

# CHALLENGES FACED BY VIETNAMESE EFL STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF A SHORT-TERM EXCHANGE PROGRAM AT A POLISH UNIVERSITY

NHỮNG THÁCH THỨC CỦA SINH VIÊN EFL VIỆT NAM: NGHIÊN CỨU TRƯỜNG HỢP ĐỊNH TÍNH  
VỀ CHƯƠNG TRÌNH TRAO ĐỔI NGẮN HẠN TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC BA LAN

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the challenges faced by Vietnamese EFL students who participated in a short-term exchange program at a Polish university, with the aim of better understanding students' experiences studying abroad. Five students enrolled in the program were purposely selected for data collection in December 2025 via individual in-depth interviews. A semi-structured interview guide was used. Qualitative content analysis was employed to analyze the data. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. The findings revealed three major challenges: (1) adjustment difficulties in student-centered methods, (2) linguistic barriers in multilingual learning environments and daily communication, and (3) socio-cultural adaptation difficulties and emotional distress. The study contributes to the literature on short-term student mobility by highlighting context-specific challenges faced by Vietnamese EFL learners in Central Europe, and implying that efforts to support such short-term exchange programs should continue.

**Keywords:** Short-term exchange, Vietnamese EFL students, academic challenges, sociocultural challenges, linguistic challenges.

## TÓM TẮT

Mục tiêu của bài báo này nhằm khám phá những thách thức của sinh viên (EFL) Việt Nam khi tham gia chương trình trao đổi ngắn hạn tại một trường đại học Ba Lan để hiểu rõ hơn về trải nghiệm du học của sinh viên. Năm sinh viên đăng ký vào chương trình đã được lựa chọn một cách có chủ đích để thu thập dữ liệu vào tháng 12 năm 2025 thông qua các cuộc phỏng vấn chuyên sâu cá nhân. Một hướng dẫn phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc đã được sử dụng. Phương pháp phân tích nội dung định tính đã được sử dụng để phân tích dữ liệu. Mỗi cuộc phỏng vấn đều được ghi lại và phiên âm nguyên văn. Các phát hiện cho thấy ba thách thức chính: (1) khó khăn khi chuyển đổi sang phương pháp lấy học sinh làm trung tâm, (2) rào cản ngôn ngữ trong môi trường học tập đa ngôn ngữ và giao tiếp hàng ngày, và (3) khó khăn thích ứng văn hóa xã hội và căng thẳng về mặt cảm xúc. Nghiên cứu đóng góp lý thuyết về sự dịch chuyển ngắn hạn của học sinh bằng cách nêu bật những thách thức cụ thể trong bối cảnh mà người học EFL Việt Nam ở Trung Âu phải đối mặt và hàm ý rằng những nỗ lực hỗ trợ các chương trình trao đổi ngắn hạn như vậy nên tiếp tục.

**Từ khóa:** Trao đổi ngắn hạn, Sinh viên Việt Nam học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ, thách thức học tập, thách thức văn hóa xã hội, thách thức ngôn ngữ.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Participating in academic or professional endeavors abroad offers an optimal environment for experiential learning beyond the traditional classroom. A growing

number of higher education institutions are adopting this trend, especially short-term exchange programs to promote international engagement and pedagogy. According to Knight [1], international exchange

programs are structured educational efforts that facilitate the exchange of students between institutions in different countries and provide them with opportunities to study, work, or participate in cultural immersion experiences while away from their home countries. Strategically, these programs offer numerous significant advantages not only to students but also to faculty and universities. Students can attain cross-cultural understanding, improve academic and professional competencies, and promote global citizenship [2]. Meanwhile, higher education institutions and their administrations can gain heightened awareness of global issues, a better understanding of diverse educational systems, increased revenue generation, strengthened academic and research collaborations, and enhanced institutional branding [3].

