Culturally Responsive Teaching in Vietnam's International Higher Education: Where Do We Stand?

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigates the implementation of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) across thirteen internationalized programs, utilizing data from in-depth interviews with twenty-six faculty members at eight universities in Vietnam. The qualitative data were systematically analyzed using NVIVO software. Inductive coding and thematic analysis yielded five key dimensions of CRT practice: (i) adaptation of internationalized curriculum, syllabi and lesson plan to align with students' learning preferences; (ii) contextualization of instructional contents to reflect Vietnam's culture and societal context; (iii) modification of pedagogical approaches to address students' diverse needs and backgrounds; (iv) creation of a culturally responsive and supportive environment; (v) promotion of students' self-transformation through engagement with internationalized programs. The study concludes by discussing the implications for faculty professional development, emphasizing the importance of equipping educators with responsive pedagogical competencies to meet the challenges of an increasingly internationalized higher education landscape in Vietnam.*

1. Introduction

The internationalization of higher education has become a central focus in the development strategies of many countries worldwide. This "strategic shift" has significantly contributed to enhancing international training capacities and human resource development, aligning with the socio-economic needs of countries both regionally and globally (Tran et al., 2018). In response to the growing demand for internationalization in higher education, Vietnamese universities have increasingly developed international programs. The influx of international students and faculty from foreign institutions offers valuable opportunities for Vietnamese students and educators to engage with a more globalized workforce, both within Vietnam and abroad. As a result, merely teaching professional knowledge in English or covering international content is no longer sufficient. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) has become essential to enhancing the quality of international programs (Luong, 2024). CRT plays a pivotal role in the internationalization of Vietnamese higher education institutions (HEIs), not only in attracting international students and faculty but also in preparing Vietnamese students and educators to improve learning outcomes and boost future employability (Luong et al., 2023).

In Vietnam's international education context, the delivery of international programs involves not only Vietnamese but also international students and teachers. This highlights the need for both groups to adopt CRT to effectively address the diverse needs of all learners and engage them in meaningful learning experiences. However, there is a lack of comprehensive and systematic understanding of CRT in culturally diverse environments (Phan et al., 2019). This gap calls for further exploration of CRT practices, with particular focus on how institutions can link classroom practices with administrative leadership to foster culturally responsive teacher development (Luong, 2024).

The successful implementation of CRT is essential for the success of international

programs. By promoting CRT, educators and students can more effectively engage in the teaching and learning process. This research article addresses the following key questions:

How is CRT implemented in international programs at universities in Vietnam?

What are the implications for pre-service and in-service training programs to enhance CRT in international programs in Vietnam?

2. Literature review

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is defined as a pedagogy that encourage students from different cultural backgrounds to use their cultural knowledge, cultural characteristics, prior experiences, frames of reference, perspectives, performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant to and effective for them; it teaches to and through strengths of these students (Gay, 2018)

CRT involves recognizing and integrating the cultural backgrounds and lived experiences of students, while actively fostering a classroom environment in which all learners feel valued, respected, and supported (Taylor & Sobel, 2011; Luong, 2024). In a more holistic perspective, Gay (2018) identifies eight fundamental attributes of CRT, highlighting the dual responsibility of educators to support both academic learning and students' holistic wellbeing. CRT affirms students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and performance styles, positioning them as valuable assets within learning process. It promotes ethnic identity development, strengthens community ties, and support student success. As a multidimensional approach, CRT integrates cultural awareness throughout curricula, instructional practice and assessment frameworks. By forstering students' academic self-efficacy and cultural pride, CRT serves as an empowering pedagogical model. Furthermore, it emphasizes humanistic principles, cultivating self-awareness and cultural responsiveness among both teachers and students, while also embracing emancipatory aims that encourage student agency and activism. Ultimately, CRT is an transformative and ethical educational

practice, linking academic achievement with cultural identity development, and advocating for its institutionalization as a normative standard in education.

CRT in Internationally Higher Education Contexts

CRT has gained increasing prominence in higher education as a pedagogical framework for fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments, particularly in response to the growing cultural diversity of student populations. CRT emphasizes teacher self-reflection and cultural awareness, encouraging educators to acknowledge their own cultural biases and identities to better engage with diverse students. Mizzi (2017) promotes a "pedagogy of preparedness," urging teachers to critically examine their positionalities, while Markey et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of understanding one's cultural lens to meet students' needs effectively.

