinh University, all the training programs are applying the proportion of assessment within which 50% is for formative assessment and 50% for summative assessment. It is quite a reasonable and convincing breakdown for assessment since the University started to officially apply CDIO approach in 2017. However, with the exceptional characteristics of the course Cross-Cultural Communication, we strongly recommend that the format of multiple choice questions should not be applied in mid-term test for the course, and even for the final test alike, because this course needs to be effective communication skills-based

rather than knowledge-based.

#### **4.3. Designing the CDIO-Based Course Book “Cross-Cultural Communication”**

To address the question of lacking materials and unreliable sources, it is essential to design a course book in line with CDIO approach. It is common knowledge that course book designing is a challenging job. Many factors must be taken into account because the writing of a course book must be based on the syllabus designed for the course. First, it is required to prepare for the course by learning from past experiences, for example, what successes and troubles teachers have encountered. Teachers also have to review their materials they have employed in teaching in combination with students' course evaluations so that they can make a good plan for the future. One more important point should be considered is which contents are included in the course book. The course content should be the material and ideas that are most necessary and that can fit into the structure. Trying to pack too much information into a course can hinder students' learning. To do so, teachers have to think about the knowledge students have already had, and what prerequisites the course requires, what students need to learn and the amount of time the course covers. Once teachers have selected the main ideas and the content they want to cover in their course, it is important to have a sense of how the content goes within the allotted time. Haruchan (2016) proposes several possible ways to organize the content as follows:

- (1) Chronologically
- (2) Topically/Categorically
- (3) Theory to application (or vice versa)
- (4) Easy to difficult
- (5) Broad ideas to narrow examples (or vice versa) [19]

In this sense, the Cross-Cultural Communication course book needs to be designed to equip students with cross-cultural communication knowledge and skills necessary for successful engagement in a multicultural/multinational business environment. In detail, it is intended to provide students with:

##### **4.3.1. Knowledge**

- (1) Understand how cultural formation and how categorical dimensions in cross-cultural communication impact identities and relationships interpersonally, between groups, and even internationally.
- (2) Explore how these theories impact different groups based on values, behaviors, region, ethnicity, etc..., causing culture shocks/conflicts and culture bumps.
- (3) Investigate how cross-cultural communication is effectively used and applied in various environments, especially in multicultural workplace.

##### **4.3.2. Skills**

- (1) Consider existing and potential strategies for enhancing appreciation and concern for different cultures.

- (2) Recognize and address potential culture conflicts and bumps, including barriers to effective communications.
- (3) Develop critical thinking regarding cross-cultural relations in order to better analyze and understand complex contexts.

##### **4.3.3. Attitudes**

- (1) Build cross-cultural awareness through a sense of humility, empathy, and respect for diversity and difference.
- (2) Encourage curiosity for further learning and experience in the cross-cultural field.
- (3) Lay a foundational groundwork for doing work and services across cultures with integrity.
- (4) Build a positive attitude as well as appropriate/adaptive cultural attitudes in communicating across cultures and be mindful of the differences.

For deriving a tentative content, we have based on literature review and on feedback of the lecturers in our Division as well as other Faculty members who have taught the course before and, more importantly, on information from the data gathered during need analysis so that the content should be motivational for the students and suitable with the teaching-learning contexts. In the course book, all the theoretical parts are introduced and illustrated, along with questions for discussion, exercises, quizzes, analysis of issue-based multicultural business situations, and practice. Thus, the course book has a good balance between theory and practice, if not to say more emphasis is placed on the latter. The course book is designed into 10 units for 15 weeks, of which several units last for two class meetings. As an adaptation of learner-centered curriculum, the content is subject to change.

##### **4.3.4. Teaching Principles of the Course Book**

In order to ensure efficient methodology, one must consider teaching principles underpinning the syllabus. In this case, we strongly recommend adult-teaching principles be taken into account with the assumption that students will learn best when:

teaching materials and course content are relevant to their interests  
 their own learning styles are taken into account  
 they have the opportunity to practice in pairs or groups  
 there is a friendly, interactive and supportive atmosphere in the classroom  
 they are exposed to authentic materials  
 they are provided with appropriate feedback and chances for correction (teacher-correction, peer-correction and self-correction)  
 the teacher appreciates their achievements rather than looks for perfection  
 they are given the skills for autonomous learning.

