



EXPLORING CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING (ELT)

Maratul Azizah¹, Nanang Jayani², Nilla Rojana³

IAI Nusantara Ashiddiqiyah Lempuing Jaya OKI^{1,3}. Universitas Islam OKI Kayuagung²

Email : Azizahmaratul48@gmail.com. Jayanipangestu89@gmail.com.

nillarojana1@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

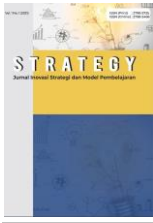
The research of this study to explore and give a clear explanation and develop culture integrated EFL teaching learning classroom platform and curriculum for effective communication and understanding cross cultural from perspective of the teachers. This research was carried out through qualitative research with a case study design. This research used purposive sampling which is all English teachers (two English teacher in total) in SMK Ashiddiqiyah are four teachers. The instruments used in this research were observation and interviews. The data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with English teachers. The results of this research show that the English teachers recognize the significance of cultural understanding in EFL. They also face various challenges and use similar methods and materials to integrate culture into their classroom. The findings from this research highlighted EFL teachers can overcome challenges and integrate cultural understanding into their teaching by embracing resourcefulness and creativity. It's hoped that this research can provide views to English teachers and education practitioners in foster rich learning experiences that equip students to navigate the interconnected world with confidence and intercultural competence.

Keyword: *Cultural Understanding, English Language Teaching, EFL Teachers' Perspective*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dan memberikan penjelasan yang jelas serta mengembangkan platform dan kurikulum pembelajaran EFL (English as a Foreign Language) yang terintegrasi budaya untuk komunikasi dan pemahaman lintas budaya yang efektif dari perspektif guru. Penelitian ini dilakukan melalui penelitian kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Penelitian ini menggunakan purposive sampling yaitu seluruh guru Bahasa Inggris (dua guru Bahasa Inggris) di SMK Ashiddiqiyah berjumlah empat guru. Instrumen yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah observasi dan wawancara. Data dikumpulkan dengan melakukan wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan guru Bahasa Inggris. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa guru Bahasa Inggris menyadari pentingnya pemahaman budaya dalam EFL. Mereka juga menghadapi berbagai tantangan dan menggunakan metode dan materi yang serupa untuk mengintegrasikan budaya ke dalam kelas mereka. Temuan dari penelitian ini menyoroti bahwa guru EFL dapat mengatasi tantangan dan mengintegrasikan pemahaman budaya ke dalam pengajaran mereka dengan merangkul daya cipta dan kreativitas. Diharapkan penelitian ini dapat memberikan pandangan kepada guru Bahasa Inggris dan praktisi pendidikan dalam menumbuhkan pengalaman belajar yang kaya yang membekali siswa untuk menavigasi dunia yang saling terhubung dengan percaya diri dan kompetensi antarbudaya.

Kata Kunci: *Pemahaman Budaya, Pengajaran Bahasa Inggris, Perspektif Guru EFL*



INTRODUCTION

For several decades, foreign language instruction has transitioned toward what scholars describe as a *post-method* condition. This significant evolution grants educators the autonomy to explore a more extensive range of pedagogical strategies tailored to specific classroom needs. Central to this contemporary paradigm is the fundamental belief that language is inherently and inextricably linked to culture. Therefore, culture should not be viewed as an elective addition but as a core, integral component of any comprehensive language program. In our modern, globalized era, English functions as a crucial *lingua franca*, bridging the gap between millions of speakers from vastly different first-language backgrounds. Mastering a language under this framework involves more than just internalizing grammatical structures; it requires an immersive understanding of the social and cultural norms of those who speak it. By fostering this deep connection, the educational process enables learners to participate in international dialogue with greater sensitivity, ensuring that communication is not merely a linguistic exchange but a meaningful encounter between diverse human identities in an increasingly interconnected world (Boc-Sinmarghiṭan et al., 2025; Ozer & Kamran, 2023; Tarsoly & Čalić, 2022).

Indonesia stands as a prominent example of a nation defined by its profound multilingual and multicultural heritage as it navigates the complexities of the 21st century. A primary objective within this societal framework is to nurture individuals who are harmoniously developed, capable of balancing their local roots with global demands. For educators, the teaching process is a dynamic and goal-oriented journey where the interaction between the instructor and the learner constantly evolves to reflect the surrounding environment. This environment is particularly rich in Indonesia, where students come from a staggering variety of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. In response to the increasing necessity for global proficiency, the government has established English as a compulsory subject across junior and senior secondary schools, as well as in higher education. The ultimate goal of this instruction is to facilitate a transformative interaction that refines the student's behavior and prepares them for a successful life. Ideally, this education should create a bridge where local values and global English skills coexist to empower the younger generation in competitive international arenas (Alharbi, 2024; Henao, 2024; Mudra, 2024).

