

Research Article**EFL students' Intercultural Willingness to Communicate through Intergenerational Storytelling**Phi Dat Luu^{1,*} ¹ Independent Researcher, Ho Chi Minh City, 70000, Vietnam* Corresponding Author: Phi Dat Luu, E-mail: datphi19030@gmail.com

Article Info	Abstract
Article History	Intercultural communication is shaped by language, emotion, and human connection. This study examines how intergenerational storytelling influences Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language students' intercultural willingness to communicate. A qualitative design with semi-structured interviews was conducted with fifteen Vietnamese students studying abroad. Findings show that willingness to communicate developed through emotional engagement and narrative immersion rather than linguistic confidence alone. Students shifted from avoidance to active and self-initiated communication when they felt emotionally connected to stories. Storytelling reduced cultural stereotypes and fostered both cognitive and emotional empathy through lived experiences. Communication anxiety decreased due to supportive interaction, visual scaffolding, and balanced relational power. The study suggests that storytelling creates emotional safety and meaningful intercultural contact. It recommends integrating narrative-based intercultural activities into English as a Foreign Language pedagogy to enhance real-world communication readiness.
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1. Introduction

In contemporary EFL education, communicative success is increasingly associated with learners' ability to engage in intercultural interaction rather than with grammatical accuracy alone (Álvarez Valencia & Michelson, 2023; God & Zhang, 2019). Because English is now widely used across multicultural settings, language learners are expected to negotiate meaning, interpret cultural perspectives, and communicate appropriately with people from different backgrounds (Iswandari & Ardi, 2022; Munezane, 2021). For this reason, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become an important goal in language education. ICC includes not only linguistic knowledge but also openness, empathy, cultural awareness, and the ability to manage intercultural differences effectively (Iswandari & Ardi, 2022; Munene, 2021).

Within this intercultural perspective, willingness to communicate (WTC) has attracted increasing scholarly attention because it reflects learners' readiness to use English in authentic communication (Elahi Shirvan et al., 2019; Lee & Hsieh, 2019). Previous studies demonstrate that WTC is positively associated with motivation, communicative confidence, and self-perceived competence, whereas anxiety often reduces learners' participation in communication (Elahi Shirvan et al., 2019; Lee & Hsieh, 2019). Research also shows that WTC is highly situational. Learners tend to communicate more actively in supportive environments but may avoid interaction when they fear mistakes or negative evaluation (Lee & Lee, 2020; Lee et al., 2022). In intercultural situations, these challenges become more complex because learners must manage both linguistic demands and cultural uncertainty simultaneously (Yousaf et al., 2022).

Intercultural willingness to communicate (IWTC) extends this discussion by focusing specifically on learners' readiness to initiate communication with people from different cultural backgrounds (Kassing, 1997; Lu & Hsu, 2008). Previous studies identify several important predictors of IWTC, including self-perceived communication competence, motivation, immersion experiences, and intercultural attitudes (Jiang & Wu, 2026; Lu & Hsu, 2008). Other research further reports that ethnocentrism, intercultural anxiety, and communication apprehension negatively influence intercultural interaction and reduce learners' communicative engagement (Lin & Rancer, 2003a, 2003b; Logan et al., 2015). These findings indicate that IWTC is shaped not only by linguistic competence but also by emotional and psychological factors (Hosseini Fatemi et al., 2016; Logan et al., 2015). In this sense, ICC, WTC, and IWTC should be understood as interconnected constructs. ICC provides the intercultural awareness and attitudes necessary for communication, while WTC reflects communicative readiness more generally. IWTC emerges when learners apply these communicative resources in culturally unfamiliar interactions (Kassing, 1997; Lu & Hsu, 2008).

This issue is particularly relevant for Vietnamese students studying abroad in English-speaking or multilingual environments. Previous studies report that many Vietnamese students demonstrate positive attitudes toward intercultural learning but still experience difficulty in authentic intercultural communication (Pham & Pham, 2022; Vu & Dinh, 2022). Reported challenges include communication anxiety, unfamiliar accents, low confidence, and fear of misunderstanding during intercultural interaction (Vu, 2022). Recent research on Vietnamese learners also suggests that intercultural communication often involves self-monitoring, concern about cultural appropriateness, and fear of negative evaluation rather

than only linguistic limitations (Luu, 2026). These findings suggest that linguistic competence alone does not automatically lead to active intercultural participation (Luu, 2026; Vu, 2022).

