

CULTURAL AWARENESS IN EFL PEDAGOGY: A SCOPING REVIEW

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Abstract

This scoping review maps 25 studies (2021–2025) on cultural awareness integration in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts using Arksey and O'Malley's framework. Analysis identified four central themes: materials and curriculum representation, teacher beliefs and practices, learner perceptions and outcomes, and pedagogical strategies. Findings reveal persistent implementation challenges across all themes. Textbook analyses revealed systematic Western bias, with 70% of cultural content emphasizing target-culture contexts versus 30% local contexts. Teacher studies disclosed significant gaps between stated beliefs and classroom practices, which remained incidental rather than systematic. Learner research demonstrated positive attitudes toward intercultural learning, yet showed limited competence beyond familiar cultural contexts. Methodologically, databases searched included ERIC, Scopus, and Google Scholar using keywords including "cultural awareness in ELT," "intercultural competence in EFL," and "intercultural communicative competence." Qualitative approaches dominated (44% of studies). All reviewed studies were conducted in Indonesian EFL contexts, limiting generalizability. Critical gaps include scarcity of longitudinal designs, limited comparative multi-site research, insufficient experimental studies, concentration on tertiary education (75% of learner studies), and minimal investigation of technology-mediated intercultural learning. Pedagogically, findings indicate two reform priorities. First, curriculum design needs balanced cultural representation and assessment frameworks valuing intercultural competence alongside linguistic proficiency. Second, teacher development requires systematic training in intercultural communicative competence frameworks, particularly Byram's model, integrated with task-based, project-based, and technology-mediated pedagogies. This synthesis provides evidence-based guidance for curriculum designers, teacher educators, and researchers advancing intercultural communicative competence in EFL contexts.

Keywords: *cultural awareness; intercultural communicative competence; EFL pedagogy; scoping review; teacher development.*

1. Introduction

Cultural awareness in EFL pedagogy remains insufficiently synthesized systematically, despite its growing recognition as a fundamental component of effective English language

teaching and the development of learners' intercultural communicative competence. Although researchers have increasingly produced individual studies that examine cultural representation in teaching materials, teacher beliefs and classroom practices, as well as learners' perceptions and attitudes toward culture, there is still no comprehensive mapping that clarifies how cultural awareness is conceptualized, researched, and pedagogically applied across diverse global EFL contexts. This lack of an integrative overview creates a significant gap in the field, as it prevents educators and curriculum designers from clearly understanding existing theoretical frameworks, methodological trends, and practical strategies supported by empirical evidence. Consequently, their ability to design coherent, culturally responsive, and evidence-based instructional practices is limited, particularly in contemporary EFL classrooms that are becoming increasingly diverse, intercultural, and digitally connected.

To address this gap effectively, it is essential to first define cultural awareness within EFL contexts. In English Language Teaching (ELT), cultural awareness refers to learners' understanding of cultural norms, values, and communicative conventions, both within their own culture and those of other communities, as well as their ability to critically reflect on and respond appropriately to cultural differences. (Byram, 1997). Related constructs such as intercultural communicative competence (ICC), intercultural sensitivity, and multicultural competence offer additional conceptual resources for pedagogy. In practice, teachers integrate cultural awareness through multiple forms: incorporating multicultural literature, adapting textbook content, designing intercultural tasks, or embedding reflective activities that foster perspective-taking.

Building on this conceptual foundation, recent empirical studies from diverse contexts demonstrate both the potential and challenges of cultural integration. Recent empirical studies from diverse global contexts demonstrate both the potential and challenges of cultural integration in EFL. Research from China shows that task-based approaches enhance learners' critical cultural awareness and willingness to communicate (Xu et al., 2025). In Colombian contexts, (Ávila & Riveros, 2024) demonstrate that intercultural communication activities in EFL enable learners to develop intercultural understanding, show respect for diverse cultures, and engage meaningfully with global perspectives through autonomous language practice. Across these contexts, systematic reviews indicate that multicultural literature and game-based approaches can enhance engagement and intercultural awareness.

However, three critical gaps persist in this expanding literature. First, researchers have not comprehensively mapped prevailing themes, pedagogical strategies, research designs, participant populations, and educational settings in recent EFL cultural awareness research, leaving practitioners without a coherent overview of current trends. Second, comparative analyses distinguishing patterns across primary, secondary, and tertiary education or across geographic regions remain limited, hindering context-sensitive curriculum development. Third, while materials analysis is well represented, fewer studies synthesize findings on enacted classroom practices and their documented effects on learners' intercultural development (Mokoginta, 2024; Permatasari, 2023). These gaps create an urgent need for systematic synthesis that maps the current research landscape and identifies priority areas for future inquiry.

The primary aim of this scoping review is to strengthen theoretical clarity and pedagogical decision-making in EFL by providing a systematic and integrative understanding of how cultural awareness has been studied and implemented in diverse educational

contexts. By organizing fragmented findings into a coherent research landscape, this review seeks to support evidence-based curriculum design and culturally responsive teaching practices. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions: This scoping review addresses these gaps by systematically mapping recent research (2021–2025) on cultural awareness integration in EFL classrooms. Analyzing 25 studies published across global contexts, this review addresses three research questions:

- RQ1: What are the principal research themes and pedagogical focuses in recent studies of cultural awareness in EFL classrooms?
- RQ2: What methodological approaches, participant populations, and educational settings characterize this research?
- RQ3: What pedagogical implications emerge from recent research, and what gaps warrant future investigation?

The review follows (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) five-stage framework for scoping reviews: (1) identifying the research question, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) study selection, (4) charting the data, and (5) collating and summarizing results. This framework has proven effective for educational and applied linguistics research, providing systematic and transparent procedures for literature mapping.

By synthesizing findings across empirical and review studies from diverse EFL contexts, this article offers three contributions. Theoretically, it clarifies how researchers currently operationalize cultural awareness across varying educational and cultural contexts. Pedagogically, it provides actionable insights for EFL teachers and curriculum designers developing culturally responsive curricula. Methodologically, it identifies underexplored participant groups, educational levels, and research designs, suggesting priority areas for future empirical work. The underlying argument is straightforward: systematic synthesis enables more targeted, evidence-based pedagogical innovations that enhance learners' intercultural communicative competence in an increasingly interconnected world.

