

# STUDENTS' CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE: A CASE STUDY IN A UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM

## TRÍ TUỆ VĂN HÓA CỦA SINH VIÊN: NGHIÊN CỨU TÌNH HUỐNG TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC Ở VIỆT NAM

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**Abstract** - Cultural intelligence (CQ) which refers to the level of an individual can adapt to new cultural settings has been researched as the level of CQ affects people in the process of integrating into a new cultural environment. CQ consists of four dimensions: Metacognitive CQ, Cognitive CQ, Motivational CQ, and Behavioral CQ. This study was conducted to understand the CQ level of English-majored students at The University of Danang - University of Foreign Language Studies (UD-UFLS). The research applied mixed methods with the semi-structured interview and the questionnaire as instruments. The data reveals that UFLS students generally had a good level of CQ though they have to confront some challenges such as language barriers, and culture shocks. It is recommended that students should be equipped with some basic language of the country where they have internship, and with cultural knowledge to avoid culture shocks.

**Key words** - Cultural intelligence; metacognition; cognition; motivation; behavior

### 1. Introduction

International internships are becoming increasingly popular in higher education worldwide as well as in Vietnam [1]. Organizing international internships is one of the most effective ways to develop students' skills and enhance knowledge for employment when they enter the labour market. Therefore, universities have been trying to send their students for short internships in other countries [2]. To extend students' experience in a new environment together with the improvement in skills and knowledge to successfully enter the labor market, UD-UFLS has been sending students abroad. Udon Thani Rajabhat University is a popular destination for UD-UFLS students' internship. The internship takes five weeks and students have chances to take part in a variety of activities (See Section 2.2. for details).

Yet, the internship may be affected more or less by students' cultural intelligence (CQ). CQ is a rather new concept that can be used to explain why certain people can adapt to different cultural contexts than others [3]. Cultural intelligence is defined as an individual's capability to function effectively in contexts of diverse cultural features [3].

To understand how CQ UFLS students are during their internship in Thailand, the study was conducted. The research aims to address the following research questions:

- How cultural UD-UFLS students are during their internship in Thailand?

**Tóm tắt** - Trí tuệ văn hóa (CQ) đề cập đến mức độ một cá nhân có thể thích nghi với môi trường văn hóa mới đang được nghiên cứu nhiều vì mức độ trí tuệ văn hóa ảnh hưởng đến con người trong quá trình hòa nhập vào môi trường văn hóa mới. CQ bao gồm bốn khía cạnh: CQ siêu nhận thức, CQ nhận thức, CQ động lực, và CQ hành vi. Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện nhằm tìm hiểu mức độ trí tuệ văn hóa của sinh viên chuyên ngành Tiếng Anh tại Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Đà Nẵng (UD-UFLS). Nghiên cứu áp dụng phương pháp hỗn hợp với công cụ là phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc và bảng câu hỏi. Dữ liệu cho thấy sinh viên UFLS nhìn chung có khả năng CQ tốt mặc dù họ phải đối mặt với một số thách thức như rào cản ngôn ngữ và cú sốc văn hóa. Nghiên cứu khuyến cáo sinh viên nên trang bị một số ngôn ngữ cơ bản của quốc gia nơi mình thực tập, kiến thức văn hóa để tránh những cú sốc văn hóa.

**Từ khóa** - Trí tuệ văn hóa; siêu nhận thức; nhận thức; động lực; hành vi

- What cultural difficulties may they face?

- What should be prepared to enhance the effectiveness of the internship?

### 2. Theoretical Background

#### 2.1. Cultural Intelligence Framework

The term CQ first appeared in the early 21st century [4]. Based on the multiple loci of intelligence [5], CQ has been conceptualised with four dimensions: Metacognitive CQ, Cognitive CQ, Motivational CQ, and Behavioral CQ [6], [4], [7]. These four dimensions assess multiple aspects of intercultural competence that an individual possesses and reflects in diverse cultural settings.

**Metacognitive CQ:** This dimension "refers to an individual level of conscious cultural awareness during cultural interaction" [6, pp. 584]. Metacognitive CQ involves strategies that permit people to develop heuristic rules for social interactions in diverse settings with new cultures. Individuals with high metacognitive CQ have a good ability to deal with cultural differences. They are able to use their intercultural knowledge consciously to adjust their behaviors, and their speech mindfully to interact with those from different cultures. A clear example of this is the situation in which a Western businessman with the high level of metacognitive CQ interacts with his Asian counterparts. He uses his metacognitive CQ to mindfully speak up during the meeting. In other words, this person observes the

interaction and the communication style of his Asian counterparts to have appropriate time to speak up in a meeting [6]. In sum, metacognitive CQ is the factor that promotes active thinking about people, and different cultural settings, which drives individuals to adapt and adjust their communicative strategies to be more culturally appropriate in communication.

