

EXPLORING GRADUATE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE ELT CLASSROOM

¹Kamala K. C., ^{2*}Laxman Prasad Bhandari, ³Alexis Arizabal-Enriquez

¹Department of English Language Education, Butwal Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University, P.O. Box 8212, Kirtipur, Kathmandu, Nepal

^{2*}Department of English and Business Communication, Lumbini Banijya Campus, Tribhuvan University, Devinagar, Butwal Sub-Metropolitan City-11/13, Rupandehi, Nepal

³Abra State Institute of Sciences and Technology Bangued Campus, Bangued, Abra, Philippines

*Corresponding Author Email: laxman@lbc.edu.np

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Abstract

The importance of effective communication in education has been widely discussed; however, the communication obstacles in cross-cultural English language teaching and learning contexts from the learners' perspectives need deeper exploration. This study explores students' perceptions of the challenges they face in communication in cross-cultural ELT classrooms and the strategies they adopt to overcome them. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected graduate students at Kathmandu University School of Education, Nepal. The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The findings revealed that students faced obstacles in both verbal and nonverbal communication in cross-cultural ELT classrooms. It also showed that non-verbal communication components, temporal and spatial differences, context, and ethnocentrism, particularly, posed problems in communication in a cross-cultural ELT classroom. Thus, developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is essential for effective cross-cultural communication in ELT classrooms. It helps learners understand others' perspectives, interact respectfully, and adjust to different languages and cultures. ICC involves empathy, tolerance, and cultural sensitivity, which support learners in handling both verbal and non-verbal communication differences. Furthermore, the ELT curriculum should incorporate cross-cultural literary content, including non-verbal forms of communication, such as communication styles, non-verbal cues, cultural values, classroom expectations, everyday practices, language nuances, global issues, and country-specific cultural knowledge, to develop intercultural communicative competence at the university level. The paper recommends fostering harmonious interaction and understanding in ELT classrooms through cross-cultural communication.

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INTRODUCTION

With globalization and digitization, the world has become increasingly interconnected, creating new opportunities for education, communication, and advancement. Despite differences

in culture, geography, and perspectives, people share a common platform for collaboration. A key factor enabling this interconnectedness is language. The English language emerged as the global medium of communication, widely used for cross-border education, business, and intercultural exchanges (Wang & Ling, 2024). However, while English functions as a global lingua franca, its teaching and learning are deeply entangled with cultural issues that shape communication in multilingual and multicultural classrooms.

Language and culture are inseparable. Padhi (2016) defines culture as the characteristics and knowledge of a specific group of people, which includes language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, and the arts. In English Language Teaching (ELT), learners from diverse cultural backgrounds bring different values, practices, and identities into the classroom. These cultural differences often create challenges for communication, participation, and mutual understanding in ELT contexts (Sultana, 2011). However, cultural shock, adaptation, and negotiation are everyday experiences for students navigating new linguistic and educational environments (Fries, 2002; McLaren, 1998). Scholars argue that effective ELT must move beyond teaching grammar and vocabulary to include cultural content and intercultural awareness (Hoa, 2011).

While existing studies have highlighted the importance of integrating culture into ELT, much of the literature has focused on general challenges or on broad conceptual frameworks. There remains a need to explore in greater depth how cross-cultural communication issues are negotiated in actual ELT classrooms, particularly in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language. This study emphasizes the voices of international graduate students in Nepal and explores their real-life communication difficulties and coping strategies within Nepali higher education, an area rarely addressed in existing literature. Nepal presents a unique context for such inquiry, as its universities are gradually becoming more diverse with the arrival of international students from Asia, Africa, and Europe. Yet, cross-cultural classroom interactions in Nepal remain under-researched, leaving a gap in understanding how cultural differences shape communication, participation, and learning in ELT settings. Exploring these experiences is essential to inform culturally responsive teaching practices in Nepali universities.

This study aimed to address these gaps by examining the role of culture in English Language Teaching, with a particular focus on how cross-cultural communication can both challenge and enrich language learning. By analyzing theoretical perspectives and empirical cases, the study aims to demonstrate why cultural integration is not optional but essential in ELT. It also offers practical insights into how teachers can acknowledge, respect, and leverage learners' diverse cultural identities to foster more effective communication and engagement.

