

THE CULTURAL FAMILIARITY TRAP: VIETNAMESE EFL LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CULTURAL SIMILARITY WITH CHATGPT

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Abstract: This study explores how Vietnamese EFL learners perceive ChatGPT as a culturally familiar learning partner and how they describe the relationship between this perceived familiarity and trust and reliance in English learning. Guided by perceived cultural similarity and the provisional concept of the cultural familiarity trap, this study used a qualitative exploratory design based on semi-structured interviews with 15 English-major undergraduates. Thematic analysis showed that participants perceived cultural familiarity through educational experiences, learning expectations, and interactional features that they regarded as familiar, rather than through objective cultural characteristics of ChatGPT. Participants discussed trust and reliance alongside these perceptions, but their accounts did not establish that cultural familiarity increased either. They also described skepticism and the need to verify AI-generated information, suggesting that familiarity could coexist with critical awareness. The study contributes a context-sensitive account of learner–AI interaction and presents the cultural familiarity trap as a dynamic, ambivalent process in which perceived familiarity and critical evaluation may occur together.

Key words: ChatGPT; cultural familiarity; trust in AI; AI-assisted language learning; Vietnamese EFL learners

BẦY QUEN THUỘC VĂN HÓA: NHẬN THỨC CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH VỀ SỰ TƯƠNG ĐỒNG VĂN HOÁ VỚI CHATGPT

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu cách người học tiếng Anh như ngoại ngữ tại Việt Nam cảm nhận ChatGPT như một đối tác học tập gắn gũi về văn hóa, cũng như cách họ mô tả mối liên hệ giữa cảm nhận về sự gắn gũi này với niềm tin và việc dựa vào công cụ trong quá trình học tiếng Anh. Dựa trên khái niệm sự tương đồng văn hóa được cảm nhận và khái niệm tạm thời về “bầy quen thuộc văn hóa”, nghiên cứu sử dụng thiết kế định tính khám phá với các cuộc phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc với 15 sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh. Phân tích chủ đề cho thấy người tham gia cảm nhận sự gắn gũi văn hóa qua trải nghiệm giáo dục, kỳ vọng học tập và những đặc điểm tương tác mà họ xem là quen thuộc, chứ không phải qua các đặc điểm văn hóa khách quan của ChatGPT. Người tham gia đề cập đến niềm tin và sự dựa vào AI bên cạnh những nhận thức này, nhưng chia sẻ của họ không xác lập rằng sự quen thuộc văn hóa làm tăng niềm tin hay sự dựa vào AI. Họ cũng mô tả sự hoài nghi và nhu cầu kiểm chứng thông tin do AI tạo ra, cho thấy sự quen thuộc có thể song hành với nhận thức phản biện. Nghiên cứu bổ sung góc nhìn theo bối cảnh về tương tác người học–AI và xem “bầy quen thuộc văn hóa” là một quá trình năng động, có tính hai mặt, trong đó cảm nhận về sự quen thuộc có thể đồng thời tồn tại với việc đánh giá phản biện.

Từ khóa: ChatGPT; sự quen thuộc văn hóa; niềm tin vào AI; học tập ngôn ngữ có sự hỗ trợ của AI; người học EFL Việt Nam

1. Introduction

The rapid emergence of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), particularly ChatGPT, has transformed English language learning by providing learners with immediate, interactive, and personalized support. A growing body of research has documented its pedagogical potential for language development, learner autonomy, engagement, and affective support (Du & Alm, 2024; Wang & Zou, 2026). Unlike conventional digital tools that primarily deliver predetermined content, ChatGPT enables learners to ask follow-up questions, request clarification, and refine its responses through sustained dialogue. Through these exchanges, it can function as an interactive learning partner whose responses may influence learners' decisions, learning practices, and attitudes toward English learning. However, existing research has largely examined these interactions through pedagogical, cognitive, and technological lenses (Al-Khresheh, 2024; Lee et al., 2025), while the cultural processes underlying learner-AI interaction remain underexplored. Examining these processes is important because learners do not respond to ChatGPT's outputs in a cultural vacuum. They interpret the system's language, examples, communicative style, and apparent authority through culturally shaped norms, values, identities, and prior educational experiences (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Learner-AI interaction is therefore a particularly relevant unit of inquiry because perceptions of familiarity, credibility, and authority are formed and negotiated through repeated exchanges with the system, potentially shaping whether learners question, accept, or rely on its responses.