**Cognitive CQ:** Cognitive CQ refers to people's knowledge of cultural norms, cultural practices, and conventions that people obtain through education, and personal experience [6]. Actually, cognitive CQ denotes the different cultural knowledge that people can use in their conversations or interactions. Such knowledge is accumulated through various sources like personal experience, education or exposure to cultures of other countries. While metacognitive CQ involves higher cognitive processes, cognitive CQ refers to more specific knowledge of culture like norms, conventions, and practices [3], [8]. Cultural norms, and values differ from countries to countries. Time, authority, relationships, and family systems are some typical differences in cultures that may cause problems for people in other countries if they lack such knowledge. Success in work can be affected if people do not have good knowledge of norms, relationships, and practices to implement effective social interactions. Individuals having high cognitive CQ know and understand the economic, legal and social contexts of various cultures.

**Motivational CQ:** This dimension denotes the capability to direct energy and attention towards acquiring and functioning in different cultural contexts with cultural differences [3]. Motivational CQ is conceptualised as the form of self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation in intercultural situations which requires confidence and interest in new cultural settings [9]. In fact, a person who has high motivational CQ is likely to be more successful in intercultural interactions.

**Behavioral CQ:** Behavioral CQ refers to a person's capability to use appropriate verbal and nonverbal actions in interacting with others from different cultures [6]. Behavioral CQ is based on a range of behaviors. In fact, behavioral CQ is the visible form of cultural intelligence. When individuals implement conversations, they rely on others' behaviors through verbal and nonverbal actions like facial expressions, vocal expressions or bodily actions to decide what they need to react or exhibit in the interaction. Dos and Don'ts are what people are expected to know when they contact people from various cultures. In other words, behavioral CQ involves a person's flexibility in using verbal and nonverbal actions in their interaction so that they can be highly adaptable to different cultural settings.

Generally, cultural intelligence is understood as the person's level of ability to function in novel cultural settings. Cultural intelligence consists of four dimensions: metacognitive CQ, cognitive CQ, motivational CQ, and behavioral CQ.

## 2.2. Internship in Thailand

UD-UFLS has organised internships for students in Thailand for several years. This year (2024), the

internship was organised in Udonthani Rajabhat University. The internship took 5 weeks from 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2024 to 21<sup>st</sup> April, 2024. During the internship, students took part in a variety of activities including preparing lesson plans to teach English/ Vietnamese as a foreign language, taking part in workshops to learn Thai language, studying cultural features of Thai people, translating and interpreting activities, studying tourism activities, and so on. During the internship, students were offered chances to improve some soft skills such as teamwork, leadership, time management, and especially communication skills in a new cultural setting.

## 3. Methodology

The study used mixed methods in which the quantitative approach was followed by the qualitative one. The data of the questionnaire addressed the research questions, which were then further explained by the data from the interview.

### 3.1. Research participants

23 students who had just finished their internship in Thailand responded to the questionnaire. Five students of them were invited for the interview. They are all English-major students who are going to graduate from university next July.

### 3.2. Research instruments

#### 3.2.1. Interview

Semi-structured interview was applied in the research. The questions were well-prepared in a specific order. The questions move from the ones on students' difficulties in the internship to the ones to exploit specific examples of their culture shocks. Spontaneous questions were added to get deeper information when necessary. The questions were developed from previous studies which focus on students' cultural intelligence, cultural difficulties, and what should be prepared to have effective international internships [7].

#### 3.2.2. Questionnaire

The study employed the questionnaire developed and validated by Van Dyne Linn, Ang Soon, and Koh Christine [4]. The questionnaire was designed based on the conceptual framework of cultural intelligence as discussed in Section 2.1. It consists of four parts measuring four dimensions of CQ. The first part, metacognitive CQ, has 4 items; the second part, cognitive CQ includes 6 items; the third part motivational CQ has 5 items; the final one, behavioral CQ has 5 items. In addition, to answer research questions 2, and 3, three open-ended questions were added to the original questionnaire.

### 3.3. Reliability and validity

The research's validity and reliability were maintained through the careful selection of the instruments [4]. The reliability level of the questionnaire was .816, which denotes a good level of reliability.

### 3.4. Data analysis

The qualitative data was analysed using codes and themes. First, the major themes were picked up from the analysis. Such themes were also selected in correlation

with the ones from previous studies [9], [8]. Under the umbrella of the major themes, sub-themes were added from the interview data.