Intercultural competence is essential to CRT, as educators must develop skills to navigate cultural differences and incorporate students' diverse backgrounds into the curriculum. Hutchison and McAlister-Shields (2020) stress the need for teachers to understand the communities they serve and include students' "funds of knowledge" in their teaching. This competence enhances teaching effectiveness and supports inclusive, culturally rich classrooms. Adapting curriculum and teaching strategies to reflect students' cultural experiences and perspectives is key to making learning more relevant (Hutchison & McAlister-Shields, 2020; Markey et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2024).

An increasing body of research advocates for an asset-based perspective on cultural diversity, which positions students' cultural backgrounds as valuable resources for learning rather than deficits. Scholars such as Liao et al. (2021) and Kim et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of drawing on students' cultural strengths to foster belonging, and promote academic success through inclusive pedagogical practices.

Within the context of international higher education, CRT underscores the imperative for

educators to not only acknowledge and value cultural diversity but also to meaningfully integrate it into their instructional design and teaching practices. The process of becoming culturally responsive is multifaceted, requiring self-reflection, pedagogical adaptation, and the acquisition of new competencies that go beyond conventional teaching expertise.

CRT in Vietnam's Higher Education Context

Despite extensive international research on CRT, there is limited exploration of CRT in Vietnamese higher education. Most studies in Vietnam focus on intercultural communication competence (ICC) in English language teaching (ELT), emphasizing teaching methods that build linguistic skills and intercultural awareness (Tran, 2020; Ho, 2019; Vu, 2019). However, CRT's application in non-ELT disciplines remains under-researched.

The growing cultural and linguistic diversity in Vietnamese universities, particularly in international programs and among ethnic minority students, underscores the need for culturally responsive curricula. Existing research has drawn attention to several challenges, including language barriers, cultural misrepresentation, and inadequate support for intercultural engagement (Nguyen & Huynh, 2021; Luong et al., 2023). For instance, Tran (2020) demonstrated how teachers attempted to implement intercultural approaches despite curricular constraints, while Ho (2019) identified gaps in intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among Business English instructors, underscoring the need for targeted professional development. Similarly, Nguyen (2015) and Doan (2014) highlighted systemic limitations in integrating intercultural competence into instructional practices, calling for comprehensive reforms in both curriculum design and pedagogical approach.

In ELT contexts, cultural integration often remains superficial due to reliance on prescribed materials and limited CRT training (Vu, 2019). Additionally, the persistence of Confucian-influenced hierarchical norms, which emphasize teacher authority, can restrict open dialogue and critical engagement—both of which are foundational to CRT (Luong et al., 2024). Beyond

ELT, research on CRT in international curriculum development remains limited. While studies by Nguyen et al. (2017) and Tran et al. (2018) highlight selective adaptations of international curricula to align with national priorities, these efforts often place additional burdens on educators, who must navigate conflicting cultural and institutional expectations. Trinh and Corner (2019) further found that fostering student engagement in internationalized programs enhances diversity and inclusion, offering opportunities to strengthen CRT in Vietnamese higher education.

Collectively, these studies reveal substantial gaps in literature on CRT in Vietnam, particularly in non-ELT disciplines and international training programs. Key challenges include limited teacher understanding of CRT, continued reliance on traditional teaching methods, and narrow conceptualizations of cultural integration. The prevalent use of prescribed instructional materials, minimal articulation of cultural learning objectives, and insufficient incorporation of CRT principles indicate a constrained and underdeveloped practice. Furthermore, while international curriculum adaptation has been explored in some studies, there remains a paucity of research on innovative, context-sensitive strategies for designing and implementing internationalized curricula that meaningfully prepare Vietnamese students for global engagement.

3. Research Methodology

Research Context and Participants

This qualitative study examines and describes CRT practices within the international programs at Vietnamese universities through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The selected international programs primarily reflect collaborative partnerships with higher education institutions from the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Australia, and South Korea.

