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The Intercultural Experiences of Vietnamese Students in Taiwan: A Transformative Learning Analysis of Written Reflections

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ABSTRACT: *This study explores the intercultural experiences of four Vietnamese students in a Taiwanese intercultural communication course over 15 weeks of self-reflective writing. Guided by Mezirow's transformative learning theory, this analysis examines how these students navigate cultural differences, make sense of stereotypes, and reconstruct their identities. Qualitative analysis reveals disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, and shifts in perspective that deepen cultural awareness and empathy. Self-reflective writing has emerged as a crucial tool for expressing and connecting classroom discussions with personal experiences. The findings highlight the importance of experiential learning and reflection in promoting intercultural sensitivity, offering valuable insights for curriculum design in global education settings.*

Keywords: Mezirow's transformative learning theory, Vietnamese students, higher education in Taiwan, intercultural experiences, intercultural communication, written reflections

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INTRODUCTION

Vietnam has a growing presence in Taiwan's international student community (Strong, 2024). This growth is driven by Taiwan's high-quality yet affordable education (Wong, 2023), longstanding economic and cultural ties, and initiatives such as the New Southbound Policy, which, since 2016, has sought to strengthen relationships with Southeast Asia through investment and talent exchange (Strong, 2024). Consequently, applications for scholarships and exchange programs from Vietnam have increased substantially (Strong, 2024; Wong, 2023).

Taiwan's sociolinguistic environment further shapes these experiences. Mandarin Chinese is the official language and primary medium of instruction (Lau & Lin, 2017; Nguyen & Hajek, 2024), whereas English, promoted since 2002 through English-medium instruction (EMI), is used primarily in academic contexts (Chou & Ching, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2013). As a result, students often rely on Mandarin in daily life while navigating English for academic work (Lin, 2022; Nguyen & Hajek, 2024). Vietnamese students pursue either EMI or Mandarin programs motivated by both instrumental and integrative goals. Their ideal selves aspire to acquire linguistic capital for career and social integration, whereas their ought-to selves reflect external expectations (Nguyen & Hajek, 2024). In addition to language, education in Taiwan influences identity, autonomy, and belonging (Lin, 2024).

Intercultural communication skills are crucial. Chau et al. (2024) demonstrated that Vietnamese students derive greater benefits from online learning for the development of intercultural competence, whereas Taiwanese students progress more effectively in face-to-face contexts. Structured intercultural programs can thus enhance adaptability and confidence (Chau et al., 2024). However, research on Vietnamese students in Taiwan remains limited. Existing studies have focused primarily on language proficiency, academic adjustment, and acculturation stress, often employing U-shaped adaptations (Wu & Hammond, 2011) or nonlinear evolution (Heng, 2018). Few studies have explored how transformative learning (TL), through critical reflection and identity shifts, unfolds in this group (Wallace & Harvey, 2024).

Transformative learning theory (TLT) outlines ten stages from disorienting dilemmas to reintegration with new perspectives (Mezirow, 1981, 2000, 2006). While widely applied in adult education (Cranton & Wright, 2008; Dwyer & Seery, 2025; Stone et al., 2017; Wallace & Harvey, 2024), TLT has seldom been used to study Vietnamese students in Taiwan. These students encounter distinctive challenges in academic discourse communities without prior exposure to Mandarin or EMI norms (Cowley & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2018; Li et al., 2018). Nonnative English speakers, in particular, must adapt to nuanced academic

English and implicit cultural expectations (Nambiar & Ibrahim, 2013). Research has shown that intercultural encounters often mirror TLT stages. Disorienting dilemmas arise from unfamiliar norms and values, which catalyze reflection and identity negotiation (Stone & Petrick, 2013). Reflection and debriefing then become crucial for adaptation (Stone et al., 2017). These dynamics indicate TLT's explanatory power in analyzing Vietnamese students' intercultural experiences in Taiwan.

This study addresses three gaps: (1) limited research on Vietnamese students' intercultural experiences in Taiwan; (2) the underexplored role of self-reflective writing in adaptation; and (3) the need to understand identity negotiation in multilingual environments. It also responds to Inouye et al.'s (2023) call to study non-Chinese students in less prominent host countries, challenging deficit narratives in international student research. To address these gaps, this study analyzes 15 weeks of self-reflective writing from four Vietnamese participants enrolled in the same intercultural communication course at a Taiwanese university. Vietnamese students, one of the largest international cohorts in Taiwan (Strong, 2024), remain underrepresented in scholarships. Their shared cultural background provides a meaningful lens through which to examine both commonalities and individual variations in transformative learning. The findings contribute to TLT and offer practical insights for curriculum design in global higher education contexts. The two research questions are as follows.

