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From WhatsApp to Whiteboard: Intra-Cultural Norms and EFL Interaction in Indonesian MTs Classrooms

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study investigates how intra-cultural norms shape English as a Foreign Language (EFL) interaction among Grade IX students in an Indonesian Islamic junior high school. Data were collected from 40 students and two English teachers over two months through classroom observations, a 12-item questionnaire, and interviews. Quantitative findings show high levels of intra-cultural awareness, with no significant gender differences, and a moderate positive correlation between intra-cultural awareness and students' digital participation. Qualitative analysis using Braun and Clarke's thematic approach identified four overarching themes illustrating how cultural values guided participation, humor use, peer correction, and teacher mediation in both classroom and WhatsApp-based interaction. Overall, the study demonstrates that intra-cultural norms operate as both supportive and restrictive forces in students' communicative behavior across face-to-face and digital settings. The findings highlight the importance of culturally responsive EFL pedagogy and suggest integrating socio-pragmatic awareness into instructional practices to better align English learning with students' local communicative realities.

Keywords: *intra-cultural communication, EFL interaction, WhatsApp learning, MTs classroom*

Introduction

Culture has long been recognized as a central component of English language teaching; however, most scholarship has approached it through an intercultural lens, emphasizing learners' exposure to global communication norms. Recent work highlights the equally critical role of intra-cultural communication, referring to meaning-making processes among individuals sharing the same cultural background and social expectations (Yang & Yeh, 2021). Such processes including harmony maintenance, politeness norms, and hierarchical sensitivity shape how Indonesian learners position themselves, interact with authority, and negotiate peer relationships in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting.

These dynamics are particularly salient in Islamic junior high schools (MTs), where classroom expectations are informed not only by local cultural norms but also by religious teachings that emphasize *adab* (appropriate conduct), cooperation, and humility. This intersection gives rise to a communicative environment where English practices are filtered through cultural-religious expectations, making MTs classrooms a sociocultural unique site for examining EFL interaction.

The widespread adoption of WhatsApp during and after the COVID-19 pandemic further expanded students' communication spaces. In Indonesia, WhatsApp became the most ubiquitous educational platform due to affordability, ease of access, and integration into learners' everyday lives. Research from the file highlights that WhatsApp enables students to:

- participate using voice notes to reduce speaking anxiety,
- use emojis and humor to maintain group harmony,
- ask questions politely through private chats, and
- access materials asynchronously despite infrastructural constraints (Maknunah & Rizal, 2024; Alimah et al., 2025; Sari, 2024).

These features transform traditional participation patterns and reshape teacher–student roles by blending formality with informality. Yet, as noted in file-based research, cultural norms continue to regulate digital behavior, such as students' avoidance of direct criticism, their continued reliance on honorifics, and the persistence of turn-taking hierarchies (Nur et al., 2024; Naghdipour & Manca, 2022).

Despite these developments, a significant gap remains: very few studies examine intra-cultural norms across both classroom and WhatsApp interaction simultaneously, particularly within Islamic school contexts where cultural and religious values intertwine. Most digital-learning research in Indonesia focuses on technology use, online participation challenges, or speaking strategies, but not on how local communication norms mediate English interaction across hybrid learning spaces (Abdusyukur et al., 2022; Butarbutar et al., 2023).

Addressing this gap is important for two reasons. First, it reveals how learners' English communication is shaped not only by instructional design but by deep-seated socio-cultural schemata. Second, it provides insights for developing culturally

responsive and context-sensitive EFL pedagogies suited to Indonesian Islamic school settings.

Accordingly, this study examines how intra-cultural norms influence Grade IX students' EFL interaction across classroom and WhatsApp environments at MTsN Makassar, and how teachers and students perceive the role of cultural values in shaping participation.

