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Repositioning English Through Vietnamese Culture: Teachers' Practices, Tensions, and Intercultural Possibilities in EFL Classrooms



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Abstract

This study investigates how Vietnamese culture is integrated into English Language Teaching (ELT) by examining teachers' perceptions, classroom practices, and the challenges they encounter in Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Drawing on individual interviews and classroom observations with 10 Vietnamese EFL teachers, the study found that teachers viewed local culture as a valuable pedagogical resource for connecting English learning with students' identities, experiences, and everyday lives. Integrating Vietnamese culture encouraged learner engagement, enabled students to express their own cultural knowledge through English, and supported teachers' understanding of learners' sociocultural backgrounds. Classroom practices included using local festivals, authentic cultural materials, stories, and role-playing activities to make English learning more meaningful and contextually relevant. However, teachers also faced challenges related to cultural sensitivity, limited access to locally grounded English-language resources, and difficulties in translating culturally embedded meanings across languages. The findings further indicate that although Vietnamese culture was regularly incorporated into lessons, classroom discussions often emphasized cultural description rather than interpretation and critical reflection. The study argues that the value of local culture integration lies not simply in including local content but in promoting intercultural learning through dialogue, interpretation, and engagement with multiple cultural perspectives.

Keywords: English as a global language, culturally responsive pedagogy, intercultural learning, local culture integration, Vietnamese culture

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Introduction

Contemporary language education has moved beyond a narrow focus on grammar and vocabulary toward the broader goal of developing learners' intercultural competence (see Byram & Wagner, 2018; Nguyen & Ho, 2023; Xu et al., 2025). This shift reflects recognition that successful communication requires not only linguistic proficiency but also the ability to engage meaningfully with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Byram & Wagner, 2018). Thus, intercultural language teaching emphasizes the development of attitudes, knowledge, and skills that enable learners to interpret, relate to, and negotiate cultural differences. In doing so, it positions language classrooms as spaces where students are prepared to participate critically and responsibly in an increasingly interconnected world (Byram & Wagner, 2018). Within such a perspective, language teaching is increasingly understood as a holistic endeavor that engages the whole person. In other words, instead of treating language as a neutral system of rules, scholars argue that it is deeply embedded in social, cultural, and ethical contexts (Kim, 2020). Therefore, effective pedagogy attends to learners' social and emotional dimensions, promoting empathy, cultural awareness, and relational understanding. Through engagement with authentic contexts and intercultural dialogue, students are encouraged to develop not only communicative competence but also the capacity to appreciate diverse perspectives and navigate complex cultural realities (Kim, 2020). Such an approach underscores the role of language education in shaping individuals who can participate actively and ethically in global communication.

Although contemporary language education policies increasingly emphasize the development of learners' intercultural communicative competence and their ability to engage with diverse linguistic and cultural communities, classroom implementation has not always reflected these aspirations. In many English Language Teaching (ELT) contexts, pedagogical practices and instructional materials continue to privilege the cultures of traditionally English-speaking countries, particularly those associated with the Inner Circle, while giving comparatively limited attention to local and regional perspectives (Baker, 2015; Hoa & Vi n, 2018; McConachy, 2026). This disconnect between policy goals and classroom practice risks positioning English primarily as a vehicle for transmitting external cultural norms rather than as a shared resource for reciprocal intercultural dialogue in which learners' own cultural knowledge is equally valued (Alvarez Valencia, 2026).

Vietnam provides a particularly compelling context in which to examine these developments. Since the late 1990s, English has become the most widely taught foreign language in the country and is closely tied to national goals of socio-economic development and global integration (Tran et al., 2019; Vu & Dinh, 2021). Educational reforms have increasingly emphasized integrating language proficiency with cultural understanding, positioning intercultural competence as a central learning outcome. At the policy level, Vietnam's foreign language education framework aligns with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, highlighting sociocultural knowledge, intercultural attitudes, and communicative skills as essential components of language learning (Nguyen, 2014).

Despite policy commitments to promoting intercultural competence, classroom practices in Vietnam often fall short of these aspirations. One reason for this is that although teachers acknowledge a general inseparability of language and culture, pedagogy tends to emphasize the transmission of factual knowledge about English-speaking countries rather than the processes of intercultural meaning-making (Nguyen & Ho, 2023). This orientation reinforces a curriculum in which intercultural competence is formally embedded but often marginalized in favor of linguistic accuracy and discrete language skills (Nguyen, 2014). Limited professional development and persistent conceptual ambiguity surrounding interculturality further constrain teachers' capacity to translate policy into practice. Consequently, cultural instruction is often reduced to transmitting cultural facts or promoting positive attitudes, rather

than promoting learners' critical intercultural awareness and communicative engagement (Nguyen, 2014). These challenges reveal a persistent tension between national policy aspirations and teachers' enacted pedagogical practices.

Recently, some classroom-based studies have shown that Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers do attempt to integrate cultural content through real-world examples, authentic materials, and interactive activities such as role-plays and group discussions (Hua & Le, 2025; Tran & Newton, 2026). The use of technology and multimodal resources has further expanded access to diverse cultural perspectives and supported collaborative learning. However, these efforts remain uneven, as teachers, particularly those at earlier career stages, often struggle to balance cultural integration with language-focused objectives, resulting in culture being treated as supplementary rather than integral to instruction (Hua & Le, 2025).

