

Exploring and Expressing Culture through Project-Based Learning

Teaching in Vietnam recently, I had opportunities to work with some amazing students and teachers. Being in such a position lent itself well to cultural exchanges inside and outside the classroom. However, it was clear to me, to my colleagues, and I believe to the majority of students that there was a need to dig deeper—to move beyond the cultural dos and don'ts and the comparisons of cultural practices and behavior. As teachers, we must also support and motivate students to reflect on and investigate how one's own and others' cultural beliefs, attitudes, and norms are shaped. Additionally, being in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context requires English-language support and activities that motivate students to engage in English. This article presents four lessons based on project-based learning (PBL) that I used with EFL students in Vietnam and that other teachers can use with students in their own contexts. The lessons focus on developing students' English proficiency, research and analytical skills, and their ability to produce and present work collaboratively. Furthermore, these lessons aim to create not only a successful learning experience but also a more understanding and peaceful world.

DEFINING INTERCULTURAL-COMPETENCE EDUCATION

According to Dearsdorff (2006), *intercultural competence* is “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes,” as well as “the awareness, valuing, and understanding of cultural differences; experiencing other cultures; and self-awareness of one's own culture” (247).

In Vietnam, primarily teaching students at a university, I had to ask myself, “What

intercultural situations do I need to prepare my students for?” Having interactions with foreigners was a relatively new phenomenon for the majority of my Vietnamese students. Additionally, many of them were preparing for jobs in the tourism industry or as English-language teachers themselves. They will certainly need to develop their knowledge of other people, cultures, and perspectives. They will also need to articulate the diverse cultural practices of Vietnam (a country with over 50 distinct ethnic groups), as well as develop greater intercultural awareness and competence with their future clients and students. Considering these student-driven

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goals helped me to better understand what intercultural competence means for my students and how to structure intercultural instruction within our courses and programs.

A major goal of intercultural-competence education is to facilitate a shift in viewpoint from a dualistic or *ethnocentric* perspective of culture (i.e., seeing the world in terms of “my/our way is the best”) to a more culturally *ethnorelative* understanding of seeing the world (i.e., accepting that there are multiple ways of seeing the world and living life, as well as holding off negative evaluation of a cultural trait without further thought and inquiry) (Bennett 2004; Peterson 2011). Additionally, well-designed intercultural-competence education should go beyond *surface knowledge*—objective and observable aspects of culture (e.g., food and clothing)—to *deep culture*, often understood as subjective underlying aspects of culture (e.g., attitudes and beliefs of gender roles). These definitions and goals of intercultural-competence education informed the design of the activities we developed for our course and students.

Importantly, my Vietnamese colleagues and I wanted to get away from using only paper-based assessment of our students' understanding of intercultural communication and awareness of other cultures. We felt strongly that we needed to develop alternative assessment methods that stimulate creativity and encourage greater use of English both inside and outside the classroom. We decided to design a project where students could build intercultural competence weekly and apply their knowledge, skills, and ability to real-world concepts that were geared toward their current and future academic, personal, and professional needs. The use of PBL helped guide us to design pedagogically sound lessons and activities. Before I discuss the lessons in

more detail, it is important to be clear on how PBL is defined and how it can be applied.

UNDERSTANDING PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

The Buck Institute for Education, a leader in the development and research of PBL, describes PBL as follows:

Students work on a project over an extended period of time—from a week up to a semester—that engages them in solving a real-world problem or answering a complex question. They demonstrate their knowledge and skills by developing a public product or presentation for a real audience. As a result, students develop deep content knowledge as well as critical thinking, creativity, and communication skills in the context of doing an authentic, meaningful project. Project Based Learning unleashes a contagious, creative energy among students and teachers. (Buck Institute for Education 2019)

Within English-language-learning contexts, PBL has been shown to be a powerful method that enables the integration of academic, social, and linguistic communication skills with the application of real-world issues and contexts. However, research also reports conflicting perspectives by English-language learners on how they view the usefulness of PBL activities toward their English-language development (Beckett and Slater 2005). With this said, it is clear that careful planning and scaffolding of PBL that integrates both intercultural and English-language-learning goals are essential to the successful completion of PBL activities in an EFL context.

