

Pre-service English teachers' intercultural awareness of othering: Insights from CLA

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Abstract

This study examines pre-service English teachers' intercultural awareness of othering from a postcolonial perspective and explores the potential of the Critical Literary Approach (CLA) in EFL contexts. Twenty English education students from a state university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, participated in the study. Data were collected through written reflections on the film *Fences* (2016) and analysed thematically using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) framework. Findings show that nine students identified racial discrimination, one recognized gender inequality, while the others mainly interpreted the film as a family drama. Only half of the participants demonstrated awareness of postcolonial dimensions of othering. The findings suggest that CLA can create opportunities to examine power, inequality, and cultural difference through literary texts. Its use may also encourage critical dialogue and support the development of intercultural awareness. The study highlights the relevance of film-based literary pedagogy for integrating postcolonial and intercultural perspectives into Indonesian EFL teacher education.

Keywords: *pre-service English teachers; intercultural awareness; othering; critical literary approach; postcolonial perspective*

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INTRODUCTION

Colonial history has undoubtedly had a huge impact worldwide. In Indonesia, more than seven decades after independence, traces of colonial influence remain visible in attitudes toward language, culture, and identity. One illustration of this is the continued Western primacy among Indonesians in terms of technology, culture, ideology, and language. Former colonizers, moreover, constantly view themselves as having superior power, being better educated, and being more civilized, while viewing the colonized as inferior, less educated, and even uncivilized. The colonizers believe that they are entitled to rule over the colonized (Vichiensing, 2017). This condition, in fact, influences not only the mindset of Indonesian people but also literature in many parts of the world. One of the issues raised in relation to colonialism is the binary opposition of "the Self and the Other" the practice of othering (see Staszak, 2008). Othering can take shape in many kinds of discrimination. Usually, the group that is discriminated against is frequently viewed as weak and inferior, much like the colonized.

In educational contexts, othering undermines the goals of equity and inclusion by normalizing unequal relationships between dominant and marginalized groups. This is in line with the context of English education, governments, international organizations, educational institutions, and other educational practitioners that have underlined the necessity of promoting democratic citizenship and active involvement that opposes all forms of prejudice, discrimination, inequality, and violations of human rights (Article 33 of Law 20/2003; Article 29 Law 24/2009; Council of Europe, 2001; Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). Therefore, it is important for teachers to consider the goal of intercultural education which aims to counter these patterns by equipping learners with the skills and dispositions needed to engage across differences with respect and critical awareness (Bennett, 1993;

Byram, 1997; Byram & Fleming, 1998; Council of Europe, 2020). Within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, intercultural awareness is increasingly recognized as essential for preparing students to function in diverse global contexts. Yet even though universities are vital actors in intercultural education (Bulgrin & Daniels, 2025), research in Indonesia and elsewhere shows that intercultural dimensions remain insufficiently integrated into language classrooms, with teachers often prioritizing linguistic competence over cultural understanding (Ghavamnia, 2020; Iswandari & Ardi, 2022; Megawati et al., 2020; Syam, Basri, and Sahril, 2020).

In relation to the discussion above, literature and film offer rich opportunities to cultivate intercultural awareness, as they embody cultural values, identities, and struggles. They have a focus on spoken and written language and evolved into a work that contains certain values (Hafid, 2017; Wahyuningsi, 2018). It is not just a contemplation of the real world, which is associated with imaginative fiction. When supported by evidence from history, data, and the author's personal experience, literature can develop into historical documents (Saputri, 2019, p. 3). It is in accordance with Aristotle's saying that authors do not merely imitate the real world; they create a world with the power of their creativity (Hafid, 2017). Therefore, literature and film can help open people's minds about how they think and feel about the world as literary texts have the power to influence the readers/viewers through the messages delivered between the lines. However, these resources must be approached critically. Critical Literary Approach (CLA) encourages learners to interrogate texts for how they construct identities, reflect power relations, and perpetuate or challenge discrimination (Anderson & Irvine, 1993). From a postcolonial perspective, CLA can create a "third space" in the classroom where students analyse how cultural narratives represent "the Other" and reflect on their own positions in relation to diversity and inequality (Bhabha, 1994).