1. How do Vietnamese students' intercultural experiences contribute to their TL process?
2. How does TL reshape participants' perceptions of their own cultural identities?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory

The value of being physically immersed in different cultures through international study is widely recognized as fostering TL (Jarman et al., 2022; Wallace & Harvey, 2024). Mezirow's TLT (1981, 2000, 2006) provides a framework for understanding how individuals critically examine their beliefs and worldviews, adopt new perspectives, and incorporate these insights to guide future thinking and behavior. At its core, TL enables individuals to revise problematic frames of reference, becoming more open, inclusive, and reflective (Mezirow, 1981, 2000, 2006).

Mezirow (1981, 2000, 2006) outlines a sequence of stages starting with a disorienting dilemma, an experience that causes a sense of disequilibrium. Learners then engage in self-examination, critically analyze their assumptions, consider alternative perspectives, and eventually enact change on the basis of this new understanding. Beer (2019) noted that learners do not need to complete every stage to exhibit signs of transformation.

The potential benefits of TL, including empathy, cultural humility, confidence in diverse interactions, and awareness of social justice and health

equity, are particularly relevant in the health and social sciences (Hoggan, 2016; Van Schalkwyk et al., 2019). These outcomes align with the broader goals of internationalization and the development of global capabilities (Johnston et al., 2022). Wallace and Harvey (2024) demonstrated that virtual international experiences can also facilitate TL. Their study of Australian midwifery students revealed changes in cultural sensitivity, power awareness, and global professional identity. While participation in such programs does not guarantee transformation (Crawford et al., 2017), key enablers include service learning, reflection, and context-specific design (Anand et al., 2020). Measuring transformation remains difficult, but critical reflection, often captured in journals, is a widely accepted tool for facilitating and assessing it (Dwyer & Seery, 2025; Hoggan, 2016; Jarman et al., 2022).

Pink et al. (2016) and Wallace and Harvey (2024) used students' reflective journals to analyze TL. These written reflections, especially when guided by prompts, reveal changes in worldview and identity. Disorienting dilemmas are central to this process, triggering learners to reflect deeply on their beliefs (Cranton & Wright, 2008; Mezirow, 1981, 2000, 2006).

TL involves both internal and social processes. It often begins with individual discomfort but is shaped by interpersonal interactions and educational design (Casey, 2018). Open dialog and discourse with others allow learners to explore different perspectives, question assumptions, and make meaning of new experiences (Christie et al., 2015). This finding supports social constructivist views of learning, where meaning is co-constructed.

TLT, which was initially developed in adult education, has been widely applied in diverse educational contexts to understand identity shifts, particularly in relation to culture, race, and interdisciplinary challenges (Feng et al., 2024; Hoggan, 2016). Research consistently shows that TLT captures both the emotional disruption of disorienting dilemmas and the reflective processes that support long-term perspective change. For example, Dwyer and Seery (2025) reported that 77% of students experienced some form of transformation, with explicit transformations shaped by lecturer support and active learning, particularly among graduate students. Similar applications in engineering education reveal that transformative shifts are associated with increased engagement, reduced boredom, and varying levels of reflection, including cases of reflection without action (Rivers et al., 2024; Shandliya & Kwuimy, 2024). These findings emphasize the versatility of TLT in explaining how structured educational interventions foster transformation across contexts.

In the field of intercultural education, TLT is especially well-suited because it explains how cultural immersion triggers transformative change. Research has demonstrated that encounters with cultural differences often act as disorienting dilemmas, prompting students to reassess assumptions and reconstruct worldviews (Stone et al., 2017; Stone & Petrick, 2013). The novelty of living in an unfamiliar society exposes learners to new norms, values, and communication styles, catalyzing reflection and growth (Ritz, 2011, p. 168). Being positioned as outsiders in host societies further encourages risk-taking, experimentation with new identities, and openness to intercultural growth (Chang et al., 2012;

Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). Although frameworks such as experiential or constructivist learning also address intercultural contexts, TLT is distinct in its comprehensive treatment of disruption, reflection, and reintegration. Transformation is incomplete until learners integrate new perspectives into daily life, a process consistently documented in both studies abroad and traditional TLT research (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011).

Taken together, these studies confirm that TLT provides sufficient explanatory power for exploring Vietnamese students' intercultural experiences in Taiwan. Its established alignment with study-abroad contexts, emphasis on disorienting dilemmas, and recognition of reflection and reintegration make it the most appropriate theoretical framework for analyzing how reflective writing and intercultural engagement foster transformation. TLT thus offers a rich lens for understanding intercultural education, one that is attuned to the broader goals of global higher education in cultivating intercultural competence, adaptive identities, and critical awareness.

