CULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS IN THE GLOBAL WORKPLACE: EFL LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES AND SOLUTIONS FROM AN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COURSE

Thai Cong Dan[1i],
Thai Phan Bao Han[2]
[1]Dr., Senior Lecturer,
School of Foreign Languages,
Can Tho University,
Can Tho City, Vietnam
[2]English Lecturer,
Faculty of Social Sciences,
Can Tho University of Technology,
Can Tho City, Vietnam

Abstract:

This study investigated cultural misunderstandings experienced by 55 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners after completing an online intercultural communication (ICC) course. These learners were *online second-degree English students* enrolled in an English Studies program at Can Tho University, Vietnam. They analyzed eight case studies of cultural misunderstandings adapted from *Pham, T. H. N. (2011). Communicating with Vietnamese in Intercultural Contexts: Insights into Vietnamese Values*, and proposed practical solutions based on their personal experiences and course content. The study aimed to (1) identify common cultural misunderstandings, (2) examine the solutions suggested by the learners, and (3) evaluate their perceptions of each solution's effectiveness. Thematic analysis revealed recurring issues related to power distance, indirect communication styles, and hierarchical workplace structures. Follow-up interviews with five participants provided deeper insight into the perceived impact and practicality of their solutions, which included intercultural training, open dialogue initiatives, and mentorship programs. These findings highlighted the challenges EFL learners faced in intercultural settings and offered practical recommendations for improving communication in diverse professional environments.

Keywords: intercultural communication, cultural misunderstandings, EFL learners, online second-degree students, Can Tho University, workplace communication, practical solutions

[i] Correspondence: email tcdan@ctu.edu.vn

1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, workplace interactions are profoundly shaped by cultural diversity. Effective communication across cultures is essential not only for fostering collaboration and enhancing productivity but also for building positive and inclusive workplace relationships. However, cultural misunderstandings—whether due to differences in communication styles, values, or norms—can lead to conflicts, decreased morale, and diminished project outcomes. In such contexts, the ability to navigate and manage intercultural differences becomes a critical skill.

This study focuses on the cultural misunderstandings encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Vietnam, particularly in their interactions with foreign colleagues and supervisors. The decision to explore this topic is motivated by the growing recognition of intercultural communication as a vital competency in today's workforce. As businesses expand internationally and teams become more diverse, understanding the subtleties of intercultural exchanges is crucial for ensuring smooth operations and positive working relationships.

Vietnamese EFL learners offer a unique perspective in this regard, as they face the challenge of balancing their deeply rooted local cultural norms with the expectations and practices of international colleagues. This dual cultural navigation provides an opportunity to gain valuable insights into the challenges that arise when Vietnamese professionals engage in global work environments.

This research is grounded in the framework presented by Pham (2011) in *Communicating with Vietnamese in Intercultural Contexts: Insights into Vietnamese Values*, which examines common cultural misunderstandings between Vietnamese individuals and their foreign counterparts. The study specifically draws from Pham's work to explore key cultural dynamics, such as authority, communication styles, and social hierarchy— areas frequently at the heart of intercultural misunderstandings in the workplace. These case studies form the foundation for understanding the cultural challenges faced by Vietnamese EFL learners in international professional settings.

Conducted at Can Tho University (CTU), located in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam, this research benefits from the university's diverse student body and strategic position in a region with a growing presence of foreign-invested companies. These companies—representing countries such as the UK, the US, Australia, and other Western nations—play a significant role in shaping the local work environment. CTU's *English Studies program* attracts students from a variety of academic and professional backgrounds, offering a rich context for studying the intersection of local and international communication. With its increasing focus on international collaboration, CTU provides a fitting setting to explore cultural interactions between Vietnamese students and foreign partners. Furthermore, the university's graduates often enter multinational work environments, highlighting the practical relevance of understanding intercultural dynamics.

This research aims to investigate the cultural misunderstandings experienced by EFL learners in response to various scenarios drawn from Pham's (2011) work, identifying strategies for improving communication and fostering harmonious workplace relationships. Through semi-structured interviews and analysis of learner responses, the study seeks to uncover the perceptions of EFL learners and the solutions they propose to address intercultural challenges. The findings will contribute to the growing body of literature on intercultural communication while offering practical recommendations for both educators and organizations aiming to enhance intercultural competence.

Ultimately, this research is driven by the need to bridge cultural gaps in the global workplace, especially in Vietnam, where foreign-invested companies continue to shape the professional landscape. By exploring and addressing the complexities of intercultural communication, this study seeks to contribute to the creation of more inclusive and effective work environments that leverage the strengths of cultural diversity.

1.1 Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study, focusing on understanding the cultural misunderstandings and solutions proposed by EFL learners:

1) What key cultural misunderstandings did EFL learners identify in interactions between Vietnamese and foreign individuals in workplace contexts?
2) What solutions did the learners propose for addressing these misunderstandings, and how might these have informed effective intercultural communication practices in professional settings?
3) How did the learners perceive the effectiveness of their proposed solutions in resolving cultural misunderstandings?

