

Pedagogical Approaches For Intercultural Awareness: A Qualitative Inquiry Into EFL Teaching Practice In Bima

Hadijah¹, Syarifuddin Dollah², Munir²

¹Universitas Muhammadiyah Bima, Indonesia

²Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia

*Correspondence: Syafurruddindollah@unm.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Intercultural awareness is becoming important in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, especially students will interact with people from different cultural backgrounds in the future. However, This gap can be understood through the lens of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) proposed by Michael Byram, which emphasizes not only linguistic skills but also attitudes, knowledge, and skills for interpreting and relating across cultures. This study investigates how five EFL teachers in Bima integrate cultural elements into their lessons and challenges in their teaching. A qualitative approach was used, involving classroom observations, interviews, and an analysis of lesson documents. The findings show that teachers do include cultural ideas in their teaching, but these moments are usually brief and not fully developed. Teachers often begin with local cultural to help students understand the cultures from other countries, and they adjust their teaching based on students' reactions. Despite their efforts, teachers face several difficulties, such as students' limited exposure to global cultures, strict curriculum requirements, sensitive cultural issues, and a lack of training and appropriate materials. Overall, the study shows that intercultural teaching in Bima is present but it does not consistent or deeply developed. More support, training, and resources are needed to help teachers promote intercultural awareness more effectively.

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1. Introduction

Intercultural awareness has become an increasingly important part of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, especially as English continues to function as a global language used by people from many cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds. However, a major problem is that many EFL classrooms still focus primarily on grammar, vocabulary, and test-oriented outcomes, with limited integration of cultural understanding. As a result, learners may develop linguistic competence but lack the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultures, leading to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and ineffective communication in real-life international contexts. (Yusri & Andriyanti, 2025). Today, learning a foreign language involves more than memorizing grammar rules, vocabulary items, or sentence structures. It also requires understanding the cultural values, communication styles, beliefs, and social meanings that shape how language is used in real-life situations (Eragamreddy, 2024). These cultural aspects influence how people express politeness, show respect, deliver opinions, disagree politely, or interpret messages in ways that differ across societies (Kiyama et al., 2012). Because of this, EFL teachers are increasingly expected to help learners not only use English accurately but also communicate appropriately across cultures. Teachers play a central role in guiding students to recognize cultural differences, develop open-minded attitudes, avoid stereotypes, appreciate diversity, and communicate respectfully with people from various cultural backgrounds (Markey et al., 2021).

Previous research has shown strong evidence that intercultural awareness contributes positively to students' communication skills and personal development (Roza et al., 2024). Studies in international education contexts have found that students who receive intercultural instruction tend to show greater confidence when interacting with people from different countries, stronger empathy, and improved ability to negotiate cultural differences. In Asian contexts, including Indonesia, researchers emphasize that integrating cultural topics into EFL lessons helps learners understand both their own cultural identities and the cultural practices associated with English-speaking communities. This integration

encourages students to reflect on their local values while learning to appreciate alternative worldviews, creating a more holistic approach to language learning that goes beyond linguistic competence (Coyle, 2015).

Despite these positive developments, current research in Indonesia still shows several important limitations. Many existing studies focus mainly on teachers' beliefs, textbook content, or curriculum. While these studies are useful for understanding the broader context, they do not provide detailed descriptions of what actually happens in classrooms. As a result, there is limited knowledge about how intercultural awareness is taught through classroom activities such as group work, discussions, material adaptation, role-plays, or interactions between teachers and students. The gap between what teachers say they do and what they actually do in practice remains unclear.

Another notable limitation is the geographical concentration of previous studies. Much of the existing Indonesian research has been conducted in well-developed regions such as Java and Bali, where schools often have better resources, more training opportunities, and easier access to updated teaching materials (Bilgiler Eđitimi Arařtırmaları Dergisi et al., 2020). However, eastern regions of Indonesia including Bima have received very little attention in intercultural education research. This lack of research attention is problematic because schools in eastern Indonesia may face different challenges, such as limited resources, fewer professional development opportunities, and more diverse linguistic and cultural environments (Marcellino, 2015). These conditions might influence how teachers approach intercultural awareness in ways that have not yet been documented. Understanding these differences is essential for building a more inclusive picture of Indonesia's EFL teaching practices.

