PASAA

Assessing the Learning Environment in an EFL Classroom with International Students: A Case Study of a University in Vietnam

Nguyen Van Khanh

Hanoi University of Science and Technology, Hanoi, Vietnam

Corresponding Author: Khanh.nguyenvan@hust.edu.vn

Article information	
Abstract	Rapid economic growth and globalization have made higher education internationalization no longer the exclusive arena for developed countries but also open for players from the non-English speaking, developing world. A quality learning environment is among determinants for the success of international students mobility and should be taken into serious consideration by countries that want to prevail. However, much of the existing learning environment literature has targeted international students, ignoring the insights of other stakeholders, especially those from the host country side. This mixed-methods study investigated the perception and attitudes of EFL teachers and students towards the quality of the classroom learning environment (CLE) with the participation of international students in a university in Vietnam. Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews were used to interpret quantitative data collected via questionnaire surveys with 136 student participants. Findings showed a positive assessment of CLEs in the studied context. CLE factors such as student cohesiveness and task orientation were believed to be affected by the presence of international students, which could be attributed to communication barriers and challenges in organizing class activities. The findings contribute a robust

1. Introduction

The international student is a well-researched topic following the current trend of internationalization in higher education (HE). From this research, we have seen that international student mobility is one major indicator of success. Existing literature mainly targets international students at host institutes in developed English speaking countries, while the number of studies on this group of learners in countries where English is not the first language remains limited (Calikoglu, 2018; Kondakci, 2011; Lee et al., 2016; Wilkins et al., 2012). In addition, much of the available research focuses on problems facing international students such as learning, language barriers and communication challenges, cultural differences, and psychological issues (Weng, 2018). Few inquiries have begun to examine the topic from the perspectives of the host country/institutes, local teachers, and students (Gonzales-Carriedo, 2017). Advances and improvement in the quality of Vietnamese higher education institutes in recent years have attracted a number of international students to this Southeast Asian country. Despite being a popular trend in the world, internationalization remains an alien concept in developing Asian countries (Mehta et al., 2021); thus, HE institutes in Vietnam have struggled to attract and host students from other countries. Research on international students in the context of Vietnam HE in particular and other non-English speaking countries is, therefore, imperative as it enables institutes as well as policymakers to develop strategies for attracting and managing this group of students.

Available research on factors "pulling" international students to the host country shows that teaching quality is among the top considerations of

international students when making study abroad decisions (Chu et al., 2017; Pawar et al., 2020; Tsai et al., 2017). For non-English speaking countries, especially the developing ones, initiatives at institutional level are scholarships and grants and job opportunities, and those at classroom level include the syllabus, language of instruction, and learning environment, all of which are determining factors for the success of international student mobility.

As one of the strategies to attract international students, universities in non-English speaking countries are promoting English-taught programs (Kirloskar & Inamdar, 2021). Mai and Chau (2021), when reviewing research on international student mobility to Asian countries, have found that although local language and culture courses might be a potential niche market to attract international students this should be a long-term plan only. It cannot take the place of developing and perfecting training courses with English as medium of instruction. Given the fact that the current trend of student mobility is multi-directional in nature, which means the flow of international students is not only towards higher-income countries in the "Global North" but also to countries in the lower-income "Global South" (Cheng, 2021), EFL courses are offered to international students with low English proficiency to better prepare them for courses taught in English at the host institution (Kim et al., 2014). Therefore, besides ensuring quality of courses taught in English, EFL courses should also be given adequate attention (Chang, 2010).

As an effort to contribute to the understanding of the international students in a developing context, this research examined the current classroom learning environment in EFL classrooms in a university in Vietnam by attempting to seek answers to the following research questions:

1. How are the classroom learning environments with and without international students perceived by the students and teachers?

2. What are the differences in the evaluation of the classroom learning environment with and without international students?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Classroom Learning Environment

Classroom learning environment (CLE) is a basic educational concept which has been studied and interpreted by quite a few researchers. Charalampous and Kokkinos (2017) consider CLE a multidimensional concept, the components of which have been verified in existing literature. Despite being a dynamic concept to which new components are being proposed, in essence, CLE encompasses pedagogical, psychological, and social enviroments in which learning takes place. Particularly, Higgins et al. (2005) describe CLE as physical, cultural environments and diversified contexts. Accordingly, CLE encompasses the classroom culture or school culture as well as students' interaction, and the ways to organize an educational environment. From a teacher's perspective, CLE includes such aspects as the teacher, teaching process, psychosomatic essentials, and physical environments (Lwin et al., 2017), while through the learners' lenses, CLE concerns the dynamics, interaction, and behaviors within classrooms or small learning environments, including how students experience the classroom characteristics and how classroom activities are organized to ensure an effective learning environment for all students (Gettinger et al., 2011).

2.2 Classroom Learning Environment Assessment

Much research has highlighted the crucial role of CLE in teaching—learning due to its impact on learning outcomes, motivation, behavior, and students' perception of success (Fraser, 2012; Lwin, 2017; Wu & Wu, 2008). This can be explained by the nature of CLE and socio-psychological interactions which can make a difference in the students' way of learning and achieving their goals (Khine, 2001). A positive and effective CLE will support and inspire students' participation in learning activities. For instance, students' participation can be encouraged by teachers' support, teaching methods, cooperative learning activities, curriculum of appropriate difficulty, teacher-student interaction in unofficial learning content, and out-of-class activities (Tian et al., 2020).

