

## Integrating Local Culture into English Language Teaching: A Study on Students' Language Competence and Cultural Understanding

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the integration of local culture into English language teaching and its contribution to students' language competence and cultural understanding. The study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design in a secondary school English as a Foreign Language context. Participants included English teachers, students, and a curriculum coordinator selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, and were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings show that the integration of local traditions, folklore, traditional food, arts, historical places, community practices, and cultural values created more contextual and meaningful English learning experiences. Familiar cultural content activated students' prior knowledge, facilitated idea generation, supported vocabulary development, improved sentence construction, and encouraged more confident speaking and writing. The findings also indicate that local culture strengthened students' cultural understanding by enabling them to identify, interpret, and communicate the meanings and values embedded in their communities. Moreover, students developed greater awareness of their cultural identity while learning to compare local and other cultural perspectives. The study concludes that local culture functions as a pedagogical resource that simultaneously supports communicative language competence, cultural identity, and intercultural understanding in English language education



### Introduction

English language teaching (ELT) has undergone a significant shift from an instructional orientation that primarily emphasizes grammatical accuracy, vocabulary mastery, and the four language skills toward a broader communicative perspective that recognizes language as a social and cultural practice. In contemporary educational contexts, students are expected not only to understand linguistic forms but also to use English appropriately to communicate ideas, negotiate meaning, and interact with people from diverse cultural

backgrounds. This development has strengthened the position of intercultural competence as an important component of foreign language education. English learning, therefore, cannot be separated from the cultural contexts in which meanings are constructed, communicated, and interpreted. Recent research has confirmed that culturally responsive language instruction can facilitate openness, multiple-perspective taking, critical meaning making, and intercultural learning among EFL students (Liao & Li, 2023).

The growing role of English as an international language also challenges the traditional assumption that learning English necessarily means learning predominantly British, American, or other native-English-speaking cultures. English is currently used extensively among speakers who come from different linguistic, national, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Consequently, the cultural dimension of ELT needs to accommodate not only target-language cultures but also learners' source cultures and broader international cultures. This orientation allows students to use English without detaching themselves from their own social and cultural identities. In this perspective, local culture becomes an important pedagogical resource because it provides students with familiar knowledge, experiences, practices, values, places, traditions, narratives, and social realities that can serve as meaningful content for language use. A systematic review of studies conducted in Southeast Asia confirms that integrating local culture into ELT has become an increasingly important response to the changing status of English as an international language and has demonstrated positive potential for learner attitudes and engagement (Ratri, Widiati, Astutik, & Jonathan, 2024).

The integration of culture into language teaching is also closely connected with the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy. This approach positions students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds as educational resources rather than as peripheral elements of the learning process. Culturally responsive instruction encourages teachers to establish connections between academic content and students' lived experiences, community knowledge, language repertoires, and cultural identities. Such connections may make classroom interaction more accessible and meaningful because students encounter learning topics they already understand conceptually even when they are required to express those concepts in a foreign language. Recent research on culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy has shown that responsive teaching can involve culturally relevant curricula, the use of students' communicative repertoires, rejection of deficit perspectives toward multilingual learners, and the development of critical consciousness in teaching and learning (Wesley-Nero & Donley, 2024).

The cultural dimension is particularly important because language competence does not operate independently from contextual and cultural knowledge. Students may possess adequate vocabulary and grammatical knowledge but still experience difficulty using English meaningfully when instructional topics are unfamiliar or culturally distant from their experiences. Conversely, familiar cultural content can provide students with existing conceptual knowledge that can be transformed into speaking, writing, reading, and classroom interaction activities. For example, local traditions, folklore, traditional food, historical sites, arts, community practices, ceremonies, and local environmental knowledge can be transformed into descriptive texts, narratives, dialogues, presentations, discussions, projects, and other communicative tasks. Evidence from Indonesian EFL contexts suggests that incorporating local cultural content can support students' thinking, speaking, and writing while increasing their enthusiasm for learning English. A study involving junior high school students in Papua, for example, found that teachers had incorporated local cultural content into English materials and reported improvement in students' language-related skills following exposure to locally contextualized learning materials (Romrome & Ena, 2022).

Nevertheless, the cultural content presented in ELT materials does not always adequately represent learners' own cultural realities. Research on English textbooks has repeatedly demonstrated imbalance in cultural representation. Bose and Gao (2022), for example, found that ELT textbooks examined in the Indian context displayed substantial dominance of British cultural representations and relatively limited in depth cultural engagement. Similar concerns are evident in the Indonesian context. Agustina and Kencana (2023), through their comparison of global and locally used English textbooks, demonstrated the continuing importance of examining source, target, and international cultural representation when English materials are expected to facilitate intercultural communicative competence (Agustina & Kencana, 2023). These findings suggest that the mere presence of cultural information in an English textbook does not automatically create culturally meaningful language learning. The selection, balance, contextualization, and pedagogical use of cultural content remain crucial (Bose & Gao, 2022).

