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The Effects of Integrating Local Culture Integration on The English-Speaking Skill of Seventh Grade Students in Bac Lieu Province, Vietnam

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Abstract

This study examines the effects of integrating local cultural content into English-speaking skill for seventh grade students in a rural area of Bac Lieu Province, Vietnam. Using the mixed-methods research design, the study aims at investigating changes in students' speaking skill, confidence, motivation, and cultural awareness. Thirty students participated in a 12-week instructional intervention in which English-speaking tasks were created around locally familiar themes, including the Ok-Om-Bok Festival, the legend of Cong Tu Bac Lieu, shrimp farming, and ecotourism. Data were gathered through pre- and post-intervention observation checklists and examined using paired-samples t-tests, while qualitative data were collected from semi-structured interviews and student artifacts. The findings showed that students' pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and speaking confidence following the intervention was significantly improved. Also, the result revealed that students' motivation and sense of cultural and intercultural pride increased when they used English to express their local identity. As a result, the study showed that integrating local culture into EFL speaking lessons can help students improve linguistic performance while also supporting their engagement and intercultural awareness. Also, these findings highlighted that the educational value of culturally responsive methods in rural English language teaching cannot be absent in a new language learning especially in regional context like Bac lieu, Vietnam.

Keywords local culture, EFL speaking, culturally responsive pedagogy, rural education, Vietnam

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INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

In the era of educational integration and education cross-share, English has become central to knowledge exchange and professional connection. Interlinkages among countries are becoming more accessible, and this network of interconnection is closely tied to English as a global language, which represents an important learning goal for Vietnamese students. Consequently, English learning is not always engaging, and students may struggle to relate it to their real lives. One possible pedagogical solution to this gap is the inclusion of local culture in English instruction, which connects classroom learning with students' daily lives, community, and cultural pride. Intercultural integration should involve a balance between cultural and linguistic focus (Kramsch, 1993; Nguyen et al., 2016). Bac Lieu Province, in the Mekong Delta, has a rich cultural heritage that includes the Ok Om Bok Festival, the legend of Cong Tu Bac Lieu, and the local shrimp and salt industries, all of which can be used to develop meaningful and authentic English-speaking tasks. By incorporating these familiar cultural components into English classes, teachers may help students communicate with greater fluency and confidence about the world they know in English. As such, this paper aims to investigate the impact of local culture integration on English-speaking proficiency and students' involvement in rural areas of Vietnam.

Research Objective and Research Question

The research goal and setting described in this paper formed part of an educational project planned and set by the local authority as the official provider. Specifically, this project was conducted to identify the effects of integrating local cultural content into English-speaking lessons on Grade 7 junior learners' language proficiency and motivation. The project sought to answer the following research question. What is the relationship between the inclusion of local cultural material in English lessons and students' speaking proficiency, confidence, and motivation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature is based on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that learning occurs through social interaction and cultural mediation. Language learning, therefore, cannot be separated from cultural context; learners create meaning through communication, which represents their social and cultural world. In this respect, culture becomes both the content and the context of language learning (Kramsch, 1993). According to Byram (2021), intercultural communicative competence entails the linguistic skill to use language effectively in culturally diverse situations. The incorporation of local culture in EFL classrooms not only supports linguistic accuracy but also develops learners' intercultural awareness and identity. Previous studies have highlighted the potential of culturally responsive approaches to support language learning and learner engagement. Remarkably, Corbett (2003) stated that new teaching practices and rationales need to be introduced to students who may be unfamiliar to an intercultural ELT approach. Furthermore, he strongly believed that intercultural language education is common in teaching languages, English is a good way to convey the cultural identity. Intercultural language education can solve the problems of understanding local and global inequality. English language education has more or less potential to empower students by giving them excellent opportunity to get broader humanistic and cultural education. Intercultural ELT provides a process to better understanding individual and cultural diversity. Most importantly, Intercultural ELT has important role in contributing to broaden individual perspectives and promoting open minds and understanding through educational and cultural shares.

