

## CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT IN EFL CLASSROOMS: A NARRATIVE THEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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### ABSTRAK

*Keberagaman budaya dalam kelas Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL) menuntut pemahaman tentang bagaimana peserta didik menyesuaikan diri dengan perbedaan budaya selama pembelajaran. Kesalahpahaman yang muncul akibat ketidaksesuaian antara latar belakang budaya peserta didik dan praktik kelas dapat mengurangi partisipasi serta menghambat pemahaman makna. Artikel ini menyintesis penelitian terdahulu mengenai penyesuaian budaya dalam kelas EFL menggunakan pendekatan narrative thematic literature review. Studi yang dianalisis mencakup aspek budaya dalam pembelajaran bahasa, komunikasi antarbudaya, dan adaptasi lintas budaya, dengan menelaah landasan teoretis, konteks, dan temuan utama. Hasil sintesis mengidentifikasi empat tema utama: (1) budaya sebagai komponen integral pembelajaran bahasa, (2) tahapan penyesuaian budaya peserta didik EFL, (3) tantangan dan manfaat penyesuaian budaya dalam interaksi kelas, dan (4) persepsi peserta didik terhadap praktik penyesuaian budaya. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa penyesuaian budaya merupakan proses dinamis dan bersifat siklis yang memengaruhi pemahaman, partisipasi, dan kepercayaan diri peserta didik. Artikel ini menekankan pentingnya penerapan pembelajaran yang responsif secara budaya sekaligus mengungkap celah penelitian terkait sintesis pengalaman penyesuaian budaya peserta didik di konteks lokal EFL.*

***Kata kunci:** : Penyesuaian budaya, Kelas EFL, Persepsi peserta didik, Narrative thematic literature review*

### ABSTRACT

Cultural diversity in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms has intensified the need to understand how students adjust to cultural differences during the learning process. Cultural diversity in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms requires an understanding of how learners adjust to cultural differences during the learning process. Misunderstandings arising from mismatches between learners' cultural backgrounds and classroom practices can reduce participation and hinder meaningful comprehension. This article synthesizes previous studies on cultural adjustment in EFL classrooms using a narrative thematic literature review approach. The analyzed studies focus on culture in language learning, intercultural communication, and cross-cultural adaptation, examining theoretical foundations, research contexts, and key findings. The synthesis identifies four main themes: (1) culture as an integral component of language learning, (2) stages of cultural adjustment experienced by EFL learners, (3) challenges and benefits of cultural adjustment in classroom interaction, and (4) learners' perceptions of cultural adjustment practices. Findings indicate that cultural adjustment is a dynamic and cyclical process influencing learners' comprehension, participation, and confidence. This study emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive teaching and highlights a research gap in synthesizing learners' cultural adjustment experiences in local EFL contexts.

**Keyword:** Cultural adjustment, EFL classroom, Students' perceptions, Narrative thematic literature review

### INTRODUCTION

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning takes place within socially and culturally diverse contexts, making language comprehension inseparable from cultural understanding. Previous studies indicate that difficulties in EFL learning are often not caused by limited grammatical knowledge, but by learners' inability to interpret meaning pragmatically and contextually (Thomas,

1983; Byram, 1997). Although Communicative Language Teaching emphasizes meaningful language use (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), meaningful communication remains influenced by cultural values, norms, and interactional conventions embedded in classroom practices. These findings suggest that linguistic competence alone is insufficient without cultural awareness in EFL learning.

From a sociocultural perspective, language learning is viewed as a socially mediated process shaped through interaction and cultural practices (Lantolf & Thorne, 2015). Research demonstrates that classroom interaction, such as group discussions and collaborative tasks, can facilitate language understanding. However, other studies reveal that differences in learners' cultural backgrounds may result in mismatched interpretations, even when interaction occurs (Sobkowiak, 2021; Hossain, 2024). This contrast indicates that interaction alone does not guarantee shared understanding, highlighting the need for cultural sensitivity and awareness in managing EFL classroom communication.

