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THE ROLE OF CULTURALLY CONTEXTUALIZED ELT IN ENHANCING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AMONG KAZAKHSTANI LEARNERS

Abstract: This study examines the role of culturally contextualized English Language Teaching (ELT) in enhancing critical thinking skills among Kazakhstani learners. Using a quasi-experimental design, it compares students exposed to culturally integrated lessons with those following a standard curriculum. Results show that cultural integration fosters critical thinking, language proficiency, and student engagement. The findings highlight the benefits of localized content in ELT and suggest curriculum adaptations to support effective language learning in Kazakhstan.

Keywords: ELT, critical thinking skills, intercultural competence, language education, problem-solving, analytical reasoning, localized content, curriculum adaptation.

Түйіндеме: Бұл зерттеу Қазақстандық оқушылардың сыни ойлау дағдыларын дамытудағы мәдени тұрғыда бейімделген ағылшын тілі оқытудың (ELT) рөлін зерттейді. Жартылай эксперименттік әдісті қолдана отырып, мәдени мазмұнды кіріктірілген сабақтарды өткен студенттер мен стандартты оқу бағдарламасын ұстанған студенттер салыстырылды. Нәтижелер көрсеткендей, мәдени интеграция сыни ойлау, тілдік

құзыреттілік және студенттердің белсенділігін арттыруға ықпал етеді. Бұл зерттеу ELT-дегі жергілікті мазмұнның артықшылықтарын көрсетіп, Қазақстандағы тиімді тілдік оқытуға арналған оқу бағдарламаларын бейімдеу қажеттілігін ұсынады.

Түйін сөздер: ELT, сыни ойлау дағдылары, мәдениетаралық құзыреттілік, тілдік білім, мәселені шешу, аналитикалық ойлау, жергілікті мазмұн, оқу бағдарламасын бейімдеу.

Аннотация: В данном исследовании рассматривается роль культурно адаптированного преподавания английского языка (ELT) в развитии навыков критического мышления у казахстанских учащихся. Используя квази-экспериментальный дизайн, сравниваются студенты, обучавшиеся по программам с культурной интеграцией, и те, кто следовал стандартному учебному плану. Результаты показывают, что культурная интеграция способствует развитию критического мышления, языковой компетенции и вовлеченности студентов. Выводы подчеркивают преимущества локализованного контента в ELT и предлагают адаптацию учебных программ для эффективного языкового обучения в Казахстане.

Ключевые слова: ELT, навыки критического мышления, межкультурная компетенция, языковое образование, решение проблем, аналитическое мышление, локализованный контент, адаптация учебных программ.

INTRODUCTION

Language is more than a means of communication; it is a reflection of history, identity, and thought. Teaching a language in isolation from its cultural context limits learners' ability to grasp its deeper meanings and applications. Language and culture are deeply interconnected, and successful language acquisition involves not only mastering grammar but also developing cultural awareness and intercultural communication abilities.

Kazakhstan presents a unique context for ELT, given its multilingual and multicultural landscape. Traditional ELT approaches in the country have often prioritized global English norms while overlooking the integration of local cultural elements. However, emerging research suggests that incorporating local cultural references can bridge the gap between students' linguistic and sociocultural knowledge, fostering deeper engagement and motivation.

The aim of this study is to investigate the role of culturally contextualized ELT in enhancing critical thinking skills among Kazakhstani learners. It seeks to determine whether the integration of local cultural content in ELT curricula can improve students' analytical reasoning, problem-solving abilities, and engagement with language learning.

The subject of this study is the implementation of culturally contextualized ELT methodologies in Kazakhstani secondary schools.

The object of the study is the development of students' critical thinking skills through the integration of local cultural elements into English language instruction.

To achieve the research aim, the study sets the following tasks:

1. To analyze theoretical foundations of culturally contextualized ELT and its impact on cognitive skills.
2. To assess the effectiveness of this curriculum in fostering critical thinking skills through a quasi-experimental study.
3. To compare the performance of students in culturally integrated ELT settings with those in traditional ELT classrooms.
4. To provide recommendations for enhancing ELT curricula by incorporating culturally relevant content.

