



Bridging Cultures through Reflection: Metacognitive Approaches of Multicultural EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how EFL students from diverse cultural backgrounds manage their learning processes through metacognitive awareness and self-reflection in a multicultural academic setting. The importance of cross-cultural communicative competence in English language acquisition is increasing, rendering students' ability to regulate their cognition, learning strategies, and emotional responses crucial for achieving academic success. This study employed a phenomenological approach with eleven students from the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Megarezky. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and later analyzed using thematic analysis technique. The findings found four principal themes: Self-awareness, Strategic regulation, Cultural adaptation, and Competence transformation. These findings emphasize the importance of integrating metacognitive and reflection-based learning practices into the EFL curriculum to enhance students' intercultural competence, emotional resilience, and learning independence. This research provides theoretical contributions to the study of metacognitive learning and cross-cultural communication, as well as practical implications for educators designing globally responsive English language learning.

Keywords: Cultural Reflection; EFL Learners; Metacognitive awareness; Multicultural



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INTRODUCTION

EFL learning takes place in a progressively multicultural environment. It is not just language proficiency but also the development of intercultural competency, enabling learners to navigate diverse cultural environments effectively (Rahmawati 2023; Schiopu 2024). Nevertheless, the majority of students and educational institutions are inadequately equipped to navigate

the intricacies of cross-cultural communication. Numerous students have sufficient linguistic proficiency yet encounter difficulties in comprehending the social norms, attitudes, communication styles, and academic expectations of diverse cultures (Hagar 2018; Rahmawati 2023; Gurning & Tarigan 2025). Multicultural students often struggle to engage successfully with their peers or comprehend learning materials that are embedded in foreign cultural contexts.

Metacognition, the knowledge and management of one's own cognitive process, has been proven to be a vital tool for language learners to evaluate comprehension, adapt learning tactics, and handle cognitive obstacles (Haerazi 2023; Sieck 2017). In multicultural environments, metacognitive reflection helps students to become aware of cultural differences, to analyze their influence on learning, and to create adaptive methods to remove barriers to communication and comprehension (Putra & Musigrungsi 2022). This contemplation not only enhances language abilities but also promotes cognitive flexibility and intercultural sensitivity.

In the context of a private university, especially Universitas Megarezky, the diversity of students from various regions in Indonesia creates complex interaction dynamics in EFL classrooms. However, ongoing learning tends to focus on mastering technical language skills, with little emphasis on students' reflective abilities to understand the cultural differences that emerge in discussions and group work. Furthermore, the diverse cultural characteristics of students' regions of origin include varying values, communication styles, and interaction patterns. These often create gaps in perception and challenges to adaptation when working within a multicultural campus environment.

Literature Review

Intercultural Communicative Competence

The idea of Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram as cited in Huang 2023) provides a framework for understanding how learners make sense of interactions in a multicultural environment. In the EFL environment, the ICC underlines that language is not merely a system of codes but also a reflection of cultural values and identities. The ICC framework helps explain how multicultural students manage cultural differences in the classroom and how critical reflection is an important aspect in bridging these discrepancies (Wu, 2023).

The positive and direct impact of L2 learners' self-confidence on their ICC level suggests that when a learner possesses high confidence in their ability to perform L2 tasks, they experience reduced arousal and anxiety in interactions with others from diverse ethnicities and cultures. Embracing the values and norms of others during L2 communication enhances the level of intercultural competence (Ghasemi et al., 2020).

Metacognitive Awareness

The conceptual basis of this research rests on metacognitive theory, which emphasizes an individual's ability to be aware of, monitor, and control their thinking processes (Ahangari and Mohseni 2016; Flavell as cited in (Dangin & Hartati, Elysa, 2022); Huang 2023). In language learning, metacognition encompasses pre-learning strategy planning, monitoring during the learning process, and post-learning evaluation. Models such as the Metacognitive Awareness Inventory, adopted by Schraw & Dennison cited in Dangin and Hartati (2022) demonstrate that metacognitive awareness plays a crucial role in enhancing comprehension, decision-making, and learning effectiveness.

