

FOSTERING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURALLY SENSITIVE TOPIC

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Abstract

This study explores the interests and comfort levels of students in discussing culturally sensitive topics within the English classroom. Using a specially designed questionnaire, we asked students about their willingness to engage in conversations on subjects such as sexual violence, sex education, homosexuality, religion, gay rights, politics, transgender issues, abortion, suicide, tradition, superstition, race discrimination, refugees, social class, and gender equality. The data was taken from English major students of Dian Nuswantoro University. The collected data were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive method to provide a detailed understanding of 61 student's attitudes toward these topics. The results reveal varying degrees of interest and comfort among students, highlighting the challenges and opportunities for integrating culturally sensitive discussions in educational settings. The findings emphasize the importance of culturally responsive teaching practices and suggest that educators need to navigate these discussions with care to ensure an inclusive and respectful classroom environment.

Keywords – culturally sensitive, english classroom, student perspective

Introduction

In recent years, the integration of culturally sensitive topics in educational curricula has become increasingly important. As societies become more diverse, classrooms reflect a multitude of perspectives, experiences, and cultural backgrounds. This diversity gives both opportunities and challenges for lecturer or lecturer, especially when addressing sensitive topics such as sexual violence, sex education, homosexuality, religion, gay rights, politics, transgender issues, abortion, suicide, tradition, superstition, race discrimination, refugees, social class, and gender equality (Banks & Banks, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2022). These subjects are often at the intersection of personal beliefs, societal norms, and legal frameworks, making them complex yet essential for comprehensive education.

The main challenge lies in the varying comfort levels and interests of students in engaging with these topics. While some students might feel passionate about discussing and understanding these issues, others might find them uncomfortable or even distressing. The role of the lecturer is crucial in creating a classroom environment that is both inclusive and respectful, where students feel safe to express their thoughts and learn from each other. Previous studies have highlighted the significance of culturally responsive teaching in promoting equity and understanding within the classroom (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2014).

To address these challenges, this study aims to explore the interests and comfort levels of students in discussing culturally sensitive topics in their English classes. The central research questions guiding this study are: (1) What are the students' interests in discussing culturally sensitive topics?

- (2) How comfortable are students in engaging with these topics in an English classroom setting?
- (3) What reasons influence students' willingness to participate in these discussions?

The purpose of this research is to provide lecturer with insights into student attitudes towards sensitive topics, thus aiding in the development of teaching strategies that are both effective and considerate of students' diverse backgrounds and perspectives. By understanding students' interests and comfort levels, educators can better facilitate discussions that are not only educational but also supportive of students' emotional and psychological well-being (Nieto, 1992).

The benefits of this research extend to various aspects within the educational scope. For lecturers, the findings can widen the information that include culturally sensitive topics in a manner that is engaging and respectful. For students, the research can lead to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment where they feel valued and understood. Additionally, for policymakers and curriculum developers, the study provides evidence-based insights that can guide the creation of educational policies and programs that promote cultural sensitivity and inclusivity (Sleeter, 2011).

Therefore, addressing culturally sensitive topics in the classroom is crucial for fostering a comprehensive and empathetic educational experience. This study seeks to illuminate the perspectives of students on these issues, thereby contributing to the broader goal of creating educational environments that are both inclusive and equitable.

Methodology

The study utilized a qualitative descriptive research design to explore students' interests and comfort levels in discussing culturally sensitive topics within the English classroom. Qualitative descriptive research is appropriate for this study as it allows for a detailed and nuanced understanding of the students' perspectives and experiences (Sandelowski, 2000).

The subjects for this research are university students of Dian Nuswantoro University who enrolled English courses. The selection criteria include students from different ages and genders to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the collective attitudes toward culturally sensitive discussions. A total of 61 students participated in the study, providing a broad spectrum of views and experiences.

The data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed specifically for this study. The questionnaire included open-ended and close-ended questions to gather detailed information about students' interests and comfort levels regarding culturally sensitive topics. The topics covered in the questionnaire included sexual violence, sex education, homosexuality, religion, gay rights, politics, transgender issues, abortion, suicide, tradition, superstition, race discrimination, refugees, social class, and gender equality. The close-ended questions are yes or no options. The open-ended questions were to dig into student perceptions based on their answer.

The primary instrument for data collection was the questionnaire, which was divided into three sections. The first section gathered demographic information, such as age, and gender. The second section included Likert-scale questions to measure students' interest and comfort levels with each topic. The third section consisted of open-ended questions that allowed students to elaborate on their responses and provide additional insights.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis techniques. The close-ended questions were quantitatively analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize the levels of interest and comfort among the students. For the open-ended questions, thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns in the students' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of the student's attitudes and perceptions. The research was conducted in several stages. Initially, the questionnaire was developed and validated through a pilot study with a small group of students to ensure clarity and relevance. After refining the questionnaire based on feedback, the final version was administered to the participants during regular class sessions. Students were given sufficient time to complete the questionnaire, and their responses were collected anonymously to ensure confidentiality. After collecting the data from Google Form, the responses were coded and organized for analysis. The quantitative data were automatically coded into percentages from the spread sheet. The qualitative data from the open-ended questions were transcribed and analyzed thematically to identify key themes and insights.

