

Navigating Cultural Duality: Strategies of Uzbek EFL Students at Fergana State University for Preserving Cultural Identity in English Language Learning

Munajat Umaralieva 

Abstract. *This research examines how second-year students of English as a foreign language at Fergana State University's Faculty of English Language and Literature perceive, negotiate, and balance traditional Uzbek cultural values against Western cultural influences encountered through English language learning.*

This study, based on Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Norton's (2000) theory of identity and investment, and Kramsch's (1993) concept of the "third place," employs a mixed-methods approach, utilizing a Likert-scale questionnaire (n = 116) and semi-structured interviews (n = 15) to explore students' cultural balancing strategies.

The findings indicate that students predominantly adopt a selective integration approach, embracing Western communicative norms while firmly upholding core Uzbek cultural values. Additionally, the emergence of a "third place" identity occurs organically through students' self-directed engagement with multimodal English-language resources, rather than as a result of deliberate pedagogical intervention. The research has profound implications for the development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curricula and intercultural education in Central Asian universities.

Keywords: *intercultural communicative competence, cultural identity, EFL, Uzbekistan, Fergana State University, third place, self-directed learning, cultural duality*

Fergana State University, Uzbekistan

E-mail: umunajat1@gmail.com

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Mədəni ikiliyi aşmaq: Fərqanə Dövlət Universitetinin özbək ingilis dili tələbələrinin ingilis dilini öyrənmədə mədəni kimliyi qorumaq strategiyaları

Munajat Umaralieva 

Xülasə. *Bu tədqiqat Fərqanə Dövlət Universitetinin İngilis Dili və Ədəbiyyatı Fakültəsinin ikinci kurs xarici dil kimi ingilis dili tələbələrinin ənənəvi özbək mədəni dəyərlərini ingilis dilini öyrənmə prosesində qarşılaşdıqları Qərb mədəni təsirləri ilə necə qavradığını, uzlaşdırdığını və tarazlaşdırdığını araşdırır.*

Byram-ın (1997) Mədəniyyətlərarası Kommunikativ Kompetensiya (MKK) modeli, Norton-un (2000) kimlik və investisiya nəzəriyyəsi və Kramsch-ın (1993) "üçüncü məkan" konsepsiyasına əsaslanan bu tədqiqat, tələbələrin mədəni tarazlıq strategiyalarını araşdırmaq üçün Likert-şkalalı sorğu (n = 116) və yarımstrukturlu müsahibələrdən (n = 15) istifadə edərək qarışıq metodlar yanaşmasını tətbiq edir.

Natıcalar göstərir ki, tələbələr əsasən seçici integrasiya yanaşmasını mənimsəyir: Qərb kommunikativ normalarını qəbul edərkən əsas özbək mədəni dəyərlərini möhkəm şəkildə qoruyurlar. Bundan əlavə, “üçüncü məkan” kimliyinin formalaşması məqsədyönlü pedaqoji müdaxilənin nəticəsi kimi deyil, tələbələrin çoxmodallı ingilis dili resursları ilə müstəqil məşğuliyyəti sayəsində üzvi şəkildə baş verir. Tədqiqat Mərkəzi Asiya universitetlərində xarici dil kimi ingilis dili (XDİD) tədris proqramlarının və mədəniyyətlərarası təhsilin inkişafı üçün böyük əhəmiyyət daşıyır.

Açar sözlər: mədəniyyətlərarası kommunikativ kompetensiya, mədəni kimlik, XDİD, Özbəkistan, Fərqanə Dövlət Universiteti, üçüncü məkan, müstəqil öyrənmə, mədəni ikilik

Fərqanə Dövlət Universiteti, Özbəkistan

E-poçt: umunajat1@gmail.com

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Introduction

The swift rise of English as a universal language has placed English language education at the crossroads of linguistic assimilation and cultural exchange. In many non-Western societies, learning English is not a culturally neutral endeavor – it directly exposes learners to Western cultural paradigms, values, and perspectives that may diverge significantly from their own. This dichotomy is particularly evident in Uzbekistan, a post-Soviet nation in Central Asia with a predominantly Muslim population, where deeply ingrained traditional values coexist with the growing influence of globalization.

