

BACKGROUND STUDIES  
FOR  
VIETNAMESE STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have witnessed many developments in the use of the communicative approach in language teaching. This approach aims at developing students' ability to communicate with native speakers of the target language. To achieve this ability, students are required to have not only linguistic competence but also communicative competence. That is why the students need not only the linguistic knowledge but also the background knowledge of the culture in which the language is spoken.

Language is a part of culture. Cultural differences always cause problems for speakers of different cultures while communicating. Therefore, the " learning of a second culture is often a part of the learning of a second language " (Brown, 1980: 242 ).

Background Studies, including culture, used to be neglected or taught improperly in the curriculum of the Hanoi Foreign Languages College. In consequence, Vietnamese E.F.L students at the College have a poor background knowledge of the English speaking countries and their people's patterned ways of life. This causes difficulties for them when communicating with native

speakers of English, even when they are studying at the College where culture-based textbooks and materials are commonly used.

Therefore, Background Studies, including culture, must be seen as a separate and indispensable component of the curriculum of the College which aims at providing the students with the background knowledge of English speaking countries and with an awareness of their people's ways of life, their customs and habits and so on. Various techniques for the teaching of this subject are examined.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS		i
ABSTRACT		ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS		vi
CHAPTER 1	INTRODUCTION	1
	1.1 Aims and Objectives of Study	1
	1.2 Scope of Study	3
CHAPTER 2	WHAT IS CULTURE	6
	2.1 The Concept of Culture	6
	2.2 Culture and Society	11
	2.2.1 The Definition of Society	11
	2.2.2 The Relationship Between Culture and Society	12
	2.3 Aspects of Culture in Foreign Language Teaching	13
CHAPTER 3	LANGUAGE AND CULTURE	19
	3.1 The Relation Between Language and Culture	19
	3.2 Culture and Foreign Language Learning and Teaching	25
	3.2.1 The Importance of Culture in Learning a Foreign Language	25
	3.2.2 Culture Shock	30
CHAPTER 4	TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH IN HANOI FOREIGN LANGUAGES COLLEGE	34
	4.1 The Aims of the College	34
	4.2 The Teacher and the Learner	37
	4.2.1 The Learner	37
	4.2.2 The Teacher	40
	4.3 Other Factors	42
	4.4 Curriculum	44
	4.5 Some Ideas About the Cultural Content of Textbooks Commonly Used in Hanoi Foreign Languages College	47

CHAPTER 5	SUGGESTIONS ON THE INTRODUCTION OF BACKGROUND STUDIES FOR VIETNAMESE E.F.L STUDENTS	51
	5.1 Aims of the Course	51
	5.2 Aspects of Culture to Be Included	55
	5.3 Who Should Teach Culture	59
	5.4 When to Introduce Background Studies	63
	5.5 Organizations of Courses and Techniques	68
CHAPTER 6	CONCLUSION	84
BIBLIOGRAPHY		87

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Aims and Objectives of Study

In learning a foreign language, those students who wish to be able to communicate in that language effectively must : know the correct language to use, understand the situations in which to use the language, and understand the culture of the native speakers of that language. In other words, not only linguistic factors but also cultural factors play an important role in developing students' language skills. It is obviously seen that learning a target language in a target culture is easier than learning it in the students' own culture. Ideally, the foreign language should be learned in as close association as practicable with the culture of the country where it is spoken (Rivers,1981). So the best way for students to develop their language skills is to go and live among the native speakers. But the trouble is that not many students of a foreign language have the opportunity of going and living among the people whose language they are learning. As far as the Vietnamese students of English are concerned, they have very little opportunity of studying English in English speaking countries. Even

Vietnamese teachers of English are in the same situation. Furthermore, not many films, plays, magazines, newspapers, etc., from English speaking countries are introduced to Vietnam. The only way Vietnamese students of English can learn about these countries and their people is from textbooks and their teachers. Since 1979, the English Department of the Hanoi Foreign Languages College has used only textbooks written by British authors. These textbooks have many advantages, but there are also some disadvantages. The disadvantages are frequently caused by the students' poor background knowledge of English speaking countries and the cultural differences ( this is discussed further in Chapter 4).

The main purpose of the Hanoi Foreign Languages College is to train students to become teachers and interpreters. In their future career, the latter will work not only with people from Great Britain but also with people from other English speaking countries ; therefore, they need to know about those countries. This background knowledge helps them to increase their awareness of other cultures, stimulates their interest in foreign language study, and develops their ability to function in these cultures if they are given the opportunity.

When using textbooks written by British authors which are commonly used in the Hanoi Foreign Languages



College now, the teachers are also faced with many difficulties caused by the cultural content and assumed knowledge of English speaking countries. Therefore , background knowledge and cultural knowledge should also be introduced to the teachers because they need to have this knowledge in order to explain culture related language usage to the students they are training.

Based on the training purpose of the College, the urgent needs of the students as well as teachers, and the problems they have when using textbooks written by British authors, this Field Study will discuss the important role of Background Studies, including culture, in teaching English to Vietnamese E.F.L. students at Hanoi Foreign Languages College. It will also deal with the concept of culture, the aspects of culture that students need to become familiar with; and, overall, it will give suggestions on the content as well as techniques for introducing background cultural knowledge to the students. Suggested ways of helping the teachers to overcome difficulties when using textbooks written by native speakers of English will also be discussed.

## 1.2 Scope of Study

According to W.M. Rivers (1981) traditionally many language departments have offered a course or courses in the civilisation of the country (or countries) where

the language is spoken. The subject called "civilization" traditionally has included such areas as geography , political, educational and religious institutions , accomplishments in the arts and sciences, and major philosophical concepts basic to the operation of the society. The subject called "culture" in the contemporary teaching of languages includes these aspects, but much more attention is paid to the everyday lifestyle of ordinary people and the values, beliefs, and prejudices they share with their fellows within their linguistic and social group. (Rivers, 1981:322) .

In the Hanoi Foreign Languages College, during the five year degree course, students have to learn twelve subjects which comprise the discipline of English. They have to take one course in the third year called Background Studies to English speaking countries. A total of sixty six periods of forty five minutes is available for this course. While it is recognized that this time is inadequate, and also that some background knowledge occurs in other components of their discipline, as for example, in the English literature course, this Field Study aims at designing an improved syllabus for the unit in Background Studies, and suggesting ways in which that syllabus may be implemented.

Based on the curriculum of the College, the students' needs and consultation with other language departments,

this field study will lay emphasis on some important and necessary aspects of culture that Vietnamese E.F.L students should be introduced to. These aspects should include the political structure, the educational system, the social structure, the people's work and living conditions, and generally the people's way of life in English speaking countries. This is in contrast with other courses dealing with cultural background which overemphasize history and geography.

The most important part of this field study is the discussion of the techniques to be used in familiarising Vietnamese E.F.L students with background cultural knowledge. It would be helpful to introduce this information through some supplementary reading materials or other activities either in the classroom or out of it, for example: film shows, slide shows, newspapers, and magazines, maps, and so on.

## CHAPTER 2

### WHAT IS CULTURE

#### 2.1 The Concept of Culture

In the social sciences, the term culture refers to all knowledge, beliefs, customs, and skills that are available to all members of a society. It is notable that of all animals man alone has culture because only he is capable of creating symbols. Without symbols there could be social life, as there is among other animals, but it would be rudimentary. Culture is created by all members of a society and it serves them all. So, it not only deals with intelligence, morality, and art but also with the way of thinking, behaving, feeling, etc., of members of a society. It also includes their custom, traditions and language. In short, culture refers to social heritage. Taylor, in Schusky (1973:53) proposed a definition of the term culture as follows:

Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities, and habits acquired by man as a member of a society.

To make this definition clearer, let us consider some of the characteristics of culture: culture is learned, culture is shared by a group of people. It is

cumulative and diverse. It is a system composed of many interrelated parts.

a) It is learned because out of all animals man alone has language. Language is the means for people to communicate with one another. Through communication culture is changed. So, man has the key - language, to the process of learning culture. If a newly born child of Vietnamese parents was moved to another country such as England and if he was brought up by English parents he would develop only English culture. It is so because he had not got any Vietnamese cultural insight before being moved. In contrast, if a grown-up Vietnamese moved to England to live as a migrant he would acquire English culture too though he has got Vietnamese cultural understanding already. It is the question of revival. He would have to exchange ideas and communicate with English people every day. Only when he has got a knowledge of English language and English culture will he be able to understand English people and be understood by them. The second characteristic of culture is that it is shared by a group of people. Each person has a few idiosyncrasies and habits that are not shared with anyone. Such items are not parts of culture. However, they might become so if they were learned by others and became customary actions of a group.

b) It should be pointed out that culture is shared,

but it is not shared equally by all members of a society. For example, in large and complex cultures such as American, Chinese, and English there are many smaller groups different from one another in ideas, values, and behaviour.

c) Third, culture is cumulative. It means that knowledge is first created and stored, and then passed from generation to generation. New knowledge is added to the existing fund. Each culture has worked out solutions to the basic problems of life, which is then passed to their children. A child thereby gains free time to devote to making changes or improvements or to facing the new situations he may encounter. Foreign language teachers and students as well as textbook writers should pay much attention to this characteristic of culture so that the language they are learning and teaching is a "living language", closely connected to the social contexts.

d) Fourth, culture is diverse. The sum total of human culture is made up of a great many separate cultures each different from the others. Every society has its own culture because a culture is made up when patterned ways of living, working, acting, talking, behaving and feeling become uniform enough in a society and different enough from those of other societies. We must be careful to avoid assuming that our way of doing

things is better than others or that it is the only practical or right one. No one can say this culture is superior to that one, and vice versa. A patterned way which is acceptable in one culture may be rejected in other cultures. For instance, in North America , children are expected to show off their abilities in front of their parents and other adults. They are also expected to be talkative before their parents and the family's guests. In contrast, in Vietnamese culture this way of behaving is not accepted. Vietnamese children are expected to be modest. They are regarded as naughty children if they are too talkative before the family's guests or take part in the adults' conversation without permission. "English speakers typically present a positive display of their own abilities and achievements, talk freely about their past accomplishments and future plans and goals ". (Richard, 1982:64). In Vietnamese culture, such people are considered to be boastful. Vietnamese speakers never speak of their future plans and goals freely because they superstitiously believe that they will not fulfil them if they foretell them. They think that it is unlucky to count one's chickens before they are hatched.

