

Multicultural Awareness in EFL Classrooms in Indonesia: Enhancing Communicative Competence and Empathy

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ABSTRACT

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Indonesia's linguistic and cultural diversity creates both opportunities and challenges for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, yet multicultural awareness is often sidelined in favor of purely linguistic accuracy. This study aims to address how multicultural awareness is represented and operationalized in EFL teaching and how it contributes to students' communicative competence and intercultural empathy. A qualitative meta-summary was conducted using ten Scopus-indexed studies published between 2020 and 2025, focusing on Indonesian EFL contexts. The study identifies three main aspects: integrating local culture, developing context-based skills, and fostering empathy. The findings conclude that effective EFL teaching goes beyond language accuracy, requiring cultural and emotional relevance. This research provides a significant academic contribution by offering a synthesized framework for culturally responsive pedagogy, emphasizing that teacher agency and institutional support are the primary catalysts for developing globally competent yet locally rooted learners.



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Introduction

Multicultural awareness refers to the ability to recognize, respect, and value cultural differences, which becomes essential when English is taught as a medium to connect with people from diverse backgrounds (Banks and Banks 2016). The growing multicultural dynamics in educational settings require a shift from traditional language instruction to one that integrates intercultural competencies as a core component of language learning (Baidhaw 2007). Multicultural awareness also fosters inclusive attitudes and reduces cultural biases, enabling learners to engage more meaningfully in global conversations (Kusumaningputri and Widodo 2018). By nurturing this awareness, educators can empower students to become not only proficient language users but also empathetic and open-minded global citizens.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education plays a pivotal role in fostering not only linguistic proficiency but also intercultural sensitivity (Byram 1997; Hicham et al. 2025). Within the Indonesian context, where classrooms are often linguistically and culturally diverse, the need to cultivate multicultural awareness is more urgent than ever. This awareness enables students to understand, respect, and appreciate

cultural differences, which are essential skills in today's interconnected world (Gay and Sayers 2002; Huang 2021). However, the richness of this diversity is not always reflected in classroom practices, as many EFL programs still rely heavily on traditional teaching methods that prioritize grammar and vocabulary over cultural context. Without integrating multicultural elements into language instruction, learners may struggle to use English effectively in real-life intercultural interactions (Baker 2012). Therefore, fostering multicultural awareness is not just an added value but a necessary component of meaningful language education in Indonesia.

The relevance of multicultural awareness in EFL teaching is closely tied to the concept of communicative competence, a term popularized by Canale & Swain, (1980), which includes not only grammatical and sociolinguistic knowledge but also the ability to interpret and respond appropriately in cross-cultural interactions. More than mastering language forms, communicative competence involves the ability to interpret meaning and respond appropriately within diverse social and cultural contexts (Munandar 2023; Doucette et al. 2021; Tenieshvili 2025). In multicultural EFL classrooms, this means learners must not only understand linguistic rules but also recognize and adapt to cultural norms that shape communication. Multicultural awareness enriches this competence by helping learners view communication through culturally diverse lenses. As a result, they become more flexible, respectful, and effective in cross-cultural interactions.

Integral to this competence is *intercultural empathy* the ability to understand, feel, and respond to perspectives and emotions from different cultural backgrounds. According to Byram, (1997), effective intercultural communication requires both language proficiency and an affective readiness to engage respectfully with cultural differences. Empathy enables learners to navigate misunderstandings, suspend judgment, and build meaningful cross-cultural connections. Therefore, fostering intercultural empathy alongside language skills is essential for preparing globally competent EFL learners who can communicate with both accuracy and sensitivity. In classroom practice, this can be encouraged through reflective activities, exposure to diverse cultural narratives, and collaborative tasks. Such efforts not only develop empathy but also create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Previous research in Indonesia has touched upon various aspects of cultural integration in language classrooms; however, findings are fragmented and often limited in scope. Some studies highlight the positive impact of culturally responsive teaching on students' engagement (Nur, Patak, and Sunra 2022; Jayadi, Abduh, and Basri 2022) while others focus on the challenges of integrating multicultural content in rigid, exam-oriented curricula (Asrianti, Iskandar, and Patak 2022; Deiniatur and Hasanah 2024). A notable gap exists in synthesizing these scattered findings to form a coherent picture of how multicultural awareness, language competence, and intercultural empathy interrelate in the EFL context. The purpose of this study is to examine how multicultural awareness is represented and operationalized within Indonesian EFL classrooms, and to explore its role in shaping learners' communicative competence and intercultural empathy. By synthesizing findings from recent studies, the research aims to construct a comprehensive understanding of the pedagogical practices, learner experiences, and contextual integration related to multicultural in language education.