A total of twenty-six educators from thirteen international programs across eight universities – located in northern, central, and southern Vietnam – participated in the study. Participant selection was guided by purposive sampling

based three key criteria: i) academic discipline (spanning technical, economic, business, or social sciences); ii) geographic representation (to ensure diversity across Vietnam's three major regions); iii) origin of international partner institutions (Asia, Australia, Europe, and the Americas).

The sampled programs encompassed a broad disciplinary spectrum, with five focused on natural sciences and eight on social sciences. Among the participating educators, the majority were Vietnamese (82.4%), with foreign instructors comprising 17.6% of the sample. Notably, 75% of participants reported having over five years of teaching experience within internationalized higher education programs in Vietnam.

Data Collection

The qualitative data were collected over five months through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting 60-90 minutes. All the participants provided informed consent, and their identities were anonymized. All the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded for analysis.

Data Analysis

A thematic approach was used to analyze the interview data. The interview transcripts were uploaded to NVIVO 12 for coding and categorized into five emerging themes related to CRT as presented in the results below. The codes were iteratively refined, aggregated into the analytic categories, and compared across the participants to ensure consistency.

4. Results

The analyzed data highlights five key aspects of CRT practices in the international programs of eight universities: (i) adaptation of internationalized curriculum, syllabi and lesson plan to align with students' learning preferences; (ii) contextualization of instructional contents to reflect Vietnam's culture and societal context; (iii) modification of pedagogical approaches to address students' diverse needs and backgrounds; (iv) creation of a culturally responsive and supportive environment; (v) promotion of students' self-transformation through engagement with internationalized programs.

4.1. Adapting internationalized curriculum, syllabus, and lesson plans to align with students' learning preferences

The study reveals that teachers recognize the importance of understanding students' learning preferences to effectively adapt curricula, syllabi, and lesson plans within international programs. Three key characteristics of these preferences were commonly noted. Firstly, Vietnamese students often value teacher-led instruction and well-structured lessons, which feature clearly defined objectives, detailed teaching and learning activities, and explicit instructional guidance. Secondly, collaborative learning approaches (i.e. group work and peer discussions) are generally well-received as students often thrive in cooperative and peer-supported environments. Thirdly, there is a strong preference for learning experiences that are explicitly linked to real-world applications or future career pathways, underscoring the importance of relevance and practicality in educational content.

By gaining insight into these characteristic learning preferences, teachers have adapted the international programs to better meet students' needs through structured instruction, interactive teaching methods that accounts for language considerations and flexible assessment methods supported by relevant feedback mechanism. Given the cultural and educational differences between Vietnam's domestic programs and those of international partners, implementing specifically structured instruction has proven essential in enabling students to engage effectively with their assigned tasks in international programs.

The study highlights that teachers recognize the importance of understanding Vietnamese students' learning preferences in order to effectively tailor curricula, syllabi, and lesson plans within international programs. Three prominent characteristics of Vietnamese students' learning styles emerge from the findings:

Preference for structured, teacher-led instruction: Vietnamese students place high value on well-organized lessons that include clearly defined objectives, detailed instructional activities, and explicit guidance within syllabi and lesson plans.

Affinity for collaborative learning: Group work and peer discussions are particularly favoured, as students tend to thrive in environments that foster mutual support and cooperative learning.

Emphasis on practical and career-oriented learning: Students are especially motivated by contents that connect directly to real-life applications and future professional opportunities, enhancing the relevance and engagement of their educational experiences.

In response to these identified learning preferences, teachers have adapted international programs by incorporating structured instructional methods, interactive pedagogicall approaches that address language needs, and flexible assessment strategies supported by constructive feedback mechanisms. The implementation of structured instruction is particularly critical, as it enables students to navigate and perform effectively within the context of international programs. This approach helps to bridge the cultural and educational gaps between Vietnam's traditional educational practices and those commonly employed by international partner institutions.

