Intercultural Topics in the Indonesian English Language Teaching Classroom: Contextualizing Local and Neutral Cultures to Target and Global Cultures

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Abstract: Recently, there has been a phenomenon of reclaiming cultures other than those of the target language in English language teaching (ELT). This qualitative research explores intercultural topics in Indonesian ELT classrooms that are shown along with the target and global cultures. The research involves four English teachers from two Indonesian universities who have intercultural experience studying in universities overseas. Data were collected through observational fieldnotes, interview guides, audio recordings, and compilation of documents. The study reveals that local and neutral culture topics have functioned as templates to contextualize target and global cultures in Indonesian ELT classrooms in order to develop students' intercultural awareness of local, target, and global cultures.

Keywords: ELT classrooms, local culture, target culture, global culture, intercultural experience, intercultural topics.

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1. Introduction

A globalized world has geared many scholars to explore intercultural competence (ICC) and its expression in intercultural communication. ICC acknowledges the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures (Byram 1997, Bennett 2008, Lustig & Koester 2006). Byram's ICC definition comprises five elements: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical awareness. These dimensions support appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts. Lustig and Koester describe ICC as requiring knowledge, motivation, skills in verbal and non-verbal communication, and appropriate and effective behaviors. Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) claim there are five qualities of being interculturally competent speakers: empathy, intercultural experience/training, motivation, global attitude, and ability to listen well in conversation. To cope with the crucial demand to be successful in intercultural communication, language education must take teaching culture into account.

Teaching culture has been an inseparable part of second language teaching/learning and has remained the important issue in language education (Kramsh 2013). In English language teaching (ELT), cultural representations are grounded in textbooks and related references. The cultural content of ELT textbooks becomes one of the cornerstones for introducing learners to other cultures. Baker (2011) argues that exploration of language-learning materials functions to evaluate cultural images and descriptions in local textbooks and images of other cultures both in local and imported ELT textbooks. Regarding teaching cultural content in ELT, whose culture should be predominantly taught: the culture of target language (L2), the language learners' home the culture, or a global culture? Should these cultures be taught equally?

English teachers are often not aware that most ELT materials are not presented in any neutral or value-free way. As Cunningsworth writes (1995: 90), "course books will directly or

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indirectly communicate sets of social and cultural values which are inherent in their make-up". Most current English-as-foreign-language (EFL) or English-as-second-language (ESL) textbooks expose features of native-speakers' Anglo-American cultures, since they do not offer equally representative contents of cultural values from myriad cultures (Tseng 2002, Yuen 2011). Shin, Eslami, and Chen (2011) argue that different voices and cultural perspectives need to be accommodated in ELT textbooks to enable language learners to figure out the diversity of cultural values and perspectives. Such ideas have previously been proposed by Widdowson (1998), who asserts that instructional materials and activities should provide examples of appropriate native and non-native speaker discourse/interactions. Discourses with exclusively Anglo-American content are irrelevant for many language learners for use in authentic settings.

To adopt a globalizing perspective, English teachers should rethink their teaching methods to place equal value on non-native and native speakers' cultural dimensions. There is a particular challenge given the status of English as an international language: a lingua franca. Language teachers must pay serious concern to the main goals of second language cultural learning: global cultural consciousness and intercultural citizenship (Byram 2011, Kumaravadivelu 2008). The strategy that has been used to reduce the dominance of US and British culture in English-teaching materials is to shift the focus away from an Anglo-American perspective to local and global cultures: "reclaiming the local and global" (Garcia 2005, Nault 2006, Rubdy 2009, Shin Eslami & Chen 2011, Ali & Walker 2014, Mambu 2014, Raquitico 2014, Rai & Deng 2014, Su 2014, Forman 2014, Tajeddin & Teimournezhad 2014).

