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An investigation into modern British and Vietnamese etiquette

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ABSTRACT

Language proficiency is a crucial factor for cross-cultural communication to be achieved successfully, yet it is not sufficient. Additionally, speakers of a foreign language are supposed to know how to act appropriately in social situations, which is regarded as etiquette. When it comes to the United Kingdom, a western country with rich history and sophisticated culture, it becomes more challenging for the learners of English since the British have conventionally been believed to attach enormous significance to their strict etiquette rules. The study intends to investigate modern British etiquette regarding popular social interaction compared to modern Vietnamese manners. Five fundamental features to be investigated involves: Time and punctuality, Greetings and meetings, Body language and dress code, Communication style, and Table manners. To achieve the targeted outcomes, analytical technique is applied aiming at analyzing fundamental features of modern British and Vietnamese etiquette, and contrastive technique aiming at exploring similarities and differences between the two cultures. It is manifested that Vietnamese manners have substantially been influenced by Western culture since globalization has gradually led to the transmission of modern ways of life in Vietnam. This proposes a plausible explanation as to why the two presumed opposite cultures share a great deal of significant resemblance in social etiquette despite certain dissimilarities.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication; etiquette; social interaction; resemblance

1. Introduction

For the past few decades, the process of globalization has resulted in the increasing needs for communication in foreign languages. Among the core components of language, culture has gradually been recognized as a fundamental part and given considerable concentration, the significance of which is highlighted in the United States' National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project 1999.

Etiquette, which is the code of polite behaviour in society, represents a fundamental part of every culture; as a result, cultural awareness of British etiquette in contrast with Vietnamese one will help learners of English ensure that their behaviour is polite and appropriate whilst they communicate with British people. With such an interest in the domain of culture, the study aims at analyzing and comparing the etiquette norms between British and Vietnamese cultures and exploring similarities and differences between the two cultures to prepare English language learners for cross-cultural communication in their upcoming future careers.

2. Literature review and research method

2.1. Definition and significance of etiquette

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *etiquette* is defined as '*the customary code of polite behaviour in society or among members of a particular profession or group*'. Every culture has its own form of etiquette, which is distinguished from other cultures' and can be changed over the years. In other words, *etiquette* refers to the social norms and expectations regarding how one is expected to behave in various interactions in society. These norms provide a set of principles that subtly regulate the expected attitudes, behaviours, and manners of all members of society. Examples of etiquette include behaviours such as using proper greetings in conversations and thanking service personnel in shops or restaurants. It also includes more subtle behaviours such as adopting an appropriate dress code and being punctual.

'*Manners make the man*' was a popular proverb which was originated in Britain in the late 15th century. This proverb appreciates the real significance of good manners in the sense that people, despite having intelligence, friendliness, kindness or talent, could be misunderstood and disrespected if they do not have good manners since their true character might not be seen.

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Etiquette holds a central position in social interactions in every culture. Following the rules and principles of etiquette is significant for healthy social interactions for several reasons. Etiquette provides a system through which each member of society can observe and exhibit respectful behaviour. It also enables the expression of empathy and consideration for the rights and boundaries of other people. In the fullness of time, proper etiquette helps to prevent unnecessary tension and conflict and therefore maintains order, peace, and harmony in a community.

2.2. Research methods

The research adopts qualitative methods. The techniques to be applied in this study involve analytical technique, which is intended to analyze fundamental features of modern British and Vietnamese etiquette, and contrastive technique, which aims at exploring and explaining the similarities and differences in modern etiquette between the two cultures.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Similarities between modern British and Vietnamese etiquette

Both British and Vietnamese cultures place great importance on observing etiquette norms, although the specific practices may differ since etiquette serves to maintain harmony and show respect for others in both societies. Both cultures emphasize politeness and respect in social interactions. Formalities such as using appropriate titles and expressions of gratitude are common.

A detailed comparison between British and Vietnamese etiquette is designed to examine social etiquette in both cultures in terms of 5 aspects as follows: (1) Time and punctuality; (2) Greetings and meetings; (3) Body language and dress code; (4) Communication style, and (5) Table Manners.

3.1.1. Time and punctuality

Though the British have always had a great reputation for a strict attitude towards punctuality, both of the two cultures highly appreciate punctuality since being on time on social occasions remains a fundamental value, which is to respect other people, ensure smooth event flow and maintain a positive impression. It reflects responsibility, consideration and professionalism, enhancing social interactions and fostering relationships. Late arrivals disrupt schedules, cause inconvenience and convey a lack of regard for others' time and effort. Those who are late are expected to say a few words of apology and explanation. Thanks to the process of globalization, the significance of punctuality to Vietnamese people has considerably increased in the past few decades, and it has become a compulsory practice in social interaction.

