

Experiential Learning and Immersion: Strategies for Fostering Intercultural Competence in Vietnamese English Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates effective pedagogical strategies for fostering intercultural competence (IC) among undergraduate English majors at Thu Dau Mot University (TDMU), addressing the persistent educational gap between structural linguistic proficiency and cross-cultural readiness. Employing a convergent mixed-methods research design, the investigation gathered data from 120 students and 12 language educators using multi-dimensional self-assessment questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and structured classroom observations. The quantitative survey tracked student capabilities across core dimensions using a five-point Likert scale, while field observations were conducted over a continuous six-week period to monitor real-time teacher-student discourse. Quantitative variance was evaluated via descriptive statistics, a One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), and Tukey's post-hoc criteria, while qualitative tracking data underwent recursive thematic analysis. The empirical findings reveal that language learners possess a moderate baseline level of overall IC, demonstrating highly developed intercultural attitudes ($M = 3.8$) but significantly depressed critical cultural awareness ($M = 3.2$). Among the evaluated instructional methods, cultural immersion configurations proved to be statistically the most effective intervention ($M = 4.1$) compared to traditional reflective practice ($M = 3.4$), while structured intercultural dialogue yielded moderate developmental gains ($M = 3.8$). Triangulated thematic field data confirm that active experiential frameworks and digital cross-cultural exchanges markedly improve student dialogic engagement and situational adaptability. However, rigid institutional curricula, severe time constraints, and a lack of specialized faculty training continue to hinder systemic implementation. Based on these outcomes, the study recommends embedding structured experiential and dialogue-driven modules directly into core language curricula while establishing continuous, professional teacher-training programs. These insights offer context-specific, evidence-based solutions to equip language learners with the critical analytical capacities necessary for global citizenship.

KEYWORDS: Byram's framework, cross-cultural communication, tertiary education, convergent mixed-methods, global citizenship, pedagogical interventions

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's profoundly interconnected global economy, the cultivation of intercultural competence (IC) has emerged as a core imperative within higher education, particularly for individuals pursuing English as an academic major (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). The capacity to successfully decode and navigate complex cultural differences is no longer an optional supplement but a foundational requirement for international professional success, institutional mobility, and cross-border collaboration (Fantini, 2007). As systemic globalization continuously transforms modern economic, social, and educational environments, tertiary graduates must be equipped with the behavioral tools necessary to communicate effectively across diverse cultural boundaries (OECD, 2018).

Crucially, modern language acquisition cannot be treated as a purely mechanical process centered exclusively on structural linguistic mastery; it inherently requires a deep, synchronized internalization of cultural nuances, historical worldviews, and diverse communicative perspectives (Kramsch, 1993). Despite the growing recognition of the importance of IC, many English language programs still prioritize linguistic accuracy and exam-oriented outcomes, often neglecting the intercultural dimensions of language learning (Byram & Feng, 2004; Sercu et al., 2005). This imbalance poses challenges for students when engaging in international academic environments, global workplaces, and cross-cultural interactions (Deardorff, 2009).

To construct effective interventions that address this problem, language educators must carefully evaluate the current state of empirical literature regarding intercultural instruction. Recent international studies have increasingly emphasized the urgency of embedding systematic IC components directly into English Language Teaching (ELT) frameworks. However, as Tran and Duong

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(2015) argue, ELT curricula within developing educational settings like Vietnam remain disproportionately centered on rote grammar, technical vocabulary acquisition, and rigid examination preparation, while routinely discarding the fluid communicative and cultural aspects vital for international engagement. This problematic compartmentalization characterized by the artificial separation of core language skills from active cultural training fundamentally inhibits students from establishing a functional, holistic level of IC.

Furthermore, this operational disconnect is exacerbated by professional challenges at the classroom level. Vo (2017) demonstrated a significant pedagogical gap between tertiary lecturers' abstract appreciation of intercultural communication and their actual classroom practices, noting that while educators widely recognize the value of IC, their daily lessons lack structured intercultural components due to severe institutional constraints and minimal training resources.

