

The influence of Vietnamese culture on English language acquisition: Learners' perspectives



Huynh Thi My Duyen^a ✉

^aTay Do University, Vietnam.

Abstract Culture plays a significant role in language learning, impacting aspects such as vocabulary, grammar, and usage in various contexts, including formal and informal settings tied to social status or age. Disparities between a learner's native culture and the target culture can affect the acquisition of the target language. Native culture may either facilitate or interfere with learning, with interference often being more prominent (Ara, 2017; Ellis, 1997; Brown, 2001). Vietnamese culture exemplifies this dynamic within the context of Vietnamese students learning English. Distinct cultural traits in Vietnam can pose cross-cultural challenges, leading to potential misunderstandings in communication (Dang & Norris, 2024). Recognizing traditional characteristics plays a crucial role in assisting students in overcoming cultural barriers in language acquisition. Despite this understanding, there exists a considerable gap in the literature regarding this topic. This gap in research provides the impetus for the present study, which seeks to explore how Vietnamese culture affects the process of learning English. Data collected from a questionnaire involving 83 students majoring in English at a university located in the Mekong Delta reveals their valuable insights into this phenomenon. The findings indicate that the communication styles and learning preferences prevalent among Vietnamese students present distinct challenges in their English language learning journey. The research results suggest several pedagogical implications, suggesting that tailored instructional strategies could enhance the effectiveness of the English learning process for Vietnamese students. Addressing these cultural factors is essential for improving language acquisition outcomes and fostering more effective learning environments.

Keywords: Vietnamese culture, communication styles, learning preferences, English learning process, Mekong Delta

1. Introduction

Language and culture are deeply interconnected (Karlik, 2023). Each plays a crucial role in shaping the other. As noted by Brown (2007), language not only functions as a tool for communication but also reflects the core values, beliefs, traditions, and social norms of a specific culture. This dynamic relationship means that the influence of culture on language is significant, affecting vocabulary, grammar, and the ways language is used in different contexts (Tiny-Toomey, 1999). For instance, cultural values often dictate how language is employed, determining when to use formal versus informal language on the basis of social status or age.

In language education, the connection between culture and language is crucial (Karlik, 2023). It is believed that a learner's native culture can influence their acquisition of a foreign language in various ways (Ara, 2017). Ellis (1997) described this influence as a form of "transfer," which may facilitate learning. Brown (2001) agreed that the native cultural framework can either facilitate or interfere with the learning process of the target language; however, interference from native culture is often more pronounced.

Dang and Norris (2024) contend that cultural characteristics specific to Vietnam shape how Vietnamese individuals approach education and communication. These traits can significantly affect the process of learning English. Consequently, Vietnamese learners may encounter numerous cross-cultural challenges that hinder their educational experience. The differences between their native cultures and those of English-speaking communities can result in misunderstandings and difficulties in the acquisition of a new language. The researchers also recommend that it is essential for both teachers and learners to be aware of these traditional characteristics in order to effectively navigate and mitigate cultural barriers and balance them with the modern language learning approach. Despite the importance of these cultural issues, there is a notable deficiency in the literature that addresses the effects of cultural differences on language learning, particularly within the Vietnamese context with the Confucian-influenced education (Dang & Norris, 2024) and the need for education reform to improve foreign language teaching efficiency and students' foreign language proficiency (The Vietnamese Politburo, 2024).

This paper aims to investigate the differences between Vietnamese culture and Western culture, focusing on how these cultural differences influence English language acquisition. Specifically, this study examines this influence in two critical areas: communication styles and learning preferences. By understanding these distinctions, educators can better navigate the



challenges faced by Vietnamese learners and develop more effective teaching strategies that cater to their unique cultural context. This exploration contributes to the broader field of language education by highlighting the importance of cultural awareness in facilitating successful language learning outcomes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Different values in Vietnamese and Western culture

Cultural value differences between Vietnamese culture and Western culture, including English culture, can be identified in various aspects, such as history, traditions, and societal norms. Key distinctions are evident in the areas of *collectivism* versus *individualism*, *hierarchy* and *respect*, and the concept of *face saving*.

2.1.1. Collectivism vs. individualism

Vietnamese culture places a strong emphasis on collectivism, where the needs and goals of the community take precedence over individual desires. Gudykunst and Kim (2003) noted that children in Vietnamese households and educational settings are encouraged to consider the opinions of others and to align with what benefits the group. Additionally, maintaining harmonious relationships is deemed more crucial than achieving personal success, as highlighted by Varner and Beamer (1995, cited in McLaren, 1998). Consequently, individuals often avoid asserting their personal interests in ways that conflict with the group's objectives (Kim et al., 1994), preferring to work collaboratively (Burns, 1998) and sharing responsibility for the group's outcomes (McLaren, 1998).

