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Enhancing Learner Autonomy and Cultural Awareness: Strategies of Vietnamese Tertiary-Level EFL Teachers

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Abstract: This qualitative study investigates the strategies employed by Vietnamese tertiary-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to promote learner autonomy (LA) and enhance cultural awareness. This research provides a deeper understanding of EFL teaching practices in this setting, conducted in the context of Vietnam's evolving educational landscape, where English proficiency and cultural competence are increasingly prioritized. The study utilized semi-structured interviews with nine EFL teachers from two different Vietnamese tertiary institutions, representing various career stages: novice, mid-career, and near-end career. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, revealing a range of strategies encompassing collaborative learning, technology integration, personalized feedback, real-life scenarios and role-play, reflective learning practices, local culture incorporation, contextualized language instruction, critical thinking, and cultural analysis, student-centered environments, interdisciplinary approaches, language skills for intercultural communication, and authentic material use. Findings highlight the multifaceted nature of language teaching, emphasizing not just linguistic competence but also cultural understanding and LA. These strategies are crucial in a globalized world where intercultural communication is a key skill. The study suggests the need for continuous professional development and policy support for diverse and holistic teaching practices. It offers practical insights for EFL educators, particularly in similar socio-cultural contexts, on integrating various strategies to enhance language skills and cultural awareness.

Keywords: *Cultural awareness, learner autonomy, teachers' strategies, Vietnamese tertiary-level EFL teachers.*

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Introduction

In the dynamic field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, particularly within the Vietnamese tertiary context, the concept of learner autonomy (LA) has emerged as a pivotal element (S. V. Nguyen & Habók, 2020; Roe & Perkins, 2020; Tuan, 2021). Despite its importance, there is a notable gap in research regarding the specific strategies employed by Vietnamese EFL teachers to foster LA and how it correlates with the development of cultural awareness (CA) in students. This qualitative study hones in on the specific strategies employed by Vietnamese tertiary-level EFL teachers to promote LA, with a unique focus on how these strategies aid in enhancing CA among students. Previous studies have often focused predominantly on language acquisition and proficiency, with less emphasis on how educators can effectively integrate cultural elements into their teaching practices (Little, 2022; Yen et al., 2024). Given Vietnam's ongoing efforts to align its educational objectives with global standards (Lap et al., 2022; Le, 2023; Thao & Mai, 2022), this study's focus on integrating CA within EFL education addresses a critical need in the Vietnamese tertiary education landscape. This need arises from the limitations of previous research which has not sufficiently explored the intertwining of language proficiency with cultural understanding, particularly in the Vietnamese context (Phuong et al., 2023). This alignment supports the nation's broader educational goals, including enhancing intercultural competence and preparing students to thrive in a globalized economy. In Vietnam, where the rapid pace of globalization and economic shifts underscore the importance of English proficiency (Doan & Hamid, 2021), the role of EFL educators is critical. These educators are not just language teachers; they are facilitators of cultural understanding in a world where intercultural competence is increasingly valued.

This study emerges from a landscape where the traditional EFL curriculum in Vietnam has often overlooked the integration of CA (Hoang Hoa, 2020). This oversight represents a significant research gap, as the existing literature does not adequately address how cultural components can be seamlessly integrated into EFL teaching in Vietnam. Recognizing

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this gap, the research specifically explores the varied methodologies and pedagogical approaches adopted by Vietnamese EFL teachers to foster an environment where learners are encouraged to take charge of their own learning journey. Moreover, by highlighting how these approaches address the challenges of integrating cultural understanding into language instruction, the study directly contributes to overcoming a significant barrier in the Vietnamese tertiary education system. Such a barrier has been underexamined in previous studies (e.g., L. T. Tran & Bui, 2023), marking a clear distinction in the focus and contributions of this research. This exploration is significant, given the nuanced challenges inherent in blending language proficiency with cultural acumen.

To address this, the research delves into the question:

What strategies do Vietnamese tertiary-level EFL teachers employ to promote LA in facilitating the enhancement of CA?

The study's focus on LA within the realm of CA in the EFL classroom is both timely and relevant. Its relevance is enhanced by the lack of emphasis on these aspects in existing EFL literature, particularly within the context of Vietnamese education. This pertinence is amplified by the current educational reforms in Vietnam, which prioritize equipping students with the skills to effectively navigate and contribute to an interconnected world. It aims to shed light on the innovative practices in the Vietnamese EFL teaching community, highlighting how educators navigate the complex interplay between language learning and cultural understanding. The insights gained from this research are expected to fill critical gaps in the existing literature and contribute significantly to the broader field of EFL education, particularly in settings where cultural diversity and language education intersect. By concentrating on the Vietnamese context, the study offers a unique lens through which to view and understand the role of EFL educators in cultivating not just linguistic skills, but also global cultural competence.

Literature Review

LA in Language Learning

The concept of LA has been a subject of considerable interest in language education research. Holec (1996) originally defined LA as the ability of the learner to take charge of their own learning. Benson (2013) further elaborated on this, emphasizing the importance of self-direction and personal responsibility in the learning process. However, there has been criticism that these definitions, while foundational, may not fully encompass the evolving understanding of LA in diverse cultural contexts, particularly in non-Western settings (Yen et al., 2023). In the context of language education, Little (2009) highlighted the role of autonomy in enhancing language proficiency, suggesting that autonomous learners are more motivated and effective in their language acquisition. Yet, this perspective may not adequately address the complex interplay between autonomy and cultural factors in language learning, a gap this study aims to explore. Research has shown that autonomy leads to better language retention and a deeper understanding of cultural nuances (Everhard & Murphy, 2015). Nonetheless, there is a need for more current research to validate and expand upon these findings, especially in rapidly changing educational landscapes like Vietnam.

CA in EFL Education

CA in language teaching is increasingly recognized as crucial for effective communication in a globalized world. Byram (2014) argued that language teaching should encompass cultural elements, as language and culture are inextricably linked. However, Byram's (2014) work has been critiqued for not fully exploring how CA can be integrated into the classroom in practical and measurable ways. Kramsch (2013) explored the concept of cultural competence, suggesting that language learners need to understand both the source and target cultures to communicate effectively. Still, there remains a gap in how this cultural competence is developed within the EFL classroom, particularly in Asian contexts. In the context of EFL, studies have indicated that incorporating cultural elements into language instruction enhances students' engagement and understanding of the language (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1994). Yet, these studies often do not delve deeply into the specific strategies teachers can employ to effectively integrate these cultural elements.

Teaching Strategies for Promoting Autonomy and CA

In the specific context of Vietnamese tertiary education, there has been a growing interest in exploring how teachers can foster LA and CA. T. Q. Tran and Tran (2020) investigated the use of project-based learning in Vietnamese EFL classrooms, finding that such methods encouraged students to explore cultural topics independently. However, the study did not sufficiently explore the impact of these strategies on students' overall language proficiency and intercultural competence. B. D. Nguyen and Le Thi (2021) examined the use of technology in facilitating autonomous learning, noting that digital resources allowed students to access diverse cultural materials. Despite these findings, there is still a lack of comprehensive research on how effectively these digital tools are being utilized to bridge cultural gaps in language learning. Additionally, Le et al. (2023) explored teacher-student interactions in the Vietnamese EFL classroom, highlighting the role of dialogue in fostering cultural understanding and LA. Their research, while insightful, calls for further investigation into how these interactions specifically contribute to the development of CA in students.