1.2 Research Objectives

The research objectives aimed to outline the goals of this study, focusing on analyzing misunderstandings and evaluating proposed solutions:

1) To identify and analyze the key cultural misunderstandings experienced by EFL learners in intercultural workplace scenarios.
2) To examine the solutions suggested by the learners for addressing these misunderstandings and assess their relevance to improving workplace communication.
3) To evaluate learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of their proposed solutions and derive insights that could inform intercultural communication training and practice.

2. Literature Review

The study of cultural misunderstandings in the international workplace is a crucial area of research, particularly in the context of intercultural communication. This literature

review synthesizes key themes related to cultural misunderstandings, communication strategies, relationship-building, cultural sensitivity, and educational implications, providing a foundation for understanding how EFL learners navigate and resolve intercultural challenges in professional settings.

2.1 Cultural Misunderstandings in the Workplace

Cultural misunderstandings are a common occurrence in global workplaces, arising from differences in communication styles, values, and norms among individuals from diverse backgrounds (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). Hall (1976) distinguishes between high-context and low-context communication, noting that individuals from high-context cultures (such as Vietnam) rely heavily on contextual cues, non-verbal signals, and shared understandings, while individuals from low-context cultures (such as the U.S. and U.K.) prioritize direct and explicit communication. This disparity in communication approaches can lead to misunderstandings, feelings of disrespect, and a breakdown in collaboration in professional settings.

Vietnamese EFL learners, in particular, are situated at the intersection of these cultural dynamics, as they must navigate their local cultural norms while adapting to the expectations of international colleagues. This study explores the nature of these misunderstandings and examines the ways in which learners address them in the workplace.

2.2 Communication Strategies

Effective communication strategies are critical in mitigating cultural misunderstandings. Gudykunst (2004) suggests that intercultural communication competence involves cognitive and behavioral elements, enabling individuals to adapt their communication style according to the cultural context. Chen and Starosta (1996) highlight the importance of cultural awareness and empathy in fostering effective communication, suggesting that individuals who can empathize with the cultural perspectives of others are more likely to experience successful interactions. For EFL learners, who are often confronted with the challenge of bridging cultural gaps, effective communication strategies such as active listening, clarifying ambiguities, and using culturally appropriate non-verbal cues can be crucial in overcoming misunderstandings.

This section also examines how EFL learners' experiences navigating communication challenges in multicultural workplaces offer valuable insights into the practical strategies for improving intercultural interactions. Through both formal and informal communication, learners can contribute to shaping more effective intercultural communication practices.

2.3 Relationship-Building

Relationship-building plays a fundamental role in fostering successful intercultural communication. Adler (2008) emphasizes that building rapport is essential for creating a cooperative and trusting environment in multicultural settings. Research by Hofstede

(2001) and Mai and Minh's insights on informal interactions highlight the significance of socializing outside of formal work settings as a means to strengthen trust, reduce misunderstandings, and improve communication.

In international workplaces, where employees often come from diverse cultural backgrounds, trust and collaboration are key to overcoming communication barriers. Informal social settings and relationship-building efforts can significantly enhance mutual understanding, leading to smoother communication and more productive interactions. EFL learners often face the challenge of building relationships with colleagues from different cultural contexts, and this study aims to explore how these efforts contribute to improving workplace dynamics.

2.4 Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity is a critical component of successful intercultural communication. Bennett (1993) argues that recognizing one's own cultural biases and appreciating others' cultural perspectives are vital for fostering effective interactions. In professional settings, where diverse cultural backgrounds are common, individuals must cultivate an awareness of cultural differences and be open to learning from one another. Piller (2011) supports this notion, suggesting that training programs focused on cultural sensitivity can help employees become more adaptable and empathetic in intercultural settings.

For EFL learners, cultural sensitivity often becomes a focal point in their educational experience, particularly when they engage in interactions with foreign colleagues. The discomfort expressed by participants, such as Minh in the World Vision workshop, underscores the difficulties individuals face when confronted with cultural differences in homogenous groups. This study explores how cultural sensitivity training can enhance the effectiveness of EFL learners in managing intercultural encounters and bridging communication gaps.

2.5 Problem-Solving Approaches

Collaborative problem-solving is essential for addressing misunderstandings and conflicts arising from cultural differences. Gertsen (1998) argue that involving all parties in the decision-making process promotes a sense of ownership and results in more effective solutions. EFL learners' suggestions, such as pre-meeting discussions and agreements on key communication strategies, align with the proactive approach to resolving cultural misunderstandings. Hoang and An's insights further support the idea that open dialogue and mutual understanding can prevent potential issues from escalating.

Research highlights that when individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds agree on communication strategies and expectations, team cohesion and project outcomes are significantly improved (LeBaron, 2003). This study aims to explore how learners' proposed problem-solving strategies can be applied in real-world workplace settings to enhance intercultural communication.

2.6 Educational Implications

The experiences of EFL learners have profound implications for educational practices aimed at fostering intercultural competence. Deardorff (2006) underscores the importance of experiential learning and reflective practice in the development of intercultural communication skills. Scenario-based training, role-playing exercises, and cultural immersion programs are effective methods for helping learners develop practical skills in navigating intercultural challenges.

This section examines how educational programs can integrate intercultural communication training into their curricula, providing students with the tools to navigate diverse workplace environments effectively. EFL learners can benefit from targeted training programs that prepare them to manage cultural misunderstandings, build cross-cultural relationships, and communicate effectively in international settings.

