

EXPLORING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN INDONESIAN ELT: PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perceptions, practices, and challenges faced by Indonesian preservice English teachers in implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in English Language Teaching (ELT), drawing on Gay's (2010) framework. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected from five postgraduate preservice teachers through classroom observations, pre- and post-observation interviews, and reflective writing, and were analyzed thematically. Findings indicate that participants perceived CRT as a meaningful and empowering pedagogy that affirms learners' cultural identities, enhances engagement, and contextualizes instruction. Implementation strategies included integrating local and youth cultures into lessons and leveraging technology for student-centered learning. However, participants also faced key challenges: limited conceptual grounding in CRT, disconnects between curriculum policy and classroom realities, scarcity of relevant materials, and a theory–practice gap. As a result, culturally responsive efforts were evident but partial and constrained by structural and institutional factors. These findings reveal a recognition–implementation gap, pointing to the need for more robust CRT training in teacher education, alignment between policy and pedagogy, and development of localized teaching resources. This study contributes to global conversations on CRT in multilingual settings and offers insights for advancing inclusive, culturally relevant ELT practices in Indonesia.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), English Language Teaching (ELT), Perception, Preservice Teacher

A. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world, comprising over 17,000 islands, more than 300 ethnic groups, and over 1,000 languages (Setyono & Widodo, 2019). Unlike multiculturalism in Western countries, which often results from immigration, Indonesia's diversity is indigenous, rooted in local histories, languages, and belief systems. However, this diversity is frequently underutilized in formal education, and culturally

responsive teaching remains inconsistently applied (Douglas, 2020; Fatmawaty et al., 2024; Hidayati et al., 2024).

Globally, CRT has gained increasing prominence in teacher education as a pedagogical framework for fostering inclusive and equitable teaching practices (Gay, 2015). Many teacher education programs have begun incorporating CRT into coursework and practicum components. As in recent years, CRT has gained traction in Indonesian ELT, particularly with the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* and programs like *Kampus Mengajar*, which emphasize learner-centered and contextually relevant pedagogy. However, studies consistently report a gap between theoretical understanding and classroom application. Preservice teachers may express favorable attitudes toward CRT yet struggle with its implementation, especially in the absence of critical reflection, diverse teaching experiences, and mentoring (Siwatu et al., 2016; Idrus & Sohid, 2023). For example, in Malaysia, Idrus and Sohid (2023) found that while inquiry-based CRT instruction enhanced conceptual understanding, institutional constraints often hindered its enactment. Similarly, Kong et al. (2022) found that teachers' emotional and cognitive engagement with CRT varied depending on their exposure to critical self-reflection and identity work. This suggests that CRT preparation must go beyond technical training to include culturally grounded pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and identity exploration. Teacher educators, in particular, play a crucial role in this process. As Koro and Hagger-Vaughan (2025) argue, teacher educators must model CRT principles through their teaching and assessments and support preservice teachers in negotiating identity, power, and sociocultural complexity. Without explicit modeling and critical engagement, CRT risks remaining an abstract theory rather than an embodied practice (Kidwell, 2019).

