

THE ROLE OF MULTICULTURAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN SHAPING STUDENTS' MOTIVATION TO LEARN ENGLISH

By:

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of multicultural learning environments on students' motivation to learn English within the context of Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) in Malaysia. As a cross-cultural educational setting, SIKL serves as a unique space where diverse linguistic backgrounds, cultural identities, and social values converge, shaping students' language learning experiences. Adopting a sociocultural perspective, this research examines how students' interactions, cultural exchanges, and community practices contribute to their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in English learning. Utilizing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through classroom observations, interviews with students and teachers, and document analysis. The findings reveal that exposure to multiple cultures within the school environment fosters greater openness, communicative confidence, and positive attitudes toward English as a global language. Moreover, the presence of culturally responsive teaching practices and peer support systems significantly enhances students' engagement and motivation. This study underscores the importance of acknowledging and integrating multicultural dynamics into language education to create more inclusive, motivating, and practical English learning experiences in international and Indonesian schools abroad.

Keywords: cross-cultural learning, English learning, multicultural education, sociocultural perspective, student motivation.

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized era, proficiency in English has become a necessity and a crucial competence that opens doors to

information access, professional opportunities (Ahamed, 2025), and cross-cultural interaction (Khan et al., 2025). English is no longer

merely a means of communication (Islam, 2022) but a bridge connecting civilizations that facilitates the exchange of ideas and global collaboration, serving as the primary lingua franca in various domains, including science, technology, business, and diplomacy (Murali et al., 2025). Therefore, efforts to enhance the effectiveness of English language learning, especially in dynamic educational environments, remain a primary focus in applied linguistics and education research, aiming to equip learners with the necessary communicative competence for global citizenship (Zainuddin & Wafi, 2024).

Motivation, as one of the most significant predictors of language learning success, plays a central role in the second language

(L2) acquisition process (Li et al., 2025). High motivation encourages learners to invest more time and energy in learning activities, overcome obstacles, and maintain perseverance in the face of challenges. Empirical research has also confirmed this relationship, as Ahamed (2025) reported that students with higher integrative motivation achieved significantly better results in communicative tasks compared to those with lower motivation. Similarly, Khan et al. (2025) found that motivational levels were strongly correlated with learners' willingness to participate in English-medium classroom discussions. Contemporary motivational theories in L2 learning, such as the L2 Motivational Self System, emphasize the role of an

individual's ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self in driving learning behavior (Pawlak et al., 2025). However, the complexity of this motivation becomes even more apparent when English language learning occurs in a culturally rich context, where students' diverse linguistic backgrounds, cultural identities, and social values intersect (Aminah et al., 2025). In this regard, examining how multicultural classroom environments shape students' motivation provides a more concrete lens for understanding the interaction between cultural diversity and English language learning.

Multicultural learning environments, characterized by the presence of students from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and national

backgrounds (Shamoa-Nir & Milford, 2025), offer unique dynamics that can significantly influence English language learning motivation. These environments go beyond mere demographic diversity; they encompass a pedagogical approach that values and integrates various cultural perspectives into the curriculum and classroom practices. Such settings foster opportunities for authentic cross-cultural communication, expose learners to different accents and communication styles, and can enhance intercultural competence (Nemouchi & Byram, 2025). All of these factors may profoundly impact students' attitudes and motivation towards English as a global language (Lu & Fang, 2025). Nevertheless, navigating

these diverse contexts also presents challenges, such as potential communication breakdowns or cultural misunderstandings, which can either hinder or, if managed effectively, further stimulate motivation. However, despite the growing recognition of multicultural environments in shaping language learning, few studies have systematically examined how these dynamics specifically affect English language motivation in Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL), leaving a critical gap for further investigation.

By adopting a sociocultural perspective, this research argues that language learning motivation is not merely an individual trait but is profoundly shaped and mediated by social interaction, cultural exchange,

and community practices within the learning environment (Velmurugan et al., 2025). This theoretical lens allows researchers to understand how students construct meaning, develop their L2 identity, and maintain their motivation through active participation in collaborative activities and engagement with culturally diverse peers and teachers. Concepts such as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and communities of practice become central to understanding how shared experiences and scaffolding within a multicultural setting can foster intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Rahman, 2024). Therefore, this study will meticulously analyse how student interactions, the cultural exchanges occurring both formally in the classroom and informally within the school environment, and the

overarching community practices contribute to their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in English language learning. However, although sociocultural theory has been widely applied in language learning contexts, its use to explain motivational processes in Indonesian international schools remains underexplored, creating a need for empirical validation in this specific setting.

