

Fostering Students' Curiosity through Pop Culture: Insights from English Lecturers in Indonesia

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Abstract

Curiosity is the driving force behind learning, innovation, and human progress, while popular culture, comprising a spectrum of modern media and entertainment, is an integral part of contemporary student life. This study explores how popular culture can be used in English classrooms to spark students' curiosity. The research was a qualitative investigation involving six English lecturers in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, actively participating in focus group discussions and individual interviews. The results showed the potential of using pop culture to increase students' curiosity. The lecturers integrated various forms of pop culture in discussion activities, role-playing, voiceover exercises, storytelling sessions, vocabulary expansion exercises, dictation tasks, extensive reading, creative writing endeavors, comic and video making, vlogging, social media interactions, and interviews. The lecturers underlined that integrating popular culture into teaching practices engages, relaxes, and effectively stimulates students' curiosity. It can also foster closer relationships with students, encourage more in-depth and meaningful learning experiences, and significantly, students show enthusiasm and positive attitudes towards learning by incorporating popular culture.

Keywords: curiosity, English lecturer, learning activity, pop culture

A. Introduction

The influence of pop culture, which covers a broad spectrum of media such as movies, music, television, literature, and social media, is undeniable in Indonesia. Hootsuite reported (2022) that young Indonesians are avid consumers of international pop culture, significantly shaping their interests

and worldviews. Recognizing this, English teachers have begun to incorporate pop culture references into their teaching methodologies to bridge the gap between traditional language teaching and students' real-world experiences (Mandasari et al., 2022; Riswanto et al., 2022; Teppa et al., 2022). Moreover, educators have also started exploring innovative

teaching approaches to effectively engage students and cultivate their curiosity (Asmin, 2020; Gómez-Maureira & Kniestedt, 2019; Suhirman & Ghazali, 2022).

According to Jubas (2022), combining popular culture with professional education may boost student engagement with theory and complex topics, fostering critical learning and inquiry that advance students' growth as ethical, responsible, and reflective practitioners and individuals. Embracing pop culture in education offers the advantage of instilling students with confidence that their interests are valued within the academic context (Santee, 2020). Thus, this research aims to bridge this gap by delving into the viewpoints and encounters of English language lecturers who have integrated popular culture into their instructional settings. The study is designed to address the following research inquiries:

How do EFL teachers incorporate pop culture into their classrooms?

How do these teachers view the role of popular culture in stimulating students' curiosity in the English classroom?

What is Curiosity?

Curiosity is an essential requirement for language acquisition and significantly impacts student involvement. Because curiosity primes the brain for learning and makes future learning more fun and gratifying, people acquire knowledge more effectively (Stenger, 2014). Curiosity is the desire to acquire new knowledge and sensory experiences that motivate exploratory behavior (Litman, 2008). He said curiosity could be defined as the desire for knowledge that motivates individuals to learn new ideas, eliminate information gaps, and solve philosophical problems. Knowing more about people, cultures, ideas, and concepts piques intellectual curiosity (Asmin, 2020).

There are several types of curiosity: adjustive-reactive curiosity, conceptual curiosity, curiosity about the complex or ambiguous, diverse curiosity, epistemic curiosity,

adjustive-reactive curiosity, conceptual curiosity, curiosity about the complex or ambiguous, diverse curiosity, epistemic curiosity (Olson in Asmin, 2020). This study discusses epistemic curiosity, also called intellectual curiosity, in the EFL context. Unfortunately, educational frameworks often prioritize achieving measurable goals, leaving little room for nurturing curiosity (Binu et al., 2020). A book by Willingham (2021) introduces the concept that "Memory is the residual of thought." It implies that we retain the things on our minds the most. If students are motivated to think about something for an extended period because they are interested in it, their memory will likely improve. As a result of constructivism, curiosity, and inquiry, students are allowed to consider their learning. According to Binu et al. (2020), curiosity significantly affects students' learning habits. Curious students actively seek out new information, bridge gaps in their knowledge, and engage in intellectual activities (Hardy et al., 2017). Several studies considered the value of curiosity and learning (Kashdan et al.,

2020; Lindholm, 2018; Russell, 2013; Weible & Zimmerman, 2016). They all agreed that curiosity drives humans, which affects learning, information acquisition, and overall happiness. One of the exciting ideas put forward by (Russell, 2013) is that students who show intellectual curiosity can develop practical inquiry skills, and inquiry skills are one of the essential skills a teacher must have. Curiosity may also influence students toward lifelong learning, influenced by pedagogical practices such as active learning, reflection, and assignments encouraging perspective-taking and the world of education (Lombardi et al., 2021). While it is recognized that curiosity lends itself to scientific development, how pedagogy can encourage or inhibit curiosity is rarely discussed (Clark, 2018; Gilbert & Byers, 2017).

