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Review

Barriers to the Intercultural Communication of Native English Speaking Teachers in an Intercultural Environment: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Native English speaking (NES) teachers are important contributors to the English acquisition process. In a multicultural environment, the ability to communicate with people and minimize misunderstandings is vital. Nevertheless, very little concern is shown about possible barriers to intercultural communication that NES teachers may have when working in different regions in the world, including: anxiety, the assumption of similarity instead of differences, stereotypes and prejudice, ethnocentrism, and nonverbal misinterpretation (Barna, 1997). This may cause many problems for both the NES teachers themselves and the students they teach. This paper aims to review other research and studies concerning the challenges that NES teachers might face when working in an intercultural environment.

Keywords

barriers, Intercultural communication, Intercultural communication competence, NES teachers

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Globalization has made the world smaller by offering people unlimited chances to live, study and work in multicultural environments, including traveling abroad, worldwide cooperation and trading, international networks, or entertaining or working with foreign partners in their own country. This requires people not only to have good language competence but also to understand their partners' cultural features to have acceptable communication and avoid misunderstandings.

In education, globalization could provide good opportunities as well as challenges. To some extent, students may enjoy a wide variety of choices for learning in advanced education systems. On the other hand, in an intercultural classroom with different cultural backgrounds from around the world, both

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language learners and teachers are required to adapt to the constantly changing environment while balancing their learning process as culture is an important factor that affects language acquisition. In fact, language learning is currently not just about learning how to read and write, but also about how to communicate with people with different cultural identities (Fantini, 1995). As a consequence, intercultural communication (IC) has been part of teaching methodology and a topic of interest for scientific research in the past few decades.

In Vietnam, English has become one of the priorities in the educational system from primary school to college education and has seen advancements in recent years. Currently, Vietnamese learners of English do not necessarily study abroad to have a 100% English speaking environment, but within local classrooms, teachers from the USA, the UK, Australia, the Philippines, etc., can support such a learning target. Unlike international students, those who study English in Vietnam do not suffer significant culture shocks; however, as local learners, they may miscommunicate with their NES teachers because of differences between Vietnamese and other native English-speaking countries' customs and traditions. According to Le Roux (2002), in a multicultural environment, communication enables the success of both teachers and learners while assisting them with essential tools to complete their objectives. Therefore, it is important to maintain communication between students and their instructors and avoid interruptions or misunderstandings, which always exist among various cultural backgrounds (Samovar and Porter's, 1997).

In addition, there could be the same problems in communication among co-teachers with different cultural identities. In this paper, studies about intercultural communication barriers will be discussed and analyzed to understand the problems that NES teachers face when working with different cultural identities.

1.2 Significance

In recent years, IC has become a well-concerned topic in scientific research because of its importance in organizations. Success in communication depends on the way information is exchanged within the organization and how relationships are established through that process (Byram, 1997). Good communication among staff motivates and engages people in fulfilling their commitment. Educating IC skills boosts a better understanding of differences among cultures, develop appropriate etiquette and avoids conflicts.

NES teachers, or foreign teachers, are part of the educational system, especially in terms of language teaching and learning. Several studies have shown that those teachers are highly valued for their experience of using English as a first or second language (Llurda 2010). Therefore, according to Benke & Medgyes (2005), one of the considerable advantages is that NES teachers are well qualified for conversation classes and act as perfect models for students to imitate.

With recent advancement in English training in different countries in general and in Vietnam in particular, most schools are updating their curricula with native speakers' sessions. This helps boost motivation and interest in learning English for students and reduce teaching pressure for local lecturers. The point is that few schools have plans to help NES teachers keep up with teaching styles or working culture within their organizations. In other words, IC is normally underestimated. Ellis (1994) claimed that the lack of knowledge of a target culture may lead to misunderstandings and "a disorientating dilemma in cross-cultural interactions". As a consequence, many of them become "foreigners", who do not have feelings of belonging in their society to a certain extent, fail to adapt to new environments and lack effective communication with their learners or co-teachers. This study is expected to help improve the working environment for native teachers themselves and benefit learners of English by focusing on the importance of IC in the era of globalization.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Culture and communication

There are many perspectives to mention when discussing the term "culture". In general, culture is about how people perceive the world; therefore, those perceptions differ from culture to culture (Bennet, 1993). However, Hofstede (2010: 6) and his team claim that culture is not the same thing as human nature. While human nature is inherited from birth, including universal feelings and reactions, culture can be built only through a learning process and is specific to a certain group or category.