To conclude we will examine an anthropological definition of culture. In this definition, culture is often labeled with a "small c". It encompasses the "lifeway of population" ( Oswalt, 1970:15). Professor

Wilga M. Rivers's idea of culture is as follows:

The culture of a people refers to all aspects of shared life in a community. Children growing up in a social group learn ways of doing things, ways of expressing themselves, ways of looking at things, what things they should value, what things they should despise or avoid, what is expected of them, and what they may expect of others. These attitudes, reactions, and unspoken assumptions become part of their way of life without their being conscious of them.

(Wilga M. Rivers, 1981:316)

However, it should be pointed out that there is another definition of culture which focuses on the major products and contributions of a society in general or of outstanding individuals in that society. This approach is sometimes referred to as "large C culture". In teaching culture, if this definition is taken for granted, students will have to study the economic, social and political history, and the great politicians, heroes, writers, artists, poets, musicians, etc., of the country. The anthropological definition of culture as the way people live is the one most commonly and highly recommended as the basis for selecting cultural content for foreign language class (Rivers, 1970 ; Brook, 1975 ; Chastain, 1976). It is because this definition satisfies the requirements for the type of material needed in teaching intercultural understanding. Ideally speaking, at the end of their studies students



will have not only a functional knowledge of the second-language system but also that of the second-culture system. In this field study, I prefer the first definition - culture as the people's way of life.

## 2.2 Culture and Society

### 2.2.1 The Definition of Society

Human beings know how to create and recreate an organization in which all of them are members. When an organization is set up, many patterned ways of life are formed. Then, men have to follow and maintain them in order to develop their organization. This organization is called society. As Maciver stated :

Society is a system of usages and procedures, of authority and mutual aid, of many groupings and divisions, of control of human behaviour and of liberties. This ever-changing system we call society. It is the web of social relationships. And it is always changing.

(R. m Maciver, 1950:5 )

Maciver also pointed out that the organization created and recreated by men, guides them, and controls their behaviour in many ways. This social organization, society, liberates and limits the activities of men, sets up standards for them to follow and maintain . Whatever the imperfections and tyrannies it has

exhibited in human history, it is a necessary condition for every fulfilment of life.

### 2.2.2 The Relation Between Culture and Society

Society is made up of interpersonal and group relations. Culture is the way of living, talking, feeling, behaving, etc., of the people in a society. Culture comes from a society and it reflects the society in which it is formed. The family is a good example of one of the patterned ways of life of a society. It is a unit of society. The form of the family and much familial behaviour are prescribed by the culture. One culture may value a kind of family in which the father is dominant; another may relegate him to a lesser role. Even in the same culture this value judgement may differ in different places, different time, and different social status. For instance, in traditional Vietnamese culture, the father was always in the dominant position. But, now, it has changed a lot . The husband and the wife are equal. However, in rural areas the husband is still dominant and sometimes autocratic. In the same place, at the same time, it should be noted that intellectual couples behave in a different way from couples of lower social status.

In short, we may say that culture is the design

and the prescription, the composite of guiding values and ideals. Hence, culture and society are inter-dependent. This can explain why social scientists cannot go beyond culture because the cultural element is so pervasive in human society that no behaviour is free from its influence. Therefore, social scientists are very interested in the actual day-to-day contact between individuals, and their concrete actions. In the human race, there are different cultures. So, when a person comes into contact with people of another culture he easily recognises that they belong to another society because they have different ways of talking, behaving, dressing, and above all, speaking from his own.

By observing the people's way of life, their traditions, and customs, their language and social communication, a good observer can better understand that society. That is to say, he may judge whether the family system is authoritarian or not; whether the people he is contacting are from high social status and whether they are greatly influenced by any religion. He can do so because culture is the reflection of a society. The cultural elements are his great helpers.

### 2.3 Aspects of Culture in Foreign Language Teaching

In teaching any subject, the first thing to be done is to find out its definition. So, defining culture is very important and necessary for introducing the second culture into foreign languages classes. However, to have only the definition is not helpful enough to obtain the final goal. This is because the definition merely provides guidelines for choosing the types of information that are to be included in the course content. The questions arise about what topics should be chosen, what information should be organized and how much the learner needs to be given as a basis for developing insights and sensitivities to other cultural patterns. To answer these questions, text-book writers and language teachers have to put aspects of culture under consideration and concentrate on the most important and necessary ones to meet the need of learners in obtaining cultural understanding of the target language community. The culture of a group of people includes a lot of aspects that make up their way of life. Davis (1949:5) stated that:

The content of culture is extremely diverse. It includes art, music, architecture , literature, science, technology, philosophy, religion, and a million other things. To treat culture in all its detail would require a gigantic encyclopedia and an army of specialists.

So, the content of culture is very broad for even

students of sociology to encompass. Furthermore , students of foreign languages wish to have a better understanding of the second culture in order to have more effective contact with speakers of the second language. Therefore, the most relevant aspects of culture should be selected for a text-book. On the other hand, it is not necessary to cover all small aspects within a course of limited duration. One early taxonomy of culture divided it into its material and non-material aspects. Material aspects of culture were composed of such subjects as houses, clothes, foods, tools, cars, guns, canoes, and a lot of other concrete things. In short, material aspects are those that can be readily seen, touched and felt. Nonmaterial aspects are more abstract . These manifestations are more difficult to observe, but equally important for understanding a people's way of life. They are customs, beliefs, values, ways of talking, feeling, behaving, and many other means for regulating interaction with other humans. ( Schusky and Culbert, 1973 ; Saville and Troike, 1976 ). In the book "Developing Second Language Skills", Chastain ( 1976 ) pointed out that :

Various authors have addressed themselves to the topic of how to organize culture into key themes that will provide insights into characteristic behaviour patterns. Nostrand (1974) states that no culture

seems to have more than twelve major themes and lists the twelve themes of French culture. Seelye (1968) refers to twenty-three "key ideas" for the comprehension of Latin American culture developed ( for social studies teachers ) at the University of Texas in Austin. Taylor and Sorenson (1961) outline eight general categories that should be considered in the study of a culture.

( Chastain, 1976:389 )

Based on the anthropological definition of culture, and the aspects of culture mentioned above, I think that both material and non-material aspects of culture are important and necessary in teaching and learning a foreign language. However, material aspects might be easier to introduce than non-material ones because material aspects are concrete but non-material aspects are abstract. It is non-material aspects that easily confuse students. In communicating with speakers of other languages, students have to know what to say in certain regularly occurring situations; they should be ready to respond naturally and idiomatically when being introduced to someone, meeting a friend, ordering in a hotel or a cafeteria, asking the way to some place, complaining, or receiving a compliment. Furthermore, to speak more naturally, students have to be acquainted not only with verbal activities but also with nonverbal ones. For example, they have to be aware of facial expressions, gestures, tones of voice, or other body

language which are normally and frequently used in specific situations and which carry important social and psychological implications. In Vietnamese culture, gestures or facial expressions are used but not as frequently as in English culture. But the Vietnamese smile may mean almost everything . The Vietnamese smile to show their interest, to please their superiors, to hide their shyness, their bitterness, disappointment or anger; they may smile instead of saying "sorry" or "thank you"; they may smile to show their agreement; they may smile when they are pleased with someone or with someone's words or behaviour; and when they despise someone they smile too. The Vietnamese smile might be said to be very mysterious and sometimes ambiguous. Without the context no one can understand it correctly.

In English culture, shaking hands is a friendly as well as a formal and polite way when meeting someone or being introduced to someone, but perhaps it is not a friendly and polite way in other cultures. It should be noted that among the most important pieces of information about a second culture are its courtesy phrases and kineses . They are the bases for the establishment of comfortable intercultural relationships.

In conclusion, as language is a key component of culture, learning a second language also involves

learning a second culture. To have a good knowledge of a target language, students should also have a good understanding of the target culture. To meet this need of students, text-book writers as well as language teachers should select the most important and essential aspects of culture to introduce to students so that their awareness of the second culture can be internalized. In turn, this cultural competence may help students to achieve a better command of the target language.



## CHAPTER 3

### LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

#### 3.1 The Relation Between Language and Culture

Language is a part of culture and a culture is a part of a language. The two are interwoven. So, it is difficult to separate one from the other. If it were desirable to separate the two, the significance of either language or culture would be lost. Edward Sapir ( 1963: 207 ) stated :

Language has a setting. The people that speak it belong to a race ( or a number of races ), that is, to a group which is set off by physical characteristics from other groups. Again, language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives.

