DEVELOPING EFL STUDENTS' COMMUNICATIVE PERFORMANCE THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL CROSS-CULTURAL INTERACTION WITH INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY AT TSES ENGLISH CLUB

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Abstract: *The disconnect between formal language instruction and real-world communicative competence remains a core challenge in global EFL education. This convergent mixed-methods study examines an innovative experiential learning model at the TSES English Club in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, where university students practise their English skills via structured, authentic interactions with international tourists in public spaces. The quantitative data, collected over an 18-week intervention period, comprised pre/post-test scores of 11 students assessed using a 100-point rubric, alongside student post-intervention perception surveys from 71 students and 7 expert facilitators. The qualitative data, gathered via semi-structured interviews with 3 facilitators and 5 students, underwent reflexive thematic analysis and were supplemented by ethnographic observation. Findings reveal significant practical communication score gains ($t(10)=24.06$, $p<.001$, $d=7.25$), indicating an extremely large effect. Post-intervention surveys indicated over 77% of students improved across all criteria. Thematic analysis revealed three primary catalysts: authentic communicative pressure, intrinsic motivation from meaningful cross-cultural exchange, and peer scaffolding with emotional support. Three principal barriers emerged: accent-triggered anxiety, cultural and pragmatic misunderstandings, and environmental noise. The study theoretically operationalises experiential learning and intercultural competence frameworks within this non-institutional, tourism-driven context. Practically, it offers ten evidence-based, actionable recommendations to maximise pedagogical impact for language clubs.*

Keywords: *Experiential learning, cross-cultural communication, communicative performance, English club, international tourists, mixed-methods research*

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and rationale

A persistent challenge confronting English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Vietnam and globally is the profound disconnection between formal classroom instruction and the capacity for effective communication in authentic, real-world situations (Kolb, 2015; Byram, 2021). Learners may devote years to mastering grammatical structures and expanding lexical knowledge yet find themselves unable to engage in spontaneous conversation with native or non-native English speakers beyond the classroom walls. This fundamental divide between declarative knowledge, knowing about the language, and procedural knowledge, using the language fluidly in real time, represents a well-documented phenomenon in applied linguistics (Larsen-Freeman, 2023; Kramsch, 2021).

In Vietnam, this challenge assumes particular urgency within the context of the nation's rapidly expanding tourism sector. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnam's tourism industry has experienced remarkable resurgence. In 2023, international tourism rebounded forcefully, with the country welcoming 12.6 million international visitors, a 332% increase over the previous year, alongside 108 million domestic travellers. In 2024, international tourist arrivals surpassed 17 million, representing a 39% increase (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, 2025). This extraordinary growth has generated urgent demand for a workforce equipped with practical English communication competencies (Nguyen & Malabarba, 2024; Van, 2018).

Empirical research has consistently demonstrated that within hospitality and tourism contexts, listening and speaking constitute the most frequently deployed skills. Hotel front-desk personnel face considerable challenges due to limited English proficiency, particularly in comprehending diverse accents and responding effectively to guest complaints (Van, 2018; Do, 2026). A comprehensive needs analysis revealed that employees frequently experience communication breakdowns with international guests, with common difficulties including understanding varied accents, handling complaints, and sustaining extended conversations (Do, 2026). Critically, English language training in educational institutions frequently fails to adequately prepare graduates for these workplace demands.

These findings align with research investigating the gap between English training at tertiary institutions and actual workplace requirements. Nguyen and Malabarba (2024) conducted a longitudinal ethnographic study revealing that employees developed interactional competence primarily through authentic workplace interactions rather than formal instruction. Research has further shown that tourism students possess significant needs for intercultural communicative competence (ICC), particularly in developing attitudes such as respect for cultural differences (Trang & Phuong, 2023). However, studies examining Vietnamese EFL teachers' practices in English for Tourism Purposes classes have revealed that ICC teaching is frequently treated as a subordinate goal (Tran, 2024). This suggests a significant chasm between industry demands and what is delivered in formal educational settings.

The Vietnamese government has recognised the imperative of enhancing English proficiency among young people. The Prime Minister approved the programme "Supporting the improvement of foreign language competence and international integration for Vietnamese youth and children for the period 2022-2030" (Decision No. 1477/QD-TTg), which emphasises extracurricular activities and practical language use. In response, educational institutions have established English clubs as platforms for students to practise foreign language skills in real-world environments.