Metacognition is the awareness and regulation of one's own thinking processes that plays a crucial role in how students approach their learning experiences (Jessner & Allgäuer-Hackl, 2022). By encouraging learners to reflect on their cognitive strategies, understand their learning styles, and monitor their comprehension, educators can empower them to take ownership of their cultural exploration. Metacognition encompasses the awareness, processing, and monitoring of cognitive information (Siregar & Stroupe, 2025). Metacognition helps individuals make use of the knowledge they have and allows them to apply it in novel ways across different situations (Şchiopu, 2024). Furthermore, it encourages individuals to seek out latent theories, principles, and rules that connect their knowledge, thereby enhancing their ability to identify unique patterns and solve otherwise complex problems (Klafehn et al., 2013).

Cultural Adaptation

The cultural adaptation model (Kim, 2001) explains that individuals entering a new cultural environment experience a process of stress, adaptation, and growth. In the context of a multicultural classroom, differences in learning styles, communication styles, and academic norms often create tensions that require adjustment (Sangwa et al., 2025). The theory of reflective practice (Kohonen, 2010 in (Azizah et al., 2018) emphasizes that reflection is a tool for interpreting these experiences constructively. Through reflection, learners can understand cultural misperceptions, assess their emotional responses, and discover strategies for building intercultural bridges (Husain et al., 2025). The integration of reflection and metacognition enables learners to transform multicultural experiences into productive learning processes.

Multicultural

According to Byrd Clark and Dervin (2014), reflexivity, as 'a multifaceted, complex, and ongoing dialogical process', reveals the multidimensionality of meanings, interpretations, positionings, voices, and strategies in second language and intercultural learning and teaching (Wu, 2023). As the multiculturalism of tertiary classrooms expands, there is a growing call for competency in the ability to effectively communicate across cultural

boundaries. Such "intercultural competence", referred to as IC, requires an understanding of one's own cultural beliefs and behaviours as well as how such beliefs and behaviours differ from culture to culture (Hagar, 2018). Without reflective strategies, learners may struggle to engage meaningfully in classroom activities or collaborative learning tasks.

Moreover, the last point is evaluation, where students analyse and evaluate their own path in facing and executing the materials or tasks. A strategy evaluation matrix, a short review of metacognitive information that he believes will increase students' capacity to grasp learning goals. In fact, this schema incorporated metacognitive knowledge patterns developed by previous pioneers, such as Flavell (1979) in Dangin and Elysa, (2022).

In cross-cultural contexts, the use of metacognitive processes and skills is essential. Not only must individuals be aware of their roles or positions within a new culture, but they must also be flexible in their thoughts and actions toward the people with whom they interact (Ghasemi et al., 2020). This metacognitive flexibility is crucial to adaptive performance because it enables individuals to suspend their judgments of other cultures while looking for creative solutions to problems they might encounter. This mismatch, which can lead to psychological stress or "culture shock", occurs in part because individuals are simply not capable of capturing the enormous variance that exists within individual cultures. To illustrate, the cross-cultural literature is abundant with studies depicting the vast psychological differences that exist across cultures (Klafehn et al., 2013).

Some previous studies have highlighted the favourable views of both educators and students over the efficacy of cross-cultural assessment in enhancing intercultural competence (Rahmawati, 2023). The findings provide significant insights for educators to improve teaching techniques and cultivate a more inclusive and effective learning environment for critical thinking in multicultural settings (Darwin & Prasodjo, 2025). Reflective practice is an efficacious tool for augmenting foreign language teaching and fostering intercultural competency within a multicultural framework (Chaika, 2023). Metacognitive learning strategies were closely linked to intercultural competence (ICC), indicating that learners who consistently reflect on their learning and assess their performance are more likely to possess a greater degree of ICC (Ghasemi et al., 2020).

