



The Integration of Culture-Specific Vocabulary in EFL Classrooms: Enhancing Intercultural Communicative Competence among High School Students

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ABSTRACT

This explanatory sequential mixed-methods study investigated the impact of explicit culture-specific vocabulary (CSV) instruction on the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and vocabulary retention of Vietnamese high school students. Quantitative data from a seven-week quasi-experiment showed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group on both vocabulary retention and ICC scenario assessments, yielding large effect sizes. Thematic analysis of qualitative data from teacher semi-structured interviews and student focus groups revealed that while the CSV framework enhanced student communication motivation and minimized foreign language anxiety, its classroom execution faced substantial challenges. These included rigid institutional curriculum pacing, high-stakes examination pressures, and textbook material deficiencies. The study concludes that explicit cultural contextualization is essential for real-world communication readiness, and calls for intentional reforms in EFL curriculum design and assessment practices.

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ABSTRACT

Penelitian metode campuran sekuensial eksplanatori ini menyelidiki dampak pengajaran kosakata spesifik budaya (CSV) secara eksplisit terhadap kompetensi komunikasi antarbudaya (ICC) dan retensi kosakata siswa sekolah menengah atas di Vietnam. Data kuantitatif dari kuasi-eksperimen selama tujuh minggu menunjukkan bahwa kelompok eksperimen secara signifikan mengungguli kelompok kontrol pada penilaian retensi kosakata dan skenario ICC, dengan ukuran efek yang besar. Analisis tematik dari data kualitatif melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur guru dan diskusi kelompok terfokus siswa mengungkapkan bahwa meskipun kerangka kerja CSV meningkatkan motivasi komunikasi siswa dan meminimalkan kecemasan bahasa asing, pelaksanaan di kelas menghadapi tantangan berat. Tantangan tersebut meliputi ritme kurikulum institusional yang kaku, tekanan ujian taruhan tinggi, dan kekurangan materi buku ajar. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa kontekstualisasi budaya yang eksplisit sangat penting untuk kesiapan komunikasi di dunia nyata, serta mendorong adanya reformasi terencana dalam desain kurikulum dan praktik penilaian EFL.

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**Corresponding Author:**Nguyen Thanh Huong¹¹Nguyen Hue University, Vietname-mail: huongtn.nhu.edu@gmail.com¹**INTRODUCTION**

In the contemporary era of globalization, the status of English has fundamentally transformed from a foreign language into an international lingua franca. This shift has prompted a major paradigm transition in English Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogy, moving the ultimate goal of language learning away from isolated linguistic competence toward Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). As highlighted by Rao (2019), English serves as the primary conduit for international cooperation across education, technology, and trade within the global village. However, language proficiency alone no longer guarantees successful communication. Effective interaction necessitates that users achieve deeper mutual understanding and manage cultural variations productively (Grigoryeva & Zakirova, 2022). Consequently, language curricula worldwide have begun to redefine their frameworks to adapt to these multicultural demands, integrating internationalized standards to equip students with global readiness (Zhang & Zeegers, 2010). Under this lens, ICC emerges as the most comprehensive and accurate construct to describe the sophisticated linguistic and socio-cultural abilities required to navigate modern, globalized environments (Fantini, 2020).

At the intersection of language and culture lies vocabulary, which serves as the primary vehicle for cultural nuances. Vocabulary acquisition is not merely a cognitive process of mapping labels to universal concepts, but rather an enculturation process where culture is embedded in language as active discourse (Chun, 2011). Within this domain, "Culture-Specific Vocabulary" (CSV) represents lexical items, idioms, and formulaic expressions that bear distinct cultural weight and cannot be readily translated or understood across linguistic boundaries without explicit contextual knowledge (Shabtaev et al., 2024). In academic and formal communication, the mastery of formulaic and culture-bound language is essential for fluency and rhetorical power, requiring pedagogical approaches anchored in usage-based learning and sociocultural scaffolding (Luu, 2025). Without a firm grasp of how cultural values shape word meanings, learners often face significant barriers. Indeed, a student's willingness to communicate in intercultural settings is a dynamic and co-constructed phenomenon that relies heavily on their strategic competence and their ability to sustain respectful, culturally sensitive interactions (Luu, 2026a).

