



## The Integration of Local Culture in Teaching English in Select Universities of Manipur

Udatraj Pukhram

Research Scholar, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Manipur University

Email: [udatrajpukhram07@gmail.com](mailto:udatrajpukhram07@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

The integration of local culture into English as a Second Language (ESL) education is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of effective pedagogy, enhancing both linguistic proficiency and cultural competence. This study explores the landscape of culturally inclusive teaching within the unique, multi-ethnic context of Manipur, India. The primary purpose is to investigate the perspectives of university-level English teachers regarding the benefits, challenges, and practical strategies for incorporating local Manipuri culture into their ESL classrooms. Employing a qualitative research design, the study collected data from six experienced English teachers from Manipur University and National Sports University through comprehensive questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis of the data reveals a strong consensus among educators on the positive impact of cultural integration, which significantly boosts student engagement, critical thinking, motivation, and intercultural awareness. However, the findings also illuminate substantial systemic barriers that impede effective implementation, including restrictive curricula that neglect regional diversity, a scarcity of relevant teaching resources, significant time constraints, and a critical lack of targeted professional development opportunities. The study concludes that while Manipuri



educators are philosophically aligned with culturally responsive pedagogy, they are constrained by institutional and structural limitations. It offers targeted recommendations for curriculum reform, institutional support, and teacher training to bridge this gap, advocating for an educational model that validates students' identities and prepares them to navigate a globally interconnected world

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## **Introduction**

In contemporary language pedagogy, the value of integrating local culture into English as a Second Language (ESL) education is widely recognized as a significant practice. This approach moves beyond rote memorization, aiming instead to foster a richer, more contextualized understanding of language that strengthens both linguistic proficiency and cultural competence. By weaving the familiar threads of students' own cultural narratives, traditions, and perspectives into the fabric of English language instruction, educators can create a more inclusive, engaging, and effective learning environment. This methodology validates students' identities and deepens their connection to the material.

This study narrows its focus to the specific sociolinguistic context of Manipur, a small multi-ethnic region in Northeast India characterized by a diverse cultural landscape. This unique environment presents both opportunities and distinct challenges for language education. However, the practical application of culturally accessible pedagogy is an area that remains underexplored. The existing educational frameworks often overlook this local richness, creating a disconnect between the curriculum and the lived experiences of the students it aims to serve.

This article, therefore, explores the perspectives of university-level English teachers in Manipur regarding the implementation of local culture in their ESL classrooms. Through an in-depth analysis of teachers' experiences and insights, this study aims to illuminate the critical role of culture in the language learning process and promote pedagogical and curricular reform.

## **Statement of the Problem**

This section pinpoints the specific gap in pedagogical research that this investigation seeks to address, situated within the unique sociolinguistic context of Manipur. The core research problem stems from a fundamental disconnect: while Manipur's rich cultural diversity represents an invaluable



pedagogical resource, there is minimal research exploring how this asset can be effectively leveraged to enhance English language acquisition through literature and other cultural materials. The region is a confluence of diverse cultures concentrated in a small geographical area, presenting a unique case for study. Despite this, the potential of using local narratives, traditions, and folklore remains largely untapped and unexamined. Consequently, understanding the current level of awareness among teachers, their existing practices, and the barriers they face in incorporating local culture into ESL contexts constitutes a significant area of concern that demands scholarly attention.

The existing syllabus often neglects regional diversity, focusing predominantly on British, American, or generalized Indian cultural contexts. This curricular orientation fails to provide students with material that reflects their own identities and experiences, treating English more as an abstract academic subject than a practical tool for communication.

### **Research Questions and Objectives**

To address the problem outlined above, this study was guided by a set of specific research questions and objectives designed to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the role of local culture in ESL pedagogy in Manipur.

The overarching research questions that frame this investigation are as follows:

1. What are the perspectives of university English teachers in Manipur on the role and implementation of local culture in ESL pedagogy?
2. What challenges do these teachers face in integrating local cultural content into their classrooms, and what institutional support systems are in place?
3. What are the perceived benefits for ESL learners when local literature and culture are utilized as pedagogical tools?

These questions are directly addressed through the following formal research objectives:

1. To explore teachers' perspectives on the implementation of local culture in teaching English in select Universities of Manipur.
2. To identify the challenges faced by teachers and the support systems in select universities of Manipur in ESL contexts.