2. Literature Review

To frame the discussion, this literature review synthesizes key theoretical perspectives on culture, intercultural communicative competence, and their evolving role in EFL pedagogy, establishing the conceptual foundation for the subsequent subsections.

Culture functions as a complex system that shapes meaning, identity, and communicative practices rather than merely a collection of traditions or artifacts. Indonesian EFL scholars emphasize that language and culture are inseparable, with language serving as a cultural mediator, symbol, and discourse construct that frames communication (Aulia, 2022). Because language both reflects and constructs culture, cultural understanding becomes essential to language learning

Cultural awareness refers to learners' understanding of their own and others' cultures, accompanied by the ability to reflect on cultural similarities and differences critically. In EFL pedagogy, this awareness bridges linguistic competence and intercultural understanding (Byram, 1997), enabling learners to encounter language as a lived social practice where they actively co-construct meaning through culturally-situated interactions (Liao & Li, 2023). This positions learners as active participants in meaning-making processes.

Intercultural sensitivity refers to learners' emotional readiness to recognize, respect, and appreciate cultural differences, including attitudes of openness and empathy, and

functions as an affective foundation for the development of more complex intercultural abilities (Chen & William, 1997). A UNESCO manual further emphasizes the role of affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions in developing intercultural competencies (Deardorff, 2020).

Byram (1997) identifies five interrelated components of ICC: attitudes (curiosity and openness), knowledge (of social groups and their cultures), skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. This framework shifts EFL learning objectives from "native-like" proficiency toward effective and appropriate cross-cultural communication. (Deardorff, 2020) extends this perspective with an intercultural competence process model extends this by emphasizing the cyclical nature of competence development, incorporating attitudes, knowledge/comprehension, internal outcomes (adaptability, flexibility, empathy), and external outcomes (effective and appropriate communication).

The incorporation of cultural awareness within EFL pedagogy has evolved from culture as content toward culture as practice. Early ELT traditions prioritized linguistic accuracy, positioning culture as peripheral or limited to factual information about target countries. Contemporary approaches recognize that language is not merely a linguistic endeavor but also a moral and cultural practice, viewing culture as a dynamic process of meaning-making that extends beyond familiarizing learners with foreign cultural norms to cultivating interpretive skills for negotiating cultural differences (Siahaan et al., 2025).

This pedagogical shift challenges traditional approaches that reproduce cultural stereotypes or exoticized representations, encouraging learners to critically examine underlying values and ideologies embedded in discourse (Liao & Li, 2023; Siahaan et al., 2025).

Cross-cultural research demonstrates that intercultural awareness development is mediated by learners' local cultural identities, revealing distinct patterns across global EFL contexts. In Asian contexts, (Wang et al., 2024) found that task-based collaborative projects requiring cultural comparison significantly enhanced Chinese learners' metacultural awareness, the ability to recognize how culture shapes meaning-making processes. Students developed critical perspectives on both their own cultural frameworks and target cultures through analyzing cultural products such as films and advertisements from multiple countries.

Research conducted in Morocco by (Bellaarabi & Bouguerba, 2025) revealed a persistent gap between teachers' beliefs about intercultural education and actual classroom implementation. Despite teachers recognizing the centrality of intercultural competence for language learning, multiple systemic and institutional constraints disrupted the coherence between their educational ideals and actual classroom practices. These constraints included curriculum limitations, inadequate pre-service training, lack of professional development programs, and insufficient resources, highlighting systemic barriers to intercultural pedagogy even when teachers hold positive beliefs about its importance.

Studies conducted in Southeast Asian contexts by (Vuong et al., 2025) documented tensions between local cultural identities and dominant native-speaker representations in EFL textbooks. Their analysis of Vietnamese EFL materials revealed that textbooks still heavily favored native speaker norms while local culture remained inadequately represented, risking the undermining of national cultural identity. This cultural imbalance

limited opportunities for learners to develop bidirectional intercultural awareness that values both local and global perspectives.

These cross-cultural studies collectively challenge assumptions about native-speaker culture dominance in ELT materials. They advocate for pedagogies that integrate local contexts with global relevance through glocalisation, an approach that promotes mutual understanding and shared values while requiring teachers to develop culturally responsive pedagogies (Wright, 2025). The comparative evidence reveals that effective cultural awareness pedagogy must be contextually responsive, acknowledging learners' cultural positionality rather than imposing uniform target-culture frameworks.

Table 1

Distinctions among Related Constructs

Construct	Definition	Focus	Scope
Cultural Awareness	Recognition and understanding of cultural similarities and differences	Cognitive understanding of cultural frameworks	Foundation for intercultural engagement
Intercultural Sensitivity	Affective response and appreciation of cultural differences	Emotional readiness and openness	Attitudinal dimension
Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)	Ability to communicate effectively across cultures	Integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical awareness	Comprehensive framework encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions

Cultural awareness thus becomes a bidirectional process acknowledging both "self" and "other" (Byram, 1997), aligning with intercultural competence models across contexts. Teaching language without cultural awareness risks reducing communication to surface-level exchange detached from social context. Conversely, integrating cultural awareness encourages learners to interpret pragmatic cues, negotiate meaning, and engage authentically in intercultural communication.

The theoretical frameworks reviewed underscore cultural awareness as a central component of communicative competence in EFL education. The shift from native-speaker norms to an intercultural orientation that values plural perspectives reconceptualizes cultural awareness as a transformative process rather than a body of information. This orientation equips learners with interpretive, reflective, and critical capacities to engage with language as a culturally situated practice, thereby broadening ELT objectives from linguistic proficiency toward intercultural competence responsive to the demands of global communication.

Despite these well-established frameworks and cross-cultural insights, recent empirical studies examining the integration of cultural awareness in EFL curricula remain fragmented across different educational contexts, methodological approaches, and conceptual interpretations. This fragmentation limits comprehensive understanding of how cultural awareness is operationalized in diverse EFL settings and what pedagogical practices

prove most effective. Consequently, a scoping review is warranted to systematically map existing research, identify patterns and gaps, and provide evidence-based directions for future investigation and practice.

