

Vietnamese EFL teachers' cultural integration in business English classes: an ecological perspective

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ABSTRACT

Cultural integration in English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction has become a key focus in Vietnamese universities, particularly in business and finance programs preparing students to navigate intercultural communication in global professional environments. However, limited research has examined how teachers' practices are shaped by ecological factors such as institutional structures, resources, and sociocultural conditions. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how EFL teachers at a Vietnamese public university integrate cultural content into their instruction. Guided by an ecological framework, the research employed a sequential mixed-methods design, using convenience sampling to collect data through 67 questionnaires and 10 semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data from questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative interview data were coded thematically to identify recurring patterns and ecological influences. Findings indicate that teachers prioritized international and target cultures, while local Vietnamese cultural content was largely underrepresented. Though teachers expressed strong commitment to fostering students' intercultural competence for international business communication, their pedagogical practices were constrained by ecological factors like limited instructional time, rigid curricula, and a lack of localized, business-relevant resources. In response, several teachers leveraged personal agency and digital tools to adapt cultural content despite structural limitations. The study highlights the need for ecologically responsive cultural instruction in business English classrooms.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In multinational corporations stretching continents, from Europe to Asia, from America to Australia, employees' proficiency in English communication broadens the door to employment opportunities, cross-border collaborations, and career progression [1]. The rise of business English as a distinct pedagogical domain globally reflects this development that students require not only grammar and vocabulary but communicative competence, cultural awareness, and adaptations [2], and the capacity of meaning negotiation across diverse socio-cultural boundaries [3], [4]. Culture is the language of international business [5], making the incorporation of language teaching almost inevitable [6], [7]. According to Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen [8], intercultural awareness becomes particularly critical when business communication demands not only mutual intelligibility but also sensitivity to norms, practices, and values held by interlocutors from

multiple cultural backgrounds. Baker [9] asserts that cultural familiarity enhances learners' practical communication skills in multicultural settings, thereby fostering more effective global citizenship skills. As a result, teachers who incorporate cultural components into English language teaching (ELT) not only assist students in embracing cultural variety but also equip them for effective cross-cultural communication in the academic, professional, and personal spheres. To recap, business success relies greatly on understanding other cultures, making it essential to include cultural awareness in language teaching [10].

In Vietnam, despite the fact that many English as a foreign language (EFL) learners have developed good linguistic competence, they still face communicative difficulties arising from a lack of sociolinguistic competence [7], [11]. Nevertheless, these days, national policies in Vietnam acclaim the significance of infusing cultural knowledge into EFL education at any level [12], [13]. Evidently, in alignment with the CEFR benchmarks, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training issued the 2008-2020 National Foreign Language highlights the presence of cultural content in preparing students for multicultural competence in the globalized world [14]. Nevertheless, many Vietnamese universities have encountered visible obstacles in bringing cultural lessons into EFL classrooms, such as limited access to appropriate authentic cultural resources [15], the dilemma of transitioning from traditional testing to innovative assessment methods for intercultural understanding [16]. To elaborate, Karabinar and Guler [17] highlight that culture integration in language teaching is critical yet complicated in terms of determining the place of culture in the curriculum, what is taught in terms of culture, and observing the methods and strategies used in teaching culture in ELT classes.

One notable point is that ample research on cultural integration into EFL pedagogy has been conducted in primary and secondary schools within the Vietnamese context, yet little in the tertiary level [11], [18]. This research gap is particularly suitable for specialized institutions, such as the current study's setting, where English instruction is geared toward business and economics. Further investigation is required to gain a comprehensive understanding of the distinct learning needs of these students and the challenges EFL instructors face in integrating culturally relevant content. In addition, the complex interplay of institutional, educational, and contextual factors that shapes EFL instructors' specific classroom practices has been underestimated in current regulations. The current study investigates the experiences of EFL lecturers at a public institution in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, in relation to cultural integration in language instruction in order to bridge this gap. By investigating the perspectives of Vietnamese EFL lecturers, this study aims to advance culturally responsive approaches to EFL pedagogy in current higher education. As a corollary, the findings are expected to support curriculum improvement and pedagogical innovation in a globalized higher education environment.

The study uses Bronfenbrenner's [19] ecological approach, emphasizing the dynamic and reciprocal traits of the teacher-environment interaction, to obtain a more nuanced and deeper grasp of these issues. This approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of multiple environments embedded in the teaching and learning process. Specifically, the macrosystem (e.g., national policies and cultural expectations), the mesosystem (e.g., teachers' relationships with administrators and colleagues), the chronosystem (e.g., shifting educational trends), and the microsystem (e.g., teachers' interactions with students, teaching materials, and resources) are key layers that constitute these environments in the context of EFL instruction. This approach, technically, facilitates an in-depth analysis of possible influences of internal and external working conditions on Vietnamese EFL instructors' cultural integration practices. For instance, a lecturer's willingness to adapt cultural resources is steered not only by their personal motivation but also by institutional teaching philosophy, collegial assistance, and prevailing societal attitudes toward cultural inclusivity. In other words, how a teacher interacts with the surrounding contexts and how these contexts necessarily impact them are the driving forces of an ecological approach [20].