International exchange programs are formal agreements between two or more universities that allow students from one country to attend classes at another university in another country [4]. These programs, including short-term overseas courses lasting from one week to several weeks or typically half of an academic semester, often provide greater accessibility, a lower financial burden, and greater flexibility compared to long-term study abroad programs. A few studies have identified the benefits of short-term overseas study in fostering students' global competencies, academic and professional growth and experiential and transformative learning [5]. Additionally, other research has found that students can enhance their personal development by expanding their horizons, seizing travel opportunities and cultivating independence, while simultaneously achieving cultural and social growth through cultural immersion and social networking [6].

In the domain of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), it is emphasized that teaching a foreign language should involve learners in venturing beyond the four walls of the classroom, engaging with the real world or, via imaginative exploration, within the context of the target language communities [7]. Therefore, overseas exchange programs are particularly valuable for language learners to improve language proficiency and international competence. Numerous studies assert that students participating in exchange programs can enhance their English proficiency and expand their job prospects in international organizations and multinational corporations, as these programs predominantly emphasize English as a global lingua franca [8, 9].

In the context of Vietnamese higher education, international exchange programs have grown rapidly as universities seek to boost global engagement and enhance graduates' employability. Despite these advantages, participating in overseas exchange programs poses various challenges that can impact students' learning experiences and overall well-being. These challenges often encompass academic adjustments, linguistic barriers, and difficulties in sociocultural adaptation [10, 11]. Numerous studies consistently highlight academic adjustment as a significant challenge for international students, particularly those accustomed to the pedagogical approaches and educational practices of their home countries. This transition frequently leads to struggles with language requirements [12], unfamiliar teaching styles, expectations for independent learning, and assessment practices in host institutions [13, 14].

Another prominent challenge international students often face is language proficiency, including difficulty with listening comprehension (e.g., diverse accents and fast-paced speech in academic contexts) [15], answering professors' inquiries, and engaging in class discussions with peers [16]. It has been reported that international students often encounter language barriers in the host country's socio-cultural environment when participating in daily activities (e.g., grocery shopping) or socializing outside the campus [2]. Besides linguistic issues, research has demonstrated that overseas students also face numerous sociocultural challenges, including psychological distress and lower self-esteem [17], negative feelings (i.e., loneliness, homesickness, and emotional distress) [18]. Further studies showed evidence of negative experiences which are commonly associated with anxiety, isolation, cultural shock, discrimination and racism [19, 20, 21].

Nevertheless, the aforementioned research on international students' study abroad experiences has primarily focused on long-term programs in traditional study destinations, such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. There is a noticeable limitation in the literature regarding short-term overseas programs, particularly for Vietnamese EFL students in Central and Eastern European contexts. In addition, examining students' international experiences can provide different stakeholders, including Vietnamese institutions, faculties, and lecturers, with necessary insights on their policies, program design and practices

that foster student support and academic success. This study addresses these gaps by exploring the context-specific academic, linguistic, and sociocultural challenges that Vietnamese EFL students faced during a short-term exchange program at a Polish university. By focusing on a newly established Vietnam-Poland exchange initiative, the study offers empirical insights into how short-term mobility shapes students' experiences, thereby extending existing literature on international exchange programs. As a result, the study was directed by the following research questions:

*RQ1: What academic challenges do Vietnamese EFL students face during their participation in a short-term exchange program in Poland?*

*RQ2: What linguistic and socio-cultural difficulties do students experience during their stay?*

**2. METHOD**

**2.1. Research design**

The study uses a qualitative case study design to examine Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of academic, linguistic, and social challenges experienced during a short-term exchange program at a Polish university. A qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing deeper insights into personal, interpersonal and social phenomena or contextual factors that are sometimes not easy to understand, describe or explain from the outside [22].