Most previous studies have focused on mastering language competence, self-directed learning strategies, or improving ICC in general without deeply examining the role of metacognitive reflection as an internal mechanism that can help students understand cultural differences, interpret cross-cultural experiences, and develop communication adaptation strategies (Hagar, 2018; Rahmawati, 2023; Ghasemi, et al. 2020).

Furthermore, existing research has been mostly conducted in the context of international institutions or culturally homogeneous classrooms, so the findings do not reflect the reality of local institutions with strong cultural diversity characteristics, such as Universitas Megarezky. Therefore, this study fills this research gap by investigating how metacognitive reflection experiences are formed, used, and interpreted by multicultural EFL students in the learning process and academic interactions in heterogeneous classrooms.

The urgency of this research lies in the urgent need to understand how metacognitive awareness contributes to EFL students' reflective thinking and cultural adaptation skills in an increasingly digital and multicultural global learning context. Amidst increasing academic mobility, the use of cross-cultural learning technologies, and the demand for global competency, this study provides empirical insight into how students develop self-awareness, learning strategies, and adaptability to cultural diversity in academic settings. These findings are important because they can inform curriculum development, learning strategies, and pedagogical interventions that can enhance students' readiness to face global challenges and the world of intercultural education.

Thus, this paper investigated

1) How do students plan learning strategies when faced with assignments in different cultural contexts?. 2) How do they monitor themselves when they feel uncomfortable due to cultural differences?. 3) How do they reflect after interacting with cross-cultural peers in class?

The purpose of this study is to explore in depth how metacognitive awareness plays a role in shaping EFL students' reflective thinking and cultural adaptation skills in a multicultural learning context in the English Language Education Study Program. Specifically, this study aims to identify students' learning experiences related to metacognitive strategies, understand the mechanisms of self-reflection in the cross-cultural learning process, and uncover the challenges and adjustments they make when interacting with cultural diversity in an academic environment. The results of this study are expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions in the development of a metacognitive awareness-based learning model that is responsive to global and multicultural contexts.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2014). The phenomenological approach was chosen because it aimed to deeply explore the lived experiences of multicultural EFL students in using metacognitive reflection as a strategy to bridge cultural differences in the English language learning process. Phenomenology enables researchers to understand the subjective meanings, patterns of awareness, and

dynamics of cognitive and emotional regulation that emerge in the context of cross-cultural interactions in academic settings.

Research Location and Participants

The research was conducted in the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Megarezky. Eleven EFL students were selected using purposive sampling with the following criteria: Being active students in the first and third semesters. Having a cross-cultural learning experience (through interactions in multicultural classes, international academic activities, or digital global engagement experiences). Willingness to participate in interviews and share experience. Participant demographics included Toraja, Bulukumba, Ambon, Jenepono, and Maybrat (Southwest Papua).

Data Collection

Data were obtained from interviews that were conducted face to face with a duration of 25-30 minutes and field notes. The researcher used an interview guide including background, awareness of cultural differences, metacognitive strategies, challenges and adaptation, and reflection on learning. This instrument relates to the theory of intercultural competence (Deardorff 2006), metacognitive learning (Flavell, 1979), intercultural adaptation (Kim, 2001), dan reflective learning (Mezirow, 1991).

Research Instruments

The research instruments in this study were systematically developed based on a phenomenological framework and metacognitive theory of Flavell (1979) in Ozturk (2024), critical reflection (Mezirow, 1997), and a cross-cultural learning approach (Byram, 2009 in Huang, 2023). The instruments were designed to explore students' subjective experiences, internal processes, and the dynamics of cultural adaptation in a multicultural EFL learning context. The main instruments used included:

1. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

The interview guide was developed based on the Metacognitive Awareness Framework (Schraw & Moshman, 1995 in (Ozturk, 2024) and the Intercultural Communicative Competence model (Byram, 2009 in Huang, 2023). Questions were directed at exploring three core areas: Metacognitive Knowledge (person knowledge, task knowledge, strategy knowledge); Metacognitive Regulation (planning, monitoring, evaluating); Intercultural Reflective Experience (cultural adaptation, emotional response, meaning negotiation)

2. Field note

This instrument is used to document the context of interactions not verbally expressed during interviews and participant observations. Referring to the approaches of (Creswell, 2014), field notes included observations of non-verbal

expressions, gestures, tone of voice, and emotional states. Interactions between participants from a cultural and linguistic perspective.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis based on (Braun & Clarke, 2022) which included the following steps:

Reading of the entire transcript to understand the tone, meaning, and context of the participant's experience repeatedly (Familiarization with the data), Code quotes that indicate cultural awareness, regulatory strategies, communication barriers, or adaptation (Generating Initial codes), grouping data based on similar phenomena (searching for themes), review the theme's suitability to the overall data set. (reviewing and refining themes), Defining and Naming Themes, ensure that theme has relevant with research question (Theme refinement and finalization and Reporting.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A phenomenological analysis of interviews and reflective journals from 11 respondents yielded four main interrelated themes. Each theme describes the dynamics of self-awareness, regulation of learning and communication strategies, cultural negotiation and emotional adaptation, and transformative intercultural reflection

Theme 1: Self-Awareness of the Learning Process and Language Identity

Students demonstrated increased awareness of their thought processes, self-perceptions, and emotional factors that influence their communication performance in multicultural contexts.

Data Excerpt (3 Respondents):

"I recognize cultural difference ways of speaking, dressing, examples in materials." (P3)

"I noticed cultural differences when we discussed traditions and local dialects." (P1)

"I recognize cultural differences when classroom discussions involve lifestyle, communication styles, family structure..." (P10)

These three excerpts demonstrate that participants recognized the cultural variation that emerges in the learning process, whether through classroom interaction, teaching materials or communication styles between students. This awareness is a part of intercultural awareness, the ability to understand that people from different cultures have different norms, practices and perspectives.

Theme 2: Regulation of Learning and Communication Strategies

Regulation helps students plan, monitor, and evaluate effective communication strategies appropriate to the cultural and situational context.

Data Excerpt (3 Respondents):

"When I encounter unfamiliar cultural practices, I seek more information and ask classmates." (P2)

"I changed my way of speaking; I speak more slowly and politely when speaking with friends from cultures that maintain formality." (P7)

"...sometimes they don't understand because I speak too fast." (P11)

These statements demonstrate the function of regulation of cognition, particularly in the aspects of planning, monitoring, and evaluation. Students begin to understand that communication is not only linguistic, but also pragmatic and sociocultural. This change in strategy demonstrates pragmatic awareness, performance control, and communication adaptation, reflecting intercultural communicative pragmatics.

Theme 3: Cultural Negotiation and Emotional Adaptation

Students faced the dynamics of differences in cultural values, interaction styles, and non-verbal interpretations, which initially caused anxiety but were gradually resolved through reflection.

Data Excerpt (3 Respondents):

"Some people express ideas very openly, while in my community, communication tends to be humble and polite." (P9)

"I am also afraid to start a conversation because I am confused about the use of several affixes such as 'ki, mi, ji, and several others'. (P4)

"Initially, I felt stressed because I had difficulty understanding humour in English, but after reflection, I began to relax and see it as a learning process." (P8)

These sections demonstrate the relationship between metacognitive reflection and cultural empathy. The processes of meaning negotiation and emotional regulation play a crucial role in communal adaptation. Reflection allows students to reinterpret social experiences and develop tolerance for ambiguity.

Theme 4: Transformation in Intercultural Communication Competence

Students reported changes in attitude, confidence, communication flexibility, and cross-cultural understanding.

