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Emotional intelligence and intercultural growth: Examining affective dimensions in the Efl public speaking classroom

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Abstract - Although Emotional Intelligence (EI) is often associated with communication success, EFL studies tend to position it as an individual psychological attribute and have not yet explored its affective dimension in the process of intercultural growth. This research aims to reconstruct EI as a relational practice in EFL public speaking classes. The study used an ethnographic approach based on an interpretivist paradigm, involving 24 EFL students at a private university. Data were collected over one semester through participant observation, video recordings of presentations, peer feedback sessions, reflective journals, and field notes. Analysis was conducted abductively and iteratively, combining open coding, micro-ethnography of interaction, and theoretical coding. The findings indicate that speech anxiety, embodied confidence, interactional empathy, and negotiation of cultural voice form a relational ecology of affect that fosters intercultural becoming. EI does not emerge as a stable competency, but rather as a situated and co-constructed affective practice. This study concludes that EFL public speaking is an arena for intercultural transformation rooted in emotional engagement rather than merely rhetorical mastery.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, intercultural growth, Efl public speaking, ethnography, affective dimensions

1. Introduction

In today's global language education landscape, English-speaking ability is no longer solely a matter of linguistic accuracy or rhetorical performance. Public speaking in EFL classrooms is increasingly becoming a space where identities are negotiated, power relations operate, and emotions are both displayed and concealed (Chu et al., 2025; Du et al., 2026; Han & Zhang, 2025; Nurhikmah et al., 2023; Sun, 2024; Syam et al., 2023). However, despite the rapid development of discourse on intercultural communication, including through post-humanist, multimodal, and embodied communication approaches, the affective dimension of EFL public speaking practice is still often positioned as a peripheral aspect, rather than a central analysis. Emotions are considered an individual psychological variable, rather than a socio-cultural phenomenon that shapes intercultural growth.

Emotional Intelligence (EI) has become a popular concept in education and communication studies. EI is often associated with self-management, empathy, and emotion regulation. However, in many EFL studies, EI is reduced to a quantitative instrument or

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psychometric score detached from the social context in which emotions are produced and interpreted (Chen & Zhang, 2022; Ferdowsi & Razmi, 2022; Li & Zhang, 2024; Yang, 2022). Yet, in the context of public speaking classrooms, emotions never stand alone. It is tied to cultural expectations about courage, shame, vocal authority, bodily expression, and even perceptions of who is considered "worthy" to speak. In other words, emotion is a social practice intertwined with the process of becoming intercultural.

The study of intercultural communication itself has long moved beyond the static paradigm of competence to a more dynamic understanding of interculturality as a relational and situational process (Álvarez Valencia & Michelson, 2023; R'boul, 2022; Syam et al., 2023; Victoria et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2022). Concepts such as interactional competence, relational identity construction, and multimodal repertoires have broadened our understanding of cross-cultural communication. However, the affective dimension is often implicit but rarely analysed as central to the transformation process. In the context of EFL pedagogy, particularly in public speaking, intercultural growth is often measured through verbal performance or argumentative ability. At the same time, students' emotional experiences during this process have received little theoretical attention.

Recent studies consistently position speaking as a central yet persistently problematic skill in second language acquisition, arguing that communicative competence cannot develop optimally without systematic attention to oral production, though the conceptualization of "speaking" often remains broad and under-theorized (Windriya et al., 2025). The discussion of key challenges such as anxiety, limited vocabulary, and lack of exposure is valuable, yet the analysis tends to describe symptoms rather than interrogate deeper structural factors like curriculum design, assessment culture, or sociolinguistic hierarchies that shape classroom interaction (Windriya et al., 2025).

The exploration of students' self-confidence in spoken English provides important learner-centered insights, particularly in highlighting how language policy and classroom norms influence willingness to speak, but the reliance on self-reported perceptions raises concerns about the gap between perceived and actual communicative competence (Briones et al., 2023). While the "English only" stance is critically examined, the study stops short of offering a nuanced framework that reconciles translanguaging practices with measurable gains in fluency and accuracy (Briones et al., 2023).

The analysis of English speaking course outlines against employment industry demands makes a timely contribution by foregrounding employability and workplace communication skills, yet the emphasis on document analysis may oversimplify the dynamic nature of communicative competence as enacted in real professional contexts (Ayub & Khaleel, 2024). Although the study calls for curriculum alignment with industry expectations, it provides limited empirical evidence on whether revised syllabi actually translate into improved graduate performance (Ayub & Khaleel, 2024).

