

Embedding Intercultural Language Learning in Pakistani ELT

Classrooms: A Participatory Action Research Study

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Abstract

This empirical study uses Participatory Action Research (PAR) to examine how intercultural language learning (IcLL) might be incorporated into English classes at the secondary level in Pakistan. A six-week reflective intervention was conducted with six English instructors from two public schools in Punjab with the goal of integrating intercultural awareness into the current textbook-based curriculum. Learner reflective diaries, focus groups, teacher journals, and classroom observations were used to gather data. The utilization of locally relevant cultural examples, intercultural sensitivity, and instructional inventiveness were all enhanced by instructors' participation in iterative PAR cycles, according to thematic analysis. Pupils showed more curiosity about various cultures and more appreciation for linguistic diversity. Results show that when operationalized through collaborative reflection, IcLL can convert grammar-

focused ELT into dialogic intercultural practice. In order to mainstream intercultural pedagogy in Pakistan, the study suggests professional learning groups and unavoidable curriculum flexibility.

Keywords: English Language Instruction, Teacher Reflection, Intercultural Language Learning, Participatory Action Research, Pakistan

Introduction

Context of the Study

In Pakistan's bilingual educational system, English continues to serve as both a linguistic bridge and a societal barrier. English instruction still prioritizes grammatical correctness and textbook duplication above cross-cultural comprehension, despite its official position and curriculum relevance. Learners frequently commit language forms to memory outside of authentic cultural and communicative contexts. A paradigm change from language as a neutral code to language as a culturally situated social practice is demanded by current applied linguistics debates (Ali, 2020).

Despite English's dominance as a language of upward mobility, employment, and power in Pakistan, its teaching methods frequently contribute to systemic inequality. Most students in public schools learn English as a second language and have little exposure to it outside of the classroom. Students who are isolated from real-world communication situations exhibit shallow competence because they replicate patterns they have learnt without understanding their cultural or practical significance. Instead of participating in real international exchange, learning English thus becomes a technique of memorization and repetition (Haidar, 2019). The majority of ELT classes continue to use antiquated teaching methods that are typified by strict textbook adherence, teacher-centered instruction, and little interaction. Typically, lessons focus on formulaic comprehension questions, grammatical drills, and translation tasks. These methods limit the human element of language acquisition.

Lack of multicultural perspectives deprives students of the chance to experience different points of view or consider their own cultural presumptions, and this instructional deficit has broad ramifications (Farooqui et al., 2024).

However, educators themselves frequently operate in institutional settings that have limitations. Large class numbers, overcrowded curricula, and a lack of instructional resources make it difficult for them to be innovative and engage in reflective activities. Seldom do in-service professional development programs encourage instructors to try dialogic and participatory techniques or highlight the intercultural aspects of language instruction (Saeed et al., 2013). As a result, educators frequently imitate the identical teaching models they were exposed to as students. This further perpetuates a loop in which teaching English continues to emphasize linguistic structure above cross-cultural comprehension (Jadoon et al., 2020).

Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Intercultural Language Learning (IcLL) in Pakistani Context

In light of contextual difficulties, this study suggests PAR as a transformative agent. By methodically examining their own classrooms to find the root causes and jointly creating context-sensitive solutions, PAR places teachers as co-investigators. PAR allows teachers to try out intercultural activities, evaluate the results, and reflect as a group on their teaching methods rather than imposing top-down changes (Riedy et al., 2023). An approach like this fosters a sense of ownership over instructional innovation in addition to enhancing professional autonomy. Action research thus serves as a methodological framework and a means of empowerment, allowing educators to reconcile institutional constraints with their desire for revolutionary change (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009).

