INTERCULTURAL APPROACH IN TEACHING INDONESIAN LANGUAGE TO MADAGASCAR STUDENTS: COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY LEARNERS

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Abstract
This study aims to explore the application of an intercultural approach in teaching the Indonesian language to students from Madagascar, with a comparative analysis between elementary school and university learners. The growing interest in learning Indonesian among Malagasy students, due to cultural and economic ties between Indonesia and Madagascar, presents an opportunity to examine how language acquisition can be enhanced through intercultural perspectives. Using a qualitative approach, this study uses interviews, classroom observations and document analysis to explore how Indonesian is taught in two educational contexts and how cross-cultural elements are integrated into the curriculum. The study compares different teaching methods used for elementary schools and more advanced learners at the university level, with a focus on cultural nuances, teaching strategies, and students` attitudes toward language and culture. Preliminary results suggest that while both groups benefited from the intercultural approach, the depth and complexity of intercultural content differed significantly between the two educational levels. Primary school students engage more with basic cultural concepts through interactive activities, while university students explore cultural themes more deeply through analytical discussions and educational materials. The study concluded that the intercultural approach not only enriches language learning but also promotes better cultural understanding, which is essential for improving communication skills in both contexts. This comparative study provides valuable insights into how to apply intercultural pedagogy to different age groups, offering recommendations for developing Indonesian language curriculum for Malagasy students.

Keywords: *Indonesian Language, Elementary school, Cultural Learning, Students*

INTRODUCTION

The study of foreign languages has long been recognized as an essential part of global education. However, in an increasingly interconnected world, language teaching cannot be limited to language proficiency alone (Yates & Clarke, 2010). A growing body of research highlights the importance of integrating cultural content into language learning to facilitate not only communication but also intercultural understanding (Tomalin & Stempleksi, 2020). This is particularly true when teaching languages such as Indonesian to learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. One such context is Madagascar, where interest in learning Indonesian has increased due to the historical, economic and diplomatic ties between the two countries. However, the way Indonesian is taught to Malagasy students, both in elementary school and at university, can have a significant impact on how students acquire the language and understand the broader cultural context in which they learn.

The idea of integrating culture into language teaching is not new, but it is an evolving educational approach. Traditionally, language learning has primarily focused on grammar, vocabulary and syntax, often isolating the language from the cultural context in which it is spoken (Saville-Troike, 2012). However, this approach is increasingly challenged by the recognition that language cannot be separated from culture. Intercultural language teaching integrates cultural awareness into the curriculum, helping students understand how language reflects and shapes cultural values, behaviours and social norms (Jandt, 2017). For Malagasy students learning Indonesian, this means not only learning words and phrases, but also understanding the cultural practices, traditions, and social customs that shape how the language is used.

Indonesia is a large archipelago with diverse cultural influences, including Malay, Javanese, Balinese, and indigenous languages (Hall, 1997). As such, learning Indonesian is not just about mastering a set of linguistic rules, but also about understanding a complex set of cultural values, traditions, and social norms (Deardorff, 2015). For Malagasy students, who may come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, understanding Indonesian culture is essential to meaningful language acquisition. Without this cultural context, students may have difficulty understanding the nuances of language use, such as differences in politeness, non-verbal communication, or the contextual meanings of words. This highlights the importance of an intercultural approach, which can bridge the gap between language and culture.

The Malagasy educational context provides a unique setting for considering how to apply an intercultural approach to the teaching of Indonesian. At the primary level, where students are just beginning to acquire foreign language skills, the focus is often on basic communication and vocabulary. However, incorporating cultural elements can make the learning process more engaging and relevant to young learners (Emynorane et al, 2024). Teachers can use activities such as storytelling, music and games to introduce students to Indonesian culture, helping them develop their language skills in a tangible and meaningful context (Kramsch, 1993). At the university level, students may have a more advanced understanding of the language but are also prepared to approach more complex cultural topics, such as Indonesian history, politics, religion and social dynamics (Lynch & Maclean, 2001). For university students, cultural content becomes an integral part of their learning experience, influencing a deeper understanding of language and its global significance.

Although the role of cultural content in language learning is widely recognized, its implementation varies significantly across educational contexts. In some contexts, cultural immersion is superficial and focuses on holidays, customs and cuisine without a deeper exploration of the cultural values that underpin these practices (Dewaele, 2016). In other cases, the cultural component may be well developed but may not be age-appropriate or linguistically accessible to students at different stages (Biermann, 2007). For example,

young learners may benefit more from experiential, interactive activities that introduce basic cultural elements, while older students may be able to handle more complex cultural discussions and analysis. This raises the question of how best to structure the curriculum to meet the specific needs of learners at different levels, especially when teaching a language as rich and diverse as Indonesian.

