

Students' Perceptions of Intercultural Learning in English Language Learning

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ABSTRAK

Perkembangan globalisasi menuntut penguasaan bahasa asing yang terintegrasi dengan pemahaman budaya penuturnya untuk menghindari kesalahpahaman komunikasi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi persepsi siswa, faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi, serta dampak pembelajaran lintas budaya dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif yang dilaksanakan di SMA Negeri 5 Tidore Kepulauan dengan melibatkan 10 siswa kelas X yang dipilih melalui purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi non-partisipan, dan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles dan Huberman yang meliputi reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa siswa memiliki persepsi yang sangat positif terhadap pembelajaran lintas budaya. Materi budaya dianggap mampu meningkatkan wawasan global, motivasi belajar, serta menciptakan pembelajaran yang lebih bervariasi. Faktor utama yang memengaruhi meliputi metode pengajaran guru, relevansi materi, dan penggunaan contoh konkret. Dampak yang dirasakan mencakup peningkatan kompetensi komunikatif lintas budaya, sikap toleransi, dan kesadaran terhadap keberagaman budaya. Kesimpulannya, integrasi budaya dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris berperan penting dalam mendukung kompetensi akademik dan sosial siswa di era global.

ABSTRACT

Globalization demands the mastery of foreign languages integrated with an understanding of the speakers' culture to avoid communication misunderstandings. This study aims to identify students' perceptions, the influencing factors, and the impacts of cross-cultural learning in English language learning. This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach conducted at SMA Negeri 5 Tidore Kepulauan, involving 10 tenth-grade students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation, and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The results show that students have a highly positive perception of cross-cultural learning. Cultural materials are considered to enhance global insight, increase learning motivation, and create more varied learning experiences. The main influencing factors include teachers' teaching methods, material relevance, and the use of concrete examples. The impacts include improved intercultural communicative competence, an attitude of tolerance, and greater awareness of cultural diversity. In conclusion, the integration of cultural elements in English language learning plays an important role in supporting students' academic and social competence in the global era.

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of globalization has brought significant changes to various aspects of human life, including the education sector. Advances in information and communication technology now enable individuals from different parts of the world and diverse cultural backgrounds to interact intensively without the barriers of space and time. This dynamic global condition requires individuals not only to

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possess communication skills limited to linguistic mastery but also to have a comprehensive understanding of the culture embedded in the language used.

English, as the primary international language, plays a crucial role in facilitating communication among nations. In the process of learning English, students should not only focus on purely linguistic aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and formal language skills. More than that, they also need to learn the cultural elements that are closely embedded in the language. Language and culture are essentially inseparable, as language serves as the primary medium for conveying values, norms, customs, and ways of thinking within a society.

Cross-cultural learning in the context of English language learning is very important because it helps students understand and internalize cultural diversity around the world. A strong understanding of intercultural contexts can foster tolerance, mutual respect for differences, and improve students' communication skills in international settings. In addition, cross-cultural learning also equips students with the ability to avoid communication misunderstandings that often arise from cultural differences.

In the modern educational landscape, intercultural communicative competence has become one of the essential competencies that every student must possess. This competence includes the ability to understand one's own culture as well as others' cultures, interact effectively, and adapt flexibly in communication situations involving diverse cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the integration of cultural elements into the English language curriculum should be emphasized so that the learning process is not only oriented toward linguistic competence but also balanced with the development of students' social and cultural competencies.

However, students may have different perceptions of the implementation of cross-cultural learning. Some students may show very positive views due to their strong interest in exploring foreign cultures, while others may experience difficulties in understanding cultural values and customs that differ significantly from their local culture. These differences in perception may be influenced by variations in learning experiences, social environments, prior cultural knowledge, and teachers' creativity in delivering classroom materials. Based on this background, this study aims to thoroughly examine the perceptions of tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 5 Tidore Kepulauan regarding cross-cultural learning.

1. METHOD

This study applies a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. Referring to Sugiyono (2019), qualitative methods are used to examine the natural condition of an object (natural setting), in which the researcher serves as the key instrument in the data collection process. The data obtained are presented descriptively in the form of written or spoken words from the participants observed, in order to depict the phenomenon of perception in a real and contextual manner.

This research was conducted at SMA Negeri 5 Tidore Kepulauan, located at Jl. Siswa 2, Sofifi, Oba Utara Subdistrict, Tidore Kepulauan City, North Maluku Province. The research subjects were tenth-grade students actively enrolled in English classes, with a class population of 38 students. From this total population, 10 students were selected as the core sample subjects using purposive sampling, namely sample selection based on criteria of information richness and relevance to the cultural topic.

