

TEACHING OF CULTURAL CONTENTS IN ESL TEXTBOOKS: CHALLENGES FACED BY ESL TEACHERS AT INTERMEDIATE LEVEL IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This study investigates the challenges faced by ESL teachers in teaching cultural contents at the intermediate level in District Dir Lower, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The study aims to identify the difficulties encountered by the ESL teachers while teaching the target-language cultural contents to the students. In the initial stage, the textbook was examined and the cultural contents were located. A questionnaire was drafted, based on the text which was followed by interviews. The study used mixed methods approach including questionnaires and interviews. The sample size of the selected participants included fifty-two teachers. The findings of the research revealed that teachers face several difficulties while teaching foreign cultural words to learners. One major problem was the students' lack of background knowledge of the target culture. Secondly, it was challenging to explain such concepts in the absence of their equivalent words in the local language. During the study, it was known that the teachers faced difficulty explaining the meanings mainly those related to conflicting concepts from religious and ideological points of view. The study recommends measures to train the teachers to effectively teach the target culture through proper training.

Key Words: *ESL Learners, Cultural Contents, Cross-Cultural Communication, Challenges, Prospects*

Introduction

Teaching English to the native speakers of Pashto has become an indispensable part of the education system. English is taught at schools level as one of the compulsory subjects (Li & Akram, 2024, 2023), the educators sometimes struggle with teaching values and social contents which take place in textbooks (Akram et al., 2020, 2021). Culture is critical in language learning, as it brings insight on how language is used differently in different contexts and societies (Ahmad et al., 2022; Amjad et al., 2021). But linking cultural issues can be challenging for teachers, especially if the examples used in the books are far removed from the students' own experiences (Ramzan et al., 2025, 2023, 2020). For instance, reading about festivals, traditions, or lifestyles from other countries which are new for them may be difficult to explain. In the absence of proper teaching skills and approach, the students may suffer demotivation to continue with the text and lose interest. Teachers need to double their efforts to explain these differences and connect the dots to make the lessons relevant (Akram & Oteir, 2025). In addition, the teachers also have their own shortcomings mainly including the lack of relevant training and their lack of understanding foreign concepts (Akram et al., 2022, 2021). They may be unsure of the cultural content themselves, or they may not have the confidence to convey it in a way students can relate to. Some teachers find teaching aids or tools to make lessons more interactive and engaging due to limited access to resources (Abdelrady et al., 2026, 2025). The significance of the study lies in its aim to investigate the specific culture-related challenges faced by ESL teachers of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa when teaching cultural

content to intermediate-level students. The purpose of this study is to recognize these obstacles in order to make the taught knowledge easier to practice by teachers while providing additional benefits for students. Knowing the challenges and problems that they face, it can be taught to take corrective measures and adopt better teaching methods.

Literature Review

Culture is one of the essential aspects of human life, as being knowledgeable or understanding culture is an important step along the road towards communicative competence. After the impact (positive) of culture in the foreign language classroom has been well documented and restated many times, the problems of what to teach, the problems of how to teach it remain the central dilemma (cultures) of the language teaching classroom. According to McKay (2006), "Culture intersects with language teaching in general and in complex ways: linguistic and pedagogical", as it considered one of the most crucial linguistic dimensions. It occurs on the semantic level, pragmatic level, and discourse level of language. This realization not only benefits the approach of using the language items chosen but also maintains the choice on cultural basis which affects choice on how the language items are selected (McKay, 2003). As the lessons learned through cultural examination are an experience from which all of us can benefit, the cultural examination is one of the processes that help college students learn to know their cultures and in turn realize their cultures (Ramzan & Khan, 2024a, 2024b).