The quantitative data were processed using SPSS version 16. Mean, Std. Deviation, Minimum, and Maximum were calculated, and then further explained by what was found in the interview.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. UFLS students' cultural intelligence

The cultural intelligence level was identified by the four dimensions as mentioned in Section 2.1. The scale is from 1 to 7, expressing from *Totally Disagree* to *Totally Agree*.

*Table 1. Descriptive Statistics*

Dimensions	N.	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Metacognitive CQ	23	4.00	7.00	5.77	.93
Cognitive CQ	23	3.00	5.5	4.94	.58
Motivational CQ	23	5.00	6.80	5.74	.54
Behavioral CQ	23	4.40	7.00	5.75	.74

As shown from Table 1, the range of mean for all four dimensions is from 4.94 to 5.75, denoting that English-major students generally have a good level of cultural intelligence [6]. Surprisingly, the highest mean belongs to metacognitive CQ with 5.77, the dimension that requires high mental processes while cognitive CQ has the lowest mean with 4.94.

The data from the interview also reveals that students found it easy to adapt to the new cultural environment. All five interviewed students replied that they found the Thai lifestyle to be similar to Vietnam. Though they faced some challenges due to language barriers and some culture shocks, such ones were considered to be very small difficulties.

*"Actually, I think it is quite easy for me to be here. Differences in cultures cause me some difficulties, but I can overcome such difficulties easily. For me, Thai lifestyle is not very different from ours."* One reply from an interviewed student.

Yet, students also stated that the time of the internship in Thailand is quite short, and they were taken care of quite well by lecturers from both UFLS and Udonthani Rajabhat University. They spent most of the time taking part in activities organised by Udonthani Rajabhat University. The exposure to Thai culture was guided, resulting in less chance to experience cultural differences in life.

### 4.2. Difficulties caused by cultural differences

It is found from the questionnaire that approximately 84% of students experienced some difficulties during the time of the internship in Thailand. During the internship, students were identified to face three major difficulties: language barriers, culture shocks caused by norms, lifestyles, and religions.

*"Culture shock can happen due to differences in language, food, social customs, and work culture. In Thailand, some common aspects that I might cause culture shock include the hierarchical nature of relationships, the importance of respect for elders and authority figures. Additionally, the spicy and flavorful cuisine, bustling city life, and vibrant cultural festivals can also be new and exciting experiences for me"* cited from a student' reply to what culture shocks they experienced. In this case, differences in lifestyles cause students to have difficulties. During the interview, three students admitted that they had difficulties in traveling on the road because Thai people go on the left. Some norms like not pointing to others, or three different ways for greetings also make students feel confused. Using forks and knives in meals and the habit of wearing light clothes in extremely hot weather was also mentioned by students.

In addition, some students were shocked in Thailand due to its religion. Thailand is dominated by Buddhism. Even though Vietnam also shares such cultural features when Buddhism is also the main religion with numerous pagodas everywhere in Vietnam, students still find it strange in Thailand.

*"During my internship in Thailand, I was shocked by their culture when everywhere there were statues and pictures of Buddha as well as the King. And another surprising thing is that, I guess, Thai people really like details with pointed shapes or patterns"* one student replied to the question about what culture shock they had.

Yet, for most students, such cultural differences did not cause them many difficulties as these differences are tolerable, Vietnamese culture and Thai one are very similar; therefore, students did not suffer much from culture shocks even though they did experience some in the internship.

Language barriers are the biggest difficulties students had in the internship. Students were surprised that Thai people are not good at English, resulting in difficulties in contacting local people.

### 4.3. Preparations for effective internship

It is recommended by students that for an effective internship, students need to prepare (1) some basic Thai language; (2) cultural knowledge. As found from the interview, students met language barriers as Thai people do not speak English. As a result, students had many difficulties in communicating with local people when they were in restaurants, on the street, or in the market. The lack of a basic local language prevents them from studying cultural features and having a good understanding of the socio-economic characteristics of Thai society and government. The lack of cultural knowledge causes some culture shocks to students as mentioned in Section 4.2. 18 out of 23 students replied in the questionnaire that they had some misunderstandings or culture shocks due to their limited understanding of social norms, and behaviors in Thailand.

*"I suggest that people should learn some basic words and sentences, learn a little bit about the culture, some prohibitions when intern abroad because these will help*

you a lot in getting used to a new living environment.” Cited from an interview with one student.