Theoretically, Willis *et al.* [21] distinguish three overarching domains, including personal, structural, and cultural, that offer valuable insight into how contextual elements, individual traits, and larger cultural forces influence teachers' agency and instructional strategies. What makes this study distinctive is its application of Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective specifically within English for specific purposes (ESP) (e.g., business English) classrooms, a context rarely examined in prior research. It further innovates by analyzing how digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) tools are mobilized by teachers to integrate cultural content, thereby extending ecological theory into the digital era. Finally, the study foregrounds the unique tensions between local Vietnamese cultural identity and global business communication demands, offering fresh insights into how these frictions shape pedagogical practices.

Purposely, this study aims to fill research gaps by concentrating on the relationships between these elements and offering insights that can guide curriculum design, resource allocation, and policy changes to improve cultural integration in EFL training. Though the three constructs are theoretically related, further research is necessary to understand how they interact and impact one another. On this basis, the study proceeds with the following research question as its central point of inquiry: how do personal, structural, and cultural factors within an ecological perspective influence teachers' experiences of cultural integration in

business English language classes? By focusing on this question, the study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the complexities surrounding cultural integration in Vietnamese higher education and to inform future improvements in curriculum design and teaching practices in a globalized context.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research context and participants

The setting of this study is a prominent institution that focuses on finance, marketing, and economics, attracting a diverse student body, including both local and Laotian students. This study was conducted at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, which offers English language programs tailored for approximately 600 business English majors and students from 16 other business-related departments. Since this setting emphasizes global readiness, incorporating cultural elements into language instruction is essential. The sample size for this mixed-methods study was determined based on both methodological guidelines and practical considerations.

In the quantitative phase, 67 EFL teachers were recruited using convenience sampling, which was appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research and the accessibility of participants [22]. According to Kwak and Kim [23], a sample size exceeding 30 is sufficient for exploratory quantitative analysis, as it enables stable estimation of descriptive statistics and supports the assumption of normality under the central limit theorem. The participants were predominantly female (76.1%), with most aged 31-40 and holding a Master of Arts degree (95.5%). Furthermore, 67.2% had traveled abroad, and 52.2% had engaged in intercultural training; such experiences might shape their perspectives on cultural integration in language teaching. In the qualitative phase, a targeted group of ten participants representing 14.9% of the survey sample was intentionally chosen to reflect varied teaching profiles and intercultural exposure. This number is consistent with established guidance for qualitative research, emphasizing the value of smaller, purposefully selected samples that enable rich understanding of individual stances [24]. The selection strategy was designed to balance diversity of insight with the practical feasibility of conducting meticulous thematic analysis.

2.2. Research design

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods design to collect comprehensive data addressing the research question. Specifically, quantitative data were gathered from responses to 67 questionnaires, followed by qualitative insights obtained from ten semi-structured interviews to complement and enrich the quantitative findings. The combination of both data types enables a more thorough understanding of the research problem, as better understanding the research problem and question than either method by itself [25]. The two-phase design allowed the research group to map the landscape of the phenomenon through statistical analysis of quantitative inquiry in the first phase, followed by the second phase, inviting further investigation of the participants' interpretation of their lived experience.

2.3. Research instruments

The research group decided to utilize a questionnaire, known to be one of the easiest methods to administer [25], even with large numbers of participants. The questionnaire collected data on EFL teachers' experiences with cultural integration in English teaching and included two sections. The first section gathered demographic information (e.g., gender, age, qualifications, and teaching experience). The second section, covering cultural integration practices, consisted of 16 items on teaching content, activities, resources/technology, adapted from several studies [26]–[28]. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1=never to 5=always. These items were validated by three experienced colleagues before finalizing the questionnaire version. Administered via Google Forms, the questionnaire facilitated convenient online participation.

The research group also employed semi-structured interviews as a supplementary tool, enabling a more in-depth and comprehensive investigation of the target phenomenon [29]. Guiding questions for the semi-structured interviews were developed based on two sources: the preliminary results of the student questionnaires and a synthesis of the literature. Specifically, the interviews were structured around three thematic categories: i) personal, structural, and cultural conditions dynamically influence teachers' practices regarding cultural content; ii) personal, structural, and cultural conditions dynamically influence teachers' practices regarding cultural activities; and iii) personal, structural, and cultural conditions dynamically influence teachers' practices regarding cultural resources and technology.

The reliability and validity of the research instruments were carefully established to ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings [30]. In the quantitative phase, the 5-point Likert scale questionnaires demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ($\alpha=0.779$) greater than 0.700 [31].

This means that the items within each scale were measuring consistent constructs. The reliability was further supported by providing clear instructions to the teachers on how to complete the questionnaires. Content validity was ensured by aligning questionnaire items with the study's objectives and the shared experiences of the participants, all of whom had completed the same training program and materials. Construct validity was strengthened by grouping items under pre-defined thematic categories that reflected the conceptual framework of the study. Face validity was confirmed through expert review by two experienced lecturers who evaluated the clarity, layout, and linguistic accuracy of both the English and L1 versions of the instrument. The interview questions were designed to mirror the key constructs of the questionnaire, allowing for deeper exploration of emerging patterns. This triangulation enhanced the credibility and confirmability of the findings [25].

