From Classroom to Community: Enhancing Cultural Competence of Vietnamese Students through Service-Learning Projects

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Abstract: Community service-learning is an educational method that creates conditions for students to participate in an organized community activity and then reflect the benefits that activity brings to them. One of the factors to conduct successful community activities is that students need to understand the culture of the local areas where the students come to work on the project. From these perspectives, this research was conducted to explore the effectiveness of service-learning to cultural competence of Vietnamese students. The study involved 30 students, who participated in a community learning project, also known as a project to improve the quality of English teaching and learning in the local provinces. I used quantitative and qualitative methods to collect and analyze data through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to investigate whether students' cultural competence would increase or not after participating in community service activities. The results highlighted the feasibility of community service-learning in enhancing students' cultural competence, especially in aspects such as cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, and cultural desire. From this, I also proposed some solutions for integrating service-learning projects into the curriculum to be appropriate for the current teaching and learning context.
Keywords: Service-learning, culture, cultural competence, community activity, Vietnamese students.

Service-learning is a relatively new concept in the field of social sciences although now this type of learning is becoming a popular useful pedagogical method for university students' professional development (Butcher et al., 2005). The idea has its origins in John Dewey's educational philosophy, and this pedagogical tool links cross-disciplinary courses with service-learning to address social issues (Cummings, 2000).

Service-learning has been found to be a successful teaching and learning method in numerous international studies, and it has been used for a very long time in the educational systems of many nations, including the US, Australia, the Netherlands, and Canada. The urge to help others and the need to link theory and practice in learning are two demands that good learning methodologies should combine to stress the "know-how" in learning. Students have the chance to adapt what they have done for the community to other real-life circumstances when they engage in service-learning (Turnley, 2007), which allows them to better grasp the community's actual needs (Maher, 2003). This strategy requires tight collaboration between all parties, including the community, teachers, students, and school administration. These benefits have led to widespread use of the approach in universities all around the world. Although

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Vietnam's higher education saw a lot of changes after 1980, little meaningful progress was made. The demands of the social community are less closely related to the training curriculum. Community related activities are often associated with youth movements or volunteer programs. Those activities have not yet carried the mission of higher education or have not been used to evaluate the educational quality of training institutions. Service-learning has been used in many nations such as in Malaysia (Hudin & Yi, 2022; Azman & Abdullah, 2021), in Indonesia (Komalasari & Saripudin, 2019), in Pakistan (Afzal & Hussain, 2020), in China (Liu & Lee, 2011), in America (Diaconu et al., 2018; Norman, 2018; Chen et al., 2012; Campinha-Bacote, 2007), in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2022; Huynh & Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen, 2020), in Africa (Hooli et al., 2025), in New Mexico (Giambo & Garrido, 2025). From the results of these studies, it has proven to be successful and beneficial for students, faculty/teachers, the community, and universities. Although service-learning is still a relatively new idea in Vietnam, it is beginning to attract the attention of academics and is considered as a significant educational trend in university teaching and learning.

As society moves toward greater cultural variety, the demand for cultural competency grows (Ge et al., 2024; Soffer-Vital & Finkelstein, 2024; Al Khateeb & Hassan, 2023; Moradi & Ghabanchi, 2019; Short & St. Peters. 2017). Undoubtedly, when implementing community projects, students must determine their destination, create a strategy to assist themselves, and work with the neighborhood to perform community activities based on ordering themes and local peculiarities. Thus, understanding the culture of the local areas where the students come to work on the project is essential for effective project implementation. At universities, community service is one of the three areas of professional activity and it is also the mission in the development orientation. Students have the chance to interact with the real world, develop their knowledge, and increase socially responsible thinking through community service initiatives. In other words, being immersed in a different culture gives students the chance to apply their learning into reality and see the importance of being able to communicate well with people from diverse cultures.

From these perspectives, this study was conducted to explore the effectiveness of service-learning to cultural competence of Vietnamese students. Students will thus be better able to deepen their understanding of culture and persevere to overcome any cultural barriers while taking part in community projects in the future.

Literature Review

Research on Service-Learning and Cultural Competence in the World

In the world, the relationship between service-learning and social skills, especially cultural competence, received attention from the authors.

From very early studies, community service learning was described by Kohlberg (1971) as an essential component of social and civic development that compels students to engage with social issues. Similarly, Rest and Narvaez (1991) claimed that participating in community service could help people grow morally and socially. According to Jacoby and Associates (1996), it was the approach and instructional techniques that linked academic learning and community service so that they could complement one another and help students reach their educational objectives. Thus, through the development of ethical and responsible citizenship, community service-learning is crucial in fostering social skills.