The investigation into improving proficiency through watching engaging and educational English movies offers an appealing, affect-driven approach that integrates entertainment and language learning, but its claims would be strengthened by clearer operationalization of proficiency gains and longitudinal tracking of learners' progress (Sadiyani et al., 2025). The study convincingly argues that authentic audiovisual input enhances motivation and listening-speaking integration, yet it risks overstating the causal relationship without sufficiently controlling for extraneous variables such as prior exposure and learner autonomy (Sadiyani et al., 2025).

The application of problem-based learning (PBL) to engineering students demonstrates pedagogical innovation by situating speaking tasks within discipline-specific problem solving, thereby increasing relevance and engagement, though the research design appears to prioritize short-term fluency outcomes over sustained communicative development (Sadiyani et al., 2025). While measurable gains in fluency are reported, the study offers limited discussion on how

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accuracy, pragmatic competence, and interactional strategies evolve within the PBL framework (Sadiyani et al., 2025).

The in-depth examination of learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) contributes theoretically by linking psychological readiness with classroom ecology, yet the study largely treats WTC as an individual trait rather than a socially co-constructed phenomenon shaped by peer dynamics and institutional power relations (Marshalina, 2025). Its emphasis on internal factors such as motivation and anxiety is insightful, but greater methodological triangulation would enhance the robustness of its conclusions (Marshalina, 2025).

The identification of effective strategies for enhancing speaking competence synthesizes pedagogical techniques such as interactive tasks, collaborative learning, and continuous feedback, providing practical value for teacher training programs, though the recommendations at times resemble best-practice checklists rather than critically evaluated interventions (Zega, 2025). The study successfully underscores the need for active learner participation, yet stronger comparative data would be necessary to determine which strategies yield the most sustainable impact across diverse educational contexts (Zega, 2025).

Collectively, these studies demonstrate a growing commitment to contextualized and innovative approaches to improving English speaking competence in EFL settings, but they share recurring methodological limitations, including short intervention periods, heavy reliance on self-report instruments, and insufficient longitudinal evidence to substantiate long-term effectiveness (Windriya et al., 2025; Briones et al., 2023; Ayub & Khaleel, 2024; Sadiyani et al., 2025; Marshalina, 2025; Zega, 2025). While the body of work meaningfully advances discussion on speaking pedagogy, future research would benefit from more rigorous experimental designs, cross-institutional comparisons, and deeper theoretical integration linking affective, sociocultural, and professional dimensions of oral communication (Windriya et al., 2025; Briones et al., 2023; Ayub & Khaleel, 2024; Sadiyani et al., 2025; Marshalina, 2025; Zega, 2025).

The recent studies collectively emphasize innovative approaches to language learning and communication in diverse contexts. One study highlights the importance of enhancing professional communication skills through effective English business correspondence in international settings (Wajdi et al., 2025). Another research explores how social media platforms can foster cultural diversity and improve intercultural understanding among EFL university students (Mahmood et al., 2024). The integration of flipped classroom methods has been shown to positively influence English language teaching by promoting active learning and student engagement (Maulana et al., 2025). Additionally, an analysis of religious lecturers' speeches to street food vendors provides insights into the interplay between language structures and social relations from pragmatic and sociolinguistic perspectives (Paramita et al., 2025). Overall, these studies demonstrate a growing focus on practical, context-sensitive approaches to language education and intercultural communication.

Herein lies the epistemological problem. If we accept that communication is an embodied, situated, and relational practice, then emotions cannot be treated as an internal attribute of the individual. They must be understood as part of the classroom ecology, emerging through interactions, audience responses, institutional norms, and power dynamics that are not always visible. Studying Emotional Intelligence in the context of EFL public speaking requires a shift from an individual psychological approach to one that views emotions as a social and cultural practice.

This study departs from this concern. Rather than measuring EI as a numerical score, this study explores how affective dimensions are negotiated, performed, and interpreted in EFL public speaking classes, and how these processes contribute to intercultural growth. Using an ethnographic approach, this research positions the classroom as a social space where emotions, language, the body, and power relations are intertwined. This approach allows us to see how students not only learn to speak English but also learn to perceive, interpret, and respond to differences.

Theoretically, this study positions EI in dialogue with intercultural communication theory, specifically through the lenses of the affective turn and embodied interculturality.

