

Cultural Contexts In English Language Teaching: Balancing Global Standards With Local Relevance

Author

Abstract

The globalization of English language teaching (ELT) has produced a dual imperative: alignment with standardized international benchmarks such as IELTS, TOEFL, and the CEFR, and responsiveness to the cultural, linguistic, and social needs of diverse learners. These frameworks have become an important tool of academic and professional mobility, offering comparability, quality assurance, and the portability of language credentials across national borders. Yet their dominance has also provoked sustained critique for privileging Western-centric communicative norms, marginalizing local linguistic repertoires, and perpetuating inequities in test performance and access. A growing body of empirical research and case studies from East Asia, Africa, and Latin America highlights the consequences of this tension, ranging from learner alienation and disengagement to systemic disparities in educational opportunity. At the same time, these contexts demonstrate that localization through rooting indigenous cultural narratives, translanguaging practices, and contextually adapted curricula need not undermine international comparability and can instead strengthen learner engagement and identity while preserving global mobility. This study critically examines the intersection of global standardization and local adaptation in ELT, advancing a framework for balance that integrates international benchmarks with culturally responsive pedagogy. It argues that sustainable models of English instruction must incorporate dual assessment strategies, adaptable curricula, and sound teacher training to mediate the demands of global comparability and local relevance. This allows English to be reframed above an imposed norm but as a shared communicative resource, simultaneously enabling global participation and affirming cultural identity. The paper concludes by calling for further research into scalable localized frameworks and cross-country best practices that can inform policy, pedagogy, and assessment in an increasingly interconnected yet culturally plural world.

Keywords And Phrases: English Language Teaching, Globalization, Localization, IELTS, TOEFL, CEFR, Cultural Relevance, Standardization, Multilingualism, Language Policy

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I. Introduction

English holds a dominant global role today, serving as the primary lingua franca across education, business, science, diplomacy, media, and digital communication. For instance, according to the Education First English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), countries around the world are benchmarked against English proficiency - in 2021, out of 112 countries, only 31 achieved a “Very High” or “High” rating, while English has about 1.4 billion first- and second-language speakers globally (Statista, 2021). Standardized English tests like IELTS, TOEFL, and Cambridge exams serve as global benchmarks of competence for study, work, or migration, reflecting norms rooted in inner-circle English varieties and assumptions about standard grammar, accent, and discourse.

Learners often contend with realities shaped by their own languages, cultural norms, and social practices, which differ markedly from the standardized contexts assumed by global English proficiency tests. Guangwei (2021) proposes redefining English proficiency around communicative effectiveness in real-world contexts, guided by five macrostrategies rooted in how Global Englishes function in contact situations, rather than traditional form-focused criteria like accuracy, fluency, and complexity. Rigid alignment to global standard English norms in teaching risks producing learners who can pass tests but struggle with authentic communication in local contexts, where divergent idioms, sociocultural references, and pragmatic norms often leave their identities and cultures underrepresented.

This tension matters because it impacts education policy, pedagogy, and learner outcomes in profound ways. Nations often invest heavily in English instruction and standardized testing, driven by global benchmarks linked to funding, accreditation, and international competitiveness. When local cultures are sidelined, it influences curriculum design, teacher training, and assessment frameworks. Teachers, caught between global expectations and local realities, must balance preparing students for international standards, often privileging specific accents, styles, and syntactic norms with honoring learners’ identities and contexts. Pedagogical approaches that neglect cultural relevance risk diminishing motivation, engagement, and the development of deeper competencies like

pragmatic and intercultural communication. As a result, learners may excel at test-taking yet struggle with authentic interaction in local or informal settings, and may internalize feelings of cultural inferiority, leading to broader social and psychological consequences.

Research has also shown that integrating local culture into English teaching improves attitudes, engagement, and motivation. For example, in Southeast Asia, a systematic review found that local culture integration in ELT positively affects learner attitudes and engagement. (Puspita et al., 2024) And Turkish university students majoring in ELT reported generally positive attitudes toward incorporating target culture and explicit cultural awareness, even across variables like their origin or past exposure abroad (Cansu, 2022).

This article aims to identify strategies for adapting English teaching curricula and materials to reflect learners' cultural contexts, including their local languages, values, and norms, while ensuring they acquire the competencies required by global standards such as test formats, internationally intelligible usage, and intercultural communication. It proposes a balanced instructional framework that integrates both global expectations and local relevance, enabling learners to be globally capable and locally resonant.

II. Literature Review

Global standards in ELT: IELTS, TOEFL, CEFR and their reach

The global English assessment framework is dominated by high-stakes instruments like CEFR, IELTS, and TOEFL, which serve as gatekeepers for education, migration, and employment. These tools influence proficiency standards, curriculum design, teaching priorities, and learners' perceptions of English learning. Savski and Prabjandee (2022) argue that the CEFR Companion Volume (2020), with its emphasis on plurilingual and pluricultural competence, provides an important theoretical foundation for integrating Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT) into classroom practice. By moving away from static native-speaker norms, the CEFR encourages pedagogies that highlight teacher agency, contextualized instruction, and communicative effectiveness. This framing is critical because it aligns with contemporary calls for English education that prepares learners not just for standardized tests but for real-world intercultural communication.