##### **4.3.5. Teaching Approach of the Course Book**

We have innovated teaching approaches by employing cooperative learning approach. In particular, pair-work and group-work activities allow each individual student more

time and opportunities to participate in the classroom discourse. The cooperative approach offers students opportunities to gain higher retention and achievement, develop interpersonal skills and responsibility, and be more self-confident and creative. This approach also enables students to become more knowledgeable and to develop creative thinking and problem-solving skills.

#### 4.3.6. Teaching Modes of the Course Book

In order to best achieve the objectives of the course, both active and passive modes of teaching are used. Passive mode involves lecturing, which is used to convey information to a large number of students in a short time. However, this mode is used for teaching the theoretical component only since it is a one-way communication, but we are entirely aware that it has little value in facilitating attitudinal and behavioral changes.

Discussion and group/pair work, along with demonstrations, role-play, acting, reports and presentations, are the active modes of teaching mainly used in this course because they involve two-way communication between the instructor and students as well as among students themselves. Discussion provides an opportunity for clarification and exchange of ideas. Group and pair work activities provide cooperation among the students, thus helping to develop self-confidence, decision-making skills and creative thinking and problem-solving skills. Shifting from an instructor focus in the classroom to a more workshop-like approach would help students solve their problems with peers and instructor supervision.

The procedure of the course is carried out as follows. On the first day of the course, students are provided with the syllabus outline in which all relevant information about the course such as course and objectives, course contents, course requirements and assessment, and students’ tasks. Beyond the classroom, students are expected to read books or documents to seek answers to questions and exercises required by the instructor beforehand to prepare for the next class contact. In class, they are expected to participate in pair-work and group-work activities to share information, to discuss and then to present. Some main cooperative learning activities carried out in the course are peer-tutoring that consists of think-pair share, information-gap activities, problem solving, etc. Role-play provides the students with an opportunity to review the acquisition of theoretical knowledge provided by the instructor and to get accessed to additional relevant information in service of plot preparation for their play, practice on issue-based communication settings, problem-solving skills, verbal and non-verbal behaviors in communicating across cultures.

## 5. Conclusion

The teaching of Cross-Cultural Communication is becoming increasingly important for the sake of students’ job opportunities and for effective communications of any sort in the age of integration and globalization. For English-majored students, the course has become more prominent as the

teaching of a language cannot be separate from the fostering of cultural knowledge and communicative competence in multicultural settings for students. However, the present status of the course teaching in many institutions reveals a variety of difficulties and problems, particularly in teaching approaches and the absence of a suitable course book, along with heavy load of contents and students’ background of cultural knowledge and cross-cultural communication skills.

At Vinh University, the course has been drawing more and more English majors’ attention given their increasing awareness of the course significance, especially for their future job opportunities. However, the teaching of the course, despite great efforts made by the institution and the teachers, has been facing a number of problems, of which the two most dominant ones are the absence of a suitable course book and inefficient teaching methods. This urgent situation has encouraged us to carry out this study in the hope that the situation can be improved.

With a view to improving the teaching quality of the course, it is vital to involve, among other things, renewal of teaching methods, facilities, and more importantly, designing of the course book. In order to design an appropriate course book conducive for English-majored students’ levels and needs, the student need analysis for the proposed course book was carried out by means of an investigation of the reality of teaching the course. The course book Cross-Cultural Communication needs to ensure a twofold purpose: helping students understand the basic concepts in cross-cultural communication as well as acquire cultural knowledge of a variety of worldwide countries AND assisting them in developing communicative competence in line with theory part to ensure CDIO-based learning standards. The course book also needs to adopt cooperative learning approach that is learner-centered to create a comfortable, friendly and competitive learning environment among students.

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