To address these communication barriers, storytelling has been widely discussed as a transformative communicative practice in language and intercultural education. Previous studies argue that storytelling supports empathy, reflection, and human connection because learners engage emotionally with the experiences of others through narrative exchange (Hofman-Bergholm, 2022; Nguyen & Phillips, 2025; Rahiem, 2021). When integrated into an intergenerational framework, such as narrative exchanges between younger learners and older adults, this practice becomes even more significant. Research on intergenerational storytelling argues that narrative exchange between different age groups can promote deeper perspective-taking and emotional engagement through the sharing of lived experiences (Charise et al., 2022; Sljivic et al., 2022). Compared with peer interaction, intergenerational communication often creates a slower, more reflective interactional space that reduces immediate performance pressure, challenges stereotypes, and supports intercultural openness through emotional internalization (Charise et al., 2022; Li et al., 2019; Sljivic et al., 2022).

The present study applies this narrative framework to interactions between Vietnamese international students and older foreigners, defined as older adult interlocutors from cultural backgrounds different from those of the participants. Such shared narrative experiences align with transformative perspectives of intercultural learning, which emphasize emotional engagement, reflection, and exposure to diverse life histories as crucial conditions for deeper intercultural understanding (Álvarez Valencia & Michelson, 2023; Sljivic et al., 2022).

However, despite the clear theoretical benefits of narrative exchanges, previous IWTC research has remained limited in several ways. Most existing studies have focused primarily on linguistic competence, motivation, personality traits, or technology-mediated virtual interaction among peers within traditional classroom boundaries (Aladini & Gheisari, 2025; Fathi et al., 2025; Hosseini Fatemi et al., 2016). Limited research has examined the emotional and relational dimensions of intercultural communication, particularly how meaningful interpersonal relationships shape learners' willingness to communicate across cultures (Campbell, 2016; Roach & Olaniran, 2001). Crucially, the potential role of intergenerational interaction remains almost entirely underexplored, especially among Asian student populations such as Vietnamese international students abroad. Existing literature rarely investigates how real-time emotional connection

and cross-generational storytelling influence learners' active readiness to communicate interculturally.

Therefore, this study extends previous IWTC research by examining intercultural communication as an emotional and relational process rather than only a linguistic or cognitive one. More specifically, the study investigates how intergenerational storytelling sessions with older foreigners influence Vietnamese international students' intercultural willingness to communicate, cultural empathy, and communication apprehension in authentic intercultural settings. By focusing on narrative interaction across generations, the study seeks to provide a more contextualized understanding of how meaningful interpersonal interaction may support learners' communicative readiness in intercultural communication. To achieve these aims, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does participation in intergenerational storytelling sessions shape EFL students' intercultural willingness to communicate?
2. In what ways do this narrative exchanges contribute to the development of cultural empathy among EFL students?
3. Which specific elements of the intergenerational storytelling process act as catalysts for overcoming communication apprehension?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on MacIntyre et al.'s L2 WTC model (1998), Byram's ICC (2021), and Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954) to explain how intergenerational storytelling may strengthen IWTC. Rather than treating IWTC as only a linguistic outcome, this framework views it as an emotional and relational process shaped through meaningful intercultural interaction.

MacIntyre et al. (1998) describe WTC as a situational readiness to use the L2 with a specific person at a specific moment. The model shows that communication behavior is strongly influenced by self-confidence, anxiety, motivation, and social context. In intercultural settings, learners may avoid communication not because of low language ability, but because they fear misunderstanding, judgment, or cultural difference. This perspective is important for the present study because storytelling with older foreigners may create a slower, more supportive interactional space. Such interactions can reduce communication anxiety and strengthen learners' confidence to speak.

Byram's (2021) ICC framework further explains how intercultural communication develops through

openness, cultural understanding, interpretation, interaction, and critical reflection. ICC is not limited to learning facts about other cultures. It requires learners to engage with other people's live experiences and reflect on their own assumptions. In this study, intergenerational storytelling functions as a form of reciprocal learning. Through personal narratives, students are exposed to emotional, historical, and cultural experiences that cannot be fully captured through textbooks or classroom discussions. This process may encourage empathy, patience, and deeper intercultural awareness.

The study also draws on Allport's (1954) Intergroup Contact Theory, which argues that positive interaction between different social groups can reduce prejudice and social distance. Later research showed that meaningful contact helps lower anxiety and increase empathy in intercultural encounters. This idea is highly relevant to storytelling activities because repeated narrative exchanges may help students feel emotionally safer when communicating with foreigners. Instead of focusing only on language accuracy, learners gradually build trust and human connection through shared stories.

Within this framework, IWTC is understood as more than a stable personality trait. It is shaped by emotional readiness, cultural empathy, communication anxiety, and perceived intercultural competence. Previous studies found that anxiety often reduces IWTC, while self-confidence, open-mindedness, and cultural empathy strengthen it. Recent research also suggests that learners communicate more actively when interactions feel personally meaningful and emotionally supportive.