Irawan and Sotlikova (2023) explain that IcLL emphasizes the interconnectedness of language, culture, and identity. It pushes students to investigate how meanings are created through social and cultural contexts rather of focusing solely on memorizing vocabulary and

grammar rules. Practically speaking, this entails giving students the chance to evaluate and contrast cultural perspectives, decipher meanings from other points of view, and engage in thoughtful discussion regarding customs, norms, and communication methods. Students develop intercultural competence, a sophisticated kind of critical awareness that goes beyond language skills, when they consider how their own presumptions influence interpretation. Sultana (2023) emphasizes that an approach like this is especially pertinent in the context of Pakistan. Students from a variety of socioeconomic, linguistic, and geographic origins are present in the nation's classrooms, making them naturally multicultural. However, this wealth of variation is rarely used as a teaching tool. Instead, in an effort to achieve standardized, "native-like" norms, dominant forms of English instruction often silence local voices. Teachers can now reframe classroom discourse as an arena for intercultural debate where students can learn about and through culture thanks to the implementation of IcLL. This change in teaching encourages students to embrace diversity in their own communities while interacting with viewpoints from around the world.

Furthermore, including IcLL into a PAR framework is consistent with Pakistan's larger goals for educational reform. While communicative competence is emphasized in current curricular frameworks, intercultural awareness is sometimes overlooked as a critical English education outcome (Panhwar et al., 2021). While policy directions prioritize technical advancement and employability, intercultural sensitivity and empathy are equally important for effective communication in multicultural environments (Muntaha & Zafar, 2025). This study attempts to close the gap between the goals of policy and the realities of the classroom by linking action research to intercultural teaching. It offers a context-responsive model in which educators themselves participate as change agents by engaging in reflective learning and real-world experimentation.

Significance of the Study

This study investigates empirically how Intercultural Language Learning (IcLL) might be included into secondary-level English classes using Participatory Action Research (PAR). The study's emphasis on public schools adds a useful perspective to the worldwide conversation on intercultural education, where studies frequently highlight creative approaches in environments with ample resources while ignoring those with limited resources. Despite institutional constraints, the Pakistani setting demonstrates how teachers can innovatively reinterpret curricula and promote intercultural communication. The study looks at student reactions, classroom interactions, and teachers' reflective narratives in an effort to find long-term methods for incorporating the concepts of Intercultural Language Learning (IcLL) into routine practice. In addition to improving language proficiency, the participatory method seeks to develop internationally aware, socially conscious students and turn language classes into forums for critical thinking, ethical analysis, and cross-cultural communication. Integration of intercultural pedagogy using participatory action can foster collaborative, reflective, and culturally responsive English teaching in Pakistan. The study accentuates how effective it is to implement significant and long-lasting educational reform when it comes from within the system, with teachers empowered as creative thinkers, reflective practitioners, and cultural mediators who can convert theoretical frameworks into practical, context-sensitive teaching methods.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Despite the existence of numerous theoretical models of IcLL and participatory pedagogy, little research has been done to show how these strategies are used in tandem in developing nations (Muhammad et al., 2024). In order to fill this gap, the current study involves Pakistani secondary English instructors in a six-week PAR project. In addition to assessing instructional changes, the study documents how teachers and students develop emotionally and cognitively while completing intercultural learning activities. By presenting field-based data

from Pakistani classrooms, the study expands on previous conceptual discussions (Byram, 2020; Liddicoat, 2024; Scarino et al., 2025). The study aimed to ascertain the following questions through reflective inquiry and teacher collaboration:

1. How do secondary school English teachers interpret and integrate Intercultural Language Learning (IcLL) principles into their daily classroom practices in Pakistan?
2. In what ways do classroom interactions and student engagement evolve as a result of implementing intercultural approaches in Pakistan?

By answering the aforementioned queries, this study offers empirical information that enhances Pakistan's current conversation about curriculum reform and teacher preparation while empowering regional educators to evaluate their own methods.

Literature Review

Intercultural Language Learning and Communicative Competence

By incorporating the attitudes, information, and abilities that allow students to mediate meaning across cultural barriers, Byram's (1997) model of international communicative competence transformed language instruction (Khan et al., 2023). According to this study, learners must acquire interpretive knowledge of how language expresses power, identity, and worldview; simply knowing language forms is insufficient. As a result, IcLL moves education away from "teaching about cultures" and toward "learning through culture," where students can negotiate different viewpoints through collaborative activities (Liddicoat, 2020).