Following the declaration of independence in 1991, Uzbekistan embarked on a journey of language policy transformation, prioritizing English as a crucial instrument for international engagement. As Hasanova (2016) highlights, English education in Uzbekistan has experienced a remarkable expansion since the Soviet era, with the government introducing mandatory English instruction from the primary school level. More recently, the Mirziyoyev administration has reinforced this trajectory by mandating compulsory English instruction in elementary schools, further solidifying English's position in the national educational framework.

The elevation of English in the national curriculum, however, prompts important questions about cultural autonomy and the preservation of Uzbek cultural identity among young learners. At the tertiary level, EFL students at institutions such as Fergana State University (FSU) engage daily with English-medium materials, many of which are produced in or oriented toward British and American cultural contexts. Beyond formal classroom instruction, students independently access Western cultural content through a wide variety of digital and literary resources – including YouTube videos, podcasts, reading materials, and English literature – thereby extending their intercultural exposure well beyond the boundaries of the curriculum. As Umaralieva (2025) demonstrates, the intersection of self-directed learning and intercultural competence is a defining feature of contemporary Uzbek EFL learners, who actively construct intercultural knowledge outside of formal educational settings. This exposure creates a unique form of cultural duality – students must navigate between the demands of becoming interculturally competent communicators and the social expectation of remaining culturally loyal members of their communities.

However, it is crucial to note that preliminary observations suggest that this broad exposure to Western cultural content does not lead to cultural assimilation. Instead, students seem to comprehend, appreciate, and critically engage with Western cultural perspectives while maintaining their Uzbek

identity. This phenomenon aligns with Kramsch's concept of the "third space" – an intercultural space between the learner's home culture and the target language culture, where learners can critically reflect on both without fully merging with either.

What is particularly remarkable in the context of the FSU is that this third space appears to emerge naturally and unconsciously – not as a result of deliberate pedagogical intervention, but through students' own, self-directed engagement with diverse English-language resources. Despite the abundance of research on ICC in EFL contexts, there is a dearth of studies specifically focusing on Uzbek university students. The unconscious, resource-driven process of forming a third-place identity remains largely unexplored. This research aims to explore how second-year EFL students of the Faculty of English Language and Literature at FSU perceive and respond to Western cultural influences, and the strategies they employ to maintain their Uzbek cultural identity. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do second-year EFL students at FSU perceive Western cultural values encountered through both formal EFL materials and informal digital and literary resources?

RQ2: What strategies do they employ to maintain their cultural identity while developing intercultural communicative competence?

RQ3: How do FSU students demonstrate evidence of spontaneous "third-place" identity formation through their multimodal, self-directed engagement with English-language content?

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has emerged as a fundamental concept in foreign language education since the late 20th century. Byram's (1997) groundbreaking model defines ICC through five interconnected elements – attitudes (*savoir être*), knowledge (*savoirs*), skills of interpretation and connection (*savoir comprendre*), skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*), and critical cultural awareness (*savior's engager*). This model highlights that effective intercultural communication goes beyond linguistic proficiency; it necessitates learners to develop the ability to engage with cultural diversity with empathy and criticality. Recent research has shown that incorporating ICC into English language instruction enables learners to express their identities while engaging in meaningful discussions about cultural viewpoints (Byram, 2020).

Deardorff (2006) further refined the theory of intercultural competence through her process model, which highlights a cyclical process that links personal attitudes, knowledge acquisition, skill development, and behavioral outcomes. Importantly, Deardorff (2006) argues that intercultural competence should be evaluated using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, acknowledging the intricacies of measuring internal dispositions. In the context of English as a foreign language (EFL), researchers have observed that students in non-Western settings often grapple with the dilemma of developing intercultural competence while safeguarding their native cultural identity – a challenge that is particularly pronounced in collectivist societies.

