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To cite this article. H. Q. Ngo and T. T. Do, “Cultural Collisions As Disorienting Dilemmas: Transformative Learning Through Authentic Intercultural Communication In Vietnamese EFL Education,” *Lang. Technol. Soc. Media*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 168–184, 2026.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70211/ltsm.3026-7196.394>

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Cultural Collisions As Disorienting Dilemmas: Transformative Learning Through Authentic Intercultural Communication In Vietnamese EFL Education

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Received: 21 December 2025

Revised: 19 January 2026

Accepted: 27 February 2026

Online: 6 March 2026

Abstract

This study aims to examine the cultural disorienting dilemmas experienced by Vietnamese EFL students during authentic intercultural communication and to explore how such encounters reshape their meaning perspectives as English communicators. Grounded in Transformative Learning Theory, this qualitative study involved nine third-year English-major students who participated in an experiential EFL module requiring field interviews with foreign tourists. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. The findings show that authentic intercultural encounters exposed learners to mismatches in communication styles, politeness norms, and interactional expectations, generating emotional responses such as shock, anxiety, and self-doubt that prompted critical reflection. Over time, these experiences contributed to greater cultural relativity, increased communicative confidence, and a reconfiguration of self-perception from evaluated learners to more legitimate English users. The study demonstrates that authentic intercultural communication can function not only as a site of language practice but also as a catalyst for transformative learning in locally situated EFL contexts. This study contributes to the literature by extending Transformative Learning Theory into Vietnamese EFL education and by highlighting the pedagogical significance of integrating authentic intercultural engagement into EFL curricula to foster intercultural awareness, reflective capacity, and communicative identity development.

Keywords: Transformative learning; Cultural collisions; Intercultural communication; Disorienting dilemmas; Vietnamese EFL

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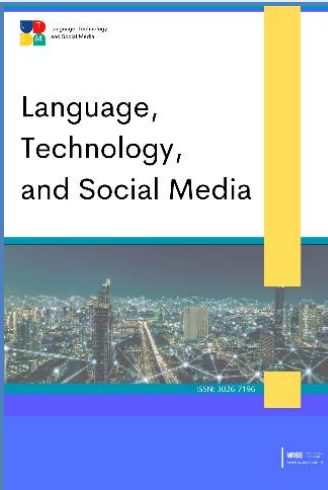
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INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and the rapid growth of cross-cultural interactions, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education is increasingly expected not only to develop linguistic proficiency but also to enable learners to participate effectively in authentic intercultural communication [1], [2]. From an applied linguistic perspective, foreign language learning is understood as a socially situated process in which learners construct meaning, negotiate identity, and position themselves within specific interactional contexts [3]. However, in many EFL contexts where English is not widely used outside the classroom, opportunities to engage in authentic intercultural interaction remain limited, and communication largely takes place within highly controlled classroom environments [4], [5].

In addition to classroom learning, contemporary EFL learners increasingly encounter foreign cultures through digitally mediated environments such as social media platforms, online videos, and language exchange applications. These online spaces function as informal sites of intercultural contact where learners are exposed to representations of communication styles, politeness norms, and cultural practices beyond their local context [2]. However, digitally mediated representations of culture may simplify or selectively frame communicative behavior, shaping learners' expectations about how intercultural interaction should unfold [3]. When learners subsequently participate in face-to-face communication with international interlocutors, mismatches between these mediated expectations and actual interactional practices may contribute to experiences of uncertainty, tension, or communicative disruption [1].

When learners step beyond the classroom and engage in real-life intercultural communication, they may encounter differences in politeness norms, degrees of directness, speaker–listener roles, and interactional expectations. Research on intercultural learning suggests that situations characterized by uncertainty or misalignment with prior expectations can generate ambiguity, discomfort, or cognitive tension, prompting learners to reconsider assumptions that were previously taken for granted [2], [3]. In this study, such moments of intercultural communication in which culturally embedded assumptions become visible and are challenged through interactional tension are conceptualized as cultural collisions. The term is used here as an analytical construct, comparable to “critical incidents” in intercultural education [2] and to “disorienting dilemmas” in Transformative Learning Theory [6], that is, experiences that destabilize individuals' existing frames of reference.

To analyze changes that go beyond surface-level behavioral adjustment, Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) provides an appropriate theoretical lens. According to Mezirow [6], [7], transformative learning occurs when individuals confront experiences that disrupt their frames of reference, leading them to engage in critical reflection and potentially reconstruct their meaning perspectives. Disorienting dilemmas often function as the initiating point of this process [6], [8]. Subsequent scholarship emphasizes that such destabilizing experiences need not be major life events but may arise in everyday social interactions where misalignment between expectations and reality becomes evident [8], [9], [10].