3. Research Method

This study employed a scoping review design to systematically map research trends, theoretical orientations, and practical implications concerning cultural awareness integration in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. The scoping review approach was selected for its capacity to provide a comprehensive overview of how cultural awareness has been conceptualized and operationalized in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly where research remains emergent and heterogeneous. The review followed the five-stage methodological framework proposed by (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) and refined by (Levac et al., 2010): identifying the research question, identifying relevant studies, selecting studies, charting the data, and collating and summarizing results.

The review was conducted within the field of applied linguistics, focusing specifically on the pedagogical intersection between *language learning* and *culture*. Cultural awareness has increasingly been recognized as a crucial dimension of English language education, particularly in EFL settings where learners' exposure to authentic intercultural experiences is limited. Given the rising emphasis on global competence and intercultural communication in educational policy and practice, this review examines how cultural awareness has been implemented, interpreted, and theorized in recent EFL research. The temporal scope was restricted to studies published between 2021 and 2025 to capture contemporary pedagogical approaches and align with journal requirements for currency of evidence.

A systematic search was conducted across four major academic databases: Google Scholar, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), ResearchGate, and Scopus. This multi-database approach ensured comprehensive coverage of both indexed and open-access literature in applied linguistics and language education. The search strategy employed combinations of keywords including "*cultural awareness in ELT*," "*intercultural competence in EFL*," "*teaching English through culture*," "*intercultural communicative competence*," and "*multicultural EFL pedagogy*." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine and expand searches systematically across databases.

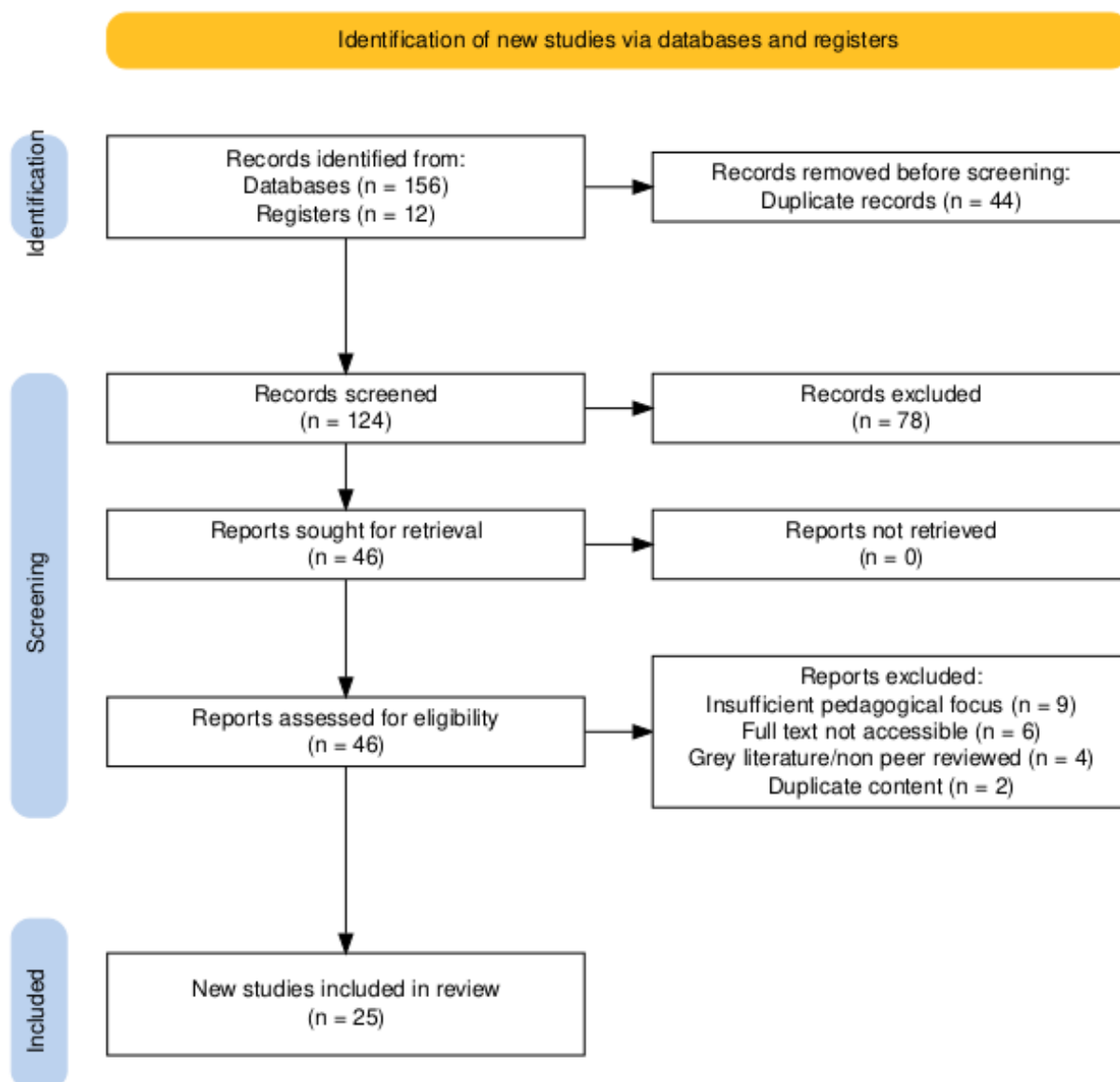
Studies were included if they addressed cultural awareness or intercultural competence within EFL or ELT pedagogical contexts, were published between 2021 and 2025 in peer-reviewed journals or conference proceedings, were written in English or Indonesian, were accessible in full-text form, and focused explicitly on pedagogical dimensions such as teaching practices, curriculum materials, or learner outcomes. Studies were excluded if they addressed cultural studies without pedagogical application, were published before 2021, consisted of grey literature such as unpublished reports or non-peer-reviewed documents, were inaccessible in full text, or did not specifically address EFL or ELT contexts.

