

Authentic Immersion Versus Symbolic Exposure in Indonesian Language and Culture Education

Destiani,¹ Yulianeta,² Vismaia S. Damaianti,^{3*} Yeti Mulyati,⁴ Isah Cahyani,⁵ Dian Anggraini,⁶ Muhammad Rudy⁷

¹²³⁴⁵Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, West Java – Indonesia, ⁶Balai Bahasa Provinsi Lampung – Indonesia, ⁷Universitas Malahayati, Bandar Lampung, Lampung – Indonesia

Article Information

Received: September 16, 2025

Revised: January 06, 2026

Accepted: January 06, 2026

Published online: April 02, 2026

Abstract

Intercultural learning is an important component in teaching Indonesian to foreign speakers (BIPA). The study aims to compare intercultural learning for foreign learners across four contexts: face-to-face in Indonesia, face-to-face in the learners' home countries, online, and the role of local teachers. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and questionnaires involving 22 foreign learners and 1 local teacher. The findings indicated that intercultural learning in Indonesia offers authentic cultural immersion and deep contextual understanding, while learning in home countries provided limited but practical exposure through workshops. Online learning allows flexible access to cultural materials, although understanding often remains symbolic. Local instructors act as cultural mediators but face limitations due to their practical experience. The study highlights the need to adjust learning strategies to include the Savoir framework by Byram (2020), promoting direct experiences and collaboration between local teachers and Indonesian communities abroad to enhance intercultural competence. Future researchers are encouraged to develop and evaluate Savoir-based intercultural curriculum models in diverse BIPA contexts, exploring how blended approaches combining in-country immersion, online tools, and locally trained instructors can enhance learners' intercultural competence.

Keywords: intercultural learning; Savoir Byram, international students; online BIPA; local BIPA teacher

Introduction

Intercultural communication is a fundamental aspect that determines the quality of interactions between individuals and communities. Intercultural competence is important in language learning and teaching

because all intercultural encounters involve communication between individuals from different cultures (Némethová, 2020). In this context, learning BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia untuk Penutur Asing, or Indonesian for Foreign Speakers) becomes a vehicle for building intercultural competence. BIPA is a program that

***Corresponding Author:** Vismaia S. Damaianti (vismaia@upi.edu) Jalan Dr. Setiabudi No.229, Isola, Sukasari, Bandung, Central Java, 40154

©2025 by the Authors, published by Vision: Journal for Language and Foreign Language Learning
<https://journal.walisongo.ac.id/index.php/vision>

aims to introduce the Indonesian language and culture to foreign learners. (Kusmiatun et al., 2017). In the Indonesian Language for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) program, cross-cultural material is not treated as separate from language skills. However, it is integrated into the text, as stated in the Graduate Competency Standards (SKL), in accordance with Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia No. 27 of 2017. Every text studied contains representations of Indonesian culture, including values, norms, and social practices, thereby making language learning a form of cultural learning. This integration encourages foreign learners not only to understand the language system but also to directly encounter differences in values and cultural practices that demand intercultural adaptation skills.

In practice, cultural learning does not always run smoothly. Cultural learning can be conducted through direct interaction. Research such as that of Huszka et al. (2024) on how metaphors provide insight into the cultural and linguistic perspectives of native speakers can help deepen intercultural understanding. Another study, a cross-cultural study of handshaking as a form of nonverbal communication in Indonesia (Destiani et al., 2025). It shows that different ways of shaking hands based on age are a characteristic of Indonesian culture, which is rich in politeness and respect for others. However, foreign learners who try to practice Indonesian culture are not immune to culture shock (Almukdad & Karadag, 2024; WU Hui-nan & LIU Ying-liang, 2022). Foreign learners often experience culture shock due to differences in language, food, and community living habits in Indonesia, as well as difficulties in socializing and forming friendships

in their new environment (Simanjuntak et al., 2024). Another example is that students from Uzbekistan also experience difficulties adapting to a foreign academic environment, including academic adjustment, psychological needs, and language anxiety (Nuralieva et al., 2024). It shows that learning a culture involves not only linguistic aspects but also affective, social, and reflective abilities.

Cross-cultural learning in the BIPA program takes place not only face-to-face in Indonesia, but also through face-to-face learning in the learners' home countries, online learning, and the role of local teachers. These four contexts of cross-cultural learning in the BIPA program will provide foreign learners with their own understanding and impressions. Learning about Indonesian culture face-to-face in the learners' home countries presents its own challenges because direct interaction with the authentic Indonesian cultural environment is not available. In this context, teachers need to present cultural representations through media, texts, simulation practices, and collaborative activities that allow learners to experience the culture even though they are outside Indonesia. According to interviews with BIPA teachers, they are required to bring authentic artifacts from Indonesia to introduce to learners. It poses a challenge for intercultural learning in the learners' home countries.

To understand this adaptation process more deeply, the intercultural competence framework proposed by Byram (2020) is an important reference. The phenomenon of culture shock, often considered a challenge for international students, can be understood as a formative stage in the development of intercultural savoir. Byram (2020) includes

attitude (*savoir être*), cultural knowledge (*savoir*), interpretation and connection skills (*savoir comprendre*), discovery and interaction skills (*savoir faire*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*). Research using Byram's framework as a basis for assessing the development of intercultural competence (Erickson, 2021) concludes that it provides learners with space to develop critical cultural awareness by comparing cross-cultural values and practices. Harper explains that foreign language instruction on campus is an effective means of fostering cultural awareness, attitudes, and skills, provided that teachers are equipped with cultural teaching strategies (Harper, 2023). Understanding Byram's *savoir* framework is an important basis for explaining how culture shock shapes a person's development of intercultural competence.