Conversely, many Western nations advocate individualism, which emphasizes personal freedom, autonomy, and self-expression. In these cultures, students are encouraged to voice their own ideas and appreciate diversity, even embracing disagreement as a pathway to uncovering deeper truths (Hofstede, 1991). This perspective values group work but prioritizes individual achievements over the maintenance of group harmony.

2.1.2. Hierarchy and respect

In Vietnamese society, hierarchy and respect for authority figures, such as parents, elders, and educators, are of paramount importance. In a collectivist culture such as Vietnam, the fundamental principle is "Honor the hierarchy first, your vision of truth second" (Bond, 1991). This hierarchical structure significantly influences the teacher-centered methodologies prevalent in education. Gudykunst (1991) posits that in such societies, teachers possess the bulk of information, leading students to pose indirect or accommodating questions and resulting in less detailed verbal exchanges.

In contrast, Western societies generally promote equality and individual rights, where respect is acquired through personal achievements rather than through age or social standing. Vo (2014) asserts that these cultures foster children's independence and emphasize individual success, which manifests in activities designed to enhance self-expression and critical thinking, as well as encouraging students to speak out and assert their viewpoints (Pae, 2020).

2.1.3. Face savings

In Vietnamese culture, face saving is regarded as a critical component of communication and is essential for preserving harmony within the community. This belief influences Vietnamese students to listen attentively to their teachers and accept their perspectives (Burns, 1998). There is a pervasive fear of losing face, both personally and for the teacher, as dissenting views may be perceived as negative criticism, suggesting that the teacher is not infallible. As a result, Vietnamese students often seek clarification privately or consult their peers rather than expressing dissent in class. They tend to remain silent during discussions to avoid making errors and risk embarrassment.

2.2. Influence of Vietnamese culture on English-language learning

2.2.1. Communication styles

Vietnamese communication is characterized by its indirectness and politeness (Duong et al., 1975). People often use softening language and tend to avoid confrontational discussions. In contrast, Western cultures generally favor direct communication, where individuals openly express their thoughts and opinions.

Ellis (1995) indicated that Vietnamese students often hesitate to engage in classroom activities because of concerns about disappointing their teachers with incorrect answers. Additionally, they may refrain from asking questions in class for fear that their peers will recognize their lack of knowledge. While some Vietnamese students may not be inherently shy, they prefer not to draw attention to themselves, as they are anxious about "losing face" if they make mistakes.

2.2.2. Learning preferences

Vietnamese students typically favor collaborative learning styles that emphasize group work. They often feel more secure when they participate as part of a team (Burns, 1998) or in whole-class settings, where group opinions are prioritized over individual perspectives (Vo, 2014).

Traditional Vietnamese education is predominantly teacher-centered. In Vietnam, esteemed teachers are regarded as symbols of knowledge and hold significant authority in the classroom. Consequently, students are expected to remain quiet, listen attentively, take notes, and review them later. The emphasis is on rote memorization and repetition rather than fostering critical thinking, problem-solving skills, or conceptual understanding. Students often memorize content to ensure comprehension of subsequent material, but they may feel uncomfortable, challenging or disagree with instructors, who are typically viewed as authoritative figures or experts.

3. Methodology

This research employs a quantitative design, utilizing a Likert scale questionnaire. The participants included 83 sophomore students enrolled in two English classes at a private university located in the Mekong Delta region. They indicated their level of agreement (ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)), with 22 statements pertaining to their cultural values, communication styles, and learning preferences. Data analysis was conducted via SPSS software to assess the reliability of the test items and to examine the correlation between the students' cultural values and their communication styles and learning preferences. Additionally, the percentage of responses for each item was calculated to provide detailed insights into the subject matter. The findings of this study may reveal the influence of Vietnamese culture on students' English language acquisition.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. General results

The Cronbach's alpha value for the whole questionnaire is $\alpha=.94$. This high value indicates excellent internal consistency across the entire instrument. The value for cultural values is $\alpha=.88$, the one for communication styles is $\alpha=.75$, and the one for learning preferences is $\alpha=.89$. Each of these values exceeds the acceptable threshold of .7, demonstrating that the questionnaire is sufficiently reliable for research purposes.

