



EFL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMPACT OF VOLUNTEER WORK EXPERIENCES ON THEIR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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Abstract:

Intercultural communication focuses on the exchange of information among various cultures and social groups, encompassing individuals with diverse religious, social, ethnic, and educational backgrounds. This research article explores the impact of volunteer work experience on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' intercultural communication skills at a university in Vietnam. The study aims to understand how engaging in volunteer activities enhances students' ability to interact effectively across cultures, thereby contributing to their overall language proficiency and cultural awareness. The quantitative method was conducted through experimental convention and questionnaires with the participation of students majoring in English at a university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Data was collected through surveys involving 65 EFL students who participated in various volunteer programs and activities. The findings indicate that volunteer work experiences significantly help students boost their intercultural communication skills, fostering greater empathy, adaptability, and confidence in interpersonal communication in general.

Keywords: intercultural communication, volunteer work, EFL students, interpersonal communication

1. Introduction

Intercultural communication pertains to the sharing of information, ideas, and meanings among individuals from various cultural backgrounds. It is vital for promoting understanding, collaboration, and effective communication in our increasingly globalized world. Essentially, intercultural communication entails engaging appropriately and effectively with people from different cultures. This involves having

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the necessary communication skills, knowledge, and attitudes to facilitate successful cross-cultural interactions (Byram, 1997). Exploring intercultural communication requires a thorough understanding of both the socio-cultural characteristics of the participants and their linguistic differences. The context in which communication occurs is also important. In personal interactions, awareness of proxemics and body language norms is essential; maintaining appropriate social distances can enhance or hinder mutual understanding. Besides, gestures act as additional signals that can clarify or complicate conversations, and depending on cultural norms, they may lead to feelings of surprise, rejection, or alienation among individuals with different expectations regarding behaviour and emotional expression. Furthermore, in wider community interactions, the geographical context of communication must be considered (Aleksandrova *et al.*, 2024). Integrating intercultural communication within the university setting enhances students' language proficiency, communication effectiveness, and cultural sensitivity. It equips them to navigate diverse linguistic and cultural environments, fostering mutual understanding and encouraging global citizenship as they develop their intercultural communication skills (Oleksandrivna & Gustavivna, 2023).

The study was conducted to investigate the effectiveness of volunteer work experiences on EFL students' intercultural communication development, and to find out how those experiences help students in the purpose of learning and exploring culture. In addition, through the perspectives of English majors, this study aims to answer the research question focusing on students' intercultural communication skills development:

- What is the EFL students' perception of the effect of volunteer work on their intercultural communication skills?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is a critical area of study that examines how individuals from different cultural backgrounds interact and exchange information. According to Gudykunst and Kim (2003), effective intercultural communication is essential for fostering understanding and collaboration in an increasingly globalized world. This field explores various factors that influence communication, including language, nonverbal cues, and cultural norms, which can significantly impact interpersonal interactions (Ting-Toomey, 2018). Furthermore, the ability to navigate cultural differences is linked to enhanced interpersonal relationships and reduced conflict, as highlighted by Bennett (2013), who emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity and awareness. As globalization continues to shape social dynamics, the relevance of intercultural communication becomes even more pronounced, necessitating ongoing research and education in this domain (Hofstede, 2001).

Intercultural communication helps learners understand and appreciate these variations, including dialects, accents, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references. It enables them to communicate effectively with English speakers from different countries

and regions, fostering mutual understanding and reducing communication barriers (Gün & Yavuz, 2023).

Intercultural communication has become increasingly important today, as it enhances our understanding of global cultural diversity (Ilie, 2019). Gaining insight into different cultures and developing international communication skills can lead to more open and tolerant interactions. By embracing intercultural communication, individuals can bridge cultural divides, promote mutual understanding, and navigate the complexities of a diverse world. This practice fosters meaningful connections, encourages cultural appreciation, and contributes to a more inclusive and harmonious global community. However, it also presents several challenges that can hinder effective interactions. Language barriers often lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations, complicating communication (Baker, 2011). Additionally, cultural misinterpretations of nonverbal cues and gestures can create confusion or offense. Stereotyping and preconceived notions about other cultures may obstruct open-mindedness and lead to biased interactions (Ilie, 2019). Furthermore, assumptions of similarity can result in miscommunication, while power dynamics related to social status and privilege can complicate exchanges. Emotional responses also vary across cultures, leading to potential misinterpretations (Baker, 2011). Resistance to change in communication styles and contextual differences, such as variations in time orientation and individualism versus collectivism, further complicate interactions. Lastly, a lack of awareness about one's own cultural biases can impede understanding and effective communication. Addressing these challenges necessitates ongoing awareness and a commitment to learning and adaptation.