Furthermore, Byram (1997) explains that intercultural competence is formed through five main types of *savoir*. Openness and tolerance refer to the ability to suspend judgment of other cultures; cultural and social knowledge refers to learners' understanding of social practices, values, and cultural systems of both their own and target cultures; interpretation and linkage skills refer to the ability to interpret the meaning behind cultural behaviors or symbols and relate them to one's own cultural values; the skills of discovery and interaction refer to the learner's ability to apply cultural knowledge in real interactions. Cultural and critical thinking skills refer to the learner's ability to assess and reflect on cultural values. Thus, culture shock can be seen not merely as an obstacle, but as a process that encourages the development of intercultural competence.

In the context of teaching BIPA, the application of Byram's *savoir* framework is important because cross-cultural learning does not only take place face-to-face in Indonesia, but also in the learners' home countries, through online learning, and with the involvement of local teachers. However, studies on intercultural learning in BIPA programs still tend to focus on specific contexts, such as face-to-face learning in Indonesia or online learning. Previous studies, such as Hertiki et al. (2025) and Muzaki & Hakim (2022), have focused more on media and the effectiveness of online learning, while research on comparing intercultural learning contexts remains limited. In fact, these contextual variations can lead to differences in how learners understand culture, interact with others, and interpret the role of local teachers. This gap provides an important basis for research, raising the main question of how intercultural learning for foreign learners in the BIPA program compares across face-to-face learning in Indonesia, face-to-face learning in the learners' country of origin, online learning, and learning with local teachers.

Method

This study is a qualitative research study to compare Indonesian cultural learning for BIPA learners through face-to-face learning in Indonesia, face-to-face learning in the learners' home countries, online learning, and the role of local teachers.

Participants

Participants in this study were divided into four categories. First, five foreign learners were studying Indonesian culture face-to-face. They came from Sri Lanka, Japan, Korea, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. The learners attended

Indonesian culture classes at a private university in West Java. They had been attending BIPA classes for five months. The learners' ages range from 18 to 35. They are taught by instructors proficient in the Indonesian language and culture, with 2 years of teaching experience. Second, learners who study Indonesian in their home country of Timor-Leste. The instructors are sent by the Indonesian Language Agency of the Ministry of Education and Culture as State Language Ambassadors. Indonesian language and culture instruction has been underway for three months.

Various Indonesian cultural activities are introduced to learners. Teaching is conducted at the Indonesian Language Center in Timor-Leste. Learners are aged 17 to 22. Teachers have experience in the Indonesian language and culture and have undergone a selection process to teach it in Timor-Leste. Then, BIPA learning

takes place online, either face-to-face or asynchronously. Learners gain insight into Indonesian culture through multimodal practices, such as videos and images. Learners can replay videos at their convenience and ask questions directly via Zoom. Learners range in age from 17 to 35. Teachers in this category have experience in language and culture and have been selected by the Ministry of Education and Culture's Language Agency. Finally, BIPA learning is conducted by local teachers in Timor-Leste. The average age of learners is between 15 and 17 years old. The process of learning the Indonesian language and culture has been underway for more than 2 months. The teachers already have experience in teaching the Indonesian language and culture. The teachers and learners come from the same country. Teachers are assigned to introduce the Indonesian language and culture. The following are the codes for each participant.

Table 1
Student and Teacher Code

culture class	code	total
Face-to-face (Indonesia), abbreviated as LI	LI1, LI2, LI3, LI4, LI5	5 students
Face-to-face (home country) abbreviated as LH	LH1, LH2, until LH7	7 students
Online abbreviated LO	LO1 until LO5	5 students
The role of local teachers is abbreviated as LL,	LL1 until LL5	5 students
Teacher of local	TL	1 teacher

Data Collection

The research was conducted in May–June 2025. The data collection process in this study was quite diverse because the context of cultural learning for BIPA learners included face-to-face, online, and local teacher attendance. The data collection process for face-to-face learning, both

in Indonesia and in the learners' home countries, used observation, documentation, and interviews. In the observation, the aspects mandated in the data collection process included the learning context and situation, instructor activities, foreign learner responses, intercultural interactions in the classroom, the process of cultural meaning-making, and the

obstacles to cultural meaning-making faced by learners. These aspects refer to the stages of intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997) to understand cross-cultural issues by learners and researchers by summarizing the aspects of attitude (At), knowledge (Kw), interpretation and connection skills (IR), skills to discover and interact (DI), and cultural awareness (CA). This research involved several researchers conducting observations and documentation in different locations, according to the learning context. The first researcher made descriptive field notes on BIPA learners in Indonesia.

In contrast, the other researcher made notes in the learners' home country, Timor-Leste. The researchers conducted six classroom observations during May-June, covering learning in Indonesia, the learners' country, online learning, and the role of local teachers. The materials introduced included the culture of greeting in Indonesia, family values, *angklung*, and eating together. In contrast, the cultural materials introduced in Timor Leste included *angklung*, watching regional performances, and the value of deliberation in Indonesia.

In addition to observation, researchers also documented the learning process by photographing and recording lessons, which were then transcribed. After that, interviews were conducted to supplement the field data obtained. The interview aspects included background and motivation for learning BIPA, face-to-face/online learning experiences/the role of local teachers, cultural interactions, understanding of Indonesian culture, learning media and methods obtained, intercultural challenges, and the impact on BIPA learners while learning Indonesian culture. The

interviews lasted 20-30 minutes each in the cultural learning context. The data collection process in online BIPA learning was conducted through observation, online virtual documentation, and interviews. The researcher conducted observations by monitoring several aspects, such as the learning process (how teachers presented cultural material online, whether the learning resources were multimodal or discussion forums), how learners were involved during online class activities, intercultural interactions (how they responded to cross-cultural topics, whether learners were able to compare cross-cultural learning with their home countries, whether they are interested in learning about Indonesian culture, and others), and the use of multimodal resources to help learners understand Indonesian culture.