Considering these gaps, there is a clear need for research that investigates intercultural teaching practices directly within the classroom. To address these issues, the present study aims to explore how EFL teachers in Bima promote intercultural awareness through their day-to-day teaching practices. The study focuses on how teachers plan their lessons, select or modify learning materials, integrate cultural content into language activities, facilitate classroom discussions, and respond to cultural issues that arise during instruction. By examining what teachers actually do rather than relying solely on what they claim to believe this study provides a more realistic and detailed understanding of intercultural language teaching in an under-researched region of Indonesia.

2. Methodology

This study used a qualitative research design to explore how EFL teachers in Bima integrate intercultural awareness into their classroom practices. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of real teaching situations, teacher decision-making, and classroom interactions that cannot be fully captured through surveys or quantitative methods. This approach is appropriate for examining complex social and pedagogical processes, especially those related to culture, meaning-making, and teacher student interaction (Creswell, 2017).

The research was conducted in SMAN 1 Madapangga and SMAN I Woha in Bima West Nusa Tenggara, a region in eastern Indonesia characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity. The setting was selected to address the lack of research in underrepresented areas and to gain insights into how teachers work with local sociocultural conditions while incorporating intercultural learning. Participants included five EFL teachers who had at least three years of teaching experience and were actively involved in planning and delivering English lessons. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were knowledgeable and experienced in classroom teaching, allowing the researcher to gather rich and relevant information (Subedi, 2021).

Three key instruments were used to collect data: classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Classroom observations were conducted to capture teachers' actual practices, including how they introduced cultural topics, structured classroom activities, interacted with students, and responded to cultural discussions or issues. An observation checklist and field notes were used to ensure consistency in data recording. Semi-structured interviews were conducted after the observations to explore teachers' perspectives, rationales, and reflections on their own teaching decisions. Interviews allowed the researcher to clarify aspects that were not visible during classroom observations. Document analysis included reviewing lesson plans, teaching materials, textbooks, and teacher-created resources to identify how intercultural elements were integrated into instructional materials.

Data were collected over a period of four weeks to ensure adequate time for observing teaching routines and obtaining detailed insights from participants. All data from observations, interviews, and documents were transcribed and organized for analysis. The thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the data, following the steps proposed by (Byrne, 2021): familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing and refining themes, and

producing the final analysis. This method allowed the researcher to identify patterns across the data regarding how teachers plan and implement intercultural awareness in their EFL classrooms.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed: triangulation of data sources (observations, interviews, documents), member checking with participants to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations, and maintaining a detailed audit trail of analytical decisions. These steps helped enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study.

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their voluntary participation was secured through informed consent. They were assured that their identities, as well as the names of their schools, would remain confidential. All collected data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

3. Results and Discussion

Analysis of classroom observations, interviews with five EFL teachers, and teaching documents resulted in four major themes describing how intercultural awareness is implemented in Bima's EFL classrooms. The themes present not only teachers' practices but also the reasoning behind their decisions, the challenges they face, and the strategies they use to respond to real classroom dynamics.

3.1 Selective and Surface-Level Integration of Cultural Content

Across all classrooms, cultural content appeared in short, intentional moments but rarely became a sustained part of the lesson. Teachers regularly used cultural comparisons, but these were often inserted briefly at the beginning or end of the lesson. For example, in one observation, a teacher began a lesson on descriptive text by comparing Indonesian traditional clothing with Japanese kimono and British formal dress. Students reacted positively, but after a few comments, the teacher moved directly into linguistic exercises. This pattern was common across all observed lessons.