3. To highlight the benefits of utilizing local literature for ESL learners, relating it to the in-hand teaching experiences of the teachers.

## Literature Review

The contemporary global landscape, characterized by constant communication between people of diverse origins, mandates a fundamental shift in English language and literature education. The curriculum must evolve from a focus on mere linguistic mastery to the deliberate cultivation of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Traditional language pedagogy often treated culture as a static body of knowledge, which is insufficient for developing true intercultural competence. The necessary shift is from transmitting cultural facts to engaging with culture as context, process, and critical awareness.

### Foundational Theoretical Frameworks for Cultural Integration

#### 'Big C' and 'Small c' culture

"Big C" culture encompasses tangible, institutionalized aspects, such as History, Art (paintings, architecture), Institutions (government, politics), Education systems, Geography, and, critically, Literature (novels, poems, plays, proverbs).

In contrast, "Small c" culture refers to the more subtle, everyday elements that profoundly impact communication, including values, beliefs, attitudes, norms, and daily living practices.

#### Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT)

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) provides a foundation for integrating culture and interaction into the learning process. SCT emphasizes that language is a critical tool for human cognitive development, facilitating the memorization of concepts and the creation of complex ideas. Furthermore, SCT posits that higher-order thinking skills are acquired primarily through social interaction, engagement in dialogue, problem-solving, and guided practice.

This theory is widely practiced in ESL classrooms because it inherently involves social interaction, cultural involvement, and integrates all components of the teaching environment. The theory provides the mechanism—social learning—through which the complex, demanding goals of Intercultural



Communicative Competence (ICC), such as the development of skills of discovery and critical cultural awareness, are internalized by the learner.

### Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) represents the necessary evolution of communicative language teaching. ICC moves far beyond traditional linguistic or grammatical competence to recognize that successful communication relies on a broader set of intellectual and socio-affective skills.

Michael Byram's model defines ICC through five interconnected components:

- i. Attitudes: Curiosity and openness, coupled with the readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and beliefs about one's own.
- ii. Knowledge: Understanding both one's own culture and other cultures, particularly the insight into the relationship between them.
- iii. Skills of Interpreting and Relating: The ability to understand a document or event from another culture and relate it to one's own.
- iv. Skills of Discovery and Interaction: The capacity to acquire new knowledge of a culture and use it successfully in unfamiliar cultural situations.
- v. Critical Cultural Awareness: The ability to evaluate perspectives and practices critically.

An individual who has attained ICC is therefore someone who can integrate this knowledge and these skills to act appropriately in an intercultural situation.

Culture profoundly influences the choices speakers make, constrained by sociolinguistic and sociocultural variables. A failure to account for these cultural variables risks genuine communication breakdown. For instance, non-native English speakers may use falling intonation when making offers, whereas native speakers often use rising intonation. To a native speaker, the intended offer using falling intonation may sound more like a statement or even a demand, risking perception as rude.

This realization—that communication failure often stems from cultural variables leading to pragmatic errors, rather than purely grammatical mistakes—provides compelling justification for ICC



being the primary curricular aim. Instruction must therefore move beyond exposing learners to cultural facts or conversational formulas. Instead, effective teaching must develop awareness of the sociolinguistic and sociocultural variables affecting people's communicative behavior, providing learners with contextual choices they understand and can control.

### Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) Principles in the English Classroom

In modern classrooms, particularly those in contexts marked by increasing globalization and immigration, student populations are often highly multicultural. Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is an effective solution to address the challenges posed by varied student values, beliefs, and learning styles, which, if unaddressed, can lead to poor academic achievement among certain ethnic learners.

CRT is founded on the principle that instruction must incorporate the learners' culture and previous experiences. Students are not "blank slates"; they arrive in the classroom with diverse backgrounds and prior knowledge. Educators implementing CRT enhance academic achievement by encouraging students to build upon these previous experiences, using their background knowledge as a crucial "anchor to learning"

### Methodology

This section details the qualitative research design employed to conduct an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences, perspectives, and practices of English language teachers in Manipur.

