

## **Using Critical Incidents to Develop Intercultural Understanding and Skills among Students Learning French**

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**ABSTRACT:** In Vietnamese higher education, French as a Foreign Language (FLE) instruction often concentrates heavily on linguistic forms, offering learners limited exposure to the complex cultural dynamics of authentic interactions. To address this gap, this study evaluated a nine-week intervention using critical incidents in the form of short scenarios depicting real-world cross-cultural misunderstandings. The intervention involved 110 undergraduate students at Thang Long University and was informed by Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Fantini's conceptualization of intercultural competence. The module integrated structured problem-solving with reflective discourse. A mixed-methods assessment revealed statistically significant gains across all five measured dimensions, with participants demonstrating the most marked progress in cultural insight and empathy. Complementary qualitative data from reflective journals, observations, and focus groups underscored improvements in contextual sensitivity, emotional regulation, and communicative negotiation. These findings suggest that integrating experiential, scenario-based activities into FLE curricula may support the development of context-sensitive intercultural competence among Vietnamese university students.

**KEYWORDS:** critical incidents, experiential learning, intercultural competence, French as a Foreign Language (FLE), Vietnamese higher education

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Modern foreign language education increasingly recognizes that effective language learning involves more than linguistic proficiency. It also requires learners to develop intercultural competence, which refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds (Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2009). Intercultural competence involves cultural knowledge, communication skills, empathy, and the ability to reflect critically on one's own cultural assumptions. These abilities help learners understand cultural differences, respond appropriately in intercultural interactions, and adapt their communication to different social and cultural contexts.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of intercultural competence, FLE pedagogy in Vietnam remains predominantly grammar-focused and teacher-led, giving students limited opportunities to engage with authentic cultural situations. At Thang Long University, undergraduate students are generally motivated to learn French, yet they may still face difficulties when interpreting and responding to cultural misunderstandings in real-world interactions. One promising pedagogical approach is the use of critical incidents (CIs), short scenarios depicting cross-cultural misunderstandings that encourage learners to reflect on cultural differences, consider alternative perspectives, and develop appropriate responses (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). By bringing realistic cultural challenges into the classroom, CIs create a safe and structured environment in which learners can explore and practice intercultural responses.

Although CI-based activities have been used in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, their application in FLE has received relatively limited attention, particularly in Vietnamese higher education. The present study accordingly implemented a nine-week CI-based experiential module with 110 university students at Thang Long University. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study examined how learners responded to culturally complex scenarios, reflected on underlying cultural values, and developed strategies for intercultural communication. The study therefore provides empirical evidence on the potential of experiential, scenario-based learning to support intercultural competence development in Vietnamese FLE contexts.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 2.1 Previous Studies

Theoretical work on intercultural competence has emphasized the importance of experiential and reflective engagement in developing learners' ability to deal with cultural differences. Deardorff (2006), for example, conceptualizes intercultural competence as a developmental process in which attitudes, knowledge, skills, and internal and external outcomes are interconnected. Similarly, Fantini (2009) highlights the importance of experience, reflection, and the development of multiple dimensions of intercultural awareness in language learning. These perspectives suggest that intercultural competence is not developed simply through the acquisition of cultural information, but through learners' active engagement with, interpretation of, and reflection on intercultural experiences.

Building on this perspective, CIs have been proposed as a useful pedagogical tool for engaging learners with intercultural situations. CIs typically present a situation involving an unexpected, problematic, or culturally challenging interaction and encourage learners to examine possible explanations and responses. Snow (2015) argues that critical incident activities can promote awareness of how learners interpret intercultural encounters and encourage them to consider multiple explanations rather than relying on a single cultural interpretation. In a broader intercultural training context, Herfst et al. (2008) evaluated critical incidents designed to assess intercultural effectiveness and found evidence supporting the cross-cultural applicability of a number of these scenarios. These studies provide a theoretical and pedagogical rationale for using CIs to encourage reflection on cultural assumptions and consideration of alternative interpretations and responses.