Despite this orientation, the global dominance of IELTS and TOEFL underscores the enduring power of standardized exams. CEFR functions primarily as a reference framework, describing ability across levels (A1 to C2), whereas IELTS and TOEFL are operationalized tests with concrete scoring systems and specific uses in higher education, professional licensing, and migration. Recent data confirm their scale (EduSynch, 2025, industry report). IELTS volumes, despite volatility, remain in the millions annually. In 2023, global IELTS volumes fell by 18% to 1.58 million, with India seeing a sharper 42% drop, yet overall annual test sittings reached 3.98 million when British Council-administered exams were included. Outside India, volumes even rose by 12%, reflecting regional differences in demand, although projections anticipate further declines in key markets for FY2025 (TOEFL Resources, 2024).

TOEFL continues to report similar reach. Program data indicate tens of millions of cumulative test takers since its inception, with present acceptance extending to more than 12,500 institutions across over 160 countries. Every university in the United States accepts TOEFL results, and its format remains highly standardized: four sections (reading, listening, speaking, writing), each scored from 0 to 30, for a maximum of 120. Results are typically released within six business days depending on whether the iBT or other delivery formats are used (U.S. News & World Report, 2024). The widespread acceptance of IELTS and TOEFL, coupled with their CEFR-aligned score reports, gives them significant curricular influence, shaping global pedagogical objectives and instructional practices that extend past language assessment alone.

The CEFR's curricular influence

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), with its descriptive scales (A1–C2) and companion materials, has been widely adopted outside Europe as a benchmark for curriculum design, exam alignment, and teacher education. Its influence reaches far outside Europe, as policymakers, universities, and testing organizations adopt CEFR descriptors to set benchmarks for admissions, placement, and language support including regions where local linguistic contexts diverge significantly. Empirical research has documented both the benefits and challenges of this adoption. Sahib and Stapa (2021) found that while teachers and students regarded CEFR implementation positively and acknowledged its benefits for student learning, teachers reported greater challenges in adapting classroom practice to CEFR-based standards. Similarly, Ashratul and Nur (2023) observed that although most teachers viewed the CEFR-aligned curriculum favorably, many felt that students had insufficient exposure to it in their learning environments, creating a gap between curricular expectations and classroom realities.

In Southeast Asia, Phoolaikao and Sukying (2021) reported that participants demonstrated strong understanding of CEFR descriptors in assessment and level descriptions, yet Thai preservice teachers exhibited limited overall knowledge of the framework. Importantly, these teachers still expressed positive attitudes toward its classroom implementation, underscoring both the potential of CEFR-based pedagogy and the need for greater

institutional support, training, and alignment with national curricula. These findings reveal that the widespread adoption of the CEFR has redefined regional measures of English proficiency, offering a unified framework for assessment and mobility while simultaneously introducing tensions between global standards and local classroom realities, ultimately shaping both curricular content and evaluative practices.

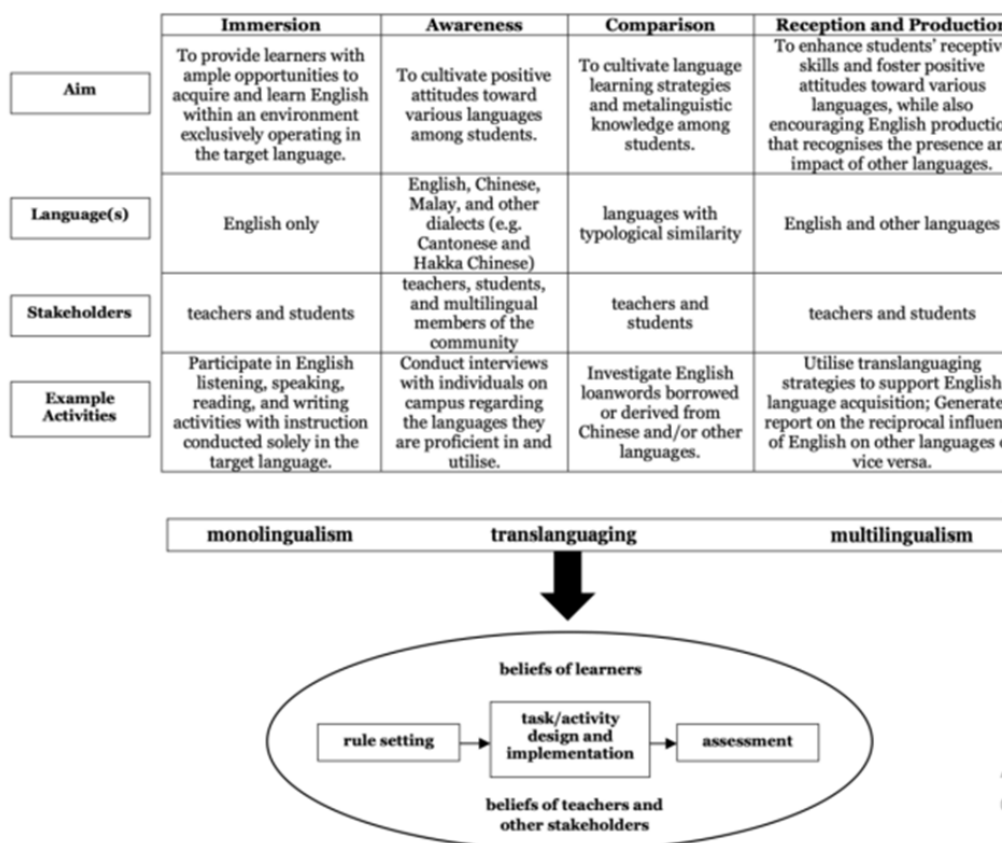
Cultural relevance and culturally responsive pedagogy