Data Excerpt (3 Respondents):

"...on my cultural experiences, I have become more open-minded and tolerant of diverse cultures..." (P5)

"I find it easier to communicate with students from different cultures because I learned to listen first." (P6)

"Understanding my own cultural identity has made me feel more confident when communicating and interacting with people from other cultures." (P2)

These statements illustrate the shift from self-doubt to self-regulated intercultural competence. It demonstrates the transition toward intercultural maturity, where students are not only able to understand cultural differences but also internalize the value of adaptive communication. This finding aligns with Byram's framework

of intercultural communicative competence (ICC)—specifically in the dimensions of attitude, awareness, and interaction skills.

The excerpt P5 was supported by a field note.

During the interview, P5 frequently smiled when describing his experiences meeting friends from different cultures. She maintained open body language, leaned forward, and emphasized the phrase "I learned a lot from them" several times. When describing his experiences with different cultures, P5 appeared enthusiastic and did not display defensiveness. This reinforces the notion that she was developing a more inclusive attitude.

The four themes form a hierarchical development pattern:

(1) Self-awareness → (2) Strategic regulation → (3) Cultural adaptation → (4) Competence transformation.

1. Learning strategies planned by students when faced with assignments in different cultural contexts

Students begin the planning process by identifying relevant cultural differences in the learning context, which forms the basis for more adaptive and contextual learning strategies. They asked for clarification and found out an additional source.

The excerpt related this point are *"I recognize cultural different ways of speaking, dressing, examples in materials" P3(Toraja). I noticed cultural differences when we discussed traditions and local dialects.P1 (Ambon)*

Student (P3) demonstrates an initial awareness of cultural variations that appear in classroom materials and interactions. This reflects self-awareness and the ability to adapt learning strategies based on cultural context. Furthermore, student (P1) actively pay attention to the cultural norms and practices of their classmates, which helps them plan how to interact and understand material that supports cultural-based planning.

2. Students monitor themselves when they feel uncomfortable due to cultural differences

This point emphasizes that self-monitoring in the context of cross-cultural interactions is not limited to cognitive aspects, such as thinking about strategies, words, or communication content, but also includes an equally important emotional dimension.

In multicultural interactions, students not only face differences in language and social norms, but also differences in values, emotional expressions, and non-verbal communication patterns. The excerpt related this point are *"When I encounter unfamiliar cultural practices, I seek more information and ask classmates" P2(Bulukumba). "I changed my way of speaking,I speak more slowly and politely when speaking with friends from culture that maintain formality" P7 (Maybrat).* Student (P2) implements cognitive and social monitoring by seeking

clarification, reflecting self-monitoring and adapting communication strategies. Furthermore, student (P7) demonstrates regulation of speech and behavior in response to differences in cultural norms, and emphasizing the importance of self-monitoring.

3. Reflection after interacting with cross-cultural peers in class

Reflection helps students to understand cultural identity, adapt communication attitude and shape of attitude “compare-not judge, and intercultural communication competence. This relates to a transformation in intercultural competence and a strengthening of self-confidence in multicultural interactions. “...on my cultural experiences, I have become more open-minded and tolerant of diverse culture..” P5 (Jenepono). This self-reflection shows an increase in reflective attitude where students internalize the values of tolerance and respect for cultural diversity. Another excerpt “ I find it easier to communicate with students from different cultures because I learned to listen first.”P6 (Toraja). Students develop adaptive communication strategies through reflection, strengthening cross-cultural interaction skills.

Discussion

This study's results demonstrate that metacognitive reflection is essential in influencing the cross-cultural learning strategies of multicultural EFL students in the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Megarezky. The students can employ self-awareness, strategic monitoring, learning assessment, and cultural adaptation as essential strategies for overcoming the barriers of learning English in a culturally diverse setting. The four main themes that emerged—self-awareness of cultural identity, self-regulation strategies in learning, cultural negotiation and emotional adaptation, and transformation in intercultural communication competence, particularly those developed by Flavell (1979) in (Ozturk, 2024).