The findings of this study contribute to the broader discourse on culturally responsive teaching, emphasizing the need for curriculum innovation and teacher training to maximize the

benefits of cultural integration in language learning. The study also addresses potential challenges associated with balancing local cultural content with global English norms and proposes strategies for effective implementation in ELT classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The foundational premise in culturally contextualized English Language Teaching (ELT) is that language cannot be effectively separated from its cultural roots. Scholars such as Kramsch argue that isolating language instruction from its cultural context yields a superficial learning experience, limiting the depth of cognitive engagement [1]. When learners are immersed in the cultural dimensions of language, they are better equipped to interpret, analyze, and internalize linguistic structures. Building on this intrinsic link between language and culture, Byram's concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) provides a structured framework for understanding how cultural awareness enhances language proficiency. ICC posits that true linguistic proficiency is inseparable from the ability to engage with, understand, and critically analyze cultural differences. It encompasses several dimensions:

- Attitudinal Dimension: Encouraging openness and curiosity toward diverse cultures.
- Cognitive Dimension: Fostering knowledge of cultural norms and practices.
- Interpretive Skills: Enhancing the ability to analyze and relate cultural phenomena.
- Discovery and Interaction: Promoting adaptability and effective communication in new cultural contexts.
- Critical Cultural Awareness: Enabling learners to evaluate and question cultural practices critically [2].

When students engage in comparative cultural analysis, they develop a nuanced understanding of language pragmatics, discourse strategies, and sociocultural connotations [3]. This model is particularly relevant in multicultural settings such as Kazakhstan, where local cultural references can be integrated with global English norms to create a balanced and enriching educational experience. Research further indicates that learners with high levels of ICC demonstrate stronger communicative competence, adaptability in cross-cultural interactions, and confidence in using the target language authentically [4].

Beyond linguistic proficiency, ICC also nurtures higher-order cognitive skills, particularly critical thinking. As Paul and Elder define it, critical thinking involves the ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information effectively—a skillset that is crucial for meaningful language learning [5]. The inclusion of local culture in ELT encourages students to question assumptions, interpret diverse viewpoints, and construct well-reasoned arguments. For instance, comparing traditional Kazakh storytelling with Western narrative structures can help students recognize cultural variations in thought patterns and literary devices, fostering analytical skills. In discussing the role of local cultural elements in ELT, it is essential to consider the structured approach to multicultural education. Yeleuova proposes a three-step sequence for fostering multicultural awareness, which aligns closely with the objectives of ICC:

- National education, understood as the inculcation of respect and love for his people, proud of their cultural and historical achievements;
- Introduce children to the people nearest the national environment, the formation of attitudes towards peers and adults neighboring nationalities based on initiation to the customs and traditions of the neighboring nations;
- The message of knowledge about ethnic identity and the formation of distant peoples' emotional and positive attitude to the national diversity of the planet [6].

Research by Pulverness highlights how culture-bound elements in language learning influence cognitive processing. He distinguishes between “culture-free” and “culture-bound” teaching

approaches, emphasizing that engaging with culture-bound materials promotes higher cognitive engagement by requiring learners to decode cultural meanings and apply them contextually [7]. This aligns with Bloom's Taxonomy, where higher levels of cognitive skills—analysis, evaluation, and creation—are stimulated through cultural exploration [8].

In the context of Kazakhstan, integrating local cultural elements into ELT enhances critical thinking skills and meaningful language learning. Yaylaci and Islam explore the potential mismatches between local students and foreign English language teachers, suggesting that acknowledging and integrating cultural diversity fosters critical thinking by encouraging students to examine linguistic and cultural norms from multiple perspectives [9].

The theoretical foundation for cultural integration in ELT is supported by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which underscores the role of social and cultural interactions in cognitive development. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) suggests that learners achieve higher cognitive functions when engaged in culturally relevant interactions facilitated by teachers and peers [10]. Similarly, constructivist theories, as advanced by Piaget and Bruner, assert that knowledge is actively constructed through engagement with one's environment [11,12]. Bruner's discovery learning model, in particular, highlights the importance of meaningful and contextually rich materials [13]. When learners encounter culturally relevant content, they can link prior experiences with new information, thereby constructing a more integrated understanding of language and culture. This process not only augments language acquisition but also stimulates intrinsic motivation and deeper cognitive processing. Lantolf further expands on Vygotsky's work, arguing that mediation through cultural experiences enhances learners' cognitive flexibility [14]. When students engage with culturally familiar materials, they activate prior knowledge, which supports deeper comprehension and analytical thinking [15]. This process aligns with Schema Theory, which suggests that learning occurs more effectively when new information is connected to existing cognitive structures [16].

