

## NAVIGATING INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS WITH ENGLISH-LANGUAGE MOVIE GENRES: ENGLISH LEARNERS' VOICES

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**ABSTRACT** In the context of globalization and the increasing accessibility of English-language media, movies have become a significant source for learning about different cultures. As English has become a global lingua franca, exposure to English-language movies offers learners valuable opportunities to engage with diverse cultural narratives, values, and social norms. This study explored the effect of English movies on intercultural awareness among English learners. Particularly, it explored how learners' preferences for specific movie genres shaped their understanding of cultural differences and similarities. The present study used thematic analysis to analyze interview data from 14 English learners, aged 18 to 25, selected through convenience sampling. Participants were asked about their favorite genres and how they believed these movies influenced their perceptions of other cultures. The findings suggested that English movies significantly contributed to intercultural awareness by offering learners a deeper understanding of cultural practices, communication styles, and societal values. Genres such as comedy and romance helped participants reflect on humor, relationships, and individual freedom, highlighting cultural contrasts between their home cultures and Western norms. Furthermore, animation films introduced learners to unfamiliar cultural traditions and values in an engaging and accessible way. The research also emphasized that movies shaped learners' intercultural perspectives, both intentionally and unintentionally. This study contributed to the growing field of intercultural communication and highlighted the potential of movies as means of fostering intercultural awareness, offering valuable insights for educators and learners seeking to enhance understanding in cultural diversity.

**Keywords:** English-language movies, movie genres, intercultural awareness

### INTRODUCTION

The rapid developments of technology and transportation industries diminish distance between countries affecting constant contact between diverse cultures around the world. In this case, English as lingua franca plays a vital role as the default language in any intercultural communication settings (Victoria et al., 2024). However, oftentimes, when two people from different cultural backgrounds communicate, miscommunication is still possible to occur (Susanto et al., 2023). So, in this hyper-interconnected world, intercultural awareness is a major concern.

Intercultural awareness is described as understanding and awareness of the distinctions and resemblances between an individual's native cultures and other cultures. As Baker said that intercultural awareness is behavior and skills to consciously understand culturally heterogeneous contexts in intercultural communication (Baker, 2011). Furthermore, intercultural awareness also means that people should not assume that their culture is the most accurate one, instead, they also have to respect and perceive other cultures (Ragnarsdóttir et al., 2020). Thus, to be interculturally aware, individuals have to possess knowledge about cultural identity and also develop intercultural and cross-cultural understanding.

Intercultural awareness also has a close relationship to English language learning. English learners who are interculturally aware will use language socially and culturally correct (Back, 2023). In intercultural communication settings, making grammatical mistakes still can be tolerated. However, having low intercultural understanding and awareness can lead to cultural misunderstanding and communication failure (Nurhastuti & Basikin, 2022). Furthermore, the acquisition of target culture and intercultural awareness assist language learners to have high English proficiency level (Eren, 2024; Gashi, 2021). These explanations show that intercultural awareness and language learning are interrelated.

Knowing the urgency of intercultural awareness in learning an international language like English, prior studies have identified several approaches to fostering this competence. For instance, English textbooks enriched with cultural content can promote intercultural awareness (Amerian & Tajabadi, 2020; Haerazi & Nunez, 2022; Sihombing & Nguyen, 2022). Moreover, social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube are also effective for creating engaging virtual learning environments that enhance intercultural communication skills (Mahaputri et al., 2024; Susilo et al., 2023). Additionally, study-abroad programs provide opportunities for direct cultural immersion, which significantly contributes to the development of intercultural awareness (Baker et al., 2022; Humphreys & Baker, 2021).

While those methods above have been widely explored, limited studies have examined how English movies influence intercultural awareness. Existing research shows that incorporating English movies into teaching syllabi can create dynamic and engaging environments, supporting learners in understanding both language and cultural diversity (Çakır, 2022; Wardhany, 2022). Also, Yustika et al. (2022) highlighted how movies offer real-life examples of intercultural literacy in cross-cultural context. Whereas, Chinelo (2022) emphasized the value of English movies as authentic materials rich in cultural content.

