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THE EFFECTS OF LOCAL CULTURE INTEGRATION ON ENGLISH-SPEAKING SKILLS OF GRADE 7 STUDENTS IN RURAL VIETNAM

Le Hoang Nam¹, Vo Phan Thu Ngan^{2*}, and Le Ky Nguyen¹

¹*Postgraduate, Dong Thap University, Cao Lanh 870000, Vietnam*

²*Foreign Languages Faculty, Dong Thap University, Cao Lanh 870000, Vietnam*

**Corresponding author, Email: vptngan@dthu.edu.vn*

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Abstract

This quasi-experimental study investigates the effects of integrating local culture into English-speaking instruction on the speaking skills of 30 seventh-grade students at a rural secondary school in Bac Lieu province, Vietnam. The 12-week intervention was integrated into the English 7 textbook and included four culturally integrated units. Quantitative data were collected from pre- and post-speaking tests assessed across four dimensions, namely content, vocabulary, grammar, and a combined fluency- pronunciation criterion, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with six students. The results demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in students' overall speaking performance, particularly in content development and vocabulary use. In addition, qualitative evidence indicated perceived improvements in speaking fluency and increased learner confidence in culturally related speaking tasks. Nevertheless, students showed a preference for familiar cultural contents and experienced relatively slower development in grammatical accuracy and pronunciation in unfamiliar speaking contexts. These findings suggest that integrating local culture can effectively promote both linguistic development and cultural awareness in rural English as a foreign language contexts. The study highlights the pedagogical value of culturally responsive teaching in English as a foreign language settings and calls for further research with larger samples and diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: *Effects, English as a foreign language teaching in rural contexts, English-speaking skills, local culture integration.*

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HIỆU QUẢ CỦA VIỆC TÍCH HỢP VĂN HÓA ĐỊA PHƯƠNG ĐỐI VỚI KỸ NĂNG NÓI TIẾNG ANH CỦA HỌC SINH LỚP 7 Ở KHU VỰC NÔNG THÔN VIỆT NAM

Lê Hoàng Nam¹, Võ Phan Thu Ngân^{2*} và Lê Kỳ Nguyên¹

¹*Học viên cao học, Trường Đại học Đồng Tháp, Việt Nam*

²*Khoa Ngoại ngữ, Trường Đại học Đồng Tháp, Việt Nam*

**Tác giả liên hệ, Email: vptngan@dthu.edu.vn*

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Tóm tắt

Nghiên cứu bán thực nghiệm này nhằm khảo sát tác động của việc tích hợp văn hóa địa phương vào hoạt động dạy học kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh đối với năng lực nói của 30 học sinh lớp 7 tại một trường trung học cơ sở ở khu vực nông thôn thuộc tỉnh Bạc Liêu, Việt Nam. Chương trình can thiệp này được tích hợp vào bốn đơn vị bài học trong sách giáo khoa Tiếng Anh 7 trong khoảng thời gian 12 tuần. Dữ liệu định lượng được thu thập thông qua các bài kiểm tra nói trước và sau can thiệp, được đánh giá theo bốn tiêu chí, bao gồm nội dung, từ vựng, ngữ pháp và một tiêu chí tổng hợp kết hợp độ trôi chảy– phát âm; trong khi đó, dữ liệu định tính được thu thập thông qua phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc với sáu học sinh. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy sự cải thiện có ý nghĩa thống kê trong năng lực nói tổng thể của học sinh, đặc biệt là ở phương diện phát triển nội dung và sử dụng từ vựng. Bên cạnh đó, dữ liệu định tính cho thấy học sinh có sự cải thiện về độ trôi chảy khi nói, thể hiện qua khả năng diễn đạt ý tưởng rõ ràng hơn, giảm hiện tượng ngập ngừng và tăng mức độ tự tin trong các bài nói gắn với nội dung văn hóa. Tuy nhiên, học sinh có xu hướng lựa chọn các nội dung văn hóa quen thuộc và thể hiện mức độ tiến bộ khiêm tốn hơn về độ chính xác ngữ pháp và phát âm trong các tình huống nói chưa quen thuộc. Những phát hiện này cho thấy việc tích hợp văn hóa địa phương có thể thúc đẩy hiệu quả cả sự phát triển ngôn ngữ và nhận thức văn hóa trong bối cảnh dạy học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ ở nông thôn. Nghiên cứu này nhấn mạnh giá trị sư phạm của việc giảng dạy đáp ứng văn hóa trong bối cảnh học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ và kêu gọi nghiên cứu sâu hơn với mẫu lớn hơn và bối cảnh giáo dục đa dạng hơn.