The Research Context

Language and culture are interrelated. The relationship is better understood when they are used in a proper classroom context. Culture is an inseparable part of English language teaching because language without culture is a collection of symbols that can be misinterpreted if not understood in the proper cultural context (Kramsch, 1993; Oueld Ahmed, 2023). Comparing and contrasting, instructional discussion, conversation, engaging learners in context understanding, dialogue, scene-setting, role-playing, using anecdotes, and other strategies can be used to create a context in the classroom. In an ELT classroom, English becomes a bridge that connects and crosses different cultural contexts (Hosseini et al., 2024). They also suggest exposing English language learners to literary texts such as stories, dramas, essays, poems, and novels as well as traditional texts such as textbooks, newspapers, and magazines because these provide opportunities for meaning negotiation and encounters with cultural representations.

As ELT practitioners, we asked ourselves: Is English language teaching (ELT) possible without integrating local and international cultures of globally diversified students? How can ELT help a student understand 'oneness' (uniqueness and originality) in the absence of cultures? On the basis of these broader questions, 15 interview questions were designed to help students share real examples of misunderstandings, classroom communication issues, and how they responded to them to explore students' perceptions of the obstacles to cross-cultural communication arising from non-verbal differences in ELT classrooms, and the strategies they adopted to address them.

Literature Review

Culture reflects the language, values, norms, traditions, and religion of an individual within the community. In other words, culture is a set of beliefs of a particular community, group, or society that guides people in thinking, behaving, and communicating. Bringing cultural contexts from different parts of the country or outside is known as cross-cultural context (Jamin et al., 2023). Thus, cross-cultural communication refers to communication between people or groups from diverse cultures to achieve a common purpose. In ELT classrooms, students from diverse cultures share their linguistic and social cultures (Keles, 2023), focusing on verbal and non-verbal communication while learning English as a foreign language. Therefore, ELT is incomplete without integrating the diverse cultural backgrounds of global students (Nrown, 2024; Nault, 2006). To improve cross-cultural communication, ELT courses should also incorporate texts that address non-verbal differences among students. Some essential forms of non-verbal communication include gestures, temporal and spatial cues, context, and ethnocentrism.

Gestures are practical communication tools. Gestures vary across cultures worldwide (Levinson, 2023). For example, a Vietnamese man may intend to convey respect by gazing directly and folding his arms across his chest. Still, a North American may interpret the posture as defiance rather than respect. As a result, a gesture used by one person can be offensive to another. Positive and negative head nods are widely understood around the world, but they are not universal (Eunson, 2015). Furthermore, our facial expressions reveal strong emotions while conveying social and cultural messages. Morris (2002) claims that in Japanese culture, and to a lesser extent in British culture, hiding one's emotions is highly valued because it demonstrates qualities of self-control (as cited in Eunson, 2015).

Cross-cultural differences in temporal factors pose a problem for communication. Time plays a crucial role in education and differs from one culture to another. According to Edward Hall (1956), a Sioux Indian School Superintendent mentioned that his people had no word for 'late' or 'waiting' (as cited in McLaren, 1998). For Americans, time is a resource, and money. Punctuality is a substantial value in American culture, whereas people are more flexible with time in Nepal. Being 15 minutes late for work is considered normal in Nepal and referred to as 'Nepali Time'. Time speaks with an accent in Brazil because the times on clocks there are not the same (Gardner, 2005). Similarly, in Indonesia, both lecturers and students can arrive ten to fifteen minutes late to class without issue. In the Philippines, being late is common, and 'just a minute' means a quarter of an hour (McLaren, 1998). Cultural differences in temporal factors lead to misunderstandings in communication, especially in an international classroom with students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

There is a cross-cultural difference in the use of personal space that can sometimes cause communication conflicts if the values and norms behind it are not understood in the classroom. Personal space varies across cultures and even by gender (Parlak et al., 2021). In many Eastern

societies, women maintain a firm physical distance when communicating with men, but not in women-to-women communication. Personal space also differs between cultures, social classes, and genders (Eunson, 2015). In Nepal, males and females maintain distinct spaces when communicating with each other. In a classroom, most boys and girls are found to sit in different rows and hold space as they participate in various activities (Devkota & Bashyal, 2024). The existence of spatial differences in cultures creates another barrier to cross-cultural communication. In America, people shake hands and then talk at arm's length; Arabs do a Hollywood-style cheek-to-cheek social kiss, and Japanese bow and speak with each other (Davis, 1990). Personal space is less in intimate relationships and more in public relationships. It is commonly believed that males require more personal space than females. Similarly, city dwellers are seen to maintain less personal space compared to rural residents.

