Localization and Contextualization in ELT Curriculum and Materials: Reflecting Learners' Culture, Values, and Identities

Elena Sukma Aryatama, Nathanael Joan Pratama

Master's Program of English Education, Faculty of Language and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang

elenaskm@students.unnes.ac.id

ABSTRACT

The increasing role of English as a global language poses challenges in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), particularly in relation to the incompatibility of teaching materials with the local cultural context of learners. Global and Western-oriented ELT curricula and teaching materials often overlook the local culture, values, and identity of learners, leading to low engagement and a lack of meaning in learning. This study aims to examine the importance of localization and contextualization in ELT curricula and materials in reflecting the culture, values, and identities of learners. This study employs a critical literature review method, analyzing journal articles and relevant theoretical sources related to ELT, material localization, and cultural identity. The results of the study indicate that integrating local culture into ELT curricula and teaching materials can enhance the relevance of learning, increase student motivation, improve language comprehension, and strengthen learners' cultural identity, all while maintaining the achievement of global communicative competence. This study concludes that localization and contextualization are not merely pedagogical choices but essential requirements in ELT. The contribution of this study lies in the development of a conceptual framework that links localization, contextualization, and learner identity formation as the basis for developing a more

inclusive and contextual ELT curriculum.

Keywords: cultural identity, contextualization, ELT curriculum, localization, teaching materials

INTRODUCTION

The increasing global prominence of the English language has sparked a critical discussion within English Language Teaching (ELT) about the balance between global English and the preservation of local linguistic and cultural identities. While English serves as a vital tool for international communication and socioeconomic advancement, its widespread use has also raised concerns about the potential erosion of native languages and cultural heritage, as described by Baylis et al. (2020). This tension is particularly evident in diverse EFL environments, where learners often grapple with the decision of whether to assimilate into American or British societies or to maintain their unique cultural backgrounds, a concern observed by Christison & Murray (2021).

Previous literature highlights the fundamental role of contextualization in EFL instruction, emphasizing the importance of situating language content within relevant historical, sociocultural, and situational contexts to enhance comprehension, engagement, and retention (Brown & Douglas, 2004). However, a significant gap exists in current ELT curriculum and materials, as they frequently fail to adequately reflect the local cultures, values, and identities of learners. Textbooks, often designed for a broad audience, may not capture the nuances of specific cultural phenomena, religious practices, or daily life experiences pertinent to the students (Mahmoud, 2025). This oversight can hinder learner participation and understanding, as students may struggle to connect with unfamiliar cultural content while simultaneously acquiring a new language.

This paper aims to address the research gap by investigating how ELT curriculum and materials can be effectively localized to reflect learners' cultures, values, and identities. The purpose of this study is to raise awareness about the necessity of integrating local culture into EFL textbooks and

pedagogical approaches. By exploring the influence of students' native cultures on EFL skill development, this research seeks to demonstrate that when educators and learners engage in a genuine comparison and contrast of cultural elements shared by both target and native cultures, students can achieve a deeper understanding of the target culture while simultaneously strengthening their own cultural identity. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform the development of more meaningful and successful learning experiences for students across various cultural contexts (Mahmoud, 2025), ultimately fostering a sense of pride and connection to their own cultural heritage within the English language classroom.

This paper's exploration of localization and contextualization in ELT curriculum and materials, with a focus on reflecting learners' culture, values, and identities, is firmly rooted in several key theoretical frameworks. These theories offer a comprehensive understanding of how language learning is intricately linked to social interaction, cultural experience, and critical awareness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Localization in ELT: Definition, Origins, and Rationale

Localization in ELT refers to the adaptation of language teaching materials and curricula to align with the specific cultural, social, and linguistic contexts of the learners. This goes beyond mere translation, encompassing the modification of content, examples, and pedagogical approaches to make them relevant and meaningful to students' lived experiences. The origins of localization can be traced to a growing recognition of the limitations of universally applied, often Anglo-centric, ELT materials. As English became a global language, regional and native variations emerged, and users from diverse backgrounds brought their distinct histories, cultural identities, and perspectives to English language pedagogy (Kavakli, 2020). This led to concerns about the potential for English to diminish the sovereignty and influence of native English speakers over the language, and for the language to become detached from the cultures of its first-language users

(Kavakli, 2020).