Từ khóa: *Hiệu quả, kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh, giảng dạy tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ ở bối cảnh nông thôn, tích hợp văn hóa địa phương.*

1. Introduction

English has become a global lingua franca and is the most widely learned language as a second or foreign language worldwide, playing a crucial role in international communication. Among the four language skills, speaking is often considered the most important skill to master because of its essential role in communication (Nguyen, 2024). According to Sayin (2015), speaking skills are necessary for learners to communicate confidently and effectively in real-life situations. Consequently, the teaching of speaking skills has become a key priority in English as a foreign language (EFL) education, as speaking is widely recognized as one of the most challenging yet essential components of communicative competence (Goh & Burns, 2012; Richards, 2008).

In speaking tasks, research has consistently shown that EFL learners face multiple challenges, such as constraints in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, practice opportunities, and confidence, with comparable patterns also observed among learners in Vietnam (Nguyen & Vu, 2024; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020). For example, at the Vinh Phu Dong A Secondary School in Bac Lieu province, where most 7th-grade students come from agricultural families and have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, leading to low confidence, limited vocabulary, grammar, and fluency amongst students. As a result, many students demonstrate modest speaking performance and are reluctant to participate in oral activities. In response to these concerns, the local culture integration has been increasingly recognized as an effective approach for fostering speaking skills. A growing number of international research (Putera, 2023; Seftika et al., 2017) has consistently reported improved cultural awareness, effective communication, notable improvements in learners' fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and speaking confidence. In the Vietnamese context, studies by Nguyen and Nguyen (2022) and Tran and Vo (2025) further confirm that local cultural content can increase students' awareness of both intercultural and local culture, as well as enhance their motivation, confidence and vocabulary in culturally integrated learning.

However, there is still a lack of research on examining the relationship between local culture integration and speaking skill development among secondary students in rural areas. Therefore, this study aims to examine the effects of integrating local culture into English-speaking instruction on the speaking skill development of Grade 7 students in a rural secondary school in Vietnam. It also seeks to explore students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges encountered when engaging in speaking activities based on local cultural integration. To achieve these aims, the study was conducted with Grade 7 students at Vinh Phu Dong A secondary school. It was guided by the following research questions (1) What are the effects of integrating local culture into teaching English speaking skills for 7th graders at Vinh Phu Dong A Secondary School? (2) What are the students' perceptions of learning English-speaking through local culture content?

2. Literature review

2.1. Culture in language learning and teaching

Culture is a broad and complex concept that encompasses multiple aspects of human life and is interpreted differently across contexts (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022). In language education, culture is commonly understood as a socially constructed and dynamic system of meanings, values, and practices that shapes how individuals perceive the world and interact with others (Kramsch, 2013; Rietjens, 2019). In this study, local culture refers to the traditions, customs, values, and everyday practices of communities in the Mekong Delta, a region characterized by close-knit social relations, oral traditions, and culturally grounded daily experiences that influence learners' communication patterns.