The TSES English Club, a student-led initiative in Ho Chi Minh City, represents an innovative response to these policy directions. The club organises sessions in public spaces where students practise English through direct, structured interaction with international tourists. This model constitutes an innovative, low-cost approach to language learning that capitalises on the city's abundant tourism resources. The TSES model incorporates the "Four Can-Dos" progressive framework, wherein students advance from being able to speak to speaking correctly, speaking well, and finally speaking persuasively.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Many Vietnamese EFL learners attain intermediate levels of grammatical knowledge yet continue to struggle with speaking fluency, listening comprehension in challenging environments, and the confidence necessary to initiate and sustain conversations (Tran & Vi, 2022; Trinh & Pham, 2021). Traditional classroom instruction lacks the authentic communicative pressure that drives the development of procedural knowledge and strategic competence (VanPatten & Williams, 2014). The central problem this study addresses is the paucity of empirical evidence on the effectiveness of informal, place-based, experiential learning models in improving EFL students' communicative performance. Existing research provides descriptive accounts, but systematic, mixed-methods investigations remain rare (Boussoulaim & Madoui, 2025; Hidayati et al., 2023).

1.3 Research aim and questions

The aim is to investigate the potential association of the TSES English Club's experiential, cross-cultural model on the communicative performance of its EFL student members. The study has three objectives: (1) to measure changes in practical communication performance after an 18-week intervention; (2) to identify catalysts and barriers; and (3) to translate findings into actionable recommendations. Two research questions guide this investigation: (1) To what extent do students' practical communication scores change from pre- to post-intervention? (2) What key catalysts and barriers do students and expert facilitators report experiencing?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical foundations

The TSES experiential learning model is built upon four interconnected theoretical pillars: experiential learning theory, the competence-performance distinction, intercultural communicative competence, and sociocultural theory.

Experiential learning theory. The TSES model is grounded in Kolb's (2015) experiential learning theory, which posits that learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 49). Kolb's cycle comprises four stages: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation, and Active Experimentation. While ELT has been widely cited, its systematic operationalisation in informal language education remains rare (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Most formal instruction remains confined to abstract conceptualisation. The TSES model propels learners through the entire loop: a student has a concrete experience (struggling to understand a tourist), reflects on what went wrong,

conceptualises a repair strategy, and immediately experiments with it. This complete, rapid-cycle loop constitutes the engine of learning.

Communicative performance. Drawing on Chomsky (1965) and Hymes (1972), this study distinguishes between communicative competence and communicative performance. Canale and Swain (1980) identified four components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Bachman and Palmer (2010) added affective factors such as confidence and anxiety, which are particularly relevant to the TSES context (Horwitz et al., 1986). In the Vietnamese EFL context, research consistently shows that while students may possess grammatical knowledge, they struggle with spontaneous performance (Tran & Vi, 2022; Trinh & Pham, 2021). This competence-performance gap is precisely what the TSES model seeks to address.

Intercultural communicative competence. Byram's (2021) ICC model encompasses attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. The TSES model transforms cultural missteps into powerful learning opportunities for developing intercultural attitudes and strategic competence.

Sociocultural theory. Drawing on Vygotsky (1978), learning is fundamentally a socially mediated activity. Key concepts include the Zone of Proximal Development, scaffolding, and mediation. In the TSES context, environmental noise is not interference but the very condition under which listening comprehension must be operationalised. The cultural diversity of tourists is authentic material for developing phonetic adaptability and intercultural awareness.

2.2 Review of empirical studies

The international literature reveals critical gaps. On experiential learning, systematic operationalisation in informal language education remains rare. On place-based pedagogy, Hidayati et al. (2023) found that students in tourist areas outperform peers on speaking confidence, though they did not implement a structured intervention. On cross-cultural challenges, Xu and Shapii (2025) identified language anxiety as a significant barrier. In English clubs, Boussoulaim and Madoui (2025) found improved speaking and listening skills, though their study was exclusively qualitative.

The Vietnamese literature has diagnosed local challenges effectively. Nguyen and Habok (2021) revealed complex motivation dynamics. Nguyen et al. (2024) established a link between extracurricular participation and reduced anxiety. Studies have provided systematic taxonomies of speaking barriers (Vy et al., 2024; Luu et al., 2024). However, no domestic study has provided a systematic evaluation of a structured experiential model in a tourist-rich environment—the TSES study directly fills this void.