Effective and appropriate intercultural communication necessitates the integration of both intercultural communication competence and intercultural sensitivity. Intercultural communication competence refers to the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to communicate effectively across cultures. This includes understanding cultural differences, adapting communication styles, and demonstrating cultural empathy. For instance, individuals must be aware of how their communication may be perceived differently in various cultural contexts, which can significantly impact the effectiveness of their interactions (Arasaratnam, 2009).

On the other hand, intercultural sensitivity encompasses the mindset and attitudes that enable individuals to appreciate and respect diverse cultures. It involves challenging one's own cultural biases and approaching intercultural interactions with openness and curiosity (Gün & Yavuz, 2023). This sensitivity is crucial for fostering mutual understanding and reducing the likelihood of conflict in intercultural exchanges. Research indicates that individuals with high intercultural sensitivity are more adept at navigating complex social situations and are better equipped to build meaningful relationships across cultural boundaries (Chen & Starosta, 1998).

In general, intercultural communication has become increasingly important in the current society, as it plays a vital role in comprehending the diversity of global cultural

expressions. As a result, nearly all universities have made it a mandatory subject in their curricula.

2.2 Volunteer Work at the University

Volunteer work at universities has become an increasingly important facet of higher education, providing students with opportunities to engage with their communities while developing essential skills. Research shows that involvement in volunteer activities fosters personal growth and enhances students' social competencies, such as teamwork, leadership and communication (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 2014).

Volunteer work at universities has emerged as a crucial element in enhancing students' academic experiences and fostering personal growth. Recent studies have shown that engaging in volunteer activities not only contributes to community development but also equips students with essential skills that are valuable in their future careers. According to a study by Billig and Eyler (2015), students who participate in volunteer work report increased levels of self-efficacy, empathy, and leadership skills. Those experiences help students connect their academic pursuits, as real-world applications of their studies can deepen their understanding of course content and societal challenges, thereby enriching their learning processes (Billig & Eyler, 2015), contributing to their self-esteem and sense of belonging, encouraging civic responsibility and awareness of social issues (Billig, 2000).

Moreover, the integration of volunteer work into university curricula has been linked to improved student retention and satisfaction. A study conducted by Zaff *et al.* (2016) found that students who engage in service-learning initiatives demonstrate higher levels of academic engagement and commitment to their studies. The authors argue that these programs foster a sense of belonging and community among students, which can lead to better academic outcomes. By participating in volunteer activities, students not only enhance their educational experiences but also develop important interpersonal communication skills that are crucial for their professional lives (Byram, 2008; Zaff *et al.*, 2016).

In recent years, the role of technology in facilitating volunteer work at universities has also gained attention. According to a study by Haski-Leventhal and Mehta (2020), digital platforms have transformed the way students engage with volunteer opportunities, making it easier for them to find and participate in community service to develop empathy and understanding projects (Deardorff, 2006). The authors highlight that these platforms not only streamline the volunteer matching process but also provide students with valuable resources and support to enhance their service experiences. As universities continue to embrace technology in promoting volunteerism, it is essential to explore how these innovations can further strengthen the impact of volunteer work on students and their communities (Haski-Leventhal & Mehta, 2020).

In Vietnam, university students have a wide range of popular volunteer activities to choose from, allowing them to give back to their communities while gaining valuable experience. Many students engage in tutoring and mentoring programs, where they help

younger students with academic subjects or provide guidance in personal development. Environmental initiatives, such as tree planting and clean-up drives, are also popular, enabling students to contribute to sustainability efforts. Additionally, volunteering at local shelters or food banks allows students to support those in need directly. Participating in health-related outreach programs, such as blood drives or health education workshops, is another meaningful option. Finally, involvement in cultural events and festivals can provide students with opportunities to promote community engagement and celebrate diversity. Those activities not only contribute positively to the community but also provide students with valuable experiences and intercultural communication skills that enhance their personal and professional development.