From a language learning perspective, beliefs, social norms, and cultural conventions are embedded in language use and influence how speakers construct and convey meaning in specific contexts (Kramersch, 1998; Whorf, 2012). Therefore, incorporating local cultural content into English teaching can provide learners with familiar contexts, supporting comprehension and interaction rather than focusing solely on grammatical accuracy (Hinkel, 2014). In English language teaching, local culture serves as a pedagogical resource that helps learners relate new linguistic input to their lived experiences, thereby increasing the relevance, naturalness, and accessibility of speaking tasks (Lestari, 2017; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2017). The pedagogical value of local culture integration can be explained through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which conceptualizes language learning as a socially and culturally mediated process (Vygotsky, 1978). Within this framework, learning occurs through interaction with teachers, peers, and cultural tools, including familiar traditions and local contexts, within learners' Zone of Proximal Development. From this perspective, local cultural content functions as a mediating artifact that may reduce cognitive and affective barriers in speaking tasks. Empirical studies suggest that culture-based materials and local-context speaking activities are associated with increased learner engagement, willingness to speak, and perceived fluency (Anwar et al., 2025; Rahman & Ali, 2022; Ratri et al., 2024).

2.2. Previous studies

Previous studies on the integration of local culture into EFL speaking instruction have documented a range of pedagogical benefits as well as implementation challenges. Overall, empirical findings can be grouped into five main domains: (1) content development, (2) vocabulary and grammar development, (3) fluency and pronunciation improvement, (4) confidence and engagement, and (5) challenges. This section synthesizes key findings within these domains to identify consistent patterns and remaining research gaps.

Content Development

Research on integrating local culture into English teaching has resulted in significant improvements in speaking content. Seftika et al. (2017) showed that although students initially struggled with pronunciation, content development, and limited vocabulary their performance improved after regular practice speaking about local culture. Through repeated opportunities to speak and to listen attentively to their peers' presentations, they gained substantial vocabulary input and models of accurate pronunciation, which in turn enabled them to elaborate their ideas more fully and speak with greater confidence about local cultural topics. In addition, Romrome and Ena (2022) indicated that the integration contributed to the development of students' English proficiency, particularly speaking skills, by strengthening their ability to develop content. Furthermore, students had a positive attitude towards cultural content, as it supported more effective idea generation in speaking tasks (Che & Fatah, 2024).

Vocabulary and Grammar Development

Research has also indicated that integrating local culture into EFL instruction supports learners' vocabulary expansion and creates favorable conditions for the gradual development of grammatical control in speaking. Romrome and Ena (2022) demonstrated that culturally relevant content facilitated vocabulary growth across speaking, reading, and writing activities, enabling learners to access a broader lexical selection during oral communication. Evidence from Seftika et al. (2017) noted that although learners initially experienced difficulties with vocabulary and grammar, culturally grounded speaking tasks provided opportunities for progressive improvement. Additional findings suggests that cultural integration encourages experimentation with language use, as learners actively employed newly learned vocabulary,

attempted clearer sentence structures, and became more aware of their linguistic errors (Alakrash et al., 2021).

Pronunciation and Fluency Improvement

Another aspect of research has examined the effects of cultural relevance on fluency-related aspects of speaking. Studies suggest that culturally familiar topics reduce cognitive load and facilitate smoother speech production. Seftika et al. (2017) reported improvements in pronunciation when students spoke about local cultural topics. Similarly, Sawongta (2017), in a study involving sixth-grade learners, found that integrating local culture into English lessons enhanced speaking fluency and supported the development of more coherent speaking strategies. Regarding learners' perceptions, Anwar et al. (2025) found that practicing speaking through cultural themes contributed to perceived improvements in communicative fluency and accuracy. However, existing studies also indicate that gains across fluency and pronunciation are not always uniform, suggesting that these components may develop at different rates under culturally integrated instruction.

Confidence and Engagement

Beyond linguistic outcomes, integrating local culture has been consistently associated with positive affective effects in EFL classrooms. Alakrash et al. (2021) and Rohman et al. (2025) found that a local culture-based curriculum was associated with marked improvements in students' language skills and confidence, while high school learners showed strong interest in everyday "small-c" cultural topics such as food and customs, which supported sustained engagement and participation (Che & Fatah, 2024). Moreover, Tran and Vo's (2025) pre-experimental study with eleventh-grade students demonstrated that embedding local cultural elements and activities into textbook units led to statistically significant vocabulary gains and fostered greater motivation, confidence, and word retention.

