



## Cultural Beats and Language Feats: Enhancing English Skills at @America through Jazz Music Festival

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### Abstract

This study explores how immersive language use and cultural exposure can enhance English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning among Indonesian university students. It aims to identify the communicative benefits of participating in an interactive visit to @america, an American cultural center in Jakarta, and to examine how visual ethnography supports students' reflections on intercultural learning. On December 3, 2024, one hundred EFL students attended the Empire Wild Jazz Music Festival at @america, engaging in authentic listening, speaking, and intercultural interaction under a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) framework. Photographs and personal reflections served as primary data for the visual ethnographic analysis. The findings indicate that this informal, immersive environment increased students' motivation, fostered fluency development, and deepened cultural awareness. The visual documentation process also encouraged students to critically reflect on their learning and cultural experiences. This study demonstrates that integrating experiential activities and visual reflection into EFL curricula can help educators bridge the gap between classroom instruction and real-life communication, ultimately enhancing students' engagement and intercultural competence.

**Keywords:** *American center, cultural immersion, communicative language teaching, EFL, visual ethnography*

## **Introduction**

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts such as Indonesia, learners often encounter English only within the boundaries of the classroom, limiting their exposure to authentic communication and cultural contexts. Bridging this gap between classroom instruction and real-world English use is essential for developing learners' communicative competence and intercultural awareness (Richards, 2006). Because language functions as both a communicative and cultural tool, immersive experiences outside formal instruction can significantly enhance students' motivation, fluency, and retention (Krashen, 1982; Nunan, 2003; Sato & Loewen, 2019).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) addresses these goals by promoting engaging interactions, learner-centered tasks, and real-life language use (Savignon, 2002; Ellis, 2018). However, applying CLT principles in EFL settings is often challenging due to limited access to proficient speakers and insufficient cultural immersion opportunities. As a result, most EFL students practice English in textbook-driven environments that offer little room for spontaneous communication or cultural exchange.

One promising alternative is to incorporate structured cultural immersion experiences into language instruction. @america, a public cultural center sponsored by the U.S. Embassy and located in Jakarta's Pacific Place Mall. It regularly hosts free American-themed educational and cultural programs, such as public lectures, live musical performances, and interactive workshops, creating an accessible and informal venue for students to practice English while engaging with U.S. culture. On December 3, 2024, a cohort of 100 EFL students from Horizon University Indonesia attended the Empire Wild Jazz Music Festival at @america. This live concert which showcased American jazz performers was especially significant because jazz is a uniquely American art form with deep cultural and historical roots. Experiencing jazz live enabled students to appreciate not only the language used by the performers but also the cultural contexts and emotional expressions that shaped the music.

Despite growing interest in experiential learning, most existing research on immersion programs in EFL settings has focused on long-term overseas programs (Brennan & Schulze, 2004). Short-term, locally accessible immersion experiences like visits to cultural centers, especially those combined with live cultural events, remain underexplored. Moreover, while Visual Ethnography has proven valuable in capturing the cultural and emotional depth of language learning (Pink, 2013; Kharel, 2015; Kiss & Weninger, 2017), few studies have applied it in the context of short-term cultural immersion in Southeast Asian EFL classrooms.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasizes the role of meaningful

interaction and real-life communication in developing learners' language proficiency (Savignon, 2002). It encourages students to participate in authentic tasks that reflect real-world language use and intercultural engagement. However, applying CLT in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts can be challenging. Many EFL learners, especially those in non-English-speaking countries, have limited exposure to English outside the classroom and rely heavily on textbooks and grammar-focused exercises (Doeur, 2022). These constraints reduce opportunities for genuine communication and intercultural experience.

To address this issue, researchers have investigated cultural immersion as a supplement to formal instruction. Although most studies focus on long-term, overseas programs, short-term and local immersion experiences also show promise. Brennan and Schulze (2004), for example, demonstrated that structured cultural activities can enhance students' intercultural sensitivity, confidence, and motivation. These findings imply that even brief exposure to authentic English environments whether real or simulated can offer valuable opportunities for language practice and cultural learning. However, in the Indonesian higher education context, research into the impact of local cultural visits on EFL learning remains limited.