Following PRISMA-ScR (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews) guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018), the selection process proceeded through four systematic stages. Initial database searches yielded 168 records, comprising 156 records from database searches and 12 additional records identified through reference list examination and citation tracking. After removing 44 duplicate records, 124 unique records underwent title and abstract screening, resulting in exclusion of 78 records that did not meet inclusion criteria (primarily due to insufficient focus on cultural awareness,

irrelevant contexts, publication dates outside the specified range, or language restrictions). The remaining 46 records were retrieved for full-text assessment. All 46 records were successfully retrieved (n = 0 reports not retrieved). Following full-text review, 21 records were excluded based on the following criteria: insufficient pedagogical focus (n = 9), full text not accessible (n = 6), grey literature/non peer-reviewed status (n = 4), and duplicate content (n = 2). This process yielded a final corpus of 25 studies for qualitative synthesis.

Figure 1

PRISMA flow diagram illustrating this selection process in detail.



Data extraction employed a structured matrix developed specifically for this review, capturing key study characteristics including author(s) and publication year, research design and methodology, participant characteristics and sample size, educational context and level, geographic location, main research focus and objectives, key findings related to cultural

awareness, and pedagogical implications. Table 1 presents a comprehensive summary of all included studies organized by these dimensions.

Table 2

Summary of included studies

No	Name	Year	Focus	Design	Participants	Key findings
1.	Mokoginta, K.	2024	How culture is represented and taught in Indonesian ELT	Qualitative Literature Review	15 journal articles (Indonesia, 2018-2023)	Cultural integration remains surface-level; many teachers lack theoretical understanding of intercultural competence
2.	Permatasari, I.	2023	Extent of ICC integration in Indonesian ELT	Systematic Literature Review	25 articles (2020-2023)	ICC often implicitly included rather than systematically taught
3.	Tika, A., & Fithriani, R.	2023	Identify multicultural values in ELT textbooks	Qualitative Content Analysis	3 English textbooks for primary schools	Limited representation of local cultures; Western bias observed
4.	Jayanti, L. N.	2023	Evaluate cultural representation in textbooks	Descriptive Qualitative	4 ELT textbooks (junior-senior high)	70% of content emphasizes target (Western) culture; 30% local
5.	Dwi Prastiwi, F., & Lestari, T. D.	2025	Use of game-based media for English vocabulary learning	Systematic Literature Review	18 studies (EFL Indonesia)	Game-based tools (e.g., Drops, Quizizz) enhance engagement and motivation
6.	Nafisah, S. L., Oktarina, I., Santri, D., & Suwartono, T.	2024	Teachers' perception and practices of ICC integration in EFL	Systematic Literature Review	10 studies	Most EFL teachers value ICC, but classroom practice remains language-focused due to time limits, rigid curriculum, lack of training, and limited materials.
7.	Wardhani, A., & Syahrial, D.	2024	Observe ICC integration in classroom teaching	Case Study	8 teachers in Java-based schools	ICC appears incidentally, not via structured lesson plans
8.	Sari, D. K.	2023	Measure students' intercultural awareness	Mixed Methods	100 EFL students (universities)	Students aware of diversity but lack global perspective

9.	Hidayati, A.	2022	Integrate culture via project-based learning	Action Research	EFL class at private university	Improved students' empathy and curiosity about other cultures
10.	Rahmah, R.	2024	Teacher perspectives on local culture inclusion	Qualitative Survey	20 teachers (West Java)	Teachers want local context inclusion but face curriculum constraints
11.	Santoso, B.	2021	Measure students' attitudes toward cultural learning	Quantitative Study	120 university EFL students	Positive perception but limited classroom implementation
12.	Mahendra, Y., & Kusuma, D.	2023	Design intercultural-based ELT tasks	Design & Development Research	Senior high school classes	Tasks improved cultural curiosity and awareness
13.	Wijayanti, F.	2024	Compare cultural representations across curricula	Comparative Content Analysis	Two textbook series (K13 & Merdeka)	New (Merdeka) curriculum shows more localized culture integration
14.	Rini, D.	2022	Teacher beliefs and awareness of cultural teaching	Qualitative Interview Study	10 EFL teachers (Bali)	Teachers acknowledge importance but lack pedagogical guidance
15.	Sulastri, E.	2023	Students' perceptions of intercultural activities	Survey Research	EFL learners in universities (n=80)	Students enjoy intercultural topics and peer collaboration
16.	Nugraha, A., & Dewi, R.	2023	Cultural content integration in vocational contexts	Case Study	Vocational school English classes	Cultural teaching exists but limited to celebrations
17.	Kusnadi, H.	2024	How teachers promote intercultural competence	Descriptive Qualitative	15 EFL teachers (Central Java)	Teachers promote tolerance & empathy via discussions
18.	Utami, P.	2022	How local culture is integrated into national curriculum	Curriculum Analysis	EFL curriculum documents	Cultural values present but not pedagogically implemented
19.	Aulia, M.	2022	Teacher beliefs and intercultural profiles	Qualitative Narrative Inquiry	8 university English lecturers	Ambivalence and contradictions in teachers' beliefs about intercultural pedagogy

20.	Batunan, D., Kweldju, S., & Wulyani, A. N.	2023	Teacher perceptions of ICC and culturally laden instruction	Qualitative Interview Study	6 English teachers (Eastern Indonesia)	Most teachers unfamiliar with ICC; cultural elements not explicitly taught
21.	Madkur, A.	2025	How teachers promote intercultural awareness in multilingual Islamic boarding schools	Qualitative Case Study	10 English teachers (Pesantren schools, Lampung)	Teachers use code-switching and local cultural references to promote awareness
22.	Gozalib, A., Muslem, A., Usman, B., & Ghazali, M.	2024	Design English syllabus integrating local culture to maintain students' identity	Design-Based Research	Primary school students (Grade 4)	Local culture integration enhances comprehension and preserves cultural identity
23.	Butarbutar, R., Weda, S., Nur, S., & Leba, S. M. R.	2023	Impact of intercultural communication via social media on EFL speaking motivation	Quantitative Survey	40 university students (multi-ethnic groups)	Positive correlation between IC integration and speaking motivation
24.	Setiawan, B. N.	2023	Explore ELT practices in culturally diverse Indonesian settings	Qualitative Exploration	EFL teachers in multilingual contexts	Teachers navigate linguistic and cultural diversity through translanguaging
25.	Widiastuti, R., Asri, A. S., & Patmawati, T.	2025	Difficulties and contextual factors in implementing intercultural competence	Qualitative Narrative Inquiry	8 English teachers (Indonesian universities)	Teachers use interactive approaches and authentic materials but face student engagement issues