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Once more, it is impossible to deny that the relationship between learning and cultural identity is closely allied. Some of the positive correlations have been found out from Tineh et al.'s (2023); Hoelscher's (1999) research studies. The results showed that classrooms filled with teachers and students who share their cultural identities build trust and foster stronger relationships, which leads to student engagement, higher motivation and excitement about learning together. Education inevitably brings shifts; however, learners' cultural identity plays a significant role in transmission of such values.

To borrow the perspectives of Socio-cultural Theory (SCT), it has reflected popularity for providing valuable psychological insights into human language development, to get language to express the culture and culture lifts the language development. Hue's (2024) study revealed that the clear picture of local culture including Ok Om Bok, Ba OM Pond and Cong Tu Bac Lieu offered unique opportunities to contextualize language learning. The current research helps close this gap by demonstrating that the integration of local culture can increase language proficiency and cultural identity in the EFL classroom.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-method design was used because it integrated quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative part of the study involved measuring improvement in students' speaking proficiency using pre- and post-observation checklists, whereas the qualitative part investigated students' perceptions and engagement through interviews and artefacts. This triangulation methodology supports validity and rich interpretation (Creswell, 2012). The study involved 30 Grade 7 students at Vinh Phu Dong A Secondary School in Bac Lieu Province. The class represented a standard rural learning context, with students having an average A2 level according to the CEFR descriptors. They completed speaking projects on local themes in groups of five across six groups. The tools included an observation checklist covering pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and confidence; semi-structured interviews; and student artefacts such as posters and dialogues. SPSS was employed to analyse quantitative data, whereas the thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2012) was used for qualitative data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this mixed-methods study showed that incorporating local culture into English-speaking lessons had a significant effect on learners' linguistic proficiency, confidence, and interest. Triangulation of data based on classroom observation, student interviews, and learning artefacts consistently showed improvement in both measurable language components and affective learning outcomes.

Observation Findings

From the pre- and post-intervention observation checklists, quantitative data were examined to identify changes in students' English-speaking performance across five components, namely pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and confidence. Descriptive statistics and paired-samples t-tests were used to clarify whether the observed differences were statistically significant.

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During the 12-week local culture-integrated intervention, the results showed consistent and substantial enhancement across all components. As displayed in Figure 1, students' overall speaking performance improved steadily rather than unevenly, demonstrating balanced improvement in speaking.

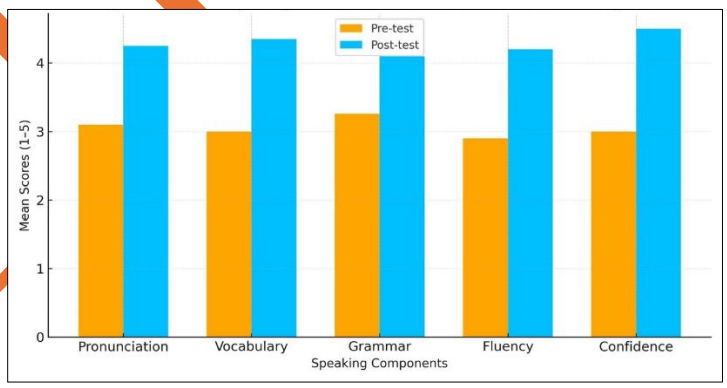
Specifically, pronunciation scores rose from a pre-intervention mean of 3.10 (SD = 0.47) to a post-intervention mean of 4.25 (SD = 0.39). The paired-samples t-test confirmed that this increase was statistically significant, $t(29) = 8.62$, $p < .001$. Vocabulary performance also increased from a mean score of 3.00 (SD = 0.51) to 4.35 (SD = 0.42), $t(29) = 9.14$, $p < .001$, indicating that students expanded their lexical selection when discussing familiar cultural topics.

Fluency and confidence also improved. Fluency scores increased from a mean of 2.95 (SD = 0.49) to 4.25 (SD = 0.44), $t(29) = 7.88$, $p < .001$, while confidence scores rose from 2.85 (SD = 0.53) to 4.35 (SD = 0.40), $t(29) = 9.67$, $p < .001$. These gains imply that students spoke more willingly and participated in English communication with less hesitation.

