



“I Learned Something, But It Felt Uncomfortable”: International Students Negotiating Sensitive Content in English Language Curricula

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Abstract. This study explores how international Muslim students in Malaysia navigate emotionally and culturally sensitive topics in English communication classes. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with eight participants from the Middle East and Africa, the study investigates how learners perceive, manage, and adapt to discussions that may challenge their faith, identity, or cultural norms. Thematic analysis revealed four key patterns: (1) what students found sensitive, (2) emotional regulation and behavioural strategies, (3) cognitive and linguistic adaptation, and (4) teacher mediation. Findings suggest that sensitivity does not imply resistance, but instead signals a need for empathy, cultural awareness, and practical pedagogical approaches. The study concludes that with clear guidelines, topic flexibility, and psychological safety, students engage critically and confidently while maintaining their beliefs. The findings therefore suggest important implications for culturally responsive curriculum design, particularly in promoting for students voice, respectful engagement, and ethical participation.

Keywords: Sensitive Content, Intercultural Communication, Emotional Regulation, Muslim Learners, Higher Education, English Curriculum.

1 Introduction and Background

The rapid internationalisation of higher education has transformed Malaysia into an emerging hub for English-medium instruction (EMI), attracting students from across Asia, the Middle East, and Africa [1]. In Malaysian universities, English functions as a second language (ESL) within an officially bilingual education system. At the same time, for many international students, particularly those from the Middle East and parts of Africa, it remains a foreign language (EFL) [2]. This distinction creates a unique linguistic and cultural dynamic in that Malaysian students generally operate within an environment where English is widely used in academic and social domains, whereas international students often encounter English as a classroom-bound subject with limited exposure to authentic communication prior to arrival [3].

In English proficiency courses that emphasise discussion, persuasion, and reflection, these differences can heighten challenges related to cultural interpretation and emotional expression. Topics that seem routine or neutral in a Malaysian ESL classroom, such as gender roles, relationships, or identity; may appear sensitive or even inappropriate to students who come from more conservative EFL contexts. This sensitivity, however, should not be viewed as a sign of resistance or weakness. Instead, it reflects the intercultural negotiation that occurs when learners engage with ideas framed outside their familiar moral and linguistic boundaries [4].

Given these intercultural dynamics, Malaysia’s multicultural higher education classrooms provide a particularly compelling setting for examining how students navigate sensitive topics in English proficiency courses. Although the country is predominantly Muslim and socially conservative, its tertiary curricula frequently adopt western communicative and critical-thinking pedagogies. Thus, international Muslim students find themselves in a space that is simultaneously culturally familiar and pedagogically foreign. Understanding how these students negotiate linguistic, emotional, and cognitive adjustments provides important insight into how culturally responsive English language teaching can better support learners from diverse backgrounds.

2 Conceptual and Empirical Background

In educational contexts, sensitive content can be understood as material that evokes discomfort, anxiety, or strong emotional reactions because it intersects with learners’ personal, cultural, or moral values. However, up until this present, there is no definite definition about sensitive content in teaching contexts especially in the higher education. Drawing on Lee’s (1993) notion of sensitive research as any topic “laden with emotion or which inspires feelings of awe or dread” (p. 6), such content typically involves issues that challenge social norms, identity, or belief systems. Subsequent educational scholarship extends this view to include classroom topics that may provoke distress or controversy due to their connection with lived experiences or culturally embedded sensitivities [6], [7]. For Muslim students, issues related to relationships, religion, war, or family roles often trigger such responses, not out of unwillingness to learn but due to a desire to preserve dignity and faith-based principles.

Pedagogically, addressing sensitive topics presents a double-edged challenge. On the one hand, it can encourage critical thinking, empathy, and intercultural understanding; on the other hand, it risks emotional disengagement or silence if handled insensitively. In multilingual classrooms such as those in Malaysia, teachers must therefore navigate both academic expectations that favour open expression and debate and cultural boundaries that prioritise respect and modesty.

Existing research offers valuable insights into how students navigate this tension. [8] argues that English language teaching (ELT) materials often embed Western cultural assumptions, marginalising alternative perspectives. [9] found that Muslim learners in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes often regulate emotion through silence or humour rather than open objection. Similarly, [10] document learner silence among female Saudi EFL students as a culturally situated participation strategy, highlighting

how norms of deference shape classroom talk. However, most studies focus on Western or Middle Eastern contexts, with limited attention to Muslim international students studying in Asian ESL environments like Malaysia, where faith-based norms coexist with liberal academic discourse. Existing research offers valuable insights into how students navigate this tension.

3 Research Purpose and Questions

The present study aims to explore how Muslim international students from the Middle East and Africa, who have previously learned English in EFL contexts, navigate, interpret, and adapt to sensitive content in an ESL university classroom in Malaysia. Specifically, it examines how students manage emotional discomfort, negotiate faith and identity through language, and respond to teachers' strategies for maintaining inclusivity.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What types of topics do Muslim international students perceive as sensitive in English communication courses in Malaysia?
2. How do they regulate their emotions and behaviours when encountering sensitive content?
3. What linguistic strategies do they employ to maintain politeness and academic objectivity?
4. How do teacher practices facilitate comfort, engagement, and intercultural understanding?

