



## STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EFL MULTICULTURAL-BASED READING ACTIVITIES IN A HIGHER EDUCATION SETTING

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### abstract

This research study explores first-year university students' perspectives on integrating multicultural-based reading activities into their EFL reading courses during their second semester. The researcher used a qualitative methodology to collect detailed data, including semi-structured interviews as the primary data, as well as focus group discussions, field notes, and classroom artifacts, from 40 undergraduate students majoring in the English Language Education Department at a public university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The data gained were analyzed and interpreted qualitatively by using thematic analysis, particularly the interview and field notes taken during the implementation of the activity, to reveal several key findings. Two major different themes were finally concluded: cultural awareness, and critical thinking skills. It was found that students became more involved, understood better, and respected other cultures. Besides, they elaborated on their critical thinking skills by interpreting and evaluating the texts. The results of the study posit further research to investigate how the activities may affect students' language skills in communicating with people from different cultures in the long term.

## INTRODUCTION

In a globally interconnected world, the status of English has played a significant role, especially when dealing with a language used as a means of global communication (Michaud, et.al., 2015; Hooda, 2022; Schkinder 2024). This emerges in various domains, and education has become the area that English has certainly served as primary medium of instruction, which supports the access to higher learning globally (Bank; 1989; Kramsch, 2020; Mehrajuddin, 2022; Murmu, 2022). In accordance with this, English as a foreign language (EFL) education also meets the challenges and tries to educate students to not only be capable in terms of being linguistically proficient but also to be qualified to successfully maintain the effective intercultural communication in different settings (Byram & Wagner, 2018; Li & Chen, 2021; Cai, 2022) . In this case, language learning can expose students to diversity and provide new cultural perspectives (Kubota, 2010). Despite challenges such as colloquialisms and access to learning resources, English is still essential in modern life, promoting global connectivity, growth across numerous sectors, as well as the variety of cultural perspectives on many different global aspects, especially in language learning.

Fundamentally, the variety of the cultural perspectives in the integration of English as a foreign language learning has been suggested by some experts as one the ways that correspond to the success of EFL teaching (Bank, 1993; Abdulrahman, et.al., 2016; Dabou, et.al., 2017; Jiang & Matsumura, 2023). Some previous studies have addressed the benefits and potential of implementing the elements of a multicultural approach in language teaching. The incorporation of a multicultural approach in language teaching offers the benefits, including a deeper

understanding of cultural backgrounds, empathy and tolerance, critical thinking, and preparation for a globalized workforce which also contribute to adult learning and successful education (Hanemann, 2016; Chaika, 2023). In another study, this approach has been found to be particularly effective in improving writing achievement in Indonesian language among elementary school students (Alfulaila, 2019). The study on a task-based approach, which has been proposed as a methodological framework for integrating multicultural education into language teaching, also reveals a good point with a focus on promoting intercultural competence and understanding (Chaika, 2023). The success of multilingual and multicultural approaches to literacy depends on participatory decision-making and community involvement, particularly in higher education context (Hanemann, 2016; Kim, 2017). Integrating variety into foreign language instruction has the capacity to enhance students' comprehension of cultural roots and linguistic subtleties, foster empathy and acceptance, promote critical thinking and innovation, and equip them for a worldwide economy (Paul & Elder, 2019). To incorporate multicultural education into foreign language teaching, one can use practical resources and assignments, encourage collaboration and interaction among students from diverse cultural backgrounds, and include reflection exercises in the curriculum (Shtyrlina, et.al, 2020).

Multicultural-based activities which are implemented in reading courses have also been considered as a series of techniques to improve students' motivation and their engagement during learning (Dorn-Medeiros, 2020). Particularly, within Indonesian context, this result is supported by Sinaga (2023), who also revealed that multicultural reading materials given to junior high school participants, had improved their reading skills which was positively responded by the participants. According to Al-Jarf (2015), utilizing multicultural children's short stories is recommended for enhancing reading and speaking abilities, as well as fostering cultural consciousness. A study by Pavlova (2023) focuses on developing critical thinking of students-linguists with the use of problem-based technology of teaching intercultural reading based on modern British novels. Miftakh (2019) highlights the significance of intercultural instruction and learning in English, namely through reading exercises, to augment students' multicultural consciousness. The student's ability to understand and interact with different cultures was improved by creating a school environment that included both organized and spontaneous activities. The teacher facilitated these activities to promote active participation and collaboration among students with diverse cultural backgrounds. The teachers, as material developers, can also get the advantages from the implementation of cultural familiar texts in their teaching (Karimi & Nafissi, 2017). The main goal of this implementation was also to improve their intercultural competence as well as their English reading comprehension skills (Hellerstein-Yehezkel, D., 2017).