Empirical studies have subsequently examined the use of CI-based activities in educational contexts, with much of the available evidence coming from EFL settings. Tran et al. (2019), for instance, investigated the effects of ten weeks of critical incident task instruction on the intercultural competence of Vietnamese university students studying English as non-majors. Compared with students receiving standard English instruction, participants in the CI intervention demonstrated significantly greater development in measures of intercultural communication awareness. This finding provides empirical support for the potential of CI-based instruction in the Vietnamese higher education context and suggests that sustained engagement with critical incidents can contribute to learners' intercultural development. Engelking (2018) further illustrates the pedagogical potential of CIs in foreign language education, showing how critical incidents can be used to connect intercultural competence with foreign language development through reflection on authentic intercultural misunderstandings. This study is particularly relevant to the present research because it demonstrates the potential of CI-based activities to address both linguistic and intercultural dimensions of language learning.

Despite these promising findings, empirical research on CI-based learning remains relatively limited in FLE. Moreover, relatively little research has examined the learning process through which students interpret CI scenarios, reflect on underlying cultural perspectives, and develop possible strategies for intercultural communication over an extended period. This leaves a need for research that not only evaluates the outcomes of CI-based instruction but also explores learners' responses and reflections during the learning process. The present study responds to this need by examining a nine-week CI-based experiential module with university students in a Vietnamese FLE context.

#### 2.2 Theoretical framework

This study draws on two complementary theoretical perspectives, Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory and Fantini's (2009) conceptualization of intercultural competence. Kolb's model provides the pedagogical basis for designing the intervention, while Fantini's conceptualization provides a basis for understanding the multidimensional nature of intercultural competence and interpreting learners' intercultural development.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process comprising four stages, namely *Concrete Experience*, *Reflective Observation*, *Abstract Conceptualization*, and *Active Experimentation*. In the present intervention, CIs served as concrete experiences that exposed students to culturally challenging situations, such as misunderstandings in polite communication or differences in teamwork styles. Students were then guided to reflect on these situations, identify the cultural assumptions underlying different interpretations, and develop possible response strategies. Through role-plays, discussions, and other follow-up activities, learners had opportunities to apply and reconsider these strategies. In this way, the intervention connected experience, reflection, conceptual understanding, and experimentation in accordance with Kolb's experiential learning cycle.

Fantini (2009) conceptualizes intercultural competence as a multidimensional construct involving knowledge, attitudes, skills, and awareness. His work also emphasizes the importance of language proficiency and the developmental nature of intercultural competence. In the present study, these dimensions informed the design of critical incidents and the interpretation of students' intercultural development. For example, analyzing culturally shaped uses of humor or body language required students to draw on cultural knowledge, consider alternative perspectives, develop empathy, and reflect on their own cultural assumptions. Rather than treating Fantini's dimensions as direct measures, the present study operationalized intercultural development through five assessment dimensions: *Solution effectiveness*, *Cultural insight*, *Strategic fluency*, *Empathy and perspective-taking*, and *Coherence and clarity*. These dimensions were developed to capture different aspects of students' ability to interpret culturally challenging situations and formulate appropriate responses.

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In combination, the two perspectives provide complementary foundations for the study. Kolb's model guided the design and sequencing of the learning activities, ensuring that students moved from experience and reflection toward conceptual understanding and application. Fantini's conceptualization, in turn, informed the understanding of the intercultural competencies targeted by the intervention and the interpretation of students' development across the five assessment dimensions. This alignment provided a coherent link between the intervention design and the evaluation of its outcomes.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research design

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods, classroom-based intervention design to examine changes in students' intercultural competence following CI-based instruction. Quantitative data captured changes in performance from pre- to post-intervention, while qualitative data explored how students engaged with the scenarios, reflected on cultural differences, and developed communication strategies.

The intervention comprised nine scenario-based CIs delivered over nine consecutive weeks. Quantitative assessments were administered immediately before and after the intervention across five assessment dimensions: *Solution effectiveness*, *Cultural insight*, *Strategic fluency*, *Empathy and perspective-taking*, and *Coherence and clarity*. Qualitative data were collected through classroom observations, focus-group interviews, and student reflective journals. The integration of both data sources enabled the study to examine not only measurable changes in students' performance but also the learning processes underlying those changes.