More meaningful adoption of an intercultural orientation in ELT in Vietnam would require moving away from viewing culture as a static entity belonging to Anglophone countries. It requires a shift towards helping learners understand and participate in intercultural processes of meaning-making (Tran & Newton, 2026). Importantly, this necessitates critical attention to learners' own cultures and their own lived experiences as a reference point for understanding global linguistic and cultural diversity. At present, relatively little is known about how Vietnamese EFL teachers conceptualize and enact the integration of Vietnamese culture in English language classrooms. Accordingly, the present study examines teachers' perceptions of incorporating local cultural elements, the strategies they employ, and the challenges they encounter. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Vietnamese EFL teachers conceptualize the integration of Vietnamese culture within ELT?
2. What pedagogical strategies do teachers use to integrate it into English instruction?
3. What challenges do teachers encounter in integrating Vietnamese culture into ELT?

Intercultural Learning in ELT

Traditionally, ELT has conceptualized culture primarily as knowledge of English-speaking countries, particularly those in Anglophone and Western contexts (McConachy, 2026). Within this perspective, learning English has often been associated with acquiring the cultural norms, values, and practices of native English-speaking communities. This orientation has been widely criticized for positioning Anglophone cultures as the dominant cultural reference point for English learners and implying that successful language learning depends on adopting external cultural norms rather than using English to express learners' own identities, experiences, and cultural realities (Baker & Fang, 2023). As English increasingly functions as a global language used by speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, such a culture-specific orientation has become insufficient to prepare learners for intercultural communication.

More recent approaches to intercultural learning have aimed to reconceptualize culture as dynamic, diverse, and interactionally negotiated on an on-going basis, rather than as a fixed body of knowledge about particular nations (Baker, 2022). Based on such a view of culture, learning is positioned as an ongoing process of meaning-making in which learners interpret, compare, negotiate, and reconstruct cultural meanings through dialogue and interaction with diverse perspectives (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). In other words, instead of simply acquiring information about other cultures, learners are encouraged to critically reflect on both familiar and unfamiliar cultural practices, question taken-for-granted assumptions, recognize the influence of social and ideological contexts on communication,

and develop the capacity to mediate between different cultural perspectives (McConachy, 2018). Thus, intercultural learning emphasizes interpretative and reflective processes through which learners construct increasingly complex understandings of culture and communication.

Because intercultural learning is fundamentally an interpretative process, learners' existing cultural knowledge, identities, and lived experiences play an important role (McConachy, 2018). Learners' local cultural experiences provide an important interpretative framework through which they compare cultural perspectives, recognize similarities and differences, and critically examine both their own assumptions and those of others (McConachy, 2018). From this view, English becomes not merely a vehicle for transmitting Anglophone cultural norms but a shared medium through which learners communicate, negotiate, and represent their own cultural identities while engaging with cultural diversity (Baker, 2022).

This perspective provides a strong rationale for integrating local culture into ELT. Such integration enables learners to use English to communicate their own communities, traditions, values, and lived experiences, instead of positioning English solely as a means of accessing English-speaking cultures. As Ulla and Perales (2021) and Ulla (2019) argue, incorporating local cultural content helps learners maintain connections with their linguistic and cultural identities while participating in English communication. It also creates opportunities for learners to compare cultural perspectives, interpret meanings, negotiate differences, and develop intercultural communicative competence. In this sense, culture is not merely content to be transmitted but a pedagogical resource through which learners develop greater awareness of both themselves and others.

In the Vietnamese context, this pedagogical orientation is particularly relevant, as the country's English language education has traditionally privileged Anglophone cultural norms (Hoa & Viên, 2018). Thus, recognizing learners' own cultural knowledge and identities as legitimate resources for English language learning helps reposition local culture as an essential foundation for intercultural learning rather than a peripheral addition to the curriculum (Hoa & Viên, 2018; Nguyen & Ho, 2023; Tien, 2023). From this perspective, integrating local culture should extend beyond introducing familiar cultural topics to encouraging learners to critically examine issues of identity, representation, and whose cultural knowledge is legitimized within the curriculum. Without such critical engagement, cultural integration risks remaining at the level of superficial references to food, festivals, and traditions rather than promoting the critical intercultural awareness central to intercultural communicative competence.

However, previous studies suggest that realizing this pedagogical potential remains challenging in practice. Many English textbooks continue to privilege British and American cultural perspectives while providing limited representation of local cultures and diverse global identities (Sabrina et al., 2026; Tien, 2023). Moreover, cultural content is frequently presented through visible cultural products such as food, festivals, and customs without engaging learners in deeper exploration of values, identities, meanings, and social perspectives (Tien, 2023). Such representations risk reinforcing static and essentialized understandings of culture rather than promoting the dynamic and negotiated view emphasized in intercultural learning.

Because intercultural learning depends not only on curriculum materials but also on how they are interpreted and enacted in classrooms, teachers play a central role in shaping learners' intercultural experiences (see Peskoller & Hirzinger-Unterrainer, 2026). Teachers mediate curriculum expectations, select and adapt instructional materials, and design learning activities that connect cultural content with learners' lived experiences. Consequently, teachers' beliefs about the relationship between language and culture influence whether local cultural integration becomes an integral component of English learning or remains an occasional classroom activity. Fang et al. (2024) further argue that teachers'

own intercultural experiences shape their understandings of intercultural learning and influence how they translate these understandings into classroom practice.

