

Interculturalism in Indonesian ELT

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ABSTRACT

The integration of culture in language classrooms is crucial to enhance students' translingual and transcultural competence. This is particularly relevant in English Language Teaching (ELT), where English serves as a global lingua franca among multicultural users. Effective communication requires both language proficiency and cultural literacy. In Indonesia, where English is taught and learned by individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, the Ministry of Higher Education mandates the inclusion of cross-cultural subjects in teacher education. However, many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers feel unprepared to integrate cultural elements due to a lack of training and models. This essay explores the challenges of cultural integration in Indonesian teacher education, reviews related literature and case studies, and proposes strategies to enhance cultural inclusion in language teaching.

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INTRODUCTION

The interconnectedness of language and culture reflects the significance of cultural integration in language classrooms. Teacher education programs across the world are required to boost students' translingual and transcultural competence through culture-related subjects, such as Cross-Cultural Understanding and Intercultural Communication. Culture plays a pivotal role in ELT as English has become the world lingua franca with multicultural language users. By teaching English, teachers are preparing students to communicate with people with many cultural differences, and thus communication can be successful if not only language proficiency is acquired, but also cultural literacy (Kidwell, 2019). Without integrating culture, the definite consequence is that students might not learn English properly. Even if they are fluent, they may be fluent in the target language but might not understand the social and philosophical norms of that language.

In Indonesia, English is learned by multicultural students and taught by multicultural teachers, whereby the viewpoints of culture might be complex. To familiarize Indonesian EFL teachers with intercultural knowledge, cross-cultural subjects are introduced in teacher education courses as required by the Indonesian Ministry of Higher Education. (Gandana & Parr, 2013) suggest the extent to which knowledge about culture impacts students' beliefs might be contingent upon the particular understandings and beliefs of the teacher educators who teach cultural knowledge.

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It is in line with what (Morganna & Samiati Tarjana, 2018) explained that culture is a dynamic social construct made of human perceptions. It implies teachers' knowledge of culture is highly needed in language teaching to support them in raising EFL students' empathy and awareness of cultural diversities worldwide.

The immersion of culture in ELT, however, can be challenging, particularly if EFL teachers are not trained and less prepared to integrate culture. Many EFL teachers might feel unprepared to teach either cultural or intercultural competence to their students because they need a model to adapt or imitate in their teaching. Recent research in the Indonesian EFL contexts, such as (Gandana & Parr, 2013; Morganna & Samiati Tarjana, 2018) indicates that trainee teachers have few opportunities to learn about how to integrate culture in their teaching. As a result, cultural understanding is relatively infrequently addressed in EFL classrooms despite the national curriculum, which requires the immersion of culture. This issue appears to be worth exploring; therefore, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent is intercultural knowledge integrated into language teacher education?
2. What are the challenges of interculturalism immersion in language teacher education?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interculturalism, Language, and Language Teacher Education

The importance of cultural immersion in English teaching has been accepted by many scholars and generated many empirical research and academic studies in different cultural backgrounds, such as in China (Chen & Yang, 2015), Japan (Lockley & Yoshida, 2016), and Indonesia (Morganna & Samiati Tarjana, 2018). These studies suggest the inextricable bond between culture and language, as described by (Morganna & Samiati Tarjana, 2018) that language is used for meaning negotiation, espoused by ideas and conceptions that are fundamentally constructed within the framework of culture. There are also significant roles that culture plays in the ELT context: (1) culture is the basis of content knowledge in language teaching materials and classroom discussions; and (2) contingent upon culture are pragmatic standards frequently constructed (Shahed, 2013). It implies that culture is a part of content knowledge and the ways of teaching culture are also parts of pedagogical content knowledge.