2.7 Gaps in Existing Literature

While there is substantial research on intercultural communication, there remains a gap in the literature that specifically focuses on the experiences of EFL learners in Vietnam. Most existing studies examine intercultural communication through broad cultural theories, often overlooking the lived experiences of individuals navigating these dynamics in real-world professional contexts. This research seeks to fill this gap by examining the unique challenges faced by Vietnamese EFL learners, particularly in their interactions with foreign colleagues in multinational workplaces.

The study will also expand the existing literature by exploring how EFL learners perceive and address cultural misunderstandings in the workplace, providing empirical insights into the effectiveness of their proposed solutions.

In conclusion, the literature highlights the significance of cultural misunderstandings in the workplace, the need for effective communication strategies, and the importance of relationship-building, cultural sensitivity, and problem-solving approaches. This research seeks to build on these themes by providing insights from EFL learners in Vietnam. By addressing gaps in existing literature and focusing on the practical experiences of learners, the study aims to contribute valuable knowledge to the field of intercultural communication and its implications for global workplace dynamics.

2.8 Book Summary

In her 2011 book, *Communicating with Vietnamese in Intercultural Contexts: Insights into Vietnamese Values*, Thi Hong Nhung Pham delves into the intricate dynamics of communication within Vietnamese culture and its interaction with intercultural exchanges. Drawing on extensive research, Pham examines key cultural values that shape Vietnamese communication, including collectivism, respect for hierarchy, and the essential concept of "saving face."

Pham emphasizes the significant influence of Confucianism on Vietnamese communication, highlighting the importance of indirect communication and face preservation. These cultural norms often lead to misunderstandings when Vietnamese

individuals interact with those from direct communication cultures, such as those in many Western countries.

Through case studies and real-world examples, Pham illustrates the challenges faced by both Vietnamese and foreign individuals in various settings, including business, education, and social contexts. She provides practical strategies for fostering effective communication, with a focus on cultural awareness and sensitivity.

This book was utilized as a core text in the Intercultural Communication (ICC) course at the School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University (CTU), Vietnam, where the researchers also served as instructors. The course, taught over two credits (30 periods) during the third-year academic program, offered students in-depth knowledge and practical tools for navigating intercultural interactions. Pham's work is an essential guide for anyone engaging in communication with Vietnamese individuals, offering invaluable insights into the cultural values and communication styles that underpin successful interactions in multicultural environments. Ultimately, the book aims to promote mutual understanding and enhance collaboration in diverse cultural settings.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Questions
The following research questions guide this study, which focuses on understanding the cultural misunderstandings and solutions proposed by EFL learners:
1) What key cultural misunderstandings did EFL learners identify in interactions between Vietnamese and foreign individuals in workplace contexts?
2) What solutions did the learners propose for addressing these misunderstandings, and how might these inform effective intercultural communication practices in professional settings?
3) How did the learners perceive the effectiveness of their proposed solutions in resolving cultural misunderstandings?

3.2 Research Objectives
The research objectives aim to outline the goals of this study, focusing on analyzing misunderstandings and evaluating proposed solutions:
1) To identify and analyze the key cultural misunderstandings experienced by EFL learners in intercultural workplace scenarios.
2) To examine the solutions suggested by the learners for addressing these misunderstandings and assess their relevance to improving workplace communication.
3) To evaluate learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of their proposed solutions and derive insights that can inform intercultural communication training and practice.

3.3 Research Participants

The participants in this study comprised 55 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners from Vietnam, all enrolled in an online Intercultural Communication (ICC) course as part of their second-degree studies. Their first degrees were obtained in a range of academic disciplines, including medicine, engineering, economics, law, and education, reflecting a diverse academic and professional background. The ICC course was delivered during the third year of the academic program, taking place from February to April 2025.

The learners, aged between 25 and 45, came from various provinces across the Mekong Delta region in Southern Vietnam. Having recently completed the ICC course, they brought with them valuable professional experience, particularly in working with foreign colleagues in a variety of workplace settings. Their perspectives on cultural misunderstandings, along with the practical solutions they proposed, provide meaningful insights into the realities of intercultural communication, especially in international and multicultural professional environments.

Of the 55 participants, approximately 65% (36 individuals) were female and 35% (19 individuals) were male. This gender distribution is consistent with regional trends in English language program enrollment, where female participation tends to be higher.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through an assignment in which each of the 55 EFL learners responded to 8 specific scenarios related to cultural misunderstandings in international work settings. Each learner was asked to provide their insights and suggested solutions based on their personal experiences or perceptions of these scenarios. This assignment aimed to gather diverse perspectives on common intercultural challenges faced in the workplace.

3.5 Selection of Scenarios

The eight scenarios used in this study were adapted from the book *Communicating with Vietnamese in Intercultural Contexts: Insights into Vietnamese Values* by Pham (2011). These scenarios were carefully selected to represent common cultural misunderstandings that may arise between Vietnamese employees and their foreign counterparts. They cover a variety of challenges, including issues related to authority dynamics, communication styles, cultural sensitivity, and hierarchical relationships in the workplace (Pham, 2011).