Cultural Identity and Investment in Language Learning. Norton (2000) offers a critical perspective on the relationship between language learning and identity, arguing that identity refers to how a person understands their relationship to the world across time and space, and how that understanding shapes possibilities for the future. Norton further introduces the concept of "investment", which she positions as a sociological complement to motivation: learners invest in a language with the understanding that they will gain access to symbolic and material resources, increasing their cultural capital and social power. This framework is particularly relevant in the Uzbek context, where learning English is often driven by economic and professional aspirations without necessarily entailing cultural assimilation.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) contributes further by arguing that individuals maintain a positive sense of self partly through identification with social groups. For Uzbek EFL learners, whose cultural and religious identity is deeply tied to family, community, and Islamic values, English language learning can represent both an opportunity and a potential threat to this social self-concept. Research suggests that learners in collectivist cultural contexts – including those in Central Asia – often demonstrate strong in-group cultural loyalty even as they acquire global communicative skills (Hofstede, 2001).

The “Third Place” and Cultural Mediation. Kramsch (1993) proposed the idea of the «third place» as a cross-cultural space situated between the learner's native culture and the target language culture. This position allows learners to critically examine both cultures without fully immersing themselves in either one. Bhabha (1994) similarly introduced the notion of the «third space», which views cultural identity as a hybrid and evolving concept, shaped through negotiation rather than being fixed in its origins.

This framework is highly relevant for EFL learners in Uzbekistan, who frequently encounter Western cultural content in textbooks that are produced or inspired by British and American contexts. Rather than passively accepting or rejecting this content, research suggests that EFL learners often develop hybrid cultural identities, blending elements of both cultures in a unique way (Kramsch, 1993; Bhabha, 1994).

Moreover, recent research on Uzbek EFL learners has shown that self-directed learning is a crucial factor in this process. Students independently navigate intercultural challenges using informal digital and literary resources (Umaraliev, 2025b). The current study aims to explore whether and how this phenomenon occurs among students in the former Soviet Union EFL and Cultural Dynamics in Uzbekistan. The linguistic landscape of Uzbekistan is characterized by the presence of Uzbek, Russian, Tajik, and, increasingly, English, within the context of post-Soviet language policy reforms. As Hasanova (2016) notes, the reforms after independence have gradually elevated the status of Uzbek as the official language, while also embracing English as a language for international communication. This multilingual environment has led to a complex negotiation of national identity, where Uzbek cultural values, such as collectivism, respect for elders, Islamic religious practices, and family-oriented social structures, coexist with aspirations for global mobility.

Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions framework places Uzbekistan firmly on the collectivist side of the individualism-collectivism spectrum, in stark contrast to the individualistic orientation of most English-speaking cultures. This structural difference is evident in EFL classrooms, where students encounter texts, values, and communication patterns that emphasize individual self-expression, critical thinking, and openness about personal life – all of which may clash with Uzbek social norms. The aim of this study is to explore how students navigate this clash.

Methods

Research Design. This research employs a mixed-methods approach, as outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018), where quantitative data collection and analysis precede and inform qualitative exploration. This approach was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive quantitative measurement alongside a thorough qualitative interpretation, both of which are essential for capturing the intricate dynamics of cultural identity negotiation among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners.

Participants and Selection. The participants were 116 second-year students enrolled in the English Language and Literature Department at Fergana State University, Uzbekistan. The department

consists of 12 student groups at the second-year level, each with a student count ranging from 27 to 30, resulting in a total student population of approximately 340. From this population, 116 participants were selected through a purposeful sampling method to ensure they had sufficient English proficiency (B1-B2 level, as determined by the department's placement records) to effectively reflect on their intercultural experiences. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 21, and they had been studying English formally for at least seven years. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Table 1
Demographic Profile of Research Participants

Parameter	Detail
Participants	2nd year EFL students
Number of groups	12 groups
Questionnaire participants (n)	116
Interview participants (n)	15
Age range	19-20
English proficiency level	B1-B2
Sampling method	Purposive sampling