Visual Ethnography provides an additional lens for examining such experiences. This method uses photographs, videos, and other visual data to explore learners' cultural and emotional responses (Pink, 2013). In language education, visual approaches can capture rich, nuanced interactions often overlooked by traditional assessments (Kharel, 2015; Kiss & Weninger, 2017). Despite its potential, Visual Ethnography is rarely integrated into EFL research in higher education, especially in Indonesia.

While CLT and Visual Ethnography are well-established individually, few studies have combined them to examine local, short-term cultural immersion experiences. Existing research mostly emphasizes long-term international programs or classroom-centered activities, leaving a gap in understanding how local cultural visits can support EFL learners' communicative and intercultural development. Moreover, the role of visual data in capturing the depth of these immersive learning processes is still underexplored.

This study addresses these gaps by combining CLT and Visual Ethnography to examine the linguistic and intercultural learning that took place during this jazz-centered immersion event at @america. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do students describe their communicative experiences during the jazz performance and related interactive activities at @america?
2. In what ways do visual documentation and reflections help students process

and make meaning of their cultural and linguistic encounters?

3. What practical implications can these findings offer for EFL educators looking to integrate cultural immersion into their teaching practice?

By situating this inquiry in the context of a live jazz music event at a U.S. cultural center, this study contributes to EFL research and practice in several ways. It provides empirical evidence of the benefits of short-term cultural immersion, highlights the role of music and performance as powerful tools for intercultural understanding, and underscores the value of visual ethnographic methods for documenting nuanced learning experiences. Ultimately, these insights may encourage educators and curriculum designers to incorporate similar local immersion opportunities into their instruction, fostering richer, more holistic language development for EFL learners.

## **Method**

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how a short-term cultural visit supported students' English learning through communicative engagement and visual reflection. Integrating principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Savignon, 2002) and Visual Ethnography (Pink, 2013), this research examined both linguistic practice and cultural immersion.

The participants were 100 undergraduate students aged 19–22 from Horizon University Indonesia. They were selected through purposive sampling by English lecturers, who nominated students demonstrating intermediate or higher English proficiency across the Faculty of Informatics and Computer Technology (FICT), the Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS), and the Faculty of Management and Business (FMB). All participants had at least one year of formal English instruction and were familiar with basic conversational English.

The visit took place on December 3, 2024, and lasted approximately four hours. Three of these hours were spent at @america, an American cultural center located in Jakarta, where students attended the Empire Wild Jazz Music Festival. The live event featured American jazz musicians and included informal Q&A sessions with the performers as well as spontaneous conversations with staff and other visitors. This informal, real-world environment offered students opportunities to practice listening, speaking, and intercultural interaction outside the classroom.

Data consisted of photographs taken by the researchers, who also served as accompanying lecturers during the visit. The images captured student engagement, body language, facial expressions, group dynamics, and intercultural interactions as they experienced the event. Approximately 50 images were collected during the visit, and a final set of 15 was selected for analysis. Images were chosen for their

visual clarity and thematic relevance to CLT, focusing on authentic communication and intercultural engagement. They were also guided by visual ethnographic criteria (Pink, 2013), such as observable gestures, emotional responses, and social interactions.

Analysis was conducted using a visual ethnographic approach, which allowed the researchers to interpret the non-verbal aspects of the students' participation alongside CLT principles. Interpretation focused on identifying evidence of authentic communication and intercultural awareness, allowing for a holistic understanding of the language and cultural experiences that emerged during the visit. Throughout the research process, the researchers reflected on their positionality as both educators and data collectors. Since they facilitated the visit and interacted closely with students, they kept a reflexive journal to acknowledge their influence on data collection and to remain conscious of their dual role.

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, findings were triangulated across different visual observations, and member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary results with a small group of students to gain feedback. Dependability was ensured by carefully documenting all decisions related to data selection and analysis, while transferability was supported through rich, detailed descriptions of the context, participants, and research procedures. Together, these strategies ensured a rigorous and transparent research process that can inform future work in EFL learning and cultural immersion.