Written Reflections

Assessing the extent of TL that a student undergoes is widely acknowledged as a complex and challenging task (Beer, 2019). However, scholars agree that critical reflection plays a fundamental role in both facilitating and evaluating TL (Hoggan, 2016; Jarman et al., 2022; Mezirow, 1981, 2000, 2006; Van Schalkwyk et al., 2019; Wallace & Harvey, 2024). As a core component of TLT, critical reflection enables individuals to analyze their experiences, challenge their assumptions, and reconstruct their perspectives. Beyond its significance in TL, critical reflection is also considered an essential professional competency across various fields, including midwifery (Bass et al., 2017).

Reflection, whether structured through assignments or occurring informally in peer dialog, plays a central role in this process, enabling learners to test and validate new perspectives (Bailey & Russell, 2010; Duerden & Witt, 2010). Guided reflection, in particular, enhances the likelihood of outcome-related change by linking classroom learning with lived experiences (Hutchison & Rea, 2011). Given its centrality in fostering and assessing personal and intellectual growth, this study relies on students' written reflections as a primary data source to capture their TL experiences.

Individual reflection is widely recognized in the literature on critical reflection, with reflective journals frequently cited as the primary method for documenting these reflections (O'Brien & Graham, 2020; Revell et al., 2022). Written reflections have been shown to effectively capture TL experiences, as demonstrated by Pink et al. (2016), who use health students' critical reflective journal entries to examine their TL following an international study tour. Similarly, Wallace and Harvey (2024) analyze students' critical reflections during a virtual short-term international study experience to determine whether the program facilitated TL. These studies highlight the value of reflective writing in tracking cognitive and emotional shifts, making it an appropriate and reliable method for exploring Vietnamese students' intercultural experiences and TL

processes. The research was guided by TLT (Mezirow, 1981, 2006), along with insights from prior studies on TL, including those by Pink et al. (2016), Dorsett et al. (2019), and Wallace and Harvey (2024). These theoretical frameworks emphasize the idea that students construct meaning from their experiences, shaping their realities and potentially transforming their perspectives and behaviors in response (Jarman et al., 2022).

METHOD

The study focuses on the written reflections of four Vietnamese participants out of 14 students who provided consent after the course ended. Although all 14 enrolled students submitted additional mini-project reflections, those entries were excluded from the analysis because of confidentiality concerns. Participation was strictly voluntary, and ethical safeguards were followed to ensure that no power imbalance influenced consent.

To maintain anonymity, the participants were assigned code names (S1–S4). This personalized coding allows readers to engage with each student’s journey while preserving privacy. The course, offered biannually in the Master’s program in Applied Linguistics, is taught by a Taiwanese professor with advanced degrees from the United States. The instructor designed reflective assignments, peer interactions, and a curriculum intended to foster intercultural competence.

The course was fully taught in English, aligning with Baker’s (2016) definition and Seidlhofer’s (2013, p. 7) framing of English as a “communicative medium of choice”. Students wrote and posted weekly reflections for 15 weeks on the course portal, which was accessible to peers and the instructor. The reflections responded to guided prompts and incorporated references to course materials, including case studies and the film *Lost in Translation*. Students were expected to demonstrate at least intermediate English proficiency per the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) standards.

The class included 14 students: five Vietnamese (including the first author), four Taiwanese, and one each from the Netherlands, Thailand, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Jordan. Ten were master’s degree students in applied linguistics; the other four were undergraduates in the English bachelor’s degree program in strategic communication. The study analyzed reflections from the four consenting Vietnamese students whose demographic profiles are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Profiles of Four Vietnamese Participants (Source: Own elaboration)

Code name	Biological gender	Born in	Education level	Major in Taiwan	Previous major in Vietnam	Mandarin Chinese Proficiency	English Proficiency
S1	Male	200X	Final year in a bachelor's program	Strategic Communication	Not applicable	Intermediate (B1)	Advanced (C1)
S2	Male	199X	Master	Foreign Languages and Applied Linguistics	English	Intermediate (B1)	Intermediate (B2)
S3	Female	200X	Master	Foreign Languages and Applied Linguistics	Chinese	Advanced (C1)	Intermediate (B2)
S4	Female	199X	Master	Foreign Languages and Applied Linguistics	English & Chinese	Advanced (C1)	Advanced (C1)

An example of a prompt from the instructor is captured in Figure 1. The data were organized into an Excel file and 14 Word documents. To ensure consistency and confidentiality, the first author independently conducted all the data analyses. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2022) six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing, refining, and writing up themes. This rigorous model balances flexibility and structure in qualitative research.

