



# Students' Meaning-Making in Multicultural Interactions: A Phenomenological Study in International English Classrooms

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## ABSTRACT

International English classrooms are key settings for exploring intercultural engagement in English Language Teaching (ELT), especially in globalized higher education. While these classrooms promote diversity, little is known about how students reflect on their multicultural experiences. Most research has focused on outcomes like communication skills or academic performance, but has overlooked the personal experiences behind these outcomes. This study explores how students make sense of their experiences in multicultural English classrooms, using a descriptive phenomenological approach. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twelve culturally diverse undergraduate students. Thematic reduction was used to identify core experiential themes. The analysis revealed four key themes: cultural dissonance and discovery, identity negotiation, development of intercultural openness, and critical reflections on power and voice. These themes show how students internalize cultural differences, adapt emotionally and cognitively, and build intercultural sensitivity through discomfort and reflection. The findings offer deeper insight into the emotional and interpretive aspects of intercultural learning. They contribute to ELT by shifting attention from observable behaviors to lived experiences. The results also suggest that educators should design more inclusive and reflective learning environments, and they open new avenues for future research in internationalized education.



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## INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized education systems, international English classrooms have become dynamic environments where culturally diverse students engage in shared learning experiences. Often situated in English-medium instruction (EMI) settings, these classrooms function not only as linguistic spaces but also as social arenas for intercultural communication and identity negotiation. They present both opportunities and challenges as students navigate unfamiliar cultural and social dynamics.

Multicultural interactions in such settings go beyond language acquisition. They involve personal encounters with different values, communication styles, and cultural norms, shaping students' self-perception and their understanding of others in a global context.

Although prior studies have documented the academic advantages of internationalized education (Lee, 2018; Wang, 2021), there is limited attention to the subjective, lived experiences of students—especially how they interpret and reflect upon their intercultural encounters. This gap suggests the need for a more nuanced exploration of the emotional and interpretive dimensions of intercultural engagement, which are often overlooked in quantitatively driven studies.

Understanding the lived experiences of students in multicultural classrooms is essential for grasping how they construct meaning from these encounters. Such understanding can offer insights into the formation of intercultural awareness, identity shifts, and emotional responses within the learning environment. A phenomenological approach is well-suited to investigate this domain, as it centers on the ways individuals experience and interpret specific phenomena in their lifeworld. In this context,

exploring students' subjective reflections can uncover the nuanced realities of intercultural learning that are often overlooked in more outcome-driven or quantitative studies.

As global higher education continues to expand, there is a pressing need to move beyond surface-level accounts of international classrooms and delve into the personal and existential dimensions of student experiences. Examining these reflections not only contributes to pedagogical insight but also advances a more humanistic understanding of learning in diverse, multicultural contexts.

Research into students' lived experiences within multicultural English classrooms has emerged as a significant area of inquiry in the broader field of English Language Teaching (ELT) and applied linguistics. As global education systems continue to internationalize, there is increasing recognition of the importance of understanding how students make sense of their intercultural encounters—not merely in terms of communicative outcomes, but through the meanings they construct in real-time interactions. This shift from language output to experiential depth underscores a growing demand for methodologies that prioritize subjective understanding over objective measurement.

Despite the growing interest, methodological challenges persist. Much of the existing literature tends to rely on survey-based or quantitative approaches, which, while valuable for identifying general trends, often fall short in capturing the depth, complexity, and nuance of individual experiences (Lo & Hew, 2017; Tang & Chaw, 2020). These methods typically overlook the affective, reflective, and interpretive dimensions of multicultural interaction, such as the inner conflicts, evolving perceptions, and shifting identities students experience when confronted with cultural differences.

Such limitations have resulted in a fragmented understanding of the phenomenon—one that emphasizes surface-level engagement without fully accessing the essence of students' reflections and meaning-making processes. The complexity of intercultural encounters within international classrooms calls for a more interpretive lens—one capable of revealing the layers of thought, emotion, and identity negotiation embedded in students' experiences. Phenomenology, with its commitment to exploring lived realities from the first-person perspective, offers a compelling framework to bridge this methodological and epistemological gap.

Common responses to the challenges of multicultural dynamics in English classrooms have often centered on pedagogical interventions, cross-cultural training, or the enhancement of communicative competence. These practical solutions, while beneficial for improving classroom engagement and intercultural collaboration, typically rely on standardized tools and frameworks that prioritize behavior and performance over perception and meaning. As a result, the more nuanced, internal experiences of students—their reflections, uncertainties, and emotional negotiations—are frequently overlooked or underrepresented in the research (Lee, 2018; Wang, 2021).