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Intercultural growth in EFL public speaking cannot be understood without considering how students manage vulnerability, confront fear of judgment, and develop empathy for diverse audiences. EI is understood not as a stable individual competency but as a relational practice formed through repeated interactions in the classroom.

2. Method

This research uses an ethnographic approach rooted in the interpretivist paradigm and aligned with the affective turn perspective in intercultural communication. The EFL public speaking classroom is positioned not simply as a pedagogical space, but as a social ecology where emotions, language, identity, and power relations are situationally produced. The choice of ethnography is epistemological: if Emotional Intelligence (EI) is understood as a relational practice that emerges in interaction, then it can only be understood through in-depth engagement and contextual observation. This research is naturalistic and immersive, with the researcher present continuously throughout the semester to capture the affective dynamics that develop over time. This design also uses a micro-ethnographic approach to interaction to identify crucial moments, such as speech anxiety, audience empathy, or the negotiation of cultural norms, that reflect the process of intercultural growth. Ontologically, classroom reality is understood as situated and co-constructed, enabling an iterative, reflective data collection and analysis process. Thus, this design allows for an in-depth exploration of the affective dimensions of EFL public speaking practice.

The participants in this study were 24 third-year EFL students taking a Public Speaking course at a private university in Indonesia. They came from diverse socio-cultural and first language backgrounds, with varying levels of exposure to English. Participants were selected purposively, considering that the class required oral performance, audience interaction, and self-reflection, a relevant context for exploring affective dimensions and intercultural growth. This ethnographic study focused on depth of understanding rather than statistical representation. The 24 participants enabled immersive engagement and detailed observation of classroom dynamics. Students were positioned as actors actively shaping the classroom's emotional ecology, making the diversity of their experiences and expressions key to understanding how Emotional Intelligence practices are negotiated in the context of EFL public speaking.

Data were collected over one semester through a combination of participant observation, video recordings, field notes, and pedagogical artifacts. The researcher was regularly present during each class session to capture the dynamics of both spontaneous and structured interactions. The primary materials analysed included video recordings of individual and group presentations, peer feedback sessions, and reflective discussions after public speaking performances. These recordings enabled analysis of affective dimensions such as speech anxiety, audience empathy, emotion regulation, and identity negotiation. Furthermore, students were asked to regularly write reflective journals to document their emotional experiences during preparation and performance. The data collection process includes the researcher's initial observations and reflections, which guided subsequent observations. The data captured not only what was said but also how emotions were manifested through voice, gestures, pauses, and collective responses within the ecology of the EFL public speaking classroom.

To emphasize openness to emergent findings, data analysis was conducted in parallel with data collection. The approach used was abductive, moving back and forth between empirical data and theoretical frameworks on Emotional Intelligence, affective dimensions, and intercultural growth. The first stage involved open coding of presentation transcripts, peer feedback sessions, reflective journals, and fieldnotes to identify recurring affective patterns, such as expressions of speech anxiety, emotion regulation strategies, moments of empathy, and negotiations of cultural identity. The second stage used a micro-ethnography of interaction lens to analyse in depth significant interaction snippets, paying attention to multimodal elements such

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as intonation, pauses, laughter, gestures, and audience responses. Next, initial categories were reconstructed into more conceptually analytical themes through a process of theoretical coding, positioning affective practices as part of the becoming intercultural. The validity of interpretations was maintained through analytic memoing, reflective discussions among researchers, and triangulation across data sources. Thus, the analysis does not stop at describing emotions but also explores how emotions function as a relational mechanism to foster intercultural growth in EFL public speaking classes.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Speech Anxiety as Relational Vulnerability

Analysis shows that speech anxiety in public speaking classes does not emerge as an isolated individual fear, but rather as a form of relational vulnerability produced and negotiated collectively. Anxiety appears as a fragile moment that actually opens up a space for connection. Several observations revealed that students who appeared to be trembling before a presentation were not left in silence; instead, the audience responded with whispers of support, small nods, or light applause as the speech began. Anxiety is more than just a performance barrier; it is also a trigger for affective solidarity.

In one session, a student opened her presentation in a low voice and stated,

"I'm actually really nervous right now… so please bear with me."

She chuckled, eliciting sympathetic laughter from her classmates. Several students were heard exclaiming,

"You got this!"
"Take your time."

In the video, she can be seen taking a deep breath, adjusting her posture, and then maintaining a more stable intonation. In a reflective journal, the student wrote,

"When they smiled at me, I felt less alone. It wasn't just my speech anymore."