Similarly, when examining pre-service English educators across diverse institutional environments, Hernández-López et al. (2024) observed that while affective traits like cultural openness were highly developed among participants, concrete conceptual knowledge and critical analytical skills consistently lagged behind. Although international study-abroad experiences predictably yield higher capability metrics, recent research confirms that well-designed local curricula and intentional domestic pedagogies possess an underutilized potential to stimulate profound intercultural growth even within non-multicultural home environments (Hernández-López et al., 2024).

Consequently, identifying the optimal pedagogical pathways for local implementation requires a rigorous synthesis of established educational models. This investigation is theoretically grounded in the integration of Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence and Kolb's (2014) experiential learning theory. Byram's framework establishes that comprehensive intercultural effectiveness comprises five overlapping, non-linear dimensions namely attitudes of openness, explicit cultural knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. This multi-dimensional model is further reinforced by Tran and Duong (2015), who emphasize that true communicative fluency demands a synchronized combination of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competencies alongside active intercultural awareness.

However, to move these cognitive and affective components from abstract theory into functional behavior, they must be paired with Kolb's (2014) experiential learning cycle, which dictates that deep cognitive development progresses through four continuous stages including concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. By synthesizing these two complementary theoretical perspectives, this study establishes a holistic framework ensuring that both the internal cognitive structures and external experiential behaviors of IC acquisition are empirically targeted.

Despite the conceptual strength of these foundational models, several critical gaps persist within contemporary international literature that justify the execution of this research. First, the existing body of empirical research remains heavily biased toward Western educational contexts, creating a notable scarcity of localized data regarding how IC is cultivated within Asian tertiary learning environments where traditional educational norms and collectivist cultural practices differ substantially.

Second, there is a severe disconnect between theoretical conceptualization and concrete classroom application; while some domestic institutions offer isolated historical or cultural courses, such as American or British Studies, these are typically taught as independent content modules separate from core English language instruction, resulting in fragmented knowledge that fails to prepare students for real-world interactions (Tran & Duong, 2015).

Third, as highlighted globally by Tiurikova (2021), assessing IC remains an enduring methodological challenge, as the vast majority of existing studies rely almost exclusively on vulnerable self-reported questionnaires, underscoring an urgent need for multi-dimensional, mixed-methods evaluations that utilize robust qualitative triangulation to capture actual student behavioral growth accurately and ethically. Finally, there is minimal empirical evidence verifying which specific instructional strategies ranging from immersion to reflective practice operate most effectively when subjected to the rigid curricula and limited teacher-training frameworks typical of regional public universities.

To systematically address these literature gaps, the present mixed-methods study investigates the operational realities of intercultural instruction within a localized Vietnamese higher education setting. The central purpose of this research is to evaluate the baseline IC levels of language learners at Thu Dau Mot University (TDMU) and determine which specific pedagogical interventions yield the highest levels of cross-cultural readiness under real-world institutional conditions. By examining both student data and educator perspectives, this study seeks to provide actionable, evidence-based recommendations for curriculum redesign and professional faculty development. To guide this empirical evaluation, the study addresses the following two research questions:

- 1) What are the baseline levels of knowledge, attitudes, skills, and critical cultural awareness related to IC among English majors at TDMU?
- 2) What teaching strategies do educators and students perceive as most effective in fostering IC, and what specific contextual factors affect their classroom implementation?

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The significance of this investigation lies in its capacity to translate international intercultural theory into a localized, actionable pedagogical framework for emerging Southeast Asian ELT educational landscapes. By providing contextualized empirical data, the outcomes of this research serve to inform data-driven curriculum design, optimize institutional teacher-training structures, and support administrative policies that advance globally relevant language education.

The structural scope of this study is intentionally focused on active undergraduate English majors and language educators within the Faculty of Foreign Languages at TDMU. While this specialized institutional boundary allows for a deep, highly accurate triangulation of the target population using mixed-methods data, it introduces specific geographic constraints. Readers must note that these localized parameters mean the immediate statistical generalizability of the findings to contrasting primary educational settings or highly diverse international contexts may be restricted, thereby establishing a clear foundation for future multi-institutional, longitudinal scientific inquiries.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A. Research Design and Methodological Triangulation

This investigation was executed using an explanatory, convergent mixed-methods research design that simultaneously pairs quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments. The implementation of this dual-paradigm framework is structurally engineered to minimize the inherent validity flaws associated with mono-method data streams.