Literature Review
Intra-Cultural Communication and Classroom Discourse

Intra-cultural communication refers to message exchange among individuals who share cultural heritage, values, and social norms. In Indonesian classrooms, these norms include **collectivism, hierarchy, and indirectness**, which collectively shape students' approaches to turn-taking, feedback, and cooperation (Nadia & Amalia, 2025; Wibawa & Sumarwan, 2024). These cultural dimensions often lead learners to avoid explicit disagreement, soften criticism, and depend on teacher cues patterns that may diverge from Western-influenced communicative language teaching approaches emphasizing assertiveness and direct participation (Rezai, 2023).

Studies from the file highlight that such norms contribute to classroom behaviors such as hesitation to volunteer answers, preference for group consensus, and reliance on polite negotiation strategies (Hartiwi, 2024; Fatonah et al., 2024). In MTs contexts, religious values intensify these tendencies through emphasis on respectful conduct and maintaining harmony among peers and with teachers.

Digital Platforms, WhatsApp, and EFL Interaction

WhatsApp has become a dominant tool for Indonesian EFL learning, valued for affordability, accessibility, and alignment with students' daily communication habits. File-based studies show that WhatsApp enables:

- voice messages for pronunciation practice and reduced anxiety (Minalla, 2022),
- emoticons and humor as strategies for maintaining group cohesion (Sari, 2024),
- private chats allowing students to request clarification politely and avoid public mistakes (Alimah et al., 2025),
- flexible participation, enabling quieter students to contribute more confidently (Nur et al., 2024).

These affordances soften the rigidities of traditional classroom hierarchy by decentralizing teacher control and providing a less intimidating environment for communication. However, intra-cultural norms continue to be evident: students still hesitate to interrupt teachers in group chats, avoid direct confrontation in feedback,

and rely on respectful forms of address (Naghdipour & Manca, 2022).

Connecting Cultural Norms Across Modalities

Evidence from the uploaded research suggests that intra-cultural values particularly politeness, face protection, and group harmony are not diminished in digital spaces but adapted to them. Humor becomes more prominent online as a relational strategy; turn-taking becomes more flexible but remains teacher-led; and peer correction stays indirect to avoid embarrassment (Maknunah & Rizal, 2024; Riza et al., 2024).

This continuity supports the need for studying hybrid environments as interconnected sociocultural systems rather than separate domains.

Integrated Research Gap

Although Indonesian studies have explored digital learning, mobile-assisted language learning, and collaborative strategies, few have addressed how intra-cultural norms mediate EFL interaction simultaneously across classroom and WhatsApp contexts, particularly within Islamic junior high schools where cultural and religious values interplay. The uploaded research emphasizes gaps in alignment between pedagogical expectations and cultural behavior, highlighting the need for frameworks that account for socio-pragmatic realities in hybrid contexts (Butarbutar et al., 2023; Abdusyukur et al., 2022).

This study responds to that need by examining how intra-cultural norms inform students' communicative behavior across both modalities at MTsN Makassar.

Research Objectives and Questions

The study aims to:

1. Examine how intra-cultural norms influence students' EFL interaction in MTsN Makassar classrooms.

2. Compare interactional patterns between face-to-face and WhatsApp-based communication.

3. Identify students' and teachers' perspectives on how cultural values shape participation.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of students' awareness and application of intra-cultural norms in EFL classroom interaction?

2. Is there any relationship between students' intra-cultural awareness and their digital participation?

3. How do teachers and students describe the role of local cultural values in English communication?

Method
Design
This study employed a mixed-methods design integrating quantitative and qualitative procedures to investigate intra-cultural norms in students' English as a Foreign Language (EFL) interaction at MTsN Makassar. The mixed-methods approach enabled triangulation across data sources, thereby strengthening the validity and trustworthiness of findings by combining statistical patterns with contextualized accounts of interaction (Clark & Clark, 2022; Nafsiah, 2024). The qualitative strand was used to deepen and explain quantitative trends, following an explanatory-sequential logic.

Participants
Participants consisted of 40 Grade IX students and two English teachers from MTsN Makassar. A convenience sampling strategy was used based on classroom accessibility and teacher permission. The school had sixth Grade IX classes (total 240 students); one intact class (n = 40) was selected because of its active use of a structured WhatsApp group for English lessons.

Students were aged 14–15 years and had studied English for a minimum of three years. All 40 students were members of the class's WhatsApp group administered by the English teachers.