In recent studies, the impact of service-learning on cultural competence was investigated by several authors. Short and St. Peters (2017) examined the effects of a service-learning trip to Haiti for occupational therapy doctoral students, based on the four components of cultural intelligence (metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral). The findings showed that service-learning as a form of experiential learning enhanced all four components

of cultural intelligence. Norman (2018) also discussed how students' development of cultural competence was impacted by service-learning experiences and stated that service-learning was a very effective and successful traditional community-based teaching and learning program. Similarly, when investigating the impact of service-learning in developing cultural adaptation skills, analytical thinking skills and communication skills among university students, Hudin and Yi (2022) implied that service-learning was an effective teaching strategy that could foster the abilities required by the needs of the current workforce. According to Azman and Abdullah (2021), the goals of service-learning are to improve education, promote transformative community involvement, and cultivate organized, experience-based learning and introspection. In further support for investigating the impact of service-learning on cultural adaptation skills, Luo and Zhang (2021) provided additional evidence by explaining that using the integration technique could lessen cross-cultural strain by allowing one to retain their original culture while learning a new one. Moreover, Basma et al. (2020) stated that service-learning commonly required students to apply their skills such as identifying and solving problems to help the community. Moreover, the earlier service-learning intervention conducted in Melilla by Chiva-Bartoll et al. (2021) demonstrated that implementing service-learning programs in such culturally and socially diverse settings not only improved students' understanding of sociocultural diversity but also worked incredibly well to promote social cohesion.

More generally, the qualitative study of Afzal and Hussain (2020) sought to investigate how students' social skills were impacted by community service-learning. The results showed that the community service-learning program had a beneficial effect on students' social skills and they enjoyed their educational experience (Afzal & Hussain, 2020; Halpern et al., 2024). Diaconu et al. (2018) proposed a framework for developing cross-cultural competence in international service-learning trips. These authors concluded that international service-learning experiences could be an excellent way for students to get ready for professions working with people from a variety of cultures both domestically and abroad (Diaconu et al., 2018). Giambo and Garrido's (2025) study also investigated how college students viewed a study-away program that was based on a course and involved service-learning in a culture that was very different from their own. According to students' reflections, university students could have life-changing experiences through course-based, service-learning, and study-away programs, particularly those that offered cross-cultural exposure. These experiences might have long-lasting effects on their personal and professional lives (Giambo & Garrido, 2025). Besides, the goal of the Hooli et al.'s (2025) study is to evaluate how service-learning interventions affected students' prosocial competencies, critical thinking, and social commitment while encouraging language learning and cultural awareness among immigrant populations. The research demonstrated the transforming power of service-learning in fostering social inclusion and multicultural understanding, offering insightful information for future educational practices and policy.

Research on Service-Learning and Cultural Competence in Vietnam

In Vietnam, although community learning is still a relatively new concept, this model has been applied at some universities and attracted moderate attention from authors.

In the study of Le and Dinh (2019), the authors clarified concepts related to university community service activities, commented on the reality of community service activities at most universities in the country, introduced a model to organize this activity and some experiences of foreign universities. Truong and Huynh (2021) investigated the perceptions of teachers and students about service-learning, as well as explored student experiences through an integrated service-learning module at a university in the central region of Vietnam. The findings demonstrated that service-learning was a tool to assist students' professional, personal, and

academic development and was well-supported by both teachers and students. According to Huynh and Nguyen (2021), service-learning sought to integrate theoretical knowledge into the process of resolving practical issues, encouraging students' active learning abilities, and learning via the process of practical experience, related with the community interests of students. More specifically, Nguyen (2022) made some comments on the content and form of organizing community service activities that were considered appropriate and feasible when implemented in practice and proposed some solutions to promote community service activities in a university in Ho Chi Minh City. For a more comprehensive view of service-learning, the study of Truong et al. (2021) mentioned both benefits and difficulties in the application of service-learning model from students' perceptions. The results showed that students' participation in the process of knowledge self-construction would be strengthened through the use of service-learning. However, the integration of community learning methods into the curriculum still faced some difficulties due to the large class size and the unfamiliarity of students with new learning methods; thus, lecturers' assistance and counsel were required to enable students to engage with the community in a better and more efficient manner (Truong et al., 2021).