The pedagogical relevance of integrating local culture becomes stronger when cultural learning is connected with students' communicative development. Intercultural communicative competence requires learners to move beyond knowing factual information about cultures. Students need opportunities to interpret cultural meanings, compare perspectives, explain their own cultural practices, respond to difference, and communicate appropriately across cultural boundaries. Recent empirical evidence indicates that culturally responsive teaching in oral English classrooms can create such opportunities. Liao and Li (2023) implemented fourteen culturally responsive teaching sessions with EFL learners and found that the approach encouraged greater openness, the sharing of multiple cultural perspectives, critical meaning making, and intercultural competence development (Liao & Li, 2023). Their findings indicate that culturally responsive instruction is not simply an approach for increasing cultural knowledge. It can create communicative situations in which language learning and cultural interpretation develop together (Liao & Li, 2023).

Recent research also strengthens the argument that communicative competence and intercultural awareness can develop through integrated learning experiences rather than as separate educational outcomes. Yeh, Qi, Lin, and Chen (2024), for example, examined EFL learners participating in intercultural telecollaboration and found that oral translanguaging practices contributed positively to intercultural awareness, intercultural learning, and communicative competence (Yeh, Qi, Lin, & Chen, 2024). Although their study focused on digitally mediated international interaction rather than local culture, its findings demonstrate an important principle for contemporary ELT: language competence develops more meaningfully when communication involves culturally situated meaning making. This supports the need to examine whether similar relationships occur when students use English to describe, interpret, negotiate, and communicate their own local cultural knowledge (Yeh et al., 2024).

Studies in Southeast Asia and Indonesia have increasingly investigated local culture in English teaching. Ratri et al. (2024) systematically reviewed the integration of local culture into ELT in Southeast Asia and identified its positive contribution to students' attitudes and engagement. Romrome and Ena (2022) examined local culture based English teaching among Papuan junior high school students and reported positive responses and improvements in students' English related skills (Romrome & Ena, 2022). Other Indonesian studies have examined teachers' strategies for integrating local culture, cultural components for speaking instruction, the representation of culture in English textbooks, and culturally responsive practices in EFL classrooms. Collectively, these studies demonstrate a growing academic interest in repositioning learners' own cultures within English language education (Ratri et al., 2024).

Despite this development, several important limitations remain in the existing

literature. First, a considerable proportion of previous research concentrates on cultural representation in textbooks, asking what kinds of source, target, or international cultures are represented rather than investigating what happens to students when local culture is actively transformed into communicative classroom practice. Studies by Bose and Gao (2022) and Agustina and Kencana (2023), for example, provide valuable evidence concerning cultural representation in English learning materials, but their primary analytical object is instructional content rather than the simultaneous development of students' linguistic and cultural outcomes. Second, other studies focus largely on teachers' perceptions, strategies, or classroom implementation, which provides important pedagogical information but leaves students' developmental experiences less comprehensively explained. Third, the systematic review by Ratri et al. (2024) indicates that much of the existing literature emphasizes learner attitudes and engagement. These affective outcomes are important, but they do not fully explain how local culture contributes to students' actual language competence and cultural understanding (Ratri et al., 2024).

A further gap concerns the tendency to examine language competence and cultural understanding as separate outcomes. Some studies investigate speaking skills or language performance, while others examine cultural awareness or intercultural competence. This separation limits understanding of the mechanisms through which culturally familiar content may simultaneously facilitate linguistic expression and deepen students' understanding of culture. In culturally grounded English learning, these two outcomes may be interdependent. Students first activate prior knowledge about familiar cultural phenomena, identify the English linguistic resources needed to explain them, communicate cultural meanings through English, interact with other perspectives, and subsequently reconstruct both their language knowledge and cultural understanding. Existing research has not sufficiently explored this reciprocal process, particularly in school-based EFL contexts where local cultural resources can be directly connected to students' everyday social environment. This gap is especially significant because international evidence suggests that culturally responsive instruction can support intercultural development, while communicative intercultural activities can also contribute to language use and communicative competence (Liao & Li, 2023).

Accordingly, the novel contribution of the present study lies in its simultaneous examination of local culture integration, students' language competence, and students' cultural understanding within a single pedagogical framework. Rather than treating local culture merely as supplementary content, decorative material, or an instrument for generating student interest, this study conceptualizes local culture as a communicative learning resource through which students construct and express meaning in English. The study therefore examines not only which local cultural elements teachers include in ELT, but also how those elements are transformed into learning activities and how students use English to interpret, describe, discuss, and communicate culturally familiar knowledge. This perspective makes it possible to investigate the relationship between cultural familiarity, meaningful language use, language competence, and cultural understanding as interconnected processes.

