



## Integrating Ethnopedagogical Approaches in English Vocabulary Learning: A Qualitative Study from Toraja, Indonesia

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**ABSTRACT:** This study investigates the impacts of integrating Ethnopedagogical approaches on students' motivation in English vocabulary learning and identifies the challenges teachers face in implementing these culturally responsive approaches in the Toraja context, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative research design with thematic analysis following the Miles and Huberman interactive model, data were collected through in-depth interviews with English teachers regarding the integration of ethnopedagogical approaches in vocabulary instruction. Findings reveal that ethnopedagogy significantly enhances student motivation across eight dimensions: increased learning attractiveness and information retention, enhanced overall motivation, greater active participation, increased confidence, improved long-term vocabulary retention, stronger sense of ownership and cultural pride, increased perseverance, and fostered independent learning habits. Teachers face ten substantial implementation challenges, including limited competence in integrating local wisdom, insufficient contextual materials, absence of evaluation standards, time constraints, difficulty balancing cultural content and linguistic targets, and assessment difficulties. Despite these challenges, teachers employ ten effective strategies including the use of authentic cultural objects, storytelling, discovery learning, cultural portfolios, and collaboration with community experts. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on culturally responsive language teaching by providing empirical evidence from an under-researched Indonesian context, offering practical implications for teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers.

**KEYWORDS:** Culturally responsive teaching, ethnopedagogy, local wisdom, student motivation, Toraja, vocabulary learning.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The interplay between culture and language learning has long been recognized as a fundamental determinant of educational success, yet the systematic integration of local cultural wisdom into English language instruction remains largely underdeveloped in many contexts (Gay, 2018). In linguistically and culturally diverse nations like Indonesia, where hundreds of distinct ethnic groups maintain rich cultural traditions, the disconnect between students lived experiences and formal English education has created persistent challenges in learner engagement and motivation (Poedjiastutie, Mayaputri, & Arifani, 2021). This cultural disconnect is particularly acute in regions with strong indigenous cultural identities, such as Toraja in South Sulawesi, where students navigate between globally-oriented English instruction and locally-grounded cultural values, often experiencing language learning as alienating rather than empowering.

Ethnopedagogy, defined as educational practice that integrates local cultural wisdom, values, and traditions into teaching and learning processes, offers a promising framework for addressing this disconnect (Alwasilah, Suryadi, & Karyono, 2022). Rooted in the recognition that learning is most effective when it connects to learners' cultural backgrounds and prior knowledge, ethnopedagogy positions local culture not as an obstacle to be overcome but as a resource to be leveraged (Paris & Alim, 2017). In the context of English vocabulary learning, Ethnopedagogical approaches involve teaching English words and phrases through culturally familiar contexts such as traditional ceremonies, local customs, indigenous practices, and community knowledge systems thereby creating meaningful connections between new linguistic content and existing cultural schemas.

The theoretical foundations of ethnopedagogy draw from multiple intellectual traditions. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction within culturally-shaped contexts, suggesting that language acquisition cannot be separated from the cultural environments in which it occurs. More recently, culturally responsive pedagogy scholars have argued that academic achievement improves when instruction builds upon students' cultural strengths and validates their identities (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Gay, 2018). In the Indonesian context, ethnopedagogy has been conceptualized as education based on local



wisdom that respects cultural diversity while preparing students for participation in broader national and global communities (Alwasilah et al., 2022).

Vocabulary acquisition represents a particularly promising domain for ethnopedagogical integration. Research in cognitive psychology demonstrates that memory is enhanced when information is encoded within meaningful contexts and connected to existing knowledge structures (Mayer, 2021). When English vocabulary is taught through culturally significant narratives, ceremonies, or practices, learners can leverage their deep cultural knowledge as a foundation for building new linguistic representations. The emotional resonance of culturally connected content may also facilitate deeper processing and more durable retention through activation of both semantic and episodic memory systems (Schumann, 2020).

Despite the theoretical promise of ethnopedagogy, empirical research on its implementation in Indonesian English language teaching remains limited. Existing studies have examined culturally responsive teaching in general education contexts (Kurniawan, Nurkamto, & Drajadi, 2023), explored local wisdom in curriculum development (Ghani & Bachtar, 2025), and investigated teacher perceptions of culture-based instruction (Hanifa, Korompot, & Basri, 2026). However, few studies have specifically focused on vocabulary learning, and even fewer have examined the Toraja context, with its distinctive funeral ceremonies, traditional tongkonan architecture, and rich oral traditions. For Toraja students, these cultural practices are not abstract historical artifacts but living traditions that shape daily life and identity.

