

BEYOND THE GEOGRAPHICAL DIVIDE: THE IMPACT OF INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES AND AUTHENTIC EXPOSURE ON INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF URBAN AND RURAL EFL STUDENTS

VƯỢT QUA RÀO CẢN ĐỊA LÝ: TÁC ĐỘNG CỦA THỰC HÀNH GIẢNG DẠY VÀ TIẾP XÚC THỰC TẾ ĐẾN NĂNG LỰC GIAO TIẾP LIÊN VĂN HÓA CỦA HỌC SINH TIẾNG ANH ĐÔ THỊ VÀ NÔNG THÔN

Nguyen Thi Thuan Hanh

Le Hong Phong High School, Quang Tri

ABSTRACT: *This study investigates differences in Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) between urban and rural high school students in Quang Tri Province, Vietnam, and examines the role of instructional practices in shaping intercultural competence. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed, involving 240 students and 17 English teachers from Dao Duy Tu High School (urban) and Le Hong Phong High School (rural). The findings revealed that urban students outperformed their rural counterparts in intercultural knowledge and communication skills ($p < .001$), while no statistically significant difference was found in intercultural attitudes between the two groups ($p > .05$). The study also identified a discrepancy between teachers' reported use of authentic materials and students' actual classroom experiences. Multiple regression analysis indicated that exposure to authentic materials and instructional practices were stronger predictors of ICC than school location. The findings suggest that disparities in intercultural competence are primarily associated with unequal learning opportunities rather than geographical factors. Enhancing students' access to authentic materials and intercultural learning experiences may therefore contribute to reducing educational inequalities and fostering intercultural competence among EFL learners.*

Keywords: *Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), urban-rural divide, EFL, Instructional practices, authentic Exposure.*

TÓM TẮT: *Nghiên cứu này xem xét sự khác biệt về năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa (Intercultural Communicative Competence - ICC) giữa học sinh trung học phổ thông khu vực thành thị và nông thôn tại tỉnh Quảng Trị, đồng thời phân tích vai trò của các thực hành giảng dạy đối với năng lực này. Nghiên cứu sử dụng thiết kế phương pháp hỗn hợp tuần tự giải thích với dữ liệu thu thập từ 240 học sinh và 17 giáo viên tiếng Anh tại Trường THPT Đào Duy Từ và Trường THPT Lê Hồng Phong. Kết quả cho thấy học sinh thành thị đạt kết quả cao hơn học sinh nông thôn ở các thành tố kiến thức văn hóa và kỹ năng giao tiếp liên văn hóa ($p < 0,001$), trong khi không có sự khác biệt có ý nghĩa thống kê về thái độ liên văn hóa giữa hai nhóm ($p > 0,05$). Nghiên cứu cũng phát hiện sự chênh lệch giữa nhận thức của giáo viên và trải nghiệm thực tế của học sinh về việc sử dụng học liệu xác thực trong giảng dạy. Phân tích hồi quy cho thấy tiếp xúc với học liệu xác thực và các thực hành giảng dạy có ảnh hưởng mạnh hơn yếu tố vị trí địa lý trong dự báo năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa. Kết quả khẳng định rằng khoảng cách giữa học sinh thành thị và nông thôn có thể được thu hẹp thông qua việc tăng cường cơ hội tiếp xúc với học liệu và trải nghiệm giao tiếp xác thực trong dạy học tiếng Anh.*

Từ khóa: *Năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa (ICC), chênh lệch thành thị - nông thôn, tiếng Anh như ngoại ngữ (EFL), thực hành giảng dạy, tiếp xúc với nguồn học liệu xác thực.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, the goal of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has expanded beyond linguistic proficiency to include the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Scholars such as Byram [2] and Kramsch [7] emphasize that effective communication requires not only language knowledge but also the ability to interact appropriately across cultures. Consequently, ICC has become a key objective of language education and an essential component of preparing learners for participation in multicultural societies [1], [4].