Within the Vietnamese high school EFL context, vocabulary instruction traditionally remains constrained by conventional practices. The pedagogical landscape is heavily dominated by rote learning, memorization, and grammar-translation methods (Nguyen & Javorsky, 2025). These traditional methods often prioritize structural accuracy and higher test scores over real-world communication skills and communicative language teaching (Çiftci & Özcan, 2019). While these approaches may assist students in passing rigid, high-stakes assessments, they lead to slow lexical acquisition, lexical ambiguity, and a profound lack of interest in long-term learning (Luu & Le, 2026). More importantly, Vietnamese EFL learners generally demonstrate limited knowledge of both single words and formulaic language due to insufficient exposure to contextualized input (Vu & Peters, 2021). By ignoring the cultural dimensions embedded within English vocabulary, the current curriculum inadvertently leaves high school students ill-prepared for real-world interactions. When encountering foreign interlocutors, these students frequently experience heightened communication anxiety, hesitation, and avoidance behavior, which stems directly from a lack of emotional engagement and a deficiency in cultural empathy (Luu, 2026b).



The critical gap between classroom achievement and practical communication presents a multifaceted problem in Vietnamese secondary education. On one hand, even though high school students can achieve excellent scores on standard grammatical and lexical examinations, they frequently encounter pragmatic failure and cultural misunderstandings when interacting in authentic cross-cultural environments. This vulnerability occurs because traditional language lessons offer very little opportunity to develop tangible interactive skills, leaving learners unable to act appropriately in real-life scenarios (Reid, 2015). When a strict disconnection occurs between lexical instruction and cultural knowledge, students' understanding of culture-specific words is severely compromised, directly harming their ability to communicate successfully (Bin Towairesh, 2021). Without explicit intervention, learners lack the socio-pragmatic awareness required to connect linguistic forms with intercultural contexts, which restricts their willingness to initiate communication (Munezane, 2019).

On the other hand, the successful integration of cultural elements into vocabulary teaching faces severe pedagogical constraints. EFL teachers in Vietnamese high schools are restricted by rigid national curricula, limited instructional time, and a pervasive pressure to prepare students for high-stakes examinations that focus purely on structural forms. Furthermore, general curricular documents often emphasize the importance of developing ICC but fail to provide specific guidelines, materials, or practical techniques, leaving educators confused and unsupported (Reid, 2015). Many teachers also lack formal pedagogical training regarding how to systematically scaffold culture-bound expressions or how to manage individual differences in student readiness. Consequently, vocabulary instruction remains confined to traditional dictionary definitions and memorization sheets, leaving the rich intercultural potential of language completely untapped.

This study aims to address these pedagogical and empirical gaps by implementing an explicit culture-specific vocabulary instructional framework in the high school EFL classroom. The primary objective is to investigate the extent to which the explicit teaching of culture-specific vocabulary enhances secondary school students' vocabulary retention and their overall intercultural communicative competence. Secondly, the study seeks to identify and document the specific pedagogical challenges, institutional constraints, and material limitations that EFL teachers face when attempting to integrate cultural vocabulary into their daily lesson plans. Finally, this research explores the attitudes, emotional engagement, and perceptions of high school students toward learning English vocabulary through cultural contexts, offering a comprehensive view of the classroom dynamics from both sides of the teaching-learning spectrum. To achieve these objectives, the study formulates and addresses the following three research questions:

1. To what extent does the explicit teaching of culture-specific vocabulary improve EFL students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC)?
2. What are the common challenges faced by EFL teachers when integrating intercultural vocabulary into their lesson plans?
3. What are the students' perceptions of learning English vocabulary through cultural contexts?