In addition, it is also advised that the university needs to prepare students well with guidelines and internship plans in detail. Before the internship in Thailand, UD-UFLS organised workshops to equip students with Dos and Don'ts in Thailand. The plan for the internship was carefully designed by both UD-UFLS and Udonthani Rajabhat University. The two universities also had several meetings to discuss what students needed to prepare and what two universities had to plan, and prepare. Yet, students still complained that what they obtained from the workshop before the internship should be improved, especially basic cultural features such as some etiquettes to avoid cultural misunderstandings in interaction.

## 5. Discussion of Findings

As revealed from the findings, UD-UFLS students generally have a good level of cultural intelligence though they had to encounter difficulties due to language barriers and culture shocks. These findings align well with what is found in a study in Germany when students have some challenges due to cultural differences in their international internship [2]. The study in Germany also figures out that students' cultural competence increased during the internship when they were exposed to the new culture.

The mixed method study on the international internship in France shows differences from those from the research on UD-UFLS students' CQ in the sense that students assessed themselves as lack of CQ when they first came to France [10]. Their CQ rose significantly after six months of the internship. Yet, students doing the internship in France shared some difficulties caused by cultural differences and language barriers with UFLS students [10].

Currently, the knowledge of how CQ Vietnamese students are in a foreign country is quite limited. The findings of this research can be considered as the first step for further understandings of Vietnamese students CQ later.

## 6. Implications and Conclusion

### 6.1. Implications

Students' CQ level is a critical factor to decide how students can perform in a new cultural setting [11], [12]. To have effective internships, both the university and students have to be conscious of making students more CQ to avoid culture shocks and have effective integration into the new environment.

First, students have to actively equip themselves with basic cultural knowledge, especially social norms, etiquettes, local language, and religious practice [3]. Second, the university needs to organise workshops to provide students with the necessary knowledge, and guidelines for their international internship. In addition, the curriculum should have some subjects to educate students with intercultural knowledge. Currently, the English

language program of UFLS focuses on cultural knowledge of English native countries like America, and Britain. No courses on Asian cultures are introduced in the curriculum, leading to the fact that students do not have a chance to access these cultures.

### 6.2. Conclusion

To sum up, English- majored students have a good level of cultural intelligence as found in the study. Students generally adapted well to the cultural setting during their internship. Yet, they had some difficulties caused by the language barriers and cultural differences.

The study has certain limitations. Firstly, the number of participants is quite limited, which cannot represent the large population of UFLS students. Second, Thailand is one of the Southeast Asian countries, so its culture is similar to other ones in this group including Vietnam. Yet, what is found in the research can be used as a reference for further studies on the cultural intelligence of Vietnamese students as well as Vietnamese people, and it can be useful for UFLS to implement future internships for its students.

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## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed and validated by Linn Van Dye, Soon Ang, and Christine Koh.

**Instructions:** Read each statement and select the response that best describes your capabilities. Select the answer that BEST describes you AS YOU REALLY ARE. The 7 point scale is from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree

### Metacognitive CQ

Q1: I am conscious of the cultural knowledge I use when interacting with people with different cultural backgrounds.

Q2: I adjust my cultural knowledge as I interact with people from a culture that is unfamiliar to me.

Q3: I am conscious of the cultural knowledge I apply to cross-cultural interactions.

Q4: I check the accuracy of my cultural knowledge as I interact with people from different cultures.

### Cognitive CQ

Q5: I know the legal and economic systems of other cultures.

Q6: I know the rules (e.g., vocabulary, grammar) of other languages.

Q7: I know the cultural values and religious beliefs of other cultures.

Q8: I know the marriage systems of other cultures.

Q9: I know the arts and crafts of other cultures.

Q10: I know the rules for expressing nonverbal behaviors in other cultures.

### Motivational CQ

Q11: I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.

Q12: I am confident that I can socialize with locals in a culture that is unfamiliar to me.

Q13: I am sure I can deal with the stresses of adjusting to a culture that is new to me.

Q14: I enjoy living in cultures that are unfamiliar to me.

Q15: I am confident that I can get accustomed to the shopping conditions in a different culture.

### Behavioral CQ

Q16: I change my verbal behavior (e.g., accent, tone) when a cross-cultural interaction requires it.

Q17: I use pause and silence differently to suit different cross-cultural situations.

Q18: I vary the rate of my speaking when a cross-cultural situation requires it.

Q19: I change my nonverbal behavior when a cross-cultural situation requires it.

Q20: I alter my facial expressions when a cross-cultural interaction requires it.

### Open-ended questions:

Q21. During the internship, have you ever experienced a culture shock? If yes, please specify the situation.

Q22. What are the difficulties that you faced in your internship in Thailand?

Q23. In your opinion, what should be prepared for an effective internship?