"Compared to international standards for academic writing, Vietnamese students face distinct challenges. These often stem from culturally influenced communication styles, including a preference for indirectness, a circular pattern of reasoning, and an emphasis on maintaining social harmony and face keeping. Such tendencies can result in writing that verboses and lack structural clarity. Recognizing these cultural characteristics, I have intentionally designed my Academic English course syllabus and lesson plans to prioritise activities that cultivate precision and structural coherence. Additionally, I carefully select supplementary materials that examplify concise and logically organized writing. (A Vietnamese lecturer, University 02)

Vietnamese students have traditionally adopted a passive learning style, characterized by an emphasis on listening to lectures and taking notes rather than engaging actively through discussions or questioning. In response, educators introduced pedagogical strategies aimed at fostering active learning. These include debates, role-playing, and problem-solving exercises, all of which encourage greater student participation and ownership of the learning process. Technological tools—such as e-learning platforms and mobile applications—further support this shift by enabling peer collaboration and discourse beyond the confines of the classroom. To address language barriers and build learners' confidence in using English, many institutions provide bilingual instructional resources in both Vietnamese and English. Moreover, the integration of culturally relevant content and local contexts into lessons has enhanced students' comprehension and engagement. Collectively, these initiatives have contributed to the development of more confident, inquisitive learners who are increasingly willing to ask questions and seek clarification when faced with challenging concepts.

"The discipline of public relations is largely rooted in Western traditions, which can make the content feel somewhat disconnected from the Vietnamese context. This disconnection becomes particularly evident when students are expected to independent reading of unfamiliar texts prior to class. Many students face difficulties with reading comprehension, a consequence of prior educational experiences shaped by the banking model of learning, which emphasized rote memorization over critical thinking. In response to this challenge, I have adapted the syllabus and lesson plans to incorporate Vietnam's distinctive historical and cultural evolution in the field of public relations. This contextualization not only enhances relevance but also aids comprehension. Furthermore, I have integrated more collaborative learning activities, such as group assignments and classroom debates, which encourage student participation, foster peer-to-peer learning, and promote the development of critical thinking through dialogue and reflection." – (a Vietnamese lecturer, University 08, Mass Media Program)

The curriculum design and instructional strategies in international programs have been carefully developed to incorporate real-world applications and align with contemporary labor

market demands. This practice-oriented approach has significantly enhanced student engagement, particularly when industry partners and potential employers are actively involved in the teaching process, offering practical insights and professional perspectives. In response to ongoing feedback, substantial revisions have been made to achieve a more balanced integration of theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Previously, some programs were characterized by short-term, low-credit courses that disproportionately emphasized theory, resulting in heightened pressure on both instructors and learners. To address these challenges, the curriculum has been restructured by merging smaller sub-courses into more comprehensive ones. This change allows for better distribution of teaching periods across the semester and facilitates the inclusion of more practical, hands-on content, ultimately enhancing the overall learning experience.

In the international programs, traditional examinations are increasingly supplemented by a range of alternative assessment methods, including presentations, group projects, and reflective assignments. These diverse approaches are intentionally employed to accommodate students' varied learning styles, cognitive strengths, and social preferences. According to the study, educators strategically integrate these assessment forms to enhance student engagement and academic performance. For instance, the group projects promote collaboration and critical thinking, while reflective assignments encourage deeper understanding and self-awareness. Moreover, continuous formative feedback—gathered through student surveys, open discussions, and anonymous suggestion channels—serves as a vital mechanism for refining instructional practices. The findings indicate that ongoing feedback not only sustains student motivation but also facilitates meaningful improvement and enables instructors to adapt their teaching methods more responsively to learners' evolving needs.

4.2. Contextualizing instructional contents to reflect Vietnam's culture and societal context

Localizing content within international programs is considered as a crucial teaching task for teachers to ensure the material is relevant and engaging for students. While the core concepts of the syllabus remain unchanged, the teachers are required to adapt content to Vietnam's contexts. In this case, local case studies, examples, and cultural references are integrated to make the curriculum more relevant to students in international programs. By incorporating examples from Vietnamese companies and cultural practices, the teachers help students relate learnt concepts to their own environment. For example, when teaching topics related to financial or legal systems, educators may present comparative analysis that include both international and local frameworks. Such dual-context instruction not only depeens students' understanding but also equips them to apply theoretical knowledge in both global and local settings. As one foreign teacher from Coventry University, currently teaching at University 05, explains:

"Certain content in the textbooks has been localized, particularly in courses related to Vietnamese business, finance, and legal systems. For example, when discussing financial systems or legal documents affecting business, I present information on the systems of Western countries as outlined in the textbook, but I also ensure students explore and understand Vietnam's systems."