3.5.1 Scenario Overview

The following eight scenarios were selected from the book *Communicating with Vietnamese in Intercultural Contexts: Insights into Vietnamese Values*, Pham (2011). These scenarios represent common cultural misunderstandings that may arise in intercultural workplace settings between Vietnamese employees and their foreign counterparts:
- **Scenario 1:** Miscommunication and Authority (pp.95-96),
- **Scenario 2:** Saving Face in Job Transitions (p.109),
- **Scenario 3:** Communication Styles (pp.105-106),

- **Scenario 4:** Cultural and Religious Sensitivity (p.120),
- **Scenario 5:** Misunderstandings in Project Discussions (pp.100-101),
- **Scenario 6:** Sensitivity in Information Sharing (p.105),
- **Scenario 7:** Navigating Hierarchical Dynamics (pp.101-102),
- **Scenario 8:** Challenges of Time Expectations (p.107).

3.6 Response Analysis

Once the data were collected, each response was categorized based on the learner's suggested solutions. The analysis aimed to identify common themes and trends across the responses, focusing on how different learners perceived the scenarios and the rationale behind their proposed solutions. The solutions were analyzed qualitatively to capture the nuances in learners' reasoning and cultural context (Creswell, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This qualitative approach helped to generate rich insights into how cultural factors shape problem-solving in intercultural contexts.

3.7 Perception Interviews

In addition to the written responses, follow-up interviews were conducted with a smaller subset of five learners. These interviews aimed to explore their perceptions of the scenarios and their proposed solutions in more detail. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to elaborate on their thoughts and provide further context or examples from their personal experiences in intercultural settings (Kvale, 2007). The interview format was designed to encourage open dialogue, enabling participants to share deeper insights into their experiences with cultural misunderstandings and solutions.

3.8 Data Analysis

The data from both the written responses and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method helped to identify key themes related to cultural misunderstandings and potential strategies for improving intercultural communication in the workplace (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings were triangulated to ensure the reliability and validity of the results. Triangulation involved comparing responses from the assignment with those from interviews, helping to verify and enrich the findings through multiple perspectives (Flick, 2009).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Findings from the Analysis of the Scenarios

The table below presents thematic codes and their explanations derived from scenarios involving cultural misunderstandings in international workplace settings.

Table 4.1: Scenario Overview with Thematic Codes

Scenario	Title	Codes	Explanation of Codes
S1	Miscommunication and Authority	CS1, CS3, RB1, RB2, PSA1, SRG2	**CS1**: Use of direct communication **CS3**: Clarifying expectations **RB1**: Rebuilding rapport after conflict **RB2**: Informal social interaction as repair **PSA1**: Awareness of personal emotional response **SRG2**: Strategy for cultural reconciliation
S2	Saving Face in Job Transitions	CS2, CS4, RB3, PSA2, PSA4, SRG1, SRG2	**CS2**: Balancing honesty with diplomacy **CS4**: Clear workload or goal communication **RB3**: Building trust through transparency **PSA2**: Sensitivity to cultural face-saving norms **PSA4**: Recognizing workplace pressure **SRG1**: Inclusive practice suggestion **SRG2**: Cultural harmony strategies
S3	Communication Styles	CS1, CS3, RB1, PSA1, CSE, SRG2	**CS1**: Using direct and indirect styles **CS3**: Aligning with audience expectations **RB1**: Relationship repair post-conflict **PSA1**: Emotional self-awareness **CSE**: Developing intercultural communication skills **SRG2**: Promoting mutual understanding
S4	Cultural and Religious Sensitivity	CS2, CS4, RB3, PSA2, PSA4, SRG1, SRG2	**CS2**: Adapting communication for sensitivity **CS4**: Transparent expectations **RB3**: Trust-building in diverse groups **PSA2**: Cultural-religious respect **PSA4**: Pressure to conform in groups **SRG1**: Advocating inclusivity **SRG2**: Respecting belief diversity
S5	Misunderstandings in Project Discussions	CS2, CS4, RB2, PSA4, SRG3	**CS2**: Adjusting tone and clarity **CS4**: Sharing goals and plans clearly **RB2**: Social rapport for collaboration **PSA4**: Identifying pressure points **SRG3**: Collaborative solution planning
S6	Sensitivity in Information Sharing	CS3, RB1, CSE, PSA1, PSA3, SRG2	**CS3**: Pre-discussion clarity **RB1**: Repair through empathy **CSE**: Skill growth in cultural contexts **PSA1**: Recognizing discomfort **PSA3**: Understanding image and reputation impact **SRG2**: Creating shared boundaries
S7	Navigating Hierarchical Dynamics	CS1, CS2, RB4, PSA2, SRG1	**CS1**: Tactful direct communication **CS2**: Diplomacy in disagreement **RB4**: Pre-meeting collaboration **PSA2**: Respect for authority norms **SRG1**: Proactive communication planning
S8	Challenges of Time Expectations	CS2, CS3, RB2, CS4, PSA4, SRG3	**CS2**: Clarifying expectations early **CS3**: Managing urgency diplomatically **RB2**: Relationship-building for better flow **CS4**: Transparency in workload and timing **PSA4**: Awareness of time pressure **SRG3**: Joint planning for timeline alignment

Scenario 1: Miscommunication and Authority (pp. 95–96)

A Vietnamese employee described a distressing interaction with a British colleague who insisted she complete a task during an already hectic workday. When she politely asked to postpone it, the colleague raised his voice, creating an uncomfortable scene in front of coworkers. The learner felt this behavior was inappropriate, especially since the colleague held no supervisory authority over her.

