

Is Cultural Identity the Missing Link in English Learning?

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English language education has become an increasingly important priority in many parts of the world. However, discussions about improving English learning often emphasize curriculum, assessment, and language proficiency while paying far less attention to cultural identity. This imbalance raises an important question: can English learning truly become meaningful when learners struggle to see their own cultural experiences reflected in the classroom?

Yet this question remains largely overlooked in many discussions about English education. Debates frequently focus on curriculum reforms, proficiency benchmarks, and assessment outcomes, while the issue of cultural relevance receives considerably less attention. As a result, English learning is often treated as a linguistic endeavour detached from the social and cultural realities of learners. For young children in particular, such a separation may limit the extent to which they find meaning and personal connection in the learning process.



One possible answer lies in a dimension that has long been treated as secondary rather than foundational: culture. For decades, English language teaching has concentrated on linguistic competence, emphasizing vocabulary acquisition, grammar mastery, and communicative skills. While these objectives remain important, research increasingly demonstrates that language learning is deeply connected to learners' identities, emotions, social relationships, and cultural backgrounds. These dimensions influence how students participate in learning activities, develop confidence, and sustain long-term interest in language study.

Within the field of English for Young Learners (EYL), student engagement has become a central concern. Engagement shapes how learners interact with classroom tasks, respond to instructional practices, and persist when confronted with challenges. It is widely understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioural participation, cognitive investment, emotional involvement, and social interaction. More recent perspectives have expanded this understanding by recognizing cultural relevance as an important component of meaningful learning. When students encounter materials that resonate with their experiences and identities, they are more likely to perceive learning as personally valuable rather than merely obligatory.

Rethinking

Rethinking Student Engagement in English Education through Cultural Identity

This perspective is particularly relevant in multilingual and multicultural societies such as Indonesia. Young learners enter classrooms carrying rich cultural knowledge acquired through family traditions, community practices, local stories, and everyday interactions. These cultural resources represent valuable educational assets. Nevertheless, English learning materials frequently present contexts and narratives drawn predominantly from foreign settings. Learners may encounter cultural references that feel distant from their daily realities. Although exposure to international perspectives is an important educational objective, exclusive reliance on foreign cultural content can create a sense of detachment that weakens learners' connection to the subject.

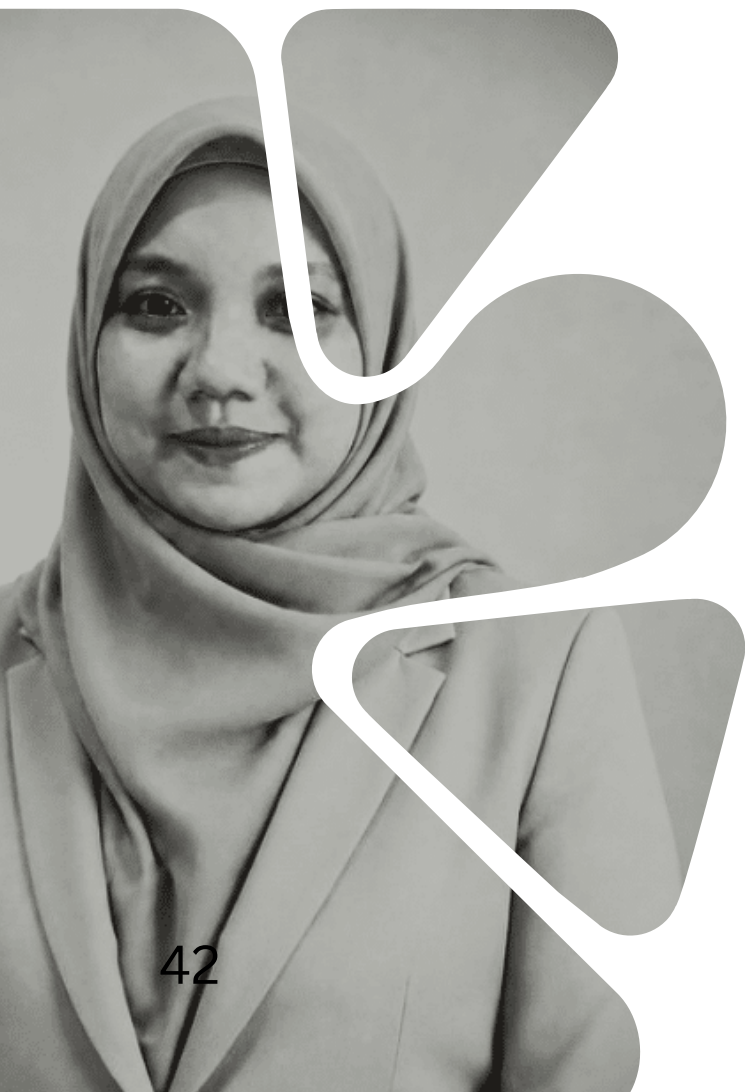
Cultural integration offers an alternative pathway. Rather than positioning local culture and English learning as separate domains, this approach encourages meaningful connections between them. Learners can discuss traditional games, regional cuisines, local folklore, and community celebrations through English. Language becomes a tool for expressing familiar ideas and sharing personal experiences. In this way, English shifts from being an external academic subject to becoming a medium through which learners interpret and communicate aspects of their own world.