Instruments. Two instruments were used. First, a 40-item Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) was developed, drawing on Byram's (1997) ICC framework and Berry's (2005) acculturation orientations. The questionnaire assessed three dimensions: (a) perceptions of Western cultural values encountered in EFL materials and informal digital resources; (b) identity preservation strategies; and (c) cultural balancing behaviors. The instrument was piloted with 15 students not included in the main study, and Cronbach's alpha reliability was calculated at $\alpha = .83$, indicating strong internal consistency.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants purposively selected from questionnaire respondents to represent a range of attitudinal profiles. Participants were chosen to reflect maximum variation in their cultural attitudes, ensuring that students with differing degrees of openness to Western cultural influences were represented. Interviews lasted approximately 35–45 minutes, were conducted in Uzbek to minimize linguistic barriers to authentic self-expression, and were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Interview questions explored students' concrete experiences of encountering cultural difference and the specific strategies they employ to manage these encounters.

Data Analysis. Questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests in SPSS (v.26), with mean scores computed for each subscale. Interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves familiarization with data, generating initial codes, constructing themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings was conducted in the discussion phase to produce an integrated, convergent interpretation of the data.

Results

Perceptions of Western Cultural Values in EFL Materials and Beyond. The results showed that the vast majority of participants ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.68$) acknowledged the presence of Western cultural values – particularly individualism, gender equality, and secularism – in the English language learning materials they used. Specifically, 81% of the 116 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the English textbooks they used contained cultural assumptions that differed significantly from Uzbek cultural norms. This finding aligns with the criticism in the literature regarding the cultural bias embedded in internationally produced English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbook, which often reflect British or American cultural perspectives (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993).

Crucially, the data from the interviews showed that students do not solely encounter Western cultural influences through formal classroom materials. All 15 interviewees reported actively engaging with Western cultural content through self-directed, informal channels, such as YouTube videos, podcasts, English-language literature, and digital reading platforms. This finding reinforces and expands upon Umaralieva's (2025) empirical research, which demonstrated that self-directed learning is a primary means for Uzbek EFL learners to develop intercultural awareness, often outside the confines of formal instruction.

The interview data provided further insight into this issue. The participants were able to pinpoint and articulate specific instances of cultural conflict with great precision and subtlety. One participant remarked, "When I read about families where children challenge their parents or make decisions independently, I feel uneasy. That is not our way." Another participant commented, "The textbook portrays men and women as equal in all aspects. I appreciate the respect for women, but some of the examples seem out of place in our culture." These responses demonstrate a nuanced and critical understanding of cultural differences, rather than a blanket rejection. The students were able to engage with Western cultural content while maintaining a clear understanding of where their own values differ.

Cultural Identity Preservation Strategies. The most significant discovery pertains to the approaches employed by participants when confronted with conflicts between perceived values. Based on Berry's (2005) framework of acculturation, three predominant orientations emerged from the combined data.

The majority of participants (64%, $n = 74$) exhibited what Berry refers to as "integration" – a selective acceptance of Western communication styles and pragmatic norms, such as directness in academic writing and active participation in classroom discussions, while maintaining their core Uzbek values in personal and social spheres. A smaller group (22%, $n = 26$) demonstrated tendencies towards "separation", actively resisting Western cultural content in their personal lives. The remaining 14% ($n = 16$) displayed signs of a more gradual cultural negotiation, not fitting neatly into either pattern. Thematic analysis of the 15 interview transcripts revealed four key strategies employed by students to navigate cultural duality. The first approach is to view English as a purely linguistic tool, mentally separating it from its cultural context. The second approach is to consciously choose which Western communication norms are beneficial for professional or academic purposes, and to integrate only those specific elements.

The third approach is to interpret Western cultural content through the lens of Uzbek culture, making it locally relevant without fully adopting it.

The fourth approach is to strengthen Uzbek identity through family connections, peer networks, and community involvement outside the classroom.

These approaches closely correspond with Norton's (2000) concept of investment, where students view English as a tool for social advancement and career growth, without compromising their cultural identity. They also align with the obstacles and assistance methods outlined by Umaralieva (2025) in her research on self-directed intercultural learning among Uzbek EFL students.