The theoretical foundation for integrating learners' cultures into pedagogy is well established. Geneva Gay's model of culturally responsive teaching emphasizes connecting academic content to students' lived experiences in order to deepen meaning, increase engagement, and improve learning outcomes. Her framework highlights that curriculum, teaching methods, and classroom interactions must be designed to validate and reflect the cultural backgrounds of learners rather than marginalize them, Sonia Nieto emphasizes the importance of sustaining students' cultural identities and linguistic heritage within the classroom, thereby framing cultural responsiveness not merely as a strategy for engagement but as an ethical stance toward educational equity (Abdalla & Moussa, 2024). Building on these foundations, Ladson-Billings' conception of culturally relevant pedagogy foregrounds students' cultural knowledge and identity as central resources for learning. Rather than viewing culture as a barrier to standard instruction, her model positions it as a catalyst for achievement and empowerment (Mensah, 2021; Smith et al., 2022). Together, these perspectives form a coherent theoretical basis for embedding cultural responsiveness into English language teaching.

Recent empirical research has provided strong validation for these frameworks. Brooks (2022) identified student-teacher relationships, curriculum flexibility, and exposure to culturally inclusive content as key themes driving engagement and achievement under culturally responsive teaching. Similarly, Shalgimbekova et al. (2022) found that students taught through integrated methods showed significantly higher gains in both academic performance and motivation. Learners in integrated classrooms improved their grades by an average of 9.4 points, compared with only 2.5 points among students taught with traditional methods; motivation scores were likewise higher (3.9 vs. 3.0). These findings emphasize the concrete advantages of integrating cultural contexts into pedagogy, enhancing measurable academic outcomes and also nurturing learners' motivation, engagement, and sense of identity within the learning environment. These theories and findings strongly support the localization of ELT materials, showing that culturally responsive teaching enhances engagement and achievement while ensuring learners' linguistic competence and self-identity in both global and local contexts.

Empirical work on localization in ELT and multilingual frameworks

There is an expanding empirical literature documenting attempts to "glocalize" or localize ELT. Classroom studies, materials analyses, and curriculum reports from diverse settings (Bangladesh, Southeast Asia, parts of Africa) show a range of approaches locally developed materials, integration of local content and multilingual scaffolding, and explicit teacher training in intercultural competence. Trisha et al. (2025) emphasizes that embedding language instruction within cultural and multilingual contexts enhances comprehension, ensures belonging, and supports a progressive shift in Bangladesh's ELT paradigm through educator practices and policy reform. Krulatz et al. (2023) highlight that insufficient pedagogical training and limited teacher awareness of linguistic diversity hinder flexible multilingual instruction, yet teachers remain pivotal in shaping classroom language practices and driving inclusive educational change. G.P. Pandey (2024) highlights applied linguistics as an interdisciplinary field that draws from psychology, sociology, and computer science, employs diverse research methods, and contributes significantly to ELT through studies in second language acquisition, curriculum development, and language assessment. Adopting an ecological perspective reveals the layered complexity of language teaching by examining how macro-level factors such as cultural traditions, political ideologies, and socioeconomic shifts interact with institutional policies and individual teacher agency at meso and micro levels, shaping evolving professional practices within multilingual and context-sensitive environments (Xuesong (Andy) & Weijia, 2023). Hu and Zhang (2024) proposed a multilingual model for IEPs that shifts from traditional monolingual English instruction to a more inclusive approach by integrating translanguaging strategies, promoting linguistic awareness, and encouraging cross-language comparisons, yielding positive initial outcomes despite institutional resistance and challenges in implementation. Kopečková and Poarch (2022) use plurilingualism and multilingualism interchangeably to describe language acquisition among diverse learners, emphasizing that multilingualism influences cognition, with its effects shaped by language proficiency, typology, and usage contexts. Recent peer-reviewed studies report that locally developed materials can increase learner engagement and perceived relevance, but also highlight challenges: alignment with international assessment demands, teacher preparedness, and resource constraints. Work on Global Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF/EIL) similarly argues for pedagogy that recognizes variation and intelligibility rather than native-speaker norms (Deng & Wang, 2023).



Source: Hu & Zhang 2024
Figure 1. A Model of Multilingualism for IEPs

Studies on test-preparation effects and assessment bias

Research consistently shows that intensive test-focused instruction can improve student performance on targeted formats, yet these gains often come at the expense of broader communicative competence. Students may master test-taking tasks while making only limited progress in pragmatic and intercultural communication. Critical examinations of high-stakes exams such as IELTS and TOEFL further highlight validity concerns, their reliance on native-speaker norms and culturally specific references risks introducing construct-irrelevant variance that disadvantages test takers from diverse backgrounds (Nugky et al., 2023).

The cognitive dimensions of test preparation have also attracted scholarly attention. Polack and Miller (2022) emphasize the testing effect as a consistent phenomenon across learning conditions, underscoring its central role in theories of learning and assessment. Complementing this, Hao et al. (2025) report that structured test preparation, particularly when supported by workbooks, socio-affective strategies, and explicit test-taking skills, significantly enhances student performance. By contrast, they found limited impact from mere practice effects, suggesting that preparation benefits may be linked more to domain-specific knowledge and cognitive skill development than to repeated exposure alone.

