

## Integrating Vietnamese Socio-Cultural Themes through Student Presentations: A Pathway to Cultural Competence

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the integration of Vietnamese socio-cultural themes into student presentations and its effects to their cultural competency. To achieve this aim, the researcher adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-method approach, including pre- and post-intervention surveys and reflective journals for 120 students in three classes. The evaluation was based on five main components of cultural competency including cultural self-awareness, contextualized learning, reflective thinking, critical cultural awareness, and confidence in cultural expression. The quantitative data revealed that there was a great improvement in students' capacity to critically interact with cultural content and confidently communicate cultural ideas. These findings were further enhanced by the qualitative data, which showed a change in the way that students perceived Vietnamese culture, especially in a greater amount of introspection, heightened awareness of cultural nuances, and an increasing capacity for critical reflection. These results indicate that integrating localized cultural themes into active learning tasks can be an effective pedagogical method for increasing cultural competence and reflective involvement. I hope that the study can contribute to the current discussion about culturally responsive education by identifying student presentations as an effective strategy to cultivate cultural competency in higher education settings.

**Keywords:** Cultural competence, cultural integration, student presentations, Vietnamese socio-cultural themes, Vietnamese students.

Globalization has accelerated in the twenty-first century, changing the social, cultural, scientific, technological, and economic landscapes. At the same time, cultures have become closer than ever thanks to developments in digital communication and the quick dissemination of knowledge (Li et al., 2024; Tran, 2024). However, when the increasing influence of global cultural trends threatens traditional values, it can also lead to a loss of national cultural identity (Kabylov et al., 2024; M. G. Nguyen, 2023; Zabadi et al., 2025). Young people are especially exposed to foreign cultural influences through popular culture and digital media during a crucial time for identity formation. This makes them both extremely adaptable and culturally

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vulnerable at the intersection of local and global cultures (Buribayev et al., 2025; Khan, 2023; Kurebwa, 2020). Today, globalization broadens perspectives on the world, but if it is not correctly focused, it can also lead to "cultural rootlessness" (Yang et al., 2022). In this perspective, education is regarded as one of the most powerful elements molding the cultural consciousness and personal identity of the younger generation (Haughton & Schödl, 2020). However, existing studies primarily discuss cultural identity and globalization at a conceptual level, paying little attention to how university classrooms can apply cultural education through specific learning activities.

In current educational policies, cultural competence has become a core objective of higher education to meet the growing needs of the intercultural context (Cseh et al., 2025; Teng & Cosier, 2024). Furthermore, Wangkamhan et al. (2024) argued that incorporating indigenous knowledge into the curriculum not only assists teachers in developing empathy and critical thinking skills but also improves students' academic learning experiences. This link implies that cultural knowledge is not only an academic goal, but also a necessary component of empathy and social involvement in an increasingly globalized world (Bekpenbetova et al., 2024; Chupradit & Baron-Gutty, 2009; Phan, 2025). Additionally, emerging educational philosophies, including learner-centered, competency-based, and liberal education, emphasize the learner's role in self-discovery, reflection, and knowledge construction, thereby enabling the integration of social and cultural aspects into meaningful learning activities (Evans et al., 2021; Mitchell, 2023; O'Fallon & Garcia, 2023). Within this framework, active learning methods such as group discussions, projects, and presentations are increasingly adopted to promote self-directed learning, practical application, and multi-dimensional worldviews (de Hei et al., 2025). However, existing studies on cultural competence primarily emphasize the intercultural or international context, with limited empirical focus on how learner-centered activities promote cultural awareness rooted in the students' own national culture.

In Vietnam, higher education is increasingly moving towards interdisciplinary integration to better connect disciplinary knowledge with practical social challenges (Ha et al., 2023). Integrating cultural and social content into the curriculum allows students to reflect on and relate national cultural identity to their academic learning, while supporting broader goals of civic education and learner development (Ha, 2024; Nguyen, 2024; Vallis et al., 2024). As a result, establishing learning activities that allow learners to examine and critique their own culture is critical in the process of developing autonomous thinking and academic identity (Ha et al., 2023; Phan, 2025). However, at many training institutions, the integration of cultural and social components in education frequently ends with theoretical lectures, leaving learners without a lively and practical connection (Chau & Truong, 2023; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023). The gap between the emphasis on culturally responsive education at the policy level and classroom teaching practices highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that allow students to actively and critically engage with Vietnamese socio-cultural realities through experiential learning (Cao, 2022; Hua & Le, 2024).

In foundational courses such as study skills, core competencies are often taught in a general, less culturally integrated manner, resulting in weak connections between learning content and students' real-life experiences (Hua & Le, 2024). This lack of connection can reduce learning motivation and hinder students from understanding the relationship between their learning practices and the socio-cultural environment in which they live (Tran & Chau, 2022). In this context, student presentations in English, which are widely used in current training programs, offer a promising means of integrating Vietnamese cultural and social themes. When purposefully designed, such English presentations not only develop language skills, critical thinking, and collaboration but also foster deeper cultural awareness through analysis, critique, and personal reflection (Le & Pham, 2024; Ngo & Le, 2025). Despite this potential, studies on culturally integrated English presentation activities in Vietnam are still limited, particularly

regarding their impact on students' cultural perceptions, while limited pedagogical guidance further reduces their effectiveness (Nguyen et al., 2016).

In response to these gaps, this study investigates the integration of Vietnamese socio-cultural themes into students' presentation activities in the context of their freshman year of university. Specifically, this study examines: (1) how such integration affects students' cultural perceptions and (2) how students' understanding and views of Vietnamese cultural and social values change after participating in culturally integrated presentation-based learning activities. On that basis, the study not only contributes theoretically to the field of cultural-indigenous education but also proposes a feasible pedagogical approach that is suitable for the current context of Vietnamese higher education.

## Literature Review

### Conceptual Framework and Key Definitions

In Applied Linguistics, culture is widely recognized as an integral component of language use, rather than a peripheral or supplementary factor (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993). Consequently, the concept of cultural competence is increasingly emphasized as a key learning outcome in language education. Cultural competence is often understood as a multidimensional construct that goes beyond surface-level cultural knowledge. It includes the capacity to critically examine one's own cultural presumptions and behave appropriately in culturally relevant communication contexts, in addition to being aware of cultural practices, values, and beliefs (Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2009).

Cultural awareness is defined as the ability to recognize and comprehend cultural similarities and differences (Byram, 1997). Besides, it also refers to how cultures influence communication, behavior, and viewpoints (Nguyen, 2017). Although cultural awareness is important for cultural learning, it is not the same as cultural competency. Instead, cultural competency is regarded as a larger notion, which includes cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and reflective behaviors (Wu et al., 2022). According to Bennett (2013), cultural awareness is a necessary basis for developing higher levels of cultural competency.

Cultural self-awareness is closely related to these notions, because it refers to a learners' ability to assess their own cultural identity, values, and assumptions (Deardorff, 2006). In addition, cultural self-awareness also influences their interpretations and interactions (Fantini, 2009). Specially, cultural self-awareness is of great significance in educational settings where students are exposed to their own indigenous cultures. It encourages critical evaluation rather than passive acceptance of cultural norms (Byram, 1997). Developing cultural self-awareness enables students to progress beyond descriptive knowledge of culture to a more critical and reflective understanding of their socio-cultural situation.

In language education, intercultural competency is frequently mentioned with cultural competence. Intercultural competence is often defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural barriers, particularly in encounters with people from different cultural backgrounds (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). While intercultural competence is a central goal in many contexts of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and international education, current research focuses primarily on students' engagement with their own cultural and social realities. In this sense, intercultural competence is recognized as a related but distinct concept, while the focus of this research lies in promoting cultural competence through a critical exploration of indigenous socio-cultural themes.

Based on these conceptual distinctions, the current study adopts a developmental perspective on cultural competence, in which cultural awareness serves as an essential starting

point for freshman university students (Bennett, 2013; Wu et al., 2022). Since learners at this stage begin to critically explore their socio-cultural identity within the academic environment, activities that promote cultural awareness and reflection are considered particularly relevant (Nguyen, 2017). Accordingly, cultural competence in this study is conceptualized as a process beginning with raising cultural awareness and progressing towards deeper understanding and reflective engagement with Vietnamese cultural and social values.