Given this significance of CLE, assessing CLE is one of the top concerns for researchers, schools, and teachers alike. Lim and Fraser (2018) argue that the most practical and meaningful application of CLE assessment is to provide teachers with feedback, inspiring them in doing action research to enhance the learning environment in their classrooms.

The three most popular methods of CLE assessment today include (1) classroom observation, (2) ecobehavioral method, and (3) student and teacher's perceptions and attitudes survey (Gettinger et al., 2011). Most instruments developed from these three approaches are based on Moo's (1997) framework of environment and behavior. Accordingly, human environment is characterized by three dimensions, namely the relationship between an individual and a specific environment, personal growth or the opportunities for individuals' development in such an environment, and system maintenance and change (i.e. the order and openness that allow the environment to be responsive to change) (Fraser, 1998; Gettinger et al., 2011; Mutlu & Yildirim, 2019).

The convergence and divergence of the above three methods make them peculiarly suitable to CLE assessment. Nevertheless, each method poses certain challenges in data collection and analysis. CLE questionnaire surveys seem to be the most economic and time-saving method for teachers and students (Khine, 2001). Besides allowing CLE to be assessed from the insiders' perspective, questionnaire surveys may yield genuine assessment in comparison with observation as teachers and learners have experienced the learning environment for a certain period of time, thus generating valid impressions. Data on perception and attitudes towards CLE often have more impact on the variation in academic results than other directly observable variables. In many cases, learner's perception may merit more than observable behaviors as behaviors are manifestations of perception (Fraser & Walberg, 1981). As a result, research on individuals' perception of CLE have attracted increasing attention from educational

researchers and scholars, resulting in the need to develop data collection instrument in this realm (Mutlu & Yildirim, 2019).

2.3 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Classroom Environment

Despite being a popular research realm with investigation conducted in a multitude of contexts and subject areas, much of the existing CLE research focuses on natural science subjects such as Biology and Mathematics (Goksu, 2015). This means the number of studies on CLE in English classrooms, especially EFL, remains modest. Besides, available research mainly targets secondary school classrooms (Lim & Fraser, 2018). The under-researched EFL classroom environment, however, has started to attract the attention of educational researchers recently (Mutlu & Yildirim, 2019; Skordi & Fraser, 2019). Such studies reflect major lines in CLE such as teacher and student's perceptions of preferred and actual CLE (Gur, 2006), the relationship between learners and motivation (Wei & Elias, 2011), and comparing different CLEs' impacts on language learning activities (Torti, 2006). According to Goksu (2015), these studies emphasize the vital role of CLE in language teaching and learning. Mutlu and Yildirim (2019) surveyed 1,365 students who enrolled in preparatory English courses at Turkish universities in order to determine the features of CLE in university EFL classrooms with reference to variables about students' characteristics and English learning efforts. Regression analysis showed a strong link among CLE, students' background characteristics and students' persistence in EFL learning, of which CLE elements were considered the most important predictor of learning outcomes.

2.4 Classroom Learning Environment with International Students

Despite the current trend of internationalization in education, studies in tertiary internationalized CLE which target both interntational students and local students are limited in number (Chu et al., 2017). To yield a comprehensive understanding, it is important to explore the attitudes and perceptions of stakeholders including students, the faculty, the institution, the employer, the sponsor, and the assessing agency (Knight, 2002). The results of internationalized

CLE assessment will create values, trust, and understanding of an educational environment in which international students, local students, and teaching staff all take an active part and equally benefit from vision enhancement, global understanding, intercultural understanding, as well as attitudes, knowledge, and skills required by a globalized labor market (Quintal & Phau, 2014). A recent study was conducted in China by Tian et al. (2020) with 1,429 international students from 34 universities and colleges in China investigating the nature and level of participation of international students in learning activities and factors influencing such participation. The findings revealed six factors among which classroom learning environment and school/institution environment are the most influential.

Likewise, Lwin et al. (2017) assert that enhancing CLE quality and international students' perception of CLE will help host countries attract more international students. CLE assessment is the foundation for developing a quality student-centered curriculum; hence, international students' CLE perception and attitude will be essential for adjusting, improving, and optimizing CLE. Quintal and Phau (2014) conducted a quantitative inquiry with 484 international students from an Australian university's six campuses in Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Malaysia in order to explore international students' perceptions of internationalized CLE. At the institute level, the study measured international students' perceptions based on seven features of internationalized CLE, namely teaching quality, curriculum, student-support staff interaction, resources, personal development outcomes, and professional development outcomes. The results showed that the attitude and perceptions of international students towards curriculum, resources, and student-support staff interaction varied remarkably according to the context.

The number of studies on international students and CLE with the presence of these learners remain limited. Available research has mostly targeted international students. One of the studies that have focused on both international students and teachers is the research undertaken by Robertson et al. (2000). This

inquiry showed differences in students' and teachers' perception of CLE; thus, the researchers highlight the significance of CLE awareness in improving learning outcomes. An appropriate understanding of the school and classroom cultures would contribute to learners' improvement. As for teachers, their perception of international students' expectation and needs would allow them to adjust teaching and support to help international students achieve good results. Hence, studying CLE with the presence of international students from the perspectives of different stakeholders is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

It can be concluded that existing literature on international students, CLE, and the relationship between them remains an unchartered realm with a modest number of investigations. The number of studies on CLE in English classrooms with international students is limited. Available research focuses mostly on evaluating international students' attitudes and perception of CLE, while other stakeholders, especially teachers and local students, are ignored. In terms of method, existing research mainly employs either quantitative or qualitative approaches. Studies combining both approaches are necessary to delineate a comprehensive picture of CLE with international students.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Quantitative data were collected via a questionnaire survey with 136 sophomores at the School of Foreign Languages at a university in Vietnam. Of these 136 students, 68 participated in language classrooms with international students in one semester. The other 68 enrolled in the same courses without international students. The first group included all of the students participating in EFL classes with international students, while the second group participated in the study on a voluntary basis. Both groups enrolled in the same courses to ensure reliability and rigor.