These issues are further complicated by the characteristics of Vietnamese EFL education, which has traditionally been influenced by textbook-driven instruction and examination-oriented practices. Although recent educational reforms increasingly emphasize communicative competence and global citizenship, classroom instruction continues to prioritize grammar, vocabulary, and examination preparation in many contexts. Similar tensions have been reported across other Asian EFL settings, where policy aspirations for intercultural learning are not always reflected in everyday classroom practices (Zhang et al., 2025). Consequently, teachers may encounter challenges related to curriculum demands, limited teaching materials, insufficient professional preparation, and uncertainty about how to facilitate and assess intercultural learning, particularly because intercultural competence involves complex processes of interpretation, reflection, and critical awareness that extend beyond linguistic knowledge alone (Zhang et al., 2025).

Addressing these challenges requires pedagogical approaches that move beyond presenting cultural facts toward engaging learners in meaningful intercultural inquiry. Strategies such as culturally relevant texts, storytelling, classroom discussions, presentations, project-based learning, role plays, comparative activities, and teacher-developed materials can create opportunities for learners to interpret cultural meanings, negotiate multiple perspectives, and communicate Vietnamese identities through English (Sabrina et al., 2026). However, the effectiveness of these approaches ultimately depends on teachers' understandings, beliefs, and pedagogical decisions. Therefore, examining how Vietnamese EFL teachers conceptualize and implement local cultural integration is essential for understanding how intercultural learning is enacted in English classrooms and for identifying ways to better support teachers in fostering meaningful intercultural language education.

Research on Local Culture Integration in ELT

A growing body of empirical research has examined how local culture is integrated into ELT and its implications for learners' engagement, motivation, and intercultural communicative competence (Hicham et al., 2025; Ratri et al., 2025). In this paper, local culture integration refers to the deliberate and systematic incorporation of local cultural knowledge, experiences, practices, perspectives, and issues into ELT design. This means that instead of making occasional or incidental references to local customs or traditions, local culture integration positions local cultural resources as a recurring pedagogical and thematic foundation for language learning. In this approach, local culture informs the selection of learning materials, classroom activities, discussion topics, and communicative tasks, enabling learners to develop English while critically engaging with the cultural realities of their own communities.

While existing studies (see Hicham et al., 2025; Ratri et al., 2025) generally report positive outcomes, they also highlight important conceptual and pedagogical challenges. In particular, they raise questions about what constitutes local culture and how it is represented within classroom practice. In this sense, rather than referring to a single, homogeneous body of traditions or values, local culture encompasses diverse identities, histories, communities, and everyday practices that vary across regions and social groups. Consequently, decisions about which aspects of local culture are included in ELT inevitably involve choices about representation and legitimacy.

Research on local cultural integration illustrates both its potential and its limitations. For instance, Ratri et al. (2025) show that embedding local culture enhances learners' comprehension and engagement by connecting classroom learning to familiar contexts. However, they also suggest that local culture is often presented as a fixed, unified entity, overlooking its diversity. This concern echoes

broader critiques in intercultural education, where culture is sometimes reduced to easily teachable content rather than understood as a complex, negotiated process of meaning-making (Baker, 2012).

Similarly, studies in higher education contexts report generally positive teacher attitudes toward cultural integration. Hicham et al. (2025) find that teachers employ a range of interactive strategies, including role-play and multimedia resources, to promote intercultural competence. Yet these practices are often constrained by structural factors, such as exam-oriented systems, limited access to authentic materials, and insufficient curricular emphasis on intercultural outcomes. These findings suggest that positive teacher beliefs do not necessarily translate into sustained pedagogical change.

More critically, the literature highlights systemic and contextual barriers that shape classroom practice. Hicham et al. (2025) identify tensions between communicative and exam-driven priorities, while Hossain (2024) points to the challenges of addressing diverse learner backgrounds within standardized curricula. These constraints often lead to a pragmatic compromise in which cultural content is included but remains peripheral. In such cases, intercultural competence is acknowledged in principle but not fully integrated into instructional design.

Thus, although previous studies document a range of pedagogical strategies and generally positive outcomes, limited attention has been paid to how local culture itself is conceptualized in ELT. Existing research often treats local culture as a coherent and stable body of knowledge, with relatively little discussion of its internal diversity, contested meanings, or the pedagogical decisions involved in selecting particular cultural representations. This gap is particularly evident in the Vietnamese EFL context, where local culture may encompass national traditions, regional identities, ethnic diversity, and contemporary social practices. Therefore, greater attention is needed to examine not only how culture is integrated into ELT but also how teachers conceptualize local culture, whose cultural knowledge is prioritized, and how these decisions shape intercultural learning.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design. This recognizes the subjective nature of the issue, acknowledges the diverse experiences of participants, and presents findings that closely align with the terminology used in the initial research question, outlining the “who, what, and where of events or experiences” (Kim et al., 2017, p. 24), investigating the experiences of research participants regarding specific events in particular locations.

Context and Participants

The research was conducted in primary educational institutions in Ha Long, Quang Ninh Province, Vietnam, an area that has emphasized English language instruction and learning owing to the rising significance of English on the global stage. This emphasis was evident in the growing number of EFL teachers and the proliferation of EFL learning centers and schools within the province.