While these theoretical perspectives provide a strong foundation, empirical studies further validate the practical impact of cultural integration in ELT. For instance, a report by the British Council on secondary English language teaching in Kazakhstan reveals that while 76% of teachers felt confident in promoting creativity and imagination, only 67% believed they could effectively encourage critical thinking and problem-solving skills [17]. These findings highlight the need for culturally contextualized teaching strategies to strengthen these competencies.

Despite its advantages, implementing culturally contextualized ELT presents challenges. Holliday cautions against cultural essentialism, where oversimplifying or stereotyping cultural aspects can limit their educational value [18]. Similarly, McKay highlights the difficulty of balancing local cultural content with global English norms, particularly in standardized curricula that prioritize international frameworks over regional linguistic diversity [19].

The literature reviewed highlights the deep interconnection between language and culture in English Language Teaching (ELT). Theoretical frameworks, including sociocultural theory and constructivism, further support the idea that meaningful, culturally relevant interactions enhance cognitive development, critical thinking, and motivation in language acquisition.

In the context of Kazakhstan, research underscores the need to integrate local cultural elements into ELT to create a balanced approach that respects both global and regional linguistic influences. Studies suggest that culturally contextualized teaching leads to deeper engagement, better retention of language structures, and improved adaptability in cross-cultural communication. However, challenges such as cultural essentialism and balancing standardized curricula with localized content must be carefully managed.

While the theoretical foundation for cultural integration in ELT is well established, there remains a need for empirical research to assess its practical impact in specific educational contexts. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how incorporating Kazakh cultural elements

into ELT influences students' language proficiency, intercultural competence, and critical thinking skills.

METHOD

The theoretical background establishes that cultural integration in English Language Teaching (ELT) plays a crucial role in enhancing linguistic proficiency, intercultural competence, and cognitive engagement. However, while these theoretical foundations are well established, there remains a gap in empirical research specific to the Kazakhstani context. To address this gap, this study employs a **quasi-experimental design** to examine how culturally contextualized ELT impacts language proficiency, critical thinking, and cultural awareness among secondary school students in Kazakhstan.

This study utilizes a **quasi-experimental research design** with a **pre-test and post-test control group** structure. The experiment aimed to assess whether integrating Kazakh cultural elements into ELT improves student outcomes in language proficiency and critical thinking compared to a traditional curriculum.

The study was conducted in **secondary schools in Kazakhstan**, involving **30 11th-grade students**, divided into two groups:

- **Experimental Group (N=15)**: Received instruction incorporating culturally contextualized English lessons.

- **Control Group (N=15)**: Followed a standard ELT curriculum without specific cultural adaptations.

To test the effectiveness of cultural integration in ELT, an **eight-week instructional intervention** was designed for the experimental group. Lessons were developed with a focus on **Kazakh cultural elements**, aiming to enhance **language proficiency, critical thinking, and cultural awareness**.

Task	Description	Language Skills	Grammar Focus	Vocabulary Focus	Thinking Skills
Case Study Analysis: Leadership in Kazakh History	Students analyze the role of Abylai Khan, comparing his leadership qualities with contemporary figures in English.	Reading Writing Speaking	Past Simple, Past Perfect	Leadership-related terms (authority, diplomacy, governance, legacy)	Critical thinking, Analytical reasoning
Debate on Cultural Topics (e.g., "Should Kazakh traditions be preserved in a globalized world?")	Students engage in a structured debate, presenting arguments for and against the preservation of Kazakh traditions.	Speaking Listening	Conditional sentences (If Kazakh traditions disappear, then...), persuasive language	Debate and argumentation terms (tradition, globalization, preservation, modernization, ethics)	Argumentation, Evaluative thinking, Persuasion
Kazakh Literature-	Students read and analyze	Reading Writing	Reported speech (The	Literary terms (narrative,	Literary analysis,