However, a significant discrepancy exists between these idealistic goals and the actual conditions observed within the educational field today. While the aim is to foster seamless intercultural communication, real-world interactions are frequently marred by significant misunderstandings. These communicative failures often arise because listeners or speakers provide inappropriate responses that lack cultural awareness, highlighting a gap in the current curriculum. Furthermore, prioritizing the cultural aspects of English as an international language presents a unique challenge in the Indonesian context. The nation maintains a vigorous commitment to preserving its indigenous cultures, a priority that is deeply articulated in national educational policies. There is often a perceived tension between the government's mandate to enhance local literature and the pressure to adopt international cultural norms associated with the English language (Ahmad, 2023; Curdt-Christiansen & Sun, 2020; Hasna et al., 2024). This creates a situation where teachers struggle to find a middle ground, often leading to a classroom experience that focuses purely on linguistic mechanics while ignoring the vital cultural nuances that actually prevent social friction and foster true global understanding between different people across borders.

This research specifically examines the dynamics at SMK Ashiddiqiyah during the 2025/2026 academic year to understand how these global and national tensions manifest in a



vocational school setting. Within this particular institution, the necessity for effective cross-cultural communication is paramount, yet the practical implementation of a culture-integrated curriculum remains elusive. Teachers often find themselves navigating a complex landscape where they must fulfill the requirements of a standardized syllabus while trying to respect the diverse cultural identities of their students. The existing instructional methods frequently fall short of providing the necessary tools for students to navigate the complexities of an interconnected world with genuine confidence. There is a clear need for a structured platform that allows for the seamless integration of cultural perspectives without compromising the preservation of local heritage. By focusing on this specific school, the study aims to uncover the nuanced difficulties faced by practitioners on the front lines of language education. Understanding these classroom realities is essential for developing a more responsive and effective educational framework that bridges the current gap between theory and practice (Domogen, 2023; He & Xueyun, 2025; Imran et al., 2024; Neokleous & Natlandsmyr, 2025).

To address these prevailing issues, this study offers a significant innovation by developing a comprehensive culture-integrated *EFL* curriculum and platform designed specifically for the vocational context. The new value of this research lies in its focus on teacher perspectives to create a curriculum that is not only theoretically sound but also practically viable in diverse Indonesian classrooms. Instead of viewing cultural diversity as a barrier or a source of communicative misunderstanding, this innovation treats it as a rich resource for creative and resourceful teaching. The goal is to move beyond conventional methods and provide a clear explanation of how cultural understanding can be woven into the very fabric of language learning. By embracing a case study design, the research provides a detailed roadmap for practitioners to foster learning experiences that equip students with intercultural competence. This approach ensures that learners are not just proficient in English but are also sensitive to the cultural complexities of the global stage. Ultimately, this study aims to redefine the role of the language teacher as a cultural mediator who prepares students for an interconnected existence.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative approach with a case study design to investigate how English teachers perceive and integrate cultural understanding in their classrooms. The research was conducted at SMK Ashiddiqiyah Lempuing Jaya OKI in South Sumatra. To select participants, the researchers employed a purposive sampling technique, involving 4 English teachers who manage classes from the 10th to 12th grades. This specific sample allows for a detailed exploration of instructional experiences and professional perspectives within the school's unique environment. The research procedure began with site selection followed by obtaining administrative permissions. The primary focus remains on the *English as a Foreign Language* context, where the relationship between linguistic rules and cultural nuances is examined. By focusing on these cases, the study produces descriptive data regarding the integration of customs and communicative traditions into the standard curriculum. This qualitative framework ensures that the findings reflect the deep, lived realities of educators navigating cross-cultural communication challenges.

Data collection was carried out through 3 primary instruments: semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and document analysis. The researchers conducted face-to-face interviews using a guideline consisting of 10 open-ended questions covering strategies, obstacles, and assessment methods. During observations, the researchers acted as non-participants, recording classroom dynamics and the use of authentic materials like news articles



or pop music. Furthermore, the researchers analyzed teachers' lesson plans to verify the consistency between interview responses and actual instructional designs. For data analysis, an inductive thematic approach was used, involving data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. To ensure the validity and credibility of the results, the study applied triangulation by comparing information obtained from different techniques. This systematic process provides a comprehensive understanding of how teachers navigate the challenges of teaching culture alongside vocabulary while using resources like *lingua franca* materials to enhance student competence and confidence in an interconnected world.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