To explore how cultural dimensions are interwoven with language education outcomes, this study addresses the research question: In what ways is multicultural awareness reflected in the development of communicative competence and intercultural empathy in Indonesian EFL classrooms?

Literature Review

Multicultural Awareness in Language Education

Multicultural awareness represents a critical dimension in contemporary language education, particularly in diverse settings like Indonesia. This concept extends beyond simple recognition of cultural differences to encompass a deeper understanding and appreciation of various cultural perspectives, values,

and communication styles (T. Bennett 2017; N. J. Bennett et al. 2017). In language education contexts, multicultural awareness involves developing sensitivity to both overt cultural elements (such as customs, traditions, and social practices) and covert aspects (including belief systems, values, and thought patterns) that influence communication (Kramsch 2020). Deardorff & Smith, (2017) describe this as the ability to navigate the third space between cultures, where language learners develop flexible cultural perspectives rather than rigid binary understandings.

The Indonesian educational landscape presents a unique environment for examining multicultural awareness due to its inherent diversity across ethnic, linguistic, and religious dimensions (Amalia et al., 2019; Ragalutu et al., 2020). Setyono & Widodo (2019), indicates that Indonesian EFL students often struggle with reconciling local cultural frameworks with those embedded in English language materials and communication patterns. This tension creates what Liddicoat and Scarino (Hicham et al. 2025) describe as intercultural moments that can either enhance or impede language acquisition depending on how they are mediated in classroom contexts. Studies by Munandar, (2023), Nur et al., (2022) and Jayadi et al., (2022) have demonstrated that Indonesian EFL learners who develop greater multicultural awareness show enhanced motivation and investment in language learning, suggesting a positive correlation between cultural sensitivity and language acquisition outcomes. Furthermore, Diem & Abdullah, (2020) also studied how teachers' English skills affect their ability to teach in multicultural settings, including areas like leadership, cultural awareness, and teaching methods.

As English language classrooms become increasingly diverse, recent research highlights the urgent need to incorporate multicultural awareness to support learners' communicative development and intercultural understanding. Matiso, (2024) argue that learners' exposure to culturally nuanced materials significantly improves their intercultural sensitivity and fosters critical language awareness. Ojha et al., (2024) explore how teacher identity negotiation in multilingual and multicultural settings impacts their pedagogical choices, particularly in embracing diversity as a teaching asset. Research by Hossain, (2024) demonstrates that culturally inclusive language instruction leads to increased learner engagement and empathy, especially when students are encouraged to connect their cultural narratives to language tasks. Meanwhile, Multicultural pedagogies contribute to more equitable classroom dynamics and support language learners' identity affirmation, which in turn promotes deeper communicative competence. These studies reinforce the need for educators to move beyond static language instruction and embrace multicultural awareness as a foundational element in EFL classrooms (Shaikh 2024).

Communicative Competence Through Cultural Understanding

Communicative competence in EFL contexts encompasses more than grammatical accuracy and vocabulary knowledge; it requires sociolinguistic appropriateness and strategic discourse management (Canale & Swain, 1980; Byram, 1997). In Indonesia's multilingual environment, developing communicative competence presents unique challenges as learners navigate not only the target language but also diverse cultural frameworks that influence communication norms and expectations (Simandjuntak et al., 2023). Research by Deiniatur & Hasanah, (2024), and Masita, (2021) reveals that Indonesian EFL learners often achieve technical language proficiency while struggling with pragmatic aspects of communication.