So, as mentioned in the previous chapter, language is the heritage and reflection of a culture, culture is the heritage of a society. No culture can come into being and develop in an empty space. It is created by all members of a society. It is stored and transferred from generation to generation. It has developed ceaselessly. In their shared community, men have to communicate, all the time, with one another. The

main and most helpful way to communicate is language. By spoken language the speaker and the hearer can have a successful social interaction. The writer can convey information to the reader by written language. By reading many written works or being told by others, nowadays, we can understand what our forefathers' lives were like, how they behaved, how they enjoyed themselves, what their beliefs and customs were like. Through language we can leave our cultural heritage to future generations. Furthermore, nowadays men are not bound to knowledge of their own cultures. Modern means of communication as well as transport have developed greatly, enabling us to co-operate, exchange ideas, and scientific and technological research. In addition, men, at the present time, find it important and necessary to travel not only in their own countries but also to other places in the world. While travelling, co-operating, and exchanging their ideas, men also exchange their culture. The deeper their inter-cultural understanding is, the more successful their discussion will be. One of the chief means of communicating is language, the key component of any culture of any society in the world. Languages, on the other hand, may spread far beyond their original home, invading the territory of new races and of new culture spheres. A language may even

die out in its primary area ( Sapir, 1963 ). When you know your native language, you have the key to your cultural treasure. The cultural heritage is equal for all members of a society. However, it is obvious that not all members can enjoy their culture at the same level. Their cultural understanding depends on their ages, experience, and knowledge of the language. It is a certainty that parents understand their culture better than their young children when the latter are still home-bound and have little social interaction. Yet , when the children are grown up, they develop physically , psychologically, and biophysically. If they develop their linguistic knowledge well, they also understand their culture well. They may even have a better understanding of culture and subcultures than their parents if they read a lot, travel a lot, and have more social interaction than their parents.

Language is a key component of culture. It is the primary and most helpful medium for transmitting much of culture. Children progressing in language learning also make progress in cultural understanding. Learning their own language they also learn their own culture. With the knowledge of language one can communicate with others. But, without the cultural

knowledge, the communication is not always successful, because cross-cultural misunderstanding may occur. This happens when words are used with different meanings. For example, in Vietnamese - English what is called an omelette, in fact, in British - English is called a fried egg, and what is called a fried egg in Vietnamese - English is called an omelette in British - English. So, it is humorous to hear that when a Vietnamese visitor went to an English restaurant and ordered an omelette, he was surprised and somewhat annoyed when the waiter brought him some fried eggs. A Turkish visitor to the United States refused to eat a "hot dog" because it was against his beliefs to eat dog meat.

Differences in cultural meanings across languages cause a communication problem for people of different cultures. The word "mother", for instance, may have strong emotional overtones in one culture but these overtones may be incomprehensible in a culture where children are regarded as belonging to the tribe, or clan rather than their individual parents. Language does not develop without culture. It is the reflection of culture. It is the chief way by which the members of a culture communicate. They are very closely related to each other. They help each other to exist and develop. An individual learns his native language

along with the ways and attitudes of the social group in which he grows up, and these attitudes and ways find expressions through language ( Rivers, 1981 ).

Speakers of the same language may misunderstand one another because they belong to different cultures. For example, British humour is not always appreciated in America, even though the language is similar . Conversely, two groups may have similar cultures, but very different languages, as for example China and Vietnam. Vietnamese visitors to China find it easier to adjust culturally than they do when visiting Britain, because the culture of Vietnam is, to some extent, similar to that of China, even though the languages are very different. Sapir found that the Athabaskan North American Indian languages are clearly unified but the speakers of these languages belong to four distinct culture areas - the simple hunting culture of Western Canada and the interior of Alaska ( Loucheux, Chipewyan ), the buffalo culture of the Plains ( Sarcee ), the highly ritualized culture of the Southwest ( Navaho ), and the peculiarly specialized culture of northwestern California ( Hupa ) ( Sapir,1963). The English language provides a major example of the differences between cultures sharing the same language. Even though Great Britain and the United States share a language, they are far from having a like culture.

The English and the Americans have different ways of behaving, talking, feeling, and judging. They also have different customs. However, we cannot deny that the possession of a common language facilitates mutual cultural understanding. But many other factors cause cultural differences. As Sapir ( 1963 : 215 ) pointed out :

A common language cannot definitely set the seal on a common culture when the geographical, political, and economic determinants of the culture are no longer the same throughout its area.

Sapir also wondered whether language and culture are in any true sense causally related. He believed that culture is "what" a society does and thinks, and language is the means of expressing thought. He also said that language and culture are not necessarily correlated, but the content of language is intimately related to culture. When a new thing is introduced to a culture which has not got any name for it, a word for the newly introduced thing must be invented or borrowed. For example, before the bicycle was introduced to Vietnam, there was naturally no word to express it. But, when the Vietnamese made acquaintance with it, they borrowed the word "bicycle" and either borrowed or invented words to describe the bicycle parts. Most of Vietnamese words for the bicycle parts are French-borrowed. So, in the sense

that the vocabulary of a language more or less reflects the culture whose purposes it serves, it is true that the history of language and the history of culture move along parallel lines ( Sapir, 1963 ). In the 1940's, some American linguists explored the relationship between language and thought ( Whorf, 1956 ; Sapir, 1963 ). One extreme view put forward was that language determined thought. This linguistic determinism caused heated debate since the proponents agreed that, if a language did not express a concept, that concept did not exist. More moderate views were that languages could adapt to new concepts as the need arose. The example of "bicycle" in Vietnam in the paragraph above supports this view.

### 3.2 Culture and Foreign Language Learning and Teaching

#### 3.2.1 The Importance of Culture in Learning a Foreign Language

As we all know the aim in teaching a foreign language is to enable learners to use it; understand its meanings; not only everyday meanings but also , for some learners, the great ideas and accomplishments of the group. This does not mean that learners have to act as natives, but they need to understand what

natives mean. In Vietnam, the target of learning a foreign language is to acquire the ability to understand the native speakers of L2 and be understood by them. All Vietnamese language learners want to be able to communicate with native speakers accurately, fluently, naturally, and idiomatically by the end of their course. It should be noted that, to have successful communication with native speakers of L2, as well as the ability to read and to write well, it is very necessary for every learner to have cultural awareness of the society whose language he is learning. It is not sufficient simply to speak or write grammatically. So, cultural awareness should be one of the basic goals of Vietnamese courses of English. The students should learn the language and its people as well. This is because the ability to react with speakers of another language depends not only on language skills but also on comprehension of cultural habits and expectations. For example, in Vietnamese culture, it is considered polite behaviour to ask someone at the first meeting about his or her age, and marital status. But this way of talking is not acceptable in other cultures like English and American. While visiting a Vietnamese newly born child, it is advisable not to say " how strong it is ! ". It may worry and frighten the child's mother because the Vietnamese believe superstitiously that the child will become sick after



the visitor has gone. While two Vietnamese close friends are talking they seldom say 'sorry' or 'thank you'. He who always says 'thanks', 'sorry', or 'excuse me' to a close friend may be regarded as snobbish. But, it is clearly seen that this way of talking is acceptable in English, American and Australian cultures. It is considered a polite way of talking. Instead of saying 'thank you', in Vietnamese culture, a happy and friendly smile is often used. Therefore, while communicating, intercultural understanding plays a very important role. Chastain ( 1976 : 383 ) indicated that :

Understanding a second language does not ensure understanding the speaker's actions. Successful cross-cultural communication entails a great deal more than language skills. Intercultural communication between speakers of different languages is rooted in language skills, but it blossoms as people relate to others.

Culture also plays another role in foreign language learning and teaching; that is, to develop international understanding : an important goal of education in the modern times. Foreign language teaching in general and cultural understanding in particular enable students to enter into the life , thought, and literature of people who speak another language, break down the barriers of provincialism and build up the spirit of international understanding

and friendliness, leading to world peace (Newmark : 1948 ).

Coming back to the Vietnamese students' wishes and desires in learning a foreign language, Vietnamese students are very interested in the people whose language they are studying. They want to know about their way of life, what they are like, what their customs are like. It is not simply curiosity. It is the matter of knowledge. Students want to get not only the knowledge of a second language but also a second culture. Moreover, by learning a second culture, students may get to know more about their own culture, because while learning they have to find out the differences and similarities between the second culture and their own.

Although cultural understanding is very necessary and important in foreign language learning and teaching, some teachers may wonder whether their task is to teach culture along with the target language. They may think that their teaching purpose is to teach their students the fundamental structures of the language and to develop skills of comprehension and language use, both in speech and writing. Such teachers prefer to ignore the fact that a language cannot be separated completely from the culture in which it is

deeply embedded ( Rivers , 1981 ). Such teachers' point of view may lead students to a wrong approach to communication, causing misunderstanding between speakers and hearers as well as writers and readers. We can take semantic meaning as an example. The sentence "She is in mourning" conveys the notion of wearing white to a Korean, Chinese or Vietnamese. In Greece, men often wear beards when they are in mourning. So, the sentence "He is in mourning", in Greek culture, has the additional connotation of wearing a beard. Without this cultural awareness, the interpretation could be misunderstood. Therefore, students acquiring another language must learn the expressions used in the new culture. Once students have realized that a new language is much more than a code to be cracked in order to transform ideas back into the familiar ones of the native language, they have gained an important insight into the meaning of culture .

According to Wilga Rivers ( 1981 : 322 ) :

Learning to understand a foreign culture should help students of another language to use words and expressions more skillfully and authentically; to understand levels of language and situationally appropriate language; to act naturally with persons of the other culture, while recognizing and accepting their different reactions; and to help speakers of other tongues feel at home in the students' own culture.

