

Vietnamese Cultural Influences on Learning Styles of English-Language Learners

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Abstract

There are great differences between individualist and collectivist societies' typical cultural values, which are evident in language, culture, and communication. Thus, it is inevitable that Vietnamese students' learning styles, which still retain aspects of Vietnamese culture, will have a significant impact on their ability to attain English language proficiency. From these perspectives, the present study was conducted to understand how Vietnamese culture affects the learning styles of English-language learners. To achieve the above purpose, I employed classroom observations, end-of-semester interviews, learner journals, and comparative methodologies with the participation of 100 students from four English classes that I directly taught at Vietnam National University. This article reveals some cultural traits influencing Vietnamese students' learning styles, such as high-context communication, saving face, and collectivism reflected in language, all of which have an impact on English instruction and learning. When studying English, it may be challenging for students to identify these differences at first, which could lead to misunderstandings or poor judgment on the part of teachers. I hope that this study can help create an awareness in teachers of these unique characteristics of Vietnamese students' learning styles to help them get beyond cultural barriers during the English learning process.

Keywords: cultural influences, learning styles, individualistic and collectivistic countries, English-language learners, Vietnam

Introduction

English is becoming a universal language in keeping with the current, pervasive trend of globalization. Consequently, this international language needs to be taught and learned everywhere in the world. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that language and culture are integral parts of our everyday existence (Papademetre and Scarino, 2000). As Kramsch (1993) pointed out, any communication with someone who speaks a foreign language is a cultural act. Thus, studying a language is really studying a culture. Language-only education results in symbols that are either nearly meaningless or so ambiguous that students may misinterpret them.

One cannot undervalue the impact that cultural factors have on students' learning patterns. Eilisha (2007) observed that learning styles are frequently influenced by cultural backgrounds, and as a result, students from diverse backgrounds will exhibit various approaches to learning, thought processes, and behavioral patterns. Kim and Bonk (2002), Ramburuth and McCormick (2001), and Teng (2007) expressed a similar opinion that an understanding of culture is essential since it influences learning patterns.

Additionally, Ward (2006) identified a wide range of variables that affect learning styles, including past educational experiences, evaluation techniques, values, and religion, among others. Seo and Koro-Ljungberg (2005) went so far as to say that the primary objective of higher education cannot be fully achieved in the absence of efforts to comprehend the cultural backgrounds of students. According to Dörnyei and Ryan (2015), learning style is defined as a person's preferred or habitual way of perceiving, interacting with, and responding to their learning environment. It is a profile of that person's approach to learning. As a result, this idea has been linked to the development of L2 learners' linguistic competences in the context of foreign language learning as a complex component. Learning styles can either support or undermine learners' autonomy and motivation. They also have varying effects on L2 learning, resulting in varying learning outcomes (Phan and Hamid, 2017).

The choice to study and teach language also forces Vietnamese people to deal with cross-cultural issues. Vietnamese culture is known as a "villagers' culture" (Tran Ngoc Them, 1994) or "rice culture" (Huard and Durand, 1990). It emphasizes "hierarchical, social order in their dealings with one another" (Ellis, 1995: 9), and is centered on family relationships. Traditional teaching methods, such as the teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar translation method, and rote memory, are often used (Liu and Littlewood, 1997). By contrast, English is rooted in Western civilization, whose cultural values and relationships are centered on the individual. This difference creates challenges for both teachers and students who are directly involved in learning and teaching English. This study was conducted to understand how Vietnamese culture affects the learning styles of Vietnamese English-language learners. I hope that the results will enable teachers to help Vietnamese students become proficient in English, and still maintain the distinctive characteristics of Vietnamese culture in their learning styles.

Literature Review

Cultural Aspects of Individualistic and Collectivistic Countries

Singelis and Brown (1995) noted that whereas civilizations in Asia, Latin America, and Africa with long-standing agrarian traditions favor collectivism, modern Western industrial civilizations like those in America and Canada promote individualism.

Individualism, according to Hofstede (1991), is associated with a society in which there are few social links between people and everyone is expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families to the exclusion of others. An individualistic culture prioritizes the aspirations and successes of the individual. When disagreements emerge within a community, people often prioritize their own goals over those of other members (Singelis and Brown, 1995). Additionally, it is widely acknowledged that independence from family, as well as from social and religious groups, is important; as a result, privacy and the "self" are emphasized (Triandis, 1995). Thus, decisions are taken solely for the benefit of the individual and without consideration for the interests of the groups. Personal time, independence, and challenges are valued (Würtz, 2005).