## **Reviews on Integrating Cultural Aspects into Lessons to Develop Cultural Competence in the World**

### ***The Concept of Cultural Competence in Different Fields***

At the global level, cultural competence is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing awareness, knowledge, attitudes, and reflective practices across various educational and occupational contexts. Early studies emphasized the systematic integration of cultural competence into curricula through structured strategies such as experiential learning, reflection, and consideration of individual cultural values (Romanello, 2007). Similarly, research in the fields of health and vocational education has highlighted cultural competence as a combination of motor skills, cross-cultural communication, self-awareness, and background cultural knowledge (Axtell et al., 2010; Renzaho et al., 2013). Besides, Watt et al. (2016) provided a thorough overview of the literature on the following topics: the aspects of cultural competency that general practitioners and GP registrars should actively cultivate and enhance; the current methods for fostering and developing cultural competency in general practice; and the individuals who support this process. Later models further clarified cultural competence as a developmental process, progressing from cultural awareness and knowledge to competent sensitivity and action (Wu et al., 2022). Overall, these studies showed that cultural competence goes beyond surface-level familiarity with cultural facts and requires continuous reflective engagement with both one and others.

### ***Pedagogical Methods for Developing Cultural Competencies***

Numerous international studies focused on pedagogical strategies, which aimed at integrating cultural aspects into teaching and learning. Some authors regarded experiential and reflective strategies to be particularly beneficial in a variety of fields. For example, according to Carter-Black (2007), students' cultural awareness and appreciation could be increased by storytelling in a variety of social narratives. In language instruction, incorporating cultural elements into EFL texts and classroom activities might enable learners to enhance their cultural awareness and language development (Catana, 2014; Türkan & Çelik, 2007). Furthermore, some authors also mentioned instructional methodologies such as the Text-Driven Approach (Cardona et al., 2015), CLIL (Garzón-Díaz, 2018), and culturally responsive teaching (Hutchison & McAlister-Shields, 2020) to prove the pedagogical potential of incorporating cultural viewpoints into subject content. These approaches highlighted essential components of culturally oriented instruction such as critical reflection, contextual knowledge building, and active learner participation.

### ***Cultural Competencies in the Context of Language and EFL Education***

In Applied Linguistics and EFL education, some authors defined cultural competency in relation to intercultural communication skills, learning motivation, and meaningful language use. According to Lee et al. (2023), by integrating cultural factors into EFL programs, teachers could improve students' intercultural communication skills, motivation, and overall language

competency. Similarly, by raising their awareness of how cultural assumptions influence communication, learners' intercultural competency could be enhanced by instructional approaches such as cultural metacognition (Huang, 2023). These findings supported the concept that language learning is intrinsically cultural. Thus, cultural competency is critical for efficient communication in multilingual and multicultural environments.

### ***Assessment, Perception, and Professional Preparation***

In addition to pedagogical approaches, several studies investigated the measurement and perception of cultural competency in educational settings. The study of Hadziabdic et al. (2016) helped to verify measures for assessing cultural awareness, which emphasized the need for reliable tools for evaluating learning outcomes. Besides, Sinclair (2019) used qualitative and hybrid approaches, such as the Q method, to capture the complexities of beliefs and attitudes toward culturally informed teaching. Furthermore, many authors applied courses focused on culture and reflective activities such as journaling, simulations, and whole-curriculum integration in vocational education to improve learners' intercultural communication skills, confidence, and career readiness (Ho & Oh, 2022; Laird-Arnold, 2022; Massarelli, 2023).

### ***Emerging Directions: Indigenous Knowledge and Perspective Transformation***

In recent years, some authors have broadened the definition of cultural competence by incorporating indigenous knowledge systems, community-based learning, and viewpoint shift. Wangkamhan et al. (2024) claimed that integrating traditional knowledge and community activities into curricula might improve students' critical thinking abilities and build their relationship to cultural heritage. Furthermore, the study of Carlson et al. (2025) revealed that interdisciplinary and technology-based projects, such as international webinars, could promote transformative changes in cultural understanding, sensitivity, and critical thinking. These new research directions reflect an increasing appreciation for cultural competency as a dynamic, context-sensitive, and transformational learning outcome.

## **Reviews on Integrating Cultural Aspects into Lessons to Develop Cultural Competence in Vietnam**

### ***The Concept of Cultural Competence in the Vietnamese Educational Context***

In the Vietnamese educational context, several authors highlighted the necessity of incorporating cultural factors into instruction to help students comprehend their own cultural identity. Early research put emphasis on teachers' perceptions of cultural integration and its conceptual function in language instruction. For example, Nguyen (2013) discovered that while Vietnamese teachers have a comprehensive awareness of culture, they experience practical obstacles in incorporating cultural information into classroom activities. Thus, this finding exposed the gap between conceptual comprehension and pedagogical implementation. Similarly, Douglas (2015) emphasized the necessity of adding socio-cultural aspects to create a culturally responsive learning environment for Vietnamese students.

Subsequent research underlined the distinctions between important cultural learning outcomes. Based on a comprehensive review of past research, Nguyen (2017) identified that cultural competency, cultural awareness, and cultural knowledge were distinct but related concepts. Building on this conceptual framework, Do and Dao (2020) focused on the importance of cultivating critical cultural awareness in indigenous cultural classes. These

authors suggested that cultural learning should entail more than just knowledge transfer but also critical reflection on traditional values and practices.

### ***Culturally Integrated Pedagogical Methods in Language Education***

A significant number of Vietnamese researchers investigated pedagogical ways for incorporating cultural elements into language instruction. Tran (2020) demonstrated that in tertiary EFL situations, Vietnamese teachers switched from a solely cultural orientation to an intercultural one by engaging in action research. This study discovered that ongoing professional development could aid in the implementation of intercultural pedagogical strategies. Similarly, Tran and Tran (2022) emphasized the importance of cultural knowledge in teaching Vietnamese as a foreign language. These authors discussed socio-cultural factors that influence communicative competence, culturally embedded lexical meanings, and teaching techniques for conveying cultural content to international students.

In recent years, Vietnamese authors have paid attention to classroom strategies that promote cultural understanding and competency. T. T. B. Nguyen (2023) gave evidence that cultural information should be valued equally with linguistic knowledge in English language instruction to accomplish instructional objectives. Furthermore, according to Hua and Le (2024), to gain an effective EFL instruction at the university level, teachers are required to have both linguistic ability and cultural awareness. Moreover, Truong and Thai (2025) also investigated the usage of genuine materials in EFL courses and found that they have a good impact on students' cultural awareness and language development.

### ***Cultural Awareness, Responsiveness, and Broader Educational Goals***

Several Vietnamese studies focused on cultural competence as part of larger educational and societal goals. Cao et al. (2023) explored the impact of intercultural knowledge on international students' choices to study abroad in Vietnam. From this study, the authors emphasized the importance of cultural awareness in educational mobility. Furthermore, Nguyen et al. (2024) underlined the need of incorporating global cultural heritage into education to foster historical understanding, cultural awareness, and personal growth. Similarly, Luong et al. (2025) investigated instructors' perspectives of culturally responsive teaching in foreign programs at Vietnamese institutions. From these findings, customizing pedagogical tactics is of great significance to varied groups of students. Furthermore, Vu (2025) designed a framework to promote inclusiveness and mental health for Vietnamese people of varied cultural origins in a broader social and psychological context.

### ***Intercultural Communicative Competence in Vietnamese EFL Contexts***

Many studies in Vietnam focused on improving intercultural communication competence (ICC), typically in response to increased globalization. According to Vo (2019), Vietnam's integration into international organizations such as the WTO and ASEAN raised the awareness and interest of students in cross-cultural communication. This leads to students displaying positive attitudes and interactive abilities in ICC-related activities. Besides, Ho (2019) also investigated teachers' opinions of incorporating ICC into corporate English education, with implications for policy and curricular development.