While the CRT literature is growing, much of it is situated in Western contexts, with limited research from postcolonial, multilingual societies such as Indonesia. This gap is especially relevant given the unique sociopolitical histories and educational challenges these contexts face. Indonesian teacher education must be reconceptualized not only as a site for developing teaching techniques but also as a space for fostering sociopolitical consciousness and localized pedagogical strategies. Teachers in rural or underserved areas have used CRT to make English instruction more culturally meaningful and locally grounded (Fatmawaty et al., 2024; Hidayati et al., 2024; Yuliantari & Huda, 2023). Studies have highlighted diverse CRT practices in Indonesia, such as rewriting EFL textbooks using local narratives (Setyono & Widodo, 2019), integrating oral storytelling and student-created materials (Sukmawati et al., 2024), and engaging students as co-constructors of knowledge (Hidayati et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, several challenges hinder implementation. Teachers cite a lack of culturally relevant materials, limited exposure to CRT in preservice training, and insufficient professional development opportunities (Munandar & Newton, 2021; Rima et al., 2024; Nurbatra & Masyhud, 2022). Centralized curricula and high-stakes assessments further constrain innovation. To overcome these barriers, scholars emphasize embedding CRT in preservice education through identity work, critical discourse, and reflective practice (Fatmawaty et al., 2024; Hidayati et al., 2024). Gay (2015) and Lucas and Villegas (2013) stress that CRT demands teachers recognize and challenge power relations within classrooms and curricula. Despite the progress made in policy and practice, little is known about how Indonesian preservice teachers interpret and enact CRT during their practicum. Their insights are critical for understanding how well teacher education programs prepare them to navigate classroom diversity and implement responsive pedagogy. This study seeks

to fill that gap by exploring preservice teachers' perceptions, practices, and challenges related to CRT in ELT.

The present study is intended to investigate how EFL preservice teachers in Indonesia experience and implement Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in English Language Teaching (ELT) during their teaching practicum. Situated in a multilingual, postcolonial context, the study addresses a growing need to understand how future teachers develop pedagogical approaches that acknowledge and respond to cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom. Moreover, CRT encourages teachers to serve as cultural mediators, critically negotiating the intersections of language, identity, and power in the classroom (Paris & Alim, 2017). Accordingly, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do EFL preservice teachers perceive CRT in ELT?
2. How do they implement CRT in their teaching practicum?
3. What challenges do they face in implementing CRT?

Guided by Gay's (2015) framework, this study analyzes how preservice teachers conceptualize and perform CRT. Gay defines CRT as a pedagogy that affirms students' cultural identities and integrates their lived experiences into instruction. Her model identifies five core components: (1) building a knowledge base of cultural diversity, (2) developing culturally responsive curricula, (3) fostering cultural caring and inclusive communities, (4) applying cross-cultural communication, and (5) achieving cultural congruity in teaching. These principles serve as analytical tools to evaluate how preservice teachers engage with culturally responsive pedagogy in real classroom contexts. This framework aligns with the Indonesian educational landscape, where English is a foreign language and classrooms are diverse in ethnicity, language, and religion. Concepts like *kearifan lokal* (local wisdom) and *gotong royong* (communal values) resonate with the CRT emphasis on community-based, humanizing education. It also addresses longstanding critiques of English language materials that marginalize local voices and overemphasize Western cultural perspectives (Setyono & Widodo, 2019).

Although grounded in the Indonesian context, the findings contribute to global conversations on how culturally responsive pedagogy can be localized and sustained in multilingual, postcolonial educational settings.

B. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Merriam, 2009) to explore how Indonesian EFL preservice teachers understand, enact, and experience challenges in implementing CRT during their practicum. A case study approach enabled a rich, contextualized investigation of five postgraduate preservice teachers enrolled in a one-year, state-funded, non-degree teacher education program in West Java (Creswell, 2013). This hybrid program combines academic coursework (Mondays–Tuesdays) with school-based teaching (Wednesdays–Fridays). Participants were selected from a cohort of 40 following an open call; five volunteered based on their interest in CRT. Ethical clearance was obtained, and all participants gave informed consent.

Data were collected from four sources: pre-observation interviews as the primary data collection instrument to investigate CRT in Indonesian classrooms from the perspective of Indonesian educators. This involved in-depth or semi-structured interviews with five Indonesian teachers' experiences. Afterwards, we do classroom observations, post-observation interviews, and reflective writing. Initial interviews explored participants' CRT perceptions and informed observational focus. Observations during senior secondary. Observations during senior secondary teaching documented CRT enactment, classroom interaction, and student engagement. Follow-up interviews probed pedagogical choices, implementation strategies, and challenges. Reflective writing at the practicum's end captured participants' evolving CRT awareness, instructional experiences, and responses to cultural and identity-related issues. This multi-source design enabled triangulated, in-depth insights into how CRT was interpreted and applied in Indonesian EFL classrooms.

