

Teaching English Language Journal

ISSN: 2538-5488 – E-ISSN: 2538-547X – <http://teljournal.org>

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Please cite this paper as follows:

Lontaan, M., Batunan, D.A., Rorintulus, O., & Wuntu, C. (2025). Enhancing Indonesian Elementary Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence: Insights from a Thanksgiving-themed Poster Project. *Teaching English Language*, 19(2), 437-467. <https://doi.org/10.22132/tel.2025.539816.1931>

Research Paper

Enhancing Indonesian Elementary Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence: Insights from a Thanksgiving-themed Poster Project

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Abstract

Grounded in Byram's (1997) intercultural theory, this report defends intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and the enactment of project-based learning (PBL). In light of the significance of intercultural communicative competence in English language teaching (ELT), this study records an in-class research probing the enactment of project-based learning

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to enhance students' intercultural communicative competence in the primary ELT context. Six primary school students were recruited to take part in the investigation. In the present study, datasets were amassed from classroom observations, student interviews, and analysis of student-produced artifacts. Drawing on thematic analysis, findings showcased that project-based learning assists students to simultaneously cultivate their three Byram's ICC components (cultural knowledge, respect and openness, and skill of interpreting) and stimulates study participants' motivation and engagement in learning English. The absence of the other two higher-order elements of ICC (skills of discovery and interaction and critical cultural awareness) is likely attributed to young learners' intellectual readiness, restricted experiential base, and restricted linguistic repertoire. However, the study underscores the potential of project-based learning to cultivate learners' ICC in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: *Intercultural communicative competence, project-based learning, Byram's ICC framework, EFL students, Indonesian context*

Received: August 07, 2025

Accepted: October 03, 2025



1. Introduction

English language teaching (ELT) praxis has evolved significantly where infusing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) deserves attention in EFL classrooms aiming to equip students to be future global citizens to function effectively in multicultural and multilingual settings (UNESCO, 2014) and coexist harmoniously with people of various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. ICC encompasses a multifaceted construct of necessary attitudes, knowledge, and skills to support appropriateness and effectiveness in transcultural interaction (Byram, 1997). The incorporation of intercultural awareness and understanding in education has been argued to be better promoted since the initial start for greater outcomes (Driscoll & Simpson, 2015; Read, 2023). By the same token, research (Cho, 2010; Peiser, 2015) showcased that study participants demonstrated positive attitude and a

reduction in stereotypes towards other cultures with their engagement of culturally-embedded instruction. As a result, it is urgent to imbue culturally responsive pedagogy for young learners to prepare this generation to come for a more peaceful and non-discriminatory world within pluralistic societies.

The ongoing scholarly discussion has addressed this urgency; teachers have undertaken some endeavours (e.g., music, digital storytelling, and telecollaboration) as pedagogical tasks to integrate cultural awareness for young learners (Abril, 2016; Korosidoua & Griva, 2024; Okumura, 2020). For example, Korosidoua and Griva (2024) studied online storytelling's effect to foster fifth-grade Greek students' L2 writing skills and cross-cultural understanding. They conclude that this pedagogical task elevates students' writing skills while cultivating their empathy and sensitivity towards other cultures and their intercultural communication. Another study conducted by Okumura (2020) examined the implementation of an intercultural exchange meeting (telecollaboration) between Japanese and Australian elementary students facilitated by Edmodo to stimulate young learners' intercultural awareness and understanding. The finding demonstrated that students showed curiosity for discovering different cultures and distinctions between their host culture and that of their tandem partner, gradually amplifying their motivation to learn English. In the same wavelength, Abril (2006) investigated the effect of two multicultural music instructions on classroom learning outcomes with fifth-grade students as the focus of the study. The study disclosed that students who engaged in sociocultural groups had achieved stronger awareness and sensitivity to other cultures. Although prior research across the globe has made endeavours to the body of literature of cultivating young learners' intercultural understanding, this area of study is not sufficiently documented in the ongoing scholarly discussion in the area of

pedagogical tasks to further young learners' cultural awareness and understanding.

In the Indonesian context, research on integrating intercultural communication in day-to-day teaching praxis has received growing attention, though concentrated mainly at the secondary and tertiary levels (Batunan et al., 2023b; Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018; Susilo et al., 2023), highlighting the utilization of video clip-assisted intercultural tasks, telecollaboration, and digital photographs. Notwithstanding, little attention is given to the elementary students as the focal participants. To the best of our knowledge, hardly has the current literature delved into the enactment of project-based learning anchored in Byram's (1997) ICC model to facilitate young learners' intercultural competence in Indonesia and global contexts. We aim to contribute to and expand the ongoing discourse and practice on intercultural learning by portraying the potential of project-based learning as a viable instruction to cultivate students' intercultural competence.

2. Research Questions

Addressing the outlined gap, the present study scrutinises the incorporation of project-based learning to cultivate intercultural communicative competence of EFL Indonesian fifth-graders. The present study intends to zoom in on the ensuing research questions:

1. How can the implementation of project-based learning promote students' intercultural communicative competence?
2. How do the students engage with culturally laden instruction informed by project-based learning?