1. English Teacher's Perspectives on Cultural Understanding

Teachers at the vocational school level generally perceive cultural understanding as a fundamental component of language acquisition that extends far beyond the mere memorization of vocabulary lists or complex grammatical structures. From their perspective, teaching English effectively requires developing a deep awareness of the customs, traditions, and underlying values that dictate how people communicate in real-world settings. Educators believe that when students understand the social beliefs influencing a language, they become more than just speakers; they become culturally aware communicators who can navigate diverse social environments. This broader view of ELT emphasizes that language is not a static set of rules but a living entity shaped by the people who use it. Consequently, teachers strive to foster an environment where students recognize that every word and phrase carries a specific cultural weight that can alter the meaning of a conversation entirely.

Furthermore, many educators emphasize that language is a direct product of the culture from which it emerges, making the two elements inseparable in a classroom setting. By grasping these cultural aspects, learners are better equipped to understand the subtle nuances of English, such as the appropriate use of humor, sarcasm, or levels of formality. Teachers note that understanding social norms—such as the concept of personal space or appropriate greetings—allows students to interpret language use accurately and avoid potential misunderstandings. For Indonesian students, who are learning English as a foreign language, this connection is vital because it helps them bridge the gap between their native cultural practices and those of English-speaking countries. Ultimately, the teachers' perspective is that cultural competence empowers students to use English more effectively and confidently in professional or social interactions, ensuring they are truly prepared for the international stage.

2. Strategies for Integrating Culture in the Classroom

To bring cultural elements into the classroom, teachers employ a variety of engaging strategies that make learning more relevant and authentic for their students. One primary method involves the use of authentic materials sourced directly from English-speaking countries, such as news articles, advertisements, social media posts, and contemporary pop music lyrics. By utilizing these real-world resources, teachers provide students with a glimpse into genuine language usage and current cultural references that are often missing from standard textbooks. These materials serve as excellent tools for reading comprehension exercises and listening practice, as they showcase how native speakers express themselves in daily life. This strategy not only improves linguistic skills but also sparks curiosity about the world outside the classroom. Students are encouraged to analyze the tone and context of these materials, helping them to see English as a tool for actual communication rather than just a school subject.



Another effective strategy used by educators is the encouragement of comparative analysis, where students are asked to reflect on their own traditions while learning about others. Teachers often start lessons by having students share local greetings, customs, or ways of expressing emotions in their own Indonesian culture before comparing them to target language practices. This approach activates the students' prior knowledge and creates a meaningful connection between their lived experiences and the new cultural concepts they are studying. By fostering this type of critical thinking, teachers help students understand why certain expressions or behaviors exist in English-speaking societies. This comparative method also builds a sense of respect for diversity, as students learn that different cultures have unique but equally valid ways of interacting. Through role-playing and group discussions based on these comparisons, the classroom becomes a dynamic space where cultural awareness and language proficiency grow side by side in a supportive environment.

3. Challenges and Obstacles in Cultural Instruction

Despite the clear benefits of teaching culture, educators face several significant challenges that can hinder the effectiveness of their instruction. One of the most prominent obstacles is the limitation in the teachers' own cultural expertise and the presence of unconscious biases. Many teachers feel they lack in-depth knowledge of the vast array of English-speaking cultures, making it difficult to create balanced and sensitive lessons that represent global diversity accurately. There is also the risk of unintentionally favoring certain cultural perspectives over others, which might leave some students feeling misunderstood or excluded from the conversation. Without a comprehensive background in the target culture, teachers may struggle to explain the "why" behind certain linguistic choices, leading to a superficial transfer of information. This gap in knowledge requires teachers to spend significant extra time researching and preparing materials to ensure they are providing accurate and respectful cultural contexts for their learners.

In addition to personal knowledge gaps, structural barriers such as rigid curricula and a lack of resources pose serious difficulties for ELT practitioners. Most standardized educational frameworks prioritize grammar and vocabulary because these are the elements most frequently measured in high-stakes testing environments. This pressure to perform well on exams often leaves very little time for teachers to integrate deep cultural explorations or interactive activities into their weekly schedules. Furthermore, many schools in rural or underfunded areas suffer from limited access to high-quality, diverse resources and reliable internet connections. This makes it challenging for teachers to find the authentic multimedia content necessary for a modern cultural education. Student factors, such as low language proficiency or anxiety about discussing unfamiliar social norms, can also create a barrier to engagement. When students struggle with basic sentence structure, they may find complex cultural discussions frustrating, leading to a decrease in motivation and a slower overall learning process.

