

English Education Students' Experiences of Representing Cultural Identity through Food Sharing and Potluck

Luqyana Amalia¹, Fina Fatkhurizqia^{1*}, Tatsbita Ramadhani¹, Putri Amalia Salsabila¹, Intan Mustika Dewi¹, Rosiana¹, Nayla Aulya Rahmah¹

¹English Education Department, Faculty of Education and Teacher Training,
Universitas Islam Negeri K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan

*E-mail: fina.fatkhurizqia@mhs.uingusdur.ac.id (corresponding author)

Abstract: Food is a key element in the expression of culture and one way to maintain cultural identity, particularly within highly multicultural contexts. Although many studies have examined the relationship between food and cultural identity, there has been little research on how students express their cultural identity through food-sharing experiences in higher education settings. Thus, this study explored how English education students represented cultural identity in food sharing and potluck experiences. The present study applied a qualitative narrative inquiry design to the experiences of three international students enrolled in a master's program in English Education at an Indonesian university. Participants were purposively sampled based on their habit of sharing traditional food from their home countries. Semi-structured WhatsApp interviews were conducted, and data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings showed that sharing traditional food was a way for students to express and give meaning to their identity, convey cultural values and traditions, practice cultural heritage, and promote intercultural understanding. They also expressed pride in seeing their traditional food appreciated by others and saw sharing food as a means of bridging cultural gaps. Participants also expressed pride when others appreciated their traditional meals and identified food sharing as a channel to enhance social ties across diverse cultures. These results indicate potential for food-sharing activities as opportunities for cultural expression and intercultural learning in multicultural educational contexts.

Keywords: Cultural Identity; Traditional Food; Food Sharing; Potluck; English Education Students

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, cultural identity has become an important aspect of individuals' lives, especially among university students who interact with diverse cultural backgrounds. Cultural identity refers to a sense of belonging to a particular cultural group, reflected through shared values, traditions, beliefs, language, and everyday practices. One of the most visible ways people express and preserve their cultural identity is through food. Food is not merely a means of satisfying physical needs but also serves as a symbol of cultural heritage and social belonging. According to Wright et al. (2021), food shapes cultural and ethnic identity through foodways, including the preparation, sharing, and

consumption of traditional foods. Food practices enable individuals to maintain connections with their cultural roots while adapting to new social environments.

Food-sharing activities, such as potluck gatherings, provide opportunities for individuals to introduce their cultural backgrounds to others. A potluck is a communal event in which participants bring food to share with others, fostering interaction, cooperation, and cultural exchange. Through these activities, students can communicate the cultural meanings embedded in traditional dishes and learn about their peers' cultures. Research has shown that sharing meals contributes to the construction of cultural identity and strengthens a sense of community and belonging among participants.

In educational settings, food-based activities have increasingly been recognized as effective tools for fostering intercultural awareness and cultural learning. Felayati et al. (2024) found that gastronomy-based learning activities, in which students bring and discuss traditional foods from various cultures, help enhance cultural awareness and understanding among university students. Similarly, cultural food-sharing programs provide spaces for students to engage in meaningful discussions about cultural traditions, values, and identities while practicing communication skills.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore how English language education students represent their cultural identities through food-sharing and potluck activities. Narrative inquiry was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of participants' life experiences and the meanings they attach to them through their personal stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This study involved three international students enrolled in an English Language Education program at a university in Indonesia. They were selected purposively because they had experience sharing traditional foods from their home cultures in a multicultural setting. To protect their privacy, pseudonyms were used throughout the study.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via WhatsApp in May 2026. During the interviews, participants were invited to share their experiences, feelings, and perspectives regarding traditional food sharing and its role in expressing cultural identity. The interview data were then transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researcher carefully read the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data, identified meaningful statements, grouped similar ideas into themes, and interpreted the findings in relation to existing studies on cultural identity, food sharing, and intercultural communication.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sharing traditional food is one of the most tangible ways for students to represent their cultural identity in a multicultural academic setting, as it carries values, history, and social meanings embedded in that tradition. Marino (2018) stated that sharing food among individuals from different cultural backgrounds constitutes a form of cross-cultural communication that is non-verbal yet deeply meaningful. Bideratan (2025) also noted that food serves as a strong cultural identity marker, preserving a community's stories passed down from one generation to another.