Qualitative data were obtained using semi-structured interviews with three teachers and five students. All the interviewees were in classrooms with

international students. Table 1 presents demographic information of the interviewees.

Table 1

Interviewees' Demographics

Occupation	Interviewee	Gender	Time in CLE with international students	Number of courses with international students
Teacher	Teacher A	Female	1 semester	1
	Teacher B	Female	1 semester	2
	Teacher C	Female	1 semester	2
Student	Student A	Female	1 semester	3
	Student B	Female	1 semester	3
	Student C	Female	1 semester	2
	Student D	Male	1 semester	3
	Student E	Male	1 semester	2

Snowball sampling was employed to select interviewees. Factors such as gender, duration of time in CLE with international students, and number of courses with international students were also considered when selecting interviewees to ensure consistency and diversity. The researcher contacted the potential interviewees to request their participation. An invitation letter with information about the project, the benefits, possible risks, and rights of the participants was forwarded. On acceptance of the invitation, participants received a copy of consent form for consideration and were asked to propose their preferred interview date.

3.2 Data Collecting Instruments

Two instruments were employed to collect data, namely a survey questionnaire and a semi-structured interview protocol.

An online survey questionnaire was selected as it allows large data collection, short return time, and great convenience. It is suitable for obtaining data

on attitudes, opinions, and perceptions of the participants, from which the researcher can draw conclusions on trends of characteristics of the participants (Creswell, 2014). This instrument fit the research question aimed to evaluate CLE with international students from the students' perspective. The questionnaire was sent to all participants with a consent form attached via emails and targeted students' groups on Facebook.

The *What Is Happening in This Classroom* (WIHIC) by Fraser et al. (1996) was employed for its popularity and reliability which have been verified in different contexts. The original questionnaire was translated into the Vietnamese language and modified into two versions, one to assess CLE in EFL classes with international students and the other for CLE in EFL classes without international students. After consulting with two experienced colleagues, one of whom was a highschool teacher, the original 56-item questionnaire designed for high school students was shortened into a 51-item version evaluating seven factors of CLE in university context, namely student cohesiveness, teacher support, student involvement, investigation, task orientation, cooperation, and equity. The variables were graded in a 5-point Likert scale: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree.

To interpret and explain quantitative data, qualitative data were collected via semi-structured interviews, which were considered to fit the nature of the qualitative method (Bryman, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data in great detail; besides this, the instrument also facilitated management, interactions, and respondent encouragement (Smith et al., 2009). Key questions were structured, while other questions might arise and be administrated by the interviewer in response to the real situation to encourage interviewees' sharing of their viewpoints.

There were 13 structured questions, ten of which explored the attitudes and perceptions of the interviewees about CLEs with and without international

students. The last three questions were to examine the participants' views and experience on challenges and opportunities brought about by CLE with international students.

Prior to each interview, a consent form was sent to interviewees via email. On the day of interview, before starting, the interviewees were again informed of the consent form and encouraged to discuss any matter concerning their confidentiality and rights as a participant of the study. Inherent to the nature of qualitative data is the role of the interviewer as a data collecting instrument per se; therefore, both parties were required to actively engage in the research process (Smith et al., 2009). As a result, interview techniques such as probing, active listening, paraphrasing, and summarizing were employed.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data yielded from the questionnaire survey on CLEs with and without international students were analyzed using SPSS 20. Descriptive analysis was carried out to identify the main patterns of the datasets (Creswell, 2014).

As the questionnaire was translated from English into Vietnamese and adapted to suit the research population (i.e. university students) and topic (CLE with international students), internal consistency reliability should be measured to ensure reliability and validity. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was computed, and as shown in Table 2, coefficients for different WIHIC scales of both questionnaires range from 0.81 to 0.93 with the corrected item-total correlation larger than 0.30. These reliability values support the strong internal consistency of all WIHIC scales for both questionnaires used in this study. T-tests were conducted to compare CLEs with and without international students.

Table 2

Internal Consistency Reliability for WIHIC Questionnaires

Factors	No. of items	Alpha's reliability	
		CLE without IS	**CLE with IS**
Student cohesiveness	8	0.89	0.87
Teacher support	8	0.89	0.86
Student involvement	7	0.88	0.84
Investigation	7	0.87	0.81
Task orientation	7	0.84	0.83
Cooperation	6	0.88	0.84
Equity	8	0.93	0.89

Note: N_1 = 136 (CLE without IS) N_2 = 68 (CLE with IS)

Qualitative data collected through eight semi-structured interviews were processed and analyzed in accordance with Creswell (2014) six-stage model. In the final stage, findings from both quantitative and qualitative analysis were compared and combined to delineate a comprehensive picture of the studied CLEs.

4. Findings

4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

The questionnaire for CLE without international students was answered by 136 students, 68 of whom studied with international students for at least one semester and continued to answer the questionnaire for CLE with international students.