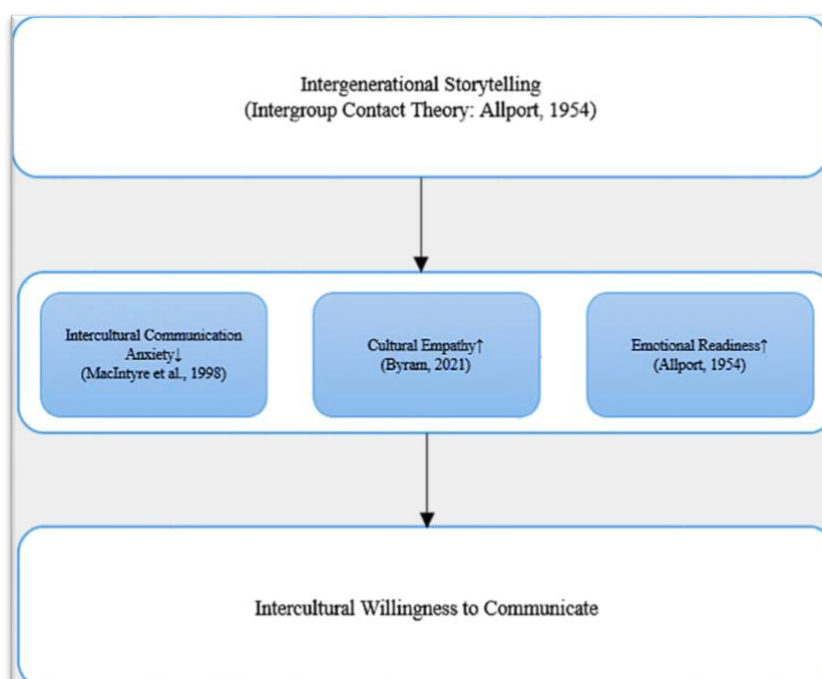


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Based on these perspectives, the present study proposes that intergenerational storytelling may support IWTC development through three interconnected processes: reducing intercultural communication anxiety, strengthening cultural empathy, and creating emotionally meaningful intercultural relationships. The framework therefore connects linguistic, emotional, and relational dimensions of communication rather than treating them as separate factors.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how intergenerational storytelling shapes Vietnamese students' IWTC. A qualitative approach is appropriate because IWTC is a context-dependent and experience-based phenomenon that cannot be fully captured through numerical data. Instead, it requires an in-depth understanding of learners' emotions, reflections, and lived intercultural experiences. Qualitative inquiry is suitable for examining meaning, perception, and personal interpretation in social interaction (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Dörnyei, 2007). In this study, intergenerational storytelling is treated as a real-life communicative context where participants construct meaning through interaction with older foreigners. Moreover, this method allows flexibility while still following a clear guiding structure. It enables participants to express personal experiences in their own words and allows the researcher to explore unexpected but meaningful insights during the interview process. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in qualitative language and intercultural studies because they support depth, reflection, and clarification of complex social and emotional experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014; Patton, 2014).

3.2. Research Context and Participants

This study was conducted in intercultural settings where Vietnamese students are currently studying abroad in English-speaking or multilingual environments. These contexts were selected because daily intercultural exposure allows communication to extend beyond classrooms into real-life situations. Such environments are suitable for examining IWTC because learners must constantly manage emotions, negotiate meaning, and adapt to cultural differences in authentic interactions. This helps capture IWTC as a lived experience rather than an abstract concept (Mackey & Gass, 2015; Yin, 2017).

The participants included 15 Vietnamese international students (P1–P15) selected through purposive sampling. This method was used because the study requires participants with direct experience in

intergenerational storytelling and intercultural interaction with older foreigners. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research when participants are chosen based on relevance to the research focus rather than representativeness (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Patton, 2014). The sample size of 15 was guided by data saturation, where no new themes emerged during interviews. Participants shared similar backgrounds as Vietnamese students abroad but differed in study level, age, and overseas experience, allowing diverse perspectives within the same context.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants (N = 15)

