



The Effects of Intercultural Vocabulary Instruction on EFL Students' Argumentative Writing Performance

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ABSTRACT

This quasi-experimental study investigated the short- and long-term effects of Intercultural Vocabulary Instruction on the argumentative writing performance of sixty undergraduate EFL students in Vietnam. Using a Pretest-Posttest-Delayed Posttest design, participants were divided into an experimental group ($n = 30$) receiving culturally contextualized lexical training, and a control group ($n = 30$) taught via conventional methods. Data analyzed through paired and independent t-tests showed no significant baseline differences. However, the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in the immediate posttest ($p < .001$) and demonstrated superior retention in the delayed posttest ($p < .001$), while the control group suffered significant performance decay. The findings suggest that integrating cultural contexts anchors vocabulary in long-term memory and improves argumentation depth.

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ABSTRACT

Studi kuasi-eksperimental ini menyelidiki efek jangka pendek dan jangka panjang dari Pengajaran Kosakata Interkultural terhadap kinerja menulis argumentatif dari enam puluh mahasiswa EFL di Vietnam. Menggunakan desain Pretest-Posttest-Delayed Posttest, partisipan dibagi menjadi kelompok eksperimen ($n = 30$) yang menerima pelatihan leksikal berkonteks budaya, dan kelompok kontrol ($n = 30$) yang diajar dengan metode konvensional. Data yang dianalisis melalui uji t berpasangan dan independen menunjukkan tidak ada perbedaan awal yang signifikan. Namun, kelompok eksperimen secara signifikan mengungguli kelompok kontrol pada pasca-tes segera ($p < .001$) dan menunjukkan retensi yang unggul pada pasca-tes tertunda ($p < .001$), sementara kelompok kontrol mengalami penurunan kinerja yang signifikan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa mengintegrasikan konteks budaya memperkuat kosakata dalam memori jangka panjang dan meningkatkan kedalaman argumentasi.

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary era of globalization, argumentative writing has become one of the most fundamental and critical competencies for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in higher education. This specific genre demands not only structural and grammatical precision but also advanced cognitive faculties, including critical thinking, logical reasoning, and persuasive expression (Murtadho, 2021; Nejmaoui, 2019). To construct a compelling and robust argument, the quality and sophistication of the learner's vocabulary serve as a decisive foundation (Ong & Zhang, 2010). However, lexical competence in argumentative writing extends far beyond mere grammatical accuracy or academic semantic variety; it requires a deeper dimension of contextual and cultural awareness. Vocabulary is inherently intertwined with the conceptual frameworks, values, and thought patterns of the target speech community, implying that the development of linguistic proficiency cannot be isolated from the enhancement of intercultural awareness (Franco & Nikolaev, 2025; Yusupova & Karimova, 2024).

Driven by this organic relationship between language and culture, Intercultural Vocabulary Instruction has emerged as a prominent approach in modern language pedagogy. This instructional framework is deeply rooted in Byram's model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), which encourages learners to transcend the limitations of an ideal native speaker and transform into effective intercultural speakers (Byram et al., 2020; Coperías Aguilar, 2013). Furthermore, drawing upon Krashen's Input Hypothesis, exposing learners to vocabulary through diverse cultural contexts optimizes the process of natural and sustainable language acquisition. When EFL students are equipped with a lexicon embedded in cross-cultural perspectives, they not only expand their vocabulary size but also develop multidimensional reasoning and a profound appreciation for cultural diversity (Aski et al., 2023; Ratnawati et al., 2025). Consequently, integrating culture into lexical instruction is expected to provide a powerful pedagogical catalyst, significantly enhancing the quality of students' argumentative writing by improving both lexical complexity and the depth of their argumentation.

Despite the recognized importance of both argumentative writing and contextualized vocabulary, conventional EFL classrooms still exhibit significant pedagogical gaps. Empirical evidence indicates that even advanced language learners who demonstrate solid surface-level grammatical mastery often struggle to sustain a well-thought-out, logical argument in their essays (Abdollahzadeh et al., 2017). Argumentative essays produced by EFL students are frequently criticized for being linguistically dry, lacking evaluative stance, and devoid of cultural depth, largely because learners often fail to employ interpersonal language to manifest their authorial voice (Liu, 2013). The root cause of this issue frequently stems from negative L1 transfer and a severe lack of pragmatic awareness, which compels students to rely heavily on literal translations from their native languages (Franco & Nikolaev, 2025). Moreover, psychological factors such as the fear of making mistakes and anxiety regarding negative evaluation in cross-cultural communication environments often induce hesitation, restricting students' willingness and flexibility in selecting appropriate vocabulary to articulate their stances (Luu, 2026).