Data analysis followed an iterative thematic synthesis approach adapted from framework analysis procedures. First, descriptive characteristics of all studies were systematically extracted and tabulated, documenting research designs, participant types, educational contexts, and geographic distributions to establish the methodological and contextual landscape of reviewed literature. Second, findings from each study were coded inductively using open coding procedures to identify recurring concepts, practices, and outcomes related to cultural awareness integration. Third, initial codes were grouped into broader thematic categories through constant comparison, examining similarities and differences across studies to construct coherent patterns. Finally, themes were refined and

organized into a conceptual framework directly addressing the review's research aims, ensuring both systematic coverage and interpretive depth in identifying patterns, tensions, and gaps within the field.

To enhance reliability and transparency, the primary researcher conducted systematic coding and theme development, with iterative consultation with the research supervisor at key decision points regarding theme construction and interpretation. While formal inter-rater reliability procedures were not employed given the scoping review's exploratory rather than evaluative purpose, all coding decisions and thematic groupings were documented through reflective memos and returned iteratively to raw data for verification. This approach aligns with established scoping review methodology, which prioritizes comprehensive mapping over formal quality appraisal of individual studies (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Tricco et al., 2018).

All 25 studies included in the final synthesis were conducted in Indonesian EFL contexts. This geographic concentration emerged through the study selection process rather than as a predetermined criterion. While the initial search strategy and inclusion criteria permitted studies from any EFL context globally, the combination of database coverage, language restrictions (English and Indonesian), and the search terms employed resulted in retrieval predominantly of Indonesian scholarship. This concentration reflects both the active research community examining cultural awareness in Indonesian ELT and the review's search parameters. The geographic homogeneity presents both limitations (reduced transferability to other contexts) and strengths (contextual depth regarding a major Southeast Asian EFL setting), which are addressed in the Discussion section's treatment of review limitations and future research directions.

4. Results and Discussion

Systematic analysis of the 25 studies published between 2021 and 2025 disclosed four major themes characterizing recent research on cultural awareness integration in EFL contexts: (a) materials and curriculum representation, (b) teacher beliefs and practices, (c) learner perceptions and outcomes, and (d) pedagogical strategies and innovations. These themes emerged from iterative coding and constant comparison across diverse research designs, participant groups, and educational settings. The findings illuminate dominant patterns, methodological characteristics, and persistent tensions within the field, while revealing critical inter-theme relationships that shape the implementation of cultural awareness.

4.1 Methodological and Contextual Landscape

4.1.1 Research Design Distribution

Thematic convergence across the corpus reveals pronounced methodological patterns (see Table 3). Qualitative approaches dominated, encompassing content analysis, descriptive studies, and interviews (n=11, 44%), followed by systematic or literature reviews (n=5, 20%), case studies (n=4, 16%), and single instances of action research, mixed methods, quantitative surveys, design-development research, and comparative content analysis (n=1 each, 4% respectively).

Table 3.*Distribution of Research Designs (N=25)*

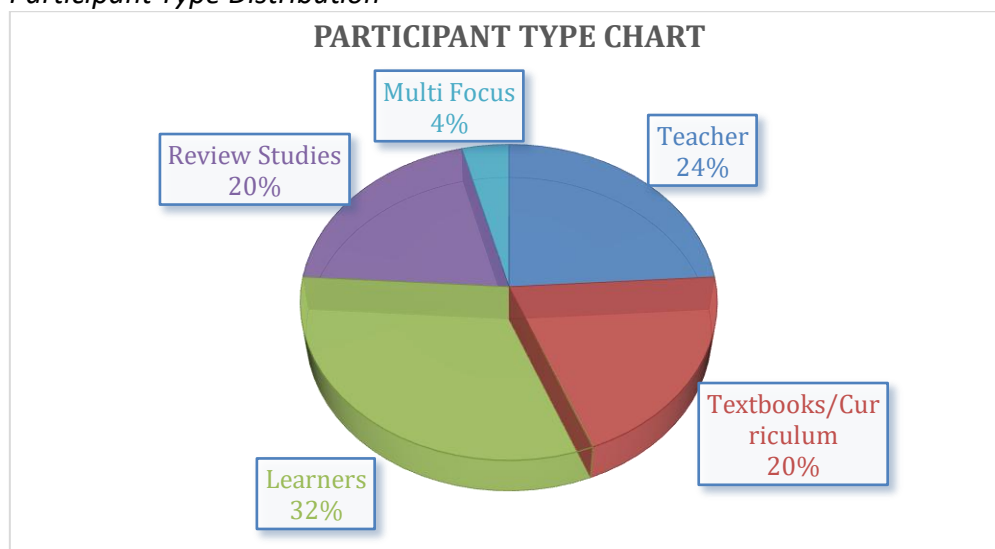
Research Design	Frequency	Percentage
Qualitative (content analysis, interviews, descriptive)	11	44%
Systematic/literature reviews	5	20%
Case studies	4	16%
Action research	1	4%
Mixed methods	1	4%
Quantitative surveys	1	4%
Design-development research	1	4%
Comparative content analysis	1	4%

This distribution reflects the field's emphasis on understanding context-specific practices and stakeholder perceptions. Yet the dominance of qualitative studies (68% when including case studies) presents dual implications. It enables deep contextual exploration but limits generalizability across diverse EFL settings. The scarcity of experimental designs (n=1 action research) and longitudinal studies (n=0) restricts causal inference regarding which pedagogical interventions effectively enhance intercultural competence.