4. Assessment Methods for Cultural Understanding

Assessing a student's cultural understanding requires a shift away from traditional multiple-choice tests toward more qualitative and performance-based methods. Teachers often begin this process by analyzing written work, such as essays, summaries, or specific responses to reading comprehension prompts. In these assignments, educators look for the student's ability to identify and explain the cultural meanings behind specific words, phrases, or social situations encountered in the text. A successful assessment shows that a student can use language in a culturally appropriate way, such as applying correct greetings and farewells or choosing the right level of formality for a given context. This type of written evaluation helps teachers determine if students are simply translating words from their native language or if they truly



understand the social expectations of the target language. It provides a clear window into the student's cognitive grasp of how culture influences written communication and professional documentation.

Oral assessments and simulations are also frequently used to gauge how well students can apply cultural knowledge in real-time interactions. Through discussions and role-playing activities, teachers facilitate scenarios where students must demonstrate their ability to compare and contrast their own culture with the target culture. For example, students might participate in a role-play where they practice ordering food at a restaurant, giving directions to a stranger, or handling a polite disagreement using English cultural etiquette. These activities allow teachers to observe the students' use of social cues, body language, and appropriate verbal responses in a simulated real-life environment. This form of assessment is particularly valuable because it measures communicative competence—the ability to use language effectively in a social context—rather than just grammatical accuracy. By observing these performances, teachers can provide immediate feedback on how to improve both linguistic flow and cultural sensitivity, ensuring that students are becoming well-rounded and versatile English speakers.

5. Solutions and Best Practices for Teachers

To overcome the various hurdles associated with cultural instruction, teachers have developed several proactive solutions aimed at creating a more inclusive and effective learning experience. One primary solution is a commitment to continuous professional development, where educators actively seek out workshops, online courses, and academic literature on cultural teaching methods. By expanding their own horizons, teachers gain the confidence and skills necessary to design more sensitive and comprehensive lessons for their students. Furthermore, teachers have found success in modifying existing curriculum materials to include cultural elements, even when not explicitly required by national standards. This might involve creating "culture islands" within a lesson—brief, focused activities that explore a specific tradition or social norm related to the day's grammar point. By being creative with time management, educators ensure that culture remains a consistent part of the classroom dialogue rather than an afterthought or a separate, disconnected topic.

Another essential solution involves fostering a safe and non-judgmental classroom environment where students feel comfortable asking questions about unfamiliar practices. Teachers emphasize cultural sensitivity and respect for diverse viewpoints, making it clear that the goal is to understand differences rather than judge them. This approach helps to reduce student anxiety and encourages those with lower proficiency levels to participate without fear of making a social mistake. Educators also utilize peer-to-peer learning, where students research and present on cultural topics of their choice, such as traditional festivals or historical landmarks. This shifts the focus from a teacher-centered lecture to a student-centered exploration, fostering deeper engagement and a sense of ownership over the learning process. By combining these social strategies with the use of digital platforms and interactive tools, teachers can bridge the resource gap and provide a stimulating, culturally rich education that prepares students to navigate the complexities of our interconnected global society.

Discussion

The integration of cultural awareness within English language teaching serves as a fundamental necessity because language and culture remain truly inseparable entities. Failing to bridge these two aspects often results in students acquiring empty symbols that lack genuine communicative meaning in real life. Within the Indonesian context of this 21st century, the educational process must be viewed as a goal oriented activity that constantly evolves to meet the needs of a multicultural society. Teachers face significant challenges when interacting with



learners from 1340 different ethnic backgrounds spread across the archipelago. Mastering the socio cultural context is critical for ensuring that language use remains effective, appropriate, and natural for every student. By fostering a deep understanding of these interrelated activities, educators can bring up harmoniously developed persons who are ready for global interaction. This approach ensures that the 1 compulsory subject of English in secondary schools becomes a meaningful tool for expression rather than just a rote exercise in grammar. Such holistic integration is vital for the modern era (Banda & Kakoma, 2020; Guo, 2023; Kumar & Murzello, 2025). Progress continues.

English functions as a vital *lingua franca* in this globalized world, connecting millions of native and non native speakers across diverse borders. For Indonesia, the mandate from the Ministry of Education and Culture emphasizes that national education must facilitate the preservation of local traditions while enhancing language development. This dual objective ensures that teaching English does not alienate students from their own identities but instead promotes a broader worldview. When students perceive their own cultural heritage reflected in their studies, their interest and engagement in learning a foreign language often increase significantly (Julia & Jeyanthi, 2024; Ratri et al., 2024; Rohim et al., 2024; Tompo et al., 2023; Waked et al., 2024). The curriculum aims to build 1 cohesive framework where international communication skills and local values coexist. This balance is necessary because understanding cultural nuances directly influences how students interpret information and interact with others. By promoting 2 distinct levels of awareness, both of the self and the other, the educational system helps learners navigate intercultural interactions effectively. This strategic alignment supports the development of proficient speakers who respect their roots while reaching outward. Future success depends on unity.

