

The Ethnographic Dimension in English Language Teaching: Teaching Approaches and the Influence of Culture on Students

Nehru Pasoloran Pongsapan^{*1}, Marchelyn Pongsapan², Osmar Buntu Lobo³

¹*Christian University Indonesia Toraja, Indonesia

^{2,3}Politeknik Negeri Fakfak, Indonesia

ABSTRACT: This study explores the ethnographic dimension in English Language Teaching (ELT), focusing on how culturally responsive teaching approaches impact student engagement, comprehension, and language acquisition. The primary aim is to examine the interplay between teaching methods and cultural influences and to investigate how incorporating students' cultural backgrounds enhances the effectiveness of English instruction. Drawing on an ethnographic research methodology, the study was conducted in secondary-level English classrooms in a multicultural setting. Data were collected through classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student focus groups over 12 weeks. The research emphasized qualitative analysis to uncover patterns in teacher-student interactions and the integration of cultural elements within lessons.

Findings reveal that when teachers employ ethnographically informed strategies, such as culturally relevant materials, context-based discussions, and inclusive pedagogies, students exhibit higher motivation and improved language proficiency. Teachers who acknowledged students' cultural identities were better able to foster inclusive learning environments and facilitate a deeper understanding of linguistic and sociocultural content. Conversely, classrooms that overlooked cultural diversity tended to demonstrate lower student engagement and limited participation.

The study concludes that embedding the ethnographic dimension into ELT not only bridges cultural gaps but also enhances communicative competence and classroom dynamics. It advocates for professional development programs that train teachers in ethnographic awareness and culturally adaptive teaching techniques. Ultimately, recognizing and incorporating students' cultural contexts is essential for more equitable, meaningful, and effective English language education in increasingly diverse classrooms.

KEYWORDS: Ethnography, English Language Teaching (ELT), communicative competence, intercultural competence.

A. INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are deeply intertwined, forming a reciprocal relationship that shapes the way individuals communicate, interpret meaning, and construct their social realities. Language is not merely a system of grammatical rules and vocabulary, but also a reflection of cultural norms, values, beliefs, and practices (Kramsch, 2021). In the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), this relationship becomes particularly significant, as language instruction often occurs in multicultural and multilingual environments where learners bring diverse sociocultural backgrounds into the classroom.

Understanding the inseparability of language and culture is therefore essential for effective teaching and meaningful learning. When culture is integrated into language instruction, it fosters deeper engagement, enhances communicative competence, and helps students navigate intercultural interactions more effectively (Dervin, 2020). Conversely, neglecting the cultural dimensions of language may result in superficial learning, cultural misunderstandings, and a disconnect between linguistic forms and their social functions.

An ethnographic approach in ELT offers a transformative framework for language education. Ethnography, as both a research method and a pedagogical orientation, enables educators to observe, document, and analyze the lived experiences, practices, and identities of learners within their social contexts (Palmer & Menken, 2018). Rather than treating students as passive recipients of standardized linguistic input, ethnography views learners as active cultural agents whose knowledge, perspectives, and language use are shaped by complex cultural affiliations.

By adopting ethnographic perspectives, language educators can become more attuned to the cultural dimensions of learning, including the ways in which students negotiate meaning, assert identity, and respond to classroom practices. This approach also empowers teachers to critically examine their own cultural assumptions and adjust their pedagogies accordingly (Duff & Uchida, 2022). Ethnographic sensitivity in ELT is not limited to incorporating cultural content into lessons; it involves creating a culturally responsive learning environment that acknowledges and validates the diverse backgrounds of all students. Furthermore, the global

The Ethnographic Dimension in English Language Teaching: Teaching Approaches and the Influence of Culture on Students

spread of English and the rise of English as a lingua franca have added new layers of complexity to ELT. In multilingual settings, language learners may experience tensions between their native identities and the cultural expectations embedded in English use (Baker, 2015). An ethnographic orientation helps educators address these challenges by promoting inclusive pedagogies that respect linguistic diversity, support intercultural communication, and facilitate critical reflection on global and local cultural dynamics.

In light of these considerations, this article explores how ethnographic dimensions can enrich ELT practices and investigates the ways in which students' cultural identities influence their engagement with English. By examining classroom interactions, teaching strategies, and student responses through an ethnographic lens, we aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the cultural processes that underpin language acquisition in diverse educational settings.