Previous studies explore the integration of multicultural texts in educational setting to students critical thinking. In their study, Thomas and Choi (2017) conducted research that questioned the conventional strategy of using a single method for teaching literacy to all individuals. Their study concentrated on pupils with linguistic diversity and discovered that the utilization of numerous texts had a substantial positive impact on the development of critical reading abilities within this group. The researchers noted that by exposing students to a diverse range of texts, they noticed an increase in student engagement, improved understanding, and the development of more advanced analytical skills. This discovery implies that educators should contemplate integrating a wide array of reading materials to more effectively assist kids from different linguistic origins. Another study from Lawrence et al. (2017) investigated the way pre-service instructors employ multicultural literature to enhance student literacy. Their research emphasized the efficacy of such literary works in captivating students and fostering their talents in analyzing texts. The researchers discovered that integrating culturally diverse

texts into the training of pre-service instructors resulted in pupils showing heightened enthusiasm for reading and displaying enhanced skills in critically analyzing and interpreting literature. This study highlights the need of introducing prospective teachers to multicultural literature and providing them with techniques to proficiently incorporate these texts into their instructional practices.

Jackson (2018) outlined a pedagogical method known as critical multiculturalism for instructing English language learners. This approach entails combining reading instruction with social studies material. The primary objective of this novel approach was to cultivate students' ability to think critically and enhance their understanding of social issues. Jackson noticed that when literacy development was integrated with culturally relevant social studies topics, children experienced improvements in their language abilities as well as a more profound comprehension of social issues and varied viewpoints. This method demonstrates the ability to integrate multiple courses into the curriculum to enhance the academic and socio-emotional growth of English language learners. Sobkowiak (2016) conducted a study to investigate the efficacy of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks used in Polish schools in improving students' critical thinking skills in intercultural contexts. The investigation uncovered constraints in the textbooks' capacity to foster critical thinking and cultural sensitivity. Sobkowiak's research emphasizes the necessity of additional resources and instructional methods that can effectively assist students in cultivating critical thinking abilities while actively exploring other cultural viewpoints inside the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Parker (2019) in his research findings also provide that a foundation for educators and administrators in higher education worldwide, across various fields, has aimed to redefine their classrooms or the overall college or university experience to better cater to the increasingly diverse student population. This can be achieved through research in multicultural education.

Those recent studies have highlighted the potential benefits of incorporating multicultural elements in language teaching, yet there is limited research on how students perceive and engage with such approaches, especially in reading courses. This gap is particularly evident in the context of Indonesian higher education, where exposure to diverse cultures may be limited. The necessity of enhancing EFL education to align with the demands of a globalized world is the source of the urgency of this research. Although previous research has primarily concentrated on the theoretical advantages of multicultural approaches, there is a dearth of qualitative data regarding the perspectives and experiences of students, particularly during the initial years of their university education.

The objective of this study is to investigate the attitude of the first-year university students in the implementation of multicultural-based reading activities into their English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading course. This study also has the objective to understand how students in a specific cultural setting react to and gain advantages from being exposed to various cultural content in their reading materials. By studying students' viewpoints, this study is expected to bridge the gap between theoretical approaches to multicultural education and actual application in EFL classes, resulting in more effective and culturally sensitive language teaching practices. Therefore, this study tries to answer the following research questions:

1. How do first-year university students perceive the integration of multicultural-based reading activities in their EFL reading courses in terms of developing cultural awareness?
2. In what ways do multicultural-based reading activities in EFL reading course give effect on the development of critical thinking skills among first-year university students?

## METHOD

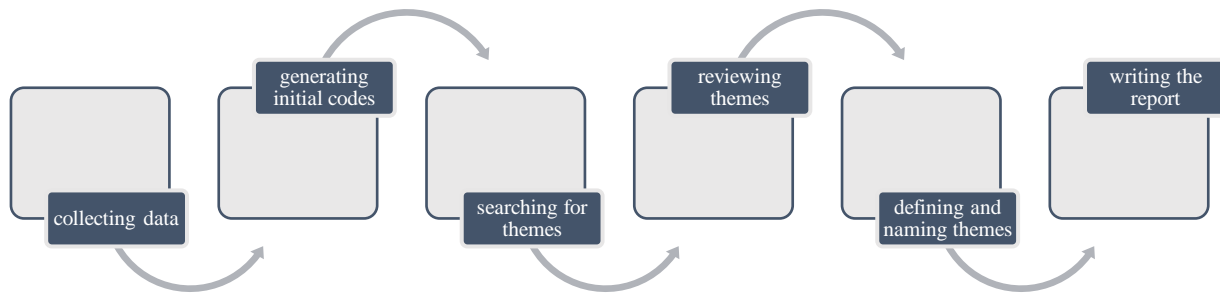
The study involved forty participants of undergraduate students, including 23 females and 17 males, aged between 18 and 20. The participants were enrolled in the English Language Education Department at a public university located in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. They were chosen by purposive sampling to ensure that they were enrolled in EFL reading classes that incorporated multicultural-based activities. Each participant was in their second semester and had successfully finished at least one previous EFL reading course.