ID	Gender	Age range	Study level	Country of study	Duration abroad	English proficiency (self-reported)	Frequency of intercultural contact	Participation in storytelling sessions
P1	Female	20	Undergraduate	Australia	<1 year	Intermediate	Medium	Yes
P2	Male	20	Undergraduate	USA	<1 year	Intermediate	Medium	Yes
P3	Female	23	Undergraduate	UK	1–2 years	Upper-intermediate	High	Yes
P4	Female	21	Postgraduate	Canada	1–2 years	Upper-intermediate	High	Yes
P5	Male	22	Undergraduate	Australia	1–2 years	Intermediate	Medium	Yes
P6	Female	18	Undergraduate	USA	<1 year	Intermediate	Low	Yes
P7	Male	25	Postgraduate	UK	2–3 years	Advanced	High	Yes
P8	Female	23	Undergraduate	Canada	1–2 years	Upper-intermediate	Medium	Yes
P9	Female	20	Undergraduate	Australia	<1 year	Intermediate	Medium	Yes
P10	Male	25	Postgraduate	USA	1–2 years	Upper-intermediate	High	Yes
P11	Female	21	Undergraduate	UK	1–2 years	Intermediate	Medium	Yes
P12	Female	20	Undergraduate	Canada	<1 year	Intermediate	Low	Yes
P13	Male	25	Postgraduate	Australia	2–3 years	Advanced	High	Yes
P14	Female	23	Undergraduate	USA	1–2 years	Upper-intermediate	Medium	Yes
P15	Male	26	Postgraduate	UK	1–2 years	Upper-intermediate	High	Yes

3.3. Instruments

This study used semi-structured interviews to explore participants' intergenerational storytelling experiences and their influence on intercultural willingness to communicate (IWTC), cultural empathy, and communication anxiety. The interview questions were developed based on MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) WTC model, Byram's (2021) ICC framework, and Allport's (1954) Intergroup Contact Theory. These frameworks guided the interview focus on emotional readiness, self-confidence, cultural understanding, empathy, and anxiety reduction during intercultural interaction. The interview was divided into four parts covering participants' storytelling experiences, changes in IWTC, development of cultural empathy, and

factors that helped reduce communication apprehension. This structure allowed the study to examine IWTC as an emotional and relational process shaped through meaningful intercultural contact (Yousaf et al., 2022; Luu, 2026).

The storytelling intervention was designed as a guided but natural interaction between Vietnamese students and older foreigners from English-speaking and multilingual backgrounds. Each session centered on personal life narratives shared by the older participants, including topics such as migration, family history, education, aging, and cultural change. To facilitate this, the study utilized diverse visual materials, including personal photographs, maps, and historical artifacts, which served as concrete reference points to support narrative flow and mitigate the cognitive load associated with language production.

Narrative approaches in learning suggest that personal stories function as meaning-making processes that support reflection and perspective-taking (Bruner, 1991; Alterio & McDrury, 2003). Students were not passive listeners; they were actively encouraged to ask questions, react, and share related personal experiences. The interaction was informal and meaning-focused rather than performance-based, aligning with findings that reduced form-focused pressure can increase willingness to communicate in interactional tasks (Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000; MacIntyre et al., 1998). The role of the researcher was to facilitate the flow of conversation and ensure equal participation, not to control linguistic output. From an intergroup contact perspective, such structured but informal interaction may promote positive intergroup attitudes and reduce communicative anxiety (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). This design created a unique space for emotional engagement, reflection, and mutual understanding during intercultural exchange (Sljivic et al., 2022).

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was conducted from December 2024 to May 2025 through semi-structured interviews with 15 Vietnamese international students. The extended collection period was necessary because several participants had changed academic schedules, personal commitments, and limited availability during their study-abroad experience. Interviews were arranged flexibly based on participants' schedules to ensure a comfortable and low-pressure environment. Most interviews were conducted online through video-call platforms because participants were living in different countries. Each interview lasted approximately 35–60 minutes and was conducted in English. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow researchers

to explore participants' life experiences, emotions, and reflections in greater depth while still maintaining focus on the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014).

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. First, the interview transcripts were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then identified based on recurring ideas related to IWTC, cultural empathy, emotional engagement, and communication anxiety. After coding, related patterns were grouped into broader themes and interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical framework. The analysis followed an inductive and interpretive process because the study aimed to understand how participants personally experienced intercultural storytelling rather than test predetermined categories. To improve trustworthiness, the researcher continuously compared themes across interviews and returned to the original transcripts during interpretation to maintain consistency between participants' meanings and the final analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tracy, 2019).

3.5. Ethical Considerations

This study followed basic ethical principles for qualitative research involving human participants. Before the interviews, all participants received clear information about the purpose of the study, the interview process, and their rights as participants. Participation was fully voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before data collection began. Participants were also informed that they could refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. These procedures follow common ethical guidelines for qualitative and social research (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Mackey & Gass, 2015).

To protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms (P1–P15) were used instead of real names in all transcripts and reported findings. Any potentially identifiable personal information was removed during transcription and analysis. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely and used only for research purposes. Because the study explored emotional experiences related to intercultural communication, particular attention was given to participants' psychological comfort during interviews. The interviewer maintained a respectful and non-judgmental atmosphere and avoided forcing participants to discuss experiences that caused discomfort. This approach is important in qualitative interviewing because emotional safety helps participants share experiences more openly and honestly (Patton, 2014; Tracy, 2019).

In addition, the study aimed to represent participants' experiences fairly and accurately during data

interpretation. The researcher avoided exaggerating statements or imposing fixed cultural assumptions on participants' narratives. Instead, the analysis focused on understanding participants' live intercultural experiences within their own social and emotional contexts. This reflects the ethical responsibility of qualitative researchers to ensure respectful representation and interpretive transparency (Tracy, 2019; Yin, 2017).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Intergenerational Storytelling and EFL Students' Intercultural Willingness to Communicate

4.1.1. Emotional evolution and engagement

Students' IWTC changed mainly through emotional involvement, not through sudden improvements in language accuracy. At the beginning, many participants described themselves as distant, nervous, and careful. Their communication remained limited because they feared misunderstanding the speaker or making mistakes. However, as they became involved in the storytelling sessions, this anxiety decreased. They became more relaxed, and their interaction became more natural and sustained. These responses indicate that the transition from anxiety to engagement happened organically as the emotional connection grew.

"At first, I was afraid I wouldn't understand his accent or could not respond properly, but as the conversation continued, I gradually felt more comfortable, and I started enjoying the exchange instead of worrying about mistakes or hesitation." (P7)

"In the beginning I stayed quiet and unsure, but later I found myself more willing to respond and even ask questions because the conversation felt more natural and emotionally engaging." (P13)

This emotional connection also changed how students viewed English communication. Instead of focusing heavily on grammar or vocabulary accuracy, their attention moved toward understanding the speaker's personal experiences. In this environment, English was no longer just an academic subject; it became a practical tool for meaningful interaction. Both learners clearly prioritized relational connection over linguistic correctness during these moments.

"During the storytelling, I felt completely absorbed in the speaker's life experiences, and I stopped thinking about grammar or vocabulary because I genuinely wanted to understand what happened in his life journey." (P3)

"It no longer felt like a speaking task in class; instead, it felt like I was sharing a real human conversation where I could express myself without constantly worrying about language accuracy." (P14)

A third pattern in the data concerns the reduction of emotional distance. Students stopped describing the storytellers simply as foreigners or strangers. Instead, they began to see them as individuals with relatable life experiences. Shared themes such as family, personal struggles, and memories helped participants feel emotionally closer to the speakers despite cultural and generational gaps. This human-to-human re-framing made the intercultural interaction feel familiar and less intimidating.

"After hearing his life story, I stopped seeing him as a foreign elderly speaker and started feeling like I was talking to someone similar to my own grandfather who also had struggles and memories worth listening to." (P5)

"Even though we came from different cultures and generations, the way he talked about family and personal memories made me feel emotionally connected and less distant from him as a stranger." (P10)

4.1.2. Proactive intercultural interaction

Beyond emotional shifts, the sessions notably improved students' confidence. Before the project, several participants believed their English ability was not sufficient for real-world interactions. This negative self-view often led them to avoid talking to foreigners. After the storytelling experience, however, many reported feelings capable of maintaining real conversations. This newfound confidence directly helped them overcome their initial hesitation.

"Before joining this project, I often avoided talking to foreigners because I thought my English was not good enough, but now I feel more confident and willing to start small conversations when I meet them in daily situations." (P6)

"The experience helped me realize that I can actually maintain a meaningful conversation in English, so I no longer see communication with foreigners as something too difficult or intimidating for me." (P2)

These mindset changes directly influenced their actual communicative behavior, specifically their willingness to initiate interaction. Rather than remaining silent or waiting for others to speak first, students

became more proactive. The data show a clear shift from passive listening to active behavioral engagement.

“I used to just observe when meeting foreigners, but after this experience I learned how to start conversations more naturally without overthinking or worrying about being judged.” (P11)

“Now I feel more like someone who belongs in global communication contexts, and I am more ready to initiate conversations instead of waiting for others to speak first.” (P15)

In addition, this proactive attitude expanded into a broader curiosity about other cultures. English was no longer viewed only as a school subject or an exam requirement. Instead, students began to link the language with future cultural exploration, self-expression, and travel. Furthermore, some participants expressed a strong desire to use English to share Vietnamese culture with the world. Ultimately, the project transformed English from a classroom task into a tool for future intercultural connection.