During interviews, teachers revealed why this happens:

Data 1

"To be honest, I always try to introduce cultural aspects, but I cannot explore them much because I must follow the time allocation. If I continue too long, I won't finish the main material." (Data 1-Teacher N)

"I think culture is important, but the textbook only gives short cultural notes. If I want to add more, I must search by myself, and sometimes I am not confident about the accuracy." (Data-Teacher M)

Teachers also expressed concern about their own limited intercultural knowledge:

"I don't want to give wrong information. So I limit myself to the things I know for sure, like simple differences in greetings or daily habits." (Data-Teacher A)

First, the interviews indicate that time constraints strongly shape teachers' decisions. Teachers feel pressure to complete the required curriculum within a limited class period, which forces them to prioritize grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension activities. Cultural discussions, which often require reflection and elaboration, are viewed as extra rather than integral parts of the lesson. This explains why cultural elements usually appear only at the beginning of a lesson as a short introduction, or at the end as a concluding remark. Such time-related concerns reveal that cultural learning is not yet positioned as a central learning goal within classroom practice. Teachers' reliance on textbooks with minimal cultural content further reinforces this pattern. The textbooks available to them include only small cultural notes often brief sidebars or simple illustrations without offering deeper explanations or activities designed to promote cross-cultural reflection. As a result, teachers often feel they must independently search for supplemental cultural information, a task that many find difficult due to concerns about the accuracy of external sources. This situation reflects limited institutional support and inadequate professional development related to intercultural pedagogy.

Second, the interviews highlight teachers' concerns about their own limited cultural knowledge, which influences how they design and deliver classroom instruction. Many teachers fear providing inaccurate or misleading information about foreign cultures, which makes them hesitant to explore deeper cultural issues such as values, beliefs, and social norms. Instead, they prefer to discuss cultural topics they feel confident about, usually simple differences in greetings, daily routines, or social etiquette. This tendency reveals a gap between personal awareness and pedagogical competence: although teachers acknowledge the importance of intercultural learning, they lack practical guidance on how to

systematically incorporate it into lessons. Additionally, teachers express concern about balancing cultural exploration with linguistic objectives. They worry that spending too much time on cultural discussions may distract from core language targets, reflecting a common tension in EFL instruction. These interconnected challenges time pressure, curriculum demands, textbook limitations, teacher confidence issues, and minimal training create a cycle in which cultural integration remains present but underdeveloped. As a result, intercultural content is incorporated intentionally but not deeply, producing lessons that include culture only in brief, predictable, and surface-level ways.

3.2 Use of Local Culture as a Strategic Entry Point

One of the strongest findings is that teachers rely heavily on local cultural practices as a foundation for introducing global cultural ideas. This strategy was evident across nearly all observed lessons and was repeatedly emphasized in interviews. Teachers believed that grounding intercultural content in familiar experiences makes it easier for students to understand unfamiliar global cultures:

Data 2

“Students understand faster when I start from something they already know. If I directly mention a foreign custom, the class becomes silent.” (Data 4-Teacher H)

“Bima has rich traditions. I use them as examples. Then I show how other cultures may do the same thing differently.” (Data 5-Teacher L)

During a lesson on “politeness,” a teacher asked:

“How do we show respect to elders in Bima? Do British people do it the same way?”

Students actively compared bowing slightly in Bima to handshakes or verbal greetings in Western countries. These discussions were more engaged compared to lessons that attempted to introduce foreign culture without linking it to local reality.

These interview insights and classroom observations reveal a deeper pattern in how teachers strategically position local culture as a foundation for intercultural learning. By anchoring lessons in familiar cultural references, teachers reduce students' initial hesitation and cognitive load, allowing them to approach unfamiliar global concepts with more confidence. This approach not only increases student engagement but also helps teachers manage potential misunderstandings that may arise when discussing foreign cultural practices. Teachers seem to recognize that students' comprehension depends heavily on the relevance of examples used, which is why local traditions such as Maja Labo Dahu, wedding customs, and forms of greeting frequently appear in their lessons. These culturally grounded examples function as scaffolding, enabling students to draw comparisons between what they already understand and what is new to them. Teachers reported that this method creates a smoother transition from local to global perspectives, helping students develop intercultural awareness without feeling overwhelmed or disconnected from the subject matter.

