

FROM CULTURE SHOCK TO CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING IN READING COMPREHENSION: A RECEPTION STUDY OF FIFTH- SEMESTER EFL STUDENTS AT FTIK UIN DATOKARAMA PALU ON STEINBECK'S "THE PEARL"

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Abstract

Reading comprehension in EFL teacher education is increasingly framed as an ability to interpret texts critically, engage ethically with difference, and negotiate meaning across cultures. Yet, culturally distant literary texts often provoke affective disruption and moral discomfort that students may label as "culture shock". This qualitative reception study examines how culture shock, elicited through John Steinbeck's novella *The Pearl*, became a generative starting point for cross-cultural understanding among ten fifth-semester EFL student-teachers at FTIK UIN Datokarama Palu. Data were collected from reflective reading journals written after each reading segment and a follow-up focus group discussion. The analysis applied an inductive thematic approach to trace recurring shock triggers, interpretive moves, and pedagogical implications. Four interrelated themes emerged: (1) shock at structural injustice and institutional betrayal, (2) shock around gendered violence and patriarchal constraints, (3) shock at materialism and the moral economy of wealth, and (4) movement toward cross-cultural understanding through perspective-taking, value negotiation, and critical comparison with local socio-religious frames. The findings suggest that structured reader-response tasks, especially reflective journals, help student-teachers transform initial emotional resistance into critical, dialogic interpretations that support intercultural reading competence. This study contributes (1) a context-sensitive model of how readers move from culture shock to cross-cultural understanding in an Islamic EFL teacher-education setting and (2) task-level design principles (journal prompts and discussion moves) that instructors can use to evidence and support that movement.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Understanding, Culture Shock, EFL Teacher Education, Intercultural Competence, Reader-Response Pedagogy



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INTRODUCTION

EFL reading instruction in teacher education is no longer evaluated only through accurate decoding or literal comprehension. Metacognitive strategy use and intercultural literacy are increasingly positioned as core outcomes because teachers are expected to guide learners in monitoring comprehension, interpreting texts in relation to ideology, identity, and social context, and responding ethically to difference (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Jeon & Yamashita, 2014; Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). This shift has intensified the need for pedagogies that connect reading comprehension to ethical judgement, perspective-taking, and culturally informed meaning-making (Heggernes, 2021; Paran, 2008). In EFL contexts, the problem becomes sharper when texts embody unfamiliar cultural practices or value systems, because comprehension then depends on learners' ability to bridge cultural schemas rather than retrieve information alone (Erten & Razi, 2012, 2020). Intercultural language education research has repeatedly shown that competence develops through guided engagement with difference, reflection on one's own assumptions, and dialogic negotiation of meaning, which can be conceptualized as intercultural citizenship and measured through developmental sensitivity frameworks (Byram et al., 2019; Deardorff, 2006; Hammer et al., 2003). However, classroom reading tasks often under-specify how such processes can be designed, monitored, and evidenced, especially within teacher education where interpretive habits are still forming (Bloemert et al., 2019; Young & Sachdev, 2011).

Cultural distance in narrative texts can also produce an affective–cognitive disturbance that readers experience as culture shock. Culture shock is widely described as a cluster of emotional strain, confusion, and value disorientation that arises when familiar interpretive routines fail to explain new cultural cues (Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Y. Zhou et al., 2008). In educational settings, such disruption is often treated as a barrier to learning, yet intercultural research indicates that discomfort can become productive when learners are supported to reframe it as inquiry and reflection (Deardorff, 2006; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). This reframing aligns with findings that literary fiction can foster empathy, mental-state attribution, and moral reasoning by inviting readers to inhabit perspectives that are not their own (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Dodell-Feder & Tamir, 2018; Kidd & Castano, 2013). From a reading-comprehension standpoint, the pedagogical challenge is to transform immediate emotional resistance into interpretive work that is accountable to textual evidence and responsive to cultural context. In reader-response terms, affective reactions such as shock, anger, or moral discomfort are not peripheral to comprehension; they shape inference-making, stance-taking, and the willingness to revisit initial judgements. Recent work in EFL literature pedagogy also stresses that literary reading engages cognition and emotion simultaneously, and that structured response activities (e.g., reflective journals and guided discussion) help learners articulate emotions, test interpretations against textual evidence, and develop intercultural and empathic competence (Bist & Kandel, 2024; Calafato & Hunstadbråten, 2025; Widayanti et al., 2025).