This data suggests that emotion regulation is not entirely intrapersonal, but rather interactional. Speech anxiety serves as an early mechanism for intercultural growth, as shared vulnerability enables students to read, respond, and adapt affectively in diverse spaces.

3.1.2 Emotional Intelligence as Embodied Practice

The result suggests that confidence in public speaking classes does not exist as a stable psychological quality but rather as an embodied practice learned, tested, and negotiated. Students actively manage their voices, gestures, and body positions to appear confident, even when they admit to still feeling nervous. In other words, Emotional Intelligence appears as a form of affective labour, a conscious effort to manage self-expression before a diverse audience.

In one presentation, a student who previously admitted to experiencing speech anxiety stood upright with his feet shoulder-width apart, maintained eye contact, and emphasized his points with measured hand gestures. He said,

"I realized that if I stand firm, I feel more in control."

The recording shows how he deliberately slowed down his speech when the audience seemed confused, then raised his intonation to emphasize his argument. Another student wrote in his reflective journal,

"I practiced smiling even when I felt unsure. It helped me connect with them."

Here, smiling was not just a spontaneous expression, but a relational strategy. This data demonstrates that confidence is not simply an internal state, but a performance manifested through the body. Through these practices, students not only hone their speaking skills but also build the affective capacity to be authentically present in complex intercultural spaces.

3.1.3 From Peer Feedback to Intercultural Awareness

Analysis shows that empathy in public speaking classes is not formed through normative instruction about "being empathetic," but rather grows through the negotiated practice of peer feedback. In feedback sessions, students not only evaluate performance but also subtly read their

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peers' emotional states. Empathy emerges as interactional attunement, the ability to adjust one's response to the vulnerability just displayed.

In one session, after a student shared an experience about family pressure regarding her career choice, a peer responded,

"I can't fully understand your situation, but I respect your courage to share it."

Instead of immediately criticizing the presentation's structure, she began by acknowledging the emotional dimension of the story. Another student added,

"Maybe you can slow down a bit, because your story deserves to be heard clearly."

The criticism was delivered with mitigating strategies that maintained the speaker's dignity. In a reflective journal, one participant wrote,

"Giving feedback made me more aware that everyone carries different cultural expectations."

Empathy moves from a personal response to intercultural awareness. Feedback practice becomes a learning space for reading differences without reducing them. Empathy is not simply an attitude, but a relational process that broadens students' sensitivity to the complexity of cultural experiences in EFL public speaking spaces.

3.1.4 Identity, Emotion, and the Risk of Speaking

The findings show that public speaking becomes a space where students negotiate their cultural voice, often with real emotional risk. Speaking in English about personal experiences means opening oneself to the possibility of being misunderstood, judged, or even reduced. In this context, Emotional Intelligence appears as the capacity to manage the tension between authenticity and social acceptance.

In one presentation, a student recounted her experience as a woman from a conservative area who chose to study in a big city. She said,

"In my hometown, girls are not expected to speak too much in public."

Her voice trailed off, and she paused for a moment before continuing. The recording showed a silent classroom, followed by slow nods from several students. After the presentation, a classmate commented,

"Thank you for sharing something so personal. It made me rethink my assumptions."

In her reflective journal, the student wrote,

"I was afraid they would judge me, but I felt heard."

This moment demonstrates that intercultural growth occurs through the courage to take emotional risks. Identity negotiation is not a sterile process; it involves vulnerability, resistance, and recognition. Public speaking serves as an arena for intercultural becoming, where emotions and identities mutually shape one another through meaningful speaking practices.

3.1.5 Emotional Intelligence as a Relational Ecology

The four themes above demonstrate that Emotional Intelligence in EFL public speaking classes cannot be reduced to a set of individual skills such as self-awareness or emotion regulation. Instead, EI emerges as a relational ecology of affect, a dynamic network formed through vulnerability, bodily performativity, interactional empathy, and the negotiation of cultural identity. Anxiety creates a space for solidarity; confidence is learned through the body; empathy grows through peer feedback practices; and cultural voice is negotiated through emotional risk.

Viewed separately, each phenomenon appears to be a typical classroom episode. However, when read integratively, a broader pattern emerges: emotions serve as a connecting mechanism that enables students to move from simply "speaking English" to becoming intercultural. EI here is not a stable attribute, but rather a distributed practice within interactions, visible in pauses, smiles, collective support, and the courage to share personal experiences.