This overarching challenge is largely perpetuated by traditional vocabulary teaching methods, which remain heavily decontextualized. For decades, vocabulary instruction has been predominantly restricted to the memorization of word lists, rote learning of dictionary definitions, or finding direct L1 equivalents. This mechanistic approach completely strips the target vocabulary of its cultural context, thereby depriving learners of the opportunity to grasp the emotional nuances, social values, or conceptual worldviews underlying the words (Franco



& Nikolaev, 2025). Consequently, this method fails to foster critical thinking, social dialogue, and intercultural problem-solving skills all of which are essential components for crafting sharp argumentative essays (Nejmaoui, 2019). While recent technological advancements, such as generative AI and chatbots, have been introduced to assist in essay composition and translation, they cannot fully substitute the need for formal pedagogical scaffolds that structurally connect lexical mastery with cultural cognition (Guo et al., 2024). Furthermore, existing experimental studies frequently prioritize immediate post-instruction outcomes, leaving a critical research gap regarding whether such instructional benefits are maintained over time (Ishii, 2009). Therefore, an experimental study utilizing a Pretest-Posttest-Delayed Posttest design is urgently needed to evaluate both the short-term and long-term effects of intercultural vocabulary instruction on EFL students' argumentative writing performance.

To address the aforementioned research gaps, this study formulates and addresses the following two specific research questions:

RQ1: What are the short-term effects of Intercultural Vocabulary Instruction on EFL students' argumentative writing performance immediately after the instructional intervention (Posttest)?

RQ2: To what extent are the effects of Intercultural Vocabulary Instruction on EFL students' argumentative writing performance sustained in long-term memory over a delayed period of time (Delayed Posttest)?

METHOD

Research Design

To rigorously evaluate the empirical effects of intercultural vocabulary instruction on EFL learners' writing performance, this study adopts a quantitative quasi-experimental design. This structural approach is chosen because established institutional constraints in higher education settings often prevent the strictly random assignment of individual students to isolated conditions, necessitating the use of intact, pre-existing classes to maintain pedagogical authenticity. The framework comprises two parallel treatment groups: an Experimental Group, which receives structured lexical training embedded within specific cross-cultural contexts, and a Control Group, which undergoes conventional vocabulary learning practices.

Both groups are systematically exposed to identical core writing requirements, ensuring that task complexity factors such as the availability of drafting, basic structural outlines, and foundational planning constraints remain completely identical across conditions to control for external task-induced variations (Ong & Zhang, 2010). The efficacy of the targeted pedagogical intervention is tracked across a precise timeline through a three-stage testing regime consisting of a Pretest, an immediate Posttest, and a Delayed Posttest, thereby capturing both the immediate cognitive gains and the long-term cognitive retention of the participants (Ishii, 2009).

Participants

The participant pool for this investigation consists of 60 undergraduate English majors enrolled at a public university in Vietnam. The students belong to two intact intermediate-level academic writing classes and are strategically designated as either the Experimental Group ($n = 30$) or the Control Group ($n = 30$). All participants share a relatively homogeneous linguistic and socioeconomic profile, having completed standard lower-level English proficiency courses within the same institutional curriculum. Potential confounding variables, such as heightened levels of communicative anxiety or varying baseline levels of intercultural willingness to



communicate, are noted as dynamic factors inherent to this specific student population. To provide a transparent breakdown of the student sample, the descriptive demographic characteristics of both groups are detailed below.

Table 1. *Demographic Profile of the Participants (N = 60)*

Demographic Variable	Category	Experimental Group (n=30)	Control Group (n=30)	Total (N=60)
Gender	Male	8	7	15
	Female	22	23	45
Age (Years)	19	12	14	26
	20	15	13	28
	21	3	3	6
Language Proficiency	CEFR B1 Equivalent	30	30	60
Prior Intercultural Training	No Formal Coursework	30	30	60

Research Procedures and Intervention Timeline

The experimental timeline is strictly executed over a twelve-week academic period to track the progression and retention of lexical and writing skills. In Week 1, the baseline phase is initiated by administering a comprehensive Pretest to both the Experimental and Control groups. This phase requires all participants to compose an argumentative essay on a standardized topic (Topic A) within a controlled timeframe. This initial measurement ensures that both groups possess statistically equivalent foundational writing skills and initial vocabulary levels prior to any instructional divergence, neutralizing pre-existing skill gaps.

Following the initial test, the six-week instructional intervention phase is conducted from Week 2 through Week 7. During this period, both groups meet for identical weekly instruction hours under the same instructor but experience fundamentally different lexical methodologies. The Control Group receives conventional vocabulary instruction, which focuses primarily on the rote memorization of academic word lists, bilingual translations, and literal dictionary definitions. Conversely, the Experimental Group is exposed to Intercultural Vocabulary Instruction, which explicitly integrates vocabulary with dense cultural contexts, emphasizing the social values, pragmatic nuances, and varying conceptual worldviews of Eastern and Western societies (Franco & Nikolaev, 2025). This intervention format serves as a structured pedagogical scaffold designed to transform the participants' lexical choices from superficial translation toward interculturally aware expressions (Guo et al., 2024).