Within the field of EFL, some studies have begun to examine the role of intercultural experiences in triggering reflection and cognitive change. Jackson [2] demonstrates that intercultural communication situations can prompt learners to reposition themselves. Nada and Legutko [11] argue that intercultural encounters characterized by uncertainty may act as catalysts for meaning reconstruction. However, most of these studies have focused on study abroad or highly

internationalized settings and have often emphasized outcomes or isolated components such as reflection, rather than systematically analyzing the intertwined cognitive, emotional, and dialogic processes unfolding within authentic communicative interaction in local contexts.

This gap becomes particularly evident in the Vietnamese EFL context. Recent studies have primarily examined intercultural competence through quantitative self-report measures [12], [13], analyzed strategies for integrating cultural content in the classroom [14], [15], or documented the benefits of online interaction for skill development and confidence [4]. Although these studies provide important insights into classroom structures and learner attitudes, they have largely been conducted in classroom or simulated environments and have not systematically examined authentic intercultural communication situations characterized by uncertainty and the potential for communicative breakdown. Moreover, few studies have approached such experiences through the lens of Transformative Learning to clarify how culturally internalized assumptions may be challenged and restructured through real-life interaction. In response to this gap, the present study aims to examine cultural collisions in authentic intercultural communication and analyze how such encounters trigger transformative learning processes among Vietnamese EFL students. Specifically, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What cultural disorienting dilemmas do Vietnamese EFL learners encounter when communicating across cultures?

RQ2. How do these intercultural encounters transform learners' meaning perspectives about themselves as English communicators?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative Learning (TL) explains how learners reconstruct meaning about themselves, others, and the world through critical reflection on underlying assumptions [6], [7]. Rather than focusing on the accumulation of knowledge, TL centers on meaning-making, whereby individuals reinterpret experiences and may revise their frames of reference toward more open-minded and reflective perspectives [9]. Recent scholarship has emphasized that transformative learning involves changes at the level of internal meaning structures rather than surface behavioral adjustment [9], [16]. TL is often initiated by disorienting dilemmas, which are experiences that make familiar assumptions insufficient to explain reality [7]. Such dilemmas may arise not only from major life crises but also from everyday learning situations involving cognitive instability or expectation misalignment [8], [9]. Empirical studies suggest that ordinary educational experiences can catalyze transformative processes when learners actively interpret and respond to these disruptions [17], [18].

Post-Mezirow scholarship highlights that TL integrates cognition, emotion, and social dialogue. Challenging experiences are frequently accompanied by anxiety, confusion, or self-doubt, which may function as catalysts for deeper reflection [19], [20]. Reflection is not linear but iterative and socially mediated through dialogue, particularly within psychologically safe learning environments [21], [22]. Studies further show that emotional disturbance, dialogue, and reflection operate as interconnected processes in transformative learning [23], [24]. In intercultural communication contexts, challenged meaning perspectives often relate to learners' self-concept and positioning as English users [3], [25]. Transformative shifts may therefore involve changes in communicative confidence and perceived legitimacy [26]. Although TL has been applied in EFL research, particularly in study abroad and practicum settings [11], [27], [28], most studies examine

isolated components such as reflection or emotion. There remains limited qualitative research investigating how intercultural experiences within experiential-oriented local EFL modules simultaneously activate cognitive–emotional disruption, dialogue, and reflection, leading to shifts in meaning perspectives over time. This gap provides the rationale for the present study.

Culture and Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative Learning Theory conceptualizes learning as a meaning-making process through which individuals critically examine and potentially revise the frames of reference that shape their interpretations of experience [6]. These frames of reference are socially and culturally embedded rather than individually constructed in isolation. Culture therefore plays a central role in shaping assumptions, communicative norms, and interpretive habits that may later become objects of critical reflection [9], [10]. Meaning perspectives are acquired through socialization and reinforced by cultural norms, often perceived as natural within a given context [6]. When experiences challenge these assumptions, learners may begin to question culturally grounded interpretations of communication and interaction. Intercultural experiences have been identified as contexts in which taken-for-granted assumptions become visible and potentially destabilized [2]. Within transformative learning literature, such encounters may function as sites of disorienting dilemmas [6], [8]. However, transformation does not occur automatically; it depends on learners' engagement in critical reflection and dialogue that question underlying assumptions [9], [10]. Empirical studies suggest that intercultural change tends to unfold gradually through sustained interaction and reflection rather than through single turning-point events [8], [29].

