

VIETNAMESE EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF INTEGRATING CULTURAL CONTENT INTO READING AND WRITING COURSES

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ABSTRACT

This study explores Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of integrating cultural content into reading and writing courses, with a particular focus on perceived benefits and challenges. A quantitative research design was employed using a structured questionnaire administered to 200 English-major students at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University in Vietnam. The instrument consisted of 20 Likert-scale items measuring students' perceptions of usefulness, engagement, and challenges associated with cultural integration. Data were analyzed using percentage distributions to identify overall trends in students' responses. The findings indicate that students generally hold positive perceptions of integrating cultural content, particularly in terms of improving reading comprehension, supporting idea development in writing, and increasing engagement. However, several challenges were also identified, including limited background knowledge, difficulties with culturally specific vocabulary, and challenges in writing about unfamiliar cultural topics. The study highlights the importance of incorporating cultural content into Reading and Writing instruction while also emphasizing the need for appropriate instructional support to enhance learning effectiveness in EFL contexts.

Keywords: *cultural content integration, reading and writing courses, student perceptions, Vietnamese EFL context*

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, the incorporation of culture into foreign language teaching has gained considerable attention. Language is increasingly recognized as a medium of communication influenced by social practices and cultural meanings rather than just a system of grammar and vocabulary. According to Kramsch (1993), Byram (1997), and Alptekin (2002), effective language learning requires the development of intercultural communicative competence, which enables learners to interpret and produce language appropriately in diverse cultural contexts. As a result, integrating cultural material into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) training has emerged as a crucial pedagogical goal.

In spite of this recognition, education in many EFL contexts tends to emphasize linguistic knowledge and technical abilities while ignoring cultural aspects, especially in skill-based courses like reading and writing. This imbalance may limit students' ability to completely understand texts and produce insightful written responses, particularly when interacting with culturally embedded content. Integrating cultural

components into reading and writing classes can improve students' prior knowledge, increase their level of involvement, and foster idea development, thereby leading to more successful language learning.

While cultural content is occasionally incorporated into teaching materials in the Vietnamese EFL environment, there is still little systematic integration of it into reading and writing instruction. More importantly, learners' perceptions of such integration have not been sufficiently explored. Understanding students' perceptions is crucial, as it can significantly influence the success of pedagogical innovations (Sercu, 2005).

Therefore, this study aims to investigate Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of integrating cultural content into reading and writing courses. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of integrating cultural content into Reading and Writing courses?

2. What benefits and challenges do students perceive from culture-integrated instruction?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of culture into foreign language teaching has been widely viewed as a crucial component of effective language acquisition. Modern perspectives place more emphasis on language's function as a communication tool influenced by social norms and cultural meanings than they do on it as a strictly structured system of grammar and lexicon (Brown, 2007).

Since language both reflects and creates cultural realities, Kramsch (1993) contends that language and culture are inextricably linked. Similarly, Byram (1997) emphasizes the significance of intercultural communicative competence, which enables learners to interact effectively across cultural contexts. This perspective is further supported by Alptekin (2002), who highlights the importance of intercultural competence in English language teaching. In EFL settings, particularly in countries such as Vietnam where learners have limited exposure to authentic cultural environments, classroom instruction is the main source of cultural knowledge. Therefore, incorporating cultural content into language teaching is essential for developing learners' communicative competence.

Despite this theoretical recognition, there is still little incorporation of cultural content into skill-based courses like writing and reading. Instruction in these courses often focuses on linguistic aspects, including vocabulary development, grammatical accuracy, and comprehension strategies (Hyland, 2003; Harmer, 2007), with less emphasis on the cultural dimensions of texts. In contrast, reading and writing are inherently connected to cultural contexts, as texts are embedded with values, beliefs, and perspectives specific to particular societies. According to Grabe and Zhang (2013), reading-to-write tasks require learners to engage with texts critically, interpret meaning, and construct their own responses. When cultural content is incorporated into these tasks, learners are encouraged not only to understand language forms but also to interpret cultural meanings and express ideas more meaningfully in writing.