Participants were recruited through criterion sampling to ensure those included could offer informed, experience-based insights relevant to the study's focus. Two selection criteria guided this process. First, participants were required to have at least 5 years of teaching experience in EFL contexts. This threshold was set to ensure that participants had developed a sustained engagement with classroom practice and curriculum decision-making. Second, participants needed to demonstrate prior experience integrating Vietnamese cultural content into their English-language instruction.

A total of 10 primary school teachers participated in the study, selected based on their willingness to participate and availability during the data collection period. These participants signed the consent form, were informed about the nature and scope of the study, and were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. In addition, the recordings of interviews and observations were saved in Google Drive, preventing unauthorized access. The recorded information is confidential, and only the researcher has access to the recordings. Finally, participants were guaranteed that all data, including their personal information, would be kept strictly confidential and used solely for research purposes.

Table 1 *Profile of the Participants*

Profile	Number
Age	
25–30 years old	1
30–35 years old	9
Total	10
Sex	
Male	4
Female	6
Total	10
Years of Teaching in Vietnam	
5 years	5
6 years	2
7 years	1
8 years	1
9 years	1
Total	10

Tools

Two instruments were used to collect the relevant data. These were individual interviews and classroom observations. The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol, with guide questions that guided the conversation while still allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences. These questions focused on teachers' perspectives, instructional strategies, and the challenges they encounter when integrating cultural content into ELT in Vietnam.

The semi-structured interview guide was developed in alignment with the study's research questions and was refined through consultation with the first author's adviser, who also serves as the second author of this paper, as well as the thesis panel members. Their feedback helped ensure the clarity, relevance, and coherence of the instrument.

The interview data were supported and triangulated through classroom observations, ensuring that both data sources focused on the same key areas. The purpose of the observations was to examine how teachers enacted their strategies for integrating Vietnamese culture into their ELT practices.

Due to participants' availability, willingness to participate in classroom observations, and ethical considerations regarding classroom recording, a total of eight classroom observations were conducted.

While the number of observations was limited, this was appropriate for the study's qualitative design, which aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of teachers' practices rather than to achieve statistical representativeness. The observations were conducted with participants who voluntarily agreed to be observed and focused specifically on lesson segments where cultural integration was evident. Each observation lasted between 10 and 15 minutes, as participants permitted the first author to record only selected portions of their lessons that demonstrated the incorporation of Vietnamese cultural elements into English instruction.

Although the duration of the observations was limited, the selected segments captured key instructional moments related to cultural integration, including the use of cultural discussions, authentic materials, and classroom activities involving Vietnamese cultural content. The observation data were therefore not treated as supplementary evidence but as an additional source for examining how cultural integration was operationalized in classroom interactions. All recorded observation segments were included in the final analysis and were compared with interview data to identify convergences and contextualize teachers' reported practices. Data saturation was determined when additional interview and observation data no longer generated substantially new insights related to teachers' conceptualizations, strategies, and challenges in integrating Vietnamese culture into ELT.

Data Gathering Procedure

Before data collection began, ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the first author's institution. Once approval was granted and the research instrument was finalized, potential participants were identified and invited to take part in the study. They were provided with a clear explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and scope, after which informed consent was secured through signed consent forms.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in English, either face-to-face or via phone, depending on participants' availability. Each interview lasted approximately one hour or longer, allowing sufficient time to explore participants' experiences in depth. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate capture of their responses. The semi-structured format provided a balance between guiding the discussion and allowing participants the flexibility to elaborate on their perspectives and experiences.

Classroom observations were also conducted to triangulate and enrich the data. These observations were conducted in person to allow for a more direct, context-specific understanding of classroom practices. With participants' consent, selected segments of the lessons were recorded using digital devices, which enabled the researcher to revisit and systematically code the data at a later stage.

All interview and observation recordings were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. To strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, member-checking procedures were employed. These included returning extended transcripts to participants for verification and sharing preliminary findings to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected participants' perspectives and experiences.

Analysis of Data

Audio and video recordings from the interviews and classroom observations were transcribed verbatim and compiled into extended textual datasets using Microsoft Excel. This approach facilitated systematic data management and organization across cases. The resulting transcripts were then analyzed through thematic analysis, a qualitative method that enables the identification, examination, and interpretation of recurring patterns of meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis followed the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with data familiarization, during which the researchers engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts to develop an overall sense of the dataset. This was followed by the generation of initial codes, where relevant features of the data were systematically identified and labeled. The researchers then moved to searching for themes by grouping related codes into broader patterns of meaning. These preliminary themes were subsequently reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and alignment with the dataset. In the next phase, themes were clearly defined and named to capture their analytic scope and significance. Finally, the analysis was consolidated through the writing of the report, where themes were presented and interpreted in relation to the research questions.

Findings

Integrating Vietnamese cultural elements into ELT helps learners understand the context in which the language is used. In the excerpts presented below, participants were assigned code numbers to maintain anonymity.

Culture Allows Learners to Connect with the Lesson

In the interviews, participants shared that integrating Vietnamese cultural elements into ELT lessons helps students connect with the lesson. With this connection, they become actively involved in the discussion. For example, Participant 7 mentioned:

Integrating their culture allows my learners to connect with the lesson and makes them actively involved in the class discussion because they can relate.