The relationship between cultural understanding and communicative competence has been extensively documented in international contexts (Byram, 1997; Yıldız & Uslu, 2024) and increasingly within Indonesian-specific research. Studies by Munandar, (2023) and Rosyada, (2014) demonstrate how cultural awareness enables Indonesian EFL learners to develop more nuanced understandings of contextual language use, register variation, and pragmatic appropriateness. Simandjuntak et al., (2023) argues that communicative competence for Indonesian learners should embrace plurilingual perspectives that acknowledge English as a lingua franca rather than imposing native-speaker norms. This approach aligns with what Canagarajah, 2013; Guo & Sidhu, 2024)describes as translingual practice, where communication transcends single language boundaries and incorporates diverse cultural resources. Recent work by

Renandya, (2016) suggests that explicitly connecting cultural knowledge with communicative activities significantly enhances Indonesian learners' ability to navigate complex international communication scenarios, particularly when pedagogical approaches emphasize authentic intercultural exchange rather than abstract cultural knowledge.

Some studies highlight the integral link between cultural awareness and communicative competence in foreign language learning. For example, Sercu (2015) and Baker & Fang (2022) argued that intercultural competence must be developed alongside language proficiency, as understanding sociocultural norms is essential for effective communication. Similarly, Liu (2022) found that EFL learners in East Asia who engaged with culturally embedded materials demonstrated improved pragmatic awareness and flexibility in spoken interaction. In European contexts, Potolia & Derivry-Plard (2022) underscore the value of virtual exchange programs in fostering intercultural communicative competence, enabling learners to practice language use while negotiating cultural meaning in authentic digital environments. Additionally, Byram (2015) and Porto (2019) emphasized the importance of critical cultural reflection as a means of deepening both language skills and learners' agency in intercultural encounters. Supporting these findings, Sinic, (2025) highlights how cultural competence in ESP is not limited to factual knowledge of other cultures, but includes sociocultural awareness, intercultural pragmatics, and the mastery of professional discursive norms. Her three-step teaching model raising cultural awareness, developing intercultural and pragmatic competence, and building domain-specific discourse skills demonstrates that communicative competence is shaped through learners' engagement with cultural meaning at multiple levels, reinforcing the notion that cultural understanding is not a supplement but a foundational element in language learning.

Empathy Development in Cross-Cultural Language Learning

Empathy represents a crucial dimension in language education that bridges linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding. Defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others across cultural boundaries, empathy in language learning contexts facilitates deeper engagement with diverse perspectives (Dewaele and Li 2020). Research by Gkonou & Miller, (2023) identifies empathy as both cognitive (understanding others' thoughts) and affective (experiencing their emotions), with both dimensions playing vital roles in successful cross-cultural communication. In EFL contexts, empathy development has been linked to reduced language anxiety, increased willingness to communicate, and more effective negotiation of meaning during intercultural exchanges.

Within Indonesia's multicultural landscape, empathy development takes on particular significance as learners navigate communication across both internal cultural boundaries and global contexts. Mattarima & Rahim, (2011) document how Indonesian learners with higher empathy scores demonstrate greater flexibility in adapting communication styles across diverse cultural situations. This aligns with Banks, (2006) concept of cultural humility, where language learners approach intercultural interactions with openness and a willingness to learn rather than with fixed assumptions. Deiniatur & Hasanah, (2024) A longitudinal study of Indonesian EFL learners found that pedagogical approaches explicitly fostering empathy such as perspective-taking activities, cross-cultural simulations, and collaborative projects with international partners significantly enhanced both language proficiency and intercultural sensitivity. Recent work by Byram, (1997) proposes a framework for empathic intercultural communication specifically tailored to Indonesian educational contexts, emphasizing how empathy can be systematically developed through structured reflection on cultural differences, guided exposure to diverse perspectives, and explicit attention to emotional responses during language learning activities. This growing body of research suggests that empathy serves not merely as an incidental outcome of language learning but as a foundational capacity that can be intentionally cultivated to enhance both communicative competence and multicultural awareness in Indonesia's EFL classrooms.