In Vietnam, this orientation is reflected in the General Education Program issued by the Ministry of Education and Training [9], which identifies communicative and intercultural competence as important learning outcomes for secondary school students. However, the implementation of ICC-oriented teaching remains challenging, particularly in contexts characterized by unequal access to educational resources. Significant disparities persist between urban and rural schools in terms of opportunities for authentic intercultural exposure, access to supplementary learning materials, and learning environments that support communicative language use [3], [10].

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of authentic exposure and instructional practices in fostering ICC development [3], [10]. Nevertheless, most existing research has focused on higher education or general policy issues, while empirical evidence at the secondary-school level remains limited. Furthermore, relatively few studies have examined how differences in teaching practices and authentic exposure contribute to the urban–rural gap in ICC, especially in the context of Central Vietnam.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the ICC of students at two representative high schools in Quang Tri Province: Dao Duy Tu High School (urban) and Le Hong Phong High School (rural). Beyond comparing students' ICC levels, the study explores differences in instructional practices and examines the extent to which school location, authentic exposure, and teaching methods predict intercultural competence.

Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

To what extent do the levels of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), including knowledge, attitudes, and skills, differ between students at Dao Duy Tu High School and Le Hong Phong High School?

How do instructional practices related to ICC differ between the two schools, and is there a discrepancy between teachers' self-reported practices and students' perceptions?

To what extent do school location, instructional practices, and authentic exposure predict students' ICC, and which factor serves as the strongest predictor?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) extends the traditional concept of communicative competence by emphasizing the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with individuals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds [2], [5]. Among the various theoretical, Byram's (1997) model remains one of the most influential and widely applied in language education research. Byram conceptualizes ICC as a multidimensional construct consisting of five interrelated components: knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating,

skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness [2]. This framework provides a comprehensive basis for examining both learners' cultural understanding and their ability to engage in intercultural communication.

Complementing Byram's model, Deardorff's Process Model views ICC as a developmental process rather than a fixed outcome [4]. According to this perspective, attitudes such as openness, curiosity, and respect serve as the foundation for the acquisition of intercultural knowledge and skills, which ultimately lead to effective intercultural interaction. Together, these frameworks suggest that successful intercultural communication requires not only cognitive understanding but also opportunities to apply knowledge in authentic communicative contexts.

2.2. Authentic Exposure, Context, and Instructional Practices in ICC Development

A substantial body of research highlights the importance of sociocultural context and authentic exposure in fostering ICC. Kramsch [7] argues that language and culture are inseparable, emphasizing that intercultural learning occurs through engagement with cultural meanings rather than through the memorization of cultural facts. Similarly, Nguyen [10] found that learners' intercultural development is strongly influenced by access to supportive environments, including interaction with foreigners and exposure to authentic media. In contexts where such opportunities are limited, learners often rely heavily on textbook-based knowledge, which may restrict the development of practical intercultural skills.

Within the Vietnamese context, previous studies have identified significant disparities in the implementation of ICC-

oriented education across regions [3]. While urban schools generally provide greater access to authentic materials, digital resources, and intercultural encounters, rural schools often face resource constraints that limit opportunities for experiential learning. As a result, differences in ICC may stem not only from geographical location but also from unequal access to intercultural experiences and learning resources.

Recent pedagogical perspectives have therefore shifted from teaching culture as a collection of facts toward promoting intercultural awareness and engagement [1]. Effective ICC instruction encourages learners to interpret cultural perspectives, negotiate meaning, and reflect critically on their own cultural assumptions [8]. However, the implementation of such approaches remains challenging, particularly in resource-constrained environments where teachers frequently rely on traditional, teacher-centered methods [11]. Consequently, authentic exposure and instructional practices have emerged as key factors influencing students' intercultural competence and may help explain disparities between urban and rural learners.

Drawing on these theoretical and empirical perspectives, the present study examines the relationship between school context, authentic exposure, instructional practices, and students' ICC in order to better understand the factors underlying the urban-rural divide in intercultural competence.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to investigate the relationship between school context, instructional practices, authentic exposure, and students' Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). The research was conducted in two phases. First,

quantitative data were collected to examine differences in ICC levels and identify significant predictors of competence. Subsequently, qualitative interviews were conducted to provide explanatory insights into the quantitative findings, particularly regarding instructional practices and barriers to ICC development. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing ICC in urban and rural educational contexts.