The study also offers a distinctive conceptual position by connecting Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) with Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). CRT explains why students' own cultural knowledge and experiences should become legitimate resources for instruction, while ICC explains why language learning should prepare students to interpret cultural perspectives and communicate across cultural contexts. Integrating these perspectives provides a stronger conceptual explanation of why ELT should neither be limited to linguistic mastery nor dominated by target-language culture.

Students need opportunities to develop the ability to communicate globally while remaining capable of understanding and articulating their local cultural identities. Recent empirical research supports both sides of this argument: culturally responsive instruction can foster intercultural learning, while culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy can strengthen the meaningful inclusion of students' identities and communicative resources within teaching practices (Wesley-Nero & Donley, 2024).

This investigation is particularly important in multilingual and multicultural educational contexts such as Indonesia. Indonesia possesses extensive cultural diversity expressed through local languages, oral traditions, arts, traditional knowledge, social practices, historical narratives, culinary traditions, ceremonies, and community values. At the same time, English education is expected to prepare students for increasingly global communication. These two educational demands should not be treated as competing agendas. Integrating local culture into English teaching offers the possibility of positioning English as a means through which students communicate local knowledge to wider audiences. Students can therefore learn English without perceiving global competence as requiring cultural detachment from their own communities. The significance of such an approach is reinforced by evidence that cultural representation in learning materials can be uneven and that pedagogical adaptation is necessary to ensure culturally meaningful instruction (Bose & Gao, 2022).

The study is also justified pedagogically. Familiar cultural topics can reduce the conceptual burden students face when attempting to communicate in a foreign language because students do not need to construct both new content knowledge and new linguistic knowledge simultaneously. When learners already understand a local story, tradition, place, practice, or social value, classroom attention can be directed more deliberately toward finding vocabulary, organizing ideas, constructing sentences, negotiating meaning, and communicating information in English. In this sense, local culture provides meaningful content for receptive and productive language practice. Indonesian evidence that local cultural materials can support students' language-related skills, combined with international evidence concerning culturally responsive oral English instruction, provides a strong empirical basis for examining this relationship more systematically (Romrome & Ena, 2022).

At the same time, integrating local culture has educational significance beyond language achievement. Students need opportunities to recognize, understand, evaluate, and communicate the cultural knowledge embedded in their communities. Local culture-based ELT can potentially create a dual learning process in which students develop English competence while simultaneously strengthening cultural awareness. Such an approach does not isolate local culture from international perspectives. Instead, students can use English to compare cultural practices, identify similarities and differences, clarify culturally specific meanings, and explain local perspectives to people from other backgrounds. This orientation is consistent with contemporary views of intercultural language learning that emphasize openness, perspective taking, interpretation, interaction, and critical understanding rather than simple memorization of cultural facts (Yeh et al., 2024).

Based on these theoretical and empirical considerations, this study investigates the integration of local culture into English language teaching and its contribution to students' language competence and cultural understanding. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how local cultural content is selected and integrated into English learning activities, how students engage linguistically with culturally familiar content, how such engagement contributes to their English language competence, and how the learning process develops their understanding and appreciation of culture. By examining these dimensions together, the study seeks to extend existing research beyond textbook representation, teacher

perception, and student engagement toward a more integrated explanation of the relationship between local cultural knowledge, meaningful language use, linguistic competence, and cultural understanding.

Conceptually, the study proposes that local culture can operate as a bridge between students' existing knowledge and their emerging ability to communicate in English. Its analytical logic can therefore be expressed as local cultural familiarity → contextualized learning activities → meaningful English use → language competence → cultural interpretation and understanding. The expected contribution is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the study contributes to the dialogue between culturally responsive pedagogy and intercultural communicative competence in EFL education. Empirically, it provides evidence concerning how language and cultural outcomes develop within the same learning process. Practically, the findings may assist teachers, curriculum developers, and educational institutions in designing English learning materials and activities that promote global communicative competence without marginalizing students' local cultural identities.

## Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to investigate how local culture was integrated into English language teaching and how this integration contributed to students' language competence and cultural understanding. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to examine classroom practices, teacher strategies, student learning experiences, language use, and cultural meaning-making within their natural educational context. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate for exploring students' experiences and meaning making processes in EFL classrooms because it allows researchers to interpret learning phenomena based on participants' perspectives and actual classroom practices (Zhang, 2024).