Similarly, learners at a certain level of proficiency find it engaging when the teacher integrates their culture into class. Like Participant 7, this cultural integration connects learners with the lesson, allowing them to share something in the class. Participant 10 stated:

Students who have a B2–C1 level find it engaging because they have something to share. Their culture allows them to connect with the lesson. Learners are motivated when culture is integrated into English language teaching, as a personal connection has been established among them. In other words, their engagement and participation in class are active.

These excerpts above suggest that cultural integration serves as a mediating resource, transforming classroom participation from passive reception to relational engagement. In other words, when learners encounter familiar cultural references, they are positioned not only as language users but also as knowledge holders, which legitimizes their voices in classroom interaction. This is particularly evident among higher-proficiency learners, who are better able to articulate culturally grounded perspectives. Thus, engagement is not merely increased but qualitatively reshaped, as participation becomes anchored in identity and lived experience.

Integrating Vietnamese Culture: An Opportunity for Teachers to Learn Vietnamese Culture

In teaching English in Vietnam, integrating Vietnamese culture also serves as an avenue for teachers, as foreigners, to become acquainted with Vietnamese culture and to know their learners better. These claims are best amplified by the statement of Participant 4 saying:

Integrating Vietnam's culture is an avenue for me to learn about it and use it in my teaching. This provides an advantage because I get to know them.

Likewise, integrating Vietnamese cultural elements into English teaching enables teachers to gain first-hand experience with Vietnamese culture, helping them better understand their learners' backgrounds. Participant 6 stated:

I would say it's an opportunity to learn, because I tend to experience Vietnamese culture firsthand.

Aside from helping teachers learn more about their learners, they view the integration of Vietnamese culture into their English instruction as a way for learners to be more enthusiastic when talking about their culture. For example, Participant 5 acknowledged:

So, I see this cultural integration as an opportunity to learn not only for my learners but also for me, as I am exposed to their culture and heritage. They really enjoy it when we talk about their culture in class.

With the interview extracts above, these teachers position cultural integration not only as a pedagogical strategy but as a reciprocal learning process. Teachers are not merely transmitters of knowledge. They also become cultural learners who develop deeper insight into students' lived experiences. This suggests a shift toward more relational and dialogic classroom dynamics, where understanding learners' cultural backgrounds informs instructional choices. At the same time, students' increased enthusiasm indicates that local culture functions as an affective bridge, making learning more meaningful and participatory.

Teachers' Strategies for Integrating Vietnamese Culture into ELT

The data presented below are derived from individual interviews and classroom observations aimed at exploring some of the strategies teachers employ when integrating Vietnamese culture into ELT.

Leveraging Vietnamese Holidays and Festivals

In integrating Vietnamese culture, one of the teachers' strategies is to use the country's various holidays and festivals. Participant 6 stated:

It comes down to how to formulate their answers to different types of questions, so the first thing is to ask about traditions and cultural festivals, asking them, "What is this festival?" "What kind of festival is it?" "What do you do during this festival, and so on, something that is related to their culture?"

During one classroom observation, the teacher asked the students to find different holidays or festivals they knew about the day before class. Through this assignment, the teacher taught speaking by allowing students to share something they knew about the holiday.

Teacher: Let's start. Let's see if you did your homework. Are you ready?
 Students: Yes, teacher! Go! Amazing!
 Teacher: Who would like to share first?
 Student 1: Okay, so the 10th holiday is a special day that we celebrate in Vietnam during the Lunar

New Year, which falls on February 1st. At this time, families gather together to wish each other luck for the New Year and to give blessings. Okay, so this flower is called the blossom. It's a pink blossom.

When spring arrives, this flower begins to bloom and turns pink. This flower also represents Northern Vietnam and is believed to help people ward off diseases and misfortunes.

- Teacher: What else do you have there?
 Student 2: Next is the apple flower. It represents the summer of Vietnam. It brings luck to the people.
 Teacher: What other holidays do you celebrate?
 Student 3: Okay, so the last thing is we celebrate the Lunar New Year.

Based on the above excerpts, it can be suggested that teachers are beginning to reposition English as a medium for expressing local cultural knowledge rather than merely as a means of accessing Anglophone content. Through familiar festivals, instruction becomes more meaningful and lowers barriers to participation, particularly in classroom speaking activities. However, it can also be noted that the interaction also reveals a tendency to prioritize descriptive knowledge over deeper intercultural engagement. Students recount traditions and symbols, yet opportunities to compare, interpret, or critically reflect on cultural meanings remain limited. As such, while the practice affirms learners' identities and supports communicative use of English, it risks remaining at a surface level of cultural integration without promoting critical intercultural competence.

Using Authentic Materials

In the interview, the teachers verbalized that they use authentic materials to integrate Vietnamese culture into English language instruction. These materials include local literature, folktales, songs, and traditional games. Participant 7 shared:

Teachers employ various strategies to integrate Vietnamese culture into English teaching, such as using local literature, folktales, songs, and traditional games, incorporating cultural discussions and projects...

As verbalized by Participant 3:

I think the first one would be the use of cultural materials. In my classes, I usually use books that have context about their culture, songs, and we even play games played here in Vietnam, like cultural games.

During the classroom observation, the teacher initiated a discussion about *banh chung*, a traditional Vietnamese food associated with the Tết holiday, and invited students to explain its cultural significance.