The Need for Contextualized Intercultural Competence

It is necessary to reinterpret intercultural competency in light of local dynamics in multilingual and multicultural cultures such as Pakistan. It must take into consideration the social conventions, religious beliefs, and regional languages that influence communication rather than just copying Western models of cultural interaction. Context-sensitive framework

development guarantees that intercultural learning complements national educational objectives rather than undermines them.

To strike this balance, educators need assistance. They must learn to respect regional customs and values while promoting tolerance for diversity. This can be achieved through contextualized training programs that combine national interests with intercultural understanding. According to published research, intercultural competency promotes pride, inclusion, and respect between students when it is rooted in local identity rather than being imposed as a foreign ideal (Tran & Seepho, 2017).

Intercultural Challenges in Pakistani ELT

Qazi (2020) highlights that there are advantages and disadvantages to Pakistan's linguistic landscape, which is dominated by Urdu, regional languages, and English. Although it perpetuates aristocratic hierarchies, English frequently represents social mobility. Local cultural representation is scarce in textbooks authorized under the Single National Curriculum (2020), which mostly uphold British-centric standards. Due to their traditional training, teachers are rarely exposed to multicultural frameworks. As a result, students are exposed to cultural material that is more superficial than profound. This disparity calls for empirical research into the practical ways in which educators might incorporate intercultural thought into the current curriculum.

Participatory Action Research in Language Education

Teachers and students are positioned as co-constructors of knowledge through the cyclic collaborative framework of plan, act, observe, reflect provided by Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Thawinwong & Sanrattana, 2022). PAR, which has its roots in Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, connects empowerment and inquiry. It enables educators to methodically analyze and alter classroom reality in ELT environments. Research conducted throughout Asia

shows that PAR promotes culturally sensitive instruction and reflective practice. However, not enough research has been done on its applicability to Pakistani ELT (Tran, 2020).

Integrating PAR and IcLL: Conceptual Synergy

Innovation is encouraged by the conceptual alignment between Intercultural Language Learning and Participatory Action Research. Reflection, teamwork, and contextual reactivity are all emphasized in both systems. IcLL offers the pedagogical emphasis on culture, identity, and communication, while PAR provides the methodological framework—cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection. When combined, they produce a dynamic paradigm that enables educators to research intercultural teaching techniques, assess their effectiveness, and improve their methods. Classrooms become inquiry-based spaces where theory is put to the test through this integration. Changes in student engagement, attitudes, or communication style are examples of evidence that teachers record. These insights serve as the foundation for group discussions and professional development. Such research eventually creates a local research culture that emphasizes empirical data and ongoing development. Thus, PAR and IcLL work together to close the gap between local classroom experiences and global educational theory (Qin, 2024).

Implications for Policy and Curriculum Development

Since memorization-focused curricula can impede critical thinking and intercultural understanding, the literature highlights the importance of matching educational policy with intercultural goals. Along with teacher-driven research and reflective practice, incorporating intercultural outcomes into standards and teacher education encourages creativity and closes the gap between classroom reality and policy. Though its combined use in Pakistan is still little understood, participatory action research and intercultural pedagogy change the way English is taught from teacher-centered transmission to collaborative, inquiry-based, meaning-focused learning (Khan et al., 2019).

This work situates itself within this emerging field to demonstrate how PAR may operationalize IcLL in ways that are practical, context-sensitive, and empowering for educators. By exploring the relationship between culture, identity, and pedagogy, it aims to improve academic understanding as well as the practical rejuvenation of classroom life in Pakistan's public schools.