#### 3.2 Participants and context

The study involved 110 undergraduate students enrolled in French Level 2 courses at Thang Long University. Participants were recruited from existing French classes in which the CI module was integrated into the regular curriculum. This arrangement allowed the intervention to be implemented within the students' usual classroom setting without requiring additional coursework. The participants were second-year students whose French proficiency was approximately at the pre-intermediate level. All participants completed the nine-week intervention and both the pre- and post-intervention assessments.

#### 3.3 Instructional intervention

##### 3.3.1 Critical incident design

The intervention consisted of nine scenario-based critical incidents (CIs) designed to address common areas of intercultural misunderstanding. Table 1 summarizes the themes, cultural tensions, and targeted communication skills and strategies addressed in each incident.

**Table 1. Summary of the nine critical incidents in the intervention module**

| CI  | Theme                       | Main Cultural Friction                           | Targeted Skills & Strategies               |
|-----|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| CI1 | Politeness norms            | Misinterpretations of "thank you" frequency      | Adaptive politeness techniques             |
| CI2 | Silence & feedback          | Silence perceived as rejection vs. respect       | Communication pacing & active checking     |
| CI3 | Teamwork styles             | Individual accountability vs. collective harmony | Cross-cultural negotiation & collaboration |
| CI4 | Register ( <i>tu/vous</i> ) | Inappropriate formal/informal address            | Sociolinguistic & hierarchical sensitivity |
| CI5 | Directness in critique      | Blunt feedback vs. face-saving expectations      | Empathic reframing & constructive dialogue |
| CI6 | Humor & sarcasm             | Jokes creating unintended offense                | Pragmatic flexibility & emotional control  |
| CI7 | Non-verbal cues             | Misread gestures and body language               | Decoding implicit non-verbal codes         |
| CI8 | Time management             | Strict punctuality vs. flexible timing           | Negotiating commitments & expectations     |
| CI9 | Preference expression       | Dietary criticism perceived as cultural insult   | Respectful framing & cultural empathy      |

The nine scenarios covered a range of sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and interpersonal issues, including politeness, silence and feedback, forms of address, directness, humor, non-verbal communication, and time management. Each incident was designed to encourage students to examine alternative interpretations of culturally shaped communication practices and develop context-appropriate response strategies. For example, the scenario "*The Awkward Silence: When No Response Creates Confusion*" described

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an interaction in which a French student, Pierre, interpreted a 20-second silence from his Vietnamese peers as a sign of rejection. The Vietnamese students, however, understood the pause as a way of showing respect and allowing time for thoughtful consideration. Students examined the possible reasons for the misunderstanding, compared the different communication expectations represented in the scenario, and developed possible response strategies through discussion and role-play. The scenarios were designed to encourage learners to consider multiple interpretations rather than attribute communication difficulties to fixed national or cultural characteristics.

### 3.3.2 Experiential procedure

Each weekly session followed Kolb's four-stage experiential learning cycle through a sequence of structured classroom activities.

1. Concrete Experience: Students engaged with a critical incident by reading the scenario and sharing their initial reactions to the situation.
2. Reflective Observation: Working in small groups, students examined the underlying cultural assumptions, communication expectations, and different perspectives represented in the incident.
3. Abstract Conceptualization: With guidance from the instructor, students identified broader sociolinguistic principles and formulated possible strategies for responding appropriately to similar intercultural situations.
4. Active Experimentation: Students applied and refined these strategies through collaborative tasks, negotiation activities, and role-plays that simulated alternative responses to the incident.

### 3.4 Assessment instrument and rubric

Students' intercultural performance was assessed using a researcher-developed, scenario-based task administered at Week 1 (pre-test) and Week 9 (post-test). To minimize potential testing effects, the two assessments used parallel scenarios with comparable levels of structural complexity while presenting different cultural situations. Participants responded through written reflections and oral role-plays conducted in French. The tasks were designed to assess their ability to interpret intercultural situations, consider alternative perspectives, formulate appropriate responses, and articulate their reasoning in French.

Responses were evaluated using an analytical rubric based on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Unsatisfactory*) to 5 (*Excellent*). The rubric comprised five assessment dimensions. The first four were informed by Fantini's (2009) conceptualization of intercultural competence, with *Cultural insight* drawing primarily on knowledge and awareness, *Empathy and perspective-taking* reflecting attitudes, and *Solution effectiveness* and *Strategic fluency* capturing aspects of intercultural skills. *Coherence and clarity* was included as a supporting performance dimension to assess how clearly and logically students articulated their intercultural reasoning in French.