- Teacher: All right, everyone. I have a question. What does *banh chung* signify? Can you explain its significance during the Tết holiday?
 Student 1: Basically, *banh chung* is a famous traditional dish that is always served during the Tết holiday.
 Teacher: So, are you saying it has no special meaning and is simply part of the Tết tradition? Or does it symbolize something about the holiday?

This exchange between the teacher and a student illustrates that the teacher was not merely asking students to identify a cultural artifact but encouraging them to move beyond descriptive knowledge toward interpreting its cultural meaning. The teacher prompted further explanation by asking whether *banh chung* holds symbolic significance, rather than accepting the student's factual response. In doing so, the teacher scaffolded students' meaning-making by inviting them to reflect on the relationship between cultural practices and the values they represent.

Such an interaction aligns with the view of intercultural learning adopted in this study, which conceptualizes learning as an interpretive and dialogic process in which learners actively construct understandings of culture instead of simply acquiring factual information. Although the discussion remained focused on students' own cultural knowledge, it created an opportunity for learners to articulate cultural meanings that could later serve as a basis for intercultural comparison and dialogue.

Role-Playing

Role-playing was also used as a strategy through which teachers transformed local culture from a topic of discussion into an interactive learning experience. As noted by Participant 1:

Additionally, we engage in role-playing to reenact significant past events or celebrate beloved festivals.

Similarly, Participant 2 described incorporating everyday family practices into role-playing activities:

The strategy would be to incorporate family routines into role-playing exercises in which they act out things related to their daily experiences and culture.

These excerpts suggest that teachers viewed role-playing as a means of contextualizing English communication within learners' lived cultural experiences. Through the reenactment of festivals, historical events, and family routines, students practiced English through culturally familiar scenarios rather than decontextualized textbook dialogues. This strategy also reflects a more integrated approach to local culture, as cultural content served as the context in which communicative skills were developed rather than as supplementary information. Furthermore, the emphasis on everyday experiences indicates that participants conceptualized local culture broadly, encompassing not only traditional celebrations but also ordinary social practices that learners encounter in their daily lives.

Challenges of Teachers in Integrating Vietnamese Culture into ELT

Cultural Sensitivity

Integrating Vietnamese culture into ELT is not simply a matter of adding local content. It also requires careful negotiation of meaning, identity, and classroom dynamics. Teachers must make ongoing decisions about how to introduce, discuss, and interpret cultural topics for learners with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. In this process, issues of representation, inclusivity, and respect become particularly salient. As participants in this study indicate, cultural sensitivity emerges as a central concern, shaping both pedagogical choices and classroom interactions. The excerpts below illustrate how teachers navigate the complexities of addressing culture while maintaining a supportive and respectful learning environment. Participant 8 stated:

The other one here is cultural sensitivity. So when we talk about culture, you need to be really sensitive. You need to gauge whether it might affect the student's culture or personality because students have different views when it comes to culture. So you need to really avoid stereotyping. Is that why you call it? So a teacher must be mindful of cultural nuances. And of course, we have these taboos and sensitive issues. You need to avoid them for you to still have this very friendly and good atmosphere in class.

Participant 10 noted:

The second challenge is like ensuring or we have to ensure that we are sensitive enough to avoid the stereotypes or biases when presenting Vietnamese culture to a diverse group of learners.

Participant 7 shared:

Teachers encounter challenges in integrating Vietnamese cultural into English Language teaching, including ... navigating potential sensitivities or misconceptions related to cultural topics.

Based on the excerpts above, integrating Vietnamese culture involves more than selecting culturally relevant content for English lessons. Participants' repeated emphasis on avoiding stereotypes, respecting diverse perspectives, and exercising caution when discussing sensitive issues indicates that they perceive cultural integration as a relational and ethical responsibility. They described making careful decisions about how to introduce and discuss cultural topics in ways that acknowledge the diversity of Vietnamese society, rather than presenting culture as a fixed body of knowledge. These accounts position teachers as cultural mediators who continually negotiate between representing local culture and responding sensitively to learners' backgrounds and classroom contexts.

At the same time, the participants' caution also reveals a tension within this process. Although their awareness of stereotyping and taboo topics reflects a commitment to respectful and inclusive teaching, it may also discourage engagement with complex or contested cultural issues. As a result, potentially meaningful opportunities for critical intercultural dialogue may be avoided in favor of culturally "safe" topics. These suggest that cultural sensitivity functions both as an essential pedagogical competence and as a contextual constraint shaping which aspects of Vietnamese culture are ultimately represented in English-language classrooms.

Accessing Suitable and Authentic Materials

Integrating Vietnamese culture into ELT is not simply a matter of intention, as it also depends on the availability of appropriate pedagogical resources. Teachers often need materials that are both linguistically accessible and culturally meaningful, yet such resources are not always readily available. This creates a practical barrier to enacting culturally responsive and intercultural approaches in the classroom. In particular, the search for authentic materials that accurately represent Vietnamese culture while also supporting language-learning objectives can be demanding. As a result, teachers must navigate tensions between ideal pedagogical goals and the limitations of existing instructional resources, as reflected in the participants' accounts below. Participant 7 mentioned:

Teachers encounter challenges in integrating Vietnamese culture into English Language teaching, including finding suitable and authentic cultural materials, balancing cultural content with language learning objectives.

Participant 8 expressed:

Sometimes finding appropriate and authentic materials related to Vietnamese culture in English can be challenging. So I myself, as I've mentioned, it's really a struggle for me to locate relevant, relevant resources like textbook, videos that I need.