The concept of othering in postcolonial perspective

According to Dobie (2012), colonialism is the physical dominance of one group of people over another. In other contexts, it also incorporates several additional types of political, cultural, and economic domination. After then, postcolonialism emerges as a response to those dominances. It is brought up to address how colonialism "has affected cultures and society" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007, p.168). Postcolonialism, in its simplest form, refers to an attempt to construct new economic, political, and social policies for a country to separate itself from the colonizer's remaining social and economic structures. Additionally, it includes various behaviors, such as the act of reconstructing indigenous cultures and folklore and the act of rewriting historical accounts using contemporary narrative patterns (Sharma, 2016).

Spivak (1985) refers othering to the ideological and dialectical process by which the colonial discourse separates groups and produces its "others" in unfair conditions (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007, p. 168). Race, gender, and class are the three categories that Spivak (1985) claims are created through the process of othering. Thus, it is possible to interpret othering as the result of interactions between a group of individuals who are in a position of power and wish to use it against an additional group of individuals who they believe to be powerless based on established criteria.

Said (1978) then addressed the issue of othering by emphasizing how Europe formed the Orient and its identity in an exoticized, reductionist, and alienating fashion. As an illustration, Bhabha (1994) stated that the practice of racial stereotyping, for instance, has institutionalized imperial systems of instruction and administration over the inferiors and degraded others. In the context of language teaching, Bhabha (1994) further explained that it is important to create a neutral circumstance, the third space, in the classroom to foster students' awareness of the existence of the others. This circumstance, in fact, can be created through implementing intercultural teaching and learning activities which will later improve the students' intercultural awareness.

Intercultural awareness as the prerequisite to achieve intercultural communicative competence

Intercultural awareness, according to Byram et al. (2002), is the process of becoming more conscious of and gaining an understanding of one's own and other people's cultures to improve cross-

cultural and international understanding. In a similar vein, Liu (2016) and Zhang and Steele (2012) see intercultural awareness as the cognitive component of intercultural communication and the readiness to comprehend the interconnections among various cultural groups that influence how people think and behave. Therefore, intercultural awareness encompasses not only knowing and evaluating how well students learn a foreign language, but also the abilities and mindsets required to communicate in English in a variety of international settings (Baker, 2011). This way, intercultural awareness can be said as the prerequisite for fostering ICC because it enables us to understand how others view us (Barany, 2016).

In addition, ICC is regarded as the third stage of student outcomes in the study of a foreign language, following cultural knowledge and cultural awareness. It is the capacity to communicate in a foreign language with individuals from different cultures and countries (Byram, 1997; Byram et al., 2002). According to Baker (2011), ICC involves the capacity to compare and mediate between various cultural values in a non-judgmental way. Therefore, students at this level of cultural learning are expected to not only learn about other cultures and become more culturally aware, but also to grow in their ability to reflect, argue, and develop a critical perspective on various cultural issues and identities. Additionally, they must cultivate tolerance and harmony with different people and cultures as well as with themselves (Nguyen, 2017). Figure 3 shows the three levels of students' outcomes in learning culture.

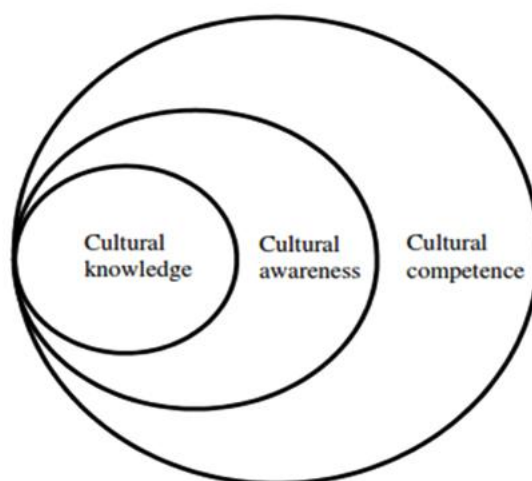


Figure 1. Three levels of students' outcomes in learning culture

CLA in intercultural education

CLA is a pedagogical framework that positions reading and writing as socially situated acts of critique. Rather than treating texts as neutral, CLA encourages learners to interrogate how narratives construct identities, reflect cultural hierarchies, and reinforce or challenge unequal power relations (Anderson & Irvine, 1993; Priyatni, 2012). Within English language teaching, this approach shifts the focus from surface-level comprehension toward fostering critical reflection and intercultural awareness.