Evidence from educational research points to a consistent conclusion: students become more engaged when learning experiences reflect aspects of their cultural realities. Emotional connection tends to increase when instructional content resonates with familiar experiences, while participation becomes more meaningful when learners can draw upon their own knowledge and perspectives. Cultural familiarity creates confidence, encourages interaction, and strengthens learners' investment in classroom activities.

The relationship between culture and engagement extends beyond content selection. Cultural integration influences the broader classroom environment by affirming learners' identities. Scholars working within culturally responsive pedagogy argue that students learn more effectively when their linguistic and cultural backgrounds are acknowledged as legitimate sources of knowledge. Such recognition fosters a sense of belonging. Students who feel respected and represented are more likely to participate actively, collaborate with peers, and develop positive attitudes toward learning.

Identity affirmation is particularly important during childhood, when learners begin developing confidence and perceptions of themselves as students. When classroom materials reflect their communities and experiences, children are more likely to view learning as relevant and personally meaningful. In contrast, the absence of cultural representation may reinforce the perception that school knowledge exists apart from everyday life.

The connection between culture and motivation is equally significant. Traditional perspectives often viewed English learning as a process that required learners to move toward a foreign linguistic and cultural sphere. Contemporary thinking challenges this assumption. Learners can maintain strong attachments to their first language and cultural identity while simultaneously developing enthusiasm for English. Motivation becomes more sustainable when multilingualism is perceived as an expansion of communicative possibilities rather than a replacement of existing identities.



Cultural Identity

In many Indonesian classrooms, English is still presented primarily as a body of knowledge to be mastered rather than a medium through which children can interpret and communicate their own experiences. This orientation may partly explain why learners often participate in classroom activities without developing a lasting connection to the language itself. When English learning is linked to local identities, traditions, and everyday realities, learners are more likely to perceive the language as relevant to their lives rather than as an abstract school subject.

Emotional experiences play a significant role in shaping learners' engagement with language learning. Feelings of enjoyment, pride, curiosity, and accomplishment encourage participation and persistence, whereas boredom, frustration, and anxiety can diminish engagement. Cultural integration contributes to more positive emotional experiences by increasing relevance and familiarity within learning activities. Students often express greater enthusiasm when discussing topics that reflect their interests, communities, and lived experiences.

Teachers play a central role in translating these principles into classroom practice. Effective cultural integration requires more than adding occasional cultural references to instructional materials. It demands thoughtful decisions regarding content selection, classroom interaction, assessment practices, and learning objectives. Teachers need opportunities to develop cultural awareness and reflective teaching practices that enable them to recognize the diversity present within their classrooms. Professional development grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy can help create learning environments where engagement emerges naturally from meaningful interaction.

Technology further expands opportunities for culturally integrated language learning. Digital platforms enable teachers to incorporate multimedia resources showcasing local traditions, community narratives, and regional heritage. Students can create digital stories, document cultural practices, and participate in projects that explore local identities through English. Such activities connect language learning with authentic communication and creative expression while making cultural knowledge more accessible and relevant to contemporary learners.

Perhaps the question facing English educators today is not how early children should learn English or how much exposure they require. A more pressing question concerns whether English classrooms are capable of recognizing the identities learners bring with them. Discussions about student engagement often revolve around teaching methods, technological innovations, and curriculum design. These factors certainly matter, yet their impact is often diminished when learners struggle to recognize their own identities, experiences, and communities within the learning process. Cultural identity provides a sense of relevance, belonging, and personal meaning that can transform language learning from a classroom requirement into a meaningful educational experience. Viewed from this perspective, culture is far more than an additional classroom resource; it may well be the missing link that connects English learning to genuine student engagement.