The rationale for localization is multifaceted. Firstly, it addresses the issue of cultural relevance. Textbooks that do not adequately capture the facets of local culture, such as Islamic Arabic history, literature, feasts, and way of life, can alienate learners (Mahmoud, 2025). Secondly, localization enhances motivation and engagement. When students encounter familiar cultural material, they can concentrate more readily on linguistic elements, as suggested by schema theory. This familiarity fosters a deeper understanding of their language learning objectives. Thirdly, it supports the development of cultural identity. Incorporating students' native cultures into the English language classroom helps them recognize and express their own cultural identity, particularly when discussing complex cultural concepts like family dynamics and morals. Finally, localization is crucial for effective communication.

Contextualization in Curriculum Design: Tailoring Content to Learners' Socio-Cultural Realities

Contextualization in curriculum design involves tailoring language content to pertinent historical, sociocultural, and situational contexts to enhance learners' comprehension, engagement, and retention (Brown & Douglas, 2004). It is a critical factor in selecting EFL textbooks, as it determines how well instructional materials align with the communicative demands, language proficiency, and cultural backgrounds of learners. The actual lived experiences of students need to be a key element of curriculum development and pedagogy. This approach ensures that the learning environment aligns with the students' needs and interests, making the learning process more meaningful and effective.

For instance, Arabic-speaking learners bring unique perspectives, vocabulary, and linguistic structures shaped by their cultural and religious backgrounds into their language learning process. Islamic culture's emphasis on linguistic precision can impact learners' attention to detail and accuracy in EFL contexts. Therefore, pedagogical approaches, curricular frameworks, and educational methodologies must be modified to localize English language instruction, maintain the position

of indigenous languages as cornerstones of culture, and incorporate elements of indigenous culture into EFL curricula. Examples of successful contextualization include the "Go for Chile" textbook series, which integrates Chilean places and concerns, and "English for Saudi Arabia," where nearly every scene is located in the original culture, encouraging students to converse about their culture and recognize their identity (Hinkel, 2012).

Cultural Identity and Language Learning

The relationship between cultural identity and language learning is profound and reciprocal. Language is not merely a tool for communication but also a carrier of culture, values, and worldview (Kramsch, 2003). As learners acquire a new language, they inevitably engage in a new culture. However, this engagement does not necessitate abandoning their native cultural identity. Instead, it fosters a "third place" where learners can objectively and subjectively reflect on both their first culture (C1) and the foreign language culture (C2), choosing meanings that best reflect their personal perspectives. This process emphasizes individual interpretations of culture rather than rigid stereotypical notions.

Fostering a sense of self and self-awareness among students is a crucial educational goal of foreign language instruction. EFL learners need to be aware of the necessity of acquiring both language and culture simultaneously, acknowledging and honoring their cultural background, and developing a positive attitude towards the target language's culture. When students are encouraged to use English to discuss their own culture, it helps them recognize their cultural identity. This integration of native culture into ELT can increase motivation and provide a deeper understanding of language learning objectives.

Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory is a cornerstone of this paper's theoretical framework. It posits that cognitive development is mediated by culture and social interaction

(Vygotsky, 1978). The theory emphasizes that individual mental functioning originates in social sources, first appearing on a social plane (intermental) and then being internalized on a psychological plane (intramental). This means that learning is not an isolated internal process but rather a product of interactions with others and the cultural tools available.