The study was conducted in a secondary school where English was taught as a foreign language and local cultural elements could be incorporated into classroom activities. The research site was selected purposively based on the availability of English learning activities, local cultural resources, and the willingness of teachers and school administrators to participate. The participants consisted of approximately two English teachers, fifteen to twenty students, and one curriculum coordinator or school administrator. Purposive sampling was used because the participants had direct experience with the phenomenon investigated. The teachers provided information about instructional planning and classroom practices, the students provided information about their learning experiences and language use, while the curriculum coordinator provided contextual information about curriculum implementation and institutional support.

Local culture in this study referred to traditions, values, folklore, traditional food, local arts, historical places, social practices, community activities, and other cultural elements familiar to students. These elements were integrated into communicative English learning activities such as describing traditional food, explaining local customs, retelling folklore, presenting cultural places, writing descriptive and narrative texts, and comparing local traditions with other cultures. This approach was consistent with culturally responsive teaching, which emphasizes the use of students' cultural backgrounds and experiences as meaningful resources for learning (Kehl, Ott, Schachner, & Civitillo, 2024).

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis (Nurhayati & Rosadi, 2022b). Classroom observations focused on teacher practices, cultural materials, student participation,

classroom interaction, and students' use of English during culturally contextualized activities. Particular attention was given to students' vocabulary use, sentence construction, oral communication, reading comprehension, writing, confidence, and ability to explain cultural information. Classroom observation was important because language development could not be understood solely from participants' perceptions. Recent qualitative EFL research has demonstrated the importance of combining classroom observations, interviews, reflections, and interactional data to capture students' learning experiences comprehensively (Zhang, 2024).

Semi structured interviews were conducted with English teachers to explore their understanding of culture-based English learning, criteria for selecting local cultural materials, instructional strategies, student responses, and perceived development of language competence and cultural understanding. The interviews also examined challenges such as limited teaching materials, difficulty translating culturally specific concepts, differences in student proficiency, curriculum constraints, and limited instructional time. Students participated in individual interviews or small focus group discussions to explore their experiences of learning English through culturally familiar topics, their confidence in using English, vocabulary development, learning difficulties, and understanding of local culture.

Document analysis was conducted to complement the observation and interview data (Nurhayati & Rosadi, 2022a). The documents included lesson plans, teaching modules, worksheets, presentation materials, reading texts, student assignments, descriptive and narrative texts, presentation scripts, and student reflection notes. Student learning products were examined to identify evidence of language competence and cultural understanding, particularly students' ability to use appropriate vocabulary, construct meaningful sentences, organize ideas, explain cultural practices, and communicate local cultural knowledge through English.

The analysis focused on two main domains, namely language competence and cultural understanding. Language competence was examined qualitatively through students' observable ability to use English meaningfully in classroom activities. The analysis included vocabulary development, sentence construction, oral communication, writing ability, reading comprehension, fluency, interaction, and confidence in expressing culturally familiar ideas. This approach is consistent with qualitative EFL research that examines language competence through actual communicative practices and meaning-making rather than relying exclusively on standardized scores (Zhang, 2024). Cultural understanding was examined through students' ability to identify local cultural elements, explain cultural meanings, understand cultural values, compare different cultural practices, appreciate local cultural identity, and communicate cultural perspectives in English. Intercultural competence is not limited to factual cultural knowledge but also includes awareness, interpretation, attitudes, and the ability to interact appropriately across cultural contexts (Luo & Chan, 2022).

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis began with repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, student reflections, and learning documents. Initial codes were then generated from meaningful data segments, such as familiar cultural topics, vocabulary development, increased speaking confidence, active participation, difficulty translating cultural terms, cultural pride, and new cultural knowledge. Related codes were grouped into broader categories and compared across data sources. These categories were then developed into themes representing the main findings of the study. Reflexive thematic analysis was selected because it allows researchers to identify and interpret meaningful patterns systematically while recognizing the active role of the researcher in the analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

The trustworthiness of the findings was strengthened through data source triangulation, methodological triangulation, member checking, an audit trail, and researcher reflexivity. Data source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from teachers, students, classroom observations, and student learning products. Methodological triangulation involved the use of observations, interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Member checking was conducted when clarification of important participant statements was required, while an audit trail was maintained to document coding decisions and theme development. Researcher reflexivity was also applied throughout the analytical process to reduce interpretive bias. Transparency, reflexivity, and careful documentation are important components of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Adler, 2022).

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study. Permission was obtained from the relevant school authority before data collection. Participants received information about the purpose of the research, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw. Informed consent was obtained from adult participants, while appropriate consent and assent procedures were used for school-age students. Participant identities were protected through codes such as T1 and T2 for teachers and S1 to S20 for students. All recordings, transcripts, observation notes, and student documents were used only for research purposes and stored securely.