Data analysis followed Clarke and Braun's (2021) thematic analysis approach and was conducted concurrently with data collection. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed iteratively alongside fieldnotes and reflective writing. Initial inductive coding identified patterns in participants' conceptualizations, practices, and challenges with CRT. Codes were revised as new data emerged, allowing cross-source comparison. Final themes synthesized findings across all data sets, illuminating the complexity of preservice teachers' engagement with CRT in a multilingual, culturally diverse educational context.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of CRT in ELT

This section presents findings from preservice teachers' reflections on culturally responsive teaching (CRT) in English Language Teaching (ELT) and discusses them in relation to Gay's (2010) framework and to recent studies on CRT in the Indonesian context. Three major themes emerged: (1) CRT as contextualized and culturally rooted pedagogy, (2) CRT as a strategy for cultural empowerment and preservation, and (3) CRT as a novel and relevant pedagogical innovation. These themes reveal how CRT is being reinterpreted and localized by Indonesian preservice teachers.

CRT as Contextualized and Culturally Rooted Pedagogy

Consistently, the preservice teachers viewed CRT as an English localization where the students' lived experiences and cultural identities were incorporated into their English instruction. Extending Gay's (2010) emphasis on What is being taught and What is to be learned, participants appreciated that effective ELT needs to be content that connects with learners' cultural worlds. As Participant 1 explained,

“...we are not merely teaching English; we are also incorporating students' own cultures to help them become more familiar with, and appreciative of, their local cultural heritage.”

This perception aligns with findings by Yuliantari and Huda (2023), who reported that culturally grounded instruction enhances student engagement and promotes identity development. Participants emphasized that CRT promotes comprehension by presenting content through familiar cultural lenses. As Participant 2 noted,

"CRT refers to Culturally Responsive Teaching, which involves incorporating the surrounding culture into classroom practices. For example, in the context of Cirebon, this would mean integrating elements of Cirebonese culture into the teaching and learning process."

This quote illustrates CRT's contextual adaptability (Nurbatra & Masyhud, 2022) as well as its capacity to handle intra-cultural complexity (Douglas, 2020), since teachers consider regional variances instead of using a one-size-fits-all strategy. But these views also point to a gap between recognition and implementation (Siwatu et al., 2016; Idrus et al., 2023). Despite having a conceptual understanding of CRT, many preservice teachers lacked the confidence or tangible strategies necessary for systematic application. This disparity highlights the need for continued improvements in teacher preparation programs, especially in practicums and courses that demonstrate culturally sensitive teaching practices (Kidwell, 2019).

CRT as a Strategy for Cultural Empowerment and Preservation

Another emerging theme was the way in which CRT was perceived as a means to uphold local identities and cultural pride amidst globalization and hegemonic Western discourses in English education. This view is in line with Gay (2010) observation that students' academic and cultural identity should be affirmed and fostered through instructional practices. By way of example, Participant 1 pondered that,

"...it would be better if their own cultures were also introduced in class, so that they can realize, 'Oh, I do have a culture like this.'"

For participants, CRT was a pedagogical counter-story in which students could consider knowledge from countries abroad while viewing it alongside comparable content from their own culture. "We were taking the culture here — and comparing it to the culture in there — to see how they are different?" ponders Participant 2 in her reflective writing.

Such comparative approaches reflect Setyono and Widodo's (2019) call for counter-dominant Western content in Indonesian textbooks and highlight the benefits of an equilibrium between global and local inflected culture. This finding also speaks to issues of cultural power relations (Kramsch, 2013; Douglas, 2020). Preservice teachers subvert mainstream narratives and create classroom climates as Gay (2002) advocates by focusing on local values such as politeness or respect for the family. However, as research suggests, "addressing power imbalances between the knowledge holder and knowledge user does not occur solely through the process of including people; it also involves critical reflection on what cultures are being included and how" (Douglas, 2020), a rationale which is hardly touched upon in the respondents' responses to the question.

