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Beyond Language Proficiency: Investigating Socio-Cultural Communication Practices in English Learning among University Students

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Abstract

Learning English in higher education has typically focused on the development of language competence. This study explored the socio-cultural communication in the English acquisition of university students, especially their negotiation of meaning, cultural identity building, responses to diversity and classroom communication adaptability. A qualitative study approach was adopted in an effort to explore the students' communication experiences in the real learning contexts in depth. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and document analysis. The results highlight the importance of socio-cultural elements in students' English communication. Learners clarified, repeated, reworded, contextualized and adapted to overcome language and culture misinterpretations. The results indicate that students often employed local cultural experiences and personal identities as tools for meaning-making and participation in classroom activities. Collaborative educational activities, especially dyadic and group dialogs, offered an opportunity for learners to negotiate interpretations and to engage different perspectives. However, the document analysis showed that socio-cultural communication was not routinely specified as a clearly defined learning aim or assessment criterion. This study implies that English language training in higher education should go beyond the narrow focus on linguistic competence and systematically integrate socio-cultural communication into educational objectives, pedagogical strategies and assessment.

Keywords

English language learning; socio-cultural communication; communicative competence

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1. INTRODUCTON

English language teaching in higher education has moved from the sole development of grammatical competence and linguistic abilities to the development of the learners' capacity to express meaning efficiently in different social and cultural contexts. Students in the academic world nowadays do not regard English as only a set of linguistic structures, but as a way of negotiating identities, cultural values, interpersonal relationships, and social meanings (Om Bharti & Kumar Singh, 2015). Therefore,

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the proficiency of English communication cannot be accurately measured based only on the vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and fluency. It also involves students' ability to interpret meanings in a cultural context, react appropriately to different communication expectations and mediate misunderstandings occurring in interaction (Azizah & Akbar, 2025). This broad perspective has become more important as institutions of higher education prepare students to participate in increasingly diverse educational and professional environments.

Language and culture are interconnected and fundamentally important for understanding communication dynamics. Language is embedded in social activities and reflects the values, beliefs, customs and identities of the communities that use it. In learning English, students also learn ways of expressing civility, dissent, agreement, respect, social distance, camaraderie, and social identity that may be different from those they have known (Godwin, 2013). Such differences can be both opportunities for intercultural education and challenges to classroom conversation. A student could be very precise in their language, but struggle with understanding indirect requests, dealing with disputes, managing turn-taking or understanding culturally unique allusions (Furyanto et al., 2025). These situations show that communicative competence is not only about producing grammatically correct language but also about knowing how language functions in specific social and cultural contexts (Mantra et al., 2024).

These issues are particularly relevant in the higher education context since university classrooms are complex communicative contexts. Learners come to the classroom with their own language, regional, cultural, and educational backgrounds, as well as their own ideas about what constitutes appropriate classroom participation, authority, collaboration, decorum, and ways of expressing opinions (Lai, 2023). English-medium or English-learning classrooms can be sites for students to negotiate not only linguistic interpretations but also cultural expectations and personal identities. Classroom dialogs, collaborative assignments, presentations, peer groupings and digital exchanges give opportunities for students to articulate and debate their perspectives. But these encounters do not necessarily lead to substantial socio-cultural education. Learners may continue to use known communication strategies and avoid culturally sensitive topics (Cong-Lem, 2025; Zabrodskaja & Wang, 2025). For us to understand the processes, however, we must focus on the actual communicative behaviors of the students rather than on standard indices of language proficiency.

The concept of socio-cultural communication provides a useful lens for evaluating these processes. The socio-cultural perspective considers communication as a socially situated activity in which individuals construct and negotiate meaning through their relationships with others (Pronina & Sidneva, 2026; Yang, 2013). But significance is not just a matter of individual linguistic competence, but is shaped by participants, interpersonal relations, cultural norms, institutional arrangements and the

particular communicative context. This is an especially essential perspective in relation to the teaching of English, since English is increasingly becoming a world language used among people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. University students may therefore use English to communicate with other students who have different first languages or cultural backgrounds. These communicative practices may include adaptation, accommodation, code-switching, clarification, negotiation of meaning, and strategic use of culturally appropriate resources (Zhou et al., 2024). Examining such activities may illuminate features of the language acquisition process that are concealed when grammatical accuracy or uniform competence are the only measures of learning.