2.4. Data collection and analysis

Using Google Forms, the survey was distributed to 67 EFL teachers at the study location, allowing for easy access from desktop, laptop, or smartphone devices. Participants received a link to the questionnaire along with instructions on how to complete it and a brief overview of the study. Prior to the primary data collection, a pilot study with five teachers was carried out to ensure the questionnaire items were pertinent and clear. Small changes were made to increase coherence in response to their input. After a week for participants to finish the questionnaire, their answers were gathered and examined. A total 10 teachers who were purposefully chosen to represent a range of ages, genders, and teaching experience participated in semi-structured interviews after the questionnaire phase. To guarantee clarity and simplicity of expression, the interviews were done in Vietnamese and scheduled at times and places that worked for each participant. With the participant's permission, each interview was audio recorded and lasted roughly 30-40 minutes. Following the interviews, verbatim transcriptions of the audio recordings were made and distributed to participants for member verification. They were able to confirm the correctness of their answers and offer any clarifications.

The questionnaire responses from the teachers about cultural integration in EFL classes were examined using descriptive statistics. Besides, the interview data were examined through thematic analysis following six-step framework [30]: i) familiarization with the data, ii) generating initial codes, iii) searching for themes, iv) reviewing themes, v) defining and naming themes, and vi) producing the report. To begin, all transcripts were read several times to ensure deep engagement with the data. Keywords, phrases, and sentences with related meanings were coded and grouped into preliminary categories reflecting teachers' practices of: i) cultural content, ii) cultural activities, and iii) cultural resources and technology. These initial codes were iteratively refined to identify broader patterns across the dataset. Themes were then reviewed and refined collaboratively to enhance consistency and ensure that they accurately represented the data. This two-month procedure was repeated until the point of saturation, which means no new lines of thinking or codes could be applied. To guarantee the high level of transparency and traceability, all excerpts are coded using the format teacher-question-subtheme (e.g., T1-Q1-S1.1), where "T" refers to the teacher participant, "Q" corresponds to the interview question, and the "S" names the thematic subcategory (S1.1: employment relevance). These coded excerpts are integrated into the narrative to illustrate key patterns and variations across participants. The data are interpreted within the ecological context, linking micro-level classroom practices with meso- and macro-level influences such as institutional policy, technological mediation, and global cultural trends. This approach enables a coherent, evidence-based account of how teachers select and implement cultural content.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Ecological dynamics of selecting cultural content in EFL classrooms

The data from the questionnaires and interviews indicated that the teachers' personal factors, like pedagogical beliefs and prior knowledge, directly determined their preferences for selecting cultural concepts in their actual classroom practices. For example, a majority of teachers displayed a strong tendency to utilize materials featuring target culture content (Item 1, $M=4.18$, $S.D.=0.53$) and a balanced representation of international target cultures (Item 3, $M=3.90$, $S.D.=0.58$) rather than materials featuring source culture content (Item 2, $M=2.48$, $S.D.=1.12$). Qualitatively, most of the interviewed teachers (excluding T1, T4, T7, and T10) indicated that they consistently integrated cultural elements from English-speaking countries (e.g., American, British, or Australian culture) into their teaching. To illustrate, T5 the integration of English-speaking cultures into their teaching:

"From what I observe and grasp, I tend to focus more on cultural aspects from English-speaking countries like the US, UK, and Australia, as students will communicate better in future jobs."
(T5-Q1-S1.1)

These verbal responses derived from the teachers' knowledge and assumptions demonstrate a personal commitment to the target culture, particularly Western cultures, because they are perceived as instrumental for business English language students to engage with the international community. Interestingly, T6 and T9 expressed a strong desire to incorporate more source culture (Vietnamese culture), which reflects their personal belief in the extrinsic value of homeland culture in preparing their business EFL students to be global citizens:

"I try to, in fact, incorporate a mix of target culture, international culture, and Vietnamese culture in my lessons. [...] Having good Vietnamese cultural knowledge makes my students more confident of their own culture when working with other people." (T6-Q1-S1.2)

Inferentially, the personal intention to deliver more Vietnamese culture reveals a teacher's intrinsic motivation to sharpen local identity, albeit the resource-based challenges constraining these efforts. The teachers' personal preference for blending local culture with global perspectives demonstrates their understanding of the importance of cultural diversity in education, under their solid pedagogical and content knowledge, regardless of other contextual factors. Consistent with the quantitative data, a large number of teachers exhibited a preference for target culture aspects (Item 4, $M=3.67$, $S.D.=0.93$) and international target culture aspects (Item 6, $M=3.81$, $S.D.=0.74$) in classroom activities while balanced target, international, and source cultural content (Item 7, $M=3.38$, $S.D.=0.76$) was preferred to some extent. Nevertheless, these preferences shaped by their updated knowledge and ideologies were not fully manifested in their classroom practices, caused by structural factors including institutional influences and the availability of resources and materials. Firstly, the scarcity of Vietnamese cultural resources is a key structural limitation mentioned by T2 and T6:

"To be honest, I found it hard to seek appropriate and rich Vietnamese cultural content to incorporate in my English lessons as its themes are not relevant to the textbook units, or it is not written in English, and so on." (T2-Q1-S1.3)

"[...] I see that finding materials of Vietnamese cultural content is time-consuming and arduous, while I have to manage all things of a lesson, like materials, time, teaching and learning activities, and scoring before attending the class." (T6-Q1-S1.3)

Indeed, both teachers recognized a gap in available materials covering Vietnamese culture and the time fund, which led to their limited ability to fully integrate Vietnamese culture in their English lessons to business EFL students, notwithstanding their strong desire for that. Apparently, these constraints urged them to rely on readily available Western-centric resources in the current textbooks. Nevertheless, T4 found success in integrating a variety of cultures through technology deployment.