Table 3

Scale mean and scale standard deviation for WIHIC questionnaires

Factors	No. of items	M		SD	
		CLE without IS	CLE with IS	CLE without IS	CLE with IS
Student cohesiveness	8	3.78	3.58	.60	.61
Teacher support	8	3.86	3.79	.56	.51
Student involvement	7	3.88	3.79	.55	.55
Investigation	7	3.83	3.74	.52	.51
Task orientation	7	3.89	3.78	.53	.55
Cooperation	6	4.00	3.95	.54	.52
Equity	8	4.09	4.04	.60	.58

Note: $N_1 = 136$ (CLE without IS) $N_2 = 68$ (CLE with IS)

Table 3 provides the average item means and average standard deviations for each scale in the two questionnaires (for CLE with and without international students). Generally, the means for scales of WIHIC with international students were slightly smaller than those of WIHIC without international students. All scales in both questionnaires had a mean above 3 (neutral), indicating that practices encompased by the scales were positively perceived by the participants. For WIHIC without international students, cooperation and equity were the scales with highest means, while equity was the scale with a mean above 4 (agree) in the WIHIC with international students. In both questionnaires, all the scales had a standard deviation below 0.61. This showed a positive assessment of the participants for elements of CLE regardless of the international students' presence.

4.2 Comparing CLE with and without International Students

4.2.1 Assessement of Students Participating in CLE with and without International Students

Independent sample T-test was used to determine statistical differences between the CLE assessment of 68 students participating in CLE with international students (Group 1) and 68 students in CLE without international students (Group 2). The results are as follows:

- The presence of international students reduced the cohesiveness among students, as Group 1 (M = 3.46, SD = 0.07) reported a lower level of satisfaction over student cohesiveness than Group 2 (M = 3.98, SD = 0.06), t(134) = -4.02, p < .001.

- As for teacher support, both groups ($M1$ = 3.97, $SD1$ = 0.06; $M2$ = 3.93, $SD2$ = 0.7) showed no remarkable difference in assessing this factor, t(134) = -1.48, p = .14.

- There was no significant difference in student involvement perceived by Group 1 (M = 3.79, SD = 0.07) and Group 2 (M = 3.9, SD = 0.07), t(134) = -1.68, p = .09.

- Sixty-eight students in traditional classes (with no international students) (M = 3.74, SD = 0.62) had a more positive assessment of investigation than the students enrolling in CLE with international students (M = 3.92, SD = 0.62), t(134) = 0.02, p = .04.

- Task orientation was also better rated by Group 2 (M = 4.01, SD = 0.48) than Group 1 (M = 3.77, SD = 0.55), t(131) = -2.57, p = .01.

- There was no remarkable difference in the assessment of Group 1 ($M =$ 3.94, $SD = 0.52$) and Group 2 ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.56$) for cooperation, $t(134) = -1.0$, $p = .09$.

- Both groups ($M1 = 4.04$, $SD1 = 0.58$; $M2 = 4.15$, $SD2 = 0.62$) had similarly positive evaluation of equity, $t(134) = -1.09$, $p = .28$.

The above analysis shows that experience in CLE with international students resulted in differences in how the groups perceived student cohesiveness, investigation, and task orientation. Specifically, students who had no experience with international students tended to evaluate these factors more positively.

4.2.2 CLE Assessment of Students Enrolling in Classes with International Students

To ensure reliability and research rigor, students who participated in CLE with international students were asked to evaluate both CLEs with and without international students. Data collected were tested with paired samples T-test, the results of which are shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4

Paired samples T-test for CLEs with and without international students

Pair	*t*	*df*	*p* (sig. 2-tailed)
SC1-SC2	3.78	67	.001*
TS1-TS2	0.34	67	.73
SI1-SI2	0.39	67	.70
IV1-IV2	0.22	67	.83
TO1-TO2	-0.44	67	.66
CO1-CO2	-0.43	67	.97
EQ1-EQ2	0.26	67	.79

*p<.05

There was a significant difference in the students' evaluation of student cohesiveness in CLE with international students (M = 3.59, SD = 0.61) and CLE without international students (M = 3.85, SD = 0.56), t(67) = 3.78, p = .001. These values suggest that student cohesiveness in CLE without international students (SC1) was perceived better than in CLE with international students (SC2).

Paired samples T-test results for the remaining factors of both CLEs, namely teacher support, student involvement, investigation, task orientation, cooperation, and equity showed no significant differences.

4.3 Interview Results

4.3.1 Assessment of CLE without International Students

Quantitative data analysis demonstrates consistency with results from qualitative analysis. All interviewed students and teachers expressed a highly positive assessment of traditional CLE (without international students) of the studied school.

Student cohesiveness—all Interviewees highly rated their relationships with other students in the class as well as the relationships among their classmates. One of the reasons for this, in student C's opinion, was the idiosyncratic feature of the EFL classroom which was its small size, "Actually, I like the environment in this school. The class size is small, about 25-26 students, and we are very close-knitted."

Teacher support—Interviewees demonstrated a positive attitude towards the teachers' level of support and care. Learning activities were reported to be implemented and closely supervised by the teacher, "I always receive timely responses and feedback. I am very happy as I feel the environment here is very intimating and my progress from the first year to third year is very clear" (Student C). Teacher's support and care are consistent and equal, "The teacher's interaction and care for my classmates and me are the same" (Student B).

Student involvement—This was also considered positive by both teachers and students interviewed. Some interviewees believed that active participation in learning activities had positive influences on learning outcomes, "I myself do interact a lot with my classmates and teachers. Then my learning outcomes are very good" (Student B).