Moreover, Vietnamese authors also researched pedagogical strategies to promote ICC. For example, Ta (2021) investigated the benefits of project-based learning for intercultural learning in EFL curricula. Besides, Vu (2022) used the Steiner approach to investigate cultural teaching methods in EFL classrooms. The study results emphasized students' ability to communicate across cultural borders and develop positive attitudes toward diversity. According

to Nguyen et al. (2022), Vietnamese students studying in the UK often possess cultural knowledge but lack deep interaction skills and critical cultural awareness. Similarly, V. L. Nguyen (2023) found that although high school English teachers express positive views on intercultural competence, their teaching practices tend to prioritize linguistic competence over cultural competence.

More comprehensive perspectives on integrating intercultural competencies have emerged in recent years. Thieu (2024) studied the integration of intercultural competencies at the curriculum and classroom levels, identifying both favorable and restrictive factors in EFL education in Vietnam. Furthermore, researchers highlighted the central role of attitudes in successful intercultural interaction and demonstrated the positive impact of cross-cultural interview-based interventions on the intercultural competencies of university students (Ha & Nguyen, 2024; Imouri, 2021). Finally, Nguyen and Ho (2024) explored English teachers' perceptions and practices regarding cultural instruction, which emphasized implications for employability and a reconsideration of how cultural instruction is conceptualized and taught in English education in Vietnam.

## **Research Gap**

As we can see from the review of the literature, even though the importance of culture in learning has been extensively studied in the past, most of these studies has been on intercultural settings, particularly in English language classrooms or international student exchange programs. These studies frequently focus on comprehending and adjusting to "other" cultures, but they have not thoroughly examined how to recognize, consider, and cultivate critical thinking about one's own culture, particularly in traditional academic settings. Besides, no research has been done on the use of English presentations as a culturally integrated teaching strategy aimed at helping students at Vietnamese institutions strengthen their cultural awareness and critical thinking skills. Furthermore, although some Vietnamese and international studies have discussed the integration of cultural elements into teaching, there is still a lack of studies with clear experimental designs (e.g., pre-post surveys) to measure the impact of culturally relevant teaching interventions. This creates a clear gap in assessing the extent to which students' cultural awareness changes when they participate in learning activities integrating indigenous cultures. These objectives could be achieved by answering two research questions:

1. How does integrating Vietnamese cultural and social topics into presentation activities affect first-year students' cultural awareness?
2. How do students' understanding and perspectives on Vietnamese cultural and social values change after participating in culturally integrated learning activities?

## **Research Study Design and Context**

### ***Participants and Course Context***

All participants were Vietnamese native speakers with limited prior experience in formal cultural studies. They included 120 first-year university students who were enrolled in three separate Study Skills classes, all of which were taught by the researcher. Each session had about 40 people, which is the normal class size for this required subject. Students were placed into small groups of 4-5 people within each class, for a total of 8-10 groups. This group-based organization was established to ensure the feasibility of large-class presentations and to foster collaborative learning. As a result, all English presentations during the study were delivered in groups rather than individually.

The Study Skills course is a required foundational course for freshmen designed to provide them with critical study skills, self-awareness, and learning strategies for university courses. This study employed a classroom-based action research design aimed at exploring how the integration of Vietnamese socio-cultural themes through student presentations can enhance students' cultural competence. This design is considered appropriate because it allows the researcher, who is also the instructor of the course, to systematically implement, observe, and reflect on a pedagogical intervention within a real classroom context, while simultaneously addressing the identified learning needs. Specifically, students were required to participate in a cross-curricular activity called "Vietnam in my Lens" - a presentation project on Vietnamese culture and society in study skills. Instead of operating as a single activity, the project comprises a series of structured, progressive group presentations distributed over seven academic weeks. Each presentation task is clearly designed to connect a core learning skill topic from the official curriculum with a relevant Vietnamese cultural or social issue related to the student's lived experiences. Students then did a series of mini presentations to progressively construct a final presentation project. Table 1 below provides illustrations of how to accomplish this cultural integration into each lesson on a weekly basis.

**Table 1**  
*Integrating Vietnamese Socio-Cultural Themes into Lessons*

No	Topics	Integrated cultural and social content	Sample presentation activities
1	Understanding Myself at University	Traditional Vietnamese learning values (study for parents, for honor, for oneself?)	Short presentation: "What do I study for?" includes family and social cultural factors.
2	Managing My Time and Plan	How do Vietnamese people manage time: flexible or unplanned? What is the role of "rubber time"?	Presentation: "Time in Vietnamese culture – Do you have any influence?"
3	Getting Ready for Exams	Exam pressure in Vietnamese society: comparison with other countries.	Debate: "Are exams the fairest measure in Vietnamese society?"
4	Financial Management	How do young Vietnamese people look at money, spending, and saving influenced by parents and society?	Case Analysis: "Vietnamese Student Spending: Current Situation & Personal Perspective"
5	Becoming a Critical Thinker	Do Vietnamese people have critical thinking? Why are they still "afraid" of criticism?	Group presentation: "Critical reflection in the classroom: difficult because of culture?"
6	Learning to Work with Others	Teamwork & community spirit in Vietnamese culture (collective > individual?)	Group presentation: "Group work at university: the self and the other in Vietnamese culture"
7	Getting & Keeping the Right Information	How do Vietnamese people filter information? Trust in social networks and traditional press.	Analysis: "Information filtering in the Internet age: Vietnamese students' perspective"

The skill and culture goals achieved are described in Table 2 below.

**Table 2**

*Skills and Culture Goals*

Study Skills	Integrated cultural and social knowledge
Academic Presentation	Understanding values, habits, and norms in Vietnamese society
Critical thinking	Comparing traditional and modern, indigenous and global aspects
Paraphrasing, organizing ideas	Developing language skills and incorporating personal cultural experiences
Teamwork	Communication in Vietnamese cultural context: roles, respect, responsibility

### **Instructional Procedures and Delivery of Presentation Activities**

Each weekly lesson followed a consistent teaching sequence. First, the teacher introduced the week's focus skill (e.g., time management, teamwork, critical thinking). This was followed by a guided discussion of a relevant Vietnamese cultural or social aspect related to that skill. Then, students were assigned a short group presentation, requiring them to critically relate the skill topic to a specific belief, practice, or social phenomenon in Vietnamese society.

Due to time limits in big classes, not all groups are fully present at each session. Instead, presentations are controlled using a variety of tactics, including alternating presentation schedules across weeks, short in-class presentations by selected groups, peer debates and feedback sessions, and brief spoken summaries supported by slide presentations. Each week, the teacher asked groups to prepare a presentation related to given cultural topics. In each lesson, each presentation group received feedback from their peers and the teacher to improve their performance. There were differences in the focus, examples, and perspectives of students' presentations each week due to the diversity of their viewpoints, regional contexts, and personal experiences.

### **The Role of Presentation Activities in the Course**

In the Study Skill course, presentations serve as an important pedagogical tool for the teacher to integrate Vietnamese socio-cultural information into the curriculum. Other course components (such as lectures, skill demonstrations, and note-taking exercises) are largely concerned with general academic skills and do not expressly address cultural awareness or reflection.

To ensure that the observed increases in students' cultural awareness may be legitimately attributed to the presentation-based intervention, only the cultural aspect is systematically integrated into the presentation activities in the "Vietnam in My Lens" project. Students must do these duties via (a) presenting cultural perspectives, (b) reflecting on personal and communal cultural experiences, and (c) critically discussing socio-cultural concerns. As a result, presentation activities play an important role in encouraging cultural competency development.

