



Literature Review Related to Cultural Identity Challenges of ESL Learners in African Rural Contexts

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Abstract

This systematic review examines the complex relationship between cultural identity and English as a Second Language (ESL) acquisition in African rural contexts. A comprehensive literature search strategy was conducted across multiple academic databases, from which 127 peer-reviewed studies published between 2010 and 2024 were identified. Through an analysis of relevant theoretical frameworks and a purposively selected sample of 49 empirical studies, this examination synthesizes current understanding of how rural African learners navigate cultural identity challenges while acquiring English proficiency. The review integrates psychosocial theories, sociocultural learning theory, social learning theory, and postcolonial perspectives to provide a multidimensional understanding of the intersections between identity and language. The findings reveal that rural African ESL learners face unique challenges, including cultural identity conflicts, community resistance, intergenerational tensions, and limited culturally responsive pedagogical resources. They suggest that successful ESL acquisition in rural African contexts necessitates culturally responsive approaches that validate local identities while promoting English proficiency development. This review contributes to the growing body of literature on culturally sustaining pedagogy and provides recommendations for educators, policymakers, and researchers working in African rural educational contexts. The implications extend beyond language learning to encompass broader questions of cultural preservation, educational equity, and sustainable development in rural African communities.

1. INTRODUCTION

The intersection of cultural identity and second language acquisition represents a critical area of inquiry in contemporary research on applied linguistics and educational psychology. This relationship becomes particularly complex and consequential in African rural contexts, where English language learning occurs within the context of cultural, social, economic, and political factors that profoundly influence learner experiences and outcomes. The significance of this intersection extends far beyond individual language learning success to encompass broader questions of cultural preservation, educational equity, social mobility, and sustainable community development. African rural contexts present unique challenges and opportunities

for English as a Second Language (ESL) acquisition that differ markedly from urban or Western educational environments. These environments are characterised by rich cultural traditions, strong community bonds, indigenous knowledge systems, multilingual environments, and often limited access to formal educational resources. Within these settings, learners must navigate the complex process of acquiring English while trying to maintain their cultural identities, manage community expectations, and address practical constraints related to resources, infrastructure, and pedagogical approaches.

The theoretical landscape surrounding cultural identity and second language acquisition has evolved significantly over the past three decades, moving from primarily cognitive and structural approaches to more socially situated and culturally responsive frameworks (Jalil, 2023). Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises that language learning is not merely a cognitive process but a deeply social and cultural endeavour that involves identity construction, community participation, and cultural negotiation (Norton, 2013; Toomey *et al*, 2013; Chung and Long, 2024). This shift has profound implications for understanding ESL acquisition in African rural contexts, where cultural identity considerations are particularly salient and complex. This review addresses the growing need for a comprehensive understanding of how cultural identity challenges impact ESL acquisition in African rural contexts. It synthesises current research findings, identifies key theoretical frameworks, examines empirical evidence, and provides recommendations for culturally responsive pedagogical approaches. By focusing specifically on African rural contexts, this review fills a significant gap in the literature on second language acquisition in diverse cultural settings.

The significance of this review is underscored by several contemporary developments. First, the continued expansion of English as a global lingua franca (Mauranen, 2015) has intensified pressure for English proficiency across African contexts, including rural areas previously less affected by globalisation pressures. Second, increasing recognition of the importance of cultural identity in educational success has highlighted the need for more culturally responsive approaches to language teaching which are transformative (Baker and Fang, 2020; Hossain, 2024). Third, growing awareness of the limitations of Western-centric educational models has created demand for more contextually appropriate pedagogical frameworks. Finally, the emergence of digital technologies and global connectivity has created new opportunities and challenges for rural African communities in relation to English language learning and cultural identity maintenance.

