

Cross-cultural Dimensions in ELT Classrooms: How Is It Carried Out in Indonesian Schools?

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ABSTRACT

Given that English as a foreign language in Indonesia, teaching English often introduces cultural aspects that may be different from students' local values, norms, and traditions. Hence, this study tries to investigate the challenges of the cultural differences in classroom interactions and the strategies used to encourage cross-cultural understanding. To collect the data, this study employed a qualitative approach where the data were collected through observations and interviews with English teachers. The results show that many teachers adapt Western cultural materials to ensure the relevance of their students' cultural contexts presented in classrooms. The study also finds that the lack of training in intercultural skills and the dependence on textbooks have led to less competence in diverse cross-cultural understanding. The study also highlights the importance of cultural pedagogy and encourages professional development programs to assist teachers in acquiring cross-cultural knowledge practically. These findings have suggested that improving cross-cultural understanding in ELT classrooms can promote not only English skills but also global-minded competence while remaining connected to students' own culture.

Keywords: cultural understanding; ELT; cross-cultural interactions

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, teaching English as a second language (ELT) involves both linguistic and cultural aspects. The English language carries embedded values, social norms, and perspectives from its native contexts, mainly Western societies (Kramsch, 1993). Teachers and students have a variety of difficulties in balancing between local identity and global awareness when these cultural components are introduced into Indonesian classrooms (Lauder, 2008). This delicate balancing effort is necessary in a multicultural nation like Indonesia to prevent language instruction from alienating children from their own cultural heritage.

Culture and language are closely related. Language is "a part of culture, and culture is a part of language," as Brown (2007) points out, and knowing one invariably entails comprehending the other. In contrast to Indonesia's collectivist and hierarchical culture, English training frequently exposes students to Western communication styles, individualistic principles, and expressions of equality (Hofstede, 2011). For example, the Indonesian ideal of deference and harmony in communication may seem at odds with the Western concept of "speaking up" (Huda, 2018). Teachers' lesson plans, material choices, and interactions with students are influenced by these cultural conflicts.

English textbooks that depict foreign lifestyles, including dating traditions, gender roles, and holidays, are imported or designed after Western standards in many Indonesian schools (Zacharias, 2005). As cultural mediators, teachers are therefore essential in modifying and reinterpreting these resources to suit local values (Byram, 1997). But this kind of adjustment is not always simple, particularly for teachers who are not formally trained in intercultural communication (Sari & Ardi, 2021). Teachers find it challenging to foster profound intercultural awareness due to their dependency on textbooks and lack of contextualized teaching resources (Nurhayati, 2016).

According to earlier studies (Choudhury, 2014; Kramsch, 2013), teaching a foreign language without taking cultural factors into account runs the risk of turning learning into a mechanical process of vocabulary and grammar. On the other hand, students can acquire "intercultural communicative competence," or the capacity to communicate successfully and appropriately across cultural boundaries, by integrating cultural awareness (Byram, 1997). In an increasingly globalized world where communication transcends national borders, developing this competency is essential.

Teachers in Indonesia face two challenges: they must support students' successful English language learning while encouraging respect for their own culture (Holliday, 2011). Students may feel uneasy when foreign cultures are introduced in English classes, especially when the subjects are at odds with Islamic or traditional standards (Huda, 2018). Thus, it is crucial for English education policy and teacher preparation to comprehend how teachers deal with these difficulties and foster intercultural understanding (Marcellino, 2008).

According to the explanation above, this study is aimed to investigate the cultural challenges and strategies employed by English teachers in SMA Negeri 4 Wira Bangsa and SMK Negeri 2 Aceh Barat. It examines how teachers from these Indonesian schools adapt Western-based learning materials, manage culturally sensitive topics, and encourage students' intercultural understanding. This study attempts to shed light on how Indonesian teachers balance local and global cultural values within the context of teaching English by concentrating on teachers' perspectives and methods in the classroom. In the end, the study contributes to discussions on incorporating intercultural competency and cultural pedagogy into Indonesian EFL teaching methods.

METHOD

This study investigated how English teachers handle cultural differences in EFL courses using a qualitative descriptive method. Ten English teachers, five from SMK Negeri 2 Aceh Barat and five from SMA Negeri 4 Wira Bangsa, participated in semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to gather data. The participants were chosen based on their readiness to talk about cultural dimensions of their teaching and their minimum five years of teaching experience.

Two observations of each classroom were made to look at how teachers engaged with students, introduced cultural content, and modified items. Teachers' impressions of cultural barriers, techniques for adaptation, and comprehension of intercultural competency were all examined throughout the 30- to 45-minute interviews. The six-step thematic analysis method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to audio record, transcribe, and code all of the data. "Cultural adaptation," "teacher challenges," and "intercultural awareness development" were the categories used to group the emergent themes. Triangulating observation and interview data improved the validity of the results (Creswell, 2014). Prior to data collection, the schools and participants gave their ethical consent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study have found four aspects in investigating the challenges of the cultural differences in classroom interactions, and the strategies used to encourage cross-cultural understanding, such as cultural and challenges in the classroom, strategies for cultural adaptation, lack of intercultural training, and fostering cultural understanding as discussed.