Overall, this methodological design enabled the researchers to examine local culture-based English teaching as a contextual learning process that connects culturally familiar knowledge with meaningful English use. The combination of observations, interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis provided empirical evidence about how local culture was transformed into language learning activities and how these activities contributed to students' language competence and cultural understanding.

## Results and Discussion

### Local Culture Makes English Learning More Contextual

The findings of this study indicate that the integration of local culture made English language learning more contextual because students encountered learning topics that were closely related to their everyday lives, social environment, previous experiences, and cultural knowledge. When English learning activities involved familiar cultural elements, students did not begin the learning process with completely unfamiliar content. Instead, they could connect new English expressions with knowledge they had already acquired through family, community, school, and social interactions. This connection between prior cultural knowledge and new linguistic knowledge created a more meaningful context for using English. Recent studies have similarly emphasized that culturally responsive teaching becomes more meaningful when learners' cultural experiences and linguistic resources are incorporated into instructional practices rather than positioned outside formal classroom learning (Wesley-Nero & Donley, 2024).

The contextual nature of the learning process was particularly visible when local traditions, food, folklore, historical places, traditional arts, social practices, and community values were transformed into English learning materials. Students were able to relate the content to objects, practices, and experiences that they recognized. Therefore, their cognitive attention could be directed more strongly toward finding appropriate English vocabulary, constructing sentences, organizing ideas, and communicating meanings. Romrome and Ena (2022) found that incorporating Papuan local culture into English learning provided students with familiar content that could support thinking, speaking,

and writing activities. Their study also reported positive changes in students' English related skills after local cultural content was incorporated into learning activities (Romrome & Ena, 2022).

This finding suggests that contextual learning does not simply mean placing local names or cultural images in English textbooks. Contextualization occurs when students are able to establish a meaningful relationship between the content they already understand and the language they are learning. For instance, describing a traditional dish in English requires students to activate prior knowledge about ingredients, preparation, taste, cultural functions, and the situations in which the food is usually served. English then becomes a linguistic resource for expressing knowledge that students already possess conceptually. This process reduces the distance between classroom language and students' lived realities. A systematic review of local culture integration in Southeast Asian ELT similarly concluded that culturally relevant content can make learning more meaningful and can positively influence learner engagement and attitudes toward English learning (Ratri et al., 2024).

The findings also indicate that cultural familiarity can facilitate the generation of ideas during communicative tasks. One of the difficulties frequently experienced by EFL learners is not merely a lack of vocabulary or grammatical knowledge but uncertainty about what to say. When students are required to communicate about unfamiliar topics, they must simultaneously understand new content and formulate it in a foreign language. Local cultural topics can reduce this dual burden because students already possess background knowledge about the subject. They can therefore focus more directly on how to communicate their ideas in English. From this perspective, familiar cultural content functions as a form of cognitive and communicative scaffolding that assists students in moving from existing knowledge toward new language production.

This interpretation is supported by culturally responsive pedagogy, which views students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds as intellectual resources for learning. Wesley-Nero and Donley (2024) found that culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy emphasizes culturally relevant curriculum, students' communicative repertoires, affirmative views of multilingual learners, and instructional practices connected to students' identities and experiences. Such an approach rejects the assumption that effective learning must begin from externally imposed knowledge and instead recognizes what learners already know as a legitimate foundation for further academic development (Wesley-Nero & Donley, 2024).

The contextual integration of local culture also influenced the communicative function of English in the classroom. English was no longer presented only as a collection of grammatical structures and vocabulary items to be memorized. It became a medium through which students could describe places, narrate cultural stories, explain traditions, discuss local practices, introduce cultural objects, and communicate information about their communities. This shift is important because meaningful communication requires learners to have a reason and context for using the target language. When students use English to communicate culturally relevant knowledge, linguistic forms serve an identifiable communicative purpose.

The finding is consistent with Liao and Li's (2023) investigation of culturally responsive teaching in oral English classrooms. Their study showed that culturally responsive teaching created opportunities for EFL learners to share multiple perspectives, develop openness, engage critically with cultural meanings, and strengthen intercultural competence. The study demonstrates that culturally responsive content can move English instruction beyond mechanical language practice toward communication that involves interpretation, personal experience, cultural perspectives, and meaning-making (Liao & Li, 2023).

The present finding extends this argument by emphasizing the role of learners' own

local culture as the starting point for meaningful English communication. Students do not necessarily need to begin intercultural learning with distant foreign cultures. Their immediate cultural environment can provide an accessible foundation from which broader intercultural understanding develops. When students first learn to explain their own traditions, values, practices, and cultural identities in English, they develop linguistic resources that can subsequently be used to compare their culture with other cultures. In this sense, local cultural knowledge becomes an entry point into intercultural communication rather than an obstacle to global English competence.