The complexity of these dynamics is further compounded by the diversity of African rural contexts, each with distinct cultural traditions, linguistic landscapes, historical experiences, and contemporary challenges (Chinonso, 2024). From the pastoralist communities of East Africa to the agricultural villages of West Africa, from the mining communities of Southern Africa to the fishing villages of coastal regions, rural African contexts encompass tremendous diversity that defies simple generalisations. This diversity necessitates diverse approaches to understanding cultural identity challenges in ESL acquisition that recognise both common patterns and context-specific variations. The relevance of this review is justified by the contemporary globalisation processes that have been creating new pressures and opportunities for English language learning in rural African contexts (Hossain, 2024). Economic integration, technological advancement, educational policy reforms, and cultural exchange have all contributed to increased demand for English proficiency while simultaneously raising concerns about cultural preservation and linguistic diversity. These developments have created what scholars describe as "glocalisation" dynamics, where global forces interact with local contexts in complex and sometimes contradictory ways (Wright, 2025). Given this backdrop, this review seeks to synthesize current understanding of how rural African learners navigate cultural

identity challenges while acquiring English proficiency in order to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the primary cultural identity challenges that ESL learners face in rural contexts?
- 2) How do relevant theoretical frameworks explain these challenges?
- 3) What are the implications for pedagogy and policy?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Search Strategy and Selection Criteria

This systematic review employed a comprehensive search strategy designed to identify relevant literature on cultural identity challenges in ESL acquisition within African rural contexts. The search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including ERIC, PsycINFO and Google Scholar. The search strategy utilised both controlled vocabulary terms and free-text keywords to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant literature. Primary search terms included combinations of: “cultural identity”, “second language acquisition”, “language acquisition theories”, “ESL”, “English language learning,” “African,” “rural”, “identity investment”, “cultural challenges”, “postcolonial education”, “indigenous knowledge”, and “culturally responsive pedagogy”. The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2024 to ensure currency while providing sufficient temporal scope for comprehensive analysis.

2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Studies that: ▪ Focus on English as a second or foreign language learning in African contexts; ▪ Address cultural identity issues or challenges; ▪ Include rural or semi-rural populations; ▪ Employ empirical research methods or provide substantial theoretical analysis; and ▪ Are published in English	Eliminated studies that: ▪ Focused exclusively on urban contexts; ▪ Did not address cultural identity issues. ▪ Were purely descriptive without analytical content; or ▪ Focused on languages other than English

2.3. Data Extraction and Analysis

From the 127 studies extracted that met all the criteria, a sample of 49 was purposively selected manually for inclusion in the final review to allow for a manageable scope for comprehensive analysis. In this selection, particular attention was paid to identifying specific cultural identity challenges, coping strategies employed by learners, community responses to English language learning, and effective pedagogical approaches that were mentioned in the study. Thematic content analysis using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six stage approach in order to identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights across these studies. This approach allowed for a solid understanding of the complex cultural identity dynamics that accompany ESL learning.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. Psychosocial and ESL Acquisition Theoretical Frameworks

3.1.1. Sociocultural Theory and Language Learning

Sociocultural Theory, primarily developed through the work of Vygotsky (1962) and later expanded by scholars such as Norton (2013), Swain *et al*, (2015) and Pathan *et al*, (2018), provides a foundational framework for understanding the relationship between cultural identity and second language acquisition. This theoretical perspective emphasizes that language learning occurs through social interaction within specific cultural contexts, mediated by cultural tools and artifacts, and shaped by historical and institutional factors (Swain *et al*, 2015). In African rural contexts, sociocultural theory helps explain how ESL acquisition is embedded within complex networks of cultural practices, community relationships, and traditional knowledge systems. The theory's emphasis on mediated learning through cultural tools becomes particularly relevant when considering how rural African learners are caught between traditional cultural practices and English language learning requirements. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) takes on new dimensions when applied to contexts where cultural identity considerations may create tensions between what learners can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with culturally appropriate support. The sociocultural perspective also highlights the importance of legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice, a concept that becomes complex in rural African contexts where English language communities of practice may be limited or may conflict with traditional community structures. Vygotsky's theory suggests that variable development depends on cultural diversity (Mirzaee and Maftoon, 2016). This theoretical lens helps explain why traditional approaches to ESL instruction, which often ignore cultural context and community dynamics, may be less effective in rural African settings.

Furthermore, sociocultural theory's emphasis on the social construction of Knowledge aligns with African indigenous epistemologies that prioritize collective knowledge creation and community-based learning. This alignment suggests potential for developing culturally responsive pedagogical approaches that honour both sociocultural learning principles and traditional African educational practices (Anlimachie *et al*, 2023). However, this integration requires careful attention to power dynamics and cultural sensitivity to avoid superficial appropriation of traditional practices. The concept of cultural mediation, central to sociocultural theory, becomes particularly complex in rural African ESL contexts where learners must navigate multiple cultural systems simultaneously. Traditional cultural mediators such as elders, storytellers, and community leaders may play important roles in language learning processes (Bonney *et al*, 2025), but their involvement requires careful negotiation to ensure that English language learning supports rather than undermines traditional cultural transmission.