CRT as a Novel and Relevant Pedagogical Innovation.

The third result illuminated CRT as a fresh, but useful pedagogical tool to preservice teachers. Some had first been introduced to CRT in the PPG (Preservice Teacher Professional Education) program. As Participant 3 shared,

"...I have only recently encountered this Critical Responsive Teaching during the current postgraduate education program that I am participating in... to my recollection, I have not yet implemented this Critical Reflection approach..."

Participant 4 echoed this sentiment:

"This is the first time I've encountered this during the Teacher Professional Education program... there is a specific Course that contains a topic on CRT..."

This novelty points to gaps in preservice preparation (Nurbatra & Masyhud, 2022) and corroborates literature that advocates greater classroom practice in teacher education (Siwatu et al., 2016). However, even though preservice teachers had only been minimally exposed to CRT, they regarded it as a radical departure from traditional teaching. Participant 2 noted,

"When we integrate cultural elements into educational activities, students invariably experience enhanced relatability, which consequently may facilitate elevated motivational parameters."

These results support earlier studies demonstrating that CRT has a positive influence on student motivation and the development of identity (Kong et al., 2022). However, this excitement was tempered by awareness of systemic constraints—standardized tests, prescribed curriculum, and the constraints of “what you could leave behind”—that the literature of CRT has well chronicled (Rima et al., 2024; Koro & Hagger-Vaughan, 2025). Although agencies have taken an active role in the development of CRT training and have shown themselves to be flexible and open to change, the overarching system provides few supports for the ongoing use of CRT. Throughout the findings, participants’ beliefs demonstrate convergence with all five dimensions of Gay’s (2010) CRT framework. They conceive of CRT as culturally informed (cultural knowledge), empowering (teacher attitudes), meaningful (curriculum content), engaging (instructional strategies), and affirming (classroom climate). However, certain issues examined in the literature are also highlighted when the results are presented:

- a) The recognition-implementation gap persists despite growing theoretical awareness.
- b) Teacher agency is challenged by systemic constraints and lack of localized materials.
- c) CRT is seen as relevant and empowering but remains peripheral in teacher preparation.

These findings underscore the need to go beyond theoretical education of teachers in Indonesia to linking CRT to sound, context-informed models of teaching. In addition, policy-practice convergence—particularly through initiatives like the Merdeka Curriculum—must be increased in order to sustain CRT adoption at the classroom level.

2. The Implementation of CRT

This section explores how preservice English teachers enacted culturally responsive teaching (CRT) during their practicum. Guided by Gay’s (2010) framework, the findings highlight three key practices: (1) integrating local and contemporary culture, (2) adopting student-centred and tech-supported strategies, and (3) Implementation variability due to systemic and contextual Constraints. These reflect both growing CRT awareness and the challenges of implementation in diverse Indonesian classrooms.

Integrating Local and Contemporary Culture into English Lessons

Preservice teachers integrated local customs and youth concerns into language activities, a reflection of Gay's focus on curriculum content as cultural knowledge. This enabled students to connect to course content in personal ways that validated their identities and enhanced retention. Some participants, such as Participant 1, explained how traditional content was adjusted:

"For teaching narrative text, I used local story such as Roro Jongrang, to make the content culturally relatable to the students."