METHOD

Research design

This study utilizes an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to comprehensively examine the integration of culture-specific vocabulary in secondary classrooms. Under this design, quantitative data are collected and analyzed in the first phase to test the statistical effectiveness of the pedagogical intervention on students' lexical and intercultural outcomes. Following the quantitative phase, qualitative data are systematically gathered and analyzed to explain, refine, and deepen the initial statistical results. By combining a quasi-experimental



approach with thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups, this design neutralizes the limitations of relying on a single method. It allows the statistical trends found in the testing data to be directly context-enriched by the lived professional experiences of teachers and the personal learning paths of students.

Participants and sampling

The study comprised a total sample of $N = 186$ participants, consisting of 180 high school students and 6 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. For the student sample, convenience sampling was utilized to select four intact classes from a public high school, which were then assigned into two distinct academic conditions. The Experimental Group comprised two intact classes ($n = 90$ students) that received explicit instruction in culture-specific vocabulary, while the Control Group comprised another two intact classes ($n = 90$ students) taught through conventional vocabulary instruction methods. For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was employed to select 6 active EFL teachers to participate in semi-structured interviews. This selection ensured that the participating educators possessed sufficient teaching experience and were directly familiar with the school's structural curriculum and classroom dynamics. The detailed socio-demographic distribution of the research participants across both the quantitative and qualitative phases is systematically presented in the table below.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Distribution

Participant Type	Sub-group / Identifier	Gender Distribution	Age Range / Experience	Sample Size (n)
Students (Quantitative)	Experimental Group (Classes 11A1, 11A2)	48 Female, 42 Male	16–17 years old	90
	Control Group (Classes 11A3, 11A4)	51 Female, 39 Male	16–17 years old	90
Teachers (Qualitative)	Teacher A (T1) to Teacher F (T6)	4 Female, 2 Male	5–18 years of teaching	6
Total Sample (N)		103 Female, 83 Male		186

Research instruments

The quantitative phase of the research utilized two primary testing instruments designed to evaluate vocabulary knowledge and socio-cultural performance. The Vocabulary Retention Test was developed by the researcher based on the targeted lexical units within the national textbook curriculum, measuring students' ability to recognize and contextualize culture-bound expressions and idioms. To operationalize the measurement of student intercultural capabilities, the Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) Scenario Scale was adapted from Fantini's (2020) multinational intercultural framework and Byram's (1997) foundational assessment criteria. This scale presented students with critical cross-cultural communication scenarios, scoring their responses based on cultural sensitivity, contextual appropriateness, and behavioral flexibility. Both instruments were modified to match the cognitive and linguistic proficiency levels of grade 11 Vietnamese students and underwent pilot testing to establish adequate reliability and internal consistency.

The qualitative phase utilized two instruments designed to capture nuanced experiential perspectives from teachers and students. The Teacher Semi-Structured Interview Protocol targeted instructional challenges, curricular limitations, and perceived student developments. The specific items guiding these interviews are systematically outlined in the table below. To capture student perspectives, the Student Focus Group Discussion Guide was developed to evaluate learner motivation, engagement, and emotional shifts during vocabulary tasks. This guide utilized open-ended prompts based on Byram's (1997) attitudinal and affective ICC



components to observe changes in communication anxiety or cultural empathy during group interactions.

Table 2. Core Construct

Core Construct	Dimension Matrix	Sample Interview Question Items
Pedagogical Practices	Instructional Execution	How do you currently introduce culture-bound terms or idioms in your lessons?
	Scaffolding Methods	What specific strategies do you find most useful when helping students link vocabulary to culture?
Curricular Challenges	Institutional Constraints	What are the main challenges you face when inserting cultural vocabulary into your weekly lessons?
	Material Availability	How do you evaluate the availability and quality of cultural components in your current textbook?
Perceived Outcomes	Student Progress	In what ways have you observed changes in your students' cultural awareness or communication readiness?
	Strategic Limitations	What difficulties do students still encounter when trying to use culture-specific words in speech?