More recently, shifts in the global testing landscape have intensified debates on fairness and accessibility. Yao (2024) documents how the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated adoption of the Duolingo English Test among Chinese students, positioning it as a flexible alternative to traditional standardized exams. However, the study also raises concerns about equity, access, and educational consequences, reinforcing broader critiques that test design and interpretation must account for diverse communicative norms and contexts.

Identified gap: balancing global standards with local relevance

Across these literatures, a recurring yet underexplored theme is that while many studies examine how global standards and assessments shape curricula or how culturally responsive pedagogy benefits learners, few offer empirically validated frameworks that integrate both aims into a single, replicable instructional model. Recent reviews and position pieces in the Global Englishes and ELT pedagogical research stream explicitly call for more classroom-based, comparative research into instructional models that simultaneously prepare learners for internationally standardized assessments while including local cultural and linguistic realities in pedagogy and

materials. In other words, while the theoretical and descriptive literatures are rich, there remains limited rigorous, generalizable evidence about “how” to operationalize a balanced model at scale, and how curricular objectives, assessment practices, teacher training, and materials development can be aligned so learners achieve global test benchmarks without cultural alienation or narrow communicative repertoires (Rose et al., 2021).

III. The Global Standardization Imperative

Historical rise of IELTS, TOEFL, and CEFR as benchmarks for academic/professional mobility

From the late twentieth century onward, English proficiency frameworks and assessments became central mechanisms for regulating access to higher education, migration, and international employment. The TOEFL, introduced in 1964 by ETS, was designed to assess the readiness of non-native speakers for U.S. universities (U.S. News & World Report, 2024, report). The IELTS, jointly introduced in 1989 by the British Council, IDP with IELTS Australia, and Cambridge Assessment English, served as an alternative credential particularly for applicants to institutions in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand (MOSAIC, 2024, report). The CEFR, developed by the Council of Europe in the 1990s and officially released in 2001, provided a harmonized framework of language levels (A1–C2) to guide curriculum design, teaching, and assessment across Europe, later extending its reach globally (Jami, 2023; Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers, 2021). Over time, these tools became embedded in institutional policies: universities require minimum TOEFL or IELTS scores for admission; governments set them as thresholds for visa eligibility; and employers, particularly in internationalized sectors such as aviation, tourism, and multinational corporations, use them as indicators of professional readiness. The CEFR, though not a test itself, has been adopted by ministries of education worldwide as the reference scale for curriculum alignment, teacher certification, and occasionally licensing examinations.

Advantages of global standards

Global benchmarks offer clear advantages that explain their widespread adoption. First, they enable comparability across diverse national systems, providing institutions and employers with a common metric for interpreting proficiency levels. For example, a TOEFL iBT score can be read consistently regardless of where it is earned, ensuring transparent admissions and hiring decisions. Second, they provide quality assurance with these assessments undergoing validation studies and are often mapped onto the CEFR, ensuring standardized and reliable measures of proficiency. Phoolaikao and Sukying (2021) showed that teachers and preservice teachers in Thailand demonstrated strong understanding of CEFR descriptors and expressed positive attitudes toward its classroom implementation, even as they acknowledged gaps in broader conceptual understanding. Third, global standards facilitate the portability of skills, granting learners credentials recognized across borders that open pathways to academic study, migration, and professional advancement. As Umirov (2024, report) notes, such tests provide clear goals and objective benchmarks, though their influence on curriculum design may simultaneously heighten anxiety, constrain broader learning aims, and exacerbate socioeconomic disparities.

Critiques of standardization

Despite these benefits, global English assessments are subject to sustained critique. Cultural bias remains a persistent concern, test content often include Western idioms, metaphors, and cultural references that disadvantage learners unfamiliar with them, thereby introducing construct-irrelevant variance (Lozano-Ruiz et al., 2021; Psico Smart, 2024, report). Standardization also neglects local linguistic realities, marginalizing regional Englishes and multilingual practices by privileging British and American norms. This has pressured learners toward accent conformity and “ideal worker” language ideologies that exclude individuals not aligned with such standards (Hamza, 2024; Levon, 2021; Ayres-Bennett & Bellamy, 2021; Wilmot et al., 2023). Scholars further highlight how Western-centric communicative styles embedded in these frameworks reinforce global power asymmetries, privileging Anglophone cultural values and sidelining local expressions (Saraceni & Camille, 2023).

Concerns about validity and fairness are equally pressing. Test scores often correlate with socioeconomic status, access to high-quality preparation, or familiarity with Western discourse, undermining their claim to objectivity. Nugky et al. (2023) and Hao et al. (2025) show that while test preparation can significantly improve performance, the gains are often task-specific and do not translate into broader communicative competence. Yet policymakers continue to rely on these tools because of the empirical evidence linking English proficiency to academic success. Saoussan Maarouf (2024) demonstrates that English Language Arts proficiency is a strong predictor of achievement across math, science, and social studies, with particularly significant benefits for English language learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities (SWD). Such findings underscore why global benchmarks remain attractive despite critiques: they continue to provide measurable links between language proficiency and broader educational outcomes.