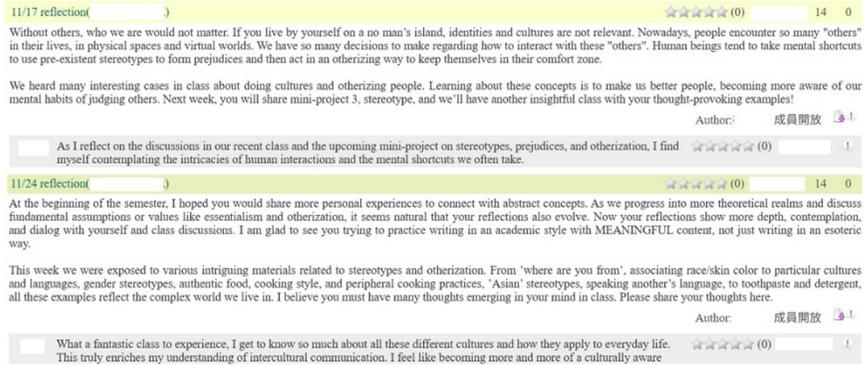


Figure 1: An Example of Reflection Prompts Written by the Instructor and Parts of Students’ Reflections (Source: Own elaboration)

A hybrid deductive–inductive approach (Proudfoot, 2023) was employed. The data were first organized via Mezirow’s (1981, 2000, 2006) TLT and then analyzed inductively via reflective thematic analysis (Coates et al., 2021). This dual approach enabled the identification of nuanced themes grounded both in theory and participant narratives. To foreground participants’ voices, direct quotes from the four Vietnamese students were used throughout the analysis (Liamputtong, 2010). The participants’ original reflections, which contained nonstandard English, were analyzed as authentic data. The focus of the analysis was on the meanings conveyed and the intercultural learning processes reflected in their writing rather than the linguistic accuracy of their texts.

FINDINGS

Over the 15 weeks, the participants’ reflections revealed both recurring themes and individual shifts. While some students showed early signs of confusion or surface-level observations, others gradually moved toward deeper engagement with dilemmas, critical reflection, and identity negotiation at different points in the semester. These varied trajectories illustrate that transformative learning unfolded progressively but not uniformly across participants.

Four major themes were constructed on the basis of data aligning with ten phases (Figure 2) in the TLT (Mezirow, 1981, 2000, 2006). To maintain clarity and transparency, references to participants’ reflections are cited in text by indicating the participant’s code names (S1, S2, S3, and S4) and the corresponding

week (e.g., S1–W8). This format allows readers to easily trace quotes or insights back to specific points in the participants’ reflective timelines without compromising their confidentiality. This representation is adopted from Zhu et al. (2023), Fritz and Marchewka (2024), and Wallace and Harvey (2024).

Themes	Corresponding transformative learning phase (Mezirow, 1981, 2006)
Navigating cultural adaptation and identity transformation	1. A disorienting dilemma 4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared
Intercultural communication and understanding across contexts	3. A critical assessment of assumptions 5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and action
Challenging and reconstructing stereotypes	2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame 9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
Experiential and reflective learning in an intercultural environment	6. Planning a course of action 7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans 8. Provisional trying of new roles 10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective

Figure 2. Findings: Four Themes and Ten Phases of TLT (Source: Own elaboration)

Theme 1: Navigating Cultural Adaptation and Identity Transformation

Cultural adaptation is a continuous process that involves confronting disorienting dilemmas, adjusting to unfamiliar social norms, and redefining one’s sense of identity. The participants’ reflections illustrate their evolving experiences in Taiwan, from initial culture shock to a more nuanced understanding of themselves and their cultural identity in a foreign environment. Upon arriving in Taiwan, the

participants experienced varying degrees of cultural dissonance. S1 described his early days as a foreign student:

On my early days as an international student, I used to be really shock and disappointed when I realised people I've met has prejudices or stereotypes about me before they even got to know me. (S1-W8)

S1's reflection highlights the emotional impact of being perceived through preconceived notions rather than as an individual. Similarly, S3 shared her feelings of loneliness when she first arrived: "So when I first came here, I felt so lonely because I had no friends and had to do things alone" (S3-W3). This sense of isolation is a common disorienting dilemma faced by international students.