The inseparable relation between language and culture, however, generates one foregrounding question as to the aims of teaching culture. That is 'if teaching language means teaching culture, why should the notion of teaching culture in language teacher education grab so much attention while there might be other aspects of EFL teaching that need to be more accentuated?'. The need to develop students' awareness of interculturalism can be one of the answers. Teaching language may familiarize students with a variety of beliefs, ways of living, and social variables, such as gender, ethnicity, age, and social classes in different groups; however, promoting students' empathy and respect for such differences requires teachers to 'teach culture'. Another aim is as argued by (Shahed, 2013) that teaching culture while teaching language can avoid stereotypes. (Kidwell, 2019), furthermore, suggests that cultural proficiency can contribute to sociolinguistic and sociocultural competence. It implies that, albeit teaching language means teaching culture, the strategies to promote cultural awareness and empathy as well as to avoid negative generalization and otherness need to be introduced to the trainee teachers.

As culture is a facet of content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Shahed, 2013) cultural understanding in language teacher education should not only be taught but also be integrated into language assessment. It can be assessed through essays, classroom discussions, and presentations focusing on, for example, taboos, stereotypes, otherness, and politeness. (Bennett, 2003) posit that the task of measuring cultural knowledge should not be a 'formal, rigid activity, limited to the classroom only'. Instead, it can be assessed in a slightly informal and random manner, such as by putting students in some cultural situations that lead to varied yet valuable reactions or throwing queries about cultural

issues to students. Such an assessment may give teachers some hints about where the students stand and what they believe about cultural proficiency.

While intercultural competence can be developed through knowledge sharing and assessment, there are still various challenges hampering students from fully manifesting their cultural awareness. In the context of Indonesian ELT, the difficulties involve adjusting to different cultural communication styles, articulating thoughts within intercultural discussions in English, grasping the conversational norms of other cultures, and engaging with new cultural settings while acquiring the English language (Saini & Ardhy, 2023). More challenges were also found by (Nindya et al., 2022) revealing that there are some external factors such as time constraints, curriculum demands, and varying student proficiency levels that prevent teachers from incorporating culture-related activities into their teaching. While these challenges seem undeniable, delving more deeply into the practice of intercultural immersion in the Indonesian ELT context is paramount to generating more concrete solutions to the problems.

METHODS

This study used qualitative research in the form of a literature review as its methodology to distinguish, assess, and synthesize the issue regarding interculturalism in ELT. A literature review is a study that uses literature or documents from previous research such as textbooks, journals, statistical references, and research results in the form of a thesis and dissertation (Sanusi, 2016). The description in this literature review is directed to analyze the issue that has been described previously in the above section.

The research starts with the process of searching literature associated with the discussed issue. First, we defined the keywords or a set of key terms to search literature such as integration culture, intercultural communication, EFL, language, and culture with some modification using “AND” and “OR.” Second, we limited the journal articles to accredited journals such as ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center), Scopus, and nationally accredited journals. After finding many articles, we focused on the screening process using the abstract. The relevant journals were used to explore the integration of interculturalism in ELT classrooms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Culture Integration in Language Teacher Education in Indonesia

In the context of Indonesian English teacher education, the immersion of culture can be observed through the curriculum, syllabi, materials, and teaching practice which comprise the concept of culture, Indonesian culture, and target cultures. The curriculum on which the syllabi and the teaching materials are based is arranged by the teacher training institutions with the guidelines from the Ministry of Higher Education. The course content below is taken from one of the teacher educational courses in Indonesia, reflecting the opportunities in which teacher students may learn about culture (Kidwell, 2019).

The course design above suggests that culture is embedded in the content knowledge. Cultural inclusion can be addressed in several ways, such as playing an American pop song in a listening class, watching a multicultural interaction video to stimulate discussion in a speaking class, or comprehending a passage about British culture in a reading class. Civics education and *Pancasila* (Indonesia’s national ideology) allow trainee teachers to learn about Indonesian culture, including the history of Indonesia, civic organization, national identity, and Indonesia’s great diversity.