"Although the availability of high-quality Vietnamese cultural materials suitable for the textbook units is scarce, I can still make something with the aid of AI tools to generate the content. I find that it is convenient for busy language teachers like me." (T4-Q1-S1.4)

It is clear that digital literacy in the 21st century and accessibility of AI-generated localized cultural resources might mitigate the structural constraints and foster their agency in diversifying cultural integration within business EFL classrooms. Even though teachers' personal beliefs and knowledge, along with the structural limitations, shaped much of their practice, these factors might not be independent of the cultural domain embodied in wider societal attitudes. In line with the evolution of cultural knowledge and individual identity positioning, the teachers at this university also captured evolving societal attitudes and global discourses about English, such as inclusivity and diversity in this case. Inspired by these ideologies, they were not only aware of the limitations of existing materials but also actively adapted their current teaching practices. They emphasized that the cultural factors also function as a powerful layer within the ecological system, influencing the teachers' perceptions and decisions about what and how culture should be manifested in their classroom practices in the context of scarce marginalized cultural materials and preparation time. To illustrate, T1 voiced:

"Previously, Western cultures in America or Britain were the most prominent in language materials, almost to the exclusion of others. However, cultural content about other parts of the world, such as Asia or Africa, has become more attentive these days. This motivates me a lot to find a better balance between Western and non-Western cultures, like Vietnamese, in my English lessons." (T1-Q1-S1.5)

In general, the first theme captures how teachers select and frame cultural content within a complex ecosystem of institutional expectations, material access, and sociocultural orientation. Indeed, many teachers showed a strong preference for Western cultural materials, in particular American and British examples, as these were perceived to enhance students' employability and global competence. This preference reflects the long-standing hegemony of Western norms in ELT, where global English is often equated with Anglo-centric communicative practices [9]. In the context of business English, this orientation aligns with students' instrumental motivations to prepare for international business communication dominated by Western corporate values, especially since Vietnam has opened its doors to the world by participating in world and regional organizations. However, it also documented an emergent awareness from teachers of the need to equalize global and local cultural representation. Some participants highlighted the necessity to promote cultural identity within the country while keeping up with global readiness, a function that is dualistic in nature and again resonates with the glocalization concept in language education [32]. This dual orientation represents an adaptive affordance within the ecological system, with teachers mediating between external expectations about global competence and internal commitments to national identity and pride.

As a matter of fact, serious obstacles were also highlighted in the study. Some of the most frequently reported challenges among teachers are the lack of localized English-language teaching materials and time constraints resulting from heavy teaching workloads. According to Başar *et al.* [33], such structural limitations act as environmental stressors that restrict individual agency within an educational ecology. These findings align with research in Indonesia [34] and Iran [35], where teachers similarly struggled to incorporate local culture due to insufficient resources, echoing earlier evidence from Vietnam [7], [36]. Institutional demands and curricula often prioritize language competency over intercultural content; therefore, inclusivity of locally and globally cultural balance in actual classroom practices experiences negligence. This suggests practical implications for curriculum design: institutions should allocate space for intercultural content alongside linguistic proficiency, and policymakers could support the development of localized, business-relevant resources to reduce teachers' reliance on Western materials.

Nonetheless, some teachers showed creative resilience and technological adaptability in overcoming these challenges. Such practices point to the potential of digital technologies and AI as mediating tools that can be formally integrated into teacher training and resource development strategies. A smaller group of teachers also emphasized the need to broaden cultural paradigms beyond Western dominance, advocating for the inclusion of regional and global perspectives. Concurrently, teachers' personal values, teaching experiences, and intercultural understanding influenced the kinds of cultural materials they resorted to using. Aligning with the global prominence of English-speaking countries in EFL instruction, many teachers continued to favor Western cultural themes, while others sought to integrate Vietnamese elements to maintain cultural relevance. This imbalance in representation, driven by the dominance of Western resources, the primacy of linguistic proficiency, and teachers' greater familiarity with target-language cultures, expands findings from previous studies [37]–[39].

3.2. Ecological dynamics of implementing cultural teaching activities in business EFL classrooms

Questionnaire data depicted that the learner-centered activity that most of the teachers favored is encouraging students to share experiences of travel or intercultural interactions (Item 12, $M=3.65$, $S.D.=0.79$). As documented in interviews, this most preferred teaching activity was steered by both personal beliefs and structural affordances; specifically, the teachers perceived it as pedagogically useful and manageable within the limited class time. For example, T10 stated that:

“During the lessons, I often ask my volunteer students to share their experiences in Vietnam or other countries, if any. This activity does not consume too much class time. It is also an interesting activity for students to internalize the language forms.” (T10-Q2-S2.1)

In addition, a variety of cultural teaching activities were conducted in their actual classroom practices, including: i) analyzing cultural references in films/TV/news (Item 9, $M=3.10$, $S.D.=0.91$); ii) assigning activities to compare information between cultures (Item 8, $M=3.02$, $S.D.=0.75$); and iii) introducing educational documentaries on cultures (Item 10, $M=3.02$, $S.D.=0.84$). The practices of these activities were conditioned by the reciprocal and synergistic interaction of personal beliefs, structural supports or constraints, and broader cultural influences, evidenced by interview data. First, the often-practiced activity of cross-cultural comparison by which students identify similarities and differences across cultures was stimulated by the teachers' personal beliefs found in five interviews (T3, T4, T7, T8, and T9).