ELT materials should contain local and international contexts both familiar and relevant to language learners' lives to help them develop intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Many researchers advocate reclaiming local and global cultures. Rai and Deng (2014) explore the "glocalisation" of ELT in the Chinese context by relating local situations with global awareness and analyzing sample learning materials. Su (2014) evaluates linguistic and cultural issues around the status of English as a lingua franca and the wider issue of intercultural understanding in Taiwan's high-school-level EFL textbooks. Su reports that the textbooks generally legitimate the hegemony of American and British English as the standard or only acceptable varieties of the language. Forman's (2014) study of an EFL textbook in use at a Thai university reveals that the textbook proved misleading in its cultural assumptions and discourses. It was chosen due to local teachers' assumptions about the prestige of foreign publications written by native speakers that present authoritative and attractive cultural information. Tajeddin and Teimournezhad (2014) explore the hidden agenda behind the representation of culture in international and localized ELT textbooks. Their content analysis shows that most of the cultural content represented in the localized ELT textbooks was neutral: i.e., not dominated by a particular culture.

Similar studies advocating the idea of reclaiming the local have been conducted. Shin and colleagues (2011) analyze the cultural content of seven series of internationally distributed ELT textbooks and find that even though cultural aspects are diverse in each series, still inner-circle cultural content dominates most of them. Raquitico (2014) conducted a study in the Philippines to aid in the ongoing writing of new K-12 English textbooks and showed that inclusion of non-native English literary texts in high-school English textbooks can address essential goals. Ali and Walker (2014) argue that in the context of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), the target language (TL) culture cannot be ignored; ideally, both TL culture and the language learners' home culture should be included so that the learners' ICC can develop. Mambu's (2014) study problematizes the cultural hegemony associated with ELT materials in Indonesian EFL settings and attempts to encourage locally published materials based on current practices gleaned from the ELT

literature and the researchers' own observations. Garcia (2005) analyzes intercultural issues in ELT textbooks in which the English-speaking communities described in the textbooks are a constituent element in their design. Textbooks that aim to promote intercultural analysis and reflection benefit from an explicit focus on that and not exclusively on the culture of primarily English-speaking communities.

To fill the gaps in reclaiming local, global and neutral culture topics in ELT materials, the present study examines (1) how local culture topics are contextualized into target and global cultures in Indonesian ELT classrooms and (2) how neutral culture topics are contextualized into local, target, and global cultures in those classrooms. Investigation of intercultural topics in these classrooms shows how such juxtaposition of local and neutral culture topics to target and global cultures provides more intercultural topics for discussion.

2. Research method
2.1 Research design
This research has been approached from a predominantly qualitative perspective as a phenomenological study with a lot of fieldwork activities. The study focused on investigation of intercultural topics covered by English teachers in their ELT classrooms. It explored how teachers identified as interculturally competent English teachers contextualized various culture layers – local, target, and global cultures – into their ELT materials.

Research consisted of fieldwork carried out in two stages: (1) a pilot study identifying interculturally competent English teachers by (a) distributing the Intercultural Competence Profile (ICP) questionnaire to teachers and the Evaluation of Teaching Competencies questionnaire to their students, (b) profiling interculturally competent English teachers, and (c) conducting preliminary examination of the ELT materials; (2) the primary fieldwork including observing, audio-recording English teachers' teaching, interviewing English teachers, and collecting relevant documentation.

2.2 Research settings and participants
This research explored intercultural topics presented by English teachers in ELT classrooms. The research was conducted in two public universities in Indonesia over approximately five months. The four teachers who were involved in this study were selected based on results of completing the ICP questionnaire designed particularly for English teachers. The questionnaire was used to assess the teachers' ICC revealing personal choices made when resolving intercultural issues in the ELT classroom. The selected teachers had very high levels of ICC. They were likewise identified as having good teaching competence in their classrooms. Their students completed the ETC questionnaire. The final selection criterion proceeded from profiling the teachers in terms of length of teaching experience, educational time spent abroad, participation in international academic forums or other activities supporting their ICC development, such as local, national or international seminars or short courses (Baker 2011; Trede, Bowles & Bridges 2013; Dervin 2014).