## Findings

This section discusses how the immersive cultural environment at @america supported students' English learning through real-world engagement and visual experience. Drawing on the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Visual Ethnography, the findings highlight how space, interaction, and emotional response intersected during the cultural visit. Analysis of visual data and spoken student reflections reveals that a simulated American setting created meaningful opportunities for communication, intercultural learning, and increased motivation.

The replica of the Statue of Liberty, American flags, and interactive exhibits created a visually rich environment that many students described as "*exciting*" and "*inspiring*." Throughout the visit, students spontaneously reacted to these cultural elements. One student shared, "*When I saw the Statue of Liberty, it felt like I was in America. It made me want to speak English and take photos with my friends.*" From a CLT perspective, this immersive setting encouraged spontaneous communication. Students engaged in informal conversations with guides, facilitators, and one another including many who normally stayed within their own friend circles. One

participant noted, *"I usually feel shy in class, but here I felt more confident to speak,"* which reflects Savignon's (2002) emphasis on authentic communication in meaningful contexts.

The Empire Wild Jazz Music Festival also offered a dynamic linguistic and cultural experience. Observation data revealed enthusiastic student responses to the live performance-clapping, smiling, and making comments to one another during the event. The musicians introduced themselves, told brief stories, and invited the audience to participate, providing an authentic context for listening and responding. Many students reacted naturally in English; one remarked, *"The way they spoke felt natural. I could follow their English easily,"* while another added, *"I learned new phrases just by listening and reacting to the band."* These spontaneous verbal exchanges align with CLT's focus on real-life language use, allowing students to practice listening and speaking skills without scripted dialogues.

This informal, enjoyable environment also supported emotional engagement. Spoken reflections showed that students felt more relaxed and less hesitant to use English during the event. One exclaimed, *"The concert was fun. I forgot I was practicing English because I was enjoying myself,"* while others noted that experiencing American culture through live music helped them feel more personally connected to the language. These emotional responses underscore CLT's view that motivation and comfort significantly influence language learning, reinforcing the role of informal, immersive cultural spaces in fostering students' confidence and interest.

In sum, the cultural visit created a supportive visual and auditory environment that encouraged communication and intercultural engagement. The findings show that short, local immersion experiences can enhance students' language use and motivation when they involve authentic interactions, cultural richness, and enjoyable experiences.

## **Discussion**

This section explores the cultural visit to @america from the perspective of Visual Ethnography, extending the earlier findings by examining the visual and social dimensions of students' engagement. Whereas the Findings focused on students' communicative behaviors and responses, this Discussion considers what the visual data including space, gestures, expressions, and interactions-reveal about their experiences. It reflects on how the simulated American setting shaped the atmosphere for learning, supported authentic intercultural encounters, and enhanced students' motivation. In doing so, this section highlights the unique value of visual evidence in deepening our understanding of informal language learning contexts. The first analysis is taken from Figure 1.



Figure 1. The Liberty Statue replica

Figure 1 presents a visual snapshot of the @america studio, where the room was designed to reflect iconic symbols of American culture. The replica of the Statue of Liberty, graffiti-style walls, and American flags combined to create an immersive environment that most students described as distinctly “American.” This visual setting sparked visible excitement, evident in photographs of students smiling, pointing toward cultural symbols, posing for pictures, and engaging in spontaneous conversations. The familiar yet stimulating surroundings appeared to encourage students to use English naturally as they reacted to the displays and shared their impressions.

Applying a Visual Ethnographic lens, the analysis of these photographs focused on students’ body language, facial expressions, and spatial choices. Images showed open postures, hands gesturing toward exhibits, and groups clustering around particular visual elements. Students appeared engaged and attentive—leaning in during conversations, laughing together, and making eye contact with one another as they interacted with the space. One image showed a group of students discussing a graffiti map of the United States, with one participant pointing and saying, *“I want to go here someday!”* Moments like these illustrate how the environment acted as both a cultural and linguistic prompt, inviting English use in a natural and enjoyable way.