The present study begins from the premise that learners' interactions with ChatGPT may be shaped not only by technological affordances but also by culturally situated interpretations. In language learning contexts, users do not engage with AI solely as an information source; they also interpret its responses through their own cultural, educational, and linguistic experiences (Yu et al., 2025). Several features of ChatGPT may contribute to perceptions of cultural familiarity. For instance, it can communicate in Vietnamese, provide locally relevant examples, adapt to educational expectations, and interact in ways that users may perceive as familiar or supportive (Tran et al., 2024). Such features raise the possibility that ChatGPT may be experienced not only as a useful language-learning tool but also as a culturally understandable learning partner (Yu et al., 2025). Examining how learners construct such perceptions is therefore an important step toward understanding the cultural dimensions of learner-AI interaction.

To theorize this issue, the present study draws first on the established concepts of perceived cultural distance and perceived cultural similarity in cross-cultural psychology. Perceived cultural distance refers to individuals' subjective assessments of similarity and difference between cultural contexts, which may not correspond to objectively observable cultural differences (Babiker et al., 1980; Suanet & Van de Vijver, 2009). Previous research has associated perceived similarity with greater familiarity, reduced uncertainty, and increased comfort during cross-cultural adaptation (Demes & Geeraert, 2014; Ward et al., 2005). These concepts were originally developed to explain individuals' experiences across human cultural environments rather than their interactions with AI systems. In the present study, they are transferred to learner-AI interaction as a sensitizing lens rather than treated as an established explanatory model for that context. More specifically, perceived cultural familiarity refers here to learners' subjective sense that ChatGPT's language, examples, interactional style, or apparent understanding aligns with their cultural and educational

experiences (Al-Khresheh, 2024; Tran et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2025). It does not imply that ChatGPT possesses a culture or is objectively culturally similar to its users.

A second body of established literature concerns trust and reliance in human-AI interaction. Trust refers to an attitude or expectation that an automated system will support one's goals under conditions of uncertainty, whereas reliance concerns the extent to which a user acts on, accepts, or depends on the system's outputs (Lee & See, 2004; Glikson & Woolley, 2020). The two concepts are related but not interchangeable: a user may regard an AI system as generally trustworthy while still verifying a particular response, or may rely on a system for convenience without fully trusting its accuracy. Prior human-AI research has examined factors that contribute to trust and appropriate or inappropriate reliance (Galindez-Acosta & Giraldo-Huertas, 2026; Glikson & Woolley, 2020; Lee & See, 2004; Rosas-Jiménez et al., 2026; Visser et al., 2025), but cultural familiarity has not been firmly established as an antecedent of either construct in AI-assisted language learning. Accordingly, the present study does not posit a causal pathway from cultural familiarity to trust and reliance. It investigates how learners themselves describe the relationships among these experiences.

To clarify the relationships among the concepts used in this study, perceived cultural similarity refers to learners' subjective perception that ChatGPT appears aligned with aspects of their cultural and educational backgrounds (Xu et al., 2024). Cultural familiarity refers to the resulting sense of recognition, accessibility, or reduced foreignness experienced during interaction (Chen et al., 2024). The two concepts are related but not identical: perceived similarity concerns an interpreted alignment, whereas familiarity describes how that alignment is experienced (Simmons & Estes, 2008). Educational or pedagogical familiarity constitutes a more specific form of familiarity arising when ChatGPT uses instructional practices that learners recognize, such as step-by-step explanations, explicit correction, model answers, and examination-oriented support (Lo et al., 2024). Such pedagogical practices are not inherently or exclusively Vietnamese; they become culturally meaningful when learners interpret them through their prior educational experiences in Vietnam. Educational familiarity is therefore treated as one possible basis for perceived cultural familiarity rather than as equivalent to cultural similarity (Jæger & Møllegaard, 2017).

Trust and reliance describe different aspects of learners' responses to ChatGPT. Trust refers to learners' expectations that the system and its responses are credible or dependable, whereas reliance refers to their reported use of, acceptance of, or dependence on its outputs (Pham et al., 2025; Rosas-Jiménez et al., 2026). Trust may accompany reliance, but the two do not necessarily coincide: learners may trust ChatGPT generally while verifying particular responses, or they may rely on it for convenience without fully trusting its accuracy. The present study examines how participants describe cultural familiarity, trust, and reliance as interconnected experiences; it does not assume or test a causal sequence among them.