Through these questions, the study contributes to a growing body of research on culturally responsive pedagogy by highlighting how Malaysia's ESL context mediates the experiences of students from EFL backgrounds. The findings offer implications for curriculum design, teacher training, and intercultural communication in higher education, demonstrating that sensitivity when acknowledged and managed with empathy can become a site of meaningful learning rather than a source of conflict.

4 Research Method

This study employed a qualitative interpretive design using semi-structured interviews to explore how Muslim international students experienced and managed sensitive classroom content. The approach was selected to foreground participants' personal narratives and varied emotional responses, reflecting the study's concern with meaning-making rather than numerical measurement. Eight students were purposively selected from an English Communication course at a Malaysian public university. All were Muslim undergraduates from the Middle East (Yemen) and Africa (Chad, Somalia, and Sudan). The participants, whose average age was 22, had little or no formal instruction in English before enrolment; the course therefore represented their first structured exposure to English as an academic and communicative medium.

Data were gathered through individual interviews conducted in English and audio-recorded with participants' consent. Each interview invited reflection on moments of discomfort, the strategies used to cope with sensitive content, and perceptions of teacher support. The data were analysed using [11]six-step thematic analysis framework. Initial codes captured emotional, cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical dimensions, and recurring patterns were refined through iterative comparison and interpretation. The analysis yielded four overarching themes that illustrated how students perceived, negotiated, and adapted to sensitivity in the classroom. The following section presents each theme in detail, capturing their experiences and perspectives.

5 Results and Discussion

The findings revealed that Muslim international students from the Middle East and Africa experienced a range of emotions when encountering classroom topics that touched on personal, cultural, or religious beliefs. Although some issues provoked discomfort, the students did not resist participation. Instead, they showed maturity, patience, and a strong desire to learn. They tried to manage sensitivity through emotional control, linguistic diplomacy, and the support of empathetic teachers. This pattern suggests that sensitivity in the classroom should not be viewed as resistance to learning, but rather as a form of cultural and emotional negotiation. The study supports [12]argument that emotion is integral to classroom life and that teachers should view learners' affective responses as part of inclusive and equitable education.

The analysis identified four interrelated themes that explain how the students made sense of and managed sensitive topics. These are: (1) culturally rooted sources of sensitivity, (2) emotional regulation as adaptive engagement, (3) linguistic and cognitive adaptation, and (4) teacher mediation through responsive pedagogy. Altogether, these themes demonstrate how learners employed self-awareness and respect to balance their faith, identity, and learning in a cross-cultural environment. Table 1 presents the four main themes identified in the study, along with their corresponding interpretations.

Table 1. Summary of Key Findings

Theme	Interpretation
Culturally Rooted Sensitivity	Students' values framed how they understood and responded to sensitive issues.
Emotional Regulation	Emotional restraint functioned as a form of adaptive engagement.
Linguistic and Cognitive Adaptation	Language and thought adjustments enabled respectful communication.
Teacher Mediation	Teachers acted as mediators who transformed discomfort into learning.

The first theme, culturally rooted sources of sensitivity, reflects how students' beliefs shaped their perceptions of specific topics. While religion, gender, and lifestyle were expected to be delicate, some participants also found topics such as visiting orphanages, helping in old-age care homes, and celebrating birthdays emotionally challenging. For

them, caring for both orphans and the elderly is a religious and family obligation rather than a government or institutional responsibility. One student from Somalia explained that in his culture;

"If you send your parents to a nursing home, people will think you are a bad son. It is our duty to take care of them." Another participant from Yemen shared that the discussion of orphanages made him uneasy because "In Islam, the family should take care of the orphan. It is not something we give to others."

A Sudanese student also described birthday celebrations as difficult, explaining, "In my religion, we are not encouraged to celebrate birthdays. When others talk about it, I just listen." For students from countries affected by war, the topic of conflict carried personal pain. One participant from Yemen said, "When I hear about war, I remember my home. It is not only a topic for me. It is my life." These experiences show that what may appear to be neutral classroom content in Malaysia can hold strong emotional meaning for international students. The findings are consistent with those of [13] and [9], who note that English language materials often reflect Western cultural assumptions that may not align with learners' moral or religious worldviews. The results also support [14]view that emotions and memory have a profound influence on learning, particularly in multicultural and multilingual classrooms.