A key concept within Vygotsky's theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD is defined as the distance between what a learner can achieve independently (actual developmental level) and what they can achieve with the assistance of a more knowledgeable individual (potential developmental level). This assistance, known as scaffolding, provides learners with the framework to extend their knowledge. In the context of ELT, the ZPD highlights the importance of teacher-student and peer-peer interactions in language acquisition. The application of ZPD in group settings, where students with varying abilities work together, fosters constructive learning environments and promotes growth in subject areas through diverse viewpoints, problem-solving, and creative thinking.

Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978) suggested that culture plays a vital role in influencing and shaping development. This aligns with the need for cultural sensitivity in ELT, where educators must consider how cultural factors influence students' daily lives and learning. Bilingual teachers, for instance, are often more beneficial as they can bridge past and present cultures, creating a "happy medium" in the learning environment.

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is another vital theoretical lens. Byram (1997) defines ICC as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, which involves not only linguistic competence but also cultural understanding, attitudes, and skills. This approach moves beyond simply teaching language structures to foster intellectual inquiry and reflection on cultural standards and practices.

The "cultural awareness" approach, which helps students

comprehend and value cultural variances, is central to ICC (Byram, 1997). Educators utilize genuine cultural materials, such as literature and multimedia tools, to promote this awareness. The "experiential learning" method, which emphasizes hands-on interaction with cultural activities such as field excursions and language exchanges, enables students to gain firsthand knowledge of the target culture. Moreover, the "critical cultural awareness" approach, a component of ICC, pushes students to think critically about equality, authority, and injustice within and between cultures. This involves analyzing media and conversations to confront prejudices and stereotypes, resulting in a more nuanced and compassionate understanding of diverse cultural identities. The "integrated language and culture" approach, also aligned with ICC, promotes the seamless integration of language and cultural education to build international communicative skills.

The concept of "Third Places" by Kramsch (2003) further enriches ICC. These unofficial settings, such as community centers and online forums, facilitate genuine conversations and meaningful exchanges between people from diverse cultural backgrounds. In these spaces, learners acquire not just language proficiency but also an understanding of diverse cultural viewpoints, fostering a sense of integration and belonging. Cultural learning, to be genuinely meaningful, must be comparative and contrastive, leading to a greater understanding of both the stimulus culture and the learner's own culture.

Critical Pedagogy

While not explicitly detailed in the provided text, the principles of Critical Pedagogy, particularly as advanced by Paulo Freire, implicitly underpin the rationale for localization and contextualization. Freire (2020) advocates for a critical pedagogy that empowers learners to analyze and challenge oppressive social structures critically. In the context of ELT, this translates to moving away from a "banking" model of education, where knowledge is passively received, towards a more transformative approach where learners actively engage with and critique the cultural content presented.

The call for curriculum designers to be cautious when selecting themes for their curricula, to avoid potential conflicts and address the cultural backgrounds of their pupils (Mahmoud, 2025), aligns with the emphasis on relevance and respect for learners' experiences in critical pedagogy. Similarly, the "critical cultural awareness" approach, which challenges students to think critically about equality, authority, and injustice, directly reflects Freirean principles. By incorporating students' prior knowledge and experience, as well as current literacy practices in the school curriculum, educators can create "third spaces" where primary and secondary discourses merge, fostering a more equitable and empowering learning environment. This critical approach ensures that ELT does not inadvertently perpetuate cultural imperialism or reinforce linguistic hierarchies but instead empowers learners to navigate and shape their own artistic and linguistic identities in a globalized world.

Rationale for Localization and Contextualization

The imperative for localization and contextualization in English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum and materials stems from a profound understanding of how cultural relevance, learner identity, and pedagogical effectiveness are intertwined. This section elaborates on the critical reasons why adapting ELT to reflect learners' culture, values, and identities is not merely beneficial but essential for successful language acquisition and holistic educational development.