Collectivism (C) and individualism (I), key concepts in Hofstede's cultural dimensions model, explain how societies prioritize group versus individual interests (Hofstede, 2011; Hofstede & Pedersen, 2006). Collectivist cultures value group loyalty and harmony, whereas individualist cultures emphasize autonomy, personal rights, and self-expression, encouraging individuals to pursue their own goals over collective obligations. As students engage with Taiwanese culture, their perceptions of their own and others' cultural norms begin to shift. S4, for example, recognized the differences between collectivist (C) and individualist (I) societies:

I believe both (C) and (I) when changing the environment, they all encounter difficulties and culture shocks. Collectivists have to deal with loneliness and feeling lost & offended when moving to an (I) society as everyone is very independent and rarely communicates indirectly to save each other's faces. (S4-W3)

S4's realization suggests that adaptation involves not only adjusting to new norms but also understanding the social logic behind them. According to Hofstede's cultural dimensions, both Vietnam and Taiwan are predominantly collectivist societies. However, Taiwan displays slightly more individualistic tendencies than Vietnam does (The Cultural Factor Group, 2025). Taiwan's individualism score is 40, whereas Vietnam's score is even lower at 30 (Figure 3). Although both societies emphasize group loyalty and family ties, Taiwan's rapid modernization and exposure to globalization have led to growing trends toward self-expression and personal achievement, particularly among younger generations (The Cultural Factor Group, 2025). In contrast, Vietnam continues to emphasize community and family-based collectivism more strongly. Therefore, S3 reflected on her growing appreciation for individualism after experiencing it firsthand in Taiwan:

When I come to Taiwan, I have more opportunities to interact with (I) culture, so I can learn to be on my own and speak out loud more than in the past, which I think is a great thing but hard to learn in (C) culture. (S3-W3)

S3 acknowledged the difficulty of adapting but saw it as a positive learning experience, stating, "I think it is a great thing but hard to learn in (C) culture" (S3-W3). These reflections indicate how students reassess their cultural values in response to their experiences in different cultural contexts.

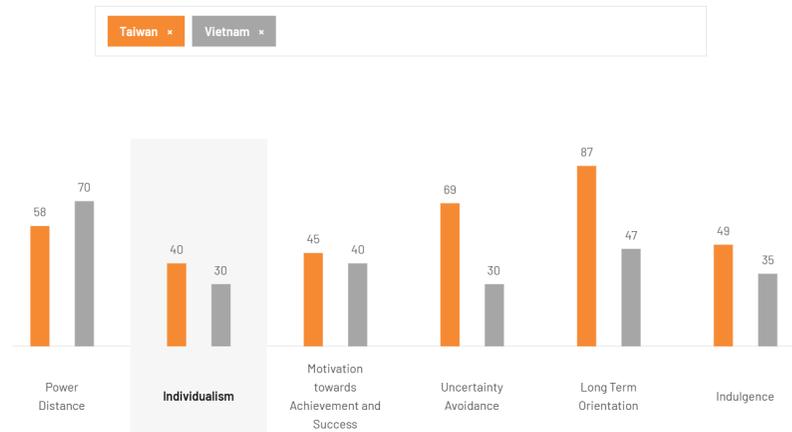


Figure 3. Country Comparison Tool: Taiwan and Vietnam (Hofstede, 2011; The Cultural Factor Group, 2025)

Exposure to different cultural norms also prompted students to reflect on their own identities. S4, for example, described her role as both an observer and a representative of Vietnamese culture:

As an international student, I'm open to all new things and cultures around me, but at the same time, I would also want to keep my root strong and present it to others (for example, through discussions in this class). (S4–W7)

Theme 2: Intercultural Communication and Understanding across Contexts

Intercultural communication is a crucial aspect of studying abroad, as it requires the navigation of different communication styles, cultural assumptions, and linguistic barriers. Four participants highlighted their experiences in adjusting to diverse communication norms, making sense of stereotypes, and deepening their understanding of different cultural perspectives. Hall's (1976) framework contrasts high-context cultures, which rely on implicit cues, with low-context cultures, which emphasize direct communication, helping explain cross-cultural misunderstandings. Studies show that countries such as Vietnam and Taiwan are considered high-context, whereas nations such as the United States, France, and Germany are low-context (Lee & Ande, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2012).

Students encounter distinct communication styles shaped by high-context and low-context cultures. S4, who comes from a high-context communication culture in Vietnam, noted how implicit understanding plays a crucial role and provided an example of how nonverbal cues are understood among close friends: "For example, when my best friend and I are talking to each other, if she slightly taps my thigh for a few times, it means that there is someone or something that she wants me to silently notice" (S4–W5). However, transitioning to an environment where direct communication is more common requires adjustment.