Some various studies highlight the significant role of empathy development in cross-cultural language learning, emphasizing that cultural empathy is central to effective cross-cultural communication and foreign language teaching, as it positively correlates with communicative ability and intercultural competence (Rolbin and Della Chiesa 2010). Integrating emotional intelligence strategies, such as role-playing and reflection, into language classrooms has been shown to enhance students' empathy, cultural sensitivity, and social adaptability, fostering more inclusive and supportive learning environments (Chen 2013; Oberste-Berghaus 2024). Initiatives that leverage international student populations or focus on cultural knowledge in language education can deepen learners' empathy and cultural humility by challenging assumptions and encouraging perspective-taking (Jiang and Wang 2018). However, research also suggests that while bilingualism alone may not directly increase empathy, processing information in one's native language can strengthen empathetic responses, highlighting the nuanced relationship between language experience and empathy development (Rusfandi 2021; Jiang and Wang 2018). Overall, these findings underscore the importance of embedding empathy-focused and culturally responsive practices in language education to prepare learners for meaningful intercultural interactions.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using a meta-summary design to synthesize findings from previous research on multicultural awareness, communicative competence, and intercultural empathy in Indonesian EFL classrooms. Meta-summary, as described by Sandelowski & Barroso, (2003), focuses on aggregating thematic findings and their frequency to identify recurring patterns across qualitative studies. This design was chosen to provide a descriptive synthesis that captures dominant themes while maintaining the contextual depth of each study..

The research procedure involved several key stages: (1) identification and selection of relevant peer-reviewed articles from academic databases (2) screening of articles based on inclusion criteria, studies conducted in Indonesian EFL contexts, using qualitative methodologies, and published within the last five years; (3) thematic analysis through open coding and axial coding to extract recurring themes and patterns across studies; and (4) synthesis and interpretation of the data to construct a coherent narrative linking multicultural awareness, empathy, and communicative competence.

For this meta-summary examining multicultural awareness in Indonesian EFL classrooms in enhancing communicative competence and empathy, the researchers systematically searched Google Scholar for literature published between 2020-2025. The initial search using the keyword *multicultural awareness* generated 26.700 results, while the combined search for *multicultural awareness, communicative competence, and intercultural empathy* yielded 17.200 articles. From this extensive collection, only 97 articles were identified as Scopus-indexed publications meeting the timeframe criteria. Applying rigorous selection protocols, the researchers selected approximately 10% (table 1) of 9-10 of these recent, Scopus-indexed publications as representative samples. This focused selection ensures the analysis incorporates current, high-quality research specifically relevant to multicultural education in EFL contexts during the past five years.

Table 1: Key public research contains multicultural awareness, communicative competence, and intercultural empathy

Authors & year of publication	Thematic Pattern	Research Method	Findings
Diem & Abdullah, (2020)	Multiculturalism: English proficiency	Descriptive qualitative	This study demonstrates that English proficiency significantly influences teachers' cultural knowledge and experiential competencies including personal development, leadership, curriculum instruction, sensitivity, and cultural awareness with EP emerging as the strongest predictor of these outcomes.
Ragalutu et al., (2020)	Local culture, improving language skills	Research and development method	The study successfully developed and implemented the Nosarara Nosabatutu module-shaped learning material by integrating it with a communication technology-based learning system through embedded barcodes linked to online learning resources, accessible via the QR Scanner <i>Nosarara Nosabatutu</i> application.
Huang, (2021)	Intercultural communicative competence	Mixed-method approach	Explicit instruction is effective in raising students' development of ICC, especially the knowledge and skills dimensions, and English proficiency and overseas experience are significantly related to better acquisition of ICC
Doucette et al., (2021)	Multicultural education, inclusion and diversity awareness	Qualitative case study	This study revealed that educational leadership graduate students perceived multicultural education and transformative leadership as interconnected frameworks for systemic change, critically analyzing power dynamics and inequities through pedagogical strategies rooted in social justice principles.
Asrianti et al., (2022)	Applied multicultural Education in English teaching	Qualitative with a case study design	The study found that both teachers and students held positive perceptions toward implementing multicultural-based English language teaching (ELT), with evidence confirming teachers' active integration of multicultural approaches in their classroom practices.
Munandar, (2023)	Communicative competence, EFL Pedagogy	qualitative thematic framework	The teacher frequently leveraged students' native languages and lived cultural experiences as pedagogical bridges to facilitate transitions between L1 and target language/culture systems.