Steinbeck's *The Pearl* provides a dense site for this transformation because its depiction of poverty, racialized hierarchy, institutional corruption, and moral conflict tends to trigger strong evaluative reactions among contemporary readers. Such reactions can remain at the level of rejection, but they can also open space for critical comparison and ethical interrogation when reading is organized through tasks that scaffold reflection and dialogue (Carlisle, 2000; Paran, 2008). Evidence-based surveys indicate that literature can support language learning and higher-order reading when tasks prompt inference, interpretation, and discussion rather than plot recall (Heggernes, 2021; Paran, 2008). In addition, intercultural learning research across media suggests that diaries, reflective writing, and structured response prompts help learners articulate shifts in awareness, attitudes, and knowledge over time (Chao, 2013; Gonzalez-Torres & Vargas-Saritama, 2025). In this study, early journal entries captured moral emotions (e.g., anger at the doctor's refusal, sadness for Coyotito, and discomfort with gendered violence), which then prompted re-reading, questioning, and perspective-taking across later

segments. These insights motivate an instructional focus on response processes rather than on predetermined “correct” cultural interpretations.

Existing studies on literature-based intercultural pedagogy have contributed important guidance on task design and possible outcomes. For example, research has shown that guided literary discussions can develop interpretive flexibility and intercultural sensitivity when learners compare cultural frames and justify evaluations (Bloemert et al., 2019; Heggernes, 2021). Classroom innovations using translation tasks, digital collaboration, and multimodal materials have also been proposed to stimulate intercultural reflection and awareness (Ducate & Steckenbiller, 2017; Elorza, 2008; Faneca et al., 2016). Within Indonesian EFL contexts, reflective practices such as reading journals are increasingly reported to support self-regulation and critical engagement, though implementation quality varies across courses (Atmojo & Putra, 2022; Sudirman et al., 2021b). Despite these contributions, two limitations remain salient. First, many studies treat intercultural learning as an outcome measured at the end of instruction, leaving the micro-processes of interpretive struggle under-described. Second, less is known about how student-teachers in faith-based institutions negotiate culturally distant narratives through socio-religious values that may both constrain and enrich interpretation (Byram, 2014; Byram et al., 2021).

To clarify the claimed novelty, the empirical gaps addressed by this study are specified as follows: (a) much of the literature reports intercultural learning as an end-state (e.g., post-hoc surveys or final reflections), so the segment by segment reception process-how initial culture shock is negotiated across reading moments-remains under-documented; (b) qualitative studies that triangulate reflective journals written after each reading segment with a follow-up focus group to trace interpretive moves are still limited; and (c) evidence from faith-based EFL teacher education (including Islamic university contexts) remains scarce, particularly regarding how socio-religious value resources shape literary interpretation of culturally distant narratives.

This study addresses those limitations by adopting a reception perspective that treats readers’ responses as data about meaning-making in progress. The analysis focuses on how initial culture shock is articulated, what textual elements trigger it, and how subsequent reflections signal movement toward cross-cultural understanding. The work is grounded in reader-response pedagogy, which conceptualizes reading as a transactional process between text and reader and positions response writing as a vehicle for interpretive development (Carlisle, 2000; Ilyas et al., 2025). Reflective journals are treated as a structured method for making interpretive moves visible, including shifts in stance, emerging questions, and value negotiations (Gonzalez-Torres & Vargas-Saritama, 2025; Sudirman et al., 2021a). In this sense, culture shock is operationalized as an entry point to intercultural reading rather than as a deficit to be avoided.

The proposed contribution is twofold. Conceptually, the study clarifies how culture shock can be translated into intercultural meaning-making through a sequence of reader-response moves: moral evaluation, critical contextualization, perspective-taking, and comparative reflection. Practically, it formulates task-level implications for EFL teacher education, including prompts for reflective journals and principles for facilitating discussion that maintains sensitivity while sustaining critical analysis (Bloemert et al., 2019; Heggernes, 2021). The innovation lies in documenting a culturally situated pathway from shock to understanding in an Islamic university setting, using triangulated qualitative data rather than relying on post-hoc self-report alone (Nowell et al., 2017). Importantly, the move from rejection to understanding is often iterative rather than linear, involving ambivalence, value conflict, and moments of unresolved tension as readers negotiate cultural difference.

In practical terms, this article contributes (1) an evidence-based description of culture-shock triggers grounded in reader reception data and (2) a transferable set of task design principles (journal prompts and discussion moves) for converting affective disruption into text-grounded, dialogic interpretation in Reading Comprehension courses.

