

## VOICES FROM THE FIELD: CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO PRACTICAL PROBLEMS

### **Exploring Kashmiri Identity through Projects with Stories and Visual Design in English**

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#### **Teaching context**

Students in public schools across Azad Jammu and Kashmir, aged 13–17, come from Kashmiri, Pahadi, and Gojri-speaking backgrounds and have intermediate English skills. Urdu is the medium of instruction, and English is taught as a subject, while heritage languages like Kashmiri are rarely included. Kashmiri, in particular, holds deep cultural significance but remains largely absent from formal education. Most schools have limited resources and little support for multilingual teaching, leaving students disconnected from their linguistic identity. This highlights the need for TESOL approaches that link English learning with local culture, especially through the inclusion of the Kashmiri language.

#### **Problem**

Students often perceive English as difficult and distant from daily life. Closer examination reveals a deeper issue: Many are losing touch with heritage languages. While parents and grandparents still speak Kashmiri, Pahadi, or Gojri, children rarely use these languages at home due to the dominance of Urdu and English in school and everyday conversation. This limited exposure weakens cultural memory and identity over time (Cummins, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

#### **Solution**

##### ***Project Design and Rationale***

This classroom project blends cultural identity with English learning. The goal is to make English meaningful as a bridge to heritage rather than a replacement. The approach draws on culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy, which validates learners' backgrounds while promoting academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The guiding principles describe the theoretical and practical foundations of this classroom project, showing why it is structured the way it is:

1. Lessons connect to students' lived experiences: Students understand and retain knowledge better when lessons relate to their own culture, language, and life experiences. (Vygotsky, 1978; Gay, 2010)



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2. Local culture provides authentic English content: Using local traditions, proverbs, poems, and stories gives students meaningful material for practicing English, making language learning relevant and engaging. (Kramersch, 1993; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; McKay, 2002)
3. Creative and multimodal tasks increase engagement: Incorporating activities like storytelling, translation, poster design, and audio/video recordings allows students to express themselves in multiple ways, enhancing motivation and learning. (García & Wei, 2014)

### **Teaching Techniques / Project Design**

The project runs for three weeks (six 45-Minute classes), with 2 classes per week.

Week 1 – Lesson 1: Exploring Language and Identity

The goal is to build multilingual awareness and descriptive English skills.

1. Class discussion: What languages do you speak? What did your grandparents speak?
2. Show visuals from Tuba Altaf's thesis project. Though not linguistically presented, they provide a creative entry point to language identity (see Figure 1).
3. Compare Kashmiri numerals with Urdu and English numerals: Students create a bilingual chart (see Figure 2).
4. Reflection: If your language had a visual identity, what would it look like?

Figure 1

*Visuals from Altaf's (2021) Thesis Project Illustrating Language Identity*



*Note.* Adapted from Altaf (2021). Used with permission.

Figure 2  
Student-Created Bilingual Charts Comparing Kashmiri with Urdu and English



Note. Adapted from Altaf (2021). Used with permission

### Week 2 – Lesson 2: Story Collection, Recording, and Translation

The goal is to link heritage voices to English learning while developing translation, vocabulary, and comprehension skills.

1. Students talk to a parent, grandparent, or elder and record a short audio or video of a poem, vakh, or folktale in Kashmiri, Pahadi, or Gojri. If possible, they can use a phone to make the recording. A *vakh* is a short, traditional Kashmiri poem, often composed in a simple style, that conveys spiritual, mystical, or philosophical insights. In this storytelling activity, students engage with oral traditions by recording family members narrating poems such as Lal Ded's vakhs (see Box 1). These vakhs' profound cultural and spiritual meaning provides rich material for retelling, translation, and vocabulary discussion, helping students understand the limits of direct English equivalents and appreciate cultural nuances.
2. In class, groups share one recording or retelling and work together to translate the text into English, focusing on meaning over literal words. Teaching these folktales, poems, and proverbs helps students see how Kashmiri culture shapes language and meaning, beyond direct English translation. It builds their understanding of cultural context and improves translation skills.
3. List key vocabulary (see Table 1) and also use three proverbs (see Box 2), to discuss where English words match and where cultural or emotional meaning needs explanation.