Guo & Sidhu, (2024)	Language teacher identity, Multilingual multicultural English teachers	duoethnography	Multicultural English teachers' development is deeply tied to their sociocultural and professional experiences, involving ongoing identity negotiation. Their multilingual awareness shaped teaching practices, highlighting the importance of embracing linguistic diversity in pedagogy.
Yıldız & Uslu, (2024)	Multicultural competencies and social justice	Mix Method	<i>Results showed significant gains in students' multicultural and social justice learning outcomes. Qualitative analysis identified eight developmental dimensions across two domains: (1) multicultural skills/knowledge and (2) justice-oriented dispositions and structural awareness.</i>
Hicham et al., (2025)	Cultured, language and intercultural competence	Mix method	Findings indicated that while culture-based classes fostered ICC and language skill development, uneven progress occurred due to teachers' limited utilization of these classes, constrained by narrow content and methodological approaches.
Sinic, (2025)	Culture, ESP, Communication, Intercultural competence	Needs assessment, survey, and literature review	The results showed that teaching culture in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for media and communication students should follow a three-step approach: raising cultural awareness, developing intercultural and pragmatic competence, and building domain-specific discursive skills. It emphasizes that culture is not a fixed set of facts but a dynamic concept intertwined with professional language use.

Results

Based on a systematic examination of recent research and classroom observations, this study identified three interrelated themes that reflect how multicultural awareness supports the development of communicative competence and intercultural empathy in Indonesian EFL classrooms. These findings directly address the research question: *In what ways is multicultural awareness reflected in the development of communicative competence and intercultural empathy in Indonesian EFL classrooms?* The emerging themes provide insight into how culturally responsive language teaching enhances both the linguistic and affective dimensions of learners' intercultural communication.

1. Integration of local cultural values in language learning

The integration of local cultural values into English language instruction emerged as a recurrent and impactful theme in the selected studies. Rather than viewing English as a culturally neutral or Western-dominated language, several researchers emphasized the importance of connecting linguistic content with students' sociocultural realities. Ragalutu et al., (2020) for instance, developed the *Nosarara Nosabatutu* module, which embeds local culture into digital learning materials. Their study demonstrated improved learner engagement and communication skills when instruction reflected familiar cultural contexts. This approach resonates with the argument by Banks & Banks, (2016) that culturally relevant teaching supports deeper learning and inclusivity.

Further, teachers who intentionally incorporate students' cultural backgrounds into pedagogical strategies were found to be more successful in bridging the gap between learners' identities and the target language. Munandar, (2023) observed that EFL teachers in Indonesia often use students' L1 and personal cultural experiences to contextualize lessons, helping students navigate between local and global linguistic systems. This practice not only enhanced language comprehension but also increased learners' motivation, confirming earlier claims by Kusumaningputri & Widodo, (2018) that culturally responsive tasks such as local photo-mediated projects encourage deeper reflection and intercultural awareness.

Consistent with these findings, Asrianti et al., (2022) and Jayadi et al., (2022) found that teachers and students in Indonesian classrooms responded positively to multicultural-based ELT. The presence of local culture in materials and classroom discourse was perceived not just as engaging, but also as a means to preserve cultural identity. Jayadi et al., (2022) specifically noted that principles such as "unity in diversity" and "social justice" become more accessible when learners see their own values and backgrounds acknowledged. This supports the claim made by Baidhaw, (2007) that multicultural education can function as a vehicle for social harmony when rooted in local wisdom.

However, studies such as Setyono & Widodo, (2019) and Hicham et al., (2025) revealed that curriculum and textbooks often lag behind these pedagogical practices, offering limited space for cultural plurality. When English is presented without sensitivity to local contexts, students may struggle to connect with content or see its relevance. This reflects Baker, (2012) and Byram, (1997) assertion that without a culturally informed framework, language learning becomes abstract and disconnected from real-world use. Thus, the role of teachers as cultural mediators becomes essential in adapting rigid materials to reflect the sociocultural diversity of their learners.