Ethnography in Language Education

Ethnography, originally rooted in anthropology and sociology, is the systematic study of people and cultures from the insider's perspective. It emphasizes prolonged engagement, participant observation, and the interpretation of meanings individuals assign to their social experiences (Holliday, 2019). In the realm of language education, ethnography has evolved from a purely research methodology into a pedagogical lens that emphasizes culturally situated learning. It enables educators to become more attuned to the rich cultural narratives that learners bring into the classroom and encourages a shift from a deficit view of cultural difference to one of resource-based appreciation (Hornberger & Hult, 2021).

In English Language Teaching (ELT), an ethnographic dimension encourages teachers not only to observe but to participate in the cultural world of their students. This participatory role enables educators to design learning experiences that resonate with learners' lived realities, promoting authenticity, engagement, and deeper learning (Canagarajah, 2020). By interpreting classroom interaction ethnographically, educators gain insights into students' values, communication preferences, and learning strategies, which are often culturally mediated.

Teaching Approaches That Integrate Ethnographic Perspectives

Numerous teaching approaches have emerged that align with ethnographic principles, reinforcing the importance of learner identity, community engagement, and intercultural awareness. The instructional strategies that meaningfully integrate these perspectives.

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)

CRT, as advanced by Gay (2018), advocates for pedagogical practices that validate and reflect students' cultural backgrounds. This involves selecting texts, examples, and classroom practices that are culturally familiar or relevant to learners. In ELT, CRT can include incorporating folk tales, community issues, or family practices into lessons, thereby positioning students' culture as central rather than peripheral. Recent studies emphasize the benefits of CRT in increasing learner motivation, participation, and achievement, especially in multicultural and multilingual contexts (Paris & Alim, 2020). Through this lens, the teacher becomes a facilitator who bridges cultural and linguistic worlds, rather than a transmitter of decontextualized English norms.

Task-Based Learning with Cultural Content

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) involves the use of authentic communicative tasks as the core unit of instruction. When these tasks incorporate cultural themes, such as comparing marriage customs, discussing food traditions, or exploring holidays, they not only practice language skills but also stimulate intercultural dialogue (Ellis, 2020). These tasks enable learners to use English to express, analyze, and compare cultural knowledge, fostering both linguistic and cultural competence. TBLT from an ethnographic standpoint requires tasks to be situated within learners' real sociocultural lives. This contrasts with generalized, "neutral" tasks often found in commercial textbooks, which may marginalize learners' unique backgrounds.

Project-Based Learning (PBL)

Incorporating PBL allows students to undertake small-scale ethnographic inquiries, such as interviewing elders, documenting oral traditions, or investigating local celebrations. These activities demand data collection, critical thinking, and reporting—all in the target language. PBL encourages students to see English as a tool for exploring and sharing their cultural realities, rather than a foreign, abstract system (Beckett & Slater, 2018). Moreover, such projects nurture learner autonomy and foster a reflective stance toward both their first language (L1) and their second language (L2), facilitating cultural ownership of their language learning.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy, inspired by Paulo Freire, calls for an education that is reflective, dialogic, and transformative. In ELT, this approach invites students to interrogate issues of power, identity, marginalization, and representation as they relate to language (Norton & Toohey, 2016). Ethnographic pedagogy and critical pedagogy intersect in their emphasis on learner voice and the deconstruction of dominant narratives. This approach might involve analyzing advertisements for cultural bias, discussing stereotypes in media, or exploring the role of English in globalization. Through such activities, students are not only taught language but are also encouraged to question and shape the sociocultural narratives that accompany it.

Cultural Influence on Students' Language Learning

1. Learning Styles and Cultural Norms

Culture significantly influences learning preferences and interactional behavior in classrooms. For example, students from collectivist cultures (e.g., many East and Southeast Asian contexts) often prefer group harmony, teacher authority, and indirect

The Ethnographic Dimension in English Language Teaching: Teaching Approaches and the Influence of Culture on Students

communication, while students from individualistic cultures may value personal expression and critical questioning (Hofstede Insights, 2021). Awareness of these norms helps teachers avoid misinterpreting quietness as disengagement or assertiveness as rudeness. Ethnographic insight allows educators to respect diverse participation styles while scaffolding communicative competence in culturally sensitive ways.