3.1.2. Identity Investment Theory

Norton's (2015) Identity Investment Theory provides crucial insights into how learners' sense of self and future aspirations influence their engagement with second language learning. This theory posits that the investment of learners involves dynamic negotiations of learning that is dependent on specific contexts (Darvin and Norton, 2017). Learners invest in language learning to the extent to which they believe it will enhance their cultural capital and provide access to previously inaccessible resources and opportunities. However, since learner identity determines the level of investment in English learning (Teng, 2019), this investment is complicated by questions of identity and belonging, particularly in contexts where the target language may be associated with colonial histories or cultural imperialism.

In African rural contexts, the Identity Investment Theory helps explain the complex negotiations that learners must undertake when deciding how much to invest in English language learning. These negotiations involve considerations of cultural authenticity, community belonging, economic opportunity, and personal aspiration. The theory's emphasis on the relationship between identity and investment becomes particularly relevant when examining how rural African learners balance their desire for English proficiency with their commitment to maintaining cultural identity and community connections. This balance is significant as the challenges experienced in attempt at the preservation of one's indigenous cultural identity may hinder English learning (Burgos *et al*, 2024). The concept of imagined communities, central to identity investment theory, takes on particular significance in rural African contexts where learners may have limited direct contact with English-speaking communities but must imagine their future participation in such communities. This imagination process is shaped by cultural values, community expectations, media representations, and personal aspirations, creating complex dynamics that influence learning motivation and engagement. Identity investment theory also highlights the importance of examining how power relations and social positioning influence language learning opportunities and outcomes (Norton, 2015). In rural African contexts, factors such as gender, age, social class, ethnic identity, and religious affiliation may significantly impact learners' ability to invest in English language learning and their access to supportive learning environments. Understanding these intersectional dynamics is crucial for developing equitable and effective ESL programmes.

Pertinently, the theory's emphasis on the non-unitary and changing nature of identity resonates with the fluid and dynamic nature of cultural identity in contemporary rural African contexts. As communities experience social, economic, and technological change, individual and collective identities evolve, creating new possibilities and challenges for English language learning. This dynamic perspective suggests the need for flexible and adaptive approaches to ESL instruction that can respond to changing identity configurations and learning needs.

3.1.3. Poststructural Theory of Identity Construction

The Poststructural Theory of Identity Construction is a theoretical framework that perceives identity as a social construct that is not fixed or essential, but rather is fluid, fragmented, and constantly changing (Norton, 2014). This theory emphasises the role of power, discourse and language in shaping our understanding of identity. According to this theory, identity is not something that we are born with or that we possess inherently, but rather it is something that is constructed through our interactions with others and the cultural and social contexts in which we exist (Drzewiecka, 2017). In the context of second language acquisition in rural contexts, this theoretical lens provides a useful framework for understanding the complex and dynamic interactions between language, culture, and identity. This theory suggests that language learners do not simply acquire a new language, but rather negotiate and construct their identities in relation to the target language and culture, as well as their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Zacharia, 2010). Therefore, language learning is not just a cognitive process, but also a social and cultural process of identity negotiation and construction.

3.1.4. Postcolonial Theory and Language Education

Postcolonial theory provides essential perspectives on the power dynamics and historical contexts that shape English language learning in African rural contexts. This theoretical framework examines how colonial histories continue to influence contemporary educational practices, language policies, and cultural attitudes toward English language learning. Postcolonial scholars such as Canagarajah (2013) and Ranjan *et al* (2024) have highlighted how English language teaching can perpetuate colonial power structures and marginalise local languages and cultures. In African rural contexts, postcolonial theory helps explain the ambivalent attitudes that many communities and individuals hold toward learning the English

language. While English proficiency may provide access to economic opportunities and global participation, it may also be viewed as a threat to cultural authenticity and community cohesion (Malewaneng, 2024). This ambivalence creates complex challenges for ESL educators and learners, who must negotiate between the practical benefits of English proficiency and the cultural costs of linguistic assimilation. The postcolonial perspective also emphasises the importance of recognising and validating local knowledge systems, cultural practices, and linguistic resources in educational contexts. This recognition is crucial for developing culturally responsive approaches to ESL instruction that honour learners' cultural identities while facilitating English language development. Postcolonial theory suggests that effective ESL programmes in rural African contexts must actively resist linguistic imperialism by incorporating local languages, cultural content, and indigenous pedagogical approaches (Abraham, 2020).

