

Bridging the Cultural Gap: Pedagogical Strategies and Challenges in Integrating Torajan Local Culture into Cross-Cultural Understanding Instruction

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Abstract

Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) courses play a crucial role in developing students' intercultural communicative competence. However, CCU instruction in many Indonesian higher education contexts remains predominantly oriented toward Western cultures, with limited integration of local cultural knowledge as a meaningful pedagogical resource. This study explores the pedagogical strategies employed in integrating Torajan local culture into CCU instruction and examines the challenges encountered during its implementation. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research involved one CCU lecturer and undergraduate students enrolled in an English Education program at a private university in Indonesia. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and document analysis, and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal five major pedagogical strategies: contextual storytelling, comparative cultural discussions, project-based cultural exploration, reflective learning, and collaborative intercultural dialogue. These strategies enabled students to critically connect their local cultural identity with global cultural perspectives, fostering intercultural awareness, cultural confidence, and active classroom engagement. Nevertheless, the implementation faced several challenges, including students' limited English proficiency in expressing culturally specific concepts, the scarcity of culture-based instructional materials, time constraints, and the complexity of translating indigenous cultural values into intercultural learning contexts. The study argues that integrating Torajan local culture transforms CCU learning from knowledge transmission into a culturally responsive and dialogic learning process that strengthens students' intercultural communicative competence while preserving local cultural identity. The findings provide practical insights for English language educators and curriculum developers seeking to contextualize intercultural education through indigenous cultural resources in multilingual and multicultural settings.

Keywords: *Cross-Cultural Understanding, Torajan local culture, culturally responsive pedagogy, intercultural communicative competence, local wisdom, English language teaching*

Introduction

Cross-cultural understanding (CCU) has become an essential component of English language education in response to the increasing demands of globalization, international communication, and multicultural interactions. Beyond developing linguistic competence, English language teaching is expected to cultivate learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC), enabling them to communicate effectively and appropriately across diverse cultural contexts. According to Byram

(1997), intercultural competence encompasses not only knowledge of other cultures but also the ability to interpret, relate, and critically evaluate cultural perspectives. Similarly, Deardorff (2006) emphasizes that intercultural competence involves attitudes of openness, respect, and adaptability, which are indispensable in preparing students to participate in global communities. Consequently, CCU courses have been widely incorporated into English language education curricula to equip learners with intercultural awareness and communication skills.

Despite this growing emphasis, CCU instruction in many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts continues to rely predominantly on Western cultural perspectives. Instructional materials frequently introduce learners to cultures from English-speaking countries while providing limited opportunities to explore and critically reflect on their own cultural identities. Such practices may inadvertently position local cultures as peripheral rather than integral to intercultural learning, limiting students' ability to engage in meaningful comparisons between their own cultural values and those of others. In multicultural societies such as Indonesia, where cultural diversity constitutes a valuable educational resource, this imbalance highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that integrate local cultural knowledge into intercultural education.

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized the significance of incorporating local culture into English language teaching. McKay (2003) argues that English should function as an international language that accommodates local cultural identities rather than replacing them with native-speaker cultural norms. Likewise, Gay (2018) and Ladson-Billings (2021) emphasize that culturally responsive pedagogy enables learners to connect academic content with their lived cultural experiences, thereby enhancing engagement and meaningful learning. Within the Indonesian context, several studies have explored the integration of local wisdom into English language instruction to promote students' cultural awareness while preserving indigenous identities. These studies generally report positive outcomes, including increased motivation, improved intercultural awareness, and stronger appreciation of local cultural heritage.

Specifically, previous studies have investigated the use of local folktales, traditional ceremonies, local literature, and indigenous values as instructional resources in English classrooms. Other researchers have examined culture-based teaching materials, project-based learning, and contextual learning approaches to facilitate intercultural competence among EFL learners. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that integrating local culture contributes positively to students' language learning and cultural awareness. Nevertheless, the majority of these investigations primarily evaluate learning outcomes or the effectiveness of instructional materials, with comparatively limited attention devoted to the pedagogical processes through which local culture is integrated into Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) instruction.