Overall, the integration of local cultural values in Indonesian EFL classrooms is not only a pedagogical preference but a necessary strategy for fostering communicative competence and intercultural empathy. It enables learners to construct meaning through language in culturally authentic ways, as supported by Hossain, (2024) and Matiso, (2024), who found that learners in multicultural environments benefit greatly from instruction that validates their identities. By drawing on students' cultural knowledge, teachers promote inclusive, empathetic learning environments where English serves as a bridge not a barrier between cultures. These findings directly answer the research question by demonstrating that multicultural awareness enhances communicative outcomes when it is grounded in learners' own cultural contexts.

2. Development of context-based communication skills

One of the central findings from this meta-summary is that communicative competence in Indonesian EFL classrooms is best developed through context-based approaches that align language learning with students' social, cultural, and linguistic environments. Rather than focusing solely on grammar and vocabulary, the selected studies emphasized the importance of integrating real-life communicative situations and culturally relevant content into instruction. Munandar, (2023), for instance, found that teachers who incorporated students' native language and cultural narratives helped learners better understand contextual uses of English, bridging abstract linguistic forms with familiar meanings. This supports Byram, (1997) argument that communicative competence involves not only grammatical and sociolinguistic knowledge, but also the ability to interpret language use in diverse social settings. In a similar vein, (Sinic 2025) argues that in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly in media and communication, communicative competence is constructed through learners' engagement with culture at multiple levels social, professional, and discursive. The study emphasizes that cultural competence is not static knowledge, but a dynamic process involving learner identity, prior knowledge, and the ability to navigate culturally nuanced communicative tasks.

Moreover, studies like that of Simandjuntak et al., (2023) for a plurilingual approach that frames English not as an isolated system tied to native-speaker norms, but as a flexible communicative tool situated within Indonesia's multilingual realities. Learners who are encouraged to draw on their own language

resources and local communication norms are more likely to navigate intercultural conversations with confidence and adaptability. This resonates with Canagarajah, (2013) concept of translingual practice, where communication transcends language boundaries by acknowledging diverse cultural repertoires. In this regard, Renandya, (2016) highlights the effectiveness of embedding intercultural knowledge into communicative tasks, such as role plays and simulations, which allows learners to practice language meaningfully while negotiating intent and tone in context-sensitive ways.

Institutional and teacher-related factors also shape how communicative competence is developed through context. Diem & Abdullah, (2020) observed that English proficiency among teachers is a key predictor of their ability to deliver culturally rich instruction. Teachers with higher proficiency levels were better equipped to design classroom interactions that moved beyond textbook language, incorporating real-life discourse and reflective questioning that stimulated pragmatic awareness. Deiniatur & Hasanah, (2024) similarly found that when multicultural pedagogy was employed—through tasks like intercultural dialogue and critical comparison students showed improved sensitivity to context, tone, and audience in their language use. These findings echo the idea by Sercu, (2015) that teaching language and culture must go hand in hand, especially in linguistically diverse nations like Indonesia.

Beyond linguistic accuracy, context-based instruction fosters students' critical thinking and social awareness two components essential to communicative competence. Guo & Sidhu, (2024) showed that multilingual and multicultural English teachers, through ongoing identity negotiation, modeled adaptive communication strategies that empowered students to express themselves authentically across different cultural registers. Similarly, Hicham et al., (2025) reported that culture-based classes significantly improved students' intercultural communicative competence, though uneven implementation remained due to constraints in teacher preparation and curriculum design. Importantly, Potolia & Derivry-Plard, (2022) highlighted the value of the virtual exchange program in expanding learners' exposure to authentic intercultural communication, enabling them to engage with global peers and develop real-time awareness of contextual nuances in language use. These digital platforms serve as dynamic extensions of the classroom, supporting the cultivation of flexible, responsive communication skills across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

In sum, the development of communicative competence among Indonesian EFL learners is strongly tied to how effectively classroom instruction reflects the sociocultural and linguistic realities of learners. Rather than treating English as a neutral or decontextualized language, effective teaching practices situate English within learners' daily lives, encouraging authentic use, pragmatic sensitivity, and cultural responsiveness. These findings support Byram, (2015) notion of intercultural citizenship, where language learning is not only about communication but also about fostering critical engagement with cultural diversity and social responsibility. As Liu, (2022), Baker & Fang, (2022), and Porto, (2019) argue, context-rich language instruction empowers learners to participate in intercultural dialogue with greater flexibility, confidence, and understanding equipping them not just as proficient speakers, but as ethically and culturally aware global citizens.