The increasing need to study the learning of English from a socio-cultural perspective is due to the globalization of higher education. Universities are increasingly encouraging international collaboration, student mobility, virtual exchanges, multi-cultural learning spaces and technology-mediated communication. Such developments give students conversational situations in which cultural differences might be more evident and more noticeable (Curran & Ladegaard, 2025). The internet platforms have also increased the channels for students to communicate in English. Educational management systems, social networks, virtual discussion boards, video conferencing apps and cooperative digital resources are supporting participation beyond the box of the traditional classroom. These environments provide students with more opportunities to be exposed to different perspectives, but also create new misunderstandings about language use, cultural values, ways of communication, and internet etiquette. The evaluation of face-to-face and technology-mediated encounters is the best way to study socio-cultural communication patterns(Gonzalez-Vidal, 2026).

Culture is increasingly recognized in language teaching, yet little empirical research has been conducted on how university students really practice socio-cultural communication in English. Many researches have explored intercultural communicative competence, cultural awareness, attitudes toward cultural diversity or learners' views on intercultural education (Hassan, 2025; Novita et al., 2020; Yassung, 2026). While these areas provide important insights, there has been little attention paid to the everyday communication practices through which learners negotiate socio-cultural meanings in English learning initiatives. The assessment of students' understanding of culture should be changed to the research of their actual behavior in interpersonal communication. This approach may shed light on how learners understand cultural differences, negotiate meaning, manage interactional problems, express identities and deploy their cultural resources in the use of English (Esmaeili & Kuhi, 2023).

This divergence is particularly relevant in higher education multilingual and intercultural contexts. Learners don’t walk into English classes as culture-neutral consumers of language. They bring regional identities, cultural insights, beliefs, social customs and past experiences to bear on classroom engagement (Ahmed & Pardaev, 2025; Soriya Enny et al., 2025). These materials can impact their

engagement in dialogs, their reactions to lecturers and peers, the development of their arguments, their expression of opposition and their grasp of communicative aims. At the same time, learning English can open up different ways of expression and can make learners rethink ideas they held before. The process that emerges is fluid: learners might reproduce, change, resist or transform existing communication patterns during interaction in English. Qualitative research is especially appropriate since it permits researchers to examine such processes in their natural settings and to document participants' opinions of their own communication experiences.

Against this background, the present study explores socio-cultural communication practices of university students involved in English language learning. It stresses the way students use English to construct and negotiate meaning, the influence of cultural identities and experiences on their relations, and their responses to socio-cultural differences in classroom discourse. Particular attention is given to students' interactional strategies such as bargaining, cultural context and responses to communicative barriers. Through qualitative exploration of these behaviors, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of English learning as a process deeply embedded in social and cultural settings, rather than simply the acquisition of linguistic patterns.

It is important to point out that the research changes the focus of higher education English language education from language proficiency as an end in itself to communication as an action entrenched in social and cultural contexts. The results are expected to offer empirical evidence for the development of English learning environments that value students' cultural resources, facilitate meaningful engagement, and improve learners' ability to deal with language and cultural differences. The research generally places socio-cultural communication within the framework of English acquisition. It supports pedagogical approaches that prepare university students to use English not only accurately but also appropriately, critically and adaptively in a range of communicative contexts.

2. METHOD

The current study used a qualitative method to explore the socio-cultural communication behaviors during the process of learning the English language among university learners. A qualitative approach was chosen relevant considering that the study intended to explore how students develop meaning, negotiate cultural differences, express identities, and react to communication scenarios in authentic learning contexts (Cohen et al., 2018). The study was conducted in a tertiary institution where English was part of the students' course. The study focused on university students who were actively involved in English language learning activities such as classroom interaction, group discussions, presentations and peer interactions. The classroom observation was conducted in two English classrooms and ten students were interviewed to collect further data on their experiences about socio-

cultural communication.