“After listening to his stories, I became curious about his country and started thinking that I would like to travel there one day to experience the culture and meet people in real life.” (P4)

“I realized that English is not only for exams but also for expressing my own experiences and connecting my personal story with people from different cultures.” (P10)

“I feel more motivated to use English now because I want to share Vietnamese culture with others just like how the storyteller shared his life with us.” (P12)

4.2. Narrative Exchanges and Cultural Empathy among EFL Students

4.2.1. Cognitive perspective-taking

The participants explained that listening to the stories helped them question their previous cultural assumptions. Before joining the project, many students relied on simplified descriptions from textbooks, media, or online content. However, the personal details shared during the sessions showed them that real-world experiences are far more complex than these generalized images. Several students described a clear change in how they viewed individuals from other backgrounds. Both participants clearly noted that hearing a real person's life history made them realize the limitations of their earlier, textbook-based assumptions.

“Before this experience, I thought people from that culture were emotionally distant and very different from us, but after hearing his personal family struggles and memories, I

realized my assumption was completely wrong.” (P8)

“The storytelling helped me see that textbook descriptions are too general and do not reflect real human experiences, because his life story showed emotions and challenges that are not usually included in formal learning materials.” (P11)

Furthermore, students became less focused on cultural differences alone. Instead of viewing another culture as completely separate from their own, many participants began to recognize shared human values. Common topics such as family responsibility, emotional support, and daily life struggles appeared repeatedly in the interviews. As shown in these responses, identifying these common experiences allowed students to process the interaction through a familiar, personal framework rather than viewing the speaker as an outsider. These responses indicate that the students' shift in perspective was driven directly by these specific personal details rather than by learning abstract facts about a country.

“I used to think Western and Asian cultures were very different, but after listening to his story, I realized we both value family responsibility, hard work, and emotional support in similar ways.” (P5)

“When he talked about his hometown, I felt emotionally connected because many of his experiences reminded me of my own community and family life.” (P14)

4.2.2. Affective empathy and emotional resonance

Beyond changes in perspective, the sessions also triggered strong emotional responses. Many participants described feeling deeply affected by the storytellers' life paths, even when those experiences belonged to a completely different generation or historical background. The interview data show that students did not just listen to collect information; they became emotionally invested in the narratives. The report by P4 is also noteworthy because it demonstrates how students deliberately exploited their own personal challenges, such as Vietnam traveling to Saigon for university to relate to a foreigner's plight. These responses show that building an emotional connection did not require having identical backgrounds. Instead, students connected through universal human feelings like loneliness, grief, hope, or family attachment. Even when the historical settings differed, participants still found immediate personal meaning in the speaker's memories. This shared emotional experience helped reduce the initial sense of distance between the students and the foreign speakers, making the entire intercultural interaction feel much closer and more authentic.

“When he talked about losing his close friend during the war, I felt a strong emotional sadness even though I have never experienced anything like that in my own life.” (P6)

“When he described feeling lonely after moving to a new city, I immediately related it to my own experience studying away from home in Saigon, which made the story feel very real to me.” (P4)

Besides shared difficulties, emotional resonance also emerged through moments of shared joy and resilience. Many students explained that they felt genuinely inspired and happy when listening to how the storytellers overcame major life obstacles. This positive emotional connection helped participants see the elderly speakers not as passive subjects from the past, but as active individuals with strengths they could admire. These statements prove that affective empathy in these exchanges was not limited to feelings of sadness or pity; it included a strong sense of shared happiness and mutual respect.

“When he laughed and talked about how he finally built his own house after years of hard work, I felt a sudden wave of happiness inside me, as if it were my own family’s success.” (P1)

“Listening to her talk about her achievements despite past hardships did not make me feel sorry for her; instead, it made me feel deeply inspired and energized by her strength.” (P9)

This emotional investment led to a desire for active care and future connection. The empathy students felt during the sessions did not disappear when the stories ended. Instead, it turned into a genuine personal interest in the well-being of the storytellers. Several participants reported that they wanted to maintain relationships with the older generation beyond the classroom requirements. As highlighted by these participants, the emotional resonance successfully transformed a formal academic project into an authentic, ongoing human relationship.

“After the session, I found myself constantly wondering if he felt healthy today or if he needed any help with his daily routines, because he no longer felt like a research participant to me.” (P12)

“The emotional connection was so real that I asked for her contact information; I truly want to visit her again or write to her just to check how she is doing in her daily life.” (P3)

4.3. Intergenerational Storytelling and Communication Apprehension

4.3.1. Visual and relational support factors

The participants emphasized that non-verbal communication from the storytellers directly reduced their communication anxiety. Warm facial expressions, consistent eye contact, and patient listening behaviors helped students feel accepted even when they hesitated or made language mistakes. Many students noted that this relational warmth allowed them to focus less on monitoring their own errors and more on continuing the conversation. These statements highlight that the storytellers' welcoming physical presence acted as a real-time reassurance, reducing the students' internal pressure to be linguistically perfect.