Quantitatively, the study leverages cross-sectional numerical survey parameters to construct a macro-level empirical map of baseline learner capabilities and comparative pedagogical variances. Concurrently, the qualitative research track employs semi-structured interviews and long-term classroom observations to systematically capture micro-level contextual nuances, active communicative strategies, and institutional barriers. This methodological configuration provides a comprehensive, cross-verified overview of IC cultivation within the target educational setting.

B. Sampling Strategy and Participant Demographics

To gather data from key participants in the local educational setting, a non-probability purposive sampling strategy was applied within the Faculty of Foreign Languages at TDMU. The total sample consisted of two distinct groups, a student group of 120 undergraduate English majors actively enrolled in advanced language modules and an educator group of 12 active English language lecturers.

This specific selection criterion ensured that all participants possessed direct, ongoing experience with the university curriculum, learning spaces, and teaching environments under evaluation. This boundary guarantees that the collected feedback is valid, context-specific, and fully representative of the target institutional population.

C. Research Instrumentation and Psychometric Validation

Data collection was operationalized through three distinct, specialized research instruments.

Self-Assessment Survey Questionnaire: Administered to the student sample (N = 120), this instrument was modeled after the multi-dimensional parameters of Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence framework. The questionnaire was divided into three core sections including participant demographic indicators, a 20-item psychometric self-assessment measuring IC dimensions across a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), and a composite section featuring 10 multiple-choice items and 5 open-ended questions designed to evaluate active instructional methods.

Semi-Structured Interview Protocols: Independent interview matrices were developed for a specialized subsample of students (n = 20) and educators (n = 12). These narrative frameworks were designed to capture detailed qualitative accounts regarding personal cross-cultural encounters, classroom communication difficulties, and curriculum delivery challenges.

Structured Classroom Observation Checklists: A field tracking sheet was deployed across six distinct English language classes over a continuous six-week period. Each designated class section was monitored for 90 minutes per session, with tracking parameters focusing on real-time teacher-student discourse, the integration frequency of intercultural content, student dialogic engagement, and the use of experiential learning models.

D. Data Collection Protocols and Analytical Procedures

The operational timeline was systematically sequenced, beginning with the digital distribution and collection of the student survey questionnaire. Following the initial survey phase, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted, while the six-week classroom field observation window was executed in parallel.

Quantitatively, all collected numerical matrices were audited, structured, and analyzed using SPSS Statistics software (Version 26.0). The statistical analysis computed descriptive metrics, including mean scores (M) and standard deviations (SD), followed by a One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) post-hoc tests to verify the statistical significance of performance variances across the instructional groups. Qualitative audio recordings were transcribed

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verbatim, subjected to recursive reading cycles, and processed via inductive thematic analysis to isolate, cross-reference, and stabilize recurring conceptual codes and structural categories.

E. Ethical Considerations

To ensure rigorous ethical compliance with international standards for human subject research, the protocol for this study was formally reviewed and authorized by the institutional oversight framework at TDMU. Prior to their engagement, all prospective participants received complete written disclosures outlining the study's scientific purposes, data collection procedures, and academic scope. Formal written informed consent was acquired from each participant, with explicit conditions protecting their unconditional right to withdraw from the research process at any stage without administrative or academic penalty.

Complete data privacy and anonymity were enforced by removing all direct personal identifiers from the datasets and substituting them with localized alphanumeric coding systems. All primary text files, audio recordings, and numerical spreadsheets were encrypted and stored on restricted-access cloud platforms available exclusively to the researcher.

III. RESULTS

A. Results from the Questionnaire

To address the first research question, a self-assessment questionnaire based on Byram's (1997) model was administered to a sample of 120 students. This model evaluates IC across four core dimensions including intercultural attitudes; knowledge; skills of interpreting and relating; and critical cultural awareness.