### **Research Design**

Within the framework of classroom-based action research, the study used a sequential explanatory mixed-method design, with quantitative data acquired first followed by qualitative data collection and analysis to gain a better understanding of the quantitative findings, according to Haynes-Brown (2025). Thus, to triangulate the impact of the intervention, this

study combined qualitative comments with quantitative data (gathered by pre- and post-surveys). Students' reflection journals offer insights into how and why these changes occur, and changes in cultural perceptions may be empirically quantified, making this technique especially well-suited to the current research. In particular, the research was conducted over the course of a 10-week academic semester and was divided into three primary stages:

### ***Pre-Intervention Stage***

- In Week 1 & 2, students received weekly topic suggestions and instruction on the English presentation structure. Additionally, in Week 1, a pre-survey was given to evaluate students' baseline cultural awareness, critical thinking skills on Vietnamese culture, and self-assurance in expressing cultural opinions.
- There were 15 Likert-scale items in the survey, which were divided into five domains: (1) Cultural self-awareness, (2) Contextualized learning, (3) Reflective thinking, (4) Critical cultural awareness, (5) Confidence in cultural expression.

### ***Intervention Stage***

- During the following seven weeks, students participated in a sequence of structured mini presentations that included Vietnamese socio-cultural subjects into academic skill themes (e.g., critical thinking, time management, group work, etc.)
- For each presentation, students had to relate a study skills topic to a particular Vietnamese cultural practice, belief, or problem.
- During class, students were given instructions, feedback rubrics, and chances to discuss and reflect on cultural issues.

### ***Post-Intervention Stage***

- A post-survey (identical to the pre-survey) was conducted in the final week to measure changes in students' cultural awareness and critical thinking.
- Additionally, students submitted a short reflective journal entry on what they learned about Vietnamese culture and themselves throughout the course.

In terms of data analysis, quantitative data from pre- and post-intervention surveys were analyzed to identify changes in students' cultural perceptions across five measured domains. Descriptive statistics and comparative analysis were used to examine overall trends and pre- and post-intervention differences. Qualitative data from students' reflection journals were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to cultural understanding, self-reflection, and perspective changes, thereby supplementing and explaining the quantitative findings.

### **Ethical Considerations for the Study**

According to Hasan et al. (2021), without applying ethics in research, it is impossible to find exact truths and address the true issue; therefore, ethics is the most important and crucial topic covered in a study.

Initially, during the first week of the course, all students were informed about a cross-curricular project called "Vietnam in my Lens" that involves English presentations on Vietnamese culture and society as part of their study skills. I described the activity's goal and method to them. I also explained to them how the pre- and post-survey data as well as the reflective journals would be used in the study. After a few clarifying inquiries, they were willing

to help me implement this study. Then, students received a research informed consent form, formally requesting permission to utilize their survey and journal data for the study.

Besides, the questionnaire and journal data were guaranteed to be accessed and used exclusively by me; thus, data confidentiality was ensured. Furthermore, all participants were identified solely by pseudonyms or code names, ensuring student anonymity.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Theoretical Framework for Assessing Cultural Competence**

This study is based on the process-oriented model of cultural competence development proposed by Wu et al. (2022) including four closely related stages: cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and cultural competence. In this model, cultural competency is viewed as a gradual process that involves reflection, contextual learning, and experiential involvement. Thus, this model is appropriate for educational settings.

Besides, this theoretical approach is consistent with viewpoints of Applied Linguistics, which highlighted the need of reflective practice, self-awareness, and contextually sensitive communication in cultural learning (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). More importantly, Wu et al.'s (2022) approach is relevant to the present study on student involvement with their indigenous socio-cultural setting, since it explicitly emphasizes cultural awareness and reflection as basic phases in the development of cultural competence.

Based on this framework, the current study used a set of quantifiable dimensions that represented several developmental phases to clarify changes in students' cultural competency. To maintain theoretical coherence throughout the study stages, these domains served as a guide for the design of both quantitative and qualitative data gathering instruments.

### **Data Collecting Methods**

As previously stated, this study used a sequential explanatory mixed-method design to collect both qualitative and quantitative data via pre- and post-surveys and students' reflection journals. This strategy allows researchers to utilize quantitative analysis to first identify broad trends and patterns, followed by qualitative methods to delve further into the "why" behind such patterns (Healey et al., 2025).

In the quantitative phase, I adopted pre- and post-surveys to assess students' cultural competency, critical thinking about Vietnamese culture, and confidence in expressing cultural perspectives before and after their participation in the project on Vietnamese culture and society. According to Majka (2024), pre- and post-surveys are helpful instruments for assessing the effectiveness of programs, training, and interventions. They allow researchers to measure changes in knowledge, abilities, attitudes, or behaviors before and after an event, providing insights for improvement and demonstrating impact. The survey in this study was theoretically grounded in Wu et al.'s (2022) cultural competence development framework. It included 15 Likert-scale items categorized into five domains: (1) Cultural self-awareness, (2) Contextualized learning, (3) Reflective thinking, (4) Critical cultural awareness, and (5) Confidence in cultural expression. This categorization was based on Wu et al. (2022)'s steps in the process of developing cultural competence. It included cultural awareness (domain 1), cultural knowledge (domain 2), cultural sensitivity (domains 3 and 4), and cultural competence (domain 5). This domain structure does not approach cultural competence as a single, undifferentiated term. Instead, it reflects the sequential stages of cultural competence development and permits the evaluation of improvements across various dimensions. Furthermore, the popularity of a 5-point Likert scale is due to its ease of use and capacity to

gather comprehensive replies (Sol, 2024). Particularly in larger surveys, it makes it easier to comprehend and finish by allowing respondents to express their ideas on a spectrum with a neutral midway. This user friendliness typically leads to higher response rates and more accurate data collection (Dawes, 2008).

In the qualitative phase, reflective journals were employed in addition to pre- and post-course surveys to assess students' cultural competency development while they made presentations on Vietnamese cultural and social subjects. A reflective journal is a qualitative data gathering instrument that allows students to record their emotions, thoughts, experiences, and personal viewpoints after they engage in learning activities (Chan, 2009). According to Sudirman et al. (2021), writing a reflective journal gave the students more freedom than just rethinking topics being discussed in class based on their importance, urgency, and complexity. Reflective journaling provides various advantages, including increased self-awareness, greater critical thinking, and a better knowledge of one's own learning process. It also promotes personal development, aids in problem solving, and enables the creation of more effective learning processes (Anis & Hasan, 2025). In this study, students were provided with a set of suggested questions to guide them in writing their reflections. This set of 10 questions closely followed the main categorization contents in the survey including 5 domains as described above. Thus, it could maintain theoretical consistency with the framework of Wu et al. (2022). In addition, students were encouraged to record issues such as cognitive changes, unique personal experiences, expressions of deep understanding or cultural conflicts after each presentation made during the semester. These reflections were collected at the end of the semester after students had completed all relevant presentations and activities.

## **Data Analysis Methods**

### ***Phase 1 - Pre- and post-surveys***

To assess the extent to which students' cultural competence changed when participating in learning activities integrating Vietnamese cultures, quantitative data (from Likert-scale responses) were analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired t-tests to measure differences between pre- and post-intervention scores for each domain.

In terms of descriptive statistics, mean scores and standard deviations were calculated for each domain across both pre- and post-surveys to provide an overview of students' self-perceived competence levels before and after the intervention. Besides, the Spearman-Brown method was used as a split-half strategy to assess the internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire. With Spearman-Brown reliability ( $R_{sb}$ ) = 0.72 for the pre-test and 0.71 for the post-test, both of which are greater than the value of 0.7, it might be claimed that the data gathered is trustworthy. These reliability coefficients indicate an acceptable level of internal consistency for educational research tools.

As regards paired sample t-tests, this method was chosen to examine whether there were statistically significant differences between pre- and post-survey scores within each of the five domains. This test is particularly suitable for this study because the same group of students participated in both the pre- and post-surveys, allowing for the examination of internal changes within everyone over time. To investigate whether students' cultural competence would increase or not after participating in a presentation project called "Vietnam in my Lens", a paired-samples t-test ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ) was employed to compare the mean scores of the pre-survey at time 1 and the mean scores of the post-survey 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 the presentation project; (2) Hypothesis 2: Participating in the presentation project will enhance students' cultural competence. There were five processes involved in processing the hypothesis test statistics: (1) Identify the Null Hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) and Alternative

Hypothesis ( $H_a$ ); (2) Select Alpha; (3) Determine whether the variance of the two samples is identical (using the F-test); (4) Determine the t statistics; (5) Compile the findings and conclusions.