From a postcolonial perspective, CLA provides a means for learners to analyse how cultural texts reproduce othering through race, gender, or class while simultaneously recognizing opportunities for resistance and transformation (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1985; Bhabha, 1994). By engaging critically with literature and film, students are positioned to uncover the implicit ideologies embedded within texts and reflect on how these shape their own perceptions of "self" and "other." This critical engagement aligns with intercultural education's broader aim of preparing learners to navigate diversity with respect, equality, and openness (Byram, 1997; Council of Europe, 2020).

In practice, CLA has been shown to support the development of intercultural communicative competence (Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018). Through guided analysis of texts, learners can identify language patterns that encode discrimination, challenge dominant narratives, and construct alternative interpretations grounded in justice and inclusivity. For pre-service teachers, such practices are particularly significant, as they prepare future educators to integrate intercultural perspectives into their own classrooms.

However, despite this potential, limited research has examined how CLA can be systematically employed in Indonesian EFL teacher education. Moreover, few studies have explored how pre-service English teachers engage with postcolonial issues such as othering when exposed to literary or media texts in the classroom. A study conducted by Syam, Basri, and Sahril (2020) and Permatasari & Andriyanti (2021) revealed that this condition was due to a lack of integration of intercultural aspects, an inconsistent teaching method, and insufficient learning materials that could be used by teachers in their teaching practices.

Addressing this gap, this study focuses on examining preservice English teachers' awareness of the aspect of othering in *The Fences* movie. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What kinds of discrimination are presented in *The Fences* movie?
2. How aware are the pre-service English teachers' awareness of othering acts in *The Fences* movie?

By situating the analysis within the frameworks of CLA and intercultural education, this study contributes to discussions on the role of literary-based approaches in incorporating critical and intercultural perspectives into English teacher education.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to analyse pre-service English teachers' awareness of othering, particularly racial and gender discrimination, as represented in the film *The Fences* (2016). Participants consisted of 20 English education students (aged 19-22 years old) enrolled in a writing-for-general-communication course at a state university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. A purposive sampling technique was used to select this group, as the students represented diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds and were engaged in a course requiring critical reflection. Data were collected from students' written reviews guided by open-ended questions on race, gender, and intercultural issues. The reviews were part of a course assignment in the writing class. The data were analysed following the qualitative analysis procedures of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which include data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Initial coding was carried out inductively to identify references to racial discrimination, gender inequality, and other themes. These codes were then categorized into broader themes reflecting the participants' levels of awareness of othering. This analysis aimed to describe how pre-service English teachers recognized and interpreted issues of othering in the film and the extent to which their reflections demonstrated intercultural awareness.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Discriminations in *the fences* movie

The Fences, a 2016 American adaptation film by Denzel Washington based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, depicts the struggles of a working-class American who works as a trash man to support his family. Troy Maxson, his wife Rose Lee, son Lyons, and Cory are all key characters in the film. The plot opens in Pittsburgh in the 1950s, when the film focuses on Maxson's family life and his relationship with his disabled brother Gabe, who was injured in World War 2. Despite having terrible habits that lead to selfishness and alcoholism, Troy Maxson is a kind old man who attempts to support his family's needs.

The narrator in August Wilson's play *The Fences* depicts racism in society, the workplace, and sports, which ultimately has an impact on Troy's goals. Troy Maxson must continuously struggle with the prejudice ingrained in the fair and unfair, verbal, and nonverbal laws of the racial hierarchy. This movie also shows the existence of gender inequality and mistreatment a woman— Rose Lee—felt. Since Troy endures many years of racism while playing in the Negro Major Baseball League, Troy chooses to protect Cory from dealing with it in his pursuit of success. However, Troy ultimately gives in to the racial policies because they are too difficult to fight, despite his constant efforts to gain agency.