In conclusion, volunteer work at universities plays a vital role in shaping students' academic and personal development while fostering a sense of civic responsibility and community engagement. The integration of service-learning initiatives into the curriculum not only enhances students' interpersonal skills and self-efficacy but also contributes to improved academic outcomes and retention rates. Furthermore, the advent of technology has revolutionized the way students access and participate in volunteer opportunities, making it easier for them to engage meaningfully with their communities. As universities continue to prioritize and innovate in their volunteer programs, they not only prepare socially responsible graduates but also cultivate a culture of service that benefits both students and the wider community. Moving forward, it is essential for educational institutions to further explore and enhance the impact of volunteer work, ensuring that it remains a cornerstone of the university experience.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Empirical Quantitative Method

The study was carried out by an empirical quantitative method through the process of participating in the activities at the university.

First of all, students surveyed their perspectives on how volunteer activities influence their cultural communication skills before participating in a variety of roles in the program. This approach aims to understand how students perceive and benefit from volunteer work experiences to enhance their cultural communication. Quantitative questions may focus on measuring the perceived impact of volunteer work on various aspects of cultural communication, such as knowledge of cultural diversity, communication skills, cultural sensitivity, teamwork skills, cultural thinking, and information technology skills. Students were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 how much they believe volunteer activities helped them understand and appreciate different cultural contexts.

After that, students volunteer to take part in activities held by the Youth Union and Student Association. Thereby, they may highlight specific cultural knowledge or intercultural skills. This could involve posing deep-insight questions or facilitating discussions to deepen students' understanding of the instructional techniques and their

potential benefits, which helps them to create their own skills through the roles of organizers and participants.

Finally, students engage in evaluating the effectiveness of the process of volunteer activities.

3.2 Participants

The study employed a convenience sampling method (Johnson & Christensen, 2014) to recruit the participants who were final-year English majors at a public university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, hereafter referred to as Mekong University (pseudonym). The total number of participants were 65 English as a foreign language (EFL) junior from the Department of English Linguistics, Translation and Interpretation, the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Mekong University. Details about the participants were described in the following figures.

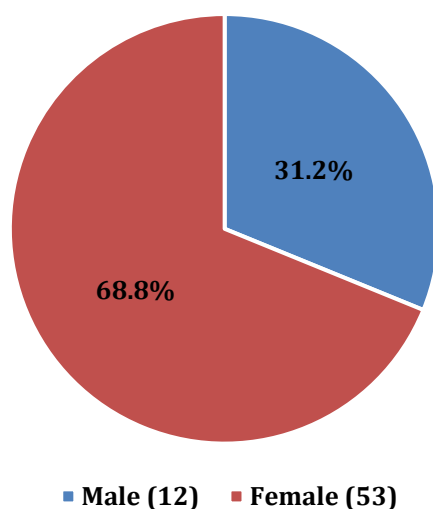


Figure 1: The participants

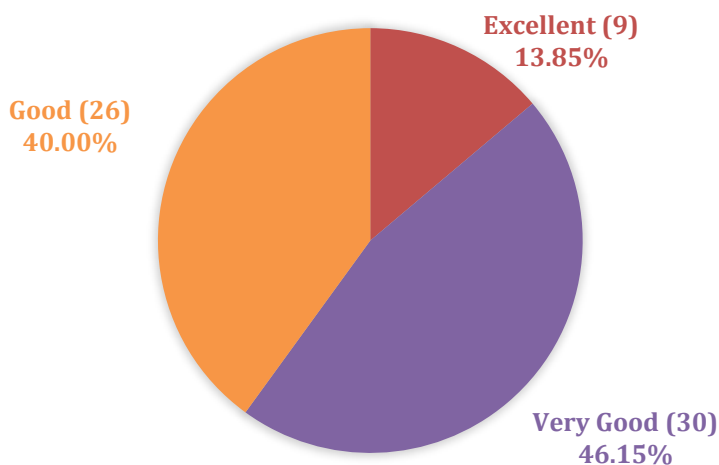


Figure 2: The participants according to their gender and academic levels

3.3 Research Instruments

This research used two questionnaires to collect data before and after volunteer work experiences. The participants were asked to show their answers on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was delivered in Vietnamese to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding of the content. The questionnaire consisted of two parts, developed based on key aspects related to students' information and how they perceived the impact of volunteer work experiences on their intercultural skills development. The first part asked about the participants' personal information, including gender, age and educational background. The second part focused on participants' perceptions of their confidence in intercultural communication skills.