By contrast, collectivism refers to a society in which individuals are born into robust, cohesive ingroups that provide them with lifelong protection in exchange for unwavering allegiance Hofstede (1991). Collectivist cultures, which encourage members to support one another, are those that put the interests of the group before those of the individual. People's perceptions of individuals are frequently shaped by their family's past, with personal achievements bearing less weight. People in collectivistic cultures are more likely to be interdependent with others when the "we" outweighs the "I" and they have typically established a network of enduring friendships and devoted personal connections (Triandis, 1995). According to Lustig and Koetes (2010), groups in collectivistic societies are like people's extended families and demand complete allegiance from them. Furthermore, individuals seem to exhibit "in-group egoism" (Hofstede, 1994), whereby they prioritize safeguarding the advantages of their own group's constituents over those of other groups. Collectivist cultures place a high value on skill application, physical fitness, and training (Würtz, 2005).

Review: Cultural Influences on Learning Styles of Language Learners in the World

Omidvar and Tan (2012) conducted research on cultural variations in learning processes and learning styles and emphasized that the shifting cultural composition of classrooms and society at large makes it more and more necessary to have a cross-cultural awareness of the relationship between culture and learning style. Similarly, Naik et al. (2010) implemented a comparative study of two cultures to investigate whether culture can influence the learning styles of business students. The study's findings demonstrate that most business students in Egypt and the United States have balanced learning styles across all four Felder-Silverman model learning style variables, which include processing (active–reflective), perception (sensing–intuitive), input (visual–verbal), and understanding (sequential–global) (Naik et al., 2010). Oktavian (2013) conducted research on the influence of culture on learning styles. The results showed that learners' culture, family history, and socioeconomic status have an impact on their ability to learn. Therefore, it might be difficult for teachers to adapt their lessons to the cultural diversity that affects students' learning preferences (Oktavian, 2013).

Saeed and Yemen (2020) also investigated the possibility of a connection between a learner's culture and learning style. Their study revealed that learners' learning styles are impacted by culture in a variety of ways. Raymond and Choon (2017) helped readers understand Asian students' learning styles, cultural influences, and learning strategies, and the study supported the idea that culture has a significant impact on how students learn. Tripp (2017) offered investigations on how the learning process is influenced by cultural differences and emphasized the need for further research to determine the extent to which cultural factors affect learning preferences as well as pedagogical and programming approaches. In addition, Wursten and Jacobs (2013) shed light on the ways in which education and learning are impacted by Hofstede's five cultural dimensions: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term versus short-term orientation.

Below is a summary of the dimensions of culture that have been compiled to show similarities cited in the study of Raymond and Choon (2017). There are three possible groupings shown in the tables below.

Table 1 Group 1: Singapore, Hong Kong, China, South Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam (*characterized by collectivism, high power distance, masculinity, low-to-moderate uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation*)

Teachers are highly respected for their positions and rank in the hierarchy.
Students anticipate that teachers will explain their learning pathways and that sessions will cover a wide range of topics.
In class, students should be polite to their teachers and refrain from asking too many questions.
The importance of relationships often goes beyond the classroom.
There is indirect and implicit communication.
Exams are usually used and structural learning environments are desired.
Perseverance is considered a virtue.
Academic achievement is a major factor in success, as it boosts self-esteem and familial pride.
Students choose their courses based on their aspirations and career goals.

Source: Adapted from Raymond and Choon (2017), based on Hofstede (1980)

Table 2 Group 2: Thailand and the Philippines (*characterized by collectivism, high power distance, moderate masculinity/femininity, moderate uncertainty avoidance, and short-term orientation*)

Teacher-centered classrooms maintain a great deal of control.
Students look to the teacher to start conversations, speak out when necessary, and maintain order in the classroom.
Success and achievement are given a fair amount of weight, and achievement performance is rewarded for Thailand (masculinity).
Individuals have a good sense of direction, empathy, and quality of life. In the Philippines, there is less differentiation between the winners and losers (femininity).
It is preferable to communicate implicitly rather than directly and to be “face conscious.”
There is a moderate degree of uncertainty avoidance when using a combination of exams and assignments.
Stability is a virtue since it is necessary to maintain status and tradition.
Academic achievement is a major factor in success, as it boosts self-esteem and familial pride.

Source: Adapted from Raymond and Choon (2017), based on Hofstede (1980)

Table 3 Group 3: UK, Australia, and the United States (*characterized by individualism, low power distance, femininity, low uncertainty avoidance, and short-term orientation*)

Student-centered learning is implemented with the active participation of students in their education.
Teachers encourage students to learn independently by giving them a brief outline.
Students frequently ask questions in class, and they are encouraged to voice their ideas.
The relationship exists only in the classroom.
Communication that is spoken aloud is explicit.
The utilization of unstructured learning environments and assignments promotes critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
Being stable is a good quality.
Achievement extends beyond the classroom; a good, balanced life is highly valued.
Students choose their subjects based on what interests them.