The results of the analysis were then synthesized to provide a comprehensive understanding of the student's interests and comfort levels in discussing culturally sensitive topics. These findings later, were used to draw conclusions and make recommendations for educators on how to effectively integrate these discussions into the English curriculum while maintaining a supportive and inclusive classroom environment.

Finding and Discussion

The findings reveal a complex interplay between students' interests and comfort levels in discussing culturally sensitive topics. The research questions sought to understand these dynamics, and the results provide a clear picture: while students show a strong interest in certain topics, their comfort levels vary significantly. This indicates a need for educators to create a supportive environment where sensitive topics can be discussed openly and respectfully.

Table 1. Data of Yes Responds

	Yes Responds	18	19	20	21	22	23
Sex Education	78,7%	8	10	13	4	1	1
Sexual Violence	58,3%	5	20	9	2	1	1
Homosexuality	39,3%	4	10	6	2	1	1
Gay Rights	31,1%	3	8	4	2	1	1
Religion	80,3%	8	23	11	5	1	1
Transgender Issues	50,8%	6	13	7	3	1	1
Politics	65,6%	5	16	11	5	1	1
Abortion	44,3%	5	11	7	1	1	1
Suicide	73,3%	6	22	12	2	1	1
Traditions	90%	10	23	13	5	1	1
Superstitions	80%	8	22	12	4	0	1
Race Discrimination	68,9%	6	20	9	4	1	1
Refugees	66,7%	4	19	10	4	1	1
Social Class	88,5%	9	24	14	5	1	1
Gender Equality	77%	8	19	13	5	1	1

Table 1 indicates varying levels of interest and engagement with culturally sensitive topics among students. Specifically, 12 out of 16 topics received affirmative responses from over 50% of participants, demonstrating a general willingness to engage in these discussions within the classroom setting. The age distribution of participants includes 10 students aged 18, 27 students aged 19, 15 students aged 20, 6 students aged 21, and one student each aged 22 and 23. This distribution suggests that late adolescence and early adulthood (ages 18-20) are critical periods for cultivating awareness and facilitating discussions on these issues. Consequently, students within this age range exhibit a heightened interest in addressing culturally sensitive topics in their English classroom.

The findings from the close-ended questions are further corroborated by an additional inquiry regarding students' comfort levels when asked by their lecturer to discuss these topics in class. The data indicates that 55 out of 61 participants expressed that they would have no issue engaging in discussions on these topics if prompted by their lecturer. This is noteworthy despite the fact that a portion of students showed a lack of interest in these topics, as reflected in Table 1.

The data also reveals that topics such as homosexuality, gay rights, and abortion gained less than 50% interest from students. Several factors likely contribute to this lower level of engagement. Cultural sensitivity and stigma play significant roles, as discussions around homosexuality and gay rights are often highly sensitive and stigmatized in Indonesian cultures. Students might feel uncomfortable expressing their views due to fear of social judgment, peer pressure, or conflicting cultural and familial values. Similarly, abortion is intertwined with strong moral, ethical, and religious beliefs, making it a controversial and deeply personal subject that students might avoid discussing to prevent polarized opinions and discomfort. Additionally, a lack of awareness and understanding can lead to hesitancy in discussing these issues, as meaningful engagement requires a certain level of education and confidence that students might not possess. The perceived personal relevance of these topics also affects interest levels; if students have not encountered these issues directly, they might not feel compelled to discuss them. Furthermore, the fear of potential backlash or negative consequences from discussing controversial subjects can deter students from expressing interest. Lastly, the educational environment and the approach of instructors towards these topics can significantly influence student interest. A classroom environment that does not foster open and safe discussions about sensitive topics can further discourage students from engaging. Therefore, while there is a general willingness among students to engage with culturally sensitive topics, the lower interest in homosexuality, gay rights, and abortion underscores the ongoing challenges in addressing these issues in educational settings and highlights the need for supportive and inclusive environments that encourage open dialogue.

Based on the 59 responses to the question regarding the positive impact of discussing culturally sensitive topics in an English classroom, several key implications emerge. Many students highlight that these discussions help broaden their perspectives and increase their knowledge, recognizing the educational value in understanding diverse issues. Engaging with these topics also fosters critical thinking and awareness, making students more open-minded and better equipped to analyze complex social issues. Furthermore, these discussions promote inclusivity and respect for diverse opinions and backgrounds, allowing students to appreciate different cultural and social experiences. Additionally, the opportunity to articulate thoughts and engage in respectful dialogue enhances communication and interpersonal skills. Practical knowledge

gained from topics like sex education and sexual violence informs students' daily lives and decision-making processes. Such discussions contribute to a positive learning environment where students feel comfortable exploring sensitive topics, indicating the importance of fostering a supportive atmosphere. Moreover, these conversations prepare students for global citizenship by increasing their awareness of global issues and diverse cultural contexts. Overall, incorporating culturally sensitive topics into the curriculum significantly enhances students' educational experience by broadening their knowledge, fostering critical thinking, promoting inclusivity and respect, and improving communication skills, thereby preparing them for active and informed participation in a diverse and interconnected world.