Pop Culture in English Classrooms

Pop culture is a part of technology, and technology offers curiosity by offering access to diverse information and cultural engagement through various media platforms

(Hardy et al., 2017). Popular culture includes music, art, literature, fashion, and more, which play an important role in our society (Dietrich et al., 2021). This approach can captivate students and increase their motivation to learn, offering various ways to engage students in learning (Tegge, 2021). In EFL contexts, popular culture is a motivational resource. It serves as a source of inspiration (Luo, 2014). Different definitions of "popular culture" can be found based on who defines it and its context. In general, popular culture is a term that refers to popular cultural products that are spread through mass media, such as movies, K-pop, games, and music. In the book *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture*, Brummett (1991) wrote that the aspects of social life that pop culture is the form of popular culture that the public participates in the most. In its role as the "culture of the people," popular culture is impacted by daily interactions between individuals. Fashion trends, language use, greeting traditions, and culinary preferences are a few examples of popular culture.

In English teaching and learning, popular culture is used as authentic audio-visual materials (Sánchez-Auñón & Férez-Mora, 2021). Various types of pop culture can be used in classrooms in multiple contexts, namely using comics (Rutta et al., 2021), social media (Mehrpuoyan & Zakeri, 2021), using YouTube (Saed et al., 2021), songs (Kuśnierek, 2016), social media (Ansari & Khan, 2020), music (Xi, 2021), using video dubbing (Jao et al., 2022), and through K-Pop (Wooten et al., 2021). In recent years, a strong focus on popular culture has increased in education (Kim & Song, 2020). It is inseparable from the progress and development of technology (Scott et al., 2019). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the role of pop culture as media and learning materials in English classes increased. Many teachers use online platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Tik and Tok, and film in their classrooms (Jogezai et al., 2021; Trisnawati et al., 2021; Huwaidi et al., 2021). Advances in technology and education require teachers to develop students' abilities to think critically, be innovative, be

creative, and have an intellectual curiosity that encourages them to continue learning (Clifton, 2022; Lv et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2019). Pop culture phenomena such as television, music, the internet, and computer games produce texts that elicit different responses from different people that can be used as material in teaching (Alvermann et al., 2018). In addition, they said that teaching a language by bringing desire and interest into it draws some diverse theories. For example, the psychoanalytic theory points to the theme of repression in horror fiction, which makes readers, both in print and pictures, come into contact with prohibited cultural practices. Readers can imagine themselves as victims and victims in horror fiction made to the theme of repression.

B. Research Method

This qualitative study involved the participation of six English language lecturers teaching at a private university in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. These lecturers were affiliated with three academic departments, serving diverse student

populations (see Table 1). Participants were selected through purposive sampling with criteria including having a scholarly background in English or English literature, having a minimum of five years of English teaching experience, having a track record of integrating pop culture into English classes and being willing participants in this study.

Table 1. Participants of the study

Groups	Code	# Participant
English Language	EL	2 (T1, T2)
Informatics	IT	2 (T3, T4)
Childhood Education	CE	2 (T5, T6)

The main method used for data collection was Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Before conducting the FGDs, the researcher prepared a discussion guide or a list of open-ended questions. It was done to gain insight into lecturers' experiences and practices using pop culture in the classroom. Next, the researcher coordinated with the participants to schedule the FGD session at a suitable time, choosing

the Zoom platform as it was deemed suitable, and all participants had the necessary access and technical support. Next, the FGDs started as scheduled, and each group met separately. The researcher tried to facilitate the discussion by asking questions and encouraging participants to express their opinions, experiences, and ideas about integrating pop culture into their classrooms. The researcher took small notes and recorded video interviews during the discussion sessions for analysis. After the FGDs, the researcher conducted follow-up in-person interviews with the participants to gain additional insights or clarifications on specific points discussed during the group sessions. The analytical framework adopted for this study follows the model proposed by Miles and Huberman (2014). This framework includes various stages: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and, ultimately, drawing comprehensive conclusions.