S2, on the other hand, recognized the way communication styles reflect deeper societal values:

Politeness in speech may indicate a well-educated person, whereas confidence and assertiveness may indicate a free-spirited soul developed in a progressive atmosphere. This realisation suggests that people's communication styles frequently reflect their educational backgrounds. In my own country of Vietnam, we definitely practise high-context communication. (S2–W5)

S2's observation connects verbal communication with broader cultural ideologies. Intercultural interactions often come with challenges, as individuals may face preconceived notions about their nationality. Language differences also pose challenges in intercultural interactions. S3 expressed that her language learning was exam-oriented: "*In my language learning journey, the focus used to be on vocabulary, grammar, basically it was exam-oriented teaching and learning*" (S3–W13). This suggests that linguistic barriers can shape one's ability to fully express one's thoughts and feelings in intercultural settings. S2 emphasized the importance of recognizing different communicative expectations in various cultural settings and reflected on Vietnamese communication norms:

In my own country of Vietnam, we definitely practise high-context communication. We have an ancient tradition that goes, "please think seven times before saying." The phrase emphasises the need of thoughtful, mindful communication. It encourages us to carefully evaluate our words, recognising the importance of what we say and how it influences our relationships. (S2–W5)

S2's reflection in week 5 contrasts with cultures that prioritize directness and spontaneity in conversation. S4's self-awareness highlights how intercultural experiences contribute to more nuanced perspectives.

Theme 3: Challenging and Reconstructing Stereotypes

Stereotypes shape initial perceptions and interactions in intercultural settings, often influencing how individuals are perceived and treated. Four participants detail their encounters with stereotypes, their frustrations, and how their perspectives evolved. Their experiences highlight the challenge of confronting ingrained assumptions while reconstructing more nuanced understandings of cultural identities.

As international students, the participants frequently encountered stereotypes that shaped how they were perceived. S1 recalled how his identity was questioned in Taiwan: "*Because since I first came to Taiwan, not many people think that I'm Vietnamese. However, after acknowledging my nationality, people started to put suspicion and stereotype on me*" (S1–W6). S4 similarly acknowledged how national stereotypes affect Vietnamese people's mobility:

For example, there are a lot of Viet who work illegally or do bad things (fighting, shoplifting, committing fraud, etc.) in

Japan and Korea; hence, it is very hard for Viet to get tourist visas from those countries as we are stereotyped as unreliable, poor, and will-try-to-hide-and-work-illegally-there. (S4–W6)

This shows how collective stereotypes influence policies and shape everyday interactions. While stereotypes can be frustrating, the participants also recognized their pervasiveness and began to challenge their own assumptions. S1 admitted that his reaction to stereotypes changed over time: *“But now it comes to my realisation that it is an ordinary thing. Those prejudice and stereotypes can act like a fail safe mode when you first meet someone”* (S1–W8). S1 accepts that initial assumptions are common but stresses the importance of moving beyond them.

S2 reflected on the origins of stereotypes, acknowledging their basis in collective experiences but cautioning against overgeneralization: *“The characteristics of one community will often be clear to people from another community”* (S2–W7). S2 noted that while stereotypes might have roots in observed behaviors, they should not define individuals. S3 also recognized how her perspective on stereotypes had shifted: *“Although sometimes I still have stereotypical thinking, I am trying to refresh my brain to not think the way it used to”* (S3–W7). S3’s perspective suggests an active effort to challenge ingrained biases and embrace a more open-minded approach.

Through intercultural interactions, the participants actively reconstructed their views on stereotypes, learning to see individuals beyond their assumed cultural traits. S4 expressed a conscious effort to avoid stereotyping others: *“To me, I will try my best not to frame anyone in the stereotype that I have in my mind so that I can genuinely get to know them without having any false judgment”* (S4–W6).

Similarly, S1 recognized the importance of challenging stereotypes in personal interactions: *“We can have opinion on people based on their background. But we should not judge them or having assumption about them just based on that. Instead, we should have an open mind and a warm heart to welcome them”* (S1–W6). This transformation suggests that direct intercultural exposure plays a crucial role in dismantling stereotypes and fostering more inclusive perspectives.

Theme 4: Experiential and Reflective Learning in an Intercultural Environment

The reflections of four participants demonstrated how firsthand intercultural experiences, combined with critical reflection, played a crucial role in shaping their understanding of culture, identity, and communication. Their learning process was not confined to the classroom but extended to real-life interactions, self-examination, and continuous meaning-making.

Each participant highlighted how engaging in real-life intercultural encounters deepened their understanding of cultural diversity. S4 reflected on the role of practical engagement in cultural learning: *“The knowledge students gained from school would be a waste if not being put into practice”* (S4–W14). S1 also

recognized the role of intercultural interactions in reshaping his understanding of people and relationships: “*Before, I have assumptions about different types of people. I believe everyone does to. But when putting together in a classroom, people can have different outcomes, based on not only their culture, but also their experience as well*” (S1–W14).