“For me, this activity is useful to make students engage in the lessons, but also to develop their critical thinking skills important to modern life. I believe it does not stand at learning language and culture but sharpens students' soft skills.” (T3-Q2-S2.2)

T7, additionally, pinpointed that their favor of this activity was enabled by the institutional teaching guidelines:

“Inclusivity and critical thinking are what are described in our university’s key educational policy, which equips Business-majored students to be effective employees in the globalized and competitive job market.” (T7-Q2-S2.2)

Meanwhile, 9 out of 10 teachers (exclusive of T6) also elucidated that their use of such comparative cultural activities was reinforced by the cultural conditions. For example, T5 stated that:

“This activity, moreover, is also necessary in cultural teaching because if my students are only exposed to US-UK culture, biases can occur, and their limited cultural knowledge can cause misunderstandings when they work with multinational companies using English in some Asian regions, for example.” (T5-Q2-S2.3)

T9 considered multiculturalism and interculturalism, and the pluralism of culture in the ELT curriculum and teaching in modern society. This synergistic interaction of three ecological domains may create a coherent momentum for embedding cross-cultural perspectives in EFL classrooms.

“Without these cross-cultural activities, students can easily fall into a narrow cultural view, which runs counter to contemporary cultural trends that recognize English as belonging to multiple cultures, not only the native speaking countries.” (T9-Q2-S2.3)

Secondly, at a moderate frequency sought in questionnaires, the practice of analyzing cultural references in authentic media was synergistically formed by personal beliefs, structural support, and contemporary cultural conditions, which emerged from five interviews. From their personal pedagogical beliefs and assumptions, the teachers believed that using these activities is conducive to motivating and scaffolding their students in cultural interpretation. In this case, T1 emphasized that:

“[...] I also think that when I present cultural elements through multimedia like YouTube, Instagram, my students can notice both verbal, like idioms, and non-verbal, like humor, gestures, or facial expressions, vividly, then they will get more motivated in the lessons.” (T1-Q2-S2.4)

This practice was largely strengthened by enabling structural conditions such as high accessibility to media resources, Internet, and technological equipment like interactive whiteboard, TV, and projector in classroom settings. T5 exemplified that:

“Luckily, our school campus is well equipped with facilities like the Internet, projectors, TVs, and even Interactive Whiteboards. Thanks to these, I can conveniently use media resources to introduce cultural content in my English classes.” (T5-Q2-S2.4)

However, T10 also admitted that the affordances of technology depend on teachers’ ability to manipulate:

“Using these technologies for cultural activities also requires teachers’ digital literacy, which is challenging for me. I am kind of low-tech.” (T10-Q2-S2.5)

From a cultural perspective, the increasing presence of global multimedia made this practice particularly meaningful. Most teachers recognized that their students have been consuming pop culture from around the world outside their formal coursebooks. Accordingly, T4 specified an example:

“My students should have watched American or British dramas or TV shows, or even Korean movies, Japanese anime, or Thai mukbang videos. So, bringing these cultural elements into English classes is useful to prepare business-majored students for real-life intercultural employment.” (T4-Q2-S2.6)

T7 linked the activity to contemporary social values, particularly the momentum of inclusivity and diversity in today’s cultural landscape:

“When students are exposed to references from different media, they can understand that English belongs to the globalized world. Also, these students can avoid the misconception that learning English merely means learning about the US or the UK.” (T7-Q2-S2.6)

Although some teachers (Item 11, $M=3.01$, $S.D.=0.88$) preferred assigning role-play for speaking in cultures, this activity was shaped by the teachers' personal convictions and cultural orientations, but blocked by the structural conditions. Qualitatively, as revealed by T1, T4, T6, and T9, the teachers' personal preferences originated from their interactive and hands-on teaching methods, like role-playing or simulation tasks. For example, T4 gave a typical example.

“I do like to ask my students to act out a simple cultural scenario, for example, an American host family and a Vietnamese exchange student. Clearly, this task not only helps my students to practice English but also makes them aware of how different between two cultural backgrounds are.” (T4-Q2-S2.7)

However, T9 advocated that these activities were not frequently done in their classes because of two structural blockers, i.e., time scarcity and rigid curricular demands on grammar and vocabulary, respectively.

“Although role-plays or simulation tasks are helpful for students' culture and language acquisition, I actually need to complete the curriculum demands fully. For instance, I concentrate on testing students' linguistic knowledge and skills, if possible. Thus, cultural tasks are the only means of contextualizing vocabulary and grammar.” (T9-Q2-S2.8)

It is evident that although they highly valued these interactive cultural activities, regarding role-playing, such structural constraints might prevent them from incorporating these teaching activities regularly. However, T7 proposed an alternative that if the teachers took advantage of the flexibility of the ELT curriculum, they would be able to implement these cultural activities meaningfully. Unlike T1 and T9, who often reported being hindered by structural factors, T7's suggestion indicates that innovative practices for interactive and engaging cultural activities can be taken within the curriculum framework, provided that all objectives are fulfilled.