These results transform the understanding of EI from a psychological competency to a situated and co-constructed social practice. Intercultural growth does not occur through rhetorical mastery alone, but through affective engagement that reshapes the relationship between self and others in the EFL public speaking space.

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3.2 Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that Emotional Intelligence (EI) in EFL public speaking classes does not operate as a psychological attribute inherent to individuals, but rather as a relational ecology of affect formed through interaction. Speech anxiety emerges as relational vulnerability that triggers solidarity; confidence is learned through the body as embodied practice; empathy develops through peer feedback practices; and cultural voice is negotiated through tangible emotional risks. These dynamics demonstrate that intercultural growth is not the result of mastering speaking skills, but rather a process of becoming that occurs through continuous affective engagement (Al-khresheh et al., 2025; Cong-Lem, 2025; Hu & Shu, 2025; Syam et al., 2025; Xia et al., 2024).

Theoretically, these findings shift the understanding of EI from a trait-based model to a more situated, co-constructed perspective. EI is no longer understood as an internal capacity to manage emotions, but as a relational practice manifested through voice, gestures, pauses, and collective responses. In this context, emotion regulation is distributed, emerging from the interaction between the speaker and the audience. Public speaking becomes an arena in which affect serves as a medium for intercultural learning (Hossain, 2024; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2023; Shahjahan & Grimm, 2023; Sun, 2023; Zhussupova & Shadiev, 2023).

Furthermore, this study expands the concept of intercultural growth by emphasizing its affective dimension. Rather than focusing solely on intercultural growth in the cognitive realm, for example, increased cultural awareness, the findings suggest that change is rooted in moments of vulnerability, empathy, and the courage to share personal experiences. In other words, becoming intercultural is both an emotional and social process.

These results align with the affective turn approach to intercultural communication, which emphasizes emotions as an integral part of communication practices (Charalambous et al., 2025; Doungphummes et al., 2025; Feitosa et al., 2022; Hossain, 2024; Syam & Nurhikmah, 2025; Vistorte et al., 2024). However, this study goes further by demonstrating how affect not only accompanies communication but also shapes its relational structure. In the EFL context, this enriches the discourse on interactional competence by incorporating the affective dimension as a central rather than an ancillary element.

This study challenges the tendency in EI literature to rely on psychometric instruments and isolate emotions from social context. Using an ethnographic approach, EI is seen as a multimodal and contextually embodied practice. This study bridges the EI and intercultural communication literature through a relational and embodied lens.

These results invite us to rethink the pedagogy of public speaking in EFL. If EI is a relational ecology, then the classroom must be understood as an affective environment consciously designed to foster vulnerability, empathy, and identity negotiation. This approach has implications for curriculum design that emphasize not only rhetoric and speech structure but also foster safe spaces for emotional exploration and intercultural dialogue.

For intercultural communication studies, this study emphasizes that intercultural growth does not occur solely through exposure to information about other cultures, but rather through affective engagement that allows students to experience and respond to differences directly.

This research is limited to a single class at a private university, as the institution's particular culture may influence the observed dynamics. Furthermore, the researcher's presence within the classroom ecology may have influenced interactions, although methodological reflexivity was consistently pursued.

Further research could explore how this relational ecology of affect develops in different educational contexts, including classes with more heterogeneous cultural compositions or in online formats. Furthermore, comparative studies between survey-based and ethnographic approaches could enrich the understanding of how EI is practiced in real-life communication situations. Thus, future research agendas can continue to deepen the integration of EI, affective dimensions, and intercultural communication in language learning.

4. Conclusion

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This study repositions Emotional Intelligence (EI) in the context of EFL public speaking, not as a stable psychological trait, but as a relational ecology of affect formed through interaction. This study demonstrates that speech anxiety, embodied confidence, empathy in peer feedback, and the negotiation of cultural voice are affective practices that collectively shape intercultural growth. Public speaking is no longer understood simply as a rhetorical exercise, but as a space for intercultural becoming that involves emotional risk and relational solidarity. Conceptually, these findings broaden the discourse on intercultural communication by placing the affective dimension at the centre rather than the periphery. EI is understood as a situated and co-constructed social practice, in line with the affective turn and embodied communication perspectives. This approach also emphasizes the value of ethnography in uncovering emotional dynamics that quantitative instruments cannot capture. Studies on EI and interculturality should continue to explore how affect shapes relationships across diverse learning contexts. Intercultural growth is not just about recognizing differences, but about feeling and responding to them relationally.

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