The concept of cultural competence was also studied by a few Vietnamese authors, but it was mentioned separately without associating with service-learning activities. In recent studies, Bui (2019) explored the perspectives of second- and third-year English major students at Thai Nguyen University regarding the development of intercultural competence in the foreign language classroom. The results of the study demonstrated that students did not receive enough cultural information and rarely or never engaged in discussions regarding the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Bui, 2019). It is clear that Vietnamese classroom settings for teaching and studying foreign languages have not yet fully taken use of the opportunities for intercultural competency development. Thus, the purpose of Nguyen's (2020) study is to increase the knowledge of Vietnamese EFL teachers regarding the significance of cultural competence for Vietnamese students. Nguyen (2020) emphasized that language teaching could not be separated from cultural teaching of that language. Therefore, to enhance their students' knowledge, attitudes, abilities, and awareness of intercultural information, English teachers in Vietnam needed to incorporate cultural competency activities into their lessons. Similarly, Dao and Do (2019) examined students' understanding of intercultural communicative competence. The results of their study indicated that while students' awareness of cultural competence was growing, training in the classroom and extracurricular cultural competence consolidation were still insufficient. Therefore, the authors suggested that more extracurricular activities were required to supplement in-class explicit instruction on cultural competence (Dao & Do, 2019).

Research Gap

As we can see from the review of the literature, students' cultural competence and implementation of service-learning around the world have been studied a lot, along with its undeniable benefits. Specifically, participation in instructional service-learning programs can give university students life-changing experiences in addition to improving their academic abilities (Hooli et al., 2023). These changes have been demonstrated to improve abilities linked to social responsibility (Ruiz-Montero et al., 2021), inclusiveness (Culcasi & Paz, 2023), and ethical commitment (Luna González et al., 2024). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that service-learning improves intercultural communication and cross-cultural competency (Hooli et al., 2025; Yang & Zhong, 2024). However, in the Vietnamese context, there are still few studies related to service-learning, especially integrating service-learning into the teaching program to improve learners' cultural competence. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate how well service-learning contributed to Vietnamese students' cultural competency.

As a result, when participating in community projects in the future, students will be better equipped to broaden their awareness of culture and persevere in overcoming any obstacles related to it.

This study purpose could be achieved by answering two research questions:

1. What is the difference in the cultural competence of Vietnamese students before and after they participated in community service activities?
2. How well did service-learning contribute to Vietnamese students' cultural competency?

Participants and Research Study Design

This study was conducted with the participation of a group of 30 students at universities. This group of students participated in a community learning project, also known as a project to improve the quality of English teaching and learning in the local provinces. All participants were between 18-22 years old and were Vietnamese citizens, coming from different departments in universities. To attend this program, they were required to achieve English B1 or higher at CEFR (equivalent to level 3 according to the 6-level foreign language competency framework for Vietnam). In accordance with the voluntary registration, qualified students were asked to participate in interviews to discuss their goals and areas of strength and weakness. From there, the program could select the most suitable candidates to participate in the program. Besides the meaning of accompanying teachers and students of secondary schools of local provinces in teaching and learning English, the project represents the promotion of the university's community responsibility, creates opportunities for students to develop and practice skills and gain experience.

Since the ethical issues surrounding the research are just as important as the choice of suitable research methods (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018), ethical considerations were carefully taken into account for this study. First and foremost, all enrolled students were briefed on the community learning project's policy, as well as the goal and methodology of the study. I gave them an explanation of the benefits of service-learning for Vietnamese students' cultural competency. In addition, I explained the analysis and study procedures for the survey data. Following some questioning, the students consented to help me implement this research. Students were then sent an informed-consent form asking for their official consent to utilize their project data for the research as informed consent is the cornerstone of ethical research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The participants were informed that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary and that they might leave at any time. It was demonstrated that all 30 students who had completed the community learning service supported and voluntarily participated in the study. The confidentiality of the data was further ensured by the guarantee that only I, the researcher, would view and utilize the questionnaire. All participants were also solely identified by code names or pseudonyms, ensuring the students' confidentiality.

A sequential explanatory mixed-method design was adapted to collect and analyze both qualitative and quantitative data in this study. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), this is a two-phase design where quantitative data is collected and analyzed first, then qualitative data is collected and analyzed based on the quantitative results. The qualitative data is used to explain the quantitative data. Specifically, before joining in the service learning program, students were required to do the pre-test questionnaire to measure their cultural competence. Then, the group of students spent 3 weeks with a schedule of 3 sessions participating in the community learning project. Each month there would be 1 session lasting for 1 week. The number of student-teachers depended on the university schedule and the number of grades 9 of the local schools. The participating group of students' overall tasks included attending classes and exchanging knowledge, practicing teaching and learning from mistakes, assisting students in utilizing documents, and supporting and organizing extracurricular activities. In addition, the

main job of the student group at the secondary school was to teach, follow up, and support the 9th graders in preparing for the 10th grade English exam. Besides the field trips, the teaching team still connected and communicated with secondary students to exchange, update and assign assignments easily as well as study online with 9th grade students. After completing the service-learning program, students were asked to do the post-test questionnaire measuring their cultural competence again to compare the similarities and differences with the pre-test. In the next phase, based on the results from the pre-test and post-test questionnaires, I conducted interviews with students to clarify the issues that arose from the quantitative data.