#### *Research Participants*

The study involved six purposefully selected respondents, all of whom are English teachers working at the postgraduate or undergraduate level at Manipur University and National Sports University (including Imphal College, an affiliate of Manipur University). These institutions were chosen for their significance in the state's higher education landscape. The participants possess a combined average teaching experience of over 15 years, bringing a wealth of practical knowledge to the study. Their academic specializations are varied, providing a broad range of perspectives. Three teachers from Imphal College focus on the broader traditions of English Literature and Indian Literature in English. One of the teachers from Manipur University along with the sole teacher from National Sports University are specialised in English Language Teaching (ELT). The final teacher, from Manipur University, has a



background in literary studies with a specialization in Cultural Studies and Folk Narratives. This diversity in expertise ensures a comprehensive view of the research problem.

### *Data Collection Instruments*

A two-part data collection process was utilized to gather comprehensive qualitative data.

1. **Questionnaire:** An initial questionnaire was administered to all six participants. This instrument was structured to collect personal and professional information, followed by ten closed-ended questions, and ten open-ended questions. .
2. **Short Interviews:** Following the completion of the questionnaires, short, semi-structured interview sessions were conducted with each participant. These interviews provided an opportunity for teachers to elaborate on their written responses, share specific classroom experiences and anecdotes, and provide feedback on the study itself.

### *Data Analysis Approach*

The qualitative data gathered from the open-ended questionnaire responses and interview transcripts were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. This method involved systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. This approach enabled the synthesis of the individual experiences of the six teachers into a coherent and insightful narrative that addresses the core research questions.

## **Thematic Analysis and Findings**

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis of data collected from the six university-level English teachers. The analysis revealed four prominent themes that encapsulate their experiences and perspectives on integrating local culture into ESL classrooms: perceptions of culture and its pedagogical value, current strategies for cultural integration, systemic challenges and institutional barriers, and the need for professional development and institutional support.

### *Teachers' Perceptions of Culture and its Pedagogical Value*

There was a unanimous and deeply held belief among all participants that culture is a multifaceted concept integral to the process of language learning. They view culture and language as inseparable, with culture providing the context and meaning that bring language to life. The teachers



asserted that incorporating cultural elements into their lessons has a "moderate to strong positive impact" on student learning. They identified several key benefits, including a marked increase in student interest and engagement, greater openness and dialogue among peers from diverse backgrounds, and the development of more sophisticated critical thinking skills.

Furthermore, the educators emphasized that in an era of globalization, English functions as a primary language for intercultural communication. Therefore, teaching English without an attendant focus on cultural competence would be a disservice to students. They believe that by integrating cultural content, they are not only teaching a language but also fostering empathy, broadening students' worldviews, and preparing them to be more effective and respectful communicators in a multicultural world.

### *Current Strategies for Cultural Integration*

Despite systemic limitations, the participating teachers demonstrated resourcefulness and pedagogical creativity by employing a variety of strategies to integrate local culture. Common methods include using literature, history, traditions, and current events to create an immersive and contextualized learning environment. They actively encourage class discussions where students can share their own cultural perspectives, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and making the classroom dialogue richer and more inclusive.

More specific and innovative implementations were also reported. Project-based learning initiatives have been used to allow students to create their own narratives inspired by local folklore, a method that hones language skills through practical, creative application. A particularly powerful example of successful integration is the annual field trip organized by the Department of English and Cultural Studies at Manipur University. Students visit culturally significant sites like Moirang, Loktak, and Andro, providing them with a "live experience of cultural performance and material culture," including traditional festivities, shamanic traditions, and socio-economic practices. These immersive experiences culminate in project reports, effectively bridging academic learning with lived reality. Another effective strategy mentioned was the use of contrastive analysis, where students compare and contrast themes and techniques in English literature with those found in local Manipuri folklore, thereby sharpening their analytical skills.

*Systemic Challenges and Institutional Barriers*

The teachers' enthusiasm for cultural integration is significantly tempered by a range of formidable challenges. The most frequently cited barriers include:

**Time Constraints:** The pressure to cover a dense, pre-defined syllabus leaves little room for supplementary cultural activities.

**Lack of Resources:** There is a severe shortage of appropriate teaching materials, such as translated local folktales, and a lack of infrastructure like smart classrooms to support dynamic, multimedia-based teaching.

**Scarcity of Professional Development:** Educators reported a near-total absence of training opportunities focused on cultural competence and pedagogical integration.