Challenges in Integrating Autonomy and CA

Despite the recognized importance, integrating LA and CA in EFL education is not without challenges. Teachers often face difficulties in balancing curriculum requirements with the need for flexible, student-centered learning approaches (Eaton, 2020). This highlights a gap in the current literature regarding effective strategies to overcome these pedagogical challenges. There is also the challenge of resource availability, especially in contexts like Vietnam, where access to diverse cultural materials may be limited (Truong et al., 2021). This limitation points to the need for research on resourceful strategies that can be employed in resource-constrained environments.

In conclusion, the literature indicates that while the integration of LA and CA is vital in the EFL context, especially in a culturally rich environment like Vietnam, it requires innovative teaching strategies and an understanding of the unique challenges faced in such settings. This review underscores the necessity for this study, aiming to fill these gaps by providing fresh insights into effective practices for promoting LA and CA in Vietnamese tertiary-level EFL classrooms. Moreover, this review sets the foundation for exploring the specific strategies Vietnamese tertiary-level EFL teachers employ to promote these elements in their classrooms.

Theoretical Frameworks of the Study

Underpinning this study are two primary theoretical frameworks: Constructivist theory (CT) and Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). CT, as proposed by Vygotsky (1978), posits that knowledge is constructed through interaction with the environment and is deeply influenced by social and cultural factors. This framework informs our understanding of how LA is fostered in the classroom, emphasizing the role of active engagement and interaction in the learning process. In this context, teachers are seen not merely as knowledge transmitters but as facilitators who create an environment conducive to self-directed learning and exploration.

ICC, a concept developed by Byram (2014), provides a framework for understanding the role of CA in language education. This theory highlights the importance of developing learners' ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations. It underscores the need for language learners to acquire not only linguistic skills but also an understanding of cultural nuances and differences. This theoretical lens is particularly relevant in examining how EFL teachers integrate cultural elements into their teaching to enhance learners' communicative competence.

Methodology*Research Design*

This study adopts a qualitative research design, focusing on the use of semi-structured interviews to delve into the strategies Vietnamese tertiary-level EFL teachers employ to promote LA in enhancing CA. The choice of a qualitative approach is driven by the desire to gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the teaching practices, beliefs, and experiences of these educators. This methodology allows for the exploration of complex phenomena within their natural settings, offering rich, detailed insights that are often not accessible through quantitative methods.

The qualitative approach, supported by the underpinning frameworks, including CT and ICC, is instrumental in uncovering the strategies used by Vietnamese EFL teachers to foster LA and CA. The insights gained from this study are expected to contribute to the broader field of language education, offering valuable perspectives on effective teaching practices in diverse cultural and linguistic contexts.

Participants

The participants in this study comprised nine Vietnamese EFL teachers, recruited from two different tertiary institutions in Vietnam. This selection was purposeful to ensure a diverse representation of teaching experiences and perspectives within the Vietnamese EFL context. The participant group was stratified into three distinct career stages: three novice teachers, three mid-career teachers, and three teachers nearing the end of their careers. This stratification was intentional to capture the varying approaches and challenges faced by teachers at different stages of their professional journey in promoting LA and enhancing CA.

The novice teachers, having less than five years of teaching experience, were expected to provide insights into contemporary teaching practices and the challenges faced by educators new to the profession. The mid-career teachers, with 5 to 15 years of experience, were anticipated to offer a balance between fresh approaches and established practices, reflecting on the evolution of their teaching strategies over time. The near-end career teachers, with over 15 years of experience, were included to provide a depth of perspective, drawing upon a wealth of experience in the field and potentially offering insights into the long-term changes and trends in EFL teaching in Vietnam.

Addressing ethical issues was paramount in this study. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the nature of their involvement, and the use of their responses in the study. They were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Participants were given pseudonyms in all research documents and publications to

protect their identities. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring they were fully aware of their rights and the scope of the study. This consent process also involved explaining the potential risks and benefits of their participation, ensuring that they were making an informed decision to participate. By adhering to these ethical considerations, the study aimed to maintain the highest standards of research integrity and respect for the participants' rights and wellbeing.

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection in this study was through semi-structured interviews, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the strategies Vietnamese EFL teachers employ to foster LA and enhance CA. Prior to conducting the main interviews, a pilot study was undertaken. This preliminary phase involved interviewing two EFL teachers who were not part of the main study. The purpose of the pilot study was to test the interview questions, ensuring they were clear, relevant, and effective in eliciting the necessary information. Based on the feedback and observations from the pilot study, revisions were made to the interview questions to enhance their clarity and relevance to the research objectives. The revised interview questions included inquiries such as: "How do you encourage your students to take responsibility for their own learning?" and "Can you describe any activities or methods you use to integrate CA into your language teaching?" These questions were designed to prompt detailed responses and reflections on teaching practices and philosophies.

Each interview was conducted in a setting chosen by the participant to ensure their comfort and convenience, typically within their own institution or a neutral location like a quiet café. The interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, providing sufficient time for participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives. To ensure accuracy and ease of communication, all interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the native language of both the participants and the researcher. This choice was crucial for capturing the nuances of the participants' responses and ensuring they could express themselves freely and comfortably. To accommodate the linguistic aspect of the study, professional translation services were employed for data analysis. This was necessary to accurately translate the interview content into English for the purpose of analysis while preserving the original meaning and context of the participants' responses. The use of Vietnamese in the interviews and subsequent professional translation ensured that the data collected was both authentic and accurately represented in the study's findings.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews with Vietnamese EFL teachers was subjected to a thorough thematic analysis. This approach was chosen for its effectiveness in identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun et al., 2023). It allowed for a rich and detailed, yet complex account of the data, aligning well with the qualitative nature of the study. To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of this analysis, several measures were employed. First, member checking was conducted, where participants were given the opportunity to review and comment on the findings. This process helped to verify the accuracy of the interpretations and ensure that the analysis truly reflected the participants' perspectives. Additionally, peer debriefing was utilized, involving discussions with experienced researchers in the field who provided critical feedback and insights, thereby enhancing the rigor and depth of the thematic analysis.

The process of thematic analysis began with a comprehensive transcription of the interview recordings. Each transcription was carefully translated to English, ensuring that the nuances and subtleties of the participants' responses were accurately captured. Following this, the transcriptions were read multiple times to gain a deep familiarity with the content, a process that is essential for thematic analysis. The initial coding stage involved generating succinct labels for various aspects of the data that appeared interesting or relevant to the research questions. These codes were applied across the entire data set, aggregating data relevant to each code. This stage was iterative, with codes being constantly refined and modified as new insights emerged from the data.

After coding, the next step involved searching for themes. This involved examining the codes and collated data to identify significant broader patterns. These emerging themes were reviewed and refined, ensuring they formed a coherent pattern and accurately reflected the meanings evident in the data set. Once the themes were clearly established and defined, the analysis proceeded to the next phase of defining and naming themes. This required a detailed analysis of each theme, identifying the essence of what each theme captured about the data and determining what aspect of the research question it addressed. Throughout this process, continuous reflective commentary was maintained, which further contributed to the analytical rigor. The final stage involved writing up the analysis, weaving together the analytic narrative with appropriate excerpts from the data. This narrative not only presented the data and the analysis but also told the story of the research, bringing forth the experiences and strategies of Vietnamese EFL teachers in promoting LA and enhancing CA. The thematic analysis thus provided a structured yet flexible approach to analyzing the qualitative data, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the complex phenomena under investigation.