The second theme, emotional regulation as adaptive engagement, describes how students maintained respect and composure even when they felt uneasy. Rather than avoiding discussion, they managed their emotions through politeness, humour, or quiet participation. One participant remarked, "Sometimes I keep quiet because I do not want to say something wrong. The teacher knows I am listening." Another added, "When I feel uncomfortable, I just smile or make a small joke. It helps me to feel calm." Silence, in this sense, was not a sign of disengagement but a way of demonstrating courtesy and emotional control. Several students connected this restraint to their faith, stating that patience, or *sabr*, is a crucial Islamic value. As one Somali student explained, "We learn to be patient and polite. If I disagree, I will think about it quietly rather than argue." These behaviors demonstrate how students navigated the tension between their internal beliefs and the expectations of a communicative classroom. They also reflect Benesch's [11] concept of emotional labour, although she originally applied the concept of emotional labor to teachers, her argument that emotions are central to classroom life can also be extended to learners. Just as teachers manage feelings of empathy, frustration, or care to sustain professional roles, students also engage in emotional regulation when confronting classroom topics that challenge their beliefs or lived experiences. From this perspective, the international students' responses in this study can be understood as a form of learner emotion labor, in which they balance personal discomfort with the academic expectation to participate critically and respectfully in discussions involving sensitive issues. This concept describes how learners manage their feelings in response to the power dynamics and emotional demands of educational settings. Consequently, emotional regulation has become a form of intercultural competence, enabling students to maintain their dignity while engaging in the learning process.

The third theme, linguistic and cognitive adaptation, illustrates how students used language strategically to maintain politeness and balance during sensitive discussions. They often chose indirect or neutral expressions, such as “some people believe” or “in certain cultures,” rather than using direct statements like “I believe.” This linguistic adjustment allowed them to express ideas without appearing judgmental. A participant from Sudan said, “When I use general words, it feels safer. I can share my opinion without making it too personal.” Another student noted that speaking in this way “helps everyone to feel comfortable and included.” These practices align with [15] discussion of how multilingual learners adapt their linguistic choices to navigate intercultural communication and maintain harmony in diverse classrooms. Cognitively, students learned to distinguish between academic discussion and moral judgment. One participant from Sudan described his thought process by saying, “When the teacher asked about old-age care, I told myself this is only an English exercise, not about my belief.” This cognitive distancing helped reduce emotional pressure and allowed students to remain engaged. Such reflection supports the principles of [16], who emphasises empathy, contextual awareness, and respect for students’ cultural perspectives as central to culturally responsive pedagogy. Through this process, students developed intercultural understanding and demonstrated that linguistic growth and emotional maturity can occur simultaneously.

The fourth theme, teacher mediation and responsive pedagogy, highlights the essential role of teachers in helping students navigate sensitive content. The majority of participants reported feeling comfortable when teachers anticipated potential discomfort and explained the purpose of activities clearly. One student recalled, “Our teacher told us that if a topic makes us uncomfortable, we can choose another one. That made me feel respected.” Another commented, “The teacher said we don’t need to agree, just to practise speaking. That made me more confident.” These statements show that clear communication, empathy, and flexibility fostered a sense of safety in the classroom. [17] describe this sense of trust as psychological safety; a condition that allows learners to take intellectual risks without fear of embarrassment or moral judgment. When teachers ignored emotional cues or forced participation, students reported feeling anxious or silent. One student said, “Sometimes I think the teacher does not understand that the topic is sensitive for us. I prefer to stay quiet then.” Teachers who demonstrated understanding were described as “kind,” “patient,” and “respectful.” Their approach reflects the principles of responsive pedagogy discussed by Gay [15], which emphasise the teacher’s role as a cultural mediator who bridges the gap between communicative openness and moral sensitivity. Such teachers treated emotion not as a classroom distraction but as a meaningful part of learning that deserved recognition.

In sum, these themes are closely connected and reinforce one another. Students first recognised sensitivity when a topic conflicted with their values or emotions. They then employed emotional control to maintain their composure, adapted their language to express ideas respectfully, and relied on their teachers’ empathy to sustain their participation. Sensitivity was therefore relational, shaped by the interaction between learners, teachers, and institutional culture. Within Malaysia’s ESL environment, where Islamic

values coexist with communicative and student-centred teaching, this relationship created opportunities for transformation. Students gradually learned to view discomfort as a natural part of intercultural learning rather than a threat to their beliefs.

6 Conclusion

Overall, the study reveals that Muslim international students did not shy away from sensitive topics; instead, they reinterpreted them through emotional control, careful language use, and the guidance of empathetic teachers. Their experiences reveal that emotion, culture, and language learning are inseparable. Feelings of discomfort, faith-based values, and cultural expectations interact continuously with classroom communication.

The findings suggest that effective education involves more than teaching language skills or academic knowledge. It depends on empathy, inclusion, and respect for cultural diversity in the classroom. When students feel recognised and valued, they are more willing to share their thoughts and participate actively, even when discussions involve sensitive or emotional topics. Teaching, therefore, is not only an act of instruction but also a commitment to understanding learners as complete individuals whose emotions, beliefs, and experiences shape their learning process. Hence, a responsive and culturally aware approach builds respect and understanding, helping teachers and students learn from each other. In the Malaysian context, this approach helps teachers transform sensitivity into a source of strength. When educators validate students' beliefs and respond to their discomfort with patience and clarity, they foster trust, promote intercultural dialogue, and encourage deeper reflection. Ultimately, sensitivity becomes a catalyst for growth, enriching both language learning and human understanding in a globalised educational setting.

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