2. Language Anxiety and Identity

Cultural expectations and self-perceptions strongly shape students' willingness to speak and their experiences of language anxiety. Learners from high power-distance cultures may be reluctant to speak in class due to fear of "losing face" or violating norms of deference (Brown & Lee, 2006). Teachers aware of these dynamics can create emotionally supportive spaces by encouraging risk-taking, validating effort, and fostering peer collaboration. Ethnographic ELT places identity at the center of language learning and regards emotional and cultural safety as essential for meaningful participation.

3. Code-switching and Multilingual Realities

In multilingual contexts, students often engage in code-switching, alternating between languages during communication. Rather than viewing this as an error, ethnographic approaches celebrate code-switching as an authentic expression of hybrid identity and a strategic resource for meaning-making (Creese & Blackledge, 2015). Encouraging translanguaging in the classroom helps learners connect their L1 and L2 worlds and reinforces their linguistic agency. Classroom Implications. To incorporate ethnographic dimensions into ELT practice, educators can adopt the following strategies: Conduct cultural inventories or interviews with students to learn about their values, practices, and communication styles. Use local stories, folklore, and oral histories as reading or listening materials to make content relatable and inclusive. Encourage comparative reflection between home and target cultures, prompting learners to analyze similarities and differences critically.

Design tasks and projects that explore both global and local themes, using English as a tool for exploration and presentation and create inclusive classroom environments that affirm students' multilingual identities and cultural contributions. These practices cultivate not just linguistic skills but also intercultural competence, critical consciousness, and a deeper sense of belonging.

B. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic research design to explore the intricate interplay between teaching approaches and cultural influences in English Language Teaching (ELT). Ethnography.

Data Collection Methods

To capture the multifaceted nature of cultural influences in ELT, the study employed a combination of data collection methods:

Participant Observation: Engaging in classroom settings to observe interactions, teaching methodologies, and cultural dynamics firsthand.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Conducting interviews with teachers and students to gather insights into their perceptions, experiences, and cultural backgrounds.

Document Analysis: Reviewing curricular materials, and lesson plans, to understand the integration of cultural elements in ELT.

This triangulation of data sources ensures a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon.

Data Analysis Procedures

The collected data will be analyzed by using thematic analysis, identifying patterns and themes related to cultural influences and teaching approaches in ELT. This process involves coding data, categorizing themes, and interpreting findings within the cultural contexts of the participants.

C. RESEARCH RESULTS

The research aims to uncover how ethnographic perspectives in English Language Teaching (ELT) influence both teaching practices and learners' language acquisition, with a special focus on cultural dimensions. The following are the anticipated categories and findings that may emerge from ethnographic inquiry:

Increased Cultural Awareness Among Teachers

One likely outcome is the development of greater cultural awareness and sensitivity among English language teachers who employ ethnographic approaches. Teachers become more attuned to students' diverse cultural backgrounds and communication styles, resulting in: More inclusive lesson planning that incorporates culturally relevant themes, Reduced instances of cultural miscommunication or misunderstandings, and teachers adapting pedagogical strategies to students' socio-cultural contexts. Teachers who adopt ethnographic lenses tend to "redefine their instructional practices around students' lived experiences," leading to deeper engagement.

Improved Student Engagement and Motivation

By validating students' cultural identities in the classroom, ethnographically informed approaches are expected to boost learners' motivation and engagement. Students feel more respected and represented, which can increase their willingness to participate in

The Ethnographic Dimension in English Language Teaching: Teaching Approaches and the Influence of Culture on Students

classroom discussions, enhance language retention through culturally meaningful content, and foster a stronger emotional connection to the learning process. Student from an Indigenous background who share a story from their community in English may feel empowered, increasing confidence and reducing language anxiety (Suwandi et al., 2023).

Emergence of Intercultural Competence

Students exposed to culturally diverse content and peer collaboration are expected to demonstrate intercultural competence, including the ability to analyze and compare cultural practices critically, Openness to other worldviews and ways of thinking, and Growth in empathy, tolerance, and curiosity toward different cultures.

Identification of Cultural Barriers to Language Learning

Your research may also uncover persistent cultural and identity-related challenges affecting language learning, such as Students' fear of losing their cultural identity while mastering English, Language anxiety stemming from unfamiliar classroom dynamics or peer judgment, and Conflicts between collectivist values and individualistic classroom participation norms.