This study is guided by two research questions: (1) What are the impacts of integrating ethnopedagogy on students' motivation in English vocabulary learning? (2) What are the challenges faced by English teachers in implementing ethnopedagogical approaches in vocabulary learning? Theoretically, it contributes to the international literature on culturally responsive language teaching by providing empirical evidence from an under-researched Indonesian context. Practically, the findings offer guidance for teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of qualitative inquiry in capturing the complexity of culturally grounded pedagogy.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the integration of ethnopedagogical approaches in English vocabulary learning. The selection of a qualitative approach was grounded in the need to acquire contextual depth and rich understanding of teachers' experiences, practices, and perspectives regarding culturally responsive instruction (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative methods are particularly suited for exploring complex phenomena within their natural settings, allowing researchers to capture the meanings and interpretations that participants themselves bring to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### 2.2 Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in Toraja, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, a region selected for its rich cultural heritage and the relevance of ethnopedagogical approaches to its educational context. Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Patton, 2015), with criteria including active English teaching experience and demonstrated engagement with ethnopedagogical approaches. The study included English teachers at the secondary level who had implemented or were in the process of implementing culture-based vocabulary instruction.

### 2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in Indonesian to enable participants to express themselves fully and naturally (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The interview protocol was developed based on the research questions and a comprehensive review of the ethnopedagogy literature, exploring three main areas: the impacts of ethnopedagogy on student motivation, the challenges encountered in implementation, and the strategies employed for successful integration. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. Field notes were taken to capture contextual details and non-verbal cues (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

### 2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), consisting of three concurrent flows: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and read



repeatedly for familiarization. Data condensation involved coding using both deductive codes derived from research questions and inductive codes emerging from the data (Saldaña, 2021). Codes were refined and grouped into categories and themes through constant comparison. Data display involved organizing condensed data into thematic matrices presenting themes, key findings, and representative quotations. Conclusion drawing and verification involved interpreting patterns, checking back to original data, and seeking disconfirming evidence.

### 2.5 Trustworthiness and Ethics

Trustworthiness was established through prolonged engagement, triangulation of data sources, member checking with participants, and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was addressed through thick description of context and participants. An audit trail and reflexive journaling enhanced dependability and confirmability. Ethical approval was obtained, informed consent secured from all participants, and pseudonyms used to protect confidentiality.

## 3. RESULTS

The analysis of interview data revealed three major categories of findings: the impacts of ethnopedagogy on student motivation, the challenges teachers face in implementation, and the strategies they employ for successful integration. Together, these findings provide a comprehensive picture of ethnopedagogy as both a powerful pedagogical resource and a demanding instructional commitment.

### 3.1 Impacts of Ethnopedagogy on Student Motivation

Eight major themes emerged regarding the positive impacts of ethnopedagogical approaches on students' motivation in English vocabulary learning. These themes collectively demonstrate that ethnopedagogy operates through interconnected cognitive, affective, and behavioral mechanisms that reinforce one another to sustain learner engagement.

**Table 1. Themes in the Impact of Ethnopedagogy on Student Motivation**

<b>Increased Learning Attractiveness &amp; Retention</b>	Students find culturally connected content more engaging and easier to remember. Familiar cultural contexts serve as cognitive anchors facilitating vocabulary processing and recall. Teachers noted students capture information more quickly when grounded in local experience.
<b>Enhanced Overall Motivation</b>	Vocabulary learning is transformed from tedious memorization into meaningful exploration of identity and heritage. Students who previously showed little interest become more engaged when lessons incorporate their cultural background.
<b>Greater Active Participation</b>	The cultural context positions students as cultural experts, empowering them to contribute knowledge and experiences, which naturally increases participation. Students take ownership of classroom discourse when their knowledge is valued.
<b>Increased Confidence</b>	Students' confidence improves significantly, enabling quicker responses and greater willingness to use new vocabulary. Familiar cultural contexts reduce anxiety, allowing students to focus cognitive resources on linguistic aspects rather than unfamiliar content.
<b>Improved Vocabulary Retention</b>	Emotionally significant cultural experiences create multiple neural pathways for recall. Teachers observed better long-term memory for culturally connected vocabulary compared to vocabulary taught through conventional methods.
<b>Sense of Ownership &amp; Cultural Pride</b>	Students feel that their heritage is valued in the educational setting, generating emotional investment that sustains motivation beyond