Rivers stated that students are a "culture-bound" who see the world usually through the lens of cultural values they are endorsed through their socialization. That can lead to some issues though, when you are solving across cultures. The relationship between language and thought poses a problem for the cogitation of language instructors due to the two contradictions in theories of learning Verbose (2006). Apart from international vocabulary and custom conduct, they need to recall the "concept" in the back of the language / language phrases used in the first-rate order of the speculation. The first one, however, suggests that learners acquire the 'mind-sets' which this taught in language form in L2 implicitly. In the culture vs. language war, there are some great theories but according to Brown (2000) a learner of a second language should aim not just to converse and communicate beyond their native culture, but assimilate the beliefs of the target culture. The argument above suggests that knowledge about language learning and knowledge about target culture are intrinsically connected. Byram in Ekawati & Hamdani (2012) also states that there are three broad objectives which must be incorporated in the foreign language teaching and learning process. And these objectives and aims comprise: the extension of communicative competence to carry out in situations the pupil may be likely to successfully many; the realization of the nature of language and language discovering; the growth of awareness of the overseas culture and positive attitudes in the direction of foreign nationals. Kramsch (1996) further put forward that we cannot be skilled in the language if we do not have realization of that culture, and how that culture connects to our first language or first culture.

Textbooks are an integral part of any subject area, both for teaching and for learning. Even though there are variety in educational resources and technologies, textbooks as the only most important support for teachers and students. Cunnings (1995) says that "textbooks are the most an effective resource for autonomous learning and for presentation material, a source of notions and activities, a reference source for students, a syllabus where that reflects pre-determined learning aims, and support for untrained teachers who have yet to gain self-confidence". The implementation of knowledge dissemination then becomes the basic feature of a textbook (Karvonen: 1995 cited in Lappalainen, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

Intercultural understanding plays a pivotal role in cross-cultural communication since it is essential for the learners of English language learners to understand the cultural associations and connotations of English. It is essential that teachers should be aware of the cultural diversity and sensitive presented in the textbooks while teaching those books. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the cultural items in textbooks in the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and how the ESL teachers deal with those cultural contents. Thus, the primary purpose of the undertaken study is to highlight the challenges faced by ESL teachers in teaching those cultural contents in the context of KP at intermediate level.

Significance of the Study

This research has great significance for curriculum designers, teachers and students in terms of highlighting the essential role of cultural contents, existing in the current textbooks which hinder the teaching and learning process. The study highlighted those challenging, strange and alien cultural items in the textbooks which became hindrance in the learning of the students. The study informs the curriculum designers to incorporate such lessons which are culturally relevant and acceptable to the local culture. Likewise, the study also contributes to the international culture where it highlighted culturally fixed items and contents that become problematic for a specific culture. Thus, this study promotes the significance of local culture and highlights barriers occurs to them due to the dominant cultures of the world.

Objective of the Research

The study is guided by the following research objectives:

1. To evaluate how well-suited the existing teaching methods and textbooks are for fostering intercultural understanding
2. To create useful tactics and suggestions to improve cultural content instruction and learning
3. To participate in the creation of teacher training programs and ELT materials which are sensitive to cultural differences

Research Questions

This research has investigated the following research questions:

1. What are the main obstacles that ESL teachers face while teaching cultural contents at intermediate level?
2. How are cultural diversity and sensitivity addressed in contemporary English language textbooks?
3. What tactics may be used to improve the way cultural contents are taught and learned in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa ESL classrooms?

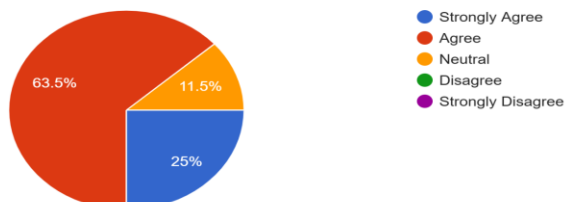
Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify the challenges of ESL teachers regarding teaching of cultural contents at intermediate-level textbooks in Dir Lower, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A mixed-method approach was used while employing questionnaire and open-ended questions as data collection tools. The researchers used stratified sampling procedure to collect the data from the participants. The quantitative data was analyzed statistically for percentages and frequencies, while the qualitative data was analysed for finding out the prevalent themes in the responses of the participants. Thematic analysis was utilized to investigate the dominant themes in collected data. Based on the analysis, key findings were drawn, appropriately supported by the results. The study revealed that teachers faced challenges while teaching cultural contents to the learners at intermediate level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Results

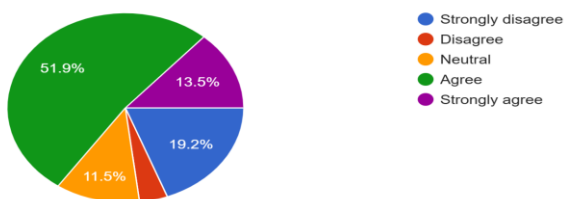
As described earlier, the questionnaire consisted of the various aspects of the presence of foreign culture content and the ensuing problems and challenges associated with them during the teaching process. The first item was as follows:

There are often cultural words in the English coursebooks which are difficult to explain to the students.
52 responses



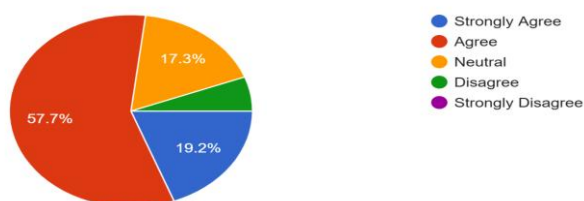
The above pie chart provides results of the respondents about the existence of cultural words in English course books. The results illustrate 63% agree and 25% strongly agree that there are cultural words in course books, while 11% remained neutral. The results indicate that the majority of English teachers believed that there were cultural words in the English course books that made it difficult for them to explain.

I understand that there are three types of cultures; international culture, target language culture and local culture.
52 responses



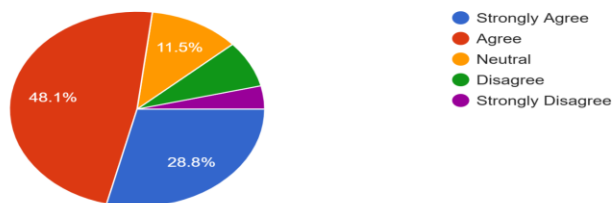
The above pie chart gives us the results of the respondents about that there are three types of culture. The results demonstrate 51.9% agree and 13.5% strongly agree that there are local culture, target culture, and international culture, while 11.5% remained neutral. The results point out that 19.2% of English teachers strongly disagree that they do not understand the three types of culture.

I have noticed these different culture elements in the English coursebook.
52 responses



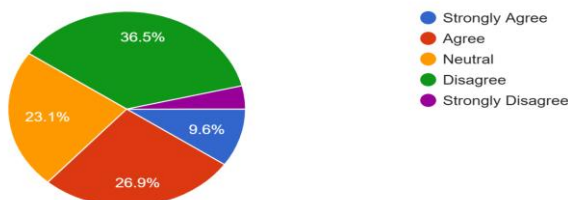
The above pie chart presents the results of the respondents about the English teachers who have noticed these different elements in English course books. The results show 57.7% agree and 19.2% strongly agree, while 17.3% remained neutral. The results suggest that the majority of English teachers have noticed these different elements in the English course book.

I find that most of the cultural words are related with target language culture (American & British) in coursebook.
52 responses



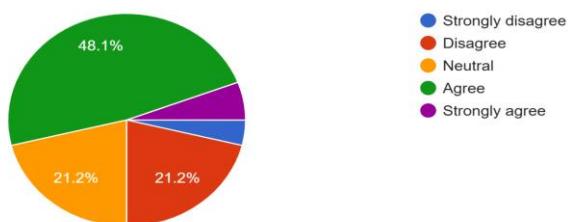
The above pie chart provides results of the respondents about how most of the cultural words are related to the target language (American and British) in English course books. The results illustrate that 48.1% agree and 28.8% strongly agree, while 11.5% remained neutral. The results indicate that the majority of English teachers believed that most of the cultural words are related to the target language.

I find that most of the cultural words are related with local culture.
52 responses



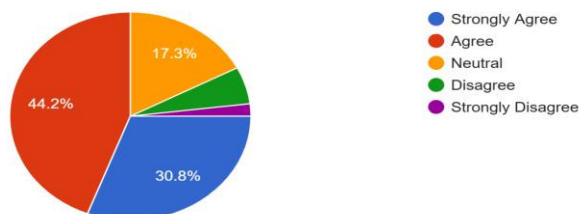
The above pie chart portrays the results of the respondents about the English teachers. They found that most cultural words are related to local culture. The results prove 26.9% agree and 9.6% strongly agree, while 23.1% remained neutral. The results suggest that 35.5% of English teachers disagree that most of the cultural words in the English course books are not related to local culture.