Pre-service English teachers' awareness of the act of *othering* in *the fences* movie

From 20 written reviews created by the selected pre-service English teachers in this study, data showed that the act of *othering* noticed by half of the students was about racial discrimination; there was one student who wrote about gender discrimination in her review. The other half of the students, on the other hand, viewed this movie as a general picture of a parents and children relationship. Details of the above data can be seen in the following sub-categories.

Reviews regarding racial discrimination

Nine students identified racial inequality as a central theme in *The Fences*. They noted that Black characters faced barriers in employment and sports, with talent and ambition constrained by systemic racism. One student, for instance, explained that Troy's exclusion from Major League Baseball illustrates how opportunities for African Americans were underestimated and restricted. These reflections show that participants were aware of racism as a structural issue, though they tended to describe rather than critically analyse its broader implications. Examples of the students' reviews regarding this aspect can be seen as follows:

"In this film, there is an inequality of opportunity between black people and white people. Opportunities for work, or careers for black people to succeed are still very limited and often underestimated. Black people must have extra effort to be able to compete with white people in order to get success." (Student 1)

"The aspect of inequality that I find in this movie is racial discrimination where Troy, a very talented baseball player, has never entered Major League Baseball, because of racial discrimination which is still very prevalent in the Major Leagues. In that era, America had a dark history of racial conflict between white people and black people. (Student 2)

"The Fences raised the issue of race which was still quite strong in the 1950s. The problem is getting more complicated, where when the issue of racial differences is heating up.." (Student 3)

Review regarding gender inequality

Only one participant identified gender discrimination, pointing to Rose Lee's role as an unrecognized caregiver and her experiences of emotional abuse in her marriage. This student emphasized that Rose's sacrifices were overlooked within a patriarchal system. The fact that only one participant acknowledged this theme suggests that gendered othering was largely invisible to the group. Below is an excerpt of that one student's review concerning this issue.

"Gender inequality was also showed by Troy, when he was physically and mentally abusing to his wife, Rose." (Student 4)

Review regarding family or parents and children relationship

Despite the issue on racial and gender discriminations, this study also found an issue relating parents and children relationship in a family. Ten students primarily viewed the film through a family

lens, highlighting lessons about responsibility, loyalty, and strained parent–child relationships. They tended to frame the film as a moral story about everyday life rather than a critique of structural inequalities. Examples of this finding are presented below.

“This is the best movie to watch with family and friends. This film contains a lot of lessons about life and the meaning of a family.” (Student 5)

“Fences film has a long conversation and is a bit boring for some people. However, if we ourselves can understand that the storyline of the Fences film contains conversations between parents, then this film will be suitable to watch.” (Student 6)

“In my opinion, this movie is a must-see for families. This is because the movie shows that love may be expressed by parents in variety of ways, and that parent’s should also support their children’s decision.” (Student 7)

“This film is a family film and there are many moral messages that can be taken from this film. A film that teaches responsibility and how far we should apply the limits of responsibility itself. Maybe this film can be used as an option if you want to watch a movie that doesn’t have too many problems.” (Student 8)

In short, details of data collected in this study can be seen on Table 1 below.

Table 1. Details of data collected in the study

No.	Name of movie	The act of otherness found by the preservice teachers in <i>The Fences</i> movie	Frequency
1.	The Fences	Racial discrimination	9
2.		Gender inequality	1
3.		Parent-children relationship in a family	10

The findings above revealed that only half of the pre-service English teachers were able to recognize elements of racial or gender othering in *The Fences*, while the other half focused primarily on family relationships. This limited awareness demonstrates that intercultural dimensions are not yet fully integrated into their language learning experiences. The result resonates with previous studies highlighting the lack of systematic intercultural teaching in Indonesian EFL classrooms (Syam, Basri, and Sahril, 2020; Permatasari & Andriyanti, 2021).

