

Enhancing Intercultural Competence Through Cross-Cultural Understanding Among Indonesian and Thai Students

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ABSTRACT

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Intercultural competence has become an essential skill for students in the era of globalization and international academic collaboration. According to Deardorff (2020), intercultural competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on knowledge, skills, and attitudes. This community engagement program aimed to enhance intercultural competence through cross-cultural understanding among Indonesian and Thai students. The program involved 50 participants consisting of 25 students from Walailak University and 25 students from the German Literature Study Program at Universitas Negeri Surabaya. The activities were conducted through three main stages: intercultural understanding training, intercultural competence workshops, and focus group discussions addressing contemporary cultural issues in Asia and Europe. The training activities were initiated with a pre-test and concluded with a post-test to evaluate participants' intercultural understanding improvement. The results indicated a significant increase in participants' intercultural awareness, communication skills, and understanding of cultural diversity between Indonesia and Thailand. The findings suggest that intercultural engagement activities can effectively foster multicultural awareness and global competencies among university students.

INTRODUCTION

Today's world is interconnected in ways previous generations couldn't have imagined. Globalization isn't just an abstract economic concept—it actively shapes how we interact, learn, and build relationships every day. Because of this shift, intercultural competence has evolved from a “nice-to-have” soft skill into an absolute necessity for modern university students. As Sorrells (2022) emphasizes, globalization has made cross-cultural communication an unavoidable reality in both our social and academic lives. Students today aren't learning in isolation; they are navigating multi-ethnic lecture halls, participating in digital international exchanges, and preparing for globalized careers. Consequently, higher education institutions face a broader mission: they can no longer focus solely on technical instruction. Universities carry a vital responsibility to help students thrive in multicultural environment, fostering true cultural diversity, encouraging cross-border collaboration, and equipping graduates to communicate thoughtfully across different worldviews.

Intercultural competence is essentially our ability to connect and communicate meaningfully across different cultural backgrounds. It relies on a mix of self-awareness, open attitudes, cultural knowledge, and practical communication skills (Deardorff, 2020). In educational settings, fostering this competence helps students build real empathy, tolerance, and a global mindset. As Byram (2021) highlights, it allows people to step back and view cultural practices through diverse lenses, encouraging thoughtful understanding rather than quick judgment.

In Southeast Asia, cross-cultural interaction has become increasingly important due to the expansion of academic mobility and international collaboration among universities.

Indonesia and Thailand are multicultural societies with rich traditions and diverse social values. However, both countries are also experiencing rapid cultural transformation influenced by globalization, digital technology, and transnational popular culture. Liu, Volcic, and Gallois (2021) argued that technological advancement and digital communication have accelerated intercultural interactions while simultaneously creating challenges related to cultural identity and adaptation.

Several previous studies emphasized the importance of intercultural learning programs in higher education. Tran and Vu (2021) found that international collaborative programs significantly improved students' intercultural communication skills and cultural sensitivity. Similarly, Zhou and Griffiths (2021) demonstrated that intercultural learning activities promote critical awareness, openness, and mutual understanding among students from different cultural backgrounds. Despite these findings, many intercultural education programs still rely heavily on theoretical approaches and provide limited opportunities for direct intercultural interaction.

Therefore, practical community engagement activities involving international participants are necessary to provide authentic intercultural experiences. As part of its international community engagement initiative, the German Literature Study Program at Universitas Negeri Surabaya organized a cross-cultural understanding program involving students from Walailak University. The program aimed to strengthen intercultural competence through intercultural training, workshops, and focus group discussions discussing contemporary cultural developments in Asia and Europe.

The uniqueness of this program lies in its participatory and collaborative approach combining intercultural competence training with direct intercultural dialogue and comparative cultural reflection. Unlike conventional seminars, this activity emphasized active student participation through cultural exchange sessions and collaborative discussions. In addition, the program integrated pre-test and post-test assessments to evaluate participants' intercultural understanding improvement quantitatively.