“Why don't we carry out role-plays or drama activities right in the classrooms? Accomplish two objectives in one action. One is to enhance their cultural understanding. The other is to assess their use of language in context.” (T7-Q2-S2.9)

To the second theme, how teachers operationalized cultural integration in their classrooms reflected a balance of personal agency, pedagogical beliefs, and institutional constraints. Results indicated that teachers did not consider culture an isolated component of business English but rather an embedded feature of communication, professional behavior, and identity formation. Cultural integration was manifested in a range of activities pertaining to sharing student experiences, role-plays, case studies, and the development of soft skills, including negotiation, critical thinking, and cross-cultural communication. These activities demonstrate ecological synergy between pedagogical aims and professional realities whereby language learning and cultural understanding are interrelated in the preparation of learners for real-life global interaction. Second, the range and number of cultural activities exploited by the teachers depended greatly on individual factors: pedagogical experience, intercultural teaching approaches, or the notion of the significance of cultural learning. Accordingly, teachers with strong intercultural awareness conducted discussions, comparative cultural analyses, and role-play simulations, whereas less confident or less trained teachers preferred activities focused on language precision and test preparation. This aligns with Tran and Dang [7] that there are different ways of approaching cultural education among Vietnamese EFL teachers.

Consistent with previous research in Saudi Arabia [40], Yemen [37], and Turkey [38], this study indicated that time pressure, curricular imperatives, and assessment systems geared toward high-stakes exams often circumscribed teachers' implementation of culture-rich lessons. The teachers working under more stringent institutional controls tended to give more emphasis to linguistic rather than intercultural outcomes, leading to inconsistent implementation of cultural content across classrooms. This suggests practical implications for curriculum design and assessment reform: institutions should consider balancing exam-oriented requirements with intercultural learning objectives, thereby enabling teachers to integrate culture more consistently into business English instruction. The practice of cultural integration into business English classes was influenced by the environment in which it is situated [41].

More broadly, structural and cultural factors further solidified these limitations. In the EFL context of Vietnam, communicative language teaching and exam-oriented instruction continue to dominate classroom

practices, leaving little room for more profound exploration of cultural topics. For teachers, this means balancing competing demands, namely meeting the language proficiency targets and curriculum requirements of the institution, while also maintaining the development of ESP students' intercultural competence for their future careers. Teachers have designed many versatile teaching activities, integrating cultural elements into activities while scaffolding these business-majored students' language proficiency and exam results. Such adaptations demonstrate teachers' adaptive strategies within the educational ecosystem, shaped through negotiations between larger structural forces and individual pedagogical beliefs. From a policy perspective, these findings highlight the importance of providing institutional support (e.g., professional development in intercultural pedagogy and investment in localized teaching resources) to reduce reliance on Western materials and empower teachers to sustain cultural integration. Teachers also tap into multimedia and popular culture resources such as films, advertisements, and social media content to enrich classroom interactions and make intercultural learning more tangible and real. These resources acted as cultural bridges, linking students to globalized communication contexts beyond traditional Western models, particularly with regard to the East Asian cultural narratives. This forms a growing trend toward pluralistic and diversified cultural representation, which reinforces intercultural sensitivity and an awareness of cultural diversity among EFL university students operating in global business environments.

3.3. Ecological dynamics of employing cultural teaching resources and technology in business EFL classrooms

For culture teaching, the teachers slightly preferred authentic materials (Item 14, $M=3.38$, $S.D.=0.91$) to textbooks (Item 13, $M=3.26$, $S.D.=0.83$). This trend was clearly explained through interviews, indicating that both personal and cultural domains alleviated the impact of the structural barriers, such as limited instructional materials or the rigid dependence on market-determined language textbooks. For instance, six teachers (i.e., T1, T2, T4, T5, T8, and T10) alluded to the reality of globalization and everlasting changes in human societies. Specifically, T1 uttered that:

“As far as we know, our world is changing constantly, so cultural and societal knowledge is no longer circumscribed as in the coursebooks. It does, too. Thus, I use supplementary authentic materials in case I introduce cultural aspects to my students. (T1-Q3-S3.1)”

In the same vein, T10 appraised the attractiveness and authenticity of real-life materials in delivering cultural substances to business EFL students:

“It is undeniable that social media posts or YouTube vlogs provide vivid evidence of how cultural norms operate in everyday contexts from different cultural backgrounds, from Western to Eastern regions. Thus, lessons for culture become more genuine.” (T10-Q3-S3.1)”

T4 discussed the limitations of coursebooks to culture teaching in EFL classrooms, which often contain linguistic practice while paying minimal attention to cultural content or adding some elements perfunctorily:

“I have to admit that the currently used textbooks in my teaching primarily focus on language skills instead of cultural content. I reckon this is a big gap. I see one huge effort to make the language contextualized in them, but I realize that this inclusion is rather mechanical and superficial. [...]” (T4-Q3-S3.1)”

From these responses, we can conclude that the teachers' personal convictions and contemporary cultural demands interacted to offset structural constraints, calling for the teachers' agency, initiative, and creative problem-solving in selecting, adapting, and using resources in their EFL classroom contexts. In addition, physical cultural objects, such as statuettes, tools, and jewelry (Item 15, $M=2.54$, $S.D.=1.04$), were less frequently incorporated into EFL classroom practices. Consistently, only two teachers (T2 and T8) referred to this activity in their interviews. Their accounts displayed how personal and cultural domains acted as enablers, empowering teachers' intrinsic motivation and creativity, while structural constraints like availability, time limits, and language-focused objectives hindered their sustained integration of material culture in the classroom.