Effective communication involves much more than simply memorizing vocabulary lists or complex grammatical rules. Cultural awareness allows learners to grasp subtle nuances, idioms, and social contexts that prevent potential misunderstandings or unintended disrespect in various social settings. For example, while direct eye contact signifies honesty in 4 specific western cultures, it may be perceived as a sign of disrespect in 5 different eastern traditions. Contextualized learning helps students use the language correctly by understanding the behaviors and values behind every cultural product. Knowing the background of a target culture enables students to navigate 6 key aspects of social interaction with greater confidence and social grace. Mastery of these elements reduces the likelihood of awkward situations when communicating in a global arena. Education must move beyond the 7 basic skills of reading and writing to include the interpretation of cultural codes. This depth of understanding ensures that students are not just speakers but culturally sensitive communicators who can adapt to the diverse demands of international environments (Algouzi & Atamna, 2021; Fan et al., 2025; Ivorgba, 2025; Yelenevskaya & Protassova, 2021). True mastery requires consistent effort.

Motivation and engagement levels often peak when teachers utilize 8 authentic cultural materials such as films, music, and literature during their lessons. These materials transform abstract language concepts into relatable experiences, making the classroom a vibrant space for exploration. Furthermore, analyzing diverse practices challenges students to confront their own biases, which promotes empathy and a significantly broader worldview. High cultural competence among educators allows for the creation of 9 inclusive environments where learners feel their unique identities are truly acknowledged. In such a supportive atmosphere, students are more likely to participate and take risks in their speech. Beyond the classroom, English as a common tongue requires navigating 10 different types of intercultural interactions with non native speakers. The development of critical thinking through these cultural lenses prepares



students for the complexities of 21st century life. By valuing diversity, teachers not only teach a language but also foster a sense of global citizenship that transcends simple communication to build lasting human connections. Knowledge expands through shared respect and open minded learning (Eslit, 2023; Ivorgba, 2025; Mouboua et al., 2024; Nopas & Kerdsomboon, 2024; Tin, 2025; Zainuddin, 2024).

Implementing these strategies requires teachers to act as 11 central facilitators who use local culture as a bridge to make connections with student experiences. Learners should be encouraged to develop a third place that respects their own traditions while adopting new cultural perspectives. It is essential to present cultural topics carefully to avoid reinforcing 12 common stereotypes that can lead to biased thinking. Despite these clear goals, teachers in Indonesia face 13 unique challenges due to immense geographic and linguistic diversity. Limitations in available resources often hinder the full integration of authentic cultural materials across all 38 provinces. However, by focusing on intercultural competence, educators can mitigate these obstacles and improve student proficiency. The goal remains to create a 14 percent increase in communicative confidence over time. Success in English language teaching ultimately depends on a 15 point improvement in cultural literacy among all stakeholders. Thus, the educational system must prioritize these cultural aspects to ensure students thrive in our interconnected world today. Global communication starts with mutual understanding. Effort.

RESULT

Teachers at the vocational school level increasingly recognize that cultural understanding is a fundamental pillar of successful language acquisition. This research highlights that mastering English involves much more than memorizing grammatical structures; it requires a deep immersion into the social norms and values that shape communication. Educators perceive language as a living product of culture, where every phrase carries specific weight. By integrating authentic materials and comparative analysis, teachers help students bridge the gap between their native heritage and international standards. Ultimately, developing intercultural competence prepares learners for meaningful global dialogue. This study concludes that when educators embrace creativity and resourcefulness, they can transform the classroom into a dynamic space where linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness grow in harmony as a *lingua franca*.

To improve language instruction, institutions should prioritize continuous professional development for teachers to broaden their global cultural expertise. Educators are encouraged to move beyond rigid standardized frameworks that focus strictly on linguistic mechanics by incorporating more real-world cultural contexts into daily lessons. It is crucial to foster a safe, non-judgmental classroom atmosphere where learners feel confident exploring unfamiliar traditions without fear of social mistakes. Furthermore, schools should provide better access to authentic multimedia resources and digital platforms to showcase genuine language usage. Strengthening the synergy between policymakers and practitioners will help create a responsive curriculum that treats cultural diversity as a valuable asset. These steps will ensure students develop the intercultural competence necessary to navigate an increasingly interconnected world with genuine confidence.

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