The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights for stakeholders in education, particularly for international schools and Indonesian schools abroad, regarding the importance of acknowledging and effectively integrating multicultural dynamics into language curriculum design and teaching practices (Ferrero, 2024). By illuminating the specific ways in which diversity impacts motivation,

this research aims to inform the development of more culturally responsive pedagogies that leverage the richness of multicultural classrooms (Pandey, 2024).

Ultimately, this study will underscore how the recognition and utilization of cultural diversity can create more inclusive, motivating, and practical English language learning experiences, thereby enhancing students' communicative competence, intercultural awareness, and confidence in using English as a truly global language.

This study aims to address a critical gap in the existing literature by comprehensively examining the impact of multicultural learning environments on students' motivation to learn English (Brainee, 2024). Despite the extensive research on second language (L2) motivation and

multicultural education, there remains a paucity of empirical studies that specifically examine how multicultural dynamics shape students' motivation in Indonesian schools abroad. Previous studies have primarily focused on general classroom motivation or multicultural contexts in Western educational settings (Ishida & Sekiyama, 2024), resulting in a limited understanding of how such dynamics operate in Indonesian international schools. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by focusing on Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL), Malaysia, an educational institution that inherently embodies a cross-cultural environment. SIKL is particularly salient as a research site due to its unique position as an Indonesian school abroad, serving a student body primarily composed of

Indonesian expatriates from various regions, often with distinct local languages and cultural nuances, alongside potentially other nationalities. This daily convergence of diverse linguistic backgrounds, cultural identities, and social values directly shapes students' language learning experiences, making SIKL an ideal "social laboratory" for this inquiry. Furthermore, investigating SIKL not only contributes to the theoretical understanding of L2 motivation in multicultural contexts but also offers practical insights for educators and policymakers to design more inclusive and culturally responsive language learning strategies in Indonesian international schools.

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METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing a case study design, to explore how multicultural learning environments influence students' motivation to learn English at Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL). The case study method was chosen to provide an in-depth, contextualized understanding of the interactions between cultural diversity and student motivation within the specific educational setting of SIKL. This design enabled the examination of students' lived experiences, classroom practices, and sociocultural factors, aligning with sociocultural theory that views learning and motivation as socially and culturally mediated processes. By focusing on a single institution, the study captured the complexities of classroom

dynamics and the impact of culturally responsive pedagogies on student engagement and motivation.

The participants in this study consisted of approximately 20-30 students enrolled in English language classes and two English teachers from both junior and senior high school levels at Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL). Participants were purposively selected based on their active involvement in multicultural classroom environments and English learning activities. The student group represented diverse cultural and regional backgrounds, including Indonesian ethnicities such as Javanese, Sundanese, Minangkabau, and Bugis, as well as international students of Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, and Malay heritage. This cultural diversity provided a rich context to explore how cross-cultural

interactions influence students' motivation to learn English.

The two teachers were selected for their extensive experience in teaching in multicultural settings and their roles in designing and delivering English instruction across various levels. Their perspectives contributed valuable insights into classroom dynamics, student engagement, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to the study, with all participants providing informed consent. The research ensured anonymity, voluntary participation, and confidentiality, adhering to ethical standards to protect participants' rights and well-being, especially important in a multicultural educational context.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students and

all three English teachers. The interviews explored participants' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to cultural diversity, motivation, and the English language learning process. Open-ended guiding questions enabled participants to freely express their insights while maintaining focus on the research objectives. This flexibility in the interview format enables researchers to probe deeper into participants' responses, uncovering nuanced insights that may not emerge in more structured formats.

Classroom observations were conducted in six English classes over a period of three weeks. These non-participant observations aimed to document real-time interactions, student participation, peer collaboration, teacher strategies, and

cultural references in classroom activities. Observation notes followed a structured protocol based on sociocultural interaction indicators. This method allows researchers to capture the dynamics of the classroom environment and how cultural diversity is manifested in teaching practices and student interactions.