The five assessment dimensions were defined as follows:

- Solution effectiveness: Proposing practical and context-appropriate responses to intercultural challenges.
- Cultural insight: Identifying underlying cultural assumptions, values, and communicative expectations.
- Strategic fluency: Selecting and adapting communication strategies flexibly to manage intercultural tension.
- Empathy and perspective-taking: Demonstrating consideration for alternative cultural viewpoints, interpretations, and emotions.
- Coherence and clarity: Expressing intercultural reasoning logically, clearly, and appropriately in French.

To assess scoring reliability, all pre- and post-test performances were independently evaluated by two trained raters. Inter-rater reliability was then assessed using the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC).

### 3.5 Data collection, analysis, and integration

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected throughout the nine-week intervention and integrated during the interpretation stage. Pre- and post-intervention scores across the five assessment dimensions were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize students' performance before and after the intervention. Paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted to assess whether changes from pre- to post-intervention were statistically significant, and Cohen's *d* effect sizes were calculated to determine the magnitude of the observed changes. Qualitative data from weekly reflective journals, twice-weekly classroom observations, and four post-intervention focus groups were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The data were coded and thematically organized to identify recurring patterns related to cultural self-awareness, emotional regulation, and communication strategies. The quantitative and qualitative findings were then examined together, with quantitative results providing evidence of measurable changes in students' performance and qualitative data contextualizing these changes by illustrating how students reflected on cultural differences, interpreted challenging situations, and developed communication strategies during the intervention.

### 3.6 Ethical considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Students were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study without any

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academic penalty. They were also assured that participation or withdrawal would not affect their course grades. All assessment records, reflective journals, and focus-group transcripts were anonymized using participant codes and stored securely to protect participants' confidentiality in accordance with institutional ethical requirements.

### 4. FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Quantitative findings

Students' intercultural performance was assessed before and after the intervention across five assessment dimensions. As shown in Table 2, post-test mean scores were higher than pre-test scores across all five dimensions.

**Table 2. Paired-samples t-test results and effect sizes across performance dimensions**

| <i>Performance dimensions</i>   | <i>Pre-test<br/>M (SD)</i> | <i>Post-test<br/>M (SD)</i> | <i>Mean Gain<br/>(ΔM)</i> | <i>t(109)</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>Cohen's<br/>d</i> |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------|----------|----------------------|
| 1. Solution effectiveness       | 2.85 (0.61)                | 3.42 (0.58)                 | +0.57                     | 7.21          | < .001   | 0.96                 |
| 2. Cultural insight             | 2.67 (0.72)                | 3.58 (0.63)                 | +0.91                     | 9.84          | < .001   | 1.35                 |
| 3. Strategic fluency            | 2.91 (0.65)                | 3.46 (0.62)                 | +0.55                     | 6.93          | < .001   | 0.88                 |
| 4. Empathy & perspective-taking | 2.76 (0.69)                | 3.64 (0.66)                 | +0.88                     | 9.45          | < .001   | 1.30                 |
| 5. Coherence & clarity          | 3.02 (0.59)                | 3.47 (0.57)                 | +0.45                     | 6.11          | < .001   | 0.78                 |

**Note.**  $N = 110$ . All tests are two-tailed.  $d \geq 0.80$  represents a large effect size.

Statistically significant improvements were observed across all five assessment dimensions (all  $ps < .001$ ). The largest gains were found in *Cultural insight* ( $\Delta = 0.91$ ,  $t = 9.84$ ,  $d = 1.35$ ) and *Empathy and perspective-taking* ( $\Delta = 0.88$ ,  $t = 9.45$ ,  $d = 1.30$ ), both of which showed large effect sizes. *Solution effectiveness* ( $\Delta = 0.57$ ,  $t = 7.21$ ,  $d = 0.96$ ) and *Strategic fluency* ( $\Delta = 0.55$ ,  $t = 6.93$ ,  $d = 0.88$ ) also showed substantial gains. Although *Coherence and clarity* demonstrated the smallest mean increase ( $\Delta = 0.45$ ,  $t = 6.11$ ,  $d = 0.78$ ), the change remained statistically significant and was associated with a medium-to-large effect size.