The study is guided by three research questions. First, what aspects of *The Pearl* trigger culture shock in the participants' reception? Second, how do participants' responses— including moments of resistance, ambivalence, and perspective-taking—trace trajectories toward cross-cultural understanding? Third, what pedagogical implications emerge for Reading Comprehension in EFL teacher education at an Islamic university?

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The next section explains the research design, context, data sources, and analysis procedures. The Results section presents the thematic findings from journals and the focus group. The Discussion interprets the themes in relation to intercultural competence and literature pedagogy research. The article closes with conclusions, implications, and directions for further research.

METHOD

Design

The study employed a qualitative reception design to examine how readers construct meaning while engaging with a culturally distant literary text. Reception analysis was selected because it foregrounds interpretive processes rather than assuming that textual meaning is fixed. The approach aligns with reader-response pedagogy, which treats written reflections as evidence of evolving interpretations (Carlisle, 2000; Ilyas et al., 2025).

Participants and Context

Participants were ten fifth-semester EFL student-teachers enrolled in a Reading Comprehension course in the English Language Education program (Tadris Bahasa Inggris) at FTIK UIN Datokarama Palu. The course integrated literary reading as a means to develop interpretive and critical reading skills. Participation was voluntary and the analysis used anonymized identifiers (J1–J10).

Materials and Learning Tasks

The focal text was Steinbeck's novella *The Pearl*, selected for its narrative accessibility and its depiction of social inequality, moral conflict, and cultural values. Reading was organized into segments. After each segment, participants wrote reflective journals guided by prompts that invited emotional reactions, textual evidence, interpretive questions, and connections to local experience. The prompts were designed to encourage perspective-taking and critical comparison rather than summary (Heggernes, 2021; Paran, 2008).

To improve methodological clarity, the reflective journal used a consistent prompt set across reading segments to support comparable, in-depth entries. Concrete examples of the journal prompts included: 1) What scene/idea surprised, disturbed, or confused you, and what emotion did you experience (e.g., shock, anger, pity, discomfort)? 2) Which textual evidence (quotation/description) triggered that reaction? 3) How do you interpret the characters' actions in the segment, and what contextual constraints might explain them? 4) How does the segment connect to your local socio-cultural or socio-religious frames (which values resonate or conflict, and why)? 5) What question would you bring to class discussion to consider alternative interpretations?

Data Sources

Two data sources were analyzed: (1) ten reflective reading journals submitted after each reading segment, and (2) a follow-up focus group discussion (FGD) conducted after the completion of the novella. The journals captured individual reception trajectories, while the FGD provided opportunities for clarification, peer elaboration, and negotiated meanings.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

All texts were read repeatedly for familiarization. Coding was conducted inductively to identify recurrent shock triggers, interpretive moves, and emergent pedagogical insights. Codes were clustered into themes following a thematic analysis logic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis emphasized transparency through an audit trail of coding decisions and triangulation across journals and the FGD summary to strengthen credibility (Nowell et al., 2017). To address the subjectivity inherent in affective reception data, the researchers maintained a reflexive audit trail (coding memos and a developing codebook), searched for discrepant/negative cases, and periodically re-checked themes against the full dataset. In addition, a peer debriefing step was used to challenge interpretations, and brief member-check feedback was sought on the theme summaries to confirm that they reflected participants' intended meanings. (Herzog et al., 2025).

RESULTS

The analysis identified four interrelated themes that captured how culture shock was triggered and how meaning-making developed across the reading journals and the focus group. The themes are presented with representative excerpts, while preserving the qualitative nature of the data.

Table 1. Overview of Themes, Interpretive Focus, and Pedagogical Implications

Theme	Primary Shock Trigger / Issue	Illustrative Evidence from Journals	Pedagogical Implication
Structural injustice and institutional betrayal	Encountering systemic exclusion in health care and governance.	"Health care is available only to those who can afford it, not a basic right for everyone." (J1).	Use prompts that connect textual injustice to evidence-based interpretation and contextual inquiry.
Gendered violence and patriarchal constraints	Discomfort with domestic violence and gendered power relations.	"A person who is close to you should never hurt you." (J4).	Facilitate ethical discussion rules and perspective-taking tasks that keep critique anchored in the text.
Materialism and the moral economy of wealth	Tension between desire, greed, and communal pressure after the pearl is found.	"The pearl becomes a curse because it changes everyone's intentions." (J6).	Guide students to analyze how values and institutions shape choices in narrative worlds.
Movement toward cross-cultural understanding	Shifts from rejection to explanation through comparison, empathy, and value negotiation.	"At first it felt unfair, but then I realized how power works in that society and how fear controls choices." (J8).	Structure reflective journals to document shifts in stance and to support dialogic synthesis.