Investigation—This was rated highly by the participants. Teacher A believed that her students were proactive in searching for information to solve the assigned problems; however, the level of proactivity varied according to classes. From the students' perspective, student B thought the reason was "in university environment, autonomous learning is the most important." Regardless of the differences in the level of students' proactivity in investigation, this factor was considered a requirement of CLE at university level.

Task Orientation—Interviewed students reported their willingness to study the course requirements, have a sound learning plan, and make efforts to realize such a plan. The teacher interviewees also agreed, "my students often go to class in time, being active in their learning and asking the teacher whenever they don't understand anything. They are quite proactive in completing the assigned task" (Teacher B).

Cooperation—Positive attitudes towards the above factors had led to a positive assessment of cooperation, which was rated highly by all students interviewed. Teacher C believed that students' willingness to cooperate with other students and teachers was due to "the small class size."

Equity—Equity was the highest rated factor in the survey, and it was positively evaluated by the interviewees. This was achieved by the teachers' effort in treating all students equally as claimed by Teacher B.

The interview results showed that all CLE factors in the school were highly evaluated by both teachers and students. Teacher support, interaction, and relationship between teachers-students and students-students were considered major contributors to the satisfaction with the classroom environment.

4.3.2 Assessment of CLE with International Students

Overall, the participants claimed no significant difference between CLE with international students and CLE without this group of learners. The attitudes of interviewees towards the presence of international students in the classroom were generally positive. In some cases, international students' integration created a congenial learning environment without discrimination:

I find that with the presence of international students, Vietnamese students are very active and friendly. They are proactive in involving international students in the class activities such as groupwork. In general, there is no discrimination between Vietnamese and international students in my class" (Teacher A).

Teacher C believed that having international students in a foreign language classroom is preferable, "the presence of any foreign elements, either from students' or teacher's perspectives, is encouraging and conducive to language students." Some interviewed students even considered being in a CLE with international students a privilege; thus, despite some drawbacks, international students' presence in EFL classrooms brought about significant benefits, "the students in other classes [⋯] are very jealous of us, as we have international students in our class while they do not. [⋯] I think it [international student's presence] creates more benefits than disadvantages (Student B).

Seven CLE elements were all rated positively, which also resonated with results from quantitative data analysis.

Student cohesiveness—The respondents thought that international students' presence reduced the class cohesiveness to a certain extent; notably,

such influences were evident in the beginning and then faded, "well, in the beginning, we were rather shy. But after one or two weeks, as we got accustomed to their presence, we got to know them, the international students… well… the groupwork went smoothly …" (Student B). This finding somehow explained why student cohesiveness in CLE with international students was evaluated lower than in CLE without international students.

The first reason for international students' influence on CLE cohesiveness was the language barrier which created an isolated feeling:

In the class, they spoke English, but during break time, they spoke Korean, just as we spoke Vietnamese with one another. I found this kind of unfriendly. I mean they spoke Korean and we spoke Vietnamese. It does not sound cohesive" (Student A).

The use of native tongue led to "the interactions among us became awkward and reduced in frequency" (Student B). Both interviewed teachers and students agreed that this was due to the international students' level of English proficiency, "These international students, their English is generally not good. Even when they want to express something, they could not do it due to their limited English. They are also shy by nature" (Teacher C) and "Their English is not good so they are reluctant to communicate with us" (Student E).

Besides language, in terms of communication, the participants believed that the presence of "the stranger" in any environment could make certain impacts in the beginning. As this was a natural phenomenon in communication, most students were quite open about this influence, "I find it natural. When there is someone new, we always try to build a good image of ourselves; after a few classes, everything will be normal" (Student E).

International students' personalities were also considered a factor influencing student cohesiveness in the CLE with this group of learners. As shared

by Teacher C, "despite my students' effort to involve them [international students] in class activities, we invited them to join our class activities, and Vietnamese students tried to encourage them, but they are shy," or by Student E, "it is partly due to their lack of confidence, (···) the cultural differences might be the hurdle." Notably, some interviewees considered the reason was from both sides, "I think it is due to both parties. None of us reach out to one another first; thus, there was a lack of interaction" (Student C). Giving an account for this lack of interaction, Teacher C thought that the relative short duration of time (one semester, in one or two courses), the rather big sizes of some classes and online learning (in the onset of Covid pandemic) were the reasons.

As for investigation, this factor was considered positive in CLE with international students, "I find that he [the international student] was very active in searching information; we cooperated to complete the task well" (Student C). However, as believed by Student B, "the international students' learning attitudes also affected me;" thus, the evaluation of Vietnamese students on this factor of CLE was somehow influenced by international students' attitudes towards investigation.

Similar to other factors, task orientation in CLE with international students were positive, "when there are international students in the class, I feel more excited going to school and come to the class early to have time talking with them" (Student D). Supporting international students became a learning goal and motivation for completing learning task for some students.

In contrast, some participants experienced negative influences on their task orientation, such as learning interruption, "negative influences are minor; for instance, when I was listening to the teachers, I had to turn to him and explained what the teachers were talking about so he could follow" (Student C) or failure to meet their expectations, "··· if I was with a more active student, the result would have been better" (Student E). Again, the international students' attitudes toward

learning were considered a detrimental factor for task orientation, "One international student was often absent, then I found that their learning attitudes did have some impact on me" (Student B). Student E explained this impact with quite an interesting reason, which was the frustration due to their expectation about international students' presence in the class and the reality:

I don't know how to say it, as they are accustomed to the learning styles in their country when they come here, there are a lot of problems, and they need help. But ⋯ I think it's me who also need help. I want to be helped rather than being the helper.