Table 1. *Cultural Integration in Language Teacher Education Curriculum*

Course	Semester	Primary Cultural Focus
English language courses (reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, structure, translation, etc.; 22 courses in total)	Semesters 1-4	Target cultures
Civics Education	Semester 2	Indonesian culture
Sociolinguistics	Semester 4	Concept of culture
Multicultural Education	Semester 4	Cultural diversity
<i>Pancasila</i>	Semester 5	Indonesian culture
Semantics & Pragmatics	Semester 6	Concept of culture
Cross-Cultural Understanding	Semester 6	Concept of culture

Furthermore, multicultural education can familiarize them with the principles of teaching English to culturally diverse students. The concept of culture might be integrated into several modules, such as Sociolinguistics, Semantics & Pragmatics, which focus on how cultural and contextual backgrounds influence language use and meaning. Finally, Cross-Cultural Understanding is suggested to be the most-cultural-concept-covering module in the curriculum. Such a module provides trainee teachers with the opportunity to learn the benefits and possible conflicts associated with cross-cultural interactions, verbal and non-verbal behavior across the world, and different concepts of taboos, stereotypes, and politeness. There might be several different modules in different institutions. Some EFL teacher education courses, for instance, do not cover pragmatics and semantics and use the term Intercultural Communication in place of Cross-Cultural Understanding.

The Challenges of Integrating Interculturalism in Language Teacher Education in Indonesia

Albeit the opportunity to learn cultural knowledge, there seems to be devoid of teacher students' understanding of relevant pedagogies. (Kidwell's, 2019) research reveals that some Indonesian EFL teachers seem to be less familiar with the idea of how to integrate intercultural education into their teaching despite the culture-related courses provided. Some even did not appear to retain a conscious awareness of learning culture in their teacher education as mentioned by one of them in a journal entry:

"I've learned about culture since I was in my early formal school, [but] I'm not sure if I've learned to teach my students about culture" (Putri, journal 11, in (Kidwell, 2019).

One of the teacher educators who was interviewed also confirmed that there was no space for teacher candidates to learn about how to teach culture either in the related course or in the curriculum. Consequently, when they work as teachers, they seem to struggle to familiarize their students with intercultural competence. While the students may easily acquire input of various cultures from the teaching materials used in the classroom, they are devoid of the way intercultural messages are interpreted, the consequence of stereotyping, and the essence of cross-cultural understanding. Kidwell's research implies that the experiences of learning culture in the teacher training program are barely sufficient to transfer their intercultural competence to the students. Teachers might face a delicate balance in their teaching careers as they need to challenge negative stereotypes and discriminatory views (Welsh, 2014). It is, therefore, pivotal to prepare trainee teachers with intercultural competence and the concept of how to teach such knowledge in ELT classrooms.

Some fundamental tensions in the perspectives of cultural inclusion also emerge in another Indonesian teacher training program. Gandana's & Parr's (2013) study indicates teachers' frustrations in working with the required learning objectives and some of the specific cultural activities suggested in the curriculum document. One of them aimed at enabling teacher students to 'internalize and have an English cultural experience' by requiring them to learn the 'correct' Western dining etiquette, such as how to use the fork and knife. Nancy (a pseudonym), one of the teacher educators who once studied in a foreign university, reflects on her inconvenience about cultural aspects in the curriculum and suggests that knowing Western dining etiquette was 'not that important' for EFL teachers and jokes about it – quipping, “*Who would be invited to a gala dinner? It's not in your everyday agenda ...*”. It implies her awareness of the idea that preparing teacher students with intercultural competence seems more significant.