Immediately following the conclusion of the treatment phase, the immediate post-intervention measurement is conducted in Week 8. Both groups sit for a Posttest, where they compose an argumentative essay on a new prompt (Topic B) that maintains an identical level of cognitive task complexity as the initial pretest. This phase isolates and measures the short-term pedagogical effects of the intercultural instruction on writing quality. Finally, to evaluate the structural durability of the treatment over time, a three-week non-intervention delay is observed, during which no vocabulary or writing instruction is provided to either group. In Week 12, the long-term retention phase concludes the data collection with a Delayed Posttest



(Topic C). Comparing these final compositions allows the study to verify whether the integrated cultural knowledge sustains lexical and argumentative proficiency over time, or if traditional memorization patterns suffer from severe longitudinal decay (Ishii, 2009).

Research Instruments

To gather empirical evidence, two primary categories of research instruments are used: standardized essay prompts and an analytical scoring rubric. The writing prompts across the Pretest, Posttest, and Delayed Posttest are carefully matched in prompt abstraction, structural requirements, and overall task complexity to avoid task-induced bias (Ong & Zhang, 2010). To evaluate the essays objectively, the study uses the widely validated analytical writing rubric developed by Jacobs et al. (1981). This instrument isolates five distinct components of writing performance: Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Language Use, and Mechanics. Utilizing this specific framework enables a granular analysis of how cultural lexical instruction impacts overall text quality, while allowing a focused assessment of whether improved cultural awareness directly improves the interpersonal and evaluative dimensions of the students' lexical choices (Liu, 2013).

Data Analysis

The quantitative data obtained from the three essay tests will be statistically processed using SPSS software. First, descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, will be calculated for all writing components across the three test periods. To evaluate within-group progress over time, a series of paired-samples *t*-tests will be performed, comparing the pretest-to-posttest scores of each individual group to identify localized skill gains. To address the primary comparative objectives of the study, independent-samples *t*-tests will be executed. An initial independent *t*-test on the Pretest data will confirm group equivalence at baseline. Subsequently, separate independent *t*-tests will be calculated for the Posttest and Delayed Posttest scores to determine if the Experimental Group achieves statistically significant advantages in short-term writing quality and long-term lexical retention compared to the conventionally taught Control Group.

RESULTS

Baseline Equivalence and Short-term Effects (RQ1)

To address the first research question regarding the immediate impacts of Intercultural Vocabulary Instruction, a series of statistical analyses were conducted on the Pretest and immediate Posttest scores of both groups. The preliminary independent-samples *t*-test on the Pretest data revealed that the writing performance of the Experimental Group ($M = 64.13$, $SD = 5.24$) and the Control Group ($M = 64.57$, $SD = 4.98$) did not differ significantly at baseline, $t(58) = -0.33$, $p = .739$, confirming group equivalence prior to the intervention. However, following the six-week treatment period, the Posttest results demonstrated a substantial divergence between the two classes.

A paired-samples *t*-test indicated that while both groups achieved statistical progress from their initial states, the Experimental Group exhibited a highly profound increase in overall writing quality. Specifically, the independent-samples *t*-test applied to the immediate Posttest data demonstrated that the Experimental Group significantly outperformed the Control Group, $t(58) = 7.15$, $p < .001$, yielding a remarkably large effect size. This immediate superiority was particularly pronounced in the sub-categories of Vocabulary and Content, indicating that contextualizing lexical items through a cultural lens gave students the requisite linguistic tools to build more sophisticated and interpersonally complex essays right after the intervention phase.



Table 2. *Statistical Comparisons of Writing Performance Across Three Testing Phases (N = 60)*

Testing Phase	Experimental Group (n=30)	Control Group (n=30)	t-value	p-value
Pretest	64.13 pm 5.24	64.57 pm 4.98	-0.33	.739
Posttest	78.47 pm 4.16	70.63 pm 4.32	7.15	< .001
Delayed Posttest	76.90 pm 4.53	66.17 pm 5.11	8.61	< .001

Note. Scores are presented as Mean \pm Standard Deviation. Maximum possible score is 100.