At the same time, the cultural familiarity trap is used as a provisional analytical label for the possibility that perceived familiarity may make ChatGPT's responses appear more credible or reduce users' immediate scrutiny of their limitations. It is adapted from the established notion of the minimization trap in cross-cultural adaptation research rather than treated as an established construct in human-AI interaction (Bakogianni et al., 2026; Sarkar, 2026). The term does not imply that familiarity inevitably produces overreliance. Instead, it directs attention to a potential

tension: learners may experience ChatGPT as familiar and trustworthy while continuing to question, verify, modify, or reject its responses.

Finally, perceived cultural similarity must also be distinguished from personalization and perceived competence. Personalization refers to the extent to which ChatGPT tailors its responses to an individual learner's prompts, needs, proficiency, or prior interaction history (Chernikova et al., 2025). Perceived competence concerns the learner's judgment that the system understands a task and provides accurate, relevant, or useful support (Van Horn, 2024). Neither experience, by itself, indicates perceived cultural similarity. A learner may feel that ChatGPT "understands me" because its response is well personalized or demonstrates competence, without attributing this fit to any cultural alignment. In this study, an account was interpreted as reflecting perceived cultural similarity only when participants explicitly connected ChatGPT's responses to their Vietnamese linguistic, cultural, or educational background. General statements about clarity, usefulness, relevance, or individualized support were treated as evidence of personalization or perceived competence unless participants provided such a cultural attribution.

This conceptual distinction is particularly relevant in Vietnam, where educational experiences involving teacher authority, examination-oriented learning, and respect for expert knowledge may inform how learners interpret ChatGPT's fluent and authoritative-sounding responses (Dang, 2026). If learners experience the system as both authoritative and culturally familiar, they may describe its responses as credible or useful. However, such perceptions should not be interpreted as evidence that Vietnamese learners are inherently passive or uncritical. Nor does cultural familiarity necessarily produce trust or reliance. These relationships may vary across tasks and situations and may involve simultaneous acceptance, skepticism, verification, and rejection.

Although the context of migration differs substantially from AI-assisted language learning, the underlying mechanism may still be relevant. When users perceive an interactional partner as culturally familiar, they may feel more comfortable, understood, and willing to engage (Ostrowski et al., 2022). At the same time, familiarity may reduce critical scrutiny by creating the impression that the interactional partner shares similar assumptions, values, or ways of thinking. In the case of ChatGPT, learners may perceive the system as aligned with their linguistic backgrounds, educational experiences, and learning expectations (Al-Khresheh, 2024). While such perceptions may facilitate engagement with AI-assisted learning, they may also coexist with reduced scrutiny of the content and assumptions embedded in AI-generated responses. Examining how learners construct perceptions of cultural similarity with ChatGPT may therefore provide important insights into the cultural foundations of learner-AI interaction (Lee et al., 2024).

The second theoretical foundation of this study concerns trust in human-AI interaction. Prior research suggests that trust plays a critical role in shaping users' willingness to adopt, engage with, and rely on AI systems (Glikson & Woolley, 2020; Lee & See, 2004). In educational contexts, trust may encourage sustained engagement with AI-powered tools, while excessive trust may lead to overreliance and reduced critical evaluation of AI-generated outputs. Because ChatGPT frequently produces fluent and authoritative-sounding responses (Jokar & Karimi, 2026), learners may perceive its outputs as credible even when they contain inaccuracies or culturally situated assumptions. Understanding how perceptions of cultural similarity relate to trust and reliance on ChatGPT is therefore important for examining learner-AI relationships.

This issue is particularly important in Vietnam, where teacher authority, exam-oriented learning, and respect for expert knowledge may shape how learners respond to AI. If ChatGPT is perceived as an authoritative and culturally familiar learning partner, learners may treat its responses as reliable guidance rather than as outputs requiring interpretation and evaluation. This does not mean that Vietnamese learners are passive or uncritical. Rather, it suggests that their trust in ChatGPT may be culturally mediated. Understanding how learners construct cultural similarity with ChatGPT can therefore help illuminate how they describe their trust in and reliance on the system, including the conditions under which they accept, verify, or question its responses.