The classroom observations focused on spontaneous interactions, including patterns of student participation, negotiation of meaning, use of culturally unique expressions, responses to variety, interactional tactics and forms of accommodation in English communication. Field notes were taken on relevant verbal and non-verbal behaviors and the contextual conditions of classroom interactions. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted to study students' thoughts and experiences further. The interview questions were related to students' experiences in communicating with others from different cultures, perceived socio-cultural barriers, how to overcome misconceptions, and how their cultural identities influenced their English communication. Document investigations were carried out to assess lecturers' lesson plans and related materials prior to teaching in the classroom.

The data collected were analyzed using a thematic analysis. The examination was carried out through a number of connected phases: familiarization with the data, initial coding, generating categories, identifying emerging themes, assessing themes, and interpreting the results (Mantula et al., 2024). The observation notes, interview transcripts and document analyzes were systematically compared to find common patterns and major disparities of students' socio-cultural communication habits. Much attention was paid to the negotiation of meaning, cultural identity, communication strategies, cultural consciousness, interactive adaptation and socio-cultural barriers. In an effort to increase the credibility of the results, data triangulation was performed through the use of the three sources. The study did not look at students' stories as individual statements but rather studied the connection between students' stories, the classroom practices as seen and the environmental elements.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the results and discussion section, the results of the study are reported based on three other types of qualitative data: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and an analysis of lesson plans. The results are presented in relation to the main aspects of socio-cultural communication that were identified in the data, which are: cultural awareness, meaning negotiation, cultural identity, interactional adaptation, communication barriers and educational integration of socio-cultural competence. By analyzing information from multiple sources, the research identifies both converging tendencies and considerable disparities between students' genuine communication practices and the representation of socio-cultural learning in educational planning. The implications of these findings for the broader understanding of English language acquisition as a socially and culturally contextualized process, and the implications for communicative proficiency and English language instruction in tertiary education, are then discussed.

3.1. Results

Student interviews provided insight into how socio-cultural factors shape communication in English learning. By looking at themes that emerged from students' answers, we found patterns about students' experiences, thoughts and strategies for speaking across cultural and social settings. The major themes that came out of student interviews are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes Emerging from Student Interviews on Socio-Cultural Communication

No.	Emerging Theme	Key Finding	Illustrative Evidence from Participants
1	Cultural awareness	Students recognized that cultural background influenced how English was used and interpreted in classroom interaction.	Students reported becoming more aware that expressions, politeness, and ways of responding could vary across cultures.
2	Negotiation of meaning	Students frequently used clarification, repetition, paraphrasing, and examples when they experienced difficulty understanding culturally influenced expressions.	Participants explained that they asked peers to clarify unfamiliar expressions or provided alternative explanations when communication was unclear.
3	Cultural identity	Students brought local cultural knowledge and personal experiences into English communication.	Several participants indicated that they felt more confident when classroom discussions allowed them to relate English topics to their own cultural experiences.
4	Communication challenges	Differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, communication style, and cultural interpretation sometimes created misunderstandings.	Students described situations in which they initially misunderstood a peer because of different ways of expressing opinions or responding to questions.
5	Interactional adaptation	Students gradually adapted their communication strategies according to their interlocutors and the communicative situation.	Participants reported speaking more slowly, selecting simpler expressions, or explaining culturally specific meanings when communicating with peers.

The interview data indicate that students saw English communication as a continuum, not only the proficiency of language structures. Aspects of their experiences that emerged as important were cultural consciousness, negotiation of meaning, identity, communication barriers and interactional adjustment. Learners particularly referred to the need to adapt their vocabulary in the face of unfamiliar ways of communication. Findings suggest that students' cultural identities were not only background characteristics but rather assets during the process of making meaning in English instruction. Their

accounts show that good communication was often the product of clarification, explanation, adaptation and the use of culturally relevant examples, rather than only a matter of verbal proficiency.