IV. The Case For Localization In English Language Teaching

Importance of embedding local culture, idioms, and contexts into English teaching materials

One of the central critiques of global English language teaching lies in its frequent failure to connect with learners' sociocultural realities. Theories of culturally responsive pedagogy (Abdalla & Moussa, 2024) emphasize that learning becomes most effective when instruction reflects students' cultural frames of reference. In ELT, this translates into designing curricula that integrate local idioms, narratives, and cultural practices into instructional materials. Studies have consistently shown that when learners encounter familiar contexts within English lessons, they report higher motivation, improved comprehension, and stronger identity affirmation (Smith et al., 2022; Brooks, 2022; Mensah, 2021). In multicultural English language teaching (ELT), integrating local culture viewed not as a barrier but as a cognitive tool, helps learners connect English to familiar contexts, reducing its foreignness and enhancing motivation, though selecting appropriate cultural content remains a complex challenge due to diverse learner backgrounds (Antonius et al., 2024). Ratri et al. (2024) conducted a thematic review of 25 studies to examine how local culture is integrated into English language teaching (ELT) across Southeast Asia, revealing its positive impact on learners' attitudes and engagement, and recommending more diverse cultural practices to enhance motivation and meaningful learning. Hossain (2024) argues that as English learners navigate the language's global landscape, they inevitably engage with diverse cultural elements such as idioms, metaphors, and social norms which enrich their communicative competence by deepening their understanding of the contextual and sociolinguistic dimensions that give meaning to language. This is particularly important in societies where English is more than a foreign language but functions alongside local vernaculars, shaping bilingual and multilingual identities.

Examples of regional adaptations

Empirical evidence from Africa, Asia, and Latin America illustrates both the feasibility and benefits of localization. In Africa, several countries have adapted ELT curricula to incorporate local proverbs, folktales, and contexts. For instance, Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum integrates local stories and themes instruction to ensure relevance and cultural continuity (Ndiangui et al., 2025). In Asia, Bangladesh has implemented textbook reforms that embed local cultural references and translanguaging practices, which Trisha et al. (2025) show significantly improve learners' sense of belonging and comprehension. Similarly, research in Thailand found that integrating CEFR-aligned descriptors with local cultural content improved learners' communicative competence without undermining international comparability (Phoolaikao & Sukying, 2021). In Latin America, Brazil's National Curriculum Parameters encourage ELT materials to reflect Brazilian cultural and social contexts, acknowledging that linguistic diversity and intercultural competence are essential for effective English learning (Arnaiz-Castro & Espejo-Mohedano, 2023). These cases suggest that localization is not about rejecting global standards but about contextualizing them in ways that make learning more meaningful.

Impact of cultural disconnect

When English instruction is divorced from learners' lived realities, serious pedagogical and social consequences emerge. Cultural disconnect frequently leads to demotivation and disengagement, as students come to view English as alien, irrelevant, or externally imposed. Research in Southeast Asia demonstrates that reliance on imported ELT textbooks designed for Western learners diminishes engagement and correlates with higher dropout rates in language programs (Zhang & Nordin, 2025). The problem extends into assessment, where standardized tests often embed culturally specific references that disadvantage students lacking familiarity with them. Lozano-Ruiz et al. (2021) caution that so-called "culture-free" tests must be culturally adapted and aligned with local norms to ensure valid interpretation; otherwise, they risk producing construct-irrelevant variance. Evidence shows that non-Western test-takers systematically struggle with reading and listening items requiring Western cultural knowledge, creating inequities not linked to language proficiency. These disparities are further compounded by socioeconomic divides as wealthier students can access preparation materials and private instruction that bridge cultural gaps, while marginalized learners remain excluded. Such divides are well documented in emerging research (Tripathi, 2024; Chikwe et al., 2024; Ehtsham et al., 2023; Aminulloh & Pranata, 2025). However, inequities rooted in cultural disconnect contribute to wider educational stratification, where access to global mobility hinges more on cultural fluency and economic advantage than on linguistic ability.

V. Case Studies And Comparative Perspectives

Case Study 1: Localized ELT Curriculum in East Asia

In East Asia, several national ministries of education have adopted strategies to integrate local cultural narratives within English language curricula while still aligning with global standards like CEFR. For example, Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has revised its English curriculum to infuse Japanese cultural references and communicative practices alongside CEFR levels and ELT

reform to ensure global comparability (Jennings, 2024). Similarly, South Korea's ELT reforms in the 2015 Revised National Curriculum emphasized above English proficiency for global mobility but also the inclusion of Korean sociocultural themes, promoting intercultural communicative competence (Shinyu & Tae-Young, 2023; Han, 2023). In China, Deng and Wang (2023) conducted an empirical evaluation of localized ELT materials designed to incorporate curriculum-based value education. Their findings highlight several challenges, including linguistic and content-related issues, difficulties in integrating ideological elements, and the need for more multidimensional teaching resources. These cases illustrate how localization does not mean rejecting global benchmarks but rather include them within national identity frameworks, resulting in improved learner motivation and cultural ownership of the language.

Case Study 2: African Context

In Africa, localized English language teaching has often drawn on indigenous resources such as proverbs, folktales, and contemporary social issues to enhance learner engagement and comprehension. Nigeria's Universal Basic Education (UBE) English curriculum exemplifies this approach by involving learners' lived realities into lesson plans while maintaining English proficiency as a foundation for academic achievement. Onotere et al. (2021) note that this contextualized design reflects the broader UBE mandate to integrate cultural relevance with skill development. At the regional level, Kagiso and Wabwire (2025) synthesized two decades of scholarship on multilingual education in Botswana and South Africa, identifying strategies such as mother-tongue instruction, translanguaging, and the integration of digital learning tools. Their findings reveal persistent inequities in implementation, with rural schools disproportionately disadvantaged by resource gaps. While Botswana foregrounds Setswana as a unifying medium and South Africa enshrines linguistic inclusivity in policy, both systems demonstrate that multilingual education remains central to equity and cultural preservation.