#### 4.2 Qualitative findings

Thematic analysis of student reflective journals, classroom observations, and focus-group discussions identified three primary themes that illustrated how students engaged with the intervention and developed intercultural responses.

##### 4.2.1 Developing context-sensitive interpretations

Students reported greater sensitivity to how communicative behaviors can acquire different meanings depending on cultural and situational contexts. Rather than applying fixed assumptions about appropriate communication, participants increasingly described the need to consider contextual cues and alternative interpretations.

"I used to think silence in a meeting meant disinterest or disagreement. Now I realize it can be a respectful pause to contemplate an idea before responding." (*Student 27, Reflective Journal*)

Similarly, activities involving forms of address (*tu/vous*) appeared to shift students' attention from grammatical rules alone toward the interpersonal meanings associated with different forms of address:

"Role-playing the address codes made me realize that choosing between 'tu' and 'vous' isn't just about politeness - it's about managing social distance and respect in French culture." (*Student 04, Focus Group 2*)

##### 4.2.2 Developing perspective-taking and emotional regulation

The second theme concerned students' reported shift from immediate emotional reactions toward more reflective responses when encountering unfamiliar or potentially uncomfortable interactions. Participants described becoming more willing to pause, seek clarification, and consider alternative interpretations before reacting.

"French humor or sarcasm used to make me feel defensive or confused. The critical incidents taught me to pause, ask clarifying questions, and look for cultural motives rather than feeling offended." (*Student 61, Reflective Journal*)

These accounts suggest that the intervention encouraged students to consider alternative perspectives and regulate their initial emotional responses during potentially challenging intercultural encounters.

##### 4.2.3 Developing adaptive communication strategies

The third theme concerned students' ability to move beyond identifying intercultural problems toward developing practical strategies for responding to them. Participants described using clarification, reframing, active listening, and negotiation to manage potential misunderstandings.

"In our group project role-play, instead of forcing my approach, I used reframing techniques to check if we understood the deadline the same way. It transformed an argument into a negotiation." (*Student 18, Focus Group 1*)

Such accounts illustrate how students applied communication strategies developed during the CI activities to simulated intercultural situations.

### 4.3 Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings

The integration of the quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that the qualitative data help contextualize the observed gains across the five assessment dimensions. The strongest quantitative improvements in *Cultural insight* and *Empathy and perspective-taking* were consistent with students' reports of increased contextual awareness, greater consideration of alternative perspectives, and improved emotional regulation. These qualitative accounts provide contextual evidence for how repeated reflection on culturally challenging situations may have contributed to students' ability to interpret intercultural encounters more flexibly.

The gains in *Strategic fluency* and *Solution effectiveness* were likewise reflected in students' descriptions of using clarification, active listening, reframing, and negotiation during role-play activities. These findings suggest that the intervention provided opportunities for students to move from identifying intercultural problems toward developing and applying practical response strategies.

Finally, *Coherence and clarity* showed the smallest mean gain among the five dimensions, although the improvement remained statistically significant. Qualitative accounts suggest that students became more able to organize and articulate their interpretations of intercultural situations in French. This finding indicates that the intervention may have supported not only students' intercultural understanding but also their ability to express that understanding clearly in the target language.

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Patterns of improvement across intercultural performance dimensions

The findings demonstrate statistically significant improvements across all five assessment dimensions, suggesting that CI-based instruction was associated with improved intercultural performance in this classroom context. The largest effect sizes were observed in *Cultural insight* ( $d = 1.35$ ) and *Empathy and perspective-taking* ( $d = 1.30$ ). This pronounced gain in cognitive and affective dimensions may be related to the experiential architecture of the intervention. Informed by Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory and Fantini's (2009) conceptualization of intercultural competence, the module engaged students as active interpreters of culturally challenging situations rather than passive recipients of cultural information. Repeated engagement with ambiguous situations, such as interpreting silence or navigating forms of address (*tu/vous*), encouraged students to reconsider their initial cultural assumptions and explore alternative interpretations of communication breakdowns. This pattern is consistent with Esmaeili and Kuhi's (2025) findings, which highlight the potential of pedagogical critical incidents to promote openness, perspective-taking, and critical interpretation of intercultural situations. Although *Coherence and clarity* also improved significantly ( $d = 0.78$ ), it showed the smallest mean gain among the five dimensions. One possible explanation is that guided reflection may provide relatively immediate opportunities for developing cultural awareness and perspective-taking, whereas articulating complex intercultural reasoning in the target language requires additional linguistic resources and sustained practice. This distinction may be particularly relevant for learners at lower levels of French proficiency.