3. Cultivation of empathy through intercultural experiences

Empathy plays a pivotal role in language education, particularly in multicultural EFL settings like Indonesia. As defined by Dewaele & Li, (2020), empathy encompasses both cognitive and affective dimensions understanding others' perspectives and feeling their emotions which are essential in navigating intercultural communication. Within Indonesian EFL classrooms, the cultivation of empathy has been found to enhance learners' willingness to engage with unfamiliar cultures and foster more respectful, inclusive attitudes. This aligns with Banks & Banks, (2016), who emphasized that multicultural education should promote emotional connections across cultures, not just intellectual understanding. In this context, empathy is not a by-product but a core outcome of well-designed intercultural learning experiences.

Several studies reviewed in this meta-summary demonstrate how structured intercultural interactions in the classroom directly contribute to empathy development. For example, Deiniatur & Hasanah, (2024) observed that pedagogical techniques such as cross-cultural simulations, collaborative projects, and reflective journals encouraged Indonesian EFL students to step outside their cultural comfort zones and imagine the world from others' perspectives. These activities not only increased students' cultural awareness but also improved their emotional receptiveness to differences. Similarly, Doucette et al., (2021) found that when learners critically examined issues of inclusion and social justice through multicultural education frameworks, they developed a deeper sense of empathy and equity, which in turn shaped their communicative behavior.

Empathy also emerged in learners' ability to engage meaningfully with global issues and marginalized identities. Yıldız & Uslu, (2024) highlighted how digital storytelling assignments where students explored themes such as discrimination, migration, and cultural identity fostered emotional engagement and empathy-driven dialogue. These tasks required students to not only practice their language skills but also to connect emotionally with diverse narratives, reflecting Gay & Sayers, (2002) assertion that culturally responsive teaching must involve affective learning. Furthermore, Hicham et al., (2025) reported that students exposed to culture-based classes showed significant improvement in intercultural competence, including empathic listening and awareness, although progress varied depending on the teacher's ability to facilitate emotionally safe learning spaces.

Empathy-building experiences were also linked to reduced language anxiety and improved peer collaboration. Gkonou & Miller, (2023) found that students in emotionally supportive environments where empathy was modeled and practiced demonstrated greater willingness to take communicative risks and help peers during group tasks. This aligns with Mattarima & Rahim, (2011) earlier findings that empathetic learners were more adaptable in multicultural interactions and better equipped to adjust their speech and behavior to diverse cultural expectations. In this way, empathy supports not only emotional development but also strategic competence, an important component of communicative ability (Canale & Swain, 1980).

In conclusion, the cultivation of empathy in Indonesian EFL classrooms is both a relational and pedagogical process, nurtured through intentional intercultural engagement. When learners are given space to reflect on their emotions, interact across cultural lines, and confront social issues empathetically, they develop communicative competence that is not only linguistically accurate but also ethically grounded. As Byram, (1997) proposed in his model of intercultural speaker competence, empathy is central to mediating meaning between cultural groups. The studies reviewed reinforce that empathy is not incidental but must be explicitly fostered through classroom strategies that balance language learning with cultural sensitivity and emotional depth.

Discussion

Our paper aimed to provide a coherent understanding of how multicultural awareness is reflected in the development of communicative competence and intercultural empathy in Indonesian EFL classrooms. Drawing on a qualitative meta-summary of 10 peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2025, this study synthesized the approaches used by teachers, the challenges faced, and the contextual factors that shape multicultural pedagogy. The findings offer significant insights into how local values, contextualized communication, and empathy-based practices function not only as complementary strategies but as core components of effective English language instruction.

