

# Negotiating Cultural Identity: Indonesian EFL Learners' Use of English to Globalize Local Narratives

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## Abstract

This study investigates how Indonesian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners negotiate their cultural identity within a Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) course. Through a qualitative analysis of performance-based final term projects, the research explores the tension between the mandatory use of English and the students' desire to project local heritage. Data from 23 student performances reveal that learners do not merely adopt Western norms. Instead, they perform a "hybrid identity," using English as a tool to globalize local narratives.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Communicative Competence; Identity Negotiation; English as an International Language; Cultural Agency; Hybrid Identity.

## 1. Introduction

Indonesian EFL learners face a pedagogical paradox: mastering English for global mobility while preserving cultural identity. In contexts where English has historically functioned as a colonial language, its mandatory use in higher education risks cultural assimilation rather than empowerment. This pedagogical setting becomes a crucial arena for students to not only acquire linguistic proficiency but also to critically engage with diverse cultural perspectives and reaffirm their indigenous roots (Nursanti & Andriyanti, 2021). This study addresses a critical gap in World Englishes research: how learners in the Expanding Circle strategically appropriate English not as a vehicle for Westernization, but as a medium for cultural sovereignty—projecting local narratives onto global platforms. Through analysis of performance-based projects in a Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) course, we examine how 23 Indonesian university students negotiated this tension, transforming English from a potential instrument of cultural erasure into a tool for globalizing local identity.

Indonesian EFL learners face strong imperatives to master English proficiency, unlocking vital opportunities for academic advancement and professional mobility in a globalized world (Thoyib et al., 2025). However, English learning can risk overshadowing local cultural narratives, leading to identity dilution. This predicament presents a significant pedagogical challenge: how to foster high levels of English competence without inadvertently eroding the students' connection to their rich indigenous heritage (Anjanillah et al., 2021; Norton & Kramersch, 2013). The central problem is how Indonesian EFL learners negotiate cultural identity while using English to globalize local stories.

This article examines a specific case study of university students tasked with a performance-based project focused on cultural diversity. The project required students to use English exclusively while presenting themes such as cultural values, adaptation, and global etiquette. By analyzing these performances, this study seeks to understand how students "claim" English to voice their local identities. This study addresses this gap by examining how students used the "Reflection" section to justify their choice of local identity within an English-speaking framework. Specifically, it investigates the extent to which students' performances prioritized local cultural accuracy over Western communication

norms and how they navigated the "Cultural Sensitivity" requirement while presenting their own potentially sensitive local traditions. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of identity negotiation in second language acquisition, particularly in contexts where English functions as an international language (Kuh et al., 2006). Furthermore, it explores the pedagogical implications of fostering an environment where students can confidently express their distinct cultural identities through English, moving beyond conventional notions of language proficiency to encompass cultural agency.

The theoretical underpinnings of this study draw from several key areas, including evolving perspectives on identity in Second Language Acquisition, the conceptualization of English as an International Language, and the inherent tension between local identity and target culture norms.

### ***Identity in Second Language Acquisition***

Traditionally, SLA theories often viewed learner identity as a relatively fixed construct, primarily focused on the acquisition of native-like proficiency and target cultural assimilation (Norton & Kramsch, 2013). However, more contemporary approaches, particularly those influenced by post-structuralist thought, emphasize a "negotiated" identity, where learners actively construct and reconstruct their sense of self in relation to the target language and culture. This perspective acknowledges that learners are not passive recipients of linguistic and cultural input but active agents who strategically position themselves within various discourse communities, often challenging monolithic notions of what it means to be a "competent" language user (Sukmana, 2023). This dynamic process involves learners strategically adapting their linguistic and cultural practices to express their individual and collective identities, often incorporating local wisdom and folklore (Abdunnashir et al., 2024; "Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture," 2017). This conceptual shift recognizes that language learners can maintain their cultural distinctiveness while acquiring proficiency in a new language (Kalthoum, 2024).