Despite the growing body of research on ChatGPT in EFL education, existing studies have mainly examined learners' uses of ChatGPT, perceived benefits and challenges, and intentions to continue using it (Du & Alm, 2024; Le et al., 2024; Tran et al., 2024; Wang & Zou, 2026; Yu et al., 2025). Few studies have investigated how learners interpret culturally familiar features in their interactions with ChatGPT or how they describe the relationship between such familiarity, trust, and reliance. The theoretical contribution of the present study does not lie in introducing perceived cultural similarity, the minimization trap, trust, or reliance as new concepts. Rather, it lies in bringing these previously separate strands of literature into dialogue and examining their relevance to AI-assisted language learning. Based on participants' accounts, the study uses the cultural familiarity trap as a provisional conceptualization of a potentially ambivalent process in which perceived familiarity may coexist with both reliance and critical scrutiny. This application extends the insight of the minimization trap insight from human cross-cultural adaptation to learner–AI interaction while allowing the original concept to be reconsidered in a context where familiarity is negotiated with an artificial rather than human interactional partner.

Addressing this gap, the present qualitative study investigates Vietnamese EFL learners' perceptions of cultural familiarity in their interactions with ChatGPT. Rather than testing a predefined causal model, the study seeks to understand learners' meaning-making processes and the conditions under which ChatGPT appears culturally familiar to them. It also examines how learners describe the relationship between perceived cultural familiarity and their trust in and reliance on ChatGPT for English language learning.

RQ1: How do Vietnamese EFL learners describe the features of their interactions with ChatGPT that make it appear culturally familiar to them?

RQ2: How do Vietnamese EFL learners describe the relationship between perceived cultural familiarity and their trust in and reliance on ChatGPT for English language learning?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research design

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design to investigate how Vietnamese EFL learners perceive and construct cultural similarity with ChatGPT and how such perceptions shape their trust in and reliance on the tool for English language learning. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to explore participants' subjective experiences, interpretations, and meaning-making processes rather than measure predefined variables or test causal relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2024). More specifically, the research questions focus on how learners construct cultural similarity through their interactions with

ChatGPT and how they interpret the relationship between this perceived similarity and their trust and reliance. These processes are subjective, context-dependent, and potentially contradictory, making them difficult to capture through predetermined response categories or numerical measures. Qualitative inquiry therefore enabled participants to describe these processes in their own words and allowed the study to identify unanticipated meanings, tensions, and conditions within their experiences of interacting with ChatGPT.

2.2 Research context and participants

The study was conducted at a private university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, where the use of generative AI tools has become increasingly common among students. The participants were 15 Vietnamese undergraduates majoring in English language who reported using ChatGPT for English learning at least once a week. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit information-rich participants who could provide detailed insights into their experiences with AI-assisted language learning (Patton, 2015). To be eligible, participants were required to have used ChatGPT for English-learning purposes for at least six months and at least once a week during the three months preceding the interviews.

The participants represented all four years of the undergraduate program and varied in English proficiency and experience with ChatGPT. A summary of their academic backgrounds, English proficiency, duration and frequency of ChatGPT use, and primary learning purposes is presented in Table 1. Based on their most recent institutional English-language assessment results, five participants were at approximately CEFR B1 level, eight were at B2 level, and two were at C1 level. These proficiency data were used descriptively to characterize the sample rather than as a basis for comparison.

Participants had used ChatGPT for English learning for periods ranging from six months to more than two years. Five participants reported using it for 6–11 months, six for 12–17 months, and four for 18 months or longer. Regarding frequency, four participants reported using ChatGPT once or twice per week, seven used it three to five times per week, and four used it daily or almost daily. For the purposes of this study, regular ChatGPT users were operationally defined as students who had used ChatGPT for English-learning purposes at least once per week during the three months immediately preceding participant recruitment and who had at least six months of prior experience using the tool.

Participants used ChatGPT for multiple and overlapping learning purposes. Writing support was the most frequently reported purpose ($n = 13$), followed by grammar explanation and correction ($n = 11$), vocabulary learning ($n = 10$), translation ($n = 9$), speaking preparation ($n = 8$), and assistance with assignments or examination preparation ($n = 7$). Because participants could report more than one purpose, these frequencies were not mutually exclusive. This variation in academic year, proficiency, duration and frequency of use, and learning purpose provided a range of experiences relevant to the study's exploration of cultural and educational familiarity, trust, and reliance.