3.2. Participants and Research Setting

The study was conducted in Quang Tri Province, Vietnam, involving two high schools representing different educational contexts: Dao Duy Tu High School in Dong Thuan Ward (urban setting) and Le Hong Phong High School in Nam Gianh Commune (rural setting).

A total of 240 students participated in the final quantitative analysis, including 120 students from each school. Participants were Grade 11 and Grade 12 students aged between 16 and 18 years. In addition, 17 EFL teachers (10 from the urban school and 7 from the rural school) participated in the qualitative phase of the study. The selection of these two sites allowed for the examination of ICC development under contrasting conditions of resource availability, authentic exposure, and intercultural learning opportunities.

3.3. Research Instruments

Data were collected using two complementary instruments.

First, an Intercultural Communicative Competence Questionnaire (ICCQ) was adapted from Byram's (1997) ICC framework and previous studies by Tran and Seepho (2016) [2], [12]. The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale and consisted of three sections: (1) demographic information and cultural exposure, (2) self-

assessment of ICC dimensions, and (3) perceptions of classroom instructional practices.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and selected students to explore their experiences with intercultural learning and to provide explanations for the quantitative findings. Particular attention was given to the implementation of student-centered activities, the use of authentic materials, and challenges affecting ICC-oriented instruction.

3.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26. Reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficients. Descriptive statistics and Independent Samples t-tests were employed to compare ICC levels between urban and rural students, while Chi-square tests were used to examine demographic differences between groups. To identify the strongest predictors of ICC, a stepwise multiple linear regression analysis was conducted using five variables: frequency of contact with foreigners, perception of authentic material use, internet use for English learning, academic achievement, and school location.

Qualitative interview data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes related to instructional practices, perceived barriers to ICC development, and discrepancies between teachers' reported practices and students' classroom experiences. The qualitative findings were subsequently used to interpret and explain the quantitative results.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. The Geographical Divide: Contextual and Demographic Disparities

The initial analysis of the research participants reveals a stark contrast in

cultural affordances and educational resources between the two settings. While the groups were statistically comparable in terms of gender and grade level, significant

disparities emerged regarding their exposure to the English language and intercultural opportunities.

Table 1. Demographic Profile and Cultural Exposure Context of the Research Participants

Characteristics	Classification	Dao Duy Tu (Urban) (n=123)	Le Hong Phong (Rural) (n=123)	p-value (Chi-square)
1. Gender	Male	48 (39.0%)	51 (41.5%)	.684 (ns)
	Female	75 (61.0%)	72 (58.5%)	
2. Grade Level	Grade 11	60 (48.8%)	63 (51.2%)	.702 (ns)
	Grade 12	63 (51.2%)	60 (48.8%)	
3. Years of English Study	Under 7 years	5 (4.1%)	18 (14.6%)	.004
	7 years or more	118 (95.9%)	105 (85.4%)	
4. Extra English Classes	Yes	98 (79.7%)	35 (28.5%)	.000
	No	25 (20.3%)	88 (71.5%)	
5. Internet usage for English	Frequent	102 (82.9%)	76 (61.8%)	.001
	Rare/Never	21 (17.1%)	47 (38.2%)	
6. Experience with Foreigners	Yes	86 (69.9%)	15 (12.2%)	.000
	Never	37 (30.1%)	108 (87.8%)	

Note: (ns): not significant; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

The data in Table 1 illustrates a “double disadvantage” for rural students. First, there is a significant gap in formal and non-formal educational investment. While nearly 80% of urban students at Dao Duy Tu High School attend extra English classes, only 28.5% of their rural counterparts at Le Hong Phong High School have access to similar supplemental instruction ($p < .001$). This reflects the socio-economic reality of Quang Tri province, where urban centers offer concentrated educational services that are often absent in agricultural communes [3],