4.1.2 Geographic and Participant Characteristics

All 25 studies originated from Indonesian EFL contexts, providing valuable regional depth while constraining broader transferability. This concentration emerged organically through database searches rather than predetermined selection, reflecting both Indonesia's active scholarship community and the review's methodological parameters.

Cross-sectional analysis of participant profiles (see Figure 2) revealed relatively balanced distribution: teachers (n=6, 24%), textbooks or curriculum documents (n=5, 20%), learners (n=8, 32%), and review studies synthesizing multiple contexts (n=5, 20%), with one study examining both textbooks and teacher perceptions.

Figure 2*Participant Type Distribution*

Educational levels spanned primary schools (n=1, 4%), secondary schools (n=4, 16%), tertiary institutions (n=8, 32%), and vocational settings (n=1, 4%), while 11 studies (44%) addressed multiple educational levels or synthesized research across diverse settings. The concentration of tertiary-focused research (32%) alongside multi-level studies (44%) suggests recognition that cultural awareness integration requires systemic consideration beyond individual classrooms. However, this creates an empirical gap in understanding younger learners' intercultural development during formative educational stages.

4.2 Thematic Findings and Cross-Theme Synthesis

4.2.1 Materials and Curriculum Representation: Persistent Imbalances

Converging evidence across nine studies analyzing textbooks and curriculum revealed systematic Western bias in cultural content. Ratri et al. (2025) documented that Indonesian primary-level textbooks allocated 70% of cultural content to target culture (Western culture) versus 30% to local contexts. This ratio was consistently observed across several studies (Jayanti & Mustofa, 2023; Tika & Fithriani, 2023), suggesting that it reflects a structural pattern rather than an isolated occurrence.

Comparative curriculum analyses have highlighted shifting educational policy priorities. Jayanti & Mustofa (2023) found that textbooks developed under *Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum* contain more localized cultural content than those produced under the K13 curriculum, indicating deliberate efforts to achieve a more balanced cultural representation. Similarly, Utami (2024), through curriculum document analysis, revealed that although cultural values are embedded within national educational guidelines, the pedagogical strategies for implementing them remain insufficiently specified. As a result, a significant gap persists, as revised instructional materials are not adequately supported by clear frameworks for classroom implementation.

The materials-practice disconnect manifests through inter-theme relationships. Teachers' reported institutional constraints (Theme 2) directly link to curriculum rigidity documented in materials analyses. When textbook content privileges Western perspectives so heavily, teachers simultaneously report lacking culturally relevant resources (Azahary & Fatimah, 2024). This circular relationship perpetuates Western dominance despite educators' stated values for local integration.

These findings align with (Lo, 2025) critique that traditional ELT practices often privilege native-speaker norms and fail to reflect the sociolinguistic realities of English as a global lingua franca, reproducing culturally homogeneous Anglo-American representations in materials. This contradicts contemporary ICC frameworks' positioning cultural awareness as bidirectional reflection on self and other (Byram, 1997). As Lo (2025) argues, if English functions as a multilingual franca, pedagogy must move beyond traditional ELT toward transcultural approaches that emphasize intercultural negotiation across multilingual, multimodal, and multicultural contexts rather than assimilation into Western norms. Current materials have not embraced this paradigm shift.

4.2.2 Teacher Beliefs and Practices: The Implementation Chasm

Cross-sectional comparison of teacher-focused studies (n=10) disclosed consistent implementation gaps between stated beliefs and classroom actualization. Teachers across contexts acknowledged culture's importance and recognized ICC's relevance for

communicative competence (Nafisah et al., 2024). Yet observational data revealed cultural integration occurring incidentally through casual discussion or celebratory activities rather than systematically through theory-driven pedagogy (Hapsari et al., 2022; Kartini et al., 2025).

Meta-analytic synthesis across teacher studies indicates three primary barriers. First, insufficient professional training in intercultural pedagogy left educators lacking conceptual equipment to construct lessons encouraging critical cultural awareness (Batunan et al., 2023). Second, institutional constraints including standardized assessments prioritizing linguistic accuracy over intercultural competence created misalignment between policy rhetoric and classroom realities (Nafisah et al., 2024; Yan, 2022). Third, limited familiarity with explicit ICC frameworks resulted in treating culture as peripheral enrichment rather than core communicative competence (Mokoginta, 2024).

Notably, teacher beliefs directly influence material design and selection. When teachers lack theoretical grounding in ICC, they cannot critically evaluate textbook cultural content or adapt materials toward balanced representation. This explains why Western-biased textbooks persist despite teachers' expressed desire for local integration. The materials-teacher practice relationship operates bidirectionally: inadequate materials constrain practice, while unprepared teachers cannot compensate for material limitations.

These patterns echo research by Bellaarabi & Bouguerba (2025) on teachers' intercultural beliefs and practices, demonstrating that positive beliefs alone prove insufficient for pedagogical change. Their study revealed that despite teachers recognizing the centrality of intercultural competence for language learning, multiple systemic and institutional constraints, including curriculum limitations, inadequate pre-service training, lack of professional development programs, and insufficient resources, disrupted the coherence between their educational ideals and actual classroom practices. Without systematic professional development grounded in frameworks like (Byram, 1997) ICC model, cultural integration remains superficial. Moreover, standardized assessment structures must value intercultural outcomes to enable meaningful implementation.

4.2.3 Learner Perceptions and Outcomes: Unrealized Potential

Thematic convergence across eight learner-focused studies revealed paradoxical patterns. Students demonstrated positive attitudes toward cultural content and expressed desire to learn about other cultures (Yan, 2022). Yet actual intercultural competence remained limited to familiar contexts, with restricted understanding of global cultural dynamics (Aulia, 2022; Hapsari et al., 2022).

When explicitly engaged through structured intercultural tasks, learners displayed heightened empathy, curiosity, and critical awareness (Butarbutar et al., 2024). This indicates receptivity to cultural learning when appropriately scaffolded. However, the gulf between learners' local awareness and limited global perspectives reflects the parochial nature of current curricula documented in Theme 1. Students cannot develop competencies not represented in materials or modelled through teaching practices.