However, those studies often focus on the general benefits of English movies or their classroom applications, with little attention paid to learners' individual movie preferences or the specific role of movie genres. The unique cultural narratives conveyed through genres, such as historical dramas, romantic comedies, or fantasy movies, remain underexplored. Thus, this study addresses this gap by investigating how English learners' genre preferences influence their intercultural awareness. By focusing on the genre-specific dimensions of movie consumption, this study provides a novel perspective that extends beyond traditional classroom contexts and contributes to a deeper understanding of intercultural learning through media.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theorizing Intercultural Awareness

As globalization continues to shape the world, ICA becomes increasingly important in various fields, including in education. Intercultural awareness (ICA) refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and appreciate cultural differences and similarities, often enhancing communication and interaction in diverse cultural contexts. According to Baker (2011), ICA involves a developmental process, where individuals progress from recognizing cultural differences to understanding the deeper social, historical, and contextual factors that shape these differences. ICA is also central to intercultural competence, which includes not only understanding other cultures but also interacting effectively across cultures (Byram, 2021). Thus, ICA requires not just recognizing differences but also being open to understand them in context and learning from them.

Several scholars have proposed models to conceptualize ICA. One prominent model is Baker's (2011) three level framework, which outlines how individuals develop ICA over time. Level 1, basic cultural awareness, focuses on the recognition of cultural differences. At this stage, individuals acknowledge surface level cultural differences, such as customs, food, and language. This stage is often characterized by curiosity but lacks a deeper understanding of cultural significance. Level 2, advanced cultural awareness, emphasizes the understanding of cultural fluidity. At this stage, individuals begin to appreciate that cultural practices evolve and are influenced by history and context. This stage fosters a deeper understanding of how culture shapes behavior and promotes empathy toward cultural diversity. Level 3, intercultural awareness, is about critical reflection and self-awareness. At this stage, individuals critically reflect their own cultural assumptions and become aware of how their cultural identity shapes their interactions. This stage requires individuals to challenge their own biases and engage in

more thoughtful and open-minded intercultural communication. This model is used as the basis to analyze the data obtained in this study.

### **The Link between English Learning and Intercultural Awareness**

English learning is closely associated with intercultural awareness. Language and culture are interconnected. English language learning includes not only mastering grammar and vocabulary but also understanding the cultural characteristics and values embedded in the language (Kim, 2020). It is important to understand the culture of the target language for acquiring meaning. However, it is not easy to understand different cultures. Individuals often face challenges, such as misinterpreting cultural contexts and being culturally insensitive (Taylan & Weber, 2023). To overcome this, incorporating local culture contents into English lessons can be one of the solutions to increase English learners' intercultural awareness and communicative competence (Kustati et al., 2023). Markey et al. (2021) also mentioned that promoting intercultural understanding can be done through integrating cultural contents into English teaching and learning which leads to the nurture of intercultural awareness. Additionally, combining cultural dimensions in English language instruction can also assist the development of English learners' intercultural awareness and understanding (Baker & Fang, 2020). Thus, it is clear that English learning is closely linked to intercultural awareness.

### **Movies and English Language Learning**

Movies often portray, reflect, and disseminate cultural diversity. The portrayal of multiculturalism is a familiar theme in movies which sometimes can affect individual mindset (Changsong & Yiming, 2017; Maheendran, 2017; Matthews & Tran, 2023). Movies have been shown to have a positive impact on English language learning, especially in terms of vocabulary acquisition and cultural representations (Sánchez-Auñón et al., 2023). A study proved that watching English movies can help enhance EFL learners' cultural competence and cultural awareness (Çakır, 2022; Chinelo, 2022; Wardhany, 2022; Yustika et al., 2022). In addition, movies also provide authentic language input and exposure for language learning which can improve their language proficiency and fluency also their cultural understanding (Chaya & Inpin, 2020; Hoinbala, 2022). So, there is no doubt that Movies impact English language learning positively.