The following framework describes the High-Quality Project-Based Learning

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(HQPBL) that we used to design lessons to develop our students' intercultural competence, English-language proficiency, and academic skills.

FRAMEWORK FOR HIGH-QUALITY PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

The Buck Institute for Education facilitated the development of a framework for HQPBL based on six criteria (High Quality Project Based Learning 2018):

1. **Intellectual challenge and accomplishment:** Students learn deeply, think critically, and strive for excellence.
2. **Authenticity:** Students work on projects that are meaningful and relevant to their culture, their lives, and their future.
3. **Collaboration:** Students collaborate with other students in person or online and/or receive guidance from adult mentors and experts.
4. **Project management:** Students use a project-management process that enables them to proceed effectively from project initiation to completion.
5. **Reflection:** Students reflect on their work and their learning throughout the project.
6. **Public product:** Students' work is publicly displayed, discussed, and critiqued.

Following are four PBL lessons applying aspects of this HQPBL framework that I used in Vietnam and recommend for use in other contexts.

PBL LESSON 1: CHALLENGING CULTURAL STEREOTYPES—VIDEO PROJECT

In planning and designing a project-based lesson for our Intercultural Communications courses for third- and fourth-year university students, my Vietnamese colleagues and I first aligned the course objectives we wanted to integrate into the project. The objectives specified that students would be able to do the following: (1) apply intercultural-competence terms and theory, (2) conduct research and identify quality sources of information, (3) apply citations to reference information presented, (4) use objective language when describing people and cultural practice, and (5) develop English-language fluency and accuracy. The lesson we developed required students to discuss cultural stereotypes, conduct research on the background of the stereotypes, and apply their knowledge of the course content and English language to challenge the stereotypes. We also felt that a video project would motivate students more than only paper-based assessment. The HQPBL framework is used to illustrate how the lesson was structured (High Quality Project Based Learning 2018).

Intellectual challenge and accomplishment. To reinforce and deepen students' understanding of the concept of stereotypes, we used the Stereotypes and Generalizations Activity (see Figure 1). This activity provides students with examples of stereotypes, along with alternative examples of how to discuss culture and people in relative and objective terms. This was our method to address the PBL criterion of having “students learn deeply” and “think critically” (High Quality Project Based Learning 2018). From an English-language-learning perspective, this activity also serves as an introduction to using adverbs of frequency to practice speaking in

Stereotypes and Generalizations Activity

A. Background

Did you ever hear anyone say any of these things?

- You can't trust people from [Country A].
- People from [Country B] are so smart.
- People from [Country C] are always late.
- People from [Country D] are fat.
- People from [Country E] eat dogs.

Are these statements completely true? Of course not! They are *stereotypes*—the automatic application of information we have about a country or culture group, both positive and negative, to every individual in it. This information is often based on limited experience with the culture, so it is incomplete at best and completely wrong at worst. If you consider only stereotypes when interacting with people, you are probably not seeing them for who they truly are.

What is the alternative? To start, you can talk to people from that culture or do research to find more information. For example, you might ask, “What are the reasons that many Vietnamese live with their extended families?” and “Do all Vietnamese live with their extended families?” Finding answers to these and related questions can lead us to think more objectively.

To understand the world objectively, you must explore and understand the different experiences and behaviors of people in a culture. Of course, people from a cultural group can share certain values, beliefs, and behaviors, but you should not assume that these behaviors apply to everyone. It is also important to understand why the behavior exists. What are the historical, political, and/or financial events that shape the culture?

B. Activity

This exercise gives you practice in differentiating between stereotypes and thinking objectively. Read each statement below and decide whether you think it is a stereotypical statement (write “S” in the blank) or objective statement (write “O” in the blank).

1. ___ “Maria is from Country Q, so she will definitely be late.”
2. ___ “Many people in Country X value their family life, so it’s not surprising that Tim still lives at home.”
3. ___ “Country Y is a violent country. Everyone carries a gun.”
4. ___ “Many people from Country Z trust their family to know what is best for them, so they don’t mind arranged marriages.”

Figure 1. Stereotypes and Generalizations Activity

language that is more objective and relative. We went over this activity with students in class using a computer and overhead projector.