By exploring these two research questions, this research could shed light on educators and stakeholders on infusing and promoting culturally-laden instruction for young EFL learners.

3. Review of Related Literature

3.1 Intercultural Communicative Competence

Cong-Lem (2025) underscores the substantial development of intercultural communicative competence in the area of language education regarding a growing concern to equip learners to interact in a multicultural global community. Byram's (1997) ICC model, used as theoretical underpinning, in many intercultural and language education programs (Dwomoh et al., 2023; Esmacili et al., 2021; Afshar & Yousefi, 2019). This model has an overarching construct and pedagogical relevance to the EFL context. This model enunciates a five-dimensional model that may foster the enhancement of learners' intercultural competence. As stated by Byram (1997), the first construct of ICC is attitude, entails willingness to be open and curious about cultural differences and take another viewpoint from analytical stance. Knowledge includes understanding diversity of cultural practices by delving into how historical and contextual factors shape these practices. Skills of interpreting and relating is defined as the capacity to interpret cultural meanings, compare and contrast perspectives, and mediate understanding between different cultural foundation. Skills of discovery and interaction encompass the ability to acquire novel cultural knowledge and operate knowledge, attitude, and skill of interpreting and relating in authentic communication. Critical cultural awareness, the highest ultimate goal of ICC, refers to "an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of an explicit, systematic process of reasoning, values present in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 1997, p. 66).

The model goes beyond functional language use to emphasise the development of learners' critical consciousness, empathy, and ethical reflection, making it highly relevant to educational goals of global citizenship and multicultural understanding (Porto & Byram, 2015).

Numerous scholars have applied Byram's model in diverse educational settings to guide the integration of intercultural objectives into language curricula (Sercu, 2005). Across educational levels and contexts, the ICC model has been most utilized in investigations situated in secondary and tertiary levels (Batunan et al., 2023b; Eren, 2021; Kim, 2020; Uzum et al., 2020) in the context of outer and expanding circle countries. For example, Batunan et al. (2023b) investigated how telecollaboration cultivated Indonesian lower high school students' intercultural communicative competence with collaborators from Egypt, Italy, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mexico, and the Philippines. The findings indicated that five Byram's ICC model constituents surfaced in the study with the enactment of different experiential learning methods, varied topics, and the interaction with multiple partners. Eren (2021) focused on how telecollaboration could enhance Turkish pre-service teachers' intercultural communication in collaboration with five faculty members across Europe. Delving into the implementation of Edmodo and Zoom's telecollaborative discussion, the study reported critical intercultural awareness as the most challenging element of ICC to develop among study participants. The investigation of Byram's ICC model in primary education in Indonesia and global contexts is still underexplored, marking a prospective line of inquiry.

Given the emphasis on both cognitive and affective learning dimensions, this research intends to investigate how project-based learning (PBL) can boost ICC in elementary EFL classrooms. This study adopts Byram's (1997) ICC framework as its underlying principles, aiming to

elucidate how culturally themed PBL activities facilitate the growth of intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes among young learners.

3.2 Young Learners and Intercultural Communicative Competence

As the world is getting connected and saturated, it is likely that students would engage in intercultural communication in their day-to-day present life through media, entertainment, and school and community exposure, and in their future life in their career and community involvement. At the same time, the world is getting divided and polarized, and young people are bombarded with political disputes and global conflicts across the globe. To respond to these pressing needs and situations, ICC aims to equip the students to be responsible citizens to take an active participation in the betterment of society (Porto, 2019; Porto et al., 2017) and engage in promoting mutual understanding and respect, and peace.

Teaching intercultural communicative competence to young learners could be debatable due to their limited cognitive capacity and the conflicts with students' host cultural and religious values. First, Piaget's cognitive development theory (1997) emphasized that young learners are unable to grasp conceptual and sophisticated thinking regarding interculturality. However, young learners could learn cultures from real-life, contextual, and experiential experiences (Cameron, 2001). Second, these kids are still in their concrete operational stages and therefore have limited complex and conceptual thinking. As such, exposing them to diverse cultures might spark confusion about their roots and identity since some cultures might contradict their pre-held beliefs and conventions (Kubota, 2004). Yet, this experience serves as a platform for students to compare and contrast and see things from multiple perspectives (Byram, 1997) and cultivates peace, harmony, and

respect (UNESCO, 2013). While thoughtful concerns are raised for teaching intercultural competence to young learners, we argue that teaching interculturality to students through exposure to diversity can strengthen their identity, tolerance, and openness towards differences.