Why Localization Matters in ELT

Localization in ELT is a strategic response to the evolving landscape of global English. As English has become a lingua franca, its usage has diversified, resulting in the emergence of various regional and native dialects (Kavakli, 2020). This phenomenon has brought forth distinct cultural identities, perspectives, and habits into the realm of English language pedagogy. Consequently, there is a growing concern that the dominance of Anglo-centric English might diminish the influence of native English speakers over the language and detach English from its original cultural contexts. More

importantly, it raises questions about the preservation of local cultural legacies, especially in situations where English and native languages interact (Baylis et al, 2020). Localization directly addresses these concerns by ensuring that ELT materials are not only linguistically sound but also culturally appropriate and respectful of the learners' backgrounds.

Enhances Relevance and Learner Engagement

One of the primary reasons for localizing and contextualizing ELT materials is to enhance their relevance and, consequently, learner engagement significantly. When language content is placed within pertinent historical, sociocultural, and situational settings, it directly improves learners' comprehension, engagement, and retention (Brown Douglas, 2004). Textbooks, as the primary teaching tools, should align with the needs, level, and cultural background of the students (Mahmoud, 2025). Unfortunately, many existing resources often fail to adequately capture the nuances of local cultures, such as Islamic Arabic history, literature, feasts, and ways of life.

By incorporating familiar cultural material, educators can leverage schema theory, which demonstrates that exposing pupils to known content can positively affect their understanding of a second language. When students are familiar with the material, they can concentrate more readily on other linguistic elements, reducing the cognitive load associated with learning both new language and unfamiliar cultural concepts simultaneously. This approach makes the learning process more accessible and less intimidating, particularly for students at lower levels. For example, creating language classes that combine regional stories, melodies, or food allows instructors to study linguistic structures and cultural implications in individually significant and pertinent contexts (Hall and Cook, 2012). This direct connection to their own world makes the learning experience more meaningful and fosters a greater enthusiasm for language acquisition.

Validates Learners' Identities and Experiences

Localization and contextualization play a crucial role in

validating learners' identities and experiences, which is fundamental for fostering a positive learning environment and promoting self-awareness. Students are not merely language learners; they are individuals with complex lives, families, jobs, responsibilities, previous learning experiences, and dreams. Ignoring their cultural background can make it more difficult for them to participate and understand (Mahmoud, 2025).

When ELT materials reflect students' native cultures, it helps them recognize and affirm their own cultural identity. This is particularly important when learners need to discuss complex cultural concepts, such as family dynamics and morals, in a language they are still acquiring. Providing opportunities to express these ideas in English, using content rooted in their own experiences, empowers students and strengthens their sense of self. As Byram (1997) suggests, foreign language instruction should foster a sense of self-awareness among students. This validation of identity can significantly increase motivation among students and provide for a deeper understanding of their language learning objectives. The goal is not assimilation into British or American societies, which many European educators and learners have shown little interest in (Christison and Murray, 2021); rather, it is to enable learners to use English in a way that reflects their own local cultures and personal beliefs.

Reduces Cultural Imperialism in Teaching

The adoption of localized and contextualized ELT materials is a powerful antidote to cultural imperialism in education. Historically, the widespread use of English has sometimes been perceived as an invasion of cultural identities, with implications for the preservation of cultural legacy (Baylis et al., 2020). In some regions, national educational policies have even mirrored the belief that English language instruction should take precedence over indigenous languages, reinforcing linguistic hierarchies. This can lead to a situation where students' local cultures are at serious risk of losing their cultural identity.

By consciously integrating elements of indigenous culture into EFL curricula, educators can counteract these

tendencies. This involves modifying pedagogical approaches and curricular frameworks to localize English language instruction and maintain the position of native languages as cornerstones of culture. Curriculum planners ought to exercise discernment in their selection of themes, ensuring that they avoid conflicts with students' local culture while simultaneously addressing a range of issues directly related to it. This approach not only cultivates an enhanced comprehension of diverse cultural viewpoints but also advances inclusion and relevance in language-learning resources. For example, the Somalia EL textbook project was designed with a curriculum based on the nation's surroundings, taking into account the experiences and passions of its citizens. Such initiatives demonstrate a commitment to cultural sensitivity and respect, ensuring that ELT serves as a bridge for communication rather than a vehicle for cultural dominance.