In the context of Madagascar, the challenge of effectively integrating cultural content into the school curriculum is further complicated by practical constraints. Many schools, especially primary schools, may have limited access to resources that can help integrate Indonesian culture into the classroom. Teachers may not have access to authentic materials, such as media, Indonesian literature, or even native speakers, which can make it difficult to create a truly engaging cultural learning environment (Emynorane et al, 2024). Additionally, there may be a lack of teacher training in intercultural communication, which is essential to guiding students through sensitive or complex cultural issues. This presents a significant challenge for educators who may not feel fully equipped to integrate cultural content in ways that enhance language learning and cultural understanding.

Despite these challenges, the potential benefits of an intercultural approach to language teaching are considerable. For Malagasy students, learning Indonesian is not only an academic activity but also an opportunity to gain a better understanding of Indonesia's cultural, historical and social diversity. This can help foster empathy, cultural sensitivity and a more global perspective in students (Hinkel, 1999). In the professional world, the ability to understand and communicate across cultures is increasingly valued. Whether in the world of business, diplomacy or international relations, the ability to manage cultural differences is an essential skill (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). Therefore, integrating cultural content into language learning programs for Malagasy students can contribute to their development as well-rounded and culturally competent individuals who are better prepared to succeed in an interconnected world.

This study aims to explore the role of intercultural approaches in teaching Indonesian to Malagasy students, focusing on comparing how cultural content is integrated in primary and secondary schools. By examining the approaches and challenges in teaching linguistic and cultural aspects of language, the study seeks to identify best practices and make recommendations for improving language teaching. Through interviews with teachers, classroom observations, and analysis of teaching materials, this study will provide valuable information on the effectiveness of integrating cultural elements into foreign language teaching, especially in the context of teaching Indonesian to Malagasy learners.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach to explore the effectiveness of intercultural teaching methods in teaching Indonesian to Malagasy students, focusing on both

elementary school and university students. The study aimed to examine the integration of cultural components in the language curriculum and its impact on learning. The study involved two groups of participants: (1) elementary school students learning Indonesian as a foreign language in Madagascar and (2) university students studying the language at a higher academic level. Both groups were selected from institutions offering Indonesian language courses.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and students from the selected institutions. These interviews focused on their experiences with intercultural teaching, how it was applied in the classroom, and its effectiveness in improving language and cultural understanding. Classroom observations were also used to investigate language lessons in both elementary and university setting to understand how intercultural elements are integrated into the teaching process. These observations focused on teaching strategies, interaction patterns, and the level of cultural content used in lessons. Documents such as teaching materials, lesson plans, and curriculum documents from both educational settings were analyzed to examine the presence and depth of intercultural content in educational resources.

Data collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researchers identified key themes related to the implementation of intercultural teaching methods, teaching strategies, student engagement, and perceived benefits of integrating cultural elements into language learning. In addition, the study compared the results of the two educational levels to identify differences and similarities in how students applied and received intercultural teaching methods. This comparison may highlight age-appropriate educational strategies to promote cultural and language acquisition.

RESULTS

The results of this study demonstrate significant differences in the way intercultural approaches to Indonesian language teaching are implemented and received by Malagasy students at different levels of education.

At the elementary level, the focus is primarily on introducing basic cultural concepts. Teaching strategies emphasize engaging and practical methods, such as storytelling, games, songs, and visual materials that highlight simple elements of Indonesian culture, such as traditional clothing, cuisine, and festivals. Teachers reported that these activities not only help students develop basic language skills but also make them more receptive to the language learning process. Students' enthusiasm for Indonesian culture is evident in their participation in these interactive activities. Students expressed greater enjoyment and interest in learning Indonesian when cultural elements were integrated, as they helped them contextualize the language, making it more meaningful and relevant.

At the university level, students were exposed to more complex and nuanced cultural content. Topics included Indonesian history, political systems, traditions, and social norms. Teaching methods at this level focused more on analytical discussions, research articles, and in-depth reading of Indonesian literature and academic texts. university students demonstrated a deeper understanding of the complexities of Indonesian culture and the connection between language and society. They can connect their language skills to real-world issues, discussing how language reflects cultural identity and social change in Indonesia.

Interviews with university students revealed a growing appreciation for the multicultural approach, with many expressing that learning about Indonesian culture not only improved their language proficiency but also prepared them for future career opportunities, particularly in diplomacy, international relations and business.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study highlight the importance of an intercultural approach in foreign language education, especially in the context of teaching Indonesian language to Malagasy students. By examining the experiences of both elementary school and university learners, this study provides valuable insights into the adaptability and impact of such teaching strategies at different levels of learning.