### ***English as an International Language (EIL)***

The emergence of English as an International Language paradigm further complicates this dynamic, suggesting that English no longer solely belongs to its native speakers but has become a global lingua franca used by diverse communities for a multitude of communicative purposes (Hsieh, 2020). This paradigm shifts the focus from native speaker norms to the functional and social roles of English in various international contexts, thereby legitimizing diverse Englishes and their associated cultural expressions (Nursanti & Andriyanti, 2021). This perspective, often associated with Kachru's concentric circles model, recognizes English varieties in inner, outer, and expanding circles, each developing a local identity for its speakers worldwide (Salimi & Abedi, 2020). Moreover, the concept of English as a Lingua Franca further extends this idea, emphasizing that non-native speakers utilize their multilingual resources to shape English according to their specific communication needs, thereby challenging the primacy of native-speaker norms and embracing a more fluid understanding of English ownership (Norton & Kramsch, 2013; Salimi & Abedi, 2020). This reorientation moves away from a unidirectional view of acculturation, where learners are expected to conform to target language norms, towards a more nuanced understanding that acknowledges the complex interplay of learners' multiple identities (Choi, 2018). This approach recognizes that language learning is not merely an individual cognitive activity but a deeply sociocultural process embedded within specific communities and power dynamics (Alotaibi & Abahussain, 2024). This pluricentric view of English acknowledges that its usage is no longer predominantly controlled by native English speakers, allowing for the integration of diverse cultural characteristics that contribute to successful cross-cultural communication (Vu & Do, 2021).

### ***Local Identity vs. Target Culture***

The tension between maintaining a local identity and conforming to target culture norms is a central theme in SLA research, particularly when considering the hegemonic influence of certain linguistic and cultural models (Kuh et al., 2006). This dichotomy often presents significant challenges for learners, who may feel pressured to adopt the cultural conventions of the target language community at the expense of their own heritage, creating a conflict between their home-based identities and those they perceive as necessary for academic or professional success (Kuh et al., 2006). However, the evolving landscape of English as an International Language and English as a Lingua Franca framework suggests that learners can assert ownership over English without sacrificing their local culture and identity (Tajeddin & Pakzadian, 2020). This often involves a strategic reinterpretation of the target language, enabling learners to infuse it with their distinct cultural perspectives and values rather than merely adopting Western norms (Yunhua & Budiman, 2024). Instead, language educators are increasingly advocating for the integration of learners' home cultures, or "source cultures," into English language teaching as a means of empowering students and acknowledging their ownership of English (Zhang & Lütge, 2023). This approach helps in fostering a "mestiza consciousness" where diverse linguistic and cultural worlds can coalesce harmoniously, rather than imposing a singular, dominant cultural framework (Kuh et al., 2006). This pedagogical shift challenges traditional power structures in language education by validating students' live experiences and integrating local cultural content into curricula (Demir & Zaimoğlu, 2025).

## 2. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative case study approach. Participants included 23 students enrolled in a CCU course. These students were undergraduate Indonesian EFL learners attending a private university, providing a focused context for examining identity negotiation within a specific cultural and educational setting. The course itself was designed to foster cross-cultural understanding, but critically, it also served as a site where students grappled with expressing their Indonesian heritage while communicating in English. The CCU course at this particular institution aimed to enrich national culture, aligning with Indonesian government regulations that mandate higher education to be based on Indonesian cultures, unlike some other CCU courses that have historically focused on Inner Circle Englishes as target culture (Tambunan et al., 2021).

### Data Sources

The primary data sources comprised concepts from group performances, accompanying scripts, and 1–2-minute reflective explanations provided by participants. These artifacts offered rich insights into the students' conceptualizations of their cultural identities and their strategies for performing these identities in an English-speaking academic environment. This multi-modal data collection allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both the planned and spontaneous aspects of identity negotiation. The reflective explanations, in particular, provided metacognitive insights into the students' conscious decisions regarding their cultural representations and linguistic choices during their performances. The analysis further considered how students leveraged English to articulate and disseminate their local narratives to a global audience, thereby demonstrating a form of "post-colonial performativity" (Anjanillah et al., 2021).

### Instruments

The analysis was informed by an evaluative rubric that assessed relevance to cross-cultural understanding, cultural authenticity, and communicative competence. This rubric facilitated a structured evaluation of how effectively students integrated their cultural heritage into their English performances while maintaining clarity and impact in their communication, aligning with the qualitative analysis approach (Siregar, 2016). This approach allowed for a nuanced interpretation of the students' creative choices and their underlying motivations in presenting their cultural identities through a foreign language. The researcher, as the primary instrument, played a crucial role in interpreting the nuances of these performances, acknowledging the inherent reflexivity required in qualitative research to mitigate personal biases (Billah, 2025).

