

Chapter 9

Ethnic Minority Pre-Service English Teachers' Narratives on Identity and Intercultural Competence

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of three pre-service English teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds as they navigate their identities and develop intercultural competence within a predominantly Kinh ethnic higher education context. Employing a narrative inquiry approach and grounded in Byram's model of intercultural competence, the research delves into how these students perceive and adjust their cultural identities during their transition from their hometowns to Hanoi. It examines the evolving nature of their identities in response to exposure to different cultural norms and assesses their perceptions of intercultural competence within a system that is often viewed as monocultural. The study also highlights the challenges these students face in pursuing higher education in Hanoi, offering insights into the broader experiences of marginalized groups. In highlighting the importance of intercultural competence, the research calls for the creation of a more inclusive educational environment where diverse voices, irrespective of ethnic background, contribute to the vibrancy and diversity of Vietnamese higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

The global population of indigenous peoples or ethnic minorities (EM), estimated at 300 to 400 million, embodies the essence of cultural diversity (World Bank, 2020). Their unique languages, beliefs, and practices contribute to a rich cultural heritage that transcends borders, making these communities vital contributors to global diversity. Despite their contributions, they often face marginalization, which threatens their cultural and linguistic heritage (World Bank, 2020).

In light of this situation, it is suggested that cultural and linguistic minority students often face challenges in educational settings dominated by other cultures (Aasebø & Willbergh, 2022). As the EM students transition from their culturally familiar contexts to a more diverse cultural environment in educational settings, this cultural discontinuity often confronts them with pressures from dominant cultures and stereotypes, which may result in their identity conflicts (Yoon et al., 2017; Zhou & Bankston, 2020). These challenges may lead EM students to a problematic situation where they are tensioned to navigate complex identity negotiations when exposed to cultural diversity (Baumert, 2024). On an additional note, in order to manage such identity complexities for enriching one's understanding of self and awareness of others upon contact with dominant cultures other than one's original culture, the pursuit of intercultural competence is a vital mediator (Dervin, 2016; Fantini, 2009b; Khanukaeva, 2020). Given these dynamics, it becomes crucial to investigate how EM students negotiate their identities and develop ICC in educational settings of dominant cultures. This investigation not only sheds light on how EM students reconcile their cultural identities with the demands and expectations of dominant cultural norms but also provides insight into the processes that facilitate their successful adaptation and integration.

Vietnam is the most ethnically diverse country in Southeast Asia, with 54 ethnic groups, including over 14 million individuals from 53 recognized ethnic minority (EM) communities who speak nearly 100 distinct languages and dialects (Dang et al., 2000; Danso, 2018). Despite this diversity, EM groups face socio-economic challenges, comprising 14.6% of the population but 52.7% of poor households (Phan, 2018). The dominance of Kinh ethnicity in political, cultural, and societal spheres, along with the widespread use of the Vietnamese language, exacerbates the risk of cultural erosion and language loss within EM communities (UNDP, 2017; Nguyen & Hamid, 2021). For this reason, EM students in Vietnam often confront stereotypes that pressure them to conform to the dominant Kinh cultural norms and transform their language practices, which may lead to the weakening of their cultural identities in assimilation into the dominant Kinh culture (Nguyen, 2019; Nguyen, 2022).

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