Research Methodology

Data Collecting Methods

In this study, as mentioned above, I used a sequential explanatory mixed-method design to collect both qualitative and quantitative data through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The sequential explanatory design seeks to investigate quantitative results and supplement them with qualitative data (Stephan, 2024).

In the first phase, the students' cultural competence was measured by comparing the pre-test and post-test results of the Cultural Competence Questionnaire (Appendix 1). This questionnaire was adapted from the cultural competence scale of Short and St. Peters (2017) including 15 items. These items were divided based on The Process of Cultural Competence by Campinha-Bacote (2002), including five groups: cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural skill, cultural encounters, and cultural desire. The survey used a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree) to learn about the cultural competence of the group of students before and after participating in community service activities in the local provinces. According to earlier research, respondents could easily understand and express their opinions using a 5-point Likert scale (Marton-Williams, 1986). The participants found it easy to read out the entire list of scale descriptors using a 5-point Likert scale (Dawes, 2008). More significantly, opinions could be expressed more subtly using 5-point Likert scales. It enabled the researcher to record the depth of people's emotions toward a particular subject, rather than just their inclinations (Sol, 2024). Therefore, by using a 5-point Likert scale, respondents found it simpler to analyze the many response alternatives, which also removed the temptation to choose middle answers or leave questions blank (Bouranta et al., 2009).

In the second phase, the interview method was used to clarify the information obtained from the questionnaire, thereby providing more reliable and authentic data for the research. Interviewing is considered a qualitative method, a technique used to understand participants' experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Punch & Oancea, 2009). More specifically, semi-structured interviews with students were used in this phase. In contrast to the structured interview, which had a predetermined and constrained set of questions, the semi-structured interview was more adaptable and allowed for the introduction of new questions based on the interviewees' responses (Ruslin et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews were those that followed a predetermined set of questions or subjects to cover. However, the setting and the interviewee's traits might influence the sequence and style of the questions. This flexibility might allow interviewers to better adapt their questions to the interviewees and the situation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). To help students understand the questions and express their ideas easily, I used simple English in our interviews. Initial interview questions included 12 open-ended questions to investigate learners' attitudes and experiences about cultural competence before and after participating in community service activities. After the necessary changes and corrections, the final version of the interview questionnaire consisted of 10 questions (Appendix 2).

Data Analysis Methods

Phase 1 - Questionnaires

First, in order to guarantee the validity of the results of the questionnaire, the Spearman-Brown method was applied as a split-half approach to evaluate the reliability coefficient. It may be argued that the data collected is reliable because Spearman-Brown reliability (Rsb) = 0.87 for the pre-test and 0.82 for the post-test, which are both higher than the value of 0.7.

To investigate whether participants' cultural competence would increase or not after community service activities, a paired-samples t-test ($\alpha = 0.05$) was employed to compare the mean scores of the pre-test at time 1 and the mean scores of the post-test at time 2 to test the two hypotheses: (1) Hypothesis 1: there is no difference in the students' cultural competence before and after participating in community service learning; (2) Hypothesis 2: Community service learning will enhance students' cultural competence. A single group's mean scores for two variables were compared using the Paired-Samples T Test technique. To determine whether the average deviates from 0, the process computed the differences between the values of the two variables for each occurrence.

The statistics of hypothesis test were processed through 5 steps: (1) Determining Null Hypothesis (Ho) and Alternative Hyp (Ha); (2) Choose Alpha; (3) Calculate if variance of 2 samples is equal (using F-test); (4) Calculate t statistics; (5) Summing up results and conclusions. In this study, I used the Data Analysis tool in Excel to perform the above data analysis steps.

Phase 2 - Interviews

The analysis of the interviews was broken into three small steps to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings: transcribing the interviews, classifying the data, interpreting the data.

In the first step, all of the interviews were transcribed after they had been completed. I arranged the audio files according to the identification of the person who had been interviewed. After that, I began to turn the audio files and notes into a coherent written text while also locating and eliminating any unnecessary recordings. The page number of every quotation was recorded in the transcripts so that it could be referred to when necessary.

In the second step, to classify the data, transcripts were categorized in accordance with the research questions. Therefore, there are two main groups of responses related to students' views on the difference in the cultural competence of Vietnamese students before and after they participated in community service activities and the contribution of the service-learning to their cultural competency.

In the third step, interpreting the data, to have a better and deeper understanding of the data collected from the respondents, I compared and contrasted them with the findings of the related studies in the world and in Vietnam. All of the participant notes from the interviews were compiled, and quotations were used where necessary to give the subject additional context. As a result, I could identify new trends or subgroups in the responses from the respondents. Furthermore, by incorporating new viewpoints and questions that surface throughout the interview process, this method allowed me to uncover novel aspects of the study that would have been missed by previous research.