Data Analysis

This study uses a comparative qualitative approach with a focus on thematic analysis and source triangulation. The researcher conducted an analysis comparing intercultural patterns that emerged across four contexts of Indonesian cultural learning for BIPA learners: face-to-face learning in Indonesia and in the learners' home countries, online learning, and the role of local teachers. The researcher referred to the theory of Miles et al. (2014), which posits that data analysis consists of three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the reduction stage, various data were obtained; for example, learners experienced firsthand bargaining activities in traditional markets for face-to-face learning in Indonesia and were categorized as cultural understanding (CU), then grouped into themes/aspects of knowledge (Kw). Then, when playing the *angklung* in the

learners' home country for BIPA teaching classes, the culture was introduced through video shows or image presentations by the teacher for online BIPA learning. The introduction of the *angklung* and its use in culture classes by local teachers to learners was coded as a form of interaction (FI). Then, the results of observations conducted in face-to-face cultural classes in Indonesia indicated that Korean learners did not understand the cultural norms regarding shaking hands in Indonesia, which were categorized as cultural understanding (CU). In addition, other data were obtained indicating that teachers gained direct experience and information about the cultural meanings they received, and these were coded as the role of teacher (RT). The field data, in the form of transcripts from the recorded documentation, showed that the instructor provided BIPA learners with an understanding of how to bargain for goods in traditional markets. Learners practiced the vocabulary to convey to the seller. In this case, there was a form of learner understanding of how to buy an item through bargaining in traditional markets. This understanding can be categorized as cultural understanding (CU).

The field data obtained in this study were validated through interviews. The interview data was obtained in the field, such as "We got firsthand experience practicing the *angklung* with the trainer." Then, another thing was also felt by Timorese learners who studied culture in their country by being taught directly by teachers from Indonesia, as quoted below: "We were taught directly by the teacher to practice the *angklung*. We will perform *angklung* at the peak event." These two quotes are excerpts from interviews with two students who studied

culture in Indonesia and in their home countries. The second example of data was coded RT. The coding can then be interpreted as the teacher being a cultural mediator for the code RT, for example.

Results and Discussion

Results

The findings in this chapter compare intercultural learning in the context of face-to-face learning in Indonesia, face-to-face learning in learners' home countries, online learning, and the role of local teachers. The aspects covered include attitudes, knowledge, interpretation and connection skills, discovery and interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness. Details are provided in Table 1.

A Learner's Attitude

The table above shows the gradation of intercultural attitudes (*savoir attitude*) from the four cultural learning contexts. Compared to the four learning contexts, face-to-face learning in Indonesia fosters deep interculturalism, as reflected in emotional involvement and empathy when interacting directly with the local community. On the other hand, in learning in the country of origin, curiosity is more guided by simulated activities facilitated by the teacher. In the online context, politeness and curiosity still arise, but remain at a surface level. In contrast, in learning with local teachers, curiosity tends to depend on the teacher's explanation (teacher-mediated curiosity). These findings indicate that the intensity of interaction and the authenticity of cultural experiences strongly influence the depth of BIPA learners' intercultural attitudes.

Immersion learning and cultural practices are experienced firsthand, for example, through

bargaining activities between sellers and BIPA learners as buyers. Previously, they learned how to bargain in the market. Learners also learned the denominations of the rupiah to make payments to sellers. Learners experienced the unique culture of bargaining that occurs in Indonesian markets. They also practiced in class what words to say when bargaining for goods at the market. Foreign learners face challenges in this activity. They must adapt to a new

environment with cultural concepts that differ from those of their home countries. In countries such as Japan, bargaining is almost non-existent. Usually, merchants label the prices of the items they sell, meaning that the prices are non-negotiable. However, learners have an open attitude and a sense of curiosity about how they can successfully obtain the items they want at traditional markets in Indonesia.

Table 1

Comparison of Face-to-Face and Online Cultural Learning and the Role of Local BIPA Teachers

Aspect	Face to face (Indonesia)	Face to face (Learner's Home Country)	Online Learning	With Local Teacher
attitude	Learners show high curiosity and emotional engagement during immersion activities (e.g., bargaining and visiting local families). They express empathy and respect for local norms.	Curiosity arises in classroom simulations (cooking and playing the angklung musical instrument). The role of the teacher is very influential.	Learners express politeness and curiosity via chat or emoji; engagement remains surface-level.	Learners' curiosity depends on teachers' explanations rather than self-exploration.
knowledge	Learners gain a deep, contextual understanding of Indonesian values (politeness, togetherness) through lived experiences.	Knowledge gained through cultural demonstrations; understanding remains factual, not experiential.	Learners acquire symbolic knowledge from videos but have limited contextual comprehension.	Knowledge depends on the teacher's own cultural literacy and local comparison.
Interpretation and connection skills	Learners compare their home culture with Indonesian norms and reflect on politeness, communication styles, and social relations.	Learners can describe differences but struggle to interpret their meanings due to a lack of lived experience.	Learners relate online symbols to their own culture but often misinterpret context.	Teachers help learners connect Indonesian and local cultural practices.
Skills in finding and interacting	Learners practice real interactions: greetings, negotiations, and eating together. Adaptation appears in language and gesture.	Learners practice through role-play but lack spontaneity and nonverbal adaptation.	Learners interact through online tasks; linguistic adaptation is visible, but cultural adaptation is minimal.	Teachers design interactive simulations with local relevance; adaptation guided by teacher scaffolding.
Critical cultural awareness	Learners express reflection: "At first I felt strange eating by hand, but now I understand it shows togetherness."	Reflection occurs cognitively during discussions; learners admire but do not internalize cultural values.	Reflection remains verbal ("Indonesians are polite") without critical evaluation.	Teachers stimulate reflection through comparative discussion (e.g., directness vs. indirectness).

The bargaining was very interesting. It is different from how it is in our country. Finally, I learned how to bargain so that the seller would give me the goods and I would pay them. (L11At, interview, 22/06/25)

The interview data above shows that learners are curious and emotional during cultural learning. However, BIPA learners are happy because they can agree on the price of goods purchased from sellers. Learners feel confident with their vocabulary to interact with residents by bargaining, which is part of Indonesian culture. As he said, this reflects an open attitude and curiosity about different cultural practices in his country. Learners not

only observe differences, but also try to adapt to local ways in Indonesia. It shows empathy on their part, so that learners can follow what happens in Indonesia regarding bargaining. With this form of reality, the data reflects their attitude. In addition, cultural activities in the learners' country include playing the angklung. The learners were introduced to the origins of the angklung musical instrument and to examples of art performances that use angklung. During the documentation in June 2025, the learners showed enthusiasm to find out how to play it. The teacher became the main source of information for teaching angklung. Below are learners from Timor-Leste practicing angklung.