The preliminary classroom observations made in the pilot study can be taken as justification that the teachers properly contextualized ELT topics and materials along intercultural dimensions. Teachers' intercultural experience is of critical importance for ensuring the content quality of intercultural lessons (Göbel & Helmke 2010; Hismanoglu 2011; Paika et al. 2015). Teachers' intercultural experience influences their teaching performance and this impacts students' intercultural learning outcomes. Hismanoglu (2011) writes that the language teacher can foster students' intercultural communicative awareness by having them watch videos of authentic interaction as well as feature films. Alptekin writes (2002:63) that "successful bilinguals with intercultural insights and knowledge should serve as pedagogic models in English as an International Language (EIL) rather than the

monolingual native speaker". The presence of teachers with intercultural experience fosters intercultural teaching which then helps develop students' intercultural competence.

2.3 Data collection and analysis
As said, this study used observational field notes, structured interviews, audio transcripts, and other documentation. For a summary of data see Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of data.

Teacher 1	eight sets of observational field notes, one structured interview, four audio transcripts, one summary of ELT materials and topics from eight meetings
Teacher 2	eight sets of observational field notes, one structured interview, three audio transcripts, one summary of ELT materials and topics from eight meetings
Teacher 3	eight sets of observational field notes, one structured interview, four audio transcripts, one summary of ELT materials and topics from eight meetings
Teacher 4	seven sets of observational field notes, one structured interview, two audio transcripts, one summary of ELT materials and topics from seven meetings

The collected data were organized and analyzed, starting from the details and working up to a general picture of the cultural layers in the surveyed classrooms. Data analysis focused on identification of the layers of intercultural topics in ELT. The target framework of ELT topics covered both local culture topics and neutral culture topics not predominantly referring to a specific culture. The two cultural layers were contextualized into native speakers' culture and global culture, as presented by the Indonesian teachers in their EFL context.

The aim of using multiple sources and levels of data from micro to macro led to a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of phenomena to consider the data's trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as required in conducting qualitative research. To do this, two approaches typically used in qualitative research were employed: triangulation and member checking. Triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence from multiple individuals (in this case, the English teachers and their students), types of data (observational field notes, audio tapes of lessons and interviews with the participants), and methods of data collection (interviews vs. other forms of documentation). Member checking means taking the findings back to participants (in this case, the English teachers) and asking them (in writing or via interview) about the findings' accuracy.

3. Results

There has been a paradigm shift in ELT teaching and a new orientation toward teaching English. The English teachers in this study realized the importance of placing equal value on local, target and global cultural knowledge. Figure 1 shows some of the cultural layers identified. It shows how the teachers developed and explored ELT topics within these layers.
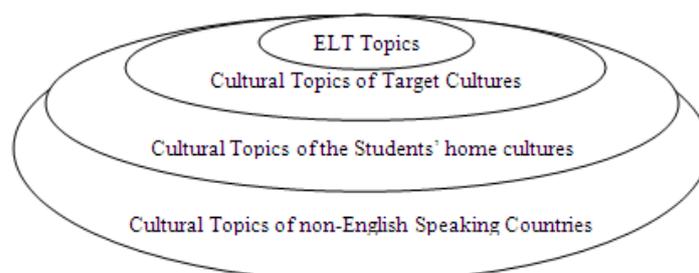

Figure 1: Layers of ELT cultural topics uncovered.

> **T1:** In case of globalized world, I agree that the materials should not be dominated by the Western cultures like American, Australian or British culture only.

Teacher T1 considered that ELT materials should not be given or dominated by the English-speaking countries. He signaled that the globalized world required English teachers to rethink the materials they used in the ELT classroom. Teacher T4 gave a more elaborate justification for his attempt to present many cultures in his ELT context.

> **T4:** What I try, what I have done so far is you know exposing them to different kinds of culture. I think, I never... well... I do not know if people see me... what I do is actually... I do not advocate certain kind of values, or certain kind of culture. So, what I have done so far is to expose them to different cultural aspects, Indonesian culture aspects, American culture aspects, Western culture aspects and I am not trying to give some kinds of judgment of this particular cultural aspect is better than the other one. What we seek is actually you know finding the common thing between two different cultures.

The teacher stated that he had exposed the students to different cultural topics. That said, he did not advocate any particular values or cultures. He just considered that it was very important to present and discuss cultural aspects: Indonesian, American, Western. Most importantly, he felt that he held no stereotypical views of or passed judgment on any particular aspects of culture. He intended to guide students to seek the common elements between cultures; obviously, this is the core idea of intercultural teaching.