3.1.2. Greetings and meetings

Handshaking, which has been a long-term custom in British culture, has become a common ritual in both formal and informal interactions in Vietnam. The significance and practice of handshaking are interpreted and carried out in almost exactly the same way in British and Vietnamese culture. A strong handshake is a standard method of greeting in both business and social settings. Your handshake can influence others' perceptions of you; for instance, a weak handshake might lead people to think you are uninterested or lacking in confidence.

A good handshake normally involves the following features:

- Grip the other person's hand confidently.
- Adjust the pressure appropriately—avoid squeezing too hard, but ensure your grip isn't weak.
- Avoid shaking hands if your hands are sweaty; discreetly pat them dry on your clothing first if necessary.
- Keep the handshake short and shake hands two or three times before releasing.
- Combine your handshake with steady eye contact and a smile.

Gentlemanliness

Gallantry is often regarded as a quintessentially British characteristic and a hallmark of a gentleman. While it remains a respected aspect of British etiquette today, men need to ensure that their chivalrous actions don't come across as arrogant to contemporary, independent women. Examples of modern chivalry in the 21st century include giving up your seat on the train for a woman who is standing, holding the door open for her, offering to carry a heavy bag if she appears to be struggling, or giving her your jacket if she is cold. These courtesies are also gradually becoming customary during social interactions in modern time

in Vietnamese culture.

Queuing

Queuing represents an essential trait in modern life for both British and Vietnamese people. Contemporary etiquette dictates that upon arrival, you should join the end of the queue to ensure that everyone is served in the order they arrived. We follow a system of "waiting our turn" in lines. The fairness of this system depends on everyone in the queue agreeing to this practice. It's considered unfair if someone bypasses the queue. However, a common British tendency is that, despite general irritation with someone who has cut in, only a few people will actually ask them to return to the end of the line.

Apologising

Ritualized expressions such as '*Please*', '*thank you*' and '*I'm sorry*' are frequent expressions in use in both cultures, though British people have a tendency to over-apologize, *i.e.* they even apologize when they have done nothing wrong. For example, if you tell someone about something unfortunate which has happened to you, it's quite likely that they will apologise. For example, '*I'm so sorry* to hear that you have been unwell'. British people even apologize if someone accidentally bumps into them as though they are sorry for being in the other's way. If somebody is sitting on the seat that they have reserved a train, it would be common to say: '*I'm so sorry but you appear to be sitting in my seat*'. In British culture, it's common for the person at fault to apologize, but it's also typical for the victim to apologize as well. Nonetheless, when someone has caused upset or offense, it's crucial that a sincere apology is given. Needless to say, a half-hearted apology is unlikely to be gladly accepted.

3.1.3. Body language and dress code

Non-verbal cues play a significant role in both British and Vietnamese etiquette. Gestures, facial expressions and body language convey meanings that supplement verbal communication. Some typical features such as hugging, kissing and touching are generally reserved for family members and very close friends; speaking loudly in public or using excessive hand gestures during conversations should be inappropriate; a certain amount of personal space should be maintained - standing too close to another person or putting your arm around someone's shoulder should be avoided.

As for clothing, there are no strict rules on how to dress although it is important to adhere to general guidelines in formal settings. People in larger cities tend to dress more formally, so for formal events, choose an outfit that matches the dress code. For occasions like holiday dinners or cultural events, such as concerts or theatre performances, formal dressing is advisable.

3.1.4. Communication style

In both cultures, speakers need to be careful about what are acceptable and unacceptable topics to talk about. Good topics for conversation at social gatherings may include hobbies and interests, favourite books or films, food and drink recommendations, upcoming events or activities in the area. It is advisable to ask open-ended questions about these topics can keep the conversation flowing and create a friendly atmosphere.

Take the weather, for example. Discussing the weather is a common way to break the ice, as it is considered a 'safe' topic. Its primary role is to initiate interaction between people. Once a common interest is found, the conversation typically shifts, but the UK's varied weather offers a useful starting point for this initial exchange.