Furthermore, the results from the SPSS correlation tests indicate significant correlations between students' cultural values and their communication styles as well as their learning preferences. The analysis yielded a p -value of .000, which suggests strong statistical significance in these relationships.

4.2. Detailed results and discussion

4.2.1. The students' cultural values

The results presented in Figure 1 indicate a strong consensus among the students regarding their cultural values. The data revealed that a significant percentage of the students (57.8%) expressed a preference for collaborative idea sharing in groups. However, there was a noticeable reluctance to engage in communication during class discussions for several reasons.

First, a substantial portion of the students reported feeling apprehensive about making mistakes (57.8%) or presenting subpar ideas (56.6%). Second, many students perceived the responsibility of expressing opinions as an obligation linked to the class rather than a personal initiative (45.8%). Consequently, when peers refrained from speaking, these students similarly chose silence.

Additionally, the students lacked confidence in seeking clarification (45.8%) and avoided contradicting their teachers (44.6%). Another contributing factor to their hesitation was the fear of distinguishing themselves or being perceived as different from their classmates (42.2%).

The findings presented align closely with existing literature. Consistent with Burns' (1998) perspectives, students demonstrated a preference for collectivism and concern for face-saving by opting to work collaboratively in small groups for a sense of security. However, they exhibited hesitation in articulating their own ideas in front of the class due to fear of losing face if their contributions were deemed incorrect. Furthermore, informed by their hierarchical worldview, students regarded their teachers as primary sources of information and were often reluctant to express dissenting viewpoints, as noted by Bond (1991) and Gudykunst (1991). In this context, it is essential to provide encouragement to enhance their motivation to participate actively and voice their opinions during class activities.

4.2.2. The students' communication styles

As illustrated in Figure 2, a significant percentage of the students demonstrated politeness in their communication, with 68.7% opting for courteous expressions. A very small number of the students (8.4%) admitted that they did not make effort to be polite in conversations. Additionally, 55.4% of the students frequently employed indirect communication strategies, which contributed to a tendency to avoid confrontational interactions, as noted by 40.9% of the participants. Nevertheless, more

than half of the students reported that they had difficulties with making clearness for their statements. This may be the result of trying to polite in communication. Their modesty in communication may also lead to the consequence that they may say less than their actual knowledge (Duong et al., 1975). The habit of avoiding disagreement may result from collectivism and face savings in social interactions. They may be worried that face-losing can make others “withdraw from the situation or relationship” (Brick & Louie, 1984). This may limit their critical thinking or creativity.