Several studies emphasize the importance of integrating culture into language learning through the development of intercultural communicative competence. Cultural integration has been shown to enhance learners' contextual understanding of language use by enabling them to interpret meaning beyond linguistic forms and within sociocultural contexts (Byram, 2021; Fauzi et al., 2025; Araujo Portugal, 2021). However, other research reports that cultural exposure without adequate explanation or connection to learners' local cultural frameworks may lead to confusion and hinder comprehension (Lee et al., 2023). These contrasting findings suggest that cultural integration in EFL learning requires a process of cultural adjustment, through which learners gradually negotiate, interpret, and adapt to cultural differences in order to achieve meaningful understanding.

Cultural adjustment is commonly understood as a dynamic process involving stages of honeymoon, crisis, adjustment, and adaptation (Winkelman, 1994; Ward et al., 2020). Studies indicate that EFL learners experience these stages within classroom settings and gradually develop adaptive strategies

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### *Theme 1: Cultural Adjustment as a Mediator of Meaning Construction in EFL Classrooms*

The reviewed studies consistently indicate that cultural adjustment plays a crucial role in mediating students' understanding in EFL classrooms. Research on pragmatics and intercultural communication suggests that comprehension difficulties in EFL learning often arise not from linguistic limitations, but from learners' inability to interpret meaning within

that enhance their comprehension, engagement, and overall participation in learning tasks (Rahmawanti et al., 2023; Souzandehfar & Abdel-Al Ibrahim, 2023; Abdel-Al Ibrahim & Basim, 2024). Despite growing attention to culture and adaptation in EFL research, studies that synthesize learners' experiences and perceptions of cultural adjustment in local EFL classroom contexts remain limited. Therefore, this article aims to present a narrative thematic literature review that synthesizes existing research on cultural adjustment and its implications for learners' understanding in EFL classrooms.

## METHOD

This study employs a narrative thematic literature review approach, which synthesizes previous studies by grouping them into thematic categories rather than reviewing each study individually (Green et al., 2006; Snyder, 2019). This review focuses on peer-reviewed journal articles that examine culture in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, intercultural communication, and cultural adjustment in EFL classroom contexts. The selected studies were analyzed based on their theoretical frameworks, learning contexts, research objectives, and key findings related to cultural aspects of language learning. Through repeated comparison, recurring patterns, similarities, and differences across studies were identified and synthesized into key themes addressing cultural integration, cultural adjustment processes, and their implications for learners' understanding in EFL classrooms. As this study is a literature review, journal articles serve as the primary data source and are thematically synthesized in the following sections.

culturally appropriate contexts (Thomas, 1983; Byram, 1997). Studies grounded in sociocultural perspectives further demonstrate that language understanding is constructed through socially mediated interaction shaped by cultural norms and classroom practices (Lantolf & Thorne, 2015; Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Across the reviewed literature, cultural adjustment is reflected in teachers' efforts to contextualize materials, clarify culturally embedded meanings, and relate foreign cultural content to learners' local experiences. While some

studies emphasize the importance of communicative interaction in fostering understanding, others reveal that interaction alone is insufficient when cultural assumptions remain implicit (Sobkowiak, 2021; Hossain, 2024). Synthesizing these findings suggests that cultural adjustment functions as a bridge between linguistic input and meaningful interpretation, enabling learners to move beyond surface-level comprehension toward culturally informed understanding in EFL classrooms.

### ***Theme 2: Stages of Cultural Adjustment Experienced by EFL Learners***

A recurring theme in the literature is that students experience cultural adjustment in stages, rather than as an immediate or linear process. Drawing on cross-cultural adaptation theories, several studies describe patterns that align with the honeymoon, crisis, adjustment, and adaptation phases (Winkelman, 1994; Ward et al., 2020). In EFL classroom contexts, learners initially display curiosity and enthusiasm toward new cultural content, followed by confusion or discomfort when encountering unfamiliar interaction styles, classroom norms, or culturally loaded materials.

Empirical studies indicate that students gradually progress toward adjustment by developing coping strategies, such as observing classroom norms, seeking clarification, and negotiating meaning through interaction with peers and teachers (Rahmawanti et al., 2023; Souzandehfar & Abdel-Al Ibrahim., 2023; Abdel-Al Ibrahim & Basim, 2024). However, variations exist across contexts. Some studies report smoother transitions when teachers provide explicit cultural explanations and use local examples, while others show prolonged crisis phases when cultural differences are left implicit. These differences suggest that although the stages of cultural adjustment are widely shared, the pace and depth of adjustment are strongly influenced by pedagogical practices within the EFL classroom.