[10]. Second, the disparity in authentic exposure is even more pronounced. A vast majority of urban students (69.9%) reported having had direct interaction with foreigners, likely due to the school's proximity to tourism hubs and urban centers. Conversely, a staggering 87.8% of rural students have never interacted with a foreign national. This lack of “real-world” contact limits rural students to “textbook culture”, which Nguyen [10] and Ho [6] argue often presents a sterilized or static view of intercultural communication. Even in the digital realm,

where geography is theoretically less restrictive, a significant gap remains. 82.9% of urban students use the internet frequently for English consumption compared to only 61.8% of rural students ($p=.001$). This suggests that urban students are more integrated into Global English networks, whereas rural students remain heavily reliant on local, formal education as their primary source of linguistic and cultural input [9].

4.2. Current Status of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

The comparative analysis of ICC dimensions reveals a significant performance gap between urban and rural cohorts, yet it also uncovers an unexpected area of convergence. Table 2 provides a detailed statistical breakdown of these differences based on Byram's (1997) five-factor model [2].

Table 2. Comparison of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) between Urban and Rural Students

ICC Components (Byram, 1997)	Dao Duy Tu (Urban) (n=120)	Le Hong Phong (Rural) (n=120)	T-test	
	M	SD	M	SD
1. Knowledge	3.82	0.74	3.15	0.81
2. Attitudes	4.15	0.65	4.08	0.72
3. Interpreting & Relating	3.54	0.78	3.02	0.85
4. Discovery & Interaction	3.68	0.82	2.65	0.91
5. Critical Cultural Awareness	3.25	0.88	2.95	0.94
Overall ICC Mean Score	3.69	0.58	3.17	0.65

Note: M (Mean); SD (Standard Deviation); (ns): Not significant; *** $p < .001$; * $p < .05$.

The Knowledge and Skills Disparity

The data indicates that urban students significantly outperform their rural counterparts in nearly all cognitive and functional domains. The most striking disparity is observed in Skills of Discovery and Interaction ($t = 9.18$, $p < .001$), where rural students scored the lowest across all categories ($M = 2.65$). This reinforces the finding in Section 4.1 regarding the lack of authentic contact. Without the “real-world” laboratory of interaction, rural students struggle to move beyond theoretical understanding to practical application [2][5]. Similarly, the Knowledge gap ($M_{\text{diff}} = 0.67$, $p < .001$) suggests that urban learners benefit from a richer “cultural ecology” that extends beyond the classroom [10].

Attitudes: The Rural Potential

Crucially, the study found no statistically significant difference in Attitudes ($p = .431$). Rural students at Le Hong Phong High School maintained a high mean score ($M = 4.08$), nearly equal to that of urban students ($M = 4.15$). This finding is pivotal; it suggests that rural students possess the necessary “mindset” - curiosity, openness, and readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures [2] - but lack the “toolset” to operationalize these attitudes. This result challenges the stereotype of rural learners as culturally insular. Instead, it aligns with Tran and Seepho (2016) [12], suggesting that the desire for intercultural engagement is present across geographical divides, but is being stifled by environmental

constraints. The high attitude score represents significant “untapped potential” that could be realized through targeted instructional interventions [3][11]. Critical Cultural Awareness (CCA). Both groups recorded their lowest scores in Critical Cultural Awareness (M = 3.25 and 2.95). This dimension, considered the “core” of ICC by Byram [2], requires the ability to critically evaluate perspectives in one's own and other cultures. The relatively low scores across the province may reflect a broader pedagogical reliance on “cultural facts” rather than “critical inquiry”, a common challenge in the Vietnamese EFL context where textbooks

often prioritize surface-level cultural information [6][8].

4.3. Pedagogical Divergence: The “Illusion Gap” in Instructional Practices

To understand the environmental factors shaping student competence, the study analyzed the frequency of ICC-related instructional activities. A critical metric employed here is the “Perceptual Gap”, calculated by subtracting student scores from teacher scores. A high positive gap indicates that teachers may be overestimating their communicative output - a phenomenon often termed “Social Desirability Bias” in professional self-reporting [11].