Ethnocentrism is a way of seeing from our own perspective. Ethnocentrism is the tendency to view all other cultures as inferior to our own (McLaren, 1998). An ethnocentric person interprets other cultures through their own lens and considers their own culture superior, creating a barrier to cross-cultural communication in a classroom with students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Tshabangu & Lancaster, 2025). Similarly, Reza (2008) states that communication is hindered by cultural prejudice. These feelings of superiority towards others are most damaging when individuals from different nations try to assimilate into that culture, influencing language learning.

The use of verbal and non-verbal effective communication together enhances effective communication. Nguyen (2018) conducted a case study of a schoolteacher teaching diverse cultural students in China. Students primarily used English to communicate verbally due to strict school rules, and they relied on body language when verbal communication was unclear. Similarly, Eunson (2015) stated that in times of conflict, nonverbal communication is more impactful than verbal communication, as it makes up 70 to 90 percent of our communication, while spoken words cover only a small portion. However, non-verbal cues can vary across cultures and lead to misunderstandings if not interpreted correctly. Correspondingly, Tseng (2017) conducted a quantitative study examining how content-based instruction facilitated learning in intercultural communication. The study found that through content-based instruction, students not only learn about culture and cross-cultural communication but also develop an appreciation for cultural differences and enhance their research paper writing skills. Including diverse cultural content in education enhances cross-cultural communication skills, with a focus on non-verbal forms in ELT courses, as they are crucial for effective cross-cultural communication.

Developing intercultural communicative competence should be the primary goal of cross-cultural ELT classrooms (Kramsch & Zhu, 2016). This competence involves understanding others' perspectives, seeing the world through their eyes, and communicating effectively with people from different languages and cultures. Effective intercultural communication requires empathy, respect, tolerance, sensitivity, and flexibility towards other cultures. Alptekin (2002) also adds that intercultural communicative competence helps students develop positive attitudes towards different cultures and fosters mutual understanding. It enhances ELT learners by providing them with linguistic and cultural behaviour patterns, allowing them to communicate effectively with others, fostering awareness of differences, and offering strategies for coping with them (Alptekin, 2002).

Furthermore, students' intercultural communicative competence should be developed to identify cultural issues that are necessarily expressed in real language. In recent years,

intercultural communicative competence has drawn attention to the cultural dimension of foreign language education, and teachers today are expected to foster intercultural competence among their learners. As a result, cross-cultural awareness helps students bridge gaps and overcome the hindrances that come with the teaching-learning context. Then, only students understand how important it is for Americans to make eye contact when they are communicating with each other. For instance, the American teacher understands the cultural reasons behind an Asian girl averting her eyes from her teacher and why a handshake can be perceived as overly physical in a Japanese office (Davis, 1990). Thus, intercultural communicative competence enables language teachers to integrate relevant local and international contexts into language learners' lives.

Although the above studies emphasize the importance of integrating cultural contexts into ELT and highlight the verbal and non-verbal aspects of cross-cultural communication, most remain theoretical or context-specific to countries such as China, Japan, or the U.S., with limited attention to classroom realities in under-researched regions, such as South Asia, particularly Nepal. The existing literature mainly describes cultural variations in gestures, time orientation, and personal space, as well as ethnocentrism, without adequately addressing how these differences shape classroom interaction, pedagogy, and multicultural contexts. Moreover, while strategies such as content-based instruction have been studied (Nguyen, 2018), little empirical evidence exists on how teachers practically foster cultural awareness or how both teachers and learners perceive the challenges of developing intercultural communicative competence in ELT. This signals the need for context-specific research that explores the lived experiences and practices of teachers and learners to bridge the gap between theoretical ideals and classroom realities.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm to explore students' perceptions of communication challenges in cross-cultural classrooms. The interpretive paradigm was considered appropriate because it allows researchers to understand social phenomena from the participants' point of view rather than imposing external interpretations (Cohen et al., 2007; Dahal et al., 2024). More specifically, the study used a phenomenological orientation because it focused on the lived experiences of students who encountered cross-cultural communication issues in their learning environment. This design enabled the researchers to examine how participants interpreted verbal and non-verbal communication challenges, how these challenges affected classroom interaction, and how students attempted to overcome them in the context of English Language Teaching.