Table 1*Participant summary*

Characteristic	Distribution
Year of study	Year 1: 3; Year 2: 4; Year 3: 4; Year 4: 4
English proficiency	CEFR B1: 5; B2: 8; C1: 2
Duration of ChatGPT use	6–11 months: 5; 12–17 months: 6; ≥18 months: 4
Frequency of use	1–2 times/week: 4; 3–5 times/week: 7; daily/almost daily: 4
Writing support	13
Grammar explanation/correction	11
Vocabulary learning	10
Translation	9
Speaking preparation	8
Assignment/examination support	7

2.3 Instrument

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview protocol developed specifically for this study. The conceptual framework guided the content of the interview questions in three areas. Questions concerning perceived cultural similarity invited participants to describe features of ChatGPT's language, examples, interactional style, and responses that appeared familiar or unfamiliar to them. Questions concerning trust explored how participants evaluated the credibility and accuracy of ChatGPT-generated information, whereas questions concerning reliance examined when and why they accepted, modified, verified, or rejected its responses in their English learning. Follow-up prompts encouraged participants to provide specific examples of these experiences. The final protocol consisted of ten main interview questions. To establish content validity, the interview protocol was reviewed by three experts in applied linguistics and technology-enhanced language learning. Their feedback was used to improve the clarity, relevance, and sequencing of the questions. The revised protocol was subsequently piloted with two Vietnamese EFL students who met the participant selection criteria. Minor revisions were made to the wording and order of several questions to enhance comprehensibility and facilitate richer responses.

2.4 Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through interviews conducted via Zoom. Each interview lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and was conducted in Vietnamese to enable participants to express their experiences and perceptions in greater depth and detail. Prior to the interviews, all participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study and signed an informed consent form. With participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. To protect participants' anonymity, pseudonymous codes (S1–S15) were assigned and used throughout the study.

The interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase approach. The researchers first familiarized themselves with the transcripts through repeated reading before generating initial codes. Although the analysis was primarily inductive, the concepts of perceived cultural similarity, trust, and reliance served as sensitizing concepts during the interpretation of emerging themes. Related codes were then organized into potential themes, which were iteratively reviewed, refined, and defined to ensure coherence and distinctiveness. To enhance the credibility of the findings, the researchers engaged

in ongoing discussions throughout the analytical process, and member checking was conducted by inviting participants to review summaries of the preliminary findings and comment on whether the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences.

3. Findings

The findings are presented in accordance with the study's two research questions. The first section addresses how Vietnamese EFL learners perceived and constructed cultural similarity with ChatGPT, drawing on three themes that illustrate the processes through which learners came to view the tool as a culturally similar learning partner. The second section examines learners' described the relationship between such perceptions and their trust in and reliance on ChatGPT for English language learning, highlighting three themes that capture the interplay between perceived cultural familiarity, trust, and reliance in learner-AI interaction.

3.1 Perceiving ChatGPT as a culturally similar learning partner (RQ1)

3.1.1 *When personalized support was interpreted as culturally familiar*

Participants frequently described ChatGPT as appearing to understand their learning difficulties, communicative needs, and preferred forms of explanation. Analytically, however, not all such accounts were treated as evidence of perceived cultural similarity. Statements concerning relevant explanations, individualized feedback, or the system's ability to identify a learner's difficulty primarily reflected personalization or perceived competence. They were interpreted as culturally relevant only when participants explicitly connected this perceived understanding to their Vietnamese linguistic, cultural, or educational background.

As S7 explained, "When I ask questions in English or Vietnamese, it seems to know exactly where I am struggling and explains things in a way I can understand." This account illustrates personalized and linguistically accessible support, but it does not, on its own, establish that the participant perceived ChatGPT as culturally similar. By comparison, S12 stated, "It feels like ChatGPT understands how Vietnamese students learn English because its explanations are usually very close to what I need." S12's account contained a more explicit cultural attribution because the participant connected the perceived relevance of the explanations to the experiences of Vietnamese learners rather than only to individual learning needs.