Case Examples

Numerous examples illustrate the successful implementation of localization and contextualization. The "Go for Chile" textbook series, created by the Ministry of Education in Chile, features students sailing along the Chilean coasts, dealing with local places and concerns to motivate children about their own culture and nation (Mahmoud, 2025). Similarly, "English for Saudi Arabia" places nearly every scene in the original culture, encouraging conversations about local identity. In Turkey, the "Spotlight on English" textbook incorporates Turkish cuisine, history, and weather, catering to English-speaking tourists traveling within the Country. These illustrations demonstrate how cultural content can be shaded in various ways, from fully student-created to almost totally Anglo-centric, to integrate national culture as a crucial component of a comprehensive curriculum. These examples underscore the practical benefits of localization in creating engaging, relevant, and culturally affirming ELT experiences.

Strategies for Localizing ELT Curriculum and Materials

In the educational context, localization can be defined as integrating curriculum, learning content, and pedagogy with learners' specific cultural backgrounds in real life. (Ifenatuora et al., 2021) Rather than using globalized materials, which can create unfamiliarity, media and materials should be used in the learning process to provide a more meaningful and familiar context for EFL learners. The specific cultural context refers to the local culture that is understood and known by EFL learners, or, in other words, the context presented in the curriculum and learning materials is adapted to real-life situations of EFL learners. This integration is crucial in supporting learners in learning English, as it can enhance EFL learners' skills. (Abdelwahab Mahmoud, et al.,2024) However, to ensure whether the localization process runs smoothly and enhances the skills of EFL learners, several strategies are needed in its application. Two strategies need to be considered.

The first one is integrating the curriculum and local culture. The most effective strategy for localizing curriculum is to design it in a way that combines local cultural values with the learning outcomes. Instead of using unfamiliar global foreign culture, which can lead to a lack of interest among learners in deepening their English language learning (Laeen et al., 2019), integrating local culture into the curriculum can increase learners' interest in learning English as a foreign language. This is because EFL learners are more familiar with and understand the cultural, social, and cultural values and traditions of the areas they live in. (Abdelwahab Mahmoud, et al.,2024) For example, in the Indonesian context, the curriculum can be adapted and developed by integrating regional cultures into the content of learning English as a foreign language, Indonesian historical stories, regional music, authentic regional foods, and so on. Thus, embedding local cultural elements into the ELT curriculum not only enhances learners' engagement but also fosters a stronger connection between language learning and their own cultural identity.

The second one is integrating textbooks and local culture. Textbooks are one of the primary sources of materials in the EFL learning process. (Wuttisrisiriporn et al.,2019) Sometimes, textbooks still present global content that is less familiar or

even in contrast to the local culture of EFL learners. Therefore, integrating the local culture into textbooks can be one strategy for localizing material. In the process of textbook localization, some materials can be integrated with various sources that have a close relationship with local cultural values, such as the use of natural folk tales, regional songs, native historical stories, social conditions, and geographical conditions of the region, among others. (Laeen, et al., 2019) All of these sources can be used as references in designing a textbook for learning English as a foreign language, which, of course, also undergoes localization. With the localization of textbooks, learners can easily understand the existing material because they can apply their understanding of cultural values and traditions that are used in learning English as a foreign language. The two strategies mentioned previously, if carried out simultaneously and collaboratively in a curriculum design, will enable the creation of an integrated curriculum that incorporates local wisdom, including values, culture, and traditions, in accordance with what is needed and understood by learners of English as a foreign language.

Challenges in Localizing ELT Curriculum and Materials

Although the process of localizing the curriculum and materials in learning English as a foreign language is crucial for supporting learner skill development, several challenges must be overcome. According to Ifenatuora, G. P., Awoyemi, O., & Atobatele, F. A. (2021), there are three main challenges in the process of localizing the curriculum and materials.