Figure 1

Angklung performance in face-to-face BIPA learning in Indonesia



Based on these images, learners acquire knowledge about how to play the angklung, its social function, and the meaning of togetherness in angklung playing. In this case, there are aspects of learners' attitudes and knowledge towards the angklung. In angklung practice, the teacher invites them to compare how the musical instrument they are learning to play is

different from musical instruments in their country. Learners are also introduced to the basic notes of the angklung and then play the rhythm of an Indonesian song, "Gundul-Gundul Pacul," which will be performed on Indonesian Independence Day. It is evident that, through the process of understanding and the attitude shown, they can compare the practice of the

angklung musical instrument with that in their country and are willing to practice the angklung for a song, showing a new way of interacting with the culture they are familiar with. The following is the result of an interview with a student from Timor-Leste about their introduction to the angklung.

I am happy to be able to play the angklung. Previously, I did not know about the angklung. The teacher introduced it to us. We will perform together in a show later. (LH1, interview, 25/06/25)

The interview results also showed their curiosity and openness to a new culture they were not previously familiar with. Furthermore, the interview excerpts conveyed the role of teachers in introducing the angklung. In addition, the statement that the students would perform in a show served as a starting point for reflection on the cultural value of togetherness in Indonesian culture. These statements showed aspects of *Savoir* (Byram, 1997).

Knowledge

In terms of *savoir-faire*, differences were found in the depth of cultural understanding across learning contexts. Learners studying in Indonesia demonstrated a more conceptual and contextual understanding because they directly experienced cultural values such as politeness and togetherness in their daily lives. In contrast, learning in their home countries tended to yield factual knowledge, acquired through cultural demonstrations rather than deep social experience. In the online context, the knowledge acquired is symbolic and visual, limited to the introduction of cultural products, such as traditional food or clothing, without emotional or social involvement. Meanwhile, in the context of local teacher involvement, the depth of learners' cultural knowledge is highly dependent on teachers' intercultural literacy in connecting Indonesian culture with learners' local culture. It shows that *savoir-faire* is not only shaped by content but also by context and the accompanying pedagogical mediation.

Figure 2

Workshop-based intercultural exposure in BIPA classes abroad



One of the cultural learning topics raised in an online class session was "Syukuran," an Indonesian tradition of expressing happiness and gratitude to God through communal meals. The teacher showed slides of Indonesians sitting on the floor, enjoying a meal together, and explained that syukuran embodies the values of togetherness, simplicity, and religiosity that characterize Indonesian culture. This lesson enriched learners' understanding of Indonesian social life. Through the images and the teacher's explanation, they understood that syukuran is not just a communal meal, but also a means of maintaining social relationships and expressing gratitude to God. However, because the lesson took place online, their understanding remained at a symbolic and descriptive level, not yet reaching experiential knowledge. These findings show that the online learning context allows for the transfer of informative cultural knowledge, but lacks the real social context that can deepen cultural understanding.

At our place, we also celebrate happiness by inviting people over. Seeing Indonesians come together makes me want to experience that togetherness too. It feels good. (LO1, interview, 27/06/25)

In interviews, learners understood that Indonesian culture emphasizes the value of togetherness in celebrations of gratitude, similar to practices in their own countries. Learners identified cross-cultural social knowledge that celebrating happiness is a universal value, even though it takes different forms. Cultural learning with local teachers involved teachers carrying out various practice-based activities, such as introducing Indonesian food, batik, and angklung music. From the results of observations and interviews, it appears that cultural learning about food is effective and meaningful, while learning about

batik and angklung faces limitations in facilities and technical difficulties in its implementation. Teachers introduced various Indonesian foods such as fried rice, satay, and tumpeng through pictures, videos, and even simple cooking practices together. The learners appeared enthusiastic, associating these foods with their local foods, and discussing the ingredients and social significance of eating together in Indonesian culture. Through this learning, the learners understood that food is not only physical, but also represents social values, togetherness, and gratitude in Indonesian culture. Teachers attempted to introduce batik through explanations and videos, but the batik-making practice was not carried out. The following is an excerpt from an interview with an Indonesian language and culture teacher in Timor-Leste.

The introduction to Indonesian food culture went well. Students were able to compare it with the food here. However, when I wanted to try my hand at batik, I didn't have the tools used in Indonesia. So, I was only able to get a basic introduction and compare it with the culture in Timor-Leste (TH1, interview, 25 Juni 2025).

Based on the above interviews with teachers in Timor-Leste, the knowledge acquired is theoretical, focusing on the region's origins and the materials used, without a deep understanding of the social values of harmony and cooperation embedded therein. As a result, cultural understanding develops only to a basic level, not to a level of social experience.

Interpretation and Connection Skills

Within the framework of *savoir*, the skills of interpreting and relating refer to learners' ability to understand the meanings of foreign behaviors, norms, symbols, and cultural

practices, and to relate those meanings to their own experiences, norms, or culture in order to gain a deeper understanding. These skills emphasize not only the recognition of cultural facts, but also the ability to understand the reasons behind certain cultural practices and to engage in critical reflection by comparing them with one's own culture.