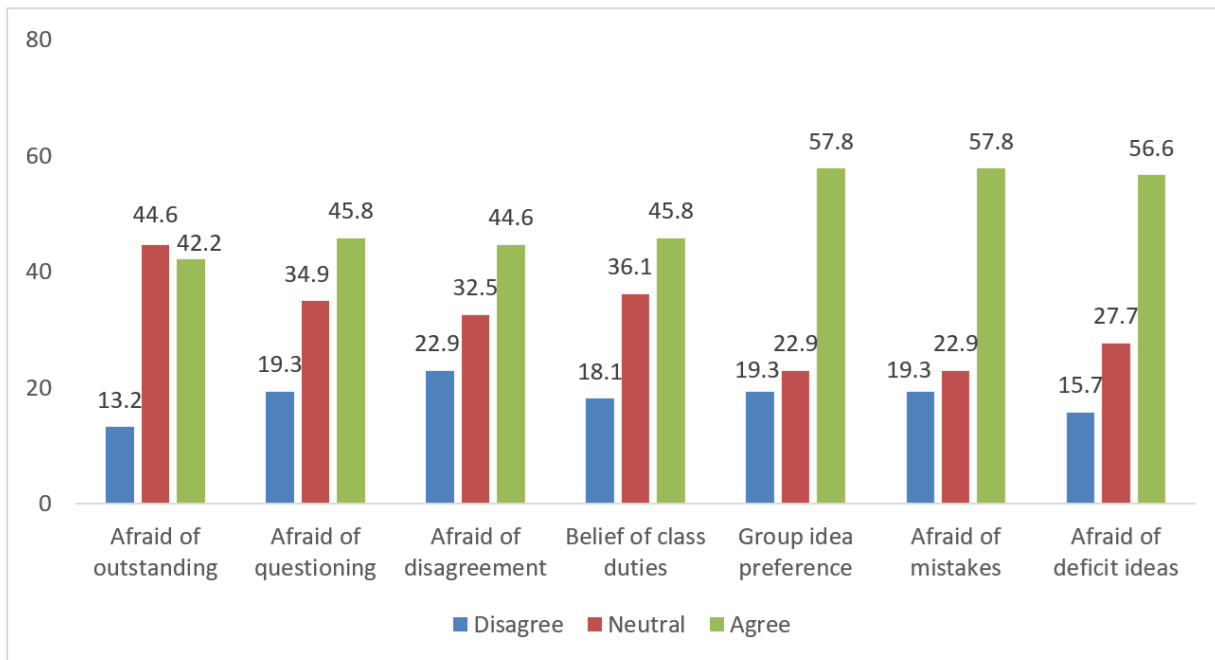


Figure 1 The students’ cultural values.

The above findings indicates that it is crucial to establish a welcoming and low-pressure environment. Teachers need to act as members of students’ family, or in one group with the same interest, not let students to think of them as outsiders (Holliday, 1994). Teachers’ use of elicitation techniques, encouragement, and constructive feedback could help to bridge the gap between educators and students, empowering learners to articulate their viewpoints confidently, without the fear of embarrassment or disappointment of their instructors.

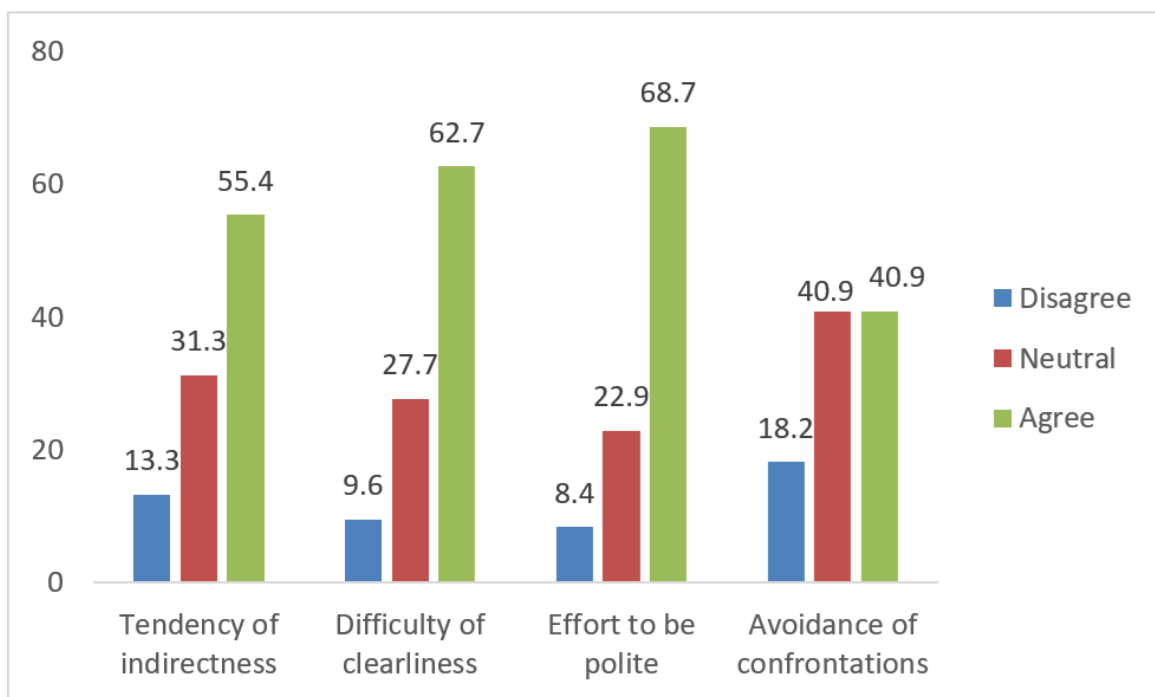


Figure 2 The students’ communication styles.

4.2.3. The students' learning preferences

The learning styles of the students are clearly illustrated in Figure 3. Notably, over 60% of the students indicated that they preferred methods involving repetition and group discussions. Furthermore, nearly half of the respondents expressed a preference for rote memorization techniques. In contrast, skills such as critical thinking and creative thinking were less favored, whereas 51.8% of the students expressed an expectation for the development of problem-solving skills. Given these insights, it is evident that students' skill acquisition and engagement in the classroom may be adversely affected.

Figure 4 presents an analysis of the students' learning expectations. A significant 63.9% of the students anticipated that teachers would provide clear guidance during class activities, whereas 59% sought additional support. A considerable portion of the respondents, nearly half, indicated a preference for a safer learning environment; however, 61.5% acknowledged that they occasionally enjoyed engaging in challenging activities that required critical thinking. Furthermore, 42.2% of the students expressed a need for more time to contemplate their thoughts prior to participating in discussions.