In students' experiences within an English education program, bringing and

presenting food from their home country at a campus cultural event positions them as cultural agents who actively introduce their traditions to a broader community. Purga et al. (2025) affirmed that food serves as a medium of self-representation, allowing a person to show where they come from and what their culture stands for without lengthy verbal explanation. Brownlee (2018) added that sharing traditional food is one of the most enduring ways to pass down cultural values, as it involves strong personal experiences and shared memories.

Food sharing was held as a potluck, where each participant brought traditional food from their culture to be shared collectively in one space. Potluck practices have been identified as spaces where cultural identities are performed and expressed, as each dish brought to the table carries the story of its preparer (Samuel, 2019). Such a setting positioned the participant not only as someone who shared food but as someone who actively represented his cultural identity through what he brought to the gathering (Kraff & Jernsand, 2023). A participant in this study shared that the experience of sharing traditional food took place at an international food festival held at school, where each student brought food from their own culture. He chose to bring adobo, one of the most well-known traditional dishes from the Philippines, and shared it with friends from various cultural backgrounds. His experience is elaborated as follows:

"I shared adobo, which is one of the most popular traditional dishes in the Philippines. I chose adobo because it is a well-known Filipino dish and represents our unique cooking style. Most people enjoyed it and said it was delicious. Some even asked for the recipe. Yes, it did. I felt proud because people appreciated a dish that is an important part of Filipino culture. Yes, it helped them learn more about Filipino traditions and our love for sharing meals with family and friends."
(Coco, WhatsApp Interview, May 2026)

Based on a statement from Coco, a phrase representing our unique cooking style shows that he consciously positioned adobo as a reflection of the distinctiveness of Filipino culinary culture. The phrase people appreciated a dish that is an important part of Filipino culture reveals that recognition from others became a significant part of his overall experience. Wright et al. (2021) stated that acknowledgment of one's cultural elements by other groups strengthens cultural identity and a sense of belonging in an individual. Such a finding shows that sharing food created space for him to see his own culture through others' eyes, and from that moment, pride grew in a more meaningful way.

He also conveyed that sharing food gave those around him a deeper understanding of Filipino traditions and the value of togetherness. Jiemuratova (2025) found that engagement with food from another culture leads individuals to become more open toward different perspectives and to build deeper mutual respect. Siddiqui (2025) also stated that social interaction built through shared experiences strengthens relational bonds among individuals from different backgrounds.

Sharing traditional food was also viewed not only as a way of introducing taste, but also as a way of keeping cultural heritage known to a wider community. Partarakis et al. (2021) affirmed that when individuals actively share their traditional food, they help sustain their cultural identity amid an ever-moving wave of globalization. Rapoport (2025) also noted that cultural practices in social settings provide a meaningful way for individuals to maintain their sense of identity across different environments.

Food sharing was also identified as a meaningful way for students to build understanding among individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Wright et al. (2021) found that sharing cultural food with people from different backgrounds fosters social connections that extend beyond ordinary interactions. Partarakis et al. (2021) also stated that traditional cuisine stores the social and cultural meanings of a community, making it a meaningful medium for introducing one culture to another. Such a view aligns with what the participant conveyed as follows:

"I learned that food can connect people from different backgrounds and encourage cultural understanding. It created opportunities for conversation, friendship, and mutual respect among people from different cultures. Traditional food sharing is important because it preserves cultural heritage, promotes understanding, and brings people together." (Coco, WhatsApp Interview, May 2026)

Based on a statement from Coco, the phrase "food can connect people from different backgrounds" suggests that he saw food as a means of bringing individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds together through a genuine, shared experience (Jiemuratova, 2025). Those who take part in cross-cultural food sharing tend to develop a deeper appreciation for cultural differences, as those differences become visible and valued when viewed through others' eyes (Showalter, 2014). A potluck gathering gave him a space to present his traditional food not simply as a dish to be eaten, but as a reflection of his own cultural roots and background (Samuel, 2019).

Taking part in a potluck by bringing traditional food became a way for the participant to ensure that his cultural background remained known and appreciated within a diverse community (Rapopart, 2025). Behind the simple act of placing a dish on the table lies a deeper intention: keeping the identity and customs of one's community present and alive in the eyes of those around him (Visser, 2015).

