

Chapter 10

“I’ve Thrived Culturally”: Navigating Identities Through Intercultural Experiences as a Vietnamese Teacher of English in Australia

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ABSTRACT

This autoethnography explores the connection between the author’s identity development and intercultural competence during his past four years of education in Australia. Drawing on the author’s experiences as an international student in Australia and a teacher of English from Vietnam, the author uses sociocultural and self-determination theories to analyse how intercultural experiences have shaped his identity and teaching approaches. Self-interviews, reflective notes, and photo analysis as artefacts were utilised to capture and interpret the complexities of those experiences. The research uncovers two primary themes. The first theme reflects on the author’s journey of cultivating different cultural identities through his lived experiences in a multicultural Australian context. The second theme explores how the author integrated insights from dynamic intercultural experiences into his teaching approaches. The author’s four-year journey, as such, underscores the critical role of cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and the integration of diverse cultural perspectives in supporting more inclusive educational environments.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-3506-2.ch010

INTRODUCTION

“What does it truly mean to belong in a place so different from where you started?” I often asked myself this question during my quiet walks around Docklands, a beautiful harbour district located in Melbourne where I am living. These moments of reflection brought to light the profound shifts in my sense of self since leaving Vietnam in 2020 to pursue higher education in a multicultural country - Australia. These reflections on belonging, in my opinion, were not only personal experiences but also part of a greater story that many international students share as they interact with the various aspects of cultural variety in foreign countries.

In today’s context of globalisation and the increasing mobility of international students, navigating cultural diversity has become a pivotal aspect of the educational experience. This is because such diversity influences how international students adapt to and thrive in new environments, shaping their success not only in academic studies but also in building meaningful relationships and managing day-to-day interactions (Gu et al., 2009; Oduwaye et al., 2023; Tang & Zhang, 2023). However, transitioning to study in a new country like Australia presents both challenges and opportunities, particularly in developing cultural adaptability and fostering personal growth (see Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). In my case, as a Vietnamese graduate who moved to Australia in 2020 to pursue a master’s degree in TESOL, the transition involved adapting to a variety of social norms. These include learning how respect is expressed in communication, navigating communication styles that emphasise either indirectness or openness, and embracing cultural practices such as shared celebrations and meal traditions. Without the ability to respond appropriately to these differences, as Oduwaye et al. (2023) note, international students can face significant challenges, including misunderstandings, feelings of isolation, and difficulty integrating into their host communities.

Being culturally aware and sensitive is an essential skill for international students. As they engage with diverse cultural settings, their experiences often reflect broader societal dynamics, revealing global trends in international education alongside the nuanced realities of local contexts (Oduwaye et al., 2023; Tang & Zhang, 2023). My own experiences during my time in Australia exemplify this dynamic; interactions with individuals from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds enriched my understanding of diverse perspectives. However, many international students, including myself, come from educational contexts like Vietnam, where teaching practices are deeply rooted in local cultural values and traditional classroom norms (Vu & Dinh, 2021). These contrasts highlight the challenges of navigating differences between familiar practices and new experiences. Here, I must acknowledge that my dual role as both a learner and an English language teacher - having taught in Vietnam before transitioning to study and teach in Australia - adds another layer of complexity.

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