In addition to experiential learning, participants actively engaged in self-reflection to process and internalize their experiences. S2 highlighted the importance of reflecting on past encounters to derive meaningful insights: “*I honestly don’t have enough ability to assess my reflections to see if they were meaningful or not, but I am trying to make them more specific and related*” (S2–W9). The structured activities in the intercultural communication class created significant learning opportunities for the participants.

DISCUSSION

Four Vietnamese participants underwent TL through disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, and identity reconstruction. Cultural contrasts, especially regarding individualism and gender, prompted them to question assumptions and stereotypes. Guided by reflective writing and peer interaction, they developed empathy, flexibility, and a hybrid sense of identity. This journey fostered a growth mindset and deeper intercultural competence.

The findings of this study align with and expand upon existing research on intercultural learning, TLT, and identity negotiation in international education contexts. Previous studies have consistently highlighted how intercultural experiences act as catalysts for personal and cognitive transformations (Jackson, 2009, 2019; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). Similar to studies on study abroad programs and intercultural communication courses (Deardorff, 2006), the present research confirms that many Vietnamese students in Taiwan underwent significant changes in their worldviews, cultural awareness, and identity perceptions. However, this study offers a nuanced perspective by focusing specifically on Vietnamese students’ reflective processes, illustrating how self-reflective writing plays a critical role in facilitating deeper intercultural understanding and self-exploration.

The results of this study support TLT (Mezirow, 1981, 2006) by demonstrating that the Vietnamese students progress through the stages of disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, and perspective shifts as they adapt to an intercultural academic environment. This confirms studies by King and Baxter Magolda (2005), Jackson (2009, 2019), and Ye (2018), which suggest that meaningful intercultural experiences challenge students’ preconceived notions and foster identity transformation. However, the results show that it is not necessary to follow the order of the ten phases of the TLT framework, as found in Wallace and Harvey (2024). Students’ TL process might negotiate among these ten phases.

Additionally, studies such as those by Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006) emphasize that intercultural competence develops through exposure to cultural differences and critical engagement with new perspectives. As S4 stated, “*The*

more one gets exposed to the reality, the more possible they are to transform their perspective, I reckon" (S4–W14). S3 similarly emphasized how living abroad challenged her perceptions and broadened her worldview: *"I feel lucky to have the chance to live abroad, which has brought me a bunch of new experiences and knowledge, teaching me how to embrace the differences with understanding and respect"* (S3–W8). This research reinforces those findings by showing that students' engagement with diverse cultural norms, communication styles, and classroom discussions led to greater cultural adaptability and a more flexible sense of self (Sung, 2023).

However, this study also challenges the assumption that intercultural adaptation follows a linear progression. Unlike studies that describe a gradual but steady development of intercultural competence (Kim et al., 2001), the reflections of Vietnamese students suggest a more dynamic and recursive process. Some students initially resisted cultural adaptation but later embraced changes, whereas others continuously negotiated between their preexisting cultural identities and newly acquired perspectives. This finding resonates with the small culture concept of Holliday (1999), suggesting that identity is shaped not only by national culture but also by localized interactions and contextual factors. In this intercultural communication course, the syllabus was designed to help students link their reflections with class activities on several theories, such as reflexivity (Moon, 1999) and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), to increase students' intercultural awareness in an environment where English is used as a lingua franca (Baker, 2016).

Furthermore, while past studies have emphasized the importance of direct intercultural interactions in fostering transformation (Jackson, 2009, 2019), this research affirms the crucial role of self-reflective writing as an additional transformative tool. Writing reflections helps students process intercultural experiences, challenge their biases, and articulate evolving self-perceptions in ways that spontaneous interactions alone may not achieve (Moon, 1999). This suggests that writing reflections is as vital as direct engagement in fostering intercultural competence. Similarly, S2 wrote, *"I hope that my reflections will contribute something meaningful"* (S2–W9).

While this study confirms the general patterns observed in intercultural learning, it also highlights distinctive aspects of the participants' transformative processes. First, these Vietnamese students navigated cultural adaptation within a unique linguistic and sociocultural context, where both Mandarin Chinese and English functioned as dominant academic languages. Unlike students from Western countries, who may rely on English as a global lingua franca, Vietnamese students often face dual linguistic challenges, adjusting to both academic English and Mandarin for social integration. This aspect of their experience aligns with that of Nguyen and Hajek (2024) on Vietnamese students' language adaptation in Taiwan, who reported that language barriers significantly shape their cultural adjustment experiences. However, in this study, although these four students were enrolled in English-medium programs, their levels of Mandarin Chinese varied from intermediate to advanced, which might have helped them adapt to daily life in Taiwan, where Mandarin Chinese is the official and dominant language. This

language ability indeed affects their identities, aligning with Nguyen and Hajek (2024).