The descriptive statistics indicated that the participants exhibited moderate overall levels of IC. The highest mean score was achieved in the dimension of intercultural attitudes ($M = 3.8$), followed by skills of interpreting ($M = 3.7$) and knowledge ($M = 3.5$). Conversely, the lowest-scoring dimension was critical cultural awareness ($M = 3.2$), as detailed in Table 1. This performance pattern suggests that while students demonstrate openness, empathy, and curiosity toward cultural differences, they lack deeper critical reflection regarding cultural assumptions, power imbalances, and the sociopolitical dynamics inherent in intercultural encounters. This deficit highlights a pronounced need for instructional strategies that transcend the transmission of basic cultural facts to actively foster critical thinking and self-awareness.

Table 1. Mean Scores of Intercultural Competence Dimensions

Dimension	Mean Score (out of 5)
Intercultural Attitudes	3.8
Knowledge	3.5
Skills of Interpreting	3.7
Critical Cultural Awareness	3.2

Although these baseline results reflect a promising level of initial engagement with intercultural learning, the lower performance in critical cultural awareness highlights a clear gap in the students' capacity to evaluate cultural values from multiple perspectives. This finding underscores the necessity for targeted pedagogical interventions that move beyond mere cultural exposure to incorporate systematic reflection, critique, and comparison. This is especially vital in ELT contexts like Vietnam, where linguistic proficiency has traditionally been prioritized over intercultural learning objectives.

In response to the second research question, the study examined the empirical impact of three distinct instructional approaches on students' IC scores containing cultural immersion (CI), intercultural dialogue (ID), and reflective practice (RP). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was executed to compare the relative effectiveness of these strategies on overall IC development. Descriptive data indicated that participants in the CI group achieved the highest mean IC score ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.5$), followed by those in the ID group ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.5$) and the RP group ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 0.6$). The ANOVA results revealed a statistically significant effect of the teaching strategy on students' IC scores, $F(2, 117) = 5.94$, $p = .003$, indicating that the choice of instructional methodology plays a meaningful role in shaping intercultural development, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. One-Way ANOVA Results for Teaching Strategies

Source	SS	df	MS	F	P-value
Between Groups	2.94	2	1.47	5.94	0.003
Within Groups	28.96	117	0.25		
Total	31.90	119			

To further investigate the specific variances between these groups, Tukey's HSD post-hoc tests were performed, as outlined in Table 3. The post-hoc analyses revealed that the CI group significantly outperformed the RP group ($p = .002$). This demonstrates that direct, immersive intercultural experiences such as study abroad programs, cultural fieldwork, or sustained virtual exchanges

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are uniquely effective in enhancing a student's capacity to navigate cultural differences. While the ID approach showed a moderate advantage over RP ($p = .057$), this variance approached but did not achieve statistical significance. Similarly, the difference between the CI and ID groups was not statistically significant ($p = .086$), implying that while full immersion yields the greatest statistical benefits, well-structured, interactive, discussion-based activities can still stimulate considerable intercultural growth.

Table 3. Tukey's HSD Post-Hoc Test Results for IC Strategies

Comparison	Mean Difference	P-value
Cultural Immersion vs. Reflective Practice	0.7	0.002
Cultural Immersion vs. Intercultural Dialogue	0.3	0.086
Intercultural Dialogue vs. Reflective Practice	0.4	0.057

These collective findings provide robust evidence that interactive, experience-rich strategies particularly cultural immersion are significantly more effective than introspective methods, such as reflective writing, in expanding student IC. Although ID did not yield statistically significant gains over RP, its moderate effect size suggests it remains a valuable supplementary strategy in educational contexts where full scale immersion is logistically unfeasible. Overall, the data reinforce the importance of integrating engagement-driven, experiential learning models into ELT curricula to systematically foster IC among English majors at TDMU.