Thus, contemporary postcolonial scholarship has evolved beyond simple resistance narratives to embrace more nuanced understandings of how individuals and communities negotiate colonial legacies while pursuing their own goals and aspirations (Brown and Patchainayagi, 2022; Manuel, 2022). This evolution is particularly relevant for understanding ESL acquisition in rural African contexts, where learners may simultaneously critique colonial influences while strategically engaging with English language learning for personal and community benefit. The concept of "appropriation" from postcolonial theory (Brown and Patchainayagi, 2022) offers valuable insights into how rural African ESL learners might transform English language learning to serve their own cultural and social purposes. Rather than just being passive recipients of Western educational models, learners can be understood as active agents who selectively adopt, adapt, and transform English language resources to meet their specific needs and goals while maintaining their cultural identities.

3.2.Learners' Cultural Identity: Challenges related to ESL Learning in African rural contexts

From a review of the literature, five primary categories of cultural identity challenges that African ESL learners encounter in rural contexts are identified. Some of these challenges are interconnected.

3.2.1. Negotiated Identity and ESL Acquisition

The relationship between language and identity is a complex and multidimensional one (Zrike, 2025). Language occupies a central position in human perception, self-development and identity construction. This suggests that acquisition of a second language may influence the identity of learners and many studies have been carried out in an attempt to provide a comprehensive understanding of identity and ESL acquisition (Morgan and Clarke, 2011; Taylor, 2014; Lazor and Mokriienko, 2025). Norton (2014) argues that language learning and identity construction are closely intertwined. He believes that second language learners are constantly engaged in identity construction every time they speak a target language and acknowledges that identity negotiation occurs in a second language. Similarly, Darvin and Norton (2017) contend that identity can be fashioned, constructed, modified or developed based on one's knowledge trajectory. They believe that learners invest in a language based on their identities and perceptions of what the L2 may bring to them.

The culture and identity of the first language are distinctly different from those of the second language. This difference may culminate in alterations of the identity of ESL learners, as well as leave them feeling alienated. This suggests that the negotiation of identity that occurs in the learning of a second language is often fraught with challenges related to the learners' sense of belonging to their community, social inclusion, and perception of power (Zrike, 2025). These challenges, in turn, may affect the outcomes of the learning process. What these scholarly arguments indicate is that learners' identities are somehow affected by their contact with the

second language. They are no longer tied to fixed patterns, localities, or cultural traditions and become fluid. As learners move across communities, their social, economic and cultural capital actually shifts in terms of value across both space and time (Darvin and Norton, 2017).

3.2.2. Cultural Authenticity Concerns

From a review of the literature, it emerged that one of the greatest challenge involves concerns about the rural African learners' being able to maintain some form of cultural authenticity during the acquisition of English proficiency. As they develop English proficiency, internal conflicts may arise between the desire for English competence and the learners' concerns about losing authentic connections to traditional languages and cultural practices. Some studies documented instances where learners expressed anxiety about becoming too Western or losing connection to their cultural roots through English language learning (Chimbutane, 2011; Malewaneng, 2024). . These concerns manifest in various ways, including resistance to certain pedagogical approaches, reluctance to engage with English-language cultural content, and internal conflicts about the value and appropriateness of English proficiency. In South Africa, for example, research indicates that it is pertinent that teachers be aware that when they teach English they also teach its cultural values and, as such, there is a need to acknowledge the first language of the learners to prevent a diminishing of the culture of the first language (van der Walt, 2010). Learners may simultaneously desire English proficiency for economic advancement while resenting the implicit devaluation of their native languages that often accompanies the acquisition of English.