Moreover, existing research has seldom examined how lecturers strategically transform indigenous cultural knowledge into pedagogically meaningful classroom practices while simultaneously addressing the practical challenges encountered during implementation. This limitation is particularly evident in studies focusing on Torajan local culture, despite its rich cultural heritage characterized by communal values, kinship systems, traditional architecture, rituals, oral traditions, and indigenous philosophies that offer valuable resources for intercultural learning. Most available studies concerning Torajan culture emphasize anthropological, linguistic, or tourism perspectives rather than its pedagogical application in higher education English classrooms. Consequently, little is known about the instructional strategies employed by

lecturers to bridge students' local cultural experiences with broader intercultural concepts within CCU courses.

This gap suggests the need for a more comprehensive understanding of how local culture functions not merely as instructional content but as a pedagogical framework that facilitates intercultural dialogue, cultural reflection, and identity negotiation. Investigating the integration of Torajan local culture into CCU instruction may provide important insights into how culturally responsive pedagogy can strengthen students' intercultural communicative competence while simultaneously reinforcing appreciation of local cultural identity. Such an investigation also contributes to current discussions on the localization of English language teaching in multilingual and multicultural educational settings.

Based on these considerations, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) What pedagogical strategies are employed in integrating Torajan local culture into Cross-Cultural Understanding instruction? (2) What challenges do lecturers and students encounter during the implementation of these pedagogical strategies? Accordingly, the objectives of this study are to identify the pedagogical strategies used in integrating Torajan local culture into CCU courses and to explore the challenges experienced throughout the instructional process. The novelty of this research lies in its conceptualization of Torajan local culture as a pedagogical resource rather than merely instructional content. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on culture-based teaching materials or students' learning outcomes, this study proposes a pedagogical perspective that explains how indigenous cultural knowledge can be systematically transformed into classroom strategies supporting intercultural dialogue, cultural identity negotiation, and culturally responsive learning in English language education.

Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the pedagogical strategies and challenges of integrating Torajan local culture into Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) instruction. A qualitative approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of classroom practices and participants' experiences within their natural educational context (Yin, 2018).

The study was conducted in the English Education Study Program at a private university in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The participants consisted of one CCU lecturer and 28 undergraduate students who were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in the implementation of Torajan local culture in the course.

Data were collected over one semester through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and document analysis, including lesson plans, teaching materials, and students' assignments. The use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation and enhanced the credibility of the findings.

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis, involving data familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, and interpretation. To ensure trustworthiness, triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing were employed. Ethical considerations were maintained by obtaining informed consent from all participants and ensuring the confidentiality of their identities.

Results

The analysis of classroom observations, interviews, reflective journals, and teaching documents revealed two major themes: (1) pedagogical strategies for integrating Torajan local culture into Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) instruction and (2) challenges encountered during the implementation.

Pedagogical Strategies for Integrating Torajan Local Culture

Five pedagogical strategies emerged from the analysis. The first strategy was contextual storytelling, in which the lecturer introduced Torajan cultural practices, such as *Rambu Solo'*, *Tongkonan*, and the philosophy of *Siri' na Pacce*, as authentic learning materials. These cultural narratives encouraged students to relate local cultural values to intercultural concepts discussed in class.

The second strategy involved comparative cultural discussions. Students were encouraged to compare Torajan traditions with cultural practices from other countries, enabling them to identify similarities and differences in beliefs, communication styles, social norms, and cultural values.

The third strategy was project-based cultural exploration, where students conducted small-scale investigations of Torajan cultural practices through interviews, observations, and digital documentation. The projects encouraged active participation and strengthened students' understanding of their own cultural identity.

The fourth strategy was reflective learning, implemented through reflective journals that allowed students to evaluate their cultural assumptions and describe how the learning activities influenced their intercultural perspectives.