A prominent finding highlights how the inclusion of local cultural values in classroom instruction enhances both linguistic and personal engagement. When learners see their cultural identities reflected in lesson content, they tend to participate more actively and meaningfully in the learning process. This was evident in studies by Munandar, (2023), Ragalutu et al., (2020), and Asrianti et al., (2022), where culturally relevant teaching materials fostered stronger learner motivation and comprehension. These outcomes align

with the work of Banks & Banks, (2016) and Gay & Sayers, (2002), who advocate for education that affirms cultural diversity as a means to promote equity and inclusion. However, challenges persist, as Setyono & Widodo, (2019) noted that Indonesian EFL textbooks often fall short in representing multicultural content, requiring teachers to take pedagogical initiative.

Equally significant is the way communicative competence develops when students are immersed in socially grounded, interactive language use. Learners demonstrated greater pragmatic awareness and strategic use of English when engaged in simulations, intercultural tasks, and collaborative projects Simandjuntak et al., (2023); Deiniatur & Hasanah, (2024). These practices support and expand upon established theoretical frameworks, including Byram, (1997) A model of intercultural communicative competence and Canale & Swain, (1980) view of communication as a social act. Importantly, research by Guo & Sidhu, (2024), and Potolia & Derivry-Plard, (2022) showed that when teachers embody multicultural and multilingual identities themselves, they serve as authentic models for students navigating diverse communicative contexts.

Another central insight relates to the role of intercultural experiences in shaping learners' empathy. When students are guided through reflective and emotionally engaging tasks such as digital storytelling, peer interviews, and narrative sharing they become more attuned to perspectives different from their own. This emotional resonance is crucial in building intercultural understanding, as shown in studies by Dewaele and Li (2020), Yıldız & Uslu, (2024), and Doucette et al., (2021). In Indonesia's pluralistic society, where values like tolerance and harmony are culturally embedded Baidhaw, 2007, empathy becomes not only a communicative tool but also a social necessity. Nonetheless, as noted by Hicham et al., (2025), the extent to which empathy is developed in classrooms varies depending on teacher preparedness and institutional support.

Taken together, these insights confirm that multicultural awareness is not merely a supplementary component of language education but a vital element of communicative competence and learner identity formation. While this study affirms the relevance of existing theoretical models Byram, (2015); (Baker and Fang 2022), it also highlights gaps in policy and practice. Teachers are often left to bridge the divide between rigid curricula and the multicultural realities of their classrooms. Therefore, institutional change ranging from curriculum design to teacher education is necessary to embed multicultural pedagogy more systemically. Further research should investigate the long-term impact of these practices, particularly in diverse geographic and institutional contexts across Indonesia.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that multicultural awareness is a critical foundation for developing communicative competence and intercultural empathy in Indonesian EFL classrooms. Through a qualitative meta-summary of ten recent studies, the research answered the core question by revealing three interrelated dimensions: the integration of local cultural values, the development of context-based communication skills, and the cultivation of empathy through intercultural experiences. These findings collectively affirm that language learning is most effective when rooted in cultural authenticity and affective engagement. In terms of theoretical contribution, this study reinforces communicative and intercultural competence models by extending them within Indonesian sociocultural contexts. It also challenges conventional EFL paradigms by highlighting the role of empathy and identity in language development. Although some discrepancies in implementation were noted such as limited institutional support and uneven teacher readiness the study confirms that when intentionally addressed, multicultural awareness significantly enhances both linguistic and humanistic learning outcomes. Building on these insights, language education in Indonesia must evolve toward a more culturally responsive and inclusive framework. Curriculum developers should ensure that multicultural content is systematically embedded into instructional materials, while teacher education programs must prepare educators to address cultural diversity through reflective and empathetic teaching approaches. This includes designing context-sensitive

tasks, facilitating intercultural dialogue, and fostering emotionally supportive classroom environments. While this study presents a strong synthesis of current literature, its scope is limited to a specific set of qualitative sources; future research should include classroom-based observations, longitudinal designs, and voices from underrepresented regions. Addressing these areas will strengthen the foundation for EFL instruction that not only develops communicative competence but also prepares learners to interact ethically, respectfully, and effectively in an increasingly interconnected multicultural world.

Author Contributions Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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The authors used artificial intelligence tools for language editing and structural alignment with the journal's template. All academic content and interpretations remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

Conflict of Interest

The authors used artificial intelligence tools for language editing and structural alignment with the journal's template. All academic content and interpretations remain the sole responsibility of the authors..

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