**2.2. Research context and participants**

Undertaken at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, the study focused on a short-term exchange program (5 - 6 months) which was jointly organized for the first time in 2025 between Ho Chi Minh City University of Foreign Languages - Information Technology (HUFLIT) and a Polish university. The program aimed to give Vietnamese EFL students the opportunity to participate in academic activities, including attending various classes, completing assignments and coursework, connecting with international and local students, and adapting to everyday life in a foreign cultural and linguistic setting. Therefore, all students were required to demonstrate English competence at the upper-intermediate level (B2) or above, in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), for admission. The program's accomplishment signifies an initial institutional effort to provide Vietnamese EFL students with overseas academic exposure, as well as expanded chances for international collaborations and long-term partnerships.

Participants with certain qualities were targeted, as Creswell [23] believes that purposeful sampling can help to adequately address the research question and raise a new concept or theory. In this way, all five students who attended the exchange program satisfied the following criteria: (1) currently registered as an English-majored student in the Department of Foreign Languages at HUFLIT, (2) completed a 5 - 6-month study abroad program in Poland, and (3) consented to participate in interviews and have their responses audiotaped. The participants' demographic information is given in the Table below, indicating that they were attending this overseas exchange program for the first time.

Table 1. Student Demographic Information

Student code	Gender	Age	Major	English proficiency	Previous overseas experience
S01	Female	22	English Studies	B2	No
S02	Female	21	English Studies	B2	No
S03	Male	21	English Studies (English teaching)	B2	No
S04	Female	20	English Studies (Business English)	B2	No
S05	Female	22	English Studies	B2	No

**2.3. Data collection instruments**

To collect data, a short demographic information sheet was first administered via Google Forms to gather basic background information on students' ages, majors, English proficiency levels, and previous overseas experience. Second, a semi-structured interview guide was developed into three main parts to frame the areas to be explored during the encounters. The first part consisted of 2 questions related to the participants' backgrounds. It was then followed by a series of questions, formulated as topics to follow the flow of the conversation, to elicit students' experiences during their exchange program. To be specific, there were three main themes for addressing the research: academic challenges (four questions), linguistic challenges (three questions), and social and cultural challenges (four questions). The

final part included two reflective questions that encouraged participants to evaluate the program's overall impact and offer advice to future exchange students.

#### **2.4. Data collection procedures**

The data collection process began by contacting participants via a local social network called Zalo. Once they had their voluntary agreement, necessary documents such as consent forms, information sheets, demographic information sheets, as well as interview guidelines, were sent through their e-mails one week before the interview so that the students could prepare themselves for the discussed topic and accordingly provide their signature and necessary information.

Once all five students agreed to participate in the interviews, an online meeting was scheduled at a convenient time for each student and conducted individually to provide in-depth data. The interviews took place over one week, from December 14 to 23, 2025, four months after the program ended. Each interview lasted 40-50 minutes and was conducted mainly in English, with occasional translation of specific terms or phrases into Vietnamese to ensure full expression of meaning. Two audio recorders (one from Google Meet and the other from the researcher's personal device) were used to minimize misunderstandings and the risk of malfunction, in addition to limiting note-taking.

#### **2.5. Data analysis**

For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed, using Braun and Clarke's [24] six-stage framework. The audio recordings were first transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word. Secondly, initial codes were generated by "coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set [and] collating data relevant to each code" [24, p. 87]. Thirdly, broader categories and potential themes were searched and organized into academic, linguistic, and social challenges by collating codes and gathering all relevant data [24, p.87]. The themes were then reviewed to assess whether they aligned with the coded extracts and the entire data set. Next, the author conducted an "ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells [and to] generate clear definitions and names for each theme" [24, p. 87]. The final stage includes "selecting vivid and compelling extract examples, finalizing analysis of selected extracts, and relating the analysis back to the research question and literature..." [24, p. 87].