“Sometimes, I prepared and brought some handicrafts and souvenirs from my previous trips abroad to present the history and culture of these items. My students were really excited and concentrated, but these objects are not always available and easy to carry. I think that the faculty should build a collection of these.” (T2-Q3-S3.2)”

Thus, there is no doubt that digital resources like social media platforms (Item 16, $M=3.76$, $S.D.=0.91$) experienced the most widespread use, respectively. Overall, the interview data illustrate that while personal and cultural conditions encouraged the teachers to resort to digital resources for their culture teaching, consistently agreed by all the interviewed teachers, their practices were ultimately either enabled or blocked by structural conditions. First, driven by their own creativity and digital literacy and the global business norms, some teachers tend to use online platforms to expose their EFL students to the authentic international business context. This tendency was strongly supported by the ubiquity of online platforms at no cost, serving as enabling structural conditions. For example, T4 voiced that:

“I often open TikTok videos and YouTube vlogs to let my students know how young professionals or entrepreneurs from different countries actually communicate. These online materials are very useful and real-world. In fact, I also highlight key vocabulary and grammar through them.” (T4-Q3-S3.3)

In the same vein, T1 highlighted how structural affordances such as classroom technology and internet accessibility supported this practice:

“Each classroom in our campuses A, B, and C has a high-end projector and streamlined Internet access; therefore, I find it convenient to show videos or browse websites directly. It saves time and helps me link lessons with real business scenarios.” (T1-Q3-S3.3)

Second, T1, T3, T7, and T8 claimed that their use of technology in language teaching, including culture lessons, was aligned with the institutional expectations and curriculum requirements to incorporate digital resources into their teaching practices. For example, T7 stated that:

“We are often informed of integrating technology into teaching practices regardless of any disciplines in recent school-level and department-level meetings. Our school administrators always encourage us to be teachers with good digital literacy, besides pedagogical and content knowledge.” (T7-Q3-S3.4)

T8 added his voice to T7's utterances, stressing that this institutional emphasis on digital literacy is not solely a directive but a reflection of a global trend toward technologically mediated learning and teaching:

“Using technology in education is not optional but compulsory in accordance with my university's curriculum mandates and policies. More broadly, technology use is prominent everywhere, even in primary schools in Vietnam, let alone university contexts.” (T8-Q3-S3.4)

Interestingly, the teachers compensated for the rigidity of textbook content and curriculum by resorting to the availability of technology and the internet. Specifically, three teachers mentioned this solution to enrich culture lessons and make language learning more relevant to real-world contexts, including T4, T9, and T10. For example, T9 advocated that:

“Why don't we leverage technology for our cultural teaching in English classes? We are easily exposed to abundant online resources like new websites, company blogs or YouTube clips, or even Instagram posts. To be honest, the Internet helps me a lot.” (T9-Q3-S3.5)

T4 emphasized his initiatives in technology exploitation when integrating cultural content in the EFL lessons came from his own autonomy and agency:

“I saw that there were limitations in teaching materials, so I took the initiative to learn about new teaching methods. In the 21st century, being proficient in technology is a strong point. Luckily, I knew a little, so I took the initiative to take advantage of some online resources to include in my lessons. It was just enough, but I felt it was extremely useful.” (T4-Q3-S3.5)

It is indicated that the teachers recognized the positive side of structural blocks and turned them into a key motivator for their professional autonomy. In addition, the teachers' (i.e., T2's and T5's) lived experiences and technology-driven beliefs also triggered them to utilize authentic online sources to introduce global culture to their EFL students. For example, T2 narrated that:

“I studied in Australia for my master’s degree in TESOL. I realized that the cultures of different countries are different. These things are not in the textbooks. If my students want to be employed in such competitive employment markets, they have to know them. Then, I sometimes incorporate real-world news and cultures into my students.” (T2-Q3-S3.6)

Overall, this third theme illustrates an increasingly critical role that technological and material resources play in the ecological actualization of culture teaching, with teachers actively using authentic materials, virtual and physical platforms, and materials and cultural objects to create meaningful and contextual learning for their students. Authentic sources, such as company websites, online news, and business interviews, were praised for the real-world credibility they added to the classroom. However, there are also logistical difficulties, such as time practicalities, resource management, and work matching to course objectives, which find structural barriers to the pedagogical power of authenticity. To illustrate, the teachers, especially middle-aged teachers, increasingly utilize digital and online resources like YouTube, TikTok, and blogs to contextualize global business communication. Such resources provided students with the opportunity to experience real-time diverse communicative styles, case studies, and workplace scenarios beyond what textbooks could provide. This trend resonates with the current move toward digitally mediated intercultural learning [42], wherein technology expands their exposure to multiple cultural perspectives and practices around the world. However, it is important to note that issues related to the number of competencies still exist. Some teachers expressed difficulties in selecting, evaluating, and adapting online materials effectively, thereby emphasizing the need for professional development programs and support from the university. This suggests practical implications: universities should provide structured training in digital pedagogy and intercultural resource evaluation, ensuring teachers can harness technology without compromising quality or relevance. Concurrently, universities are well equipped with internet connections and technological devices, which facilitate the use of digital technology in cultural teaching in business English classes.

