TED TALKS AS A TOOL FOR DEVELOPING CRITICAL CULTURAL AWARENESS IN UZBEK EFL CLASSROOMS

Nurullayeva Sevinch Anvarjon qizi,
Ortiqova Shaxzoda Xudoyberdi qizi
Scientific supervisor: **Juraquliy Gulnoza Rustamovna**
Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages, Uzbekistan

ABSTRACT: This study examines the effectiveness of TED Talks as a pedagogical resource for developing critical cultural awareness — the highest-order component of intercultural communicative competence — among Uzbek EFL learners at B1–B2 proficiency level. Grounded in Byram's (1997) savoir s'engager framework and Mayer's (2009) cognitive theory of multimedia learning, the research employed a mixed-methods design with 42 participants in a six-session instructional programme. Results demonstrate significant gains in critical cultural awareness (35% mean improvement, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 1.76$) alongside strong improvements in interpretive skills (+30%). Qualitative analysis reveals that TED Talks' argumentative structure and first-person narrative format make cultural positioning unusually transparent, enabling productive critical cultural analysis. The study provides evidence-based recommendations for integrating TED Talks into intercultural EFL instruction in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: critical cultural awareness, TED Talks, intercultural competence, EFL, Uzbekistan, multimedia learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the multiple components of intercultural communicative competence, critical cultural awareness — Byram's (1997) savoir s'engager — represents the highest-order and most cognitively demanding dimension. It requires learners not merely to understand and empathize with different cultural perspectives but to evaluate them critically and comparatively, bringing both their own and the target culture under informed analytical scrutiny. The development of this capacity is essential for genuine intercultural competence: it distinguishes the interculturally competent individual, capable of reasoning across cultural frameworks with informed critical awareness, from the merely culturally knowledgeable or sympathetic.

In Uzbek EFL educational contexts, the development of critical cultural awareness presents particular pedagogical challenges. Traditional educational culture in Uzbekistan tends to privilege transmission of established knowledge over critical inquiry and individual analytical judgment (Hoshimov & Yoqubov, 2003). Yet the demands of international academic, professional, and cultural participation increasingly require Uzbek graduates to engage with diverse cultural perspectives through informed critical analysis rather than mere acceptance or rejection. This tension between educational tradition and communicative demand creates an urgent need for pedagogical approaches that can cultivate critical cultural awareness within culturally sensitive and contextually appropriate instructional frameworks.

TED Talks — short, expert-delivered presentations on diverse topics from science to culture to personal experience — have attracted considerable attention as EFL learning resources for their combination of authentic language use, intellectual engagement, and topical diversity. However, their specific potential for developing critical cultural awareness, as distinct from general language skills or factual cultural knowledge, has not been systematically investigated in the Uzbek EFL context. This study addresses that gap by placing critical cultural awareness development at the centre of its investigation of TED Talks as an intercultural pedagogical resource.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Byram's (1997) savoir s'engager, the capacity for critical cultural awareness, involves the ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria the perspectives, practices, and products of one's own and other cultures. This critical dimension distinguishes intercultural competence from cultural adaptation: it requires maintaining one's own analytical perspective while genuinely engaging with that of cultural others. Byram connects this dimension to broader educational goals of critical citizenship and argues that it is the dimension of intercultural competence most directly relevant to democratic participation in multicultural societies.

The cognitive demands of critical cultural awareness align closely with the higher-order thinking skills identified in educational taxonomy frameworks. Evaluating cultural perspectives requires the prior competences of cultural knowledge (remembering and understanding), interpretive skill (applying and analyzing), and positive attitudinal orientation (the motivational foundation for sustained critical engagement). This hierarchical relationship suggests a developmental logic for intercultural instruction: critical cultural awareness is best developed after foundational knowledge, attitudes, and interpretive skills have been established.

Anderson (2020) argues that TED Talks are particularly well suited to developing critical cultural awareness because their argumentative structure makes the speaker's cultural positioning unusually transparent and accessible to analysis. Unlike documentary or fictional content, in which cultural assumptions are implicit in narrative choices and visual representation, TED speakers typically make explicit arguments grounded in explicit values — enabling learners to identify and evaluate the cultural assumptions motivating those arguments with relative directness.

Kramsch (1998) provides a crucial theoretical link between language, culture, and critical awareness, arguing that all language use is culturally saturated and that genuine cultural understanding requires reading beneath the surface of linguistic content to the cultural values and assumptions that give words their meaning. TED Talks, delivered by speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds who use English to articulate culturally specific perspectives on universal human themes, provide ideal material for this kind of culturally deep linguistic analysis.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed-methods design with quantitative pre-test and post-test assessment and qualitative analysis of classroom observation notes and student reflection journals. Participants were forty-two Uzbek EFL learners at B1–B2 level in a state educational institution in the Samarkand region. The quantitative instrument assessed four components of intercultural competence based on Byram's (1997) framework, with the critical cultural awareness subscale comprising five items requiring comparative evaluation of cultural perspectives and identification of cultural assumptions embedded in texts.