Source: Adapted from Raymond and Choon (2017), based on Hofstede (1980)

Review: Cultural Influences on Learning Styles of Language Learners in Vietnam

In Vietnam, the issue of cultural influence on the learning styles of language learners has attracted considerable attention. Phan Thi Thu Huong (2008) found that aspects of culture affect learning styles to the extent that some Vietnamese students even copy down everything written on the board rather than making eye contact with the teacher. This is because they may feel that it is important to absorb the information being imparted by their lecturers, and they believe that remaining silent in class demonstrates respect for the instructor (Phan Thi Thu Huong, 2008). Similarly, Tran Thi Tuyet (2013) investigated the causes of passiveness in learning of Vietnamese students and found that the cultural characteristics of Confucian heritage culture are one of the standard explanations for this passivity. Similarly, a study by Vo Thi Hoang Yen (2014) described the cultural facets of individualist and collectivist nations and the influences of collectivist cultures on EFL classes. It also provided some cultural justifications for communication avoidance in EFL classes, particularly in China, Japan, and Vietnam. The paper concludes by outlining some challenges faced by native English speakers who are teaching English in EFL situations as well as possible solutions.

Truong Thi Nhu Ngoc (2017) investigated the attitudes and linguistic practices of Vietnamese first-year university students who are not majoring in English to determine whether they are passive or active learners. The study revealed that the shyness and face-saving behavior of Vietnamese students were the main causes of their seeming passivity. In addition, Bui Thi Bich Diep (2019) focused on the relationship between culture and language in general, followed by the importance of cultural factors in the process of teaching and learning English. The author proposed some suggestions for integrating cultural factors in English teaching to help students access the cultural factors of the language they are learning most effectively. According to Truong Thi Nhu Ngoc and Samad (2021), learning styles can affect students' progress and foster their independence, particularly when learning a language. In Vietnamese culture, having a respectful attitude is highly valued. This is demonstrated by deference and civility. In addition, Vietnamese individuals have a tendency to keep their emotions hidden and to

steer clear of conflict out of concern that they would offend someone. Therefore, Vietnamese students have a tendency to remain silent in class and wait to answer questions from their teacher until they are asked (Truong Thi Nhu Ngoc and Samad, 2021). Ho Thi Kieu Oanh and Le Hoang Phuong (2021) analyzed potential cultural elements with a Confucian heritage that may have an impact on the language proficiency of Vietnamese EFL learners as well as their decisions to adopt particular styles. It then identified the fundamental causes of these EFL learning styles. Ultimately, this discussion covered the pros and cons of distinct learning styles for these students (Ho Thi Kieu Oanh and Le Hoang Phuong, 2021). Nguyen Thi Anh Thu (2023) concurred, asserting that language and culture are closely and inseparably linked, and they support each other throughout the language teaching and learning process. The integration of cultural elements into foreign language lessons is necessary and should be promoted (Nguyen Thi Anh Thu, 2023).

Research Gap

As we can see from the review of the previous studies, culture has a close relationship with and a great impact on the learning styles of students, especially in EFL classes. Vietnamese people, whether they are language learners or teachers, must deal with cross-cultural issues. Vietnamese culture is villagers' culture with a traditional teaching approach that emphasizes rote memorization, teacher-centered instruction, book-centered instruction, and a focus on family relationships in the village. The English language, by contrast, is a product of Western civilization. Teachers who actively participate in teaching and studying English also have challenges as a result of this characteristic.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine Vietnamese culture in depth in order to determine how it affects the learning styles of Vietnamese students learning foreign languages, in this case English. Knowing this will enable Vietnamese teachers to determine the ideal teaching strategy to help students obtain their desired level of English ability while still retaining the unique identities of Vietnamese culture.

Research Methodology

Participants

In this study, purposive sampling was used to select research participants. The study included 100 students from four English classes that I directly taught at Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU). These students all had an input level of A2 (equivalent to level 2 according to the 6-level foreign language proficiency framework for Vietnam) and studied to achieve the output standard of B1 (equivalent to level 3, according to the 6-level foreign language proficiency framework for Vietnam). During the teaching of the four language skills, I served as the instructor for all participating classes. This role allowed me to directly observe the classroom and keep detailed teaching logs. Additionally, I guided students in creating learning journals and conducted interviews focusing on cultural factors influencing their foreign language learning styles.

Research Methods

To investigate Vietnamese cultural influences on learning styles of English learners, I used classroom observations, learner journals, end-of-semester interviews, and comparative methods.