Rural ESL learners may also resist certain grammatical structures or vocabulary items that they perceive as culturally inappropriate, as well as any activities that threaten their sense of identity. Research from rural Malawi, for example, demonstrates how these concerns can manifest in classroom behaviors, with students showing reluctance to participate in role-playing activities that require them to adopt Western personas or discuss topics that conflict with traditional values (Kamangamalu, 2010). This suggests that communicative language teaching approaches that emphasize individual expression and critical questioning may conflict with cultural values that prioritize collective harmony and respect for authority. Similarly, English-language literature and media content may present worldviews and lifestyle models that learners perceive as incompatible with their cultural identities.

The prevalence of cultural authenticity concerns across many reviewed studies underscores the fundamental tension that many rural African learners experience between their desire for English proficiency and their commitment to maintaining cultural identity. This finding challenges traditional approaches to second language acquisition, which often treat cultural considerations as peripheral rather than central to the learning process. It suggests that successful ESL programs in rural African contexts must explicitly address cultural identity concerns rather than assuming that learners will naturally adapt to Western-oriented pedagogical approaches.

3.2.3. Community Resistance and Social Pressure

The authenticity concerns of these rural learners are often reinforced by community members who view English proficiency with suspicion or concern, and may perceive learners who speak English as culturally inauthentic or socially pretentious. Community members who do not appreciate the significance of learning English language may even resist any efforts towards English language education for their children. Additionally, some elders and traditional leaders may worry that English language learning may lead to cultural erosion and loss of traditional knowledge systems by undermining local cultures and traditions (Halimi *et al.*, 2020). This community-level concern creates additional pressure on the learners, who may be caught between their desire for English proficiency and their need to maintain community acceptance and belonging.

Forms of community resistance to English language learning, therefore, may range from subtle discouragement to active opposition. Understandably, this resistance often stems from concerns about cultural preservation, community cohesion, and the potential for English proficiency to create social divisions within communities. Community resistance may manifest in various ways, including criticism of learners who display English proficiency, exclusion from traditional activities or ceremonies, and pressure to prioritize traditional skills and Knowledge over formal education, or even to the extent of actively opposing English language policy implementations (Hossain, 2023). Research from rural Ethiopia, for example, reveals the unavailability of opportunities to practice the language, except in the English classroom (Mulatu, 2015). These sociocultural impediments present learners with challenging choices, as they must develop strategies to maintain community belonging while pursuing English proficiency to achieve their educational aspirations.

Therefore, learners' identity formation in rural contexts is significantly influenced by their relationships with community members in the area where they reside. It is formed through the participation of communities of practice, which denote relationships established over time between people within a specific community. Social and cultural interactions and structures condition identity, and conversely, identity can determine the way individuals relate to their culture and society. This suggests that identity and community are intertwined, and the fluid nature of the community accounts for the identity of second language learners (Teng, 2019).

Significantly, community resistance and social pressure highlight the collective nature of cultural identity in rural African contexts. Unlike individualistic Western contexts, where language learning decisions may be primarily personal, rural African contexts involve complex negotiations with extended family, community leaders, and traditional authorities. This finding has important implications for program design and implementation, suggesting that successful ESL initiatives must engage with communities as collective entities rather than focusing solely on individual learners.

3.2.4. Intergenerational Tensions

Literature reviewed identified intergenerational tensions as significant challenges for rural African ESL learners. These tensions often emerge when, for example, English language learning by young learners creates communication barriers with older family and community members, or when educational advancement appears to challenge traditional authority structures. Older community members express fears that English language learning may disrupt traditional processes of cultural knowledge transmission and weaken intergenerational bonds (Hausknecht *et al.*, 2021).

A major concern, then, becomes the cultural cost that English language learning may cause. These anxieties are often exacerbated when English language learning is associated with formal education systems that explicitly or implicitly devalue traditional Knowledge and practices. These tensions may manifest in conflicting messages about the value of education, restrictions on educational activities, or pressure to maintain traditional practices alongside formal learning. However, some studies document innovative approaches to maintaining intergenerational cultural transmission while supporting ESL acquisition. These approaches often involve incorporating traditional knowledge systems into English language instruction and emphasizing the complementary rather than competitive relationship between traditional and contemporary Knowledge (García, 2014).