Moreover, dominant research methods in the field have tended to emphasize external measures such as language proficiency, participation rates, or self-reported attitudes using fixed-response instruments. These approaches, though informative at a general level, lack the sensitivity required to uncover the depth and complexity of how students experience multicultural interactions on a personal level. Without access to the lived meaning behind these interactions, the pedagogical implications of multicultural learning risk becoming superficial or overly generalized (Lo & Hew, 2017).

Given these limitations, there remains a critical need to explore multicultural classroom experiences through a more interpretive and holistic lens. Phenomenology provides an alternative and powerful framework for addressing this gap, as it enables researchers to investigate not just what occurs in intercultural interactions, but how those interactions are experienced, interpreted, and internalized by students themselves. By focusing on lived experience, phenomenology offers the potential to reveal the underlying structures of meaning that shape students' reflections in ways that other methodologies cannot.

Previous studies have examined multicultural interactions in English classrooms through diverse lenses, often emphasizing communication strategies, cultural adaptation, and learning outcomes. Research by Lee (2018) and Wang (2021) highlights the value of cross-cultural exposure, yet offers limited insight into the inner experiences of students. While some studies have explored

cultural identity in language learning, they often adopt narrative or thematic frameworks without a deep phenomenological grounding. These approaches have contributed to the field, but they tend to focus on what happens, rather than how it is subjectively experienced. As a result, the essential meanings students assign to their intercultural encounters remain insufficiently explored.

This study adopts a descriptive phenomenological approach to address that gap. By focusing on students' reflections, the research seeks to uncover how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences in multicultural English classrooms. The phenomenological method was chosen for its ability to reveal structures of consciousness and capture the richness of human experience. This approach allows the study to go beyond observable behavior and access the emotional, cognitive, and relational dimensions of learning in a culturally diverse setting. In doing so, it answers the need for deeper insight into how students internalize and interpret intercultural interactions.

This article begins with an introduction to the phenomenon and its significance in the context of global English education. It then describes the methodological approach used in the study, including participant selection, data collection, and analysis based on thematic reduction. The results section presents key themes drawn from students' reflections, supported by narrative descriptions and direct quotations. The discussion explores the implications of these findings for pedagogical practice and intercultural understanding. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the study's contributions and suggests directions for future research.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore how students reflect on multicultural interactions in international English classrooms. Phenomenology, as a qualitative approach, focuses on how individuals perceive and make sense of their lived experiences. It was chosen to uncover the nuanced and personal meanings students attribute to their intercultural encounters.

A descriptive phenomenological method rooted in the Husserlian tradition was applied, highlighting the intentionality of consciousness and emphasizing the description of phenomena as experienced. This approach allowed for focused exploration of the essence of students' reflections, while suspending researcher bias through epoché. It also enabled extraction of invariant meanings grounded in participants' authentic narratives.

### **Participants**

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in English-medium instruction (EMI) programs featuring international and intercultural classroom environments. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit individuals who had substantial experience engaging with culturally diverse peers in English classroom settings.

Inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) be currently enrolled in an EMI program with at least one semester of experience in multicultural classrooms, (2) possess adequate English proficiency to articulate reflective responses, and (3) be willing to share personal experiences in depth. Exclusion criteria included students with minimal exposure to intercultural classroom environments or those unable to commit to full-length interviews.

A total of 12 participants (7 females and 5 males), averaging 21.4 years of age, were selected. They came from varied cultural backgrounds—including Southeast Asia, East Asia, the Middle East, and Western Europe—offering a rich range of intercultural perspectives.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in English. An interview protocol with open-ended questions guided discussion on intercultural experiences, communication challenges, and personal transformations. Interviews took place in quiet, private campus settings or secure online platforms, according to participants' preferences. Each session lasted

45–70 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. Field notes captured non-verbal and contextual cues. Participants were encouraged to speak freely in a respectful and supportive atmosphere.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis informed by descriptive phenomenology. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed repeatedly for immersion. Initial meaning units were identified, then grouped into clusters through thematic reduction. To enhance validity, member checking was conducted by returning summary interpretations to participants for verification and clarification. Triangulation was also employed by comparing interview data with field notes and researcher memos.

NVivo software supported the organization and visualization of coding patterns. Themes were refined iteratively through discussions between two independent coders. Discrepancies in coding were resolved through consensus-building, enhancing the reliability of thematic interpretations. The final themes represented both shared patterns and unique individual insights.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate institutional ethics board prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. All procedures adhered to international ethical standards for research with human subjects.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study are organized into four major themes that emerged from the interpretive analysis of in-depth interviews with participants. These themes represent the essential meanings and lived experiences of students engaging in multicultural interactions within international English classrooms. The themes are presented below, supported by direct quotations from participants to illuminate the personal and contextual nuances of their reflections.

### **Encountering Cultural Dissonance and Discovery**

Many students described their initial experiences in multicultural classrooms as moments of uncertainty and cultural disorientation. This discomfort, however, often served as a gateway to deeper understanding of both self and others. Participants encountered cultural norms, communicative behaviors, and classroom dynamics that challenged their previous assumptions.