Methodology

Research Design

The integration of Intercultural Language Learning (IcLL) in secondary-level English classes in Pakistan was empirically investigated in this study using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design. Because of its democratic values and fit for teacher-led change, PAR was chosen. (Stephen Kemmis & Robin McTaggart, 2014). Over the course of six weeks, the study went through three iterative cycles of planning, activity, observation, and reflection. The goal of each cycle was to introduce, put into practice, and improve intercultural teaching techniques that the participating instructors had jointly created.

Context and Participants

The study was conducted at two public secondary schools in the Sargodha District of Punjab, Pakistan. Both schools followed the provincial English curriculum, according to the Single National Curriculum (2020). Six English teachers, four of whom were women and two of whom were men, freely participated after receiving an introductory training on the principles of IcLL. Each teacher had five to fifteen years of classroom experience. Ninety kids between the ages of 14 and 15 were selected from two Grade 9 groups. The participants' identities were anonymized through the use of pseudonyms.

Table 1*Intervention Design for Participatory Action Research*

Week	Focus	Teacher Activities	Data Collected
1	Planning	Workshop on IcLL principles; collaborative lesson design	Teacher planning notes
2-3	Action	Implementation of intercultural tasks (e.g., comparing cultural idioms, reflective journaling)	Classroom observations; learner reflections
4	Observation	Peer observation and feedback sessions	Observation reports
5-6	Reflection	Focus-group discussion and revision of lesson materials	Teacher journals; interviews

Examples of classroom activities included addressing gender roles in stories from various cultures, comparing local proverbs with English idioms, and using English writing exercises to reflect on students' cultural beliefs. In order to contextualize language use, teachers were urged to make comparisons between regional customs and international viewpoints.

Data Collection Instruments

Four complementary techniques were used to gather data in order to guarantee validity and triangulation:

1. *Classroom Observations*: A standardized checklist that focused on intercultural markers such student participation, the utilization of local cultural examples, and dialogic inquiry was used to observe each lesson.
2. *Reflective Journals for Teachers*: Participants kept weekly notes on their experiences incorporating IcLL, difficulties encountered, and observed shifts in student involvement.
3. *Learner Reflective Diaries*: Each class of ten volunteer students kept brief, introspective notes in English detailing their weekly cultural education.
4. *Focus-Group Interviews*: These are held at the conclusion of every cycle to talk about modifications to teaching methods and student reactions.

Using Braun and Clarke's six-step theme analysis process, all qualitative data were transcribed and thematically coded (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Data Analysis

The method used for data analysis was interpretive and iterative. Following an initial inductive derivation from student reflections and instructor journals, codes were categorized to reflect recurrent themes in various data sources. Reliability was increased by triangulating observations, interviews, and journals. In order to guarantee authenticity and participant validation, themes were finalized in collaboration with participants during the last PAR reflection meeting.

Ethical Considerations

The corresponding school administrations granted ethical approval. Teachers, students, and parents gave their informed approval for the voluntary participation. In every report, pseudonyms were employed. The study placed a high priority on avoiding deficit rhetoric toward any linguistic minority and respecting cultural diversity.

Findings

The analysis revealed three main themes:

1. Changing teacher mindsets
2. Improving classroom communication, and
3. Students' growing intercultural awareness

1. Transformation of Teacher Mindsets

At first, educators saw "culture" as static information, such as lists of holidays or traditions from English-speaking nations. They rethought culture as dynamic and interpretive through peer debates and reflective writing. "I used to think teaching culture meant teaching about England," said Sara, one of the teachers. I now see that it has to do with how we use English to comprehend both our own and other cultures. Instructors expressed more assurance

when it came to adapting textbook assignments to make them more culturally relevant. Lessons on greetings, for example, developed into comparisons of Urdu and English politeness conventions, allowing students to analyze language pragmatically.