So, in teaching and learning a foreign language,

we cannot ignore the important role of culture.

### 3.2.2 Culture Shock

It is clearly seen that linguistic and cultural factors are very important in communication. One must know what to say in the situations one encounters ; how to say it; and what not to say. This knowledge has been called "communicative competence" by Hymes ( 1964 ). In learning a foreign language, it is a certainty that students have to learn the grammar rules, structures, vocabulary, etc., of the language. Breaking the rules of grammar of a foreign language may mean the students are misunderstood on some occasions, but it is more serious if they break the social rules of usage. So, they also have to learn the social rules of usage. While communicating with a native speaker, if the student does not know or breaksthe social rules of usage, the native speaker may be shocked. This shock is not caused by linguistic differences but cultural ones. Culture shock is a common experience for a person learning a second language especially in a second culture. It is associated with the feelings in the learner of estrangement, anger, hostility, indecision, frustration, unhappiness, sadness, loneliness, homesickness, and even physical

illness. Peter Adler ( 1972 : 8 ), referred to by Brown (1980:132), describes culture shock as follows :

Culture shock, then is thought to be a form of anxiety that results from the loss of commonly perceived and understood signs and symbols of social intercourse. The individual undergoing culture shock reflects his anxiety and nervousness with cultural differences through any number of defense mechanisms : repression, regression , isolation, and rejection.

It is quite true because not only are languages different from one another but social conventions in different cultures also differ. For example, in Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai, the greeting " Where are you going" is appropriate. It is often used instead of "hello", "good day". But, in other cultures, it may be inappropriate. It may be regarded as a curious question . In the Vietnamese culture we also say "good day" or "hello", but it is rather formal. Normally we use a question for greeting in informal cases. This kind of question is not necessarily answered. On seeing a friend having dinner one may ask " Are you having dinner ?", and the friend does not need to answer but may invite the other to have dinner with him. So, if Vietnamese students of English think in a Vietnamese way and express themselves in their own cultural way while communicating with native speakers of English, they may annoy them. Then, the

speakers and the hearers may misunderstand one another though their sentences are grammatically accurate. As a result, the students may become shy and avoid talking with others. Edward Hall (1959:59) describes a hypothetical example of an American living in Japan for the first time as follows :

At first things in the cities look pretty much alike. There are taxis, hotels with hot and cold running water, theatres, neon lights, even tall buildings with elevators and a few people who can speak English . But pretty soon the American discovers that underneath the familiar exterior there are vast differences. When someone says "yes" it often doesn't mean yes at all, and when people smile it doesn't always mean that they are pleased. When the American visitor makes a helpful gesture he may be rebuffed ; when he tries to be friendly nothing happens. People tell him that they will do things and don't . The longer he stays, the more enigmatic the new country looks....

Suppose this American were in Vietnam he would face a similar problem with the Vietnamese smile and Vietnamese "yes" and "no". Whether a Vietnamese agrees or not, understands or not, he usually responds with the English word "yes". It is translated from the word "vâng" in Vietnamese. The word "yes" here means many things. The hearer may mean that he is listening, paying attention to the speaker. He may mean that he is interested in the talk ; he takes the speaker's advice and agrees with the speaker's idea. The Vietnamese "yes" may be regarded as a

polite word in talking. It is difficult to explain the Vietnamese smile. Smiling at all times and places is a common characteristic of the Vietnamese. They smile to forget their sorrow ; to hide their shyness; to please their superiors ; to welcome visitors ; to release anger and disappointment ; to show interest in what the speaker is saying... In short, the Vietnamese smile means almost anything. So, people from other cultures should not feel frustrated , irritated or offended at not being able to guess its exact meaning.

To sum up, only when the speakers as well as the hearers share common features of vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and a common set of social rules can they have better communication. Culture shock occurs when they lack common knowledge of culture.

## CHAPTER 4

### TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH IN HANOI FOREIGN LANGUAGES COLLEGE

#### 4.1 The Aims of the College

The main purpose of the Hanoi Foreign Languages College is training students to become either interpreters or teachers. After graduating, about two thirds of them will work as interpreters in various offices, factories, plants, and research institutes in the whole country. One third of them will be teachers of English, usually in some other colleges where English is either a first or second foreign language. A few of the graduates remain to become teachers of English at the Hanoi Foreign Languages College.

Until recently the programme of study completed by all specialist language students was a four year degree programme. Recently, however, the programme has been lengthened to five years. At the time of entering the college, the students do not know whether they will become teachers or interpreters. This decision is made by the College academic staff



at the beginning of the last two years of the course. As students will work in different fields, the first years of the course cannot include all specific purposes. The course aims at providing students with a general knowledge of English, developing their four skills : listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In the final years the students' programme includes subjects specific to their careers. For example, the teacher trainees study psychology, and methodology while the interpreter trainees study interpreting and translating skills. It is difficult to include vocabularies of many specific fields in a four or five year course. On the other hand, the vocabulary of each field is not a great problem. Students will have to learn them by themselves. In short, the Hanoi Foreign Languages College aims at providing students with general structures and vocabulary of the target language during the first three years, and the students have to learn subjects concerning their future careers during the last two years.

Apart from the degree course, the College also offers short courses in English, Russian, German, French, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Czechoslovak, and Spanish. In general, these short courses last nine months and are not intended for specialist language teachers or interpreters. English short-term courses

are available for in-service students who wish to read books and magazines written in English on their specialities. A few of them learn English for the purpose of going to English speaking countries to attend academic courses or participate in scientific exchanges. For example, every year some Vietnamese students go to study in A.I.T. ( Asian Institute of Technology ) in Bangkok, some go to India, and some to the Philippines. French short-term courses are available for two kinds of students : in-service students, who wish to read books on the specialities in French; and teachers of natural science and doctors of medicine who are going to work in African countries where French is the administrative and educational language. Russian, German, Hungarian, Czechoslovak, Bulgarian, or Spanish courses are for two kinds of students. The first kind are students who have just finished their secondary schools and passed the State entrance examination to the colleges and universities with distinction and high distinction ( usually from 22 points upwards out of 30 ). The second kind are students who are going abroad to do their post-graduate work to get M.A, M.Sc or Ph.D degrees. The students of Russian go to the Soviet Union, Hungarian to Hungary, Bulgarian to Bulgaria, German to Germany, Czechoslovak to Czechoslovakia,

and Spanish to Cuba.

However, this field study focuses on the cultural components of English courses only for those degree students for whom English is the first foreign language. Students at Hanoi Foreign Languages College also have to take a second foreign language as a minor component of their degree. But the culture component of the English minor programme is not included in the field study.

#### 4.2 The Teacher and the Learner

##### 4.2.1 The Learner

Students who wish to enter the College have first to pass the highly competitive State entrance examination. Since there are more applicants than places they are only admitted if they also pass the College's aptitude test. Almost all of them are young ( from seventeen to twenty ), and highly motivated. Before entering the College they have already studied English in secondary schools where the aim of teaching English is mainly to develop intellectual power through foreign language study. During three years of English study at high school, students have 300 periods of English ( three periods a week ) which consist of 2000

vocabulary items and most of the basic structures of English with 150 language functions ( asking the way, telling the time, etc. ) related to common topics such as 'at home', 'at school', 'friends', 'sport', 'family', etc. After three years of study, students are expected to be able to read simple texts ( personal letters, diary pages, etc. ) or short stories in simple English. ( For example, " Intermediate Stories for Reproduction" by L.A. Hill ). They are also expected to be able to participate in two-part question-answer exchanges related to common topics, and understand the teacher talking about common topics. All materials used in Vietnamese high schools now are written by Vietnamese writers of English. Most of the high schools are short of textbooks. In a great number of schools, four or five students share a textbook. Before 1980, all materials used in Vietnamese high schools were structurally-graded and the grammar-translation method of teaching was dominant. From 1980 up to now the dominant teaching method is a combination of grammar-translation and communicative methods. The textbooks, written by Vietnamese writers of English, which are commonly used in high schools now are based on this combination of methods. It is this kind of English language background that students of Hanoi Foreign Languages College bring to their

tertiary studies.

To sum up, the students who are admitted to the Hanoi Foreign Languages College must have a basic knowledge of English before entering their degree course. They already know basic structures and common vocabulary, but they are very weak at speaking and aural comprehension . What they need now is to be further trained to develop their four language skills. One of the difficulties for Vietnamese students of English is that they have little opportunity to communicate with native speakers of English or foreigners who speak English. It is because there are few native speakers of English in Vietnam; and not many other foreigners living or working in Vietnam know English. Furthermore, Vietnamese students of English have no chance to go to English speaking countries to study or to have study tours as students of Russian and French often do. Vietnamese students of English do not generally study abroad; therefore, they have little knowledge of the ways people talk or behave in English speaking countries. In other words, Vietnamese students of English, learning English in their own culture, have a poor knowledge of English speaking countries. This affects their learning greatly. So, one of the tasks of the teachers is to bring the students as close to the "real world"

of English speaking countries as possible. They have to accustom their students to the ways of life in English speaking countries by providing them with cultural information in every English lesson. This can be carried out in various ways : lecturing , discussing, showing films or slides, reading newspapers or magazines, etc, and other techniques which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

#### 4.2.2 The Teacher

There are 50 teachers of English in the Hanoi Foreign Languages College. The oldest is about 50 and the youngest is about 25. They were trained from different sources. Most of the teachers aged from 40 to 50 were trained in the Foreign Languages Teachers' College of Hanoi. Half of the rest were students of the Hanoi Foreign Languages College and remained to become teachers there after graduating. The other half were trained in the Soviet Union. Fifty per cent of the teachers of English of the College have been to either Great Britain, Australia or India. Some of these attended intensive courses, some diploma courses. So far, only one teacher of English at the College has got an M.A degree. The oldest teacher has more than twenty years of teaching experience, and the youngest

teacher has got one year. As there is this range of age and teaching experience between the young and the old teachers, sometimes differences and disagreements about teaching methods occur. The old teachers like the grammar-translation method and the young teachers prefer the communicative one. It should be noted that Vietnamese teachers of English have little opportunity to participate in study tours or travel to English speaking countries. This causes difficulties for the teachers when they have to explain cultural background to students. The teachers who have been to English speaking countries, to some extent, have an advantage when coping with the cultural background to lessons over the teachers who have not been to those countries. However, even for the few who have this advantage, their time spent in English speaking countries in general is not long enough to absorb the cultural understanding needed for their teaching. Furthermore, language and culture change, but most Vietnamese teachers do not visit English speaking countries frequently. They need to go there more often either for study or travel ( this will be discussed further in the next chapter ).