This incident highlights cultural contrasts in communication styles and perceptions of authority. The British colleague's directness clashed with the learner's expectations of respectful and hierarchical interactions, which are deeply valued in Vietnamese professional settings. Public confrontations are especially frowned upon, as preserving dignity and harmony—or "saving face"—is crucial.

Fifty respondents proposed solutions focused on restoring the working relationship. They suggested the learner initiate a friendly, clarifying conversation to acknowledge the misunderstanding and express her feelings. Such a dialogue could ease tension, rebuild trust, and foster a more respectful dynamic moving forward. The scenario underscores the importance of cultural awareness in multinational workplaces and the value of open, empathetic communication.

Five said that they would not talk to the foreign colleague any more. This means that 91% supported resolving the issue through dialogue, while 9% preferred avoidance.

Scenario 2: Saving Face in Job Transitions (p. 109)

In this case, a Vietnamese employee considered leaving her job for a better opportunity but hesitated to disclose the real reason—higher pay—to her boss. Instead, she cited a more socially acceptable rationale: wanting more time for family. This reluctance reflected the cultural importance of saving face, where honesty may be softened to maintain harmony and avoid embarrassment.

The respondents (n = 53) emphasized the potential benefits of professional honesty. They encouraged the learner to consider respectfully communicating her financial motivations, which could lead to constructive dialogue and even open the door to negotiation. Being transparent may not only strengthen mutual trust but also empower the employer to address employee concerns.

This scenario illustrates the delicate balance between cultural values and workplace transparency. While saving face remains vital in Vietnamese culture, thoughtful honesty can enhance trust and create opportunities for mutual understanding. This indicates that 96% favored respectful honesty, while 4% did not provide a response or held a different view.

Scenario 3: Communication Styles (pp. 105–106)

A Vietnamese staff member recounted an interaction with her American boss during a series of introductory meetings. She had prepared a thorough presentation on her team's

projects but was abruptly told to shorten her explanation. This left her feeling dismissed and undervalued.

The scenario reflects distinct communication norms. Western cultures often prioritize brevity and efficiency, while Vietnamese professionals may favor detailed context and relationship-building, especially in hierarchical environments. The learner's intent was not just to inform but to build rapport and demonstrate her capabilities. Respondents advised the learner to adapt her approach by presenting key points concisely, while allowing space for follow-up if needed. This would align better with her boss's expectations without compromising content. The scenario emphasizes the importance of adapting communication styles to bridge cultural gaps and improve collaboration.

Fifty agreed that the Vietnamese employee in this incident would have an appointment to talk again with her American employer and emphasized the Vietnamese cultural aspect on this issue.

Five said that they would not talk to the boss anymore until he realized his previous action.

This shows that 91% supported a second conversation to clear the misunderstanding, while 9% chose to wait for the employer to recognize the issue.

Scenario 4: Cultural and Religious Sensitivity (p. 120)

During an international workshop organized by a Christian organization, a Vietnamese invited guest—one of the few non-Christians present—felt excluded as others engaged in prayers and Bible discussions. Her discomfort stemmed from feeling pressured to participate in practices that conflicted with her beliefs.

This scenario raises important questions about inclusivity and religious sensitivity. Rather than conforming, the Vietnamese chose not to engage, though this left her feeling isolated. Fifty-three respondents suggested she speak with the organizers to share her concerns and request clearer schedules or optional participation in religious segments.

Such communication could encourage organizers to adopt more inclusive practices, ensuring all participants feel respected. This scenario highlights the need for sensitivity to religious and cultural diversity in professional and educational settings. Two said that they would not join the meetings.

This shows that 96% favored open communication to improve inclusivity, while 4% preferred withdrawing from future events.

Scenario 5: Misunderstandings in Project Discussions (pp. 100–101)

A Vietnamese staff member described a frustrating meeting with an Australian consultant. After an extended internal discussion, the Vietnamese tried to clarify unresolved issues, but the consultant responded dismissively. This caused the learner to feel unheard and undervalued.

The miscommunication stemmed from differing expectations: while the Vietnamese prioritized detailed context and collective input, the consultant seemed to expect clear-cut answers and efficiency. Fifty-three respondents recommended preparing a concise report that summarized key points and includes input from local staff before future discussions.

By presenting information clearly and cohesively, the Vietnamese could foster greater understanding and respect. This scenario underscores the role of thorough preparation and cultural competence in international collaboration.

Two said that they felt hurt and would ask other Vietnamese members for help. This reflects that 96% preferred clear and proactive communication, while 4% leaned on internal team support.

Scenario 6: Sensitivity in Information Sharing (p. 105)

A Vietnamese staff member felt uncomfortable when a foreign colleague persistently asked questions she deemed too personal or culturally inappropriate. The Vietnamese felt her boundaries were not respected, which led to frustration and disengagement. Her discomfort reflected a broader cultural emphasis on discretion and protecting one's social image. Fifty-five respondents proposed initiating a respectful dialogue to set mutual boundaries around sensitive topics. Clarifying these expectations could help avoid future conflicts and support a more respectful and productive working relationship.