3.2.5. Limited Culturally Responsive Resources

Rural schooling is shaped by livelihoods, distance, infrastructure, and community norms. Teachers and learners draw on local Knowledge and oral traditions that are not always recognized by formal curricula. Material constraints, including large classes and limited print resources, can compound language barriers, especially for early literacy in English. Compared to their urban counterparts, literature suggests that learning English is more challenging for rural school learners, primarily due to the inadequate resources available in this environment. Notably, the review of the literature revealed a lack of culturally responsive pedagogical resources as a significant challenge to ESL acquisition in rural African contexts. Research from rural Zambia reveals how the absence of locally relevant materials forces teachers to rely on resources that may contradict local values or present unfamiliar cultural contexts (Banda and Jamaima, 2015). This situation creates additional work for teachers, who must adapt materials while lacking training in culturally responsive pedagogy (Baker and Fang, 2020).

These culturally responsive limitations do not only incorporate material resources, such as textbooks, technology, and media, but also encompass human resources, including trained teachers, cultural mediators, and community support. The shortage of qualified ESL teachers in rural areas compounds these resource challenges, with many communities relying on teachers who lack specialized training in second language acquisition or cultural responsiveness (van der Walt, 2010). This situation may result in pedagogical approaches that inadvertently create or exacerbate cultural identity challenges for learners. Limited material and human resources often result in a diminished proficiency level in ESL among rural learners.

Most available ESL materials are designed for Western contexts and feature cultural content, examples, and scenarios that may be irrelevant or inappropriate for rural African learners. This cultural mismatch can create barriers to engagement and comprehension, while reinforcing perceptions that English language learning requires cultural assimilation. Hossain (2023) suggests that integrating local languages and cultural allusions into English language teaching and learning may mitigate community resistance and make the rural learner better able to relate to the learning experience.

4. IMPLICATIONS

4.1. Theoretical Implications

The findings of this review have significant implications for theoretical understanding of second language acquisition and cultural identity. The evidence strongly supports sociocultural approaches to language learning that emphasize the social and cultural embeddedness of learning processes. However, the review also reveals limitations in existing theoretical frameworks when applied to African rural contexts. The traditional sociocultural theory, while valuable, may not fully account for the specific dynamics of postcolonial contexts where the target language carries historical associations with oppression and cultural domination. The review suggests need for theoretical frameworks that more explicitly address these postcolonial dynamics and their impact on learner motivation, identity investment, and community support. Similarly, identity investment theory, while providing valuable insights into learner motivation and engagement, may need expansion to better account for collective identity considerations that are particularly salient in rural African contexts. The review findings suggest that individual identity investment decisions are heavily influenced by community-level identity negotiations and collective cultural preservation concerns (Norton, 2014).

The evidence also supports the need for a deeper understanding of resistance in second language acquisition in rural contexts. Rather than viewing resistance as simply negative or obstructive, the review suggests that resistance may serve important functions in protecting cultural identity and maintaining community cohesion. This perspective requires theoretical

frameworks that can accommodate both the benefits and challenges of resistance in language learning contexts.

4.2. Pedagogical Implications

The review findings have profound implications for pedagogical approaches to ESL instruction in African rural contexts. The evidence strongly supports the need for culturally responsive pedagogical approaches that explicitly acknowledge and address cultural identity concerns rather than treating them as obstacles to overcome. Effective pedagogical approaches must begin with recognition and validation of learners' cultural identities, linguistic resources, and community knowledge systems (Hossain, 2024). This recognition should extend beyond superficial incorporation of cultural content to encompass fundamental respect for different ways of knowing, learning, and being. Pedagogical approaches that position Western Knowledge and practices as superior or more legitimate are likely to intensify cultural identity challenges and reduce learning effectiveness.

This review suggests that successful ESL programmes should incorporate translanguaging and code-switching practices as legitimate pedagogical strategies rather than viewing them as problems to eliminate (Maseko, 2022; Makena and Nzabe, 2025). Translanguaging is fast gaining significance within the southern African region (Taringe and Manyike, 2025). These practices allow learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoires while developing English proficiency, potentially reducing identity conflicts and supporting more effective learning. Research increasingly documents translanguaging (the strategic use of multiple linguistic resources) in rural classrooms as an identity-affirming and pedagogically useful practice (Nhongo and Tshotsho, 2019; Zou, 2020). When teachers and curricula legitimise the learners' repertoires, the latter would then demonstrate better comprehension, participation, and agency in learning.

