

CULTURE AS LANGUAGE CONTEXT TO INFLUENCE LANGUAGE USE IN EFL

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the integral relationship between culture and language use in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, focusing on the Indonesian educational setting. It examines how cultural integration is essential for effective EFL teaching, arguing that language and culture are inseparable and that meaningful language acquisition requires understanding the cultural contexts in which a language operates. The study highlights the risks of linguistic and cultural erosion due to the dominance of English, emphasizing the need to preserve local identity and traditions alongside global communication skills. Key principles for integrating culture into EFL include using authentic materials, encouraging cross-cultural discussions, and balancing exposure to both local and foreign cultures. The paper also addresses challenges such as limited teacher training and the potential for cultural displacement. By embedding local cultural content in EFL instruction, educators can enhance students' intercultural communicative competence and motivation, fostering a deeper appreciation for both their own heritage and the target language. The findings underscore the importance of thoughtful cultural integration to prepare students for effective and respectful participation in a globalized world.

Keywords: Cultural Integration; English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Teaching; Intercultural Communicative Competence; Education in Indonesia; Cultural Preservation.

INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are inseparable, influencing how people communicate and express their identities. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the growing dominance of English due to globalization has sparked concerns about its impact on local languages and cultures. In Indonesia, English is increasingly introduced to young learners, and proficiency in the language has become a key factor in school selection (Suryani et al., 2019; Hasibuan & Sutarmo, 2023). However, this emphasis on English learning raises concerns about the diminishing role of the Indonesian language, which serves as a symbol of national identity and unity. Studies have highlighted the risks of linguistic and cultural erosion, as the widespread use of English may weaken students' sense of nationality and reduce their interest in preserving their local language and traditions (Annisa, 2019; Dasuki et al., 2015; Hasibuan & Sutarmo, 2023).

The relationship between language and culture is well-documented in linguistic studies, emphasizing that language is deeply rooted in cultural contexts (Brdarić, 2016; Hasibuan & Sutarmo, 2023). Language does not function independently but rather serves as a means of expressing and preserving social relationships (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009; Hasibuan & Sutarmo, 2023). In EFL teaching, this creates a dilemma, as teachers must balance exposing students to the culture of the target language while also ensuring that local culture and national identity are preserved (Choudhury, 2018). The increasing use of English as a global language has prompted discussions on how to integrate cultural learning in EFL classrooms without undermining local linguistic and cultural values. Some scholars suggest that instead of allowing foreign languages to dominate, language education should incorporate a filtering process that aligns foreign language learning with local cultural contexts (Isik, 2008; Hasibuan & Sutarmo, 2023).

To address these challenges, many studies have advocated for the integration of local cultural content into EFL instruction. Teaching English without cultural elements reduces language learning to mere grammar and symbols, making it less meaningful and engaging for students (Sukarno, 2012; Hasibuan & Sutarmo, 2023). Incorporating local culture in EFL classrooms can enhance intercultural communicative competence, foster cross-cultural understanding, and ensure that students develop a strong appreciation for their own heritage while acquiring global communication skills. By embedding local culture into EFL instruction, educators can create a meaningful learning experience that respects cultural diversity while preparing students for global interactions.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at describing the importance of cultural integration in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. This method was chosen because it is suitable for examining phenomena in depth through literature analysis and theoretical interpretation. The primary data sources for this research come from library studies, including reviews of various scientific articles, books, and journals relevant to the theme of the relationship between language and culture. Key references used in this study include Choudhury (2013), Karlık (2023), and Banaruee, Farsani, & Khatin-Zadeh (2023), who discuss the importance of cultural understanding in language competence.

Data collection techniques involved reviewing documents and literature that discuss the role of culture in language teaching, strategies for integrating culture into the EFL curriculum, and challenges faced by teachers in implementation (Chlopek, 2008; Bagea, 2023). After data collection, the researcher conducted content analysis to identify main themes such as the importance of cultural awareness in communication, the influence of culture on learning motivation, and principles of culture-based teaching. The analysis results are presented narratively, illustrating the relationship between cultural context and language use, along with recommendations for teachers to implement culturally sensitive EFL instruction (Ali & Kazemian, 2015; Mustofa & Hill, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cultures Influences EFL Teaching

Language and culture are deeply interconnected, influencing how people communicate, think, and interact. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, cultural integration is essential for developing students' ability to use English appropriately in various social contexts. Without cultural understanding, learners may struggle to interpret meanings, expressions, and social cues, leading to miscommunication. As Ali, Kazemian, and Mahar (2015) state, "learning a language without its cultural context limits students' ability to engage in meaningful communication."