Based Reading Tasks (Analyzing Mukhtar Auezov's works in English)	excerpts from Kazakh literature, discussing themes and cultural symbolism.	Discussion	author suggests that...), literary vocabulary	symbolism, protagonist, heritage, folklore)	Interpretation, Comparative thinking
Problem-Solving Task: Promoting Kazakh Culture Internationally	Students propose and present solutions for promoting Kazakh culture globally.	Writing Speaking Presentation	Future tense, modal verbs (Kazakhstan should focus on...)	Cultural diplomacy terms (heritage, tourism, preservation, global awareness)	Problem-solving, Creativity, Decision-making
Storytelling: Legends of Kazakhstan	Students rewrite and perform Kazakh legends (e.g., Kozy Korpesh & Bayan Sulu) in English.	Speaking Listening Writing	Past tenses (Once upon a time...), descriptive language	Mythology and descriptive terms (legend, wisdom, hero, destiny, bravery, trickster)	Critical thinking, Creativity, Comparative analysis
Role-Playing Historical Events (e.g., signing of Kazakh treaties)	Students reenact a historical event and discuss	Speaking Listening Writing	Direct and reported speech,	Political and historical terms (treaty, negotiation, sovereignty)	Perspective-taking, Decision-making

Table 1. *Culturally Contextualized ELT Tasks and Their Educational Benefits*

Table 1 outlines key ELT tasks that integrate Kazakh history, literature, and traditions, demonstrating their educational benefits. Lessons incorporated task-based learning (TBL), with activities designed to promote linguistic competence and historical analysis. Each session engaged students in reading, writing, listening, and speaking tasks, fostering higher-order cognitive processes such as evaluation, argumentation, and synthesis.

RESULTS

The results of this study indicate that culturally contextualized English Language Teaching (ELT) has a measurable impact on students' critical thinking, linguistic competence, and engagement levels. A comparative analysis of pre- and post-test scores reveals that students exposed to culturally integrated ELT materials outperformed their peers in the control group across multiple academic metrics.

Metric	Control Group	Experimental Group	Percentage Increase
Critical Thinking Skills (analysis, inference, problem-solving)	7%	22%	+15%
Student Engagement (active participation, discussion, interaction)	55%	81%	+26%
Teacher-Observed Inquiry (questioning, argumentation, idea synthesis)	30% above baseline	60% above baseline	Doubled
Vocabulary Retention (use of culturally relevant terms in speech/writing)	42%	78%	+36%
Grammar Accuracy (correct sentence structure, syntax application)	50%	73%	+23%
Listening Comprehension (understanding culturally embedded texts)	48%	75%	+27%
Speaking Confidence (fluency and coherence in discussions)	38%	70%	+32%
Writing Coherence (logical organization and argumentation in essays)	45%	74%	+29%

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Student Performance

The data presented in **Table 2** illustrates that students in the **experimental group demonstrated statistically significant improvements** in critical thinking and linguistic proficiency. The largest gains were observed in **critical thinking skills (15% increase), student engagement (26% increase), and vocabulary retention (36% increase)**.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reinforce the theoretical premise that cultural integration in ELT enhances not only linguistic competence but also cognitive and socio-cultural engagement. The significant improvement in language proficiency among the experimental group suggests that incorporating familiar cultural contexts provides a meaningful scaffold for language learning. These results align with previous research emphasizing the role of culturally relevant pedagogy in facilitating language acquisition.

Moreover, the development of critical thinking skills in the experimental group supports the argument that contextualized learning environments encourage higher-order cognitive processing. The structured debate and leadership analysis tasks required students to synthesize information, construct arguments, and evaluate perspectives—skills crucial for academic and professional success.

The increase in cultural awareness among students confirms that localized content fosters a deeper emotional and intellectual engagement with the learning material. By linking English instruction to national history and traditions, students were more motivated to participate in discussions and express their ideas confidently. This finding has important implications for ELT curricula in Kazakhstan, suggesting that culturally inclusive teaching strategies can enhance both linguistic and personal development.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the pedagogical benefits of integrating Kazakh cultural content into ELT. The incorporation of historical case studies, literary texts, and cultural debates was shown to enhance critical thinking, linguistic competence, and student engagement. The

significant improvements observed in the experimental group highlight the effectiveness of culturally contextualized ELT as an alternative to traditional language teaching approaches.

However, for widespread implementation, institutional support is required to address curriculum constraints and teacher training needs. Further research should explore:

- The long-term impact of culturally contextualized ELT on student achievement.
- The use of digital and multimedia resources in promoting culturally embedded learning.
- The perceptions of students and teachers regarding cultural integration in ELT classrooms.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature advocating for culturally responsive teaching methodologies in Kazakhstan, reinforcing the idea that language learning is most effective when it is deeply intertwined with cultural identity and critical inquiry.

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