Moreover, the consistent use of local culture suggests that teachers view intercultural learning as a process that must begin with a strong sense of cultural identity. By encouraging students to reflect on their own cultural norms before evaluating those of others, teachers help students develop critical self-awareness a key component of intercultural competence. This approach aligns with sociocultural theories of learning, which emphasize that new knowledge is more easily constructed when linked to learners' prior experiences. However, the reliance on local culture also reflects a practical response to the challenges teachers face, such as limited access to global cultural materials or concerns about discussing sensitive foreign practices. Using familiar cultural content reduces the risk of misunderstanding or controversy, making it a safe yet effective teaching strategy. At the same time, it highlights a broader structural issue: the lack of comprehensive intercultural resources pushes teachers to rely on what they know best their own cultural background. As a result, although this strategy successfully engages students, it may limit the breadth of cultural exposure unless supported by richer materials and systematic guidance.

3.3 Teachers' Adaptive and On-the-Spot Decision-Making

Another major theme is how teachers constantly adjust their strategies during the lesson to keep students engaged and maintain clarity. During observations, teachers were seen shifting instructional techniques depending on student reactions. If students became confused, teachers slowed down, used analogies, switched to Indonesian, or used visuals. When students appeared curious, teachers extended the cultural discussion even if it was not in the lesson plan.

Teachers described this adaptability as essential:

Data 3

"Intercultural topics can be unpredictable. Sometimes students ask interesting questions, but sometimes they look completely lost. I have to adjust quickly." (Teacher A)

"I cannot prepare everything in advance. When students struggle, I change the example or give a simpler explanation." (Teacher N)

One teacher shared a detailed example of adapting a lesson:

Data 4

"When I taught about festivals, the students didn't understand Halloween. So I compared it with our local children's traditions. Only then they understood. After that, they began asking their own questions." (Teacher H)

Another teacher explained how he uses probing questions to encourage reflection:

Data 5

"I ask questions like: 'Do we have similar traditions here?' or 'How would you react if someone from another culture did this?' These questions help students think deeper." (Teacher L)

These examples show that teachers' flexibility in the classroom is not a coincidence but a necessary part of their teaching. Intercultural topics often bring ideas that students have never seen or heard before, so teachers must pay close attention to how students react. When students look unsure or confused, teachers slow the pace, give clearer examples, or connect the lesson to something familiar from daily life. This helps students follow the lesson without feeling lost. Teachers also make quick changes when they notice that an activity is not working as planned. For example, if a cultural story seems too difficult, they replace it with a simpler one or explain it using local traditions. These quick adjustments show that intercultural teaching depends heavily on how well teachers can read the classroom situation and respond in the moment.

At the same time, teachers try to keep students interested by using questions, comparisons, and short discussions. When students become curious, teachers allow the conversation to grow, even if it was not in the lesson plan. This shows that teachers are open to student input and willing to follow the direction of the discussion. However, this also shows that they often work without clear guidelines or structured materials for teaching culture. Because of this, teachers rely mostly on their own judgment and experience. While this flexible approach helps them manage the class, it also means that intercultural teaching depends more on individual creativity than on a consistent school-wide strategy. Teachers understand the value of cultural learning, but without stronger support or materials, they must depend on spontaneous decisions to keep lessons meaningful and engaging.

3.4 Barriers Limiting Deep Intercultural Engagement

Despite teachers' commitment to promoting intercultural awareness, several challenges consistently limited how deeply they could explore cultural topics in their classrooms. Observations and interviews showed that one major issue was students' limited exposure to global cultures. When teachers introduced unfamiliar traditions, many students became quiet or unsure, making it difficult to sustain meaningful discussion. As Teacher M explained,

Data 6

"Many students have never seen or heard about some foreign traditions, so I must explain from zero."

Because of this, teachers often spent more time giving basic background information instead of guiding students toward deeper cultural understanding or analysis.