Foreign language learning is widely understood as a process of identity negotiation and cultural positioning [3]. In many EFL contexts, classroom practices emphasize controlled performance, potentially limiting opportunities for flexible communicative engagement [1], [5]. When learners encounter real-life intercultural situations, classroom-based assumptions may prove insufficient, prompting reconsideration of language use in socially situated interaction [2]. Critical reflection, often mediated through dialogue, is central to transformative learning [6]. Emotional responses such as insecurity or self-doubt are integral to this process [21]. Despite existing research, there remains limited analysis of how intercultural experiences within experiential-oriented EFL modules in local contexts simultaneously trigger cognitive and emotional disruption, dialogue, and reflection, leading to shifts in learners' meaning perspectives over time. This gap directly informs the present study, which seeks to clarify the cultural conflicts experienced by EFL students and how transformative learning processes unfold within an experiential-oriented EFL module.

Vietnamese EFL Context and Cultural Assumptions

Within the Vietnamese tertiary education system, EFL classrooms continue to be shaped by teacher-centered instructional models, summative assessment pressure, and large class sizes [5], [30]. Classroom observations indicate that interaction is predominantly controlled by teachers, while student initiated contributions during whole class activities remain limited [30]. Concerns related to face saving and fear of negative evaluation further constrain students' willingness to speak publicly [5], [30]. Such conditions suggest that traditional learning environments prioritize accuracy and evaluation over spontaneous communicative engagement [5].

Limited authentic exposure further characterizes the Vietnamese EFL context. Opportunities to use English beyond the classroom remain restricted due to large class sizes, the

continued influence of grammar translation approaches, and the limited role of English in everyday life [4]. Although digital and technology integrated studies emphasize simulated authenticity and immersion, they do not examine cultural tensions or communicative breakdowns in actual intercultural encounters [31]. Consequently, real life interactions with foreign interlocutors may be experienced as uncertain and cognitively disruptive.

At the level of communicative culture, hierarchical structures, harmony maintenance, and uncertainty avoidance shape classroom behavior [32]. Learners often avoid confrontation, adhere to teacher authority, and internalize these patterns as personal traits rather than culturally embedded structures [32]. Higher willingness to communicate in digital environments further highlights the impact of evaluative pressure in face to face classrooms [30], [33]. When encountering communicative norms that emphasize directness and unpredictability, students may experience cognitive and emotional tension.

Research on intercultural competence in Vietnam has largely relied on quantitative self-report measures, reporting relatively high perceived competence but difficulty translating attitudes into behavioral action [12], [13]. However, authentic intercultural communicative experiences remain underexplored, and these processes have not been examined through the lens of Transformative Learning. How culturally internalized assumptions interact with real intercultural encounters to generate cognitive dissonance, emotional responses, and shifts in meaning perspectives therefore remains insufficiently investigated, forming the foundation of the present study.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Transformative Learning Theory [6], [7] which provides the central analytical framework for guiding data collection and analysis. Transformative learning conceptualizes learning as a meaning-making process in which individuals critically examine and potentially revise taken-for-granted assumptions. Core elements include disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, dialogue, and shifts in meaning perspectives. In this study, authentic intercultural communication encounters within an experiential-oriented EFL module are examined as potential sites of disorienting dilemmas. When learners encounter communicative practices that challenge prior classroom norms and cultural expectations, cognitive disruption and emotional disturbance may arise. These moments are treated as instances where existing frames of reference become insufficient.

Consistent with post-Mezirow perspectives, transformative learning is understood as dynamic and iterative rather than linear. Emotional responses such as confusion or self-doubt are integral to meaning-making. Through dialogue and reflective engagement, learners may reinterpret their experiences and reconsider prior assumptions, potentially leading to shifts in meaning perspectives within intercultural communication contexts.

Research Gaps

Although Transformative Learning Theory has been widely applied in adult education and increasingly in language learning contexts, empirical research examining transformative processes within experiential oriented EFL modules remains limited. Existing studies have primarily focused on isolated components such as reflection or emotion or have been situated in study abroad and professional practicum settings. Consequently, there is insufficient understanding of how authentic

intercultural encounters in locally situated EFL environments function as disorienting dilemmas that trigger cognitive and emotional disruption.