These contrasting accounts indicate that the feeling of being understood could arise at different interpretive levels. At one level, participants experienced ChatGPT as responsive to their individual needs, reflecting personalization or perceived competence. At another level, some participants interpreted this responsiveness through their identity and experiences as Vietnamese learners of English, thereby giving it cultural meaning. The finding therefore does not suggest that personalized support is inherently evidence of cultural similarity. Rather, it shows that some learners may interpret personalized or competent responses in cultural terms when they associate those responses explicitly with their linguistic, educational, or cultural backgrounds.

3.1.2 *ChatGPT speaks within familiar educational expectations*

Participants also constructed cultural similarity through the perception that ChatGPT communicated in ways that aligned with their prior educational experiences. Many learners reported that the tool explained concepts, corrected mistakes, and provided guidance in a manner that resembled the instructional approaches they had encountered in Vietnamese educational

settings. Rather than introducing unfamiliar learning practices, ChatGPT was often perceived as reinforcing expectations that participants already associated with effective English learning, such as step-by-step explanations, explicit corrections, model answers, and exam-oriented support. As a result, learners frequently described interactions with ChatGPT as feeling educationally familiar rather than foreign or disruptive. As S4 remarked, “The way ChatGPT explains grammar is very similar to what my teachers usually do, but it gives longer and clearer explanations.” Likewise, S11 observed that “It often tells me exactly what to improve and how to improve it, which feels familiar because that is how I have always been taught.” These accounts primarily reflected educational familiarity rather than direct perceptions of a shared cultural identity. Nevertheless, because participants interpreted these instructional practices through their prior educational experiences in Vietnam, educational familiarity appeared to provide one basis for perceiving ChatGPT as culturally relatable. This interpretation does not imply that the practices themselves were uniquely Vietnamese.

3.1.3 ChatGPT feels less foreign than expected

A further theme concerned learners’ perceptions that ChatGPT felt surprisingly familiar despite being a global AI system. Many participants initially expected the tool to reflect predominantly Western perspectives or communication styles. However, through continued use, they became increasingly aware of its ability to communicate in Vietnamese, generate locally relevant examples, and respond to questions in ways that appeared compatible with their cultural and educational backgrounds. This experience often reduced the sense of distance that learners associated with foreign technologies and contributed to the perception that ChatGPT was more culturally accessible than anticipated. As S3 commented, “At first, I thought it would only understand foreign contexts, but it can explain things using examples that feel surprisingly relevant to Vietnam.” Similarly, S14 noted that “I expected ChatGPT to sound very international, but sometimes it feels closer to my learning experiences than many English websites.” These perceptions did not necessarily lead learners to believe that ChatGPT was culturally identical to them. Rather, they contributed to a sense that the tool was less foreign than expected, thereby contributing to participants’ perceptions of ChatGPT as a cultural familiarity learning partner.

3.2 Learners’ accounts of cultural familiarity, trust, and reliance (RQ2)

3.2.1 Perceived familiarity and confidence in ChatGPT’s responses

Participants described cultural familiarity alongside their confidence in ChatGPT’s responses. Some said they felt more confident when explanations seemed understandable, relevant to their learning needs, or consistent with familiar educational expectations. Several participants interpreted these features as signs that ChatGPT “understood” learners like themselves. As S5 remarked, “When ChatGPT explains something in a way that feels familiar, I naturally trust the answer more because it seems to understand my situation.” Similarly, S13 stated, “I rarely feel confused by its explanations because they are usually close to how I think and learn, so I tend to believe them.” These accounts show how some participants made sense of the relationship between familiarity and confidence. They do not establish that cultural familiarity caused or increased trust.

3.2.2 Reported shifts from occasional use to greater reliance

Several participants described a shift from using ChatGPT occasionally for specific language problems to incorporating it more regularly into their English-learning routines. They reported using it for writing, grammar practice, vocabulary development, speaking preparation, and assignment support. Some said they consulted ChatGPT before approaching teachers, classmates, or other online resources, citing the immediacy, relevance, or clarity of its responses.

As S2 explained, “At first, I only used ChatGPT when I had difficult questions, but now it is usually the first place I go when studying English.” Similarly, S10 noted, “I still ask my teachers for important things, but for everyday learning, ChatGPT has become my main learning companion.”

Some participants connected their increased use with growing confidence in ChatGPT and with explanations or support they perceived as familiar. These are participants’ retrospective accounts of changes in use and their interpretations of those changes. They do not establish that cultural familiarity caused greater reliance; other factors, including convenience and perceived usefulness, may also have contributed.