The instruments used in this study were also varied. In gathering the data, the researcher used an interview guideline. An interview in qualitative research can be so powerful since it is an appropriate instrument to get deeper information in the qualitative research (Creswell, 2012). The semi-structured format's adaptability in the guideline enabled the researcher to delve deeper into responses that were intriguing or unexpected, thereby guaranteeing a thorough examination of the perspectives of each participant. As a qualitative researcher, the use of semi-structured interview guideline in this research was expected to gain unique information and interpretation from the participants (Stake, 2010). In addition to the interview guide, the investigation implemented a protocol for classroom observations and a document analysis form. The observation checklist was employed to meticulously record student participation, interactions, and responses during multicultural reading exercises during in-class sessions. The categories included the level of involvement, the types of queries asked, and the visible responses to cultural material. The document analysis form was designed to evaluate classroom artifacts, including the multicultural texts currently in use, student workbooks, and reflective notebooks.

The methodical examination of these resources was directed by this format, which emphasized the variety of cultural representations, the types of assignments associated with the texts, and evidence of students' critical interaction with cultural issues. The observation inventory and document analysis form were developed through a comprehensive process of literature research and expert consultation to ensure their validity and alignment with the study's objectives. The research was conducted over the duration of a 16-week semester, adhering to a carefully planned schedule. Initially, the university's ethics committee granted ethical approval, which was followed by the recruitment of participants through purposive sampling and the acquisition of informed consent. The study proceeded with classroom observations during the initial four weeks to establish a foundational understanding of the implementation of multicultural-based reading activities.

Classroom artifacts were consistently collected and analyzed throughout the semester. Individual semi-structured interviews were delivered during week 5 to 12, with each interview lasting approximately 15-20 minutes. To prevent the disruption of regular instruction, these interviews were scheduled outside of class time. Four focus group discussions were conducted in weeks 13 and 14, each of which lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and involved 8-10 participants. The purpose of these group sessions was to investigate shared experiences and produce interactive insights. Classroom observations were conducted concurrently with these data collection activities to monitor any modifications in student engagement and responses to the multicultural content throughout the semester. The audio recordings of all interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim. To guarantee the precision of the data and interpretations, participant member checks were implemented, which enabled them to examine and verify their interview transcripts and the researcher's initial interpretations. The accumulation of rich, multifaceted data that captured the students' evolving perspectives on multicultural-based reading activities over the course of the semester was facilitated by this comprehensive procedure.

The data analysis procedure was conducted in accordance with the six-phase framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006), with a rigorous thematic analysis approach.



At first, the researchers immersed themselves in the data, perusing the transcripts from interviews and focus group discussions, as well as field notes and document analysis forms, repeatedly to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the content. Subsequently, the initial codes were generated, which involved the systematic coding of significant data features across the entire dataset. The researchers subsequently conducted a search for themes, compiling codes into potential themes and collecting all pertinent data for each potential theme. The fourth phase entailed the evaluation and refinement of the themes, ensuring that they were compatible with the coded extracts and the entire dataset. This process resulted in the generation of a thematic map of the analysis. The fifth phase involved the identification and naming of themes, with ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall narrative of the analysis. Ultimately, the report was generated by selecting compelling extract examples and connecting the analysis to the research question and literature. To guarantee credibility, investigator triangulation was implemented, which involved two researchers independently coding the data and subsequently contrasting their analyses to establish a consensus. Furthermore, peer debriefing sessions were conducted with counterparts in the field of EFL education to challenge assumptions and interpretations.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This study's findings show that multicultural-based reading activities in EFL classes improve first-year university students' cultural awareness, sensitivity, and critical thinking skills. Two significant themes emerged from the examination of semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, demonstrating the many advantages of incorporating varied cultural literature into language learning. These findings not only support previous studies on the value of intercultural education, but also shed fresh light on how such techniques might be effectively implemented in EFL situations. The next discussion will go into these issues in depth, looking at how students' viewpoints indicate improved cultural understanding and critical engagement. Furthermore, this part will place these findings into the larger context of intercultural competence and language education, relying on relevant literature and assessing the implications for EFL practice and future study.