In the Vietnamese context, research has largely examined classroom structures, intercultural competence measured through self-report instruments, or teacher reported pedagogical strategies. However, learners' lived experiences during authentic intercultural communication, particularly moments of uncertainty and communicative breakdown, remain underexplored. Little research has systematically analyzed how cognitive disruption, emotional responses, dialogue, and reflection interact over time within experiential oriented EFL modules to produce shifts in meaning perspectives. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates cultural conflicts and the transformative processes emerging from these encounters.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of Vietnamese EFL students' intercultural communication experiences and how these experiences led to shifts in their meaning perspectives about themselves as English communicators. A qualitative approach was selected because the purpose of the study was not to measure the degree of change but to explore how learners interpret and construct meaning from their experiences. According to Creswell and Poth [34], qualitative research is appropriate when the aim is to understand how individuals make sense of social phenomena within their natural contexts. Given that the study focused on cultural disorienting dilemmas and transformative learning processes, this approach enabled the collection of rich, in-depth data emphasizing subjective experience and meaning making rather than measurable variables.

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted within an experiential-oriented English Extracurricular Module for third-year English-major students (Semester 5) at a university in Nha Trang, Vietnam. The module lasted 15 weeks and was designed around experiential activities in which students conducted interviews with foreign tourists, administered surveys, wrote reports, and delivered presentations based on their fieldwork findings. The first four weeks focused on preparing students to design interviews and survey questions, conduct interviews, and produce academic reports. The module did not include formally structured reflection sessions, guided debrief discussions, or mandatory reflective journals.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure direct experience relevant to the research focus. As Patton [35] explains, purposive sampling allows researchers to select information-rich participants who are most relevant to the research purpose. The inclusion criteria were: (1) completion of the module and (2) having engaged in real intercultural communication experiences with foreign individuals within the module activities.

A total of 11 students participated in the interviews. Two students took part in pilot interviews to assess the clarity and appropriateness of the interview questions. Nine students (six females and three males) participated in the formal data collection phase. All participants had completed Listening 4, Speaking 4, Reading 4, and Writing 4 prior to enrolling in the module.

Although the number of participants may appear small from a quantitative perspective, small purposive samples are considered appropriate in qualitative inquiry that aims to obtain in-

depth insights into participants' lived experiences. Creswell and Poth [34] note that qualitative studies typically involve relatively small samples that allow researchers to explore meaning-making processes in detail. Similarly, Patton [35] emphasizes that purposive sampling prioritizes information-rich cases rather than statistical representativeness. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, indicating that additional interviews did not generate substantially new insights, consistent with recommendations for qualitative sample adequacy [36].

Data Collection Instrument

Data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen because it provides a balance between a structured framework aligned with the research questions and flexibility that allows participants to narrate their experiences in their own ways. Tisdell and his colleagues [37] note that semi-structured interviews are particularly appropriate when the researcher seeks to understand the meanings participants assign to their experiences.

The interview protocol was developed based on Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory [6], [7], focusing on disruptive experiences, emotional responses, reflection, dialogue, and changes in self-perception. Questions were organized progressively, beginning with descriptions of concrete experiences and moving toward reflection and perceived transformation. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure that participants could express their experiences naturally and in detail. This aligns with Creswell and Poth's recommendation [34] that qualitative interviews be conducted in participants' native language to preserve cultural nuance and depth of meaning. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim in Vietnamese. The transcripts were subsequently translated into English by the researcher for reporting purposes, while the original Vietnamese transcripts were retained for analytic reference. Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes.

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews were conducted online between January 30 and February 7, 2026, shortly after the completion of the experiential-oriented module. Conducting the interviews at this time allowed participants to reflect on their experiences while they were still fresh. Prior to each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent. Data collection continued until no substantially new themes emerged, consistent with the principle of data saturation in qualitative research [38].

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke [39]. The process involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was conducted manually without the use of qualitative software. The analysis was guided by Transformative Learning Theory, which informed the analytical lens. While theoretical concepts such as disorienting dilemmas, emotional disruption, and critical reflection provided sensitizing categories, themes were developed through systematic engagement with participants' accounts. To enhance analytic rigor, theme development and interpretation were discussed with a colleague experienced in qualitative research. Data analysis was conducted on the original Vietnamese transcripts to preserve linguistic nuance and cultural meaning. Excerpts were subsequently

translated into English by the researcher for reporting purposes, while the original Vietnamese transcripts were retained for reference.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

The study adhered to fundamental ethical principles in social research. Participation was voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews. Confidentiality was ensured through anonymization using participant codes (P1–P11), and all recordings and transcripts were securely stored.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis identified eight interrelated themes addressing the two research questions. Three themes describe cultural disorienting dilemmas encountered during authentic intercultural communication. Five themes illustrate shifts in participants’ meaning perspectives about themselves as English communicators. All interview excerpts presented below are translated from Vietnamese.