“I was surprised when my Japanese classmate always avoided eye contact—it felt like he wasn’t listening. But later, I realized it’s part of his culture, and it changed how I think about respect.” (Participant 3)

Students noted that such encounters initially created confusion but gradually evolved into opportunities for cultural learning and introspection. For many, these moments served as powerful catalysts for re-evaluating their own cultural frameworks.

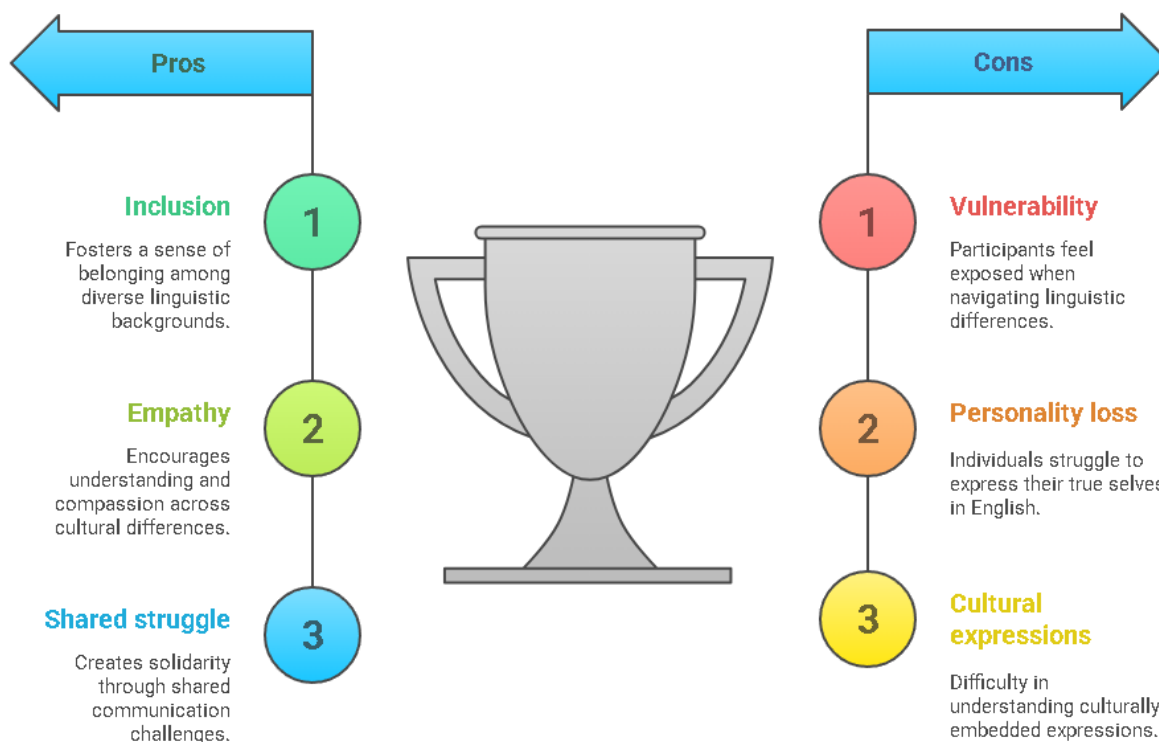
### **Negotiating Language, Identity, and Belonging**

The interaction of language and cultural identity was a central theme for participants navigating English as a lingua franca. Several expressed a sense of vulnerability when communicating across accents, fluency levels, or culturally embedded expressions.

“Sometimes I feel like I lose my real personality when I speak English. I’m not as funny or confident. But then again, everyone else is also trying, and that makes me feel less alone.” (Participant 7)

Despite these challenges, students reported a growing sense of inclusion as they developed adaptive strategies and embraced diverse linguistic expressions. These interactions also fostered empathy and a sense of shared struggle among classmates from different backgrounds.

## English as a lingua franca



### Developing Intercultural Sensitivity and Openness

Over time, participants articulated a noticeable shift in their openness toward cultural differences. The classroom became not only a linguistic space but also a social and emotional site for intercultural growth.

“I used to think my way of doing presentations was the only right way. But after seeing how others express ideas, I realized there are so many creative ways to communicate, and now I’m more curious than judgmental.” (Participant 5)

This theme reflects the students’ transformation from being culturally cautious to becoming interculturally sensitive. The process of listening, observing, and engaging with others from different traditions nurtured a broadened worldview and an appreciation of pluralism in communication.

### Reflecting on Power, Equity, and Voice

Some participants raised concerns about subtle power dynamics in classroom discussions, often linked to language dominance or cultural assertiveness. These moments provoked critical reflections on whose voices were heard, whose were marginalized, and how this affected classroom participation.