### *Enhanced Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity*

The application of multicultural reading activities provided new perspectives and experiences to students, so that they were able to sense newly found cultural aspects they perceived during the activity. It was also found that cultural awareness and sensitivity brought the students' linguistic and cultural competence that developed into an integrative personality trait that allows the students to positively solve intercultural problems using verbal and nonverbal aspects of the foreign language and its culture. In brief, the experiences of the students can be seen in these emergent themes:

Table 1: Student Reported Changes in Cultural Awareness

<b>Aspect of Cultural Awareness</b>	<b>Percentage of Students Reporting Improvement</b>
Understanding of cultural diversity	85%
Curiosity about other cultures	78%
Reduced cultural stereotyping	72%
Appreciation of own culture	68%

Students reported a significant increase in their cultural awareness and sensitivity because of engaging with multicultural texts. For example,

*S1: "Reading about different cultures has opened my eyes to how diverse the world is. I'm more curious about other cultures now and less likely to make assumptions."*

*S18: "My perspective on the diversity in the world has been improved by reading about various cultures. I am more interested in learning about different cultures."*

*S21: ". I am less pretentious now and more fascinated in learning about several civilizations. Reading about many civilizations has helped me to see the variety of the world"*

In line with the findings of Byram et al. (2002), who argue that the exposure to a range of cultural knowledge during the process of language learning can help to improve intercultural competency, the findings of this study are compatible with those findings. By exhibiting how this awareness develops within the specific setting of English as a Foreign Language reading classes, the findings of our research, on the other hand, widen this idea and provide a more comprehensive account of its development.

In contrast to earlier research, such as that conducted by Liaw (2007) and Gómez Rodríguez (2013), which concentrated largely on the linguistic effects of multicultural texts in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) situations, this study shed light on the significant impact that multicultural texts have on the cultural perspectives of students. This shows that the benefits of multicultural reading activities extend far beyond the acquisition of language, and that they contribute greatly to the development of students as citizens who can interact with people from different cultures.

### *Development of Critical Thinking Skills*

The multicultural reading activities appeared to stimulate critical thinking among students. Many participants reported that they found themselves questioning assumptions and

considering multiple perspectives when engaging with texts. This finding supports Kubota's (2004) assertion that multicultural education can enhance critical literacy skills. Through semi-structured interviews, students also revealed that their ability to analyze texts can be in different perspectives.

Aspect of Critical Thinking Skills	Percentage of Students Reporting Improvement
Ability to analyze texts from multiple perspectives	80%
Enhanced skills in questioning cultural assumptions	75%
More nuanced understanding of cause-effect relationships in cultural context	72%
Improved ability to synthesize information from diverse cultural sources	60%

The findings indicate that multicultural-based reading activities in EFL courses can greatly improve first-year university students' critical thinking abilities. The increased ability to assess texts from numerous perspectives indicated in the interviews backs up Cai's (2022) claim that exposure to diverse cultural narratives promotes cognitive flexibility. This skill is key for acquiring the critical cultural awareness that Byram and Wagner (2018) believe is required for effective intercultural communication.

*S4: “When reading the text entitled ‘The Navajo Codes’ I used to think that American Soldiers are natives with the ability to utilize technology. It turns out, Navajo comes from native American tribes who had some distinctive characters on how to use the codes based on their native language, which are completely different from American English language in general. I’m able to see it now from different angle.”*

In another interview, it was also found that students enhanced the ability in questioning cultural assumption.

*S12: “This reading activity (The Navajo Codes text reading) has shifted my initial assumption about western culture. I thought that native American tribes are like those in Europe. However, when reread the text, I perceive that native American tribes have so much more cultural effect on the existence of the nation.”*

The observed rise in students' inquiry skills and use of evidence-based reasoning during class discussions suggests a heightened level of critical involvement with texts. This supports the conclusions of Yang and Qiu (2020) that multicultural literature enhances the ability of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to analyse texts at a deeper level. The students' capacity to respectfully and productively question their peers' views also indicates the cultivation of what Facione (2015) refers to as the dispositions of critical thinkers, such as open-mindedness and inquisitiveness. Those evidence showed that the students were able to improve their ability in analyzing the text form multiple perspectives. These results were also found in the research study by Kuo (2014) which considered that multicultural text provides the students a chance to analyze a text from another perspective. The alternation observed in students' ability to synthesize information from diverse cultural sources, transitioning from descriptive to analytical, showcases the capacity of multicultural texts to support the development of critical thinking. Li and Chen's (2021) study provides evidence that continuous exposure to culturally

varied literature enhances the analytical abilities of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The enhanced capacity of the students to establish links between personal experiences and broader cultural notions, as observed in their reflective diaries, also mirrors Kramersch's (2020) research on the significance of personal reflection in cultivating critical cultural awareness.