Another preservice teachers connected food culture with procedural text writing:

"I used the recipe Nasi lengko (local dish of Cirebon) as the content for teaching procedural text. This way I tried to help my students easier to understand how to write procedural texts as the content is more familiar with their daily life." – Participant 5

These orientations are consistent with writing about the role of CRT in student engagement and identity development (Yuliantari & Huda, 2023) and they demonstrate that culturally grounded tasks increase motivation and participation. It's also a good look to blend what's contemporary with modern professions that speak to generations because they have those jobs:

"to make the material more relatable to current sociocultural development, I used job vacancy that are familiar with my students to teach them about how to read a job vacancy. Job vacancies, like content creator, digital marketing, etc., are mostly my students more familiar with" – Participant 2

However, some lessons remained instructive of cultural power structures. For example, local elements were presented; however, participants did not in a critical way reflect upon the dominant or Western cultural norms in place in current textbooks, which was the concern of, among others, Kramsch (2013) and Setyono & Widodo (2019). This indicates that while preservice teachers engaged in efforts aimed at cultural relevance, they were less inclined to engage in critical reflection on cultural representation.

Student-centered and Tech-integrated Instructional Strategies

The preservice teachers also employed CRT through student-centered learning and digital media use, thus portraying Gay's instructional strategies. These approaches enabled learners to independently navigate cultural content through their own everyday technologies. Participant 3 described:

"Students are assigned to locate textual materials pertaining to cultural aspects through the utilization of computational devices or mobile telecommunications equipment."

Similarly, *Participant 5* stated:

"I gave more freedom to my students to do what kind of assignment they wanted to make and through which channel they wanted to submit it."

Such autonomy mirrors the collaborative and creative pedagogies observed in studies like Sukmawati et al. (2024), that illustrate the ways in which student preference and creative

expression support the effectiveness of CRT. What PowerPoint, student-authored texts indicate, is a situational deployment of CRT, one that is personalized according to students' interests and technology at hand. These strategies were ultimately not tenable, however. A few of the preservice teachers got very creative, but others went a more traditional route. It is due to a recognition implementation gap (Siwatu et al., 2016; Idrus et al., 2023). Teachers in general were well disposed toward CRT, but the vast majority did not possess the effective ways and necessary confidence to put it into practice.

Systemic and Institutional Constraints

Reliance on CRT also fell across a spectrum, and was influenced by institutional requirement, the rigidity of curriculum, and characteristics of the student body. Gay's element of teacher attitudes and beliefs resounded here as participants discussed their individual dedication to CRT—yet also the constraints placed by their practicum contexts. A few enrolled adapted contents according to the students' problems through diagnosis assessment:

"Following the administration of diagnostic assessments, initial consideration was given to the environmental context, particularly within Cirebon, given the potential influence of socio-economic factors prevalent in that region." – Participant 2

"A diagnostic assessment was conducted with this cohort of students to ascertain their baseline proficiencies in literacy and numeracy prior to the design of further interventions." – Participant 4

These efforts reflect teacher agency and attempt to localize instruction—yet, others deferred entirely to teacher's expectations. These examples corroborate the systemic constraints vs. teacher agency tension identified in Munandar & Newton (2021) and Rima et al. (2024). Preservice teachers' feel they are powerless, find the demands of the curriculum are high and have few mentors. As *Participant 1* stated in her reflective writing: "... *too much multicultural aspects are a bit difficult to be applied.*" This quotation above also brings out the intracultural complication that are met in diverse classroom—teachers do not only work with interethnic complexity, but also intra-group differences should be considered, as noted by Douglas (2020). Inconsistent implementation of CRT in praxis also highlights the importance of teacher training more generally. Participants murmured doubts or they just fell back to a little bit of tweaking, signaling a lack of migration of CRT to pedagogical perspectives. Although just there started to experiment student centered tasks and cultural integration, these attempts were not regular practice, and sound in Nurbatra & Masyhud (2022). This warrants preservice programs providing opportunities to practice CRT, instead of mere exposure, as proposed by Kidwell (2019) and Koro and Hagger-Vaughan (2025).

