

Empowering Malaysian Siamese School Students with Culturally Inspired English Learning Resources: A Design-Based Research Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the importance of culturally inspired English learning resources in supporting the language development and learning engagement of Malaysian Siamese primary school students. Despite the increasing emphasis on inclusive and multicultural education within the Malaysian education system, minority learners such as Malaysian Siamese students continue to experience challenges in English language acquisition due to limited representation of their cultural identity in mainstream instructional materials. Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Learning, this qualitative design-based research investigates how culturally relevant learning materials may enhance students' motivation, participation, confidence, and language learning experiences. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview with an English language teacher from a Siamese community school in Kedah, Malaysia. The findings reveal several interconnected themes, including low English language proficiency, dominance of the Siamese linguistic environment, the importance of cultural identity in motivating learners, and the urgent need for more engaging digital and culturally responsive teaching resources. The teacher highlighted that integrating familiar cultural elements such as Songkran celebrations, Thai dance, food, customs, and local history into English lessons increased students' confidence and classroom participation. The study further suggests that culturally inspired instructional resources may function as pedagogical bridges that reduce learners' affective barriers while supporting more meaningful and inclusive English language learning experiences. The findings contribute towards discussions on culturally responsive pedagogy, minority language education, and inclusive English language learning practices in Malaysia.

Keywords: Malaysian Siamese students; culturally responsive pedagogy; English language learning; minority learners; sociocultural theory; inclusive education; culturally inspired learning resources; primary education; language identity; design-based research

INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency plays a crucial role in supporting educational access, social mobility, and future opportunities for learners in Malaysia (Renganathan, 2023). Within the national education system, English language is taught as a second language from the primary level, with the expectation that students will develop foundational skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Despite Malaysia's commitment to inclusive and multicultural education, Malaysian Siamese primary school students continue to face significant barriers in English language acquisition due to a lack of culturally relevant instructional materials (Raman, 2022). These students, belonging to a small but historically rooted ethnic minority, often find themselves excluded from mainstream syllabus that predominantly reflect dominant cultural narratives. Idrus, Hussin and Gulca (2023) mentioned that the current English language materials used in public schools are largely standardized and do not incorporate the linguistic or cultural backgrounds of minority communities, resulting in a disconnect between the students' lived experiences and classroom learning. This lack of cultural representation can lead to decreased motivation, lower engagement, and poor academic performance among Malaysian Siamese learners (Muhammadin et al., 2023). Research in language acquisition consistently highlights the importance of cultural

relevance in learning materials, particularly for students from minority groups. When students do not see their identities reflected in what they learn, it can lead to feelings of alienation, reduced self-esteem, and disengagement from the learning process (Vodi, 2023).

Furthermore, Lai (2021) believed that this marginalization in education poses a threat to the preservation of cultural identity among young Malaysian Siamese students. As English becomes a key language of instruction and mobility, the pressure to assimilate may weaken ties to cultural roots, leading to a gradual erosion of community heritage and language. This is particularly concerning in the context of early childhood and primary education, where identity development is crucial. Compounding the issue is the limited availability of teacher training and pedagogical frameworks that address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Educators may lack the tools, resources, or understanding needed to adapt lessons for students from minority backgrounds (Milner, 2021). As a result, even well-meaning teachers are often unable to effectively engage Malaysian Siamese learners in a meaningful and affirming way. In light of these challenges, there is a critical need to develop and evaluate English learning resources that are culturally inclusive and specifically designed for Malaysian Siamese primary school students. These materials must not only support English proficiency but also affirm cultural identity, increase classroom participation, and foster a sense of belonging. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing equity, inclusion, and academic success for an often-overlooked segment of Malaysia's diverse student population.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English Language Learning in Minority and Culturally Diverse Contexts

Teaching English requires understanding a particular context, community and the socio-economic factors. This premise is grounded in the view that language education is closely associated with the aspects of culture, which in turn determine the teaching and learning continuum (Maqsood et al., 2024). This interrelationship between language learning and culture, if understood, can positively impact the comprehension of language learning among students. Such contextual awareness enables language instructors to apply pragmatic pedagogical strategies that are explicitly oriented towards inclusivity and that extend beyond the teaching of vocabulary and grammatical rules. (Yokubjonova, 2025). Therefore, culturally sensitive language instructors are better positioned to curate instructional practices and address the needs of diverse learners more effectively.