Educators in international programs increasingly emphasize the importance of examining course concepts from both global and local perspectives. This dual-perspective approach enables students to contextualize international theories and practices—such as those related to business operations or marketing strategies—within their own national environment. In courses such as leadership and globalization, instructors deliberately draw comparisons between Vietnamese and international practices. For instance local collectivist leadership models are contrasted with more individualistic approaches commonly observed in Western contexts. This comparative framework encourages critical reflection and fosters a more nuanced understanding of diverse organizational cultures. As one Vietnamese lecturer from University 06 explains:

"When delivering a course on leadership and globalization, I compare Vietnamese leadership styles to those of international businesses. Vietnamese leadership tends to emphasize collectivism, while international styles may prioritize individualism and clearer structures. The course integrates global and local perspectives by introducing examples of both Vietnamese and international companies. Sometimes, I bring in case studies of companies operating in Vietnam and compares them with those in India or other parts of Asia. This makes the content more relatable to Vietnamese students."

By integrating comparative case studies and examples from both local and regional contexts, this approach enhances student engagement and promotes a more balanced, globally aware understanding of the subject matter.

In the international programs, teachers are allowed to adjust curriculum content to better suit the needs and interests of students. For example, when discussing political systems, instructors might shift the focus to the economic and business impacts of politics, which are more directly relevant to business students. This approach ensures the material is practical and engaging for students in the Vietnamese context. One Vietnamese instructor in University 01 noted:

"Some parts of the curriculum may not resonate with the students, leading instructors to make changes. For example, a course discussing political systems may be less relevant to business students, so educators suggest shifting the focus to the economic and business impacts of politics, which would be more engaging and practical for students."

Overall, adapting the content to local culture and context enhances student engagement, helps bridge cultural gaps, and ensures that the education provided is both globally informed and locally relevant.

4.3. Modifying pedagogical approaches to address students' diverse needs and backgrounds

The teaching methods focus on promoting global perspective & intercultural learning; using visual aids and culturally relevant case studies; creating opportunties for active learning and application; and encouraging interdisciplinary teaching and learning.

Firstly, integrating a global perspective into education prepares students to navigate increasingly interconnected markets and multicultural societies. The exposure to culturally diverse viewpoints, practices, and socio-cultural norms broadens students' understanding of global and local dynamics, better preparing them for international programs. This can be achieved by incorporating real-world scenarios that nurture empathy and cultural sensitivity, qualities highly valued in global industries. This approach enables students to recognize and respond to the varying needs and expectations of indviduals from different backgrounds, enhancing their ability to work effectively in diverse environments. Furthermore, it supports personal development by cultivating a mindset of global citizenship. A Vietnamese teacher from University 03 shared the compelling example of how cross-cultural understanding translate into practice competence, as students in tourism and hospitality programs learn to navigate the complexities of cultural differences in real-life contexts:

"For example, a student from Italy was asked how to behave when an Italian tourist lost his passport... He answered that first, he would help this guy, take him to the police station, and report the lost documents. Some other students from the Philippines, Cambodia, South Africa, etc. have shared their perspectives, creating a rich dialogue that highlighted different cultural norms and responses to real-world scenarios"

Secondly, teachers have effectively adapted their teaching methods by incorporating visual aids, video clips, and local case studies from Vietnam to overcome the challenges of English-based instruction in internationalized programs. Teaching specialized concepts in English can be particularly demanding for students with limited language proficiency, as it often requires extensive reading and comprehension of complex materials. This language barrier creates stress for both students and teachers, as concepts may need to be re-explained in Vietnamese. While

Vietnamese teachers can navigate this more easily, it poses greater challenges for foreign educators. To bridge this gap, innovative teaching strategies such as visual tools, interactive activities, and culturally relevant examples have proven effective in enhancing student understanding and engagement. A teacher from University 03, who specializes in economics, shared his approach:

"Instead of relying on traditional lectures that might overwhelm first-year students struggling with English, I design lessons using games, visual aids, and body language to make learning more accessible. This method not only supports students in improving their English but also helps them build foundational business knowledge. By incorporating local case studies, students can first research and understand concepts in Vietnamese before transitioning to the English materials provided in textbooks from our foreign partners."