Results and Discussions

To conduct the Hypothesis test, before and after participating in the project of community service in local provinces, the group of participants was given pre-test and post-test questionnaires on cultural competency. The mean scores with standard deviation obtained from the pre-test and post-test questionnaires are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Pre-test and Post-test on Cultural Competence

The Cultural Competence Factors	Pre-test		Post-test	
	Mean	**Standard Deviation**	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**
Cultural Awareness				
1. I am aware of the culture while interacting with individuals from various ethnic backgrounds.	3.07	0.58	4.53	0.51
2. I alter my cultural understanding when I interact with someone from a culture I am unfamiliar with.	3.10	0.48	4.63	0.49
3. I evaluate the accuracy of my knowledge as I engage in cultural exchange with others.	3.00	0.64	4.57	0.50
Cultural knowledge				
4. I know cultural norms and religious practices of other cultures.	3.00	0.64	4.53	0.51
5. I know the judicial and economic structures of other cultures.	3.03	0.56	4.50	0.51
6. I know the cultural marriage customs of other cultures.	3.13	0.73	4.50	0.51
Cultural Skill				
7. I can adhere to various languages' grammar and vocabulary rules.	2.00	0.53	3.43	0.57
8. I can understand the arts and crafts of other cultures.	2.47	0.51	3.60	0.67
9. I can express non-verbal behaviors in other cultures.	2.33	0.55	3.73	0.69
Cultural Encounters				
10. I change my verbal behavior (e.g., accent, tone) when a cross-cultural interaction requires it.	2.27	0.52	3.53	0.57
11. I change my non-verbal behavior when a cross-cultural situation requires it.	2.37	0.67	3.80	0.66
12. I vary the rate of my speaking when a cross-cultural situation requires it.	2.43	0.50	3.57	0.50
Cultural Desire				
13. I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.	2.67	0.55	4.33	0.55
14. I am confident that I can socialize with locals in a culture that is unfamiliar to me.	2.70	0.47	4.23	0.50
15. I am sure I can deal with the stresses of adjusting to a culture that is new to me.	2.67	0.55	4.33	0.71

All aspects gave a small standard deviation (SD< 0.8), which signified that the data were closely distributed around the mean value. To conduct the Hypothesis Test to measure the cultural competence between time 1 and time 2, I identified two hypotheses mentioned above: (1) Null Hypothesis (Ho): there is no difference in the students' cultural competence before and after participating in community service learning; (2) Alternative Hypothesis (Ha): Community service learning will enhance students' cultural competence. With $\alpha = 0.05$, I proceeded to

calculate the variance of 2 samples by *F-Test Two-Sample for Variances.* The statistics of the F-test were illustrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2
F-Test Two-Sample for Variances

	Pre-test	**Post-test**
	3.066667	*4.533333*
Mean	2.654762	4.092857
Variance	0.127796	0.204646
Observations	14	14
df	13	13
F	0.624474	
P(F<=f) one-tail	0.203565	
F Critical one-tail	0.388059	

Table 2 shows that F-test Pvalue = 0.203 > 0.05; thus, the variance of the two samples is equal. From the results of the F-test above, I could select the equal variance function in the Data Analysis tool to calculate the T statistic. Table 3 below displays the results for the t-Test:

Table 3
t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Equal Variances

	Post-test	**Pre-test**
	4.533333	*3.066667*
Mean	4.092857	2.654762
Variance	0.204646	0.127796
Observations	14	14
Pooled Variance	0.166221	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	26	
t Stat	9.332408	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.00000	
t Critical one-tail	1.705618	

Table 3 shows that Pvalue = 0.00000 < 0.05. From this result, it can be concluded that the null hypothesis (Ho) was rejected and the alternative hypothesis (Ha) could be accepted. It means that community service-learning will enhance students' cultural competence. This is the initial inference that may be made from the results of the paired-samples t-test used to compare mean scores of the pre-test and post-test.

This finding is in line with the results of Chen et al. (2012) who also claimed that students' cultural competence could be increased through a service-learning project in a community clinic. In this study, Chen et al. (2012) used a pretest-posttest control group design and found that the students in the experimental group significantly increased their cultural knowledge ($Z = -2.51$, p = .01) and the total score of cultural competence ($Z = -2.07$, p = .04). Similarly, Short and St. Peters (2017) investigated the influence of service-learning on the cultural competence of students at Haiti and the results showed that all four factors of cultural intelligence improved from pretest and posttest, indicating an improvement in cultural competency for the sample.