Adapting to Developmental Stages

One of the key points is the importance of adapting teaching methods to the developmental stage of the learner. At the elementary level, a focus on interactive and culturally engaging activities is essential to generate enthusiasm and develop basic language skills. Young learners benefit from a more intuitive and experiential approach, which makes language acquisition more enjoyable and less abstract (Kellermann & Byram, 2021). For instance, activities such as role-playing traditional Indonesian holidays or learning simple songs can help students develop early connections with the language and culture.

In contrast, university students benefit from a more academic approach to intercultural education. The ability to engage with abstract concepts allows them to explore deeper historical and cultural questions. The use of more complex resources such as academic articles, documentaries, and debates corresponds to their advanced cognitive abilities and greater interest in the historical and sociopolitical context of Indonesia (Alptekin, 2020). This suggests that the intercultural approach must be flexible and designed to meet the cognitive and emotional needs of learners at different stages.

The role of Cultural Content in Language Learning

The study also highlighted that integrating cultural content into language lessons improves students' language and cultural skills. At both levels, students found that understanding cultural context helped them use the language more effectively because they were able to understand the idioms, gestures, and social norms embedded in the language. For example, understanding Indonesian family structures or formal/informal languages helped students grasp the subtleties of communication that might have been overlooked in purely language instruction. In addition, both groups reported that the cultural elements of the courses sparked greater curiosity about Indonesia, leading to further independent study, such as watching Indonesian films or reading books in Indonesian. This is aligned with the idea that intercultural instruction can not only improve language skills but also stimulate intrinsic motivation to learn, where students seek deeper understanding beyond the classroom (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Cultural content plays an important role in language learning because it provides learners with the context they need to understand how language works in real-world situations. Language is more than just a set of grammar rules and vocabulary; it is deeply embedded in the values, norms, and traditions of the people who speak it (Liu, 2015). Without cultural context, learners may have difficulty using language appropriately in different social contexts because they do not understand the social conventions, idioms, and contextual meanings necessary for effective communication. Cultural content also helps improve language retention by making learning more meaningful (Peirce, 2017). When learners associate a language with cultural practices, traditions, or tangible real-world situations, they are more likely to remember and internalize that language. This connection creates an emotional and intellectual investment in learning, making it easier for students to remember vocabulary and structures (Nunan, 2003; Witte & Harden, 2020). In addition, students are more likely to interact with the language outside the classroom, deepening their understanding through authentic media such as movies, music, or social interactions with native speakers.

Integrating cultural content also helps learners develop intercultural skills, which are essential in today's globalized world. By interacting with diverse cultures through the language they learn, learners develop empathy, sensitivity, and the ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries (Martinsen, 2019). Understanding cultural nuances such as the importance of politeness in Indonesian through Bahasa Halus (polite language) and Bahasa Kasar (rough language) helps students grasp the subtleties of communication that go beyond simple translation. This cultural awareness enables learners to avoid misunderstandings and ensure that their communication is not only grammatically correct but also culturally appropriate (Chavez, 2009). In this way, language learning becomes a

tool to bridge cultural gaps and promote meaningful and respectful interactions between people from diverse backgrounds.

Finally, the role of cultural content extends beyond the classroom, as it shapes students' perceptions of language and its speakers. When cultural lessons are integrated into language instruction, students are encouraged to view language as a living, evolving entity, shaped by the people who use it (Byram, 1997; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008). This perspective often sparks an interest in exploring more about the culture and history associated with the language, leading to a more holistic approach to learning. Through this process, students not only acquire a new language, but also develop a broader worldview that enhances their ability to navigate a multicultural and interconnected world.

Educational and Professional Implications

The benefits of an intercultural approach are not limited to language outcomes. This study shows that students' cultural sensitivity and awareness of global issues are enhanced by the integration of cultural education. In particular, university students note how this knowledge applies to their future careers, particularly in international relations, business or diplomacy. Understanding the culture of native speakers of the language is essential to effective communication, and the study highlights that a program designed with an emphasis on intercultural competence can better prepare students for these professional contexts (Paige et al, 2003).

The ability to understand and manage different cultural norms is an important asset in today's globalized workplace. As businesses and institutions increasingly operate on an international scale, intercultural competence has become as important as language proficiency (Sercu, 2005). For students learning Indonesian, exposure to the cultural context in which the language is used, whether through an understanding of Indonesian business etiquette, politics, or communication styles, prepares them for professional interactions in a multinational setting. Knowing how to address someone formally in Indonesian or understanding the nuances of business in a culture that values collaboration can be a huge advantage in the workplace. As a result, the professional application of language learning becomes clear, language skills are not just about translation or basic communication, but also about understanding the cultural frameworks that underlie these interactions, making learners more marketable in international careers (Swan, 2001).