#### **2.6. Ethical considerations**

Ethical principles were carefully considered to minimize harm, respect autonomy, and ensure privacy [25]. Before being invited for data collection, information sheets and consent forms were sent to all prospective participants via email, in which they were fully informed about the study, such as its purpose, procedures for data collection, potential risks and benefits, time duration of the interviews, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Only those who voluntarily agreed to participate were invited to take part in the personal interviews. Pseudonyms were also used to guarantee their confidentiality and anonymity. To be specific, participants' identities were kept as private as possible by addressing them by numbers from 1 to 5 throughout the data analysis process, including transcription, analysis, and the presentation of results and excerpts from the data. All collected data, such as audio recordings, transcripts, and demographic information, would also be securely stored in the researcher's password-protected computer and accessed only by her.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The thematic analysis of semi-structured interview data yielded three major themes: (1) academic adjustment challenges, (2) linguistic barriers in academic and daily communication, and (3) socio-cultural adjustment difficulties.

#### **3.1. Adjustment challenges to a student-centered academic culture**

All students reported that the transition from the Vietnamese educational system to a completely new Polish one had caused certain difficulties in teaching and learning practices, especially when students had to shift from a teacher-led, or "guided" environment to one that prioritized proactive self-study, creativity, and independent research. This challenge can be particularly demanding since they were accustomed to structured instruction and explicit guidance, which contrasts sharply with Western or European pedagogical approaches. Besides, the short duration of the program intensified students' initial academic shock due to insufficient time for gradual adjustment, which contrasts with other long-term exchange contexts, such as in America, the U.K., Australia, and Canada [19, 21]. This finding resonates with prior research showing that exchange students often struggle with unfamiliar teaching styles and higher expectations for independent learning, such as proactive

self-study, autonomy, critical thinking, practical application of knowledge, and creativity [12, 13].

Small class sizes were frequently mentioned as a distinctive feature that influenced students' learning experiences. Typically, a standard Polish class consisted of 7 to 20 students, fostering a high degree of interaction. In contrast, Vietnamese institutions typically have more than 40 students, and questions are normally asked of students rather than facilitated. This finding is consistent with Heng's [17] findings in her study of Chinese international students. Similarly, this class size brought contrasting feelings among Vietnamese students. While some students felt shy or overwhelmed by the "overactive" nature of local and international peers, others eventually found the environment fostered the "courage to express" their ideas.

*At first, everything was new, and I was unfamiliar with the teaching style. The teacher did not teach directly, but observed how we expressed our ideas. (S4)*

*The class was very small, only about seven to ten students, and the teacher focused more on discussion and expressing our point of view... the class was very active and interactive (S1).*

This initial challenge required students to be more active and creative in their class activities. As Student 3 stated, "[professors]'d love us to ask creative questions. And sometimes when I do the test, I need to be creative..." This experience was also shared by students 4 and 5 when they compared teaching styles across the two educational systems. They said that both systems offered benefits and challenges. While Vietnamese professors tended to provide detailed instructions and steps, Polish professors required students to be highly independent [21]. For example, student 5 was expected to self-research and prepare extensively before lectures; otherwise, she would feel "like fish in a big tank," and unable to follow the lessons or lectures in Polish classes.

*In Poland, they give us freedom in the classroom. It means that we have to be self-study a lot and we have to self-research a lot. We have to prepare the lectures well before we go to class because if we're not, we will have no idea about what professors said (S5).*

*... in general, educators in Vietnam did more care but didn't work...but in Poland, they required us to do more for them than they do. ...[students] stay proactive and very independent and take actions, express themselves in a strong way. But in Vietnam, students are too shy to express and speak out for themselves (S4).*

Students also highlighted challenges related to assessment methods, in which originality and critical thinking were preferred over memorization [17]. For example, student 3 noted that while her English is sufficient, "open-book" exams were "insanely challenging" because the answers could not be found directly in the text, requiring learners to read a lot and having deep application of knowledge. Similarly, student 4 mentioned the emphasis on applying real life experiences in the final assignments and presentations:

*[professors] will require you to stay curious and there is less memorization and more focus on discussions and research about a topic that they are interested and reading along. You need to read a lot and they prioritize hand-on experience. For example, if you study product management, they will require you to do a real one and give like the real feedback and experience and explain in the final course score. It will be your presentations and how you're doing it.*

Despite these difficulties, students gradually adapted to the academic culture, becoming more proactive and independent learners.