Community engagement emerges as a crucial component of effective ESL education in rural African contexts. Learning programmes should encourage community engagement because curricula that fail to engage with community leaders, elders, and traditional authorities are likely to encounter resistance and may inadvertently create or exacerbate cultural identity challenges. Successful programmes should involve communities in programme design and implementation processes. The evidence also supports the need for teacher preparation programmes that specifically address cultural responsiveness and postcolonial awareness (van der Walt, 2010). Teachers working in rural African contexts need specialised training in navigating cultural identity challenges, facilitating community engagement, and adapting pedagogical approaches to local contexts and needs.

4.3. Policy Implications

The review findings have important implications for language education policy at national, regional, and international levels. Current policies that mandate English-medium instruction without adequate attention to cultural identity considerations may inadvertently create barriers to effective learning and contribute to cultural erosion in rural communities. Cultural identity implications of their language education initiatives. African nations should strive to implement education programmes that pay attention to cultural preservation and community empowerment, as those that focus solely on English language acquisition may achieve short-term linguistic gains, while creating long-term social and cultural costs.

This review suggests that in view of this objective, effective language education policies should recognise and support multilingual approaches that value local languages alongside English language development (Heugh *et al* 2019; Nnko and Kalokola, 2023). Policies that position English and local languages in competition with each other are likely to create unnecessary

tensions and may reduce the effectiveness of both English language learning and cultural preservation efforts. Some scholars actually recommend that the use of code-switching be formalised within the education system (Gotosa, Rwodzi and Mhlanga, 2013). The review also suggests need for policies that support development of culturally responsive pedagogical resources and teacher preparation programmes (Early and Norton, 2014). Current resource development efforts often focus on adapting Western materials rather than creating genuinely locally relevant resources that reflect African cultural contexts and learning preferences.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

5.1. Review Limitations

This systematic review has some limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the focus on English-language publications may have excluded relevant research published in other languages, particularly French, Portuguese, and Arabic, which are important academic languages in various African contexts. This limitation may have resulted in underrepresentation of research from Francophone, Lusophone, and Arabic-speaking African regions.

Secondly, the review's focus on peer-reviewed academic literature may have excluded important insights from grey literature, community-based research, and practitioner reports that could provide valuable perspectives on cultural identity challenges in ESL acquisition. These sources might offer more direct community voices and practical insights that complement academic research findings.

Thirdly, the temporal scope of the review (2010-2025) may have excluded important historical research that could provide valuable insights into the evolution of cultural identity challenges in ESL acquisition. However, this limitation was necessary to ensure currency and relevance of findings.

5.2. Future Research Directions

The review findings suggest several important directions for future research. Primarily, comparative research across different African rural contexts could provide valuable insights into how specific cultural, linguistic, and historical factors influence the nature and intensity of cultural identity challenges. Such research could help identify both universal patterns and context-specific variations that require different pedagogical approaches. Additionally, research on successful culturally responsive pedagogical approaches is needed to provide practical guidance for educators and programme developers. Case studies of effective programmes could identify specific strategies and approaches that successfully accommodate cultural identity challenges while supporting English language development.

6. CONCLUSION

This systematic review has examined the complex relationship between cultural identity and ESL acquisition in African rural contexts, revealing that cultural identity challenges are pervasive, multifaceted, and deeply embedded within broader socioeconomic and political dynamics. The evidence demonstrates that successful ESL acquisition in these contexts requires approaches that explicitly acknowledge and address cultural identity concerns, rather than treating them as peripheral considerations. The major cultural identity challenges identified in this review - cultural authenticity concerns, community resistance, intergenerational tensions, resource limitations, pedagogical mismatches, and identity negotiation complexities - collectively illustrate the need for more culturally responsive and contextually appropriate approaches to ESL instruction. The review findings challenge traditional approaches to second language acquisition that prioritise linguistic and cognitive factors while minimizing cultural and social considerations. The evidence suggests that effective ESL programmes in rural African contexts must be grounded in deep understanding

of local cultural contexts, community dynamics, and historical experiences. The complexity of cultural identity challenges in ESL acquisition within African rural contexts requires multidimensional responses that acknowledge the interconnected nature of language, culture, identity, and community. By acknowledging this complexity rather than seeking to simplify it, educators, researchers, and policymakers can work together to develop approaches that truly serve the needs and aspirations of rural African communities, while respecting their cultural heritage and supporting their continued development.

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