For the qualitative phase, 10 students were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure variation in gender, participation level (high–medium–low), and digital engagement based on questionnaire scores. Both English teachers were also interviewed to provide triangulated perspectives on cultural norms and instructional practices.

Instruments
1. Questionnaire
A 12-item, 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire measured six domains relevant to intra-cultural communication in EFL interaction:
1. Politeness and respect

2. Peer collaboration

3. Turn-taking behavior

4. Comfort in giving/receiving correction

5. Digital participation

6. Cultural awareness

The internal consistency reliability coefficient was **α = .86**, indicating strong reliability.

Validity: Content validity was established through expert review involving two EFL lecturers with research expertise in sociocultural communication. They examined item clarity, cultural relevance, and conceptual alignment with the study's constructs.

2. Interview Guide

Semi-structured interviews explored students' and teachers' perceptions of cultural norms, politeness expectations, correction practices, and the influence of WhatsApp on communication. The guide included open-ended questions such as:

- *"How do cultural values influence the way you participate in English class?"*

- *"What differences do you notice between speaking in class and communicating in the WhatsApp group?"*

3. Observation Sheet

Observations were conducted across six classroom lessons and six WhatsApp activity cycles using a structured observation sheet documenting:

1) turn-taking patterns

2) politeness markers (e.g., honorifics, hedging, hesitation)

3) teacher–student interaction sequences

4) peer support and correction strategies

5) instances of humor or solidarity building

6) participation frequency (oral and digital)

Codes were developed inductively and refined during pilot observations. Each classroom session lasted **70 minutes**, matching the school's schedule.

Procedures
Classroom Observations

Direct observations were conducted during scheduled English lessons. Field notes were taken using the observation sheet, with attention to verbal, non-verbal, and culturally driven interactional behaviors.

WhatsApp Monitoring

WhatsApp interactions were monitored using complete message capture during instructional tasks (not personal chats). All messages exchanged in the group during learning activities were anonymized and exported for analysis. No private WhatsApp messages were accessed.

Questionnaire Administration

The questionnaire was distributed in Week 4. Students completed it during class under researcher supervision.

Interviews

Interviews with 10 students and both teachers were conducted in **Week 8**. Each interview lasted 20–30 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent.

Data Analysis
Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using **SPSS 27**. Descriptive statistics (mean, SD, and percentages) were used to summarize students' intra-cultural awareness scores. Inferential statistics included:

1. Independent-samples t-test to examine gender differences

2. Pearson correlation to explore relationships between intra-cultural awareness and digital participation

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data (interviews, observations, WhatsApp messages) were analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, involving:

1. Familiarization

2. Initial coding

3. Theme generation

4. Review and refinement

5. Theme definition

6. Reporting

Trustworthiness Procedures:

- A second coder independently coded 25% of the dataset, achieving inter-rater agreement of 82%.

- Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with five participants to ensure accuracy.

- Triangulation was achieved by comparing themes across classroom observations, WhatsApp logs, and participant interviews.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the MTsN Makassar school committee. Written parental consent and student assent were obtained. All names were pseudonymized, and WhatsApp data were anonymized prior to analysis. Participants could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Classroom Interaction and Participation Domains

Domain	Items	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
Politeness and Respect	2	4.31	0.48	Very High
Peer Collaboration	2	4.15	0.52	High
Turn-Taking Behavior	2	3.96	0.55	Moderate–High
Comfort in Correction	2	3.84	0.60	Moderate
Digital Participation	2	4.09	0.51	High
Cultural Awareness	2	4.37	0.46	Very High
Overall	**12**	**4.12**	**0.54**	**High**

Interpretation Note:
1.00–1.80 = Very Low; 1.81–2.60 = Low; 2.61–3.40 = Moderate; 3.41–4.20 = High; 4.21–5.00 = Very High.
Students displayed high overall intra-cultural awareness, with the strongest domains being Cultural Awareness (M = 4.37) and Politeness/Respect (M = 4.31). These patterns reflect the collectivist and high-context communication traditions typical of South Sulawesi.