Thirdly, active learning and practical application are powerful pedagogical strategies that bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world practice, particularly for students with passive learning style and limited prior exposure to abstract concepts. Vietnamese students are often characterized by their introverted nature and a tendency toward passive learning. This cultural backdrop presents a unique challenge for teachers, particularly those from international backgrounds, who may be accustomed to more interactive, participatory classroom environments. To address this challenge, teachers must adjust their methods to encourage students to take an active role in their learning. As one foreign instructor in University 05 reflected on the importance of cultural sensitivity:

"As an international teacher, I was briefed a lot before I came to Vietnam. I was advised by my colleagues that Vietnamese students are a bit more introverted, a bit shyer; not used to being asked for their opinion. So this is something which international teachers do a lot. I do not do frontal teaching anymore with common eliciting questions such as 'What do you think about that? What is your opinion?'. Instead, I do not expect to get an immediate response if I am asking for students' opinion."

By understanding this initial passivity, educators modify their approach by shifting away from traditional frontal lectures to more interactive and student-centered strategies. These include integrating hands-on activities, real-world scenarios, and relatable examples into the curriculum. Such methods not only foster critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration and communication skills but also empower students to take a more active role in their learning journey. Effective techniques include group-based discussions, real-world simulations and project-based learning. For example, students may be tasked with creating mock companies or conducting simulated bookings, allowing them to apply theoretical concepts in practical settings across domains such as marketing, tourism, project management, and communication. These experiences make abstract concepts more tangible and enhance long-term retention. As a foreign teacher in tourism management at University 01 noted:

"Sometimes I realize I talk to them about things, and they're so abstract because they've never done them. For example, we do fake reservations, ask them to book something with preconditions, and then cancel it. They respond really well when they do things themselves, and it helps them understand how it works in real life."

When students are given opportunities to engage with practical, relatable experiences, they are better equipped to retain knowledge, connect theory to practice, and develop skills that transcend the classroom. Teaching students from the practical experiences of teachers through their own stories has shown to be powerful in helping students understand the abstract concepts. This is particularly useful for students who have very little even no experience or knowledge about new concepts in their studying course. This approach also prepares students to confidently navigate the complexities of the professional world.

Lastly, interdisciplinary teaching methods break down traditional subject boundaries, allowing students to integrate knowledge from various fields to solve problems creatively and holistically. By fostering connections across disciplines, students develop critical thinking skills that prepare them for complex, real-

world challenges. For example, a Vietnamese teacher disclosed that *"This course is linked with intercultural communication because from a native perspective, it helps students to explain why Russians choose certain destinations and why Chinese tourists prefer other places..."* This insights illustrates how interdisciplinary learning enables students to merge theories from cultural studies with practical applications in tourism management. The educator's ability to frame content both theoretically and practically enables students to grasp how cultural values, traditions, and behaviors influence consumer decisions and business strategies. As a result, students learn to analyze market trends and design culturally sensitive marketing approaches—skills that are increasingly essential in today's globalized industries. Interdisciplinary teaching, therefore, not only connects content across subject areas but also empowers students to actively apply their knowledge in meaningful ways. It prepares them to operate effectively in diverse professional settings where understanding multiple perspectives and navigating cultural nuances are critical to success.

In addition to integrating content across subjects, interdisciplinary teaching is reinfoced by adaptive instructional strategies that address different learning styles. For example, case studies that explore tourism patterns among diverse cultural groups can deepen students' analytical skills and provide insights into broader societal and economic trends. Interactive discussions enable students to share their perspectives and learn collaboratively, fostering a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between disciplines. As one expert states, *"Interdisciplinary learning fosters the ability to approach a problem from multiple angles, encouraging creativity and deeper understanding."* This highlights that students are not simply absorbing fragmented knowledge but learning to synthesize information, critically evaluate it, and apply it in meaningful ways. All in all, the ability to see problems through multiple lenses and integrate diverse perspectives is a powerful skill that prepares students for success in both their academic pursuits and professional careers.