Theme 1. Culture shock triggered by structural injustice and institutional betrayal: A dominant shock trigger was participants' confrontation with institutional injustice in the novella's portrayal of health care, colonial-style authority, and economic exclusion. Several journals framed the doctor's refusal to treat Kino's child as a moral rupture that challenged expectations about human dignity.

"Health care is available only to those who can afford it, not a basic right for everyone." (J1, reflective journal).

Some participants extended this reaction into broader critiques of structural power. One journal interpreted the doctor as a symbol of colonial hierarchy and racialized privilege.

“The doctor in the story is a perfect symbol of colonialism.” (J3, reflective journal).

Theme 2. Culture shock around gendered violence and patriarchal constraints: Participants reported discomfort and moral concern regarding scenes of domestic violence and the constrained agency of Juana. The shock was often expressed as a clash between participants’ normative expectations about marital care and the narrative’s depiction of coercion and fear.

“A person who is close to you should never hurt you.” (J4, reflective journal).

Several journals treated Juana’s silence and endurance as a sign of unequal gender relations reinforced by social pressure. This reaction became a starting point for questioning how gender norms are normalized by communities and institutions in different settings.

Theme 3. Culture shock at materialism and the moral economy of wealth: Another recurrent shock trigger concerned the rapid transformation of communal relations after the pearl is discovered. Participants interpreted the escalating greed of neighbors, buyers, and intruders as a commentary on how material value reorganizes morality and social ties.

“The pearl becomes a curse because it changes everyone’s intentions.” (J6, reflective journal).

In several journals, Kino’s desire for education and security was initially evaluated positively, yet later reflections identified how aspiration becomes entangled with social manipulation, fear, and institutional exploitation. The shock thus shifted from judging individual desire to analyzing the moral economy surrounding wealth.

Theme 4. Movement toward cross-cultural understanding through perspective-taking and value negotiation: Evidence of cross-cultural understanding appeared when journals moved beyond condemnation to explanation. Participants increasingly linked characters’ decisions to contextual constraints, including insecurity, social hierarchy, and limited institutional protection.

“At first it felt unfair, but then I realized how power works in that society and how fear controls choices.” (J8, reflective journal).

Several participants also compared the novella’s value conflicts with local experience, using socio-religious frames to critique injustice while sustaining empathy for vulnerable characters. This pattern suggested that cross-cultural understanding did not require value relativism. It relied on acknowledging contextual difference while maintaining ethical reasoning anchored in both text and lived principles.

The findings support the view that culture shock in literary reading can be pedagogically productive when it is structured as interpretive inquiry rather than treated as a disruptive emotion to be suppressed. In intercultural research, shock is frequently associated with adjustment difficulties (Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Y. Zhou et al., 2008), yet the present reception data suggest that the same affective disruption can mark the point where readers recognize the limits of their habitual cultural assumptions and begin to seek contextual explanations (Deardorff, 2006; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

More specifically, participants’ emotional reactions functioned as interpretive resources rather than as noise: anger highlighted perceived injustice, discomfort marked value disorientation, and sadness signaled empathic identification with vulnerable characters. These affective cues directed attention to particular textual details and were gradually reframed into questions to be tested through re-reading, evidence-seeking, and dialogue—helping to explain how psychological experience was translated into more accountable comprehension.

Theme 1 demonstrates that structural injustice is a particularly powerful trigger of shock because it confronts readers with institutionalized harm that feels incompatible with expected moral order. This aligns with accounts of intercultural competence that position critical awareness and ethical evaluation as central dimensions, not optional add-ons (Byram & Wagner, 2018; Young & Sachdev, 2011). Within EFL teacher education, this implies that

reading tasks should not only ask “what happened” but also guide learners to ask “what systems make this possible” and “what evidence supports this interpretation” (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016).

Theme 2 highlights how gendered violence functions as both an ethical shock and a catalyst for questioning normalized social practices. Studies of literature-based intercultural learning emphasize that texts can invite learners to interrogate cultural and social norms, but the learning payoff depends on task design that makes interpretation discussable without stereotyping (Bloemert et al., 2019; Heggernes, 2021). Structured reader-response prompts can reduce the risk of moralistic closure by requiring textual evidence, inviting multiple perspectives, and encouraging reflective re-reading.

