

**EXPLORING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AMONG FIRST-  
SEMESTER STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY OF LOCAL CULTURAL  
AWARENESS IN RURAL INDONESIA**

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**Abstract**

This study explores the level of intercultural competence among first-semester university students, focusing specifically on their awareness of local cultural practices in rural Indonesia. Although these students come from culturally rich rural areas, findings reveal that many exhibit only superficial knowledge of traditional elements such as local foods, daily village activities, and palm sugar production. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected from 34 students in English Education and Communication Science programs through open-ended questionnaires. Thematic analysis indicated a significant gap in cultural self-awareness, a foundational element of intercultural competence. Most students could name traditional foods but were unable to explain their cultural significance. Only a small number had firsthand experience with traditional practices, and very few had seen palm sugar being produced despite living in regions where such practices are common. These findings suggest that limited cultural self-awareness among rural students impedes the development of broader intercultural skills. The study recommends integrating local culture into university curricula, organizing intercultural workshops, and strengthening community engagement to enhance students' intercultural competence starting from their own cultural roots.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, cultural self-awareness, rural students, traditional practices, higher education

**INTRODUCTION**

In today's globalized society, the ability to navigate cultural differences is increasingly vital, especially for students in language and communication fields. This ability, known as intercultural competence, encompasses knowledge, attitudes, and skills that enable effective and respectful communication across cultures (Byram, 1997). For university students, particularly in rural or non-metropolitan areas, developing intercultural competence begins not with foreign cultures, but with an understanding of their own.

The growing need for intercultural interaction demands that learners not only master linguistic aspects but also understand the social and cultural norms embedded in language (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003).

Understanding one's own culture is crucial for fostering mutual communication, as each person and every region or country exhibits unique characteristics and customs. Therefore, studying intercultural communication should start with a comprehensive knowledge of one's own culture (Kustini, 2023).

Before delving into other cultures, it is essential to appreciate the richness of our own cultural heritage, local wisdom, and norms, which can enhance our awareness, pride, and sense of belonging. Integrating local culture into English learning materials enables students to explore intercultural strategies such as code-switching, the use of cultural symbols, and the ability to interpret implicit meanings in intercultural interactions (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001).

Deardorff (2006) emphasizes that intercultural competence is not simply acquired through passive exposure to other cultures; rather, it must be consciously developed, starting from cultural self-awareness. Students who lack a firm understanding of their own cultural context are less prepared to engage meaningfully in intercultural exchanges, as they lack the comparative perspective necessary for true dialogue and reflection. This aligns with Byram's (1997) concept of *savoir être*, the readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own.

In the context of student life, for example in boarding houses, culture shock often occurs when individuals encounter people from diverse cultural backgrounds. However, students frequently do not recognize their own culture well enough, which can lead to obstacles in intercultural communication (Kustini, 2024).

The research explores students' views on intercultural understanding as a vital aspect of communication shown that integrating intercultural themes into the curriculum enhances students' competence in navigating cultural differences and equips them for effective global communication (Kustini, 2025).

Conversations reveal that cultural awareness among students is still lacking. This limited cultural knowledge highlights a deficiency in one key component of intercultural competence: cultural self-awareness (Fantini, 2009)..

Based on the facts, this study investigates the cultural awareness of early-semester university students from rural regions of Indonesia, focusing on their understanding of traditional practices in their home villages, such as local foods, daily activities, and palm sugar production. By examining students' familiarity with their own cultural heritage, this research aims to uncover gaps in intercultural competence and suggest strategies for enhancing intercultural learning at the foundational stage of higher education.

### Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the level of local cultural awareness among first-semester students from rural areas of Indonesia?
2. What are the forms of limited knowledge about local culture experienced by these students?
3. How does this limited understanding reflect deficiencies in intercultural competence?
4. What factors contribute to the low intercultural competence among these students?

### Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the extent to which first-semester students from rural backgrounds understand local culture in their home communities.
2. To describe the forms of cultural awareness gaps among the students.
3. To analyze the relationship between local cultural awareness and intercultural competence.
4. To explore contributing factors behind limited intercultural competence, as a basis for future curriculum development.