Therefore, this community engagement program aimed to enhance intercultural competence through cross-cultural understanding among Indonesian and Thai students. Specifically, the program sought to improve students' awareness of cultural diversity, intercultural communication skills, and critical understanding of current cultural developments in Asia and Europe.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT METHOD

This community engagement program employed a participatory learning approach emphasizing collaborative interaction and intercultural dialogue among participants. Participatory learning is considered effective in intercultural education because it encourages active involvement, reflection, and collaborative problem-solving (Jackson, 2020). The program involved 50 university students consisting of 25 students from Walailak University and 25 students from the German Literature Study Program at Universitas Negeri Surabaya. The participants were selected based on their interest in intercultural communication and international academic collaboration.

The implementation was divided into three stages. The first stage involved intercultural understanding training focusing on introducing the concepts of intercultural competence, stereotypes, cultural awareness, and intercultural communication.

The second stage consisted of intercultural competence workshops focusing on Indonesian and Thai cultural diversity. Participants discussed traditions, communication styles, social norms, and contemporary cultural practices in both countries. According to Byram (2021), direct interaction and cultural exchange activities contribute significantly to the development of intercultural understanding and empathy.

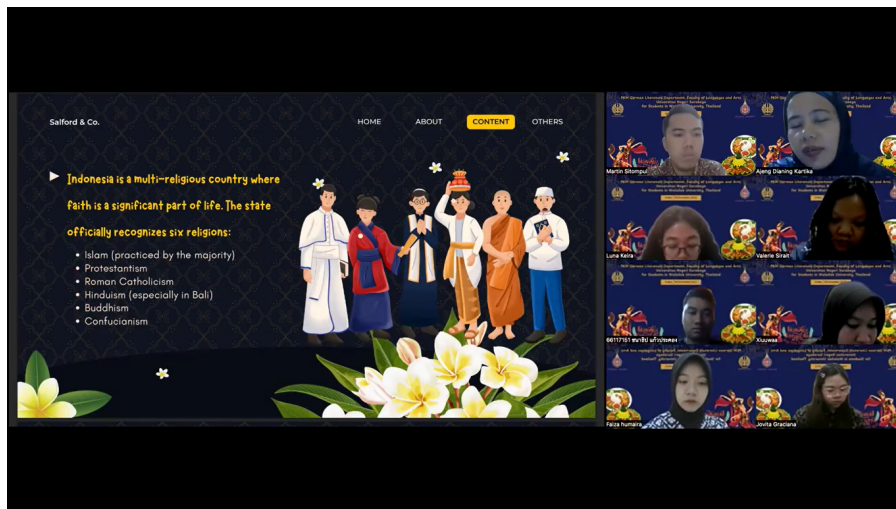


Figure 1. Documentation of Intercultural Workshops

The third stage involved Focus Group Discussions (FGD) addressing contemporary cultural issues in Asia and Europe, including globalization, digital culture, cultural identity, and the influence of popular culture among young generations. The discussions encouraged participants to critically reflect on cultural transformations occurring in global society.