The F-test was conducted before the t-test to verify the assumption of equality of variances between the two measurement points, thereby helping to select an appropriate t-test procedure. The variance of two samples was calculated using the F-Test Two-Sample for Variances with  $\alpha = 0.05$ . The following Table 3 provided an illustration of the F-test statistics.

**Table 3**  
*F-Test Two-Sample for Variances*

	<i>Pre-test</i>	<i>Post-test</i>
	3.358333	4.541667
Mean	2.631548	4.035119
Variance	0.192812	0.124382
Observations	14	14
df	13	13
F	1.550155	
P(F<=f) one-tail	0.219995	
F Critical one-tail	2.576927	

Table 3 shows that F-test Pvalue = 0.219 > 0.05; thus, the variance of the two samples is equal. I could determine the T statistic in Excel's Data Analysis tool by choosing the equal variance function based on the F-test findings above. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were also calculated before conducting the inference test to provide an overview of students' cultural competence levels before and after intervention, and to support the interpretation of the t-test results.

### ***Phase 2 – Reflective Journal***

The analysis of data from reflective journals aims to: (1) determine the level of cultural competence development of students through a personal lens; (2) explore the depth of students' thoughts, emotions and cognitive changes after learning and presenting on Vietnamese cultural and social topics; (3) triangulate with the results of quantitative surveys (pre & post-survey) to verify the consistency or difference in learning outcomes.

At the end of the semester, all students across three study skills classes submitted a reflective journal entry. Each journal entry was approximately 300 to 500 words long, based on a set of guided reflective questions. These questions were designed to elicit students' reflection on cultural self-awareness, contextual learning, reflective thinking, critical cultural awareness, and confidence in cultural expression. Although the dataset was relatively large for qualitative analysis, all journal entries were considered analytically valuable because they documented individual learning within the same pedagogical intervention.

For qualitative data analysis, I adopted the six-stage theme analysis methodology of Braun and Clarke (2006) due to its adaptability and usefulness in detecting meaningful patterns in enormous amounts of reflecting data. There are six steps in analyzing data from students' reflective journals.

#### **Step 1: Familiarization with the Data**

First, I read each reflection journal at least twice to obtain a thorough knowledge of the material. Then, I noted initial notes to capture key phrases, feelings, and emerging thoughts about students' cultural perspectives and learning experiences.

### Step 2: Initial Coding

Following manual coding, I examined the data for segments that demonstrated shifts in attitudes, opinions, feelings, and expressions of cultural awareness. Based on the cultural competency framework used in the study, the codes were developed using both data and theory (Wu et al., 2022).

### Step 3: Theme Generation

The codes were divided into major themes that corresponded to the five domains in the quantitative survey. This alignment maintained theoretical coherence between data sources. Table 4 below depicts the themes and typical coding samples.

**Table 4**  
*Generating Themes*

Criteria	Coding examples
1. Cultural Self-Awareness	identity shift, questioning values, discovering personal bias
2. Contextualized Learning	understanding social reality, connection with community, challenge of cultural context
3. Reflective Thinking	shift in perspective, rethinking assumptions, learning from others
4. Critical Cultural Awareness	questioning norms, resisting stereotypes, seeing from multiple views
5. Confidence in Cultural Expression	expressing voice, intercultural communication, public speaking growth

### Step 4: Reviewing and refining themes

I evaluated all journal entries to ensure that the topics were internally consistent and distinct from one another. Besides, I also examined overlapping items and thematic boundaries to keep the analysis clear.

### Step 5: Defining and naming themes

I defined each theme explicitly based on its appearance in the students' reflections, and its direct connections to the conceptual framework of cultural competency.

### Step 6: Selecting illustrative excerpts and reporting

To demonstrate each subject, I chose representative excerpts not only for their regularity but also for their clarity and theme-related importance. To improve the interpretative validity of the study, I compared qualitative and quantitative survey responses to identify areas of agreement or disagreement.

## Reliability, Validity, and Generalizability

The study's validity and reliability were improved by several approaches. In terms of quantitative data, the bisection method with the Spearman-Brown correlation coefficient was used to assess the survey instrument's internal consistency dependability, producing acceptable results for both pre- and post-tests. To address content validity, survey items were created using established theoretical frameworks of cultural competence (Wu et al., 2022) and connected to distinct domains of cultural development. As regards qualitative data, by comparing the subjects of students' reflection journals with the quantitative survey findings, triangulation improved trustworthiness. Additionally, the reliability of the topic analysis was reinforced by several rereading, systematic coding, and the use of guided reflection questions, which helped guarantee consistency in participant responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Next, adherence to the framework for cultural competency was used to guarantee theoretical triangulation (Wu et al., 2022). Moreover, the use of a structured subject analysis process and transparent reporting of the analysis steps improved the reliability and validity of the findings. Finally, the integration

of quantitative and qualitative findings in a sequentially interpreted mixed-methods design contributed to structural validity by allowing qualitative data to explain and be placed in context with observed quantitative changes.

Regarding the considerations of generalizability, as a classroom-based action study conducted within a specific institutional context, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalized to all Vietnamese university students. Instead, the study aims for analytical generalizations, whereby insights gained from the pedagogical intervention, research design, and learning process can be transferred to similar educational contexts. Besides, the relatively large sample size for a classroom-based study (N = 120), the use of clearly structured intervention procedures, and the detailed description of teaching activities enhance the transferability of the findings. Educators and researchers in equivalent university-level contexts of teaching English as a foreign language or study skills can adapt the teaching model and research methods to suit their own environment.

## Results and Thematic Analysis

To evaluate the hypothesis, students were given cultural competency questionnaires both before and after taking part in the presentation-based intervention. Table 5 summarizes the mean scores and standard deviations across five target domains.

**Table 5**  
*Pre-survey and Post-survey on Cultural Competence*

The Cultural Competence Factors	Pre-test		Post-test	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
<b>Cultural Self-Awareness</b>				
1. I am aware of how my cultural background influences my views, behaviors, and communication.	3.36	0.55	4.54	0.50
2. I can recognize differences and similarities between my own culture and others without judgment.	3.23	0.58	4.57	0.50
3. I can explain aspects of Vietnamese culture that shape my identity.	3.21	0.62	4.61	0.49
<b>Contextualized Learning</b>				
4. Learning about Vietnamese socio-cultural issues through presentations helps me connect classroom content to real-world contexts.	3.03	0.65	4.37	0.48
5. I better understand the complexities of Vietnamese society when cultural topics are discussed in specific social or historical contexts.	3.00	0.59	4.41	0.49
6. Cultural themes presented in class make the learning experience more relevant and meaningful to me.	3.14	0.57	4.28	0.48
<b>Reflective Thinking</b>				
7. I often reflect on how my beliefs about culture are shaped by personal experiences and education.	2.74	0.60	3.85	0.54
8. Preparing or listening to presentations about culture encourages me to question my assumptions.	2.67	0.60	4.05	0.50
9. I can identify moments when my cultural perspective has changed because of classroom activities.	2.56	0.59	3.80	0.56
<b>Critical Cultural Awareness</b>				
10. I can critically evaluate cultural practices in both Vietnamese and foreign contexts, including my own.	2.43	0.53	3.88	0.62

**Table 5***Continued*

11. I recognize the influence of power, inequality, and social norms when comparing different cultural perspectives.	2.38	0.59	4.03	0.61
12. I believe that no culture is superior, and cultural values should be analyzed in their socio-political context.	2.33	0.54	3.83	0.58
<b>Confidence in Cultural Expression</b>				
13. I feel confident presenting cultural content to others, even on complex or sensitive issues.	2.08	0.59	3.65	0.59
14. I can clearly express my thoughts and opinions about Vietnamese culture in academic settings.	2.05	0.52	3.62	0.61
15. I am comfortable participating in discussions or debates related to cultural values and traditions.	1.99	0.48	3.57	0.56