### ***Theme 3: Challenges and Impacts of Cultural Adjustment on Learners' Understanding***

Despite its benefits, the literature also highlights challenges associated with cultural adjustment in EFL learning. Several studies report that learners experience anxiety, uncertainty, and reduced participation during the crisis phase of

adjustment, particularly when classroom expectations conflict with their cultural norms (Berry, 1997; Gudykunst, 2005). For example, students from educational cultures that value silence and respect may struggle in discussion-oriented classrooms, leading to misinterpretation of their engagement and understanding.

At the same time, studies show that successful cultural adjustment positively impacts learners' comprehension, confidence, and classroom participation (Bethel et al., 2020; Lee, J.-Y., & Ciftci, 2014). When cultural differences are acknowledged and addressed through culturally responsive teaching practices, students demonstrate improved understanding of instructional content and greater willingness to engage in learning activities. Synthesizing these findings reveals a contrast: cultural differences can function either as barriers or as resources, depending on how cultural adjustment is facilitated in the EFL classroom.

### ***Overall Synthesis and Research Gap***

Overall, the reviewed literature indicates that cultural adjustment is a key factor influencing students' understanding in EFL classrooms. Previous studies have examined cultural integration, intercultural competence, and cross-cultural adaptation from theoretical or empirical perspectives. However, these studies are often fragmented, focusing either on stages of adjustment, instructional strategies, or student experiences in isolation. There remains a lack of narrative thematic literature reviews that synthesize how students experience cultural adjustment stages and how these processes collectively shape their understanding in EFL classroom contexts, particularly within local educational settings.

Addressing this gap, the present study synthesizes existing research through a narrative thematic literature review to provide a more integrated understanding of cultural adjustment in EFL learning. By foregrounding students' experiences and perceptions, this review contributes to a more coherent conceptualization of how cultural adjustment processes influence meaning-making and learning outcomes in culturally diverse EFL classrooms.

## CONCLUSION

This narrative thematic literature review highlights the central role of cultural adjustment in shaping students' understanding in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. The synthesis of previous studies indicates that learning difficulties in EFL contexts are not solely linguistic in nature, but are closely related to students' ability to interpret meaning within culturally appropriate frameworks. Cultural adjustment functions as a mediating process that enables learners to bridge differences between their own cultural backgrounds and the cultural norms embedded in English language use and classroom interaction.

The findings further show that students experience cultural adjustment as a staged process, commonly involving initial enthusiasm, periods of confusion or discomfort, gradual adaptation, and eventual functional adjustment. These stages influence learners' engagement, participation, and comprehension in different ways. While cultural differences may initially hinder understanding, they can also become valuable learning resources when teachers apply culturally responsive practices. Overall, the review demonstrates that students' successful adjustment to cultural dimensions of the EFL classroom contributes positively to their understanding, confidence, and participation in language learning.

## Suggestion

Based on the synthesized findings, several suggestions can be proposed. For EFL teachers, greater attention should be given to cultural adjustment as part of instructional practice. Teachers are encouraged to make cultural assumptions explicit, relate foreign cultural content to students' local experiences, and create inclusive classroom environments that acknowledge diverse communication styles. Such practices may support students in navigating cultural differences more effectively and enhance their understanding of learning materials.

For students, awareness of cultural adjustment as a normal and gradual process may help reduce anxiety and encourage active engagement in learning. Recognizing that confusion and discomfort are part of adaptation can motivate learners to seek clarification, participate in interaction, and develop intercultural awareness as part of their language learning journey.

For future researchers, further empirical studies are needed to explore students' cultural adjustment

experiences in diverse EFL contexts, particularly within local and underrepresented settings. Longitudinal and classroom-based studies could provide deeper insights into how adjustment stages evolve over time and how specific teaching practices facilitate or hinder this process. Such research would strengthen the understanding of cultural adjustment and contribute to more effective and culturally responsive EFL pedagogy.

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