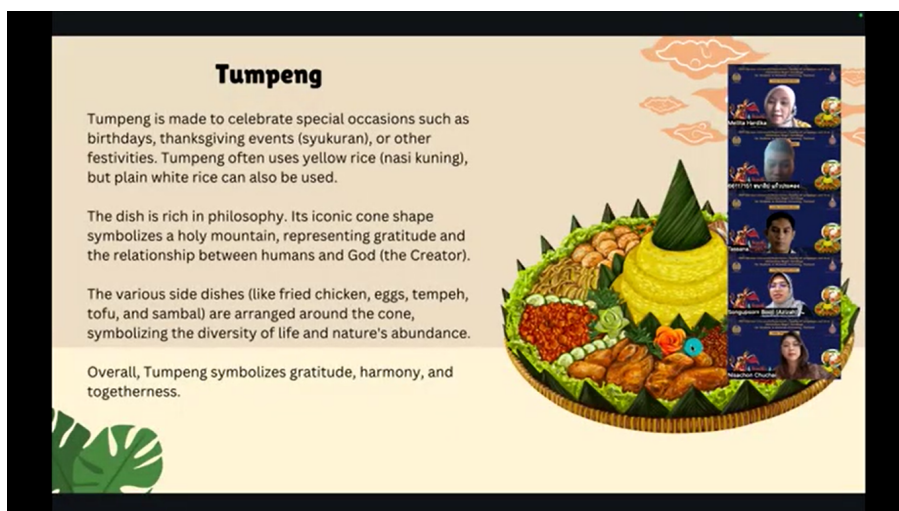


Figure 2. Documentation of FGD Session

To evaluate program effectiveness, pre-test and post-test assessments were conducted before and after the activities. The assessments measured participants' understanding of intercultural competence, cultural awareness, and intercultural communication skills. The data were analyzed descriptively by comparing participants' scores before and after the program implementation. Qualitative observations were also conducted to analyze participants' engagement and interaction patterns during the activities.

Table 1. List of Pre-Test and Post-Test

No	Question	Type	Answer Options / Scale	Purpose
1	How familiar are you with the concept of intercultural competence?	Likert Scale	1 = Not familiar at all – 5 = Very familiar	Measure prior knowledge
2	Have you ever interacted with people from cultures different from your own?	Multiple Choice	a. Never b. Rarely c. Sometimes d. Often e. Very often	Measure intercultural exposure
3	Which of the following best describes intercultural competence?	Multiple Choice	a. Ability to speak foreign languages only b. Ability to communicate effectively across cultures c. Traveling to other countries d. Learning traditional foods	Assess conceptual understanding
4	I feel comfortable communicating with people who have different cultural backgrounds.	Likert Scale	1 = Strongly disagree – 5 = Strongly agree	Measure intercultural confidence
5	When interacting with people from other cultures, misunderstandings may happen because of different communication styles.	Likert Scale	1 = Strongly disagree – 5 = Strongly agree	Assess awareness
6	Which factors may influence communication between people from different cultures? (Choose all that apply)	Multiple Response	Language, Values, Traditions, Nonverbal Communication, Religion, Social Norms	Assess knowledge
7	If someone behaves differently from your cultural expectations, what would you most likely do?	Multiple Choice	a. Judge immediately b. Ignore them c. Try to understand their perspective d. Avoid interaction	Measure intercultural attitude
8	How important do you think intercultural competence is for your future career?	Likert Scale	1 = Not important – 5 = Very important	Assess perceived relevance
9	Give one example of cultural differences between countries that may influence communication.	Short Answer	Open-ended	Assess reflection and prior knowledge
10	What do you expect to learn from this workshop?	Short Answer	Open-ended	Identify expectations

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The community engagement activities were successfully implemented with active participation from all participants. Students from Indonesia and Thailand demonstrated enthusiasm throughout the intercultural training sessions, workshops, and focus group discussions. The activities created opportunities for participants to engage directly in intercultural communication and collaborative learning.

The pre-test and post-test results indicated improvement in participants' intercultural understanding. Before participating in the program, several students demonstrated limited understanding regarding intercultural communication, stereotypes, and cultural adaptation. After the activities, participants showed better comprehension of cultural diversity and intercultural interaction strategies.

The workshop sessions focusing on Indonesian and Thai cultural diversity enabled participants to exchange perspectives regarding traditions, social values, communication patterns, and popular culture trends. Participants identified both similarities and differences between Indonesian and Thai cultural practices, contributing to broader intercultural awareness. The workshop sessions focusing on Indonesian and Thai cultural diversity enabled participants to engage in intensive intercultural exchanges regarding traditions, social values, communication patterns, lifestyles, and contemporary popular culture trends in both countries. During the sessions, Indonesian and Thai students shared their experiences and perspectives on various cultural practices, including traditional ceremonies, family values, religious influences, culinary traditions, educational environments, and social interaction patterns within their respective societies. The participants also discussed how cultural norms shape daily communication styles, particularly in terms of politeness, respect toward elders, collectivist values, and interpersonal relationships.