2.3 Conceptual framework

The framework posits that the 18-week structured intervention leads to measurable changes in communicative performance through mediating catalysts and barriers. Catalysts include authentic communicative pressure, intrinsic motivation, and peer scaffolding. Barriers include accent-triggered anxiety, cultural awareness challenges, and environmental noise. The framework is grounded in the recognition that language learning is fundamentally a social, situated process (Vygotsky, 1978).

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This investigation adopts a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The quantitative phase addresses magnitude using a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design with a single cohort, supplemented by perception surveys (Field, 2024). The qualitative phase addresses mechanism and meaning through semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observation (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Flick, 2022).

3.2 Research procedure

The research was conducted over 18 weeks (March–July 2026). Stage 1: pre-intervention data collection (March 15) with 11 students completing the pre-test. Stage 2: 18-week experiential intervention, with weekly structured interactions in public spaces. Each session followed a structured protocol: briefing (15 min), tourist interactions (45-60 min), debrief (15 min), conceptualisation (10 min), and experimentation (5 min). Task complexity increased across three phases. Stage 3: post-intervention data collection (July 15) with the same students. Stage 4: surveys administered to 71 students and 7 expert facilitators. Stage 5: interviews with 3 expert facilitators and 5 students (July 19).

3.3 Participants and sampling

Purposive sampling was employed (Patton, 2015). Group 1: 11 pre-post test participants (university students aged 18-25, not majoring in English, participating continuously for 18 weeks). Group 2: 71 perception survey participants. Group 3: 3 expert facilitators and 5 students sampled for diversity.

3.4 Instruments

Quantitative instruments included: (1) a 100-point performance test measuring 10 criteria; (2) a 20-item Likert-scale student perception survey; and (3) a 20-item expert facilitator survey. Qualitative instruments included semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

3.5 Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Version 29 with descriptive statistics, a paired-samples t-test, Cohen's d, and Cronbach's alpha. Interview data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, thick description, and reflexive journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical protocols followed the Declaration of Helsinki.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Sample description

Pre- and post-test participants were predominantly tourism majors (72.7%), with 45.5% male and 54.5% female. Self-reported proficiency ranged from A2 (18.2%) to B1 (27.3%) and B2 (54.5%). Survey participants comprised 47.9% male and 52.1% female, with majors including English Language (14.1%), Tourism (63.4%), and Other (22.5%). The expert panel had 42.9% male and 57.1% female, with 71.4% holding bachelor's and 28.6% master's degrees.

4.2 Quantitative findings

Descriptive statistics for pre- and post-test scores (n = 11)

Statistic	Pre-test	Post-test
Mean score	40.64	85.45
Standard deviation	2.16	5.50
Minimum	35	77
Maximum	43	95
Range	8	18
Mean difference	+44.82	

Source: TSES pre/post-test data, March 15 and July 15, 2026.

Across all 11 students, post-test scores were substantially higher, with a mean increase of 44.82 points (from 40.64 to 85.45). Individual improvements ranged from +36 to +55 points. A paired-samples t-test revealed significant improvement ($t(10) = 24.06$, $p < .001$). The effect size (Cohen's $d = 7.25$) indicates an extremely large effect. Experts rated effectiveness highly, with mean scores from 4.43 to 5.00. Over 77% reported improvement across all criteria, with greatest gains in overall proficiency (88.7%), vocabulary (87.3%), and confidence (85.9%). Cronbach's alpha was .94, indicating excellent reliability.

4.3 Qualitative findings

Three catalyst themes emerged. Authentic Communicative Pressure: Students reported that the unscripted nature of tourist interactions created motivating pressure. Student S04 stated: "The barrier in the first few days was shyness... At first, I could understand very little." Student S05 corroborated: "My mind went almost completely blank." This pressure was perceived as a key driver of improvement.

Intrinsic motivation from meaningful exchange: Students reported deep motivation from successful cross-cultural connections. Student S05 elaborated: "What impressed me the most is the surrounding space... decorated with pictures about Vietnamese culture... This motivates me to learn more about my country's history."