### **How Movies Navigating Intercultural Awareness**

Movies play a vital role in navigating intercultural awareness. Movies enable people, particularly the younger generation, to learn and understand diverse cultures around the world (Kim, 2020). Language learners can develop intercultural sensitivity and empathy by watching movies from distinct countries (Popa et al., 2021). Other than that, movies-based learning can be implemented as a method to enhance cross-cultural awareness among language learners (Chaya & Inpin, 2020). Movies can also act as exciting and motivating tools which can help language learners improve their intercultural understanding and awareness (Çakır, 2022; Wardhany, 2022).

For example, Sreekumar & Poongodi (2024) revealed that Disney has made efforts to include diverse cultures in their movies such as *Moana* (2016) and *Mulan* (2020). *Moana* (2016) is set in Polynesia and incorporates Polynesian myths and legends, while *Mulan* (2020) is based on a Chinese ballad and set in ancient China. Other than that, characters like *Moana* and *Mulan* are depicted as strong, independent, and capable of solving their own problems, challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes. These movies show that Disney movies not only entertain but also reflect cultural perception and values (Sreekumar & Poongodi, 2024). Overall, movies have the ability to positively influence language learners' perceptions of different cultures while also encouraging intercultural understanding and appreciation.

### **English Movie Genres and How It Relates to Intercultural Awareness**

English movie genres serve as rich mediums for navigating intercultural awareness, with each genre offering unique insights into cultural values, histories, and social norms.

Drama films, for instance, often deal with emotional stories and social issues that reflect cultural tradition (Freebody & Finneran, 2021). A film like *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) helps audiences understand British class systems and gender roles (Damayanti, 2024). Whereas, historical films give insight into important historical events and values, helping people learn about shared histories and perspectives (Paça Cengiz, 2023). Romantic comedies are another movie genre to understand cultural practices and explore intercultural relationships by highlighting the challenges of balancing love, family expectations, and cultural identity (Ballantine, 2021). Action and adventure movies often focus on universal themes like heroism and justice, but most of them also reflect specific cultural values. For instance, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022) showcases African-inspired cultures and traditions, emphasizing themes of resilience and community (Distiller, 2022). Science fiction and fantasy films often use imaginary worlds to talk about real-world issues. For example, *Dune* (2021) explores themes of colonization and environmentalism (Prihatika, 2024). Lastly, documentaries give a direct look into real-world cultural practices and histories. A film like *American Factory* (2019) shows the cultural and economic clashes between American and Chinese workers in a factory in Ohio (Hu, 2023). Together, these genres help audiences learn about and appreciate cultural diversity, making English movies a key resource for navigating intercultural awareness.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a phenomenological research design to explore how English learners used English movies to navigate their intercultural awareness. The aim of this study was to understand how participants' engagement with different movie genres influenced their perceptions of cultural differences, values, and social norms. By employing a phenomenological design, this study provides an in-depth exploration of English learners' lived experiences with movie genres and their role in navigating intercultural awareness (Ary et al., 2019). Thus, the design of this study suits its aim to explore the ways in which English learners navigate and develop intercultural awareness through exposure to English-language movies.

Fourteen English learners from Indonesia, aged 18 to 25, were selected through convenience sampling to participate in the study. This age group was chosen because it is likely to include individuals who were actively involved in both language learning and media consumption. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews by using an interview guide. The interview guide included questions about the types of movies they watched, their genre preferences, and how these genres helped them navigate their intercultural awareness. Questions were open-ended to encourage detailed responses and reflection. To ensure the validity of the instrument, the interview guide was reviewed by two experts in the fields of language education, cultural studies, and qualitative research. These experts evaluated the questions for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's objective. Additionally, the instrument was piloted with two participants who were similar to the main study sample but not included in the final data collection. The piloting process helped identify potential ambiguities in the questions and ensured that the guide effectively elicited the desired information. Ethical considerations also included by obtaining informed consent from all participants. All data collected were anonymized and interview recordings were securely stored and deleted after transcription.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative approach that identifies and interprets patterns and themes in participants' responses. The analysis focused on the movie genres participants preferred and how these genres shaped their understanding of cultural differences and similarities. It also highlighted the role of movies in shaping their intercultural awareness and offered a deeper understanding of how media consumption can influence learners' perceptions of other cultures.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

The findings reveal how English learners' exposure to English-language movies navigates their intercultural awareness. Participants' reflections on their experiences watching different genres of English-language movies revealed how they recognized and understood intercultural values. Their awareness of cultural differences and similarities was shaped by the themes, characters, and social issues presented in each genre. Certain genres significantly impacted participants' understanding of cultural norms, values, and social practices. The genres that stood out most were comedy, romance, animation, horror, and musical. Through these genres, participants were able to relate certain values to their own cultural background while also recognizing new concepts or differences that they had not previously encountered. Below are the key findings for each genre.