Table 5 shows that the data were narrowly distributed around the mean value, as indicated by the tiny standard deviation ( $SD < 0.8$ ) for all aspects. I selected the two aforementioned hypotheses to perform the Hypothesis Test, which measures cultural competency between times one and two: (1) Null Hypothesis ( $H_0$ ): there is no difference in the students' cultural competence before and after participating in the presentation project; (2) Alternative Hypothesis ( $H_a$ ): Participating in the presentation project will enhance students' cultural competence. The results of the t-test are shown in Table 6 below:

**Table 6***t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Equal Variances*

	Post-test	Pre-test
	4.541667	3.358333
Mean	4.035119	2.631548
Variance	0.124382	0.192812
Observations	14	14
Pooled Variance	0.158597	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	26	
t Stat	9.324726	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.00000	
t Critical one-tail	1.705618	
P(T<=t) two-tail	8.91E-10	
t Critical two-tail	2.055529	

Table 6 shows that  $P\text{value} = 0.00000 < 0.05$ . This result indicates that the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) was rejected whereas the alternative hypothesis ( $H_a$ ) could be accepted. This means that participating in the presenting project will help students improve their cultural competence. This is the first inference that can be drawn from the findings of the paired-samples t-test, which was used to compare the mean scores of the pre- and post-surveys.

To explore whether students' understanding and perspectives on Vietnamese cultural and social values changed after participating in culturally integrated learning activities, I also combined the reflective journals method with quantitative results obtained from pre- and post-surveys. Specific results from the five categorizations in the survey are presented in the following sections.

## Cultural Self-Awareness

Cultural self-awareness is the understanding of how culture has shaped oneself (Lu & Wan, 2018). It involves recognizing the impact of one's cultural heritage, including traditions, beliefs, and social norms, on their worldview. In the process of building cultural competence, cultural awareness is the first step as Wu et al. (2022) mentioned. Table 5 shows that before participating in the presentation project integrating Vietnamese socio-cultural themes, students showed an average level of cultural self-awareness with the average mean score being 3.27. However, after the presentation project, students had a better understanding of the influence of individual cultural background on cognition and behaviors with the average mean score being 4.57. With a large difference in mean scores (1.30), the process of presenting and listening to cultural topics helped students “look back at themselves” and discover invisible aspects of personal beliefs. Students demonstrated remarkable changes in identifying and adjusting their culturally relevant beliefs. This was further confirmed in the reflections collected from students. A student shared her views when making a presentation on traditional Vietnamese learning values to express herself at university, “When presenting on the topic 'What do I study for', I realized that the way I choose a career is greatly influenced by what society expects, not entirely by personal will” (S1). Integrating Vietnamese values into lessons also enabled students to realize aspects that they have not yet understood about themselves, thereby having a more sympathetic view of society. As one student revealed:

I realized that I had a rather negative view of local culture. After working in a group with people from other hometowns, I realized that I was bringing a biased urban lens. From then on, I thought that I needed to learn more about people from different places to be more sympathetic to their lives. (S2)

This finding is consistent with the findings of some studies that propose activities to improve students' cultural awareness, such as Carter-Black's (2007) use of storytelling to foster cultural awareness, understanding, and appreciation of social work students and Cardona et al.'s (2015) Text-Driven Approach for creating cultural awareness activities. Students' identification of implicit beliefs and deeper self-discovery were also reported in studies by Ha and Nguyen (2024) and Cao et al. (2023). Moreover, Do and Dao (2020) found that teaching culture purely from textbooks, without dialogue and comparison with other cultures, often does not foster self-reflection. This finding further emphasizes the importance of incorporating cultural themes into presentations so that students can improve their cultural understanding. If culture is taught purely theoretically through textbooks, that method is certainly not effective. Presentations allow students to communicate, express themselves, and debate information, thereby absorbing cultural knowledge in a more practical and vivid way.

## Contextualized Learning

Contextualized learning is closely related to cultural knowledge because contextualized learning emphasizes connecting new information to students' existing knowledge and experiences, and this often includes their cultural backgrounds (Cobern, 1991; Gay, 2018; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). By establishing cultural contexts for learning, teachers may make classes more interesting and relevant for students, which will help them comprehend and value different points of view more deeply. Acquiring cultural knowledge is also the second step in the process of building cultural competence by Wu et al. (2022). Thus, the statements in this category are intended to measure how students' cultural knowledge changed after participating in the presentation project.

Comparing the mean scores between pre-survey (average  $M= 3.06$ ) and post-survey (average  $M= 4.35$ ), integrating cultural content into specific historical and social contexts through presentations helped students learn more effectively, and helped them feel that the lesson was practical and meaningful. First, learning in a specific context helped students gain a deeper understanding of Vietnamese social reality and see the contradictions between tradition & modernity, individual & community. One student shared her opinion that, “When I gave a presentation on time management, I saw clearly the contradiction between flexible time and "rubber time" in Vietnamese culture and from there I saw how I was affected by time habits in Vietnamese culture” (S3). Similarly, another student expressed her attitudes towards critical thinking, one aspect that is put great emphasis in both education and life today. She said:

When discussing critical thinking, I was confused when I heard about the concept of “a good child is a child who knows how to obey”. But then I understood that it comes from Confucian roots and the war period, where discipline and compliance were considered vital. (S4)

These responses affirm that context helps students not only remember but also question, compare and understand more deeply about Vietnamese society. When students incorporate Vietnamese cultural elements into their presentations, they will have the opportunity to compare it with what is happening in the world, thereby having a broader and more tolerant view of the native culture in which they live. As one student shared in her reflection, “The lesson about exam pressure in Vietnamese society made me see clearly the difference between Vietnam and other countries in the world in the way they perceive exams and success in life” (S5).

The enhancement of cultural knowledge was also reported by Hua and Le (2024) who stated that instructors' learning methods, such as role-play integrated with local cultural content, help increase cultural understanding. Similarly, Hutchison and McAlister-Shields (2020) emphasized “culturally responsive teaching” using cultural context to increase engagement and practicalize lessons. In agreement, the incorporation of culture into EFL texts and classrooms was also underlined in the Turkan and Çelik’s (2007) study, which also offered useful lesson ideas to help students increase their cultural knowledge in addition to their language proficiency. According to T. T. B. Nguyen (2023), language classes should approach cultural information in the same way as they treat linguistic knowledge. Qualitative data strongly support the finding that incorporating cultural context into instruction helps learners connect lessons to real-world situations more deeply. However, according to Huang (2023), contextual exercises lacking metacognition may just provide superficial understanding rather than encouraging critical thinking. In my opinion, this is a significant observation that will assist me in developing cultural content related to presentation activities in a way that will best foster students' cultural cognition.

## **Reflective Thinking**

Reflective thinking is regarded as the 21st century's most crucial skill, determining one's capacity to comprehend the logical relationships between problems (Demirdag, 2015). According to Facione (2013), it is the capacity to consider and refrain from passing judgment prior to making a choice. Cultural sensitivity, the third step to build cultural competence by Wu et al. (2022), is intimately linked to reflective thinking. According to McInnis-Bowers et al. (2010), reflective thinking is used to enhance cultural sensitivity. Besides, McAllister et al. (2006) pointed out that critical incident reflection supports the development of cultural understanding and sensitivity. Thus, understanding and negotiating various cultural situations can be greatly aided by reflective thinking, which entails critically analyzing one's own experiences, convictions, and presumptions.

The data from Table 5 shows that, before participating in the presentation project, students did not have much knowledge for reflective thinking with the mean scores all lower

than 3 (the average  $M=2.66$ ). This is also reasonable with the data obtained in the categorization of cultural awareness and cultural knowledge analyzed above. In the pre-survey stage, when students' cultural awareness and knowledge were only at an average level ( $M$  around 3), the students' ability to achieve higher-level cultural sensitivity was also quite low. However, after the intervention stage, the mean scores from Table 5 demonstrated a significant improvement in reflective ability with the average mean score being 3.9. Thus, most students acknowledged that they were able to begin questioning their personal cultural beliefs and identify changes in their perceptions after the classroom activities.

