

EXPLORING STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND
SIMILARITIES THROUGH ENGLISH LANGUAGE DISCUSSIONS

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Abstract. In my article, I explore how English discussions help students understand both the differences and similarities between cultures. Today, English is not only a subject to study but also it's a tool that allows students to view the world through different cultural perspectives. By using classroom observations, interviews, and students' own reflections, I show how guided discussions give learners the chance to express their thoughts, challenge stereotypes, and better understand cultural diversity. The results of my study also reveal that these conversations help students grow more empathetic, curious, tolerant, and confident when communicating with people from other cultures.

Keywords: intercultural competence; cultural differences; cultural similarities; EFL discussions; student perceptions; global awareness; tolerance; identity.

ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ ВОСПРИЯТИЯ СТУДЕНТАМИ КУЛЬТУРНЫХ РАЗЛИЧИЙ И
СХОДСТВ В ПРОЦЕССЕ ОБСУЖДЕНИЙ НА АНГЛИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

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Аннотация. статье исследуется, каким образом обсуждения на английском языке помогают студентам осознавать, сравнивать и глубже прочувствовать культурные различия и сходства. В современном образовательном пространстве, где английский язык играет роль универсального средства общения, студенты не просто изучают грамматику или лексику — они учатся видеть мир глазами представителей разных культур. Исследование основано на наблюдениях, полуформальных интервью, письменных рефлексиях студентов и тематическом анализе. Полученные данные показывают, что обсуждение культурных тем способствует развитию эмпатии, терпимости, критического мышления и способности вести диалог в межкультурных ситуациях.

Ключевые слова: межкультурная компетентность; культурные различия; культурные сходства; восприятие студентов; дискуссии на английском языке; глобальная осведомлённость; толерантность; культурная идентичность.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, globalization has changed how people communicate, interact, and even shape their identities. English now plays a major role in bringing different cultures together, which makes intercultural competence an essential part of language learning. Today's EFL learners need more than grammar and pronunciation — they also need to understand how cultural values influence communication, behavior, politeness, and the way people see the world.

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English classrooms naturally gather students with different backgrounds and experiences. Even when students are from the same country, their exposure to media, technology, travel, and family traditions can vary widely. This creates a rich environment for cultural learning. Through guided discussions, students can share their ideas, listen to one another, clarify misunderstandings, and build a deeper sense of cultural understanding. These conversations help them notice both cultural differences and the universal similarities that connect people across the world.

In my article, I explore how students experience cultural differences and similarities during English-language discussions. I also aim to show how intercultural dialogue supports their personal development, social awareness, and communication skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers agree that language and culture cannot be separated. As Kramsch [4] explains, language reflects the culture behind it, to be more specific, its values, beliefs, sense of humor, emotions, and way of seeing the world. This means that learning a foreign language is not just about studying grammar; it also involves entering a new cultural space. Byram [1] adds that intercultural communicative competence includes being able to compare cultures, understand unfamiliar behaviors, and interact respectfully with people from different backgrounds.

Students form their cultural views through many influences such as family, school, media, social networks, and personal experiences. Deardorff [3] points out that these factors shape how learners interpret cultural behavior and whether they react with interest or discomfort. Misunderstandings often come from stereotypes, oversimplified ideas, or lack of exposure. In EFL classrooms, where real intercultural contact may be limited, guided discussions play an important role in expanding students' cultural awareness.

English discussions also give learners real communication practice. Richards and Rodgers [6] state that dialogue-based learning helps students share opinions, think critically, interact naturally, and use language more creatively. Studies show that discussing cultural topics can:

- increase motivation
- encourage empathy and tolerance
- make language learning more meaningful
- help students think more flexibly
- lower communication anxiety [5]

Therefore, classroom discussions support both language development and students' social and emotional growth.

METHODOLOGY

In my study, I used a qualitative approach to explore how students perceive cultural differences and similarities during English-language discussions. I collected data through semi-structured group discussions and personal reflections from 30 university students from diverse cultural backgrounds. I also used open-ended questions so that students could freely share their experiences and ideas.

