

Bridging the Gap: Language Learning as a Tool for Cultural Empathy at Prima Bangsa Institute

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ABSTRACT

Penelitian kualitatif dengan pendekatan *narrative inquiry* ini mengeksplorasi hubungan antara pembelajaran bahasa asing dan pengembangan empati budaya pada mahasiswa program studi Bahasa Inggris dan Bahasa Jepang di Institut Prima Bangsa. Dengan menggunakan metode *narrative inquiry*, penelitian ini menganalisis secara mendalam pengalaman hidup, persepsi, dan proses transformasi lima mahasiswa yang dipilih secara purposif melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur yang mendalam. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan secara jelas bahwa lingkungan pembelajaran yang kontekstual, kaya pengalaman, dan didukung oleh materi autentik seperti musik kontemporer, anime populer, debat terstruktur, serta kegiatan berbicara interaktif, secara signifikan meningkatkan kesadaran budaya, kepekaan emosional, dan kemampuan perspektif-taking peserta didik. Lebih dari sekadar meningkatkan kompetensi linguistik, pembelajaran bahasa berperan penting dalam membentuk sikap toleransi, menumbuhkan refleksi mendalam, serta mengembangkan sensitivitas antarbudaya. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi penting bagi kajian pedagogi antarbudaya dalam pendidikan bahasa, dengan menghadirkan bukti empiris mengenai urgensi penerapan kurikulum berbasis pengalaman, reflektif, dan terintegrasi secara budaya di perguruan tinggi Indonesia.

This qualitative narrative inquiry delves into the intricate relationship between foreign language learning and the cultivation of cultural empathy among students enrolled in the English and Japanese language programs at Prima Bangsa Institute. Employing a narrative inquiry approach, the study meticulously analyzes the lived experiences, perceptions, and transformative journeys of five purposively selected students through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The emergent findings unequivocally demonstrate that a culturally contextualized and experiential learning environment rich with authentic materials such as contemporary music, popular anime, structured debates, and interactive speaking events significantly enhances learners' cultural awareness, deepens their emotional sensitivity, and sharpens their perspective-taking abilities. Beyond mere linguistic proficiency, these language classes are shown to be instrumental in shaping attitudes of tolerance, fostering profound reflection, and nurturing robust intercultural sensitivity. This research critically contributes to the burgeoning field of intercultural pedagogy within language education, offering compelling empirical evidence that underscores the vital importance of implementing experiential, reflective, and culturally integrated curricula within the landscape of Indonesian higher education.



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INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving tapestry of the 21st century, where global interconnectedness is no longer a concept but a lived reality, proficiency in a foreign language transcends its traditional definition as a mere technical skill. It has irrevocably transformed into a fundamental gateway to profound cultural understanding and an indispensable prerequisite for genuine global citizenship. In an era characterized by unparalleled migration, ubiquitous digital communication, and increasingly diverse societies, effective communication across cultural divides demands far more than a mastery of vocabulary and grammar. It critically necessitates a sophisticated sensitivity to the intricate cultural frameworks that subtly inform human meaning making, shape social behavior, and dictate communication norms. As nations and communities grow exponentially diverse, educational systems worldwide bear an immense responsibility to adapt and evolve, focusing not solely on cultivating linguistic proficiency but equally on nurturing the crucial disposition of intercultural empathy.

Despite this pressing global imperative, language instruction in numerous educational institutions regrettably remains fixated on the structural, cognitive, and often decontextualized aspects of language. Repetitive grammar drills and rote vocabulary memorization, while possessing inherent value in building foundational knowledge, invariably fall short in adequately preparing students for the complexities and nuances of authentic intercultural encounters. Leading scholars in the field, such as Byram (2018) and Kramsch (2015), have eloquently and persuasively argued for a more holistic, integrated model of language teaching. This progressive model explicitly embraces the profound cultural and intricate emotional dimensions of communication, seamlessly integrating experiential learning methodologies with rigorous reflective and interpretive processes. They contend that language is intrinsically intertwined with culture, and to teach one without the other is to offer an incomplete and ultimately inadequate education.