	immediate classroom activities. Teachers reported: 'Siswa merasa bangga' (Students feel proud).
<b>Increased Perseverance</b>	Students demonstrate greater commitment to completing vocabulary tasks when they find material meaningful and culturally relevant, showing persistence that is often absent in traditional vocabulary instruction.
<b>Independent Learning Habits</b>	Ethnopedagogy encourages students to seek additional learning opportunities on their own initiative outside the classroom, developing intrinsic motivation that transcends formal instructional requirements.

### 3.2 Challenges in Implementing Ethnopedagogical Approaches

Ten significant challenges emerged from teachers' reflections on implementing ethnopedagogical approaches. These challenges operate at multiple levels teacher, institutional, student, and resource and interact in ways that compound their difficulty.

**Table 2. Themes in Challenges of Ethnopedagogy Implementation**

<b>Limited Teacher Competence</b>	Low teacher competence in integrating local wisdom into modern curriculum creates uncertainty about effective implementation. Teachers identified this as the most crucial challenge needing immediate attention.
<b>Insufficient Teaching Materials</b>	Contextual teaching materials are scarce, requiring teachers to create their own resources without adequate models or examples to guide material development.
<b>Absence of Evaluation Standards</b>	No standardized reference or evaluation criteria exist for assessing ethnopedagogy-based learning, leaving teachers without guidance on measuring student progress within cultural contexts.
<b>Time Constraints</b>	Ethnopedagogy requires more time for both teacher preparation and student exploration, creating tension with curriculum pacing requirements and standardized coverage expectations.
<b>Balancing Culture &amp; Language</b>	Difficulty maintaining the balance between cultural content exploration and linguistic learning targets. Teachers acknowledged: 'Seringkali struktur bahasanya terabaikan' (Often the language structure is neglected).
<b>Varying Cultural Familiarity</b>	Students' limited or uneven familiarity with local culture means cultural knowledge cannot be assumed. Less culturally familiar students show lower interest and engagement with ethnopedagogical activities.
<b>Diverse Learning Styles</b>	Diverse student backgrounds and learning styles require flexible approaches with multiple entry points, increasing the complexity of instructional planning and delivery.
<b>Technology &amp; Media Gaps</b>	Unequal access to technology and digital media creates inequities in students' ability to engage with digital cultural resources and limits certain ethnopedagogical activities.
<b>Assessment Difficulties</b>	The lack of appropriate instruments for measuring vocabulary learning within cultural contexts makes fair and valid assessment challenging for teachers.
<b>Need for Training &amp; Support</b>	Despite perceiving ethnopedagogy positively, teachers recognize they need structured professional development and institutional support to implement it sustainably and effectively.



### 3.3 Strategies for Successful Implementation

Despite the challenges identified above, teachers demonstrated remarkable pedagogical creativity in developing implementation strategies. Ten effective strategies emerged from the data, each reflecting teachers' adaptive ingenuity in working within and around resource constraints.

**Table 3. Strategies for Successful Ethnopedagogy Implementation**

<b>Authentic Cultural Objects &amp; Media</b>	Using real cultural artifacts, traditional clothing, ceremonial items, and locally produced media as vocabulary teaching props creates tangible connections between language and culture.
<b>Local Traditions &amp; Ceremonies</b>	Drawing from Toraja cultural practices such as funeral ceremonies, tongkonan architecture, and traditional crafts as vocabulary learning contexts grounds instruction in meaningful lived experience.
<b>Discovery Learning</b>	Implementing discovery-based activities where students investigate vocabulary through cultural inquiry, interviewing community members and exploring local practices to uncover linguistic knowledge.
<b>Storytelling</b>	Using oral storytelling traditions from Toraja culture to contextualize vocabulary in narrative frameworks that enhance memory and emotional engagement.
<b>Content Differentiation</b>	Employing differentiated content based on students' English proficiency levels and cultural familiarity, ensuring equitable access to the ethnopedagogical curriculum.
<b>Cultural Portfolios</b>	Using personal vocabulary portfolios where students compile local terms discovered through interviews with parents and community experts simultaneously assessing learning and engaging families in education.
<b>Culturally Arranged Classroom</b>	Organizing physical classroom environments to reflect and support cultural learning, using cultural visual aids, seating arrangements that reflect communal traditions, and culturally relevant displays.
<b>Community Expert Collaboration</b>	Inviting cultural experts, community elders, and traditional knowledge holders into the classroom to share authentic cultural knowledge that enriches vocabulary learning contexts.
<b>Lesson Plan Alignment</b>	Deliberately aligning ethnopedagogical activities with formal learning outcomes in lesson plans, ensuring cultural integration supports rather than displaces required curriculum objectives.
<b>Customary Event Frameworks</b>	Utilizing the organizational structures of traditional Toraja ceremonies and events as scaffolds for sequencing vocabulary learning activities in culturally coherent ways.