First, the classroom observation method was adopted weekly for each English class I taught. This method is classified as participatory research because it requires researchers to immerse themselves in the learning environment of the participants. According to Janse (2024), the observation method can allow the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' opinions and experiences. This method offers several advantages, including immediate access to classroom phenomena, flexibility in application, and the ability to record behaviors for later analysis (Janse, 2024). During each class, I monitored and listened to students during the teaching process. I used observation sheets and teaching diaries to record students' activities and expressions to evaluate the Vietnamese cultural influences on their learning styles. After completing the observation, I found it crucial to note any initial thoughts, feelings, or hints, and the recording of the observation was transcribed before conducting a content or theme analysis.

Second, in addition to teacher observation notes, I required students to maintain a weekly learning journal to record personal experiences, reflections, and suggestions related to classroom issues. As Moon (2006) and Cresswell (2024) have suggested, learning journals are valuable tools in qualitative educational research because they encourage self-reflection, and metacognition, and provide insight into students' inner processes. These journals were compiled and reviewed to identify common learning difficulties related to cultural influences. They also provided insights into the strategies students used to address these challenges. Journal entries were coded and categorized for easier reference and thematic illustration during analysis.

Third, I conducted in-depth interviews during the final weeks of the semester. The purpose of this method was to clarify points raised in both teacher observations and student learning journals, and to allow students to share deeper insights into the influence of Vietnamese culture on their learning. As Seidman (2019) and Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) emphasized, in-depth interviews are very effective in exploring participants' experiences through their own words, making this method highly suitable for educational and cultural studies. Interview transcripts were organized according to research purposes and integrated thematically. I then analyzed each set of responses to gain deeper insights into the data collected from participants.

Finally, I used a comparative approach to examine the differences between individualist and collectivist societies, which provided a theoretical basis for explaining the observed learning styles in Vietnamese students. Comparative analysis is particularly useful in intercultural and educational research because it allows researchers to contextualize behaviors and beliefs within broader cultural frameworks (Bray et al., 2014). In this study, I relied on established theoretical models, such as Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions and Triandis' (1995) work on individualism and collectivism, to compare the culturally-influenced learning behaviors of Vietnamese students with those commonly seen in more individualistic educational environments. This comparison provided an analytical lens with which to better understand the data collected from the previous methods.

Data Analysis

Data obtained from three sources (classroom observations, student learning journals, and end-of-semester interviews) were processed using qualitative content analysis with an inductive approach to uncover emerging patterns and themes from the raw data (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Inductive coding allows researchers to construct an analytical framework based on actual data

rather than pre-existing theories, thereby better reflecting the specific experiences and contexts of the participants (Thomas, 2006). Furthermore, to ensure reliability and objectivity in the analysis process, the study employed triangulation, a common strategy for cross-checking and strengthening conclusions in qualitative research (Denzin, 2009; Patton, 1999). Below are the detailed analysis processes for each data source.

First, in terms of classroom observation data, after each lesson, notes from observation sheets and the teacher's reflective journals were compiled and reviewed repeatedly to identify learning behaviors, responses, and culturally-influenced actions (e.g., group dependence, reluctance to speak, passive engagement). Meaningful units were highlighted and coded according to prominent themes such as "collective spirit," "dependence on the teacher," or "lack of individual initiative." The analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection, allowing for adjustments to observation criteria as the study progressed.

Second, students' learning journals were collected weekly and then categorized based on content reflecting difficulties, attitudes, or learning habits related to Vietnamese cultural characteristics. The coding process was performed using open coding, and similar codes were grouped into themes, such as: "prioritizing note-taking," "avoiding direct discussion," "desiring detailed instruction," etc. These themes were compared with observation data to cross-validate patterns.

Third, concerning data from final interviews, the interview recordings were fully transcribed and then coded. The analysis focused on reconfirming themes that appeared in observations and learning journals, while also uncovering new aspects through deeper personal sharing from learners on how Vietnamese cultural norms influenced their learning. Representative quotes were selected to illustrate each theme. The repeated patterns in different interviews were also recorded to determine the prevalence of each phenomenon.

After completing the analysis for each data source, cross-source comparison was carried out to triangulate findings. Recurring themes across the three data sources were identified and interpreted in the discussion section. This triangulation helped to strengthen the validity of the study's conclusions regarding the influence of Vietnamese culture on the learning styles of English learners.

All participant feedback and teacher observation notes from learning journals and interviews were compiled and presented as citations. This process helped identify subgroups and emerging trends in participant responses. The transcripts were included with the quotations' page numbers so that I could consult them as needed. Additionally, the recurrence of themes across observations, learning journals, and interviews was recorded to estimate the relative frequency of the observed behaviors. The main results are presented in the following section.