### 5.2 Development of adaptive communication strategies

The concurrent gains in *Solution effectiveness* ( $d = 0.96$ ) and *Strategic fluency* ( $d = 0.88$ ) suggest that improvements in intercultural understanding were accompanied by greater capacity to formulate and adapt communication strategies. In conventional language instruction, cultural misunderstandings may be addressed primarily through the explanation of linguistic forms or cultural information. In contrast, the CI approach structured learning around problem-solving, reflection, and role-play. By engaging students with realistic situations involving direct feedback, teamwork styles, and other potential sources of misunderstanding, the intervention provided opportunities to connect reflection with practical communication responses. The qualitative findings further support this interpretation, as students described using clarification, reframing, active listening, and negotiation during role-play activities. These findings extend previous work by illustrating how structured critical incidents can be used to connect intercultural reflection with practical communication strategies in FLE contexts.

### 5.3 Theoretical and contextual implications for FLE in Vietnam

This study offers two main contributions to FLE pedagogy. First, it highlights the complementary value of combining Kolb's experiential learning cycle with Fantini's multidimensional conceptualization of intercultural competence. Kolb's model provides a process for structuring learning activities through experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation, while Fantini's conceptualization provides a multidimensional basis for considering knowledge, attitudes, skills, and awareness in intercultural development. Beyond this theoretical contribution, the findings also have contextual implications for FLE in Vietnam. Structured CIs may be particularly relevant in Vietnamese FLE classrooms, where learners can encounter culturally challenging situations, consider alternative interpretations, and rehearse communication strategies before facing comparable challenges in real-world interactions. This approach may be particularly useful in contexts where opportunities for sustained intercultural interaction outside the classroom are limited.

### 5.4 Limitations and directions for future research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the absence of a control group and the use of a single-group pre-test/post-test design limit causal inferences, as changes in students' performance may have been influenced by concurrent coursework, maturation, or other factors during the nine-week period. Second, the relatively short intervention period prevents conclusions about the long-term retention of intercultural learning; delayed post-tests would be needed to determine whether the observed gains are sustained over time. Third, the study involved students from a single university in Vietnam, limiting the transferability of the findings to other institutional contexts and proficiency levels. Fourth, the scenario-based assessment task and analytical rubric were developed specifically for this study. Although strong inter-rater reliability was observed, further validation with larger and more diverse samples is needed to establish the instrument's broader validity.

Future research should therefore consider controlled or randomized designs, larger samples across multiple institutions, and delayed post-tests to examine the durability of learning gains. Further studies could also investigate how digital or virtual reality simulations might complement scenario-based CIs by providing additional opportunities for immersive intercultural practice.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study examined a nine-week CI-based instructional intervention designed to support intercultural competence among undergraduate FLE learners in Vietnam. The intervention combined Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory with Fantini's multidimensional conceptualization of intercultural competence and engaged students in problem-solving, reflection, perspective-taking, and role-play. Quantitative findings showed statistically significant gains across all five assessment dimensions, with the largest improvements observed in *Cultural insight* and *Empathy and perspective-taking*. Qualitative findings further indicated greater contextual awareness, more reflective responses to culturally challenging situations, and greater use of adaptive communication strategies. The evidence suggests that scenario-based critical incidents may provide a useful pedagogical approach for integrating intercultural learning into FLE instruction by giving learners structured opportunities to interpret cultural differences, reconsider their initial assumptions, and rehearse context-appropriate responses. Future research should include comparison or control groups, delayed post-tests, and samples from multiple institutions to examine whether the observed gains are retained over time and transferable across institutional contexts.

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