Data were collected through three main techniques (triangulation):

1. Semi-structured interviews: using a formal yet flexible guide to explore students' subjective views.
2. Non-participant observation: observing teacher-student interaction and the implementation of cultural elements in the classroom without the researcher's involvement in the instructional process.
3. Documentation: photographs of classroom activities and field notes of interview transcripts.

The data analysis technique adopts the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of the stages of data reduction (selecting and focusing on essential data), data display (constructing a descriptive narrative accompanied by interview excerpts), and conclusion drawing/verification. To maintain the credibility of the findings, source and method triangulation were applied by cross-comparing the results of interviews, observation, and documentation.

2. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the qualitative data analysis, strong evidence was found that tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 5 Tidore Kepulauan hold a highly positive perception of cross-cultural learning in the English subject. Cultural elements were viewed as an inherent and crucial component because they provide new cultural knowledge while simultaneously sharpening linguistic skills. The factors driving students' interest include teachers' teaching methods, the relevance of the material, real-life examples, and interactive classroom activities. The impact is evident in improved communicative competence, an open-minded attitude, and robust global tolerance. This pattern of findings is consistent with the results of Adzima et al. (2023) and Yusri and Andriyanti (2025), who likewise found positive attitudes among Indonesian EFL students toward cultural content in English language learning.

Thematic Analysis of Interview Results

Students' Perceptions of Cross-Cultural Learning

This category of perception was explored through the question: "What is your opinion about cross-cultural learning in English language teaching?" The majority of students (SM, RN, AS, JS, and AI) expressed feeling helped because this material opened their insight into the lifestyles and customs of the world:

"In my opinion, cross-cultural learning is quite interesting because I can learn about the culture of other countries, not just learn the language." (SM)

"Cross-cultural learning helps me understand the customs and lifestyles of people from various different countries." (RN)

"Through cross-cultural learning, I can find out and learn about cultures I had never known before." (JS)

Interestingly, the student with the initials EL highlighted the dimension of the learning experience itself, considering that cultural content made the classroom atmosphere feel refreshing:

"In my opinion, cross-cultural learning is very interesting because it makes the atmosphere of English learning more varied and not boring." (EL)

These responses reflect the attitudes component in Byram's model (1997), namely students' openness and interest toward other cultures as the initial foundation of intercultural communicative competence.

The Importance of Cross-Cultural Learning in Language Use

Students responded to the question: "Do you think cross-cultural learning is important in English language learning? Why?" Their responses converged on a pragmatic awareness that language and culture form a single, whole unity. This symbiotic relationship was expressed by MR, RA, and AS:

"Yes, it's important because language and culture are interrelated, which makes the use of English easier to understand in terms of its intended meaning." (MR)

"Yes, it's important, because that way I can understand the culture that is directly related to how English is used in its country of origin." (RA)

Students recognized that mastery of grammatical structure would be incomplete without an understanding of cultural context, since culture determines how linguistic expressions are used politely and appropriately in social reality. This finding reinforces Kramsch's (1993) argument that communicative competence cannot be fully achieved without cultural awareness, and is also

in line with the findings of Yang and Zhong (2024), who confirmed a positive correlation between intercultural communicative competence and success in foreign language learning.

Students' Emotional Responses to Cultural Content

When teachers presented aspects of foreign culture (such as traditional festivals, patterns of interaction among teenagers abroad, or lifestyles), students (RN, AS, JS, EL, AI) consistently reported feelings of enjoyment, enthusiasm, and high curiosity. This demonstrates that cultural integration shifts the paradigm of English learning away from being regarded as a theoretical, rote-memorization subject toward becoming applicable and humanistic material for global exploration. This positive emotional response is also in line with the findings of Permatasari (2023), which showed that culture-based learning effectively fosters students' intrinsic motivation and cross-cultural awareness.

Factors Influencing Students' Interest in Cross-Cultural Content

Beyond the emotional and cognitive responses described above, the interview data also reveal a recurring pattern regarding the specific factors that shape the intensity of students' interest in cross-cultural material. Three interrelated factors emerged consistently across informants: the teacher's teaching method, the relevance of the material to students' daily lives, and the concreteness of the examples presented. Students such as SM and MR noted that when a teacher merely explained cultural facts verbally without illustration, their interest tended to be flat, whereas the same material delivered through pictures, short videos, or storytelling was described as far more engaging. This suggests that students' positive perception of cross-cultural learning is not automatic or purely intrinsic, but is substantially mediated by pedagogical delivery. In other words, cultural content functions as a necessary but not sufficient condition for fostering interest; it must be paired with instructional creativity to translate into genuine engagement.