C. Results and Discussion

The realm of pop culture phenomena is a source of

entertainment and a rich resource for learning and exploration. While exploring the diverse landscape of pop culture, we discover many avenues for education and personal growth. Based on the results of the FGDs and interviews, the researcher found a collection of pop culture types and learning activities that lecturers do, and this provides a roadmap of how lecturers can harness the power of pop culture to expand creativity and increase curiosity and engagement of students in the classroom (see Table 2).

Before integrating pop culture, teachers uniformly recognized the same challenge of motivation. Students, especially those who did not major in English, often experienced anxiety when asking questions in English. The teachers, therefore, took proactive steps to address this issue. They began the teaching process by instructing students to formulate high-quality questions in English. It included giving practical examples, introducing valuable phrases, and providing guidelines for expressing questions effectively. This approach

resulted in a marked increase in student participation and engagement in the classroom. The following table displays some class activities for teaching English through pop culture implemented by teachers.

The data from Table 2 below indicates the type of pop culture and the activities participants use to teach their EFL classes.

As the most famous pop culture, the film is the choice of all teachers in teaching English. They explained that the reason for choosing films was that students liked short films, especially movies related to the majors or genres they were interested in. Direct quotations from the interviews are as follows:

"I played a short movie in my class about the role of the teacher. I still remember how the students focused on watching the film. They then discussed how to become a good teacher. I was surprised how enthusiastically they expressed their opinion, even though they mixed Indonesian and English" (T2- EL)

"I once used a film and digital games in my class by dubbing. Informatics students still lack speaking skills, so by dubbing, they practiced dialogue and reading in English, and it seems they like it" (T1-EL)

Table 2. Types of Pop Culture and Learning Activities

Pop Culture	Learning Activities
Movie TV shows Digital Games	Small Group Discussion Role-play (pair & group) Dubbing Storytelling/ Speaking Watching – class discussion Vocabulary building
Music/ Song	Listening Vocabulary building Dictation song lyrics Determine the tenses
Comic Short story	Reading Content Analysis Retell/ review Make short comics
Social Media (Tik Tok, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) Online Videos (Youtube)	Mini Research Compose Tweets or posts Leave a Comment Interviewing each other Vlogging Vocabulary building
Television/ Radio News	Newsreader TV/Radio Announcer Class Discussion (e.g., Favorite Channel) Vocabulary Building
Fandom, Famous people (Idols, actors, athletes, world leaders, influencers e)	Creative Writing Extensive Reading Group Discussion

In addition, participants stated that it is very important to incorporate students' interests into English lessons, so teachers should study students' interests. By integrating pop culture, teachers can embrace all students' interests. Almost all students like movies, online games, and songs. Some students nowadays are really into K-pop. Thus, combining the material with their idol figure would be perfect for stimulating their curiosity and engagement in the class. Direct quotations from the interviews are as follows:

"As we know, nowadays teenagers like viral figures like K-Pop celebrities. So, if the teacher uses idol figures that students like, such as featuring BTS, EXO, Blackpink, Stray Kids, or their favorite actors as material for discussion or reading articles about idols, they will be interested and listen carefully." (T1-EL).

Besides being interesting for students, using pop culture media in learning was easy to handle and entertaining for teachers. This integration also can encourage students to explore and learn more by nurturing their curiosity and improving their confidence in their mental process.

Furthermore, songs, comics, and short stories were teachers' favorite choices for integrating pop culture into their EFL classes. To foster students' interest, motivation, and curiosity in learning, teachers in the English department admitted that they often used songs and movies. Song lyrics were used to learn grammar in a fun way. Here, students explored each verse of the song lyrics to find the types of words and tenses in the lyrics. For students majoring in the English language, it might be easy. Therefore, for students of other majors, it is suggested that teachers prepare an example, said one of the participants. He added that students learn by observing the standards of behavior around them. If the teacher gives an example of curious behavior, students imitate it. Therefore, teachers must embrace curiosity as part of the learning process.