As stated by Student D, inadequate levels of English proficiency of some local students also caused negative feelings about task completion, "as there were international students, we used English more. Less proficient students could not participate in such activities nor understand the lecture, thus feeling bored and discouraged" (Student D).

Finally, both students and teachers evaluated the factor of equity positive in CLE with the presence of international students despite their admitting that there were changes in the teachers' care of students. To be specific, the teachers were observed to care for and interact with international students more than local ones. As an explanation for this paradox, both teacher and student interviewees believed that their acceptance of the special care for international students rooted from their sympathy and empathy with the international students:

I just felt I should not let him be alone when in an alien country. Simply as it is, I used to live abroad, and I know that being away from your home means a lack of care and loneliness ⋯ if there is someone supporting us, we will feel confident overcoming the difficulties (Teacher B).

5. Discussion

5.1 Evaluation of CLE

The results from qualitative and quantitative data analysis showed that the CLE at this university was rated positive in seven factors, namely student cohesiveness, teacher support, student involvement, investigation, task orientation, cooperation, and equity. Specifically, equity and cooperation were the two highest-rated factors. This finding is different from some research on CLE in other parts of the world, such as Chua et al. (2009) study which examined the relationship between high school students' evaluation of CLE in Chinese language classrooms and their learning motivation using the WIHIC questionnaire. Findings from this study revealed the three most important factors in a CLE, namely student involvement, teacher support, and task orientation. This can be explained by the differences between high school and university learning and teaching. For instance, the former emphasizes mastery of basic knowledge to prepare students for college matriculation, thus being more teacher-centered in many contexts and placing more attention to disciplines, while university CLE is more student-centered, encouraging more communication and collaborative learning (Song & Vermunt, 2021).

Such positive evaluation found in the context of this study can be attributable to the teachers' quality, care, and equity and humane treatment for their students. Besides, such idiosyncratic features of the EFL classroom as diverse learning activities and the small classroom size encourage students' participation as an individual and as a team member and allow more communication among learners as well as between teachers and learners.

5.2 Differences Between CLE with and without International Students

Overall, EFL CLE with international students was rated positive by the participants, especially the factor of equity which was highly appreciated despite the students' acknowledgment of their teachers' support leaning toward

international students. This finding can be explained by the students' and teachers' openness and sympathy for international students.

The most apparent difference reported by both groups of students (participating in CLE with and without international students) was that the presence of international students had certain impacts on the cohesiveness among the class members. This finding can be justified in the light of social cohesion theory. Veerman et al. (2021) documented Schiefer and Van der Noll's multidimensional social cohesion model to propose seven components of school social cohesion, namely: social networks, trust, mutual tolerance, participation, belonging, solidarity, and compliance with social rules and norms. Changes made to any of these components lead to changes in cohesion. In the light of this model, the presence of international students in the studied context had certain impacts on networks, tolerance with foreign students, participation, and compliance to school rules and norms. Specifically, networks were an indicator of the quality and degree of relationships between members in the classroom environment, namely student-student, student-teacher, and parent-school relationships (Veerman et al., 2021). Despite the positive attitudes of both students and teachers studied towards the presence of international students, such presence changed the quality of the relationships between students and students and students and teachers, which could account for such factors as the international students' participation for a relatively short period (i.e. one semester), the students' personalities, language barrier, and cultural differences. Furthermore, the participation of the students in a CLE included taking part in both inside and outside classroom activities. In general, active participation of learners contributes to a positive learning environment and act as a catalyst to improve cohesion. The findings of this study revealed that such hurdles as language, cultural barriers, and personalities were a major source of influence on international students' involvement in learning activities. International students' participation in activities outsides the classroom was evident yet inadequate.

The last component justifying why cohesiveness in CLE with international students was lower than in CLE without this group of learners is the compliance of school rules and norms. The adherence to CLE rules and norms and the importance of being able to maintain these regulations create discipline, which is a key factor in social cohesion. In this study, the participants' sharing of international students' negative learning activities such as being late or absent for personal recreational purposes reflected their low evaluation of discipline in CLE with international students.

International students' influences on networks, level of participation, and discipline in CLE helped explain the low evaluation of the participation on student cohesiveness in CLE with international students. However, despite being rated lower, the evaluation of student cohesiveness in CLE with international students was generally positive, which was an effect of the tolerance for foreign students. Qualitative data reflected an open and sympathetic attitude towards international students.

Qualitative data analysis also showed a lower evaluation of task orientation and investigation in CLE with international students, which can be understood by considering factors idiosyncratic to EFL such as local students' expectation of international students' presence in the classroom, international students' learning attitudes, and language proficiency. Local students' expectation of international students' presence in the classroom might disappoint them instead of being a source of help for English practice and cultural learning. In fact, international students with low English proficiency turned out to be a learning distractor in some cases. This finding is also discussed and explained by some researchers (Kwon, 2013) who argue that international students when working with non-English speaking students from the host country would need support for their interactional and social needs with local students. At the same time, the need for academic support of local students who identify themselves as EFL learners is also recognized by extant literature (Kim et al., 2014).