South Africa offers particularly rich examples of localization. Sibanda and Tshehla (2025) conducted a qualitative study in a multilingual township primary school, documenting how English-medium instruction from the foundation phase often hinders comprehension due to limited exposure to English outside the classroom and teachers' own challenges with the medium. At the tertiary level, Mendelowitz et al. (2022) present a sixteen-year longitudinal study of a sociolinguistics course that employed narrative heteroglossic pedagogy to engage linguistically diverse first-year education students. By validating students' multilingual repertoires and including their cultural narratives, the program fostered identity negotiation, reduced alienation, and advanced calls for decolonizing language education. These cases demonstrate that integrating indigenous knowledge into ELT sustains cultural continuity and also transforms English from an imposed foreign medium into a vehicle for local expression, participation, and empowerment.

Case Study 3: Latin American Bilingual Initiatives

In Latin America, bilingual education initiatives illustrate how English language teaching can be adapted to balance global competencies with local cultural and linguistic identities. In Colombia, the National Bilingual Program (NBP) and Colombia Bilingüe have driven a decade of reforms, positioning English as a tool for competitiveness. However, these programs have been critiqued for privileging imported English standards at the expense of local realities. Sigifredo (2024) notes that while policy discourse emphasizes international benchmarks, regional adaptations in some schools have attempted to integrate Colombian literature and cultural narratives into English classrooms, helping to bridge identity gaps. Cardona-Escobar et al. (2023), in a mixed-methods study of the Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo, found that while the policy aims for B1 proficiency for students and B2 for teachers, uneven implementation across schools aggregates disparities in language capital, particularly disadvantaging students from rural and lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Brazil provides another instructive example. In São Paulo's public schools, bilingual programs have been designed to position Portuguese identity at the core, with English framed as a complementary global skill rather than a replacement language. Curricula in these programs deliberately incorporate Brazilian history, arts, and social issues, thereby contextualizing English learning within the lived realities of students (Oliveira & Höfling, 2023; Leonardo, 2023). This hybrid model seeks to resist cultural erasure by reducing reliance on imported textbooks and instead crafting localized materials that sustain national identity while granting learners access to global opportunities. Collectively, these Latin American approaches show how localized bilingual education can counterbalance the homogenizing effects of global standards, preserving cultural ownership while still engaging with international mobility frameworks.

Insights

These three regional cases demonstrate that localization in English language teaching does not imply a rejection of global standards but rather their contextual adaptation. East Asian reforms have focused on aligning with frameworks such as the CEFR while involving cultural references to sustain national identity alongside global mobility goals. In contrast, African approaches emphasize cultural resonance and learner engagement,

drawing on indigenous narratives and multilingual practices to reduce linguistic alienation and enhance inclusivity. Latin American initiatives, particularly in Colombia and Brazil, highlight the tensions between imported English benchmarks and local bilingual identities, with hybrid curricula seeking to prevent cultural erasure while promoting international competitiveness. Across these contexts, the evidence suggests that localized ELT models can preserve cultural heritage, mitigate inequities in test performance, and still provide learners with pathways to global academic and professional opportunities.

VI. Toward A Balanced Model

The preceding discussions has examined the paradox confronting contemporary English Language Teaching (ELT), while global benchmarks such as IELTS, TOEFL, and CEFR offer clear advantages in terms of portability, comparability, and quality assurance (Umirov, 2024; Phoolaikao & Sukying, 2021), they also carry inherent risks of cultural bias, standardization pressure, and the reinforcement of Western-centric norms (Lozano-Ruiz et al., 2021; Hamza, 2024; Saraceni & Camille, 2023). On the other hand, empirical work on localization in East Asia, Africa, and Latin America demonstrates that infusing sociocultural realities into ELT enhances engagement, reduces learner alienation, and fosters stronger identities (Jennings, 2024; Mendelowitz et al., 2022; Oliveira & Höfling, 2023). This tension reveals the urgent need for a framework that balances the mobility-driven imperatives of globalization with the equity and identity-driven imperatives of localization.

Framework Proposal

A balanced model rests on three interdependent pillars that include maintaining international proficiency standards, including localized content and pedagogy, and adopting dual-assessment mechanisms that reflect both global comparability and local communicative competence.

First, the maintenance of international standards is non-negotiable, given that IELTS, TOEFL, and CEFR function as gatekeeping instruments for migration, higher education, and professional mobility (Jami, 2023; MOSAIC, 2024). Retaining these benchmarks ensures that learners are not excluded from opportunities that hinge on demonstrable proficiency in English. However, the adoption of these standards must avoid imposing them as culturally neutral, instead recognizing their rooted Western assumptions and complementing them with more contextually grounded forms of assessment (Levon, 2021; Psico Smart, 2024 report).