In a more complicated way, culture refers to the following elements: symbols such as words, gestures, images, etc.; rituals such as social ceremonies; values such as good or evil, allowed or prohibited, etc.; and heroes who serve as good examples in society (Hofstede, 2001). As a result, when a person contacts another in a different culture, this person experiences dissimilar knowledge and norms that may cause culture shocks or other problems with adaptation, i.e. something that one thinks valuable in that culture may be devaluated in another.

On the other hand, communication is "*any behavior, verbal or non-verbal, that is perceived by another. Knowledge, feelings or thoughts are encoded and sent from at least one person and received and decoded by another*" (Dwyer, 2003). From the study of culture, Jandt (2018) indicated that communication should show (1) the way people learn the "appropriate behaviors" that are regulated and (2) the way people contact each other as a group. In short, communication is a tool used to express cultural values.

Culture and communication have a "very complex and intimate" relationship (Wang et al., 2011). Communication refers to the way people express their feelings and opinions while culture is perceived and learnt through communication which is also the only way to maintain and preserve culture from generation to generation. Communication changes in different kinds of contexts, such as the educational context, social context, economic context or political context. All parties must be able to adapt and have better awareness of intercultural aspects (McLuhan, 1962). On the whole, there is mutual influence between culture and communication, and the two terms should be studied together. (Alfred G. Smith, 1966).

2.2 Intercultural communication (IC) and Intercultural communication competence (ICC)

To explain the notion of IC, Patel et al. (2011) draw a connection between IC and the movement of the global population. They cited Lee (2003: 3) as saying that "developments in transportation and communication technology have been rapidly removing geographical boundaries" but have led to cultural boundary moves. They explain that humans seek better jobs, investments and educational opportunities around the world; therefore, geographical spaces have become meaningless. Consequently, the need to build a "global community that can work in harmony" has been significant.

In line with that, Kim (2005) explains that IC is the actual contact and communication between people from different cultural backgrounds. When people have contact with another culture or subculture, they may experience changes and unfamiliarity that may lead to problems such as uncertainty or anxiety. Only when they have a certain understanding of the new culture or learn how to adapt to it, do they feel less uncertain and anxious. Effective IC is not only beneficial to individuals themselves but also important for ensuring global peace, improving relationships among regions and nations and promoting sustainable values or resources as in globalization, human lives are more dependent on lives in other parts of the world (Samovar et al., 2015).

Neuliep (2018) suggested four benefits that a good relationship with people from another culture may bring back, including: (1) healthier communities where members accept and respect each other despite differences and work for everyone's benefits; (2) increased commerce that brings economic potential; (3) reduced conflict to understand other people's viewpoints in an assertive way; and (4) personal growth through tolerance while developing knowledge about others' history, beliefs or values that are not the same.

Obviously, that is when the ICC plays a role. Deardoff (2006) defines ICC as "a person's ability to interact effectively and appropriately in cross-cultural situations based on his or her intercultural attitudes, knowledge and comprehension and skills". Accordingly, the Deardoff Process of Intercultural Competence (Deardoff, 2006) (*Figure 1*) explains that a person should obtain (1) the attitudes of respecting other cultures, being open and willing to learn or tolerate differences; (2) understanding of cultural self-awareness and cultural knowledge; and (3) listening skills, the ability to be critical, self-reflect or interpret. Moreover, Wiseman (2002) reached the same consensus but replaced attitudes with motivation as one of the three important factors that contribute to the success of ICC.

