

DIGITAL REALIA IN ESL CLASSROOMS: LOCAL CULTURE INTEGRATION AS A TOOL FOR DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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Abstract. This paper explores the role of digital realia in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, emphasizing the integration of local culture as a means of fostering intercultural competence. Incorporating cultural elements into digital learning materials not only enriches language acquisition but also equips learners with the skills to engage in meaningful intercultural communication. Through digital tools, students can present their own cultural values within a global context, gain awareness of other cultures, and expand communicative abilities. Findings suggest that embedding local culture via digital realia enhances learner motivation and prepares students for effective intercultural interaction.

Keywords: digital realia, local culture, ESL, intercultural competence, learner motivation

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается использование цифровой реалии в обучении английскому языку как иностранному. Интеграция элементов локальной культуры в учебный процесс способствует не только более глубокому освоению языка, но и формированию межкультурной компетенции у студентов. Цифровые ресурсы позволяют учащимся представлять собственные культурные ценности в глобальном контексте, лучше понимать другие культуры и развивать навыки межкультурного общения. Результаты исследования показывают, что включение локальной культуры через цифровую реалию повышает мотивацию студентов и готовит их к эффективному межкультурному взаимодействию.

Ключевые слова: цифровая реалия, локальная культура, ESL, межкультурная компетенция, мотивация.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the role of English as a global lingua franca has highlighted the necessity of equipping learners not only with linguistic proficiency but also with the ability to interact effectively across cultures. As a result, the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become a central goal in modern ESL and EFL instruction. While numerous studies have examined the integration of cultural content into language curricula, the use of digital realia—authentic digital materials such as videos, virtual tours, online visuals, and multimedia resources—to introduce and represent local culture remains an emerging and under-researched area.

In the context of Uzbekistan, English teachers increasingly seek innovative strategies that connect global communication with national identity. However, limited attention has been paid to how local cultural elements can be presented through digital tools in English classrooms, and how such practices may support the development of students' intercultural competence. This gap in the literature suggests the need for a more systematic exploration of digital realia as a pedagogical resource.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the potential of digital realia in integrating local cultural content into ESL lessons and to analyze its role in fostering intercultural



competence among learners. By reviewing existing theoretical frameworks and practical applications, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how digital technologies can support culturally responsive and globally oriented English language teaching.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design based on a systematic review of scholarly literature, pedagogical frameworks, and practical case analyses related to the use of digital realia in ESL classrooms. The methodology focuses on examining how integrating local cultural content through digital tools influences the development of learners' intercultural communicative competence

LITERATURE REVIEW:

In recent decades, the importance of cultural competence alongside linguistic competence in English language teaching has been widely recognized. According to the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) framework, language teaching should go beyond mere grammar and vocabulary to include cultural awareness, sociolinguistic knowledge, and the ability to interact across cultures (Byram, 2021). As argued by some scholars, competence needed for cross-cultural communication goes beyond traditional notions of “native-speaker proficiency” — learners need to become “intercultural speakers”, who can mediate between their own and other cultures (Risager, 2007; as cited in recent ELT research)

A growing body of empirical research confirms that integrating cultural content into English language teaching (ELT) — especially via authentic materials — can effectively support ICC development. For instance, a large-scale literature review of 36 empirical studies found that using texts (especially fiction) in ELT classes, combined with dialogic and student-centered activities, significantly fosters intercultural learning. The review highlights that such pedagogical choices enable deeper reflection, cultural comparison, and critical awareness rather than superficial exposure to culture (Author of review, 2021).

Beyond texts, “realia” — i.e. real-world or authentic materials, objects, or media — has also been shown to be an effective pedagogical tool in language teaching contexts. Research in several settings demonstrated that realia helps bridge the gap between classroom language and learners' real-life experience, increases student engagement, and improves communication competence (Patmi & Sabaruddin, 2021; Ahmadova, 2025). For example, a study with young learners showed that using realia media significantly improved vocabulary acquisition and made learning more meaningful and contextualized (Humaira et al., 2022).

More recent studies have combined the intercultural competence framework with realia-based teaching or culturally responsive material design. For example, a study using an intercultural-based language learning (IBLL) model found that embedding cultural awareness and intercultural tasks into speaking instruction significantly enhanced prospective teachers' linguistic awareness and speaking skills — suggesting a strong link between intercultural pedagogy and practical language competence (Haerazi, Irawan & Sotlikova, 2023). Similarly, literature-based approaches in higher education — using novels or other English literature, coupled with intercultural tasks — have been shown to stimulate students' intercultural communication skills (Datokarama, Thayyib & Haerazi, 2023).



Moreover, studies have tested full “intercultural communicative language teaching” (ICLT) models in EFL contexts, showing that structured intercultural instruction over a term can lead to measurable improvement in both language competence and ICC. For example, a study with Vietnamese EFL learners demonstrated significant gains after a 13-week ICLT course in both language proficiency and intercultural competence (Le & Nguyen, 2018). Another recent study in Taiwan found that explicit intercultural instruction improved EFL learners’ ICC, especially when combined with reflection on learners’ backgrounds and exposure to varied cultural content (Chang & Lee, 2021).