Second, localized content and pedagogy must be systematically integrated into curricula to ensure cultural resonance. Evidence from Japan's CEFR-aligned reforms, Nigeria's UBE curriculum, South Korea's ELT reforms in Revised National Curriculum and Brazil's bilingual initiatives shows that contextualized teaching materials increase motivation and facilitate ownership of English as a communicative resource (Onotere et al., 2021; Jennings, 2024; Shinyu & Tae-Young, 2023; Leonardo, 2023). Local proverbs, idioms, narratives, and sociopolitical issues render English instruction more relatable and reaffirm students' cultural identities, mitigating the alienation reported in contexts where Western-authored textbooks dominate.

Third, assessment must move toward a dual model that incorporates both global benchmarks and localized measures. While standardized tests are necessary for comparability, they often fail to reflect pragmatic, intercultural, and locally situated communicative skills (Nugky et al., 2023). Integrating localized performance tasks such as role plays grounded in local cultural practices or projects drawing on community issues would offer a more equitable and holistic picture of learners' competence. Hu and Zhang's (2024) model of multilingual IEPs illustrates the feasibility of such approaches, where translanguaging and cross-linguistic comparisons are systematically incorporated despite institutional resistance.

Implementation Strategies

Teacher Training

The teacher's role is important in operationalizing this balanced model. Studies reveal that teachers often lack sufficient preparation in multilingual pedagogy and intercultural competence, limiting their ability to adapt curricula flexibly (Krulatz et al., 2023; Sibanda & Tshela, 2025). Professional development must therefore emphasize training educators to mediate between global requirements and local realities. This includes developing the ability to scaffold students for standardized assessments while simultaneously including lessons in familiar cultural contexts. Training should also foreground translanguaging strategies, narrative-based instruction, and intercultural awareness, enabling teachers to reconcile the dual demands of international mobility and local belonging.

Curriculum Design

A modular, adaptable curriculum allows flexible, responsive teaching structured to diverse learner needs. Materials should be designed around CEFR descriptors and IELTS task types, while allowing insertion of localized content, case studies, and examples relevant to students' lived experiences. East Asian reforms, which align curricula with CEFR while infusing national identity, offer a model of this balance (Han, 2023; Jennings,

2024). Similarly, hybrid Latin American curricula that incorporate both Colombian literature and global communicative skills (Sigifredo, 2024; Oliveira & Höfling, 2023) show how content can remain globally relevant without erasing local identities.

Policy Alignment

National education policies should shift from wholesale adoption of global standards toward embracing hybridized frameworks that reflect local contexts, cultural diversity, and inclusive pedagogical goals. An ecological perspective, which situates ELT within macro, meso, and micro interactions (Xuesong & Weijia, 2023), highlights how systemic reform requires coordination between ministries, institutions, and classroom practitioners. Without such alignment, attempts at localization risk remaining fragmented and inequitably implemented, as seen in Colombia's uneven enactment of bilingual goals (Cardona-Escobar et al., 2023).

Toward Negotiated ELT

This balanced framework reconceptualizes ELT not as a binary choice between global mobility and cultural authenticity but as a negotiated practice that integrates both. Learners can aspire to global benchmarks while simultaneously affirming their cultural heritage, while teachers can prepare students for international exams, also employing pedagogies rooted in local realities. Inserting localization within the structures of global standardization, rather than positioning them as opposites allows the model to reduce inequities, sustain engagement, and empower English to function as both a global passport and a local voice.

VII. Policy And Pedagogical Implications

For Governments

National ministries of education hold the authority to align international frameworks such as CEFR with local priorities. Policies should shift from uncritical adoption of foreign standards toward hybridized models that include national identity and reflect local sociocultural narratives (Han, 2023; Jennings, 2024). An example is Japan and South Korea, where reforms show that CEFR descriptors can be adapted to local contexts without losing cultural distinctiveness. In Africa, however, research highlights persistent resource gaps and policy inconsistencies that undermine multilingual and culturally include instruction (Kagiso & Wabwire, 2025; Sibanda & Tshehla, 2025). Governments should therefore provide policy incentives such as funding for localized textbook development, teacher training subsidies, and flexible assessment frameworks that enable schools to include cultural relevance while meeting international proficiency requirements. Without such support, localization risks remaining fragmented and unevenly implemented, as evidenced by disparities in Colombia's National Bilingual Program (Cardona-Escobar et al., 2023).

For Curriculum Developers

Curriculum developers are pivotal in operationalizing the balance between global comparability and cultural authenticity. Imported textbooks frequently prioritize Western idioms, metaphors, and communicative styles that feel unfamiliar to many learners. This disconnect can alienate students and deepen existing educational inequities (Xiong et al., 2022; Zhang & Nordin, 2025; Lozano-Ruiz et al., 2021). In contrast, localized curricula in Nigeria and Brazil demonstrate that integrating proverbs, folktales, and local histories increases learner engagement, also affirming cultural identity (Onotere et al., 2021; Oliveira & Höfling, 2023). Developers should therefore adopt modular curriculum designs with materials that should align with CEFR descriptors and IELTS/TOEFL task types, but allow for insertion of context-specific examples, narratives, and role-play scenarios. Hybrid models that weave global communicative goals with national culture ensure that students acquire both the linguistic capital necessary for global mobility and the cultural grounding necessary for relevance.

For Teachers

Teachers serve as the final mediators of policy and curriculum in practice. However, studies consistently reveal gaps in teacher preparation for multilingual and culturally responsive pedagogy (Krulatz et al., 2023; Sibanda & Tshehla, 2025). Professional development should therefore focus on equipping teachers with practical strategies to involve culture while maintaining test preparedness. These strategies such as role plays, localized case studies, contextualized assessments, and translanguaging help learners navigate both global and local communicative demands. By integrating cultural relevance with international standards, such practices boost engagement and equip students for success in global assessments while honoring their identities (Hu & Zhang, 2024).