**Institutional Constraints:** A significant institutional challenge highlighted was the "paucity of faculty to teach" specialized courses. For example, while the M.A. syllabus includes a paper on Cultural Studies, many faculty members are not sufficiently competent or trained in that specific interdisciplinary area to teach it effectively, creating a gap between curricular offerings and institutional capacity.

*The Need for Professional Development and Institutional Support*

Flowing directly from the challenges identified, a clear and urgent need for robust professional development and institutional support emerged as a central theme. A striking finding was that only one of the six participating teachers had ever received any professional development focused on using cultural elements in language teaching. This gap leaves educators unprepared to meet the diverse needs of their students and reliant on their own initiative to develop culturally responsive methods.

The teachers articulated a clear vision for the type of support required. This includes workshops on cultural inclusion, university funding for community engagement projects and cultural immersion experiences, and investment in smart classroom technology. Crucially, they called for the creation and dissemination of translated local materials, particularly folktales, and a comprehensive revision of the syllabus to formally include regional content. The annual field trips conducted by Manipur University's Department of English and Cultural Studies were cited as a model of good practice that should be more widely supported and replicated, as such experiences are invaluable for enhancing both teacher and student understanding of local culture.



In summary, the findings paint a picture of dedicated educators who champion culturally inclusive pedagogy but are constrained by an educational system that has yet to fully embrace and support it. The subsequent discussion will interpret these findings and explore their broader implications.

## Discussion

This section interprets the key findings from the thematic analysis, connecting them back to the study's primary research questions and the theoretical framework. The discussion focuses on the critical tensions and implications that emerge from the data, offering a deeper analysis of the state of culturally responsive ESL pedagogy in Manipuri higher education.

### *The Dichotomy Between Belief and Practice*

The most salient finding of this study is the stark dichotomy between teachers' profound belief in the value of cultural integration and their limited ability to implement it consistently and effectively. This gap is not a matter of individual failing but a symptom of a systemic issue: a lack of **teacher agency** within the institutional structure. This reveals a critical disconnect between pedagogical philosophy and institutional reality. The significance of this finding is that while these educators possess the will and the insight to innovate, their efforts are often isolated and occur in spite of the system rather than because of it.

### *A Critique of the Curriculum's Cultural Inclusivity*

The study's findings offer a powerful critique of the current university curriculum, which demonstrates a significant misalignment with the students' sociocultural and linguistic realities. By predominantly focusing on British, American, and mainstream Indian cultures, the syllabus implicitly devalues local knowledge and identity, risking the **linguistic marginalization** of Manipuri students. When students do not see themselves reflected in their studies, they are less likely to connect with the material, which in turn diminishes motivation. This exclusion also misses a crucial opportunity to use students' existing cultural schemas as a bridge to new linguistic knowledge.

### *The Critical Role of Professional Development*

The near-complete absence of formal professional development in culturally responsive teaching is perhaps the most critical leverage point for change identified in this study. This gap is the primary mechanism that perpetuates the disconnect between belief and practice. Without targeted training,



teachers are left to their own devices to develop strategies, find resources, and navigate the complexities of creating an inclusive classroom. Targeted professional development is the key to equipping teachers with the pedagogical tools, curricular resources, and institutional validation. Investing in teachers is the most direct path to empowering students.

## Conclusion

This study has explored the critical role of local culture in English language teaching within the universities of Manipur. The central argument of this research is that while the integration of local Manipuri culture is vital for effective and meaningful ESL education, its potential is currently unrealized due to significant institutional barriers. The findings clearly demonstrate that teachers possess a strong conviction in the pedagogical benefits of a culturally responsive approach, observing its positive impact on student engagement, motivation, and critical thinking. But their efforts are consistently undermined by a restrictive curriculum, a lack of resources, and a profound deficit in professional development.

This research contributes to the field of language pedagogy by highlighting the urgent need for a paradigm shift in how English is taught in culturally diverse regions like Manipur. The implementation of the recommendations outlined—from curriculum reform to robust teacher training—is essential for creating an educational environment that does not force students to choose between their heritage and their global aspirations. By embracing its own rich cultural tapestry as a pedagogical asset, the Manipuri education system can empower its students, validate their identities, and better prepare them to bridge their local worlds with the global community.

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