These accounts highlight a structural constraint that shapes how intercultural aims are enacted in practice. The difficulty of sourcing authentic, contextually relevant English-language materials limits

teachers' capacity to meaningfully integrate Vietnamese culture, often reducing it to sporadic or improvised inclusion. This challenge also reveals a misalignment between curricular expectations and available resources, leaving teachers to operationalize intercultural competence without sufficient material support. As a result, pedagogical decisions become constrained by accessibility rather than intention, reinforcing the tendency to prioritize language objectives over culturally grounded learning. The struggle, therefore, is not merely technical but reflects broader systemic gaps in resource development and curricular design.

Translating the Vietnamese Language into the English Language

Teachers highlighted how language is not a neutral system but is deeply embedded in cultural meanings, making direct translation often insufficient or misleading. In classroom practice, this becomes particularly evident when local terms, cultural practices, or context-specific expressions are introduced in English. Participants described how these moments require careful negotiation, as literal translations may distort meaning or carry unintended connotations. The excerpts below illustrate how teachers navigate these challenges while attempting to preserve both linguistic accuracy and cultural integrity in their instruction. Participant 5 revealed:

I think the most important or the most difficult thing is translating some local terms into English. Because this month, the children made the traditional cake, which is called *Banh Choi*. So when the local teachers, when the Vietnamese teachers will translate it, they do it like the word by word, like they were like saying floating bread.

Participant 6 said:

Well, for one thing I would say that language barrier is the biggest challenge ... as far as I've known there are just some words that for English language it's a positive way of saying it, but in Vietnamese translation, it gives a negative connotation which is one of the challenges that I have to tell my student and explain to my students that it meant this way, but the connotation of the particular word or the meaning of this word is not entirely negative, but rather it's more of the positive tone when they use it.

These accounts point to translation as a site of cultural negotiation rather than a straightforward linguistic task. Teachers are not simply converting words but mediating meaning across culturally embedded systems of reference. The example of *Banh Choi* illustrates how literal translation can distort cultural significance, reducing rich local practices to misleading equivalents. Similarly, shifts in connotation reveal how meaning is shaped by cultural context, not just vocabulary. As a result, teachers assume an interpretive role, explaining nuance and intent. This highlights the limits of word-for-word translation and underscores the need for pedagogies that treat language and culture as inseparable in meaning-making.

Discussion

This study examined how Vietnamese culture is integrated into ELT within Vietnamese EFL classrooms, addressing a gap in the existing literature regarding the conceptualization and practice of local culture in the classroom. The findings contribute to discussions of intercultural learning by demonstrating that integrating Vietnamese culture goes beyond merely enhancing learner engagement or contextualizing language instruction. This aligns with contemporary perspectives on language education, which define intercultural learning as a process involving the interpretation of meanings, the negotiation of perspectives, critical reflection on cultural assumptions, and ethical engagement with cultural diversity,

rather than simply acquiring knowledge about cultures (Byram & Wagner, 2018; McConachy, 2026; Nguyen & Ho, 2023; Xu et al., 2025). The integration of Vietnamese culture empowered learners to become active participants who contribute their own cultural perspectives to classroom interactions, rather than being passive recipients of the English language and culture.

The finding that cultural integration helped learners connect with classroom lessons reflects broader understandings of language learning as a socially and culturally situated process (Hossain, 2024; Kim, 2020). Participants explained that students became more engaged when lessons incorporated familiar cultural references because these provided meaningful opportunities to share their knowledge and experiences. However, the significance of these findings extends beyond engagement. Familiar cultural experiences provided learners with a point of departure for intercultural learning by encouraging them to explain local practices, articulate cultural meanings, and communicate their lived experiences through English. In the Vietnamese EFL context, where English education has historically been associated with access to foreign cultural knowledge, integrating local culture enables learners to represent their own communities and identities while interacting with broader cultural perspectives. This challenges approaches that position English primarily as a vehicle for learning Anglophone cultural norms and instead aligns with perspectives on English as an international language, in which English serves as a resource for expressing diverse cultural experiences (Baker, 2015; Sabrina et al., 2026).

Despite these benefits, classroom observations revealed that discussions of Vietnamese festivals, traditions, and cultural practices often remained descriptive rather than interpretive. Although learners were encouraged to identify and explain cultural practices, they were less frequently invited to examine why these practices exist, how they are understood by different communities, or how they might be interpreted across cultural contexts. This finding reflects previous research suggesting that teachers may recognize the importance of culture while still approaching it primarily as factual knowledge rather than as a process of intercultural meaning-making (Nguyen & Ho, 2023). From an intercultural learning perspective, describing cultural practices alone is insufficient, as it requires learners to actively make meaning from cultural experiences, interpret multiple perspectives, question assumptions, and reflect critically on how cultural understandings are socially constructed (Byram & Wagner, 2018; McConachy, 2018; Zou, 2025). Therefore, Vietnamese cultural integration provides an important foundation for intercultural learning, but its transformative potential depends on whether classroom interactions encourage inquiry, dialogue, and critical reflection rather than merely transmitting cultural information.