In addition, the workshop encouraged participants to critically examine the influence of globalization and digital media on youth culture in Indonesia and Thailand. Discussions highlighted the growing impact of Korean popular culture, social media trends, digital communication practices, and transnational entertainment on students' lifestyles and cultural identities. Through collaborative group discussions and intercultural dialogue, participants identified several similarities between Indonesian and Thai cultures, such as strong communal values, respect for social harmony, and the importance of family relationships. At the same time, they also recognized differences in communication styles, cultural expressions, educational traditions, and public social behaviors that reflect the uniqueness of each society.

The intercultural interaction created a reflective learning environment in which participants developed greater awareness of cultural diversity and intercultural sensitivity. By directly engaging with peers from different cultural backgrounds, students were encouraged to challenge stereotypes, appreciate cultural differences, and develop more open-minded perspectives toward multicultural societies. These activities significantly contributed to strengthening participants' intercultural awareness,

empathy, and communication skills, which are essential competencies in the context of global education and international collaboration.

The Focus Group Discussions discussing cultural developments in Asia and Europe encouraged critical reflection among participants. Students analyzed the impact of globalization and digital media on cultural identity and local traditions. According to Sorrells (2022), globalization creates intercultural interconnectedness while simultaneously influencing local cultural practices and identities.

Table 2. The program outcomes can be summarized in the following table:

Aspect	Before Program	After Program
Understanding of intercultural competence	Moderate	High
Awareness of cultural diversity	Moderate	High
Intercultural communication skills	Moderate	Improved
Participation in intercultural discussion	Limited	Active
Critical understanding of cultural issues	Limited	Improved

Discussions

The findings demonstrate that intercultural training and collaborative cultural discussions effectively improved participants' intercultural competence. The increase in post-test results indicates that intercultural learning activities can significantly enhance cultural awareness and communication skills among university students. These findings support Tran and Vu (2021), who argued that collaborative international programs contribute positively to students' intercultural sensitivity and global perspectives.

The participatory learning approach contributed significantly to the success of the program. Through collaborative discussions and cultural exchange sessions, participants developed mutual understanding and intercultural empathy. Zhou and Griffiths (2021) emphasized that intercultural dialogue encourages openness, critical awareness, and appreciation of cultural diversity.

The Focus Group Discussions concerning cultural developments in Asia and Europe encouraged participants to analyze globalization critically. Students recognized that globalization creates opportunities for intercultural communication while simultaneously posing challenges to local cultural preservation. Liu et al. (2021) explained that digital communication and globalization continuously reshape cultural interaction patterns among young generations worldwide.

Another important outcome of the program was the strengthening of academic collaboration between Universitas Negeri Surabaya and Walailak University. The collaborative activities established intercultural dialogue and international networking opportunities supporting future educational cooperation.

Despite the positive outcomes, several challenges were encountered during program implementation, particularly differences in communication styles and language adaptation among participants. However, these challenges became valuable learning

experiences that strengthened intercultural understanding and collaborative problem-solving abilities. Overall, the program successfully contributed to the implementation of SDGs 4 by promoting inclusive and quality education through intercultural learning experiences. UNESCO (2021) emphasized that quality education should foster global citizenship, intercultural understanding, and inclusive participation in multicultural societies.

CONCLUSION

This community engagement program successfully enhanced intercultural competence among Indonesian and Thai students through cross-cultural understanding activities. The combination of intercultural training, cultural exchange workshops, and focus group discussions effectively improved participants' cultural awareness, intercultural communication skills, and critical understanding of contemporary cultural issues in Asia and Europe.

The participatory and collaborative learning approach enabled students from Indonesia and Thailand to engage actively in intercultural dialogue and cultural reflection. The pre-test and post-test results demonstrated positive improvements in participants' understanding of intercultural competence and cultural diversity. In addition, the program strengthened academic collaboration between universities and promoted international intercultural engagement among students.

The findings indicate that intercultural learning activities can contribute significantly to the development of global competencies and multicultural awareness in higher education. Future community engagement programs are recommended to involve broader international participation and longer-term intercultural collaboration to maximize sustainable educational impact.

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