4.4. Fostering a culturally responsive and supportive learning environment

Teachers play a pivotal role in fostering students' confidence, identity, and a growth mindset. This can be undertaken by building a caring and supportive environment with mentorship, personalized support, and cultural sensitivity; and an emphasis on collaboration, real-world relevance, and openness to feedback.

A supportive and responsive learning environment is fundamental to student success, fostering both self-actualization and overall wellbeing. Teachers who proactively address individual needs help reinforce an atmosphere where students feel psychologically safe and academically empowered. Through regular, constructive feedback and informal, friendly interactions, educators can build students' self-confidence and motivation. The teachers in this study create a warm and inclusive classroom culture by integrating students' cultural backgrounds and life experiences into discussions. This approach extends beyond contextualized content delivery to include supportive communication and meaningful relationships. The presence of both local and international faculty further enhances this inclusive environment, enabling students to feel at ease while adapting to global academic standards. By fostering an inclusive, responsive environment, teachers help their students feel valued, which contributes to their emotional growth and academic success.

Moreover, a sense of care and collaboration is essential to creating an inclusive learning environment. Teachers who go beyond conventional instruction to offer emotional and academic support foster a nurturing atmosphere that encourages risk-taking, active participation and personal growth. The "time-consuming" nature of such support underscores the depth of teachers' commitment to their students. Impactful teaching is not solely about academic content delivery, but also about fostering emotional connection, trust and long-term development.

"I try to ensure no one is left behind, whether it's through regular check-ins or responding to emails late at night. It might be time-consuming,

but it's rewarding when I see the difference it makes in their confidence and performance" (a Vietnamese lecturer, University 07)

In addition, the informal connections and social relationships between teachers and students, such as sharing coffee or participating in outdoor activities together, play a significant role in building a strong sense of community. These interactions allow students to share their personal stories and challenges, which, in turn, helps build empathy between students and teachers; forster shared understanding, feeling of connectedness with their teachers and peers. As a result, they become more open and active in learning and socializing, enhancing their positive educational experience.

Embracing and promoting cultural awareness in the classroom enriches students' learning experiences by making them feel seen and understood. The educator's ability to engage students in their native or preferred language shows a commitment to making learning accessible, while also respecting and acknowledging students' cultural identities. Language thus becomes more than a medium of communication—it is a bridge to creating deeper connections, inclusivity and fostering a classroom environment where diverse backgrounds are not only recognized but valued.

"When I speak to students in German, I can see their attentiveness change. It creates a connection and makes the lesson more relatable to them. Language isn't just a tool for communication; it's a tool for building rapport and trust" (a Vietnamese lecturer, University 02).

In conclusion, fostering a culturally responsive and supportive learning environment requires educators to be be deeply attuned to students' individual needs, to cultivate spaces where feedback, collaboration, and trust are prioritized, and to actively integrate and celebrate diverse cultural perspectives. Through inclusive teaching strategies, adaptive methods, and a commitment to equity and care, teachers play a transformative role in shaping not only students' academic success but also their personal growth, cultural competence, and confidence in navigating a globalized world.

4.5. Promoting students' self-transformation through engagement with internationalized programs

In the context of international programs, fostering a strong belief in students' ability make their self-transformation is critical for promoting active engagement and learner autonomy. This belief, particularly when combined with teacher support, plays a vital role in overcoming the challenges presented by traditional, passive learning styles—such as rote memorization—that are prevalent in many Vietnamese students' educational backgrounds. The role of the teachers in these programs is pivotal in motivating students to shift from passive recipients of information to becoming active, self-directed learners. The teacher's strong belief in the students' capacity to engage and transform themselves is evident here, as it sets the stage for fostering a more active, participatory learning environment. The belief that students can and will change, combined with teacher support, is integral to this process of transformation.

Another critical aspect of fostering student self-transformation in international programs is the communication between students, teachers, and lecturers. In the case of Vietnamese students, the transition to an internationalized academic setting requires a shift in communication styles and expectations. Teachers who are aware of these cultural differences and actively encourage open dialogue help bridge the gap between students' passive learning tendencies and the more interactive, autonomous learning that international programs aim to promote. This open communication is not only essential for building trust but also for helping students become more comfortable in taking an active role in their education, ultimately leading to a shift in their learning behaviors.