Inclusive teaching approaches have gained global prominence, as educators are increasingly expected to understand the diverse and evolving backgrounds of their students and to adapt instruction to accommodate varied learning styles. Such practices aim to promote equitable learning opportunities while fostering social inclusivity within the classroom (Tai, 2022). This strategy aligns with UNICEF (2014), which defined inclusive education as “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education.” (p. 19). Within this framework, ethnic minority students are identified as a critical demographic requiring targeted pedagogical consideration. Several elements have been identified as facilitating this effort. For example, Jiang et al. (2020) acknowledges that the linguistics and digital elements in language learning must be integrated in English language classrooms to enhance the engagement among the Chinese ethnic minority students. Given the status of English as a second or an additional language for many contexts, educational policies are increasingly pivoting toward multicultural frameworks that validate students' diverse backgrounds.

In Norway, students are encouraged to master one being the English language from the primary until the secondary level to support the national curriculum centered on embracing diversity within the instructional setting (Lorenz et al., 2021). More broadly across Europe, evidence from Austria, Ireland, Norway, and Turkey indicates that governments play a central role in determining assessments procedures which affect language pedagogical styles and ultimately shape how languages are learnt in the classrooms (Herzog-Punzenberger et al., 2020). In sum, English language learning in the classroom is shaped by a range of context-specific elements designed to support minority and culturally diverse learners.

Access, Motivation, and Identity in Primary Language Learning

The notion of identity in language learning is rooted from the shifts in the late twentieth century that moved away from the view that learners have static personalities. Instead, from then onwards, they are acknowledged as dynamic social beings. This suggests that language acquisition is a social process rather than cognitive, where learners negotiate their sense of self within social structures they live in. The highlight is the interplay between the learners' identities, the accessibility to the target language community, and their motivation to speak in various social contexts. In the context of this study, Malaysian Siamese primary students may face difficulties in learning English if the learning materials do not reflect their unique cultural heritage and lifestyle. Experts have argued that when learners found similarities of their identities within the curriculum, their motivation to learn might as well increase significantly (Darvin & Norton, 2023). It is further argued that the lack of access to meaningful learning may be a barrier to overcome, including those of motivated learners (Nasir et al., 2024). These insights highlight the need to have inclusive resources that enable minority students to acknowledge themselves as valid users of the target language. It is also worth noting that the constant need to negotiate their sense of self against the dominant culture, which is the target language, might be a site of struggles for the learners (Zainal et al., 2025). Primarily, if the learning environment recognizes students' backgrounds, learners can change their perceptions of social distance to a productive learning process instead.

Past studies on the connection between identity and language learning have also been documented and revealed that academic success is significantly linked to students' cultural context. In the Malaysian context, several studies emphasized that minority groups such as Siamese and indigenous communities often face challenges in following the standard English curriculum due to feeling culturally distant from the syllabus (Nasir et al., 2024). On another note, when the learning contents are culturally familiar and support multilingual identity, students tend to portray higher intrinsic motivation and better adaptation to learning English (Zainal et al., 2025; Darvin & Norton, 2023). These findings put emphasis on the importance of designing culturally inspired learning contents as a step to bridge the gap between students' heritage and learning goals. By incorporating Siamese cultural elements into the English curriculum, teachers can provide the necessary cultural recognition for students to feel empowered in their learning process.

Malaysian Education Syllabus

The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) has been the guidance for the Malaysian education system where continuous development of the education system in Malaysia has been the goal with emphasis on key aspirations for the system and for the students. Regardless of the intended attempts of the blueprint towards the mentioned aspirations, Abu Bakar (2023) analysed some challenges that hinder the fulfilment of mentioned aspirations including weak progression among underachieving learners, high rates of dropouts among minority ethnic groups and disparities in educational access between urban and rural schools which led to suggestions for better educators in quality and qualifications.

Common European Framework (CEFR), an internationally recognised framework used to depict, describe and standardise language proficiency across different contexts and has been integrated in the current curriculum standardisation of the Malaysian education system (Wok Zaki, A., & Darmi, R., 2021). Recent research reveals that the efforts to align English language teaching with CEFR has its challenges which directly and indirectly affect the effectiveness of the national curriculum reforms. Based on the study by Mohammed et al., (2021), it was found that teachers face difficulties in the usage of CEFR such as the understanding descriptors, in designing aligned activities for learning and adapting existing textbooks to cater to diverse proficiency levels of Malaysian ESL learners, which showed that the current syllabus is lacking in certain areas to support the CEFR integration successfully.

A similar study by Shak et al. (2025) found that in Orang Asli (Semai) schools, the integrated CEFR-aligned English textbooks do not always reflect the linguistic abilities or background of learners. To compensate for such outcomes, educators are often required to make modifications to the materials by simplifying the language, adapting the teaching and learning contents, and incorporating visuals or translation strategies to make learning relevant to their learners. Together, both studies suggest that while the integration of CEFR does align with the Malaysian education syllabus goals of enhancing English language proficiency and achieving meaningful implementation, particularly in rural settings, would require enhanced efforts from teacher preparation, curriculum materials that reflect local linguistic contexts and a systemic support.