Another problem is that, traditionally, in Vietnamese language colleges the subject Background

Studies is taught by teachers of History or Geography through the medium of Vietnamese. These teachers do not know English at all and have never been to English speaking countries either. As they read much, they have a good background knowledge of these countries, but their weak point is that they cannot teach this subject in English nor are they familiar with the way in which cultural factors affect that language. In the writer's opinion, Background Studies should be taught by the teachers of English ( ideally by those who have lived in English speaking countries ), assisted by native speakers of English. ( This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter ).

#### 4.3 Other Factors

The Hanoi Foreign Languages College is twenty five years old, and English has been taught in the College since 1967. Before 1975, most of the English textbooks used in the College were written by either Russian or Vietnamese authors. Most of the books in the College library were published by the Hanoi Foreign Languages Publishing House or imported from the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. In the College library there were only a few monolingual English dictionaries available. Magazines, newspapers from English speaking



countries were rare. There was only one small language laboratory with a few tapes. The tapes were recorded by Russian teachers of English. The College sometimes has visiting teachers of English from the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. They were very helpful in teaching grammar, writing and other subjects but they were not always able to teach cultural background because they were not very familiar with this subject.

Since 1975, along with great changes in all spheres ( politics, economics, education, international relationship of Vietnam ), the teaching of English in the Hanoi Foreign Languages College has changed remarkably. Almost all text-books used in the College now are written by British authors and have been provided to the College from different sources. Most of the English books and dictionaries in the College library are imported from English speaking countries. The College now has two big and modern language laboratories with good tapes, cassette recorders, radio sets and videos. In the College library some English magazines and newspapers are also available. However, the College is still short of films, slide-films and video cassette tapes about English speaking countries. Introducing the cultural background of the

English speaking world to Vietnamese students of English, film, slide-films, and video shows are very useful and necessary. It is one of the effective ways to accustom the students to the target cultures which may help them a lot in acquiring the target languages. We also have English teacher from Great Britain who come to help our teachers every year. They help us enthusiastically and effectively, but unluckily they do not have enough time to cover all we need from them, and their lectures are not given to the students but to the teachers only, as this is considered the most effective way to improve the standard of teaching English.

#### 4.4 Curriculum

Throughout the five year programme, the students have to attend a total of 4524 classes of approximately 45 minutes, of which 2972 classes are for English. The remaining classes are for other subjects such as : Political science, Vietnamese language and literature, Psychology, General Linguistics, International Relations and Foreign Policy, Gymnastics, Typing and a second foreign language which may be Russian or French. These non-English subjects are generally spread throughout the course. Those subjects with only a few hours

may be completed within one academic year or one semester. Beside the non-English subjects mentioned above, in each of the first three years, the students have to spend one month for military training. In each of the last two years ( fourth and fifth year ) there is a work programme for the students. Those students who are trained to become interpreters will spend one month practising their interpretation in various offices. For example, they will be sent to work as interpreters in a factory, a construction site, an international hotel, a shipping yard, a shipping agent or a shipping company, a sea port, an airport, an insurance company and so on in order to get their first-hand experience on the job. Those students who will be teachers of other colleges where English is the first or second foreign language, will be sent to these colleges to practise teaching also for one month to have teaching experience and become accustomed to their future job.

Among the subjects in English, the practice of language skills is considered the most important one. It is allocated 1516 classes and spreads throughout the first four years. The higher concentration is given to this subject in the first and the second years. In the third and fourth years, fewer hours are spent on this subject. In teaching and learning

it, the teachers as well as the students are faced with many difficulties caused by the cultural differences between English and Vietnamese. The differences influence the content of almost all lessons. The textbooks used for lessons ( like the New Concept English series, the Kernel series, the Strategies series and the Streamline English series ) assume considerable cultural knowledge by the teachers. It is likely that those teachers who have good cultural understanding of the English speaking countries teach the language skills effectively.

Apart from the culture component of the language textbooks, in the third year, there is a short course of 66 classes of 45 minutes aimed at familiarising the students with some selected social and cultural aspects of English speaking countries. Although this course is very new, it is considered very important and necessary. In the third year there is also a subject called lexicology which is allocated 34 periods. In the fourth year, there is another theoretical subject which spreads to 30 periods - Stylistics. Pronunciation ( 62 periods ) a subject taught somewhat systematically, is only scheduled for the first year, and practical grammar ( 154 periods ) for the first and second years. A subject called Theoretical and

Contrastive Grammar ( 240 periods ) begins in the third year and ends one semester before the course is finished. This subject is mainly aimed at developing the students' translating skill. In the fourth and fifth years, the students have to follow a new subject, literature, which is allocated 194 periods. The main purpose of this subject is to acquaint the students with a historical sketch of the literatures of the major English speaking countries and with the literary style.

As I have mentioned in the first part of Chapter 4, the main purpose of the College is to train interpreters, so 676 periods are spent for the translation component. This subject is taught throughout the last three years, and considered the main component of the course.

#### 4.5 Some Ideas About the Cultural Content of Text-books Commonly Used in Hanoi Foreign Languages College

Since about 1979, an increasing number of text-books used in Hanoi Foreign Languages College are written by British authors, for example, the New Concept English and Mainline Series by L. G. Alexander,

the Kernel series by Robert O'Neill, Roy Kingsbury and Tony Yeadon, the Strategies series by Brian Abbs and Ingrid Freebairn, and Streamline English by Bernard Harley and Peter Viney. Those textbooks are rich in English cultural content. Implicit cultural information occurs in every lesson, in every text and conversation. The textbooks deal with major English speaking countries and their people's daily life and help students to develop not only their linguistic knowledge but also cultural awareness. When learning, students become accustomed to the way of living, talking, behaving and thinking of people of English speaking countries. The cultural content of the books gives them a number of advantages over textbooks without it. Firstly, they stimulate students to learn because they are interesting. In each lesson, students find cultural information new to them. Secondly, the cultural content helps students to understand more about their own culture. Finally, this background cultural knowledge helps them when they work as interpreters.

However, as mentioned above, the cultural content of these textbooks written by native speakers of English also causes great difficulties for students and teachers. These difficulties are the result of the cultural differences. These differences

can be illustrated as follows :

1- People of different cultures have different ways of looking at things, different ways of behaving , talking and thinking, etc. For example, Vietnamese students are unfamiliar with many concepts used in the above-mentioned textbooks. They know nothing about banking systems, have vague ideas about food and clothing and understand little about the social and political structures of the English speaking countries. Such things are mentioned in all texts and conversations or dialogues. Of course, when students meet a new word they can consult the dictionary. But they still do not understand it well if the concept does not exist in Vietnamese culture. For example, most Vietnamese students do not understand exactly what a pub is, what "Bed and Breakfast" means, why people have to pay V.A.T. or what it is, and so on. As in Vietnam, young couples go to the nearby administration offices to get their marriage certificate, and a wedding party takes place some days or even two weeks after that, the students find it difficult to understand the sentence; " This is an English wedding. They're standing on the steps outside the church ( Streamline English Departures, p. 28 ). A further example is : " All the shoppers left the store half an hour ago. The detective watched

them." ( Kernel Lessons Intermediate, p. 33 ). The students may ask themselves why the couple went to the church to have a wedding; what a detective is and why he works in the store, because in Vietnamese culture there is no job like this, because we do not have supermarkets or self service shops. Let's look at the sentences : " She is beautiful. That is why she was Miss Europe last year." ( Kernel Lessons Intermediate, p. 39 ). The students may ask themselves why she was Miss Europe, because in Vietnam there are no beauty contests at all.

2- Apart from the examples of differences in behaviour patterns, there are problems associated with the availability of items referred to in the textbooks. For example, a typical English breakfast scene shows a family eating cornflakes. These simply do not exist in Vietnam. Ownership of certain makes of private vehicles in English speaking countries indicates social and economic status. A lesson in which the main character owns a Rolls Royce is about a different kind of person from one in which the main character owns a VW.

To sum up, the cultural content in the textbooks by some British authors being used in Hanoi Foreign Languages College now is interesting and relevant to



some extent in developing students' awareness of the cultures of English speaking countries. However, aspects of cultural content are very difficult for both teachers and students when using these textbooks because of the considerable cultural differences between the two language communities.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUGGESTIONS ON THE INTRODUCTION OF BACKGROUND

#### STUDIES FOR VIETNAMESE E.F.L STUDENTS

##### 5.1 Aims of the Course

Based on the training purpose of the Hanoi Foreign Languages College and the students' needs as outlined in Chapter 4, the course in Background Studies aims at:

- increasing student awareness of the target culture.
- stimulating student interest in foreign language study
- developing the ability to function in the target culture when necessary, and
- establishing an understanding of linguistic/cultural referents, cultural values, and attitudes.