Participants

The participants in this study were selected purposively. They consisted of three international cross-cultural graduate students from Germany, West Africa, and India who were enrolled in the M.Ed. in English Language Education program at Kathmandu University School of Education, Nepal. These participants were chosen because they came from different cultural backgrounds and had direct experience studying in a Nepali university classroom. Their previous exposure to cross-cultural communication in their home countries was also taken into account to provide a clearer context for understanding their perspectives. The small number of participants was appropriate because phenomenological research seeks to explore lived experiences in depth rather than to generalize findings statistically. Although the study involved only three participants, their experiences provided rich and meaningful insights into cross-cultural communication challenges in ELT classrooms.

Research Instruments

The main research instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide. This instrument was designed to allow flexibility in exploring participants' experiences in depth, while also ensuring that all key issues related to cross-cultural communication were covered. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to share detailed reflections on verbal and non-verbal communication barriers, cultural misunderstandings, classroom interaction, and strategies used to address these difficulties. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in three rounds with each participant. This repeated interview process helped the researchers gain rich narratives, clarify earlier responses, and validate emerging interpretations. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) and guided by the data analysis steps proposed by Creswell and Creswell (2017). First, the researchers organized and prepared the data by transcribing all interviews and reviewing field notes related to students' cross-cultural interactions. Next, they immersed themselves in the data by reading the transcripts several times to gain a deep understanding of the participants' lived experiences. After that, initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful statements related to cultural misunderstandings, non-verbal differences, communication barriers, and coping strategies. These codes were then grouped, compared, and refined into broader themes that represented recurring patterns across participants' accounts. Finally, the findings were presented in the form of descriptive summaries and thematic explanations to ensure that the analysis accurately reflected the participants' perspectives and the purpose of the study. To maintain trustworthiness, credibility was supported through multiple rounds of interviews and member checking, whereas confirmability was strengthened through an audit trail of coding and interpretation. Ethical considerations were also carefully addressed through informed consent, confidentiality, the use of pseudonyms, and the participants' right to withdraw at any stage of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis revealed three distinct categories of communication challenges faced by students: Language Barriers, Temporal and Spatial Differences, and Cultural/Ethnocentric Perspectives. Furthermore, the analysis also identified strategies to bridge the cross-cultural gap and foster intercultural communicative competence, thereby raising awareness about cultural dimensions in English Language Teaching discourse.

Language Barriers

This theme represents the most significant finding of the study because all participants experienced communication difficulties whenever Nepali was used in the classroom. Regarding this, one participant stated, *"I often struggled to follow the class when the teacher and other students shifted into Nepali, because I could not understand what was being said."* Similarly, another participant mentioned that frequent use of Nepali during discussions made them feel excluded from classroom interaction. These accounts reveal that the use of Nepali as a common language in EFL classrooms created barriers for students from different linguistic backgrounds. Although English is the official medium of instruction in EFL classes, teachers and students often switch to Nepali, which disadvantages international learners. This finding aligns with

Nepal's status as a multilingual country, where 124 languages are spoken (Regmi, 2024). However, Nepali functions as the lingua franca and is widely used in government-aided schools.