“The storyteller’s warm smiles and continuous eye contact made me feel accepted even when I hesitated or made mistakes, so I stopped overthinking my language and felt encouraged to continue speaking more naturally.” (P12)

“His patient listening and calm reactions helped me stop constantly checking my grammar in my mind, because I felt that my ideas were already understood even before I finished my sentences completely.” (P9)

In addition to non-verbal cues, the integration of physical materials during the sessions provided practical communication support. Documents such as personal photos, maps, and artifacts helped students follow the narrative path without losing track. These materials served as concrete reference points, meaning students did not have to generate conversational topics from memory alone. According to these experiences, having an actual object to gaze at helped students redirect their attention away from abstract language creation and onto the concrete items in front of them. This dual-channel engagement made the total speaking task seem more achievable and less stressful.

“When we used old family photos during the conversation, I did not have to struggle to find words because the images already guided the topic and helped me describe things more naturally and confidently.” (P3)

“The visual materials helped me focus more on the meaning of the story rather than worrying about vocabulary, so I could speak more freely without feeling mentally overloaded or stuck.” (P6)

4.3.2. Task-based and environmental catalysts

The interview data also show that deep interest in the narratives naturally lowered students' anxiety about language accuracy. When participants became absorbed in the personal and emotional aspects of the stories, their immediate focus moved away from self-correction and toward understanding the speaker's life journey. This shift indicates that when a topic becomes personally meaningful, students naturally stop prioritizing linguistic rules.

"I became so interested in the story that I completely forgot I was speaking English, and I just focused on understanding what the storyteller was trying to share emotionally and personally." (P1)

"During the conversation, I stopped worrying about whether my grammar was correct because I was more focused on the emotions and real-life experiences being shared between us." (P5)

Furthermore, students contrasted the relaxed storytelling environment with the evaluative atmosphere of regular classrooms. The absence of immediate grading, formal correction, or performance judgment allowed participants to speak with a greater sense of freedom. By removing the fear of negative evaluation, the non-classroom setting allowed students to view their own mistakes with much less anxiety.

"The atmosphere felt very relaxed without any correction or judgment, so I felt like I was talking to a friend rather than being evaluated like in a classroom situation." (P8)

"I felt that my ideas were respected equally, and this made me more confident to express myself without fear of making mistakes or being judged negatively." (P14)

Additionally, the participants described communication during these sessions as a collaborative, shared effort. When misunderstandings occurred, both the students and the storytellers worked together to repair the breakdown rather than abandoning the conversation. This collective problem-solving completely changed how students viewed communication difficulties; they no longer saw a misunderstanding as a personal linguistic failure, but as a normal part of a shared human interaction.

"We worked together to build the conversation, so even when I struggled to find words, the storyteller helped me continue the idea smoothly without breaking the flow." (P4)

“When misunderstandings happened, we solved them together instead of stopping the conversation, which made me realize that communication is a shared process, not a test of individual ability.” (P15)

IWTC developed mainly through emotional and relational engagement rather than linguistic improvement alone. This result supports MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) view that willingness to communicate is highly situational and shaped by emotional conditions. However, the present study extends this perspective by showing that emotional immersion in storytelling can gradually transform learners' communicative identity. Previous WTC studies often emphasized self-confidence, motivation, or anxiety as separate psychological variables (Elahi Shirvan et al., 2019; Lee & Hsieh, 2019). In contrast, this study demonstrates that emotional connection itself has become the driving force of communication. Participants became more willing to speak not because they believed their English was perfect, but because they felt personally connected to the storyteller's experiences. This finding suggests that IWTC is not simply an individual trait. It is relationally constructed through emotionally meaningful interaction.

Another important finding is that storytelling changed students' perception of English itself. Many participants no longer viewed English as a school subject focused on accuracy. Instead, English became a tool for sharing emotions, memories, and personal identity. This finding differs from many traditional EFL studies that frame communication mainly as linguistic performance. The present study instead highlights the importance of narrative meaning and human connection. This supports God and Zhang's (2019) argument that intercultural communication depends on building shared understanding rather than only transmitting information. It also aligns with Álvarez Valencia and Michelson (2023), who emphasize the importance of moving beyond fixed cultural assumptions through perspective-taking and reflection. In this study, students became less focused on grammar monitoring because they were emotionally engaged in the stories. As a result, communication shifted from performance anxiety to interpersonal meaning-making.