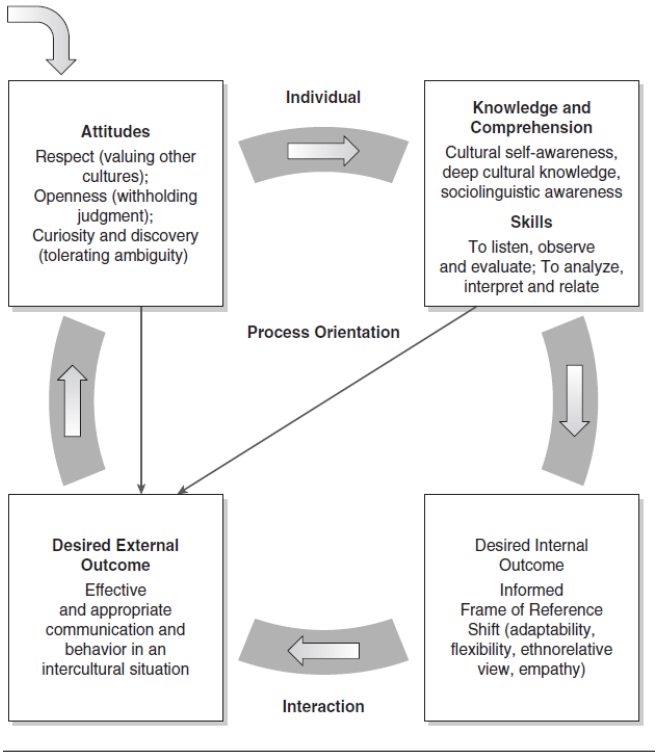

Figure 1. Deardoff Process of Intercultural Competence (Deardoff, 2006)

2.3 IC in language teaching and learning

IC is important to both teachers and students. While students should learn how to relate with and to people from other cultures to become global citizens in the new era, educators must act as curriculum makers to assist their learners in achieving their goals. To accomplish such a crucial role, teachers themselves should have adequate attitudes, knowledge and skills of related to their interculture; be able to appreciate and respect diversity (Gutiérrez Esteban et al., 2015; Hajisoteriou et al., 2018); and transmit such abilities to their students (Cushner & Mahon, 2009). This will affect a child's whole life in terms of vision and adjustments that he or she may make in the future. Currently, with the advancements in and effect of globalization on education, universities have become popular

in welcoming students and staff from around the world. Therefore, IC should be properly considered, especially in domestic higher educational organizations (Ameny-Dixon 2005).

However, despite the importance of IC in education, it is often underestimated and neglected. Cushner & Mahon (2009) argue that the role of the IC concept now still "remains on the margins, rather than central to the institutional mission". They provide examples of the US educators who are poor-equipped with IC training and such large-scale IC programs within their organizations are almost impossible. This may cause many problems, especially in the U.S., where international students and teachers live and work.

In conclusion, IC in education is vital and with IC professional training, teachers can avoid the negative feelings of depression, frustration, isolation or incompetence in teaching (Hajisoteriou et al., 2018).

2.4 Barriers to Intercultural communication

IC is a complicated process that requires many elements. When people communicate with partners from other cultural identities, they might encounter many challenges during the adaptation process, from the first contact until they completely adapt to the target culture. In fact, it is quite common for people who come to live and work in a foreign country to face such problems. Experts have come up with a wide range of stumbling blocks that people have when they are in communication with other cultures (Barna, 1997; Yan, 2009; Li and Campbell, 2006; Andrade, 2006; Jandt, 2018). Yan (2009) defined affective barriers as problems caused when people look at the same thing under different perceptions; those include stereotyping, prejudice, racism, ethnocentrism, and anxiety with uncertainty. Barna (1997) built a framework of six basic barriers to intercultural communication: anxiety, assuming similarity instead of difference, ethnocentrism, stereotypes and prejudice, nonverbal misinterpretations, and language. This framework has been popularly used to measure the obstacles people may face in different learning and working environments.

2.4.1 Language

It is undeniable that language is the greatest barrier in IC. There is a mutual relationship between language and culture; therefore, international students tend to receive less support and care because of their limitation in the target language (Andrade, 2006).

Li and Campbell (2006) conducted qualitative research on the cultural adaptation of Asian students in New Zealand. They reported that the students faced some problems concerning traditions, norms and practices in which language difficulty was considered a significant IC barrier that most Asian students encountered. In their study, they cited Berno & Ward (2004) as saying that there were many factors that affected Asian students in which the English level was top mentioned.

Similarly, after interviews with international students in Turkey, Eginli (2016) conducted thematic analysis to identify IC barriers that might affect intercultural adaptation. He concluded that in Turkey, foreign students suffer three basic problems, one of which is the English language. He explained that those who came to study in Turkey often used English in their daily life. However, it was not easy to find locals who communicated with them on and outside the campus. As a consequence, they often had problems receiving services.

Jandt (2018) noted that what makes language a barrier in communication is translation problems, categorized as: vocabulary, idiomatic, grammatical-syntactical, conceptual, and experiential equivalence. He cited the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in his study as evidence of the relationship between language and culture.