### Data Analysis

The performances were thematically categorized by the researcher to discern emergent patterns in students' identity negotiation. This involved an iterative process of coding and categorization to identify recurring strategies and representations of local identity within the English-language performances, as suggested by Creswell and Poth for qualitative research (Billah, 2025). This rigorous approach ensured that the identified themes genuinely reflected the data and provided a deep understanding of how students navigated their cultural identities (Billah, 2025). The researcher not only collected data but also served as a critical interpreter of the meanings behind these social actions, thereby enriching the study's analytical depth.

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Initial open coding was conducted independently by the first author and a trained research assistant; 20% of transcripts were double-coded to establish intercoder reliability (Cohen's  $\kappa = .82$ , indicating strong agreement). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached.

Researcher reflexivity was maintained through a positionality statement: as Indonesian EFL educators teaching CCU courses, we acknowledge our investment in validating students' cultural agency. To mitigate confirmation bias, we deliberately sought disconfirming evidence—instances where students *did* mimic Western norms—and included these in our analysis (e.g., one group initially adopted exaggerated American accents before revising their performance to prioritize cultural authenticity after peer feedback). Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with 5 student participants, who confirmed the accuracy of our interpretations regarding their identity negotiation strategies.

## 3. Findings and Discussion (Capitalized 1st letter, New Romans, Bold, 12pt)

### 3.1 Research Finding

#### a. The Reflection as a Strategic "Bridge"

The reflective explanations provided by the students served as a crucial metacultural competence, allowing them to articulate the pragmatic sensitivities and cultural values embedded in their performances (Sharoufi, 2025). The study

found that the "Reflection" segment served as a crucial space for **Linguistic Accommodation**. Since the performance itself was in English, students used the reflection to ensure the cultural "essence" was not lost in translation.

- The "Sangkuriang" Strategy: Groups like Sangkuriang Jaya used the reflection to explicitly state that their use of English was a "representative of Indonesia-English cross-cultural" interaction. They used the reflection to explain the moral values (like filial piety) which are deeply Indonesian, justifying why a local legend is relevant to a global audience.
- Theoretical Grounding: Students used the reflection to connect their acts to CCU concepts like "cultural values" or "stereotypes." This transformed a simple drama into an academic defense of their local identity.

### b. Hybridity over Assimilation

The students' performances demonstrated a nuanced process of cultural hybridization, rather than a mere assimilation into Western cultural norms, where English served as a medium for expressing and globalizing their Indonesian heritage. Analysis of the performance types suggests that students prioritized Cultural Accuracy over "sounding native".

- Visual vs. Linguistic: While the language was English (Global), the "Option" and "Costume" categories (Local) remained authentically Indonesian. For example, the Javanese-Dayak Dance prioritized the accuracy of traditional movements. They did not "Westernize" the dance to make it fit the English language; instead, they made the English language serve as an introduction to the dance.
- The "Samba" Contrast: Even when students chose a Western/Global theme like "Samba Dance," they included a pre-performance explanation in English. This shows that they viewed the English language as a neutral tool for explaining culture, whether it was their own or someone else's.

### c. Navigating Sensitivity via Mediation

This strategy highlights how English was employed as a mediating tool to bridge potential cultural gaps, allowing students to introduce and contextualize diverse cultural performances for an international audience without compromising their original essence. Students navigated the "Cultural Sensitivity" requirement by acting as Cultural Mediators. They avoided stereotypes by focusing on the "Rough Concept" and "Accuracy."

- The "Yuebing" Group (Mid-Autumn Festival): This group demonstrated high sensitivity by using a trilingual approach. While the instructions asked for English, they included Mandarin for authenticity and translated it into English. This "Translation-as-Mediation" allowed them to present a sensitive cultural heritage (Chinese-Indonesian) without it feeling like a caricature.
- Documenting the Self: The "Mini Documentary" on Solo's Cultural Habits at the Car Free Day showed that students were comfortable being critical yet respectful of their own culture. By interviewing both locals and outsiders, they presented a balanced view of their identity, fulfilling the "Sensitivity" requirement by showing multiple perspectives of the same tradition.