Peer scaffolding and emotional support: Students identified peers as crucial support. Student S04 emphasised: "When I say something wrong, the seniors are always ready to help me." Expert 1 articulated the pedagogical foundation: "It is our motto of the 'Four Can-Dos.' First, students must be able to speak. Once they can speak, we support them to speak correctly, then speak well, and finally speak persuasively."

Three barrier themes emerged.

- Accent-triggered language anxiety: Student S03 explained: "Before doing real practice, I encountered many different accents from tourists... sometimes I couldn't understand what they were saying."

- Cultural awareness and pragmatic misunderstanding: Some reported discomfort from differing cultural norms.

- Environmental noise and distractions: Expert 2 noted: "The biggest barrier I see is time. Since sessions are on Sunday mornings, many students lack determination to get up early."

4.4 Integrated findings

Integration reveals a coherent narrative. Quantitative findings indicated significant improvements with an extremely large effect size. Qualitative findings identified mechanisms: authentic pressure, intrinsic motivation, and peer support. Individual variation was explained: students with high gains described high authentic pressure, positive interactions, and strong support, while those with lower gains described overwhelming anxiety and avoidance. This suggests benefits are not automatic, students must actively engage.

V. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Recapitulation of core discoveries

This study provides compelling evidence that participation in the TSES model is associated with statistically and educationally significant gains in communicative performance, a mean increase of 44.82 points with an extremely large effect size (d = 7.25). Qualitative findings identified three catalysts and three barriers. These findings align with and extend theoretical frameworks: Kolb's cycle is operationalised in a novel context; Byram's ICC framework is extended through real-world cultural interaction; and sociocultural theory is illuminated through natural scaffolding in peer-supported environments.

5.2 Implications and recommendations

Ten evidence-based recommendations are proposed. Strategic solutions: (1) Implement a "buddy system" pairing new members with experienced peers; (2) Develop facilitator training on "facilitating, not teaching"; (3) Establish weekly 15-minute debrief sessions. Innovative solutions: (4) Introduce "Phonetic Friday" for accent familiarisation; (5) Create a "City Survival Phrasebook" for repair strategies; (6) Maintain a three-stage progression of task difficulty. Collaborative solutions: (7) Establish partnerships with tourism authorities; (8) work with universities for credit recognition; (9) develop an open-source "TSES Toolkit"; (10) Establish a cross-club network for knowledge exchange.

5.3 Contributions to knowledge

Theoretically, this study operationalises Kolb's cycle in a tourism-driven context, extends Byram's ICC framework, and contributes to the competence-performance distinction. Methodologically, the mixed-methods design provides a replicable template. Practically, the recommendations provide an evidence-based blueprint for language clubs.

5.4 Limitations and future research

Limitations include the following: single-cohort design without a control group, small sample size, sampling constraints, limited temporal scope, researcher-related bias, and absence of tourist-perspective data. Future research should employ controlled experimental designs, larger samples, longitudinal follow-up, validated intercultural instruments, tourist-perspective research, and replication across diverse contexts.

VI. CONCLUSION

This thesis has systematically investigated the effectiveness of the TSES English Club's experiential, cross-cultural model in enhancing EFL students' communicative performance. Through a convergent mixed-methods design over 18 weeks, the study provides robust empirical evidence that participation in authentic, tourism-driven interactions yields substantial improvements in practical communication skills. The quantitative findings revealed statistically significant improvements with a mean increase of 44.82 points and an extremely large effect size (d = 7.25). The qualitative findings elucidated three catalysts and three barriers, providing nuanced understanding of the mechanisms underlying these improvements.

The findings carry important implications for experiential learning theory, intercultural communicative competence, EFL pedagogy, and English club design. The study demonstrates that Kolb's experiential learning cycle can be effectively operationalised in informal settings, extends Byram's ICC framework, and provides a validated, evidence-based blueprint with ten actionable recommendations.

This thesis closes with a reflection on the power of place and human connection. In an era increasingly obsessed with digital solutions, the TSES model reminds us of something more fundamental: put a motivated learner and a willing speaker together in a space that demands communication, and learning will happen. The TSES model capitalises on the rich linguistic and cultural resources already present in Ho Chi Minh City. It requires only a safe, supportive space, a structured progression, and the willingness to embrace authentic interaction. Our responsibility as educators and policymakers is not merely to teach but to design the conditions under which such learning can flourish. This study offers one such design, grounded in evidence, tested in the reality of city streets, and ready for action.

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