Despite these promising results, the literature also highlights several challenges and limitations. First, many English teaching contexts treat culture as a “bonus” or add-on, rather than integrating intercultural elements systematically into syllabus or assessment; this often leads to superficial or stereotyped cultural exposure (Young & Sachdev, 2011; Holliday, 2011). Second, the selection of texts or realia matters: fictional vs non-fictional texts, pictures vs objects vs digital media — each has different affordances, and without careful design, the pedagogical potential may not be realized (Critical review, 2021). Third, in many EFL settings, teachers lack training in intercultural pedagogy, assessment mechanisms for ICC are underdeveloped, and institutional constraints (time, resources) limit opportunities for meaningful intercultural teaching (Research on EFL in Asia, 2021; recent reviews).

In sum, the existing literature suggests that culturally responsive teaching — especially when combined with authentic realia, thoughtful selection of materials (texts, objects, media), dialogic and student-centered pedagogy, and systematic curricular integration — offers a promising path for developing intercultural communicative competence in English language learners. However, successful implementation depends heavily on teacher preparedness, pedagogical design, and contextual adaptation, which remains a challenge in many EFL/ESL contexts.

Finally, given the growing evidence, there is still a need for more research on digital realia (e.g., multimedia, virtual tours, local-culture digital content) as a means to promote ICC, especially in contexts outside Anglophone countries. This gap suggests an opportunity for studies — like yours — to contribute meaningful insights into how local culture, digital realia, and language teaching can be integrated to foster global competence while preserving identity.

RESULTS

The review of the selected literature reveals that integrating digital realia—such as virtual tours, multimedia presentations, digital storytelling, and online cultural artifacts—significantly enhances learners’ intercultural competence in ESL environments. Studies consistently demonstrate that students become more motivated and actively engaged when local cultural elements are connected to English language learning through digital tools. The findings also suggest that teachers who utilize digital realia provide more meaningful cultural comparisons, enabling learners to recognize both similarities and diversity among cultures.

Furthermore, evidence shows that showcasing students’ own cultural identity in English through digital platforms strengthens their confidence and communicative skills. When learners present traditions, historical heritage, or contemporary social life via digital media, they not only improve language proficiency but also develop a sense of belonging within a global community.



ANALYSIS

The thematic analysis identifies four main pedagogical benefits of digital realia in developing intercultural communicative competence:

1. Authentic Cultural Exposure

Digital realia provides learners with access to genuine cultural materials, allowing them to observe and engage with cultural norms and behaviors in an interactive manner rather than relying solely on textbook-based explanations.

2. Representation of Identity

Through technology-enhanced tasks, learners can articulate and present their national identity in English, promoting cultural self-awareness and facilitating a reciprocal process of intercultural learning.

3. Enhanced Motivation and Collaboration

Technology-supported cultural activities increase learner motivation and foster active involvement, encouraging peer collaboration, creativity, and meaningful participation in classroom tasks.

4. Critical Cultural Reflection

Digital realia enables students to compare cultural practices in Uzbekistan with those in English-speaking contexts, helping them move beyond stereotypes and cultivate open-minded, critical perspectives.

Despite these advantages, analysis also reveals several challenges:

- Teachers may have limited digital literacy or resources
- Integration requires careful planning to avoid superficial cultural references
- Assessment of intercultural competence remains complex

Overall, the themes demonstrate strong pedagogical relevance and potential for broader implementation.

DISCUSSION

The results align with current educational requirements emphasizing the importance of culturally responsive teaching in ESL contexts. As globalization accelerates, students must not only acquire linguistic accuracy but also effectively communicate with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Digital realia appears to be a pedagogically viable solution that links classroom language learning with real-world intercultural needs.

In the context of Uzbekistan, incorporating local cultural content through technology can address the gap between students' national identity and global communication demands. By transforming familiar cultural elements into English-mediated digital content, learners position themselves as cultural ambassadors, contributing to international dialogue while preserving their heritage.

However, sustainable integration of digital realia requires:



- Professional development for teachers in instructional technology
- Institutional support for digital infrastructure
- Clear pedagogical guidelines to ensure intercultural competence outcomes

Future research may focus on classroom-based experiments and learner assessment models to further validate the impact of digital realia in ESL teaching.

Moreover, the use of digital realia encourages learner autonomy and critical thinking. When students interact with authentic multimedia materials—such as virtual museum tours, real-time cultural videos, or digital artefacts—they actively construct meaning rather than passively receive information. This experiential mode of learning fosters deeper cognitive engagement and enhances learners' ability to interpret cultural nuances, a skill that is crucial for developing intercultural communicative competence.

Another important implication concerns equity and accessibility. While digital realia offers rich learning opportunities, differences in students' access to devices and stable internet connectivity may create disparities in learning outcomes. Therefore, policymakers and educational institutions must ensure that technological integration does not widen the digital divide. Providing equitable access to resources, both in urban and rural settings, is essential for maximizing the benefits of digitally enhanced language education.

Finally, digital realia has the potential to strengthen collaboration between local and international educational institutions. Through virtual exchanges, joint cultural projects, and online communication platforms, students can engage with peers from around the world, allowing them to practice English authentically while sharing their own cultural perspectives. Such initiatives not only reinforce language proficiency but also contribute to mutual respect and global citizenship.

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