Findings

Collaborative Learning as a Strategy for Promoting LA and CA

One of the prominent strategies identified in this study was the use of collaborative learning techniques to enhance LA and CA. This strategy was mentioned by a significant number of participants across different career stages: two novice teachers, three mid-career teachers, and two near-end career teachers.

A novice teacher, Ms. Linh, described how she uses group projects to encourage students to explore cultural topics autonomously. She said, *"I assign projects where students have to work in groups to research a cultural aspect of English-speaking countries. They have the freedom to choose their topic, which encourages them to take charge of their learning."* Mr. Hoang, a mid-career teacher, shared a similar sentiment but focused more on the intercultural communicative competence aspect. He noted, *"In these group discussions, students not only share language skills but also cultural perspectives. It is fascinating to see them negotiate meanings and cultural understandings."* Mrs. Phuong, representing the near-end career teachers, highlighted the evolution of her teaching strategy. *"Earlier, my focus was more on grammar and vocabulary. Now, I see the value in collaborative learning where students discuss and reflect on cultural differences and similarities. It is more about learning to communicate in a culturally diverse world."*

Novice teachers like Ms. Linh often experiment with learner-centered methods, such as group projects, to engage students actively. This reflects a budding interest in fostering autonomy while developing their teaching identity. As exemplified by Mr. Hoang, mid-career teachers usually possess a more refined approach, integrating more complex aspects like intercultural communicative competence into their teaching. This reflects a shift towards a more holistic understanding of language education. In contrast, near-end career teachers like Mrs. Phuong often reflect on their long-term experiences, leading to a profound shift in their teaching philosophies. They tend to value and incorporate more inclusive and diverse teaching methods, recognizing the changing dynamics of the classroom and the global relevance of cultural competence. This evolutionary perspective on teaching strategies across career stages provides valuable insights into the professional growth of EFL teachers and the impact of experience on educational practices.

CT views learning as an active process where learners construct new knowledge based on their existing understanding, emphasizing active participation in learning rather than passive absorption. This aligns with collaborative learning techniques, like Ms. Linh's student-chosen topics and Mrs. Phuong's shift to collaborative learning, fostering autonomy and social interaction in knowledge construction. Conversely, ICC emphasizes effective and appropriate communication in diverse cultural contexts, involving cultural understanding and respect. Mr. Hoang's approach, with group discussions on language and culture, and Mrs. Phuong's focus on CA, exemplify ICC by enhancing students' ability to navigate and interact in a culturally diverse world.

Integration of Technology in Language Learning

Another significant finding of the study was the integration of technology as a strategy to enhance LA and CA among students. This approach was noted by all three groups of teachers: one novice, two mid-career, and three near-end career teachers.

A novice teacher, Mr. Binh, highlighted the role of technology in facilitating autonomous learning. *"I use online forums and social media as platforms where students can discuss cultural topics. This allows them to explore and learn at their own pace, outside the traditional classroom setting,"* he explained. Ms. Thao, a mid-career teacher, emphasized the benefits of technology in enhancing CA. *"Through online resources, students can access a vast array of cultural materials that are not available in our textbooks. It helps them gain a broader perspective on different cultures,"* she said. From the perspective of near-end career teachers, Mr. Hien reflected on the evolution of teaching methods. *"When I started teaching, such technological tools were not available. Now, I see how they can significantly contribute to a student's ability to learn autonomously and understand different cultures,"* he observed.

For novice teachers like Mr. Binh, technology is a natural and integral part of their teaching toolkit, often used to foster engagement and autonomy in a modern, connected classroom. Mid-career teachers, such as Ms. Thao, tend to leverage technology to bridge gaps in traditional resources, broadening the cultural horizon of their students. This indicates a strategic shift towards a more resource-inclusive approach. Near-end career teachers, exemplified by Mr. Hien, have witnessed the transformative role of technology over time. Their perspective incorporates an appreciation for the evolution of teaching methods and an understanding of how these tools can enrich the learning experience beyond traditional boundaries. This progression from novelty to strategic incorporation, and finally, to integrative appreciation of technology in teaching, offers valuable insights into the dynamic nature of pedagogical adaptation across different stages of a teaching career.

In a CT framework, technology serves as a facilitator in learning, encouraging active knowledge construction rather than passive information reception. For example, Mr. Binh's use of online forums and social media allows students to independently explore cultural topics, fostering LA and active engagement. Regarding ICC, technology offers access to diverse cultural materials and perspectives, essential for effective communication in various cultural contexts. Ms. Thao's

use of online resources broadens students' cultural understanding, aiding in developing intercultural communication skills. Mr. Hien's reflections on technology's impact in education illustrate its role in both CT and ICC, enhancing learner-centered education and providing insights into different cultures, crucial in a globally connected world.

Personalized Feedback and Guidance

A key finding from the study was the emphasis on providing personalized feedback and guidance as a strategy to foster LA and enhance CA. This approach was reported by two novice teachers, three mid-career teachers, and two near-end career teachers.

One of the novice teachers, Ms. Trang, spoke about the importance of individualized feedback. *"I make it a point to give personalized comments on students' cultural projects or presentations. This not only helps them improve their language skills but also deepens their understanding of cultural aspects,"* she shared. A mid-career teacher, Mr. An, described his approach to guidance. *"I hold one-on-one sessions with students to discuss their progress and interests in learning about different cultures. These conversations often lead to a more personalized learning path for them,"* he stated. Representing the near-end career teachers, Mrs. Lan highlighted the evolution in her teaching approach. *"Earlier in my career, feedback was more general. Now, I see the value in tailoring my feedback to each student's needs, especially when it comes to understanding cultural nuances,"* she explained.

Novice teachers, like Ms. Trang, often focus on the immediate application of individualized feedback to enhance specific skills and cultural understanding. This reflects a growing emphasis on the individual learner's journey and needs. Mid-career teachers, such as Mr. An, typically develop a deeper engagement with students, incorporating personalized discussions that shape learning paths according to individual cultural interests. This shift signifies a maturation in pedagogical methods, focusing more on the holistic development of the learner. Near-end career teachers, exemplified by Mrs. Lan, demonstrate a significant evolution in their approach. They often transition from a more generalized feedback method to a nuanced, individualized approach that recognizes the complex interplay of language skills and cultural sensitivity. This progression from specific skill enhancement to holistic and nuanced guidance across career stages provides critical insights into the development of teacher strategies in promoting LA and CA.

In CT, personalized feedback is key, as it supports learning as a unique and individual experience. Constructivism believes learners build their understanding through experience and reflection. Ms. Trang's tailored comments on cultural projects exemplify this, enhancing language skills and cultural understanding. Personalized learning experiences are central to Constructivist principles. In ICC, personalized guidance aids students in exploring and understanding cultures in a relevant way. Mr. An's one-on-one sessions for discussing cultural interests illustrate this, enabling students to engage with cultural concepts personally and improving intercultural communication skills. Mrs. Lan's shift to more individualized feedback combines CT and ICC, adapting teaching to individual student needs, especially in cultural understanding. This approach fosters a learner-centered, culturally sensitive environment, showing the effectiveness of personalized feedback in both knowledge construction and intercultural competence development.