Cross-theme synthesis clarifies causal pathways. Western-biased textbooks (Theme 1) taught by educators lacking ICC training (Theme 2) produce learners aware of diversity yet unable to navigate unfamiliar intercultural contexts (Theme 3). This chain reaction demonstrates how systemic failures compound across educational components. Learner

outcomes serve as downstream indicators of upstream curricular and pedagogical inadequacies.

The concentration of learner research at tertiary levels (75% of learner-focused studies) creates an empirical gap. Since foundational intercultural attitudes form during childhood and adolescence (Byram, 1997), primary and secondary contexts warrant greater investigation. Current evidence cannot illuminate how cultural awareness develops across educational stages or which interventions prove most effective at different developmental periods.

4.2.4 Pedagogical Strategies and Innovations: Fragmented Promise

Emerging research documented several promising approaches, particularly project-based learning (Berkane, 2025), project-based learning (Fitria, 2025; Ravindran & Amini, 2023), and technology-mediated pedagogies (Dwi Prastiwi & Lestari, 2025; Puspitasari et al., 2025). Project work proved effective in fostering cultural competence, empathy, and open-mindedness when students engaged in research and collaborative projects that involved cultural comparison and analysis. These interventions enhanced students' cultural curiosity and critical awareness when activities involved collaborative cultural inquiry.

Systematic review evidence indicated that multicultural literature strengthens ICC by exposing learners to alternative perspectives and culturally situated language use (Xu et al., 2025). Technology-based environments including simulations, virtual exchanges, and multimedia resources facilitate cultural sensitivity by enabling exploration of diverse contexts (Puspitasari et al., 2025). Multimodal digital storybooks represent particularly promising tools, as they integrate reflection sheets, portfolio assessment, authentic materials, and online interactive elements that foster both teacher creativity and learner engagement (Tarwiyah et al., 2024). These approaches align with cultural-historical activity theory perspective which views culture as a dynamic, enacted practice realized through social interaction and language use in context (Kim, 2020), as well as emphasis on discovery and critical analysis skills (Byram, 1997).

Implementation remains uneven despite these promising findings. Most strategies appear in small-scale, context-specific studies, raising questions about scalability and transferability. Few studies reported longitudinal data on sustained effects or comparative data across diverse learner populations. Moreover, innovations occur despite rather than because of systemic support. Teachers implementing task-based approaches (Theme 4) simultaneously face institutional constraints limiting cultural integration (Theme 2). They also lack access to balanced materials (Theme 1).

This reveals a critical tension. Pedagogical innovations demonstrate cultural awareness can be effectively integrated. Yet systemic conditions prevent widespread implementation. Isolated successes cannot compensate for structural barriers embedded in curriculum design, teacher preparation, and assessment frameworks. Without institutional scaffolding, promising innovations remain confined to motivated individual educators rather than becoming standard practice.

4.3 Integrative Discussion: Systemic Gaps and Interconnected Challenges

Together, these findings highlight systemic gaps between policy, practice, and learner outcomes that operate through interconnected pathways. The predominance of Western

cultural content (Theme 1) constrains what teachers can enact (Theme 2), limits what learners experience (Theme 3), and necessitates compensatory pedagogical innovations (Theme 4) that remain fragmented. Each theme represents one facet of broader systemic dysfunction.

Three critical insights emerge from cross-theme synthesis. First, cultural awareness integration failures stem from misalignment across educational components rather than isolated weaknesses. Curriculum reform without teacher preparation proves insufficient, as does teacher training without corresponding assessment reform or material redesign. Second, downstream learner outcomes reflect upstream systemic inadequacies. Students' limited intercultural competence indicates not an individual deficit but predictable consequences of Western-biased materials taught by educators lacking ICC training under assessment structures privileging linguistic accuracy. Third, promising pedagogical innovations occur in tension with rather than supported by institutional structures, limiting their scalability.

These patterns contradict the transformative approach advocated in contemporary ICC frameworks, where cultural awareness constitutes core communicative competence (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2020). Current Indonesian EFL contexts remain anchored in peripheral cultural enrichment despite policy rhetoric emphasizing intercultural objectives. The persistent gap between stated values and enacted practice reveals that cultural awareness integration requires coordinated systemic reform across curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and teacher education.

The concentration of evidence from Indonesian contexts enables valuable regional depth while limiting broader generalizability. Cross-cultural research demonstrates that intercultural awareness development manifests distinctly across contexts (Al-Afifi et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2025). Systematic reviews across diverse educational contexts reveal that implementation effectiveness varies significantly based on school subject, grade level, national context, and institutional resources (Al-Afifi et al., 2025). Comparative analyses between Eastern and Western educational systems show that while national policies may emphasize intercultural competence, practical implementation demonstrates considerable inconsistency, primarily attributable to limited teacher training, institutional resources, and culturally specific orientations toward language learning (Xu et al., 2025).

Indonesian patterns may reflect specific policy environments, cultural orientations toward language learning, or educational infrastructure. Comparative research examining cultural awareness integration across diverse national and educational contexts would illuminate how local factors shape implementation challenges and effective practices.

4.4 Implications for Policy and Practice

Findings generate five evidence-based implications requiring coordinated action across educational levels:

1. Curriculum Reform Toward Balanced Representation

Textbook developers must prioritize triadic cultural representation (local, target, international) rather than Western-dominated content. The documented imbalance requires explicit design principles embedding diverse cultural perspectives throughout rather than tokenistic inclusion. Materials should move beyond surface-level cultural facts toward activities fostering critical reflection, comparison, and intercultural dialogue.

2. Systematic Teacher Professional Development

Pre-service and in-service teacher education programs should provide explicit training in intercultural communicative competence (ICC) frameworks, particularly Byram's (1997) model. Such training should encompass both theoretical understanding and practical strategies for designing intercultural tasks, facilitating reflective discussions, and assessing intercultural learning outcomes. In addition, professional learning communities can support teachers by encouraging the exchange of effective practices and fostering collaborative inquiry into challenges encountered during implementation.