Results and Discussions

Collectivism and Individualism Reflected in Language and Communication

Individualist and collectivist societies differ greatly in their educational environments. Collectivism refers to a system of values in which an individual's identity, attitudes, and behavior are shaped primarily by the social groups to which they belong, especially their closest associates. According to Kim et al. (1994) and Triandis (1995), an individual does not assert rights that would support their own interests over those of

their in-groups. DeCapua and Wintergerst (2004) claimed that a collective culture fosters interdependence, deference to authority, hierarchical roles and connections, and group consensus. A collective society's members typically foster a sense of group consciousness and regard themselves as belonging to the group. Members are bound by duties and shared responsibilities, and they must cooperate to accomplish the final goal (DeCapua and Wintergerst, 2004). In contrast to individualistic cultures, confrontation can be constructive; conflicting viewpoints are seen to lead to a higher truth (Hofstede, 1991). The group is also responsible for performance and receives rewards for success. Even choosing a course of study and career is decided upon by the group rather than by the individual. Interdependence is essential and necessary at all times (McLaren, 1998). Furthermore, maintaining a positive relationship is crucial, even more crucial than success. "If the relationship is still intact, you can always try again if success eludes you this time," according to McLaren, 1998. People seek a sense of belonging and use their interactions with others and group participation to define who they are. The above comparison provides a basis for analyzing information obtained from observations, learning diaries, and interviews of Vietnamese students.

1. Indirect expression of opinions in classroom discussions

Based on the observations during the semester, individuality and collectivity are most clearly reflected in the directness and indirectness of language and communication styles in the classrooms. The first example can be seen in the students' discussions in speaking lessons. It can be observed that Vietnamese people, when presenting their opinions, prefer harmony, tactfulness, and subtlety. On the first day of the semester, when students had to interact with unfamiliar classmates, many Vietnamese students took the initiative to strike up conversations by asking personal questions. These questions helped them get acquainted and determine appropriate forms of address. Examples of these inquiries include family status, employment, monthly income, and age. In the interview, students showed that asking about personal information created a sense of familiarity and closeness with other people. One student shared:

In the first group work session during speaking class, my first question to my friends was to ask about their age and family situation so that I could know how to address them correctly, and we could understand each other better (S1 [Lan], 2024).

This is quite different from Western culture in which the most popular topics in the first meetings are typically non-personal ones like the weather, cuisine, and entertainment offerings. In addition, Vietnamese students' collectivity is also clearly shown during discussions with other students in language classes. I found that when required to give their opinions on topics, Vietnamese students also often make indirect counter-arguments, which is highly valued in cultures placing a strong emphasis on community. Observational data suggest that many students employ indirect or "roundabout" communication strategies, particularly when expressing disagreement with others in group discussions. Another example is that in a conversation, when having to decline an invitation from a partner, regardless of their status relative to the inviter, Vietnamese students rarely decline the invitation outright but tend to soften it by expressing gratitude, appreciation, and giving a fairly detailed reason/explanation. Moreover, in language expressions, Vietnamese students use many adverbs to express gratitude and sympathy such as *dear*, *yes*, *ok*, *right*, *alright*, and use many honorifics to respect the status of their partners such as *dear professor*, *thanks*, *Mr./Ms...* to make the refusal or disagreement softer. In the learning diary, students also expressed their opinions on this fact. One student admitted:

I think that discussing one's personal beliefs directly can be regarded as disrespectful or rude, so I try to find the most tactful way to present my point of view so as not to affect my relationships with other people (S2 [Minh], 2024).

This viewpoint contrasts with that of people from cultures that value individuality because they prefer to speak directly and honestly when expressing their thoughts to confirm their viewpoint and sense of self. In societies that value individuality, direct communication is thought to be the most effective means of resolving conflicts; thus, if someone does not agree with another person, they are free to voice their opinions. However, Vietnamese individuals tend to stay away from direct comments and instead let the person asking the question know what they mean. This communication style prioritizes affection and a way of thinking that values relationships and community. It is like a common saying in Vietnamese culture, "Words do not cost money to buy / Choose your words carefully to please each other."

2. Group orientation and the preference for collective identity

In addition, the interview data revealed that most students frequently used the pronoun "we" instead of "I" when expressing personal opinions, reflecting a strong sense of group identity. During the interview, when asked about this issue, a student explained, "I typically collaborate with my peers and see myself as an extension of my group. I am more at ease functioning as a team member" (S3 [Mai], 2024). Members of groups desire to be viewed as a cohesive group with strong agreement in all actions or statements, as Le Viet Dung (2003) pointed out. This is also a characteristic of the collectivity of Asians who see themselves as part of a communal culture.