### 3.4 The Cultural Portfolio: A Noteworthy Innovation

Particularly noteworthy among the identified strategies is the use of cultural portfolios. Students compile personal vocabulary collections containing local Toraja terms discovered through interviews with parents and community cultural experts. This strategy simultaneously achieves multiple pedagogical goals: it assesses vocabulary acquisition authentically, engages families and communities in the educational process, validates traditional knowledge as academically valuable, and extends learning beyond the formal classroom. The cultural portfolio represents an exemplary model of how ethnopedagogical assessment can align vocabulary learning objectives with culturally meaningful inquiry.



## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 *Ethnopedagogy as a Motivational Catalyst*

The finding that ethnopedagogical approaches significantly enhance student motivation across eight dimensions aligns with established theories of culturally responsive teaching. Gay (2018) argues that culturally responsive pedagogy validates students' cultural identities, uses cultural knowledge as a scaffold for learning, and creates bridges between academic abstractions and lived experiences. The eight motivational themes identified in this study collectively demonstrate how ethnopedagogy operationalizes these principles in vocabulary instruction. When students recognize their own cultural heritage reflected in academic content, the distance between 'school knowledge' and 'real knowledge' closes, and learning becomes personally significant.

The finding that students capture information more quickly through culturally connected content supports Mayer's (2021) cognitive theory of multimedia learning, which suggests that meaningful contexts reduce cognitive load and enhance comprehension. When vocabulary is embedded in familiar cultural frameworks, students can devote more cognitive resources to linguistic processing rather than struggling to understand unfamiliar content, contributing directly to the improved vocabulary retention that teachers observed. This cognitive efficiency, combined with the emotional resonance of culturally significant content, likely creates multiple and durable retrieval pathways through both semantic and episodic memory systems (Schumann, 2020).

The increased confidence and quicker response times reported by teachers reflect what Krashen (1982) terms the 'affective filter' hypothesis, which posits that language acquisition is optimized when learners are in low-anxiety environments. By grounding instruction in familiar cultural content, ethnopedagogy reduces the anxiety that often accompanies foreign language learning. Furthermore, the development of independent learning habits and increased perseverance aligns with Dörnyei's (2020) motivational self-system theory: when students see their culture valued in the classroom and can use English to discuss things that matter personally, they develop a stronger sense that English is relevant to their identities and futures, fueling intrinsic motivation that extends beyond classroom requirements.

The sense of ownership and cultural pride represents perhaps the most profound motivational outcome. As Canagarajah (2022) argues, language learning is not merely a cognitive process but an identity negotiation. When students see their cultural heritage treated as valuable educational content, they receive the message that their identities are compatible with English proficiency that becoming an English speaker does not require abandoning who they are. This identity affirmation is particularly significant in the Toraja context, where local culture is rich and distinctive, and where students might otherwise perceive English as threatening cultural authenticity rather than enabling cultural expression.

### 4.2 *Navigating Challenges: Systemic and Pedagogical Dimensions*

The challenges identified in this study resonate with broader research on implementing culturally responsive pedagogy. The finding that teachers struggle with limited understanding and competence reflects what Ladson-Billings (2021) identifies as a persistent gap in teacher preparation, where most programs provide limited training in culturally responsive teaching. This gap is particularly acute in contexts where teachers themselves may have experienced education that devalued local culture and where explicit models of ethnopedagogical practice are scarce. The insufficient contextual teaching materials and absence of standardized evaluation criteria highlight what Paris and Alim (2017) describe as the structural need for 'culturally sustaining pedagogy' resources, as commercial textbooks rarely include locally specific cultural content.