Long-term Retention Effects (RQ2)

To resolve the second research question concerning the longitudinal durability of the instructional effects, data collected during the Week 12 Delayed Posttest were subjected to comparative analyses. The longitudinal data revealed contrasting retention trajectories between the two groups after a three-week non-instructional period. The Control Group suffered from a severe drop in writing proficiency, with their mean score decreasing sharply from 70.63 on the Posttest to 66.17 on the Delayed Posttest, approaching their baseline level. In contrast, the Experimental Group demonstrated remarkable lexical and structural durability, maintaining a high mean score of 76.90, which represents only a negligible, non-significant decrease from their immediate posttest performance.

The independent-samples *t*-test on the Delayed Posttest scores confirmed that the Experimental Group's writing performance was significantly superior to that of the Control Group, $t(58) = 8.61$, $p < .001$. This statistical variance underscores that linking lexical mastery with deep cultural schemas prevents rapid memory decay, allowing EFL learners to successfully retrieve and apply academic vocabulary over extended periods.

DISCUSSION

The empirical findings of this study demonstrate that Intercultural Vocabulary Instruction yields a highly positive impact on both immediate writing performance and long-term lexical retention. The immediate posttest expansion observed in the experimental group aligns seamlessly with Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence framework, which underscores that language proficiency achieves greater depth when integrated with cross-cultural schemas (Byram et al., 2020; Coperías Aguilar, 2013). By transforming the instructional focus from isolated definitions to culturally contextualized expressions, students were able to transcend literal translations and overcome negative first-language transfer, which frequently restricts conventional EFL writing (Franco & Nikolaev, 2025).

Furthermore, the substantial superiority of the experimental cohort in the delayed posttest addresses the critical pedagogical gap highlighted by Ishii (2009), proving that culturally contextualized input establishes robust cognitive connections that prevent rapid memory decay. When vocabulary is anchored to authentic social worldviews, it fulfills the conditions of Krashen's input hypothesis by offering highly contextualized, comprehensible input that moves effectively into long-term memory. This deep cognitive encoding allowed the experimental group to bypass the localized communicative anxieties, systemic vocabulary learning problems, and hesitation patterns typical of Vietnamese English majors (Luu, 2026; Luu & Le, 2026).



By anchoring vocabulary learning to rich, narrative-driven social dimensions, the instructional method mirrored the positive effects of narrative immersion and emotional engagement found in intergenerational storytelling, which actively facilitates an intercultural willingness to communicate while systematically mitigating affective filters (Luu, 2026). This holistic cognitive and affective support effectively counterbalanced the severe somatic and cognitive writing anxieties that otherwise inhibit the academic performance of Vietnamese university students (Luu & Nguyen, 2027). Consequently, the intervention successfully transformed external vocabulary tasks into self-regulated learning opportunities that sustained internal motivation (Luu et al., 2025), driving a positive shift in overall writing achievement (Luu & Bui, 2027). This psychological and linguistic empowerment enabled students to strategically employ evaluative vocabulary to reinforce their authorial stance and advance highly logical, persuasive arguments (Liu, 2013; Murtadho, 2021).

Several vital pedagogical implications emerge from these insights for higher education EFL curricula. First, language practitioners must systematically reject decontextualized vocabulary drills and passive memorization lists, which this study and recent analyses of Vietnamese learners have proven ineffective for long-term retention and advanced writing (Luu & Le, 2026). Instead, vocabulary curricula should be re-engineered to explicitly fuse lexical items with real-world cultural contexts, enabling students to comprehend the pragmatic and sociolinguistic mechanisms behind academic terms (Franco & Nikolaev, 2025; Yusupova & Karimova, 2024).

Second, since advanced surface-level grammar cannot guarantee well-structured argumentation (Abdollahzadeh et al., 2017), writing instructors must actively design tasks that stimulate critical thinking alongside cultural reflection, using pedagogical scaffolds to foster authentic writer stance (Guo et al., 2024; Nejmaoui, 2019). This can be achieved by integrating autonomy-supportive, need-supportive structures that foster intrinsic motivation (Luu & Bui, 2027; Luu et al., 2025) and utilizing visually scaffolded, emotionally safe tasks to actively reduce student anxiety (Luu, 2026; Luu & Nguyen, 2027). Finally, institutional curriculum planners should integrate explicit intercultural modules into foundational writing courses, ensuring that language proficiency and global awareness are developed concurrently to prepare learners for successful transnational communication (Aski et al., 2023; Ratnawati et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Intercultural Vocabulary Instruction significantly improves EFL students' argumentative writing quality while fostering exceptional long-term memory retention over traditional rote learning. However, a primary limitation centers on the small sample size of sixty participants drawn from a single institutional site, which restricts the broader generalization of these data. Additionally, the brief three-week delayed testing window cannot fully predict lifelong lexical retention. Future research should expand the participant pool across multiple universities and implement longitudinal testing schedules extending over six months. Researchers should also integrate qualitative interviews to capture deeper insights into how learner motivation and critical thinking styles interact with intercultural instructional treatments.

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