In cross-cultural classrooms, such practice limits inclusivity and hinders the learning experience of those who do not speak Nepali. In this regard, Veer said: *“When I find my teachers and friends discussing in the Nepali language, I feel as if I am being excluded from learning experiences, though it is not intentional.”* Another participant, Bobo, shared that he had trouble communicating with his classmates at the university when he was a new student. *“When I came to Nepal at the beginning, it was tough for me to understand my classmates and teachers because they easily shifted to the Nepali language from English... it was a challenge for me to communicate with them.”* Our findings closely align with Sharma's (2024) investigation, which found that frequent code-switching is challenging for non-Nepali speakers to adjust to in ELT classrooms.

Though language is the primary medium of communication among people, intercultural communication is only possible when people use a common language (Nguyen, 2018). In the context of this study, English was not only the medium of instruction but the standard language for communication. However, participants' responses regarding the use of the Nepali language indicated first-language dominance in language classrooms. Such L1 dominance excludes international students from meaningful classroom discussions, as they are unable to understand the local language, and creates difficulties for them in experiencing real-life learning. According to Rugutt and Chemosit (2005), student involvement in learning is essential because it plays a key role in their academic achievement. The findings also corroborate the findings of Bhandari and Pokhrel (2022) who emphasize engaging students in collaborative writing among learners from different cultures to enhance their language learning while preserving their history knowledge, advancing cultures, and developing communities simultaneously. However, it is equally valid that, even though students have different nationalities, learning becomes easier when they share a common language and cultural backgrounds (Zhang & Bray, 2020). Nepal and India are not only geographically close to each other but also share a similar language and culture. Though they might not speak each other's language fluently, they understand it, which helps them adopt the cultural practices. In this regard, one of the participants, Sunil, stated,

“I did not find any problems when teachers and classmates used Nepali in the classroom because our languages are similar to some extent, but I could never speak Nepali to express myself in the discussions.”

This finding is supported by the idea that shared cultural knowledge is necessary and, often, sufficient for communication (Tiawati et al., 2024; Troike & Kleifgen, 1989). Sunil did not have much trouble code-switching from English to Nepali in class, despite his difficulty expressing himself in Nepali. As a language student, one needs ample opportunities to engage in interaction, as Harmer (2006) states that speaking activities boost students' confidence and satisfaction.

Temporal and spatial difference

Temporal and spatial differences across cultures often amaze students from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Yuan et al., 2024). Veer, originally from Germany, had travelled to three other countries —Denmark, Africa, and South Korea —and had rich exposure to different cultures. She shared her strange experiences regarding time and personal space in Nepal. She explained,

“Unlike in Germany, it is surprising to see my Nepali classmates enter a classroom usually late and leave before it ends. It is also interesting to see males and females sit separately, maintaining personal space even during collaborative tasks.”

These differences can cause problems for students during the initial phase of cultural adjustment. Similarly, personal spaces affect their collaborative activities in language classrooms. Temporal and spatial differences also present opportunities for students to learn about cross-cultural diversity. Bobo said he did not have much of a problem with spatial differences among male friends, but temporal differences caused misunderstandings. He explained,

“I have not faced the problem of spatial distance from male classmates, but female classmates maintain their own space not only with me but also with the Nepali male classmates.”

Regarding time, he mentioned that his preparation was affected when final exams were postponed. Additionally, he noted that assignment deadlines were sometimes extended. In West Africa, he emphasized, *“We take deadlines and appointments seriously because we respect others' time.”* Sunil, on the other hand, did not notice much of a difference in the temporal factor between the two cultures, but the spatial difference between males and females was more pronounced in his culture. He explained: *“In our culture, the practice is even stricter than here, especially with females. Many parents still prefer their girls to study in girls' colleges.”* Bobo's experience regarding girls' opportunities for education was even more pathetic, which did not soak him in the Nepalese ELT classrooms. Their experiences closely support the idea of Darwin and Norton (2023) that differences in time and space affect learners' motivation in language learning. Although these differences created confusion at first, they also helped students understand how cultural norms influence classroom behaviour. This connects directly to the second research question, which explores cultural challenges in classroom communication.

Temporal and spatial differences are part of the culture in any country and depend on cultural beliefs. Gardner (2005) states that cultural beliefs are like the air we breathe. While people appreciate cultural differences, they should not lead to misunderstanding among learners. Ignorance of culture can lead to misinterpretation, which in turn leads to misunderstandings and a communication gap. This gap could become a significant hurdle in learning in a cross-cultural ELT classroom.