All the teachers discussed their students' home (local) cultures as part of their ELT teaching. Table 2 shows how cultural dimensions of local, target and global cultures relate and can be incorporated into one particular ELT topic.

Table 2: One ELT topic as it relates to local, target and global cultures.

ELT topic	ELT subtopic	Home culture	Target culture	Global culture
unregistered marriage	discussing unregistered marriage and related issues	highlighting the issue of *Kawin Siri* (unregistered marriage) in Indonesia	correcting use of the words "marry", "married" and "marriage"	citing Qu'ran verses and hadith passages on marriage
		discussing Indonesia as a Muslim country	discussing the appropriate English equivalent of *Kawin Siri*	discussing the terms "Islamic country" and "Muslim country"; comparing marriage procedures between Muslims and non-Muslims

The ELT topic "unregistered marriage" belongs to the students' Indonesian culture. An unregistered marriage is an informal marriage type since it is not registered in the department of religious affairs.

The student presenters discussed issues related to the topic by presenting descriptive and supportive ideas: why people commit to such marriages and what are their advantages and downsides, including problems related to issue of birth certificates, marriage certificates, and family registration forms. In the end, the presenters concluded that couples must seek legal marriage status through a religious court or the department of religious affairs.

The teacher then problematized the topic by citing the Qur'an verse that men may marry up to four women under certain conditions. He questioned the students why the government nevertheless restricts the number of women that men can marry. He wanted to see the students' insights pertaining to the Indonesian government's regulation of marriage. Discussion then proceeded to the terms "Islamic country" and "Muslim country" in relation to practice of polygamy.

> **T2:** Okay now! What is the different between an Islamic country and a Muslim country? What is our country? Is it an Islamic country or a Muslim country? Why?
> **S1:** A Muslim country because most Indonesian people are Muslims.
> **T2:** That's right! Islamic country? An Islamic country is a country that the constitution is based on Islam…. A Muslim country is a country where most of the populations are Muslims, that's it!

Having discussed the terms "Islamic country" and "Muslim country", the students finally knew that since Indonesia is not an Islamic country, so polygamy is not endorsed by the government. The teacher highlighted the issue of marriage legacy in Islamic religion by citing the hadith, where it says *laa nikaaha illa bi waaliyyin*: "no marriage legacy without an authoritative man who represents the bride in pronouncing the wedding declaration" (Husaini, 1990: 48).

Discussion proceeded further to difference between Muslim and non-Muslim marriage procedures. The teacher asked Muslim and non-Muslim students in his class to give more information about marriage procedures in Muslim and Christian cultures that represent shared common practices in Indonesia and around the world. The students enthusiastically exchanged information about their own marriage systems and questioned each other. In conclusion, an aspect of the students' local culture was first discussed in the Indonesian context then contextualized into other cultural contexts.

The teacher jotted down words from the discussion: in particular, errors that they made. He wrote the words "marriage", "marry", "married" on the board and explained the different use of the words by giving correct English sentences. He corrected students' mispronounced words and helped them to pronounce the words well. He translated the phrase *kawin siri* to "unregistered marriage" instead of what the students had used: "hidden marriage".

Overall, the four teachers shared common practices in contextualizing ELT topics by starting from the local culture and proceeding to target and global cultures. Either implicitly or explicitly, they expressed opinions in the interviews why they did this. By introducing local cultural topics, the teachers helped their students be aware of their own culture. Local cultural topics could then function to bridge students' understanding of target and global cultures, since the students had established knowledge of "self" before turning to "others" (Byram 1997). Dalib and colleagues (2019) write that enhancement of "self" and "other" awareness in combination with interlingual communication strategies is crucial to fostering intercultural communication.

The teachers also presented neutral cultural topics not predominantly referring to or advocating a specific culture. The neutral topics were developed and contextualized into other, related topics of the students' home culture, target culture and global culture. An ELT neutral topic and its development can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Neutral cultural knowledge as ELT topic.