Cultural Disorienting Dilemmas in Intercultural Communication

Three closely related themes capture participants’ experiences of cultural disruption during authentic intercultural communication: (1) culturally disruptive encounters in communication, (2) affective and cognitive reactions to cultural dissonance, and (3) contextual and mediating conditions shaping these experiences (see Table 1).

The first theme captures instances in which participants described disruptions arising from differences in communication style, interactional norms, and value interpretation during intercultural encounters. Several students reported that their expectations, which formed through classroom learning and mediated sources such as textbooks, online videos, and social media content, did not align with real-life interaction. As P9 stated, “You cannot judge others based on what you watch in videos,” indicating recognition of a discrepancy between imagined cultural knowledge and lived experience. Similarly, P11 expressed uncertainty about interlocutors’ sincerity: “I don’t know if they really mean what they say.”

Table 1. Cultural Disorienting Dilemmas

Theme	Codes	Key Phrases	Sample Quotes
Encountered cultural disorienting dilemmas	Communication style differences; Non-verbal mismatches; Values and belief conflicts	“judge others based on videos,” “really mean what they say,” “normal vs. very special,” “not like textbooks”	“You cannot judge others based on what you watch in videos” (P9); “Some things that I see as normal are very special to them” (P11); “It’s not like the sentence structures we learn in textbooks” (P3)
Emotional and cognitive responses	Shock; Fear of rejection; Self-doubt; Cultural anxiety; Reflexive awareness	“I was shocked,” “afraid of being rejected,” “overconfident,” “scolded”	“At first, I was shocked... I didn’t want to go anymore” (P3); “Maybe I’ve been overconfident all this time” (P4)
Contextual and mediating factors	Encounter type; Contact frequency; Peer support; Prior	“offline accounted for most,” “group makes me more confident,”	“Going alone is scary, but going in a group makes me more confident” (P6); “It’s not because

Theme	Codes	Key Phrases	Sample Quotes
	EFL background; Psychological barriers	“not because of language”	of language, but because of my mindset” (P6)

Participants also reported differences in everyday value interpretation. P11 noted, “Some things that I see as normal are very special to them,” describing how practices perceived as ordinary in their own context were interpreted differently by foreign interlocutors. In addition, P3 highlighted a mismatch between classroom English and natural communication: “It’s not like the sentence structures we learn in textbooks.” Across accounts, communication style differences, expectation mismatches, and value-related contrasts were described as sources of disruption during intercultural interaction.

The second theme reflects the emotional and cognitive reactions participants reported in response to these disruptive encounters. Students frequently described shock, fear of rejection, embarrassment, and self-doubt. P3 recounted, “At first, I was shocked... I didn’t want to go anymore. I stopped for about two or three weeks because I was afraid of being rejected.” She further described an incident in which “Before I could even start talking, I was scolded,” which intensified her hesitation to continue interacting. Other participants described reflective reconsideration of their own competence. P4 stated, “Maybe I’ve been overconfident all this time,” suggesting a reassessment of prior self-perceptions. These accounts indicate that intercultural disruptions were accompanied by both immediate emotional reactions and subsequent cognitive reflection on personal communicative ability.

The third theme identifies contextual and social conditions that participants described as shaping their experiences of cultural disruption. Many interactions occurred offline in public settings and involved repeated contact with unfamiliar interlocutors. Peer presence was frequently mentioned as a source of support. As P6 explained, “Going alone is scary, but going in a group makes me more confident,” indicating that group interaction reduced anxiety. Participants also noted psychological factors influencing communication. P6 remarked, “It’s not because of language, but because of my mindset,” attributing difficulty to internal factors rather than linguistic deficiency. Prior learning experiences were also referenced. P7 reflected, “Before, I was always passive... just listening,” linking earlier classroom habits to current communicative challenges. These contextual and personal conditions were described as shaping how students experienced and responded to intercultural communication situations.

Transformation of Meaning Perspectives on Self as English Communicators

Five interrelated themes described how intercultural communication experiences reshaped students’ perceptions of themselves as English communicators: critical reflection processes, perspective transformation on culture and communication, self-identity transformation, behavioral and strategic changes, and long-term shifts in learning approach (see Table 2).