Cultural Context and Ethnocentric Perspectives

Context plays a vital role in teaching and learning in a cross-cultural classroom. All three participants believed that, for effective teaching and learning, teaching/learning items need to be discussed to create a meaningful context in an interactive and collaborative classroom (Bhandari, 2020; ElSayary, 2024). However, the participants felt that teaching was teacher-centred most of the time, and their fellow students showed less interest in collaborating with them. Bobo expressed this sentiment by saying, *“Teaching is teacher-centred most of the time. Only a few students repeatedly interact with teachers. In my country, we used to discuss when there was an exam, but this is not the way here.”* Participants' cross-cultural experiences with classroom practices influenced their learning. Bobo further noted the presence of ethnocentrism, citing the caste system in Nepal as an example. Bobo observed that students from certain castes, such as Brahmins, tend to believe they are superior to others, leading to a lack of participation in class discussions and interactions. This behaviour discourages students from learning about others' cultures and respecting them. It also promotes self-centeredness over collaboration, which hinders effective learning. Additionally, teachers should create diverse contexts and provide

students with more opportunities to interact with them and each other during discussions (Bhandari, 2020; Rusticus et al., 2023). Similarly, Veer's friends did not cooperate with her when she wanted to practice presentations. She expressed her frustration by saying, *"If I were in Germany, I would have said that it is stupid, one cannot do like this, but here I cannot say anything, they do whatever they like."* She also experienced ethnocentric behaviours differently from Bobo, as her classmates frequently questioned her decision to study in Nepal, implying that education in the West is superior to theirs.

Ethnocentrism exists within and outside cultures, explicitly and implicitly impacting learning. In developing countries, students often hold the belief that students from developed countries are more intelligent and superior (Tapia Castillo, 2023; Kang & Yaw, 2024). Sunil, a middle-aged Indian student, felt respected by his classmates due to his age. Teachers also showed him respect during classroom activities. Sunil added,

"My friends treat me with respect. I do not know the reason, but I guess it could be because of my age. Whenever we go through a class discussion, my friends always want me to start. Even my teachers ask me to give my opinion first."

He acknowledged the culture of respecting elders, prevalent in all societies, and students' ability to form close relationships and freely express opinions in the classrooms. Common ethnographic behaviour affects language teaching and learning, especially in a new country where one is unfamiliar with the culture.

Ethnocentrism directly influenced classroom interaction and confidence. Participants reported that certain cultural attitudes, such as caste-based superiority, hesitation to speak, and questioning international students' presence, limited meaningful dialogue. These are not only communication barriers but also social barriers that directly impact learning. This finding further reinforces the research question about how cultural differences influence learning behaviours.

The participants in our study revealed that teaching and learning were predominantly teacher-centred, with limited student participation in interactions. Students often remained silent, with only a few actively engaging. In a similar vein to Miled (2020), our participants were hesitant to engage in discussions due to cultural differences. They also encountered ethnocentrism among classmates, leading to reluctance to discuss and debate with teachers. Comparing the Nepali context to Chinese culture, where self-expression, critical thinking, and discussion and argument are not typically encouraged, our participants noted a similar lack of these skills in their upbringing (Xu, 2008). It is considered disrespectful to argue with teachers in class in these cultures.

Intercultural Communicative Competence

In response to the question of how to bridge the cross-cultural gap in ELT, all three participants agreed that this can be achieved by developing cultural awareness, fostering meaningful interactions and discussions, and incorporating cross-cultural literary content into the curriculum (Ismail & Zubaku, 2023). Veer mentioned that one should learn about a new country's culture before visiting, but she did not do so because she wanted to make her stay more adventurous. She said, *"I tried not to have any preconceived ideas about Nepal before coming here because it prevents you from experiencing the adventure. However, I suffered a cultural shock"*. In a cross-cultural classroom, teachers should engage students in interactions about cultural issues that help them share and learn about diversity. Veer expressed, *"I wish my teachers had asked for my perspective on the diversity we experience. Once, our teacher criticized Western thinking, comparing it to the Eastern Nepali way, where I represented the*

West.” Markey (2021) suggests that educators must value students' cultural identities and respect their linguistic and educational backgrounds for effective teaching and learning.