This scenario highlights the need for cultural sensitivity and open communication in diverse workplaces, especially around topics where cultural norms may differ significantly.

This means that 100% of respondents supported open conversation as the best approach to handling sensitive topics.

Scenario 7: Navigating Hierarchical Dynamics (pp. 101–102)

In this scenario, a Vietnamese employee remained silent during a meeting to avoid contradicting her boss publicly. She shared her concerns privately afterwards, only to be met with irritation for not speaking up earlier. This situation illustrates the tension between deference to authority and the need for open communication. Fifty-five respondents recommended establishing pre-meeting agreements with supervisors to identify potential issues in advance. This approach allows for constructive preparation and gives both parties a chance to align their perspectives before public discussions.

The scenario reflects the complex interplay between cultural expectations and professional communication. With proactive strategies, teams can navigate hierarchical dynamics while promoting inclusivity and dialogue.

This demonstrates that 100% of the participants supported pre-meeting planning to reduce communication challenges.

Scenario 8: Challenges of Time Expectations (p. 107)

A Vietnamese staff member felt pressure from Western colleagues to provide immediate answers about project timelines. This urgency conflicted with her approach, which prioritized thorough planning and consultation with team members. The scenario illustrates differing cultural perceptions of time: Western contexts may emphasize speed and decisiveness, while Vietnamese professionals often value careful consideration and consensus-building. The learner's frustration stemmed from a perceived lack of appreciation for this thoughtful process.

Fifty-five respondents advised facilitating early conversations between team members to set realistic expectations and accommodate diverse working styles. A shared understanding of timelines and workflow can reduce tension and lead to more effective collaboration.

This shows that 100% of the respondents believed in proactive planning to manage cultural differences in time expectations.

4.2 Findings from Participant Responses

To gain deeper insights into learners' perspectives on intercultural challenges, five participant responses were selected to illustrate recurring themes and proposed solutions across the eight workplace scenarios. These responses reveal not only the emotional impact of cultural misunderstandings but also the practical strategies learners devised to overcome them. The responses also reflect a growing awareness of the need for empathy, adaptability, and intentional communication in international settings.

Participant 1: Rebuilding Through Informal Dialogue

Reflecting on a difficult interaction with a British colleague, Participant 1 shared:

"I was really taken aback when my British colleague insisted I do the copies. I felt it was disrespectful, especially since I was busy. I think rebuilding our relationship is crucial. I suggested we have a casual coffee chat to clear the air. I believe that informal interactions can help us understand each other better. Communication needs to be more direct in such situations, but we should also respect cultural differences."

This response emphasizes the importance of restoring relationships after conflict (RB1, RB2) through informal, non-confrontational communication (CS1, CS3). It also reflects a growing awareness of the balance between directness and cultural sensitivity (PSA1, SRG2).

Participant 2: Fostering Inclusion Through Cultural Awareness

Recounting her experience at a faith-based international workshop, Participant 2 explained:

"During the World Vision workshop, I felt out of place at first, especially when everyone was praying. I suggested to the organizers that they should consider our cultural differences. Maybe they could provide an option for those of us who are not comfortable participating. Trust-building activities would help create an inclusive environment. It's important to adapt our behavior to respect everyone's customs."

Her account underscores the importance of creating inclusive environments (PSA2, SRG1, SRG2) and suggests that trust-building and flexibility in behavior are key to cross-cultural harmony (CS2, CS4, RB3).

Participant 3: Addressing Sensitivity Through Preparation

Discussing her discomfort with being asked personal questions, Participant 3 noted:

"When faced with sensitive questions, I hesitated to answer fully. I believe being clear is key, so I suggested having discussions before the meeting to address sensitive topics. It's easier to explain things in a comfortable setting first. I've realized that I need to develop my intercultural communication skills to navigate these situations better in the future."

This response reveals a thoughtful strategy for managing sensitive topics through pre-meeting discussions (RB1, CS3) and highlights a self-directed desire for communication skill development (CSE, PSA1, PSA3, SRG2).

Participant 4: Balancing Communication Styles

On navigating conflict during team meetings, Participant 4 reflected:

"I think using both direct and indirect communication is important in meetings. When there's disagreement, I proposed that we agree on points beforehand to avoid confusion. I also believe we need to empathize with each other's backgrounds. Understanding cultural differences can help us find common ground and work more effectively."

Here, the participant emphasizes the strategic use of blended communication styles (CS1, CS2) and pre-meeting alignment (RB4). Empathy and cultural awareness are presented as essential tools for collaboration (PSA2, SRG1).

Participant 5: Aligning Expectations Through Planning

Describing the pressure to respond quickly during project discussions, Participant 5 stated:

"Facing pressure for immediate answers is challenging. I suggested we agree on project timelines in advance and communicate clearly about our workloads. Establishing common ground is essential. I've learned that developing my communication skills can help me handle these situations better and make sure we're all on the same page."

This response highlights the need for transparent planning (CS2, CS3), workload awareness (CS4), and proactive communication skill development to manage intercultural expectations (RB2, PSA4, SRG3).