The broader educational and career benefits of an intercultural approach also include the promotion of global citizenship. Students who learn about other cultures through language instruction often develop a more global perspective, recognizing the interdependence of different cultures and societies. This improved worldview can lead to greater social responsibility and a commitment to promoting positive intercultural relationships (Baker, 2011). In the professional field, this global mindset allows students to approach international challenges with a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives,

ultimately contributing to more effective problem-solving and collaboration in a cross-border context. As global issues such as climate change, public health and migration increasingly require international collaboration, the ability to understand and communicate across cultures will remain an essential skill (Tan, 2007).

Challenges and Areas for Improvement

While the findings indicate positive results, the study also identified a number of challenges. Teachers reported that at the elementary level, it was difficult to balance the introduction of cultural elements with basic language instruction, especially with limited time. Similarly, at the tertiary level, the depth of content sometimes overwhelmed students, leading to a need for more manageable assignments and scaffolding of complex cultural topics.

Another challenge lies in teachers' ability to effectively communicate cultural content in a way that is both meaningful and engaging. Teachers may lack the training or confidence to integrate cross-cultural elements into lessons in ways that go beyond superficial discussions (Bennet, 2004). Although many language teachers are experts in teaching grammar and vocabulary, they do not always have the experience or skills to address complex cultural topics such as history, politics, or social norms. Lack of adequate professional development in intercultural communication and teaching strategies can make it difficult for teachers to address cultural differences sensitively and accurately (Tan, 2007). More structured training for teachers on how to incorporate intercultural pedagogy effectively could help address these challenges.

The next challenge is the potential cultural biases in the materials used to teach the language. Textbooks, media, and other educational resources often present a limited or stereotyped view of the target culture, which can mislead students and prevent them from understanding the full cultural context of the language (Kramsch, 2002). For example, textbooks that primarily focus on large cities may ignore rural areas or minority groups in Indonesia, presenting a one-sided view of culture. This can prevent students from gaining a comprehensive understanding of the cultural diversity of the Indonesian-speaking world. Additionally, students may internalize these overly simplified or idealized representations of culture, leading to misunderstandings when faced with real-life interactions with speakers from different regions or backgrounds (Bennet, 2004). To address this challenge, it is important for educators to use a variety of authentic materials and integrate diverse perspectives that reflect the complexity of the culture.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that an intercultural approach to teaching Indonesian significantly improves Malagasy students' language and culture learning. However, the effectiveness of this approach differs between elementary school and university levels. At

the elementary school level, the focus is primarily on introducing basic cultural concepts through interactive activities such as games, songs, and simple stories, making learning engaging and accessible. In contrast, university students address more complex cultural issues, such as Indonesian history, traditions, and social norms, through analytical discussions, readings, and research projects.

Both groups benefit from integrating cultural content into language instruction, as it contextualizes language use and promotes a deeper understanding of the cultural environment in which the language is spoken. The study also highlights the importance of adapting teaching methods to the developmental stage of the learners. Younger learners, who have less cognitive ability to grasp abstract concepts, respond better to concrete, interactive approaches, while older learners appreciate a more critical exploration of cultural topics.

The study further concludes that intercultural pedagogy not only improves language skills but also contributes to cultural empathy and sensitivity, which are essential for effective communication in a globalized world. This approach creates a more holistic learning experience, making language acquisition more meaningful by connecting it to real-life cultural contexts.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the results, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the teaching of Indonesian language to Malagasy students: First, language curriculum for both elementary school and university levels should incorporate more intercultural components. At the elementary level, this could involve incorporating more visual and interactive cultural materials, such as videos, cultural exchange activities, and simple discussions of Indonesian customs and traditions. At the university level, more advanced topics such as Indonesian politics, philosophy, and socio-cultural issues should be included to encourage critical thinking. Second, teachers must receive specialized training in teaching methods and intercultural communication. This training will equip educators with the skills needed to effectively integrate cultural content into lessons and adapt their teaching strategies to the needs of different age groups. In addition, teachers must be trained to foster an inclusive classroom environment that values cultural diversity. Third, encouraging collaborative learning projects involving students from both countries can foster direct cultural exchange and promote language practice in authentic contexts. These could be online exchange activities, joint cultural events or collaborative research on topics relevant to both countries. Forth, to enhance student engagement, it is important to use a variety of teaching materials that reflect Indonesia's rich cultural heritage. This could involve using Indonesian literature, music, films and current affairs in the curriculum. Students should also be encouraged to participate in cultural activities such as Indonesian cooking classes, dance classes or language immersion programs. Last, for further research to explore the

long-term impact of intercultural approaches on students' language acquisition and cultural competence, especially as they progress into professional or academic fields where language skills and cultural knowledge are essential. A longitudinal study examining the progress of students who receive intercultural language training could provide further insights into the long-term benefits of this approach.

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