### **3.2. Linguistic barriers in academic and daily communication**

Linguistic obstacles were encountered in both academic environments and everyday life. All students reported challenges with English instruction, particularly regarding accent variation and listening comprehension. They found it particularly difficult to understand lecturers with strong Slavic accents. One student shared, "Some professors had very strong accents, and sometimes I lost track of what she was saying" (S4). Another participant shared this concern, noting that the lecturers' pronunciation and the density of lectures made comprehension challenging:

*The professor's pronunciation was difficult to hear. It is also fast, and there was a lot of information. My brain could not process it quickly (S5).*

Another common challenge was the speed of lectures. Students 1, 2, 4 and 5 noted that professors often spoke very quickly, making it hard to process information and take notes simultaneously. However, they eventually learned to adapt their learning styles to fit the new methods.

*At first, I cannot remember all the things that the professor said. I mean, there's a lot of information, and I cannot, like, listen and write at the same time (S1).*

*[professors]spoke very quickly, very, very fast and they preferred us to be more creative rather than rely totally on everything according to the book (S2).*

...one concern was about the speed of the professors. They talk a little bit too fast. I was quite surprised at first, but had to learn to adapt. Then I found that I went through quite easily (S3).

Apart from academic communication, students also described challenges related to spoken English in international group work (e.g., classmates with diverse accents from Central Asia, such as Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, Nigeria, or Indonesia). Such differences in communicative styles and proficiency levels sometimes slowed down the process of collaboration:

*Some students relied fully on Google Translate and typing instead of speaking, and it wasted time during group work (S4).*

This occurred even among students with high English proficiency levels (B2 or IELTS 7.0); they could convey only 60% to 70% of their intended meaning when discussing complex or academic topics (S2). Consequently, diverse tactics were employed, such as using Google Translate, gestures and requests for clarification to convey the meaning. This finding is consistent with existing research, which shows that linguistic challenges in multilingual study-abroad settings extend beyond general English proficiency [16].

In terms of daily communication, students had difficulty communicating with local people during routine activities such as grocery shopping, using public transportation, and handling administrative procedures. In certain cases, students had to rely heavily on Google Translate to convey meaning.

*When I went outside the campus, many people did not speak English, so I felt nervous and sometimes avoided asking for help (S1).*

*...it's sometimes things get quite a little bit confusing when talking with the local people there. As I researched that in Poland, the English proficiency there is quite high. But not in my city. not a lot of people speak English, especially like middle-aged people. So, I have to use Google Translate a lot (S3).*

Not being fluent in the host country's language greatly hinders students' ability to integrate socially, which in turn affects their eagerness to explore and engage with local culture and community life [2, 16]. Even though linguistic challenges have been consistently found in English-speaking host countries, these difficulties were further exacerbated by limited English use in local communities in the Polish context, increasing

students' reliance on translation technology and reducing opportunities for social interaction. Nevertheless, most participants reported gradual improvement in their listening and speaking skills as they became more accustomed to different accents and communication styles.

### 3.3. Social and cultural adaptation difficulties

Students also reported experiencing sociocultural difficulties in Poland, echoing prior research indicating that international students often face complex psychological and sociocultural adjustments [19, 20]. Some students described initial culture shock related to differences in lifestyle, food preferences, climate, and social interaction norms. Students recalled that the cold weather and unfamiliar cuisine affected their physical comfort and caused their loneliness, depression, and mood regulation issues:

*When I was in Poland, there was too cold and I was a bit lonely ... And right after that I was sick, because I was not familiar with that cold weather (S5)*

*In the first one or two months, I was sick and lonely, and I had to call my family every day.... (S3)*