Challenges

Despite its pedagogical benefits, the integration of local culture into EFL speaking instruction entails several notable challenges. A key limitation relates to students' limited awareness of local culture, as English learning is often confined to textbook-based instruction rather than authentic cultural engagement. Nguyen and Nguyen (2022) highlighted that such restricted exposure prevents learners from developing meaningful cultural understanding. Similarly, Rahman et al. (2022) reported that many EFL students demonstrated a low level of comprehension regarding the integration of local culture in speaking lessons, reflecting insufficient instructional support. Several studies suggested that grammar development does not automatically emerge from culture-based activities. Alakrash et al. (2021) observed that ongoing grammar difficulties required teachers to allocate substantial time to explaining linguistic forms and culture-related structures while Kamilah et al. (2019) found minimal improvement in grammatical accuracy across instructional cycles. Moreover, vocabulary and content-related constraints significantly limit students' speaking performance. Limited culture-related vocabulary and unfamiliar cultural concepts often hinder idea expression, leading teachers to rely on first-language translation (Alakrash et al., 2021; Wutun, Arafah, & Yassi, 2018). Finally, time constraints restrict opportunities for practice and timely feedback, thereby reducing the effectiveness of local culture integration (Alakrash et al., 2021; Anwar et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, prior studies on local culture integration in EFL have mainly concentrated on higher education or urban contexts, leaving rural secondary learners in Vietnam insufficiently examined. In response, this study explores the impact of local culture-based

instruction on the speaking skills of Grade 7 students in a rural Mekong Delta secondary school using a mixed-methods design.

3. Research methods

3.1. Research design

This study adopted a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design to investigate the effects of local culture integration on learners' speaking skills. Quantitative data were used to measure the effects of the instructional intervention, while qualitative data explored students' perceptions of incorporating local culture into English-speaking lessons (Creswell & Guetterman, 2024). The participants consisted of 30 seventh graders (17 males and 13 females) from Vinh Phu Dong A Secondary School in Bac Lieu province. Their ages were from 12 to 14. They all learned EFL from Grade 3. The participants were selected through convenience sampling to select a group of people who are most easily accessible and readily available (Simkus, 2022). This approach was chosen because of its benefits such as being cost-effective, less time-consuming, simple conduction, etc (Golzar et al., 2022).

For the qualitative phase, six students were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews to represent different groups, genders, and levels of post-test speaking proficiency. Semi-structured interviews are particularly suitable because they require a few additional open-ended questions to explore deeper information (Adams, 2015). As a result, this method allows researchers to gain detailed insights into students' perceptions and learning experiences in integrating local culture into speaking lessons.

3.2. Intervention

The local culture intervention was implemented over a 12-week period during the second semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. Each 45-minute English lesson followed the textbook *Tiếng Anh 7 Global Success*, published by Vietnam Education Publishing House in 2024 in accordance with the MOET (2018) curriculum. In selected lessons where speaking activities were appropriate, students participated in local culture-based speaking tasks lasting approximately ten minutes after the main instructional content.

The speaking lessons were intervened local culture into 4 units, including Unit 8 (Films) is integrated into Cong Tu Bac Lieu story, Unit 9 (Festivals Around the World) is integrated into the Ok Om Bok festival, Unit 10 (Energy Sources) is integrated into Bac Lieu Wind Farm, Unit 12 (English-Speaking Countries) is integrated Nam Hai pagoda. These local cultural materials were chosen because they align with the topics in the textbook, which ensures that the content and time allocation are suitable for school's curriculum.

In the guided practice stage, students worked in pairs using simple structures related to the cultural topics. In these lessons, students were divided into random groups at the begin of the semester to complete requirements speaking task involving short role-plays, descriptions, or conversations based on local cultural content. While the teacher monitored performance and provided brief formative feedback focusing on content, fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, and a transition to the next textbook unit. The timeline protocol of a full 12 weeks is presented in the Table 1.

Table 1. The timeline protocol of a full 12 weeks intervention

Phase	Description	Week(s)
Phase 1: Pilot Study	Testing the initial speaking test and interview questions on students from other grades, adjusting the difficulty.	Week 1

Phase	Description	Week(s)
Phase 2: Pretest	Administering a speaking test to participants.	Week 2
Phase 3: Intervention	8-week program integrating local culture in speaking lessons.	Weeks 3–10
Phase 4: Posttest	The posttest was design as pretest to compare results.	Week 11
Phase 5: Interview	A semi-structured interview was conducted with 6 participants.	Week 12

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

3.3.1. English Speaking Pre-Test and Post-Test

The pre- and post-tests were administered at the beginning and end of the 12-week intervention to evaluate students' speaking skills. The pre-test focused on familiar topics (e.g., My Favorite Food) to measure pre-intervention level, while one of the four topics, festivals around the world was selected for posttest. The tests comprised subquestions related to What, Where, When and Why. To ensure scoring reliability and consistency, an analytic rating scale adapted from CEFR A2 descriptors and the official Dispatch No. 1633 (Department of Education, Science and Technology, 2022) were used to evaluate four dimensions of speaking performance content, fluency and pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar.

3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were administered to six students upon completion of the study in order to complement the quantitative findings and gain a deeper understanding of students' responses to the intervention. The interviews aimed to triangulate the pre- and post-test findings by capturing learners' perceived benefits and challenges of the integration. The questions mainly focused on students' perceptions of the effects of the intervention on their speaking development as well as their suggestions for future study. Each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes and was conducted in Vietnamese to ensure clear comprehension and encourage students to express their ideas freely.

Table 2. Interview questions

Effects of integrating local culture:

1. What are the impacts of local integration into the content?
2. What are the impacts of local integration into the fluency and pronunciation?
3. What are the impacts of local integration into vocabulary development?
4. What are the impacts of local integration into the use of grammar?
5. Which component (content, fluency and pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar) did you improve the most?
6. Which component (content, fluency and pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar) did you improve the least?

Students' perceptions:

7. What are your emotions when integrating local culture into speaking lesson?
8. Are you interested in talking about local culture?
9. What are the challenges when talking about local culture?
10. What suggestions do you have for the local culture integration?

3.4. Data collection and analysis

3.4.1. Speaking tests

The speaking tests took place in a quiet classroom in the research setting to create a suitable and fair environment for testing students' speaking ability. To ensure accurate, fair, consistent and objective scoring, all speaking tests were first recorded using digital audio devices. Then, two experienced English teachers were responsible for assessing students' speaking performance. The final speaking score was calculated as the average of the two teachers' total scores. After the tests were completed, all speaking scores were entered into IBM SPSS Version 26 for analysis. Descriptive statistics and paired-sample t-tests were used to compare the pre-test and post-test results and to examine changes in students' speaking performance.

3.4.2. Interviews

Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using the six-step thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). Initial coding was conducted by the teacher-researcher, who was directly involved in the instructional intervention and familiar with the classroom context. The interview transcripts were read carefully to capture overall patterns in the data. Initial descriptive codes were generated both deductively, based on the structure of the interview questions, and inductively, from key themes that emerged as students described their experiences and perceptions during the intervention. The identified themes reflected reported improvements in vocabulary recall, increased speaking confidence, and reduced speaking anxiety.

To enhance the credibility of the analysis, an expert—a Vietnamese lecturer with postgraduate training in English language education in an English-speaking country— independently reviewed the coded data and emerging themes. Any discrepancies in coding or theme interpretation were discussed and resolved through consensus. Related codes were then grouped into broader themes, such as content development, greater speaking confidence, and engagement. In the final stage, the themes were reviewed, clearly defined, and reported as a coherent narrative to support and complement the quantitative findings.