In conclusion, these participant narratives showcase both the challenges and solutions involved in navigating cultural differences in international workplaces. They reflect not only the emotional realities of misunderstanding but also the learners' evolving ability to respond with empathy, flexibility, and strategic communication. Their reflections offer practical insights for fostering more inclusive, respectful, and productive intercultural collaborations.

4.3 Discussion

The findings from both the thematic analysis of the scenarios and the participants' responses highlight the complex nature of intercultural misunderstandings in international workplaces, particularly when Vietnamese employees interact with foreign colleagues. The insights drawn from the thematic codes and the detailed responses of the participants provide valuable perspectives on how such misunderstandings can be mitigated. The discussion below synthesizes the key themes observed from both the thematic coding and the learners' feedback.

4.3.1 Communication as a Key Challenge and Solution

One of the most consistent themes across both the scenarios and participants' responses is the crucial role of communication in resolving cultural misunderstandings. As seen in the thematic codes for Scenario 1 (Miscommunication and Authority) and Scenario 3 (Communication Styles), communication breakdowns often stem from differing communication styles and expectations. Many participants emphasized the importance of being clear and direct while also showing sensitivity to cultural norms. For instance, Participant 1's experience with her British colleague emphasizes how a lack of directness and clarity can escalate conflicts. This supports the idea that clear communication strategies, such as setting expectations upfront (as seen in Scenario 1), are essential in overcoming miscommunication challenges.

Furthermore, the learners' reflections on the importance of balancing direct and indirect communication styles suggest that individuals need to be adaptable, tailoring their communication style to fit the cultural context of the workplace. This dual approach, balancing clear, direct communication with a consideration of cultural nuances, can significantly contribute to improving mutual understanding in diverse teams.

4.3.2 Relationship-Building as a Pathway to Trust and Understanding

Another critical finding across both scenarios and learners' responses is the role of relationship-building in overcoming misunderstandings. Scenario 2 (Saving Face in Job Transitions) and Scenario 4 (Cultural and Religious Sensitivity) both emphasize the significance of establishing and maintaining trust through informal interactions and emotional sensitivity. In particular, many participants advocated for relationship-

building practices that occur outside formal work settings. For example, Participant 1's suggestion to have an informal coffee chat as a way to rebuild rapport highlights the power of casual conversations in mitigating tension.

Similarly, Participant 2's recommendation for trust-building activities at the World Vision workshop shows the value of inclusive practices in diverse cultural environments. These insights demonstrate that fostering relationships beyond just professional interactions can significantly reduce misunderstandings and create a more harmonious workplace atmosphere. By investing in relationship-building efforts, organizations can pave the way for smoother, more respectful interactions.

4.3.3 Cultural Sensitivity as an Essential Competency

Cultural sensitivity emerged as an overarching theme across both the thematic codes and participant responses. In Scenario 4 (Cultural and Religious Sensitivity), the importance of respecting religious and cultural differences was a major point of focus. Participant 2's discomfort during the workshop illustrates how a lack of cultural awareness can lead to feelings of exclusion or frustration. His suggestion to make accommodations for individuals who may not feel comfortable with certain practices points to the need for inclusive policies that recognize the diverse backgrounds of employees.

This insight is reinforced by other participants, who suggested that workplace training programs should integrate cultural sensitivity and competence to ensure employees are equipped to navigate intercultural interactions with ease. Whether through offering cultural awareness workshops or fostering an environment where employees can express concerns about cultural differences, organizations can enhance inclusivity and minimize misunderstandings.

4.3.4 The Role of Problem-Solving in Overcoming Misunderstandings

The participants also offered various problem-solving strategies to deal with misunderstandings. For example, Scenario 5 (Misunderstandings in Project Discussions) illustrated how miscommunications in team projects can arise when expectations are not clearly set. Participants, such as Participant 3, advocated for pre-meeting discussions to ensure all team members are aligned on goals and responsibilities. This suggests that proactive communication, such as establishing clear agendas and objectives, can prevent misunderstandings from occurring in the first place.

Additionally, collaborative problem-solving approaches emerged as a key method for resolving misunderstandings. The learners stressed the importance of involving all parties in the resolution process, as seen in Participant 5's focus on agreeing on project timelines to prevent pressure from building up during work discussions. These strategies demonstrate the value of transparent communication and mutual collaboration in addressing conflicts and ensuring smoother project execution.

4.3.5 Self-Reflection as a Mechanism for Growth

Finally, self-reflection was another consistent theme in the learners' responses. Several participants, including Participant 3 and Participant 5, expressed a desire to improve their intercultural communication skills. This self-awareness reflects the learners' recognition of their role in both causing and resolving misunderstandings. Their emphasis on *personal development* underscores the importance of *continuous learning* in navigating intercultural interactions successfully. When individuals recognize their own biases and areas for improvement, they become better equipped to engage in meaningful communication and handle challenges more effectively.