The study's results indicate that the inclusion of multicultural-focused reading activities in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms can greatly improve the cultural awareness, sensitivity, and critical thinking abilities of first-year university students. These findings are consistent with and build upon prior studies on the significance of intercultural education in language learning environments. A significant result was the notable enhancement in students' cultural understanding and sensitivity. 85% of students reported a significant improvement in their comprehension of cultural variety, while 78% expressed a greater interest in exploring other cultures. This supports the claim made by Byram et al. (2002) that being exposed to a wide range of cultural information while learning a language can enhance one's ability to interact effectively with people from different cultures. However, this study goes beyond past studies by particularly investigating the process of how this awareness develops during English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading lessons. This research diverges from previous studies conducted by Liaw (2007) and Gómez Rodríguez (2013) by shifting the focus from linguistic outcomes to the significant influence of multicultural texts on students' cultural viewpoints. It suggests that the advantages of using such texts go beyond mere language acquisition.

The multicultural reading activities led to the emergence of critical thinking abilities as a notable result. 80% of the students shown an improved capacity to assess texts from many viewpoints, while 75% of them displayed the ability to question cultural preconceptions. This discovery corroborates Kubota's (2004) assertion that intercultural education has the potential to augment critical literacy abilities. The enhancement in students' capacity to evaluate texts from different perspectives corresponds with Cai's (2022) claim that being exposed to a wide range of cultural narratives fosters cognitive flexibility. Developing this skill is vital for cultivating the necessary critical cultural awareness that Byram and Wagner (2018) deem indispensable for successful intercultural communication. Additionally, the research noted a rise in students' ability to inquire and employ evidence-based reasoning during classroom discussions, suggesting a more profound degree of critical involvement with texts. This supports the findings of Yang and Qiu (2020) that multicultural literature improves the capacity of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to examine texts in a more thorough manner. The students' ability to respectfully challenge their friends' perspectives also indicates the development of critical thinking tendencies, as outlined by Facione (2015), such as open-mindedness and curiosity.

The study also saw an enhancement in students' capacity to integrate information from many cultural sources, shifting from descriptive to analytical methodologies. This result aligns with the research conducted by Li and Chen (2021), which shown that persistent exposure to diverse literature from different cultures improves the analytical skills of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. Furthermore, the increased ability of students to make connections between their own experiences and broader cultural notions, as seen in their reflective diaries, reflects Kramersch's (2020) study on the significance of personal reflection in developing critical cultural awareness. In summary, this study presents strong evidence supporting the efficacy of multicultural-based reading activities in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses. Through the promotion of cultural awareness and the development of critical thinking skills, these activities equip students with enhanced language proficiency and the ability to engage in more impactful intercultural communication and global citizenship. Subsequent studies could



investigate the enduring effects of these interventions and their suitability in various educational settings and levels.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigates the impact of various approaches on the perspectives of freshman university students about reading exercises that emphasize multiculturalism in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes at a public university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The results indicate that the inclusion of multicultural material in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading courses significantly enhances students' capacity for critical thinking and their understanding of diverse cultures. Students gained a significant improvement in their comprehension and admiration of cultural diversity, as well as a more subtle perspective on their own and other cultures. Furthermore, they had an increased propensity for global affairs. Furthermore, these activities cultivated an environment in which students actively questioned assumptions, explored different viewpoints, and conducted a more comprehensive analysis of texts, so enhancing their critical thinking skills. Although students encountered hurdles in comprehending unfamiliar cultural contexts, they perceived these difficulties as valuable opportunities for personal growth and improvement in their ability to communicate across cultures.

The study's influence goes beyond the confines of the classroom, indicating that these techniques in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching can have a vital role in equipping students with the necessary skills to communicate effectively in various international environments. Incorporating multicultural-focused reading exercises into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms is a potential method to provide students with the necessary skills to traverse complex cultural settings, considering the increasing interdependence of the world. This method not only encourages the development of language fluency but also fosters cultural sensitivity and improves critical thinking abilities, which are essential for achieving success in an interconnected global society.

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