## Box 1: Lal Ded's Vakh with Roman Script &amp; English Rendering

کتہ بوز دے میون متہ لبہ تار  
(Kātī bozī day meyūn methi dyēh tār)

“With a rope of untwisted thread am I towing a boat upon the ocean.

آهن تاکهن پونی زنہ شیمان  
(Āmyan ṭākhan pony zanaḥ shyemān)

Will my God hear? Will He carry even me over?

(“even me” here conveys humility and a sense of being unworthy, seeking God’s help).

زوو چھم برمان گر گڑھہ با  
(Zūw chhum barman gar gṛḥḥa ha)

Like water in goblets of unbaked clay, do I slowly waste away.

*Note:* The vakh is presented in Perso-Arabic (Nastaliq) script, adapted for Kashmiri with additional diacritics and characters. This form is documented in Grierson (1920) and may vary across written traditions.

## Box 2: Sample Kashmiri Proverbs with English Rendering and Explanations

1.

Proverb: ژند روزن، کنہ روزن

Roman Script: Zind rozan, kanah rozan

Literal Meaning: Life goes on, no matter what happens.

Message: This proverb speaks to resilience, acceptance, and the inevitability of moving forward despite hardships.

Usage: It is said when someone is grieving, worried, or disappointed as a gentle reminder that life does not stop, and one must keep living.

Example: A child loses his pet and feels very sad. A parent might gently say, “ژند روزن، کنہ روزن” (“Zind rozan, kanah rozan” “Life goes on, no matter what happens”), encouraging him to endure.

Social context: Reflects a deep-rooted mindset shaped by generations of Kashmiris who have lived through conflict, loss, and oppression; life continues not through action, but through quiet endurance.

2.

Proverb: ہاتھ چھ نہ دوان، چھانہ چھ نہ پوان

Roman Script: Haath chh ne dwan, chhaanah chh ne pwan

Literal Meaning: Words or appearances mean nothing without action; real help must come through genuine giving or effort.

Message: One can not rely on empty promises; true support comes only through action.

Usage: It is said when someone expects support or favors from someone who has not offered any real help. It warns against false hopes.

Example: A young man hopes a wealthy relative will support his education, but the relative never offers help. A neighbor might remark, “ہاتھ چھ نہ دوان، چھانہ چھ نہ پوان” (“Haath chh ne dwan, chhaanah chh ne pwan”) meaning you cannot expect benefits from someone who has not extended a hand.

Social context: Shaped by years of oppression and unresolved conflict, this proverb reflects a collective awareness in Kashmiri culture: People cannot rely on outside powers or empty promises. It conveys a hard-learned lesson; real support comes only through genuine action.

Table 1

## Selected Kashmiri Words with English Equivalents/Explanations

Kashmiri Word	English Equivalent / Explanation
بوز (boz)	Sound / voice / hear
تار (taar)	String (of an instrument / metaphorical) / prayer / call
آمین (Aamin)	Amen (religious affirmation)
زنہ (zanay)	To say / utter / will recognize
زوو (zuv)	Life / existence / water
برمان (barman)	Fire (symbolic of struggle or purification) / vessel
گژھہ (gzhah)	Travel / to go / search

## Week 3 – Lesson 3: Poster Creation

The goal is to integrate language practice, translation, and creativity. Students produce tangible cultural artifacts, building confidence, pride, and appreciation for heritage.

1. Poster Design: Students will select a proverb, poem, or story from Lesson 2 and create a poster.

The poster must:

- a. Combine the Kashmiri text (in Nastaliq/Perso-Arabic script or Roman script) with its English translation and explanations (see Box 3).