I recorded all the discussions, typed them out, and carefully coded the data to identify common themes. Using thematic analysis, I grouped the information into meaningful categories such as communication styles, cultural values, and shared experiences. Throughout the study, I followed strict ethical principles: students gave their informed consent, their information was kept confidential, and participation was completely voluntary.

ANALYSES AND RESULTS

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The data collected from 30 university students were examined through thematic analysis. This helped me identify clear patterns in how students understood cultural differences and similarities during English-language discussions. I focused on several key areas: communication styles, attitudes toward cultural diversity, shared experiences, and challenges that appeared during interaction.

One major theme was the difference in how students communicated. Some came from cultures where being direct is normal, so they shared their opinions openly. Others, who were used to more indirect communication, expressed their ideas carefully and politely. At first, these differences caused small misunderstandings. However, as the discussions continued, students began to understand each other's styles better. Many told me they became more respectful, patient, and open to alternative ways of expressing ideas.

Students also recognized both differences and similarities in their cultural values. They mentioned that their traditions and customs sometimes varied, but they still shared common values such as respect, cooperation, and the desire to learn. Some even said they were surprised to find unexpected cultural overlaps during the discussions. These moments helped them challenge and move beyond stereotypes they previously held.

When it comes to the discussions, students often reflected on their interactions. Several admitted that they had misinterpreted someone's behavior at first, only to later realize that it made sense within that person's cultural background. I found these reflections especially powerful because they showed how the discussions encouraged real empathy. Students were not just practicing English, What I mean by this is that, they were learning how to understand others on a deeper level.

There were also challenges. Some students found it hard to express complex cultural ideas in English, which sometimes limited how much they could say. But these difficulties pushed them to adapt. They used examples, gestures, and simple analogies to make their meaning clear. Surprisingly, many students discovered similarities they did not expect, such as similar jokes, shared concerns about studies, and familiar social expectations. These discoveries helped reduce the sense of cultural distance.

All things considered, the analysis showed that English-language discussions are a powerful tool for helping students explore both cultural differences and shared values. Students learned to appreciate diverse perspectives while also finding common ground. This combination of difference and similarity made their interactions richer and more meaningful. Including students' own quotes in the analysis allowed me to better understand how they negotiated cultural perceptions in real time.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I found that English-language discussions create a lively and meaningful space where students not only practise their language skills but also widen their understanding of different cultures. When students are given the chance to talk openly about cultural differences and similarities, they begin to see global diversity in a clearer and more thoughtful way. Many students told me that these discussions helped them learn new things about their own culture as well as others', which shows that intercultural dialogue encourages real self-reflection.

I also noticed that discussion-based learning helps students challenge stereotypes, question their assumptions, and approach cultural issues with more care. These conversations strengthened students' empathy — a skill that is becoming more important as people from different backgrounds interact every day. Through guided discussions, students learned to think more flexibly, compare cultural

viewpoints, recognize shared human values, and understand that cultural norms come from history and tradition.

From a language-learning perspective, I saw that cultural topics made lessons more engaging and meaningful. Students became more fluent, learned new vocabulary, and felt more confident expressing complex ideas. Because these discussions are similar to real-life communication, they prepared students for future intercultural experiences in workplaces, universities, and international environments.

However, I also observed several challenges. Some students had limited exposure to other cultures, while others struggled with the vocabulary needed to talk about cultural issues. Stereotypes also appeared at times. These challenges showed me the importance of careful teaching such as introducing key vocabulary, guiding discussions thoughtfully, and creating a safe and friendly atmosphere where students feel comfortable sharing.

Overall, my research confirms that including intercultural dialogue in English lessons is not only helpful but necessary. It supports students' overall growth by improving language skills, cultural awareness, emotional intelligence, and global citizenship. As English continues to serve as a bridge between cultures, I believe it is our responsibility as language teachers to help students become not just fluent speakers, but also empathetic, open-minded individuals who can communicate respectfully in a multicultural world.

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