Spontaneous "Third Place" Identity Formation. Perhaps the most theoretically significant finding of this study concerns the widespread evidence of what Kramsch (1993) describes as "third place" positioning. Rather than situating themselves as either purely Uzbek or as aspiring toward a Western cultural identity, the majority of participants articulated a hybrid self-concept that draws selectively from both cultural worlds. As one interviewee expressed: "I want to speak English well and understand Western thinking, but I am Uzbek. I take what is useful and leave what does not belong to me." Another reflected: "Learning English makes me see my own culture more clearly. I appreciate things I used to take for granted."

What makes this finding particularly compelling is that students appear to have arrived at this third place not through deliberate pedagogical guidance, but organically and unconsciously – through their everyday, self-directed engagement with multimodal English-language resources such as YouTube videos, podcasts, and literary texts. In other words, the third place was not taught; it was lived. This suggests that third place identity formation is not exclusively a pedagogical outcome, as much of the existing literature implies, but can also emerge as a spontaneous, experience-driven phenomenon rooted in students' autonomous learning practices. This finding extends and enriches the frameworks of both Kramsch (1993) and Bhabha (1994) by demonstrating that the third place can take root outside the formal classroom, in the informal and self-directed learning spaces that students inhabit in their daily lives – a dynamic that Umaralieva (2025a, 2025b) identifies as a distinctive feature of contemporary Uzbek EFL learner behavior.

Furthermore, the data suggest that far from eroding cultural identity, engagement with English-language content may actually serve a deeply reflexive function – prompting students to become more conscious, articulate, and appreciative of their own Uzbek cultural values. This finding is consistent with Byram's (2020) updated ICC model, which emphasizes critical cultural awareness as a central outcome of intercultural engagement. In the post-Soviet Central Asian context, where historical pressures to assimilate have given way to a post-independence reassertion of national identity, the development of a globally aware yet culturally rooted third place identity may represent one of the most adaptive and authentic forms of intercultural competence available to young Uzbek EFL learners.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research aimed to explore how second-year students at Fergana State University in Uzbekistan navigate the cultural dichotomy inherent in English language learning. The results, based on the responses of 116 participants in a survey and 15 in-depth interviews, show that students are not passive recipients of Western cultural influence or rigid cultural isolationists. Instead, they employ sophisticated strategies of selective integration, compartmentalization, and third place positioning, actively constructing hybrid intercultural identities that honor their Uzbek cultural heritage while also striving for global communicative competence.

A distinctive aspect of this research is the discovery that the development of third place identity among students from the former Soviet Union is largely an autonomous process, driven by students' independent exploration of digital and literary resources rather than through explicit instruction. These findings challenge existing theoretical frameworks (Kramsch, 1993; Bhabha, 1994) and aligns with recent empirical evidence on the significance of self-directed learning in fostering intercultural competence among Uzbek learners of English as a foreign language (Umaralieva, 2025a, 2025b).

These discoveries have significant implications for education. Firstly, English language teaching curricula at universities in Uzbekistan should explicitly acknowledge and validate the cultural backgrounds of students, rather than treating Western cultural content as the default. A culturally responsive approach to teaching, which incorporates local cultural perspectives alongside the target language content, is likely to enhance both intercultural competence development and student engagement.

Secondly, teacher training programs should equip educators with the skills to facilitate intercultural dialogue in a way that affirms rather than challenges students' cultural identities.

Thirdly, curriculum developers should recognize and build upon the informal, self-directed intercultural learning that is already taking place among students, creating connections between in-class and out-of-class intercultural experiences.

This research has some limitations. The sample was confined to a single department at a single university, which limits the ability to generalize the findings to the broader context of Uzbekistan. Self-reported data may not fully capture the intricacies of students' cultural negotiations. Future studies should adopt longitudinal approaches, expand to multiple universities across Uzbekistan and Central Asia, and incorporate the viewpoints of EFL instructors and curriculum developers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural dynamics in the region.

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