Despite Nancy's awareness, some inconsistencies can be seen when she told her class that 'no culture is better than the other; they are simply different'. In a session about verbal communication, nevertheless, she remarked with a wry grin that in Indonesian culture, a supposedly 10-minute welcoming speech could turn into an hour-long speech. Her tone of voice indicated that the local culture is less preferred and less recommended than Western practice. Another inconsistency relevant to the concept of Global Englishes is that she showed a liberal attitude toward language varieties by saying “I tell my students that they don't need to be native-like when they speak”. At the same time, there is an inclination toward the 'dictionary standard' on which the assessment is based as implied in her statement “as long as they [the students] can pronounce words by the dictionary”. Such dilemmas are not uncommon in the profession of English teaching as found by (Welsh, 2014) and (Morganna & Samiati Tarjana, 2018). A research finding by (Abdulrahman, 2016) further indicates some Indonesian teacher educators 'feel forced by the requirements of the curriculum'. While it is suggested that teacher educators have the autonomy to make their own decisions, institutional policy and sociocultural demands still require their conformity and compliance. It implies that the fundamental tension, inconsistency, and dilemma of teaching culture still become challenges of cultural inclusion in Indonesian teacher courses.

While cross-cultural subjects have been taught in teacher education courses for years, research by (Abdulrahman, 2016) found some teacher educators in Indonesia demonstrated average cross-cultural knowledge and lack of confidence in teaching culture, particularly those who teach language skills modules. It is also interesting to note that few teacher students appear to be less interested in promoting knowledge of culture and assume that the completion of teaching materials related to English proficiency is more pivotal. The practical constraints for not immersing culture in language teacher education are mostly due to time limitations in each session and teacher students' lack of knowledge to bridge the materials with the target culture (Abdulrahman et al., 2016). Some of them also argued that there were only a few collections of textbooks or resources and limited access to academic journals provided in the library to support culture immersion in teacher training. It is implied in the following teacher's comment:

“Some of the English courses need a textbook that involves the understanding of cultural content, but it is not included in the textbook or not sufficiently provided there.”

Chen & Yang (2015) posited that many popular books written for pre-service teachers barely include pedagogical content to teach culture. There seems to be limited support for teachers to immerse interculturalism in their teaching, despite the requirement from the government.

Another challenge relates to what target culture can be best situated in the curricula. What specific criteria should teacher educators be aware of before introducing intercultural knowledge in their teaching? How relevant is it to bring materials or films such as *Pride*, *Brokeback Mountain*, and *Bohemian Rhapsody*, in cross-cultural subjects in a country where Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) residents hardly have civil rights protections (N., 2012)? It is suggested that

many scholars problematize the use of such content in language teaching. (N., 2012) describes that the proponents value its relevance to people's everyday lives served with a fascinating package, especially to young minds.

On the other hand, the counter-argument believes that it lacks meaningful learning for which reason students need to be exposed to other cultural content. Although intercultural subjects have been enacted in language teacher education, the critical response towards such issues seems to be less addressed, and criteria of appropriateness may remain a bias. It may discourage teachers' awareness of the importance of cultural inclusion in language teaching, as Lange and Paige (2003, in Chen & Yang, 2015) indicate that due to the complex notion of culture immersion, some teachers posit that "Culture is not language, so why should we have to deal with it and its complexities?". It seems that the unresolved problems have the potential to influence teachers' attitudes towards teaching cross-cultural understanding in ELT classrooms.

The Role of Language Teacher Education in Enhancing Cultural Integration in ELT

Integrating the information of different cultures in language classrooms might not be as challenging as raising students' awareness and understanding of intercultural competence. In the practice of ELT, intercultural competence is not about covering multiple cultures; but rather about working through a dialogue between cultures (Lee, 2005). To prepare teacher students with the knowledge of teaching culture, curriculum, syllabus, and learning materials in teacher training courses should be more developed. Cultural subjects should provide not only knowledge about a variety of cultures but also intercultural knowledge that equips teachers with sociocultural aspects in cross-cultural communication.

As culture is intertwined with language, the pedagogy of teaching culture can be taught more explicitly. Pedagogy-related courses should promote the importance of cultural inclusion in ELT and its fundamental concepts. (Lee, 2005) argues, "Intercultural pedagogy is importantly about how we teach rather than what we teach". The challenges of culture inclusion in the context of Indonesian ELT, such as teachers' lack of confidence in teaching culture (Abdulrahman, 2016), inadequate knowledge on how to teach culture (Kidwell, 2019), and confusion about which culture to include (N., 2012), might be addressed through established modules, learning designs, curricula, and syllabi.