B. Results from Semi-Structured Interviews

To complement the quantitative questionnaire data and further investigate both research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subsample of 20 students and 12 educators. These qualitative sessions helped contextualize the statistical trends by providing a deeper narrative insight into how learners and educators perceive IC development and ongoing instructional practices. The prominent themes extracted from these sessions are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Key Themes from Interview Data

Themes	Description
Effectiveness of Experiential Learning	Students felt more confident in cross-cultural interactions after exposure to diverse contexts.
Challenges in Intercultural Assessment	Educators struggle to implement standardized measures for evaluating intercultural competence.
Institutional Constraints	Lack of teacher training and rigid curricula hinder effective integration of intercultural learning.

A prominent recurring theme was the perceived effectiveness of experiential learning. Consistent with the survey data, students who had participated in cultural exchange programs or digital collaborations reported a heightened level of confidence during cross-cultural communication, particularly in situations requiring active cultural interpretation. This qualitative feedback directly supports the higher quantitative mean scores observed in the dimensions of intercultural attitudes ($M = 3.8$) and interpreting skills ($M = 3.7$).

Another significant theme involved the systemic challenges associated with assessing IC. Participating educators reported substantial difficulties in applying standardized assessment metrics, aligning with Tiurikova's (2021) observation that robust IC evaluation remains a persistent pedagogical challenge. These evaluative challenges mirror the survey finding that critical cultural awareness ($M = 3.2$) remains underdeveloped, as very few interviewees expressed deeper engagement with sociopolitical or value-based analyses of culture.

Finally, institutional constraints, most notably limited teacher training and rigid curricular mandates, were widely cited by educators as primary barriers to effective implementation. These institutional insights support the call for more structured experiential learning opportunities backed by robust institutional frameworks to properly enable intercultural pedagogy.

C. Results from Classroom Observations

To triangulate the data derived from the questionnaires and interviews, structured classroom observations were carried out over a six-week period across six distinct English language classes. These observations aimed to verify how IC principles were integrated into actual teaching practices and to identify which specific classroom strategies fostered the highest levels of student engagement.

The observation data showed that only 40% of the monitored lessons included explicit intercultural content, reflecting inconsistent pedagogical integration and directly aligning with the relatively low student ratings for critical cultural awareness ($M = 3.2$). In classes where intercultural dialogue was intentionally facilitated, students exhibited noticeably higher levels of engagement,

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actively participating in discussions and exchanging diverse cultural perspectives. Furthermore, lessons that incorporated active experiential learning strategies such as role-plays, case studies, and simulations resulted in elevated student enthusiasm and a more profound contextual application of intercultural knowledge.

These real-time classroom observations strongly affirm the ANOVA and post-hoc results, which highlighted cultural immersion as the most effective strategy, followed closely by interactive intercultural dialogue. The field findings also provide empirical support for Kolb's (2014) experiential learning theory, demonstrating that active engagement combined with reflection is vital for deep intercultural acquisition. Instructors who facilitated explicit discussions on cultural differences and encouraged students to actively reflect on their experiences noted a clear improvement in the students' ability to articulate and analyze intercultural interactions. However, systemic time constraints and strict curricular limitations were frequently logged as challenges by the observed teachers, reinforcing the urgent need for stronger institutional support to systematically integrate intercultural learning into the language curriculum.

IV. DISCUSSION

A. Theoretical Alignment with IC and Experiential Learning Models

The empirical findings of this study provide critical insights into both evaluated research questions by mapping the specific baseline IC levels of English majors (Research Question 1) and evaluating the operational success of diverse pedagogical strategies designed to advance that competence (Research Question 2). A primary finding of this investigation is the notable asymmetry among the individual dimensions of IC within the participant sample. The reality that students scored highest in intercultural attitudes ($M = 3.8$) yet significantly lower in critical cultural awareness ($M = 3.2$) clearly indicates that psychological openness and basic curiosity do not automatically translate into high-level analytical capabilities.

This explicit discrepancy strongly validates Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, which frames IC not as a singular linguistic byproduct, but as a multi-dimensional construct where affective elements (attitudes) and cognitive-evaluative elements (critical cultural awareness) evolve along distinct developmental trajectories. As Tran and Duong (2015) assert, transforming ELT in Vietnam requires shifting the primary focus away from native-speaker linguistic norms and toward genuine intercultural effectiveness as the ultimate metric of educational success.