Increasing student awareness of the target culture is the first step in introducing the student to cultural background. The development of cultural awareness consists primarily in the introduction and continued reintroduction of cultural facts of all kinds : social and political structures, education systems, geographical information, historical personalities and events, people's patterned ways of life and

so on together with their affect on the language.

The second purpose of this course is to use culture to stimulate student interest in language study. The assumption is that when studying a foreign language, the more students know about the target culture the more they become interested in the study of the target language. It is fascinating to find out how other cultures deal with human events such as : love , courtship, marriage, birth, child bearing, death, and so on.

Many students study a foreign language with the intention of visiting or residing in the country where that language is spoken. The students of the Hanoi Foreign Languages College do not have this intention, but in their future career as interpreters they may go abroad when necessary. They also have to deal with foreigners within Vietnam. To be effective in their jobs as interpreters overseas and in Vietnam they need to function effectively with the target language. If they have a rich knowledge of the culture of the people for whom they are interpreting, they will function more effectively. For example, a lot of idiomatic expressions are deply rooted in the religious , cultural traditions of the speakers. e.g. phrases like :

"I wash my hands of these negotiations."

"We'll try to comply with your wishes but we can't  
walk on water."

Both these expressions are based on the Christian Bible. Similarly, expressions such as watching " the idiot box "; " double-time "; " over-time "; "turning a blind eye " ( from Admiral Nelson ) require some knowledge of the socio/cultural background of the speakers in order to be understood. And there are expressions which will be encountered in Vietnam, just as easily as overseas, when communicating with native speakers of English. In short, in order to function in the target culture, the students must be aware of outward differences in the way of life patterns, for instance, greetings, telling time, asking the way, eating habits, and ways of getting around. So, developing the students' ability to function in the target culture when needed is also an important and necessary aim of this course at the Hanoi Foreign Languages College.

Our language is a reflection of our culture. So, in advanced language classes, analysing the target culture is necessary if the students are to understand the language in greater depth. For example, the teacher may select articles from the foreign press which

discuss table manners, dating customs, family relations, school reforms, and so on. In order to understand political, social and economic events of the day, it is helpful to use pictorial stimuli, such as cartoons, and study the captions that accompany them.

## 5.2 Aspects of Culture to be Included

Many language methodologists such as Lado (1957); Marckwardt (1961); Nasr (1972); Alen & Valette (1977), and Rivers (1981) have discussed which aspects of culture should be taught in language classes. These aspects have been mentioned in the previous chapter. It is a certainty that all these aspects of culture are vital for a language class. The problem which arises here is that the introduction of these aspects must be in accordance with the time permitted for a course, the students' needs, and other constraints. According to the curriculum of the Hanoi Foreign Languages College, as mentioned in Chapter 4, only sixty six periods are spent on the subject of Background Studies. Furthermore, some of the aspects suggested by the above-mentioned methodologists are not really relevant to what the students require. In addition, the course only aims at introducing the cultural background of English speaking countries

to Vietnamese E.F.L students at the College. Therefore, it is not necessary to cover all aspects but the aspects included in the course must be limited. The aspects such as : city and country life, the history of art, music, dance and film should be omitted because of insufficient time and also because they are less crucial for the Vietnamese students.

Several objections have been made to the introduction of geographical factors and historical periods and events, because they are more appropriate to other subject areas like social study, history, and geography. However, the writer wants to add those aspects to the course with the intention of providing the students with general ideas only of geographical facts and a very brief history of major English speaking countries. For example, there are some useful texts about the geographical position of the countries, their capitals and big cities, the climate, etc. It is also a good idea for the teacher to give occasional talks about such topics.

A brief history used in the course now deals only with major periods and events without which the students could not understand their language lessons thoroughly because most of the texts in the course books used in the College now are written about, first

of all, Great Britain, and then Australia and America.

Take these two verbal exchanges :

1/ A: My father died at Waterloo when he was a soldier.

B: Which platform ?

2/ A: Where is John ?

B: He is going to Bath.

The students will not find these answers humorous if they do not know about the battle Waterloo and the train station Waterloo in London. They will not understand the double meaning of the second if they do not know that Bath is a city in England. Of course, such examples are not really typical of the problems caused by poor background knowledge, but they show how lost one can be without it.

Other aspects like the political structure, social structure, educational system, and man and nature are the most important aspects of the course. This is because the political structure of Vietnam is quite different from that in the major English speaking countries like Great Britain, Australia and America. The societies in Vietnam and those countries are also organized in different ways. Above all, the people's patterned ways of living, their food and clothing, their working time and leisure time activities are

aspects that cannot be omitted, because they occur in almost every language lesson, from the very early stage. For example, the ways of greeting and addressing are always taught at the early stage. But the ways of greeting and addressing in Vietnamese culture are quite different from those in British, Australian, and American cultures.

Food is another problem for teachers to explain to their students, because many kinds of food available in English speaking countries are not seen in Vietnam, but it is true that "food" occurs in a large number of lessons in any course book like the Kernel series, the Strategies series, and the Streamline English series. Therefore, this aspect of culture must be included in the course.

Thus, many aspects of culture should be introduced. But the introduction of them must depend on the time available, the students' needs, the teacher's ability and so on. The aspects mentioned above are necessary for Vietnamese students of English to know. They cannot have a good knowledge of English without the general understanding of the aspects of culture of English speaking countries. In this Field Study Report, the writer also wishes to discuss how to design a supplementary reading book about the cultural



background of English speaking countries ( see the last paragraph of this chapter ). In this book, the aspects of culture may be broader than those in the course of 66 periods. Some aspects which the course may be unable to cover could be treated in the supplementary reading book.

### 5.3 Who Should Teach Culture

For many years, foreign language study in some countries like the United States of America, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union has been based on the principle that mastering the target language provides a key to the understanding of the target culture and the personality characteristics of its people. This cultural understanding will be attained only if it occupies an important place among the language course objectives, if some way of teaching this objective can be carefully worked out, and , overall, if the culturally oriented materials and the teachers who present them are well prepared. So, the teacher plays one of the most important roles in providing students with cultural understanding . According to Wilga M. Rivers (1981:338), to act his role effectively, the teacher of the culture of a linguistic community needs

- informed insight into the culture to be taught.

- informed insight into the culture of the language learners.

The question arises now as to whether it would be better in teaching this subject to have native English speaking teachers or Vietnamese teachers, teaching this subject to students of English in Vietnam.

Native speaker teachers are often considered essential for this task because of their presumed intimate knowledge of their own culture. Unfortunately, many of those who teach their mother tongue do not possess this informed insight into their own culture. As a result, they may present the myths of their culture - the stereotypes to which many members of their culture unthinkingly subscribe. They may present an idealized view of their society which their students may consider chauvinistic . They may be insensitive or intolerant of cultural variations within their society, thus presenting the viewpoint of one class, sex, race, or religious or political group. Finally, they may offend their students through misinformed comments on the culture around them. Alternatively, they may be insensitive to the differences in cultures between the two communities, their own culture and that of their students ( Rivers, 1981 ).

Local modern language teachers have poorer knowledge of the target culture than native speaker

teachers, but they have the advantage of sharing the culture of their students. They can understand and anticipate the reactions and prejudices of their students. They can be sensitive to the degree to which members of their own culture are willing to accept criticism or the implied criticism many perceive in the pointing out of cross-cultural contrast. However, local language teachers of a foreign culture also have another handicap. That is, they may know many facts about the target culture without having sufficient insight into the deeper significance of these facts within the cultural system ( Rivers, 1981 ).

To sum up, both native speakers and local language teachers who wish to present the target culture to students have some advantages and disadvantages. To be more effective, "they both need to acquire specialized knowledge of how cultures are organized - their value systems, their institutions, their interpersonal relationships and their adaptation to the environment. Where possible, such teachers should have lived for some time in both the culture to be taught and that of their students" ( Rivers, 1981 : 339 ).

Based on the above present realities of Vietnam, the needs of students, and the ability of the teachers of the Hanoi Foreign Languages College, it would appear that the subject called Background Studies would be

best taught by those teachers who have already lived in an English speaking country. It would be still better if they were assisted by English speaking teachers both in designing materials and lecturing. It would also be a good idea if the teachers-in-charge of this subject had the opportunity to visit or make study tours to English speaking countries from time to time because language and culture keep changing. If this is not possible, they must compensate by disciplined reading. They must read what the people living in English speaking countries read ( books, newspapers, magazines ), listen to radio broadcasts where accessible, and watch films made for local viewing. Whenever possible they should make contact with native speakers of English, discussing all kinds of subjects with them. While visiting an English speaking country, they should, if possible, visit the native speakers' homes and meet their families. In this way, they can educate themselves in cultural interpretation. They should, also on these occasions, visit not only cities and the people living there but also the countryside and the country people's life. They should meet and talk with people of different classes, sex, ages, religious and political groups to understand deeper their way of life, their points of view, their behaviour, their way of talking, thinking, judging, and so on.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, in teaching other language skills ( subjects such as language practice, listening comprehension, and literature ), the teachers have to deal with many cultural items in almost every lesson. So, they have to teach culture along with language. They have to explain cultural content in order to fulfil their task. Therefore, such teachers should also be provided with cultural knowledge of English speaking countries. How this can be brought about will be discussed in the last section of this chapter ( 5.5 ).