The classroom observations showed that students' communication in English was influenced by more than their language skills. Their cultural backgrounds also played a role. So did the relationships they had with others and the social settings where they spoke. The way they talked in class often changed depending on who they were with and what situation they were in. Several patterns kept coming up, especially when students worked with each other. These patterns involved how aware they were of differences, how they worked together to communicate, and how they adjusted their language for different situations. All of these habits are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Observed Socio-Cultural Communication Practices in English Classrooms

No.	Observed Dimension	Classroom Evidence	Interpretation
1	Peer interaction	Students frequently interacted through pair and group activities and exchanged opinions in English.	Collaborative activities created opportunities for socially situated English communication.
2	Negotiation of meaning	Students asked questions, repeated statements, paraphrased ideas, and used examples when communication difficulties occurred.	Meaning was constructed collaboratively rather than transmitted solely by individual speakers.
3	Cultural references	Students occasionally connected classroom topics with local traditions, daily practices, and personal cultural experiences.	Students used their cultural backgrounds as resources for expressing and interpreting meaning.
4	Accommodation	Students adjusted their speech rate, vocabulary, pronunciation, and explanations when communicating with peers.	Students demonstrated emerging awareness of interlocutors' linguistic and cultural needs.
5	Participation patterns	More confident students tended to initiate discussions, while less confident students participated more actively when activities were collaborative and culturally familiar.	Classroom context and cultural relevance influenced students' willingness to communicate.
6	Lecturer mediation	The lecturer encouraged students to explain differences, compare experiences, and clarify culturally unfamiliar meanings.	Lecturer facilitation supported the development of socio-cultural awareness during English interaction.

As classroom observations showed, socio-cultural communication was integrated into students' daily English learning tasks. Learners demonstrated meaning negotiation through inquiry, rephrasing, reiteration and contextual clarification. Cultural references, especially, came up naturally as students were encouraged to connect knowledge to their own experiences. The data suggested that interactional accommodation was a prominent practice. Students adapted their speech and explanations to the needs

of their peers. Joint and culturally relevant activities appeared to improve participation, especially for students who were hesitant to join at first. These insights complement the interview findings by showing that the students' actual classroom behavior showed socio-cultural communication.

Document analysis was carried out to see how socio-cultural communication was built into the lecturers' lesson plans. We focused closely on learning objectives, teaching activities, materials, ways of checking learning and chances for students to connect with social parts of learning English. The key results from the lesson plan analysis appear in Table 3.

Table 3. Socio-Cultural Communication Elements Identified in Lesson Plans

No.	Analytical Aspect	Evidence Identified in Lesson Plans	Level of Integration
1	Communication objectives	Learning objectives primarily emphasized students' ability to communicate using appropriate vocabulary, expressions, and language functions.	Moderate
2	Cultural content	Some learning activities incorporated examples related to students' local environment and everyday cultural experiences.	Moderate
3	Intercultural interaction	Pair and group activities provided opportunities for students to exchange perspectives and experiences.	Moderate
4	Negotiation of meaning	Activities involving discussion, presentation, and question-and-answer sessions created opportunities for clarification and meaning negotiation.	Moderate
5	Cultural reflection	Explicit activities requiring students to reflect on cultural differences critically were limited.	Low
6	Assessment of socio-cultural competence	Assessment criteria focused predominantly on linguistic performance, participation, and task completion rather than explicit socio-cultural competence.	Low
7	Learner identity	Opportunities for students to incorporate personal and local cultural experiences were present but not consistently articulated as learning outcomes.	Low–Moderate

The analysis of the lesson plan demonstrated the partial integration of socio-cultural communication in English teaching, but it was not systematic. The materials emphasized communication skills through cooperative work, group conversations, presentations and situational language practices. They also allowed learners to draw on local cultural experiences. Less obvious, however, were explicit learning objectives tied to cultural identity, intercultural awareness, the negotiation of cultural meaning and socio-cultural competency. Assessment requirements generally stressed linguistic competency and task completion more than students' ability to negotiate culturally diverse interactions. This finding demonstrates a divergence between the character of the activities

students took part in during classroom interaction and the prescribed purposes of instructional planning and evaluation.