Sociocultural Theory of Learning

Sociocultural Theory of Learning by Lev Vygotsky was discovered in the 1920s and 1930 which posits the idea that learning is significantly a social process influenced by interaction, language and cultural context instead of solely relying on an individual's cognitive aspect. These differences then contribute to different learning styles (Cherry, 2022). According to Vygotsky, learners rationalise the information by gaining knowledge, beliefs and problem solving that they encounter through interaction with 'more knowledgeable others' (MKO) (McLeod, 2020). Therefore, this theory shows that a learner's development is shaped by social learning which one is acquired from. For example, an educator in the classroom presents a technique to the learners to be practiced. The educator here acts as MKO where he or she provides a lesson for sociocultural learning. Hence the learners need to comprehend the thoughts and actions of the MKO and incorporate them into their own memory (Cherry, 2022). This condition of MKO is supported by the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where it serves as a bridge for the learners throughout acquiring knowledge. To explain further, learners are capable of independently mastering concepts that are within their current understanding, whereas more complex or challenging material requires guidance and support from others, such as teachers or peers. In short, MKO carries the core role of the ZPD learning process.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative design-based research approach to explore the development and relevance of culturally inspired English learning resources for Malaysian Siamese primary school students. Design-based research was selected as it enables researchers to investigate educational challenges within authentic learning environments while simultaneously generating practical pedagogical solutions. The study focused on understanding how culturally relevant instructional materials may support English language learning among minority learners whose cultural identities are often underrepresented within mainstream educational resources.

The research was conducted in a Siamese community school located in Kedah, Malaysia. Kedah was selected due to the significant presence of Malaysian Siamese communities in the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia, where cultural and linguistic practices remain deeply embedded within students' daily lives. The participant involved in this preliminary phase of the study was an English language teacher currently teaching Malaysian Siamese primary school students. Purposive sampling was employed to identify a participant with direct teaching experience and contextual understanding of the students' linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds.

Data was collected through a semi-structured interview conducted with the teacher. The interview approach allowed the researchers to obtain rich and detailed insights into the challenges faced by Malaysian Siamese learners in English language classrooms, particularly regarding language proficiency, motivation, cultural identity, and access to culturally relevant learning materials. The interview also explored the teacher's perceptions regarding the integration of Siamese cultural elements into English lessons and the potential effectiveness of culturally inspired learning resources in improving students' engagement and confidence. Questions were designed around themes related to language learning experiences, cultural representation, classroom practices, student motivation, and existing gaps in instructional materials.

The collected data were analysed thematically, whereby recurring patterns, concepts, and experiences were identified and organised into broader themes. Three major themes emerged from the analysis, namely language and context, culture and identity, and materials and needs. These themes provided deeper understanding regarding the sociocultural realities experienced by Malaysian Siamese learners and highlighted the pedagogical importance of culturally responsive English learning materials. The findings were subsequently interpreted through the lens of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, particularly focusing on the role of cultural mediation, meaningful interaction, and contextual learning in second language acquisition.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This section presents the findings based on an interview conducted with an English language teacher at a Siamese community school in Kedah. The analysis focuses on how context, culture and identity shape students' English proficiency. These key patterns will also discuss Siamese students' English language learning experiences, particularly within their socio-cultural and linguistic context. The findings are organised thematically into three main themes - language and context, culture and identity and materials and needs.

Theme 1: Language & Context

Low English Language Proficiency and Dominance of Siamese Language Environment

A community's cultural diversity and socio-economic background grounds the effectiveness of language education. In the context of Malaysian Siamese primary school, the interview response reveals that the linguistic background of these students play a significant role in influencing their engagement with the English language. Students with lower English proficiency were characterised to be using only basic English words, limited vocabularies and restricted syntax formation. This observation aligns with what was highlighted by Renganathan (2021), who asserted that students in a minority setting may be highly dependent on basic language structures due to the limited access to a more supportive linguistic domain. As highlighted by the teacher, "Cabaran utamanya adalah tahap penggunaan bahasa inggeris mereka sangat rendah. Terutamanya bagi kumpulan murid yang agak lemah. Penggunaan perkataan yang basic juga sangat lemah." This indicates that students' challenges are rooted at the foundational level of language use, particularly in vocabulary development and sentence construction. In short, the pervasive use of the Siamese language among the students presents a notable drawback to a more consistent development of English language skills.