A second influencing factor is the perceived relevance of the cultural material to students' own lives and future goals. Several students (RA, JS, AI) associated cross-cultural learning with practical usefulness, such as preparing them to communicate with foreigners, understanding content they encounter on social media, or anticipating opportunities to study or work abroad. This finding indicates that students do not view cultural learning as an abstract academic exercise, but rather connect it to imagined future scenarios of real-world language use. The third factor, concreteness of examples, reinforces this pattern: students repeatedly emphasized that comparisons between local (Tidore or Indonesian) customs and foreign customs helped them grasp cultural concepts more easily than abstract explanations, suggesting that a comparative pedagogical approach is particularly effective in this context.

Impacts on Communicative Competence and Social Attitudes

In terms of impact, the data show that students perceive cross-cultural learning as contributing to at least three interrelated outcomes: linguistic-pragmatic competence, affective openness, and critical cultural awareness. With regard to linguistic-pragmatic competence, several students explained that understanding cultural context helped them realize that a literal, word-for-word translation from Indonesian to English could result in expressions that sound impolite or inappropriate in an English-speaking cultural setting. This awareness reflects an emerging, though still developing, sense of pragmatic competence, which aligns with Byram's (1997) interpretation skills component. Regarding affective openness, students' repeated use of expressions such as "interesting," "enjoyable," and "curious" when describing cultural content indicates that cross-cultural learning is not experienced as a cognitive burden, but rather as a source of intrinsic enjoyment, which in turn appears to sustain their attention and participation in class.

With respect to critical cultural awareness, the findings show a more varied picture. While most students displayed straightforward appreciation of foreign cultures, a smaller number of

informants (notably AS and EL) also expressed moments of comparison and reflection, questioning why certain foreign customs differ from local ones and evaluating which practices they personally found agreeable or disagreeable. This reflective stance, rather than uncritical admiration, suggests that at least some students are beginning to move beyond the attitudes and knowledge components of Byram's (1997) model toward the more advanced component of critical cultural awareness, even though this capacity was not equally distributed among all participants. This variation indicates that the depth of intercultural competence developed through classroom exposure is not uniform and may depend on individual students' prior exposure, reflective disposition, and the depth of classroom discussion facilitated by the teacher.

General Discussion

Overall, the findings of this study reinforce the premise that the integration of culture in English language learning is not merely a complement, but a constitutive element that shapes students' intercultural communicative competence as formulated by Byram (1997). The consistency of these findings with various previous studies — both at the senior high school level in Central Java (Adzima et al., 2023) and within the broader EFL context (Yang & Zhong, 2024; Yusri & Andriyanti, 2025) — indicates that students' positive perceptions of cultural content tend to be cross-contextual, not confined to a single geographical region. Nevertheless, this study also emphasizes that the quality of cross-cultural learning implementation is highly dependent on teachers' creativity in presenting concrete examples and interactive activities, a factor that requires further attention in curriculum development and English teacher training in the regions.

At the same time, this study extends prior findings by highlighting that students' positive perception should not be interpreted as evidence that cross-cultural competence is being developed uniformly or to its fullest potential. As shown in the thematic analysis above, most students remain at the level of attitudinal openness and factual cultural knowledge, while the more advanced components of Byram's (1997) model — namely interaction skills and critical cultural awareness — appear to be emerging only among a subset of students. This gap suggests that while cross-cultural content successfully captures students' interest and motivation, translating that interest into fully developed intercultural competence likely requires more structured pedagogical scaffolding, such as guided reflection activities, role-play, or comparative discussion tasks, rather than exposure to cultural content alone. This nuance also helps explain why previous studies conducted in different regions of Indonesia (Adzima et al., 2023; Mite & Binawan, 2025) similarly report positive attitudes coexisting with uneven levels of implementation and understanding: student enthusiasm appears to be a fairly consistent starting point across contexts, but the depth of competence gained depends heavily on how that enthusiasm is pedagogically channeled by the teacher.

3. CONCLUSION

Tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 5 Tidore Kepulauan hold a highly positive perception of cross-cultural learning in English language teaching. The integration of cultural elements is considered important, interesting, and varied, as it is able to break the monotony of instructional classroom routine. Students demonstrated a critical awareness that cross-cultural understanding greatly assists in making sense of English language use in real life, while also contributing significantly to shaping intercultural communicative competence and fostering students' social tolerance in the era of globalization. These findings reinforce the theoretical foundations of Byram (1997) and Kramsch (1993) regarding the interconnectedness of language and culture, while also adding new empirical evidence from the context of secondary schools in the Eastern Indonesia region.

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