Based on the research findings, learners demonstrated initial abilities to compare their cultures of origin with Indonesian cultural norms, including politeness, communication style, and social relationships. It indicates cultural awareness, although it is still at the observation stage and is not yet fully interpretive. On the other hand, learners can describe cultural differences but often find it difficult to interpret their meanings due to a lack of lived experience, suggesting that simply recognizing differences is not enough without the ability to interpret cultural values, norms, and social functions. Learners also try to connect Indonesian cultural symbols encountered online with their own culture. However, misunderstandings of context often occur, indicating the challenge of linking cultural meaning with personal cultural references, especially when symbols are ambiguous or contextual. In this situation, the role of the teacher becomes very important as a facilitator of interpretation and connection skills. Teachers provide additional context, bridge the experience gap, and help learners understand the relationship between their culture and the target culture, which aligns with scaffolding in intercultural learning to support the internalization of cultural meaning. An example of cultural learning in Indonesia is greeting. Learners observe that Indonesians have various

types of greetings, for example, a light handshake (general), bowing the head or bending slightly as a sign of respect to older people, shaking hands while holding the arm for close friends, or shaking hands with a kiss on the hand (*salim*) for parents and certain figures. Learners understand that greetings in Indonesia are not merely a formality, but convey values of politeness, social hierarchy, and familiarity. The form of greeting can vary according to age, social status, and personal relationships. The following are the results of interviews about Indonesian culture.

I like shaking hands. It's like in my country. But in Indonesia there are many types of handshakes, while in my country we only shake hands in a general way. (L12, interview, 15 Mei 2025)

This statement illustrates the learner's ability to interpret and connect (*savoir comprendre*) cultural values between Indonesia and their country. The learner can see that handshakes in both cultures have the same social function, namely as a form of greeting and respect, but interprets that in Indonesia, this practice has a wider variety and depth of social meaning. Through this comparison, learners demonstrate reflective cross-cultural understanding; they not only recognize differences in form, but also understand the underlying values. The positive attitude expressed through the phrase "I am happy to learn about handshaking" shows curiosity and acceptance of cultural diversity. Meanwhile, learners in the online class were introduced to eating together by sitting on the floor (*makan lesehan*). In general, in Cambodia, eating at the table is common. However, the tradition of eating on the floor remains prevalent in traditional households and in the implementation of traditional ceremonies. Culturally, the habit of eating on the floor in

Cambodia and Indonesia shares similar social values, namely emphasizing the importance of family togetherness, respect for social hierarchy, and the preservation of modesty in everyday life.

In my country, we usually eat at the table with our family, but in the village, we sometimes still eat on the floor, just like in Indonesia. I feel that the atmosphere is warmer because everyone sits close together and shares food. (LH2, interview, 25/06/2025)

The learner's quote shows their ability to interpret and connect the cultural meanings encountered in Indonesia with their own cultural experiences in their home country. The learner was able to observe similarities in the practice of eating on the floor between Indonesia and his own country (Cambodia), then interpret the social meaning behind this activity, namely the atmosphere of togetherness and warmth that arises from physical closeness and interaction while eating together. The statement "I feel the atmosphere is warmer because everyone sits close together and shares food" shows that the learner not only sees the similarities in the tradition's form, but also understands the social values it contains. In the context of *savoir comprendre* or the skill of interpreting and connecting, this statement illustrates that the learner has been able to

reflectively relate the cultural experience of Indonesia to their own cultural background.

Skills in Finding and Interacting

Learners' skills in discovering and interacting develop to varying depths depending on the learning context. In real interactions, learners can adapt linguistically and gesturally, demonstrating a more authentic understanding of the culture. However, when practiced through role-play or online learning, interactions tend to be controlled and less spontaneous, with minimal nonverbal adaptation. The role of the teacher remains important in providing scaffolding through interactive simulations relevant to the local context so that learners can recognize and adapt to social and cultural norms in cross-cultural communication. Learning that provides direct, authentic interaction experiences is more effective at fostering intercultural skills. At the same time, online simulation-based learning still requires stronger guidance and cultural context for discovery and interaction skills to develop optimally. The following is an example of an online Indonesian cultural learning activity.

Figure 3

Online BIPA learning interface for Indonesian language and culture



The online BIPA learning activity on shopping at traditional Indonesian markets reflects the application of *savoir découvrir* et *interagir*, or the skills of discovery and interaction. However, it has not yet been fully developed. In this activity, learners practiced understanding the context of buying and selling through Zoom simulations using price lists from various stores. In terms of discovery skills, learners recognized terms, units, and basic interaction patterns that reflect Indonesian market culture. However, because it was conducted online, the cultural experience gained was still representative. It did not address the market's actual social atmosphere.

Meanwhile, in terms of interaction skills, learners have demonstrated the ability to use Indonesian in functional contexts such as greeting, asking prices, and bargaining. However, the interactions that occur are still less spontaneous and do not yet display nonverbal adjustments such as friendly expressions, polite intonation, or gestures typical of Indonesian bargaining culture. It shows that learners understand the linguistic aspects of transactions but have not yet fully internalized their social meaning. In addition, the researcher conducted interviews to explore interactions, media use, and the role of teachers in online classes.

We know the vocabulary for bargaining. The teacher told us about the friendliness in interactions between sellers and buyers. I am not yet able to interact with the friendliness that exists in practice. (LO2, interview, 26/06/2025).

Critical Cultural Awareness

This awareness refers to learners' ability to assess, reflect on, and evaluate cultural values, both those of the target culture (Indonesia) and

their own, rationally and ethically, rather than simply observing or imitating cultural behaviors. In the statement, "At first I felt strange eating by hand, but now I understand it shows togetherness," it is evident that learners have begun to reflect on their personal experiences cognitively and affectively. Initially, there was a sense of unfamiliarity with the practice of eating with the hands. However, an understanding emerged that this action reflects the values of togetherness and intimacy in Indonesian culture. It is a form of initial reflection that shows an understanding of socio-cultural meaning, not just superficial differences. However, further findings show that this reflection is not yet fully critical or in-depth. Learners may admire Indonesian culture, but they have not yet reached the stage of critically evaluating or comparing it with their own cultural values. Similarly, when reflections remain verbal and descriptive, such as "Indonesians are polite," without analyzing the values, social context, or communicative implications, this indicates superficial, non-critical reflection. Teachers play an important role in stimulating this awareness through discussions of cultural comparisons (e.g., directness vs. indirectness), which encourage learners to think more deeply about why a behavior is performed and how that value relates to the social norms and belief systems of each culture. The following are the results of a questionnaire given to learners about *angklung* and *batik*.