Table 2. Transformation of Meaning Perspectives on Self as English Communicators

Theme	Codes	Key Phrases	Quotes
Critical Reflection Processes	Questioning assumptions; Meta-awareness of textbook influence;	“assumed by default,” “too formal,” “too much written language,”	“... I used too much written language in spoken communication... it’s not like the sentence structures we

Theme	Codes	Key Phrases	Quotes
	Reconsidering communication norms	“why did they feel that way?”	learn in textbooks” (P3) “I asked myself why they felt that way” (P11)
Perspective Transformation	Ethnocentric → ethnorelative shift; Cultural relativity; Redefining effective communication	“for us... for them...,” “not that simple,” “pay attention to others”	“For us it may be normal, but for foreign friends it is very wonderful” (P11) “It turns out they are not like that” (P4)
Self-Identity Transformation	Self-perception shift; Learner → communicator; Confidence & legitimacy	“underestimated myself,” “on equal footing,” “not afraid of making mistakes”	“When I actually tried talking, I realized what my ability really was” (P1) “We are on equal footing, talking like friends” (P11)
Behavioral & Strategic Changes	Adaptation; Style-shifting; Cultural accommodation; Risk-taking	“change the way I start,” “use simpler words,” “keep distance”	“For foreigners, they need more distance... so I stepped aside and changed the way I started the conversation to make it easier to hear” (P6)
Long-term Learning Impact	Learning priorities shift; Self-evaluation; Cultural preparation	“real-world practice,” “watch the video again,” “find out beforehand”	“Just studying in class, I wouldn’t know where my level actually is” (P9) “It’s not just about speaking correctly, but about making others understand” (P11)

Critical reflection was evident as students reported questioning their habitual way of speaking English after receiving direct feedback from foreigners and reconsidering how classroom learning had influenced their communication style. Participants described realizing that their spoken English in real-life interaction often reflected textbook-based structures rather than everyday usage. P3 shared that “a tourist told me that I sounded too polite, meaning that I was too formal,” and explained that she was “still using written language in spoken communication” and needed to learn “common expressions used in daily conversation, not the sentence structures that we learn in textbooks.” Similarly, P11 stated, “I asked myself why they felt that way.” These accounts indicate that students described re-examining their own communication habits and reflecting on whether their previously accepted speaking norms were appropriate in authentic contexts.

Changes in perspective were evident as students described becoming more attentive to how foreigners might interpret their words and behaviors rather than evaluating situations solely from their own viewpoint. Participants reported reconsidering assumptions about what is considered “normal” or “appropriate” during interaction. P11 reflected, “My way of seeing the world is not that simple. What seems normal to me might be something very special to foreign friends. So when communicating, I need to pay attention to them; I cannot just focus on myself.” Likewise, SV4 stated, “It turned out they weren’t like that.” These descriptions reflect that students reported reassessing initial judgments and paying closer attention to differences in interpretation during intercultural communication.

Changes in self-perception were evident as students reported reassessing their communicative ability and expressing greater confidence after interacting with foreigners. Many

participants described that they had previously underestimated themselves in English communication. P1 shared, “For a long time, I underestimated myself too much, but when I actually tried talking, I realized what I was capable of. After finishing this course, I felt that my foreign friends and I were on equal footing, talking like friends, and I was no longer afraid of making mistakes.” Similarly, SV6 stated, “After finishing the course, I realized that I’m not as bad as I thought.” These accounts indicate that students describe feeling less fearful of making mistakes and more assured of their ability to participate in communication.

Behavioral and strategic adjustments were evident as students described modifying their interactional approach after experiencing intercultural communication. Participants reported changes in interpersonal distance, clarity of expression, and organization of speech. P6 explained, “Before, I used to stand too close, but later I realized that foreigners need some distance. So I stepped a bit aside, changed the way I started conversations to make it easier to listen to, simplified what I said so they could understand, and gradually I dared to speak more.” In addition, SV10 stated, “We go straight to the point.” These accounts indicate that students described adjusting both non-verbal behavior and verbal strategies to facilitate clearer communication.

Long-term changes were evident as students described placing greater emphasis on real-life practice and communicative effectiveness beyond classroom instruction. Participants reported that studying only in class did not fully reflect their communicative ability. P9 shared, “If we only study in class, we don’t really know what our level is. After communicating in real life, I realized that only through real practice can I know who I am. So, I reviewed the videos, evaluated myself, and learned about the culture beforehand so that I could communicate better next time.” Similarly, SV11 stated, “It’s not just about speaking correctly, but about making sure the other person understands.” These accounts indicate that students described prioritizing practical engagement, self-evaluation, and mutual understanding in their ongoing approach to learning English.

Discussion

Cultural Disorienting Dilemmas in Intercultural Communication

The findings indicate that authentic intercultural communication situations generated cultural disorienting dilemmas for Vietnamese EFL students, manifested in the misalignment between expectations formed in classroom settings and actual interactional realities. Differences in degrees of directness, politeness norms, natural expressions versus textbook-based structures, as well as divergent interpretations of cultural values destabilized assumptions that had previously been taken for granted. These findings align with the concept of disorienting dilemmas in Transformative Learning Theory [6], [7], according to which experiences that disrupt existing frames of reference may function as the starting point of transformative learning.