Theme 3 indicates that participants’ shock at materialism evolved into a more analytical stance as journals connected greed to institutional conditions and community pressures. This resonates with evidence-based surveys suggesting that literature supports higher-order comprehension when tasks promote inferential and interpretive reasoning (Paran, 2008). It also mirrors findings from reflective-learning studies showing that journals help learners externalize shifts from immediate judgement to more nuanced explanation (Gonzalez-Torres & Vargas-Saritama, 2025; Sudirman et al., 2021a).

Beyond describing a shift toward analysis, the reception data also point to an inner struggle to reconcile aspiration with moral integrity: Kino’s hopes for education and security were often read sympathetically, yet the surrounding moral economy repeatedly turned hope into fear, suspicion, and risk. In this sense, culture shock can be understood as moral-emotional dissonance—students were compelled to hold empathy for vulnerability alongside critique of materialism and exploitation—and the journal format made that negotiation visible across reading segments.

Theme 4 provides the clearest evidence of cross-cultural understanding through perspective-taking, value negotiation, and critical comparison. Research on literary fiction and social cognition suggests that narrative perspective can support empathy and mental-state reasoning (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Dodell-Feder & Tamir, 2018; Kidd & Castano, 2013). In classroom terms, reflective journals appear to function as an accountability mechanism that records interpretive movement, enabling instructors to assess whether perspective-taking is grounded in textual detail rather than generalized claims.

Across themes, the reception trajectories were not uniform or linear. Some participants maintained strong moral condemnation longer, especially in relation to domestic violence, while others moved earlier toward contextual explanation and perspective-taking. There were also interpretive tensions between reading characters’ choices as individual moral failure versus as responses to structural constraints, which indicates that cross-cultural understanding emerged through negotiated meaning rather than through a single shared interpretation.

The study also adds a contextual insight for Islamic teacher education. Participants frequently used socio-religious values to critique injustice while maintaining compassion for characters. This pattern is consistent with intercultural citizenship perspectives that treat intercultural learning as ethical engagement across difference rather than neutral description (Byram, 2014; Byram et al., 2021). The implication is that intercultural reading pedagogy can leverage students’ value repertoires as resources, provided that tasks guide learners to distinguish between principled critique and cultural stereotyping. This pattern can be theoretically grounded in intercultural citizenship work, where learners’ ethical repertoires—including religiously informed values—are viewed as identity resources that shape how they evaluate, empathize, and dialogue across difference (Beazidou et al., 2025; R. Zhou et al., 2024). It also aligns with process-oriented models of intercultural competence that emphasize reflective negotiation of attitudes and values as a route to internal outcomes such as empathy and adaptability (Hossain, 2024; R. Zhou et al., 2024).

Several limitations should be noted. The study involved a small, context-specific sample and relied on written journals and a single focus group, which may not capture all interpretive dynamics. The findings are therefore transferable through analytic generalization rather than statistical generalization. Future work could expand to multiple cohorts, compare different literary texts, and integrate additional data such as classroom interaction transcripts or longitudinal follow-up journals. Future research may also test whether collaborative formats, such as literature circles, amplify the documented pathway from shock to understanding (He et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

This reception study shows that culture shock is not inherently an obstacle to EFL literary reading. It can function as a pedagogical threshold that signals the need for contextual inquiry, ethical reasoning, and perspective-taking. Across reflective journals and a follow-up discussion, student-teachers' initial reactions to structural injustice, gendered violence, and materialism were gradually reorganized into more explanatory and dialogic interpretations. Cross-cultural understanding emerged when responses moved from condemnation to text-grounded explanation and when learners explicitly negotiated values by comparing the narrative world with local socio-religious frames. For Reading Comprehension courses in teacher education, the findings recommend integrating structured reader-response tasks, especially reflective reading journals with prompts that require emotional labeling, textual evidence, and questions for dialogue. Such tasks help instructors observe interpretive movement and support students in turning discomfort into learning. The study contributes a context-sensitive model for leveraging culture shock in Islamic EFL teacher education and highlights the importance of designing reading activities that balance criticality, empathy, and evidence. Subsequent studies are encouraged to broaden samples, test other genres and cultural contexts, and examine how collaborative discussion formats interact with journal-based reflection to sustain intercultural reading competence.

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