"I shared traditional Thai tom yam with my friends because I wanted them to try one of Thailand's traditional dishes. They responded positively, saying it was delicious and interesting. This experience made me feel proud because I could introduce culture through traditional food. I also learned that food can strengthen relationships and bring people closer together. In my opinion, sharing traditional food is important because it helps preserve culture, introduce cultural identity, and strengthen social relationships." (Milly, WhatsApp Interview, May 2026)

According to Milly, sharing traditional food is a meaningful way to introduce culture to others. This experience fosters a sense of pride by providing an opportunity to express cultural identity through food. These findings suggest that traditional food can serve as a cultural symbol, enhancing understanding and appreciation of different cultures. This finding is consistent with Wang (2026), who explains that food plays an important role in shaping and expressing cultural identity. Through food practices, individuals can maintain and communicate their cultural backgrounds to others.

Sharing traditional food also provides opportunities for individuals to interact and build closer relationships. This activity creates a warm and comfortable atmosphere that encourages more open communication. Food serves not only as a necessity but also as a medium for sharing experiences and strengthening interpersonal relationships. Therefore, food sharing can strengthen social bonds among community members (Neuman, 2024).

In addition to strengthening social relationships, sharing traditional food also contributes to cultural preservation. Through this practice, cultural knowledge, values, and traditions can be introduced to a wider community. This finding is supported by Reddy and Van Dam (2020), who found that cultural food practices play an important role in maintaining and transmitting cultural identity. Therefore, sharing traditional food not only helps preserve cultural heritage but also promotes greater understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity.

"When I first came to Indonesia, I often cooked traditional Thai dishes like somtam, tomyam, cekmek, and bokho, then shared them with friends and people around me. I did this to introduce them to Thailand's flavors and culture. When I saw them interested, smiling, and enjoying the food I shared, I felt happy and proud of my culture. From this experience, I learned that sharing food not only makes others happy but also helps build closer relationships and creates a sense of community. Furthermore, traditional food can be a means of introducing culture to others, especially when accompanied by explanations and discussions about the origins and meanings behind the food." (Lila, WhatsApp Interview, May 2026)

Lila's statement above shows an act of food sharing, introducing her native culture through traditional Thai food. Cooking and sharing typical Thai foods such as somtam, tomyam, cekmek, and bokho with friends and the surrounding community shows that food serves to introduce cultural identity to new environments. Efforts to introduce traditional food to others are not only a form of cultural promotion, but also part of the process of preserving cultural identity itself (Ramli et al., 2016). Research on food as cultural heritage explains that traditional food serves not only as a means of consumption but also as part of cultural heritage, embodying social, historical, and traditional values passed down from one generation to the next. Thus, food plays a role in preserving a group's cultural identity (Brulotte, S. Di Giovine, 2016).

In cross-cultural communication, food is one of the most widely accepted cultural elements because it can be enjoyed directly and serves as a means of interaction that does not require many language barriers or differences in background (Wijaya, 2019). Sharing food can serve as a means of intercultural communication, playing an important role by bringing together individuals from different cultural backgrounds and creating a more open space for social interaction (Wenzel, 2016). Food sharing also strengthens social relationships by fostering a sense of togetherness, solidarity, and trust among individuals. When someone gives food to another, the exchange is not only material but also carries emotional meanings, such as care, appreciation, and acceptance within the social environment (Yousaf et al., 2026).

Furthermore, Lila's statement also indicates a positive emotional response that arises when someone sees others enjoying the traditional food they share. This sense of joy and pride in one's own culture reflects a form of cultural identity reinforcement. In this condition, an individual feels their cultural identity is valued and accepted by others (Piqueras S Jaeger 2016). Therefore, when others accept traditional food, it not only provides inner satisfaction but also strengthens cultural identity and fosters a sense of intercultural connection among those who share it. It also serves as an emotional channel that connects individuals to their place of origin and cultural community, even when they are in different environments (Nyamnjoh, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, sharing food and potluck activities really help English Education students show who they are and where they come from. Through traditional dishes like adobo, tom yam, or somtam, students do not just share the taste but also the story, values, and culture behind them. When their friends try the food and say it is delicious, the students feel proud and more confident in their cultural identity.

Food becomes a simple way to start a conversation. It brings people from different backgrounds together to talk and respect one another without feeling awkward. The students also learn that food can keep their culture alive, even when they are far from home. By explaining the dish and why it is special, they are actually teaching others about their country and family traditions.

In short, food sharing is more than just eating together. It helps students introduce their culture, build friendships, and feel valued for their identity. For future teachers, this experience is important because it demonstrates how food can be used in class to teach language and culture simultaneously. Potluck is not only fun, but also a meaningful way to bring people closer and make the classroom more open to diversity.

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