Collaboration. Group work is essential in enabling all students to participate in meaningful and productive ways, especially with larger classes. We assigned students to groups of four or five at the beginning of the semester. In their groups, students selected

their own topics based on stereotypes they have heard (or that they possibly have) within their own and/or other cultures, genders, socioeconomic classes, ethnic groups, and ideas. Before moving forward, we had the student groups present their topics to the class. This allowed the instructors to provide feedback to ensure that groups were on the right track. It also allowed their classmates to hear and—ideally—apply the feedback we provided.

Challenging Stereotypes: Presentation and Scoring Organizer

Stereotypes can come from limited or incomplete information about culture and lead to both explicit and implicit biases towards others. One of the best ways to address this is to research cultures and develop a deeper and more objective understanding of them. It is also important that you do not stereotype when you are talking about your own culture.

In addition to providing your own perspective and experience, think of how other people from different regions, ethnic groups, ages, and genders might view the topic. Thinking about and providing a diversity of beliefs and practices can help present a more accurate picture of society and culture, and not a stereotypical one.

Instructions: Complete sections A through D below and review the language-use specifications in section F. Section E will be completed at the conclusion of the project.

A. Definitions (20 points):

Provide a definition for each of the following terms.

1. stereotypes: _____
2. bias: _____
3. prejudice: _____
4. discrimination: _____
5. racism: _____

B. Stereotypes and Information (30 points):

- Present three stereotypes. These can be about cultures (your own and/or other cultures), gender, economic class, ethnic groups, ideas, etc.
- Provide information and examples showing that the stereotypes are not always true and that the bias is not appropriate.

Stereotype 1: _____

Information and examples: _____

Stereotype 2: _____

Information and examples: _____

Stereotype 3: _____

Information and examples: _____

C. Practice the Language of Objectivity (15 points): Write three example sentences about a person with a different age or from a different region, ethnic group, or gender.

- Use language such as *some*, *sometimes*, *many*, *at times*, *rarely*, etc.
- Do not use language such as *never*, *always*, *all*, *everyone*, etc.

Example 1: _____

Example 2: _____

Example 3: _____

D. Practice the Language of Reference (15 points): Write three sentences containing a reference to your research on stereotypes and bias.

- Use expressions to reference where you learned the information, such as “According to the website X, ...”; “According to my American friend X, ...”; “I learned the following information from X, ...”; etc.

Reference 1: _____

Reference 2: _____
 Reference 3: _____

E. Conclusion (10 points):

1. Explain why it is important to challenge stereotypes, biases, and prejudice, as well as to think and speak objectively:

2. Describe what you learned from this project:

F. Language Use (grammar, pronunciation, fluency) (10 points):

Consistently uses correct grammar tense

Speaks clearly, with pauses after each sentence

Pronounces final consonants (e.g., final /s/ and /ed/)

Uses appropriate word and sentence stress to emphasize keywords

Figure 2. Challenging Stereotypes: Presentation and Scoring Organizer

Project management. As teachers, we can be guilty of providing directions for an activity or project and then leaving students to figure out the rest on their own, an approach known as the sink-or-swim method. However, for students to produce high-quality work, teachers must provide support in managing the project. Providing students with guidelines is important in any activity, but particularly in PBL. If we want our students to strive for excellence by producing quality work, we as teachers need to make our expectations as clear as possible. With this in mind, we provided a graphic organizer for students to review and complete as a group and send to their instructor (see Figure 2). This graphic organizer informs students of project requirements for organization, language, grammar, and application of the course objectives. In addition, it gives students ideas on how they need to organize their presentation on stereotypes, gives

transparency on how they will be graded, and helps ensure that they will meet all the requirements of the project.

Authenticity. The graphic organizer in Figure 2 is important to ensure that students select quality topics related to stereotypes that will be relevant and meaningful to their understanding of the world and others. This real-world focus helps students realize that they can apply this information to their interactions with others outside the classroom. We stressed to students the necessity of conducting research to develop a deeper and more objective understanding of others, as well as citing where they gathered their information. It was evident that research skills—including applying proper citation—was an area that our students needed to develop. The graphic organizer reinforces this point. We required students to submit their organizers for feedback before moving forward to the production stage of their projects.