“When a native English speaker talks fast and dominates the group, I sometimes feel invisible. I have ideas, but I worry they’re not good enough.” (Participant 9)

This theme suggests that while multicultural classrooms offer rich opportunities for learning, they also require intentional facilitation to ensure equity of voice. Students’ reflections revealed the need for more inclusive practices that acknowledge and balance diverse communicative styles.

The lived experiences of students in international English classrooms reveal a complex interplay of cultural dissonance, identity negotiation, growing intercultural awareness, and critical engagement with issues of voice and belonging. These themes collectively underscore the transformative potential of multicultural interactions—not only for language development but also for personal growth, empathy, and global-mindedness. The results highlight the necessity of reflective pedagogical approaches that recognize and honor the diversity of student experiences in multicultural ELT environments.

The findings of this study reveal that students' experiences of multicultural interactions in international English classrooms are characterized by moments of cultural dissonance, identity negotiation, growing intercultural awareness, and reflections on equity and voice. These themes highlight the depth of subjective meaning students assign to their encounters with cultural difference, addressing the core research question on how such experiences are lived and interpreted within academic settings.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon by illuminating how students do not merely participate in multicultural classrooms but actively engage in processes of reflection, adaptation, and self-discovery. Rather than treating cultural difference as a challenge to overcome, participants described it as a space for growth—both cognitively and emotionally. These insights respond directly to the need for more holistic and experiential accounts of intercultural education, offering an interpretive dimension often absent from outcome-driven studies. By articulating how students internalize and make meaning of multicultural engagement, the study expands the pedagogical discourse beyond skills and performance, emphasizing the existential dimension of learning across cultures.

The findings align with earlier phenomenological research such as that by Lee (2018), which noted students' emotional responses and identity shifts in cross-cultural classrooms. However, this study extends previous work by foregrounding issues of power and voice, which are often understated in ELT literature. The theme of “reflecting on equity and voice,” for instance, resonates with critical intercultural theories that argue for a more nuanced understanding of classroom hierarchies and language ideologies (see Holliday, 2011). At the same time, the participants' evolving openness to other cultures supports Wang's (2021) findings on intercultural curiosity, yet the current study deepens that insight by illustrating how such openness emerges through tension, discomfort, and eventual self-reflection. Together, these findings reinforce the call for pedagogical approaches that are not only inclusive but also attuned to the affective and interpretive realities of learners.

The implications of these findings are significant both pedagogically and socially. From a pedagogical perspective, understanding students' lived experiences in multicultural classrooms can inform the design of more empathetic and culturally responsive curricula. Educators and institutions should not only focus on language proficiency and academic success but also recognize the emotional labor and identity negotiations students undergo during intercultural engagement. On a broader social level, these experiences reflect the challenges and opportunities of global citizenship, where meaningful interaction across cultures becomes a vital competence. The study underscores the importance of creating learning environments that encourage critical reflection, promote equity of voice, and support the development of intercultural sensitivity as an integral part of English language education.

This study is not without limitations. As a phenomenological inquiry, the research emphasizes depth over breadth and therefore does not aim for statistical generalizability. The findings are drawn from a specific group of participants within a particular institutional and cultural context, which may limit their applicability to other settings. Furthermore, reliance on self-reported reflections in interviews may have introduced subjective bias or selective memory. These limitations are inherent to the nature of qualitative phenomenological research and highlight the importance of contextually grounded interpretations rather than universal claims.

Future research can build on these findings by exploring similar phenomena in different institutional, cultural, or disciplinary contexts. Comparative studies across geographical regions or education systems could provide a richer understanding of how multicultural interactions are experienced globally. In addition, longitudinal designs may help capture how students' perceptions evolve over time and how these changes influence their academic and personal growth. There is also potential to examine the role of faculty and institutional practices in shaping students' intercultural experiences, offering a more comprehensive view of the dynamics at play in international English classrooms.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined how students reflect on multicultural interactions in international English classrooms, particularly how they make sense of cultural differences. It identified four key themes: cultural dissonance, identity negotiation, intercultural sensitivity, and awareness of voice and equity. These themes offer insights into the emotional and reflective dimensions of students' engagement in culturally diverse settings. By centering students' lived experiences, the study contributes to a more holistic understanding of intercultural learning, addressing gaps in prior research that often emphasized external outcomes over internal processes.

The findings underscore the importance of inclusive pedagogical approaches that recognize students' personal transformations and foster intercultural competence as a fundamental educational goal. Future research may expand on this work by including perspectives from faculty or administrators, employing longitudinal or mixed-method designs, or exploring diverse student populations across different cultural and institutional contexts. Additionally, methodological triangulation—such as combining interview data with classroom observations or reflective journals—could further enrich understanding of the dynamics within multicultural learning environments.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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