A comprehensive overview of each group's performance, including their chosen theme, cultural elements showcased, and the specific strategies employed for identity negotiation, is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Overview of Students performance and Identity Negotiation Strategies

Category	Performance	Identity Negotiation Strategy
Folklore	Sangkuriang, Malin Kundang	Using English to "export" local legends to a global audience
Ethnic Hybridity	Javanese-Dayak, Javanese-Chinese	Using English to navigate and explain internal domestic diversity.
Urban Ethnography	Solo CFD Documentary	Using English to document and analyze immediate local surroundings.
Intercultural Empathy	Samba Dance, Mid-Autumn Festival	Using English to learn and respect "the other" without losing the self.

The findings suggest that the students did not experience **Identity Loss**. Instead, they practiced Cultural Agency—the power to decide how their culture is presented in a foreign language. The English-only requirement did not act as a barrier; it acted as a "Global Stage" for their **Local Voices**.

## 3.2 Discussion

The results of the study reveal a complex process of "identity negotiation" where English acts not as a linguistic colonizer, but as a vehicle for cultural agency. The discussion below interprets the three primary findings through the lens of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). This perspective highlights how Indonesian EFL learners

strategically employ English to bridge cultural divides and assert their unique cultural identities on a global stage, thereby contributing to the evolving landscape of World Englishes (Namiq & Zafarghandi, 2025). This strategic employment of English aligns with the concept of English as an International Language, where its global spread facilitates rather than diminishes the expression of diverse local identities (Norton & Kramsch, 2013).

### The Reflection Segment as a Tool for "Cultural Sovereignty"

The data shows that students strategically used the 1–2-minute reflection segment to "re-center" their local identity after performing in a global language. *Savoir comprendre* (skills of interpreting and relating) is key to intercultural success (Engelking, 2018).

In this study, students did not just translate words; they translated worldviews. For example, the Sangkuriang Jaya group used the reflection to defend the cultural logic of their folklore. By explaining the "why" behind the performance in English, students ensured that their local values (filial piety, destiny, and social consequences) remained intact (Randell et al., 2024). The reflection segment functioned as a "sovereign space" where students controlled the narrative of their own culture, ensuring that the use of English did not lead to cultural dilution (Edi et al., 2025).

### Intentional Hybridity: Accuracy over Mimicry

A critical finding of this study is that students prioritized Cultural Accuracy over the adoption of Western communication norms. While the assessment rubric allocated 20% to "Communication Skills" (clear English), students consistently scored high by maintaining the "Indonesian-ness" of their delivery.

This supports the English as an International Language (EIL) framework, which argues that "native-speakerism" is an outdated goal (Kirana & Methitham, 2022). The Javanese-Dayak Dance and Traditional Modification Dance groups demonstrated that the body can "speak" a local language (through gesture and attire) while the mouth speaks a global one. This "intentional hybridity" suggests that students are comfortable with a dual identity: they are global citizens who can articulate their local roots with precision. They used English to invite the audience into their culture, rather than changing their culture to suit the English language (Namiq & Zafarghandi, 2025).

These findings directly challenge *native-speakerism*—the ideology positioning Inner Circle varieties as the gold standard for English proficiency (Holliday, 2006). While textbooks in Indonesian EFL contexts often present English as inseparable from Anglo-American culture (Kirana & Methitham, 2022), our participants demonstrated what Canagarajah (2007) terms *translingual practice*: treating English as a neutral semiotic resource to be reshaped for local communicative purposes. The Javanese-Dayak dance group's refusal to "Westernize" their movements—even while speaking English—exemplifies what Jenkins (2014) describes as *plurilingual creativity* in ELF contexts: speakers drawing on their full linguistic and cultural repertoires rather than approximating native norms. This aligns with recent pedagogical shifts advocating for *critical EIL awareness* (Rose et al., 2021), where learners are encouraged to view English not as a carrier of foreign values but as a tool they can ethically reshape.

Furthermore, our study extends intercultural pedagogy beyond Byram's (1997) *savoirs* framework. While traditional ICC models emphasize understanding *other* cultures, our participants demonstrated *critical cultural reflexivity*—the ability to articulate one's *own* culture through a foreign language with nuance and pride. This reframes intercultural competence not as accommodation to the target culture, but as *mediation between multiple cultural frames* (Dervin, 2011), positioning learners as cultural ambassadors rather than assimilants.