Stereotypes can come from limited or incomplete information about culture and lead to both explicit and implicit biases towards others.

Reflection. Before students began working on their own projects, we provided them with a model showing how the final video product might look. The first semester we conducted this project, I created a model myself. This helped students see what was expected of them, and we could analyze how the model met the project requirements. Additionally, it was useful for me as the teacher to understand the process of doing the project. I was able to identify areas of the project that could be challenging for the students and address these areas early on. In the second semester, we were able to show student-made models from the previous semester. This is ideal, as students can better relate to the style and content of their peers. It also sets a high bar of quality that students can attempt to meet and surpass. If for some reason teachers are unable to create and provide their own model prior to the course, I suggest searching the web to find a model that they can present to students.

Another important aspect of reflection is feedback from the instructor. We required students to submit their outline by email before making their videos. The idea was to make sure students were on the right track with meeting project requirements and to provide support as needed. Students were also required to resubmit their outline before being allowed to continue to the next step of creating their videos.

Public product. My colleagues and I agreed that having students create a video project would allow greater creativity and learning of intercultural terms and concepts. We also felt that completing video projects would be less intimidating for students than presenting in front of the class, thus enabling them to focus more on language use and accuracy. Having students create and submit their work through video also allowed time in class for group work on the project and for receiving support from the teachers and peers. Classroom presentations often take a large amount of class time and frequently allow only a small number of students to participate. We felt that having students work in groups in class with our support,

where they could ask questions and talk with us and other students about how their projects were developing, was a more effective use of class time than holding class presentations.

We also provided students with a free, easy-to-use online video software, Adobe Spark. We took time in class to show students a video tutorial on how to use the software and how to sign up for a free Adobe Spark account. We also wanted students to be able to publish, share, and comment on one another's final video projects. We created a course Facebook group page at the beginning of the semester that we frequently used as a course learning management system and had students post their final video projects there. That made it easy for teachers and students to post comments in the form of feedback and questions.

Student Reflection and Feedback

At the end of the course, we distributed a survey asking students to provide feedback on the project-based lesson. Following are comments from two students that I feel summarize the experience of the majority of the class:

***Student 1:** For me, the final project is very significant and meaningful. It is not [only] the way I and my friends in class show what we learned from subject from my teacher, but it also shows our knowledge about cultures around the world. Furthermore I can practice my speaking skills and studying myself about culture which I didn't know before.*

***Student 2:** I got more information about a new concept: stereotypes. Actually, I sometimes used it on unknown person. But after I searched about stereotypes on the internet, I knew that it's wrong when stereotyping someone. So I try not to stereotype, not to evaluate someone too soon. Through this assignment I found stereotypes not only in Vietnam, but also in other countries.*

As can be seen from these comments, Student 1 felt the project allowed her to demonstrate

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her knowledge about other cultures and her English speaking skills. Student 2, meanwhile, felt that the project helped her to develop and apply research skills that in turn changed how she views others—a shift from an ethnocentric to a more ethnorelative perspective.

PBL LESSON 2: CHALLENGING CULTURAL STEREOTYPES—POSTER PRESENTATION

A lower-tech alternative to the video project is to have students develop poster presentations, which are a way for students to share their work and do not require students to have access to computers or the Internet. Instead, students present their findings on poster board and use images from magazines, photos, and/or drawings to illustrate their project. Students present their findings through explaining the information and illustrations on their posters, through role play, and possibly through answering questions, from the audience. Poster presentations also allow students to rehearse and prepare by presenting to their classmates first. The familiarity of the classroom and classmates enables students to build confidence, reflect on what needs to be modified, and receive feedback on content, language, and presentation skills.

Having students present their work to others who are not their classmates is a key component to PBL. One suggestion is to have students present to others, but within their own classroom. This often helps lower the anxiety that students might feel about giving presentations. Teachers can coordinate with colleagues to invite students from other classes or possibly invite other faculty and staff. If possible, students can also present their posters outside the classroom, perhaps on campus or in a welcoming and safe space within the community (to younger students

in other schools, to community clubs and organizations, etc.). If time allows, students can present their posters more than once and in more than one location. This repetition allows students to further reflect on their performance, build language and presentation skills, develop expertise, and connect with the community.