Second, prior familiarity with Taiwanese culture had a paradoxical effect on students' adaptation process. Given the historical, economic, and educational ties between Vietnam and Taiwan, many students arrived with preconceived notions or partial knowledge about Taiwanese society. However, this prior exposure often led to unexpected dissonance, as they encountered deeper cultural differences that were not immediately apparent from an outsider's perspective. This aligns with the assertion of Jackson (2009) that surface-level cultural familiarity does not necessarily translate into effortless adaptation. While both Vietnam and Taiwan share Confucian educational values (Wang, 2008), notable cultural and institutional distinctions persist between the two regions (Le & Tang, 2022). Consequently, Vietnamese students still face the challenge of bridging these cultural and institutional gaps to fully integrate into Taiwanese society.

Moreover, family influence remained a central theme in students' transformative experiences. Unlike research on Western students, who often emphasize individual autonomy in their intercultural journeys (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005), Vietnamese students frequently reference familial expectations and obligations in shaping their identity negotiations. Some students, for instance, grappled with how their evolving intercultural perspectives might conflict with traditional Vietnamese values.

In addition, this study stresses the significant role that collectivist cultural backgrounds play in shaping students' engagement with intercultural learning. While much of the literature on TL focuses on individualist-oriented societies (Rivers et al., 2024; Shandliya & Kwuimy, 2024; Wallace & Harvey, 2024; Ye, 2018), this research provides new insights into how collectivist values influence students' identity transformations. Specifically, Vietnamese students were more likely to frame their cultural adjustments in relation to group harmony, social expectations, and familial responsibility, which are elements that are less emphasized in Western-based TL frameworks.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION AND INTERCULTURAL TRAINING

This study highlights how intercultural education fosters TL among Vietnamese students through structured reflection, intercultural engagement, and experiential learning. Guided by Mezirow's TLT, the students used reflective writing to process cultural dissonance, reassess assumptions, and explore evolving identities. Collaborative activities and media analysis further deepened understanding, empathy, and critical awareness. A supportive classroom environment encouraged open dialog, validated diverse perspectives, and promoted personal growth. The students displayed agency not only in adapting to new contexts but also in resisting cultural marginalization, reflecting active engagement rather than passive adjustment. These findings challenge deficit narratives often found in international student research and emphasize the importance of recognizing learner agency in less-studied educational settings such

as Taiwan. As Biesta and Tedder (2007) argue, agency emerges through interactions between personal goals and structural conditions. Educators can enhance intercultural competence by framing discomfort as growth, fostering resilience, and designing spaces that support reflection, choice, and intercultural dialog.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

While this study offers valuable insights into the TL experiences of Vietnamese students in an intercultural communication course, it has limitations. A key challenge lies in the subjectivity of analyzing self-reflective writing. As reflection is a deeply personal and variable process (Moon, 1999), students may differ in their ability to express internal change. Some might understate or exaggerate their transformation, while the researcher's interpretive lens could also shape how reflections are categorized. Despite efforts to maintain analytic rigor aligned with Mezirow's TLT, distinguishing genuine transformation from surface-level reflection remains complex.

Another limitation is the small sample size, with four Vietnamese students at one Taiwanese university. While their reflections provide rich qualitative insights, the findings are not generalizable to all Vietnamese or international students. Additionally, individual differences such as prior intercultural exposure and language proficiency influence students' TL processes in unique ways. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating triangulation methods (e.g., interviews, focus groups), increasing sample diversity, and adopting longitudinal or mixed-method approaches. Doing so would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how intercultural learning and identity transformation unfold across various contexts and timeframes.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study confirms key findings from existing research on intercultural learning, identity negotiation, and TLT while challenging linear models of adaptation and highlighting the unique experiences of the four Vietnamese students in Taiwan. The dynamic and recursive nature of their cultural transformations, coupled with the impact of linguistic challenges, preexisting familiarity, familial obligations, and collectivist values, distinguishes their experiences from those of students in Western-centric studies. Additionally, the findings suggest that structured self-reflective writing serves as a crucial tool for deepening intercultural learning and identity reconstruction. These insights contribute to a more contextually nuanced understanding of Vietnamese students' intercultural adaptation and TL in international higher education settings.

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