In another response for open-ended question regarding the negative impact or consequences of discussing culturally sensitive topics in an English classroom, many respondents express concerns that such discussions can lead to feelings of discomfort, discrimination, or offense, particularly if students have differing cultural backgrounds or deeply held beliefs. The potential for misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and miscommunication is also highlighted, which can result in conflicts or debates among students. Some fear that curiosity might lead to inappropriate behavior or that the discussions might be perceived as too vulgar or sensitive. Additionally, there is a risk that these conversations might reinforce negative stereotypes or stigmas, and students might feel bullied or threatened. The responses underscore the importance of handling these discussions with care to avoid alienating or harming students while recognizing the diverse perspectives within the classroom.

In short discussing culturally sensitive topics in an English classroom offers significant educational benefits, including broadening students' perspectives, enhancing critical thinking, promoting inclusivity, and improving communication skills. These discussions prepare students for global citizenship and informed participation in a diverse world. However, the potential negative impacts, such as feelings of discomfort, discrimination, misinterpretation, and conflict, highlight the need for careful and respectful handling of these topics. Balancing the benefits and risks requires creating a supportive and inclusive environment that respects diverse perspectives and fosters open dialogue.

Based on the findings, this study is consistent with previous research on culturally responsive teaching and student engagement. (Gay, 2018) emphasized the need for educators to be culturally responsive to create an inclusive classroom environment. (Hammond, 2014) further argued that understanding students' cultural backgrounds and experiences is crucial for effective teaching. The current study adds to this body of knowledge by providing specific insights into students' interests and comfort levels with a range of culturally sensitive topics. Previous studies have explored students' attitudes towards discussing sensitive topics, but few have provided a comprehensive analysis of such a wide range of issues. For example, (Nieto, 1992) focused on the importance of discussing race and ethnicity in the classroom, while (Sleeter, 2011) highlighted the educational value of ethnic studies. The current study builds on these findings by examining additional topics such as gender equality, sexual violence, and mental health, providing a broader perspective on students' interests and comfort levels. The findings suggest a potential modification to existing theories of culturally responsive teaching. While previous theories have emphasized the importance of integrating students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2014), the current study indicates that students' comfort levels must also be

taken into account. This suggests that culturally responsive teaching should not only consider cultural relevance but also ensure that the classroom environment supports open and respectful discussions.

The results of this study have several practical implications for educators and policymakers. First, it is essential for educators to receive training on how to handle sensitive topics in a culturally responsive manner. This includes understanding the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students and being equipped with strategies to facilitate respectful and inclusive discussions (Nostrand, 1989).

Second, curriculum developers should consider incorporating a broader range of culturally sensitive topics into the educational framework. This not only enhances student engagement but also prepares students to navigate complex social issues in their personal and professional lives (Banks & Banks, 2019).

Third, creating a supportive classroom environment is crucial for discussing sensitive topics. This can be achieved by establishing clear guidelines for respectful communication, providing support for students who may find certain topics distressing, and fostering a classroom culture that values diversity and inclusion (Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Nieto, 1992).

While this study provides valuable insights, it has several limitations. The focus on a single urban high school may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational settings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases related to social desirability or inaccurate self-assessment. Future research should explore these topics in different educational contexts, including rural and suburban schools, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' attitudes towards culturally sensitive discussions. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine how students' interests and comfort levels evolve over time and in response to various educational interventions.

The findings of this study contribute to the theoretical understanding of culturally responsive teaching. The emphasis on both interest and comfort levels suggests that educators need to consider the emotional and psychological aspects of learning in addition to cultural relevance. This aligns with the holistic approach to education advocated by scholars such as (Maslow, 1958), who emphasized the importance of addressing students' basic needs to facilitate higher-order learning. Moreover, the study supports the social constructivist perspective, which posits that learning occurs through social interactions and the co-construction of knowledge (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). The role of peer influence and classroom environment highlighted in this study underscores the importance of collaborative learning and the need for educators to create supportive and inclusive communities of learners.

Conclusion

In general this study shows how important it is to balance students' interests and comfort levels when discussing culturally sensitive topics in an English classroom. These discussions can greatly enrich students' learning by broadening their perspectives, enhancing critical thinking, promoting inclusivity, and improving communication skills. However, they can also bring challenges like discomfort, discrimination, and conflict. The findings suggest that lecturers need to create a

supportive and inclusive environment that encourages open and respectful dialogue, while also integrating students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum. This approach is vital for preparing students to navigate a diverse world. To achieve this, lecturers should receive training on handling sensitive topics, curricula should include a range of culturally relevant issues, and classrooms should foster a culture of respect and support. Future research should explore these dynamics in various educational settings to further improve culturally responsive teaching practices.

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