I can not do batik because my teacher said she does not have the tools. The tools are only available in Indonesia (LL1, interview, 16/05/2025)

The learner stated that he could not *batik* because the tools were only available in Indonesia (LL1, interview, 05/16/2025). It shows the limitations of hands-on practice in cultural learning. Nevertheless, the learner still showed

initial awareness of the cultural context, realizing that batik is a typical Indonesian craft that requires specialized equipment. Teachers can stimulate critical cultural awareness by inviting learners to reflect on the values, philosophy, and social norms contained in the batik-making process. The limitation of tools does not prevent learners from internalizing cultural meaning and developing a deeper understanding.

Discussion

Intercultural awareness is a core competency in language learning, as it involves understanding, appreciating, and adapting to cultural similarities and differences, which helps reduce fear and build understanding between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. (Al Hariri, 2022). The results of the study comparing cultural learning in BIPA classes between face-to-face learning in Indonesia, face-to-face learning in the learners' home countries, online learning, and learning with local teachers provide a comprehensive picture of how context, media, and the role of teachers can influence the development of learners' intercultural competence. Each learning context shows different characteristics in developing Byram's aspects of *savoir*, ranging from attitude (*savoir être*) to knowledge (*savoirs*), interpretation and connection skills (*savoir comprendre*), discovery and interaction skills (*savoir apprendre/faire*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*).

In face-to-face cultural learning in Indonesia, learners show high emotions, how they express empathy and respect for certain norms in Indonesia, such as learners who were initially reluctant to try bargaining at the market, but once they understood how to use vocabulary

that shows friendliness in the market as a form of Indonesian culture, the BIPA learners were finally able to adapt and dare to bargain at the market. It was possible because of a deep understanding of the role of real learning contexts in Indonesian values (politeness and togetherness). Then, learning about Indonesian culture in the learners' home countries sparked curiosity, driven by the teacher's role. The knowledge was gained through demonstrations presented by the teacher, not through direct real-life experiences. Overall, the learners were amazed by the uniqueness of Indonesian culture. However, they could not fully immerse themselves because there was no physical Indonesian environment in their countries. Another context of cultural learning is online. Online cultural learning provides only cognitive understanding, but affective understanding is not deeply felt due to limited contextual understanding. Learners only compare cultural symbols between Indonesia and their own countries. They need the teacher's validation to conclude their arguments about Indonesian culture. Learners also only provide general conclusions, without critically examining Indonesian cultural practices in depth. The final context of cultural learning is the role of local teachers. Learners' curiosity depends on the teacher's presentation, not on the results of independent exploration. Teachers act as facilitators in conveying Indonesian culture. In this case, the teacher's cultural understanding is highly relied upon. Teachers help learners compare the cultures they have learned with Indonesian culture. However, teachers are not fully able to apply cultural practices due to their limited understanding of culture and the difficulty of accessing practical materials available only in Indonesia.

Based on the four aspects of the cultural learning context for BIPA learners, it appears that elements of Byram's *savoir* are implemented, although not all aspects are maximized. However, compared to the four aspects of learning, the Indonesian learning context appears able to integrate aspects of Byram's *savoir*. The learning context in Indonesia naturally provides more space for the elements of Byram's *savoir* to be realized more fully. In immersion learning, learners not only study language and culture theoretically but also experience cultural practices firsthand in their daily lives, such as interacting with native speakers, participating in social activities, and observing cultural norms in authentic contexts. Through these direct experiences, learners can develop deeper, more contextual cultural knowledge (*savoir-faire*) by witnessing firsthand values such as politeness, mutual cooperation, and hospitality in Indonesian society. In addition, the skills of interpretation and connection (*savoir comprendre*) also develop more strongly, as they must interpret cultural behavior and adapt it to their understanding of their own culture. Immersion learning also encourages the development of interaction skills (*savoir apprendre/faire*) because learners communicate directly with the local community, which requires adaptability, negotiation of meaning, and sensitivity to cultural differences.

Furthermore, the aspect of *savoir-être* (openness and curiosity) grows through genuine cross-cultural experiences. At the same time, *savoir s'engager* (critical engagement with cultural values) emerges when learners begin to assess and reflect on these values from a personal perspective. Face-to-face learning in Indonesia provides the greatest opportunity for

learners to experience lived culture, which is a direct, authentic encounter with Indonesian cultural practices. Learners who experience live culture gain direct immersion, providing cultural and linguistic input (Qi, 2024). Through deliberate immersion and guided reflection, learners become aware of the need to reevaluate their views, expectations, and assumptions about themselves and others, even though immersion experiences and their impact on cultural awareness and self-identity vary among participants. (Onosu, 2021).

In addition, cultural immersion learning provides opportunities for students to experience diversity and develop cultural safety through targeted learning objectives (Buchanan et al., 2021). Zhang et al. (2021). Explaining someone who truly understands and appreciates other cultures requires direct (natural) cultural exposure and repeated activities so that, through habit, local values and norms are absorbed. Such as the Erasmus Program, where learners improve their knowledge, skills, and intercultural awareness, especially in nonverbal communication, active listening, asking questions, and participating in joint activities (Primorac et al., 2025). Cultural immersion is an effective experience-based learning intervention for developing learners' cultural responsiveness skills (Ramirez, 2021).

