

Culture, Local Wisdom, and Identity in EFL: A Literature Review

Parasetya Harahap¹, Reni Gusnaeni²

Email: rnisgsnaini@gmail.com

**English Education Department Program, Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training
State Islamic University of Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau**

Abstract

This literature review examines the integration of culture, local wisdom, and identity in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching through five interrelated themes: preserving local identity through EFL instruction, using local wisdom as content for speaking and writing tasks, implementing culturally responsive teaching in multilingual contexts, examining students' attitudes toward culture-based EFL learning, and negotiating global English with local culture in classrooms. Drawing on sociocultural theory, intercultural communicative competence, culturally responsive pedagogy, and World Englishes perspectives, this review synthesizes studies from Indonesia and broader international scholarship. Findings indicate that integrating local culture and wisdom into EFL instruction strengthens learner motivation, intercultural competence, identity affirmation, and communicative performance. However, challenges remain in teacher preparedness, materials development, and balancing global English norms with local authenticity. The review concludes that culture-based EFL should be treated not as supplementary content but as a foundational principle for curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher education, particularly under Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum.

Keywords: EFL teaching, local wisdom, cultural identity, culturally responsive pedagogy, multilingual classrooms, World Englishes

1. Introduction

Recent developments in English language teaching have shifted from viewing language as a neutral system of grammar and communication toward understanding it as inseparable from culture, identity, and power (Claire Kramsch, 1993; Bonny Norton, 2013). Within this perspective, EFL instruction is increasingly expected to help learners negotiate linguistic competence alongside intercultural awareness and identity construction. This shift is especially significant in multilingual and multicultural contexts such as Indonesia, where English learning occurs alongside rich local languages, traditions, and value systems.

Indonesia's educational landscape with hundreds of local languages and diverse ethnic identities presents both opportunities and tensions in EFL instruction. On one hand, English provides access to global communication and knowledge exchange. On the other, excessive dependence on Western-oriented teaching materials may marginalize learners' cultural identities and create what scholars describe as cultural alienation (McKay, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2012). Consequently, the integration of local wisdom and cultural identity has emerged as an important response to ensure that English functions as a medium for expressing local realities rather than replacing them.

This concern aligns with the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, which argue that learners' cultural backgrounds should be positioned as assets in teaching rather than obstacles (Gloria Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018). In EFL contexts, this means designing materials and classroom interactions that connect English learning with local traditions, social practices, and multilingual repertoires. Such approaches also resonate with Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes character formation, contextual learning, and local-wisdom-based education (Hasanuddin et al., 2024).

This review synthesizes scholarship around five themes central to culture-based EFL learning: (1) preserving local identity, (2) using local wisdom as task content, (3) culturally responsive teaching in multilingual classrooms, (4) students' attitudes toward culture-based EFL, and (5) negotiating global English and local culture. Through this synthesis, the review aims to propose a conceptual framework for integrating culture and identity into EFL curriculum and practice.

2. Theoretical Frameworks in Culture-Based EFL

Several theoretical perspectives underpin research on culture, identity, and local wisdom in EFL. First, sociocultural theory emphasizes that language learning is socially mediated and shaped by interaction within cultural contexts (Lev Vygotsky, 1978). Learning English, therefore, involves participation in culturally situated meaning-making. Second, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) argues that effective language users are not merely grammatically proficient but able to interpret, compare, and mediate between cultural systems (Michael Byram, 1997). Third, culturally responsive pedagogy frames learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds as instructional resources (Gay, 2018). This perspective is especially relevant in multilingual EFL classrooms. Fourth, World Englishes and English as an International Language challenge the assumption that English belongs exclusively to inner-circle native speakers. Instead, English is understood as plural and locally appropriated (Jennifer Jenkins, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2012).

Together, these frameworks support the argument that EFL instruction should promote linguistic development while affirming learners' identities and local knowledge.

3. Preserving Local Identity through EFL Instruction

A recurring theme in the literature is that English should function as a means for articulating local identity rather than erasing it. Studies in Indonesian EFL contexts show that integrating local cultural symbols, traditions, and social practices increases students' sense of relevance and belonging (Giyatmi et al., 2022; Yassi & Priyatmojo, 2016).

Classroom practices such as describing hometown traditions, presenting local heroes, or discussing religious and community practices in English allow students to use the target language to represent their own worlds. Such tasks transform English into a tool of identity performance rather than cultural imitation. This aligns with Norton's (2013) notion of "imagined communities," where learners envision themselves as legitimate users of English while maintaining their local affiliations. Similarly, McKay (2003) argues that EFL pedagogy should reflect learners' source cultures rather than privileging only target-language cultures.

Research also suggests that identity-affirming content can enhance willingness to communicate and reduce language anxiety (Suhartini, 2024). When students recognize themselves in learning materials, they are more likely to participate actively and invest in language learning. However, scholars caution that cultural representation should move beyond superficial references to festivals or artifacts and engage deeper values, beliefs, and social practices (Kramsch, 1993; Putri et al., 2023).

4. Local Wisdom as Content for Speaking and Writing Tasks

A second strand of research focuses on using local wisdom as content for language tasks. Concepts such as *gotong royong*, *adat*, environmental stewardship, and oral traditions provide culturally meaningful topics for communication tasks. Within Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), meaningful tasks drive language acquisition through authentic use (David Nunan, 2004; Willis & Willis, 2007). When tasks are grounded in familiar cultural knowledge, students can focus cognitive resources on language production rather than decoding unfamiliar concepts.