3.5. Ethical considerations

All research procedures were conducted in line with ethical principles relevant to educational research (Tran & Vo, 2016). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants, with approval from both students and their parents or guardians. Before data collection, participants were clearly informed about the purpose, procedures, and potential benefits of the study, as well as their right to withdraw at any time without penalty (Arifin, 2018). Ethical considerations in qualitative study. Confidentiality was ensured through data anonymization and secure data storage (Dane, 1990). In addition, official permission was obtained from the school principal to ensure that the research complied with institutional regulations and did not interfere with teaching activities.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Pretest and posttest findings

The speaking tests were evaluated across four core components: content, fluency and pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Each one was rated using a standardized rubric with a maximum score of 0.4, except for content, which was allocated a higher weighting of 0.8 to reflect its priority as a key indicator of effective communication. Descriptive and inferential statistics for pre-test and post-test scores are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive and Inferential Statistics of Speaking Tests (N = 30)

Statistic	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Mean	SD	t (df = 29)	p
Pre-Test	0.9	1.9	1.41	0.31		
Post-Test	1.1	2.0	1.56	0.29		
Difference			0.15	0.12	-4.82	< 0.001

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics of students' speaking scores before and after the local culture-based speaking intervention. The minimum score increased from 0.9 in the pre-test to 1.1 in the post-test, indicating improvement among lower-performing students. The maximum score also rose slightly from 1.9 to 2.0, suggesting a modest enhancement at the higher end of speaking performance. In terms of central tendency, the mean speaking score increased from 1.41 (SD = 0.31) in the pre-test to 1.56 (SD = 0.29) in the post-test. This increase reflects an overall improvement in students' speaking performance following the integration of local cultural content into English-speaking lessons. In addition, the slight reduction in standard deviation indicated that students' speaking scores became more consistent after the intervention.

To examine whether the observed improvement was statistically significant, a paired-samples t-test was conducted. The results revealed a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test speaking scores, $t(29) = -4.82$, $p < .001$. This finding suggested that the integration of local culture-based speaking instruction had a meaningful effect on students' speaking development.

To further examine the impact of the intervention on specific speaking sub-skills, paired-samples t-tests were conducted for content, fluency and pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar (Table 4).

Table 4. Descriptive and Inferential Statistics of Speaking Sub-skills (N = 30)

Sub-skill	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Mean Gain	t(29)	p
Content	0.55 (0.13)	0.61 (0.13)	0.06	3.62	0.001
Fluency & pronunciation	0.28 (0.09)	0.31 (0.07)	0.04	3.61	0.001
Vocabulary	0.30 (0.08)	0.32 (0.08)	0.02	2.25	0.032
Grammar	0.29 (0.08)	0.31 (0.07)	0.02	1.37	0.182

Table 4 indicated statistically significant improvements in content, $t(29) = 3.62$, $p = .001$, and fluency and pronunciation, $t(29) = 3.61$, $p = 0.001$. Vocabulary also showed a significant, though more modest, improvement, $t(29) = 2.25$, $p = 0.032$. In contrast, the increase in grammar scores was not statistically significant, $t(29) = 1.37$, $p = 0.182$. These findings suggested that the local culture-based speaking intervention was particularly effective in enhancing students' content development and oral fluency at a statistically significant level, while its impact on grammatical accuracy was limited.

The findings of this study were consistent with Romrome et al. (2022) and Rohman et al. (2025), who reported that local culture-based speaking activities increased students' classroom participation, confidence, and vocabulary development. Similarly, the limited improvement in grammatical accuracy aligns with Alakrash et al. (2021), who observed that learners often struggle with grammatical control when producing longer and more complex

utterances. Furthermore, the observed improvement among lower-performing students in the present study supports Nguyen and Nguyen's (2022) findings on the role of culturally relevant content in enhancing learners' speaking engagement. Different from the previous studies conducted in urban contexts, the present study was implemented in a rural high school with limited instructional resources, suggesting that local culture-based instruction may be effective even in resource-constrained settings.

4.2. Interview findings

Findings from the interview data indicate that integrating Bac Lieu's local culture into English speaking lessons positively influenced students' speaking development across affective and linguistic dimensions that supported learners' confidence, idea generation, and oral production.