During the communication process, people are advised to be cautious when talking about some topics, especially with people that they have only just met, people who are older, people who appear to have strong religious or political views, or people who may have some personal problems or sensitivities. Personal questions about salary, relationship status, weight or age (particularly in the case of more 'mature' ladies) is also disapproved of. Additionally, sensitive topics related to someone's personal life or health should be approached with care and only if the individual brings them up first. Contentious topics that should be avoided also include politics, religions, personal finances and gossip about somebody you know, money, sex, previous or current relationships, criticism and complaints.

Take money as an example. When conversing with someone new, it's best to steer clear of topics like money and personal wealth. Only bring up financial matters if the other person introduces them, as this indicates they are comfortable discussing such topics. It is considered impolite to ask someone about their salary. Talking about your own financial situation and purchases may come across as bragging, especially

if it highlights a disparity between your finances and theirs. However, attitudes are evolving, and British people are increasingly open to discussing topics like house prices or holiday expenses, particularly when they consider the purchase a bargain—such as buying a house below market value or getting a great deal on a vacation.

3.1.5. Table manners

Despite huge difference between dining customs, the two cultures share common specific norms regarding dining etiquette. Table manners, use of utensils, and seating arrangements reflect cultural values and social hierarchy.

Both cultures share the same values of dining etiquette as follows:

- Wait until everyone at the table has been served and your host begins eating or gives you a signal to start.
- Prioritize others' needs over your own when dining in a group with shared dishes.
- Eat very quietly and with discretion. Take small bites, keep your mouth closed while chewing, and swallow gently. Just as yawning or coughing is considered impolite, so is chewing with your mouth open or talking with food still in your mouth.
- Eat at a slow pace. Eating too quickly or overindulging can make you seem greedy. Avoid speaking with food in your mouth and take breaks between bites.
- Wait until everyone has finished eating or you are instructed to leave the table. If you must leave before everyone is done, politely ask for permission to do so.

3.2. Differences between modern British and Vietnamese etiquette

3.2.1. Greetings and meetings

According to Ly (2017), Vietnamese people, in informal social contexts, tend to use informal greetings in the form of questions, such as: '*Anh đi đâu thế?*' (Where are you going?), '*Bỏ làm gì đó?*' (What are you doing?), '*An cơm chưa?*' (Have you had lunch), '*Khoẻ không mà?*' (How are you doing?). This way of greetings conveys concerns and consideration to the addressee, and their purposes are not necessarily to ask for information, so the addressee does not necessarily answer straight to the point or reply in other ways. Obviously, these ways of greetings are unpopular in British culture, and thus remain the most outstanding difference between British and Vietnamese cultures.

There also exists a slight difference in greeting style between the two cultures. For British people, handshakes are common in formal and informal settings, accompanied by maintaining eye contact and a smile, while in Vietnam, greetings often involve bowing (slight nod or full bow depending on the relationship) and can be accompanied by verbal expressions of respect.

With regards to addressing people, it is becoming more common to use first names, even in professional settings in Britain. For instance, many people now refer to their doctors by their first names, whereas previously, doctors were addressed by their surnames. However, there are still situations where using someone's first name without an invitation is considered inappropriate, such as with teachers or older individuals, for whom first-name usage might seem overly familiar. In contrast, Vietnamese people typically use first names, even with titles, and rarely use surnames independently.

3.2.2. Body language

Specifically, Vietnamese people favor non-verbal communication for certain feelings. In some cases, verbal expressions such as '*thank you*' or '*I am sorry*' are not used to express feelings of thankfulness or apology, instead, non-verbal means such as a slight bow or a smile can be employed. In Vietnamese culture, when someone gives a compliment, they should not expect a verbal "thank you" in return, as such a response might be seen as lacking modesty from the person receiving the compliment. Instead, a smile plays a crucial role in Vietnamese culture as a non-verbal means of communication. It can signify respect, serve as an apology, or express embarrassment for a minor mistake. For Vietnamese people, a smile is often the appropriate response in situations where verbal responses are either unnecessary or unsuitable.

The Vietnamese tend only to apologize or thank a person when they truly believe that one's actions have indebted them or deserve gratitude. This reflects sincerity and virtuousness. On the contrary, ritualized phrases like '*thank you*', '*excuse me*', and '*sorry*' in western cultures are often used automatically and frequently to acknowledge minor incidents and show courtesy. However, Vietnamese people might view these expressions as insincere in some contexts, as they may not always reflect a genuine apology or

heartfelt gratitude. Additionally, saying ‘thank you’ in response to a compliment might be seen as lacking humility. Not recognizing this cultural difference can lead to misunderstandings when Vietnamese individuals interact with people from Britain.