2.4.2 Anxiety

In addition to language barriers, emotional difficulties constitute another concern in IC. In a new environment, people may be anxious when they do not understand what people in a different culture mean and do not know what they are expected to do; for example, on their first day at school or at work, people may feel nervous, become clumsy and make some common mistakes (Jandt, 2018); or worry with the fear of "out of place" in society (Eginli, 2016). Eginli (2016) noted that female students are more likely to suffer from type of problem. It is concluded that feeling worried or anxious limits communication among cultures, causing embarrassment and misunderstanding.

To a different extent, Barna (1994) suggested that a certain level of anxiety can be perceived as "good stress", but if that happens over a long period of time, it may make people feel like "*walking on ice*".

2.4.3 Assuming similarity instead of differences

Cultures may have some common things with each other; however, there are many more differences than people think. Researchers have found that Western and Eastern cultures have had "very different systems of thought for thousands of years." That is, while Western people value straightforward rules in behavior, categorization and logic to answer a question, Eastern cultures consider a wide range of factors in different contexts and undervalue logics in problem solving (Nisbett, 2003). Therefore, if humans think that other people also behave and show emotions the same as they do, they may find that some kinds of behavior or attitudes are displayed inappropriately. In conclusion, this is also a large barrier that requires people not to assume similarities or differences but to identify the custom itself (Jandt, 2008).

2.4.4 Ethnocentrism

According to researchers, ethnocentrism refers to the judgment that a certain culture is the standard of the others and is superior and more important, including their values, language, beliefs, history, etc. (Wang, 2008; Jandt, 2018). Accordingly, ethnocentric people believe that they should be in the center, and that all of their rules, etiquette or experiences are correct and appropriate; meanwhile, the others are inappropriate and should show respect to them. Ethnocentrism may be harmless if people evaluate things in terms of others' point of view (Barna, 1994). However, in most cases, ethnocentrism is considered a negative belief that may lead to discrimination, stereotypes, hostility and rejection of other cultures (Jandt, 2018). With such negative influences, ethnocentrism prevents people from effective communication and increases hostility and fear toward "foreigners" (Lewis, 1985).

2.4.5 Stereotype and Prejudice

Stereotype

Lippmann (1922) simply defines stereotyping as the judgments that people often make about other people on the basis of their own ethnic group standard. Judgments can be positive or negative attitudes about a group of people's traits of age, sex, race, or profession (Neuliep, 2018). This is because people normally make assumptions on the basis of their expectations and previous experiences with that group of people.

Stereotypes can be either simplified or generalized and include different dimensions: (1) direction which could be negative or positive; (2) intensity which might be strong or loose; (3) specificity which can be vague or concrete; (4) consensus which shows how wide the stereotype is spread in the community; and (5) accuracy which indicates how accurate the stereotype is (Starosta, 2007).

Like ethnocentrism, stereotypes can be harmful to communication across cultures. Jandt (2018) explains that stereotypes initially result in false assumptions. This is because people normally grow up with mindsets of values and beliefs about someone or a certain group of people; therefore, when having contact with this person or group, people automatically produce thoughts about them without thinking twice. Second, once mindsets are passed from person to person and continue over time, stereotypes are reinforced, resulting in more misunderstandings. Moreover, it could be wrong that a certain stereotype about a community is always true to every single member of it. Finally, a stereotype that is negative about a person could be a prediction that he or she might become an actual kind of such stereotype in the future.

Prejudice

Consistently negative stereotypes can lead to prejudice. This includes the hatred or hostility of a group's sex, race, religion or traditions. Starosta (2007) identified five forms of prejudice, including: verbal abuse, discrimination, physical contact, physical avoidance and massacre. Among those forms, massacre is quite close to racism. All of the forms show various levels of isolation, negation and refusal to provide fair opportunities.

2.4.6 Non-verbal misinterpretation

People use words, gestures, or other non-spoken symbols to convey their meanings. The element that causes the most misunderstanding and argument is nonverbal information. According to Jandt (2018), nonverbal communication refers to messages that are passed without words, identified with a culture to reflect it and can be used to confirm verbal messages. People believe that non-spoken behaviors can be genetically influenced or learnt through life and social experiences (Von Raffler-Engel W, 1981). E. T. Hall and Hall (1990) added that innate behaviors can be modified when humans grow up and be influenced by their surrounding environment.