Data collection procedures

The data collection process was executed across four distinct operational phases over a total duration of eight weeks. During Phase 1 (Pre-intervention), the Vocabulary Retention Test and the ICC Scenario Scale were simultaneously administered as a pre-test to all 180 students across the four intact classes to establish a baseline for linguistic and intercultural proficiency. In Phase 2 (Intervention), which lasted for seven consecutive weeks, the Control Group ($n = 90$) learned vocabulary items through standard rote learning, translation sheets, and structural drilling. Concurrently, the Experimental Group ($n = 90$) received explicit instruction using custom lesson plans integrating cultural contrastive analysis, reflective role-plays, and multimedia cultural exposure.

Immediately following the intervention period, Phase 3 (Post-intervention) was initiated, during which both groups completed the post-test using parallel versions of the original Vocabulary Retention Test and ICC Scenario Scale to quantify statistical progress. Finally, Phase 4 (Qualitative Phase) was executed to gather context-rich explanatory data. During this phase, the researcher conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the 6 purposively selected EFL teachers. Additionally, two separate focus group discussions were organized with 12 selected students from the Experimental Group (6 students per session) to explore their personal learning experiences and attitudinal shifts.

Data analysis

The quantitative data generated from the pre-tests and post-tests were cleaned, coded, and processed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize overall performance scores. To assess within-group improvement from the pre-test to the post-test, a paired-samples t-test was performed for both the Experimental and Control groups. Furthermore, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare post-test scores between the two groups, evaluating whether the explicit culture-specific vocabulary framework yielded significantly greater gains than traditional instruction methods.

For the qualitative data, the audio recordings from the teacher interviews and student focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and subjected to systematic thematic analysis. The analysis followed a rigorous structural coding process consisting of three distinct iterative stages. First, open coding was applied to break down the transcripts into discrete,



meaningful textual fragments. Second, axial coding was utilized to link and cluster these early codes into broader, interconnected categories based on structural similarities. Finally, selective coding was executed to integrate and organize these categories into core themes that directly addressed the primary research questions regarding instructional challenges and learner perceptions.

RESULTS

RQ1: Impact of CSV Instruction on Students' ICC

To answer the first research question, quantitative data from the Vocabulary Retention Test and the Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) Scenario Scale were evaluated using SPSS. Mean scores and standard deviations were computed for both the Experimental Group ($n = 90$) and the Control Group ($n = 90$). An independent-samples t -test was executed to evaluate baseline equivalence before the intervention, revealing no statistically significant difference in pre-test scores between the two groups for vocabulary retention, $t(178) = 0.41$, $p = .682$, or ICC scenarios, $t(178) = 0.32$, $p = .749$. This confirms that both student groups possessed identical baseline proficiency levels prior to the implementation of the explicit pedagogical framework.

Following the seven-week pedagogical intervention, post-test scores were collected and subjected to within-group paired-samples t -tests and between-group independent-samples t -tests. The statistical comparisons are systematically detailed in the table below.

Table 3. *RQ1: Impact of CSV Instruction on Students' ICC*

Assessment Scale	Group Type	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Paired t -test (p)	Independent t -test (p)	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
Vocabulary Retention	Experimental ($n=90$)	54.22 (8.15)	78.45 (6.34)	$t=23.41$ ($p < .001$)	$t=11.23$ ($p < .001$)	$d = 1.67$ (Large)
	Control ($n=90$)	53.75 (7.92)	61.30 (7.11)	$t=7.89$ ($p < .001$)		
ICC Scenario Scale	Experimental ($n=90$)	42.15 (6.48)	71.60 (5.90)	$t=31.14$ ($p < .001$)	$t=18.56$ ($p < .001$)	$d = 2.76$ (Large)
	Control ($n=90$)	41.85 (6.70)	48.22 (6.15)	$t=6.22$ ($p < .001$)		

The post-test metrics demonstrate that the Experimental Group achieved substantial gains. In vocabulary retention, the Experimental Group's mean score rose from 54.22 to 78.45, outperforming the Control Group's post-test mean of 61.30. More noticeably, on the ICC Scenario Scale, the Experimental Group demonstrated a profound increase from 42.15 to 71.60, whereas the Control Group exhibited minimal change, finishing at 48.22. The independent-samples t -test confirms that the post-intervention differences between the groups are highly significant ($p < .001$). Furthermore, the calculated Cohen's d effect sizes (1.67 for vocabulary and 2.76 for ICC) reveal that explicit culture-specific vocabulary (CSV) instruction exerted an exceptionally strong positive impact on both linguistic and socio-cultural outcomes compared to traditional rote learning techniques.