Prima Bangsa Institute distinguishes itself as a pioneering educational institution that proactively and systematically incorporates rich cultural dimensions into its language instruction paradigm. Both the English and Japanese language programs at the institute are meticulously designed to adopt a wide array of authentic learning materials ranging from contemporary songs and critically acclaimed films to nuanced social rituals and traditional ceremonies. Furthermore, these programs conscientiously implement innovative pedagogical projects, including but not limited to, dedicated Japanese Speaking Days, collaborative podcast production, and comprehensive cultural presentations. These deliberate pedagogical practices collectively aim to foster not only robust language competence but also to cultivate a deeper, more nuanced cultural insight among students. This present research undertakes a systematic investigation into how these specific institutional practices actively support and catalyze the development of cultural empathy, which, for the purpose of this study, is rigorously defined as the sophisticated ability to understand, appreciate, and internalize perspectives deeply rooted in diverse cultural contexts, extending beyond mere cognitive recognition to genuine affective resonance. The study endeavors to provide clear, empirically grounded answers to three pivotal research questions:

1. How are foreign language learning practices conceptualized and implemented at Prima Bangsa Institute?
2. In what specific ways is cross-cultural understanding cultivated and reinforced through these established language learning practices?
3. How do students subjectively perceive and articulate the impact of their language learning experiences on the development of their cultural empathy?

METHOD

Type of penelitian

This study meticulously employed a qualitative narrative approach to deeply examine and understand how students at Prima Bangsa Institute experientially encounter and internalize the intricate intersection of language learning and the development of cultural empathy. The adoption of a narrative design was strategically chosen for its inherent capacity to facilitate the in-depth exploration of personal reflections, the nuanced articulation of emotions, and the subtle yet significant shifts in identity that individuals undergo through the powerful medium of storytelling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This

methodology allows for rich, detailed accounts that capture the unique complexities of individual experiences.

Participants

Five students were strategically and purposively selected from the English and Japanese language programs to ensure a rich, representative sample of experiences. The stringent selection criteria for participants included a demonstrated history of active and enthusiastic engagement in culture-based language activities, such as participation in public speaking events, completion of cultural project assignments, and involvement in language-exchange simulations. The participants comprised both male and female students, hailing from diverse socio-cultural and academic backgrounds, thereby enriching the breadth and depth of the collected narratives. This deliberate sampling strategy ensured that the participants possessed firsthand experiences relevant to the research questions

Data Collection

Primary data were systematically collected through semi-structured interviews, meticulously conducted in an informal, relaxed, and highly reflective atmosphere. This conducive environment was purposefully fostered to encourage maximum openness, candor, and uninhibited sharing from the participants. Interview prompts were carefully designed and phrased to gently guide students to share their personal language learning journeys, articulate the specific cultural insights they had gained, and elaborate on any personal transformations or shifts in perspective they associated with these profound experiences. To ensure fidelity and accuracy, all interviews were digitally recorded with the participants' explicit consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for rigorous, detailed analysis. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for both consistency in data collection and flexibility to explore emergent themes.

Data Analysis

The transcribed data underwent a meticulous and systematic thematic narrative analysis. This robust analytical process was executed in several distinct, sequential phases:

1. **Initial Coding:** The first phase involved a careful, line-by-line initial coding of all key experiences, salient expressions, and recurring phrases directly related to the intertwined concepts of language and culture as articulated by the participants. This allowed for the identification of raw data points.
2. **Identification of Recurring Themes:** Following initial coding, the researchers meticulously reviewed the codes to identify overarching, recurring themes that emerged consistently across the individual narratives. This involved synthesizing common patterns, insights, and perspectives shared by the diverse participants (e.g., the development of empathy, enhanced perspective-taking abilities, deep identity reflection, heightened cultural awareness).
3. **Interpretive Synthesis:** The final, critical phase involved an interpretive synthesis, wherein the identified themes and student reflections were rigorously linked to established cultural and pedagogical theories. This process aimed to provide a deeper theoretical understanding of the observed phenomena and to situate the findings within the broader academic discourse on intercultural communication and language education.