Target language cultural words are often challenging for me to explain.
52 responses



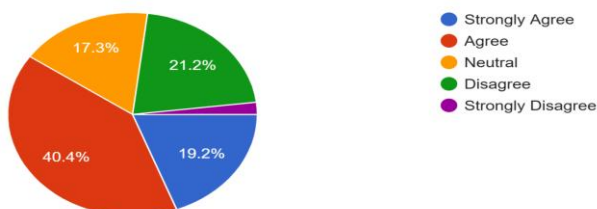
The above pie chart describes the results of the respondents about the target language; cultural words are often challenging for English teachers to explain. The results explain 48.1% agree and 21.2% disagree, while 21.2% remained neutral. The results reveal that the majority of English teachers agreed that target language cultural words are often challenging for them to explain.

The most challenging cultural words are the ones which are considered social taboo in our culture.
52 responses



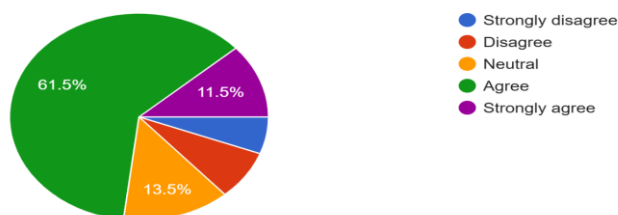
The above pie chart offers results of the respondents about which the most challenging cultural words are the ones that are considered social taboos in our culture. The results demonstrate 44.2% agree and 30.8% strongly agree, while 17.3% remained neutral. The results specify that the majority of English teachers agreed that the most challenging cultural words are social taboo words.

Culturally sensitive words are also challenging for me to explain to the students.
52 responses



The above pie chart displays the results of the respondents about how culturally sensitive words are also challenging for teachers to explain to the students. The results show 40.4% agree and 19.2% strongly agree, 21.2% disagree, while 17.3% remained neutral. The results indicate that the majority of English teachers agree that culturally sensitive words are difficult for them to describe to the learners.

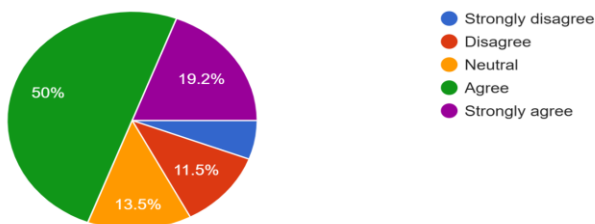
The lack of students' awareness about the target language culture makes it difficult for me to explain those words.
52 responses



The above pie chart comes up with the results of the respondents about the lack of students' awareness of the target language culture, which makes it difficult for them to explain those words. The results represent 61.5% agree and 11.5% strongly agree, while 13.5% remained neutral. The results clarify that the majority of English teachers agreed upon this point that the lack of student awareness about the target language culture makes it challenging for them to explain those words.

Sometimes, students prefer native culture over foreign culture which makes it difficult to explain foreign culture elements.

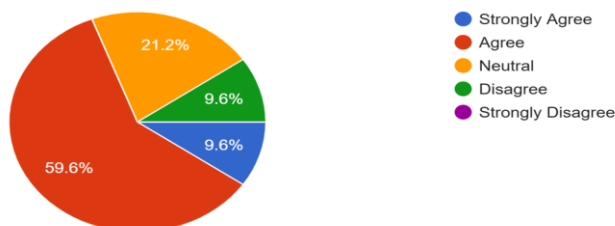
52 responses



The above pie chart extends the results of the respondents about how sometimes students prefer native culture over foreign culture, which makes it difficult to explain foreign culture elements. The results depict 50% agree and 19.2% strongly agree, while 11.5% remained neutral and 13.5% remained neutral. The results specify that the majority of English teachers agreed that sometimes students prefer native culture over foreign culture.

Sometimes, students have negative perceptions about the target language culture which makes it difficult for me to explain cultural elements.