## **METHOD**

### **1. Research Approach and Design**

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study design. This design was chosen to gain in-depth insights into the issue of low intercultural competence among first-semester students in the context of rural cultural awareness. The participants were selected from various higher education institutions in Indonesia, with a focus on those majoring in English Education and Communication Science. This approach is appropriate for capturing students' communication behavior in real contexts and understanding their constructed meanings (Creswell, 2016).

### **2. Participants and Data Sources**

The participants consisted of 34 early semester university students from rural areas in West Java, Indonesia. These students represented a diverse range of cultural traditions, village settings, and local livelihoods.

Primary data were collected through open-ended questions that asked students to describe:

- Their favorite traditional food and the reasons behind their preference.
- Daily activities in their village communities.
- Their knowledge about definite own culture, in this case, palm sugar.
- Whether they had ever seen palm sugar being made, and if so, to describe the process.

### **3. Data Collection Technique**

Data were collected using a Google Form distributed in early May 2025. Students provided responses in English, allowing researchers to assess both cultural content and language use. The open-ended format encouraged participants to express their personal experiences and knowledge freely.

### **4. Data Analysis**

Responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. The coding process focused on identifying:

- Levels of cultural knowledge (surface-level, detailed, or nonexistent).
- Descriptions of traditional practices (both general and specific).
- Emotional or personal connections to local culture.
- Misconceptions or gaps in understanding.

The results were interpreted through the lens of intercultural competence theories by Deardorff (2006) and Byram (1997), particularly focusing on cultural self-awareness as a foundational dimension.

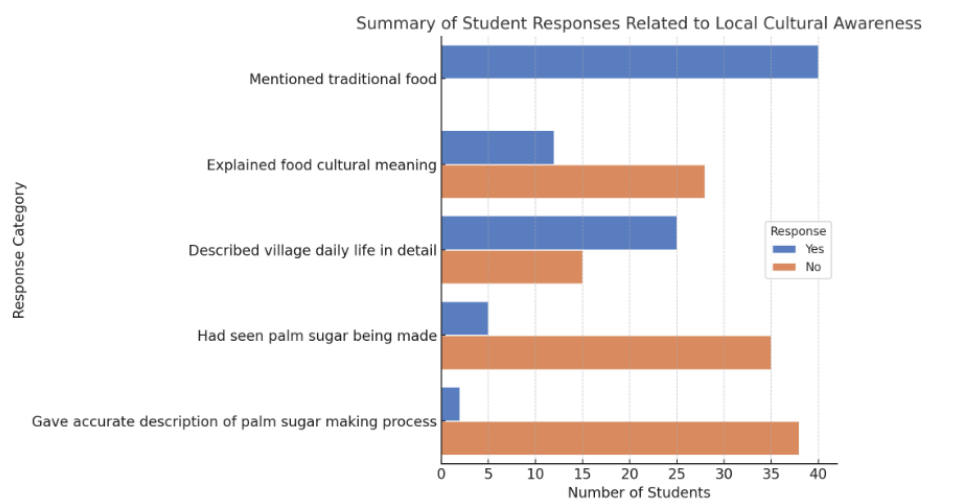
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The participants of the research are 34 university students from English Education and Communication Science consist of 10 males and 24 females.

**Table 1.** Participants Profile

No.	Participant	Male	Female	Amount	Percentage (%)
1	English Education	5	15	20	58.8
2	Communication Science	5	8	13	38.2
Total		10	23	34	100

From the results of the research, it can be drawn that students lack of some terms of local culture.



**Figure 1.** Student responses to local culture

The diagram shown some facts relate to cultural awareness among students.

### 1. Students' Knowledge of Local Culture

Most students were able to name a favorite traditional food, such as *serabi*, *geblog*, or *lotek*. However, explanations were often superficial, limited to taste or family memories. Few students demonstrated knowledge of the cultural or historical roots of these foods.