The data from the questionnaire responses were subjected to the Statistics Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for data analysis. Before beginning the analyses, the scale test was run to test the reliability of the questionnaire. The results of the scale test showed that the reliability coefficient of the questionnaire satisfied the statistical reliability ($\alpha = .89$). Therefore, the questionnaire was reliable for data analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Effect of Volunteer Work on Intercultural Communication Skills Development

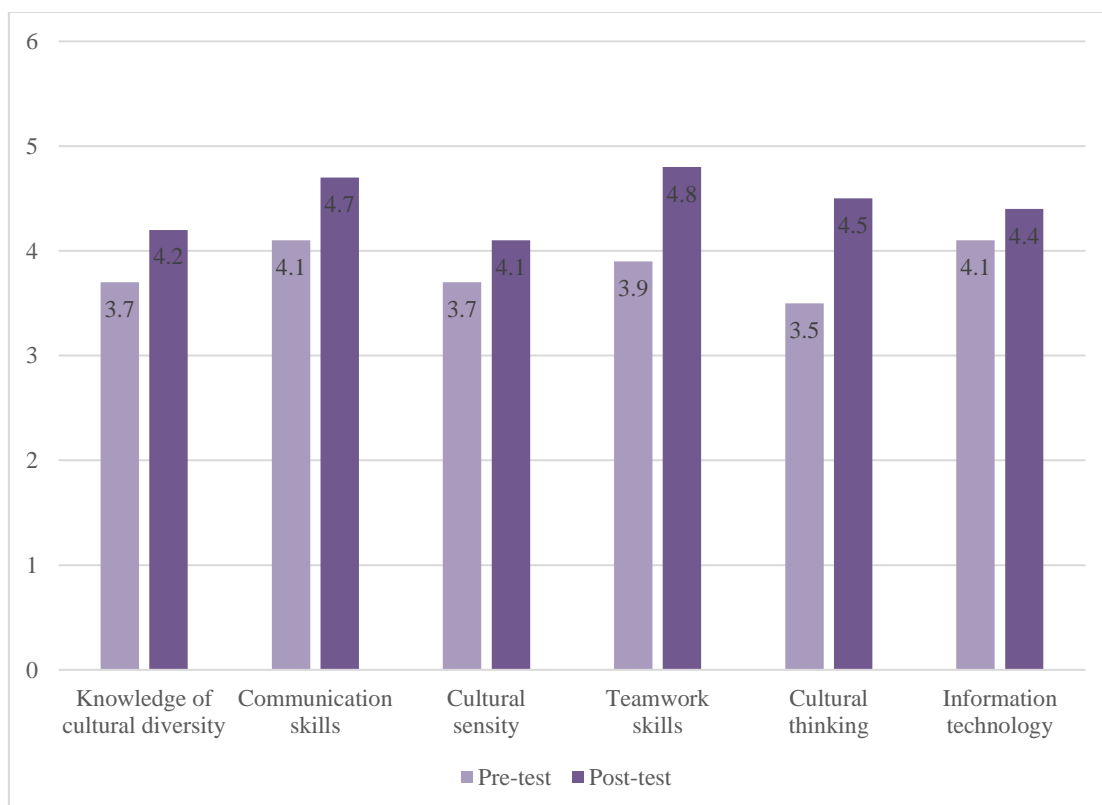


Figure 3: Intercultural communication skills development

Overall, the participants showed a high degree of improvement in their intercultural communication skills development. The results also show that the score in post-test is superior to the pre-test. It supported the conclusion that students have a positive improvement in their intercultural communication skills after participating in volunteer activities. The results from Figure 4 show that EFL students felt more confident in teamwork skills (M=3.9 in pre-test and M=4.8 in post-test) than the others such as knowledge of cultural diversity (M=3.7 in pre-test and M=4.2 in post-test), communication skills (M=4.1 in pre-test and M=4.7 in post-test), cultural sensity (M=3.7 in pre-test and M=4.1 in post-test), cultural thinking (M=3.5 in pre-test and M=4.5 in post-test), and information technology (M=4.1 in pre-test and M=4.4 in post-test). It means that EFL students had more improvement in teamwork skills than the others.