3.2.3 Questioning the familiar: Recognizing the limits of cultural similarity

Participants’ accounts suggested a tension between finding ChatGPT’s responses familiar and evaluating their accuracy. S13 stated, “I rarely feel confused by its explanations because they are usually close to how I think and learn, so I tend to believe them.” This account describes a tendency to believe familiar explanations but does not indicate whether the participant skipped verification. S8 recalled, “Sometimes the answer sounds very reasonable and familiar, but later I realize that some details are not completely correct.” The account shows that a familiar response could contain errors, although it does not specify when or how the participant checked it. Other participants explicitly recognized the need for verification. As S15 observed, “Because ChatGPT often explains things in ways I understand, it is easy to trust it, but I have learned that I still need to check important information.” Taken together, these accounts suggest that perceived familiarity could make responses feel credible while learners remained capable of questioning them. The available interview accounts do not establish that cultural familiarity reduced verification.

4. Discussion

This study sought to explore how Vietnamese EFL learners construct perceptions of cultural similarity with ChatGPT and how such perceptions relate to their trust in and reliance on the tool for English language learning. The discussion is organized around three interrelated issues emerging from the findings. First, it examines how learners constructed cultural similarity through shared educational experiences and familiar learning expectations. Second, it discusses the relationship between these perceptions of familiarity and learners’ trust in and reliance on ChatGPT. Finally, it considers the extent to which cultural familiarity may coexist with critical awareness as well as trust, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between familiarity, reliance, and the notion of a cultural familiarity trap.

4.1 Distinguishing educational familiarity from cultural similarity

The findings indicated that participants did not perceive ChatGPT as culturally familiar primarily because it displayed an explicitly Vietnamese cultural identity. Instead, they emphasized its recognizable ways of explaining concepts, correcting errors, providing model answers, and supporting examination-related learning. These responses resembled instructional practices that participants had previously encountered and therefore produced a sense of educational familiarity.

Educational familiarity, however, should not be treated as synonymous with cultural similarity. In this study, educational familiarity refers specifically to learners' recognition of instructional routines, forms of feedback, and expectations about effective learning. Cultural similarity is a broader subjective perception that an interactional partner aligns with one's culturally situated norms, values, communicative expectations, and experiences. The two constructs overlap when learners interpret familiar pedagogical practices through their own educational histories, but they remain analytically distinct.

Participants' accounts suggest that educational familiarity functioned as one possible basis upon which cultural familiarity was perceived, rather than as direct evidence that ChatGPT possessed a Vietnamese cultural identity. For example, step-by-step explanations, explicit correction, model answers, and examination-oriented guidance appeared familiar because participants associated them with their previous experiences of English education in Vietnam. Their cultural significance therefore arose from the meanings participants attached to these practices, not from the practices being inherently or exclusively Vietnamese. This interpretation is consistent with the view that perceived cultural similarity is subjective and constructed through individuals' experiences rather than determined solely by objective attributes of an interactional partner (Babiker et al., 1980; Suanet & Van de Vijver, 2009).

This distinction also sets an important boundary on the interpretation of the findings. Because the study did not compare Vietnamese learners with learners from other educational cultures, it cannot establish that the instructional features identified by participants are uniquely Vietnamese or objectively culture-specific. Step-by-step explanations, explicit feedback, and model answers may also be valued in other educational settings. The findings therefore support the more limited claim that participants interpreted these features as culturally meaningful through the lens of their own Vietnamese educational experiences.

The contribution of this finding lies in showing that perceptions of cultural familiarity in learner-AI interaction may be mediated through educational experience. Rather than collapsing educational familiarity into cultural similarity, the study proposes that culturally interpreted educational familiarity may serve as one pathway through which learners experience an AI system as less foreign and more relatable. Other potential sources of perceived cultural familiarity include language choice, locally relevant examples, communication style, and explicit references to learners' cultural or educational backgrounds. However, personalized support and perceived competence were not treated as cultural indicators unless participants themselves connected these experiences to a culturally situated background. This distinction prevents general satisfaction with ChatGPT's usefulness or responsiveness from being interpreted automatically as perceived cultural similarity.