Table 3. Comparison of Frequency in ICC Instructional Activities: Teacher vs. Student Perspectives

ICC Instructional Practices	Dao Duy Tu (Urban)			Le Hong Phong (Rural)		
	Teacher (n=10)	Student (n=120)	Gap	Teacher (n=7)	Student (n=120)	Gap
1. Traditional (Teacher-centered)						
Explaining cultural facts in textbooks	4.60	4.35	+0.25	4.80	4.55	+0.25
Comparing Vietnamese-English differences	4.20	3.95	+0.25	4.30	3.80	+0.50
2. Experiential (Student-centered)						
Using authentic materials (Videos/News)	4.10	3.80	+0.30	3.90	2.45	+1.45!
Group discussion on cultural misunderstandings	3.80	3.50	+0.30	3.20	2.10	+1.10!
Role-playing communicative situations	3.60	3.40	+0.20	2.90	1.85	+1.05!
3. Expansion (Interaction)						
Interacting with foreigners/guest speakers	3.20	3.05	+0.15	1.40	1.10	+0.30

Note: Scale 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Frequently). “!” indicates an alarming discrepancy (Gap>1.0).

Consistency in Urban Instruction At Dao Duy Tu High School, there is a high degree of pedagogical alignment. Both teachers and students report a frequent use of both traditional and student-centered activities, with gaps remaining negligible (ranging from +0.15 to +0.30). This suggests that the urban environment, supported by superior resources, allows for the consistent implementation of the communicative and intercultural goals outlined in the MOET (2018) curriculum [3][9].

The Rural “Illusion Gap”

In contrast, Le Hong Phong High School exhibits a significant misalignment in student-centered categories. While rural teachers claim to utilize authentic materials (Mean = 3.90) and group discussions (Mean = 3.20) relatively often, their students report these activities as rare (Mean = 2.45 and 2.10, respectively). The resulting gaps (+1.45 and +1.10) are statistically alarming. This discrepancy suggests that rural teachers may suffer from a “perceptual inflation” regarding their teaching efficacy. Under pressure to meet the standards of the national curriculum [9], they may interpret brief mentions of culture in the textbook as “using authentic materials” or “discussion”. However, students perceive the reality to be a far more traditional, exam-

oriented environment where the textbook remains the sole authority [6].

Barriers to Implementation

The lack of interaction with guest speakers in the rural school (Mean = 1.10) confirms the geographical isolation discussed in Section 4.1. This findings align with Sercu [11], who argues that teachers in resource-poor settings often fall back on traditional transmission models despite holding positive views toward intercultural teaching. In Nam Gianh, the “Gap” highlights a systemic failure where policy intentions for ICC are lost in the transition to classroom practice [3]. Without authentic resources, the “Attitudes” of rural students (identified in Table 2) cannot be translated into functional “Intercultural Skills”.

4.4. Predictors of Intercultural Communicative Competence

To investigate the underlying drivers of ICC and test the hypothesis that behavioral factors outweigh geographical location, a stepwise multiple linear regression analysis was performed. The model used the Overall ICC Mean Score as the dependent variable. The final model reached an adjusted R^2 of 0.62, indicating that the included predictors account for 62% of the variance in students' intercultural competence.

Table 4. Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for Predictors of Overall ICC

Predictors	Unstandardized B	Std. Error (SE)	Standardized β	t-value	Sig.
(Constant)	1.15	0.28		4.10	.000
1. Frequency of contact with foreigners	0.38	0.05	0.45	7.60	.000
2. Perception of teacher's use of authentic materials	0.32	0.06	0.36	5.33	.000
3. Frequency of internet use for English	0.21	0.07	0.22	3.00	.003
4. Final English academic grade	0.15	0.06	0.14	2.50	.013
5. School location (Dummy: 1=Urban, 0=Rural)	0.12	0.08	0.09	1.50	.135 (ns)

The Dominance of Exposure and Pedagogy The regression results offer a critical insight into the development of ICC. The strongest predictor identified was the frequency of contact with foreigners ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < .001$). This confirms that direct, authentic interaction is the most potent catalyst for developing the skills of discovery and interaction [2], [4]. Following closely is the perception of the teacher's use of authentic materials ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < .001$). This suggests that even in the absence of direct contact, a classroom environment enriched with “real-world” media (videos, news, films) can significantly bridge the competence gap [1][8].