At the same time, the visual data also revealed differences in levels of engagement. A few students appeared more hesitant—lingering at the periphery of groups, avoiding eye contact, or speaking softly in their first language. Some later

shared that they felt overwhelmed by the setting or were unsure how to begin interacting in English, despite being surrounded by familiar cultural symbols. These less engaged students highlight the importance of targeted support or scaffolding in immersive environments, ensuring that all learners feel equally comfortable participating and communicating.

Compared to traditional classroom settings, the @america environment offered a more dynamic and sensory-rich experience that supported language use beyond structured exercises. In the classroom, students typically engage in planned dialogues or controlled speaking tasks, often constrained by fear of making mistakes. In contrast, the informal and symbolic space of @america appeared to lower affective barriers: students were observed asking spontaneous questions (e.g. *“Are we in Times Square?”* and *“Have you been to New York?”*), making comparisons between cultures, and sharing impressions in English without being prompted by a teacher.

In terms of specific linguistic outcomes, the environment encouraged the development of functional speaking skills, including asking questions, giving opinions, making comparisons, and expressing curiosity. Students practiced formulaic expressions such as *“Where is this?”* and *“I think it’s...”*, as well as spontaneous language related to the visual stimuli. Listening skills were also engaged, as students needed to process responses from guides and peers in real time. These authentic interactions reflected the CLT goal of meaningful communication in context (Savignon, 2002), with the visual ethnographic evidence capturing how the space itself facilitated this process.

In summary, Figure 1 illustrates that space, symbolism, and visual context can powerfully enhance language learning when combined with communicative principles. The application of Visual Ethnography in this study demonstrates that local cultural immersion programs can create rich, multi-layered learning experiences, though attention must be paid to students who may need additional encouragement or support in informal settings.

The second analysis is taken in Figure 2.





Figure 2. Empire Wild Jazz concert

Figure 2 captures a live performance during the Empire Wild Jazz Music Festival at @america, where two cellists, Ken Kubota and Mitch Lyon who engaged students in a vibrant, immersive environment framed by American-themed stage décor. The stage was adorned with U.S. flag-colored props, dynamic lighting, and urban imagery, creating an authentic American concert atmosphere. This multisensory setting heightened students' attention and interest, encouraging them to listen, respond, and participate in English more naturally than they typically would in a traditional classroom.

Ken Kubota and Mitch Lyon, Juilliard-trained co-founders of Empire Wild, blend classical, folk, pop, and jazz influences into their music. Known for their commitment to education and community engagement (Empire Wild, n.d.), they modeled intercultural openness and accessibility during the event. Throughout the performance, they paused to introduce themselves, explain song choices, and invite audience reactions—all in clear, conversational English. These spontaneous interactions offered students authentic exposure to speech patterns, humor, and informal expressions in real time.

Using a Visual Ethnographic lens, systematic observations of the photographs revealed diverse nonverbal forms of engagement. Many students could be seen leaning forward, making eye contact with the performers, clapping along to the music, and moving rhythmically—behaviors that reflected emotional investment and active listening. Images also showed students recording videos, pointing toward the stage, and exchanging excited remarks in English with nearby peers. However, some students stood at the back of the crowd or appeared hesitant, highlighting that despite the engaging setting, not all learners felt equally comfortable participating in spoken interactions.

Compared to a typical classroom, where language practice often follows scripted dialogues or teacher-led exercises, the live performance created spontaneous linguistic opportunities. Students practiced real-time listening by decoding remarks and lyrics, and some commented to one another using simple English like *"That was amazing," "Do you play other instruments?"* and *"What's your favorite song?"* Observing the event as an informal learning space revealed that students felt more at ease expressing reactions and emotions in English, supported by the energetic music and visual stimuli surrounding them.