### Navigating Sensitivity: Student as Cultural Mediator

The most sophisticated level of negotiation was observed in how students handled sensitive or complex cultural topics. The "Yuebing" (Mid-Autumn Festival) group and the Contemporary Dance (Javanese-Chinese) group represent a high level of Intercultural Sensitivity.

These students navigated the "Cultural Sensitivity" requirement by adopting the role of a "Cultural Mediator" (López, 2023). By presenting potentially sensitive ethnic histories or minority traditions in a respectful, academic-creative framework, they successfully avoided stereotypes (Young, 2022). The Solo CFD Mini-Documentary group further showed that students could apply an "outsider's lens" (via English narration) to an "insider's experience" (local habits). This ability to step outside one's culture to describe it objectively is the hallmark of a mature intercultural communicator.

The negotiation of identity in this CCU course can be categorized into three distinct modes:

1. Exporting Identity: Using English to share local folklore with the world (The Storytellers).
2. Harmonizing Identity: Using English to bridge internal ethnic differences within Indonesia (The Dancers).
3. Analyzing Identity: Using English to document and critique local social habits (The Documentarians).

In essence, this study demonstrates that a global language and local voices are not inherently antagonistic. By according equal pedagogical emphasis to cultural fidelity and linguistic proficiency, learners flourish as bicultural agent's adept at traversing international platforms while retaining their cultural roots. This nuanced interaction fosters a "mestiza consciousness" that integrates diverse cultural frameworks rather than forcing a dichotomy between them (Kuh et al., 2006).

## Conclusion

This study elucidates how Indonesian EFL learners skilfully negotiate their cultural identities through a Cross-Cultural Understanding performance task. Examination of the "Global Language, Local Voices" dynamic demonstrates that mandatory English use did not suppress cultural expression. Rather than constituting an impediment, students harnessed English as a powerful medium for projecting their indigenous traditions onto the global stage.

The findings lead to several key conclusions regarding identity and intercultural pedagogy:

1. English as a Vehicle for Agency: Students displayed significant cultural agency by reclaiming folklore (e.g., Sangkuriang and Malin Kundang) and local urban habits, proving that English can be "owned" by non-native speakers to articulate their own realities.
2. The Power of Reflection: The inclusion of a mandatory reflection segment allowed students to bridge the gap between performance and theory, ensuring that their local cultural logic remained the primary focus, even when the linguistic delivery was in a foreign tongue.
3. A Shift in Competence: Intercultural competence in this context was not measured by how well students assimilated into Western norms, but by how effectively they mediated between their "home" culture and the "target" language.

For educators, this study offers three actionable strategies for fostering cultural agency in EFL classrooms:

1. Mandate reflective metacommentary: The 1–2minute reflection segment proved crucial for students to "re-center" local identity after English-language performance. We recommend embedding structured reflection prompts (e.g., "Explain one cultural value in your performance that has no direct English equivalent") in all performance-based assessments.
2. Rebalance assessment criteria: When rubrics prioritize "native-like pronunciation" over cultural authenticity, learners internalize assimilationist goals. Our data show students achieved high scores by prioritizing cultural fidelity (e.g., accurate Javanese gestures) alongside intelligible English. We propose weighting "cultural authenticity" equally with "linguistic accuracy" in CCU assessments.
3. Create "third spaces" for identity work: The CCU classroom functioned as a third space (Namiq & Zafarghandi, 2025)—neither fully local nor foreign—where students could safely experiment with hybrid identities. Educators can intentionally design such spaces by assigning tasks requiring students to explain their culture to imagined global audiences, transforming English from a threat to identity into a vehicle for cultural diplomacy.

Although this investigation yielded valuable qualitative insights from 23 participants, its scope was confined to a single-case study spanning one semester. Subsequent research would profit from longitudinal designs to track the development of students' identity perceptions as they transition into professional contexts. Furthermore, examining audience interpretations of these "local voices" could furnish a more comprehensive evaluation of the efficacy of identity negotiation processes.

In summation, the CCU students powerfully proved that mastering English fluency need not erode the vibrant essence of one's local heritage. They compellingly revealed that in today's interconnected world, the most potent communication harnesses a global language to magnify—not muffle—our authentic local voices.

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