The presence of international students in the studied CLE brought about both opportunities and challenges. Findings from this study have suggested efforts to be made at both institutional and classroom levels. To be specific, a transparent and fair process of recruiting international students with requirement of English language proficiency should be developed to avoid prioritizing quantity over quality. The assigning of international students into EFL courses should be made while considering the needs, language proficiency, and ability of both international and local students. At classroom level, learning activities should fit international students' English proficiency to encourage their involvement. The presence of international students should also be considered a source for integrating cultural elements into language teaching to enhance both local and international students' linguistic and intercultural competency. Even attention and fair treatment should be given to all students, not just international ones, to engage all students, especially less competent ones.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, findings of this study have shown a positive evaluation of EFL classroom environment in the studied context regardless of the presence of international students. The participants highly appreciated the opportunities for cooperation in learning activities as well as the equal treatment of their teachers. The presence of international students reduced Vietnamese student cohesiveness in CLE as well as their task orientation, which were attributable to communication barriers and challenges in organizing learning activities in CLE with international students.

This research aimed to evaluate CLE through the lenses of students and teachers from the host institutes, which made it different from the majority of existing research focusing on international students. The findings from this research, hence, have contributed to the literature of CLE with international

students from the perspectives of host institutes which remains uncharted territory.

The mixed methods allowed the researcher to gain an extensive amount of data from different sources, thus fortifying the study's rigor and trustworthiness. However, there remain some methodological limitations that should be considered through future research. First, the sample was quite modest in number (136 students), thus the findings might not be highly representative nor generalized. Second, the study may miss valuable insights from participants who had not experienced CLE with international students as this group of participants was not selected for interviews due to constraints in recruiting interviewees. Furthermore, one outstanding issue of CLE research in the EFL environment is the lack of an instrument tailored specifically for this environment. This limitation has not been addressed by this research. However, to ensure validity and rigor of the research, data were collected using a popular instrument, which was employed across contexts.

Given the aforementioned findings and limitations, the researcher proposes some recommendations for future research on this topic. First, a comprehensive study collecting data from all stakeholders such as international students, home institutes, and host institutes (e.g. admin staff, teachers, students, support staff, etc.) is essential to delineate a panoramic picture of a CLE featuring international students. Second, concerning research methods, employing multiple instruments (e.g. observation, survey, interviews, etc.) with a large sample will help ensure the research's representativeness and reliability. Furthermore, developing a specific instrument for evaluating the EFL classroom learning environment is imperative. Last but not least, the current research just managed to embrace CLE in EFL classes, other CLEs with international students also need to be investigated.

7. About the Author

Nguyen Van Khanh is a senior lecturer at School of Foreign Languages, Hanoi University of Science and Technology, Vietnam. She earned her master's degree in TESOL at Monash University, Australia in 2016. Her research interests include classroom environment, assessment & testing, education internationalization, World Englishes and content-based learning.

8. References

Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods*. Oxford University Press.

Calikoglu, A. (2018). International student experiences in non-native English-speaking countries: Postgraduate motivations and realities from Finland. *Research in Comparative & International Education, 13*(3), 439–456. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499918791362

Chang, Y. (2010). English-medium instruction for subject courses in tertiary education: Reactions from Taiwanese undergraduate students. *Taiwan International ESP Journal, 2*(1), 55–84.

Charalampous, K. & Kokkinos, C. M. (2017). The "What is Happening in This Class" questionnaire: A qualitative examination in elementary classrooms. *Journal of research in childhood education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2017.1310153

Cheng, M. (2021). Shifting trends in international student mobility: Embracing diversity and responding to change. *Trends & Insights*, 1–6. https://www.nafsa.org/professional-resources/research-and-trends/shifting-trends-international-student-mobility-embracing

Chu, H. R., Lee, W. S., & Obrien, P. W. (2017). Student satisfaction in an undergraduate international business EMI program: A case in southern Taiwan. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 22*(3), 198–209. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315317748525

Chua, S. L., Wong, A. F. L, & Chen, D. T. (2009). Associations between Chinese language classroom environements and students' motivation to learn the language. *Australian Journal of Educational & Developmental Psychology,*

9, 53–64.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288714500_Associations_betw

een_Chinese_Language_classroom_environments_and_students%27_motiv

ation_to_learn_the_language

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. Pearson.

Fraser, B. J. (1998). Classroom environment instruments: Development, validity and applications. *Learning Environment Research, 1*, 7–34.

Fraser, B. J. (2012). Classroom learning environments: Retrospect, context and prospect. In B. J. Fraser, K. G. Tobin, & C. J. McRobbie (Eds.), *Second international handbook of science education* (pp. 1191–1232). Springer. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9041-7_79

Fraser, B. J., McRobbie, C. J., & Fisher, D. L. (1996). *Development, validation and use of personal and class forms of a new classroom environment instrument.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York.

Fraser, B. J., & Walberg, H. J. (1981). Psychological learning environment in science classrooms: A review of research. *Studies in Science Education, 8*, 67–82. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057268108559887

Gettinger, M., Schienebeck, C. J., Seigel, S., & Vollmer, L. J. (2011). Assessment of Classroom Environments. In M. A. Bray, & T. J. Kehle (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of school psychology* (pp. 260–283). Oxford University Press.

Goksu, A. (2015). High school students' perceptions of classroom learning environments in an EFL context. *Revista de Cercetare si Interventie Sociala, 51*, 72–89.

Gonzalez-Carriedo, R., Nava, J., & Martinex, M. (2017). International student teaching: A transformational experience. *Journal of International Students, 7*(3), 841–855. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.570037

Gur, R. (2006). *A comparison of actual and preferred classroom learning environment as perceived by teachers and students at YADIM* (Unpublished master's thesis). Cukurova University.