Learning outcomes are greatly influenced by how students view teaching strategies. Learners' motivation, engagement, and willingness to

participate in learning activities can be influenced by their perceptions, which include their attitudes, beliefs, and assessments of teaching methods. Previous studies have shown that students generally hold positive attitudes toward culturally enriched instruction (Sercu, 2005), as it makes learning more engaging and meaningful. However, students frequently encounter certain challenges when interacting with culturally complex content. These conflicting opinions imply that while cultural integration is beneficial, it requires careful implementation to maximize its effectiveness.

Although a lot of research has examined the role of culture in language teaching, relatively few studies have focused specifically on students' perceptions of integrating cultural content into reading and writing courses, particularly in the Vietnamese EFL context. Understanding learners' perceived benefits and challenges can provide valuable insights for improving pedagogical practices; thus, this study aims to explore Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of integrating cultural content into reading and writing courses, with a particular focus on the benefits and challenges they experience.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employed quantitative research design to investigate Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of integrating cultural content into reading and writing courses. A questionnaire was used as the primary instrument to collect data on students' perceived benefits and challenges. The quantitative approach was selected to provide a clear and systematic description of students' perceptions.

3.2. Participants

The participants consisted of 200 undergraduate students majoring in English at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University (SFL-TNU) in Vietnam. These students were either currently enrolled in or had previously completed reading and writing courses. A convenience sampling method was adopted due to accessibility and practicality. The participants represented different years of study and levels of English proficiency. Most had prior exposure to cultural content in English classes, making them appropriate respondents for this study.

3.3. Instrument

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of two sections.

The first section gathered demographic information, including gender, year of study, and learning experience. The second section included 20 Likert-scale items designed to measure students' perceptions of integrating cultural content into reading and writing courses, with a focus on perceived benefits and challenges. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The questionnaire items were adapted from previous studies on culture in language learning and student perceptions, particularly drawing on frameworks proposed by Kramsch (1993), Byram (1997), and Hyland (2003).

To ensure clarity and content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by experienced EFL teachers before administration.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted over a period of two to three weeks. The questionnaire was distributed to participants in either paper-based or online format. Prior to participation, students were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential.

Participation was voluntary, and students were encouraged to provide honest responses based on their learning experiences. All responses were collected and organized for analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, focusing on percentage distributions. Specifically, the frequency and percentage of responses for each item were calculated to identify overall trends in students' perceptions of integrating cultural content into reading and writing courses.

The analysis was conducted using spreadsheet tools such as Microsoft Excel. The results were presented in tables and charts to illustrate the distribution of responses across different levels of agreement. These findings were then interpreted to address the research questions, particularly in terms of perceived benefits and challenges.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Students' Perceptions of the Usefulness of Cultural Integration

Item	Statement	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)
1	Helps understand reading texts better	78%
2	Provides useful ideas for writing tasks	74%
3	Makes Reading and Writing lessons more meaningful	81%
4	Helps use English more appropriately	76%
5	Improves overall learning experience	77%

Table 1. Perceived Usefulness of Cultural Integration (Items 1–5, N = 200)

As can be seen from Table 1, the majority of students had positive perceptions regarding the usefulness of integrating cultural content into reading and writing courses. The statement that cultural integration increases the significance of learning accounted for the highest level of agreement (81%).

Furthermore, 78% of respondents had the view that cultural content supports reading comprehension. This finding suggests that cultural knowledge provides crucial background information that improves students' ability to understand texts, especially when they deal with culturally embedded meanings.

Similarly, 74% of respondents stated that cultural topics offer helpful ideas for writing assignments, which indicates that exposure to cultural content development in writing.

In conclusion, these findings show that students recognize the educational benefits of cultural integration in enhancing both comprehension and production. This supports Kramsch's (1993) claim that language learning becomes more meaningful when it is situated within cultural contexts.