#### 5.4 When to Introduce Background Studies

As was mentioned in the previous chapters, problems caused by cultural differences for Vietnamese students of English as a foreign language, occur right at the early stage of studying. The question arises now as to whether Background Studies should be introduced right at the beginning of the five-year-degree course of the Hanoi Foreign Languages College.

It is obvious that to acquire language ability, cultural understanding plays an important role. The cultural content occurs in every lesson from the elementary level to the advanced one. Therefore , teaching cultural background is undoubtedly carried out from the earliest stage. However, according to

the curriculum outline of the Hanoi Foreign Languages College, only 66 periods are allocated for the subject Background Studies and it is taught in the third year of the course before students are divided into two groups : one for training to become interpreters and the other for teacher training before working in other colleges where English is either the first or second foreign language. Is it reasonable to teach this subject in the third year ? Are 66 periods sufficient for the subject ? One reason for offering a separate course called Background Studies is that at this stage students can understand the teacher's lecture presentation in English. It is considered preferable to teach this subject in English rather than in Vietnamese, because it helps students not only to enrich their cultural background knowledge but also to develop their language skills. It is seen as an essential component for all trainees, regardless of their individual language specialization. Therefore, the College staff wish to provide both groups of trainees with the same cultural knowledge before they are divided. The writer is of the opinion that the subject should be extended for a further half year into the first semester of the fourth year with another 33 periods. At this stage, however, as students are already divided into two groups : teacher

trainees and interpreter trainees, so the course content and the techniques of presentation should be different. For example, role-playing technique should be applied for interpreter trainees, because in their future careers they will have more opportunity to act in communication situations with foreigners than the other group. So, they should be encouraged to try to use what they have learnt freely and spontaneously in communication situations in and out of classrooms. This technique will enable students to act their role in real situations more naturally and successfully. The better their knowledge of the cultural behaviour and attitudes of people is, the more successful their communication becomes. In contrast, this technique is not so necessary for the teacher trainees, because in their future careers, they will have very little opportunity to communicate with native speakers of English either in Vietnam or in English speaking countries. This group of trainees should be supplied with more supplementary readings and given more lecture presentations in which they discuss some characteristics of the second culture. For example, they might describe the similarities and differences between Vietnamese culture and the cultures of English speaking countries in the way people have their holidays, enjoy themselves, celebrate

their wedding days or birthdays, and so on.

Some teachers may wonder whether this subject can be introduced right in the first year of the course or not, because the cultural content occurs right in the first lesson. The teacher of the subject Language Practice has to explain cultural differences in almost all lessons, as has been pointed out before. It does not seem necessary to introduce a separate subject, Background Studies, at this early stage because of the following reasons :

- 1- Teachers of other language-skill subjects can help students to experience the culture through language use .It means that the insight into culture proceeds at the same time as the language learning - in other words, teaching cultural understanding is fully integrated with the process of learning syntax and vocabulary, because language is closely interwoven with every aspect of culture. The students absorb the second culture in many small ways, little by little. Through language use, students, step by step, become conscious of correct levels of discourse and behaviour. Gradually, they will be able to perceive the patterned ways of life of the people in English speaking countries.
- 2- If the subject Background Studies is introduced



at the elementary level and continued to the advanced one, it will take much time and reduce the time available for other subjects.

3- As mentioned in the previous chapter, in Vietnam, this subject should be taught in English rather than in Vietnamese. But, at this early stage, the students' language ability is still too poor to understand long and complicated explanations in English.

4- The main purpose of this subject is just to summarize systematically the common cultural content in order to enrich the students' cultural general knowledge of English speaking countries rather than to force them to act like native speakers of English, because they are foreign language students not second language students; they are learning English in their own culture not in the target culture.

In short, the subject Background Studies should be taught over three semesters, two in the third year and one in the fourth year with ninety nine periods of forty five minutes, including three tests at the end of each semester. The techniques need to be different for the two groups of trainees in the first semester of the fourth year, and the same in the other two semesters.

### 5.5 Organization of Courses and Techniques

In teaching background studies and culture, several courses and techniques have been proposed and used. ( Chastain, 1979 ; Brown, 1980 ; Rivers,1981 ). These courses may be designed for three different levels of learners : elementary, intermediate, and advanced. The techniques applied to the teaching of culture and background studies must depend on the course levels, the students' ability and needs, and teaching conditions. According to Rivers ( 1981 ), the course may be organized in six ways for the three levels :

1- A sequenced presentation of all aspects of the culture and important background facts . In such a course, she suggests, techniques of reading, exposition, discussion, illustration by films, slides, maps and other visual means. She also suggests that courses organized this way should be conducted in the target language.

2- A contrastive study of the target culture and the students' own culture. In such a course she also suggests the same techniques as used in the above-mentioned course . But the difference is that readings and other informational material may be in either the

students' native language or the target language.

3- Interdisciplinary courses in which students study the history, sociology, or philosophy of the country or countries where the target language is spoken. These courses may be held in the native language of the students or in the target language.

4- Conversationally oriented courses aim at introducing the students to the target culture in order that they may interact orally and effectively with the speakers of the target language. In these courses, all activities such as role-playing, discussions, oral reports are conducted in the target language and are closely linked with the situations in the target culture. The teacher as well as students have to use the target language in learning this course.

5- The fifth type is organized around contemporary culture studied through literary texts. These texts are chosen to illustrate themes or values of the culture, as well as their specific literary quality. This course may include popular fiction, folklore, ballads or anything that can illuminate the thought and life of the second culture. Rivers also suggests that the course could be held in either the target language or the students' native language.

6- The last type of course is similar to the fifth course, but in this type, film is used as the medium for the study of the target culture. Like readings or other cultural materials, films must be selected which are representative of aspects of life in the target culture, not those which reflect deviant or completely untypical behaviour and situations. The films must be in the target language without any subtitles . After seeing a film, students discuss its cultural content. It is better to use the target language for the discussion, since by this stage the students have sufficient language to participate in this activity.

When one considers the language situation at the Hanoi Foreign Languages College, it is seen that, not all the above-mentioned courses ( Chastain, 1979 ; Brown, 1980 ; Rivers, 1981 ) are relevant to the students, because these courses are designed for second language classes rather than foreign language classes ; they are taught against the background of the second culture rather than the students' own culture. As they are taught in the second culture, students have many opportunities to interact with native speakers out of their class time ; they can readily compare what they have learned in class with

real cultural activities out of class. However, some components of the courses mentioned above can be used to familiarize students with background knowledge at the Hanoi Foreign Languages College. The best way to ensure a suitable course for the students is to design a course in accordance with the curriculum of the College, the students' purpose and their needs.

To meet the needs of the students in acquiring background knowledge of the major English speaking countries, it is necessary to help them get this knowledge not only by lecturing in class time but also by other activities out of class and by some supplementary reading about the target culture. So, it would appear desirable for there to be two main parts for this subject : lectures in class and activities out of class. For the lectures, the teacher should select the most important and necessary topics on some aspects of culture and prepare lecture presentations. During the lecture, the teacher gives the students some background information and discusses characteristics of the second culture. As the teacher cannot cover all the work that she needs to, she might give the students guidance so that the students have to find information and take part in the discussion. For example, in the first lecture, the teacher may give the students some geographical

information about an English speaking country. Then, the teacher might give the students the task of preparing a map for the following tutorial. During the tutorial, working with the prepared maps, the students are asked to locate the country as well as the important cities and regions within the country. For example, the students might be asked to draw the map of Australia. Then, the teacher will ask them to find the capital of Australia, the Australian Capital Territory and the six states as well as the capital town of each state. The students might be asked to find out information about the population of Australia, the climate in each region of this country, the population of each state or each capital town. Following on from this, the students may be asked to suggest ways in which leisure time is spent in different cities; thus using their newly acquired geographical knowledge to suggest answers to cultural questions. A further step may be for the teacher to give lectures on the social and political structures of English speaking countries. The students are asked to work in the school or public library to answer some questions given by the teacher on the topics, and to take part in the following tutorial. There should be two kinds of questions that the teacher gives students to answer. The first kind are questions

about what the students have already heard in lectures. This kind of question aims at checking the students' memory, making them learn their lessons. The second kind of question are questions that require the students to use the library and other resource centres to find out answers to the questions. These questions are more demanding but interesting. For example, the teacher might ask the students to supply information about the banking systems in the major English speaking countries. The teacher might give the students a picture of a supermarket and ask them to give their ideas on the system of shopping in a supermarket, and about different patterns of shopping ( e.g., daily versus weekly ) and food storage. In short, the first technique that should be applied is to describe and explain parts of the culture by lecturing. It should be remembered that during the lecture presentation, the teacher should not talk at great length about the topic. After each lecture, there should be a tutorial, in which the students are to take part in presenting, explaining or discussing the cultural information.

The second technique is using questionnaires which aim at solving problems and misunderstandings caused by the students' poor background knowledge of

the English speaking countries and by the cultural differences. In this technique, the teacher gives the students a situation , and also some suggestions for solving it. Then she asks them to choose the best one. Of course, after each situation, whether the students find the correct one or not, the teacher should give them her views and reasons for them. For example, a newcomer goes to a reception held by an Australian institution. Arriving at the reception, he finds that he does not know anyone. He :

a/ shakes hands with all the people and introduces himself to them.

b/ stands alone and waits for other people to introduce themselves to him.

c/ stays close to his friend and close to the first person he meets.

d/ stands and waits for the host to introduce him to other people.