Below is the list of local food that knowing by students:

- *Pencok kacang panjang*, *Pencok katel*, *Karedok bonteng*
- *Uleg*
- *kodes* (traditional terms for fried rice)



- *nasi lengko* (2 students)
- *sorabi* (3 students)
- *awug*
- *ampas kecap*
- *putri noong*
- *geblog*
- *lotek* (2 students)
- *karedok leunca*
- *nasi tutug oncom*
- *putu* (3 students)
- *papeda*
- *nagasari*
- *combrow*

Some types of food are not included in the local food category but are more widely known nationally, such as *mie ayam* (chicken noodle), *emping*, *kupat tahu*, *mustofa* (a chopped potatoes), *jalakotek*, *sambal* (hot chilli sauce), chicken fried rice, *uduk* rice, chicken porridge, tofu meatball, *cilok*, *bogor taro cake*, *bubuy/nasi bakar ayam* (the rice husk-smoke chicken), *batagor*, *siomay*.



Figure 2. Student's favorite food

As many as 22 students (64.7%) still know and like local food, while the remaining 12 students (35.3%) do not know/do not choose local food as their favorite food.

## 2. Description of Village Life

Descriptions of daily village life varied in detail. Some students mentioned farming, selling at markets, or helping in family businesses. Others provided minimal responses, suggesting limited reflection on their own communities. This inconsistency reflects differing levels of engagement with their immediate cultural environment.

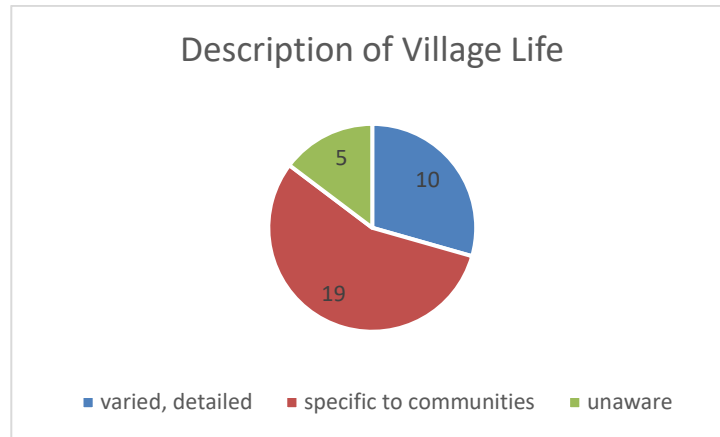


Figure 3. Students' description of village life

When students were asked to describe daily life in their living environment, 10 people provided varied descriptions, 19 people provided descriptions with a narrower scope, and 5 people answered they didn't know. From this data, it indicates that only 29.4% have a good level of cultural awareness.

### 3. Understanding of Palm Sugar and Its Production

Students' cultural understanding was explored in more depth, using the example of palm sugar production.

Although nearly all students had heard of palm sugar, very few had seen it made. Most responded with statements such as "I've never seen it" or "only know it from the market." This is significant given that palm sugar is a culturally embedded product in many Indonesian rural areas. Only two students (5.9%) said that they knew how it made.

These findings point to a pattern of cultural detachment: students are familiar with the existence of traditional practices but lack experiential knowledge or cultural context.

### 4. Implications for Intercultural Competence

The results reveal a deficiency in *cultural self-awareness*, one of the key dimensions of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2009). According to Byram (1997), effective intercultural speakers must first be rooted in their own cultural identity to engage respectfully and meaningfully with others. The students' limited awareness of local culture suggests that this foundational element has not yet been developed.

This has implications for higher education, especially in rural contexts. Students from culturally rich backgrounds may not automatically possess cultural insight, they must be guided to explore, reflect, and appreciate their own traditions as a starting point for intercultural learning.

## CONCLUSION

### Conclusion

Early semester university students from rural Indonesia exhibit limited cultural self-awareness despite living in culturally rich environments. Their understanding of traditional

foods, community activities, and practices like palm sugar production is often superficial or incomplete. This lack of connection to their own cultural background undermines the development of intercultural competence at the university level.

### Recommendations

1. Curriculum Integration: Encourage the inclusion of local culture in academic assignments, particularly in language and communication courses.
2. Experiential Learning: Facilitate student engagement with local cultural practitioners through interviews, fieldwork, or community projects.
3. Intercultural Workshops: Design learning modules that start with self-exploration of cultural identity before introducing global cultures.
4. Reflective Practice: Assign reflective journals or portfolios on cultural topics to help students connect personal experiences with theoretical concepts of intercultural competence.

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