The study also reveals that intergenerational interaction played a unique role in developing cultural empathy. Previous intercultural studies often focused on peer interaction or classroom discussion (Nguyen & Phillips, 2025; Hofman-Bergholm, 2022). However, this study shows that communication with older foreigners created a different emotional atmosphere. Older storytellers were often perceived as patient, calm, and emotionally open. This reduced social pressure and encouraged deeper listening. More importantly, participants began to challenge simplified cultural stereotypes after hearing personal life

experiences. This finding strongly reflects Byram's (2021) ICC framework, which views intercultural learning as reflective engagement with lived experience rather than memorization of cultural facts. Students did not only learn about another culture. They emotionally entered another person's world. This process helped transform cultural differences from something distant into something relatable and human.

The findings further support Allport's (1954) Intergroup Contact Theory. Positive and emotionally safe interaction reduces social distance and communication anxiety. However, this study extends the theory by identifying specific interactional mechanisms that supported anxiety reduction. Warm facial expressions, patient listening, visual materials, and collaborative meaning-making all helped participants feel psychologically safe. These elements reduced fear of judgment and shifted communication away from evaluation. Earlier studies often described anxiety reduction in broad terms (Lee & Lee, 2020; Yousaf et al., 2022). The present study provides a more detailed explanation of how anxiety decreases during intercultural interaction. Communication apprehension was reduced not through correction or intensive speaking practice, but through emotional validation and shared narrative engagement. This highlights the importance of relational support in intercultural communication development.

The study also contributes to IWTC research by showing that willingness to communicate can evolve through meaningful intercultural experience. Previous research often treated IWTC as closely related to self-confidence, openness, and cultural empathy (Campbell, 2016; Wang & Cionea, 2024; Jiang & Wu, 2026). While the present findings support these relationships, they also suggest that emotional resonance acts as a central mechanism connecting these factors together. Participants became more confident because they felt understood. They became more open-minded because they emotionally related to the storytellers' experiences. This means that empathy was not only an outcome of communication. It also became a condition that sustained further communication. Such findings help explain why some learners with sufficient language ability still avoid intercultural interaction. Linguistic competence alone cannot guarantee emotional readiness.

Several pedagogical implications emerge from this study. First, EFL programs should move beyond strongly form-focused communication practices. Specifically, emotionally meaningful interaction can support IWTC more effectively than accuracy-centered speaking tasks. Activities based on storytelling, reflective dialogue, and lived experience may create stronger emotional engagement and reduce communication anxiety. This implication aligns with Byram's (2021) emphasis on intercultural reflection

and with MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) argument that emotional context strongly shapes communication behavior. In addition, intercultural communication activities should include more human-centered and intergenerational interaction opportunities. Many classroom activities still rely heavily on peer discussion or simulated cultural topics. However, interaction with older foreigners may encourage deeper empathy, patience, and emotional reflection. Such interaction exposes learners to lived culture rather than simplified textbook representation. This supports the intercultural learning perspectives proposed by Iswandari and Ardi (2022) and Munezane (2021), which stress the importance of openness and intercultural understanding in language education.

Furthermore, teachers should pay greater attention to emotional safety during intercultural communication tasks. In particular, supportive interactional conditions strongly influenced learners' willingness to speak. Warm responses, collaborative scaffolding, and non-judgmental communication reduced self-monitoring and fear of mistakes. This supports Allport's (1954) theory that positive contact conditions reduce anxiety and social distance. It also extends previous IWTC research by showing that emotional support is not peripheral but central to intercultural participation. Besides, IWTC should be approached as a socially constructed and dynamic process. Learners' willingness to communicate may shift across contexts depending on emotional connection, relational trust, and perceived communicative safety. Future research should therefore examine IWTC beyond traditional classroom settings and explore how different forms of meaningful intercultural interaction shape learners' emotional readiness to communicate over time.

5. Conclusions

This study concludes that intergenerational storytelling strengthens IWTC by shifting learners from anxiety-based communication to emotionally engaged interactions. IWTC develops mainly through emotional connection, cultural empathy, and reduced communication apprehension, rather than linguistic improvement alone. Moreover, emotional immersion and relational closeness can activate communication even when language confidence is still fragile. They also support the idea of Byram that intercultural competence grows through lived experience and reflection, but the key contribution here is that trust and emotional safety become the main bridge for intercultural communication.

However, the study is limited by its small sample of 15 Vietnamese students, reliance on self-reported

interview data, and short-term design, which restricts generalizability and does not fully capture long-term behavioral change. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples, use longitudinal designs to examine IWTC stability over time, and combine interviews with observational or behavioral data. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that integrating structured storytelling into intercultural learning can help reduce emotional barriers, lower power distance, and create a meaningful interactional space that encourages learners to communicate more willingly across cultures.

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