Table 2. Gender Differences in Intra-Cultural Awareness

Gender	N	M	SD	t (38)	p	Interpretation
Male	18	4.08	0.58			
Female	22	4.15	0.51	-0.42	.68	Not Significant

There were no significant gender differences (p > .05), indicating that both male and female students internalize intra-cultural norms similarly, consistent with Indonesian collectivist values where behavioral expectations are shared widely across genders.

Table 3. Correlation Between Intra-Cultural Awareness and Digital Participation

Variables	r	p	Interpretation
Intra-Cultural Awareness × Digital Participation	.46	.004	Moderate positive correlation

A moderate positive correlation (r = .46) suggests that students with stronger intra-cultural awareness participate more actively in WhatsApp-based EFL communication. Practically, this means:

- Students who better understand politeness, hierarchy, and shared values are *more confident* sending messages and responding in digital spaces.

- Cultural norms appear to facilitate, not restrict, digital engagement WhatsApp creates a familiar, low-pressure environment where respectful interaction is easier to maintain.

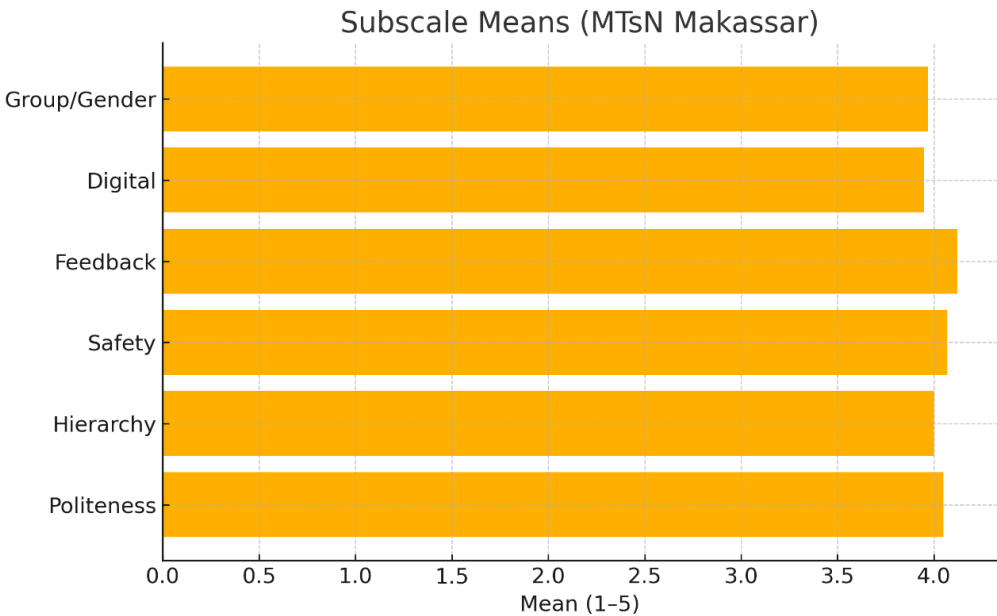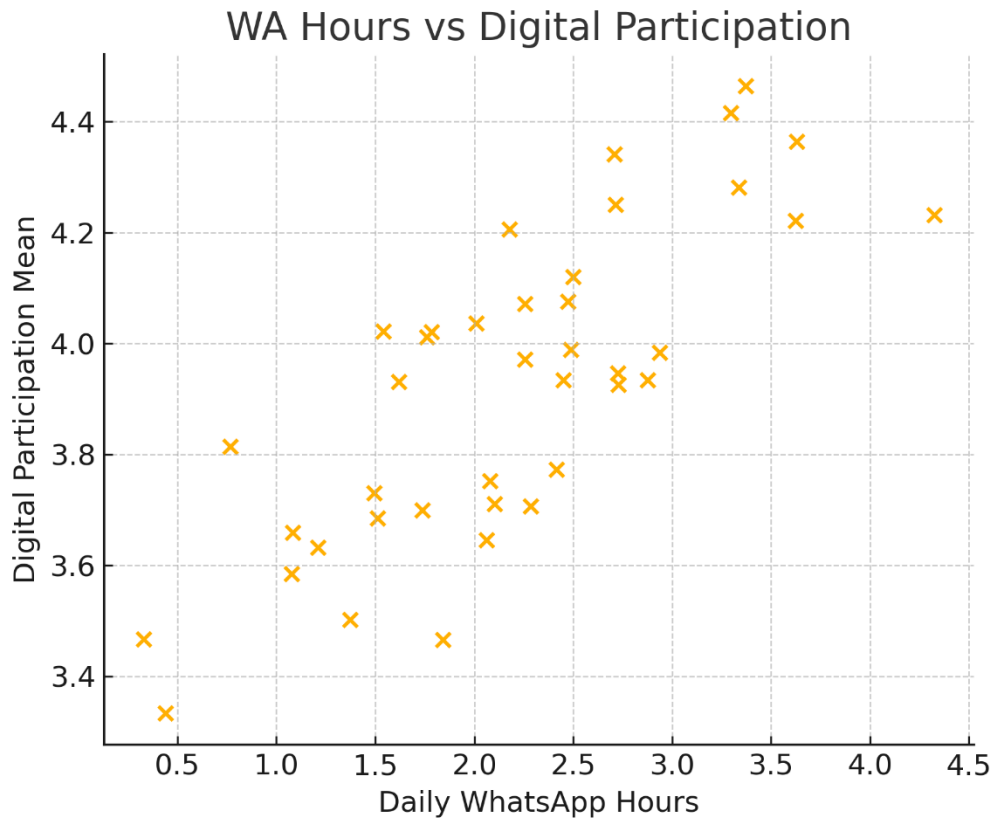Figure 1: Bar chart of mean scores across the six domains.