*... I think the most extreme part in Poland is for the weather. The weather there is very extreme. ... when I first came there, it's minus 1 degree. So, it's freezing there. I must wear lot of heat tech clothes, and a big fluffy jacket. But I can still feel really cold there. It's really humid there too. So, it made my skin, my hair dry a lot and even my eyes. Here the food I guess people here are really obsessed with sour food. Yeah, yeah. Really sour... that I cannot eat (S1).*

Some students were surprised by local norms such as supermarkets being closed on Sundays and the specific nature of Polish social gatherings, where dinner often starts and ends abruptly at 4 PM without extended socializing:

*The most shocking thing for me is that they do not open supermarkets on Sunday and like we arrived there on Sunday and we didn't have any food to eat so we ate at a local restaurant (S3).*

*[Polish people] had dinner at 4pm, this was quite weird and new for me [...] they asked us to be there at 4pm and it exactly started at 4pm ... We're not gonna finish dinner and have a chit chat or a dessert, or a little bit entertainment activities. No, when they ask you out for dinner, it's just for dinner. And then we say goodbye and that's all (S2).*

These experiences further correspond with so-called unspoken social rules that create confusion and stress for

newcomers [17]. Although students initially experienced shock, their subsequent reflections show a gradual development of awareness and understanding of these differences, marking the beginning of intercultural learning. Moreover, the use of technology and social networking applications like Zalo, Facebook, and other technological platforms helped students reduce stress and maintain communication with family and friends back home. Although these coping mechanisms were not explicitly mentioned in Rudakova and Lal's [18] review, they were observed among Vietnamese students in Australia, who navigated unfamiliar academic and social environments through adaptive techniques and resilience [21].

While several students had favorable interactions with local residents, others faced disturbing incidents of racial discrimination, including being referred to as "Asian" or "ching chong", which caused some significant emotional distress.

*... I was being discriminated a day right after I arrived to Poland. Yeah, I think he's drunk. I was on my way to the supermarket to buy food. And he was then in the middle of the door. When he saw me, he's just like oh ching chong, ching chong. And he did some weird action. And I was really hurt at a time (S5).*

*There is a lot of discrimination. I experienced it on the street, like some other men saw us and said like, oh, Asian, Asian. But I think it's a little bit offending (S4).*

These findings corroborate the work of Nguyen and Pennycook [21] and Yang, He, and Xia [20], who demonstrated that perceived discrimination significantly impacts international students' cross-cultural adaptation and psychological well-being. Moreover, experiences of racism can intensify isolation, diminish students' sense of belonging, and prolong the adaptation process. Current results further support the view that sociocultural adaptation is influenced not only by individual effort but also by the inclusivity and intercultural awareness of the host country [21].

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the academic, linguistic, and socio-cultural challenges experienced by Vietnamese EFL students during a short-term exchange program in Poland- a non-English-dominant European context. The findings show that students encountered multiple distinct difficulties, including adapting to a student-centered academic environment, understanding accent variation, communicating in multilingual group settings,

adjusting to an unfamiliar climate and lifestyle, and dealing with emotional distress stemming from loneliness and discrimination. Despite these hurdles, students gradually developed their own coping strategies and improved their communication skills.

The study has several limitations, such as its small sample size, its focus on challenges rather than balanced outcomes, and its reliance on self-reported data collected several months after the exchange. Future research should include larger and more varied samples, examine both challenges and growth trajectories, and use longitudinal or mixed-method approaches.

Based on the findings, institutions should develop pre-departure orientation programs or guidelines that detail the objectives, procedures, and expectations of international exchange programs, offer intercultural training, and establish emotional and academic support systems to help students manage possible risks and culture shocks, reducing emotional distress to boost their confidence and engagement in student-centered classrooms abroad. Enhanced collaboration between partner institutions and ongoing program evaluation will further improve the effectiveness of future exchange programs.

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### THÔNG TIN TÁC GIẢ

**Lê Bảo Vi**

Khoa Ngoại ngữ, Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ - Tin học Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh