

Article

Reflective Glimpses of Culture in EFL Online Classes during COVID-19 Pandemic in Oman

Abdelrahman Abdalla Salih *  and Lamis Ismail Omar 

Department of English Language and Literature, College of Arts and Applied Sciences, Dhofar University, Dhofar, Salalah 211, Oman; lameesiomar@gmail.com

* Correspondence: aykistar@gmail.com

Abstract: The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has made online learning the most on-demand fashion that almost the whole world aspires to navigate. Much of the literature on coronavirus-triggered online learning focuses on technological challenges, features of online learning platforms, teacher training, and professional development. However, an equally significant aspect that awaits researchers' attention is interculturality in the online language classroom, particularly the presence of students' cultural values in the virtual classroom environment in relation to teaching and learning. This study examines aspects of cultural values that either facilitate or impede learning and the strategies teachers adopt in their encounters with instances of culture in the classroom. Using the qualitative approach, two groups of 75 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) undergraduate learners and 17 expatriate teachers of English from an Omani Higher Learning Institution responded to the open-ended survey questions. Participants' responses and observations were thoroughly analyzed and grouped into various themes and domains to facilitate uncovering the presence of culture in EFL online classrooms. Results reveal cultural values that resisted online learning and hindered class interactive spaces as well as cultural values considered normal in onsite classes. The study highlights the significance of understanding the role of students and teachers in negotiating cultural constraints and the possible strategies to overcome them including engagement, direct communication, and institutional empowerment of teachers' role in pedagogical effectiveness.

Keywords: COVID-19; intercultural competence; intercultural conflict competence; culture in the classroom; EFL online learning; cultural values



Citation: Salih, A.A.; Omar, L.I. Reflective Glimpses of Culture in EFL Online Classes during COVID-19 Pandemic in Oman. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 9889. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15139889>

Academic Editors: Ilana Paul-Binyamin and Linor L. Hadar

Received: 30 April 2023

Revised: 15 June 2023

Accepted: 18 June 2023

Published: 21 June 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The pace of the changing scene in university educational practices has been recently accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not an overstatement to say that “in recent years, no external event has brought sweeping effects on education [particularly English language teaching (ELT) context] like the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic” [1] (p. 62). A pertinent fact of such a transformative process is the dramatic rise and popularity of online learning as a mandatory option [2]. As a result of fear, turmoil, and uncertainty, schools and higher education institutions across the Sultanate of Oman and around the globe had no choice but to quickly force the conversion of classroom or blended instruction to online teaching. Such a swift move to virtual learning and teaching has triggered both social sentiment and researchers' interest.

While the event of online learning and teaching was met with fear, resistance, and sometimes rejection by some segments of society in many parts of the world, researchers attempted to focus on the impact of the pandemic on education in many aspects, including the technological affordances and hurdles of the process [3–8], evaluating aspects of online learning platforms [9–13], as well as teacher training and professional development [14,15]. Despite the increasing number of studies on COVID-19 and its impact on educational

practice around the world, particularly in the ELT context, there is still limited knowledge regarding its related effects on intercultural competence learning and intercultural conflict competence.

Language and culture are entwined, thus research that examines language learners' intercultural experiences in online classes is imperative. Understanding how students negotiated virtual barriers as they pivoted to online language classrooms is essential. Such an objective is grounded in Helm's belief that "language learning and language use are interdependent, and language is conceptualized as social practice" [16] (p. 91), with culture as one facet of the complex relationship between language and society. The intricate interplay between language and culture is expected to surface with more instances of intercultural conflict in EFL COVID-19 pandemic-triggered online classes and communicative contexts. Thus, it has become necessary to exceed the traditional research focus on linguistic aspects of students' learning by inviting culture into the classroom and uncovering language learners' experiences in this new normal situation [17].

For sustainable learning, EFL learners need not only know how to use the language and develop their intercultural competence [18,19] but also to manage any intercultural encounters, misunderstanding, or differences that may lead to conflict amicably. These two dimensions of interculturality in any EFL context are integrated requirements for a conflict-free learning environment whether face-to-face or virtual. While intercultural competence relates to the ability to communicate with others in a way that is sensitive to cultural differences [20,21], "intercultural conflict competence refers to the mindful management of emotional frustrations and conflict interaction struggles due primarily to cultural or ethnic group membership differences" [22] (p. 100). Providing spaces for students to learn and practice intercultural competence and intercultural conflict competence is expected to improve their linguistic knowledge and communicative competence.

On this premise, the present study aims to examine teachers' and students' perceived experiences with culture in the EFL Omani Online classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study specifically assessed the participants' experience of intercultural teaching and learning and their intercultural encounter management styles and the impact of that on the classroom environment. The following research questions guided the present study:

1. How do English language teachers and learners perceive online learning classes?
2. From the students' perspective, what aspects of online learning classes appear culturally inappropriate?
3. What intercultural communicative management styles do teachers and students adopt towards interculturality in online classes?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Intercultural Language Education before and after COVID-19

Since the emergence of the "cultural turn" [23] (p. 251) in language teaching, intercultural language education has become one of the distinctive features of academic institutions that aspire to achieve international recognition. Before COVID-19, research on EFL education witnessed growth in the number of studies that accentuated the need for practicing intercultural language teaching as language education "cannot be isolated from the learner's socio-cultural environment" [24] (p. 1375). Bastos and Araujo [25] remarked that "language teachers feel unprepared to develop this competence in their classes" (p. 2) as they themselves need to nurture their intercultural communicative competence. Rapanta [26] explained how a growing number of Western instructors contribute to higher education in UAE without having clear expectations about the impact of cross-cultural differences on understanding their students' behavior. Cushner and Mahon [27] emphasized the significance of extending support and recognition to teachers to integrate the skills of intercultural competence with their practice.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, studies which researched the requirements of online EFL education in the Arab world and beyond underlined the challenges and affordances of online teaching from pedagogic and technical perspectives with a limited

number of studies that researched aspects related to intercultural language education. Al-Nofaie [4] researched the challenges and merits of online language learning during the pandemic focusing on the students' preferences of the implemented teaching modes (synchronous/asynchronous/blended). Alahmadi and Alraddadi [28] researched the effectiveness of virtual EFL teaching and its potential for student interaction in the online language classroom. Mahyoob [6] discussed EFL learners' experiences of online teaching methods, concluding that students did not show satisfaction with their online learning experiences due to technical and academic challenges. Salih and Omar [1] investigated the perceptions of EFL students during the pandemic, emphasizing aspects related to the effectiveness of online EFL teaching for students' acquisition of language skills and fulfillment of graduate attributes. Few studies researched online education aspects relevant to the limitations and strategies associated with the use of webcams by students in online synchronous classes [29–32] and its impact on an effective educational process. These studies concluded that an overriding majority of students preferred to keep their webcams off during online classes for reasons to do with privacy, lack of concentration, technical issues, inappropriate environment, as well as feeling embarrassed or self-consciousness.

Gonzalez-Lloret et al. [15] reviewed a special issue on the role of technology in teaching and learning language during the pandemic, addressing the contingencies created by the unanticipated shift to “Emergency Remote Teaching” (p. 477) and the relevant responses of teachers and learners. The researched topics focused on students' and teachers' perceptions and experiences in online language education with little attention to the role of the prevalent sociocultural context in mapping the relevant “pedagogical and emotional challenges” [8] (p. 481) of online L2 learning. Salih and Omar [33] explored the role of online EFL internationalization in developing and sustaining language learners' intercultural competence to prepare them for future encounters in globalized labor markets. The empirical study highlighted the value of transnational academic collaboration [34] in integrating intercultural competence with language learning skills.

Adopting intercultural language teaching may not seem pressing during emergency situations when priority is given to the sustainability of the educational process, or in contexts with latent cross-cultural variation among the learners. Salih and Omar [35] highlighted the lack of prominence given to intercultural EFL teaching in Gulf countries in view of the ostensible homogeneity among learners in EFL classrooms. However, the authors underscored the need for practicing intercultural language teaching, considering cultural and academic diversity among second language teachers and the evolving interest in internationalizing higher education platforms as an accreditation prerequisite [1]. The study concluded that language teachers' reluctance to integrate intercultural education with the language classroom is indicative of their concern about the emergence of intercultural conflict in contexts where intercultural teaching lacks visibility and support. The teachers' role in intercultural language teaching is becoming an overriding factor in a volatile context that provides a fertile environment for misunderstanding, given the limitations of direct verbal and nonverbal communication between learners and instructors.

2.2. Intercultural Conflict Mechanisms

Intercultural contact is conducive to disagreement as it involves “the display and management of cultural identities” [36] (p. 26). Throughout an interaction process, culturally diverse parties may encounter a conflict due to their distinct expectations on the verbal or nonverbal behavioral level. Intercultural conflict arises when one of the participants in a communication process fails to understand the behavior and motives of other participants, which leads to “perceived disagreements coupled with a strong, negative emotional reaction” [37] (p. 676). Accordingly, the conflict is the result of “miscommunication between members of two or more cultures over” [38] (p. 188) a “perceived or actual incompatibility” [22] in the norms, behaviors, attitudes as well as intentions of the parties involved in a direct or mediated communicative process.

Intercultural conflict is symptomatic of the individual's failure to understand intercultural differences, which leads to feelings of discomfort and frustration. Dodd [39] (p. 188) remarked that "misunderstanding cultural expectations lies behind many conflict circumstances. By identifying cultural conflict areas, we can improve our awareness and skills for communication accommodation". One of the sources of intercultural conflict in the EFL classroom is the divergence in the participants' communicative styles which are the product of their cultural identities comprising constructs such as values, norms, and beliefs [37,40,41]. Individuals who belong to collectivistic cultures embrace evasive approaches to communication, as opposed to individuals who belong to individualistic cultures. Similarly, low-context cultures emphasize direct approaches to communication, compared to high-context cultures that prefer equivocal and indirect communicative approaches [42–44].

Hammer [37] viewed the dual constructs of low/high context and individualism/collectivism as generalized theoretical frameworks that do not provide an accurate description of intercultural conflict dynamics: disagreements and emotional reactions. Other equally important factors include "personal worldview, environment, context" [41] (p. 354). Ting-Toomey [45] (p. 11) maintained that group membership is an intrinsic factor in framing intercultural conflict and that the power status of a group along with the level of contact are among the factors that "escalate or de-escalate the perceived threat level in intergroup conflict". In other words, the dominant membership of a certain group generates feelings of superiority and power among its members, as opposed to the feelings prevalent among minority group members.

According to Rubinfeld and Clement [46] (p. 2), intercultural conflict emerges when individuals identify with one group against another (the ingroup versus the outgroup) "for the purpose of preservation, strengthening, or protection of the in-group ... giving priority to the group with which one identifies". Okech et al. [41] (p. 355) observed that "microaggressions" emerge "when bias is demonstrated, overtly or covertly, by members of the dominant cultural group". This is indirectly related to facework as a decisive facet that influences all dynamics of cultural or subcultural variation. Face functions as a crucial parameter in tracing the trajectory of conflict and conflict resolution as it pertains to "respect, honor, status, reputation, credibility, competence, family/network connection, loyalty, trust, relational indebtedness and obligation issues" [38] (p. 190).

An examination of the conflict style exhibited by the involved parties provides a framework for interpreting their goals, actions, and reactions, and subsequently eliminating potential misperceptions. Hammer [37] (p. 679) defined conflict style "as the manner in which contending parties communicate with one another around substantive disagreements and their emotional or affective reaction to one another". Accordingly, intercultural conflict can be analyzed in terms of the directness/indirectness of communication and the expressiveness/restraint of emotions. The study produced a quadrant theoretical model of intercultural conflict style: discussion, engagement, accommodation, and the dynamic approach. Discussion is characterized by restraining emotions and using direct language. Engagement has preference for direct verbal and emotional communication to engage the involved parties. Accommodation is featured by indirect communication with restrained emotions to avoid an out-of-control situation. The dynamic approach also adopts indirect language and emotional discourse.

Online classroom contexts enforce restrictions on the participants' communicative styles, necessitating the adoption of direct communication by the learners and teachers alike. In homogenous online learning environments where there is invisible cross-cultural variation among the learners such as in the case in Gulf countries, the educational environment seems to have insidious cultural harmony without perceptible intercultural conflicts in the classroom. Yet, when the learners form an overriding homogenous cultural group in the educational setting, they become a dominant cultural force which can be involved in inadvertent conflictual practices. Accordingly, the learner-instructor relationship becomes vulnerable to intercultural conflict as the first party (learners) leaves a crucial influence on the setting to the detriment of the classroom culture.

In classroom settings where the learners' groups seem homogenous, the intensity of conflict amongst the learners themselves subsides to the detriment of the relationship between the learners and the instructors who, in the case of EFL, become a divided, diversified minority encountering a harmonious lobbying force that resists the norms of the classroom culture. The resistance increases substantially when the involved parties encounter a revolutionized educational environment similar to the one that prevailed during the pandemic. Incorporating intercultural competence as a criterion of language education to improve the quality and effectiveness of language learning in the academic institutions of countries such as Oman is a promising venture following the accelerated mainstreaming of online learning globally and considering the implementation of an ambitious 2040 vision which places quality education at its core [33].

2.3. Intercultural Conflict Management

In researching intercultural conflict, it is significant to consider the inextricable relationship between intercultural conflict styles and intercultural competencies which "contribute to a broader range of responses in conflict, and more effective coping with intercultural differences" [29] (p. 440). According to Martincová and Lukešová [47], the ability to address intercultural conflicts is closely related to an individual's level of intercultural competence which is subject to the acquisition of cognitive and metacognitive competencies such as critical thinking skills including observation, evaluation, analysis, independent thinking, and others. The authors posited that "intercultural competence contributes to shape respecting relations between different cultures in order to avoid events (intercultural conflicts)" [39] (p. 1258).

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and intercultural conflict competence are mutually integrated components in intercultural L2 education. Intercultural communicative competence refers to the skills that allow an individual to succeed in communicating, mediating, and resolving imminent conflicts throughout their "interaction with any social groups, not only national ones" [48]. Orsini-Jones and Lee [49] defined ICC as a global citizenship graduate attribute which enables a participant "to both recognize and value cultural difference and communicate effectively in a variety of contexts and through a variety of media" (p. 7). The authors viewed intercultural competence as an inseparable component of the "digital literacies necessary to operate in an interconnected world" (p. 3).

Ting-Toomey [22] viewed "intercultural conflict competence" as a facet that requires and sustains intercultural competence by "the mindful management of emotional frustrations and conflict interaction struggles due primarily to cultural or ethnic group membership differences" (p. 101). An individual's intercultural conflict competence can be assessed in terms of the appropriateness, effectiveness, and flexibility of their interactive behaviors. Close observation skills such as "deep listening, mindful reframing, decentring, and face-sensitive respectful dialogue . . . and respectful relationships" [45] (p. 20) enable the contending parties to view the conflict from multiple perspectives. Polat and Metin [50] remarked that "teachers with high intercultural competence prefer cooperation and compromising strategies more in conflicts" (p. 1967).

In researching the parameters of intercultural conflict, it is essential to investigate and analyze the involved parties' accounts. According to Hall and Noguchi [51], conflicts "exist when the stories being told are perceived as incompatible" (p. 402) and studying these narratives needs a framework which assumes that "each community's stories made sense" (p. 404), despite the divergence in the two senses. The goal behind this assumption is to create a wider scope for objectivity in addressing conflict. In the current study, all three components of the narratives trigger potential cases of conflict. The setting is online learning which became mainstreamed during the pandemic and was rife with intractable challenges as it emerged unexpectedly and was bound with tenacious limitations related to its seasonal nature. The participants are the learners and instructors with seemingly complementary relationships that may be disturbed by dormant intercultural conflicts.

Dodd [39] summarized several strategies that can be used to manage intercultural conflict including transparency and openness, understanding and observing the hierarchical aspects of communication, and the use of a balanced interactive model to facilitate the creation of a new culture that accommodates the needs of all participants. The newly established culture in the educational process is the classroom culture which requires the application of certain academic norms while emphasizing the need for practicing leadership on part of the instructors [52] and at the same time building mutual trust, respect, and empathy. According to Dodd [39], it is possible to manage “intercultural conflict” by “developing self-disclosure and thus becoming more transparent and open” (p. 205).

Because intercultural conflict signals the existence of disparate cultural views as a result of cultural or linguistic variation within a community, managing the conflict requires a leader to facilitate the exchanges within that community [53]. In online learning, an instructor needs to embrace the role of a leader who manages any encounters that may lead to conflict rather than the one who avoids them. Instructors are encouraged to adopt effective intervention styles to reduce the intensity of potential direct or indirect conflict. Okech et al. [41] listed several ineffective styles which may be used by leaders to manage group discussions, and these include avoiding the management of the conflict, subscribing to sarcastic remarks or criticism of a group member(s), neglecting or suppressing the voices of group minorities, and focusing on points of commonalities while neglecting differences. The authors proposed alternative responses which are effective in managing conflict. One of the promoted intervention styles is the “integrating style” (p. 361) which invites all members to participate in addressing the points of concern.

Successful facilitation of group exchanges requires the practice of reflective thinking by both instructors and learners, which is one pillar of effective teaching, especially in volatile educational settings such as online learning [54]. On the one hand, instructors as leaders “must continually examine and identify their own cultural biases, and how these biases impede effective facilitation of intercultural group conflict” [41] (p. 352). On the other hand, instructors need to be skilled in providing guidance on self-involvement in reflective practice [41,55]. Although COVID-19-triggered online classes have witnessed a growing volume of research in relation to the opportunities and challenges associated with the technological aspects of online language education, students’ perceptions [56], as well as teachers’ relevant experiences, these studies did not tackle the role of intercultural teaching [57] in facilitating language education in online contexts. Thus, studies that explore culture in the classroom are imperative, taking into consideration the role of virtual educational settings in enhancing intercultural teaching [58].

This paper aims to report the experiences of Omani learners and their teachers in negotiating intercultural encounters in EFL online classes. The study strives to provide a better understanding of EFL classrooms as conducive spaces for interculturality and examines teachers’ role in fostering their intercultural competence and that of their students. This study is significant and timely as it aims to explore aspects of intercultural encounters in online language classes and the relevant implications for managing and developing the skills to avoid intercultural conflict during the crisis and beyond.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Design

The study adopted a qualitative method using minimal statistical analysis to explore Omani EFL undergraduate students’ and teachers’ perceived experiences in online learning with a particular focus on their perspectives on intercultural competence and intercultural conflict competence and management styles. According to Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault [59], qualitative research is a flexible method of inquiry that provides researchers with an array of investigative methods such as observation, exploration of history, experiments, questions, and surveys as well as a review of existing literature. These methods enable researchers to collect descriptive data, access people’s experiences and unravel the meanings they attribute to activities [60,61]. The data patterns enable researchers to develop concepts, insights, and

understanding and generate meaning by inductively building knowledge [62–64]. To serve its objective, the study employed one instrument—a survey with open-ended questions. The students’ survey comprised four questions relating to students’ perceived experience in online learning, participating in online classes via webcams, discussing culture in the classroom, and taking the initiative to introduce their culture to teachers. On the other hand, the teachers’ survey comprised four questions concerning experience with online learning and teaching, the issue of introducing culture in the language classroom, the issue of teachers’ practice of intercultural teaching in virtual learning environments, and teachers’ management styles in handling instances of possible intercultural conflict in classes.

The data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic. The then-precautionary measures taken to control the virus hindered face-to-face interviews with the participants. Despite the relatively small size of the study’s population, the validity and reliability of the collected data were ensured by adopting qualitative research criteria. The study’s use of students and teachers’ open-ended surveys allows the researchers to access the participants’ observations and to explore the multi-dimensional variation in their perspectives, which contributes to a sufficient level of authenticity and accurate results because “The goal of qualitative research is to examine how things look from different vantage points” [59] (p. 10). Thus, the responses of the relatively small sample are meaningful given the similar online learning environments in Oman during the pandemic, the students’ cultural composition, and the teachers’ diverse cultural backgrounds. Another factor that enhances data analysis validity is the stakeholder participation (piloting and validating the instrument by expert researchers) that increases the validity of the results in the sense that it strengthens the aspects of ownership and understanding, as will be further elaborated in the section on Data Collection and Analysis.

3.2. Participants

Participants in this study comprised two groups of 75 (59 females, 16 males) EFL undergraduate learners majoring in English language and literature and translation at an Omani higher learning institution and 17 expatriate teachers of English. The students were aged 19–22. These students were Arabic native speakers. In terms of knowledge of English, the subjects had successfully completed the General Foundation Programme (GFP) before joining the undergraduate degree courses. In addition, the subjects had been studying English for a period of at least 16 years. Participants had no prior experience in online learning, although they were familiar with digital learning platforms such as Moodle and digital-related academic activities such as course registration, course add/drop, and filing petitions. The participants were taking courses with the researchers and were selected randomly for easy communication and access to data.

Teaching took place using Moodle Learning Management System both synchronously and asynchronously. The class sessions were conducted online with the students required to report to their classes and attendance was mandatory and taken regularly. At the same time, the asynchronous aspect of teaching was maintained as the system was configured to archive recordings of all classes for the students to access asynchronously.

The expatriate teachers’ group consisted of 9 females and 8 males aged 35–50 and holding a doctorate in English language studies as the highest qualification. In addition to having extensive ESL/EFL teaching experience, all participants represented a wide range of linguistic, cultural, and academic backgrounds. The subjects in both groups had experienced online learning and teaching from the time their university decided to switch to the online mode at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

As mentioned earlier, the present study’s aim was to examine aspects of EFL learners’ cultural values in fostering intercultural competence or triggering intercultural conflict in online learning spaces and the teachers’ role in managing the situation. To serve its objective, the study utilized open-ended surveys which were designed and distributed

among the participants in the two groups. Following the authority [64–66], a sample survey allows researchers to generalize about a large population by studying only a small portion of the population. The surveys were designed to elicit the participants' opinions on the cultural values perceived as crucial in the online language classroom and their effects on enhancing or impeding interculturality. The surveys also were created to collect data on teachers' perceived experience in intercultural teaching in online learning environments and the strategies they adopted in managing any intercultural differences or conflicts.

Furthermore, to ensure reliability, the surveys were piloted and given to three expert researchers for review before being administered. The feedback provided was incorporated into the production of the final versions with clear instructions and focus. Moreover, researchers have obtained approval from the University's Research Department (URD) to collect data. Data collection was carried out between 17 October and 10 November 2021. Prior to playing as sources of data, the participants were contacted to obtain their consent. Respondents were then asked to complete the surveys and return them to the researchers. All participants who took part in the data collection task were given a clearer understanding of the research topics and objectives and were informed that their responses would remain confidential and be used for the study's purposes only. The participants' responses in both surveys were collected and analyzed. The respondents' answers to each open-ended question in the surveys were grouped and analyzed to collect their insights on issues addressed in each question in relation to interculturality in the online classroom during the coronavirus pandemic. Specifically, the responses to both surveys were analyzed to determine how EFL learners' cultural values foster intercultural competence in online learning spaces or trigger intercultural conflict and how teachers manage the situation.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Online Learning Experience

The analysis of the data revealed that the students' responses to the survey suggested three types of views on the online learning experience, namely negative views, mixed views, and positive views. Each of the three categories of views contains students' reflections on online learning. The areas of reflection in relation to students' evaluation of online learning based on their perceived experience are presented in Table 1 below. Reflecting on their experiences in online learning and citing various challenges they faced in online learning, 14 out of 75 students evaluated their experience in online learning as negative. Comments such as "challenging", "boring", "I did not like it. It was difficult because the server was bad, internet connection was poor and most of lectures went off as well as inconvenient class schedule", "it is not good because it less interactive", and "no physical presence" were made by the students to evaluate their experience in online learning.

Table 1. Students' views on online learning.

Online Learning Experience		
Negative N = 14 Reflection	Mixed Views N = 27 Reflection	Positive N = 34 Reflection
Challenging	Privacy/less effort to campus	New experience
Boring	Internet issues/high possibility for cheating	Interesting
Less interactive	Safer during COVID-19/less interactive	Flexible assessment
Poor Network	Simpler testing/inconvenient studying from home	Comfortable
Encourages cheating	Boring/Improvement of IT skills	Saves time
An absence of physical presence	Limited time for tests/online resources	Asynchronous learning
Difficult assessments		More personal space (privacy)

For some other students, online learning was a positive experience. Citing varieties of positive points, 34 out of 75 students praised online learning using comments such as "easy and time saver", "very useful", "more personal space", "great experience", and "great and

helpful". The students also expressed having satisfaction with the asynchronous learning experience. One of the participants reported that "it is truly amazing because I can watch the classes more than one time, unlike physical classes. If I do not understand something, I can go back to Moodle and watch it again and again". This view reveals an aspect of the perceived affordances of asynchronous learning by the students. The exposure to the virtual learning spaces made the students reflect on the experience and compare online learning with physical classes. This reflection indicates the students' tendency to evaluate unusual learning experiences such as COVID-19-triggered online learning.

Results also revealed that the other group of students, 27 out of 75, expressed mixed views about their online learning experience by reporting both advantages and disadvantages. Comments such as "interesting, but with few problems", "physical distance for health safety, but less interactive", and "interesting experience, but full of problems" were made by students to reflect on their experience in online learning. This reflection draws attention to the significance of the students' experience especially when a student is quoted saying "online learning was interesting in the beginning but gradually I found my level of interest going down". Students' diverse views on their experience with online learning indicate the significance of the need for exploring the impact of students' participation in online learning. These views confirm the results of earlier research on student's perceptions vis-à-vis involvement in online learning [4,56,58]. Understanding the various aspects of students' experience in online learning will improve the virtual learning spaces and facilitate preparing the whole educational process for any emergency in the future.

4.2. Culture in the Classroom: Engagement or Conflict

Analysis of the data revealed three patterns of cultural values and intercultural conflict that shaped the participants' experience in online learning. The cultural values and conflict patterns are related to students' engagement in the digital learning platform, participants' understanding of cultural engagement in virtual classes, and participants' communication style in initiating and discussing culture in the classroom. The following is an account of these patterns, as demonstrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Participants' sample responses to the open-ended survey.

Involvement in Digital Learning and Cultural Values			
Participants	Responses	Strategy	Domain
Student 1	When I attempt online classes and I'm not dressing disdasha that is embarrassing. Most of the time I would be wearing comfortable clothes that are not very presentable	Avoidance	Formality
Student 2	No, I don't. For example, when a teacher asks us to open camera or microphone I reply: in our culture girls are wrong if men hear their voice or see their face on phone	Resistance	Socio-cultural value
Student 3	No, because people will think I am recording them	Avoidance	Collectivistic cultural consciousness
Student 4	No, as a girl I feel shy, because we have boys in class, and I may not be wearing a scarf and I do not like to show my face	Avoidance/Indirect communication	Socio-cultural value
Student 5	No, I do not trust the privacy of the university's websites	Avoidance	Techno-cultural reservation
Cultural Engagement in Virtual Classroom			Domain
Student 1	Not really, unless if I am asked about it	Negotiating	Conditional engagement
Student 2	Yes, if it is related to the subject of the class	Negotiating	Conditional engagement
Student 3	Yes, I discuss about culture when someone asks about my culture	Negotiating	Conditional engagement
Student 4	Yes, in some classes if the instructor introduces the topic	Negotiating	Conditional engagement
Student 5	Yes, I really think that discussing my culture during classes is a good idea because I can share my culture with class	Dynamic interaction	Forthcoming engagement
Communication Style in Initiating and Discussing Culture in the Classroom			
Student 1	No, I did not try because some teachers do not allow us to speak in the class	Restrained communication	Pedagogical constraint
Student 2	Yes, I like to talk to them about our culture and festivals and the Khareef (Fall Season)	Direct communication	Tradition/festival environment
Student 3	Only when they ask about things like our language or Eid celebration ... something like that	Restricted communication	Traditions
Student 4	Yes, I tell them about our traditional food and clothes	Restricted communication	Traditions
Student 5	When my teacher is from another culture, I try to teach them some words or tell them about the local customs we use in our daily life	Direct communication	Traditions

4.2.1. Involvement in Digital Learning and Cultural Values

One of the study's objectives was to examine the participants' experience in online learning by examining aspects of online learning classes that appear culturally appropriate or inappropriate. They were specifically asked about their views on the use of a webcam and going live during classes. The rationale behind addressing the students' and teachers' perceptions about using features of online learning such as webcams in the language classroom is to examine the participants' level of involvement. Results showed that the students' responses revealed mixed views about the idea of participating live via a webcam in online language classes. The majority of the participants expressed disagreement with the use of webcams in online classes. Figure 1 and Table 3 below illustrate the participants' views on operating webcams during online classes.

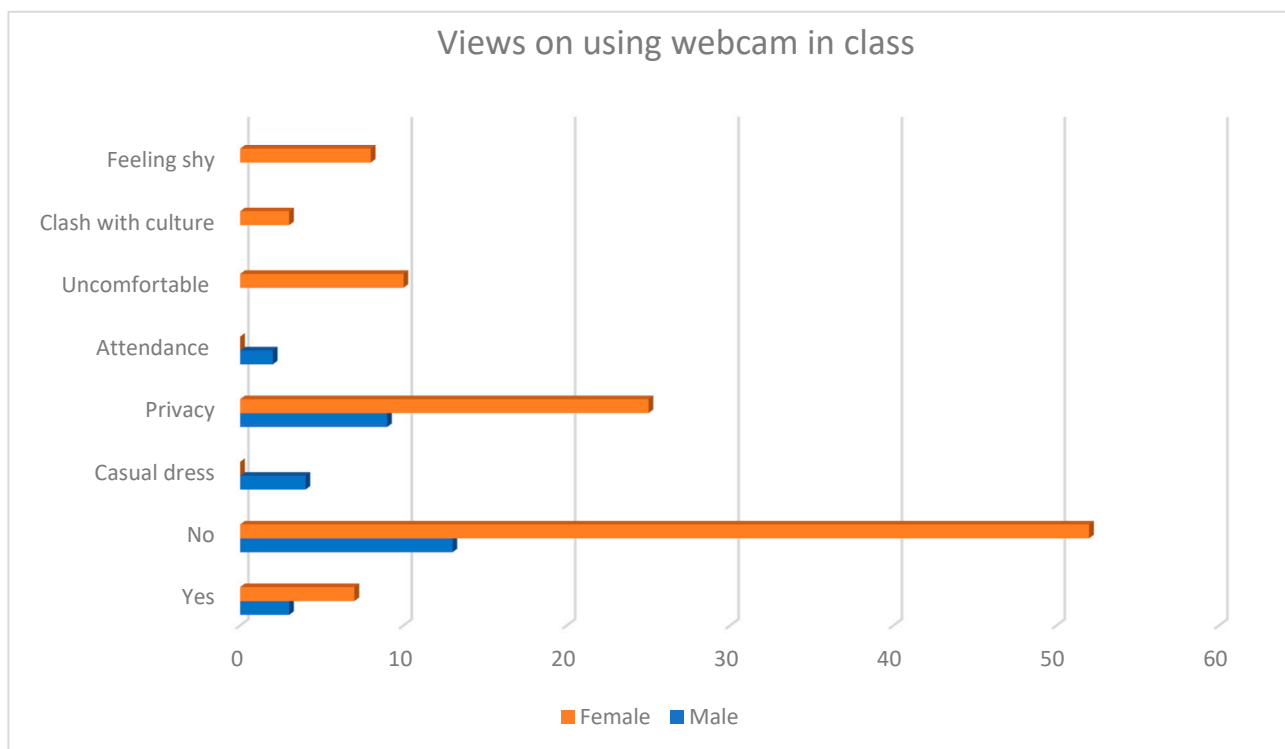


Figure 1. Students' views on webcam use in the online classroom.

Table 3. Participants' justified views on using a webcam in class.

Participants	Views on Using Webcams during Classes			
	Agree	Justifications	Disagree	Justifications
Female (N = 59) 78.6%	(7) 9.3%	- interaction - prevents cheating	(52) 69.3%	- privacy - feeling uncomfortable - clash with culture - feeling shy
Male (N = 16) 21.3%	(3) 4%	- confirm attendance - seriousness	(13) 17.3%	- privacy - wearing casual dress
Total 75 (100%)	(10) 13.3%		(65) 86.6%	

Table 3 above shows that 52 (69.3%) female students and 13 (17.3%) male students out of 75 have expressed disagreement with participating in online classes using webcams. This makes up 86.6% of the total population of the participants and represents the majority. This high percentage reveals that the majority of students both female and male are not in favor of using webcams in class. This is consistent with the results of earlier research on the use

of webcams in online teaching during the pandemic [30–32,67]. However, only 10 (13.3%) of the participants, both female and male, expressed willingness to participate in online classes with their webcams switched on. Another interesting result that emerged from the analysis concerns the diverse grounds on which the participants rejected the use of webcam in online classes. While female participants cited “feeling shy”, “clash with cultural values”, and “feeling uncomfortable” as reasons for rejecting webcam use in online classes, the male students mentioned “wearing casual dress” as the cause for refusing to participate in classes where webcams are used. In addition, as Figure 1 reveals, the responses of the female participants in rejecting the use of webcams in online classes indicate that “privacy” was rated first, followed by “feeling uncomfortable”, then “feeling shy”, and finally “clash with cultural values”.

On the other hand, both male and female students shared “privacy” as a major concern for using webcams in online classes. It is obvious that students have extended the concept of privacy to include their households. The students’ tendency to preserve and protect their privacy functioned as a source of conflict which cast an impediment on the language education process. Many students cited sharing living rooms with other siblings as a reason for rejecting the use of webcams during online classes. Thus, the idea of using a webcam in online classes is interpreted by students as exposing household privacy and making it public which is culturally inappropriate. In other words, this result implies that it is unusual for students to share information about or disclose the place they attend classes from. Thus, revealing publicly what they perceive as private was deemed an act of alienation from the values of their society and family. The students in a conservative society such as Oman found moving to cyberspace to navigate their way in virtual classes a reality that was approached cautiously and selectively. This finding is consistent with the literature in relation to the resistance people showed to coronavirus-led classes [1].

Some participants attribute their resistance of using a webcam to cultural values related to dress code, reluctance to show their face, and attending mixed classes with boys. All these observations are in conflict with the students’ cultural values (see Table 2 on participants’ sample responses). Although the number of these students is small compared to other parameters, the remarks on the connection between cultural values and the students’ reluctance to use webcams are significant, taking into consideration that not all students express their opinions openly because they come from a culture that favors an indirect communicative style (see Table 2).

The students adopted the strategy of withdrawal in expressing disagreement with what they perceived as an antagonist to their cultural norms. That is, the students preferred to protect and preserve their cultural values by rejecting online classroom features. The students’ resistance to online classroom protocols and management systems could be attributed to the asynchronous aspect of online classes. It is pertinent that the students’ cultural homogeneity has facilitated the formation of a lobbying force that vetoes certain online language practices which are perceived as a threat to the cultural norms. This finding conforms to the views of Rubinfeld and Clement [46] on sources of intercultural conflict. It is interesting to observe that the students’ views on using webcams in class clash with the views of their teachers who perceived the issue differently. This incompatibility in the participants’ perspectives is significant as it may become a source of conflict according to Ting-Toomey [22]. Table 4 below summarizes the aspects of challenges reported by the teachers concerning their experience in exposing students to online classes.

Contrary to the students’ overwhelming rejection of webcam use in online classes, the majority of teachers, 14 out of 17, expressed positive views on the matter. The other two did not feel comfortable with webcam use, while only one expressed uncertainty. The two opposing views of teachers and students on using webcams in class were the cause of conflict and disagreement. What students perceived as a threat to privacy and a cause of social annoyance was regarded as an essential learning requirement by their teachers that every student had to fulfill. In the absence of physical presence, online language classes require students to operate their webcams and interact with their teachers to ensure

some interactive aspects are achieved. One of the participants stated that “I like to use the webcam in teaching online as I believe visual intervention is very important for teaching and learning” (T1). Another teacher suggested that “since I had to teach online, I did not have any problem using the webcam. I was expecting my students to reciprocate” (T2) by accepting to turn on their webcams. Teachers were bewildered by why students would show reluctance to use a webcam in class. One of the participants questioned this by stating “students used to see me in physical classrooms, and I do not see why they cannot see me in a virtual classroom” (T3) and the same applies to them.

Table 4. Teachers’ perceived challenges of online classrooms.

Challenging Features	Student Interaction	Camera Use	Learning Management	Initiating Culture
Parameters	reluctance to participate Trusting technology lack of interaction feeling uncomfortable	uncertain uncomfortable recorded sessions	poor classroom management cheating Controlling attendance Using chat box instead of speaking connectivity issues limited activities	textbooks & curricula content personalizing academic relationship conforming to international standards
Participants	13	3	9	12
Percentage	76.47%	17.6%	52.94%	70.58%

As Figure 2 above shows, the two main challenging aspects of online classes from teachers’ perspectives were related to student interaction (76.47%) and initiating cultural exchanges in the classroom (70.58%). An absence of physical presence in online classes is an issue of concern for language teachers due to which webcam use might compensate for and maintain some missing classroom interactive aspects. A participant is quoted to say “using webcam makes students more interactive with me in the class. That is because communication is done through various ways, including facial expressions and body language” (T4), and when students’ virtual presence is not supported with webcam use, then online class objectives might be jeopardized. The contrasting views of both students and teachers are apparent causes of what is perceived by students to be clashing with their culture. In other words, an online classroom element turned what was supposed to be an ordinary online classroom into a clash room shaped by students’ resistance, fear, and suspicion. This turned the teaching experience into a difficult one for all participant teachers who stated that online learning/teaching was challenging to navigate through many hurdles. The challenges are not from the students’ side only, but also other challenges emerge from the multi-functional features of the learning management system such as the students’ access to communication and interaction during the synchronous class sessions via the chat box option. This alternative minimizes the students’ communication level both verbally and nonverbally.

The results indicated that differences between teachers and learners led to disagreements in a culturally diverse online classroom resulting in intercultural misunderstanding. The differences between the two groups marked the diverse intercultural conflict management approaches both teachers and students adopted. The students were direct in their intercultural communicative style, while the teachers’ style was characterized by being indirect because they embraced the accommodating communicative style to avoid any impending conflict. This result validates Hammer’s [37] quadrant theoretical model of the intercultural conflict style used by competing groups. It is worth mentioning that teachers’ diverse cultural backgrounds vis-à-vis students’ cultural homogeneity forced the former to restrain emotions and avoid intercultural conflict which emerged due to differences in both parties’ communicative styles. Understanding the differences in cultural backgrounds of teachers and students is deemed imperative in approaching any intercultural conflict style. Effective communicative styles and positive intercultural conflict dynamics require a learning space that is more interculturally flexible, dynamic, and effective.

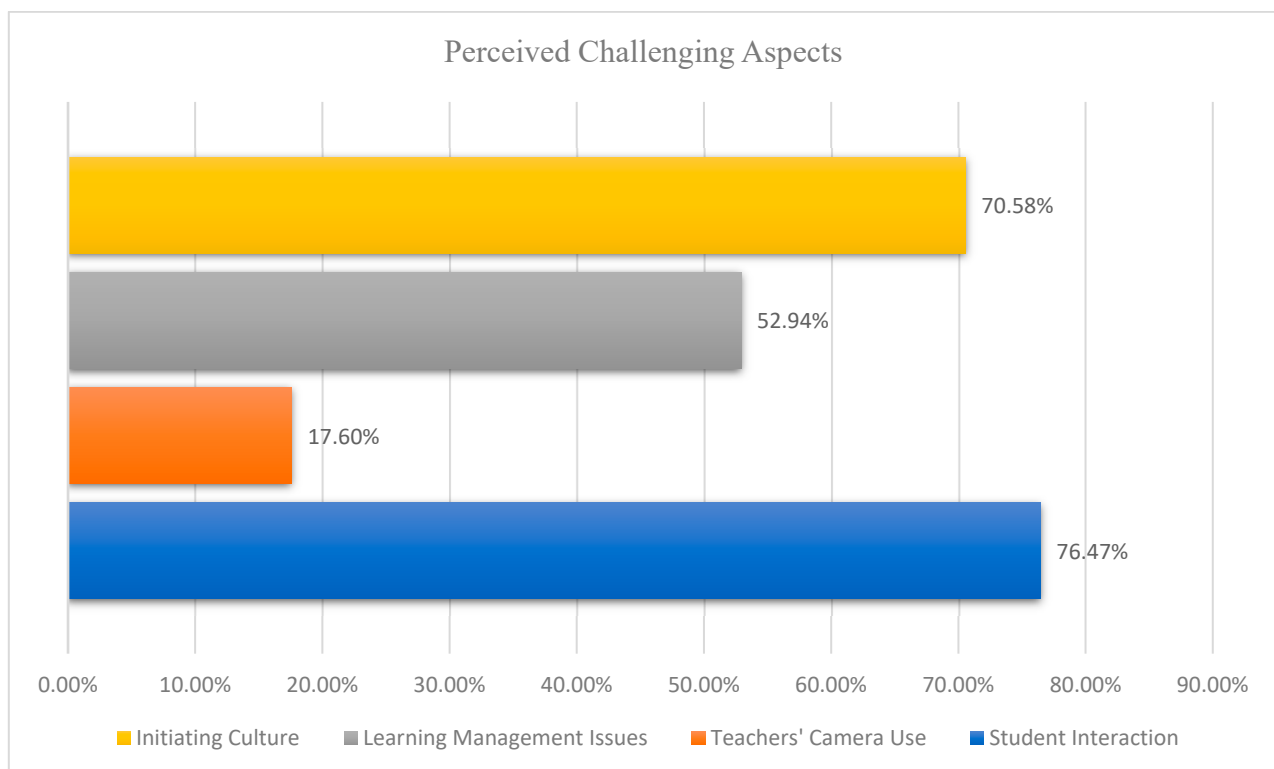


Figure 2. Teachers' perceived challenging aspects of online classrooms.

4.2.2. Understanding Culture in the Classroom

One of the factors that led to cultural conflict in online learning spaces was the lack of discussion about culture in the classroom context. The data analysis suggested that culture in the classroom was detached from the class discussions and was highlighted only when there was a mention of it in class. Table 5 below shows the students' views on discussing culture in the classroom.

Table 5. Students' views on discussing culture in the classroom.

Participants	Always	Sometimes	Never
Females	(0)	(39) 52%	(20) 26.7%
Males	(1) 1.3%	(14) 18.7%	(1) 1.3%
Total (75) 100%	(1) 1.3%	(53) 70.7%	(21) 28%

The majority of students revealed that they would sometimes discuss culture in the classroom. One of the students stated that "Yes, sometimes I discuss about my culture in the class. I tell what we do and what we wear". Another student mentioned that "I don't discuss about my culture, unless if I was asked about it". In the same vein, another student reported that "Yes, I sometimes do discuss when the subject of culture comes in context". Another student reported that "Yes, I do discuss about culture if it is related to my courses". The students were not only lacking exposure to culture in the classroom but also the willingness to share deep cultural understanding with their teachers. The students' limited understanding of sharing cultural values with "others" is limited to traditional food, national dress, and festivals [33]. One of the students reported that initiating cultural exposure is possible "when there is a mention of it and I share with them about our food, dressing and dances". Another student stated that "I don't actually try to show but I let my teachers know if they question me". Another student is quoted to say "yes, we are wearing black abaya and we have local languages". Another student stated that "sure, it's nice to tell my teachers about our food and many other things". Interestingly, another

student stated that “yes, when my teacher is from another culture I would try to teach him some words or telling him about the local costumes we use in our daily life”. The extracts above show a lack of cultural exposure in the language classroom and that is expected to limit students’ understanding of the significance of culture in building better intercultural competence. When language learners develop less intercultural competence, intercultural conflict is inevitable. An absence of intercultural communicative competence in online language classrooms is a challenge for any attempt to initiate intercultural negotiation among teachers and students.

The results also suggested that teachers held mixed views in terms of introducing culture in online language classrooms with the majority (70.58%) viewing the issue as a source of challenges and others expressing a conditioned approach to the issue (see Table 4). This realization is illustrated in one of the participants’ comments who stated that “In my opinion, introducing culture into the classroom is beneficial, although certain sensitivities may prevent an effective introduction” (T1). Another participant opined that “Well, it depends on the situation. I have been here for almost 4 years, so I’m familiar with the local culture. But sometimes, especially when it comes to verbal or non-verbal communication, some students address teachers in an inappropriate way. I know most of that was unintentional but students should be taught how to address people who come from other cultural backgrounds” (T2). Another participant suggested that “No, language is a tool for communication and it has to conform to international standards rather than nurturing culture-specific nuances in the act of communication” (T3).

4.2.3. Initiating and Discussing Culture in the Classroom

The fact that most students responded negatively to initiating culture in the classroom conforms with their cultural background which has a preference for the high-context communicative style. Most probably, the students did not feel obliged to be expressive about a possible clash that may have existed between their cultural values and the new classroom culture, assuming that there was adequate context for the instructors to infer this without making explicit references to the issue. When asked about their readiness to discuss their culture in the classroom, most students responded “sometimes”, providing answers that suggest their participation was conditioned by introducing culture as a topic for discussion in a specific context. Although some responses provided by the students on discussing their culture in the online classroom showed that they have a shallow understanding of deep cultural components focusing mainly on dress, food, and similar constructs, it is clear from the students’ responses that they did not reject the idea utterly and they were rather waiting for a trigger to encourage their active involvement.

This shows a positive sign because the students expressed an open attitude towards intercultural exchanges with their instructors. The fact that the students were waiting for an initiator of cultural topics shows that they have a preference for either the accommodating or the dynamic intercultural conflict style, which is understandable. The accommodating and dynamic intercultural conflict styles give priority to indirect communication which is typical of the students’ cultural background considering the fact that they come from a collectivistic culture. The only difference is that the first (the accommodation style) prefers restraining emotional responses whereas the second (the dynamic style) tends to display explicit expressions of emotions. This conforms with the posits of scholarly research on contexted communicative styles [42,43] and the intercultural conflict management style [37].

On the other hand, the teachers’ responses showed reluctance (70.58%) on their part to initiate or discuss culture in the classroom unless expressed explicitly in the curricula. This reveals that the teachers also had a preference for using a high-context communicative style and the accommodating conflict management style whereby priority is given to indirect communication and restraint of emotions. The dominance of one communicative style and conflict management style in the classroom (high context and accommodating) is indicative of a state of polarization that promotes the emergence of a stalemate scenario in which the teachers do not play their role as leaders of the classroom, nor do students assume the new

power status which they have acquired by virtue of belonging to a culturally homogenous community of learners.

Obviously, the teachers' lack of clear terms of reference for inviting culture in the classroom, whether administratively or in the curricula, coupled with the pressing factor of group membership [22,45] have intensified their unwillingness to launch a discussion about cultural values that impede or invigorate interculturality in the online classroom. This highlights the importance of rendering institutional support to teachers and their pedagogical choices as suggested by Cushner and Mahon [27] and Salih and Omar [35]. The students' overwhelming cultural homogeneity endows them with a power status that works as a counter subtle force resisting the actual enforcement of classroom culture [39]. What is rather required to avoid an escalation of the seeds of conflict, manifested by the remarks of some instructors (see T1, T2, T3), is the adoption of the discussion or engagement conflict style on part of the teachers, both as leaders and team players (facilitators) of the dialectical intercultural encounter. This conforms with the account by Dodd [39] on the role of instructors as leaders who can facilitate the creation of a new culture that responds to the needs of all participants. The finding also confirms with the results by Okech et al. [41] on ineffective communication styles that are conducive to conflict, particularly avoiding the management of the conflict and focusing on points of similarities while overlooking differences.

Intercultural competence, intercultural communicative competence, and intercultural conflict management competence are important constructs so relevant to ELT practice and particularly EFL contexts whose significance emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Building the abilities of EFL learners and teachers to negotiate interculturality and manage intercultural conflict in language classrooms should be placed on the agenda of higher education institutions' bid to reform education. Such an objective serves as a pathway in preparing 21st century learners to embrace more intercultural tolerance, a desire for peace, and an interest to achieve and sustain coexistence and mutual understanding.

5. Conclusion, Recommendations, and Limitations

This investigation which was carried out in Oman's higher education context attempted to explore EFL learners' perceived experience of online language learning in relation to the role of cultural values in online learning and the teachers' role in managing any intercultural encounter that might trigger conflict. Students' cultural norms and expectations have collided with features of online learning hindering their participation in their online classes. The use of webcams in online language classrooms invites resistance and clashes with students' cultural norms. Drawn from the same cultural background, participants formed a homogeneous group with an inclination for solidarity to protect cultural values and privacy.

Other cultural constructs that may have impeded students' involvement in classroom intercultural exchanges were related to the participants' cultural communicative style as well as their shallow understanding of the profound dimensions of culture and its relevance to the classroom. It was obvious that the students were not adequately expressive of their cultural priorities and they have confined their understanding of culture to limited concepts such as traditional dress, local food, and festivals. There is a need to build students' intercultural competence and develop their intercultural conflict competence.

Teachers' intercultural communicative competence and their role as intercultural conflict leaders and managers are crucial. Thus, empowering teachers through interculturality teaching-based professional development programs is imperative. Teachers' professional programs, across disciplines, should be tailored to address expatriate teachers' needs to develop classroom intercultural awareness, intercultural teaching competence, and intercultural conflict management competence, taking into consideration the cultural aspects of the Omani society and Oman's philosophy of education which is based on cultural diversity. Furthermore, teachers need to engage more with classroom issues related to interculturality by embracing classroom-oriented research [55,68,69]. When teachers become aware of the

importance of action research in dealing with classroom issues, they will be more motivated to engage in an active search for pedagogical solutions to classroom problems and phenomena associated with unpredictable circumstances [70]. The Gulf's rich intercultural EFL classes can be sources for interactive learning where diverse cultures and experiences may interact and negotiate differences peacefully.

The present study is subject to certain limitations. Firstly, it is limited in its dependence on one qualitative instrument. The study only employed open-ended surveys to explore aspects of EFL learners' cultural values enhancing intercultural competence or causing intercultural conflict in virtual classes and the teachers' role in managing such situations. Secondly, the number of participants was 75 undergraduate EFL students and 17 English language teachers, which might not be a representative sample and might limit the generalizability of the results. Thirdly, the study did not investigate the perceived experiences of students and teachers from interdisciplinary backgrounds. Fourthly, the study examined some factors which triggered intercultural misunderstandings and disagreements in online classrooms. Variables other than digital learning in multicultural contexts must be investigated. In addition, future research may address institutional and administrative roles in empowering teachers to manage intercultural conflict in emergency and normal situations.

Future research may also investigate students' experience with interculturality in virtual and physical classes within interdisciplinary settings. In addition, language teachers' intercultural experience in language classes with students from different majors and programs of study might be investigated. Future research may also explore cross-sectional features of intercultural conflict beyond virtual classes.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.A.S. and L.I.O.; methodology, A.A.S.; software, A.A.S. and L.I.O.; validation, A.A.S. and L.I.O.; formal analysis, A.A.S. and L.I.O.; investigation, A.A.S.; resources, A.A.S. and L.I.O.; data curation, A.A.S.; writing—original draft preparation, A.A.S. and L.I.O.; writing—review and editing, A.A.S. and L.I.O.; visualization, A.A.S. and L.I.O.; supervision, A.A.S.; project administration, A.A.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: A sample of the data used in the study has been shared.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. Salih, A.A.; Omar, L.I. Season of Migration to Remote Language Learning Platforms: Voices from EFL University Learners. *Int. J. High. Educ.* **2020**, *10*, 62–73. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
2. Baburajan, P.K. Psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic among expatriate residents in the UAE. *Avicenna* **2021**, *2021*, 3. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
3. Adedoyin, O.B.; Soykan, E. Covid-19 pandemic and online learning: The challenges and opportunities. *Interact. Learn. Environ.* **2020**, *31*, 863–875. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
4. Al-Nofaie, H. Saudi University Students' Perceptions towards Virtual Education During Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Language Learning via Blackboard. *Arab. World Engl. J.* **2020**, *11*, 4–20. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
5. Kooli, C. COVID-19: Challenges and opportunities. *Avicenna* **2021**, *2021*, 5. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
6. Mahyoob, M. Challenges of e-Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic Experienced by EFL Learners. *Arab. World Engl. J.* **2020**, *11*, 351–362. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
7. Manoharan, S.R.; Hua, T.K.; Sultan, F.M.M. A Comparison of Online Learning Challenges Between Young Learners and Adult Learners in ESL Classes During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Critical Review. *Theory Pract. Lang. Stud.* **2022**, *12*, 28–35. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
8. Wilson, A.K.; Lengeling, M.M. Language learning in the time of COVID-19: ELT students' narrated experiences in guided reflective journals. *Íkala Rev. Leng. Cult.* **2021**, *26*, 571–585. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
9. Gurban, M.A.; Almogren, A.S. Students' actual use of e-learning in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. *SAGE Open* **2022**, *12*, 1–16. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
10. Tao, J.; Gao, X. Teaching and learning languages online: Challenges and responses. *System* **2022**, *107*, 102819. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

11. Yazdanmehr, E.; Shirvan, M.E.; Saghafi, K. A process tracing study of the dynamic patterns of boredom in an online L3 course of German during COVID-19 pandemic. *Foreign Lang. Ann.* **2021**, *54*, 714–739. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
12. Zhang, K.; Wu, H. Synchronous Online Learning During COVID-19: Chinese University EFL Students' Perspectives. *SAGE Open* **2022**, *12*, 1–10. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
13. Zou, B.; Huang, L.; Ma, W.; Qiu, Y. Evaluation of the effectiveness of EFL online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. *SAGE Open* **2021**, *11*, 1–17. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
14. Gacs, A.; Goertler, S.; Spasova, S. Planned online language education versus crisis-prompted online language teaching: Lessons for the future. *Foreign Lang. Ann.* **2020**, *53*, 380–392. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
15. González-Lloret, M.; Canals, L.; Pineda, J.E. Role of technology in language teaching and learning amid the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. *Íkala Rev. Leng. Cult.* **2021**, *26*, 477–482. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
16. Helm, F. Language and culture in an online context: What can learner diaries tell us about intercultural competence? *Lang. Intercult. Commun.* **2009**, *9*, 91–104. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
17. Egbert, J. The new normal?: A pandemic of task engagement in language learning. *Foreign Lang. Ann.* **2020**, *53*, 314–319. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
18. Bardis, B.; Silman, F.; Mohammadzadeh, B. Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Competence in an EFL Context for a Sustainable Learning Environment: A Case of Northern Cyprus. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 10346. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
19. Czura, A. Students teachers' international experience and their beliefs about developing intercultural communicative competence. In *Challenges of Second and Foreign Language Education in a Globalized World*; Pawlak, M., Mystkowska-Wiertelak, A., Eds.; Second Language Learning and Teaching; Springer: Cham, Switzerland, 2018. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
20. Byram, M.; Nicholas, A.; Stevens, D. (Eds.) *Developing Intercultural Competence in Practice*; Multilingual Matters LTD.: Bristol, UK, 2001.
21. Deardorff, D.K. (Ed.) *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*; SAGE Publications Ltd.: Newbury Park, CA, USA, 2009.
22. Ting-Toomey, S. Intercultural conflict competence as a facet of intercultural competence development: Multiple conceptual approaches. In *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*; Deardorff, D.K., Ed.; SAGE: Newbury Park, CA, USA, 2009; pp. 100–129.
23. Byram, M.; Holmes, P.; Savvides, N. Intercultural communicative competence in foreign language education: Questions of theory, practice and research. *Lang. Learn. J.* **2013**, *41*, 251–253. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
24. Miravet, L.M.; Garcia, O.M. The role of teachers' shared values and objectives in promoting intercultural and inclusive school cultures: A case study. *Int. J. Qual. Stud. Educ.* **2013**, *26*, 1373–1386. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
25. Bastos, M.; AraújoSá, H. Pathways to teacher education for intercultural communicative competence: Teachers' perceptions. *Lang. Learn. J.* **2014**, *43*, 131–147. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
26. Rapanta, C. "Insha' Allah I'll do my homework": Adapting to Arab undergraduates at an English-speaking university in Dubai. *Learn. Teach. High. Educ. Gulf Perspect.* **2014**, *11*, 60–67. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
27. Cushner, K.; Mahon, J. Developing the intercultural competence of educators and their students: Creating the blueprints. In *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*; Deardorff, D., Ed.; SAGE: Newbury Park, CA, USA, 2009; pp. 304–320.
28. Alahmadi, N.S.; Alraddadi, B.M. The Impact of Virtual Classes on Second Language Interaction in the Saudi EFL Context: A Case Study of Saudi Undergraduate Students. *Arab. World Engl. J.* **2020**, *11*, 56–72. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
29. Euwema, M.C.; Van Emmerik, I.H. Intercultural competencies and conglomerated conflict behaviors in intercultural conflicts. *Int. J. Intercult. Relat.* **2007**, *31*, 427–441. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
30. Gherheș, V.; Șimon, S.; Para, I. Analysing Students' Reasons for Keeping Their Webcams on or off during Online Classes. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 3203. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
31. Rajab, M.H.; Soheib, M. Privacy Concerns Over the Use of Webcams in Online Medical Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Cureus* **2021**, *13*, e13536. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
32. Waluyo, B.; Wangdi, T. Reasons and impacts of camera on and off during synchronous online English teaching and learning: Insights from Thai EFL context. *Comput. Assist. Lang. Learn. Electron. J.* **2023**, *24*, 178–197.
33. Salih, A.A.; Omar, L.I. Globalized English and users' intercultural awareness: Implications for internationalization of higher education. *Citizenship, Soc. Econ. Educ.* **2021**, *20*, 181–196. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
34. Byram, M. *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*; Multilingual Matters: Bristol, UK, 1997.
35. Salih, A.; Omar, L. An investigation of teachers' perceptions and practices of interculturality in ELT. *Int. J. Soc. Cult. Lang.* **2022**, *10*, 50–63. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
36. Carbaugh, D. Toward a perspective on cultural communication and intercultural contact. *Semiotica* **1990**, *80*, 15–35. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
37. Hammer, M.R. The Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory: A conceptual framework and measure of intercultural conflict resolution approaches. *Int. J. Intercult. Relat.* **2005**, *29*, 675–695. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
38. Ting-Toomey, S.; Kurogi, A. Facework competence in intercultural conflict: An updated face-negotiation theory. *Int. J. Intercult. Relat.* **1998**, *22*, 187–225. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
39. Dodd, C.H. *Dynamics of Intercultural Communication*, 5th ed.; McGraw-Hill: New York, NY, USA, 1998.
40. DeCapua, A.; Wintergerst, A.C. *Crossing Cultures in the Language Classroom*, 2nd ed.; University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, MI, USA, 2016.

41. Okech, J.E.A.; Pimpleton-Gray, A.M.; Vannatta, R.; Champe, J. Intercultural Conflict in Groups. *J. Spec. Group Work.* **2016**, *41*, 350–369. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
42. Hall, E.T. *Beyond Culture*; Doubleday: New York, NY, USA, 1976.
43. Hall, E.T.; Hall, M.R. *Understanding Cultural Differences: Germans, French and Americans*; Intercultural Press: London, UK, 1990.
44. Lee, M.M.; Leighton, S. *Culturally Responsive Conversations: Connecting with Your Diverse School Community*; Jossey Bass: Hoboken, NJ, USA, 2023.
45. Ting-Toomey, S. Researching intercultural conflict competence. *J. Int. Commun.* **2007**, *13*, 7–30. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
46. Rubinfeld, S.; Clément, R. Intercultural Conflict and Mediation: An Intergroup Perspective. *Lang. Learn.* **2012**, *62*, 1205–1230. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
47. Martincová, J.; Lukešová, M. Critical Thinking as a Tool for Managing Intercultural Conflicts. *Procedia-Soc. Behav. Sci.* **2015**, *171*, 1255–1264. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
48. Byram, M. Intercultural competence in foreign languages: The intercultural speaker and the pedagogy of foreign language education. In *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*; Deardorff, D.K., Ed.; SAGE: Newbury Park, CA, USA, 2009; pp. 321–332.
49. Orsini-Jones, M.; Lee, F. *Intercultural Communicative Competence for Global Citizenship*; Palgrave Macmillan UK EBooks; Palgrave Macmillan: London, UK, 2018. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
50. Polat, S.; Metin, M.A. The Relationship Between the Teachers' Intercultural Competence Levels and the Strategy of Solving Conflicts. *Procedia-Soc. Behav. Sci.* **2012**, *46*, 1961–1968. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
51. Hall, B.; Noguchi, M. Intercultural conflict: A case study. *Int. J. Intercult. Relat.* **1993**, *17*, 399–413. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
52. Okech, J.E.A. Reflective Practice in Group Co-Leadership. *J. Spec. Group Work.* **2008**, *33*, 236–252. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
53. Kooli, C. Governing and managing higher education institutions: The quality audit contributions. *Eval. Program Plan.* **2019**, *77*, 101713. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
54. Salih, A.A.; Omar, L.I. Reflective Teaching in EFL Online Classrooms: Teachers' Perspective. *J. Lang. Teach. Res.* **2022**, *13*, 261–270. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
55. Kooli, C. The philosophy of education in the Sultanate of Oman: Between conservatism and modernism. *Int. J. Knowl. Learn.* **2020**, *13*, 233–245. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
56. Khan, M.A.; Kamal, T.; Illiyan, A.; Asif, M. School Students' Perception and Challenges towards Online Classes during COVID-19 Pandemic in India: An Econometric Analysis. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 4786. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
57. Civitillo, S.; Juang, L.P.; Badra, M.; Schachner, M.K. The interplay between culturally responsive teaching, cultural diversity beliefs, and self-reflection: A multiple case study. *Teach. Teach. Educ.* **2019**, *77*, 341–351. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
58. Søndergaard, M.; Takita, F.; Van Rompay-Bartels, I. International Students' Perceptions towards Their Learning Experience in an International Network Seminar in Japan: During and Post the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 8641. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
59. Taylor, S.J.; Bogdan, R.; DeVault, M.L. *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource*, 4th ed.; John Wiley & Sons: Hoboken, NJ, USA, 2016.
60. Balnaves, M.; Caputi, P. *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: An Investigative Approach*; SAGE Publications: Newbury Park, CA, USA, 2001.
61. Seidman, I. *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, 3rd ed.; Teachers College Press: New York, NY, USA, 2006.
62. Leavy, P. Introduction. In *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2014; pp. 1–14.
63. Leavy, P. *Research Design: Quantitative, Qualitative, Mixed Methods, Arts-Based, and Community-Based Participatory Research Approaches*; The Guilford Press: New York, NY, USA, 2017.
64. Silverman, D. *Doing Qualitative Research*; SAGE Publications Ltd.: Newbury Park, CA, USA, 2013.
65. Creswell, J.W.; Creswell, J.D. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed.; SAGE Publications Ltd.: Newbury Park, CA, USA, 2018.
66. Jarrett, C. *Surveys That Work: A Practical Guide for Designing Better Surveys*; Rosenfeld Media: New York, NY, USA, 2021.
67. Farid, H.; A Siddiqui, T.; Sukhia, R.H.; Hasan, S.J.; Naveed, A.; Pasha, L. Imperceptible learners: Students' reasons for keeping webcams off and strategies to address students' challenges. *J. Educ. Health Promot.* **2022**, *11*, 325. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
68. Kooli, C.; Zidi, C.; Jamrah, A. The Philosophy of Education in the Sultanate of Oman: Between Perennialism and Progressivism. *Am. J. Educ. Learn.* **2019**, *4*, 36–49. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
69. Zidi, C.; Kooli, C.; Jamrah, A. Road to academic research excellence in Gulf private universities. In *Sustainable Energy-Water-Environment Nexus in Deserts*; Heggy, E., Bermudez, V., Vermeersch, M., Eds.; Advances in Science, Technology & Innovation; Springer: Cham, Switzerland, 2022; pp. 835–839. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
70. Salih, A.A.; Omar, L.I. Action Research-based Online Teaching in Oman: Teachers' Voices and Perspectives. *World J. Engl. Lang.* **2022**, *12*, 9–19. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.