Therefore, integrating culture into EFL instruction is not optional but a fundamental aspect of language learning.

1. Language as a Reflection of Culture

Language is not just a communication tool but also reflects the values and traditions of its society. Choudhury (2013) states that language and culture are interconnected because language is shaped by cultural norms and culture is conveyed through language. In EFL learning, teaching only grammar and vocabulary without cultural context leads to a shallow understanding of English. For example, idioms like "spill the beans" or "hit the nail on the head" are hard to understand without cultural background (Karlık, 2023). Moreover, politeness norms differ across cultures; direct communication is common in the West, while indirect communication is preferred in Asia, including Indonesia (Marhamah, Daud, & Samad, 2023). Therefore, language teaching must include cultural aspects.

2. Cultural Awareness in Communication

Effective communication in English requires understanding social and cultural norms (Banaruee et al., 2023). For instance, responses to compliments vary by culture, and mismatches can cause confusion (Tran-Hoang-Thu, 2010). Expressions of emotions and disagreement also differ; Western cultures tend to be direct, while Asian cultures prefer indirectness (Chlopek, 2008). Teaching these differences helps students communicate appropriately and confidently.

3. The Role of Culture in Learning Motivation

Students' motivation to learn English increases if they are interested in the language's culture (Mustofa & Hill, 2018). Using authentic materials like films, music, and literature makes learning more engaging and meaningful (Bagea, 2023). However, it is also important to maintain a balance so students appreciate their local culture (Choudhury, 2013).

4. Strategies for Integrating Culture in EFL Teaching

Considering the importance of culture in language learning, teachers need to find effective ways to integrate cultural elements into their lessons. Several strategies can enhance students' cultural understanding while improving their English proficiency, including:

a. Using authentic materials

Textbooks alone may not provide sufficient cultural exposure. Teachers should incorporate films, songs, articles, and real-life conversations in English to help students experience language use in various cultural contexts (Karlık, 2023).

b. Encouraging cross-cultural discussions

Comparing English-speaking cultures with students' own cultures can deepen their understanding of cultural differences and similarities. Chlopek (2008) suggests that "classroom discussions about cultural norms encourage students to develop critical thinking and cultural awareness."

c. Role-playing and simulations

Practical exercises such as role-playing common social situations (e.g., ordering food, making requests, or responding to compliments) allow students to practice using language in culturally appropriate ways (Banaruee et al., 2023).

d. Introducing local culture in English

Instead of teaching only foreign cultures, teachers can encourage students to describe their own cultural practices in English. Bagea (2023) states that "teaching students' own culture in English helps them express their identity while developing language skills."

Principles and Challenges in EFL Cultural Integration

Culture plays a fundamental role in EFL teaching, shaping not only how students understand the language but also how they apply it in real life communication. However, incorporating cultural elements into language teaching requires thoughtful planning and careful implementation. Without proper cultural integration, students may struggle with language nuances, pragmatics, and intercultural communication. As Choudhury (2013) explains, "learning a language without understanding its cultural background can result in miscommunication and a limited ability to use

the language effectively." Despite its importance, cultural integration in EFL classrooms comes with several challenges that teachers must address.

1. Principles of Cultural Integration in EFL

a. Culture as a core part of language learning

Language and culture are deeply connected. Teaching English without cultural context limits students' ability to communicate naturally. Marhamah, Daud, and Samad (2023) highlight that language learning involves understanding cultural and social norms, not just grammar and vocabulary. Therefore, EFL teaching should include cultural discussions, real-life interactions, and authentic materials to deepen comprehension.

b. Balancing foreign and local cultures

While introducing English-speaking cultures is important, maintaining students' own cultural identity is equally essential. Karlık (2023) stresses that cultural integration should promote appreciation of both local and foreign cultures. A balanced curriculum helps students develop intercultural competence while respecting their traditions.

c. Using authentic materials

Culture teaching should go beyond textbooks. Banaruee, Farsani, and Khatin-Zadeh (2023) argue that authentic materials like films, music, news, and real interactions engage students better and provide immersive cultural experiences.