Furthermore, the autonomy of teacher educators in making decisions on what might work best in their classrooms needs to be promoted. It may improve their sense of belonging, commitment, and willingness to develop knowledge, intercultural competence, and teaching innovations. Gandana & Parr (2013) posit that innovations in the curriculum are unlikely to bring about the expected educational improvement if the teachers of these innovations are themselves not encouraged to have a strong sense of autonomy that would foster their professional development. The involvement of teacher educators in the process of curriculum, material, and assessment development might also decrease the level of teaching dilemma as happened to Nancy (Feryok, 2008), and the negative feeling of being imposed by the institutional requirements as implied in (Abdulrahman, 2016) research.

In Indonesia, regardless of many areas of improvement, some teachers have tried their best to develop students' intercultural competence. Some key takeaways can enrich teachers' pedagogical strategies in integrating interculturalism. First, teachers need to be pedagogically adaptive. Rather than being stressed out by undeniable constraints, teachers can apply what is possible. As stated in Novita & Purwati's (2021) study, one of their research participants did not want to push themselves to integrate culture massively. As long as some bits of interculturalism concepts are taught, then they are on the right track. Second, teachers should be creative in providing learning materials. Focusing only on textbooks can make the cultural immersion in EFL classrooms limited and too rigid. In the above-mentioned empirical study, the research participant explicitly stated that "The easiest way to enrich the student's knowledge about culture is from the internet resources". It implies that the provision of

culture-related learning materials should no longer be a challenge as long as teachers have the creativity to adopt and adapt online resources.

Finally, reflections to evaluate the practice of teaching culture in the context of teacher education programs are highly needed. (Kiely, 2019) suggests that “reflection is an abiding strand through the accounts, both as a core skill and disposition that teacher educators are seeking to develop in teachers and also as a strategy that teacher educators and program leaders use to develop their practices and learn from experience”. Data-led learning (Walsh, 2015) can also be used to develop teaching practices by observing classroom interactions. Such reflection can decrease teaching inconsistencies as implied in (Gandana & Parr, 2013) research. Furthermore, activities for professional development, such as doing research, joining conferences, and discussing language teaching issues with colleagues can be helpful to enhance teacher educators’ knowledge, confidence, and awareness of cultural inclusion in language teacher education.

CONCLUSION

Surviving in today’s multicultural communication requires knowledge of the language and intercultural competence. Without cross-cultural competence, interactions among people with different backgrounds can be very challenging, and even fluent language users can easily misunderstand each other, as Bennett (2003) refers to as ‘fluent fool’. Language teacher education has a strategic position to spread such knowledge by shaping English teachers’ intercultural understanding and developing an awareness of cultural integration in ELT classrooms. However, there are still challenges, such as inadequate cultural knowledge, lack of confidence in teaching intercultural competence, fundamental tension, teaching inconsistencies, and limited resources, found in the practice of cultural inclusion. It is, therefore, significant to establish curriculum, syllabus, and teaching materials; encourage teacher educators to do self-evaluation and professional development; as well as promote their autonomy and engagement in planning, doing, and reflecting their teaching practice.

While this research has some limitations, especially in the research methodology, further studies in this field can complement the methodology by incorporating a mixed-method approach. The scope of the research participants can also be developed by involving EFL teachers’ perspectives and practices both in rural and urban schools. More context-specific studies should also be explored, such as comparing intercultural competence immersion in language teacher education in state versus private universities. The conclusion summarizes the main findings and their implications in a concise manner. Avoid reiterating detailed results; instead, focus on broader takeaways and recommendations for future research. This section should be limited to 300 words and leave a strong impression on the reader.

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