Use of Real-Life Scenarios and Role-Play

A noteworthy strategy identified in the study was the use of real-life scenarios and role-play exercises to enhance LA and CA. This approach was mentioned by two novice teachers (Ms. Linh and Mr. Binh), two mid-career teachers (Ms. Thao and Mr. Hoang), and one near-end career teacher (Mrs. Phuong).

Ms. Linh, a novice teacher, described her use of role-play activities. *"I create scenarios that mimic real-life situations, like ordering food in an English-speaking country, and have students act them out. This not only improves their language skills but also their understanding of different cultural etiquettes,"* she explained. Mr. Hoang, a mid-career teacher, also emphasized the value of real-life scenarios. *"I ask students to research and then role-play situations involving cultural misunderstandings. It helps them understand how cultural nuances impact communication,"* he stated. Mrs. Phuong, a near-end career teacher, shared her perspective on the evolution of these techniques. *"Earlier, my focus was more on textbook scenarios. Now, I try to incorporate real-life examples that the students might encounter outside the classroom. It makes learning more relevant and engaging for them,"* she noted.

Novice teachers like Ms. Linh often bring fresh ideas to the classroom, using role-play activities to simulate engaging and culturally relevant scenarios. Their approach is characterized by experimentation and a direct application of theoretical knowledge. Mid-career teachers, such as Mr. Hoang, tend to display a deeper understanding of the pedagogical implications of these activities. Their focus shifts to more complex aspects, such as addressing cultural misunderstandings, indicating a growth in their instructional strategies towards fostering deeper cultural insight and communication skills. Near-end career teachers like Mrs. Phuong often reflect on their long-term teaching experiences and adapt their methods accordingly. They tend to shift from textbook-based scenarios to real-life examples, demonstrating a mature perspective on the practical application of learning. This progression from initial experimentation to strategic and contextual use of real-life scenarios and role-plays across different career stages offers valuable insights into how teachers' methodologies evolve with experience and reflect changing educational priorities.

CT posits that learners actively construct knowledge through experiences. Ms. Linh's role-play activities, simulating real-life situations like ordering food in an English-speaking country, exemplify this. This method enhances language skills and cultural understanding, promoting LA and knowledge construction from personal experiences. In ICC, real-life scenarios and role-plays, as used by Mr. Hoang to explore cultural misunderstandings, are effective in imparting practical insights into intercultural communication nuances. Mrs. Phuong's shift from textbook scenarios to real-life examples merges CT and ICC principles. Initially focusing on controlled scenarios, she now uses realistic examples, making learning more relevant and engaging. This aligns with Constructivist learning in realistic contexts and underscores the practical application of CA in communication, vital in a globalized world. Her approach demonstrates how integrating these methods can create a dynamic, effective learning environment for a diverse student body.

Emphasis on Reflective Learning Practices

The study also uncovered the emphasis on reflective learning practices as a key strategy in promoting LA and CA. This approach was particularly highlighted by two novice teachers (Mr. Binh and Ms. Trang), three mid-career teachers (Mr. An, Ms. Thao, and Mr. Hoang), and two near-end career teachers (Mrs. Lan and Mrs. Phuong).

Mr. Binh, a novice teacher, spoke about encouraging students to reflect on their learning experiences. *"I ask students to keep journals where they reflect on their language learning and cultural insights. This helps them become more aware of their learning process and cultural understanding,"* he said. Ms. Thao, a mid-career teacher, shared her approach to reflective discussions. *"In my classes, we have regular discussions where students share their thoughts on cultural topics we have covered. It is a space for them to reflect and learn from each other's perspectives,"* she explained. Mrs. Lan, a near-end career teacher, discussed the evolution of her teaching methods towards incorporating more reflective practices. *"Over the years, I have seen the value in having students reflect on their own cultural biases and language learning journey. It helps them become more autonomous and culturally sensitive,"* she observed.

Novice teachers, like Mr. Binh, often use reflection as a tool for immediate student engagement and self-awareness. They tend to focus on concrete practices like journaling to foster individual reflection, indicative of their early-stage experimentation with pedagogical techniques. Mid-career teachers, such as Ms. Thao, typically demonstrate a transition towards more collaborative reflection practices, using group discussions to deepen understanding. This shift marks a progression from individual to communal learning experiences, reflecting a growing recognition of the value of shared insights in cultural learning. Near-end career teachers like Mrs. Lan exhibit a sophisticated approach to reflection, incorporating it not just as a learning tool but as a means to instill deeper cultural sensitivity and autonomy in students. Their methods, refined through years of experience, often focus on encouraging students to challenge their own biases and assumptions, indicative of a holistic and mature pedagogical approach. This progression from individual reflective practices to communal and introspective reflection offers a nuanced understanding of how reflective learning practices are adapted and deepened throughout a teaching career.

In Constructivism, learning is seen as an active, reflective process for building personal understanding. Mr. Binh's use of journals for students to reflect on language learning and cultural insights exemplifies this. This self-reflection helps learners integrate new information with existing knowledge for a meaningful learning experience. In ICC, reflective discussions, like those led by Ms. Thao, are vital. They allow students to exchange and consider different cultural perspectives, thereby increasing their intercultural understanding and communication skills. Mrs. Lan's shift towards more reflective teaching methods illustrates a blend of CT and ICC. She emphasizes the importance of students reflecting on cultural biases and language learning, promoting LA and cultural sensitivity. This approach helps students construct their understanding of language and culture through both personal and collective experiences, underscoring the importance of reflective learning in developing language skills and cultural appreciation.

Incorporation of Local Culture in Language Teaching

A significant strategy revealed in the study was the incorporation of local Vietnamese culture into language teaching as a means to enhance LA and CA. This approach was highlighted by three novice teachers (Ms. Linh, Mr. Binh, Ms. Trang), two mid-career teachers (Ms. Thao, Mr. Hoang), and two near-end career teachers (Mrs. Lan, Mrs. Phuong).

Ms. Linh, one of the novice teachers, spoke about the importance of connecting language lessons with local cultural elements. *"I often use examples from Vietnamese culture to explain English idioms or concepts. This helps students relate to the material more personally and understand it in the context of their own culture,"* she explained. Mid-career teacher Mr. Hoang shared his perspective on using local culture as a bridge to understanding foreign cultures. *"By starting with what students are familiar with – our own culture – I find it easier to introduce them to the nuances of English-speaking cultures. It is a step towards developing their CA in a broader sense,"* he said. Mrs. Phuong, a near-end career teacher, discussed how her teaching style has evolved to incorporate more of the local culture. *"I have realized that when students see their own culture reflected in the language learning process, they feel more empowered and engaged. It also helps them understand that learning a language is not just about acquiring another culture but understanding the relationship between different cultures,"* she observed.

Novice teachers like Ms. Linh tend to use local cultural elements to make language concepts relatable and understandable, showing a focus on bridging familiar and foreign concepts. This approach is reflective of early career efforts to engage students by drawing on their existing cultural knowledge. Mid-career teachers, represented by Mr. Hoang, often develop this approach further, using local culture as a foundational bridge to explore and understand foreign cultures. This reflects a more strategic and expanded use of cultural elements, indicating a shift towards a broader, more interconnected understanding of cultures. Near-end career teachers, such as Mrs. Phuong, demonstrate an evolved perspective, recognizing the empowering effect of integrating local culture into language learning. Their approach often highlights the importance of cultural interconnections, moving beyond direct language learning to encompass a comprehensive understanding of cultural relationships. This evolution from basic integration to complex intercultural understanding across career stages provides insights into how teachers deepen and refine their approach to culture in language teaching.