PBL LESSON 3: TEENS TALK!

This lesson was inspired by *American Teens Talk!*—an archive of audio interviews with U.S. American teens, accompanied by written transcripts and discussion questions, that is available on the U.S. Department of State’s American English website (<https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/american-teens-talk>). The following describes the lesson using the HQPBL framework.

Authenticity. *American Teens Talk!* proved to be an excellent resource for developing listening comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and greater awareness of the multicultural society of the United States. Because the interviews are conducted with U.S. American teens, listening to them serves as an excellent activity that captures students’ attention. In our case, it also motivated students to reflect on, inquire about, and share their own background and daily life.

Intellectual challenge and accomplishment. I chose several *American Teens Talk!* interviews that I felt the students would find interesting and that would be appropriate for their language level. Because of limited time, I focused on one interview with a Vietnamese American teenager. I could see that the students were interested in her life and the fact that she and her family continued a number of traditional Vietnamese customs in

Vietnamese Teens Talk! Activity

Part 1. Having a conversation is like playing tennis or badminton, using questions and answers. After asking a question, you need to *listen* to your partner's answer so you can ask an appropriate follow-up question. Let's practice! 😊

1. First, write an answer to the following question:

“What have you been doing this week?”

Example answer: “I've been going to school and playing outside with friends, mostly.”

Your answer: _____

2. Pass your answer to your partner. He or she will write another question, based on your answer.

Example question: “What are you doing in school?”

Your question: _____

3. Give your question to your partner. He or she will write a response.

Example answer: “We just finished our end-of-grade tests. School ends in two weeks.”

Your answer: _____

4. Keep your paper and write a response to this question:

“Is there anything that you would like to say to students in other countries?”

Your answer: _____

Vietnamese Teens Talk! Recording

Part 2. Now you will make your own *Vietnamese Teens Talk!* recording. Here's how:

- 1. Practice** your conversation with your partner. Help each other with grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Try to sound as natural as possible.
- 2. Record.** When you are ready, use a phone to record your conversation. Hold the microphone close and record in a quiet place. Re-record if you aren't happy with the first recording.
- 3. Photo.** After both of you have recorded, take a photo of each other individually and together.
- 4. Share.*** Email me the photos and audio recording. We will share your recordings and photos with one another and students around the world.

*** Note:** Social media allows information to be shared easily with others, which can be beneficial. However, teachers should be aware of privacy and confidentiality concerns in sharing student photos and audio recordings on the Internet. It is recommended to explicitly discuss guidelines with students, perhaps have them sign waivers or contracts, and give them the option not to have their personal information and/or photos posted.

Figure 3. Vietnamese Teens Talk! activity

the United States. I have observed that many of my EFL students have a rather limited and narrow perspective of who U.S. Americans are, what we look like, and how we live. The diversity of teenagers in *American Teens Talk!* helps to widen and deepen students' understanding of the diversity of U.S. Americans.

Collaboration and project management. I created an activity that modeled *American Teens Talk!* to help the students create their own interviews; I appropriately named the activity *Vietnamese Teens Talk!* (see Figure 3). The activity aims to help students develop their ability to create their own interview questions and practice interviewing each

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other using the questions. The majority of our students had smartphones to audio-record and take photos of each other, so I saw this as an opportunity for students to actually be encouraged to use their smartphones in the classroom. They were certainly happy to oblige!

Public product. The students completed the assignment out of class and emailed me their audio and photo files, which I then posted on the following blog: <https://vteenstalk.blogspot.com/>. Students were able to listen to their own interview recordings and share them with friends and family if they desired. I observed that students who did not submit their recording before the deadline submitted them after I shared the blog page with them. I think that seeing the recordings and photos published on a webpage motivated other students to complete the project, as all students did eventually submit their recordings.

Reflection. One of the most valuable aspects of this PBL activity is that it encouraged students to practice and engage in speaking English outside the classroom. This is something that can be difficult for teachers to motivate students to do in an EFL setting, particularly in places where there are not many English-language speakers to engage with.