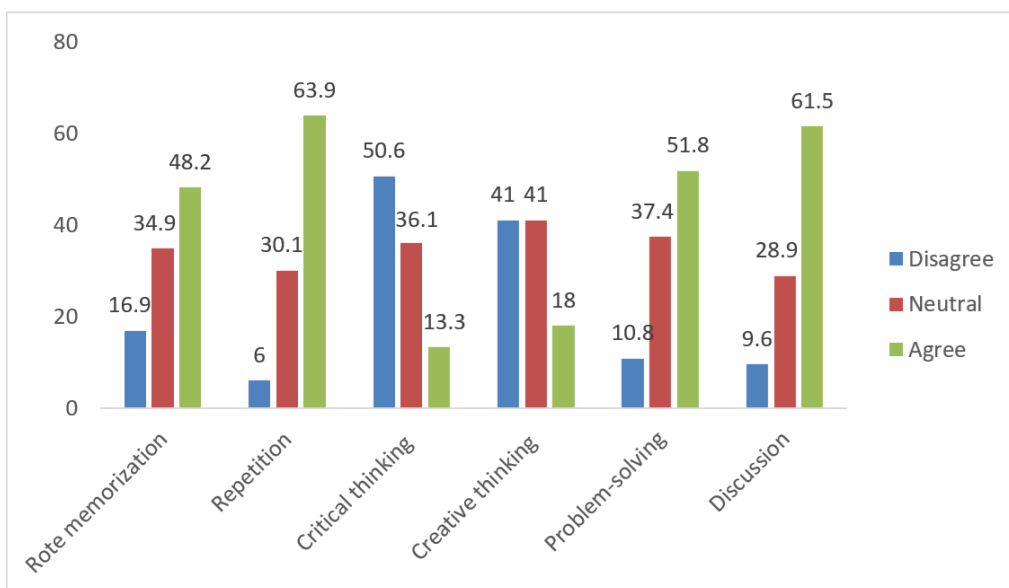


Figure 3 The students' learning styles.

The research findings indicate that students' native culture significantly impacts their preferences for teacher-centered classrooms, prioritizing safety to mitigate face-threatening risks. These students typically adhere to traditional learning methods, favoring repetition and rote memorization. Therefore, deviations from established preparation methods are generally not well-received by students (Ellis, 1995). Nonetheless, there is evidence suggesting that these students possessed an interest in challenging activities, highlighting the necessity for teachers to understand their students' preferred learning styles in order to provide suitable educational experiences.

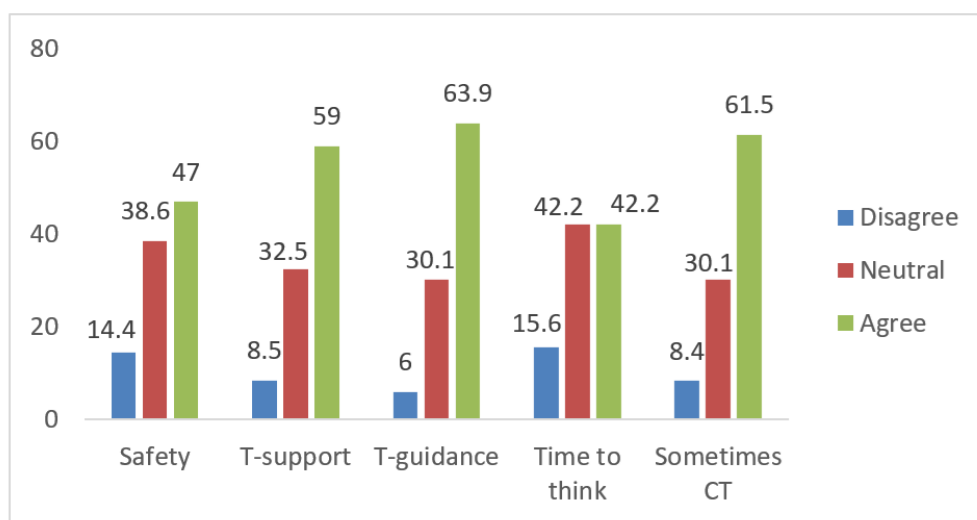


Figure 4 The students' learning expectations.