From an affective perspective, most participants reported increased confidence and engagement when speaking about familiar local cultural topics. This finding can be interpreted through Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which conceptualizes learning as a socially mediated process occurring through interaction with culturally meaningful tools (Vygotsky, 1978). As Interviewee 2 explained, "After learning about local cultural topics, I feel more confident in English speaking tasks with familiar ideas." The use of familiar content appeared to increase their willingness to communicate, a pattern also observed by Romrome and Ena (2022) and Che and Fatah (2024), who reported reduced speaking anxiety and increased engagement when local culture was incorporated into EFL speaking instruction.

In addition, learners perceived noticeable improvement in specific speaking components, particularly vocabulary development related to traditional cakes, festival activities or attractions. Participants consistently indicated that cultural familiarity facilitated vocabulary retention by enabling them to recall, reuse, and appropriately apply them during speaking activities. For example, Interviewee 6 noted, "When working in pairs to introduce Nam Hai Pagoda, I had more opportunities to use vocabulary related to famous tourist attractions in Bac Lieu." This finding aligns with previous studies suggesting that culturally grounded topics support lexical expansion by allowing learners to associate new words with concrete experiences and existing cultural schemas (Alakrash et al., 2021; Seftika et al., 2017).

In contrast, grammatical development was reported as more limited as evidenced by post-test results. Analysis of the post-test data showed that nearly half of the participants continued to demonstrate difficulties with basic grammatical features, particularly subject-verb agreement. Interview data further revealed that although the learners remained grammatically inaccurate, they reported increased awareness of their errors and an improved ability to self-correct during speaking. From a sociocultural perspective, this pattern suggests that while local culture integration may not immediately lead to grammatical accuracy, it creates favorable conditions for gradual development by encouraging experimentation, self-monitoring, and supported interaction within learners' zone of proximal development. Similar findings have been reported by Alakrash et al. (2021); Romrome and Ena (2022), who observed stronger improvements in vocabulary than in grammar when culturally relevant materials were employed.

Furthermore, participants reported improvements in content and fluency particularly in their ability to make longer sentences with fewer hesitations. Analysis of post-test speaking performances showed that many participants were able to extend their content short, fragmented sentences and maintain ideas more coherently when discussing culturally familiar topics. Interview data further helped explain this improvement. Participants reported that familiar cultural content enabled them to organize ideas more naturally and longer. As

Interviewee 1 shared, “When the teacher taught me about the Prince of Bac Lieu, ideas came very naturally because I had heard the story in Vietnamese before.” Likewise, Interviewee 4 reflected, “I only spoke in short sentences before, but now I can speak longer with familiar topics.” This interpretation is consistent with previous research highlighting improvements in fluency and content development when local culture is integrated into EFL speaking instruction (Anwar et al., 2025; Seftika et al., 2017).

Despite the benefits of integrating local culture into English lessons, students encountered several challenges. Post-test results revealed persistent pronunciation difficulties when dealing with culture-related English words and local proper nouns that were rarely used in their daily communication, such as festival, heritage, coastal, turbine, or spiritual. Several students also showed uncertainty in pronouncing local place names during the post-test speaking tasks, often hesitating between Vietnamese and English pronunciation patterns. Interview data further illustrated this challenge. For instance, One participant, (Interviewee 2) noted, “Although I love talking about our hometown, there are some words about festivals or places that are very hard to pronounce, such as Ok Om Bok or Nam Hai Pagoda. I don’t know whether to follow Vietnamese pronunciation or English pronunciation.” This finding suggests that while local culture integration enhances engagement, it may also introduce pronunciation challenges related to unfamiliar lexical items and culture-specific proper nouns in rural EFL contexts.