The Concept of Face

Saving face is a crucial part of the knowing and learning process wherever you are, including outside of the classroom. The desire for respect and the need for self-respect make this practice a global phenomenon. However, in Asian cultures, where relationships and behavior are centered on upholding, preserving, or honoring face for the group, face is given even more significance. In order to maintain unity, maintaining one's dignity becomes crucial; sentiments are prioritized over hard facts. Face is defined as the public self-image, as noted by Ting-Toomey (1999) and Gudykunst (1991). "Giving face," however, entails making space for the other person to regain their own face; in Asian culture, face is a shared term. Giving face is a crucial concern in collectivistic societies, particularly for those in positions of authority. However, face is a concept that is hard for Westerners to understand. According to DeCapua and Wintergerst (2004), it is the epitome of respect, dignity, pride, and self-worth. In classrooms, mediocre students believe their answers are not worth sharing with classmates, excellent students fear being labeled as show-offs if they answer too many questions in class, and lower-ability students fear looking foolish if they give the wrong answer (Wenzhong and Grove, 1999). From the above comparative perspectives, it can be seen that face-related concerns are focused mainly in cultures with collectivistic traditions like Vietnam. This characteristic is demonstrated through many classroom activities, as discussed below.

1. Fear of losing face in classroom participation

First, observations in the classroom and teaching diaries indicate that most students (approximately 70-80 percent) rarely volunteered to respond to lecturers' questions unless they were explicitly called upon. Typically, in a classroom setting, one or two students take the lead while the others remain silent. However, if the question raises a lot of controversy, the entire class would talk about it.

Students typically waited until they were explicitly called on by the teacher before responding. Second, data from interviews and journals indicates that approximately two-thirds of students were reluctant to ask questions immediately during class discussions. Instead, they would prefer to approach other classmates and ask whether they knew the answer. They would then approach the teacher for help if none of their classmates could solve the problem or clarify the learning task. In the learning diary, one student expressed his feelings, “I hesitate to answer the teacher’s questions because I am afraid of losing face if my answer is wrong” (S4 [Huong], 2024). Similarly, in the interview, when asked about the issue of asking questions in class, one student stated, “If I ask too many questions in class, it may be interpreted that I am unable to follow instructions, which is a loss of face” (S5 [Nam], 2024). Sharing the same opinions, another student admitted, “Talking to classmates during class or asking too many questions could be interpreted as interrupting the instructor or taking up the time of other students. So, I think silence is required in the classroom” (S6 [Linh], 2024).

2. Face-saving and teacher authority

These face-related concerns were also reported in the study of DeCapua and Wintergerst (2004), which asserted that in collectivistic cultures, preserving harmony is crucial to prevent “losing face.” Similarly, it would be awkward and unsettling for both the teacher and the students if the teacher did not know the answer to the question. Asking questions in class is typically avoided by students since they do not want to embarrass their teacher. Additionally, asking too many questions could be interpreted as a challenge to the teacher’s authority or a threat. In the learning diary, one student also explained:

There are many questions that are too broad and beyond the scope of the lesson, so sometimes I don’t want to ask them directly in class. Maybe the teacher is not an expert on this issue. Instead, I will ask the teacher privately after class (S7 [An], 2024).

In the majority of Asian classrooms, the instructor is the only one who speaks for the entire session. Typically, students sit with their heads down, taking notes. Moreover, most Asians, according to Burns (1998), are aware of how much face they have; having more face suggests that one is more influential within the system or has more connections. They gain experience in managing both superiors (greater face) and powerful subordinates (lesser face), who are in charge of many of the day-to-day tasks. In Asian traditions, face is inextricably linked to “webs of relationship.” This is one of the reasons why it can be challenging for Vietnamese students to raise questions in class as they are used to listening to their lecturers and accepting what they have to say. They fear looking foolish, but they also fear making the teacher look foolish by hinting that they disagree with what the teacher says and that the teacher is not flawless. Vietnamese students can try to ask in private later or, better yet, ask their peers.