#### **Comedy Genre**

Comedy films offer participants a unique perspective on Western humor, everyday social norms, and informal communication styles. These films often highlight interactions in friendships, workplaces, and public spaces, making them relatable learning experiences for participants. Exposure to sarcasm, slang, and awkward social scenarios provided participants with a deeper understanding of Western-style humor. One of participants mentioned *Free Guy* (2021), which blends humor with video game culture. Participant noted that the film's playful approach to reality and the use of modern slang helped them understand Western humor.

#### *Excerpt:*

*"At first, I didn't understand why people found it funny when the main character kept saying 'don't have a good day, have a great day.' Later, I realized it was about being playful and sarcastic with daily language. It made me see how humor in Western culture can be subtle but meaningful." (P12)*

Another comedy movie that participants referred to was *Jojo Rabbit* (2019). While the film addresses a serious historical period, its use of dark humor and satire prompted reflections on how humor can tackle sensitive topics.

#### *Excerpt:*

*"At first, I felt uncomfortable laughing because it's about a serious topic. But then I realized that Western humor sometimes uses serious issues to create comedy. It made me see that humor isn't always lighthearted, and sometimes it's used to criticize or reflect on society." (P7)*

Participant also referenced *Don't Look Up* (2021), a satirical comedy about society's response to a global crisis. The film's depiction of media sensationalism and government indifference introduced participant to Western satire as a form of social critique.

#### *Excerpt:*

*"The way the media and politicians acted in Don't Look Up felt exaggerated but also real. I didn't realize that humor can be used to criticize serious issues like politics. It showed me that satire can be a way to question leaders and systems in society." (P1)*

Through these films, participants became aware of how Western humor relies on wordplay, satire, and playful sarcasm. They noted that, unlike in their home cultures, dark humor and political critique are more common in Western media. Participants also gained insight into how humor is used to challenge authority and address serious issues, often blurring the line between laughter and discomfort.

#### **Romance Genre**

Romance movies offer participants a glimpse into love, dating, and relationship values in Western societies. Participants noted that, unlike in their home cultures, Western romance films often highlight individual freedom in love and personal happiness over family approval.

This was particularly clear in films like *Me Before You* (2016), *La La Land* (2016), and *Pride and Prejudice* (2005).

*Excerpt:*

*“This movie taught me that love doesn’t always mean staying together. The idea of self-fulfillment and personal choice was something I hadn’t thought about before. It’s very different from my culture, where people stay together even if they’re unhappy because of family pressure.” (P8)*

Another participant commented on the idea of love as personal freedom after watching *La La Land*. Unlike many romance films with happily-ever-after endings, *La La Land* ends with two main characters pursuing their own dreams.

*Excerpt:*

*“I was surprised by the ending of La La Land. I expected them to stay together, but instead, they both followed their dreams. It showed me that love doesn’t always come first in life, which was really different from what I had learned growing up.” (P5)*

Family involvement in romantic relationships was also a major theme. Participant 9 discussed the influence of family in *Pride and Prejudice* and compared it to their own cultural context.

*Excerpt:*

*“In Pride and Prejudice, family opinions about marriage are still important, but Elizabeth Bennet ultimately makes her own decision. It was interesting to see the balance between family expectations and personal choices. In my culture, family has a much stronger influence, and most people don’t marry without approval.” (P9)*

These reflections suggest that romance films expose participants to cultural contrasts in love, dating, and marriage. The idea of pursuing love for personal happiness rather than for family expectations was frequently mentioned. Participants also became aware of the role of individual agency, personal dreams, and the evolving role of women in relationships, all of which were less familiar in their own cultural experiences.