The instructional intervention consisted of six ninety-minute sessions built around carefully selected TED Talks. Selection criteria prioritized talks by speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds who addressed themes with clear cross-cultural relevance; whose argumentative structure made cultural positioning explicit; and whose language level was accessible with lexical support for B1–B2 learners. Topics included identity and belonging, education and values, communication across cultures, and perspectives on progress and tradition.

Each session followed a three-phase task framework specifically designed to promote critical cultural awareness. Pre-viewing tasks established the speaker's cultural background and invited prediction of perspectives; during-viewing tasks used structured annotation guides directing attention to claims, evidence, and implicit cultural assumptions; post-viewing tasks

engaged students in comparative cultural analysis, requiring them to identify the cultural values motivating the speaker's argument, compare these with alternative cultural perspectives, and evaluate the argument from multiple cultural standpoints.

Table 2. Critical Cultural Awareness and Interpretive Skills Results (N=42)

Component	Pre-test M → Post-test M | Effect Size (d)
Critical Cultural Awareness	56.3 → 76.0 (+35%) | d = 1.76
Skills of Interpreting	54.2 → 70.6 (+30%) | d = 1.62
Cultural Knowledge	51.4 → 65.8 (+28%) | d = 1.41
Intercultural Attitudes	50.7 → 69.9 (+38%) | d = 1.87
Overall ICC	53.2 → 70.6 (+33%) | d = 2.03

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative results demonstrated statistically significant gains on both the critical cultural awareness subscale (35% improvement, $p < 0.001$) and the interpretive skills subscale (30% improvement, $p < 0.001$). Critical cultural awareness showed the second largest overall gain, exceeded only by intercultural attitudes, suggesting that TED Talks are highly effective for both higher-order critical competences. Effect sizes for both subscales exceeded the threshold for large effects ($d > 0.8$), confirming practical as well as statistical significance.

Qualitative analysis of student reflection journals and observation notes produced three primary themes. The first theme, Recognizing Cultural Positioning in Language, documents students' progressive development of the capacity to read beneath the surface of speakers' linguistic content to identify the cultural values and assumptions motivating their arguments. Early observation notes show students responding primarily to TED content, accepting or rejecting speakers' arguments on their apparent merits without attending to the cultural framework within which the arguments were constructed. By mid-programme, students increasingly identified cultural positioning explicitly — commenting that a speaker's argument reflected 'individualist values' or 'high value on direct communication' — and began to evaluate arguments from multiple cultural perspectives simultaneously.

The second theme, Critical Comparison Without Cultural Hierarchy, traces students' gradual development of the capacity to compare cultural perspectives critically without implicitly ranking them on a scale of superiority. This represents one of the most significant and challenging achievements of intercultural education: the ability to evaluate cultural practices critically while resisting the ethnocentric impulse to treat one's own cultural framework as the natural standard of evaluation. Journal entries from the early sessions frequently deploy implicitly hierarchical comparative language; later entries increasingly frame comparison in terms of contextual fit and value trade-offs rather than absolute superiority.

The third theme, Transfer to Independent Media Consumption, documents the most pedagogically significant finding of the qualitative analysis: multiple students reported spontaneously applying critical cultural analysis skills developed through the TED Talk sessions to their independent consumption of English-language media outside the classroom.

Journal entries describe students noticing and questioning cultural assumptions in films, news articles, and social media content with a degree of analytical awareness that they attributed directly to the programme. This transfer of critical skills to unprompted contexts represents genuine intercultural learning rather than context-specific performance.

5. CONCLUSION

This study provides evidence that TED Talks, when integrated into a structured intercultural instructional framework with explicit critical analysis tasks, constitute highly effective pedagogical resources for developing critical cultural awareness among Uzbek EFL learners. The 35% mean gain on the critical cultural awareness subscale, combined with strong interpretive skill gains, confirms that TED Talks address precisely the higher-order intercultural competences that authentic vlog content is less well positioned to develop.

Three features of TED content appear to be particularly generative for critical cultural awareness development: the explicitness of speakers' cultural positioning in argumentative discourse; the diversity of speakers' cultural backgrounds available through the TED platform; and the combination of intellectual accessibility and genuine cultural depth that characterizes the most effective TED content for intercultural instruction. Uzbek EFL teachers selecting TED Talks for intercultural instruction should prioritize these features over topical familiarity or linguistic accessibility alone.

The finding of spontaneous transfer of critical cultural analysis skills to independent media consumption is particularly significant, suggesting that well-designed critical cultural awareness instruction can produce genuinely transformative learning outcomes that extend beyond the instructional context. Future research should investigate the conditions — teacher facilitation style, task design, learner characteristics — that most effectively promote this transfer, and explore how critical cultural awareness developed through TED Talk analysis relates to broader critical thinking capacities.

REFERENCES

Anderson, L. (2020). Teaching EFL through multimedia: A practical guide. UCL Press.

Byram, M. (1997). Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence. Multilingual Matters.

Hoshimov, O., & Yoqubov, I. (2003). Ingliz tili o'qitish metodikasi. Sharq.

Kramsch, C. (1998). Language and culture. Oxford University Press.

Mayer, R. E. (2009). Multimedia learning (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Warschauer, M., & Healey, D. (1998). Computers and language learning: An overview. Language Teaching, 31, 57–71.