In reflections, students also expressed changes in their cultural sensitivity after participating in the course's series of presentations. One student shared his feelings about preparing presentations that incorporated Vietnamese cultural elements, "I used to think that Western culture was more progressive, but when I analyzed how Vietnam maintained its traditions through many changes, I realized that it should not be judged through a one-dimensional lens" (S6). In addition, students experienced a shift in their thinking, especially when exposed to multiple perspectives from their peers and academic content. They began to re-evaluate their own beliefs and attitudes. One student admitted that "For the first time, I found myself questioning what I thought was criticism, and it turns out that those standards are not entirely objective but very cultural" (S7). Similarly, one student expressed, "After watching the clip about the intergenerational debate over clothing, I thought a lot about who has the right to define 'right - wrong' in culture" (S8). Through the students' reflections, they all learned that others could perceive the same cultural phenomenon very differently from them, and that does not make them wrong, but is an opportunity for them to learn something new. Thus, survey results and reflections indicate that students are beginning to question their worldviews and expanding their ability to see from different perspectives.

Reflective thinking is also one aspect that was mentioned by other authors. For example, to establish a culturally reflective learning environment for students, Douglas's (2015) study also emphasized the importance of teachers integrating socio-cultural elements into their curricula. Besides, Nguyen et al. (2024) also claimed that the content and methods of incorporating global cultural heritage into education are highly regarded for their ability to promote a deeper grasp of history and culture, inspire students to lead positive lifestyles, and increase their bravery and reflective skills. In agreement, Carlson et al. (2025) demonstrated that through cross-institution webinars, perspective transformation of cultural sensitivity and reflective thinking was significantly enhanced. However, in the study of Nguyen et al. (2022), Vietnamese students in the UK said that although they have cultural knowledge from exchange, they lack real interaction skills, making their reflective thinking shallow and lacking critical awareness. This reveals that, without opportunities for multilingual exchange or a multicultural environment, reflective thinking may be at an acceptable level but not deep. This result helps explain why students, despite having good knowledge about culture, found it difficult to achieve the ability to reflect on how their beliefs about culture were shaped by personal experiences and education. This research result is also a useful suggestion for me to adjust and increase interactive exchange activities in presentations for students in the following semesters.

### **Critical Cultural Awareness**

According to Cremona (2023), critical cultural awareness is the capacity to analyze cultural characteristics from a critical perspective. While both are important, critical cultural awareness is more than just cultural sensitivity (Christopher et al., 2014). To be culturally sensitive means to acknowledge and value cultural differences without passing judgment. However, critical cultural awareness entails a more profound level of involvement, which includes analyzing one's own cultural prejudices critically and comprehending the power

relationships that influence cultural behaviors. Therefore, this categorization is a higher level to measure students' cultural sensitivity before reaching cultural competence.

During the pre-survey stage, students had low critical cultural awareness ( $M < 2.5$ ), similar to the reflective thinking group above. Most of them were unable to critically analyze cultural practices in both Vietnamese and international contexts, as well as recognize the impact of power, inequality, and social norms when comparing different cultural viewpoints. However, there was a considerable increase in mean scores in this categorization during the post-survey phase, with an average mean score of 3.91. In cross-cultural comparison, this is a very positive result, showing that students were more adept at recognizing elements like power, inequality, and social stereotypes after taking part in the presenting project. In reflections, students shared more details about their practical experiences with each lesson and their progress in their critical cultural awareness. When learning about critical thinking and analyzing and comparing domestic and foreign advertisements, one student admitted, "Analyzing cross-national advertising helped me understand that cultural images are sometimes distorted to serve commercial goals" (S9). In addition, when learning about traditional cultural values to position personal values, a student said, "I never thought that 'family first' values are sometimes used to justify individual control in society" (S10). Students also exhibited a substantial improvement in their critical analytical abilities, not just recognizing but also challenging societal conventions and personal prejudices. One student shared his opinions:

When I made a presentation about how young Vietnamese people look at money, spending, and saving, influenced by parents and society, I found myself starting to distinguish between true cultural values and those that are the result of social imposition. (S11)

Likewise, criticism is considered a difficult thing to demonstrate in the classroom in Vietnam. When asked to give a presentation on this topic in connection with Vietnamese cultural values, one student admitted:

I used to think that being criticized was something that everyone was afraid of. But after discussing it, I realized that critical reflection in the classroom is difficult because of culture and felt that we need to be more open to this to receive more opinions and contributions from others. (S12)

In addition to recognizing and challenging the norms and prejudices that exist in society and within themselves, students exhibited a clear development in their critical analytical skills. As one student admitted, "I really enjoyed making a presentation about teamwork and community spirit in Vietnamese culture. I realized that glorifying the 'collective' too much sometimes obscures individual voices and makes it difficult for people who want to be different" (S13).

Reflective data confirm that students have developed a critical and multidimensional perspective, not only receiving but also analyzing and evaluating culture more deeply. This finding was aligned with that study of Do and Dao (2020) which highlighted that it is important to promote critical analysis of norms and stereotypes rather than teaching culture in an essentialist manner. In agreement, Wangkamhan et al. (2024) asserted that integrating community activities and traditional knowledge into the curriculum enhances students' critical thinking abilities and fortifies their bonds with their cultural heritage. Similarly, Truong and Thai's (2025) study examined how EFL teachers use authentic materials and how students perceive their impact on critical cultural awareness and language ability. Furthermore, Sinclair (2019) used the Q methodology to model critical awareness, demonstrating the importance of developing more than simply information but also nuanced understanding. Besides these studies, the study of Ho and Oh (2022) still showed that cultural content in training is still very limited, lacking opportunities to develop practical critical awareness. This suggests that in disciplinary contexts such as medicine, critical cultural awareness may not be as high as the

survey results suggest without in-depth training design. This further emphasized the importance of appropriate lesson design. In my study, the appropriate integration of socio-cultural themes into specific topics helped learners move beyond cultural awareness to analyzing culture from the lens of power and inequality.

### **Confidence in Cultural Expression**

According to Guzman et al. (2016), cultural competency is a person's capacity to effectively interact, work, and form meaningful connections with others from different cultural backgrounds. Thus, confidence in cultural expression is an important aspect of cultural competency, the last stage in the 4-step process of Wu et al. (2022). It refers to a person's capacity to engage and express oneself easily and successfully inside their own culture as well as in encounters with people from different cultures. This confidence allows people to convey their cultural viewpoints, participate in diverse cultural situations, and form respectful relationships with others from all backgrounds. This also explains why in the pre-survey stage, all students did not reach this final level in the process of building cultural competence. The mean scores of the statements in this stage were all around 2, indicating that students did not feel confident and comfortable to express their opinions in discussions or debates related to cultural values and traditions. After the intervention stage of the presentation project, an interesting point can be seen that although the average mean scores of the post-survey stage were 3.61, not too high compared to the categorization groups above, this was the group with the strongest increase by 1.57. This shows that students initially became more confident in discussing, presenting, and expressing their opinions on cultural issues, although most of them were previously reserved.

Student reflections also confirmed this finding. Although not all students were proficient in cultural expression, especially in academic settings, they showed greater confidence in their knowledge after learning about Vietnamese culture incorporated into their presentations. One student said, "After the first presentation, I found myself able to express my cultural ideas more clearly, especially when using examples from my own experiences" (S14). Another student expressed her experience from the presentation series, "I learned to use words carefully and express my opinions responsibly, which is very important when talking about culture" (S15). Even when discussing sensitive issues in society, students felt more comfortable expressing and defending their opinions. As one student shared, "I no longer just copy knowledge. Now I can debate, ask questions and defend my views, even on sensitive topics" (S16). Some students were quite reserved at first, but after the course they showed more confidence in sharing and debating cultural issues, especially in an academic environment. One student shared about daring to express ideas to discuss and debate with teachers and classmates, "Before, I was always afraid of being judged if I spoke differently from the majority. But after a few group presentations, I realized that there is no absolute right or wrong when sharing personal experiences" (S17). Similarly, another student also expressed his joy and satisfaction after participating in the presentation project.