This finding was also discussed and explained by many earlier researchers on Confucian principles. Accordingly, Eastern cultures adhere to the Confucian principle that respect is due to elders and teachers. In the classroom, the teacher not only imparts knowledge but also embodies authority; therefore, students are expected to show their respect by paying close attention to what they are taught. Confucian models, according to Nguyen Huu Phuoc (1975), are teacher-centered, closed, and dependent on students’ obedience. Even if they know the teacher is incorrect, students may choose to withhold their own beliefs in order to preserve the teacher’s reputation. Liu and Littlewood’s (1997) research confirmed that teacher-centered, grammar-translation instruction with a focus on rote memory dominates the majority of English teaching in East Asian countries. According to Ballard and Clanchy (1997), there are differences

in attitudes towards knowledge amongst different cultural traditions. Following over a millennium of Chinese rule, the Confucian ethical framework has influenced Vietnamese culture, particularly the character of education in Vietnam (Nguyen Dinh Hoa, 1972). Vietnamese learning methods are likewise founded on three fundamental Confucian principles: self-effacement, teamwork, and the idea of “face” (Flowerdew, 1998). Moreover, as a result of the teacher-centered approach, students hold instructors in the highest regard and view them as the source of knowledge. Vietnamese instructors offer all the information needed for the session; the only thing that is required of the students is to absorb it. Students in strong uncertainty-avoidance cultures, according to Hofstede (1991), want their professors to be knowledgeable.

High-Context Communication and Low-Context Communication

The context level refers to the degree to which meaning in communication is conveyed explicitly through words versus implicitly through context, non-verbal cues, and shared understanding (Hall, 1976). In high-context communication, the message is transmitted and processed indirectly, and the interlocutor primarily employs context to accurately interpret the message content, according to Hall (1976). Low-context communication, on the other hand, relies less on context and conveys and processes information directly in an explicit and unambiguous manner. Culture has multiple dimensions, which have a direct impact on communication, as Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) noted. Low-context communication is seen in societies that prioritize individualistic ideals, whereas high-context communication is employed in more community cultures, according to these researchers. Individuals in Western nations like the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom speak in a low context. The civilizations of these nations have a high regard for individuality. People in the same community do not often share experiences; thus, to communicate, they need to know both general and specific information. The majority of communication messages are effectively expressed through language; hence, those communicating must use more direct and noticeable means of information dissemination (Gudykunst, 1991). In contrast, people in Eastern nations, because of their strong sense of community and shared values and information-sharing practices, tend to “speak less, understand more” in most day-to-day interactions. To interpret the communication message, participants rely mainly on postures, space, time, and even silence. The status of the individuals involved in the communication, such as age, gender, education, family history, and work title, can also be used to express the information being communicated. Vietnamese high-context cultures emphasize nonverbal communication, group orientations, common codes, and a great deal of implicit meaning in spoken words. People from high-context cultures typically speak in an indirect manner because they value the idea of harmony within the group (Gudykunst, 1991). To avoid misunderstandings and to know which version of the language to use (as speaking to superiors, equals, and inferiors involves using distinct language), they want to know the status and background of others.

1. Silence as an indirect communication strategy

From the above comparison, it can be seen that some of the differences between Western and Eastern nations result in different communication styles. In the foreign language class I teach, while some students are enthusiastic in responding to my questions, there are quite a few who remain silent during most of the class. When asked to further explain this silence, one student claimed in the interview, “When the teacher asks whether anyone has any questions, our silence can be seen as a sign that we don’t have

any” (S8 [Trang], 2024). Another student explained similarly in the case of working in groups with friends, “In a group, when someone presents an idea, I think just being silent can show that I agree with that person’s point of view” (S9 [Phuong], 2024). In Vietnamese communication, silence functions as a common indirect communication strategy, as reported by most interview participants. Communicators interpret this as a positive indication since silence means agreement. This approach contrasts sharply with communication practices in many English-speaking contexts, where silence may be interpreted as disagreement or disengagement.

This finding is also in line with the study of DeCapua and Wintergerst (2004). Asian civilizations are thought to have complex contexts. In other words, they emphasize the importance of subtly conveying messages through nonverbal conduct more (DeCapua and Wintergerst, 2004). Consequently, students typically nod their heads silently rather than speak to indicate that they understand. In addition, Le Viet Dung (2003) explained more about the communication styles of Vietnamese people in groups. When it comes to communication amongst members of the ingroup, consensus and hierarchy are essential. Every participant willingly adheres to the conformity. A standard of communication is that behavior should be based on propriety and previously agreed-upon formalities. Exceptional, unusual, or novel behaviors are discouraged and may even be punished, particularly when they affect the community or group. No one involved in the communication process has the courage or opportunity to alter the roles or hierarchical positions in communication (DeCapua and Wintergerst, 2004). Because the communicators’ situations are so similar, the literature of several Asian nations, including China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, frequently uses implicit and indirect communication techniques. Nonetheless, Westerners tend to communicate everything simply and concisely because they do not know each other well and language serves as their primary means of understanding what another person is saying.