## Box 3

Proverb: کرمَت گرن پوز، کرن پوز آسان، پونَت ناسان

Roman Script: Karmat garn poz, karn poz asaan, ponat nasaan

Literal meaning: “Breaking someone else’s pot is easy; making your own is difficult.”

Message: One should not criticize or belittle others’ efforts without understanding the difficulty of creating something oneself.

Usage: Said when someone criticizes another’s work without being able to do better themselves.

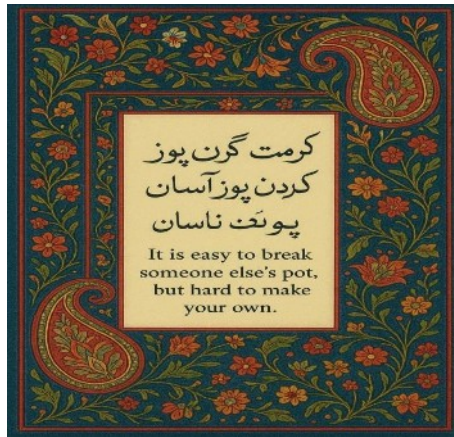
Example: During a poster-making activity, if a student mocks another’s creative design, a teacher might say, “کرمَت گرن پوز، کرن پوز آسان، پونَت ناسان,” reminding them to appreciate others’ efforts and skills in creating something.

Social context: Reflects a cultural value of patience, effort, and respect for creativity. It emphasizes that genuine work is difficult to produce, and one must appreciate others’ labor rather than simply criticizing.

- b. Use Kashmiri cultural visuals, such as hand drawings, floral motifs, paisleys, the lotus plant (*Nelumbo nucifera*), or Chinar tree leaves (*Platanus orientalis*). The visuals should reflect local artistry and show how language and culture intersect. Students may create handmade posters or use digital tools such as Canva or PowerPoint (see Fig. 3).

Figure 3

*Kashmiri Proverb with Motifs Inspired by Papier-mâché and Pashmina designs*



*Note.* Image generated by ChatGPT.

- c. Include at least one Kashmiri symbol, such as a pashmina shawl weave, a papier-mâché flower, a phairan, or a decorative script letter (see Fig. 4). The teacher provides examples for inspiration. (The Kashmiri word “Phairan” refers to a traditional loose, long gown worn by men and women in Kashmir. It is usually made of wool or cotton, providing warmth during the cold winters of the region. The phairan is a symbol of Kashmiri culture and is often paired with a sash or belt for style and comfort (Altaf, 2021).

Figure-4

*Example of Kashmiri Art as Cultural Elements in Posters*



*Note.* Adapted from Altaf (2021). Used with permission.

## 2. Gallery Walk & Reflection

Students display posters, walk in groups and note:

- One new English word (e.g., *identity*, *heritage*, *symbolism*)
- One Kashmiri word with English equivalent (e.g., *phiran* - traditional cloak; *sozni* - fine embroidery)
- One cultural insight (e.g. shawl designs reflect Kashmiri identity).

Class discussion explores how posters show identity and how comparing Kashmiri and English words helps preserve heritage language.

3. Assessment and Feedback: Teachers can evaluate learning via reflective journals, peer feedback, and rubrics for poster projects.

## Discussion and Further Suggestions

This three-week project shows that English can bridge cultural identity and language learning. Students move from exploring their own languages (Lesson 1) to collecting and translating stories (Lesson 2) and expressing ideas visually (Lesson 3), ensuring continuity and engagement (Cummins, 2000; García & Wei, 2014). Community engagement is central, as students involve elders in storytelling and share work in school or local spaces, supporting cultural preservation and intergenerational dialogue. Students can develop vocabulary, translation, descriptive writing, oral presentation, and visual literacy, reflecting translanguaging and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Future practice can include multimodal storytelling, peer teaching, heritage language clubs, digital tools for creativity, and adaptation to other multilingual contexts. Overall, the project fosters pride, collaboration, and social responsibility, linking English learning to both local culture and global communication.

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