The results from the open-ended questions show that students are very excited about discovering interpersonal skills when experiencing volunteer activities. Students also noted that they could enrich their multi-dimensional thinking, cultural awareness, appreciation, and the ability to compare and contrast different roles of both organizers and modifiers. In addition to cultural skills, they also said they had significantly improved information technology skills when using a digital platform to organize, control and assess the activities.

4.2 Discussion

Overall, the research aligns with existing literature and offers insights into potential solutions for learners. It was considered to offer a positive impact of volunteer work experiences on EFL students' intercultural communication, which has been approved in previous studies.

Volunteer work significantly enhances English major students' intercultural communication competence by exposing them to diverse cultural contexts and perspectives. Engaging with individuals from various backgrounds allows students to develop empathy and understanding, crucial components of effective communication (Deardorff, 2006). This hands-on experience not only enriches their academic learning but also prepares them for a globalized workforce where intercultural interactions are commonplace. Moreover, volunteer activities often require collaboration in multicultural teams, fostering skills such as active listening and adaptability. These experiences help students navigate linguistic and cultural barriers, thereby improving their ability to convey ideas clearly and respectfully (Byram, 2008). As they reflect on their volunteer experiences, students can articulate their insights and growth, reinforcing their intercultural competence and enhancing their overall communication skills in both personal and professional contexts (Baker, 2011; Ilie, 2019; Haski-Leventhal & Mehta, 2020).

These results align with the work of earlier researchers. Oleksandrivna and Gustavivna (2023) stress that higher education fosters intercultural competence not only through structured teaching but also through hands-on experiences. Likewise, Aleksandrova *et al.* (2024) underscore the significance of context in intercultural

interactions, pointing out that understanding geographical and cultural elements greatly shapes communication success. The present study supports these perspectives, reaffirming that real-world experiences like volunteering effectively enhance and supplement traditional classroom education.

Although most of the benefits of the volunteer work experiences researched in this current study were perceived in terms of interpersonal skills, the study revealed that learners' understanding of cultural identity and developing international communication skills can facilitate easier, more open, and tolerant intercultural interactions, especially when students experience the role of organizers and modifiers in international program or staff in international exchange field trips. The intercultural learning resources, as a result, have practical effectiveness. The inference above made by the authors is supported by Eripuddin *et al.* (2023) and Haski-Leventhal & Mehta (2020). It implied that they must demonstrate appropriate content, organizational skills, linguistic proficiency, and the ability to apply interpersonal skills in different circumstances.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, volunteer work at universities serves as a critical platform for enhancing students' intercultural communication skills while simultaneously fostering personal growth and community engagement. Through participation in diverse volunteer activities, students are exposed to various cultural perspectives and social contexts, which enrich their understanding of intercultural dynamics. Research indicates that engaging in service-learning initiatives not only improves students' empathy and adaptability but also enhances their ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries. Students reported enhanced abilities, expressing that they felt more empathetic, adaptable, and self-assured in handling cultural differences following their volunteer experiences. This experience is particularly valuable in our increasingly globalized society, where the ability to navigate cultural differences is essential for personal and professional success. As universities continue to prioritize volunteerism, it is crucial to recognize its role in cultivating intercultural competence, thereby equipping students with the skills necessary to thrive in diverse environments. By fostering these connections, educational institutions can ensure that volunteer work remains a vital component of the university experience, ultimately preparing socially responsible graduates who are adept at engaging with a wide range of cultural perspectives. Through organizing volunteer activities and programs at the university, specific steps that can be taken to improve intercultural communication and interaction skills will enhance the ability to communicate, promote the individual image and showcase the culture of the nation. This form of communication allows students to tailor their skill sets to meet the cross-cultural collaboration needs of those global agencies, organizations, companies, and businesses value. These developments are not only linguistic improvements but also critical shifts in attitude and perspective, which align with broader goals of fostering global citizenship and social responsibility.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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