The first one is the discrepancy in culture within the curriculum. The contexts presented in the curriculum and materials, especially in textbooks, are mainly derived from popular cultures in regions where English is used in everyday conversation, or in other words, Western culture. Although these contexts are relevant to English learning, they often fail to engage learners from regions with different cultural backgrounds and traditions. This can result in reduced learner motivation due to a lack of understanding of the value of the contexts presented. (Ifenatuora et al., 2021) In addition, learners cannot apply what they learn in social reality due to

the differences and lack of relevance between the context of the material and the context of real life.

For example, in the Indonesian context, English language learning materials often present winter traditions. This is irrelevant to the social context of foreign language learners in Indonesia, who do not practice such traditions. As a result, learners can only learn them without directly applying the material. Therefore, aligning learning materials with culturally relevant contexts ensures that learners can engage meaningfully with the content and use it to their own lived experiences.

Secondly, there are policy and Institutional Barriers. The centralized curriculum development process, which adheres to standardized rules established by the government to standardize English as a foreign language learning material, presents a significant challenge in the localization of ELT curriculum and materials. Centralized curriculum development offers little opportunity to adapt and align learning materials and resources with local cultures. This is due to the standardized rules that require curriculum developers to use government-established material standards. Consequently, they are limited to a single standard when developing their curriculum.

The last one is a limitation of pedagogy. In addition to the two challenges mentioned above, from an educator's perspective, there is also a significant challenge, namely, the readiness of educators to implement materials that integrate local cultural values and traditions. Sometimes, educators are not prepared to undertake this, resulting in an inadequate material localization process. This is due to a lack of training for educators regarding the importance of emphasizing local cultural aspects in English learning. (Ifenatuora et al., 2021) As a result, educators continue to use the established standard materials without modifying them to meet the needs of learners.

Solution for The Challenges

According to Deng, S., & Wang, X. (2023), two strategies can be employed to overcome the challenges in localizing ELT

curriculum and materials. Firstly, developing a collaborative community. In the process of creating a localized curriculum, the involvement of many parties is necessary. (Deng, S. et al., 2023) Not only the government, but also local parties, such as regional writers, native speakers, or people closely connected to the local culture, as well as researchers, are involved. Furthermore, teacher educators also have a crucial role as facilitators who guide teachers in implementing the localization process in learning. This community must always collaborate in every development of the curriculum and English learning materials, so that later materials can be created that are aligned with the cultural background and traditions of learners.

Secondly, developing a framework for improving local ELT materials. A standardized framework is also needed for the development of localized ELT curricula and materials. This framework will serve as a reference for the evaluation, improvement, and development of these curricula and materials. Four main items form the basis for evaluating localized ELT curricula and materials, as outlined by Deng, S., & Wang, X. (2023): language, content, integration of local cultural values, and multidimensional development of local ELT materials.

Language is the first crucial element in this evaluation framework. The language used in localized ELT materials, particularly in text, must be authentic, compliant with English norms, and easily understood by learners. Second is content, where the material presented must be aligned and appropriate in several aspects, including the suitability of the difficulty level, alignment of context with learners' daily lives, and compliance with the predetermined educational theme. Third, integration with local cultural values is crucial, as the material must be adapted and connected to the local values that form the learners' background, allowing them to understand and apply what they learn in real life easily. And finally, multi-dimensional development of Local ELT Materials. This relates to learning support resources, including learning materials and electronic resources, as well as teachers' ability to effectively apply these materials and employ appropriate teaching techniques, such as the use of deep learning approaches.

CONCLUSION

The localization and contextualization of ELT curriculum and materials are not merely pedagogical preferences but essential strategies to ensure meaningful, relevant, and empowering language learning experiences. As this paper has highlighted, the increasing global role of English must not overshadow learners' cultural values and identities. Instead, effective ELT must integrate local cultural elements into curriculum design and textbooks, enabling learners to connect language learning with their lived realities. Such an approach enhances motivation, deepens comprehension, and validates learners' cultural identities, ultimately fostering pride and confidence in using English while remaining connected to their roots.

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