The first time I presented on a cultural topic, I was very nervous. But the feeling of being listened to made me want to talk more. Before, I did not dare to criticize the lecturer, but now I see that providing different cultural perspectives is necessary and encouraged. (S18)

Both quantitative and qualitative data showed that the course created a safe space that encouraged learners to develop culturally responsible expression and debate, thereby enhancing their cultural competence. Although in the previous literature, no study applied the presentation project integrating cultural elements to enhance cultural competence, this topic has been reported quite widely in studies with results like my study. Cultural competence was highlighted

in Nguyen's (2017) study, which demonstrated that learning outcomes are taken into consideration when absorbing culture as part of language acquisition. Catana (2014) further claimed that English language courses at technical universities should prioritize the development of cultural competency as well as linguistic ability to increase engineering students' cross-cultural understanding. Sharing the same views, Hutchison and McAlister-Shields (2020) asserted that the application of culturally responsive teaching creates a safe environment, helping students confidently express, and share. Besides, according to Lee et al. (2023), cultural communicative skill improves EFL students' motivation and academic performance in English as well as their cultural development. Moreover, the study of Massarelli (2023) investigated the cultural competency of third-year undergraduate nursing students and showed that the application of reflective journaling and simulation increased self-confidence and intercultural communication in a medical setting.

In short, the highest increase in scores in this group reflects great progress in building a safe learning environment that encourages self-expression, which is a major barrier for Vietnamese students in cultural learning. Besides studies sharing similar results, some other studies also provide useful notes on developing cultural competence. In the study by Nguyen et al. (2022), Vietnamese students in the UK suggested that the development of cultural knowledge is not sustainable if there is a lack of follow-up and real communication. In addition, Nguyen and Ho (2024) also pointed out that low language proficiency and focusing on language over culture make students' confidence not likely to be transformed into cultural communicative competence. These are points that teachers need to pay attention to in the process of designing courses and activities to integrate cultural themes to enhance students' cultural competence most effectively.

## **Discussions**

This study shows that integrating Vietnamese socio-cultural topics through presentation activities has had a statistically significant positive impact on the cultural competence of first-year students. Before-and-after survey results show significant improvements in all five dimensions: self-cultural awareness, contextual learning, reflective thinking, critical cultural awareness, and confidence in expressing cultural views. In particular, the greatest increases were recorded in two dimensions considered challenging for Vietnamese students: critical cultural awareness and confidence in expressing cultural viewpoints. Qualitative data from reflection journals further reinforces the quantitative results, showing that students not only passively absorb cultural knowledge but also begin to question, compare, critique, and re-evaluate familiar cultural values in Vietnamese social life. This demonstrates that culturally integrated presentation activities not only enhance understanding but also facilitate students' development of critical thinking and individual voices within the academic environment.

The findings of this study contribute to the body of empirical research on cultural integration in education in three main directions. First, unlike most previous studies that investigated cross-cultural contexts or foreign language learning (e.g., EFL or international student exchange), this study focused on exploring and reflecting on indigenous culture within a university-level learning skills module. The results show that learning about one's own culture can produce equally profound transformations as exposure to "other cultures". Second, the study adds empirical evidence to studies both within and outside Vietnam that emphasize the role of interactive and culturally contextualized teaching methods (Carter-Black, 2007; Hua & Le, 2024; Hutchison & McAlister-Shields, 2020; Katz, 2026; Liljeström & Peltonen, 2017). However, this study goes further by revealing that student presentations, if designed with a clear cultural orientation, are not only a tool for practicing academic skills but also an effective pedagogical strategy for developing cultural competence. Third, in the Vietnamese context, where many studies indicated that cultural education still tends to focus on knowledge

transmission or descriptive approaches (Do & Dao, 2020; Nguyen, 2013; De Loof et al., 2022), this study provided a specific, feasible, and measurable practical model through before-and-after design. Through this, the study contributes to bridging the gap in clearly designed pedagogical interventions aimed at assessing changes in students' cultural perceptions.

The results of this study generally confirm Wu et al.'s (2022) four-step model of cultural competence development, in which students progress from cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, to cultural sensitivity and cultural competence. The sequential improvement in the five surveyed criteria reflects a development process that is relatively consistent with this theoretical logic. However, the study also expands and refines the above theoretical framework in several key points. Specifically, confidence in cultural expression, a key manifestation of cultural competence, is not automatically achieved simply through increased cultural awareness or knowledge. Instead, from the findings, it can be seen that students should be engaged in frequent, conversation-based, and secure practice activities, like group discussions, presentations, and constructive feedback. Besides, while some students showed confidence before delving into cultural study, others might excel in critical thinking but be more cautious in their speech. This finding suggests that cultural competency should be seen as a dynamic process that is heavily impacted by the particular socio-cultural setting and instructional strategy.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to determine whether first-year university students' cultural competency may be improved by incorporating Vietnamese socio-cultural topics into their presentations. The results demonstrate that learner-centered, culturally integrated presentations not only teach cultural knowledge but also develop critical thinking skills, increase students' self-awareness, and give them more confidence to voice opinions that are grounded in their culture. Based on both quantitative progress across five dimensions of cultural competence, this study demonstrates that engaging students with their own cultural and social realities can be an effective path to developing cultural competence in higher education. This study has both theoretical and practical implications.

## Theoretical Implications

- This study supports constructivist and post-essentialist viewpoints on culture, regarding it as dynamic, contextual, and open to critical inquiry rather than a set body of knowledge.
- This study adheres to Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, notably its critical cultural attitudes, knowledge, and perceptions.
- This study is also aligned with transformational learning theory of Mezirow (1991), which emphasizes the importance of developing reflective meaning in the development of cultural competence.

## Practical Implications

- Presentation-based learning not only aids in the acquisition of cultural knowledge but also in the changing of learners' attitudes and behaviors.
- By creating a classroom environment with respectful debate, teachers can enhance students' confidence in expressing culturally sensitive and nuanced opinions.
- Integrating cultural themes in student presentations can make cultural learning more relevant and transferable outside of the classroom.

Beyond the Vietnamese context, this study also has broader significance for worldwide scales. It is important to engage students with their own cultural realities rather than focusing primarily on foreign or global cultures in contexts such as Japan, Europe, or other societies experiencing fast social change. To promote cultural competence effectively, one crucial thing is that teachers organize learning activities, which are dialogue-based, reflective, and critical. Furthermore, presentation-based learning can be used in various fields such as education, social sciences, language studies, and general education. In this way, although this study was conducted in Vietnam, its application might be generalized to diverse cultures attempting to balance a global perspective with indigenous expertise.

Despite encouraging results, there are some certain inevitable limitations in this study. First, the generalizability of the study sample may be limited due to focusing on a single course in a specific cultural context and training institution in Vietnam. In addition, the possibility of observer bias may have influenced the information in the students' reflective journals or survey responses. Therefore, to enhance external validity, future studies may extend the results of this study by comparing different training institutions, different geographical regions, or expanding the research subjects internationally. In addition, the study may also consider integrating online or inter-school exchange programs, for example, with international students, to enhance students' comparative reflective ability and participation in intercultural environments. Another research direction could be to examine the specific role of mother tongue versus foreign language in shaping students' comfort and clarity in expressing themselves culturally.

Through the cultural-themed presentation model, the study hopes to contribute to clarifying the extent to which culturally integrated learning activities can enhance cultural competence and develop the learning identity of first-year university students. From this perspective, integrating Vietnamese cultural and social topics into students' presentations is not only academic, but also an effective and flexible cultural education method helping learners connect knowledge and life, distinguish between the individual self and the collective self, between the present and tradition. In the context of globalization, this is a means of upholding and advancing indigenous values. Besides, it is also an essential step in creating a generation of young people who are knowledgeable, responsible, and capable of adjusting to the multicultural world of the twenty-first century.

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## **Ethics statement**

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving human participants. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent prior to their participation.

## **Data Availability Statement**

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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