RQ2: Challenges Faced by EFL Teachers

Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews with the six participating EFL teachers (T1 to T6) revealed distinct, overlapping institutional and pedagogical challenges. The transcription data were categorized into three dominant structural themes: acute curricular time constraints, an absence of authentic localized materials, and asymmetrical student readiness levels. The structural frequencies and distribution of these teacher-perceived challenges are presented in the table below.

**Table 4. RQ2: Challenges Faced by EFL Teachers**

Derived Core Themes	Specific Institutional & Pedagogical Dimension	Key Indicators	Teacher Sources	Mentions (f)
Curricular Constraints	Rigid pacing guides & high-stakes exam washback	Focus on grammar; lack of time for interaction	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6	14
Material Deficiencies	Insufficient cultural context in local textbooks	Over-reliance on basic word lists; lack of media	T1, T2, T4, T5	9
Student Readiness	Asymmetric initial proficiency & low motivation	Confusion over abstract terms; communication anxiety	T2, T3, T5, T6	8

All six teachers (100\%) explicitly noted that the rigid pacing of the national curriculum and the intense washback effect of high-stakes grammar-centric examinations left almost no space for cultural exploration. As Teacher T3 stated during interviews, "We are forced to cover a specific number of lexical items per week to prepare students for structural written tests, which makes spending twenty minutes on cultural context or historical origins almost impossible." Furthermore, four teachers complained that available textbook materials lacked sufficient contextual depth, forcing educators to manually seek external authentic resources, which increased their preparation workload.

RQ3: Students' Perceptions

The data obtained from the two student focus group discussions (12 students total from the Experimental Group) provided valuable qualitative insights into learner experiences. Thematic analysis indicated that student perceptions were predominantly positive, characterized by an increase in communication motivation and a noticeable drop in foreign language anxiety. Students expressed that contextualized learning transformed abstract target words into memorable concepts. The primary qualitative themes regarding student perceptions are summarized in the table below.

Table 5. RQ3: Students' Perceptions

Identified Student Themes	Descriptive Meaning & Affective Impact	Illustrative Core Quotes from Focus Groups
Enhanced Communicative Motivation	Shifts student focus from rote memorization to authentic, context-driven communication.	"Learning idioms through cultural stories made me actually want to try speaking English instead of just memorizing lists for exams."
Reduction in Communication Anxiety	Provides psychological safety and predictability during cross-cultural scenarios.	"I used to feel terrified of making cultural mistakes with foreign interlocutors. Understanding the context gave me a clear template of what to say."
Linguistic and Cultural Overload	Occasional cognitive fatigue due to abstract socio-pragmatic nuances.	"Sometimes, tracking both the spelling rules and the deep historical meaning of Western social customs felt overwhelming."



Despite the overall enthusiastic reception, several students noted experiencing brief periods of cognitive overload. This occurred when culture-specific terms involved complex social structures or historical narratives that differed sharply from Vietnamese cultural baselines. However, they consistently maintained that the usage of interactive role-plays and multimedia cultural exposure made the learning process far more rewarding than traditional dictionary copying.

DISCUSSION

The quantitative results demonstrate that explicit Culture-Specific Vocabulary (CSV) instruction significantly improves both vocabulary retention and intercultural communicative competence (ICC). This aligns directly with Byram's (1997) foundational model, which states that true communication requires integrated cultural knowledge and a reflective mindset alongside basic linguistic skills. By contextualizing vocabulary within socio-pragmatic frameworks, the intervention allowed students to transition from simple word-to-word translation toward complex situational awareness. This structural progress confirms the assertions of Fantini (2020) and Chun (2011), who argued that language learning operates as an enculturation process where lexical forms must be taught as active, lived discourse to prevent real-world pragmatic failure.