4.2. Students' Perceptions of Engagement and Learning Experience

Item	Statement	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)
6	Lessons become more interesting	76%
7	Increases motivation to participate	72%
8	Enjoy discussing cultural issues	75%
9	Increases attention during lessons	73%
10	Feel more involved in learning	74%

Table 2. Engagement and Learning Experience (Items 6–10, N = 200)

The data presented in Table 2 highlight students' positive opinions of engagement. A substantial percentage of participants (76%) agreed that incorporating cultural information made lessons more engaging. This implies that cultural subjects make educational materials more appealing and help create a more engaging learning environment.

Moreover, 72% of students reported increased motivation to participate in classroom activities. This indicates that cultural integration not only captures students' interest but also encourages active involvement in learning.

Similarly, 75% of respondents stated that they enjoy discussing cultural issues, which suggests that cultural content fosters interaction and communication among learners.

Additionally, 72% of students indicated that they were more motivated to engage in class activities. This suggests that cultural integration not only captures students' interest but also motivates them to participate actively in learning. Likewise, 75% of respondents stated that they enjoy talking about cultural issues, which indicates that cultural content encourages student engagement and communication.

According to the comparatively high percentages across all items in this area, a more dynamic and learner-centered classroom may result from cultural integration. Cultural material fosters deeper engagement with reading and writing

assignments and improves the entire learning experience by encouraging conversation, involvement, and attentiveness.

4.3. Students' Perceived Challenges

Item	Statement	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)
11	Lack of background knowledge	68%
12	Cultural vocabulary is difficult	65%
13	Difficult to write about unfamiliar topics	62%
14	Difficult to compare cultures	59%
15	Feel confused with cultural content	60%

Table 3. Perceived Challenges (Items 11–15, N=200)

Table 3 shows that students face a number of difficulties while using culturally integrated resources despite the positive perceptions reported above. According to 68% of students, the biggest problem is a lack of background knowledge. This implies that many students lack the background information necessary to completely comprehend cultural subjects, which could impede comprehension.

The grammatical complexity of culturally rich texts, especially in reading, is further shown by the fact that 65% of respondents stated that they had trouble with cultural terminology.

62% of students found it difficult to write about unfamiliar cultural topics, while 59% reported challenges in comparing foreign and Vietnamese cultures. These results imply that while cultural content presents worthwhile educational possibilities, it may also pose challenges for students who lack the necessary prior information and assistance.

These findings show that, despite its advantages, cultural integration may raise cognitive load and necessitate more instructional scaffolding. According to Grabe and Zhang (2013), complicated content activities must be carefully

designed to prevent learners from being overwhelmed.

4.4. Overall Perceptions of Cultural Integration

Item	Statement	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)
16	Cultural content is useful for learning English	82%
17	Cultural topics improve understanding of texts	79%
18	Cultural content supports writing development	77%
19	Cultural integration makes learning more effective	80%
20	Cultural content is necessary in reading and writing courses	83%

Table 4. Overall Perceptions (Items 16–20, N=200)

Table 4 presents students' overall perceptions of cultural integration. With percentages ranging from 77% to 83%, the results consistently demonstrate strong levels of agreement across all items. Interestingly, 83% of students concurred that cultural content is essential in reading and writing classes, demonstrating a deep understanding of its significance in language acquisition.

Furthermore, 79% of respondents reported better comprehension of texts, and 80% of respondents said that cultural integration increases learning effectiveness.

These results support the notion that cultural material improves instruction's efficacy and caliber. The consistently high percentages across this section indicate that students view cultural integration as both advantageous and crucial to language acquisition.

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of integrating cultural content into reading and writing courses, with a focus on perceived benefits and challenges. The results showed that students generally hold positive

perceptions of this instructional approach. Many participants stated that cultural integration improves reading comprehension, encourages the development of ideas in writing, and adds significance and interest to learning.

Nevertheless, the study also indicated a number of challenges, such as a lack of background knowledge, difficulties with culturally specific vocabulary, and challenges in writing on cultural topics. These results show that although cultural integration has obvious pedagogical benefits, it also requires appropriate instructional support to ensure effective learning.

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