In IC, nonverbal information could support communication by confirming the meaning of verbal messages when necessary (Jayaswal, 2009), but could also be a challenge. This is because some gestures and symbols are ambiguous, easily misinterpreted and should be explained with cultural context (Burgoon, 1986). According to Barna (1994), this might be a problem when people believe that they have the same way to think, feel or behave just because they have the same language.

2.5 Native English Speaking teachers and the importance of ICC

As mentioned earlier in this paper, NES teachers are those who speak English as their mother tongue or second language. Accordingly, they may come from the UK, the US, Australia, India, the Philippines, Singapore, etc. NES teachers have advantages in speaking English since very early age and are favored for their innate ability to have good pronunciation and use vocabulary and structures in a much more standard way than non-native English speakers (Butler, 2007 – citing Eisenstein & Berkowitz, 1981). As a result, they can do a better job as language teachers (Buttler, 2007 – citing Phillipson, 1992). Lasagabaster and Sierra (2006) added some aspects of English that NES teachers can teach well, including speaking, listening, pronunciation, vocabulary, and culture.

Owing to the effect of global cooperation in education, NES teachers currently work worldwide, especially in countries where English is learnt as a foreign language. To have effective teaching and learning quality, it is important for a teacher of language to be able to communicate with their students. ICC is therefore vital to NES teachers. Hur (2013) studied

NES teachers' experience when teaching in Korea and concluded that the teachers found ambiguities and complexities in communicating with Korean students due to differences in age, gender, physical location, sociocultural background, and ethnicity. According to this study, NES teachers had problems while maintaining their core value of their original culture in Korea.

Cushner and Mahon (2009), however, argue that despite the importance of IC, intercultural training in education in most countries is slow and complicated. Teachers are not well-prepared to address intercultural concepts in school and are not provided with clear guild lines and many of them are inexperienced in cross-cultural communication.

2.6 Current research on barriers to IC in the context of Vietnam

IC has obviously been a topic of concern among researchers. In Vietnam, many studies have focused on students' ability and reaction to multicultural factors in their learning environment and few studies have focused on language teachers, especially NES teachers. A few of them are mentioned below:

Vo (2014) studied the barriers that NES teachers faced in teaching English. This is the most similar topic in Vietnam. She emphasized that a good language teacher had to be aware of multicultural differences to conduct well in class. In the study, she mentioned the characteristics of individualism and collectivism and the effect of the second on the English classroom. She analyzed several features of Asian cultures and then identified possible problems that NES teachers might have when teaching in Vietnam and three other Asian countries and some suggested solutions. Although she did not focus on the importance of IC in detail to explain why it was necessary for language teachers to understand cultural differences; she performed many significant analyses on the barriers that a foreigner may face when teaching Asian students.

Ho and Ton (2020) conducted qualitative research at a college in Vietnam. In their study, six Vietnamese lecturers were invited for an interview, classroom observation and syllabus analysis. They aimed to understand the factors that affect teachers' ability to integrate intercultural communication competence in their Business English classrooms. They reported that the teachers thought it was challenging for them to apply ICC in their class because the students' level of English was quite low, the time allotted was limited according to the syllabus, the ICC was not mentioned as a teaching objective, the students lacked a foreign environment, and the teachers lacked adequate ICC knowledge. they noted the lack of ICC concern in education at a college in Vietnam for many reasons, which could be true for many other schools and therefore increase awareness of the importance of ICCs in the future. However, they did not mention why it was important to teach ICC in an English classroom in general or in Business English classroom in particular.

Nguyen et al. (2021) conducted a similar study with two language teachers who implemented the intercultural dimension (ID) in their teaching. The team reported that the teachers failed to effectively apply ID in their class, and transmitted only the knowledge they received from the course book which led to failure in increasing students' awareness, attitudes and skills toward IC. Their research emphasized the necessity of developing ICCs for language teachers but the difficulties of doing so was not mentioned.

In general, the mentioned studies all had strengths and weaknesses and could compensate for each other. One commonality is that they lack information about how important IC is to NES teachers in teaching English in a foreign country. Therefore, this paper hopes to contribute to the theory of developing IC in language teaching, with a focus on NES teachers.