Cultural and Challenges in the Classroom

According to the research, cultural incompatibilities between Western-based learning materials and local customs are a common occurrence for teachers. For example, students frequently felt uneasy during classes that covered topics like "dating culture," "pub activities," or "Western holidays." Both schools' teachers reported omitting or changing these subjects. This result corroborates Zacharias's (2005) conclusion that many Indonesian teachers steer clear of delicate cultural topics in order to preserve peace in the classroom. Avoidance, however, may potentially restrict students' prospects for cross-cultural learning (Byram, 1997).

Students' lack of cultural background information presented another difficulty. Instead of seeing English as a tool for cross-cultural communication, many students saw it as just a school topic. Sari and Ardi's (2021) assertion that Indonesian EFL education tended to emphasize linguistic precision above cultural knowledge is supported by teachers' observations that students hardly ever interacted critically with cultural differences.

Lack of Intercultural Training

The survey discovered a major deficiency in teachers' intercultural training despite these initiatives. There was only one participant who had gone to a cross-cultural communication session. This is consistent with research by Huda (2018) and Marcellino (2008), who both observed that Indonesian teacher education programs place more emphasis on grammar and methodology than on cultural pedagogy. When dealing with cultural difficulties, teachers rely on instinct or firsthand knowledge in the absence of formal guidance, which could result in discrepancies or preconceptions.

Teachers also mentioned how much they relied on textbooks, particularly for standardized tests. This dependence limits adaptability and lessens the chance to naturally investigate cultural subjects. Despite their instructional significance, Choudhury (2014) also noted that curriculum limitations frequently deter teachers from incorporating cultural debates.

Strategies for Cultural Adaptation

According to all ten teachers, materials were modified to fit regional cultural contexts. This adaptation included comparison, contextualization, and substitution. Teachers substituted local counterparts for culturally inappropriate instances. For instance, professors talked about "Idul Fitri gatherings" rather as "Thanksgiving dinner." While comparison prompted students to examine cultural similarities and differences, contextualization involves understanding foreign practices by connecting them to Indonesian customs.

These methods are in line with Kramsch's (2013) idea of establishing a "third place" in language learning—a location where students negotiate cultural meanings. In line with Holliday's (2011) theory

that intercultural learning promotes global citizenship, teachers who used comparison approaches observed that their students were more involved and receptive.

Fostering Cross-cultural Understanding

Teachers who actively encouraged students to reflect on their cultures reported higher levels of empathy and motivation. For example, teachers encouraged students to talk about cultural greetings, family values, and everyday activities. These conversations assisted students in viewing English as a worldwide communication tool rather than a Western symbol. This result validates Byram's (1997) claim that curiosity, comparison, and appreciation for difference foster the development of intercultural competence.

Relevance was also increased by incorporating regional culture into English classes. In line with Nurhayati (2016), who advocates incorporating local culture to foster understanding, teachers employed Acehese proverbs, folktales, and customs as learning contexts. Students demonstrated that intercultural learning can enhance rather than diminish local identity by expressing delight in sharing their customs in English (Holliday, 2011).

Implication

The findings imply that institutional assistance is necessary for promoting intercultural understanding. Educational institutions ought to offer professional development courses that emphasize cultural pedagogy and regionally relevant teaching resources. Teaching culture is about learning to navigate between cultures, not about replacing one's identity, as noted by Brown (2007) and Kramsch (1993). This study demonstrates that if teachers are provided with intercultural teaching tools and abilities, EFL classrooms in Indonesia may foster both cultural rootedness and global-mindedness.

CONCLUSION

This study comes to the conclusion that teaching English in Indonesia requires negotiating complex cultural intersections. Teachers encounter difficulties because of Western-dominated resources and a lack of intercultural training, yet many employ innovative techniques to modify the curriculum to fit the cultural reality of their students. These modifications support students' engagement and cultural relevance through comparison, contextualization, and substitution.

However, teachers' ability to deal with cultural variety is limited by the lack of regular intercultural training. Thus, intercultural communication courses and ongoing professional seminars should be incorporated into teacher education programs (Byram, 1997; Huda, 2018). Additionally, customized ELT materials that strike a balance between Indonesian identity and global perspectives must be promoted in schools.

In addition to improving language skills, fostering intercultural competency helps create compassionate, internationally conscious citizens. Building culturally sensitive English classrooms is crucial to educating students to interact with the world with confidence while being rooted in their local customs and values as Indonesia continues to participate in international education networks.

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