Next, grammatical challenges emerged when students attempted to describe local cultural practices, which often required longer and more complex sentences. Post-test speaking performances showed occasional grammatical inaccuracies, particularly in word order and tense use, although these errors were not frequently observed across participants. Interview data provided further insight into the source of these difficulties. Several learners reported planning their ideas in Vietnamese before speaking English, which sometimes resulted in sentence structure problems. As Interviewee 6 shared, “I think in Vietnamese first, so when I speak English, I sometimes make mistakes in sentence structure.” This finding aligns with previous studies reporting similar grammar-related challenges in culture-based EFL instruction (Alakrash et al., 2021; Kamilah et al., 2019), while differing from studies that observed more substantial grammatical gains (e.g., Seftika et al., 2017).

Finally, instructional time constraints limited opportunities for individualized feedback on key speaking components, particularly pronunciation accuracy and grammatical correctness, during speaking activities. Teachers were often able to correct only a small number of students during presentations, leaving quieter learners with minimal guidance. As Interviewee 3 remarked, “Only some students get corrected; we don’t know if we pronounce correctly.” Similar concerns regarding time pressure and limited feedback have been noted in prior research by Alakrash et al. (2021) and Anwar et al. (2025).

5. Conclusion, implications and limitations

This study concludes that integrating local cultural content into English-speaking instruction can positively support the speaking development of Grade 7 students in a rural secondary context in Bac Lieu. The findings indicated that culturally familiar topics contribute to improvements in vocabulary use, content development, speaking fluency, learners’ confidence, classroom participation, and reducing speaking anxiety. Furthermore, the study extends existing research by demonstrating the pedagogical value of local culture integration in rural contexts, where students typically have limited exposure to English in the classroom. In such contexts, culturally responsive instruction appears to create more accessible and meaningful opportunities for oral communication. However, this study acknowledges several

challenges associated with the integration of local culture, including ongoing difficulties with pronunciation, reliance on translation strategies, and time pressure during speaking tasks.

Based on the findings of this study, several pedagogical implications for English speaking instruction in rural EFL contexts can be drawn. First, English teachers in rural secondary schools should systematically integrate local cultural content through concrete classroom activities, such as picture-based discussions, role-playing, or short presentations related to local festivals (e.g., regional celebrations), aspects of rural life (e.g., farming activities), or well-known local landmarks. These activities help create familiar and meaningful communicative contexts. Second, speaking activities should be carefully scaffolded, combining culturally familiar topics like local food, popular local films or stories or traditional festivals with gradual linguistic support, especially for grammar and pronunciation. Teachers are encouraged to provide guided practice, focused feedback, and opportunities for self-correction to support learners' development within their Zone of Proximal Development. Third, curriculum designers and textbook developers should consider incorporating locally relevant cultural themes including local history, everyday community practices, and regionally significant cultural events, to make speaking tasks more accessible and engaging for rural learners. Together, these implications highlight the value of culturally responsive and context-sensitive instruction in improving English speaking outcomes in rural and resource-constrained educational settings.

Although the study reported positive results on integrating local culture into EFL speaking instruction, several limitations were acknowledged. First, the research was limited to a single group of students in a specific rural context in Southern Vietnam, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other geographical and cultural settings. Second, the study was conducted over a relatively short instructional period, which may not fully capture the long-term impact of local culture integration on learners' speaking development, particularly in areas such as grammatical accuracy. Therefore, future studies should involve participants from different regions of Vietnam (e.g., Northern, Central, and Southern regions) and across various educational levels to enhance representativeness. In addition, longitudinal research designs spanning at least one academic year are recommended to examine the prolonged effects of local culture integration on EFL speaking development over time.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Pre-test

Topic: My favorite food

You will give a short talk (around 2 minutes) answering the following questions

- (1) What is your favorite food?
- (2) When do you eat it?
- (3) Where do you eat it?
- (4) What are its ingredients?
- (5) Why do you like this food?

Appendix B. Post-test

Topic: Festivals around the world

You will give a short talk (around 2 minutes) answering the following questions

- (1) What is your favorite festival?
- (2) When does it take place?
- (3) Where is it celebrated?
- (4) What are the activities?
- (5) Which activity do you like best? Why?