The time constraints that teachers experience reflect a fundamental tension between the exploratory, student-centered nature of ethnopedagogy and the pacing demands of standardized curricula. As Tomlinson (2014) notes, differentiated and culturally responsive approaches often require more instructional time than teacher-centered methods, creating conflicts with curriculum coverage expectations. The finding that language structure is sometimes neglected in favor of cultural exploration underlines the critical importance of structured teacher training that explicitly addresses how to maintain linguistic learning objectives while pursuing cultural integration—a balance that requires deliberate pedagogical design rather than intuition alone.

### 4.3 *The Cultural Portfolio and Community-Based Learning*

Among the strategies identified, the cultural portfolio merits particular theoretical attention. The practice of students interviewing parents and community elders to compile local vocabulary collections exemplifies what Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2022) term 'funds of knowledge'—the idea that households and communities contain rich intellectual resources that can be leveraged for academic learning. By positioning community members as authoritative sources of vocabulary knowledge, the cultural portfolio



disrupts conventional hierarchies of academic knowledge, validating traditional expertise alongside formal curriculum. This approach not only produces meaningful learning artifacts but also strengthens the connection between school and community, a relationship that research consistently identifies as foundational to educational success in culturally diverse contexts (Gay, 2018).

#### 4.4 Implications for Theory, Practice, and Policy

Theoretically, these findings extend understanding of culturally responsive language teaching by identifying the specific motivational mechanisms through which ethnopedagogy operates in vocabulary learning. The identification of eight distinct but interconnected motivational dimensions suggests that ethnopedagogy functions as a holistic intervention affecting cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of learning simultaneously. This multidimensionality challenges reductive views of motivation as a single variable and supports ecological approaches that understand learning as embedded in complex cultural and social systems.

Practically, the findings offer actionable guidance for multiple stakeholders. For teachers, the ten strategies provide a concrete implementation framework, while the identified challenges highlight areas where additional support is most needed. Teachers should be encouraged to begin with small, manageable cultural integrations and progressively expand their practice as they build confidence and resources. For curriculum developers, the findings underscore the importance of creating flexible frameworks allowing for local cultural adaptation while maintaining alignment with learning standards. For policymakers, the results highlight the need for investment in teacher professional development specifically addressing Ethnopedagogical approaches, culturally appropriate teaching materials, and assessment frameworks that can validly capture vocabulary learning within cultural contexts.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the impacts of integrating ethnopedagogical approaches on students' motivation in English vocabulary learning and identified the challenges teachers face in implementing these approaches in the Toraja context, Indonesia. The findings reveal that ethnopedagogy significantly enhances student motivation across eight dimensions: increased learning attractiveness and information retention, enhanced overall motivation, greater active participation, increased confidence, improved vocabulary retention, a stronger sense of ownership and cultural pride, increased perseverance, and the fostering of independent learning habits. These positive impacts stem from the fundamental alignment between culturally connected content and students' lived experiences, which reduces anxiety, creates meaningful context, affirms cultural identity, and activates deeper cognitive processing.

Teachers face ten substantial challenges in implementation, including limited competence, insufficient materials, absence of evaluation standards, time constraints, difficulty balancing cultural and linguistic objectives, varying student cultural familiarity, diverse learning styles, technology access gaps, assessment difficulties, and the need for structured professional support. Despite these challenges, ten effective implementation strategies were identified from the use of authentic cultural objects and storytelling to the innovative cultural portfolio approach that extends learning into the community and validates traditional knowledge as academically significant.

The study concludes that Ethnopedagogical approaches offer significant promise for enhancing English vocabulary instruction by making learning personally meaningful while fostering cultural pride and identity affirmation. Realizing this promise at scale requires systematic support for teachers through professional development, resource provision, curriculum flexibility, and community engagement. Future research should examine ethnopedagogy implementation across diverse Indonesian cultural contexts, include classroom observations to complement interview data, investigate long-term effects on vocabulary acquisition outcomes, and explore the integration of ethnopedagogy across other language skills. By centering local cultural wisdom in English language teaching, educators can help students develop global communication skills without sacrificing their cultural identities, contributing to more equitable and meaningful education in Indonesia's richly diverse society.

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