Furthermore, the qualitative findings illuminate the underlying mechanisms behind these statistical improvements while highlighting persistent structural challenges. The positive shift in student motivation and the corresponding decrease in communication anxiety validate the recent work of Luu (2026b), which proved that emotional engagement and narrative immersion help lower affective filters and foster cross-cultural empathy.

From an educational psychology perspective, this heightened student engagement can be profoundly explained through Self-Determination Theory (SDT). When vocabulary items are no longer taught as isolated, abstract lists but are instead embedded within authentic cultural narratives and interactive tasks, learners experience a high degree of task authenticity and a significant reduction in foreign language anxiety. This pedagogical shift directly satisfies their basic psychological needs for autonomy and competence. As established by Luu et al. (2025), language learning environments that consciously support these internal psychological needs are far more capable of sustaining intrinsic motivation over a long period compared to traditional classrooms that rely strictly on external rewards or rote memorization.

Furthermore, the integration of collaborative practices, such as situational role-plays and contrastive analysis within the explicit CSV framework, acts as a supportive pedagogical structure. This structure mirrors the theoretical mechanisms of need-supportive gamified learning environments, where peer collaboration and meaningful, context-driven challenges work synergistically to stimulate behavioral, cognitive, and affective student engagement (Luu, Nguyen, et al., 2025). By active participation in culturally responsive frameworks, students do not merely memorize forms; rather, they co-construct pragmatic meaning, which enhances their perceived relatedness and linguistic self-efficacy.

However, the pedagogical challenges raised by the teachers regarding curriculum pacing and high-stakes test pressures mirror the concerns documented by Nguyen and Javorsky (2025) and Vu and Peters (2021). These researchers criticized the structural limitations and limited formulaic exposure characteristic of standard Vietnamese EFL classrooms. While students are clearly receptive to and benefit from culturally contextualized vocabulary strategies, institutional limitations often prevent teachers from applying these methods consistently (Reid, 2015). This mismatch indicates a clear need to reform structural curriculum designs and high-stakes testing formats.

National textbooks and syllabi must incorporate explicit socio-pragmatic annotations, contextual illustrations, and cross-cultural scenario tasks directly alongside standard vocabulary lists rather than treating culture as an optional, supplementary feature. Teachers should actively



adopt time-efficient, culture-bound routines, such as using five-minute cultural warm-ups, contractive analysis tasks, or short situational role-plays to build student interaction without disrupting rigid school schedules. Professional training workshops should be systematically provided to equip high school teachers with practical, structured techniques to scaffold culture-specific vocabulary and measure non-linguistic ICC elements reliably.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the explicit teaching of culture-specific vocabulary is a highly effective approach for simultaneously improving vocabulary retention and cultivating intercultural communicative competence among Vietnamese high school students. The quantitative findings confirm that students under this framework achieved significantly higher gains in both linguistic recall and situational appropriateness compared to peers exposed to traditional rote learning. Qualitatively, the approach lowered communication anxiety and stimulated authentic motivation, although its implementation was constrained by rigid curriculum pacing, a lack of institutional materials, and exam-driven teaching pressures.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, this study was restricted to a sample of 180 students drawn from a single public high school via convenience sampling, which limits the immediate generalizability of the findings to diverse educational regions or differing proficiency levels across Vietnam. Second, the seven-week intervention period was relatively brief, preventing the assessment of long-term retention of cultural vocabulary and ICC sustainability over time. Future research should implement longitudinal designs with larger, randomized samples across multiple geographic regions. Additionally, investigating the integration of generative AI tools and automated writing evaluation feedback could offer valuable avenues for scaling personalized, culture-specific vocabulary instruction in resource-constrained EFL environments.

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