ELT topic	ELT subtopic	Home culture	Target culture	Global culture
foods	food vs. cuisine	discussion of *Sajen* in Javanese culture	Western businesses: McDonald's, KFC	foods in relation to ancient civilizations (Egypt, Hindustan, Euphrates)
	human civilization and hunter-gatherers	Indonesian foods	fast food as a multi-billion-dollar industry	foods and the caste system in India
	fasting			glocalization in food: Burger *Butho*
	edible vs. inedible			
	halal vs. haram			
	food vs. symbols			

The teacher assigned the neutral topic "foods". The first subtopic covered "food" vs. "cuisine" in relation to human civilizations (from hunters-gatherers to present) and ancient civilizations. The terms "food" and "cuisine" were defined: food as as a matter of human need and cuisine as a product of culture. The student presenters mentioned other subtopics like fasting, edible vs inedible food, and halal (permissible food) vs. haram (impermissible food). These were discussed along with examples from different cultures and such things as table manners. Comparison was made of Western, African, Indonesian, and Chinese food events, with examples. Fast food was discussed as a multi-billion-dollar industry. The teacher shared from his own experience.

> **T3:** …Let's see the phenomenon of McDonald. We can see it from two different perspectives like... at least there are two things we can talk about McDonald. The first is the ideology of McDonald. I think... McDonald might be seen as a pioneer in a fast-food business. You know... fast food restaurant. You see it was started in 1940s. It was just a small restaurant... somewhere in California in 1949. It was started by somebody namely McDonald... and in 1955... there was a guy "Crook" I do not know... Mr. Crook. Mr. Crook persuaded McDonald to make a franchise. And from their franchise "McDonald" then it has spread out everywhere. Of course, the widespread of McDonald was actually in line with what was happening in 1950. You know the huge culture became booming and then many youngsters started to enjoy the fast food, to gather and to socialize one another and... you see and it has become a mark for... a modernization. And it becomes a mark of industrialization... because in industrialization, the ideology implies that everything should be efficient. So, everything should be fast! Right! So, Mcdonalization should provide that ideology.

The English teacher said that American business food such as McDonald's varied according to local culture. He extended the topic "foods" by tracing a line to the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Hindustan, and Euphrates. He explained one of the fundamental reasons why Western countries colonized the East: because of food.

> **T3:** I think I have explained why?... European countries colonized Eastern countries in order to get foods. They could not actually produce the food themselves... spices!

Spices! Dutch came to Indonesia to get some spices, right! Spices became very rare, expansive and expected commodity at that time. And they came to our country….

The teacher talked about how food symbolizes the culture of societies: for example, Sajen (a food sacrifice) in Indonesian Javanese culture. He recalled his knowledge about how food in Indian culture relates to the caste system: each caste eats its own kinds of food and the Brahmans do not eat meat.

The teacher talked about globalization vs. localization of food. He talked about Malang and Jogjakarta foods. He talked about how groups of people get stereotyped for what they eat. He discussed so-called *glocalization* in the case of the Burger *Butho* found in Malang City.

The teachers realized that neutral cultural topics could be developed and contextualized into their ELT materials. Cultural aspects from the students' home culture, the target culture and the global culture could be grounded in cultural facts that enriched students' horizons on cultural diversity and contributed to their ICC development. Such competence is crucial for students to understand more complex and wider communication issues and achieve successful interactions in the globalized world.

4. Discussion

The teachers all incorporated the students' home Indonesian culture into their ELT classrooms. In the interviews, the teachers agreed that, by introducing local cultural topics, they facilitated their students' awareness of their own culture the better to contextualize aspects of their culture toward understanding other cultures. The students discussed the assigned topics from a grounding in their local culture. This is in accordance with the idea of "reclaiming the local" as a strategy to reduce the dominance of US and British culture in ELT materials by shifting the focus to local cultures (Nault 2006, Rubdy 2009, Ali & Walker 2014).

That said, such a local-content approach poses challenges. McKay (2004) investigated ELT texts from Morocco, Chile and Japan; they found that many publications fail to reduce Western cultural dominance even as they link English to the local culture. Another challenge is that students may have little chance to learn about other countries' cultures. Still, focusing on local cultural issues gives students excitement to learn in relation to already familiar topics. When students meet people from other countries and talk about culture, they can more easily promote their home culture.