3.2. Discussion

The data indicate that the learning of the English language by university students is not only a question of linguistic talents, but also a matter of socio-cultural engagement. Students involved in the study, which included interviews, classroom observations and assessments of lesson plans, engaged in meaning-making, drew on cultural identities, were adaptive to different types of communication and used personal and local cultural experiences as communicative resources. This finding supports a wider perspective of English acquisition as a socially situated process in which language, identity, culture and involvement are interrelated. English was no longer only a neutral conduit for the transfer of information but a tool for students to make sense of events, to develop social interactions and to negotiate meaning with their peers. The triangulation of data from three sources supports the argument that socio-cultural communication should be viewed as a key component of university English training, not an additional or peripheral one.

One important finding is how students make meaning. In interviews, the participants resorted to clarification, repetition, paraphrasing and contextual explanation when they encountered unfamiliar language or other modes of communication. Classroom observations validated these strategies, showing that students did not give up in the face of linguistic or cultural hurdles. They collaborated to create a shared understanding. This conclusion is important in that it challenges a competency-based view that equates successful communication with primarily grammatical accuracy and lexical diversity. In practice, the ability to identify misunderstandings, change language, seek clarification, and change responses to the interlocutor's statements may be the key to successful communication for students. Meanings in this sense are thus formed through interaction rather than existing in individual speakers. The students' language use demonstrates that the study of English is about the development of the ability to navigate ambiguity and diversity in real situations.

The results point to the importance of cultural identification for the learning of English. Generally, learners related English language activities with their culture experiences and felt more confidence when able to connect subject matter in the classroom to familiar cultural contexts. 'So young people are not coming into the English classroom as culturally neutral learners. Their identities, experiences, values and geographical expertise inform how they interpret and engage with English-mediated communication. Thus, indigenous cultural information can be an educational resource, rather than an obstacle to learning English. When learners get the opportunity to talk about events that are important to them, English is woven into their current knowledge and social situations. This is especially the case

in multilingual and multi-cultural higher education settings where the cultural heritages of students may be an asset, not an obstacle, for communicative progress (Mantra et al., 2025).

Another key finding relates to the role of interactional accommodation. It was found that students changed their speed, vocabulary, pronunciation and explanations when they spoke to their peers. These advancements are indicative of a growing understanding that effective communication requires an understanding of the needs and histories of the parties. This was an activity beyond the ordinary idea of accuracy, for students were not merely trying to be grammatically correct in English but to make the communication clear and socially appropriate. Thus, accommodation becomes a major metric of communicative skill in culturally diverse educational situations. This also indicates that learners develop elements of socio-cultural competency through engagement in interaction. Repeated exposure to different speakers can heighten students' sensitivity to the impact of their linguistic choices on comprehension and social bonding (Aminah et al., 2025).

Classroom observations also indicated that collaborative learning was particularly favorable to socio-cultural interaction. Students were encouraged to exchange ideas, enlighten interpretations and respond to a number of ways of presenting ideas through collaborative pair and group assignments. Students with lower confidence levels looked more likely to get involved when the tasks were cooperative and related to their cultural background. This implies that the social structure of classroom teaching could alter the chances for students to develop communicative competence. Lecturer-oriented education can provide opportunities for learning language structures. Still, interaction-based activities are more likely to create richer situations for learners to participate in communication as a process of negotiation. Group discussions, collaborative problem solving, presentations and peer interactions are not just techniques to boost classroom participation here. These are areas where learners are able to learn the social and cultural dimensions of using English for communication (Sabilah et al., 2025).

Based on the analysis of the documents prepared by the lecturers. Lesson plans included communicative activities, collaborative pair and group work, presentations and aspects of culture, but few specific learning objectives were related to socio-cultural communication. The assessment criteria were predominantly focused on language competency, participation and task completion and not on students' capacity to negotiate cultural meanings, demonstrate cultural awareness or adjust their communication to diverse interlocutors. That is a huge difference. The classroom activities recorded reveal that students are engaged in socio-cultural communication, but these activities are not systematically demarcated, planned or evaluated as official educational objectives. This would indicate that socio-cultural learning is episodic rather than systematic (Lai, 2023).