The structural deficits observed in critical cultural awareness within this study underscore this exact necessity; while students easily adapt to surface-level cultural variations, they encounter significant difficulties when tasked with evaluating complex power dynamics, structural privileges, or underlying systemic biases. This contextual challenge was frequently verified during participant interviews and classroom sessions, showing that students often resort to passive acceptance rather than engaging in critical, multi-perspective textual critique. This outcome implies that passive or purely information-based instructional designs are insufficient for cultivating comprehensive intercultural capabilities.

Concurrently, the statistical output from this study strongly supports Kolb's (2014) experiential learning theory. The quantitative data proved that students subjected to active experiential configurations most notably cultural immersion ($M = 4.1$) exhibited statistically superior IC advancement compared to peers relegated to traditional, introspective classroom constraints ($M = 3.4$). When analyzed through Kolb's four-stage cycle, the experiential tasks evaluated in this study clearly provided the essential concrete experiences and opportunities for reflective observation required to trigger deep conceptual shifts.

This theoretical alignment was further illustrated by the qualitative interview transcripts, where students exposed to digital collaborations or immersion reported rapid gains in communicative confidence and situational adaptability. Furthermore, classroom observations confirmed that active simulations, case studies, and role-plays dramatically elevated student engagement levels. This interactive participation generated real-time peer dialogue that allowed students to articulate, test, and refine their developing intercultural frameworks far more dynamically than was possible through passive exposure.

B. Convergence and Divergence with Recent Empirical Research on IC

By demonstrating that active, experience-driven strategies specifically cultural immersion outperform isolated introspective writing tasks, the results of this study contribute clear empirical clarity to ongoing debates within international ELT literature (Research Question 2). These outcomes closely converge with several recent international investigations while expanding their scope within the Southeast Asian context. For instance, Vo (2017) identified a problematic professional gap where tertiary lecturers highly valued the conceptual framework of IC but failed to implement it systematically due to rigid institutional constraints and a lack of practical materials. This professional disconnect was closely mirrored by the educators interviewed at TDM, who expressed substantial pedagogical willingness but pointed to rigid institutional boundaries and limited training resources as primary barriers to effective integration.

Similarly, the positive outcomes observed among students engaged in digital intercultural exchanges support the conclusions of Pereira (2023), who emphasized that integrating technology-enhanced, interactive tools effectively deepens student adaptability and cultural empathy. The present study extends Pereira's focus by demonstrating that even within institutional settings facing

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resource limitations, carefully structured virtual exchanges can serve as an accessible, highly effective alternative to physical international travel.

Furthermore, the tension observed between students' theoretical knowledge and their practical performance mirrors the empirical findings of Hernández-López et al. (2024) regarding pre-service language teachers in Mexico. Just as the Mexican educators demonstrated high baseline attitudes but lagged in critical knowledge domains, the students at TDMU showed enthusiastic baseline openness but struggled during real-time classroom communication and socio-political critique. This cross-cultural consistency across diverse developing educational environments highlights an ongoing international need to shift IC development away from passive conceptual content delivery and toward active, experiential behavioral application.

C. Pedagogical, Institutional, and Evaluative Implications

When evaluating the pedagogical and institutional realities of these findings (Research Questions 1 and 2), it becomes evident that while language learners possess a strong foundational capacity for intercultural growth, their advancement depends heavily on regular access to immersive, experiential learning environments. To bridge the gap between affective openness and critical awareness, university administrators must deliberately expand access to structured cultural immersion pathways, including domestic fieldwork, virtual international collaborations, and collaborative project-based learning.

As initially argued by Tran and Duong (2015), language proficiency and cultural awareness must be taught as an integrated system from the earliest stages of the curriculum. Intercultural objectives must be positioned as primary learning outcomes rather than secondary extensions to traditional grammar instruction.

However, achieving this curricular integration requires systematically addressing the institutional barriers raised during teacher interviews and classroom observations. The qualitative data clearly showed that educators often lack the specialized pedagogical training required to confidently guide students through sensitive socio-political analyses of culture, which directly explains the low integration rate (40%) observed during the six-week tracking period. Universities must therefore establish continuous faculty development programs that equip instructors with concrete methodologies for facilitating intercultural discussions and assessing reflective outcomes.