In this study, I also integrated the survey results with semi-structured interviewing techniques to better understand each aspect that contributed to cultural competence. The specific results and discussions for each factor group are shown below.

Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness is the in-depth evaluation of one's own professional and cultural background. This procedure entails acknowledging one's biases, preconceptions, and presumptions regarding those who are different. A person's propensity to impose their views, values, and behavioral patterns on another society is known as cultural imposition (Leininger, 1978). Without self-awareness, cross-cultural competency cannot be developed. Competent professionals must grasp how power and privilege appear in their professional lives and have a solid knowledge of and appreciation for their own cultural identity, values, and biases.

From table 1, it is interesting to see that cultural awareness is a factor gaining the highest mean scores compared with other factors at both time 1 (M>3) and time 2 (M>4.5). The magnitude of the difference in the means was large, which means that participants all agreed strongly with the statements of cultural awareness at time 2, shifting from a neutral position when evaluating cultural awareness components at time 1. Participants frequently gave examples of how taking part in a community service program made them more aware of issues in the neighborhood. Few students admitted to having preconceived notions about the local culture they would experience, but they were able to observe reality as it actually was during the service. One student stated that the community service activities enabled them to comprehend the difficulties those local pupils faced in life, such as their extreme poverty and low profile. Another shared that, "*When I interact with someone from a culture I'm unfamiliar with, my understanding of cultures changes. Now I see that those children really need our assistance; they lack the fundamental necessities of life that we take for granted.*" (S1)

This result was also reported in the study of Chen et al. (2012) in which the experimental group improved on all measures of cultural competency and exhibited a much better level of cultural awareness than the comparison group had. This finding might indicate that the experimental group was consciously more aware of the existence of cultural differences. The dynamics of cultural awareness, according to Campinha-Bacote's (2007) proposal, can be thought of as a continuum that moved one from being ignorant of one's lack of cultural understanding to the deliberate act of learning to naturally offer appropriate manners for their culture. Similarly, according to Aldrich and Johansson (2015), domestic cross-cultural interaction could be used to raise students' level of cultural competency in occupational therapy education (Aldrich & Johansson, 2015). Griswold et al. (2007) also stated that after experiential interactions with refugees, medical students also showed greater awareness of and sensitivity to cultural concerns (Griswold et al., 2007). Sharing the same views, Azman and Abdullah (2021) stated that the service-learning could enhance cultural awareness by encouraging transformative community involvement, and fostering experience-based learning and self-reflection. Besides, Hooli et al. (2025) also emphasized the effects of service-learning interventions on students' critical thinking, social commitment, and prosocial competencies while promoting language acquisition and cultural awareness among immigrant groups.

Cultural Knowledge

According to Lavizzo-Mourey and Mackenzie (1996), acquiring cultural knowledge involved looking for and acquiring a solid educational foundation about various cultural and ethnic groups. Table 1 shows that cultural knowledge factors gained the second highest means scores in both time 1 and time 2. Like cultural awareness factors, after joining in community service-learning, all students agreed that their cultural knowledge in some aspects like religious

practices, judicial and economic structures, as well as marriage customs experienced a significant increase (M>4.5).

From the interviews with participating students, I could comprehend how community service-learning assisted students in dismantling stereotypes and in realizing that one should consider more facts and information before making judgments. One student said she used to think of those in need as having low moral standards, but she can now see and understand the causes of those standards. This opinion aligns with the study of Lai (2009) when the author concluded that participants in multicultural service-learning were encouraged to tolerate and accept the differences in others, pushed to go beyond their personal boundaries, and encouraged to view people and the wider world from a new and enlightened perspective.

The interviews also revealed that the participants' perspectives and knowledge on the country also changed as a result of their exposure to various local populations' lifestyles. One student shared that, "*During the service process, I personally experienced a different view of the people in my country and saw a very different part of the country and a significant shift occurred in my view*" (S2). Similarly, Liu and Lee (2011) also claimed that the Taiwanese university students' intercultural participation in an international service-learning program allowed them to have a personal encounter with a new perspective on the world, increasing comprehension and admiration of a different culture. According to Norman (2018), service-learning was a very successful and effective traditional community-based teaching and learning program, which could affect students' development of cultural knowledge and competence. Similarly, according to students' views in the study of Giambo and Garrido (2025), the service-learning enabled them to be involved in a culture that was very different from their own. This exposure could provide university students with experiences that would change their lives.

Cultural Skill

Cultural skill is the capacity to accurately conduct a culturally based physical assessment and to gather pertinent cultural information regarding the presenting issue. Learning how to conduct cultural and physically based assessments is a necessary step in this process (Leininger, 1978). Therefore, it is not difficult to understand that the cultural skill factors gained the lowest mean scores both at time 1 and time 2. Although after participating in community service-learning, the mean scores increased, which proved that students' cultural skills were enhanced, the mean scores at time 2 only ranged from 3.5 to 3.7, indicating that some students were still neutral in their assessment of the increase in their cultural skills.