Ms. Linh's use of Vietnamese cultural elements to explain English idioms reflects CT, which values linking new knowledge to existing understanding. This method makes learning more personal and meaningful, aligning with the Constructivist principle of building knowledge based on what students already know. Similarly, Mr. Hoang employs familiar Vietnamese culture to introduce English-speaking cultures, aiding in understanding cultural nuances and the concept of cultural relativity, crucial in ICC. Mrs. Phuong's teaching evolution, incorporating local culture, merges CT and ICC. Recognizing that integrating students' own culture in language learning is empowering, her approach highlights the importance of understanding cultural interconnections. This method underlines the role of cultural relativity in language education, focusing on both knowledge construction (CT) and intercultural communication skills (ICC).

Contextualized Language Instruction

The study revealed a notable emphasis on contextualized language instruction as a strategy to promote LA and CA. This approach was particularly advocated by two novice teachers (Ms. Trang and Mr. Binh), three mid-career teachers (Mr. An, Ms. Thao, and Mr. Hoang), and one near-end career teacher (Mrs. Lan).

Ms. Trang, a novice teacher, highlighted the importance of context in language learning. *"I try to teach language through its use in real-life contexts, like navigating an airport or attending a job interview. This not only helps students understand the practical use of language but also exposes them to different cultural settings,"* she explained. Mr. An, a mid-career teacher, elaborated on the use of culturally rich contexts in teaching. *"In my classes, we discuss scenarios that involve cultural interactions, like business meetings in different cultural settings. It helps students grasp the subtleties of language used in specific cultural contexts,"* he said. Mrs. Lan, representing the near-end career teachers, shared her perspective on contextualized teaching. *"Over my years of teaching, I have found that when language is taught through meaningful contexts, students not only learn better but also develop a deeper appreciation for cultural differences,"* she observed.

Novice teachers, like Ms. Trang, often focus on introducing students to real-world scenarios, aiming to make language learning immediate and relevant. This approach reflects an early-career emphasis on practical application and tangible contexts. Mid-career teachers, such as Mr. An, typically advance this approach by integrating more culturally complex scenarios. Their teaching often involves nuanced cultural interactions, indicating a progression towards a deeper understanding of the interplay between language and culture. Near-end career teachers like Mrs. Lan demonstrate a comprehensive application of contextualized learning, integrating it not just as a technique but as a principle for effective language education. Their experience leads to a sophisticated approach that combines language skills with cultural appreciation, showcasing a mature understanding of the intrinsic link between language and culture. This progression from practical application to culturally rich and sophisticated contextualization across different career stages provides insights into the evolving nature of pedagogical strategies in language education.

Ms. Trang's approach to teaching language through real-life contexts, like navigating an airport or attending a job interview, reflects CT's emphasis on relevance and real-world experiences. This contextualized learning enhances LA by applying language skills in meaningful scenarios. Mr. An's use of culturally rich contexts, such as business meetings in different cultures, aligns with ICC principles, preparing students for effective communication across cultural settings and emphasizing the need to adapt to cultural differences. Mrs. Lan's integration of CT and ICC in her teaching focuses on the benefits of contextualized language learning. She connects language teaching to real-life experiences and cultural appreciation, enabling students to learn language effectively while understanding and respecting cultural diversity. This approach underscores the importance of combining practical language application with cultural context understanding in language education.

Emphasis on Critical Thinking and Cultural Analysis

A key strategy identified in the study was the emphasis on developing critical thinking and cultural analysis skills among students. This approach was noted by two novice teachers (Mr. Binh and Ms. Linh), three mid-career teachers (Mr. An, Ms. Thao, and Mr. Hoang), and two near-end career teachers (Mrs. Lan and Mrs. Phuong).

Mr. Binh, a novice teacher, described his focus on nurturing critical thinking. *"I often present students with scenarios that challenge their assumptions about different cultures. This encourages them to think critically and develop a more nuanced*

understanding of cultural diversity,” he said. Ms. Thao, a mid-career teacher, emphasized the role of cultural analysis in her teaching. *“In our discussions, I ask students to analyze cultural texts and media, encouraging them to delve deeper into the cultural contexts and meanings. This helps them develop a critical perspective on cultural issues,”* she explained. Mrs. Phuong, representing the near-end career teachers, reflected on the integration of critical thinking in her teaching over the years. *“Earlier in my career, the focus was more on language accuracy. Now, I see the importance of teaching students to critically analyze cultural content, which helps them become more autonomous and culturally aware learners,”* she observed.

Novice teachers, like Mr. Binh, often introduce critical thinking by challenging students’ cultural assumptions. This method reflects their emerging pedagogical identity and an early-career focus on stimulating intellectual curiosity and questioning. Mid-career teachers, exemplified by Ms. Thao, tend to deepen this approach by incorporating more structured cultural analysis, guiding students to critically engage with cultural texts and media. This shift indicates a maturation in teaching style, emphasizing a more sophisticated and analytical approach to cultural understanding. Near-end career teachers, such as Mrs. Phuong, often transition from a traditional focus on language accuracy to a more comprehensive integration of critical thinking and cultural analysis. This evolution shows a profound shift towards holistic education, recognizing the importance of not only language skills but also the ability to critically engage with cultural content. This progression from basic critical questioning to in-depth analysis and then to integrated holistic teaching across career stages provides insights into the dynamic nature of teaching strategies in fostering critical thinking and CA.

Mr. Binh’s teaching approach, which challenges students’ assumptions about cultures, reflects CT’s advocacy for active engagement and critical thinking in learning. He encourages critical thinking to foster a nuanced understanding of cultural diversity, aligning with Constructivism’s focus on learners actively constructing their knowledge. Ms. Thao’s emphasis on cultural analysis in her teaching aligns with ICC principles, as she encourages students to analyze cultural texts and media, deepening their understanding of cultural contexts and issues, essential for effective intercultural communication. Mrs. Phuong’s shift from language accuracy to integrating critical thinking and cultural analysis shows a blend of CT and ICC. Her current approach fosters LA and CA, moving towards a holistic teaching strategy that combines language learning with critical thinking and cultural analysis. This prepares students to be autonomous learners and effective communicators in a culturally diverse world.

Student-Centered Learning Environments

An essential strategy that emerged from the study was the creation of student-centered learning environments to enhance LA and CA. This approach was particularly emphasized by three novice teachers (Ms. Trang, Ms. Linh, Mr. Binh), two mid-career teachers (Mr. An, Mr. Hoang), and one near-end career teacher (Mrs. Lan).

Ms. Trang, a novice teacher, spoke about the importance of student-led activities. *“I often let students choose the topics or projects they want to work on. This not only motivates them but also gives them a sense of ownership over their learning,”* she shared. Mr. Hoang, a mid-career teacher, highlighted the benefits of a student-centered approach in enhancing cultural understanding. *“In my classes, students lead discussions on cultural topics, which encourages them to explore and share their perspectives. It is a way to make them more aware of different cultural viewpoints,”* he said. Mrs. Lan, representing the near-end career teachers, reflected on the shift in her teaching style towards more student-centered practices. *“I have moved from a teacher-centric approach to a more student-driven one. This change has made a significant difference in how students engage with the language and understand different cultures,”* she observed.