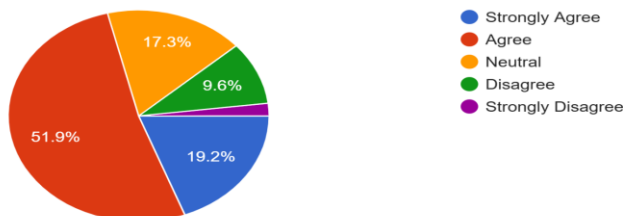
52 responses



The above pie chart shows the results of the respondents about sometimes, students have negative perceptions about the target language culture, which makes it difficult for them to explain cultural elements. The results clarify 59.6% agree, 9.6% strongly agree, and 9.6% disagree, while 21.2% remained neutral. The results point out that the majority of English teachers believed that sometimes, students have negative perceptions about the target language culture.

In most cases, there are no equivalent words of the target culture in the native language which makes it difficult for me to explain to the students.

52 responses



The above pie chart provides results of the respondents about the fact that, in most cases, there are no equivalent words of the target culture in the native language, which makes it difficult for them to explain to the students. The results prove 51.9% agree and 19.2% strongly agree, 9.6% disagree, while 17.3% remained neutral. The results indicate that most English teachers

believed that, in most cases, there are no equivalent words of the target culture in the native language.

Discussion

This paper investigated to find out the challenges faced by ESL teachers in teaching cultural contents at intermediate level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The study revealed that cultural contents are integral part of the coursebooks of English since the authors have included either target-language cultural words or local cultural words in it. From the results of fifty two teachers, it is found that foreign cultural words appeared in their lessons not as a mere linguistic unit to be taught but, rather, as a foundational unit to gain a better understanding about the socio-cultural realities of a foreign language. The results are concurrent with study of Amanda (2021) where they found that cultural words are part and parcel of the English textbooks. From the absence of cultural knowledge of students to the language barrier or even lack of acceptance of new, different ideas that differ from their own, teachers are met with a variety of challenges on a daily basis. Most of these issues arise from both the students and the educational institutions. In a similar study, Haq (2023) illustrated that the students face problems in cultural words due to no proper exposure to the target-language culture and the educational institutions do not provide additional support to the learners to come across with different cultures.

However, one major takeaway is that cultural words have cultural meanings that you cannot find in a dictionary. These words often reflect deeply ingrained traditions, values, emotions, and social behaviours that can really only be understood through proper context. Rahimi and Samadi (2022) argued that culture is understood in the relevant context and exposure. To put it simply, unless students know what is behind a professional talk on a topic that is similar to what they deal with in class or, at least, practice real-world examples, they will find it very hard to relate to its words. The results of the data indicated that there is an emotional and psychological barrier as well for the learners to understand the cultural contents. Likewise, Fauza (2018) argued that there are certain psychological factors hinder the learners to discuss sensitive and strange cultural words. They feel shy to discuss those items due cultural restrains such as gay and lesbians. Thus, in the textbooks at intermediate level, these are also some words which the students do not openly discuss them in the class.

Overall, the analysis concludes that teaching foreign culture words has certain difficulties as well as advantages. If done right, it can provide students with a more open mind and a more international perspective. However, for this to occur, it should involve schools and the school community of teachers and students. But culture is not a side topic; it should be the essence of learning a language. Lack of Support from Institutions Example Responses: 'Culture has no time or budget. "No training on teaching these subjects". Schools give very little support or resources to teachers. They are unlikely to be able to teach cultural content effectively on their own, without institutional support. They need to have training, materials, and time in schools to teach culture. The key findings of the study are that students lack the background knowledge of cultural contents. Secondly, the cross linguistic differences lead to cultural differences between the target-language culture and local culture, where the teachers face problems to teach them effectively. Thirdly, the students prejudice against the target-language culture leads to difficulties in explaining the cultural contents as the learners lack motivation to learn these words. Finally, the lack of interest of the learners leads to difficulty in teaching the cultural words.

Conclusion

This research mainly aimed at exploring the problems encountered by English language teachers in teaching words of foreign culture and identifying the strategies applied to cope with these challenges. After the data collect and analysis, the study finds that teachers face

difficulty in explaining unknown cultural contents due to no equivalent in the local culture, social taboo and sensitivity of some words. The study further found that language and culture are inseparable from one another where some words are deeply embedded in the source culture which cannot be transferred appropriately. In addition, the study recommends the assessment of cultural words in the textbooks and then the incorporation of those cultural words into the local textbooks. Therefore, this study provides a significant contribution to the field of education. This research provides a practical guide for educators, offers classroom design support, and encourages both cultural and political inclusiveness through education.

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