### **Animation Genre**

Participants shared that animated movies helped them become more aware of different cultures and traditions. These movies introduced them to cultural values, beliefs, and family customs from various parts of the world. Since animated films are visually engaging and use storytelling, they were seen as an easy and enjoyable way for participants to learn about other cultures.

The most frequently mentioned animated films were *Moana* (2016), *Coco* (2017), and *Encanto* (2021). These films exposed participants to Polynesian, Mexican, and Columbian cultures, helping them understand cultural heritage, family roles, and beliefs.

*Excerpt:*

*“I loved how Moana showed Polynesian culture, especially their strong relationship with the ocean. It was interesting to see how their traditions were connected to nature and the idea of sailing as part of their identity.” (P2)*

*Excerpt:*

*“Before I watched Coco, I didn’t know much about the Day of the Dead in Mexico. It taught me how families remember their ancestors and how this tradition connects them with loved ones who have passed away. It was emotional, and it made me appreciate how different cultures honor their family members.” (P6)*

*Excerpt:*

*“Encanto taught me about Colombian family life. I notice how every family member has a role, and I learned how strong family ties are in Latin American culture. The*

*house (Casita) was a symbol of family unity, and the music also showed me how important music is in storytelling.” (P11)*

These reflections show that animated films like *Moana*, *Coco*, and *Encanto* help participants learn more about different cultures. The films introduced them to ideas like spiritual beliefs (*Moana*), family remembrance (*Coco*), and family unity (*Encanto*). By using animation and emotional storytelling, these films made it easier for participants to understand and appreciate other cultural values and traditions.

### **Horror Genre**

In addition to animation, participants also reflected on their exposure to horror movies, which provided them with insights into cultural fears, values, and the use of suspense in entertainment. Horror movies often feature culturally specific themes, such as superstitions, taboos, and the supernatural, which vary significantly across different cultures. The most mentioned horror movies included *The Conjuring* (2013) and *A Quiet Place* (2018). These movies were highlighted by participants for showcasing how horror narratives are deeply intertwined with cultural fears and how Western horror movies approach suspense and terror.

*Excerpt:*

*“This movie was not just about monsters; it was about survival in silence. It made me think about how Western horror movies focus a lot on the idea of survival, where you need to outsmart your fears, rather than just confronting them head-on.” (P5)*

*Excerpt:*

*“This movie scared me a lot because it was based on a true story. I noticed how it focuses on haunted houses and ghosts. In my country, we also have ghost stories, but in Western movies, they use a lot of psychological fear rather than physical monsters.” (P7)*

These reflections reveal how horror movies contribute to participants' intercultural awareness by exposing them to cultural representations of fear. Unlike their own cultural experiences, participants noted that Western horror movies often rely on psychological tension, haunting imagery, and the concept of survival rather than solely focusing on spiritual or supernatural entities.

### **Musical Genre**

Musicals were noted for their ability to introduce participants to historical events, social movements, and emotional expression. Participants cited films like *Hamilton* (2020), *La La Land* (2016), and *The Greatest Showman* (2017) as valuable learning experiences. *Hamilton* (2020) provided participants with a fresh perspective on U.S. history.

*Excerpt:*

*“I didn't expect a musical to teach me about history. Hamilton made me realize that historical figures could be seen in modern ways, especially with hip-hop music. I learned about America's founding fathers, but it felt modern, which made it more interesting.” (P5)*

*La La Land* (2016) was appreciated for its exploration of individual dreams and personal ambition.

*Excerpt:*

*“The idea of pursuing your dream no matter what was inspiring. In my country, people often focus on family goals, but in Western films like La La Land, it's all about personal ambition. I saw how individual dreams can shape someone's whole life.” (P12)*

*The Greatest Showman* (2017) was recognized for its message of diversity and self-acceptance.

*Excerpt:*

*"I loved how the 'freaks' in the circus were shown as people who deserved love and respect. It made me think about how society treats people who are 'different.' This lesson was clear even without needing much dialogue." (P4)*

Musical films offer participants access to cultural histories, personal dreams, and diverse identities. This genre combines music, visual storytelling, and emotional performance, making it a powerful medium for cultural learning.