Novice teachers like Ms. Trang, often employ student-led activities as a way to encourage engagement and motivation, using these methods to foster a sense of autonomy and ownership in learners. This reflects their inclination towards innovative and flexible teaching methods that resonate with modern educational trends. Mid-career teachers, such as Mr. Hoang, expand upon this foundation by utilizing student-led discussions to delve deeper into CA. Their approach typically represents a balanced integration of content and LA, emphasizing the development of critical thinking and cultural insights. Near-end career teachers like Mrs. Lan demonstrate an evolved transition from traditional teaching methods to embracing student-centered environments. This shift often results from years of experience and reflection, leading to a comprehensive understanding of the benefits of placing learners at the heart of the learning process. Such teachers tend to foster an environment where students not only learn autonomously but also engage deeply with cultural and linguistic nuances. This evolution from initial engagement strategies to sophisticated learner-driven environments across different career stages illustrates the dynamic nature of teaching methodologies in promoting student autonomy and CA.

Ms. Trang’s practice of letting students choose their topics or projects reflects CT’s emphasis on learners constructing their understanding through experiences and reflection. This student-led approach motivates and gives them ownership of their learning, deepening engagement and autonomy. Similarly, Mr. Hoang’s method of student-led discussions on cultural topics aligns with ICC principles, fostering an environment for active engagement with and reflection on cultural diversity. This approach is key to developing CA and communication skills in diverse settings. Mrs. Lan’s evolution from a teacher-centric to a student-driven approach combines CT and ICC, placing learners at the center of education. This shift enhances language engagement and cultural understanding, creating an environment conducive to developing

autonomous learners and culturally aware individuals. Her approach emphasizes the importance of student involvement in both constructing knowledge and developing cultural competence.

Incorporation of Interdisciplinary Approaches

The study also revealed the incorporation of interdisciplinary approaches as a strategy to foster LA and enhance CA among students. This method was highlighted by three novice teachers (Ms. Linh, Ms. Trang, Mr. Binh), two mid-career teachers (Mr. An, Ms. Thao), and two near-end career teachers (Mrs. Lan, Mrs. Phuong).

Ms. Linh, a novice teacher, described integrating elements from other disciplines into language lessons. *"I often include historical, geographical, and social aspects in my English classes. This not only enriches the students' learning experience but also broadens their cultural understanding,"* she explained. Mr. An, a mid-career teacher, spoke about the value of interdisciplinary learning in developing cultural competence. *"By discussing topics like global events or international relations in English, students not only practice the language but also gain insight into different cultural perspectives,"* he said. Mrs. Phuong, a near-end career teacher, reflected on the evolution of her teaching style to incorporate interdisciplinary elements. *"Over the years, I have realized the importance of connecting English language teaching with real-world issues and subjects. It helps students see the relevance of what they are learning and how it applies to different cultural settings,"* she observed.

Novice teachers, like Ms. Linh, often begin by incorporating basic elements from other disciplines, such as history or geography, into their language teaching. This reflects an early-career enthusiasm for enriching language learning with diverse content, aiming to make lessons more engaging and contextually rich. Mid-career teachers, such as Mr. An, typically develop this approach by connecting language learning with current global issues, like international relations. This reflects a deepening understanding of how language intersects with broader cultural and world phenomena, demonstrating a more sophisticated integration of interdisciplinary content. Near-end career teachers, represented by Mrs. Phuong, often exhibit a holistic approach, seamlessly blending language learning with an array of real-world disciplines and issues. This indicates a seasoned understanding of the interconnectedness of language with various aspects of knowledge and life, aiming to provide students with a comprehensive educational experience that extends beyond traditional language instruction. This progression from initial content integration to complex, real-world interdisciplinary teaching strategies across different career stages offers insights into the evolving nature of pedagogical approaches in language education.

Ms. Linh's technique of integrating historical, geographical, and social elements into English classes exemplifies CT's emphasis on connecting learning across knowledge areas. This interdisciplinary approach enriches the learning experience and broadens cultural understanding, showing language as interconnected with various knowledge aspects. Mr. An's method of discussing global events in English classes aligns with ICC principles, helping students practice language while gaining insights into different cultural perspectives. This approach is crucial for developing cultural competence by understanding language in broader cultural and disciplinary contexts. Mrs. Phuong's incorporation of interdisciplinary elements into her teaching reflects the integration of CT and ICC, connecting English teaching with real-world issues and various subjects. This broadens students' language understanding and appreciation of its application in different fields, underlining the importance of interdisciplinary teaching for a comprehensive, culturally aware learning environment. It caters to developing both autonomous learning skills and cultural competence.

Emphasis on Language Skills for Intercultural Communication

A critical strategy identified in the study was the emphasis on developing specific language skills geared towards effective intercultural communication. This focus was noted by two novice teachers (Ms. Trang and Mr. Binh), three mid-career teachers (Mr. An, Ms. Thao, and Mr. Hoang), and one near-end career teacher (Mrs. Lan).

Ms. Trang, a novice teacher, discussed the importance of teaching language skills that are directly applicable to intercultural contexts. *"I focus on practical skills like idiomatic expressions and cultural nuances in conversation. This prepares students for real-world intercultural interactions,"* she stated. Mr. An, a mid-career teacher, emphasized the role of language skills in understanding and navigating cultural differences. *"We work on skills like listening for cultural subtleties and expressing oneself clearly in diverse cultural settings. It is crucial for students to be able to communicate effectively across cultures,"* he explained. Mrs. Lan, representing the near-end career teachers, reflected on the increasing importance of intercultural communication skills in language teaching. *"In the past, the focus was more on general language proficiency. Now, there is a greater need to teach language in a way that facilitates understanding and communication across different cultures,"* she observed.

Novice teachers like Ms. Trang tend to focus on practical language skills such as idiomatic expressions and conversational nuances. This reflects their early-career effort to equip students with tangible skills for immediate intercultural engagement, emphasizing practicality and direct application in real-world settings. Mid-career teachers, represented by Mr. An, often broaden their focus to include more complex communication skills, like listening for cultural subtleties and expressing ideas clearly across cultural boundaries. This shift indicates a development towards a more nuanced understanding of intercultural communication, incorporating deeper aspects of cultural competence into language

instruction. Near-end career teachers like Mrs. Lan exhibit a refined focus, recognizing the changing landscape of language education towards intercultural competence. Their experience informs a comprehensive approach that integrates language proficiency with CA and communication skills. This progression from basic language functions to sophisticated intercultural communication abilities across career stages underscores the dynamic nature of language teaching in an increasingly interconnected global context.

Ms. Trang's approach to teaching idiomatic expressions and cultural nuances in conversation aligns with CT's focus on practical application and real-world experiences. This method prepares students for real-world intercultural interactions, encouraging active language engagement and fostering LA. Mr. An's emphasis on skills like listening for cultural subtleties and clear expression in diverse settings reflects ICC principles, preparing students for effective cross-cultural communication. This approach ensures students are not just linguistically proficient but also culturally competent. Mrs. Lan's observations on the evolution of language teaching towards intercultural communication skills demonstrate an integration of CT and ICC. This shift from general language proficiency to facilitating cross-cultural understanding and communication reflects the growing importance of CA in language use. It aligns with Constructivist principles of relevant learning experiences and ICC's emphasis on skills for interacting in different cultural contexts, highlighting the need for evolving teaching practices in a globally interconnected world where language learning is closely tied to cultural understanding and communication.