3. Discussion

This paper has analyzed many studies related to Intercultural communication and the barriers that Native English speaking teachers face when living and working in foreign countries. First, related terms such as culture, communication, intercultural communication and intercultural communication competence are defined in their mutual relationships. These studies suggest that culture is a complicated perception and that contact among multiple cultures is a life-long experience that may cause difficulties and misunderstandings (Wang et al., 2011). Therefore, communicators are required to have the ability to adapt to any new environment in terms of attitudes, knowledge and skills (Deardoff, 2006). In addition, the paper focuses on the importance of IC in language teaching and learning. It is admitted from these studies that culture is an inseparable part of language because meanings must be conveyed in context. Hence, learning a language is integrated with acquiring its culture. In the new era of globalization, there are more chances for people to gain access to educational opportunities in other parts of the world. As a result, having the ability of IC has been proven to play a large role in helping people not only overcome the obstacles of differences in culture but also benefit the society to which they belong (Neuliep, 2018).

The main purpose of this paper is to address the barriers to IC with a focus on Barna's framework of six basic barriers to IC (Barna, 1997), including: Language, Anxiety, Assuming similarities instead of differences, Stereotypes and Prejudice, Ethnocentrism and Nonverbal misinterpretation. The framework shows the full picture of what people find most challenging when communicating with people from other cultures. Obviously the framework receive support from other researchers.

Each of these barrier can be the cause by which communicators find it hard to understand, sympathize or agree with and obtain the necessary support from others. For example, difficulty in language makes it a challenge for people to understand and to be understood; whereas high anxiety is a type of negative feeling that may prevent people from explaining well. Furthermore, unawareness of cultural differences may cause people to behave inappropriately in certain situations. Stereotypes and prejudice could lead to incorrect assumptions about a person or a group of people; thereby creating distance between people. Ethnocentrism gives people pride in their identity but provides subjective opinions about others without thinking from their viewpoint. Finally, misinterpretation of non-spoken messages can lead to serious misunderstandings. It is difficult to determine which one is the greatest barrier as a standard for everyone, as each person may find different problems in different contexts. However, this part of the review highlights the most common challenges that many researchers have faced in helping people with good preparation for themselves when starting to live in a new environment.

This paper reviews NES teachers and realizes that there could be accepted perceptions of NES teachers who use English from an early age. As a result, they are welcome in countries where English is spoken as a foreign language to act as a perfect model of language use and pronunciation. Compared with non-native English speakers, English learners prefer to offer natural opportunities to imitate and reflect the knowledge they have already learnt (Butler, 2007). However, to achieve the best results, it is vital that NES teachers know how to communicate well with their students. This is especially difficult when they teach those who have different cultural identities, live in different regions and speak different mother languages with low levels of English. The question is whether NES teachers face the same barriers in communication with people in Vietnam as they do in China or Thailand. To answer this question, further studies in specific contexts where NES teachers work are needed. In fact, there seems to be a lack of concern about the use of IC in education to support both students and teachers.

In the last few decades in Vietnam, English has become a priority in education with advancements in curriculum. Therefore, Vietnam seems to be a good destination for those who want to have a job as a language teacher. In fact, NES teachers in Vietnam are welcome and supported with necessary working conditions. However, they can still struggle in some other aspects of life in terms of culture and communication which might prevent them from effectively coordinating with others. On the one hand, they themselves must be responsible for learning to adapt to the new environment. On the other hand, the role of recruiters in Vietnam is to have sufficient measures to support their adaptation process. As seen from the literature, although culture has been the subject of much scientific research because of its importance, studies have focused on the culture and methodology of learners. Therefore, more attention needs to be given to NES teachers who are subject to cultural changes.

The aim of this paper is to focus on two aspects: the importance of IC in language teaching and learning and the barriers to IC that NES teachers may face in different environments. The literature in the paper supports the framework of Barna (1997) of six barriers to IC and elements of efficient intercultural communication (Deardoff, 2006).

4. Conclusion

This paper reviews the literature available in scientific research concerning the barriers to IC that NES teachers face when working in an intercultural environment. By analyzing what other researchers have come up with, this paper concludes that IC has been a concern with linguistic researchers because of its vital role in teaching language. This paper could be used to suggest a framework for studies in Intercultural Communication, including studies on barriers to IC and ICC elements of an effective communicator. A further study should be conducted on the basis of these two aspects with NES teachers in Vietnam to understand their problems in this country and their ability to cope with cultural problems and suggest solutions to support them in their teaching life.

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