Subscale Means (MTsN Makassar)

Figure 2: Scatterplot with upward trend line illustrating the r = .46 correlation.

Qualitative Findings
Overview
Analysis of 126 coded segments across classroom and WhatsApp data generated four themes, each occurring with notable frequency:

Theme	Frequency (n = 126 coded units)
Politeness & Hierarchy	38
Local Humor & Solidarity	29
Peer Correction Norms	34
Teacher as Cultural Mediator	25

These themes illuminate how local cultural values simultaneously scaffold and constrain EFL interaction.

Theme 1. Politeness and Hierarchy as Participation Frames (n = 38)
Students consistently positioned the teacher as a high-status figure, shaping turn-taking and participation.

Student quotes:

- "We should not interrupt the teacher even in English; it feels impolite."

- "If I answer first, it may look like I'm too confident."

Teacher quotes:
- "They often wait for my instruction before speaking. It's part of our culture of respect."

- "Even when I ask them to volunteer, they prefer to be invited."

Face-to-Face vs WhatsApp:
- F2F: Hesitation, delayed responses, teacher-dominated turns.

- WhatsApp: Faster responses, but still teacher-initiated; students avoided interrupting by waiting for message "blocks" to end.

Theme 2. Local Humor and Solidarity in Digital Talk (n = 29)
WhatsApp enabled playful interactions not visible in the classroom.
Student quotes:
- "We use jokes in Bahasa first, then continue in English it makes the group warm."

Teacher quotes:
- "Their jokes help break the ice. I see more participation after humor appears."

WhatsApp Extract (anonymized):

- **S4:** "Miss, I think my answer is… wrong 😅"

- **S7:** "Not wrong, just creative 😄 maybe say this: …"

Humor served as a cultural softener, reducing anxiety and easing English entry.
Theme 3. Peer Correction Embedded in Community Values (n = 34)
Students preferred indirect correction aligned with value of *sipakatau* (mutual respect).
Student quotes:
- "We say 'maybe like this…' instead of 'you're wrong'."

Teacher quotes:
- "Students avoid blunt criticism. Even in WhatsApp, they soften correction with emojis."

Classroom vs WhatsApp:
- F2F: Whispered corrections, quiet suggestions.