Importantly, the disruptions identified in this study did not stem from major life crises but from everyday interactional events, such as being rejected during interviews, being told that one sounded “too formal,” or realizing the discrepancy between textbook English and real-life communication. This supports the argument advanced by Taylor [8] and Cranton [9] that destabilizing experiences may arise in ordinary social interactions, as long as they expose and challenge underlying assumptions. The emotional reactions reported by participants, including shock, fear of rejection, and self-doubt, further reflect the central role of affect in transformative learning, as emphasized by Dirkx [19] and Mälkki [20].

Compared with studies of intercultural learning conducted in study abroad or highly internationalized environments [2], [11], the present findings extend the application of Transformative Learning Theory to a classroom-based EFL environment characterized by limited international exposure and short-term experiential modules. While Jackson [2] demonstrated that intercultural experiences can prompt learner repositioning, this study provides detailed qualitative evidence of how specific communicative encounters within the Vietnamese context triggered cognitive and emotional disruption even in the absence of prolonged immersion.

Furthermore, in contrast to studies in Vietnam that primarily measure intercultural competence through quantitative self-report instruments [12], [13], the present findings reveal a gap between perceived competence and lived experience. The cultural collisions described by participants were not simply the result of insufficient cultural knowledge but rather moments in which previously internalized assumptions about communication were destabilized by unpredictable interactional realities. In this sense, the study contributes experiential depth to previous research that has largely focused on attitudes or self-assessed competence.

An additional factor shaping students' expectations may relate to their prior exposure to foreign cultures through digital media. Some participants referred to images of foreigners encountered through online videos or social media, suggesting that mediated representations of culture had influenced their initial expectations about intercultural communication. As one participant noted, learners "cannot judge others based on what they watch in videos," indicating that digitally constructed cultural images had shaped assumptions about how intercultural interaction should unfold. In contemporary digital environments, communication styles are often simplified or stylized through short videos, emoji use, and algorithmically curated content. Digital communication platforms may therefore play a dual role in intercultural learning. On the one hand, exposure to foreign cultures through online media can provide learners with preliminary intercultural awareness and opportunities to observe language use beyond the classroom. On the other hand, these mediated representations may reinforce simplified communicative scripts or stereotyped expectations about intercultural interaction. When learners subsequently encounter more complex interactional practices in real-life communication, the mismatch between digitally mediated expectations and actual interaction may intensify cultural collisions and trigger emotional responses such as surprise, uncertainty, or self-doubt, which in turn stimulate deeper reflection on language use and intercultural meaning-making.

Transformative Processes and Shifts in Meaning Perspectives

Regarding the second research question, the findings show that cultural collisions did not remain at the level of immediate emotional reaction but led to processes of critical reflection and the reconstruction of learners' perspectives about themselves as English communicators. Themes such as critical reconsideration of textbook influence, shifts from ethnocentric to ethnorelative viewpoints, changes in self-perception from an "evaluated learner" to an "equal communicator," along with behavioral adjustments and long-term learning reorientation, collectively suggest a multi-dimensional transformative process involving cognitive, emotional, and identity-related shift.

These findings support the core structure of Transformative Learning Theory [6], [7], in which disorienting dilemmas lead to critical reflection and the potential reconstruction of meaning perspectives. At the same time, the findings suggest that this process does not unfold in a rigid linear sequence but rather operates dynamically through the interplay of emotion, cognition, and dialogue.

This observation is consistent with post-Mezirow perspectives that emphasize the iterative and non-linear nature of transformative learning [10], [21].

A particularly significant dimension concerns shifts in English user identity. Students did not merely adjust their communicative strategies but also reconsidered their positioning in interaction. The movement from feelings of inadequacy and fear of making mistakes toward a sense of equality and legitimacy in communication suggests a repositioning of self within intercultural encounters. This finding resonates with Kramsch's view [3] that language use is inherently tied to identity positioning, while also extending transformative learning research in EFL, which has often focused on isolated elements such as reflection or emotion without fully examining shifts in English user identity.