In the interview, one student shared: "*Even though after the service-learning trip, my awareness, and knowledge increased, I think it will take some time for me to adhere to various languages' grammar and vocabulary rules and non-verbal behaviors in other cultures*" (S3). It can be seen that cultural skills are a relatively difficult process to achieve. This finding was explained by Haslberger (2005) who claimed that cross-cultural adaptation was a complex process in which people could function successfully in cultures other than the one in which they were first socialized. Moely et al. (2002) also asserted that cultural adaptation skill was a challenging process, including the capacity to negotiate disagreements with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, get to know and feel at ease around people from diverse backgrounds, as well as reflect on and provide feedback from a cultural perspective. Despite this, investigating the effects of community service-learning on students' cultural skills was the goal of Afzal and Hussain's (2020) study. The findings demonstrated that students appreciated their educational experience and that the community service-learning program improved their cultural skills (Afzal & Hussain, 2020). Furthermore, according to Basma et al. (2020), service-learning required students to use their abilities, such as recognizing and resolving issues, to benefit the community, which could enhance their cultural skills. Similar to this, Hudin and Yi

(2022) suggested that service-learning was an efficient teaching method that could cultivate the skills needed by the demands of the modern workforce when examining its effects on university students' development of cultural adaptation, analytical thinking, and communication skills.

Cultural Encounters

According to Campinha-Bacote (2002), the process of encouraging direct engagement in cross-cultural relationships with individuals from culturally varied backgrounds is known as cultural encounter.

In the interview with students, they all claimed that direct interaction with individuals from various cultural groups could help them to clarify or adjust their preexisting opinions about a particular cultural group and could help to avoid any potential stereotyping that might have taken place. However, they would not become experts on a certain ethnic group by interacting with just three or four members of that community in a short period of time (Campinha-Bacote, 2002). Therefore, it is understandable that the mean scores of the cultural encounter factors from the pre-test and post-test gained the second lowest ranking (M<2.5 at time 1 and M<4 at time 2).

However, most students considered contact with people from local cultures to be a reward so that they could create lifelong friendships. One student said, "*Training and hardening myself was the thing that gave me the most satisfaction. I engaged in a lot of various interactions, picked up a lot of new information, and made a lot of new acquaintances*" (S4). This was reported in the study of Liu and Lee (2011) in which the participants shared that the opportunity to forge lifetime friendships with Taiwanese peers was the greatest reward of community service-learning. Moreover, according to Diaconu et al. (2018), international service-learning programs could be a great approach for students to prepare for careers that include interacting with individuals from different cultural backgrounds both at home and overseas. In agreement, the implementation of service-learning programs in such culturally and socially diverse contexts not only enhanced students' comprehension of sociocultural variety but also effectively fostered social cohesion, as Melilla by Chiva-Bartoll et al. (2021) showed.

Cultural Desire

Cultural desire is the driving force behind a person's motivation to participate in the process of becoming culturally aware, knowledgeable, skilled, and accustomed to cross-cultural interactions (Liu & Lee, 2011). From Table 1, it is interesting to find that before participating in community service-learning, students had almost disagreement or neutral behavior in terms of readiness to interact, socialize, as well as deal with new culture (M<3). However, after experiencing the community project, all students showed motivation and desire to participate in unfamiliar cultures and communicate with locals (M>4). It can be said that this is the group of factors with the most significant change in the means scores between times 1 and 2.

This is also a very surprising outcome given that students felt they needed to put in extra effort and require more time to perfect themselves in the two groups of factors about cultural skills and cultural encounters discussed above. However, those challenges did not deter the students' desire or willingness to take part in future community learning initiatives. As this statement demonstrates, one youngster spoke of how his community service experience changed the way he thought about volunteering and social skills: "*From participating in community service activities, I was just motivated to be kind to everyone, lend a hand, and volunteer more often, viewing it as a moral obligation*" (S5). Another student said that the community service program made her more responsible, and she was grateful for the university's efforts to organize such programs for students.

This finding is in line with many studies from the world and in Vietnam. Service-learning, in accordance with Huynh and Nguyen (2021), aimed to include theoretical knowledge into the process of addressing practical problems, boosting students' active learning abilities and learning via the process of practical experience. The increase in students' motivation was also reported in the study of Afzal and Hussain (2020). According to the authors, the community service-learning program improved students' social skills and made learning more enjoyable and inspiring (Afzal & Hussain, 2020). Similarly, according to Luo and Zhang (2021), employing the integration technique could reduce cross-cultural strain by enabling one to preserve their native culture while learning a new one. This further supported the idea that service-learning had an impact on cultural desire of the participants.