The significant improvement in confidence is particularly noteworthy, as it implies reduced speaking anxiety. Classroom observations demonstrated that students participated more readily, volunteered answers more frequently, and spoke with fewer pauses and self-corrections. This pattern suggests that discussing culturally familiar content, such as the Ok Om Bok Festival or local shrimp farming, helped learners concentrate on meaning instead of fear of linguistic error.

Overall, integrating local culture into speaking instruction produced statistically significant and pedagogically meaningful increases in students' oral performance. As a result, culturally contextualised instruction can improve both linguistic accuracy and communicative confidence in rural EFL classrooms.

Figure 1: *Students' Speaking Performance before and after Local Culture Integration.*



Interview Findings

Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed three similar themes, namely increased motivation, greater self-confidence, and enhanced cultural pride. Students were enthusiastic about topics with which they were personally familiar.

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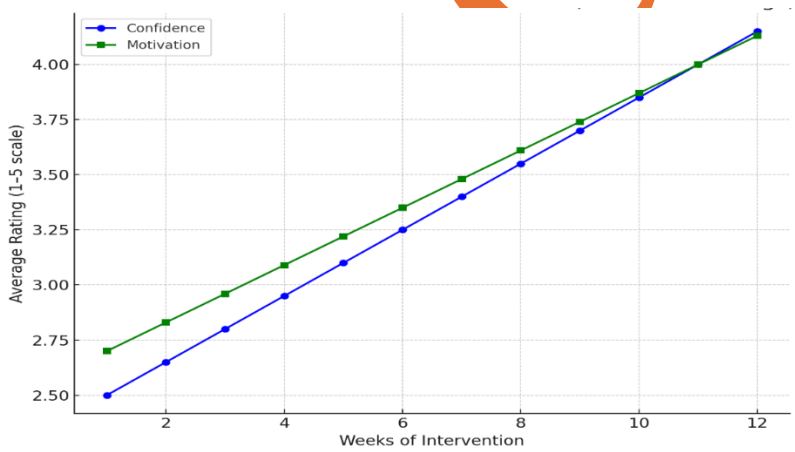
A participant noted the following.

> "… *When discussing our festivals, I can speak more comfortably since I already know the story. One of them said that I am proud to learn about the story of the Cong Tu Bac Lieu in English, which makes me proud of my hometown…*"

In interaction, both motivation and confidence increased continuously during the 12 weeks, as evidenced by the line graph of interview data below. Students who had been reluctant to use English in the presence of others were able to open up and express themselves. As stated by many learners, the new lessons enabled them to overcome fear and self-consciousness. This aligns with Kramsch's (1993) idea that culture serves as a symbolic mediator, rendering communication meaningful and personal.

In simple terms, when learners talk about their cultural environment, English ceases to be a foreign medium and becomes a medium of life. Language development is not the only positive outcome of this linguistic-identity relationship; socio-emotional engagement is also promoted. The increased confidence of students was related to the pedagogical principle of learning through meaning, where communication is both cognitive and cultural.

Figure 2: *Interview Coding Trends: Students' Confidence and Motivation.*



Analysis of Student Artifacts

Student-made artefacts, including PowerPoint presentations, role-play scripts, and posters, were clear examples of language development and cultural creativity. The pie chart, which summarises the artefact analysis, shows that the Ok Om Bok Festival (35 percent) and the Cong Tu Bac Lieu legend (25 percent) accounted for most of the students' work. Other topics included Tet celebrations (5 percent), wind power and ecotourism (15 percent), and industries such as shrimp and salt farming (20 percent).