Time pressure and curriculum demands also played a significant role. Teachers frequently reported that they had to prioritize grammar, vocabulary, and reading skills especially in preparation for exams leaving little room to explore intercultural topics. Teacher N stated, "The curriculum pushes us to cover many skills. Culture often becomes the last priority even though I know it's important." This concern was echoed by Teacher L, who said, "If I spend too long on cultural discussion, I cannot finish the target." These comments show that teachers view cultural learning as important but difficult to fit into an already crowded schedule.

Another challenge was the sensitivity of certain cultural and religious topics. Teachers worried that discussing issues such as dating customs, religious practices, or social norms could lead to misunderstandings or discomfort among students. As Teacher H noted, "Some cultural issues are sensitive, like religion or dating customs. I avoid going too deep to prevent misinterpretation." As a result, teachers tended to keep cultural discussions safe and superficial to avoid potential conflict.

A further barrier was the lack of training and suitable teaching materials. Many teachers shared that professional development workshops rarely address intercultural teaching. According to Teacher A, "In workshops, they talk about the curriculum, not intercultural teaching. So I learn by myself." This lack of training was worsened by the limited cultural content in the textbooks they used. Teacher M explained, "The book only gives simple cultural notes. To go deeper, I must find my own materials, and that takes time." Without proper guidance or resources, teachers relied on their own efforts, which were often restricted by time and confidence. These challenges significantly influence how intercultural awareness is taught in practice. Teachers are willing and motivated, but limited student background knowledge, strict curriculum demands, sensitive cultural issues, and insufficient training and materials prevent cultural learning from being developed in a deeper and more consistent way.

3.5 Discussion

The findings of this study show that intercultural awareness in Bima's EFL classrooms is shaped by a combination of structural, pedagogical, and personal factors. Although teachers clearly value the role of intercultural learning, their classroom practices remain limited by the realities they face. This is consistent with earlier research in Indonesia and other Asian contexts, which found that teachers often support intercultural teaching in principle but struggle to implement it fully (Azzahrah et al., 2025). In this study, teachers were willing to introduce cultural comparisons, yet these moments tended to be short and infrequent. This reflects (Birjandi & Khatib, 2018) argument that intercultural competence cannot develop meaningfully when culture is presented only in isolated fragments rather than through sustained engagement.

The first theme selective and surface-level integration of cultural content highlights that cultural topics were mostly presented as brief add-ons rather than core components of the lesson. Teachers explained that this happened because of time pressure, curriculum demands, and limited cultural content in textbooks. This echoes (Slamet et al., 2025), who found that Indonesian teachers often prioritize linguistic accuracy over cultural exploration due to examination requirements. (Martínez-Prieto & Lindahl, 2020) similarly observed that in many EFL contexts, teachers see culture as something extra that can be included only when time allows. The concern expressed by Teacher C about accuracy also reflects a wider issue found in (Massar, 2022) study: teachers often feel unprepared to teach culture because they lack training and resources. These factors together create a condition where cultural content is consistently present, yet not deep enough to foster meaningful intercultural reflection.

The second theme using local culture as a strategic entry point provides insight into how teachers try to overcome these limitations. The teachers in this study saw local cultural practices, such as greeting traditions or Maja Labo Dahu, as effective starting points for explaining unfamiliar global concepts. This aligns with sociocultural theories of learning that emphasize the importance of connecting new material to learners' prior experiences. (Novera, 2004) also found that Indonesian students feel more confident discussing cultural topics when they begin with familiar local examples. Teachers' use of local culture mirrors (Skrefsrud, 2020) argument that cultural identity can serve as a bridge toward intercultural understanding. However, while this approach helps students participate more actively, it also shows that teachers rely heavily on what they already know, which may limit students' exposure to diverse global perspectives. Without sufficient materials, teachers may unintentionally reinforce local viewpoints without fully expanding students' intercultural horizons.