Intracultural Diversity and Resource Limitations

Moreover, the scarce use of culturally loaded, locally made materials depict the materials and resource constraints characteristic of under-developed setting (Setyono & Widodo, 2019). Teachers were often found depended on mainstream (or reused) content because they lacked the time and the cultural understanding to develop culturally specific teaching materials. Overall, this study affirms that preservice teachers are beginning to integrate CRT, primarily through 1) Culturally relevant lesson content (curriculum content, cultural knowledge), 2) Student-led and digitally supported tasks (instructional strategies, classroom climate), AND 3) Diagnostic responsiveness (teacher attitudes and beliefs).

These practices are, however, limited by systemic and institutional factors, confirming understanding of the policy relevant of specific policy relevance and significance is applied, with further practical implications for CRT knowledge (Fatmawaty et al., 2024; Koro & Hagger-Vaughan, 2025). Finally, it will be the role of teacher education in the time to come to better prepare teachers for identity negotiation (Douglas, 2020), where preservice professionals will be challenged in terms of their cultural locations and pedagogical convictions.

3. The Challenges in Implementing CRT in ELT

This section outlines three key challenges preservice teachers faced in implementing culturally responsive teaching (CRT) during their practicum: (1) navigating conceptual and practical readiness, (2) negotiating cultural relevance within diverse and standardized contexts, and (3) designing culturally responsive and engaging learning resources. These themes reflect tensions between CRT principles and classroom realities, highlighting gaps in preparation, curricular flexibility, and resource availability.

Navigating Conceptual and practical readiness

One of the major challenges that preservice teachers experienced was their weak understanding of CRT, and they also struggled to translate CRT into practice. This mirrors a phenomenon in the literature known as the “Recognition-Implementation Gap” (Siwatu et al., 2016; Chu & Garcia, 2021) in which educators acknowledge the value of CRT, yet still find difficulty implementing it in practical terms. Respondents also repeatedly stated that their exposure to CRT was late in their own teacher preparation program:

“...my initial exposure to the concept of CRT occurred during my current Professional Teacher Program (PPG)...” – Participant 3

“My awareness of this concept emerged during the Professional Teacher Program (PPG); specifically, it was addressed within one of the courses offered at that time.” – Participant 4

“My understanding of what is termed CRT developed during the Professional Teacher Program (PPG), and this knowledge was acquired towards the latter part of the first semester.” -- Participant 2

These instances support Kidwell’s (2019) assertion that pre-service teachers receive little to no practical application for cultural blending despite exposure to theory. Teachers need to develop a wide range of information about did if they were to effectively practice culturally responsive pedagogy, according to Gay (2010), however, the timeliness of the introduction of CRT theory to the participants may not have allowed them to fully internalize and practice the concepts. Another challenge was to implement this into practice, to develop curriculum specific, culturally response materials, and align these with curriculum expectations:

“...it was necessary for me to develop modules to be implemented across bi-weekly instructional sessions...” – Participant 3

"The primary challenge lies in effectively aligning instructional objectives..."
-- Participant 2

These difficulties reflect what Idrus et al. (2023) identified as the disconnection between theory and practice in preservice teacher education. As Participant 5 noted,

"...given that CRT inherently focus on specific content domains... certain material proved challenging to integrate, such as the genre of job application letters."

These reflections reveal the challenge of determining when and how to appropriately integrate cultural content across the curriculum. This echoes Nurbatra & Masyhud's (2022) identification of skill gaps among teachers attempting to implement CRT.