The findings also highlight the evolving role of teachers in intercultural language education. Participants viewed cultural integration as an opportunity not only to support learners but also to develop their own understanding of Vietnamese culture and students' lived experiences. This challenges traditional assumptions of teachers as cultural authorities and instead positions them as cultural learners and mediators. Such a role aligns with research suggesting that intercultural teaching requires teachers to facilitate dialogue, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning rather than simply transmit cultural knowledge (Peskoller & Hirzinger-Unterrainer, 2026; Wang, 2023). Thus, cultural integration becomes a reciprocal process in which both teachers and students contribute to the construction of cultural understanding.

Furthermore, the pedagogical strategies identified in this study, including the use of festivals, authentic materials, and role-playing activities, demonstrate teachers' efforts to localize English instruction. These practices support previous studies showing that culturally relevant materials and interactive activities can enhance motivation, participation, and communicative competence (Hicham et al., 2025; Hua & Le, 2025). Their contribution to intercultural learning, however, depends not simply on the inclusion of local cultural content but also on how that content is used pedagogically. When learners

explain the significance of cultural practices, compare alternative perspectives, reflect on similarities and differences, and negotiate meanings with others, cultural activities become opportunities for intercultural learning rather than exercises in cultural description. However, the findings also indicate that these practices may remain limited when cultural integration focuses mainly on visible cultural elements, such as food, festivals, and traditional practices. As Baker (2012) argues, cultural teaching can unintentionally reinforce simplified representations when culture is presented as fixed rather than dynamic and contested.

The challenges reported by teachers further demonstrate that intercultural teaching is shaped by contextual and institutional realities. Participants' concerns about cultural sensitivity reveal their awareness that representing Vietnamese culture requires careful negotiation. Their emphasis on avoiding stereotypes indicates recognition that culture is diverse and cannot be reduced to a single narrative. However, this caution may also restrict opportunities to engage with more complex cultural issues.

Similarly, teachers' difficulties in accessing authentic materials reveal a gap between educational aspirations and classroom realities. Although Vietnamese educational policies emphasize sociocultural knowledge (Nguyen, 2014), teachers often lack sufficient English-language resources that represent Vietnamese perspectives. This reflects broader concerns that ELT materials continue to privilege Anglophone cultural narratives while providing limited representation of local identities (Hoa & Viên, 2018; Sabrina et al., 2026). Consequently, teachers frequently become curriculum developers, adapting or creating materials that better reflect learners' cultural experiences. These findings imply that supporting intercultural learning requires not only teachers' pedagogical commitment but also institutional investment in developing locally grounded English-language resources that encourage critical cultural engagement.

Lastly, the findings suggest that integrating Vietnamese culture into ELT represents both an inclusive pedagogical practice and a complex process of cultural negotiation. It enables learners to connect English with their identities, challenges the dominance of external cultural perspectives, and creates opportunities for more meaningful participation. However, its transformative potential depends on moving beyond cultural inclusion to critical reflection, intercultural dialogue, and deeper engagement with the construction of meaning. Therefore, Vietnamese cultural integration should not be understood simply as adding local examples to English lessons but as a broader reorientation of ELT in which global communication and local identities can coexist and inform one another.

Conclusions

This study explored how Vietnamese culture is integrated into ELT in Vietnamese EFL classrooms by examining teachers' conceptualizations, classroom practices, and the challenges they encounter. The findings show that local culture is not only an instructional resource for making lessons relevant or engaging but also a meaningful foundation for learners to express their identities, experiences, and communities in English. In doing so, teachers reposition English not simply as a language for accessing Anglophone cultures but as a medium for communicating local knowledge and participating in intercultural communication. These findings contribute to growing discussions on intercultural learning by showing that integrating local culture can broaden the purpose of English education beyond language proficiency to include learners' ability to interpret, communicate, and reflect on cultural meanings.

At the same time, the study reveals that the educational value of local culture depends not only on its inclusion but also on how it is taught. Although teachers frequently incorporated Vietnamese festivals, traditions, and everyday experiences into classroom activities, these cultural topics were often presented descriptively rather than explored through dialogue, comparison, and critical reflection.

This suggests that integrating local culture alone does not automatically promote intercultural learning. Its potential is realized when classroom interactions encourage learners to examine multiple perspectives, question assumptions, and negotiate cultural meanings through English. The findings also underscore the important role of teachers as cultural mediators who make thoughtful pedagogical decisions while responding to contextual constraints, including cultural sensitivity, limited teaching resources, and the continued dominance of Anglophone-oriented materials.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a particular educational context and drew primarily on teachers' perspectives and classroom observations. As such, the findings provide contextual insights rather than claims that can be generalized across all Vietnamese EFL settings. Future research could include learners' perspectives, examine how students experience intercultural learning in classrooms, and adopt longitudinal designs to explore how sustained engagement with local culture influences intercultural development over time.

Finally, this study argues that integrating Vietnamese culture into ELT is not simply about adding local examples to existing lessons. It represents a shift toward a more locally responsive and interculturally oriented pedagogy in which English serves as a resource for connecting local identities with global communication. Supporting teachers through professional development and expanding locally grounded English-language resources will be essential for realizing this vision and for creating classrooms where language learning, cultural understanding, and intercultural learning develop together.

Declaration of Use of Generative AI

The authors declare that Grammarly, ChatGPT, and Quillbot were used during the preparation of this manuscript to enhance clarity, coherence, and overall readability. The authors take full responsibility and accountability for the content of this work. All interpretations, analyses, arguments, and conclusions are solely those of the listed authors. The final manuscript was critically reviewed, revised, and approved by the authors.

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