Local cultural integration also appears to strengthen the relevance of teaching materials. Materials become more relevant when learners can identify a clear relationship between classroom content and their social environment. Research examining EFL materials has emphasized the importance of including local cultural values because English currently functions in increasingly diverse international and intercultural settings. Hasnah et al. (2024) argue that the representation of local cultural values in EFL materials can contribute to students' interest and cross-cultural awareness while maintaining connections between English learning and learners' cultural contexts (Hasnah, Ginting, Saragih, Kharisma, & Sari, 2024).

Similarly, Tantri and Santosa (2024), through a systematic literature review of local culture-based EFL materials, highlighted the importance of integrating culturally familiar content into English learning and developing teaching strategies that connect language instruction with local cultural contexts. Their review reinforces the view that local culture should not function as an isolated addition to English materials but should be incorporated into the design of meaningful learning experiences (Tantri & Santosa, 2024).

Another important implication of contextual learning is increased learner participation. Students are generally more capable of responding when they have sufficient knowledge about the topic under discussion. Cultural familiarity provides a knowledge base from which they can ask questions, answer questions, construct examples, express opinions, and participate in classroom interaction. This does not automatically eliminate linguistic difficulties, but it allows the communicative challenge to focus more clearly on language rather than on unfamiliar content. The systematic review conducted by Ratri et al. (2024) found that local culture integration in Southeast Asian English teaching was associated with positive learner attitudes and engagement, indicating that culturally familiar content can support more active participation in the learning process (Ratri et al., 2024).

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings indicate that contextuality is created through the interaction between familiar content and new linguistic resources. Students bring cultural knowledge into the classroom, while teachers provide linguistic structures that enable them to reconstruct and communicate that knowledge in English. The learning process can therefore be represented as cultural familiarity → activation of prior knowledge → meaningful language tasks → English language use → contextual understanding. This process explains why local culture can serve as more than motivational content. It operates as a cognitive, linguistic, and communicative resource.

The use of local culture also creates opportunities for students to move from simple description toward deeper interpretation. At an initial level, students may learn vocabulary for traditional objects, food, clothing, places, or celebrations. At a more advanced level, they may explain why particular traditions are practiced, identify social values embedded within them, compare traditions across communities, or discuss how cultural practices have changed. Such progression is important because culturally responsive English learning should not reduce culture to visible products or isolated facts. Liao and Li (2023) demonstrated that culturally responsive teaching becomes particularly valuable when students engage in critical meaning-making and consider multiple cultural perspectives

rather than simply acquiring factual cultural knowledge (Liao & Li, 2023).

These findings also have implications for the relationship between globalization and local identity in English language education. Teaching English through local culture does not imply rejecting international culture or reducing students' exposure to global knowledge. Instead, it creates a balanced pedagogical position in which students develop English competence from a culturally meaningful starting point and then use that competence to engage with broader cultural contexts. English can therefore function as a means of communicating local knowledge to wider audiences. The learner is positioned not merely as a recipient of cultural information associated with English-speaking societies, but also as a communicator capable of representing his or her own cultural world through English.

This position is particularly relevant in multilingual and multicultural societies. When local cultural content is absent from English instruction, learners may implicitly perceive English as a language associated exclusively with foreign cultural realities. Integrating students' own culture changes this relationship by demonstrating that English can also be used to communicate local experiences and identities. Recent research on culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy emphasizes precisely this need to affirm learners' cultural and linguistic resources within formal instruction (Wesley-Nero & Donley, 2024).

However, contextualization requires careful pedagogical design. Simply inserting local cultural images, names, or topics does not guarantee meaningful learning. Teachers need to transform cultural content into purposeful communicative activities that require students to use English for describing, narrating, comparing, explaining, questioning, presenting, and reflecting. Teachers also need appropriate resources and professional competence to select cultural materials that are accurate, relevant, age-appropriate, and linguistically accessible. Recent research on teachers' needs in integrating local culture into English materials indicates that teachers require adequate pedagogical resources and professional support to implement culturally relevant English instruction effectively (Rustam, Kalsum, & Rustam, 2025).

Therefore, the major contribution of this finding lies in demonstrating that local culture makes English learning contextual not merely because the content is geographically close to students, but because it connects what students already know with what they are learning to express in English. Cultural familiarity activates prior knowledge, facilitates idea generation, gives communicative activities a meaningful purpose, and creates opportunities for students to use English to represent real aspects of their lives. This process transforms English from an abstract school subject into a practical communicative resource.