On the other hand, the findings of this study reveals an affirmative view by the teacher on the readiness of these Siamese students in engaging in a culturally-based project learning. While the implementation stage is still preliminary, the students are perceived as capable of participating in pedagogical activities that are derived from Siamese culture. When prompted on the readiness of students to engage in culturally-based project learning, the teacher asserted, "Masih lagi di fasa persediaan. Tetapi jika diberikan secara beransur-ansur mungkin mereka boleh dan bersedia." This suggests that students' readiness should not be viewed as fixed, but as a developing process that can be nurtured through gradual and culturally familiar learning experiences. Integrating Siamese culture into English language learning may enhance enthusiasm and increase participation. As previously mentioned by Tai and Wong (2023), learning spaces that associate with sociocultural knowledge enable learners to grasp the English knowledge more effectively. In this context, culturally relevant learning, grounded in Siamese lived experiences, can be introduced gradually to build stronger connections between students and the English language.

In light of the above findings, the interview result further proposes that culturally-based project learning may be assisted with the appropriate materials. Learning tools that are culturally inspired may enhance learners' motivation and achievements, as asserted by the teacher. The finding notes, "Apabila belajar sesuatu dekat dengan jiwa dan akar mereka, semestinya ianya akan meningkatkan motivasi dan membantu mereka secara tidak langsung." This suggests that meaningful learning is achieved through personal association with learned content, which eventually leads to better intrinsic motivation. This is in agreement with Zhang et al. (2025) which asserts that intrinsic motivation grounded in cultural values and respect for the learner's background can enhance students' learning experiences. Therefore, the English language learning domain when connected to students' Siamese cultural roots will stimulate students' interest in understanding the language through efforts that reflect their daily experiences. This finding highlights the pertinent need of designing instructional materials that are culturally relevant as they can serve as links between students' current skills and new knowledge, ultimately supporting both enthusiasm and academic achievement.

Theme 2: Culture and Identity

From the interview, the data demonstrates there is a significant correlation between Siamese sociolinguistic background variables and English language acquisition rates. Primary language immersion constitutes an

operational barrier within the instructional setting. The data further showed the total use of the Siamese language at home and socially makes them rather weak and less interested in understanding. As quoted from the teacher, "Penggunaan bahasa siam secara total di rumah dan sosial membuatkan mereka agak lemah dan kurang berminat untuk memahami", This linguistic segregation then yields an environment where students comprehend and see minimal relevance in the target language, resulting in both academic weakness and apathy. Despite that the target language can be an assistance towards more meaningful interaction by discarding the comprehension block (Yuzlu & Atay, 2020), yet this matter can be a diminishing factor to contribute to English language acquisition among the Siamese students.

Viewing this matter as a vital issue to be addressed, embedding the value of a cultural integration into teaching lessons either directly or indirectly may serve as an important pedagogical bridge. According to the teacher, having learning materials as a reflection of student's realities or their customs, the students' passive resistance and less confidence are gradually improving. To exemplify, the teacher teaches the concept of procedural sequencing, where there is a highly cultural value integrated. To quote, "Pernah belajar tentang sequence dan saya mengajar Tarian Thai, dan mereka menunjukkan minat walaupun tidak secara keseluruhan". The integration of culture into learning experience is believed to appear as a significant 'hook' especially for a disconnected classroom, thus has greater potential to work effectively across pedagogical teaching and also curriculum. Despite the teacher's responses stating that not all students showcased interest in learning English, such cultural integration can be a good kickstart to build the students' preference and motivation. To reflect Siamese traditions such as the vibrant, water-splashing traditions and communal joy of the Songkhran festival into reading comprehension and speaking exercises, teachers provide a deeply recognizable framework for their students. Ultimately, familiarity breeds genuine engagement. When students finally see their own vibrant identities reflected in the curriculum, the learning material ceases to be an alien barrier and can suddenly become accessible and meaningfully worthy of their attention.

Apart from this, the findings also present an important relationship between cultural validation and the student's confidence development. It is believed that there is a positive psychological shift that happens when students' cultural identities are acknowledged and implemented in learning environments. From the teacher's perspective, they will positively express their interest and also try to give detailed information when talking about something related to their cultural identity. This is evident to show that such empowerment can tackle the students' insecurities. They showcase their pride of carrying the Siamese identity in both learning and interaction from being demotivated to enthusiastically motivated.

Hence, from the findings, this concludes that there is a need to bring in things students can genuinely connect with such as their local history, everyday food, traditional customs, clothing, and expressive arts like Thai dance towards succeeding Siamese culture as part of learning English. At the same time, teachers should also note that this matter requires a collective force rather than doing it individually. From the response by the teacher, having a dedicated team who are passionate about understanding the culture so that learning modules which consist of real and practical training can be established for educators.