The cultural immersion process learners experience is inseparable from experiential learning. (Kolb, 1984), where direct involvement in cultural practices and guided reflection enable them to build a deep understanding, internalize cultural norms and values, and develop real intercultural competence. It can be linked to cultural learning practices in BIPA classes, where foreign learners' direct involvement in cultural

activities provides both real experiences and conceptual understanding. Teixeira & Zanela Klein (2024) conveyed their direct experiences of producing knowledge internalization, a process in which cultural knowledge is not only cognitively known but also experienced affectively and socially. Learners can internalize cultural norms, values, and practices. This perspective is reinforced by Gashi (2021) and Spirovska Tevdovska (2024), who emphasize that cross-cultural social interaction is an important mechanism for increasing intercultural awareness. Through concrete experiences in a social context, learners do not merely observe cultural differences; they learn to understand the meanings, contexts, and relationships among cultural factors. Analysis of these two findings shows that intercultural awareness develops most effectively when learning combines direct experience with reflective social interaction, so that cultural knowledge becomes part of the learner's overall experience and awareness, rather than merely theoretical information. People who are new to other cultures learn social norms more effectively through direct experience if they have intuitive abilities (implicit aptitude) because social norms are often complex and cannot be learned solely through logic or formal rules (Savani et al., 2022). Curiosity arises in learners who are guided by curiosity because teachers play a controlling role in learning, and learners do not have authentic experiences. Although it requires mutual understanding between teachers and learners, learners also need to adapt to communicating virtually in order to understand the new culture they are learning about (Drixler, 2022).

Meanwhile, online learning adds a new dimension through digital technology, enabling cross-cultural interaction through multimodal texts, videos, and synchronous/asynchronous discussions, as found in the field and several studies presented by Dahlström (2022) and Muszyńska et al. (2023). Although digital media expands access to information, the experience remains cognitive in nature, and the development of social or interpretive skills (*savoir comprendre* and *savoir apprendre/faire*) is relatively limited. Learners tend to compare cultural symbols abstractly and need teacher validation to reach conclusions about cultural meanings, which can affect optimal integration of affective experiences and cultural norms. The role of local teachers in learners' home countries can mitigate these limitations because they serve as cultural bridges with a dual perspective: understanding students' context while also conveying Indonesian culture (Arwansyah et al., 2017; Lim & Griffith, 2016). In this context, the presence of local teachers can fill some of these gaps. Local teachers play an important role in guiding the process of cultural interpretation and comparison by providing a conceptual framework and context relevant to students' backgrounds. This role supports the development of *savoir comprendre* by helping learners understand the meaning of Indonesian culture through explanations adapted to their own cultural perspectives. However, the limitations of local teachers in presenting authentic cultural practices hinder the development of *savoir-être* (attitudes of openness and cultural empathy) and *savoir s'engager* (the ability to evaluate culture critically).

Based on the discussion of the four contexts of cultural learning above, it appears that the holistic integration of the five elements of savoir is key to the formation of intercultural competence in BIPA learners. Learning based on direct experience (experiential learning) and balanced with socio-cultural reflection produces an understanding of culture that is not only cognitive but also affective and ethical. Intercultural awareness does not only grow from knowledge about other cultures, but also from experiences that enable learners to feel, interpret, assess, and sustainably reflect on cultural values. Therefore, effective BIPA learning needs to combine the strengths of each context, draw on immersive experiences in Indonesia, enrich cognitive reflection through online learning, and maintain the interpretive function of local teachers as cultural mediators. The combination of these three approaches has the potential to create intercultural learning that not only transfers cultural knowledge but also fosters empathy, critical reflection, and learners' adaptive readiness for authentic interaction with cross-cultural communities.

Conclusion

This study shows that intercultural learning in BIPA programs unfolds differently across four contexts, each offering unique opportunities and challenges. Face-to-face learning in Indonesia provides learners with the most authentic and in-depth experience of Indonesian culture, allowing them to internalize social norms and practices directly through daily interactions. Meanwhile, face-to-face learning in learners' home countries offers limited but practical exposure through cultural demonstrations and workshops, though it lacks

contextual depth. Online learning provides flexible access to cultural materials and fosters intercultural interaction through digital platforms; however, learners' cultural understanding often remains symbolic and less experience-based. The role of local teachers is crucial because they act as cultural mediators, bridging participants' backgrounds with Indonesian culture, even though their limited experience with Indonesian culture limits the transfer of culture. The implications of this study focus on the following points. First, the integration of Byram's Savoirs framework in BIPA learning. It is necessary because, in Indonesia, the learner's country, online learning, and the role of local teachers activate different savoirs in proportion to the learning context. Based on the study conducted, cultural learning in Indonesia can integrate Byram's savoir framework to the fullest extent. Second, learning through experience gives meaning to learners by emphasizing continuous reflection. Third, there is training for local teachers to foster intercultural communicative competence through various means, such as collaboration with Indonesian communities abroad to raise critical cultural awareness.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the research participants for their valuable contributions to this study. Special thanks go to the State Language Ambassadors assigned abroad to teach BIPA. Through digitalization activities, the researcher obtained a wealth of valuable information to support this study. The author also thanks the local teachers who teach BIPA and the learners who are always happy to be

introduced to the Indonesian language and culture.