4.2 Perceived relationships among cultural familiarity, trust, and reliance

The findings indicated a perceived association among cultural familiarity, trust, and reliance in participants' accounts. Participants frequently reported feeling more confident in ChatGPT's responses when its explanations appeared understandable, relevant to their learning needs, and consistent with familiar educational expectations. Several participants also described moving from occasional use toward more regular reliance and, in some cases, consulting ChatGPT before seeking assistance from teachers or classmates. Importantly, these findings represent participants' retrospective interpretations of their experiences rather than evidence of a causal effect of perceived cultural similarity on reliance.

Existing research on trust in human–AI interaction has primarily emphasized system performance, reliability, transparency, and perceived competence as factors associated with trust (Lee & See, 2004; Glikson & Woolley, 2020). The present findings add cultural and educational familiarity as another consideration that participants themselves connected to their confidence in ChatGPT. However, cultural familiarity should not be treated as an independently established antecedent of trust or reliance. Participants' greater use of ChatGPT may also have been related to its accessibility, immediacy, perceived usefulness, response quality, or convenience. Because the study relied on retrospective interview data and did not observe participants' behavior over time, it cannot isolate the contribution of cultural familiarity from these alternative explanations.

The contribution of this finding is therefore interpretive rather than causal. It shows that some learners used cultural and educational familiarity when explaining why ChatGPT felt credible, understandable, and increasingly integrated into their learning routines. The findings suggest that perceived familiarity, trust, and reliance may be experienced as mutually connected, but further longitudinal or quantitative research would be required to determine their temporal ordering, relative influence, or causal relationships.

4.3 Beyond the cultural familiarity trap: Familiarity and verification

The concept of a cultural familiarity trap was used as a provisional lens for examining whether familiar-seeming responses might be accepted with insufficient scrutiny. S13's reported tendency to believe familiar explanations points to a possible vulnerability, while S8's later recognition of an error shows that a reasonable and familiar response was not necessarily accurate. However, neither account documents a decision to omit verification because of cultural familiarity. S15's account, in turn, illustrates awareness of the need to check important information despite the ease of trusting an understandable response.

The findings therefore do not confirm that participants fell into a cultural familiarity trap. Rather, they show why the possibility warrants attention while also revealing participants' critical awareness. The minimization trap discussed by Baran et al. (2025) provides a useful point of comparison, but the present interview data cannot establish an equivalent pattern of reduced scrutiny in learner–AI interaction. Future studies using concrete accounts of learning decisions or observations of AI use could examine when familiar responses are accepted without verification and how learners subsequently evaluate them.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how Vietnamese EFL learners came to perceive ChatGPT as culturally familiar and how they described the relationship between that familiarity, trust, and reliance in English learning. Participants connected familiar explanations and interactional features with their experiences of learning English in Vietnam. Some described these perceptions alongside confidence in ChatGPT or more regular use, while also recognizing that familiar responses could be inaccurate and require verification. The findings show how learners interpret cultural familiarity in their interactions with AI, without establishing that familiarity increases trust or reliance.

The findings extend the use of perceived cultural similarity as a lens for examining learner–AI interaction. They suggest that educational familiarity can become culturally meaningful when learners explicitly connect recognizable instructional practices to their own educational backgrounds. This distinction helps separate perceived cultural similarity from personalization or perceived competence. The findings also qualify the proposed *cultural familiarity trap*: familiar responses sometimes felt easier to believe, but the interviews did not document reduced verification attributable to familiarity. The concept is therefore useful for identifying a possible tension between perceived credibility and scrutiny, rather than describing an established pattern in this study.

As far as practical implications are concerned, teachers can ask learners to identify which features of a ChatGPT response feel familiar and then evaluate the response’s accuracy against course materials or other relevant sources, particularly before using it in assessed work. Learners can use the same two steps when deciding whether to accept or revise AI-generated explanations. These activities address a distinction visible in the interviews: a response can feel understandable and relevant while still requiring verification. English language programs may incorporate such tasks into AI literacy instruction, while adapting them to learners’ proficiency and assessment context. The study does not show that these activities improve learning outcomes; it provides a reason to examine their usefulness in practice.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. The study involved 15 English-major students at one university and relied on retrospective interviews. Its findings describe participants’ interpretations and may not transfer directly to other learners or settings. The interviews also cannot establish whether perceived familiarity changed actual verification behavior or caused greater trust or reliance. Future studies could observe learners completing English tasks with ChatGPT, compare their reported reasoning with their checking decisions, and examine these relationships across different educational contexts.

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