Utilization of Authentic Materials in Teaching

A prominent strategy highlighted in the study was the utilization of authentic materials in language teaching to promote LA and enhance CA. This approach was embraced by three novice teachers (Ms. Linh, Ms. Trang, Mr. Binh), two mid-career teachers (Mr. An, Ms. Thao), and two near-end career teachers (Mrs. Lan, Mrs. Phuong).

Ms. Linh, a novice teacher, spoke about the importance of using materials that reflect real-life language use. "*I incorporate news articles, podcasts, and videos from English-speaking countries in my lessons. This exposes students to authentic language and cultural contexts,*" she explained. Mr. An, a mid-career teacher, highlighted the benefits of authentic materials in fostering cultural insights. "*By using resources like movies and music, I try to bring in cultural elements that textbooks often miss. It helps students get a more holistic view of the language and its cultural nuances,*" he said. Mrs. Phuong, a near-end career teacher, reflected on the evolution of her teaching resources. "*Over the years, I have shifted from relying solely on textbooks to integrating a variety of authentic materials. It has made the learning process more dynamic and relevant to the students' experiences,*" she observed.

Novice teachers, like Ms. Linh, tend to incorporate current and relatable content such as news articles and podcasts. This reflects an early-career focus on engaging students with contemporary and realistic language use, providing a direct connection to the target culture. Mid-career teachers, such as Mr. An, often deepen this approach by introducing a wider array of cultural materials, including movies and music. This expanded use of authentic resources signifies a more nuanced understanding of cultural representation in language teaching, aiming to provide students with a comprehensive cultural immersion. Near-end career teachers like Mrs. Phuong exhibit a shift from traditional textbook-centric methods to a diverse integration of authentic materials. This reflects their accumulated experience and evolving understanding of the dynamic nature of language and culture. Their approach often focuses on creating a rich, contextually varied learning environment that mirrors the complexity and vibrancy of real-world language use. This progression from straightforward use of current materials to a sophisticated, diverse incorporation of authentic content across career stages offers valuable insights into how teaching strategies adapt and evolve to meet the needs of an increasingly interconnected and culturally diverse world.

Ms. Linh's use of real-world materials like news articles, podcasts, and videos in English lessons demonstrates CT's focus on learning through real-life exposure. This approach provides authentic language and cultural context, promoting autonomous exploration and deeper understanding. It aligns with Constructivism's view that real-world connections enhance learning effectiveness. Mr. An's incorporation of movies and music in the classroom reflects ICC principles, offering insights into cultural aspects beyond textbooks and fostering a holistic view of language and culture. This method engages students with cultural content, crucial for developing intercultural communication competence. Mrs. Phuong's shift from textbook reliance to integrating diverse, authentic materials exemplifies a blend of CT and ICC. This transition to more dynamic resources aligns learning with real-life experiences, emphasizing the use of practical, culturally relevant materials. It caters to both knowledge construction through real-life relevance (CT) and the application of cultural understanding in language use (ICC), highlighting the effectiveness of authentic materials in creating a comprehensive and engaging language learning environment.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the strategies employed by Vietnamese tertiary-level EFL teachers to promote LA and enhance CA, offering a deeper understanding of these practices in a specific educational context. The discussion below delves into each finding, comparing them with existing literature and emphasizing their unique contributions to the field of EFL education.

The use of collaborative learning techniques reflects a growing trend in EFL education that emphasizes student interaction and cooperative learning (Yoshimura et al., 2023). However, the current study extends this understanding by revealing how collaborative learning in the Vietnamese context is particularly effective in enhancing CA, a dimension not widely explored in previous studies. This study underscores the role of collaborative learning in not only improving language skills but also in facilitating deeper intercultural understanding, a crucial aspect in today's globalized world. This aligns with CT that emphasizes the role of social interaction in learning, suggesting a meaningful integration of these theories in EFL contexts.

The integration of technology aligns with the increasing use of digital tools in language education (Ahmadi, 2018; Kessler, 2018). However, this study offers a nuanced perspective by demonstrating how Vietnamese teachers leverage technology to foster LA and cultural exploration. This is particularly relevant in contexts like Vietnam, where technology adoption in education is rapidly evolving. The study contributes to the understanding of how technology can be a powerful tool in providing access to diverse cultural content, thus broadening students' intercultural perspectives. It suggests an effective application of the technological pedagogical content knowledge framework, where teachers' understanding of technology integration is combined with content and pedagogical knowledge.

The emphasis on personalized feedback reflects an understanding of its importance in language learning (Salehian Kia et al., 2023). However, the current study reveals a distinctive approach to feedback in the Vietnamese context, where it is used not only for language improvement but also for deepening cultural insights. This dual focus on language and culture in feedback is a significant contribution to the literature, highlighting a holistic approach to language education that encompasses cultural competence. This approach resonates with constructivist theories, emphasizing the role of feedback in building learner's understanding and awareness.

The adoption of real-life scenarios and role-play is consistent with communicative language teaching practices (Waluyo, 2019). The unique contribution of this study lies in its exploration of how these techniques are specifically employed to enhance cultural understanding. This finding is significant as it illustrates how real-life simulations and role-playing can bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world intercultural interactions. This aligns with experiential learning theory, which advocates for learning through experience and reflection on doing.

Reflective learning practices are well-established in language education (Schön, 2017). The current study, however, sheds light on how reflection in the Vietnamese EFL context is particularly geared towards enhancing CA. This emphasis on cultural reflection represents a novel contribution, indicating a more introspective approach to understanding language and culture, which is crucial in developing intercultural competence. This approach is reflective of transformative learning theory, where critical reflection leads to a change in perspective.

The integration of local culture adds a unique dimension to the existing literature on culturally responsive teaching (Yuliantari & Huda, 2023). This study illuminates how local cultural elements can serve as a foundation for exploring and understanding foreign cultures, thus enriching the EFL learning experience. This approach underscores the importance of contextualizing language learning within the students' own cultural framework, a practice that is particularly impactful in non-Western educational settings. This is in line with the cultural-historical activity theory, which highlights the role of culture and context in shaping human activity.

Contextualized language instruction resonates with task-based language teaching methods (Vieira, 2017). The study contributes to this area by showcasing how contextualization in the Vietnamese EFL context specifically aids in developing CA. This finding highlights the effectiveness of teaching language through culturally rich contexts, thereby providing students with a more comprehensive understanding of language use in different cultural settings. This method reflects the principles of ecological approaches to language teaching, which advocate for learning environments that mimic the complexities and dynamics of real-life communication.

The focus on critical thinking and cultural analysis aligns with contemporary educational goals (Shirayev & Levy, 2016). However, the study extends this understanding by revealing how these skills are cultivated in the Vietnamese EFL context to enhance not just language proficiency but also cultural understanding. This dual focus is a significant contribution, indicating a more critical and analytical approach to cultural content in language education. This can be seen as an application of critical pedagogy, which calls for teaching approaches that encourage students to question and challenge prevailing assumptions and beliefs.