"Communication is key communication between all the participants: communication between me and the students, me and the lecturers, and between the lecturers and the students. We always say, we are aware we are different. We have to talk, we have to talk about what we are feeling, about what we are experiencing." (a foreign teacher, University 04)

Through guided support, active encouragement, and a strong belief in the students' potential, teachers in international programs create environments that foster self-actualization. By engaging students in challenging tasks, providing necessary tools and feedback, and instilling confidence in their ability to succeed, educators play a transformative role in reshaping students' learning behaviors. This gradual shift—from passive reception to active participation—is essential for enabling students to take full ownership of their education. It not only enhances their ability to thrive within international academic contexts but also empowers them with lifelong skills in autonomy, critical thinking, and self-directed learning.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study article offers a comprehensive examination of how CRT is implemented within thirteen international programs across eight Vietnamese universities. Adapting educational content to local culture and context significantly enhances student engagement, bridges cultural gaps, and ensures that instruction remains globally informed yet locally relevant. In Vietnam's internationalized higher education programs—where Western-oriented curricula dominate (Tran et al., 2018)—contextual adaptation is essential for meaningful learning. Students often struggle to relate to abstract, foreign content unless it is localized (Ho, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2017). Integrating local case studies, familiar cultural narratives, and examples from Vietnamese society helps students connect global theories to real-life experiences, thereby improving critical thinking and retention (Hutchison & McAlister-Shields, 2020).

Aligned with Gay's (2018) model of CRT, effective pedagogy involves incorporating learners' lived experiences, values, and identities into instructional content and practice. In Vietnam, this includes adapting syllabi and lesson plans to match students' structured learning preferences and modifying pedagogical approaches to support diverse linguistic and cultural needs (Ho, 2019; Gay, 2018). For instance, using visual aids, interactive activities, and bilingual support helps bridge comprehension gaps while encouraging greater student autonomy.

Creating a culturally supportive learning environment is also critical. Teachers who integrate mentorship, open communication, and personalized feedback foster trust and psychological safety, enabling students to participate more confidently (Nguyen & Huynh, 2021; Taylor & Sobel, 2011). As noted by Kim et al. (2024), such responsiveness is especially important in blended or online settings, where lack of cultural sensitivity can lead to disengagement.

Moreover, fostering student self-transformation is a core aim of international programs. When teachers believe in students' potential and provide consistent support, learners gradually shift from passive reception to active engagement, building the skills needed to succeed in global academic environments (Luong et al., 2023; Mizzi, 2017). Teacher agency plays a central role in this transformation, especially in culturally diverse settings (Nguyen & Huynh, 2021; Liao et al., 2021). Ultimately, as Vietnam continues to internationalize, a move away from uncritical curriculum importation toward meaningful intercultural integration is vital—not only to enhance academic outcomes, but to empower students as culturally grounded global citizens (Tran, 2020; Vu, 2019; Trinh & Conner, 2019).

These findings highlight the imperative for a strategically coordinated approach to professional development in Vietnam's higher education system, particularly in light of the expanding presence of international programs. Both pre-service and in-service teacher training must be reoriented to equip educators with the pedagogical competencies necessary to adapt curricula, instructional methodologies, and classroom management strategies to meet the needs of increasingly diverse student populations. Moreover, professional development programs should emphasize the importance of fostering an inclusive, supportive learning environment where teachers not only adapt their teaching strategies but also build strong, empowering relationships with students.

To enhance the effectiveness of international programs, teacher training must place a strong emphasis on cultural competence, the principles

of culturally responsive pedagogy, and the nurturing of a growth-oriented mindset among both students and faculty. Such an approach is essential for enabling higher education institutions to respond to the demands of a globalized academic environment and for ensuring equitable access to transformative learning experiences (Luong, 2024). By embedding culturally responsive practices into teacher professional development, Vietnamese universities can reinforce the integrity and inclusivity of their internationalised curricula, thereby preparing educators and learners alike to thrive in diverse, transnational educational contexts.

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