Compared with Agustina [27] and Nada and Legutko [11], who identified intercultural experiences as catalysts for reflection, this study further unpacks the internal mechanism of transformation: from cognitive–emotional disruption to dialogic engagement and self-reassessment, followed by behavioral change and long-term learning reorientation. In this respect, the study not only confirms the catalytic role of intercultural encounters but also elucidates the intertwined cognitive, emotional, and social processes unfolding within a limited-exposure EFL context.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the study reinforces the applicability of Transformative Learning Theory in analyzing intercultural communication experiences within EFL contexts. First, the findings support the argument that disorienting dilemmas can arise from everyday interaction rather than exclusively from major life events [8]. Second, the study provides empirical evidence of the interwoven relationship between emotion and reflection, aligning with perspectives that highlight the affective dimension of transformative learning [19], [20]. Moreover, the study extends the scope of Transformative Learning Theory to context where English is used as a foreign language, where transformation unfolds within short-term experiential modules rather than prolonged study abroad environments. By analyzing how culturally internalized assumptions interact with authentic communicative situations, the study contributes to clarifying the relationship between cultural collisions and shifts in meaning perspectives in foreign language education.

Practically, the findings suggest that integrating authentic intercultural communication activities into EFL curricula can foster not only skill development but also deeper cognitive and identity-related growth. For students, real-life interaction functions as a testing ground for examining and recalibrating self-perception. For teachers, the findings highlight the importance of creating structured opportunities for authentic communication and guided reflection to support the restructuring of assumptions. At the institutional and policy levels, the study suggests that reliance solely on self-report measures of intercultural competence may not adequately capture learners' lived experiences. Designing experiential modules that incorporate authentic intercultural communication, along with mechanisms for reflective engagement, may help bridge the gap between perceived competence and communicative action in real-world contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how authentic intercultural communication experiences function as cultural disorienting dilemmas and how such encounters may trigger transformative learning processes among Vietnamese EFL students. Drawing on Transformative Learning Theory as the

primary analytical lens, the findings demonstrate that even short-term, locally situated intercultural interactions can generate meaningful cognitive and emotional disruption, prompting reflection and shifts in learners' meaning perspectives about themselves as English communicators.

First, the study shows that cultural collisions in a local EFL context do not necessarily emerge from dramatic intercultural crises, but from everyday communicative mismatches such as differences in directness, politeness norms, or conversational expectations. These seemingly ordinary encounters were sufficient to destabilize previously internalized classroom-based assumptions, thereby functioning as disorienting dilemmas. The study highlights that transformative learning is not limited to study-abroad contexts but can also unfold within locally implemented experiential EFL modules. Second, the findings illuminate the dynamic interplay between emotional responses and reflective processes. Emotional reactions such as shock, hesitation, self-doubt, or anxiety were not merely temporary obstacles but integral components of meaning-making. Through reflection and dialogue, students gradually reinterpreted these disruptions, leading to adjustments in communicative strategies and, more importantly, to shifts in self-perception. This process underscores that transformative learning in intercultural communication contexts is not linear but iterative, socially mediated, and deeply embedded in learners' identity negotiation. Third, the study highlights a notable transformation in English user identity. Participants described moving from a position of being "evaluated learners" toward perceiving themselves as legitimate and equal communicators. This repositioning suggests that authentic intercultural engagement may contribute not only to communicative competence but also to a reconfiguration of learners' perceived legitimacy and agency in English use.

In conclusion, this study contributes to a growing body of research that positions intercultural communication not merely as skill development but as a potential site of transformative learning. By foregrounding cultural collisions within a locally situated experiential EFL module, it advances understanding of how everyday intercultural encounters can catalyze deeper shifts in learners' meaning perspectives and self-positioning as English communicators.

LIMITATIONS

This study was conducted within a single institutional context and involved a limited number of participants. As is typical in qualitative research, the aim was not statistical generalization but in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and meaning-making processes. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted in terms of contextual or analytical transferability rather than generalizability. The data were collected at a single post-module time point and relied on participants' retrospective accounts rather than longitudinal tracking of transformative processes. Future research could adopt longitudinal or mixed-method designs to examine how transformative processes unfold over time and across multiple experiential modules or institutional contexts. Further investigation into the role of structured reflective scaffolding in facilitating transformative learning would also provide valuable insight. Future research may also benefit from incorporating digital platforms both as data collection tools and as sites of intercultural interaction. For example, video conferencing tools, language exchange applications, or online ethnographic approaches could be used to document intercultural communication processes in digitally mediated environments and provide deeper insight into how cultural collisions and transformative learning unfold in online or hybrid EFL contexts.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

H.Q.N. conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, conducted data collection and analysis, and T.T.D. prepared the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The author declares that no generative artificial intelligence tools were used in the writing, editing, data analysis, or graphical preparation of this manuscript. All content was developed independently, and the author assumes full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the work.

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