2. Enhanced Classroom Dialogue

Observational data revealed a notable improvement in the quality of interactions and student participation. Instead of memorizing answers, students engaged in conversations that linked their own experiences with perspectives from around the world. One lesson that caught my attention contrasted proverbs like "Unity is strength" and "It takes a village to raise a child" with local Punjabi sayings on cooperation. Greater understanding of universal human values and cross-cultural comparisons were fostered by the practice. Peer observation reports indicate that teachers began using scaffolding tactics that encouraged contemplation and asked more open-ended questions. The teacher encouraged the students to analyze the cultural meaning of the Urdu saying "Neki kar darya mein daal" and provide an English explanation. Students enthusiastically reacted, relating it to universal ideas of selflessness.

3. Emerging Intercultural Awareness among Learners

Students' reflective diaries revealed a gradual but noticeable increase in intercultural curiosity. At first, a lot of people thought that "culture" meant a foreign way of life. By week six, more complex understanding was evident in reflections like "I learned that every culture has its good values and we can learn from them." We should not mock the language or accent of others because they too try to speak English like us. Similar findings were corroborated by teachers in focus group interviews, who reported that students were more accepting and that peers' accents were less frequently made fun of. Learners were more likely to use English creatively to describe their own cultural experiences as they progressed from rote translation to authentic expression.

Table 2*Summary of Findings*

Theme	Evidence Source	Outcome
Transformation of Teacher Mindsets	Journals, Interviews	Teachers adopted reflective, intercultural views of language teaching
Enhanced Classroom Dialogue	Observations, Peer Feedback	More student-centered, dialogic lessons
Emerging Intercultural Awareness	Learner Diaries	Increased cultural empathy and linguistic confidence

Discussion

The results show that using Participatory Action Research (PAR) to integrate Intercultural Language Learning (IcLL) in Pakistani ELT classes is both possible and transformative. In line with global research on reflective and intercultural education, the six-week project produced significant professional and pedagogical changes.

Reconceptualising Teaching Roles

The first significant realization has to do with how teachers' professional identities have changed throughout time. Participants changed from being knowledge carriers to intercultural mediators, in accordance with paradigm of transformative teacher learning (Maijala et al., 2024). Teachers became aware of their agency in modifying resources and interpreting cultural content instead of just reciting textbook narratives through group reflection. Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, which promotes education as a dialogic process based on students' lived realities, is in line with this rethinking. The change also supports Pennycook's (2022) contention that local knowledge systems should be valued and epistemic hierarchies challenged in English instruction (Pennycook, 2022). Teachers showed that intercultural competency is co-constructed within local discourse rather than imported from the West by orienting their teachings on Pakistani customs.

Dialogic Interaction and Learner Voice

Classroom engagement is the subject of the second realization. Instead of having students memorize answers, teachers' greater use of open-ended questions and comparative exercises created dialogic spaces where students explored meaning. This is consistent with Kramsch's (2013) concept of the "third place," where language acquisition turns into a platform for cross-cultural interaction (DINCĂ, 2022). Byram's (1997) intercultural competency theory relies heavily on emergent critical cultural awareness, which was demonstrated by the observed student conversations about proverbs and idioms (Wagner & Byram, 2017).

Reflections from the students showed increased regard and understanding for language diversity. These results are consistent with research showing that authentic, introspective tasks improve intercultural sensitivity. The innovation here, though, is in showing this shift inside Pakistan's exam-focused, resource-constrained system, a setting that is rarely discussed in international IcLL discourse.

Institutional and Systemic Implications

The inquiry also revealed systemic barriers. Teachers noted that long-term creativity is hampered by large class sizes, exam pressure, and rigid curricula. Introspective collaboration has very little institutional backing. Pakistani educators often work alone without access to professional learning groups (Jadoon et al., 2020). The PAR framework created a micro-community of inquiry to address this, but for long-term sustainability, clear policy support is required. If intercultural learning outcomes and time for reflective teacher collaboration were incorporated into the Single National Curriculum, IcLL might not be a stand-alone experiment but rather become a common educational approach.