To enhance English-language proficiency and encourage active engagement, a diverse array of learning activities is essential to cater to the varied needs of individual students. Moreover, cultivating a classroom culture that promotes curiosity, dialogue, and mutual respect can aid students in transitioning towards a more interactive and communicative learning model (Dang & Norris, 2024). Group work should be facilitated with clearly outlined tasks. This strategy not only fosters collaboration but also reduces anxiety, enabling students to feel more comfortable sharing their ideas. Offering significant opportunities for individual work allows students to practice skills without the immediate pressure of peer evaluation. Furthermore, gradually integrating critical thinking exercises into the curriculum is highly beneficial, as it aids students in developing analytical skills and enhances their ability to engage in more sophisticated discussions, ultimately contributing to their overall language development.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that Vietnamese culture significantly influences various dimensions of students' English learning, especially their communication styles and learning preferences. Understanding this cultural context is essential for effective English teaching practices. Actually, Vietnamese students often adopt indirect and polite communication strategies due to their emphasis on collectivism and hierarchy, which can hinder direct expression and practice. They typically prefer teacher-centered environments that encourage cooperation and safety, finding comfort in repetition and rote learning. To enhance English proficiency and engagement, teachers should create a welcoming, low-pressure atmosphere that facilitates group work and individual practice. Promoting open communication through elicitation techniques and constructive feedback empowers students to express their viewpoints confidently. Additionally, gradually integrating critical thinking exercises into the curriculum enhances analytical skills and fosters sophisticated discussions. By adopting these strategies, teachers support Vietnamese students in mastering English while respecting their cultural background, ultimately empowering their journey toward proficiency.

Ethical considerations

The author confirms that the author has obtained all the consent required by the applicable law to publish any personal details or images of patients, research subjects, or other individuals used. I agree to provide the *Multidisciplinary Science Journal* with copies of the consent or evidence that such consent has been obtained if requested.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Funding

This research did not receive any financial support.

References

- Ara, R. (2017). Effects of native culture on learning English as a foreign language in Bangladesh: A case study. *International Journal of Advanced Research and Review*, 2(12), 7–24. Retrieved from <https://www.academia.edu>
- Bond, M. H. (1991). *Beyond the Chinese face*. Oxford University Press.
- Brick, J., & Louie, G. (1984). *Language and culture: Vietnam*. Commonwealth of Australia.
- Brown, H. D. (2001). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. Pearson Education.
- Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (5th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Burns, R. (1998). *Doing business in Asia*. Longman.
- Dang, T. M. T., & Norris, L. (2024). Vietnamese culture of learning and its implications for English language education. *Language – Culture*, 60(10), 97–103. <https://jst-hau.vn/media/31/uffile-upload-no-title31709.pdf>
- Duong, T. B., Diller, A., & Sutherland, K. (1975). *A handbook for teachers of Vietnamese students: Hints for dealing with cultural differences in schools*. Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Ellis, C. (1995). *Culture shock!: Vietnam*. Graphic Arts Books.
- Ellis, R. (1997). *Second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
- Gudykunst, B. W., & Kim, Y. Y. (2003). *Communicating with strangers* (4th ed.). McGraw Hill.
- Gudykunst, W. B. (1991). *Bridging differences: Effective intergroup communication*. Sage.
- Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and organizations*. McGraw-Hill.
- Holliday, A. (1994). *Appropriate methodology and social context*. Cambridge University Press.
- Karlik, M. (2023). Exploring the impact of culture on language learning: How understanding cultural context and values can deepen language acquisition. *International Journal of Language, Linguistics, Literature and Culture*, 2(5), 5–11. <https://doi.org/10.59009/ijllc.2023.0035>
- Kim, U., Triandis, H. C., Kagitcibasi, C., Choi, S. C., & Yoon, G. (Eds.). (1994). *Individualism and collectivism: Theory, method, and applications*. Sage.
- McLaren, M. (1998). *Interpreting culture differences*. Peter Francis Publishers.

- Pae, H. K. (2020). The East and the West. In *Script effects as the hidden drive of the mind, cognition, and culture* (pp. 107–134). Springer.
- The Vietnamese Politburo. (2024). *Conclusion No. 91-KL/TW on the continued implementation of Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW*. Vietnam.
- Ting-Toomey, S. (1999). *Communicating across cultures*. The Guilford Press.
- Vo, T. H. Y. (2014). Cultural differences: A barrier to native English teachers in English as a foreign language contexts. *VNU Journal of Foreign Studies*, 30(1), 63–72. <https://js.vnu.edu.vn/FS/article/view/443/421>