2. Hierarchy and formality in teacher-student interaction

The interaction between professors and students in a Vietnamese classroom is also partially reflected in the formality of the language used for communication. It can be observed from my classes that students never address a teacher by his or her given name, which is also characteristic of communication style in other East Asian countries. Teachers are always referred to by their last name or as “Teacher” by the students. In the learning diary, students also mentioned this feature and gave more explanations:

According to a proverb in Vietnamese, “Once your teacher, your father for life.” Therefore, if we are speaking to someone who is older than us, especially a teacher, it is quite impolite to address them by their given names. We always use their last name or their status (S10 [Tuan], 2024).

It can be seen that the language of communication in cultures where communal values are highly esteemed is used according to the circumstances, hierarchy, and sequence in which the communication takes place. In order to address each other appropriately, Vietnamese communicators rely on information regarding age, title, or social position. Additionally, one must behave in a kind and respectful manner toward the other person. Modesty and humility are regarded as essential components of civility in Vietnam, especially in the learning environment.

To further clarify and provide an overview of the findings, Table 4 below summarizes the key Vietnamese cultural characteristics identified in this study and their observed influences on English-language learning styles.

Table 4 Vietnamese cultural characteristics and their observed effects on English learning styles

Vietnamese cultural characteristic	Classroom manifestation	Observed effects on learning styles
Collectivism	Prioritizing group consensus and use the pronoun “we” instead of “I”	Hesitating to express personal opinions; greater active participation within groups
Face-saving	Avoiding public questioning and volunteering answers	Participating passively in the classroom; preference for private clarification
High-context communication	Using silence and indirect language to signal agreement or disagreement	Limiting verbal interaction; reliance on non-verbal cues
Respect for hierarchy	Using formal language when addressing teachers and avoiding challenging their authority	Following teacher-centered learning; dependence on instructor’s guidance
Harmony-oriented interaction	Using indirect reluctance and softened disagreement	Reducing confrontation; emphasis on maintaining interpersonal relationships

Conclusions

As there is a great demand for connection, exchange, and experience-sharing among nations worldwide, intercultural communication is essential in the contemporary globalized scenario. These activities require not only linguistic competence on the part of the communicators but also an understanding of other cultures. From this perspective, the present study was conducted to investigate how Vietnamese culture influences the learning styles of English-language learners. I employed learner journals, classroom observations, end-of-semester interviews, and comparative methodologies to examine the effects of Vietnamese culture on the learning styles of English-language learners. Based on a comparison of the fundamental distinctions between individualist and collectivist societies, the findings indicate that most participants exhibited strong collectivist tendencies, particularly through indirect communication, face-saving behavior, and a preference for group-oriented interaction in English classes. These patterns were consistently observed in classroom observations, learning journals, and interviews, suggesting their prevalence among the majority of participants.

This study offers both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study provides readers with an overview of the cultural differences between individualist and collectivist societies. It can be seen that Vietnamese people place strong importance on community, favor contexts where messages are delivered subtly, and use language in a flexible and skillful manner. In contrast, individuals in English-speaking nations respect their own values and favor straightforward, egalitarian communication in informal settings. These cultural differences may not be immediately apparent in English teaching and learning contexts, potentially leading to misinterpretations or inappropriate judgments. As a result, these variations may lessen the impact of instructional and learning activities. For the best results, both teachers and students should be aware of these unique characteristics to help them get beyond cultural barriers during the teaching and learning process.

Practically, teachers might modify their English teaching strategies based on the findings of research on Vietnamese students’ learning styles to guarantee successful cross-cultural communication in the

classroom. By understanding the characteristics of Vietnamese students' learning styles, English teachers are better able to encourage students to express their own ideas directly, even to those of higher status when talking with foreign people. Moreover, it is important that foreign language teachers make students aware of barriers in communication, avoid too many assumptions in communication, refrain from emphasizing the cultural values of their own country over the values of other countries, and carefully study non-verbal language signals, such as gestures. At the same time, to become successful communicators, it is necessary to know how to reconcile cultural differences, listen, and respect cultural differences.

This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, participants were selected from four English classes taught by a single instructor at a university, which may limit the general applicability of the findings. However, as a qualitative study, its aim was not to achieve statistical generalizations but rather to provide insights into culturally-influenced learning behavior. The findings are aimed at providing analytical generalizations and may be applicable to similar EFL contexts in Vietnam and other collectivist educational settings. Future studies could expand the participant pool across multiple educational institutions and instructors to further validate and expand these findings. I hope that this study will assist both Vietnamese teachers and students in recognizing these unique characteristics so that they can overcome cultural barriers and experience a more beneficial classroom situation.

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Interview and Learning Diary

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