First, the findings about self-awareness of cultural identity reveal that students recognize cultural differences as factors that affect their thinking, learning, and communication. Students in this study stated that understanding their cultural identity helped them become more open, less judgmental, and more tolerant of differences. This confirms that cultural reflection is not only a cognitive process, but also an affective process that shapes social sensitivity. Thus, cultural reflection contributes to the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Ghasemi et al., 2020), where openness, curiosity, and the ability to understand others' perspectives are important indicators.

Second, findings regarding self-regulation strategies in learning indicate that students actively plan, monitor, and adjust their learning strategies when faced with linguistic and sociocultural difficulties. They use strategies such as reflective notes, self-questioning, peer learning, and the use of technology to

overcome feelings of insecurity in speaking English. Thus, students' ability to regulate their learning reflects the dynamics of autonomous learners oriented toward developing both language and social skills (Hidayah et al., 2024).

The third topic, cultural negotiation and emotional adaptation. Students indicated that they initially experienced discomfort, apprehension around errors, or concerns about offending individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. These findings indicate that English teachers necessitate increased expertise to proficiently and professionally implement reflective practice (Azizah et al., 2018). In other words, the reflection process helps students develop cultural sensitivity, which then improves their oral communication skills. It converts motion into direction and activity into consciousness, enabling growth to be both efficient and significant (Rachmad, 2018).

The fourth theme, transformation in intercultural communication competence, shows that students evaluate not only their technical English performance but also their development in attitudes, collaboration skills, self-confidence, and critical thinking skills. Reflective evaluation helps them view their learning journey as a continuous process, not just an outcome. These findings were in line with the other findings state that educators maintained a favourable view of reflective teaching (RT) principles in professional development and engaged in all three forms of in-, on-, and for-action reflections (Hung et al., 2021). Reflective practice is a potent approach for teacher development, applicable through many methods or instruments (Fakazli, 2017). Therefore, self-evaluation in the context of this study not only strengthens English language skills but also fosters adaptive character, cross-cultural empathy, and a lifelong learning orientation.

Related to the context of higher education in Indonesia, these findings are relevant to the needs of an Outcome-Based Education (OBE) curriculum that requires students to master not only language competencies but also soft skills, collaborative skills, and cross-cultural communication competencies. A multicultural learning environment like that at Universitas Megarezky provides a natural space for students to develop these abilities through authentic interactions, reflection on experiences, and self-adaptation. This demonstrates that EFL learning cannot be separated from socio-cultural dimensions, making a pedagogical approach based on metacognitive reflection relevant and supportive of the development of more comprehensive linguistic and interpersonal competencies (Şchiopu, 2024).

Furthermore, this research demonstrates that a metacognitive approach is not merely an individual learning strategy, but also a process of internalizing diversity values that supports the formation of a global identity (global mindset). Students begin to view English not only as a compulsory subject, but as a medium for building social relationships, opening up academic opportunities,

and understanding global perspectives. The process of reflection transforms them into not just language learners but also cultural negotiators capable of bridging cultural differences through effective and empathetic communication.

Consequently, metacognitive reflection-based learning has significant promise for systematic implementation within a multicultural EFL program. This notion can be executed via educational methodologies like reflective journaling, reflective discourse, peer feedback, portfolio assessment, and cross-cultural collaborative activities. This method allows students to enhance their English proficiency while also cultivating 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, empathy, communication, and intercultural competency (Drigas et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that metacognitive reflection plays a key role in assisting multicultural students in their English language learning process. The results show that students develop reflective strategies across four main dimensions, namely self-awareness of cultural identity, self-regulation strategies in learning, adaptation to cross-cultural communication, and academic and social self-evaluation. This research provides theoretical contributions to the study of metacognitive learning and cross-cultural communication, as well as practical implications for educators designing globally responsive English language learning. Furthermore, it is recommended that learning should include collaborative intercultural tasks, for instance cultural discussion, peer exchanges and intercultural problem-solving task.

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