The De-neutralization of Geography

The most significant finding in Table 4 is the statistical insignificance of School Location ($\beta = 0.09$, $p = .135$) once behavioral and instructional variables are introduced into the model. This provides empirical evidence for the study's central argument: geography is not destiny. While

Table 2 showed that urban students currently have higher ICC scores, Table 4 reveals that this is not due to their physical location (urban vs. rural), but rather the opportunities for practice and instructional quality that typically cluster in urban areas [3], [10]. If rural students are provided with similar levels of authentic exposure - whether through digital means or improved instructional practices using authentic materials - their ICC levels could theoretically match those of urban students. This aligns with Baker's (2012) view that intercultural awareness is a process of engagement rather than a byproduct of a specific environment [1]. Academic Performance and Digital Literacy. While academic grades ($\beta = 0.14$) and internet use ($\beta = 0.22$) remain significant predictors, their impact is secondary to direct exposure and instructional methods. This highlights that being “good at English” (linguistic proficiency) does not automatically translate to intercultural

competence [2], [7]. Furthermore, the significant role of the internet underscores the potential for “virtual mobility”, to compensate for the lack of physical foreigners in rural areas like Nam Gianh [5][10].

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. The Attitude - Skill Paradox

One of the most notable findings of this study is the disparity between students' attitudes and their intercultural skills. Although rural students demonstrated attitudes toward intercultural learning comparable to those of urban students, their scores in the Skills of Discovery and Interaction dimension were significantly lower. This finding suggests that differences in ICC are not primarily attributable to motivation but rather to unequal learning opportunities.

The positive attitudes observed among rural students indicate that they possess the openness and curiosity considered essential foundations of ICC [2]. This result is consistent with previous studies showing that Vietnamese EFL learners generally hold favorable attitudes toward intercultural communication [12]. However, positive attitudes alone do not automatically translate into intercultural competence. As suggested by Deardorff [4] and Fantini [5], learners require opportunities for authentic engagement in order to transform intercultural awareness into practical communication skills.

The findings therefore highlight the importance of learning environments. While urban students benefit from greater exposure to authentic intercultural experiences, rural students rely largely on textbook-based learning and have fewer opportunities to interact with diverse cultural perspectives. As a result, the observed skill gap appears to

be a consequence of limited exposure rather than limited willingness to engage interculturally.

5.2. Instructional Practices and the Urban-Rural Gap

Another important finding concerns the discrepancy between teachers' reported instructional practices and students' perceptions, particularly in the rural school. While teachers reported relatively frequent use of student-centered and intercultural activities, students perceived these activities as occurring much less often. This gap suggests challenges in translating policy expectations into classroom practice.

Several factors may explain this discrepancy. First, examination-oriented instruction continues to shape classroom priorities. In many contexts, teachers remain under pressure to prepare students for grammar-focused examinations, leaving limited time for intercultural activities and communicative tasks [3], [8]. Second, limited access to authentic materials and technological resources may constrain the implementation of student-centered approaches in rural schools. Consequently, teachers tend to rely more heavily on textbooks and teacher-centered instruction, which may support linguistic knowledge but provide fewer opportunities for intercultural engagement.

These findings support previous research indicating that successful ICC development depends not only on curriculum objectives but also on the availability of resources, institutional support, and appropriate teaching practices [3], [11].

5.3. The Role of Authentic Exposure and Technology

The regression analysis provides strong evidence that authentic exposure and instructional practices are more influential

than geographical location itself in predicting students' ICC. Once behavioral and instructional variables were included in the model, school location was no longer a significant predictor, suggesting that geographical disparities can be mitigated through educational interventions.