The third theme teachers' adaptive and on-the-spot decision-making showed how teachers manage the unpredictable nature of intercultural topics. Many students are unfamiliar with global cultural practices, so teachers must adjust instruction quickly when confusion appears. These observations are consistent (Abdulhussein & Albuimedee, 2024) view that intercultural communication involves negotiating meaning in real time, and teachers need to be flexible in guiding these interactions. The way teachers shifted explanations, used analogies, or simplified examples demonstrates a strong awareness of classroom dynamics. (Vromans et al., 2023) similarly reported that intercultural learning depends on how teachers respond to student reactions rather than on rigid lesson plans. However, this study also shows that such adaptability often compensates for the absence of clear guidelines or ready to use materials. Without structured support, teachers depend heavily on intuition, which can result in inconsistent intercultural experiences across classrooms.

The fourth theme barriers limiting deep intercultural engagement further explains why teachers' efforts remain constrained. The limited global exposure among students, combined with a strong exam oriented culture, made it difficult to create space for deeper intercultural discussions. This challenge is consistent with findings by (Saddhono, 2015), who noted that Indonesian students often lack the background knowledge needed to analyze cultural differences beyond the surface level. In addition, teachers' concerns about sensitive topics such as religion or dating customs reflect culturally grounded caution, which is common in contexts where certain subjects carry social or moral weight. (Nakaya, 2018) also found that Indonesian teachers sometimes avoid deeper cultural issues to prevent misunderstanding or conflict. The lack of training and minimal textbook support, as repeatedly stated by teachers in this study, reinforces (Hasnah et al., 2024) conclusion that intercultural content in Indonesian learning materials tends to be brief, factual, and not designed to promote reflection.

Taken together, these findings highlight a key insight: teachers in Bima have the motivation but lack the structural support to teach intercultural awareness effectively. The challenges they face limited resources, exam pressure, sensitivity issues, and the absence of intercultural training mirror broader patterns in Indonesian EFL education. However, this study adds new evidence from an under-researched region, showing how these national challenges interact with local cultural realities. The strategic use of local culture demonstrates teachers' creativity and commitment, while the reliance on improvisation shows that intercultural teaching is happening, but not yet in a systematic or sustainable way.

Overall, the results of this study support existing research while providing deeper understanding of intercultural teaching in a rural Indonesian context. The findings highlight the need for stronger institutional support, more inclusive curriculum design, and practical teacher training that equips educators to handle global cultural topics with confidence. Without such efforts, intercultural awareness will continue to appear in classrooms, but mostly in short, surface-level interactions rather than in deep, transformative learning experiences.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to understand how EFL teachers in Bima introduce intercultural awareness in their classrooms and what challenges they face in doing so. The findings show that the teachers genuinely value the role of intercultural learning, but their efforts are often limited by the realities of their teaching context. Cultural content appears in lessons, yet it usually takes the form of short explanations or simple comparisons rather than deeper, ongoing discussions. Teachers rely heavily on local traditions to help students understand global cultural ideas, and this approach often helps students feel more comfortable and engaged. However, it also shows that teachers must depend on what they already know because they do not have access to richer intercultural materials.

The study also reveals that teachers must constantly adjust their strategies during lessons. They respond to students' confusion by simplifying explanations, switching languages, or connecting the topic to familiar experiences. This flexibility is one of their strengths, but it also highlights the lack of clear guidance or training for teaching culture in a more structured way. Several challenges make deeper intercultural learning difficult, including students' limited exposure to global cultures, pressure to complete curriculum targets, sensitivity around certain cultural topics, and the lack of suitable teaching resources.

Overall, the study suggests that intercultural awareness in Bima's EFL classrooms is present but not yet fully developed. Teachers show strong motivation, but they need better support from the curriculum, more accessible intercultural materials, and training that helps them feel confident in addressing global cultural issues. With stronger institutional support and clearer teaching guidance, intercultural learning could become a more meaningful and consistent part of EFL education in this context. The results highlight an important opportunity for schools, policymakers, and teacher education programs to work together in strengthening intercultural understanding among students in Bima and beyond.

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