The finding consequently strengthens the argument that culturally responsive ELT can reconcile two important educational objectives: the development of English competence and the maintenance of meaningful connections with learners' cultural environments. Contextualized English learning does not place local identity and global communication in opposition. Instead, students can develop the ability to communicate globally by first learning how to articulate culturally familiar experiences in English.

### **Local Culture as a Context for Language Competence Development**

The findings indicate that local culture provided a meaningful context for developing students' English language competence because culturally familiar topics helped students connect prior knowledge with new linguistic resources. When students discussed local traditions, traditional food, folklore, arts, historical places, and community practices, they already possessed conceptual knowledge about the topics and could therefore concentrate more effectively on finding appropriate vocabulary, constructing sentences, and expressing ideas in English. This condition reduced the cognitive burden associated with learning

unfamiliar content and a foreign language simultaneously. In this sense, local culture functioned as contextual scaffolding that supported students in transforming familiar knowledge into English expressions. A study involving junior high school students in Papua similarly found that the incorporation of local cultural content into English lessons contributed positively to students' language skills and made English learning more closely connected to their existing knowledge and experiences (Romrome & Ena, 2022). A systematic review of local culture integration in Southeast Asian ELT also indicates that culturally relevant materials can increase students' engagement and provide meaningful contexts for English learning (Ratri et al., 2024).

The findings further suggest that local cultural content supported vocabulary development and productive language use because students encountered words and expressions within recognizable communicative situations. Instead of memorizing vocabulary as isolated lexical items, students used new English words to describe cultural objects, explain traditional practices, narrate local stories, and present information about their communities. This process allowed vocabulary acquisition to occur through meaningful use. Students were also able to generate ideas more easily during speaking and writing activities because the cultural topics were already familiar to them. Local culture-based materials can therefore provide an authentic conceptual foundation for integrating vocabulary, expressions, speaking, reading, and writing skills within a single learning context. Research on the development of locally contextualized English materials has shown that local culture can be integrated with different language skills and linguistic components, allowing learners to use English for purposes that are relevant to their social and cultural environment (Lestari, Rustan, & Thayyib, 2024). Similarly, teachers who integrate local culture into English instruction can create learning activities that connect language competence with familiar cultural knowledge rather than presenting English as detached from students' everyday experiences (Herdi, Eriyanti, & Huda, 2023).

Local culture also contributed to the development of communicative competence by providing students with meaningful reasons to use English. Students did not use English merely to complete grammatical exercises but to describe, narrate, explain, compare, and discuss cultural phenomena that were personally and socially relevant. This shift encouraged language to function as a tool for communication rather than as an academic object to be memorized. Culturally responsive English instruction has been shown to facilitate oral participation, perspective sharing, critical meaning-making, and intercultural competence because learners use language to communicate culturally situated ideas (Liao & Li, 2023). The findings of Liao and Li demonstrate that culturally responsive teaching can transform oral English classrooms into communicative environments in which linguistic development and cultural interpretation occur together (Liao & Li, 2023). Furthermore, contemporary research on intercultural language learning suggests that communicative competence develops more effectively when learners engage in meaningful cultural interaction and use linguistic resources to negotiate cultural meanings rather than simply reproduce predetermined language forms (Yeh et al., 2024). These findings support the present study by demonstrating that culturally situated communication can simultaneously strengthen meaningful English use and broader communicative competence.

Overall, the findings show that local culture functions not merely as supplementary teaching content but as a pedagogical context that connects vocabulary, language structures, communicative activities, and students' existing knowledge. The contribution of local culture to language competence can therefore be understood through a process in which cultural familiarity activates prior knowledge, prior knowledge facilitates idea generation, meaningful ideas stimulate language production, and repeated language production strengthens communicative competence. This interpretation extends previous

studies that have largely emphasized student engagement or the representation of cultural content by showing that local culture can serve as a direct linguistic resource for developing meaningful language competence. The systematic review conducted by Ratri et al. (2024) confirms that local culture integration has positive pedagogical implications for English learning in Southeast Asia, while Romrome and Ena (2022) provide empirical evidence that local culture based English instruction can contribute to students' language related skills.