Finally, collaborative intercultural dialogue was implemented through group discussions and presentations, providing opportunities for students from different cultural backgrounds to exchange perspectives and negotiate meanings in an interactive learning environment.

Challenges in Integrating Torajan Local Culture

Despite the positive implementation, several challenges were identified. One major challenge was students' limited English proficiency in explaining culturally specific concepts that have no direct English equivalents. Students often experienced difficulty translating indigenous terms and expressing the philosophical meanings embedded in Torajan traditions.

Another challenge was the limited availability of teaching resources that specifically integrate Torajan local culture into CCU instruction. Consequently, the lecturer developed and adapted instructional materials from various sources to meet the learning objectives.

Time constraints also affected the implementation. Classroom discussions on cultural issues frequently required more time than scheduled because students needed opportunities to explore and compare diverse cultural perspectives.

In addition, differences in students' cultural backgrounds influenced classroom discussions. While these differences enriched intercultural learning, they also required the lecturer to facilitate discussions carefully to ensure mutual respect and balanced participation among students.

As the result of this research, the findings indicate that integrating Torajan local culture into CCU instruction promoted active learning and intercultural engagement while presenting pedagogical and practical challenges that require careful instructional planning.

Table . Summary of Research Findings

Theme	Findings
Pedagogical Strategies	Contextual storytelling; comparative cultural discussions; project-based cultural exploration; reflective learning; collaborative intercultural dialogue
Implementation Challenges	Limited English proficiency for culture-specific concepts; limited instructional resources; time constraints; diverse student cultural backgrounds

Discussion

Pedagogical Strategies for Integrating Torajan Local Culture into Cross-Cultural Understanding

The findings indicate that integrating Torajan local culture into CCU instruction provides meaningful opportunities for students to develop intercultural communicative competence while strengthening their cultural identity. The five pedagogical strategies identified in this study contextual storytelling, comparative cultural discussions, project-based cultural exploration, reflective learning, and collaborative intercultural dialogue demonstrate that local culture can function as a pedagogical resource rather than merely instructional content. This finding supports Byram's (1997) concept of intercultural communicative competence, which emphasizes learners' ability to interpret, compare, and critically engage with different cultural perspectives. By positioning Torajan culture as the starting point of intercultural learning, students became more confident in explaining their own cultural identity while appreciating cultural diversity.

Contextual Storytelling

Contextual storytelling emerged as an effective strategy for introducing intercultural concepts through authentic Torajan cultural practices such as *Rambu Solo'*, *Tongkonan*, and traditional values. These cultural narratives enabled students to relate theoretical concepts to their lived experiences, making intercultural learning more meaningful. This finding is consistent with Gay (2018), who argues that culturally responsive teaching becomes more effective when instructional content reflects learners' cultural backgrounds. It also supports McKay's (2003) view that English language education should empower learners to communicate their own culture rather than relying solely on English-speaking cultural contexts.

Comparative Cultural Discussions

Comparative cultural discussions encouraged students to analyze similarities and differences between Torajan culture and other cultures. Through guided discussions, students critically examined communication styles, social norms, traditions, and cultural values across different societies. This strategy promoted intercultural awareness by encouraging students to recognize cultural diversity without positioning one culture as superior to another. Such findings reinforce Byram's (1997) framework of intercultural learning, particularly the development of skills of interpreting and relating cultural phenomena.

Project-Based Cultural Exploration

Project-based cultural exploration provided students with opportunities to investigate local cultural practices through interviews, observations, and documentation. Rather than receiving cultural knowledge passively, students actively constructed their understanding through authentic field experiences. This finding supports previous studies highlighting project-based learning as an effective approach to fostering intercultural competence because it connects classroom learning with real social contexts.