Negotiating Cultural Relevance within Diverse and Standardized Contexts

The second major difficulty was to make the book culturally relevant in different classrooms and homogenized curricula. This struggle is an indication of the "Systemic Constraints vs. Teacher Agency" dilemma described in the literature (Rima et al, 2024; Koro & Hagger-Vaughan, 2025) where the teachers' resolve to teach CRT clashes with institutional resistance. The work moved into multiculturally diverse classrooms and there were specific challenges:

"I am teaching in a highly multicultural educational setting; it initially presents certain pedagogical complexities in fostering cohesion among students due to their disparate cultural backgrounds." – Participant 4

These experiences signal what Douglas (2020) describes as Intra-cultural Complexity, when cultural variances within presumed homogeneous groups pose challenges to the use of CRT. Teachers need to acquire a rich base of cultural information to enact relevant culturally responsive pedagogy that connects to students' lived realities (Gay, 2018). Participant 3 adds, "I'm not even from Cirebon so it was tougher." Compounding these challenges was a lack of awareness about local conditions. This barrier is similar to the conclusion of Cinarbas & Hos (2016) on the importance of teachers having cultural orientation in working across borders. Moreover, the push, pull between the standardized vs. the culture of the local community were also found to be complicating:

"...the instructional materials, specifically the textbook, exhibit a pronounced international orientation, evidenced by the prevalence of non-Indonesian proper nouns used for individuals within the text. This may present challenges in terms of cultural relevance and student engagement within the local context." – Participant 2

"...there exists a discernible need for the further development and refinement of the textbook. This imperative stems from a potential mismatch between the existing content and the specific learning needs and cultural context of the students, necessitating a curriculum review and material adaptation process." – Participant 5

The "Material and Resource Limitations" mentioned by Setyono & Widodo (2019) and Rima et al. (2024), who pointed out the excessive focus on Western cultural content in textbooks, are consistent with these observations. This challenge unveils the power relations behind the question of cultural representation, and mirrors Kramsch's (2013) probing questions

about whose culture is being taught and how. Participant 1's approach to ensuring that materials are made relevant to students' lives appears to address in embryo one of the "Policy-Practice Alignment" factors identified by Munandar & Newton (2021) and Hidayati et al. (2024).

Designing Culturally Responsive and Engaging Learning Resources

The third significant challenge involved creating learning resources that were both culturally responsive and engaging for contemporary learners. According to Gay (2018), its action is for CRT to have materials that reflect the cultural experiences of students and are highly engaging. Participants recounted some of the challenges in reconciling cultural specificity and technological advancement:

"...contemporary students possess a heightened familiarity with technological interfaces; however, the central discourse pertains to the cultural dimensions and implications thereof." -- Participant 3

This is related to the "Collaborative and Creative Pedagogical Approach" by Sukmawati et al. (2024) and Setyono & Widodo (2019) in stressing the necessity for the innovative way to deliver the cultural content. Participant 4 emphasized how the lack of cultural connection with the materials negatively affected student engagement:

"...in instances where instructional content lacks alignment with the contextual realities of the learners—for example, when descriptive texts focus on unfamiliar foreign cultures—students may experience cognitive disengagement and comprehension challenges from the outset due to a lack of relatable prior knowledge and cultural schemata."

This finding is consistent with results of Kong et al. (2022) in the relationship between culturally responsive content and on-task behaviour. And there were added challenges related to producing visually attractive and culturally appropriate materials:

"...the process of sourcing presentational materials akin to PowerPoint slides and identifying video resources that effectively maintain audience engagement and mitigate potential somnolence presents a considerable pedagogical challenge." – Participant 1

These reflections align with Gay's (2018) notion of "cultural scaffolding," where learning builds upon students' meaningful cultural experiences. The difficulty in sourcing relevant materials echoes Nurbatra and Masyhud's (2022) call for CRT to be context-specific rather than universally applied. The challenge of producing culturally relevant resources reflects a cross-context finding on "Material and Resource Limitations" (Kong et al., 2022; Rima et al., 2024). This is particularly important considering studies linking culturally responsive materials to student motivation, identity formation, and belonging (Yuliantari & Huda, 2023). The findings indicate the need for stronger CRT integration in teacher education, flexible curricula, and improved access to resources. Addressing these gaps requires moving beyond theoretical CRT frameworks toward actionable pedagogical strategies and assessment tools (Siwatu et al., 2016; Koro & Hagger-Vaughan, 2025). As Gay (2018) emphasizes, CRT is not a fixed set of strategies but a sustained pedagogical stance requiring institutional commitment. The participants' experiences underscore the need for what Koro

and Hagger-Vaughan (2025) describe as “communities of practice” to support collaborative curriculum design and ongoing teacher development in CRT.