3.2.3. Table Manners

A significant difference can be clearly observed between British and Vietnamese dining etiquette. In British culture, meals are often structured around individual servings with distinct courses whereas in Vietnamese culture, meals are often communal, with shared dishes and the use of chopsticks.

British meals are typically divided into three courses, namely starter, main course and dessert. Typically, all dishes for a meal are usually served all at once and shared among everyone during a Vietnamese meal. All dishes, except for individual bowls of rice, are placed in the center of the table for communal sharing. British people use knives, forks and spoons for eating, whereas Vietnamese utensils include bowls, chopsticks and spoons. When not being used, cutlery should be rested on the edges of the plate between bites, whereas chopsticks should be placed on a bone plate or side dish; besides, chopsticks should be rested after every mouthful or when breaking to drink or speak. In order to signify that they have finished eating, British people should put knives together in the centre while Vietnamese people put chopsticks set on the bowl. In addition, it is customary for Vietnamese people to serve food for each other as a gesture of care, but this is definitely not the case in the United Kingdom. Last but not least, British people always use a napkin during the meals, which should be placed on their lap as soon as they are seated; when they leave the table, they are supposed to leave their napkin loose and unfolded on the table, to the left of their place setting. Napkin has become popular in Vietnam recently, but it is mostly used for formal parties. It can be concluded that dining etiquette reflects the clearest distinction between the two cultures, thus the understanding of these distinction emphasizes a profound significance for Vietnamese learners of English.

4. Conclusion

Representing completely different cultures, it is certain that there exists a huge dissimilarity between modern British and Vietnamese etiquette. Understanding cultural differences in etiquette helps Vietnamese learners of English enhance intercultural communication and fosters mutual understanding. A detailed scientific study on British and Vietnamese etiquette would highlight the specific practices and customs and the underlying values and cultural contexts that shape these behaviors. Understanding these similarities and differences can facilitate effective cross-cultural communication and foster mutual respect in diverse social settings. In other words, a general knowledge of similarities and differences between British and Vietnamese etiquette is proved to be an urgent need for learners of English to be well-prepared for successful cross-cultural communication.

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TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu quy tắc ứng xử trong văn hoá Anh và văn hoá Việt hiện đại

Nguyễn Thị Thảo

Trường Đại học Mở - Địa chất

Để giao tiếp liên văn hóa đạt được thành công, trình độ ngôn ngữ là yếu tố quan trọng nhưng chưa đủ. Những người sử dụng ngoại ngữ cần phải biết cách ứng xử phù hợp trong các tình huống xã hội được coi là phép xã giao. Khi nói đến Vương quốc Anh, một quốc gia phương Tây có lịch sử lâu đời và nền văn hóa

phức tạp, và người Anh thường được cho là rất coi trọng các quy tắc nghi thức nghiêm ngặt của họ thì việc giao tiếp ứng xử cho phù hợp với văn hoá trở nên khó khăn hơn đối với người Việt Nam. Nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích tìm hiểu các nghi thức xã giao hiện đại của người Anh đối chiếu với với nghi thức hiện đại của người Việt Nam. Nghiên cứu tập trung so sánh đối chiếu vào năm hướng chính: Quan điểm về thời gian và sự đúng giờ; Chào hỏi và gặp mặt; Ngôn ngữ cử chỉ và cách ăn mặc; Phong cách giao tiếp; và Nghi thức ăn uống. Nghiên cứu áp dụng phương pháp phân tích để phân tích những đặc điểm cơ bản trong quy tắc ứng xử hiện đại trong văn hoá Anh và Việt Nam, và phương pháp so sánh đối chiếu để tìm ra những điểm giống nhau và khác nhau giữa hai nền văn hoá. Có thể thấy, văn hoá ứng xử của người Việt Nam trong xã hội hiện đại dần dần chịu ảnh hưởng tương đối sâu sắc của văn hóa phương Tây trong quá trình toàn cầu hóa trong những thập kỷ vừa qua. Điều này có thể lý giải một phần lý do tại sao hai nền văn hóa được cho là đối lập nhau lại có rất nhiều điểm tương đồng đáng kể về nghi thức xã hội mặc dù có những khác biệt nhất định.

Từ khóa: giao tiếp đa văn hóa; nghi thức; tương tác xã hội; đặc điểm tương đồng