From a pedagogical perspective, this limited awareness can be addressed through the integration of the CLA. CLA emphasizes engaging students with texts in ways that uncover hidden power relations and forms of discrimination embedded in cultural narratives (Anderson & Irvine, 1993; Priyatni, 2012). In the case of *The Fences*, CLA would encourage students not only to interpret the storyline as a family drama, but also to interrogate how the film portrays racial inequality, gender roles, and systemic oppression. Such critical engagement allows learners to connect cultural texts with broader issues of justice, identity, and intercultural communication.

Prior research has highlighted several benefits of intercultural teaching practices in EFL contexts, including improved intercultural communicative competence (Ghavamnia, 2020; Iswandari & Ardi, 2022; Shen, 2021; Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018). However, challenges remain, such as inconsistent methods, insufficient materials, and teachers’ limited preparation for integrating culture into language instruction (Council of Europe, 2001; Syam, Basri, and Sahril, 2020; Suryanto, 2014; Sulistiyo, 2016). These constraints often lead teachers to prioritize linguistic skills over cultural learning (Ghavamnia, 2020; Megawati et al., 2020).

Applying CLA in teacher education can help bridge these challenges. First, it provides students with tools to critically question cultural products, thereby fostering intercultural awareness and preparing them to teach language as more than a neutral skill (Kramsch, 1998). Second, it positions literary and media texts as “third spaces” (Bhabha, 1994) where multiple cultural voices can be negotiated, helping learners to move beyond surface-level comprehension toward deeper reflection on diversity, power, and equality. Third, CLA supports the development of democratic dispositions, encouraging learners to engage with texts in ways that promote respect for human rights and cultural pluralism (UNESCO, 2009). In the implementation, CLA can be accomplished by analysing literary texts and identifying language patterns that express notions of oppression and power, whether they are based on race, social class, gender, or a mix of the three (Priyatni, 2012).

The findings of this study suggest that CLA should be more explicitly integrated into EFL teacher education curricula. By embedding CLA in intercultural language teaching, educators can guide pre-service teachers to identify how texts construct “the Other,” reflect on their own cultural positions, and cultivate critical awareness necessary for working in diverse classrooms. Ultimately, CLA offers a concrete pedagogical pathway for bridging postcolonial theory, intercultural education, and teacher preparation. However, the implementation of intercultural teaching is not aimed at changing the students’ identities. Its objective is to enrich their knowledge of their intercultural identity and to widen their cultural horizons (Madya, 2013), as cultural diversity and intercultural communication are vital for fostering consensus on the universal foundation for human rights (UNESCO, 2009: 27; UNESCO, 2013; Shen, 2021; Su et al., 2021). Thus, teachers need to assist learners to understand both their own culture and that of others to be able to bridge the gaps between the two.

CONCLUSION

This study explored Indonesian pre-service English teachers’ awareness of othering in the film *The Fences* from a postcolonial perspective. The findings revealed that while some participants recognized racial discrimination and, to a lesser extent, gender inequality, many interpreted the film primarily as a family drama. This tendency toward surface-level interpretation highlights the limited integration of intercultural perspectives in their language learning experiences. The study demonstrates the potential of the CLA as a pedagogical framework for fostering intercultural awareness in teacher education. By encouraging learners to interrogate texts for hidden power relations and ideological messages, CLA provides a practical means of connecting literary engagement with issues of justice, diversity, and identity. For pre-service teachers, CLA not only enhances critical literacy but also equips them to incorporate intercultural dimensions into their future classrooms.

Further research and limitations

This study is limited in scope by its small sample size and single institutional context, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Data were collected from written reflections on a single film, which may not fully capture the range of students’ intercultural awareness or critical literacy skills. Further research should expand the scope by including larger samples, varied cultural texts, and longitudinal approaches to evaluate how sustained use of the CLA influences the development of intercultural awareness in teacher education. Such work is essential for deepening our understanding of how CLA can be systematically embedded in EFL teacher education.

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