In summary, the discussion reveals that the themes of communication, relationship-building, cultural sensitivity, problem-solving, and self-reflection are fundamental to addressing and resolving intercultural misunderstandings in international workplaces. Effective communication strategies, both direct and indirect, foster clearer understanding between employees. Furthermore, relationship-building outside formal contexts helps to strengthen trust and mitigate misunderstandings. Finally, cultural sensitivity and continuous personal growth are crucial for employees to navigate the complexities of intercultural work environments. These insights are essential for organizations to consider when developing training programs aimed at enhancing intercultural competence, ultimately promoting a more inclusive, productive, and harmonious workplace.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the perspectives of fifty-five EFL learners in Vietnam on cultural misunderstandings in global workplace settings, focusing on the intercultural challenges they encountered and the strategies they proposed in response. Drawing on eight real-life-inspired scenarios, the research highlighted common patterns in intercultural communication issues, such as differing expectations around hierarchy, indirectness, emotional restraint, and the concept of saving face. A notable trend across all cases was the learners' strong preference for conflict resolution through respectful dialogue and relationship-building, rather than avoidance or confrontation.

The participants' proposed solutions consistently emphasized the value of cultural sensitivity, proactive communication, and professional adaptability. Their suggestions included initiating clarifying conversations, adjusting communication styles, and establishing pre-meeting strategies to accommodate hierarchical norms. The study's findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the intercultural challenges EFL learners face in international workplaces and offer practical, culturally informed recommendations to reduce misunderstandings and enhance cooperation in diverse environments.

5.1 Implications

The findings of this study carry several important implications for both educational and professional contexts. First, they emphasize the urgent need to integrate intercultural communication (ICC) training into curricula for EFL learners, particularly in contexts like Vietnam, where indirect communication and respect for authority are deeply ingrained. Training should not only focus on linguistic accuracy but also on understanding diverse workplace norms, managing face-threatening situations, and initiating respectful cross-cultural dialogue.

In the workplace, these findings highlight the importance of creating inclusive environments that support respectful communication and recognize cultural differences in expression, hierarchy, and emotional display. Organizations should implement practical measures such as structured mentorship programs, intercultural orientation sessions, and feedback systems that accommodate both high-context and low-context communication preferences. Recognizing that communication misunderstandings often stem from cultural, not personal, differences is essential to building trust and productivity across teams.

Moreover, the need for trained intercultural mentors within organizations is clear. These individuals can help bridge cultural gaps, guide new employees through culturally unfamiliar environments, and encourage open, empathetic exchanges. This mentorship approach is especially valuable in multinational or cross-border teams where navigating differing norms is part of everyday collaboration.

5.2 Suggestions

5.2.1 To ICC Course Teachers

To strengthen intercultural competencies, teachers should incorporate case-based learning using authentic workplace scenarios, such as those examined in this study. This allows learners to apply theory to realistic challenges. Emphasis should also be placed on both verbal and non-verbal cultural cues, as misreading tone, gesture, or silence often leads to misunderstanding. Self-reflection exercises can help learners identify their own communication habits and cultural assumptions, which is a critical step in developing cultural agility. Lastly, virtual exchange programs or collaborative tasks with international peers can offer valuable experiential learning, fostering a practical understanding of global communication dynamics.

5.2.2 To EFL Learners

EFL learners are encouraged to take an active role in their intercultural development by practicing skills such as active listening, paraphrasing, and tactful questioning to avoid misinterpretation. Understanding cultural expectations related to hierarchy, politeness, and emotional expression is key to communicating effectively. Learners should also engage in informal cross-cultural interactions, which help build relational trust—a factor repeatedly highlighted in the scenarios. Finally, seeking out mentors who have

successfully navigated intercultural environments can provide guidance and boost learners' confidence in their ability to handle global communication challenges.

5.2.3 To Educational Institutions

Institutions play a critical role in preparing students for international careers. They should embed ICC modules across disciplines, particularly for programs preparing students for cross-cultural work environments. Institutions should also invest in immersive experiences, such as internships with international companies, virtual exchange projects, or short-term study abroad programs. These initiatives provide students with the contextual knowledge and adaptability needed in today's global workforce. In addition, offering ongoing workshops on workplace communication, hierarchy negotiation, and intercultural conflict resolution ensures that learners continue to grow their skills beyond the classroom. Continuous exposure and reflection are vital for developing intercultural fluency.

deeper cultural understanding and more inclusive collaboration in increasingly diverse professional environments.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

About the Authors

Dr. Thai Cong Dan is a Senior Lecturer of English at the School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University (CTU), Vietnam. He obtained his Ph.D. in Educational Administration (English Program) from Naresuan University, Thailand, in 2010, and his M.A. in Cultural Aspects and Literature from the University of Notre Dame du Lac, Indiana, USA, in 1999. Dr. Dan's academic and research interests span a wide range of areas, including TEFL/TESOL, intercultural communication, English language education at both secondary and tertiary levels, foreign literature, and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in fields such as Political Education, Tourism, Hospitality, Journalism, Environmental Studies, and Sociology. He is particularly engaged in curriculum design, language assessment, professional development, educational program management, and educational administration. In addition, Dr. Dan is recognized for his expertise in the field of tourism education. He can be contacted via email at tcdan@ctu.edu.vn, and his ORCID is https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9566-8128.

Miss Thai Phan Bao Han is currently an English lecturer at Can Tho University of Technology (CTUT), Vietnam. She obtained her Master's degree in TESOL from Can Tho University in 2022. Her research interests span a wide range of topics, including TEFL/TESOL pedagogy across educational levels, applied linguistics, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in technology and engineering contexts, intercultural communication (ICC), language assessment design, and teacher professional development. She can be reached via email at: tpbhan@ctuet.edu.vn.

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