2. Challenges in Teaching Culture in EFL

a. Limited teacher training and cultural knowledge

Many EFL teachers lack sufficient exposure to English-speaking cultures, which hampers effective cultural teaching. Choudhury (2013) notes that without proper training, teachers may only cover superficial cultural topics, missing deeper communication norms.

b. Concerns about cultural dominance and identity loss

Some fear that emphasizing foreign cultures in EFL might erode local languages and traditions. Bagea (2023) points out that globalization and English dominance raise worries about younger generations favoring foreign cultures over their own.

c. Students' reluctance to learn culture

Many students focus mainly on grammar and vocabulary, undervaluing cultural knowledge. Karlık (2023) observes that this attitude can reduce engagement in cultural activities, making integration challenging for teachers.

The Important of Considering Culture in EFL

Culture is an essential component of language learning, influencing how people communicate, express ideas, and interpret meanings. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, understanding culture is just as important as mastering grammar and vocabulary. Without cultural awareness, students may struggle with appropriate language use, misunderstand social norms, and face difficulties in real-world communication. As Ali, Kazemian, and Mahar (2015) state, "language learning without cultural understanding is incomplete, as language reflects the beliefs, values, and behaviors of its speakers." Therefore, integrating cultural aspects into EFL instruction is not only beneficial but necessary for effective communication.

1. Enhancing Communication Skills Through Cultural Awareness

a. Understanding Social Norms and Pragmatics

Language use goes beyond vocabulary; it requires knowing how to communicate appropriately in various social settings. Choudhury (2013) highlights that learners must understand cultural communication expectations like politeness, indirect speech, and nonverbal signals. For example, English-speaking cultures often value directness, while many Asian cultures, including Indonesia, prefer indirect speech to preserve harmony. Without this cultural insight, learners may come across as blunt or unclear.

b. Avoiding Miscommunication and Stereotypes

Cultural knowledge helps prevent misunderstandings and stereotyping. Karlık (2023) notes that misinterpreting cultural norms can cause communication failures despite good grammar skills. For instance, eye contact may signify confidence in some cultures but disrespect in others. Teaching these differences ensures appropriate English use in diverse contexts.

2. Developing Intercultural Competence in a Globalized World

a. Preparing Students for International Communication

As English is widely used globally, students need intercultural competence to adapt to various communication styles. Marhamah, Daud, and Samad (2023) argue that cultural understanding makes learners more effective in international settings, whether for study, work, or social interaction.

b. Encouraging Open-mindedness and Tolerance

Exposure to diverse cultures fosters empathy and respect. Bagea (2023) states that learning about different cultural norms broadens students' worldviews, promoting tolerance essential in today's interconnected society.

3. Improving Motivation and Engagement in Language Learning

a. Using Cultural Context to Make Learning Meaningful

Connecting language learning to real cultural contexts boost student motivation. Choudhury (2013) explains that incorporating cultural elements, such as films and literature, makes lessons more engaging and practical.

b. Enhancing Creativity and Critical Thinking

Cultural discussions encourage students to analyze their own and others' values critically. Karlık (2023) suggests this promotes independent thinking and global awareness by reflecting on cultural similarities and differences.

CONCLUSIONS

Integrating culture into EFL teaching is essential for fostering effective communication, intercultural competence, and student engagement. Language is deeply connected to culture, and without cultural understanding, learners may struggle with appropriate language use, social norms, and real-world communication. By embedding cultural elements in language instruction, teachers can help students navigate different communication styles, avoid misunderstandings, and develop a deeper appreciation for diverse cultural perspectives. This approach not only enhances language proficiency but also encourages open-mindedness and global awareness among students. However, cultural integration in EFL classrooms must be approached carefully to balance foreign cultural exposure with the preservation of local traditions and identities. While English serves as a global language, it should not overshadow students' native languages and cultural heritage. Using authentic materials, encouraging cultural comparisons, and incorporating interactive activities can create a meaningful and engaging learning experience. Ultimately, an effective EFL curriculum should equip students with both linguistic and cultural competence, preparing them for meaningful interactions in an increasingly interconnected world.

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