Another example is : A customer sitting at a table in a restaurant in England would like to get the waiter's attention. He :

a/ calls out in a loud voice like "Hey, waiter" or something similar.



b/ claps his hands or snaps his fingers.

c/ waits until the waiter comes to the table.

d/ tries to catch the waiter's eye and states his request when the waiter is near enough to hear him.

A third technique can be used to teach Background Studies and culture and this is through culture capsules. A culture capsule is a brief description of a certain aspect of culture. For example, the teacher might give the students a brief description of the educational system of an English speaking country. This description would include types of schools, courses, and students. After the teacher's description, the teacher might open a discussion for the students to take part in. The students should also be asked to summarize the main differences between the educational system of Vietnam and that of the major English speaking countries.

Another technique called question-directed discussion can be applied to the introduction of background knowledge. In this technique, the teacher must use visuals or realia as a means of teaching. For example, the teacher might use a picture of a typical dwelling in the target culture. After showing

the picture, the teacher asks the students questions about the picture. By asking them these questions, the teacher can lead them towards some important observations as to the differences between the house in the picture and their own houses. The teacher might give the students a picture of a supermarket and ask them about the differences between a supermarket and a department store. This technique is very necessary for an English language class for Vietnamese students, because the notion of a house, a block of flats, a market, and so on in Vietnam is different from those in many English speaking countries. Pictures or slide films help the students to get a clear idea. In a further step, the teacher might make more use of the pictures to explain other cultural factors. For example, by observing the house of an English family together with other factors, one can have a rough idea about the social and economic status of that family. Some teachers may ask why this should be done. It is because the living conditions of people in Vietnam are different from those of people in English speaking countries. So, the concept of economic status also differs. For instance, in Vietnam, a family is considered a rich family if they can afford a room in the centre of the city even though the room is small and lacks conveniences. A man is

regarded as a rich one if he has a good motorcycle, a radio-cassette recorder, and an expensive television set. Most government workers do not like to live in the suburbs of the city, though they can afford a big house with a beautiful garden there. In contrast, in Great Britain, for instance, many people like to live in the suburbs and work in the city.

Newspapers and magazines are also a good means of introducing background knowledge to the students. Each and every class should have these materials available for the students. It should be remembered that these materials must be published in and imported from English speaking countries rather than other countries like the Soviet Union or Cuba and so on, because such newspapers and magazines as the Moscow News, the Granmar ( a Cuban daily paper ), Soviet Culture and Life, etc., which are available in Vietnam, lack authentic English cultural content. It is interesting to ask the students to survey articles on current events, popular clothing styles, movies and TV programmes in a certain English speaking country. The technique of using newspapers and magazines can be used not only in class but also out of class. For example, in the classroom or the TV room, there should be some newspapers and magazines for the students and teachers to

read either for pleasure or other purposes. At the advanced level, the teacher might ask capable students to use information from these materials and then make a report for the class with the teacher's guidance. Schulz ( 1974 ) also recommends that the teacher should make full use of newspapers and magazines to teach the students cultural background knowledge. He suggests that the teacher provides students with a purpose, a topic, and specific questions before asking them to prepare a report.

Besides using newspapers and magazines, radio broadcasts can be used to help the students keep up with the news and events in English speaking countries. In lessons, the teacher might ask the students to give brief information about the general and particular events in a certain English speaking country. Groups of students may be assigned the task of preparing brief synopses of the news from these above-mentioned sources for the bulletin board or for class discussion .

Another technique which can be used in class time is to get native speakers into the classroom. It is advisable to invite native speakers into the classroom from time to time. It is not necessary to have lectures given by them , but some informal

talking could be interesting and helpful. By talking with native speakers about the people's daily life, and other cultural and social activities in their countries, students may obtain general ideas about the people and the countries whose language they are learning is spoken. By talking with the native speakers, the students themselves may get an authentic example of the native speaker's way of talking, behaving, thinking, and so on. This cultural knowledge is helpful to them when they have the opportunity to interact with native speakers in their future careers as interpreters.

Besides the above-mentioned techniques, . . . which can be used in class time, there are other techniques used out of class time for helping Vietnamese E.F.L students gain background knowledge of English speaking countries. For example, a bulletin board can be a means of presenting background studies and cultural information. Bulletin boards with carefully selected pictures and advertisements on them may help students to visualize the cultural element and background knowledge of English speaking countries being described. The teacher may get pictures, cartoons, articles, and advertisements from newspapers and magazines. Advertisements are very interesting

and contain a great deal of information about what people in the target culture eat, wear, entertain themselves, and so on. On the other hand, bulletin boards also help to brighten up the classroom.

Music and dance of the English speaking countries can serve as another way of introducing background studies and culture to the students because the words, the music, and the dance movement are all related to the people, their moods, their interest and their way of life. Even if the teacher does not like to sing, dance and music may be used in the classroom through audio-visual aids, such as cassettes, films, filmstrips, slides, and photographs. These aids not only stimulate the students' interest in their study but also help them to get a clear perception of the people's way of life in the target culture. For example, visual aids can tell students about supermarkets, open-air markets, how people spend their holidays on the beaches, on the mountains, etc.

The last activity which can serve as a helpful technique is that of finding pen pals, exchanges and travel/study abroad. It is obvious that pen pals give the students an opportunity to make personal contact with some one in the target culture. This helps the students to exchange their ideas, their

points of view, and so on. Through this activity, the students can learn a lot from their friends who are native speakers of English. Little by little, the students will not only improve their language skills but also enrich their general knowledge of the target culture, they also obtain deeper understanding of the people's way of life in the English speaking countries. Chastain ( 1976 ) points out that the most valuable type of experience is direct exposure to the customs and habits of the second culture. By travelling to the overseas country and studying the culture there, students can learn more in less time. However, whether this can be carried out or not depends on political, economic and other factors.

To sum up, a number of suggestions on the organization of the course for Background Studies including culture and some techniques for teaching this course to Vietnamese E.F.1 students at the Hanoi Foreign Languages College have been given. The course as well as the techniques are fully based on the curriculum of the College, the students' needs and purpose of studying, and on the other teaching conditions in Vietnam.

In the previous chapter, it was pointed out that, when using textbook written by British authors which

are commonly used in the Hanoi Foreign Languages College now, the teachers of other language skill subjects have to face many difficulties caused by the cultural content and assumed knowledge of the English speaking countries. Therefore, in this field study, the writer wants to use the opportunity to suggest that there should be a hand-book for the teachers to solve those problems. In such a handbook, the author might collect all the important cultural content and general knowledge of the English speaking countries which is required for understanding the commonly used English textbooks. Then, a clear explanation about these factors should be given either in Vietnamese or English for the teachers. While the existing teachers' books give guidance for the teaching of syntax, vocabulary, and pronunciation features, they assume the teacher is already familiar with the culture. The teachers' notes omit this background information ( e.g., the Kernel series, 1971; the Strategies series, 1977; Streamline English, 1978).

A second suggestion is that, from time to time, the teaching staff should have seminars focusing on background studies of English speaking countries and their people.

A third suggestion is that there should be



supplementary reading material available dealing with the cultures of the English speaking countries. In these materials, the topics should aim at providing the students as well as the teachers with background and cultural understanding of the English speaking countries and their people. The material should be in English because this helps the teachers to keep up-to-date with their English.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

The study of a foreign language involves a variety of complex tasks, such as the acquiring of language proficiency, general knowledge, background knowledge of the target culture, as well as specific language skills ( listening skill, speaking skill, reading skill, writing skill, and translating skill ). Among these tasks, the acquiring of linguistic knowledge is considered a difficult and important one. Background cultural knowledge, or the awareness of the culture in which the target language is spoken, is of equal importance, because language is a part of culture. It does not exist and develop in an empty space. It is the chief way by which the members of a society communicate. Language is the reflection of culture. The two are interwoven and always coexist. Background cultural knowledge is especially important for those students who are trained to become interpreters, as interpreting requires of interpreters not only linguistic competence but also communicative competence.

The main purpose of the Hanoi Foreign Languages

College is training students to become interpreters, but in the curriculum of the College, the emphasis used to be laid on the teaching of grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and other components rather than background studies including culture. Vietnamese E.F.L students as well as Vietnamese interpreters do not always speak spontaneously, naturally, and idiomatically when communicating with native speakers of English, and even misunderstanding sometimes occurs. This is caused by the students' poor background knowledge of the English speaking countries and their people, and by the differences between Vietnamese culture and the cultures of the English speaking community.

Recently, most of the textbooks used in the Hanoi Foreign Languages College were by the British authors. The textbooks are culture-based. While using these textbooks, students as well as teachers are faced with many difficulties caused by the cultural differences and lack of background knowledge of the English speaking world.

To enable students to acquire both linguistic competence and communicative competence so that they may have successful interaction with native speakers of English in their future careers and to help the

students and teachers to solve problems with using culture-based textbooks, it is necessary to incorporate into the existing curriculum of the Hanoi Foreign Languages College such a course as English Background Studies and Culture. This must be seen as a support as well as an indispensable component of the curriculum.

Background Studies and Culture as a separate component should include a brief history, some important geographical facts, political and social structures of major English speaking countries. It also includes the people's way of living, working, behaving, talking, judging, and their customs and habits, etc.

Techniques used for teaching this subject may vary. For instance, it might be taught through lecturing and discussing topics; showing films, video tapes or slides; reading newspapers or magazines; using bulletin boards with advertisements taken from newspapers or magazines; and through listening to radio or cassette recorders to keep up with the news from English speaking countries.

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