This conclusion indicates that socio-cultural communication has to be more explicitly integrated into the English programs in higher education. Lecturers may include learning objectives that foster

cultural interpretation, adaptive interaction, awareness of identity, negotiation of meaning, and respectful engagement with different perspectives. Educational tools can also help students compare cultural traditions, investigate communication situations embedded in context and analyze how the same communicative intents can be communicated differently in different settings. And for this reason, no educational technique should teach culture as a set of national truths. Culture should be considered as something adaptable, negotiable and related to the students' life experiences. This method would make learners active creators of the construction of meaning and not passive consumers of pre-determined cultural knowledge (Nurhaliza et al., 2025).

The data are also relevant for English competency in tertiary education. What the material demonstrates is that competence cannot be taken to mean just clarity of language. During the growth of their language skills, the learners were able to continue the debate through clarification, accommodation, contextualization and cooperative manufacturing of meaning. However, cultural standards may differ, therefore not promising efficient communication in the event of linguistic competence. This difference is especially noteworthy when English is a lingua franca for speakers of different language origins. In many cases, negotiating meaning and creating shared understanding may be as important as achieving a certain standard of native-speaker English. Thus, the present findings suggest a larger conceptualization of English proficiency that includes communicative flexibility, cultural awareness and interactional awareness (Guo et al., 2024).

Another has to do with lecturers' roles. In this instance, the lecturer is not only the provider of language training but also the facilitator of socio-cultural interaction. Analysis of observational data indicated that lecturer actions helped students compare and contrast experiences, clarify complex concepts, and communicate cultural differences, thereby opening up opportunities for more discussion. Hence, lecturers may design the environment for socio-cultural learning by choosing culturally relevant resources, creating relationships among different learners and promoting reflection on communicative experiences. Instead of lecturers responding to each misconception as it comes up, lecturers could approach these uncertain situations as opportunities for students to explore why the communication is not working and to determine other ways of connecting that work better (Sekar, 2025).

The results indicate that socio-cultural communication should be involved in the teaching of English in universities. The combination of interview, observation and document data shows that students are involved in culturally situated communication through negotiating meaning, defining identity and accommodating and collaborating. The basic problem is not to add socio-cultural communication as a new entire element, but to raise the degree of intentionality, visibility and instructional structuring of current acts. Such attributes could be integrated into classroom activities, educational goals, teaching materials, and evaluations, enabling higher education English programs to

transcend a narrow focus on language proficiency and take a wider view of communicative ability. This technique is very useful in preparing university students to use English effectively in a variety of academic, professional and cultural contexts.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that the learning of the English language by university students is not merely a linguistic ability but also a socio-cultural communication practice. Results of the interview, classroom observation, and lesson plan analysis indicate that students make sense, adapt their communication styles, express their cultural identities, and draw on their personal and local cultural experiences while working with English. The strategies indicate that good English communication requires not only grammatical correctness and lexicon, but also the ability to comprehend culturally embedded meanings, manage disparities and co-create understanding. The results also indicate that cooperative and culturally appropriate educational activities provide important contexts for students to acquire these abilities through authentic engagement.

At the same time, the study has revealed the gap between the actual socio-cultural communication practices of students and their theoretical representation in the course of educational planning and assessment. Classroom activities had an important role in motivating participation and cultural engagement, but socio-cultural competency was not explicitly articulated as a learning goal or evaluation criterion. It would therefore be useful to introduce a more systematic integration of socio-cultural factors in the aims of instruction, in the teaching materials, in the classroom activities and in the assessment of the teaching of the English language at the university level. Such an approach can transform students' cultural identities and experiences as positive educational tools to equip them to communicate in English effectively, appropriately and responsively in different social and cultural contexts.

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