Reflective Learning

Reflective journals enabled students to evaluate their assumptions, beliefs, and intercultural experiences throughout the learning process. Reflection encouraged students to reconsider stereotypes, appreciate cultural diversity, and recognize the relevance of local wisdom in global communication. This finding aligns with experiential learning theories, which emphasize reflection as an essential component of meaningful learning and personal development.

Collaborative Intercultural Dialogue

Collaborative discussions and presentations created opportunities for students from different cultural backgrounds to exchange perspectives and negotiate cultural meanings. Classroom interaction became a dialogic space where students learned to respect different viewpoints while articulating their own cultural identities. These findings support Kramsch's (1993) notion of intercultural learning as a process of negotiating meaning between cultures rather than simply acquiring cultural information.

Challenges in Integrating Torajan Local Culture into Cross-Cultural Understanding

Although the integration of Torajan local culture produced positive learning experiences, several challenges emerged during implementation.

Language Barriers

The most prominent challenge concerned students' limited English proficiency in explaining culture-specific concepts. Many Torajan cultural expressions contain philosophical meanings that cannot be translated directly into English, making intercultural explanation particularly demanding. This finding confirms Kramsch's (1993) argument that language and culture are inseparable in intercultural communication.

Limited Teaching Resources

Another challenge was the scarcity of instructional materials that integrate Torajan local culture into CCU courses. As a result, the lecturer developed teaching materials by adapting information from various cultural and academic sources. Similar constraints have been identified in previous studies on culture-based English language teaching, where teachers often rely on self-developed materials due to the limited availability of locally relevant resources.

Time Constraints

Culture-based discussions required longer instructional time because students needed opportunities to explore cultural meanings, compare perspectives, and engage in

critical reflection. This finding suggests that integrating local culture into CCU should be accompanied by flexible instructional planning to ensure sufficient time for meaningful intercultural dialogue.

Diverse Cultural Backgrounds

The diversity of students' cultural backgrounds enriched classroom interaction but also required careful facilitation to maintain respectful and inclusive discussions. Students brought different experiences and interpretations of cultural practices, creating opportunities for authentic intercultural learning while simultaneously demanding greater pedagogical sensitivity from the lecturer. This finding reinforces the importance of culturally responsive teaching in managing multicultural classrooms.

Pedagogical Implications

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Torajan local culture can serve as an effective pedagogical foundation for Cross-Cultural Understanding instruction. Unlike previous studies that primarily examined local culture as instructional content or teaching materials, this study highlights how indigenous cultural knowledge can be systematically transformed into pedagogical strategies that foster intercultural dialogue, identity negotiation, and cultural reflection. These findings suggest that integrating local culture into English language education not only strengthens students' intercultural communicative competence but also contributes to preserving indigenous cultural values within higher education.

Conclusion

This study explored the pedagogical strategies and challenges of integrating Torajan local culture into Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) instruction in an English Education program. The findings demonstrate that contextual storytelling, comparative cultural discussions, project-based cultural exploration, reflective learning, and collaborative intercultural dialogue effectively facilitated students' intercultural communicative competence while strengthening their awareness of local cultural identity. These strategies transformed Torajan local culture from being merely instructional content into a meaningful pedagogical resource that connected students' cultural experiences with broader intercultural perspectives.

The study also identified several challenges, including students' limited ability to express culture-specific concepts in English, the scarcity of culture-based instructional materials, time constraints, and the diversity of students' cultural backgrounds. Despite these challenges, the integration of Torajan local culture created a more contextual, engaging, and culturally responsive learning environment that encouraged active participation and critical reflection.

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on intercultural education by demonstrating how indigenous cultural knowledge can be systematically integrated into CCU instruction through culturally responsive pedagogical practices. The findings provide practical implications for English language educators and curriculum developers in designing culture-based intercultural learning that is relevant to local contexts while preparing students to participate effectively in global communication. Future research is recommended to investigate the implementation of similar pedagogical approaches in different educational settings and with diverse local cultures to further enrich intercultural teaching practices.

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