The creation of student-centered learning environments is consistent with learner-centered pedagogy (Weimer, 2013). The unique aspect of this study lies in its exploration of how such environments in the Vietnamese context specifically foster CA alongside language skills. This finding contributes to the understanding of how student autonomy and engagement can be effectively leveraged to deepen intercultural understanding in language education. The emphasis on student-centered learning aligns with humanistic approaches to education, which focus on the development of the whole person, including cultural and emotional aspects.

The utilization of authentic materials aligns with the trend towards authenticity in language teaching (Ibrahimovna, 2020). However, the study contributes new insights into how these materials are used in the Vietnamese context to enhance both language skills and cultural understanding. This finding underscores the effectiveness of authentic

materials in providing real-world contexts and cultural exposure, enriching the EFL learning experience. This approach is supported by authenticity theory, which stresses the importance of using real-world materials to create meaningful and engaging learning experiences.

The use of interdisciplinary approaches adds a novel perspective to language education literature. This study highlights how incorporating elements from various disciplines can enrich the EFL learning experience by providing diverse cultural and linguistic insights. This approach reflects a broader and more holistic understanding of language learning, extending beyond traditional language teaching methods. Additionally, the focus on developing language skills for intercultural communication offers a distinctive contribution to the field. This study highlights how language instruction in the Vietnamese context is specifically tailored to prepare students for effective communication in diverse cultural settings. This emphasis on intercultural communicative competence is particularly relevant in the contemporary globalized world. This holistic approach aligns with the notion of translanguaging and transcultural competence, which emphasizes the ability to operate between languages and cultures.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the strategies employed by Vietnamese tertiary-level EFL teachers to promote LA and enhance CA. Situated in the context of Vietnam's rapidly evolving educational landscape, where English language proficiency is increasingly intertwined with cultural competence, this research provides valuable insights into teaching practices in this specific setting. The methodology centered around qualitative data collection, primarily through semi-structured interviews with nine EFL teachers across different career stages in two Vietnamese tertiary institutions. The interviews were designed to delve into the teachers' experiences, beliefs, and practices, allowing for an in-depth exploration of their pedagogical approaches. The data was then subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the strategies in practice.

The findings revealed several key strategies: collaborative learning, integration of technology, personalized feedback and guidance, use of real-life scenarios and role-play, emphasis on reflective learning practices, incorporation of local culture, contextualized language instruction, emphasis on critical thinking and cultural analysis, creation of student-centered learning environments, incorporation of interdisciplinary approaches, focus on language skills for intercultural communication, and utilization of authentic materials. These strategies were shown to effectively promote LA and enhance CA among students, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of language teaching that extends beyond traditional methods. The study provides new insights into the dynamic integration of these strategies in the Vietnamese tertiary-level EFL context, offering a unique perspective on culturally responsive language teaching. One significant finding is the adept use of local cultural elements as a bridge to international cultures, underscoring a novel approach to cultural competence in language education. Additionally, the research highlights the evolving role of technology, not just as a tool for language practice, but as a medium for cultural exploration, which is particularly insightful in the context of increasing digitalization in education. This study's findings also emphasize the critical role of student-centered environments and interdisciplinary approaches, which are relatively underexplored in EFL research, particularly in Asian educational settings. These unique results contribute valuable knowledge to researchers and scholars by offering practical, context-specific examples of effective language teaching strategies that resonate with global trends in educational diversity and technological advancement. The insights from this research can inform future studies and pedagogical practices, encouraging a more comprehensive and culturally attuned approach to language education.

Based on these findings, the study has several implications for the field of EFL education. Firstly, it emphasizes the importance of adopting a multifaceted approach to language teaching, one that not only focuses on linguistic competence but also on cultural understanding and LA. Teachers are encouraged to explore and adopt diverse teaching strategies that cater to the cultural and linguistic needs of their students, enhancing their engagement and learning outcomes. This is particularly crucial in a globalized world where intercultural communication is a key skill. Secondly, the study highlights the need for continuous professional development for teachers to stay abreast of innovative teaching strategies that can address the evolving needs of language learners. Educators should seek opportunities for training and collaboration to integrate these strategies effectively in their classrooms. Thirdly, it suggests the necessity for educational policymakers to support and encourage such diverse and holistic teaching practices, recognizing the importance of cultural competence in language education. Policymakers should consider revising educational policies and curriculum standards to include and prioritize CA and LA. The study also provides practical insights for EFL educators, particularly in similar socio-cultural contexts, on how to integrate various strategies into their teaching to enhance both language skills and CA. These insights encourage educators to continually reflect on their teaching methods and adapt them to meet the evolving cultural dynamics of their classrooms.

Additionally, for pedagogical practice, this study suggests the integration of strategies such as using authentic materials, encouraging critical thinking, and adopting student-centered learning environments. Teachers should actively seek out and employ materials and activities that are culturally relevant and engaging to their students, fostering a deeper connection with the language and its cultural context. These practices align with the goal of developing well-rounded communicators who are linguistically proficient and culturally astute. In terms of teacher education, there is a clear indication of the need for ongoing professional development that includes training in these innovative strategies and a

focus on intercultural competence. Teacher training programs should emphasize the development of these competencies, preparing educators to meet the diverse needs of their learners. Workshops, seminars, and collaborative learning opportunities could be crucial in equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary for contemporary EFL teaching. Regarding curriculum design, the study advocates for a curriculum that is not only linguistically robust but also culturally rich and adaptable to the changing global context. Curriculum designers should work closely with educators to ensure that teaching materials are both linguistically accurate and culturally sensitive, providing a holistic learning experience for students. Collaborations with experts in various cultural fields and the inclusion of up-to-date authentic materials can further enhance the relevance and effectiveness of the EFL curriculum. Ultimately, these recommendations aim to foster a more culturally responsive, engaging, and effective EFL teaching and learning environment.

In conclusion, this research contributes significantly to the understanding of EFL teaching practices in the Vietnamese context. It underscores the dynamic and multifaceted nature of language teaching and provides a blueprint for effective EFL education that fosters LA and CA, preparing students for the demands of a culturally diverse and interconnected world.

Recommendations

Future research could expand the scope by including a larger and more diverse sample of teachers from various regions and types of institutions in Vietnam. Quantitative studies or mixed-methods approaches could be employed to complement the qualitative insights and provide a broader understanding of the effectiveness of the strategies used. Future research could also benefit from incorporating the perspectives of learners, thus providing a more holistic view of the teaching and learning process in the EFL context. Additionally, longitudinal studies could offer valuable information on how teaching strategies evolve over time and their long-term impact on LA and CA. Investigations into the specific challenges and successes in integrating technology in language teaching in resource-limited settings could also provide critical insights for educators in similar contexts.

Limitations

The current study, while providing valuable insights into the strategies used by Vietnamese tertiary-level EFL teachers, is not without its limitations. One of the primary limitations is the relatively small sample size and the focus on only two institutions, which may not fully represent the diversity of teaching practices across Vietnam. Additionally, the study's qualitative nature, though rich in detailed perspectives, limits the generalizability of its findings. Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to biases or inaccuracies in teachers' reflections and interpretations of their practices. Furthermore, the study did not directly involve EFL learners, whose perspectives might offer crucial insights into the effectiveness of the identified teaching strategies.

Ethics Statements

This study was reviewed and approved by Can Tho University. The participants provided their oral informed consent to participate in this study.

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