Thus, having a balanced comprehension between the need to integrate culture and identity for learning purposes can enhance more positive acceptance at acquiring English across the initial language barrier.

Theme 3: Materials & Needs

Limitations of Materials, Need for Digital & Cultural Resources, Readiness for Learning

According to the interview, limitations of materials were mentioned as the teacher indicated only using any interesting images and visuals found online to introduce cultural elements in the lesson. This shows there is a lack of structured or officially provided resources to support and assist the teacher in teaching the students culture and its related aspect. The teacher also shared a level of uncertainty about any initiatives from KSSM to include such cultural resources in the curriculum stating, 'Saya kurang pasti untuk KSSM tapi yang dulu2 pun rasanya tiada', which reflects limited awareness and possibly limited exposure towards such resources. Hence, the situation has left the teacher to depend on their own initiatives and available online materials which can lead to inconsistencies in how culture is taught as variation of quality and relevance of materials may exist. This also

points to a potential gap in curriculum design, where the development of clearer guidance and the availability of more accessible resources are needed to support effective integration of cultural elements.

Based on further clarification from the teacher, it is evident that there is a strong need for both digital & culturally relevant resources in the teaching and learning process. When asked of the gaps and limitations of needed teaching and learning resources by which the teacher emphasised the importance of using videos, noting the relevancy of more engaging and theme-based videos could be used due to the rapid advancement of video production in the digital world, similarly stating, 'Video. Dengan berkembangnya dunia penghasilan video yang semakin canggih, banyakkkan video yang menarik untuk sesuatu tema dan boleh digunakan sebagai intro bagi sesuatu topik.'. In addition, when discussing culturally inspired English materials, the teacher suggested a few related development of elements that should be included, stating, 'Banyakkkan tentang sejarah, makanan, adat dan pakaian. Dan juga tarian ! Why not...'., indicating a preference for a more holistic and engaging culture representation. These findings highlight the importance of integrating multimedia and culturally rich content into suitable classroom materials which can better engage and capture students' interest while promoting and supporting a more meaningful learning. It is also suggested that current existing resources may be insufficient to fully meet the needs, indicating a gap to be addressed through the development of more engaging, culturally relevant and inclusive, and context-appropriate teaching materials.

CONCLUSION

The findings highlight a significant intersection between linguistic ability and cultural identity. Looking from the lens of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Learning (SCT), it can be inferred that the Siamese students' learning journey is a process that is heavily embedded in their cultural milieu that is not merely cognitive, but also essentially social (Rigopouli et al., 2025). In SCT, learning can be assisted by tools to help students understand the environment and communicate. This is further supported by the interview that reveals a gap in the current curriculum in which the textbooks do not reflect Siamese cultural backgrounds. Hence, as current research implied, teachers today must act as 'architects' to address the dismissal of culturally relevant materials and integrate them into their pedagogy to make lessons effective and enjoyable (Rigopouli et al., 2025; Vadivel et al., 2021). Teachers must make use of tools to help make tasks and learning relevant. This includes physical tools like videos and cultural artifacts such as costumes and musical instruments, or psychological tools that make use of cultural traditions to engage students. This is complimented by the respondents that make use of the Songkran festival in developing students' writing skills. This method promotes a learning experience that is tailored to the students' context rather than an imported reality that lacks relevance (Roche et al., 2024). By doing this, students are able to navigate English vocabulary easier through a lens of personal experience in finishing up their essay.

In addition, the teachers also identified low English proficiency as the main challenge in teaching the students. In SCT, in order for learning to occur within the ZPD, the learning must be tailored to the students' developmental capabilities (Rigopouli et al., 2025). This is proven by the findings indicating students who felt more "proud and confident" when their culture is integrated into the learning session. This suggests that the inclusion of culture can act as an effective guide for them. It implies the importance of "teacher support" to mediate students' engagement in learning the second language (Frontiers, 2025) and shift the dynamics of the classroom from struggling learners to experts of their own learning. For example, when the lesson is on Songkran or Siamese history, the students become more confident as they have the knowledge, albeit lack of vocabulary to share it. Plus, the teachers also noted "detailed information" when discussing their identity. This happens as their motivation overrides their fear of making language mistakes. The change of class dynamics happens due to the reduced affective filter that encourages students to participate better as the perceived threat of the 'foreign' language is reduced through the implementation of familiar context (Frontiers, 2025). Consequently, effective language learning occurs only when the pedagogy moves beyond grammar and language structure to include students' identity and background, lowering the barriers that hinder students' learning and help them navigate their ZPD.

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