Reflective Professionalism and Teacher Empowerment

The growth of reflective professionalism among participating instructors was another important result of this endeavor. Teachers were able to reevaluate their teaching decisions

based on classroom evidence and critically analyze their pedagogical presumptions by participating in the PAR cycle. Through group discussion and peer review, many participants who had previously thought of reflection as a simple administrative task started to see it as a source of agency and professional insight. The method gave them the confidence to see themselves as researchers who could change their classrooms rather than as passive implementers of curricula that were imposed from beyond.

Instructors said they felt more comfortable creating assignments that promoted local storytelling, cross-cultural comparison, and community involvement. In line with the larger objectives of IcLL, such activities moved their emphasis from linguistic precision to communicative meaning-making. Crucially, the reflective journaling sessions promoted reflection on power dynamics and teacher-student relationships. Teachers reinterpreted their authority in the classroom as facilitation rather than control as they became more adept at hearing what students had to say. This change is indicative of a trend toward democratic professionalism, in which education is viewed as a cooperative activity with a strong ethical foundation.

Learner Transformation and Intercultural Awareness

Alongside the teachers' growth, learners demonstrated noticeable changes in attitude and engagement. Prior to the intervention, many students believed that English was primarily utilized for exams and rote memorization. Through intercultural activities such as discussing regional customs in English, comparing and contrasting proverbs from other nations, and analyzing cultural values embedded in the language, learners began to perceive English as a living, relational language. They demonstrated greater self-assurance, empathy, and tolerance for cultural differences in their group presentations and written comments. Students started questioning cultural stereotypes in textbooks and adding personal stories to class discussions. For instance, while analyzing them, some students drew attention to cultural parallels and

discrepancies by relating colloquial expressions to regional proverbs. These kinds of activities not only increased language flexibility but also promoted critical cultural awareness. This modification supports the notion that intercultural education fosters pupils' social imagination and communication abilities, enabling them to handle variety with grace and respect.

Toward a Sustainable Intercultural Pedagogy

Even though the six-week project showed encouraging outcomes, sustainability is still a major issue. Institutional and structural alignment are essential for IcLL to flourish in Pakistani ELT. It is essential to give educators organized chances for introspection, teamwork, and sharing research. Policymakers and school administrators must accept reflective inquiry as a valid part of professional growth. Assessment methods should also change to emphasize intercultural comprehension in addition to language competency. Teachers may be encouraged to adopt such strategies without worrying about departing from established standards if intercultural outcomes are incorporated into national curriculum. Establishing mentorship networks that link teacher-education institutions and classroom practitioners is equally crucial since it facilitates ongoing idea sharing and evidence-based improvements. Intercultural pedagogy can become a long-term educational movement that transforms English instruction in Pakistan through such cooperation.

The results essentially confirm that the combination of PAR and IcLL has the capacity to revolutionize education and institutions. It encourages students to approach language with intercultural inquiry and respect, revitalizes classroom engagement, and equips educators to become thoughtful change agents. The experiment demonstrates that, in spite of systemic obstacles, collaborative inquiry and reflective practice may initiate significant educational improvement in classrooms.

Conclusion

This empirical study provides proof that Intercultural Language Learning may be successfully incorporated into English-language schools in Pakistan through Participatory Action Research. Together, teachers and students changed how they perceived language as a cultural practice over the course of six weeks, leading to increased empathy, dialogic competence, and reflection. The findings support the idea that a drastic revamp of the curriculum is not always necessary for intercultural education. Rather, intercultural awareness can be developed through little, thoughtful changes made to already-existing curriculum, such as comparative conversations, reflective writing, and contextual examples. While pupils gained tolerance and an interest in cultural variety, teachers became empowered professionals who could mediate between local and global discourses. For long-term effects, systemic change is required. IcLL theory and PAR methodology ought to be incorporated into preservice and inservice programs at teacher-education institutes. Intercultural outcomes including empathy, open-mindedness, and interpretative ability should be acknowledged by assessment systems. Longitudinal designs may be used in future studies to investigate how intercultural attitudes change over time. Last but not least, including IcLL through participatory reflection into English instruction supports Pakistan's larger educational objective of producing inclusive, internationally capable citizens.

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