Reflecting on her time as a student at a European university, she added, “*In Denmark, I appreciated constructive criticism and would have welcomed the opportunity to present my viewpoint*”. While studying in Denmark as an international student, she was encouraged to share her cultural differences with her teachers and friends, which she found helped open minds to multiple perspectives and fostered understanding and respect for each other’s cultures. The advent of technology has been a valuable support for English language learning. In this regard, Bobo mentioned that the internet is an excellent resource for learning about cross-cultural realities. Therefore, in a cross-cultural classroom, both teachers and students can use the internet to learn about each other’s cultures and to facilitate teaching and learning activities (Shadiey, 2021). Bobo emphasized, “*Before coming to Nepal, I researched a lot about the country and its culture on Google. Teachers can also use the internet to learn about different cultures when they encounter new students from diverse backgrounds.*” Regarding bridging the cross-cultural gap, participants agreed that ELT should extend beyond language teaching. Sunil stated, “*Literary genres can help students learn the language as well as cultures. To promote cross-cultural awareness, literature rich in diverse cultures should be integrated into education at all levels.*”

Language can be effectively taught through literature. For example, Bhandari and Bhusal (2020) suggest that exposing learners to different literary texts depicting cultures and languages, such as festivals can help them become familiar with various cultural and linguistic contexts. The curriculum should encompass multiple spheres of life and cultures from diverse backgrounds. Literary genres, including stories, poems, essays, and dramas, should be included in the university curriculum and can be effectively taught through role-plays, dramatization, simulations, group work, and peer interactions worldwide. These insights also show practical ways ELT practitioners can make classrooms more inclusive. Teachers can use activities such as cultural-sharing discussions, group tasks, and role-plays that bring local and international students together. Using technology to explore global cultures can also reduce misunderstandings. These implications should be highlighted clearly in the Discussion section. This finding also responds to the part of the research question that asks how cross-cultural gaps can be bridged. The strategies suggested by participants, such as including multicultural literature, encouraging open dialogue, and reducing teacher-centeredness, directly answer this question.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the challenges of diverse-cultural communication faced by international students in EFL classrooms and examined strategies to foster intercultural communicative competence. The students experienced both verbal and non-verbal communication barriers due to cultural differences. Teachers mitigated these challenges through strategies such as differentiated instruction, group discussions, and collaborative activities, facilitating meaningful interaction and mutual understanding. The study highlighted the integral link between language and culture and demonstrated that incorporating culturally diverse content and interactive pedagogies can enhance students’ intercultural competence.

This study contributes to understanding how cross-cultural and non-verbal factors shape communication in EFL classrooms, offering practical pedagogical insights for teachers and advancing the theoretical discourse on intercultural competence. Practically, teachers could be supported through professional development that focuses on intercultural communication, culturally responsive pedagogy, and strategies to manage multilingual classrooms. At the

curriculum level, incorporating culture-focused tasks, reflective activities, and collaborative projects can help students build intercultural communicative competence in meaningful ways. Its limitations include a small sample size and focus on a single university, which may restrict generalizability. Future research should involve larger and more diverse student populations, examine additional non-verbal communication forms, and investigate the long-term effects of cross-cultural interventions. The findings indicate that teachers and students should actively learn each other's languages and cultural norms to bridge cross-cultural gaps, enhance ELT effectiveness, and foster inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments.

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This study did not receive any external funding. All parts of the research, including data collection, data analysis, and report writing, were completed using personal resources. Even without outside financial support, the study was carried out successfully by using available tools and a practical approach.

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Participation in this study was voluntary. Before taking part, participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, possible risks, and benefits of the research. They were also assured that their identities would remain confidential and that the information they provided would be used only for research purposes. In addition, participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. By agreeing to continue, they gave their informed consent to participate in the study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used in this study are not publicly available because participant privacy and confidentiality must be protected. This follows ethical research standards and data protection rules. However, researchers who need access to the data for validation or further analysis may submit a request. Any request will be reviewed individually, and data can only be shared with approval from the appropriate institutional ethics review board and in line with participant consent.

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