Enriched Curriculum and Material Development

Teachers engaged in ethnographic classroom practices may begin to adapt and co-construct materials that reflect students' lived realities. Possible results include: The use of local folktales, interviews with elders, and community case studies as reading and listening texts, Greater student involvement in creating learning materials, and Increased relevance and authenticity of classroom content. Chik & Ho (2020) suggest that locally developed materials help students build a sense of ownership and contextually grounded language competence.

Emergence of Reflective and Transformative Pedagogy

Teachers and students may jointly reflect on classroom practices, leading to transformative changes in how language and culture are taught and learned. Teachers may: Shift from being knowledge transmitters to co-learners, Engage in regular ethnographic journaling and reflection, and Facilitate student-led cultural projects that become integral to the curriculum. Freirean perspectives support this result by viewing the classroom as a dialogical space where culture, identity, and language intersect (Freire, 2018).

D. CONCLUSION

An ethnographic dimension in ELT transforms the classroom into a space of intercultural learning and mutual respect. By acknowledging the complex cultural backgrounds of learners and adapting pedagogical practices accordingly, teachers can enhance language acquisition, engagement, and global competence. Embracing culture in language teaching is not a luxury but a necessity in an increasingly interconnected world.

REFERENCES

- 1) Baker, W. (2015). Culture and Identity through English as a Lingua Franca: Rethinking Concepts and Goals in Intercultural Communication. De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501502149>
- 2) Beckett, G. H., & Slater, T. (2018). Project-Based Learning in TESOL: Connecting Classroom Practice to the Real World. TESOL Press. DOI: 10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0427
- 3) Brown, H. D., & Lee, H. (2006). Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy (5 ed.). Pearson Education ESL. ISBN 978-0-13-199128-6
- 4) Canagarajah, S. (2020). Translanguaging in Language Teaching and Learning: From a Heteroglossic Ethnographic Perspective. *Modern Language Journal*, 104(3), 529–533. e-ISSN: 1540-4781
- 5) Chik, A., & Ho, J. (2020). Localizing English Language Teaching: Context, Culture, and Curriculum. *English Today*, 36(2), 31–38. e-ISSN: 1540-4781
- 6) Creese, A., & Blackledge, A. (2015). Translanguaging and Identity in Educational Settings. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 35, 20-35. DOI: 10.1017/S0267190514000233
- 7) Dervin, F. (2020). Exploring "Interculturality" in Education: Policy, Theory, and Practice. Springer.
- 8) Duff, P., & Uchida, Y. (2022). Ethnographies of Language Learning and Use in Educational Contexts. In *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Culture*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315793993>
- 9) Ellis, R., Skehan, P., Li, S., Shintani, N., & Lambert, C. (2020). *Task-Based Language Teaching: Theory and Practice*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108643689>
- 10) Freire, P. (2018). Pedagogy of the Oppressed (50th Anniv). Bloomsbury Academic. ISBN 9781501314162
- 11) Gay, G. (2018). Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice (3 ed.). Teachers College Press. ISBN 978-0807764251.
- 12) Hofstede Insights. (2021). Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations (2nd ed.). Sage. Diakses dari <https://www.hofstede-insights.com>
- 13) Holliday, A. (2019). Understanding Intercultural Communication: Negotiating a Grammar of Culture (2 ed.). Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9781351139526

The Ethnographic Dimension in English Language Teaching: Teaching Approaches and the Influence of Culture on Students

- 14) Hornberger, N. H., & Hult, F. M. (2021). Ethnography and Language Policy. In Tollefson & Pérez-Milans (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Language Policy and Planning*. Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780190458898
- 15) Kramsch, C. (2021). *Language as Symbolic Power*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108869386>
- 16) Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2016). *Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning*. In M. Hawkins (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Language and Identity*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315669816>
- 17) Palmer, D. K., & Menken, K. (2018). Ethnography and Language Policy. In Tollefson & Pérez-Milans (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Language Policy and Planning*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190458898.001.0001>
- 18) Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2020). *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*. Teachers College Press. ISBN 978-0807775707
- 19) Suwandi, S., Baron, R., & Permana, A. (2023). An Ethnographic Research of English Learning Objectives in Junior High School. *Linguistics and ELT Journal*, 6(1), 45–60. Diambil dari <https://journal.ummat.ac.id/index.php/JELTL/article/view/27747>



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0)

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.