Studies indicate that culture-based speaking tasks—interviews with elders, presentations on local customs, or discussions of community values—support oral fluency and intercultural awareness (Putri et al., 2026; Widodo, 2016). Similarly, writing tasks based on local wisdom improve idea generation and textual organization because students possess prior knowledge about the content (Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018). Learners can write descriptive, narrative, and argumentative texts around topics they understand deeply.

Several studies also connect local wisdom tasks with environmental and ethical education. Traditional ecological knowledge, for example, can be integrated into discussions of sustainability, linking local values with global concerns. Nevertheless, effective implementation requires careful scaffolding. Teachers need support in designing tasks that maintain linguistic rigor while treating cultural content critically rather than romantically.

5. Culturally Responsive Teaching in Multilingual EFL Contexts

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) has gained increasing attention in multilingual EFL contexts. Rather than treating linguistic diversity as interference, CRT frames learners' multilingual repertoires as resources for learning (Gay, 2018). In Indonesia, where students often navigate Bahasa Indonesia, local languages, and English simultaneously, studies show that strategic translanguaging and identity-affirming interaction can improve participation and reduce anxiety (Wijaya et al., 2026; Asdar et al., 2025).

Practices associated with culturally responsive EFL include:

- strategic use of local languages for scaffolding;
- multicultural materials representing diverse communities;
- code-meshing and translanguaging activities;
- intercultural dialogue tasks;
- inclusive classroom interaction patterns.

These practices align with research showing that students from underrepresented linguistic backgrounds participate more actively when their identities are recognized (Ladson-Billings, 1995). CRT also contributes to equity by challenging hidden hierarchies that privilege certain accents, dialects, or cultural norms. In this sense, it functions not only as a teaching method but as a framework for inclusion and justice.

Challenges remain, however, particularly in teacher preparation. Many teachers report uncertainty about balancing multilingual practices with English exposure goals (Borg, 2006).

6. Students' Attitudes toward Culture-Based EFL Learning

Learners' attitudes play a central role in the success of culture-based EFL. Research consistently shows generally positive responses to integrating local culture in English instruction (Asdar et al., 2025; Suhartini, 2024). Positive attitudes are associated with:

- stronger motivation;
- lower anxiety;
- greater willingness to communicate;
- stronger sense of belonging.

These outcomes support the argument that cultural relevance strengthens affective engagement, which in turn supports language development (Kassem, 2019).

However, attitudes are not uniformly positive. Some students prefer globally oriented content or initially feel unfamiliar with cultural topics beyond their own region. Others may perceive poorly designed cultural activities as tokenistic.

Studies suggest positive attitudes increase when cultural content is explicitly connected to language-learning objectives rather than treated as decorative enrichment. This finding reinforces the need for pedagogical coherence.

7. Negotiating Global English and Local Culture

A growing body of literature rejects the binary opposition between global English and local culture. Instead, scholars conceptualize classrooms as “third spaces” where learners negotiate multiple linguistic and cultural resources (Jenkins, 2006). World Englishes scholarship argues there are multiple legitimate Englishes rather than a single native-speaker norm (Kirkpatrick, 2012). This perspective allows learners to appropriate English while maintaining local identities.

In practice, negotiation may involve:

- introducing World Englishes awareness;
- comparing Indonesian English usage with other varieties;
- using bilingual or multilingual texts;
- engaging in intercultural comparison tasks.

Such practices help students avoid idealizing foreign cultures while developing critical intercultural awareness (Giyatmi et al., 2022).

Recent studies on English-medium instruction in Indonesia further suggest that bilingual approaches are effective when paired with emotionally supportive and culturally responsive pedagogy (Indriani, 2025). Under the Merdeka Curriculum, this balance is particularly important: English is positioned as a means for global participation, while local identity and character remain central educational goals.

8. Discussion: Toward a Glocal EFL Framework

Across the literature, several converging themes emerge. First, culture and identity are increasingly viewed as central rather than peripheral to EFL instruction. Second, local wisdom offers meaningful content for communicative and task-based pedagogy. Third, multilingual and culturally responsive approaches support equity, participation, and learner investment. Fourth, negotiating global English with local culture requires moving beyond imitation toward appropriation.

Together, these insights support what may be called a glocal EFL framework, in which English functions simultaneously as a global resource and a local expressive tool. This framework has implications for:

- curriculum design (embedding local wisdom systematically);
- textbook development (increasing source-culture representation);
- teacher education (training in CRT and intercultural pedagogy);
- assessment (valuing intercultural competence alongside linguistic proficiency).

9. Conclusion

This review indicates that culture, local wisdom, and identity are foundational resources for meaningful EFL instruction. Preserving local identity, using local wisdom as communicative content, implementing culturally responsive teaching, attending to students' attitudes, and negotiating global English with local culture all contribute to more inclusive and effective language education. For Indonesia's multilingual EFL contexts, these findings support the integration of culture-based pedagogy within the Merdeka Curriculum. English should be taught not merely as a foreign code to be mastered but as a resource through which learners express who they are, engage globally, and participate ethically across cultures.

Future research should examine the long-term impact of local-wisdom-based tasks on speaking, writing, intercultural competence, and affective outcomes.

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