It is noteworthy that some teachers showed a high level of initiative and pedagogical innovation in exploring and trying new digital tools and methods to enhance cultural teaching. This form of self-initiation reflects ecological adaptability, which is demonstrated by the way teachers developed and evolved with the changing technological environment when “AI and technology” has been the most prevalent topic among professional communities in Vietnamese university contexts these days. From a policy perspective, this underscores the importance of aligning institutional digital competence initiatives with classroom-level innovation, thereby bridging micro-level practices and macro-level reforms. Another direction in an ecological perspective is demonstrated when teachers connect cultural lessons to real-life business experiences; for example, through authentic case studies or activities that simulate the workplace. Inferentially, learning then becomes more sustainable because it is closely tied to the learner’s professional practice. Additionally, teachers used a combination of textbooks, cultural artifacts, and digital media to support cultural instruction. These choices reflected the specific conditions of their teaching environments, influenced by internal and external factors such as access to resources, self-efficacy in selecting appropriate content, and prior teaching experience. As Nguyen *et al.* [15] point out, many English teachers in Vietnam still rely on textbooks for their convenience and reliability, even though the cultural content is often limited or stereotyped. Barriers such as physical facilities, school policies, and exam pressures also shape these decisions. To be more specific, although textbooks provide organized and test-relevant content, they often lack depth and cultural authenticity.

In contrast, digital media provide more dynamic, up-to-date, and engaging content, which is consistent with teachers’ goals of promoting authentic and meaningful communication. However, the integration of cultural artifacts such as souvenirs, leaflets, or traditional tools is difficult due to cost, storage issues, and practical feasibility, resulting in their limited use in the classroom. Similar trends have been observed in Iran [35] and Türkiye [43], where teachers also prioritized textbooks and digital tools over physical cultural artifacts. This suggests that resource allocation policies should support affordable, localized cultural artifacts alongside digital tools, thereby diversifying cultural representation in business English classrooms. As classrooms increasingly integrate technology, the way cultural knowledge is accessed, shared, and transmitted has also changed. With the proliferation of online platforms and social media, teachers are increasingly incorporating these digital resources into traditional methods. This shift reflects a global educational trend where technology not only acts as a facilitator but also as a medium and driver for intercultural learning in the modern English classroom. For practice, this highlights the need to embed digital intercultural literacy into teacher training programs, ensuring that technology use enhances rather than replaces the depth of cultural engagement.

4. CONCLUSION

In sum, the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study shed light on the interdependent relationship in the ecosystem between teachers' agency, institutional structures, and socio-cultural contexts in the process of integrating cultural elements into teaching business English. Teachers' practice of cultural teaching is not a linear or isolated process, but a dynamic negotiation process, shaped by the interaction of blocking and enabling factors of the given educational environment. The findings substantiate the ecological claim that educational practices are mutually constituted by personal, structural, and cultural systems. At the personal level, teachers exercised agency by innovating within constraints and adapting their pedagogical beliefs to learner needs. Structurally, policies, assessments, and curricula either supported or restricted cultural integration, while culturally, global and local ideologies shaped how English and professionalism were valued. The interaction of these levels created both opportunities and barriers, with teachers balancing Western and local cultures, leveraging technology, and adapting to institutional demands, reflecting resilient adaptability within a complex educational ecosystem. Overall, this study suggests that effective cultural integration in business English teaching is contingent on a complex and interwoven environment where teacher agency, institutional support, and recognition of cultural diversity in society intersect and co-shape the teaching-learning process. The findings are significant because they show how teachers balance global demands with local identity, while also leveraging technology and personal initiative to adapt within systemic limitations.

Theoretically, the study extends Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective into the ESP domain, offering a nuanced understanding of how personal, structural, and cultural systems co-constitute pedagogical practices. Practically, it underscores the importance of institutional support, resource development, and professional training, particularly in digital and AI-assisted pedagogy, to foster intercultural competence in business-oriented contexts. Although this study provides valuable insights into EFL teachers' cultural integration strategies, there are some limitations. The generalizability of the study is limited by the fact that it was conducted in a single institution, which may not fully reflect the diversity of teaching practices in other universities in Vietnam. In addition, although the data collected was comprehensive, the sample size may not fully capture the diversity of teachers' perspectives, and the use of self-reported data may have led to bias in responses. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs, cross-institutional comparisons, and direct classroom observations to gain a deeper understanding of the development of cultural integration over time and context. In addition, examining the relationship between institutional policies, teacher beliefs, and student attitudes would also provide deeper theoretical and practical insights into the field of ESP teaching.

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C : **C**onceptualization

M : **M**ethodology

So : **S**oftware

Va : **V**alidation

Fo : **F**ormal analysis

I : **I**nvestigation

R : **R**esources

D : **D**ata Curation

O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft

E : Writing - Review & **E**ditting

Vi : **V**isualization

Su : **S**upervision

P : **P**roject administration

Fu : **F**unding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, [TMH], upon reasonable request.




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