3. Assessment Alignment with Intercultural Objectives

Language assessment must value intercultural competence alongside linguistic proficiency. Alternatives to traditional accuracy-focused tests include performance-based assessments, reflective portfolios, and project-based evaluations capturing learners' intercultural development. Without assessment reform, curricular changes, and teacher training cannot overcome institutional pressures toward exam-oriented instruction.

4. Institutional Support for Pedagogical Innovation

Teachers implementing task-based, project-based, or technology-mediated approaches require institutional support including flexible curriculum structures, access to diverse materials, and recognition within evaluation systems. Promising innovations must transition from isolated experiments to systematically supported practices.

5. Research-Practice Integration

The field needs mechanisms translating empirical findings into actionable guidance for practitioners. Professional development should incorporate recent research on effective intercultural pedagogies, while researchers should investigate scalability and transferability of promising interventions across diverse contexts.

4.5 Methodological Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, restriction to English and Indonesian publications likely excluded relevant scholarship from other EFL environments, particularly East Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. Future reviews incorporating multilingual sources would provide greater international breadth.

Second, excluding grey literature, institutional reports, and unpublished theses may omit valuable insights into grassroots innovations and context-specific challenges not represented in peer-reviewed publications. These sources could illuminate practical strategies educators develop despite systemic constraints.

Third, the 2021–2025 temporal scope captures recent developments but may miss earlier foundational work continuing to influence practice. The emergent nature of AI-integrated and digital pedagogies means emerging practices may not yet appear in published research.

Fourth, scoping reviews prioritize comprehensive mapping over formal quality appraisal. Included studies therefore vary in methodological rigor, ranging from robust

designs to those offering limited methodological detail. Future systematic reviews incorporating quality assessment would strengthen confidence in synthesized findings.

Fifth, the concentration of Indonesian-focused studies, while enabling valuable regional depth, limits transferability to other EFL settings. Comparative research examining cultural awareness integration across diverse national and educational contexts would illuminate how local factors shape pedagogical approaches. Priority should be given to multi-context studies investigating how implementation challenges and effective practices vary across cultural and institutional settings.

Sixth, the scarcity of experimental and longitudinal designs prevents causal inference about pedagogical interventions' effectiveness. Future research should employ quasi-experimental designs comparing intervention and control groups, longitudinal studies tracking intercultural competence development across educational stages, and mixed-methods approaches combining quantitative outcome measures with qualitative process data to understand implementation mechanisms.

Seventh, the empirical gap regarding primary and secondary learners requires targeted investigation. Research should examine how cultural awareness develops across age groups, which interventions prove most effective at different developmental periods, and how early intercultural education influences subsequent competence.

4.6 Strengths and Contributions

Despite limitations, this review exhibits several strengths. Its holistic coverage encompassing empirical research, curriculum analyses, and systematic reviews provides a comprehensive field mapping. The theoretically informed analytical framework grounded in Byram's (1997) ICC model and distinctions between culture-as-content and culture as practice enabled systematic pattern identification.

Transparent methodological procedures including systematic search strategies, clearly defined inclusion criteria, and iterative thematic analysis enhance credibility and replicability. The focus on recent scholarship means findings reflect contemporary pedagogical priorities and challenges relevant to current practice.

Most significantly, the cross-theme synthesis clarifies interconnected relationships between materials, teacher practices, learner outcomes, and pedagogical innovations. By illuminating how systemic components interact to constrain or enable cultural awareness integration, this review moves beyond descriptive cataloging toward explanatory synthesis identifying leverage points for educational improvement. This integrative perspective provides actionable guidance for coordinated reform efforts addressing cultural awareness integration as a systemic rather than isolated challenge.

5. Conclusion

This scoping review synthesized 25 studies (2021–2025) examining cultural awareness integration in Indonesian EFL classrooms, revealing four interconnected themes: materials representation, teacher practices, learner perceptions, and pedagogical innovations. Analysis illuminated systematic Western bias in materials, theory-practice gaps in implementation, and unrealized learner potential despite positive attitudes.

The review provides a comprehensive mapping of cultural awareness research in Indonesian EFL contexts, exposing systemic failures where curriculum inadequacies constrain teacher practice and limit learner intercultural development. Methodologically, qualitative dominance restricts causal inference, highlighting needs for experimental and longitudinal designs. Promising innovations task-based and technology-mediated strategies, demonstrate effectiveness when systematically implemented, yet occur despite institutional support.

Theoretically, findings extend the ICC framework by demonstrating the necessity of integrating digital and technology-mediated intercultural learning. Where English functions as a global lingua franca, cultural awareness must emphasize pluricentric cultural competence rather than Anglo-American norms. Practically, curriculum designers should adopt triadic cultural representation transitioning from static facts toward critical reflection activities. Teacher educators must combine explicit ICC training with concrete techniques for designing intercultural tasks. Assessment reform should develop valid instruments measuring attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical awareness through performance-based evaluations.

Findings directly inform Indonesia's Merdeka curriculum implementation through three recommendations: (1) prioritize intercultural competence as an explicit learning outcome with clear indicators; (2) mandate triadic cultural representation in government-sponsored textbooks; (3) incorporate ICC frameworks in national teacher certification. Curriculum policy alone proves insufficient without coordinated teacher preparation, material redesign, and assessment reform.

This review is limited to Indonesian contexts, restricting transferability. Peer-reviewed article restriction excluded grey literature containing grassroots innovations. Qualitative dominance and tertiary-level concentration create gaps in causal claims and younger learner understanding. Five priority areas warrant investigation: (1) longitudinal designs tracking intercultural trajectories; (2) comparative multi-context studies across diverse EFL settings; (3) experimental and mixed-methods designs establishing causal relationships; (4) primary-secondary education research; (5) technology-mediated learning investigating virtual exchanges and AI-driven scenarios.

This synthesis advances EFL scholarship by demonstrating that cultural awareness integration requires coordinated reform across curriculum design, teacher education, assessment practices, and institutional policy. As English increasingly functions as a global lingua franca, developing learners' capacity to navigate cultural differences with critical awareness becomes essential for meaningful participation in an interconnected, culturally pluralistic world.

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