### **Discussion**

This study explored how exposure to different movie genres navigates participants' intercultural awareness. The findings demonstrate that genres such as comedy, romance, animation, horror, and musicals offer unique pathways for participants to recognize, reflect on, and critically evaluate intercultural differences. Drawing on Baker's (2011) framework of three levels of intercultural awareness (ICA), the findings illustrate how participants' engagement with these films moves them from surface-level recognition of cultural differences to deeper reflection on their own cultural norms and beliefs.

At the basic level of ICA (level 1), participants recognized visible cultural elements, such as social norms, communication styles, and everyday behaviors depicted in romance and comedy films. For instance, participants observed that romance films like *Me Before You* (2016) and *Pride of Prejudice* (2005) emphasize personal choice in love and marriage, which differs from the stronger role of family influence in their home culture. Similarly, in comedy films like *Free Guy* (2021) and *JoJo Rabbit* (2019), participants noted the use of sarcasm, satire, and wordplay as elements of Western humor, contrasting with humor styles in their own cultural contexts. These moments of recognition align with Baker's (2011) description of level 1 ICA, where people recognize visible cultural differences but still see them as fixed and separate from their own cultural beliefs.

At the second level of ICA, participants began to see that cultural differences are not fixed but can change depending on the situation. For example, romance films like *La La Land* (2016) shows that love does not always have a happily-ever-after ending. Participants reflected on how Western romance values focus on personal growth and pursuing dreams, even if it means letting go of love. This concept was new to some participants who were used to seeing love stories end with marriage or lifelong relationships. Horror films like *The Conjuring* (2013) and *A Quiet Place* (2018) also encouraged reflection on the different ways cultures represent fear. Unlike horror stories in their own countries that often focus on ghosts or monsters, Western horror movies rely more on psychological fear and survival tactics. This shift in perspective shows how participants moved to Baker's (2011) level 2 of ICA, where cultural norms are seen as fluid and changeable depending on context.

At the third and most advanced level of ICA, participants went beyond noticing and understanding cultural differences. They started to reflect on their own beliefs and values. For example, after watching the musical *Hamilton* (2020), some participants were surprised to see how historical events could be retold using modern rap and hip-hop music. This made them question the way history is taught in their own culture, where historical figures are often presented in a more serious and traditional way. Similarly, after watching romance films, participants started to question the idea that love must always follow family approval. For instance, *Me Before You* (2016) challenged participants' views on love and personal happiness, especially the idea that love should continue at all costs. Instead, they saw that love and personal choice are equally important, leading them to question their own cultural beliefs about relationships. According to Baker's (2011) idea of level 3 of ICA, this process is key to developing deeper intercultural awareness because people not only notice differences but also question their own values and beliefs.

The results of this study align with Baker's (2011) theory of intercultural awareness. Previous studies have found that media, especially movies, can help people recognize and

reflect on cultural differences (Çakır, 2022; Chaya & Inpin, 2020; Kim, 2020; Popa et al., 2021; Wardhany, 2022). This study adds to that understanding by showing how different movie genres play unique roles in this process. For example, comedy and horror helped participants notice and understand new ideas about humor and fear, supporting level 1 and level 2 of ICA. On the other hand, romance and musicals went further, encouraging participants to reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions, which supports level 3 of ICA. This finding highlights how film genres can act as learning spaces, each offering different types of cultural knowledge.

In summary, this study shows that different movie genres help people move from simply noticing cultural differences to deeply reflecting on their own beliefs. By encouraging this process, movies become a powerful tool for promoting intercultural awareness.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has shown that watching English-language movies plays a significant role in navigating intercultural awareness. By exploring various genres, such as comedy, romance, animation, horror, and musicals, participants were able to gain insights into Western cultural values, social norms, and diverse perspectives. The findings highlight how different genres contribute uniquely to intercultural understanding. These results reinforce the ideas that films are a valuable tool for learning about other cultures and fostering a deeper understanding of cultural differences. This study also suggests that focusing on specific genres can offer a more detailed and meaningful approach to intercultural learning, providing a foundation for future research on the impact on media in shaping intercultural awareness.

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