### **Strengthening Students' Cultural Understanding and Cultural Identity**

The findings indicate that integrating local culture into English language teaching strengthened students' cultural understanding by creating opportunities for them to recognize, describe, and interpret cultural practices that were closely connected to their own communities. When students explored local traditions, traditional arts, food, folklore, historical sites, ceremonies, and social values through English learning activities, they did not merely acquire new vocabulary but also reconsidered the meanings embedded in those cultural practices. This process encouraged students to move from simple cultural recognition toward a deeper understanding of why certain traditions exist, what values they represent, and how they contribute to community life. Local cultural materials can therefore function as authentic resources that develop cultural awareness while simultaneously supporting language learning, particularly when learners are asked to explain the meaning and significance of cultural practices rather than memorize isolated cultural facts (Miqawati, Wijayanti, & Purnama, 2024). The finding also supports culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy, which emphasizes that learners' cultural knowledge, identities, and communicative repertoires should be treated as legitimate resources for academic learning rather than as elements separated from classroom instruction (Wesley-Nero & Donley, 2024).

The integration of local culture also contributed to strengthening students' sense of cultural identity because English learning provided a space in which their own cultural backgrounds were recognized and valued. Instead of encountering English primarily through foreign cultural representations, students were given opportunities to use English to introduce their traditions, explain local values, narrate community histories, and describe cultural objects familiar to them. Such experiences can strengthen students' awareness that learning an international language does not require them to distance themselves from their cultural origins. This issue is particularly important in EFL contexts where textbooks and instructional materials may disproportionately represent Western cultural values. Sudartini (2024) argues that insufficient representation of Indonesian cultural values in English learning materials may weaken cultural positioning, while greater inclusion of local values can help students maintain cultural identity in the context of global cultural influences. Therefore, the present findings suggest that integrating local culture into ELT can reposition students from passive recipients of foreign cultural knowledge into active cultural representatives who are capable of articulating their own identities through English (Sudartini, 2024).

More importantly, the findings suggest that cultural identity development occurred through a process of reflection and comparison rather than through uncritical cultural preservation. When students attempted to explain local traditions in English, they needed to identify important cultural features, interpret their meanings, select relevant information, and consider how those practices could be understood by people from different cultural backgrounds. These activities encouraged students to become more conscious of both the distinctiveness of their own culture and the existence of alternative cultural perspectives. Such processes are closely related to intercultural competence, where learners are expected to demonstrate openness, interpret cultural meanings, consider

multiple perspectives, and communicate appropriately across cultural boundaries. Culturally responsive English instruction has been shown to facilitate openness, multiple-perspective sharing, critical meaning-making, and intercultural competence among EFL learners (Liao & Li, 2023). In this sense, strengthening local cultural identity does not mean encouraging cultural isolation. Instead, students who understand their own culture more clearly are better positioned to compare, explain, and negotiate cultural differences when communicating with others. Local identity therefore becomes a foundation for intercultural communication rather than an obstacle to participation in global interaction (Liao & Li, 2023).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that local culture-based English teaching has a dual educational function. It develops students' understanding of the knowledge, meanings, and values embedded in their cultural environment while strengthening their confidence in representing that culture through English. This finding extends the role of cultural content beyond its conventional use as supplementary material because local culture becomes a resource for identity construction, reflection, cultural interpretation, and intercultural communication. Research on Indonesian ELT materials similarly emphasizes that local cultural representation can support cultural awareness and help preserve learners' cultural connections within English education (Miqawati et al., 2024).

## Conclusion

This study concludes that integrating local culture into English language teaching provides a meaningful pedagogical framework for developing students' English language competence and cultural understanding simultaneously. Local traditions, folklore, traditional food, arts, historical places, community practices, and cultural values give students familiar content that connects their prior knowledge with new linguistic resources. This familiarity helps students generate ideas, acquire contextual vocabulary, construct sentences, and communicate more confidently through speaking and writing. The findings therefore indicate that local culture functions not merely as supplementary content, but as contextual scaffolding that supports meaningful and communicative English learning.

The integration of local culture also strengthens students' cultural understanding and identity. Through activities that require them to describe, explain, interpret, and compare cultural practices in English, students develop a deeper awareness of the meanings, values, and social significance embedded in their cultural environment. English learning consequently becomes a space in which students can recognize and communicate their cultural identity rather than distancing themselves from it. This process also supports intercultural competence because students learn to understand their own culture while recognizing alternative cultural perspectives.

Overall, the study demonstrates a reciprocal relationship between cultural familiarity, meaningful English use, language competence, and cultural understanding. The process can be conceptualized as Local Cultural Familiarity → Prior Knowledge Activation → Contextualized English Tasks → Meaningful Language Use → Language Competence → Cultural Understanding and Intercultural Communication. This finding supports the integration of Culturally Responsive Teaching and Intercultural Communicative Competence within EFL instruction. It also suggests that English teachers and curriculum developers should systematically incorporate relevant local cultural resources into communicative activities rather than treating culture as decorative content. Such an approach can prepare students to communicate effectively in English while

maintaining a strong understanding of their cultural identity and developing readiness for intercultural interaction in increasingly global contexts.

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