- WhatsApp: Indirect phrasing + emojis:

  o "Maybe you can try this version 😊"

Theme 4. Teacher as Cultural Mediator (n = 25)
Teachers intentionally integrated local values into English instruction.
Teacher quotes:
- "I remind them that speaking English also means respecting others in our way."

- "I use local proverbs to explain polite expressions."

Teachers acted as bridges between local cultural norms and communicative English practices, helping students negotiate identity and interaction expectations.
Comparison: Face-to-Face vs. WhatsApp Interaction Patterns

Table 4. Summary of Interaction Differences Across Modalities

Aspect	Face-to-Face Classroom	WhatsApp Group
Turn-taking	Highly teacher-led; long pauses	Faster response; but sequential turn-taking still observed
Politeness strategies	Hesitation, lowered gaze	Softeners via emojis, "maybe…", stickers
Humor	Rare & subdued	Frequent; functions as engagement booster
Peer correction	Whispered, private	Indirect phrasing, collaborative suggestions
Student confidence	Lower	Higher for most students due to reduced visibility pressure

WhatsApp allowed greater equality, reduced hierarchical pressure, and enabled students to experiment with English more freely, though cultural norms still guided tone and phrasing.

Integrated Interpretation
Together, the findings show that intra-cultural norms are not barriers but rather interactional frameworks that students actively bring into both physical and digital learning spaces. WhatsApp, by lowering social risks, enabled cultural values like humor, respect, and solidarity to *enhance* English participation rather than restrict it.

Discussion

This study examined how intra-cultural norms shape students' English as a Foreign Language (EFL) interaction across face-to-face and WhatsApp environments in an Islamic junior high school. The findings reveal that cultural values such as politeness, hierarchy, and communal harmony strongly influence how students participate, correct peers, and position themselves in relation to teachers across both contexts. The integration of quantitative and qualitative results provides a more comprehensive understanding of how these norms function in hybrid learning settings.

Cultural Awareness and Digital Participation

The moderate positive correlation between intra-cultural awareness and digital participation ($r = .46$, $p = .004$) indicates that students who understand and internalize cultural norms are more confident and active in WhatsApp-based communication. This is consistent with the idea that WhatsApp provides a culturally familiar and low-risk environment, allowing students to maintain politeness and face-saving strategies while still engaging in English interaction. Digital spaces thus allow learners to align English communication with their existing cultural frameworks through softeners ("maybe try this"), emojis for tone management, or voice notes to avoid mispronunciation anxiety. This demonstrates that cultural awareness can facilitate, not restrict, meaningful participation when the platform aligns with students' communication habits.

Gender Similarities and Cultural Cohesion

The lack of significant gender differences contradicts common assumptions in sociolinguistic studies that male and female students adopt distinct politeness or communication strategies. In the context of an Islamic junior high school, however, strong cultural and religious expectations appear to create **shared norms** that override gender-based tendencies. All students regardless of gender demonstrated similar levels of awareness of respect, hierarchy, and group harmony. This finding suggests that cultural cohesion within the school may contribute to consistent communication behavior across genders.

Face-to-Face vs. WhatsApp Interaction

A clearer distinction emerges when comparing face-to-face and digital interaction. In the classroom, hierarchical norms were more pronounced: students avoided interrupting teachers, maintained long pauses before responding, and preferred speaking only when called upon. WhatsApp, however, enabled more spontaneous and expressive communication. Students used emojis, humor, and collaborative suggestion forms ("maybe like this 😊") to maintain harmony while engaging more actively.

For example, a student who rarely spoke in class contributed multiple messages during WhatsApp discussions, reflecting increased comfort due to reduced social visibility. Teachers also noted that students who were silent face-to-face were often more engaged online indicating that modality plays a crucial role in shaping how cultural norms are enacted.

Tensions Between Cultural Norms and Communicative Language Teaching

While intra-cultural norms support group harmony and reduce communication anxiety, they also introduce potential constraints. The preference for indirectness can limit opportunities for explicit negotiation of meaning, a core component of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Similarly, waiting for teacher initiation may hinder spontaneous language production, while avoidance of criticism can reduce opportunities for corrective feedback. These tensions demonstrate that cultural norms can both **support emotional safety** and **restrict linguistic risk-taking**, requiring careful pedagogical balancing.