From the interviews, it was clear that the reasons the teachers agreed on such a new teaching orientation was due to their understanding of global imperatives, the need of defining students' own cultural identity, and the role of their own intercultural awareness. This aligns with Kirkpatrick's (2006) line of argumentation. Teachers must possess pedagogical knowledge and skills, have the ability to evaluate teaching methods, and be able to adapt their teaching styles and methods to suit the needs of different contexts and cultures. Teachers must be able to evaluate whether teaching materials promote a certain culture or not. Cheng (2012) writes that contemporary pedagogical practice has two responsibilities: it should reflect the interconnected world, and it should reflect local contexts and needs, of students and teachers.

An argument can be made for including non-native-English literature in the EFL/ESL classroom by pointing out that English-language literature does not only come from Britain or America; obviously, there are works in English by South Asian authors. Kachru (1999) argues that such texts are resources for providing cross-cultural explanations of how English can be and is redefined in non-Western contexts and how language and culture are interrelated.

The Indonesian English teachers also presented culturally neutral topics in their classrooms. The neutral topics were developed and contextualized into related topics of the students' culture, the target culture and global culture. The teachers in this study presented

such neutral topics as "cloth", "foods", "advertisements", "social media", "friendship" and "scholarship".

Such findings can be compared to Ke's (2012) conclusion that intercultural lessons have increased steadily through the years and appear likely to become the main focus of English lessons in the future. The topics covered in textbook lessons changed from literature and morality to things like scientific texts. The subtext "idealized model of society" subtext hidden in Taiwan's high-school English textbooks gradually shifted from that of American society to that of the world.

Byram and colleagues (2002) suggest that choice of topics should be partly determined by learners' existing perceptions of other countries and cultures, not by some predetermined syllabus that is supposed to represent the "correct" view of another country. In addition to supporting the promotion of neutral cultural topics as highlighted in this study, Byram and colleagues argue that there is no language curriculum that could or should be transposed directly from one national curriculum system to another. Ideally, the curriculum should be set from within the local educational system; in particular, it should not reflect the intentions of one or more of the target cultures.

Ke (2012) argues that if English is also used to teach social studies and other humanity subjects, especially world history and geography, students can learn about other cultures through English; meanwhile, English textbooks can put more emphasis on intercultural competence and awareness, which are not about any one or another specific culture. Su (2014) writes that, because English is used globally to communicate across ethnic groups, religions, and linguistic and cultural backgrounds, EFL curriculum should not promote Anglo-American or British norms and life experiences to the exclusion of others. Nault (2006: 314) writes that "ELT professionals should do more to design and... select teaching materials that are international and inclusive in scope".

ICC-based learning helps students understand more complex communications so as to be successful in the globalized world. To cope with such demands, teachers must select textbooks containing the appropriate intercultural and international cultural topics. Carlson (1989) writes that students' development and their attainment of learning goals in their ELT classrooms can gradually increase their analytical skills and understanding of cultural or ethnic diversity. Weninger and Kiss (2013: 696) claim that ELT textbooks have a pivotal role to play as facilitator with a chief responsibility to "promote the development of a reflexive, open, and globally aware language learner".

5. Conclusions

This study identified intercultural topics in Indonesian ELT classrooms whereby local (Indonesian) and neutral cultural topics have functioned as templates to contextualize target and global cultures. The presentation of local cultural topics helps build students' intercultural awareness, which in turn helps them understand the target and global cultures; neutral topics can be used to develop students' understanding of local, target and global cultures.

The presentation of intercultural topics in Indonesian ELT classrooms obviously comes with variations. The cultural layers revealed in the ELT topics surveyed in our study were in accordance with the required ICC teaching focus in global English teaching nowadays. Reclaiming local and neutral cultural topics in ELT results in challenges and recommendations for future researchers and English teachers. For future research, the pivotal question that needs to be addressed is how to treat these culture layers appropriately; which should have more emphasis in taking a global English-teaching perspective. This study suggests that English teachers should explore what topics are crucial to present in their ELT classrooms to accelerate students' intercultural awareness and ICC development.

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