Direct quotations from the interviews are as follows:

"I once played several videos of English children's songs from YouTube in my class. For students in Childhood Education, learning English using songs makes them enthusiastic. Knowing lots of nursery rhymes will help them in their duties

as future teachers for children." (T6-CE)

Today, pop culture is so prevalent that it cannot be avoided or ignored within or outside school walls. Teenagers watch entertainment media daily, such as YouTube, TikTok, and other social media. From the focus group discussion, teachers agreed that social media plays an important role in students' daily lives compared to textbooks. Participants who teach English in Informatics said that pop culture was always related to technology, so it was appropriate for students majoring in Informatics. They admitted to using social media for several learning activities, especially in online learning. During COVID-19, teachers said they often used social media in learning. The reason was simple: every student has social media, can easily access it, and likes it. Learning activities usually include asking students to leave comments, posting assignments for friends to observe, conducting vlogs, interviewing friends, and then uploading them. Learning through pop culture helps students seek new experiences and builds their

confidence and curiosity by exploring challenging things.

A lecturer from the English Language department said that adding a small quantity of a puzzle or mystery in class was essential to increase students' curiosity in learning. Direct quotations from the interviews are as follows:

"I prefer experimenting with props, playing famous characters, or playing games, for example, the game Guest Who I Am or What If." (T1-EL)

Those activities created challenging situations and made students curious and eager to learn more. Apart from using pop culture for learning activities in class, the teachers also gave assignments and projects to students by utilizing pop culture. Tasks such as being a newsreader or radio announcer were prevalent among students, where students were asked to pretend to be journalists. They wrote news, read it, and their teammates became broadcasting staff. The performance was recorded and uploaded to the teacher's YouTube channel.

Discussion

Based on the findings, there are some interesting things to explore further. First, when lecturers use pop culture in teaching, students show active participation and enthusiasm. It showed their curiosity. Several previous studies (Levin-Banchik, 2022; Hedman & Fisher, 2022; Snijders et al., 2022) have explored strategies to encourage student participation and overcome the assumption that students may lack the curiosity to learn. However, in contrast to these findings, by integrating pop culture into the classroom, students were seen to be more engaged in learning. It aligns with Wooten et al. (2021), who stated that integrating popular culture in the classroom positively impacted student engagement and interest in the subject, as well as Tegge (2021), who stated that integrating pop culture into the classroom can stimulate students' curiosity and enrich language teaching.

Based on the FGD, most participants acknowledged that they initially taught students how to ask good questions in English before

adopting learning resources like pop culture. This was in line with Tor and Gordon (2020), who stated that the predictor of curiosity was the specificity of the questions asked. Typically, curiosity is directly linked to better academic achievement, including active knowledge searching or asking focus and apparent interest (Schiefele et al., 2020). Being curious is crucial for students; they ask, try to find the answer, and creatively find solutions to problems (Asmin, 2020). A curious person is driven and spends time and effort to pursue information. Regarding the different types of popular culture that the lecturers integrate into their classes, all agree that movies, songs, and social media are the types of popular culture that they use the most to teach English. Teachers employed various forms of popular culture, including digital games, comics, short video stories, television shows, radio news, fandom, and famous figures like celebrities, influencers, and athletes. Furthermore, participants emphasized the significance of aligning English lessons with students' interests, recognizing that curiosity and

interest are the foundational pillars of human inquiry. It's worth noting that curiosity represents a specific facet of interest, a concept elucidated by Pekrun (2019).

Popular culture is emerging as an ideal tool for arousing students' curiosity, given its capacity to offer imaginative, creative, interdisciplinary, and multimedia content. These forms of pop culture media can serve as conduits to generate innovative ideas, facilitate exploration, foster storytelling, encourage futurist thinking, surprise, entertain, and stimulate improvisation. These findings strongly support the idea that curiosity is a fundamental force that drives learning and enhances understanding (Kidd & Hayden, 2015).

D. Conclusion

This research investigates the incorporation of popular culture in the English classroom to stimulate students' curiosity. Six English lecturers from various universities in Indonesia were involved. They found

that movies, songs, and social media were the main components of this approach, along with a range of other media, such as digital games, comics, and more. The research revealed various teaching activities, including discussions, role-playing, storytelling, and more. The lecturers emphasized that integrating popular culture can create dynamic and effective teaching, build better student relationships, and promote meaningful learning. In addition, the students responded enthusiastically and positively, making this approach a valuable consideration for educators. This approach utilizes the rich resources of popular culture to enhance the classroom and enrich the learning experience.

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