References

- Al Hariri, K. (2022). Incorporating Culture in Teaching English as a Lingua Franca between Intercultural Awareness and Cultura Franca: A Reading in the Literature. *Mextesol Journal*, 46(2), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.61871/mj.v46n2-15>
- Almukdad, M., & Karadag, E. (2024). Culture shock among international students in Turkey: an analysis of the effects of self-efficacy, life satisfaction and socio-cultural adaptation on culture shock. *BMC Psychology*, 12(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-024-01641-9>
- Arwansyah, Y. B., Suwandi, S., & ... (2017). Revitalisasi peran budaya lokal dalam materi pembelajaran bahasa Indonesia bagi penutur asing (BIPA). ... *Education And Language ...*, 915–920. <https://jurnal.unissula.ac.id/index.php/ELIC/article/view/1318/0%0Ahttps://jurnal.unissula.ac.id/index.php/ELIC/article/download/1318/1025>
- Buchanan, K., Velandia, M., Weckend, M., & Bayes, S. (2021). Learning objectives of cultural immersion programs: A scoping review. *Nurse Education Today*, 100. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2021.104832>
- Byram, M. (2020). Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence. In *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. <https://doi.org/10.21832/byram0244>
- Dahlström, H. (2022). Students as digital multimodal text designers: A study of resources, affordances, and experiences. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 53(2), 391–407. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13171>
- Destiani, Syihabuddin, Wahyuni, S., Simatupang, Y. J., & Putriani, A. (2025). *Budaya Bersalaman sebagai Pengembangan Materi Lintas Budaya Bagi Penutur Asing di Indonesia*. 7(1), 16–24. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.30599/asj4yh11>
- Drixler, N. (2022). Features of Online Second Language Interactional Competence in a German-Israeli Virtual Exchange. *TESOL in Context*, 30(2), 65–95.
- Erickson, L. (2021). Using Byram's Five Savoirs to Measure the Development of Intercultural Competence in the COVID-19 Era during an Engineering Sojourn Abroad. *Journal of International Engineering Education*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.23860/jiee.2021.03.01.03>
- Gashi, L. (2021). Intercultural Awareness Through English Language Teaching: The Case of Kosovo. *Interchange*, 52(3), 357–375. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-021-09441-5>
- Harper, J. (2023). *Using Byram' s Savoirs to Ensure the Incorporation of Teaching*. 8(2), 227–236.
- Hertiki, Nungki Nurbani, A., Khabib, S., Mastuti Rahayu, E., & Thria Nathalia, H. (2025). Pemanfaatan Media Interaktif Untuk Meningkatkan Motivasi Pembelajar Bipa Dalam Kelas Daring Di Kbri Oslo, Norwegia. *Pancasona*, 4(1), 127–140. <https://doi.org/10.36456/pancasona.v4i1.10030>
- Huszka, B., Stark, A., Aini, I., & Annisa, R. I. (2024). Makna Metafora pada Pembelajaran Bahasa dan Budaya Indonesia di kelas Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing (BIPA). *Indonesian Language Education and Literature*, 9(2), 443. <https://doi.org/10.24235/ileal.v9i2.16645>
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential Learning*:

- Experience as The Source of Learning and Development. *Prentice Hall, Inc., 1984*, 20–38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-7506-7223-8.50017-4>
- Kusmiatun, A., Suyitno, I., & Basuki, I. (2017). Identifying Features of Indonesian for Speakers of Other Languages (Bipa) Learning for Academic Purposes. *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies*, 3(4). <https://doi.org/10.23918/ijsses.v3i4p197>
- Lim, H.-Y., & Griffith, W. I. (2016). Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence in Foreign Language Learning. *Sociology and Anthropology*, 4(11), 1030–1035. <https://doi.org/10.13189/sa.2016.041110>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, M. A., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis* (3rd ed.). SAGE
- Muszyńska, B., Pfiingsthorn, J., & Giesler, T. (2023). The Role of Online Learning Environments in the Enhancement of Language Learners' Intercultural Competence: A Scoping Review of Studies Published between 2015 and 2022. *Languages*, 8(3). <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages8030211>
- Muzaki, H., & Hakim, C. A. (2022). Pemanfaatan Aplikasi Discord Sebagai Alternatif Pembelajaran Bipa Daring. *Estetika: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Dan Sastra Indonesia*, 4(1), 15–29. <https://doi.org/10.36379/estetika.v4i1.231>
- Némethová, I. (2020). Building Intercultural Competence through Language Education. *Economica*, 7(4), 148–157. <https://doi.org/10.47282/economica/2014/7/4/4420>
- Nuralieva, N., Wei, Z., AL-Qadri, A. H., Saraa, N., & Chang, M. (2024). Students' beliefs, basic psychological needs, classroom participation, foreign language anxiety, and academic adjustment: A correlation study in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. *Heliyon*, 10(18), e37127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e37127>
- Onosu, G. (2021). The impact of cultural immersion experience on identity transformation process. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(5), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18052680>
- Primorac, M., Begić, A., & Grbavac, I. (2025). Erasmus Students' Experience With Intercultural Communication. *Medijske Studije*, 16(31), 187–201. <https://doi.org/10.20901/ms.16.31.9>
- Qi, Y. (2024). *The Impact of Immersive Courses on Second Language Ability and Cultural Adaptation*. 11(2), 202–204. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.54097/1jbg3210>
- Ramirez, S. (2021). Cultural Exposure as a Creative Experiential Learning Intervention. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 00(00), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2021.1949420>
- Savani, K., Morris, M. W., Fincher, K., Lu, J. G., & Kaufman, S. B. (2022). Experiential Learning of Cultural Norms: The Role of Implicit and Explicit Aptitudes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 123(2), 272–291. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000290>
- Simanjuntak, C. R., Sinaga, M. A. P., Putri, N. S., Susanti, R., Sinaga, R. T., Silaban, R. D., Prasasti, T. I., & Jesika, Y. S. (2024). Mengantisipasi Gelar Budaya Melalui Pembelajaran BIPA Alat Musik Tradisional Batak Toba. *Jurnal Intelek Dan ...*, 3257–3276. <https://jicnusantara.com/index.php/jicn/article/view/374%0Ahttps://jicnusantara.com/index.php/jicn/article/download>

/374/434

Spirovska Tevdovska, E. (2024). Intercultural Awareness, Inclusion and Learning Experiences in Esp (English for Specific Purposes) Courses-Students' Perceptions and Views. *Journal of Teaching English for Specific and Academic Purposes*, 12(1), 87–95. <https://doi.org/10.22190/JTESAP240129008S>

Teixeira, K. A. da S., & Zanela Klein, A. (2024). The Development of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) in Situated Learning. *SAGE Open*, 14(4), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/215824402412>

88056

WU Hui-nan, & LIU Ying-liang. (2022). Cultural Shock and Adaptation of International Students in China. *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, 12(6), 685–690. <https://doi.org/10.17265/2159-5836/2022.06.015>

Zhang, S. N., Ruan, W. Q., & Yang, T. T. (2021). National Identity Construction in Cultural and Creative Tourism: The Double Mediators of Implicit Cultural Memory and Explicit Cultural Learning. *SAGE Open*, 11(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211040789>