Conclusion

This study investigated the effectiveness of service-learning projects in enhancing the cultural competence of thirty students from universities in Vietnam. In order to ascertain whether or not the participants' cultural competency would improve following their community service activities, the mean scores of the pre-test at time 1 and the post-test at time 2 were compared using a paired-samples t-test ($\alpha = 0.05$). The results show that there was a difference in the students' cultural competence before and after participating in community service-learning, which implied that students' cultural competency would be improved through community service-learning. To investigate more how well service-learning contributed to Vietnamese students' cultural competency, five aspects of cultural competence (cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural skill, cultural encounters, and cultural desire) were discussed in detail combining the survey results and semi-structured interviews. The findings demonstrated that students' cultural awareness, cultural understanding, and cultural desire were evidently enhanced following their involvement in service-learning activities. The remaining two groups of factors (cultural skills and cultural encounters), despite increasing at time 2, gained lower mean scores than the other groups. It means that some students' assessments of the enhancement in their cultural competence remained neutral.

The results of this study support the inclusion of service-learning experiences into education as a means to enhance the cultural competence of students. According to the aforementioned research findings, one recommendation is to establish a consistent policy that sees service-learning projects as a pedagogical perspective that can be used to the curriculum to assist students in fully enhancing all aspects of cultural competency. Successful integration of service-learning into courses requires a systematic approach that includes phases such as curriculum awareness, program description, monitoring, and application of the service-learning, writing experience articles, and assessment. The sustainability of the service-learning implementation is also a point to consider. While each difficulty in this situation must be taken into account, the awareness obstacle raised above is the most significant. The following challenges that should be mentioned are establishing service-learning projects by comprehending needs, locating sites for service-learning activities, scheduling activities, and coordinating with teachers and schools.

The scope and quantity of study participants represent one of the study's limitations. The results are solely intended for reference because this study was conducted with a limited student population. To obtain more thorough results, similar studies need to be conducted in the future on a wider scale in terms of both the number of universities involved and the number of students that participate. Despite these limitations, I hope that this research will have useful implications for both educators and learners. Emphasizing the feasibility of integrating service-learning into the curriculum to enhance cultural authority, this study helps students realize that community service-learning is a tool to develop not only themselves, but also their profession

and academic knowledge. Furthermore, the study offers educators some suggested ways to include service-learning initiatives into the curriculum that are suitable for the present situation.

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Appendix 1 – Questionnaire

Circle the number that best describes your choice.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

The Cultural Competence Factors	Likert Scale
Cultural Awareness	
1. I am aware of the culture while interacting with individuals from various ethnic backgrounds.	1 2 3 4 5
2. I alter my cultural understanding when I interact with someone from a culture I am unfamiliar with.	1 2 3 4 5
3. I evaluate the accuracy of my knowledge as I engage in cultural exchange with others.	1 2 3 4 5
Cultural knowledge	
4. I know cultural norms and religious practices of other cultures.	1 2 3 4 5
5. I know the judicial and economic structures of other cultures.	1 2 3 4 5
6. I know the cultural marriage customs of other cultures.	1 2 3 4 5
Cultural Skill	
7. I can adhere to various languages' grammar and vocabulary rules.	1 2 3 4 5
8. I can understand the arts and crafts of other cultures.	1 2 3 4 5
9. I can express non-verbal behaviors in other cultures.	1 2 3 4 5
Cultural Encounters	
10. I change my verbal behavior (e.g., accent, tone) when a cross-cultural interaction requires it.	1 2 3 4 5
11. I change my non-verbal behavior when a cross-cultural situation requires it.	1 2 3 4 5
12. I vary the rate of my speaking when a cross-cultural situation requires it.	1 2 3 4 5
Cultural Desire	
13. I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.	1 2 3 4 5
14. I am confident that I can socialize with locals in a culture that is unfamiliar to me.	1 2 3 4 5
15. I am sure I can deal with the stresses of adjusting to a culture that is new to me.	1 2 3 4 5

Appendix 2 – Interviews

1. Have you ever learned about cultural competence before participating in service-learning?
2. What did you do to prepare yourself for the service learning project?
3. In what ways can community service-learning benefit your cultural awareness?
4. In what ways can community service-learning benefit your cultural knowledge?
5. In what ways can community service-learning benefit your cultural skill?
6. In what ways can community service-learning benefit your cultural encounters?
7. In what ways can community service-learning benefit your cultural desire?
8. Among these benefits, which is the best aspect in your opinion? Why?
9. What challenges or difficulties have you encountered in doing this project?
10. Do you have any recommendations for the next service-learning projects?