To significantly enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study's findings, several methodological strategies were meticulously employed: member checking, where participants reviewed their interview transcripts and thematic interpretations for accuracy; peer debriefing, where an external researcher reviewed the data analysis process to ensure objectivity and rigor; and systematic reflexive journaling by the primary researcher throughout the study, to explicitly acknowledge and minimize potential research biases. These triangulation methods contribute to the robustness of the qualitative findings. Although no digital coding software was used, the data analysis process followed a rigorous manual coding and thematic identification procedure aligned with narrative inquiry practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Manual coding was deemed appropriate given the small participant pool and the depth of narrative data collected. The transparency of the analysis steps and use of triangulation ensured the credibility and academic rigor of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored how culturally integrated language instruction at Prima Bangsa Institute fosters the development of intercultural empathy and identity formation among learners. Through

thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with five students across English and Japanese language programs, a coherent pattern emerged: language learning experiences that are immersive, reflective, and culturally embedded tend to catalyze emotional transformation and critical awareness of the self in relation to others. These experiences were shaped not only by exposure to authentic cultural materials but also by structured reflection and comparative engagement. From the data, four overarching themes were identified: (1) Interactive and Contextualized Learning Practices, (2) Integration of Cultural Values and Intercultural Awareness, (3) Emotional Transformation and Empathy Development, and (4) Identity Reflection and the Emergence of a Global Self. These themes are presented below using participant excerpts and followed by interpretive commentary that connects their experiences to relevant theoretical frameworks.

Interactive and Contextualized Learning Practices

Tabel 1. Style

| Participant | Narrative Excerpt | Interpretation |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| P1 (Japanese) | “We learn not only how to speak but how to act and feel in Japanese; it’s about understanding the ‘spirit’ behind the words.” | Indicates that language learning is closely tied to understanding the emotional and social norms embedded in Japanese culture. |
| P3 (English) | “Making podcasts about British culture made me realize that language learning is not just about grammar, but about seeing the world differently.” | Creative media-based projects promote critical engagement with cultural perspectives, beyond surface-level language skills. |

Participants emphasized that language learning at Prima Bangsa Institute goes beyond grammar drills and vocabulary memorization. Activities such as Japanese Speaking Day, podcast production, intercultural debates, and cultural dramas immerse students in the lived experience of the target culture. This aligns with Kramsch’s (2015) theory that language is not only a system of symbols, but also a medium of cultural action and interaction.

Such experiential approaches transform language from a classroom subject into a lived cultural practice. Students begin to internalize socio-cultural norms, communication styles, and emotional nuances enabling them not only to speak the language but to feel the culture. This immersive engagement forms the foundation for the development of deeper cultural awareness and empathy.

Integration of Cultural Values and Intercultural Awareness

Tabel 2. Style

| Participant | Narrative Excerpt | Interpretation |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| P2 (Japanese) | “We were taught not just grammar, but also why Japanese people say things indirectly. That changed the way I think about communication.” | Learners begin to recognize that pragmatic norms reflect deeper cultural values such as social harmony and humility. |
| P5 (English) | “We compared how weddings work in the UK and in Indonesia. I began to understand how values shape social rituals.” | Comparative cultural reflection encourages metacognitive awareness of both foreign and native value systems. |

Cultural knowledge was not delivered as isolated lessons but seamlessly embedded within the language curriculum. Through activities such as contrastive cultural analysis and classroom discussions on social values, students developed the ability to interpret and critically reflect on cultural practices.

This integrative model aligns with Byram’s (2018) concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), which prioritizes the development of not only cultural knowledge but also skills of interpretation, critical awareness, and intercultural sensitivity. At Prima Bangsa, the curriculum allowed students to move beyond passive cultural consumption toward active cultural comparison and ethical reflection key steps in developing intercultural maturity.

Emotional Transformation and Empathy Development

Tabel 3. Style

| Participant | Narrative Excerpt | Interpretation |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
|--------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|

| | | |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| P1 (Japanese) | P1 (Japanese) “When I learned why Japanese people bow and apologize so often... I started reflecting on my own humility.” | Empathic understanding of foreign cultural practices prompts personal introspection and behavioral reevaluation. |
| P4 (English) | “I used to think Westerners were rude... but now I see it’s just a different way of being. That made me more patient.” | Exposure to alternative cultural norms disrupts stereotypes and encourages emotional openness. |

Participants reported that learning about the emotional norms of the target culture such as politeness strategies, nonverbal cues, and indirectness provoked affective shifts in their own attitudes and behavior. This emotional engagement signifies the emergence of relational empathy, a concept emphasized by Zhou et al. (2025), in which learners move beyond intellectual curiosity to emotional connection.