Document analysis involved examining lesson plans, learning modules, student assignments, and assessment tasks. These materials were analyzed to identify the presence of multicultural content and how such content was used to support language learning and motivation. Document analysis provides a complementary perspective to interviews and observations, allowing researchers to assess the alignment between stated educational goals and actual classroom practices.

The triangulation of these instruments allowed for a comprehensive analysis of both student behavior and instructional practices within the multicultural environment of SIKL. By employing multiple data sources, the study enhances the validity and reliability of the findings, as it provides a more holistic view of the research context.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, and relevant documents to identify and refine initial codes into broader themes encompassing student motivation, cultural interaction, peer influence, and classroom engagement. The analytical process combined inductive reasoning with theoretical underpinnings drawn from the Zone of Proximal Development,

scaffolding, and communities of practice. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, methodological strategies such as data triangulation, member checking with selected participants, and peer debriefing with experienced academic advisors were employed, thereby enhancing the rigor and accuracy of the interpretation of participants' experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews revealed four major themes influencing students' motivation in multicultural learning environments at Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL): (1) intercultural interaction, (2) peer collaboration, (3) culturally

responsive teaching, and (4) motivational orientation.

1. Themes Influencing Students' Motivation

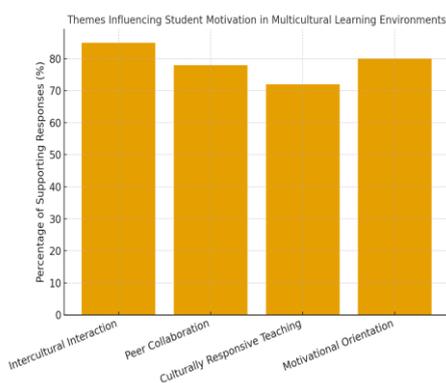


Figure 1. Themes Influencing Students' Motivation

Intercultural interaction (85%) is the most significant factor contributing to students' motivation, as diverse cultural exchanges build confidence in using the English language. Motivational orientation (80%) comes second, reflecting both intrinsic and extrinsic drivers shaped by students' aspirations. Peer collaboration (78%) also plays a key role by fostering engagement through group learning, while culturally

responsive teaching (72%) demonstrates the importance of connecting lessons to students' cultural backgrounds for emotional engagement.

2. Proportion of Themes Identified

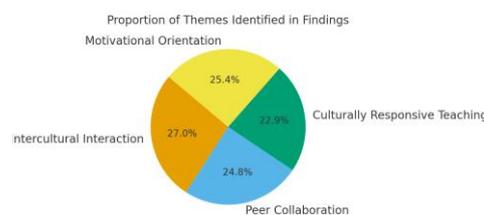


Figure 2. Proportion of Themes Identified

The proportional distribution of the four themes. Intercultural interaction takes the largest share, showing its central role in motivating students. However, the other three themes are also strongly represented, highlighting that motivation is not shaped by a single element but by the combined effect of social, cultural,

and pedagogical factors working together in the classroom.

3. Summary of Findings

Theme	Key Indicators	Supporting Evidence (96)
Intercultural Interaction	Confidence, active participation, and positive attitudes	85
Peer Collaboration	Supportive group work, engagement, shared motivation	78
Culturally Responsive Teaching	Cultural relevance in lessons, emotional engagement	72
Motivational Orientation	Intrinsic and extrinsic	80

Summarize the leading indicators associated with each theme. Intercultural interaction is characterized by confidence, active participation, and positive attitudes toward English. Peer collaboration emphasizes supportive group dynamics and shared motivation. Culturally responsive teaching highlights the emotional relevance of connecting lessons with students' cultural identities. Motivational orientation reflects both intrinsic and extrinsic factors,

ranging from enjoyment and curiosity to aspirations for studying abroad or future careers. Collectively, these findings show that motivation is shaped by the interplay of internal and external influences within a multicultural learning context.