VIII. Challenges And Limitations

Although a balanced framework that integrates global benchmarks with localized content offers promise, its implementation is constrained by several challenges. A central concern is the risk of diluting international standards when localization dominates. Global assessments such as CEFR, IELTS, or TOEFL are built upon specific linguistic and pragmatic expectations, and if localized curricula over-emphasize vernacular idioms or cultural narratives, learners may be disadvantaged in international evaluations. This issue has been evident in contexts where teachers themselves struggle to meet the proficiency demands tied to globalization norms and standardization, leading to tensions between professional identity and global expectations (Sawalmeh & Dey, 2023). China's experience with the China Standards of English (CSE) highlights the challenge of aligning national benchmarks with CEFR, as political complexities often led to surface-level integration instead of deep classroom reform (Papageorgiou et al., 2022; Lei, 2024).

Maintaining standards is challenging, and resource constraints add another layer of limitation that can hinder progress. Developing culturally relevant materials, training teachers to integrate them effectively, and providing technological support requires substantial investment. In rural Indonesia, teachers made strides in enhancing students' oral communication by structuring the English curriculum to local contexts, yet their progress was constrained by a lack of quality teaching resources and minimal improvement in reading and writing over time (Nurteteng, La Sunra, & Dollah, 2024). Similarly, a cross-national study of English teaching in low-resource environments spanning Nigeria, Cameroon, Iraq, Turkey, and Sudan revealed that scarcity of textbooks, limited teacher professional development, and infrastructural deficits consistently undermined learning outcomes (Chidi-Onwuta et al., 2022). These findings align with broader teacher perspectives indicating that while localized pedagogy can boost engagement, technological and infrastructural inequities particularly between urban and rural schools continue to constrain its effectiveness (Imran et al., 2024).

Institutional and political barriers also impede the adoption of dual frameworks that balance global and local imperatives. In many cases, governments mandate international standards or launch localization policies without sufficient stakeholder engagement or sustained funding. The rollout of the CSE in China demonstrated how national initiatives, while ambitious, often encounter weak buy-in from local educators and examination systems locked into traditional practices (Papageorgiou et al., 2022). Teacher identity further complicates reform, as non-native speaker teachers frequently report feelings of disempowerment when judged by native-speaker proficiency norms or when pressured to adopt imported methodologies that do not resonate with local realities (Sawalmeh & Dey, 2023). Levon et al. (2021) highlight enduring biases against certain English accents, especially Southern working-class varieties. These biases are influenced by factors like the listener's age, the nature of the speech, and individual psychological tendencies. This tension mirrors findings from Iran, where enthusiasm for English as an International Language (EIL) has clashed with classroom realities, with teachers lacking resources and institutional backing to implement culturally embedded approaches effectively. Hashemian et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative study with six Iranian TEFL Ph.D. students to explore overlooked challenges in implementing English as an International Language (EIL), identifying issues such as disownership of English, cultural bias in textbooks, discrimination against non-native teachers, limited acceptance of English varieties, and insufficient intercultural competence, with implications for more inclusive TEFL practices. Meanwhile, in Japan, the gap between policy aspirations for communicative, culturally adaptive English and the reality of exam-oriented teaching underscores how institutional inertia sustains misalignment between classroom practice and stated goals (Christine, 2025).

IX. Conclusion

The analysis of English language teaching and assessment reveals a persistent and unresolved tension between the demands of global standards and the imperatives of local cultural relevance. On one hand, international benchmarks such as IELTS, TOEFL, and the CEFR have become indispensable gateways to academic, professional, and migratory mobility, offering comparability, quality assurance, and the portability of skills across borders. On the other hand, their dominance often reinforces Western-centric norms, marginalizes local linguistic practices, and exacerbates inequities in test performance and access. This tension is evident in East Asia's push to align with global standards while preserving national identity, Africa's multilingual and culturally rooted curricula, and Latin America's efforts to maintain bilingualism without losing local culture. Together, these experiences confirm that while global standards are powerful instruments of mobility, their uncritical adoption risks alienation and stratification.

A sustainable path forward lies in a balanced, hybrid model that safeguards the benefits of international standards while embedding localized content, pedagogy, and assessment practices. Such a model would uphold global comparability and affirm cultural ownership of English, thereby empowering learners to succeed on international platforms without losing their sense of identity. As the case studies and analyses have shown, localization does not signify rejection but rather adaptation, one that repositions English as both a global skill and a medium of local expression. Achieving this balance demands a coordinated effort, governments need to

incentivize culturally responsive curricula, developers must integrate authentic local contexts into educational materials, and teachers require targeted training to effectively manage both global expectations and local realities. The way forward also requires greater scholarly and practical engagement with the challenges outlined. Resource disparities, institutional inertia, and political barriers continue to constrain localization efforts, while questions remain about how to scale contextually grounded practices across diverse educational systems. Future research should therefore focus on developing scalable localized frameworks, exploring hybrid models of dual assessment, and documenting cross-country best practices that can inform policy and pedagogy globally. Such work will be critical in ensuring that English language teaching evolves from a tool of exclusion into a genuinely inclusive vehicle for mobility, equity, and intercultural dialogue.

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