Among all predictors, contact with foreigners and exposure to authentic materials showed the strongest effects on ICC development. These findings reinforce the view that intercultural competence develops through meaningful engagement with authentic cultural perspectives rather than through the acquisition of cultural facts alone [1], [8]. In contexts where direct intercultural contact is limited, authentic digital resources such as videos, online interactions, and multimedia content can provide valuable opportunities for intercultural learning.

The positive contribution of internet use further highlights the importance of digital literacy in supporting ICC development. Technology can function as a form of “virtual mobility,” enabling students in rural areas to access diverse cultural experiences beyond their immediate environment. Therefore, improving access to digital resources and integrating authentic materials into English instruction may represent effective strategies for reducing the urban-rural gap in intercultural competence.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined differences in Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) between urban and rural high school students in Quang Tri Province and explored the factors influencing these outcomes. The findings revealed significant disparities in intercultural knowledge and skills between the two groups, while no significant

difference was found in their attitudes toward intercultural learning. More importantly, the regression analysis demonstrated that school location itself was not a significant predictor of ICC when instructional and behavioral variables were considered. Instead, authentic exposure, contact with foreigners, and the use of authentic materials emerged as the strongest predictors of intercultural competence.

These findings suggest that the urban–rural gap in ICC is largely associated with unequal learning opportunities rather than geographical location. Rural students possess the motivation and openness necessary for intercultural learning but have fewer opportunities to develop practical intercultural skills through authentic engagement.

Based on these results, several pedagogical implications can be proposed. First, English instruction should place greater emphasis on authentic materials and intercultural learning activities rather than the transmission of cultural facts. Second, professional development programs should support teachers in implementing student-centered and intercultural teaching practices more effectively. Third, technology and digital resources should be utilized to provide rural students with greater access to authentic intercultural experiences. Finally, assessment practices should be expanded to include intercultural dimensions in order to encourage the integration of ICC into everyday classroom instruction.

Overall, the study highlights that effective instructional practices and authentic intercultural exposure can help reduce educational disparities and promote more equitable development of intercultural competence among EFL learners.

REFERENCES

- [1] Baker, W. (2012), From cultural awareness to intercultural awareness: Culture in ELT, *ELT Journal*, 66(1), 62-70.
- [2] Byram, M. (1997), *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*, Multilingual Matters.
- [3] Chau, T. H. H., & Truong, V. (2019), The integration of intercultural communicative competence in English language teaching in Vietnam: From policy to practice, *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 9(4), 365-374.
- [4] Deardorff, D. K. (2006), Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization, *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(3), 241-266.
- [5] Fantini, A. E. (2009), Assessing intercultural competence, In D. K. Deardorff (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence* (pp. 456-476). SAGE.
- [6] Ho, S. T. K. (2009), Addressing culture in EFL textbooks: The case of Vietnam. In *English as an international language* (pp. 221-236). Multilingual Matters.
- [7] Kramsch, C. (1993), *Context and culture in language teaching*, Oxford University Press.
- [8] Liddicoat, A. J., & Scarino, A. (2013), *Intercultural language teaching and learning*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- [9] Ministry of Education and Training (2018), *The general education program in English*. Vietnam Education Publishing House.
- [10] Nguyen, T. M. H. (2011), Developing intercultural communicative competence in Vietnamese tertiary English language education, *Journal of English as an International Language*, 6(1), 38-52.
- [11] Sercu, L. (2005), *Foreign language teachers and intercultural competence*. Multilingual Matters.
- [12] Tran, T. Q., & Seepho, S. (2016), EFL learners' attitudes toward intercultural communicative competence, *Journal of English for Specific Purposes at Tertiary Level*, 4(1), 22-38.

Liên hệ:**CN. Nguyễn Thị Thuần Hạnh**

Trường THPT Lê Hồng Phong, Quảng Trị

Địa chỉ: Xã Nam Gianh, tỉnh Quảng Trị

Email: nguyenthithuanhanhd2ddt2020@gmail.com

Ngày nhận bài: 10/5/2026

Ngày gửi phản biện: 11/5/2026

Ngày duyệt đăng: 5/6/2026