Findings show that preservice teachers’ CRT efforts are shaped by interconnected individual, institutional, and systemic factors. The delayed introduction of CRT in teacher education often leads to limited conceptual grounding, restricting effective pedagogical enactment—an issue also noted by Kidwell (2019) and Gay (2018), who stress the need for early and robust CRT preparation. Participants’ struggles reflect a persistent theory- practice gap, consistent with findings by Idrus et al. (2023). This gap is further exacerbated by systemic barriers such as rigid curricula and standardized expectations, which limit the space for culturally responsive practices (Koro & Hagger-Vaughan, 2025). The misalignment between curriculum policy and CRT practice echoes critiques from Hidayati et al. (2024) and Munandar and Newton (2021). Institutional preferences for dominant cultural narratives, as discussed by Gay (2010), create further obstacles. Participants’ frustrations with Westernized textbooks support Setyono and Widodo’s (2019) and Kramsch’s (2013) concerns about the cultural biases in ELT materials.

D. CONCLUSION

This paper investigated Indonesian preservice teachers’ perceptions and practices of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in English Language Teaching (ELT). The results demonstrate that preservice teachers view CRT as a culturally responsive, empowering, and innovative pedagogy, yet its practice is variable and limited by systemic and contextual influences. Teachers took up CRT as a strategy to situate the teaching of English, maintain cultural identity, and promote student involvement through student-centered and technology- based approaches. But, although theoretically accepted, they had difficulty in putting CRT principles into practice because they were not trained in pedagogy, unwilling to follow the curriculum, and institutional constraints prevailed. The findings of the study confirm the relevance of Gay’s (2010) model in the evaluation of culturally responsive pedagogy in Indonesia. All the five dimensions’ factors: teachers’ cultural knowledge, teachers’ attitudes and beliefs, curriculum, instructional strategies, and classroom environment, were found in teachers’ practice and perception. A consistent space between recognition and enactment did exist and suggested the need for enhanced teacher education programming and organizational scaffolds.

This study underscores the urgency of formally embedding CRT into Indonesian preservice ESL teacher education. Currently, CRT appears sporadically across programs without systematic integration. To address this, CRT should be woven into practice-based courses, model lessons, and school placements, enabling candidates to develop critical dispositions and culturally responsive teaching practices. Teacher educators must also embody CRT by addressing issues of culture and power, and by guiding preservice teachers in applying these principles in diverse classrooms. Curricula should support the creation of culturally relevant materials, sustained engagement with learners’ sociocultural backgrounds, and attention to intra-cultural diversity. Bridging the gap between theoretical understanding and practical implementation requires closer alignment between coursework and field experiences. This study highlights CRT’s potential to foster inclusive, dialogic, and identity-affirming language learning environments. Incorporating local knowledge, youth culture, and student-centered practices can enhance learner motivation and belonging—but these efforts depend on collaborative school cultures, flexible curricula, and accessible resources.

Support from policymakers, curriculum developers, and textbook authors is essential to ensure culturally sensitive materials and promote critical inquiry into both global and local discourses. Mentor teachers also play a crucial role in modeling CRT for novice educators. Future research should include longitudinal studies tracking preservice teachers' evolving CRT practices and explore context-sensitive learning models—such as lesson study, peer coaching, and AI- assisted reflection—for developing CRT competence. Additional inquiries might examine curriculum-policy coherence, the co-construction of localized curricular documents, and the interplay of CRT with intersecting identities such as ethnicity, religion, and class. These directions can advance grounded theory and foster more equitable English language education in Indonesia and similar multilingual settings.

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