Finally, as noted by participating educators and highlighted globally by Tiurikova (2021), the persistent absence of standardized, performance-based IC evaluation tools remains a major obstacle to sustainable program development. To move past a reliance on unstandardized, self-reported metrics, institutions must design and implement multi-dimensional evaluation frameworks. Integrating structured observational portfolios, peer reviews, and behavioral simulations will ensure that student intercultural growth is accurately tracked, directly supporting long-term, data-driven curriculum improvement.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the developmental levels of IC among English majors at TDMU and evaluated the empirical efficacy of targeted pedagogical strategies designed to promote cross-cultural readiness. The gathered evidence successfully fulfills both primary research objectives, providing a clear empirical map of learner capabilities while verifying the operational success of diverse classroom interventions.

Regarding the first objective, the data conclusively demonstrate that while tertiary language learners exhibit robust, positive baseline intercultural attitudes and functional interpreting skills, they face persistent developmental bottlenecks in critical cultural awareness. This behavioral asymmetry indicates that affective willingness and basic curiosity do not automatically produce critical analytical capacities. Consequently, language learners require systematically structured, pedagogically guided opportunities to actively interrogate underlying cultural assumptions, historical power dynamics, and systemic values embedded within cross-cultural encounters.

Concerning the second objective, this investigation confirms that experiential, interaction-driven pedagogical frameworks are vital for accelerating comprehensive IC growth. Among the interventions analyzed, cultural immersion emerged as the most statistically potent strategy, followed by structured intercultural dialogue, whereas isolated reflective writing exercises yielded comparatively constrained developmental benefits. These quantitative variations are explicitly contextualized and validated by the qualitative interview transcripts and classroom field notes. Collectively, these data sources confirm that direct experiential learning configurations, virtual cross-cultural collaborations, and authentic interactive tasks are uniquely capable of expanding student communicative confidence, situational adaptability, and mutual cross-cultural understanding.

Theoretically and contextually, these outcomes offer a distinct contribution to the expanding international literature on intercultural language education. By delivering context-specific evidence from an emerging Vietnamese higher education landscape where empirical IC evaluations remain scarce, this study addresses an important geographical gap. Furthermore, the novelty of this research lies in its successful integration of Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence framework with Kolb's (2014) experiential learning theory. This hybridization provides a comprehensive conceptual model demonstrating that sustainable intercultural growth requires a synchronized balance of cognitive, affective, and experiential learning dimensions.

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Ultimately, these insights reinforce the urgent necessity to move beyond structural linguistic proficiency as the sole benchmark of English language teaching, positioning IC instead as a primary, non-negotiable educational outcome essential for global citizenship.

Despite these contributions, several structural limitations must be acknowledged. Because this study was executed at a single institution with a relatively localized participant sample, the generalizability of these outcomes to other regional or international tertiary contexts may be constrained. Additionally, the primary reliance on self-reported questionnaire data introduces potential subjective response biases.

While rigorous qualitative triangulation via semi-structured interviews and long-term classroom observations was implemented to mitigate this vulnerability, future investigations should employ longitudinal research designs, larger multi-institutional cohorts, and performance-based, direct behavioral assessments to generate a more objective and comprehensive overview of intercultural acquisition trajectories.

Consequently, future research endeavors should investigate the scalability of emerging digital and immersive methodologies, such as collaborative digital storytelling, simulation-based virtual exchanges, and gamified intercultural tasks. Conducting long-term tracking studies on the behavioral impact of these advanced interactive platforms will yield vital, actionable data for curriculum designers, language educators, and institutional policymakers. Ultimately, the systematic cultivation of IC among language learners cannot be achieved through isolated classroom changes; it demands a unified, sustained institutional commitment encompassing comprehensive curriculum reform, targeted faculty professional development, and robust administrative frameworks. Such structural interventions are absolutely critical to properly equip 21st-century English language learners with the analytical tools, communicative skills, and critical cultural awareness required to navigate an increasingly interconnected global society safely, effectively, and responsibly.

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