Language learning became a space of affective recalibration, where students began to question their prior assumptions, adopt more empathetic communication styles, and develop patience in the face of difference. This transformation highlights the importance of emotional literacy in intercultural learning and positions empathy not as a soft outcome, but as a core pedagogical achievement.

Identity Reflection and the Emergence of a Global Self

Tabel 4. Style

| Participant | Narrative Excerpt | Interpretation |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| P3 (English) | “I feel more confident now to speak to foreigners. I think I understand how to adjust, listen, and connect better.” | Learners develop the agency and social confidence to engage in intercultural communication. |
| P5 (English) | “This experience made me reflect on my own biases. I realized how limited my views were before.” | Language learning becomes a catalyst for critical self-examination and identity reconstruction. |

Beyond communication, participants described language learning as a process of self- discovery and identity transformation. As they encountered different value systems and modes of being, they began to question previously held beliefs and reconfigure their sense of self in relation to others.

This reflects narrative identity theory (Shin & Crookes, 2021), which sees identity as a dynamic narrative shaped through dialogic encounters and reflection. Language learning, in this sense, becomes a mirror not only to understand others, but to understand oneself as part of a broader global community. Students emerge from this process as more confident, open-minded, and culturally agile individuals.

CONCLUSION

This study provides compelling empirical evidence that culturally contextualized language instruction at Prima Bangsa Institute transcends conventional language education paradigms. Rather than treating language learning as a purely cognitive or structural exercise, the curriculum immerses students in culturally rich, interactive, and emotionally resonant experiences that fundamentally reshape not only their communicative skills but their worldview, self-perception, and intercultural empathy.

Four major insights emerged from the students' narratives. First, language learning designed around authentic and interactive practices such as anime viewing, podcast production, cultural debates, and speaking events proves to be highly effective in transforming passive learners into active cultural participants. These activities promote experiential immersion that enables learners to internalize not just vocabulary and grammar, but the social codes, emotional undertones, and unspoken norms of the target culture. Language becomes lived experience.

Second, the seamless integration of cultural content into daily instruction fosters more than cultural knowledge; it cultivates a form of critical intercultural awareness. Students gain the tools to interpret, compare, and question cultural practices, both foreign and local. This process activates a metacognitive engagement that aligns with Byram’s (2018) intercultural communicative competence framework, positioning learners not only as language users but as ethical cultural negotiators.

Third, and perhaps most transformative, is the development of empathic resonance through language education. Students did not merely understand cultural values intellectually they felt them. They reported increased patience, humility, and openness as direct outcomes of engaging with the

communicative norms and symbolic practices of another culture. This affective recalibration illustrates the emergence of what Zhou et al. (2025) define as relational empathy: the ability to experience cultural otherness not as distance, but as connection.

Finally, the most profound impact observed was in the area of identity reflection. Participants repeatedly described how language learning experiences pushed them to re-evaluate their own assumptions, challenge internalized biases, and reconstruct a more globally attuned self-concept. They did not merely learn about “others”; they learned about themselves in relation to others. Through this process, students moved toward becoming reflective, empathetic, and confident global citizens hallmarks of what Shin and Crookes (2021) term “narrative identity transformation.”

Taken together, these findings affirm that language education, when thoughtfully designed with intercultural and experiential elements, functions as a powerful site for moral, emotional, and civic growth. It does not merely equip students with linguistic tools; it fosters cross-cultural understanding, emotional intelligence, and ethical awareness.

Therefore, cultural empathy should no longer be considered a secondary benefit of language learning it is the central pedagogical imperative. In a world increasingly shaped by intercultural interaction, language classrooms must be reimagined not simply as spaces for grammar acquisition, but as transformative arenas for cultivating the kind of compassionate, reflective, and culturally agile individuals our global society so urgently needs.

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