The topics chosen show that students had a genuine emotional connection with their cultural surroundings. The language employed in these artefacts demonstrated improved grammatical accuracy, a wider lexicon, and effective use of cohesive devices and descriptive adjectives. For

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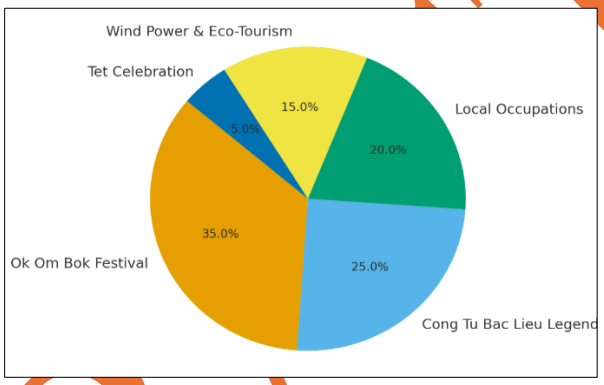
example, by describing “rice harvesting”, “traditional lanterns”, or “wind turbines along the coast”, students successfully incorporated local vocabulary into English discourse.

In addition, the imaginative visuals in their performances and posters demonstrated students’ engagement with linguistic and cultural content. Tomlinson (2012) centred on the importance of meaningful and engaging materials in language learning, particularly materials that encourage learners to interact with language in personally relevant ways. In the current study, using locally relevant cultural materials and personal perspectives appeared to support students’ creativity, teamwork, and engagement with English while providing some excellent opportunities to boost their language proficiency. The finding demonstrated that using local cultural materials personal perspectives supported creativity, teamwork, and intercultural awareness among students and then facilitated to enhance their English language proficiency.

Figure 3: *Distribution of Local Cultural Themes in Students’ Artifacts.*



DISCUSSION

The findings from the combination of all instruments demonstrate that language learning is more effective when it is grounded in culturally relevant contexts. The improvements in test scores, coupled with students’ overall development, demonstrate their cultural growth. The evidence shows how Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory can be put to practical use, as learning occurs through social interaction mediated by cultural resources. In this case, culture served as a mediator between target-language use and students’ personal experiences.

This method of integration also contributes to Byram’s (2021) framework of intercultural communicative competence because it allows students to communicate appropriately and successfully across cultural borders without losing their sense of self. The research findings indicate that English teaching in rural Vietnam should incorporate local values and practices to offer integrated and meaningful learning processes, rather than relying solely on imported cultural references.

Finally, the mixed-method evidence provides firm support for the argument that introducing local culture into English language teaching can transform passive language learning into identity-based, active communication.

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CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The empirical and qualitative data provided by this research are robust and show that students' linguistic proficiency, self-confidence, and cultural awareness improve significantly when local culture is integrated into English-speaking classes. The 12-week intervention allowed students to speak English more fluently, accurately, and with better pronunciation, while also experiencing pride in sharing their local heritage. The intervention bridged the gap between language learning and lived experience, thereby addressing the lack of engagement prevalent in rural EFL classrooms.

These findings demonstrate that when English is placed in a local context, such as through the Ok Om Bok Festival and the legend of Cong Tu Bac Lieu, students perceive it as topical and enjoyable rather than as a detached academic necessity. This meaningful relationship not only enhanced performance but also produced longer-term motivation and intercultural sensitivity. The paper emphasises the importance of teachers developing culturally sensitive lessons. Teachers should be encouraged to select topics, pictures, and activities that are motivated by learners' own environments. Real speaking opportunities can be achieved through project-based activities that promote language proficiency and a sense of community pride, such as cultural storytelling, poster design, or interviewing the region's craftspeople.

Educational policymakers and textbook writers should include more regionally focused material at the national curriculum level. English education in Vietnam is not only about language competence but also about producing citizens who are globally conscious while remaining locally grounded, as indicated by the 2018 General Education Programme (MOET, 2018). By balancing the preservation of local identity with the ability to communicate with the wider world, the incorporation of cultural content fits this vision closely. Finally, future studies should examine the long-term impacts of integrating local culture across various academic levels and skill sets, such as writing and listening. When culturally contextualised approaches are used, it would also be beneficial to examine how teachers perceive the situation and the challenges they face in the classroom.

Ultimately, the integration of local culture in EFL classrooms represents a pedagogical shift from teaching language about others to teaching language through us. When students see their community represented in English classes, they develop into cultural ambassadors as well as language learners; they become self-assured, articulate, and proud to share stories of Bac Lieu with the world.

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