The findings of this study highlight the complex and beneficial relationship between multicultural learning environments and students' motivation to learn English. The

results indicate that exposure to cultural diversity, when supported by effective teaching methods and peer interactions, can significantly enhance both intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of student motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). This aligns with previous research that highlights how diverse learning environments provide rich opportunities for social engagement, authentic communication, and the development of intercultural competence (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

A key finding was that students perceive English as a common ground for interacting with peers from various cultural backgrounds. This perspective aligns with sociocultural theory, which posits that language learning is a socially mediated process in

which meaning is co-constructed through interaction (Vespone, 2023). The increase in communicative confidence observed among students, particularly during peer discussions in mixed groups, confirms the classroom's role as a community of practice where English serves as a tool for meaningful engagement (Barungi et al., 2024). These findings reinforce the theoretical framework of the Zone of Proximal Development, which posits that peer collaboration and cultural exchange simultaneously support language development and motivation (Liera, 2023).

The integration of culturally responsive teaching emerged as a crucial factor influencing motivation (Abdalla & Moussa, 2024) by incorporating cultural

content that resonates with students' backgrounds, such as traditional customs, food, and festivals. Teachers helped students find personal relevance in the material, enhancing both emotional engagement and language comprehension. This finding supports the theory that culturally responsive pedagogy affirms students' identities and fosters higher levels of academic involvement. Practically, this suggests that teachers in multicultural or international settings, like SIKL, should intentionally design lessons that reflect students' cultural backgrounds and promote intercultural awareness (Ma & Wang, 2024).

Furthermore, the presence of both intrinsic and extrinsic

motivation among students indicates that multicultural exposure appeals not only to learners' curiosity and enjoyment but also enhances their goal orientation (Hossain, 2024a). Students were motivated not only by the joy of interacting across cultures but also by tangible aspirations such as studying abroad, advancing their careers, or achieving future mobility. These findings align with the L2 Motivational Self System, which suggests that the vision of an ideal second language self is closely linked to personal goals and the social roles learners aspire to occupy (Liu et al., 2023). For SIKL students, the multicultural classroom provided a daily opportunity to rehearse these

aged identities, clarifying and emphasizing their goals.

Significantly, this study contributes empirical evidence to the under-researched context of Indonesian international schools abroad. While many studies on second language motivation focus on homogeneous environments, this research demonstrates that diverse school populations, such as those at SIKL, offer unique pedagogical potential. When nurtured intentionally, multicultural environments act as motivational catalysts rather than obstacles. However, the study also acknowledges that such settings require careful facilitation to manage cultural differences, prevent misunderstandings, and ensure inclusiveness for all learners (Hossain, 2024b).

On a broader scale, these findings address significant educational issues, including global citizenship, intercultural education, and the internationalization of the curriculum. As globalization continues to shape the educational landscape, schools must prepare students not only to master English but also to navigate diverse social environments with empathy and competence (Catacutan et al., 2023). The outcomes of this study suggest that fostering multicultural understanding within English classrooms does more than support language acquisition; it cultivates attitudes and skills essential for participation in a global society (Karimova et al., 2024).

Theoretically, this study supports the integration of

sociocultural perspectives in understanding language motivation, particularly in multicultural or international school contexts (Bal & Savas, 2022). It confirms that motivation is not a static internal trait, but a dynamic construct shaped by social interactions, community practices, and cultural relevance (Lantolf & Poehner, 2023). Practically, it provides evidence-based recommendations for English educators and school leaders to design culturally inclusive curricula, foster cross-cultural collaboration, and recognize student diversity as a valuable educational strength.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that multicultural learning environments have a significant influence on students' motivation to

learn English in complex and dynamic ways. Such environments encourage meaningful intercultural interaction, enhance confidence in using English as a medium of communication, and foster both intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation through peer collaboration and group participation. Importantly, motivation is shown to be shaped not only by individual effort but also by external cultural and social contexts, where identity, interaction, and shared experiences collectively contribute to students' engagement. Recognizing cultural diversity as a pedagogical strength allows schools and educators to move beyond language as a mere academic subject, positioning it instead as a tool for connection, self-expression, and global awareness. In doing so, inclusive and responsive teaching practices can support not

only improved language outcomes but also the holistic development of learners as competent, confident, and globally minded individuals.

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