In terms of learning outcomes, students developed practical listening and conversational skills by hearing authentic speech, mimicking pronunciation, and engaging in informal small talk. The dynamic environment also lowered language anxiety and encouraged risk-taking—a core CLT principle—allowing students to use English more naturally and joyfully. Furthermore, the visual ethnography showed that the cultural richness of the setting enhanced motivation and shaped language use as a social and emotional process.

In sum, the analysis of Figure 2 demonstrates that immersive cultural experiences like live music can create engaging, emotionally supportive contexts for language practice. By combining CLT principles with Visual Ethnography, this study underscores how multisensory and informal learning spaces help students build linguistic confidence and intercultural awareness outside the classroom.

The last observation is taken in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Fun activities in @america

Figure 3 captures a lively scene of Horizon University students playing Xbox and Uno in the casual, American-themed lounge at @america. Students sat comfortably on carpeted areas surrounded by visual cultural elements like U.S. flags, Statue of Liberty decorations, and graffiti-style murals of New York. All of

which shaped an immersive, informal environment. This visually rich setup created a social, low-pressure space that encouraged students to interact naturally with one another in English while engaging in familiar games.

Playing games together in this simulated American setting facilitated authentic, goal-driven language use, reflecting core principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Throughout these interactions, students practiced collaborative decision-making, offered suggestions, and responded to one another with simple but purposeful phrases such as *"Your turn," "Draw two cards,"* or *"That's not fair!"* The spontaneous communication that emerged around these games illustrates how task-based, interest-driven activities can prompt students to use English as a functional, socially meaningful tool—something rarely achieved in traditional classroom exercises focused on rehearsed dialogues or textbook drills.

Applying a Visual Ethnographic lens, systematic observation of the photographs revealed nonverbal signs of engagement and comfort. Many students were leaning toward one another, smiling, laughing, and pointing at game pieces — visual cues that signaled high levels of enjoyment and immersion. The informal layout and playful group dynamics seemed to reduce linguistic anxiety, encouraging more students to take conversational risks. However, a few students remained more passive, sitting slightly apart or watching without actively joining the conversations, suggesting that even in such informal settings, personal confidence and language ability may influence participation.

Compared to classroom-based practice, where language use is often highly structured, the gaming session at @america promoted real-time, interactive language practice that felt more intuitive and enjoyable. Existing research supports this kind of learning: Peterson (2010) argues that digital and tabletop games promote dialogue and cultural exchange, while Reinhardt (2019) emphasizes that game-based contexts encourage cooperation and focus on shared goals, creating authentic opportunities for communication. The visual data also reflect the autonomy and emotional investment described by Sockett (2014), who highlights that informal learning environments driven by learners' own interests often result in deeper engagement and increased confidence.

In short, the Xbox gaming area at @america was not simply a recreational activity; it was a collaborative, multimodal space where students practiced practical English in a way that felt meaningful to them. By integrating CLT principles with Visual Ethnography, this analysis underscores the pedagogical value of informal, technology-mediated cultural immersion, demonstrating how playful, interactive contexts can help redefine students' relationship with English beyond the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study shows that a short visit by Horizon University Indonesia students to @america provided useful support for their English learning through cultural and social interaction. Applying Communicative Language Teaching and Visual Ethnography, the research demonstrated how an informal, hands-on setting encouraged students to practice English naturally while engaging with American-themed exhibits and activities. Photographs and observations revealed that students spoke, asked questions, and responded to one another more freely than they typically would in a classroom. Compared to regular classes or textbook exercises, this visit created a space where students felt more comfortable trying out their English. However, some students stayed on the sidelines or hesitated to participate, which suggests that these types of visits might need more guidance or structured tasks to involve everyone. It's also unclear whether a one-time visit can produce lasting improvements without further practice or follow-up. The findings show that cultural centers like @america can offer meaningful practice outside of formal lessons. They give students opportunities to listen to native speakers, learn new phrases, and use English for real purposes like chatting with friends, responding to performers, or reading signs. By combining CLT and visual data, this study highlights how short cultural visits can help students gain confidence and see English as a practical skill they can use — an experience that regular classrooms often struggle to provide.

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