Unexpected Findings and Contradictions

Several unexpected results enrich this analysis. First, the strong presence of humor in WhatsApp interactions contrasts with the subdued tone of classroom communication. This suggests that some cultural practices such as solidarity-building jokes become more salient when the environment allows for informal expression. Second, the correlation finding challenges the assumption that hierarchical or collectivist cultural values suppress communicative initiative. Instead, these norms appear to provide a familiar interactional framework that students use to navigate English communication more confidently online.

Implications for EFL Pedagogy

These findings emphasize the need for culturally responsive pedagogy. Teachers can leverage cultural strengths such as politeness, solidarity, and mutual support while gradually introducing communicative practices that encourage more direct feedback, spontaneous questioning, and independent language use. WhatsApp can serve as a bridging tool that allows students to experiment with English in a culturally safe environment before transferring these skills to face-to-face settings.

Limitations

Despite these insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. Some students may feel constrained by cultural expectations, avoiding extended speech or question-asking due to fear of negative evaluation or appearing overly confident. WhatsApp data also reflect only visible participation; silent reading or passive engagement remains unobserved. Additionally, the study focuses on one Islamic junior high school, which may limit generalizability to more diverse educational contexts.

Contribution to Existing Literature

This study contributes uniquely to EFL research by demonstrating how intra-cultural norms operate across *both* physical and digital learning environments in an Islamic school context. Whereas previous studies examine either classroom interaction or mobile-assisted learning separately, this study provides an integrated understanding of how cultural values persist and adapt across modalities. It also shows that digital platforms can amplify certain cultural behaviors (e.g., humor, indirect correction) while softening others (e.g., strict turn-taking), offering new insight into the cultural ecology of hybrid EFL learning.

Language Learning Outcomes

Importantly, the findings illustrate that maintaining cultural norms has **mixed effects** on English proficiency. Cultural values support affective engagement and reduce anxiety factors known to enhance language acquisition. However, excessive deference or indirectness may limit productive practice, peer feedback clarity, and negotiation of meaning. Effective EFL pedagogy should therefore honor cultural traditions while creating structured opportunities for expanded communicative practice.

Conclusion

This study examined how intra-cultural norms influence EFL interaction among Grade IX students in an Islamic junior high school, focusing on both classroom and WhatsApp-based communication. The findings demonstrate that cultural expectations such as politeness, respect for hierarchy, and communal harmony are deeply embedded in students' communicative behaviors across modalities. Quantitative data revealed high levels of intra-cultural awareness among learners, no significant gender differences, and a moderate positive correlation between cultural awareness and digital participation, indicating that students who strongly internalize local norms are more confident and active in online English interaction.

Qualitative findings further showed that politeness conventions shape turn-taking, peer correction tends to be indirect, humor supports solidarity in digital spaces, and teachers play a key role as cultural mediators. Comparisons across modalities revealed that classroom interaction remains more hierarchical, while WhatsApp provides a more flexible environment that encourages greater participation without violating cultural expectations. These insights underscore that intra-cultural norms can function as both facilitators and constraints in EFL learning, supporting emotional safety yet occasionally limiting spontaneity and direct negotiation of meaning.

The study has several limitations. Data were drawn from a single Islamic junior high school, which may limit generalizability. WhatsApp logs captured observable participation but not silent engagement, and cultural pressures may have influenced the willingness of some students to speak or correct peers. Future research could

expand to multiple school contexts, analyze multimodal digital interactions, or examine longitudinal shifts in cultural norms as learners gain greater L2 proficiency.

Overall, this research offers an integrated understanding of how cultural and digital practices intersect in shaping EFL learning. The findings highlight the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy that builds on students' existing communicative strengths while gradually introducing opportunities for more open, interactive, and linguistically demanding engagement. By acknowledging and integrating intra-cultural norms, teachers can design learning environments that honor students' identities while supporting their development as confident and competent English users.

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