Higgins, S., Hall, E., Wall,K., Woolner, P.,&McCaughey, C. (2005). *The Impact of School Environments; A literature review*. The Centre for Learning and Teaching, School of Education, Communication and Language, Science, University of New Castle. https://eprints.ncl.ac.uk/12574

Khine, M. S. (2021). Using the WIHIC questionnaire to measure the learning environment. *Teaching and Learning, 22*(2), 54–61. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281395527_Using_What's_Happening_in_this_Class_WIHIC_to_measure_the_learning_environment

Kim, J., Tatar, B., & Choi, J. (2014). Emerging culture of English-medium instruction in Korea: experiences of Korean and international students. *Language and Intercultural Communication, 14*(4), 441–459. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2014.946038

Kirloskar, P., & Inamdar, N. (2021). Shifting international student mobility directions and factors influencing students' higher education destination choices. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies, 2*(3), 160–178. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355798723_Shifting_International_Student_Mobility_Directions_and_Factors_Influencing_Students%27_Higher_Education_Destination_Choices

Knight, P. (2002). "Summative assessment in higher education: practices in disarray". *Studies in Higher Education, 27*(3), 275–286. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070220000662

Kondakci, Y. (2011). Student mobility reviews: attraction and satisfaction of international students in Turkey. *Higher Education, 62*(5), 573–592. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10734-011-9406-2

Kwon, Y. (2013). The sociocultural adjustment of Chinese graduate students at Korean universities: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 37*, 536–549. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2013.06.004

Lee, J., Jon, J., & Byun, K. (2016). Neo-racism and neo-nationalism within East Asia: The experiences of international students in South Korea. *Journal of*

Studies in International Education, *21*(2), 1–20.
https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315316669903

Lim, C. D. & Fraser, B. J. (2018). Learning environments research in English classrooms. *Learning Environment Research, 21*(3), 433–449.
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10984-018-9260-6

Lwin, T., Aslam, S., & Mukhale, P. (2017). International students' perceptions of their learning environment in graduate programs at one normal university in China. *Journal of Education and Practice, 8*(9), 229–233.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315780365_International_Stude
nts%27_Perceptions_of_their_Learning_Environment_in_Graduate_Progra
ms_at_One_Normal_University_in_China

Mai, T. K. K, & Chau, H. N. (2021). Attracting international students: Experiences of Asian countries and the case of University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University – Ho Chi Minh. *VNU Journal of Science: Education Research, 37*(3), 11–21.
https://doi.org/10.25073/2588-1159/vnuer.4504

Mehta, A. M., Khalid, R., Serfraz, A., & Raza, M. (2021). The effect of studying abroad and curriculum internationalization on global mindedness of university students: The mediating role of the English language. *TESOL International journal, 16*(3.2), 2021, 106–131.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349925165_The_Effect_of_Stud
ying_Abroad_and_Curriculum_Internationalization_on_Global_Mindedness_
of_University_Students_The_Mediating_Role_of_the

Moos, R. H. (1979). *Evaluating educational environments: Procedures, measures, findings and policy implications.* Jossey-Bass.

Mutlu, G. & Yildirim, A. (2019). Learning environment perceptions and student background variables as determinants of persistence in EFL learning. *SAGE Open,* 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019898805

Pawar, S. K., Dasgupta, H., & Vispute, S. (2020). Analysis of factors influencing international student destination choice: a case of Indian HE. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 44*(10), 1388–1400

https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1690640

Quintal, V. & Phau, I. (2014). Students' perceptions of an internationalised learning environment. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning, 31*(1), 89–106. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019898805

Robertson, M., Line, M., Jones, S., & Thomas, S. (2000). International students, learning environments and perception: A case study using the Delphi technique. *Higher education research & development, 19*(1), 89–102. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360050020499

Skordi, P. & Fraser, B. J. (2019). Validity and use of the What Is Happening In This Class? (WIHIC) questionnaire in university business statistics classrooms. *Learning Environments Research*, *22*(2), 275–295. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10984-018-09277-4

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis theory, method and research*. SAGE.

Song, Y., & Vermunt, J. D. (2021). A comparative study of learning patterns of secondary school, high school and college students. *Studies in Educational Evaluation, 68*, Article 100958. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2020.100958

Tian, M., Lu, G., Yin, H., & Li, L. (2020). Student engagement for sustainability of Chinese international education: The case of international undergraduate students in China. *Sustainability, 12*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12176831

Torti, C. D. (2006). *The relationship between the quality of the early childhood classroom environment and vocabulary development in young children learning English as a second language* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Faculty of Graduate School, Texas A & M University-Commerce.

Tsai, Y., Trang, L. T., & Kobori, K. (2017). Factors influencing international students to study at universities in Taiwan. *International journal for innovation education and research, 5*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.31686/ijier.vol5.iss1.46

Veerman, G., Denessen, E., & Zhao, Z. (2021). Social cohesion in schools: A non-systematic review of its conceptualization and instruments. *Cogent Education*, *8*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2021.1940633

Wei, L. S. & Elias, H. E. (2011). Relationship between student' perceptions of classroom environment and their motivation in learning English language. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 1*(21), 240–250.

Weng, Z. (2018). Voices from international Chinese students on varieties of English: A mixed methods study. *Asian EFL Journal, 20(*2), 60–105.

Wilkins, S., Balakrishnan, M. S., & Huisman, J. (2012). Student satisfaction and student perceptions of quality at international branch campuses in the United Arab Emirates. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 34*(5), 543–556. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2012.716003

Wu, W. V. & Wu, P. N. (2008). Creating an authentic EFL learning environment to enhance student motivation to study English. *Asian EFL Journal, 10*(4), 211–226.