PBL LESSON 4: ANALYSIS OF COMMERCIALS AND CULTURE

Analysis of cultural themes in commercials is a fun way for students to build greater awareness of cultural values, norms, and practices within diverse societies. My colleagues and I used this assignment several times throughout the school year in various

courses. We used YouTube as a resource to search for commercials and modeled the assignment in class.

Intellectual challenge and accomplishment. This activity can promote greater media literacy and consumer consciousness, essential skills in the twenty-first century. Commercials in the students' first language can be analyzed for themes in their first culture, while commercials in English can be used for analysis of cultural themes in other countries, as well as the English language. Both approaches can work in the EFL classroom, depending on the goals of the course and the level of the students.

Authenticity. Students are inundated with advertisements in print, digital, and video media. Building greater media awareness through developing analytical skills is critical to students as consumers and producers of content. Many of my students actually sell products online themselves and know the power and value of advertising. This activity is more relevant now than ever, and explaining how to apply these skills in the world outside the classroom can certainly boost interest and motivation.

Collaboration and reflection. We created a group page on Facebook as a platform for students to post, describe, and comment. Following are the instructions for the commercial-analysis assignment:

Instructions: This week, analyze and post a link to an online commercial on our Facebook group page. Provide answers to the following questions:

- What cultural values, norms, and practices are in the video?
- How are these cultural values, norms, and practices used to advertise the product?

- Does the commercial influence you and other people to buy the product? Why or why not?

Project management and public product.

To make this assignment a project-based lesson that could be completed in a relatively short time and with low-tech resources, students can create their own print advertisement on posters. Students then present their advertisements, explaining the cultural values that the advertisement is based on to connect with and influence the advertisers' audience. Selected advertisements can target the first culture or a foreign culture. If time and resources allow, students can also produce, record, and edit a video advertisement in groups. I recommend that students first use a storyboard to plan the video and receive feedback from the teacher. Students can then act out their commercial, video-record it in English, and post it online to share with the class and others.

ADVICE FOR PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING PBL ACTIVITIES

Planning and scaffolding of PBL is essential to ensure clarity and a successful experience. The following advice is based on my experiences with implementing project-based lessons in the EFL classroom:

1. The course and English-language goals and rationale of the project should be clear to teachers and be made explicit to students.
2. Teachers can and should collaborate in the design and implementation of PBL. This way, teachers can support students and each other throughout the process.
3. PBL can be a new method of learning and evaluation, so patience in the process is important. Sufficient time should be given in and outside class for students to prepare.
4. Support students for success. Provide an outline and rubric to make the goals

and requirements clear and to make grading easier later. Also provide a model example and analyze it as a class.

5. Allow students to choose their own topics. It is fine to provide examples and options, but encourage students to think of other topics on their own.
6. Make sure students designate roles and share work in their groups. Students should make clear what each person contributed.
7. If using multimedia, students will need guidance. Take time in class to go over how to use technology and any multimedia tools. Keep in mind that some students will be more proficient at using technology and can serve as group leaders in this area.
8. Technology is not a requirement for PBL. A lower-tech option is to have students prepare posters.
9. Provide feedback throughout the process in class, on outlines, and/or through a graphic organizer. This approach saves time in grading later and tends to lead to higher-quality projects.
10. Think of ways that students can share their work with peers and with others outside their class. Sharing work in this way can increase motivation and the quality of projects. The classroom (or another space) can be set up for mini-conferences, and students can share projects with peers and other invited guests.

CONCLUSION

Successfully implementing PBL takes time, patience, and careful planning, but the potential results make it all worthwhile. We must move beyond comprehension of terms and language exercises from the textbook and instead seek ways to challenge students by engaging them in real-world

issues that are authentic and collaborative. If we want students to think critically and communicate effectively in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, they will need such skills to thrive. PBL can be challenging to implement, but with proper planning and reflection, you can develop effective, manageable, and motivating learning experiences in your classroom. Learn from the process and keep refining your project-based lessons with each class. The results of your efforts can have a wide-reaching and positive impact on the lives of our students and our world.

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Ramin Yazdanpanah, PhD, is an ESOL educator who served as an English Language Fellow in Vietnam in 2017–2018. He is the founder of Full Circle Language Learning and Teaching Services. He is committed to facilitating personal growth and professional development through language learning and cultural exchange.