Brunsmeir (2017) showcased endeavours to facilitate students' intercultural communicative competence by means of visually printed resources, along with first-hand encounters with native people from global cultures, which engage students in real-life and contextualized instruction, and provide real-time interaction. In similar vein, in practical level, Salbilah (2019) provides a list of real-lives and real time activities to introduce and integrate cultures for teachers such as the use of "exposition and explanation, dialogues, skits, and mini-dramas, and drama game, masks and puppets, role plays and simulation, songs and dances, and pictures, films, filmstrips, and video and making linguistics connections" (p.200-201). In a nutshell, teaching ICC to young learners is doable by engaging them in contextual and authentic learning with real interactions with the people and world around them.

3.3 Project-Based Learning in EFL Context

Project-based learning (PBL), informed by Dewey (1986) and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, underlines that understanding emerges and skills are acquired when students take part in meaningful learning experiences and not from receiving and storing information passively. In addition, PBL has a solid ground on the belief that meaningful learning occurs in an authentic context, which is known as situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and students actively construct the knowledge in interaction and collaboration with their peers, teachers, and surroundings (Vygotsky's 1978 sociocultural framework).

PBL is often linked to task-based learning, which is fundamentally different from the former. The commonalities between these two lie in placing students as the heart of instruction with real-world and authentic tasks focusing on collaboration and communication, yet they share some differences in scope, outcome, and focus (Beckett & Slater, 2005; Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998; Stoller, 2006; Willis, 1996). PBL has longer tasks to execute than task-based learning. The outcome of PBL is in the form of a product rather than the completion of a communication task. PBL focuses mainly on content and language; on the other hand, task-based learning focuses on language use in meaningful tasks.

Project-based learning emphasizes students' active engagement and partnership with peers and teachers to construct knowledge using authentic materials, reflective learning, and product-based outcomes (Cao, 2024; Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2014; Thomas, 2000). Project-based learning facilitates learners to immerse themselves in the instruction actively because it is an approach geared towards students where students take ownership and responsibility towards the learning process by exploring, collaborating, doing, and reflecting. Students learn collaboratively from peers and teachers by, for example, brainstorming ideas and negotiating meaning in the form of questioning, explaining, and offering/receiving feedback. Instead of learning from textbooks only, students get exposed to real-life contexts which are sourced from authentic real-life materials such as YouTube videos, social media content, websites, brochures, magazines, and news articles, and apply the knowledge derived from these sources in their real life. Students are guided to documents and think about the project and learning journey in-depth through reflection, where they make meaning of their learning experiences; looking back and shedding light on what they learn about the topics, what their challenges are, how they deal with them, and what they like

best about the topic and venture. By the end of the learning process, students produce tangible products/outcomes that showcase their understanding and skills to address the designated tasks.

In relation to language education, project-based learning has enlarged students' vocabulary stock regarding specific issues and developed students' four language skills (Chen, 2017), learner's autonomy (Yuliani & Lengkanawati, 2017), student's self-learning and efficacy (Yang & Harijanto, 2022), students' engagement in learning (Aubrey, 2022), writing performance (Andargie et al., 2025), and learners' motivation and writing skills (Yang et al., 2025).

Despite its significant contribution to language instruction, the ongoing scholarly discussion regarding the enactment of PBL to promote ICC in the EFL milieu has been scarce, particularly involving young learners as the study participants. Within the dearth of evidence on this topic, few PBL-related studies have been documented involving university students (Peraza & Furumura, 2022) and secondary high school students (Mohamad, 2021). Framed in mixed methods, Feraza and Furumura (2022) found that the enactment of PBL enhanced university students' ICC. Nested in a quantitative study, Mohamad (2021) noted that project-based learning enhanced high schoolers' host cultural awareness towards inner circle country cultures and their host cultures. More studies framed from a qualitative paradigm treating intercultural communicative competence as a fluid entity should be conducted to expand the understanding and discourse of the body of literature.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The present inquiry was guided by a case study research design, inductive and interpretive in nature, to search for repetitive themes for a holistic understanding of the issue (Duff, 2014). This design sought to gain insights into the outlooks and experiences of a subset of informants in their engagement with project-based learning instruction.

4.2 Context and Participants

This research was undertaken at an elementary school run by the government in North Sulawesi, Indonesia, which implements the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Emancipated Curriculum) and provides English as a local content subject commencing from Grade 1. However, due to limited instructional time, English instruction is generally limited to basic vocabulary and simple sentence structures. Most teachers have not received specific training in incorporating intercultural content into language instruction (Batunan et al., 2023a), which accounts for their struggle to move beyond linguistic orientation. In addition, cross-cultural dimensions are not officially integrated in the curriculum. As a result, students lack sustainable and sufficient opportunities for learners to delve into varying cultural viewpoints, values, and communication practices, which are vital aspects of ICC.

There were 19 students in the fifth grade, and six of them were recruited to participate in the research over eight instructional meetings. These students were recruited through purposive sampling because the researchers aimed to involve participants who were willing and capable of collaborative engagement in PBL. This rationale was deemed essential to achieve in-depth findings to help the researchers understand the case.

Students were in A1 and A2 levels in accordance with the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) rating system.

Table 1 Study participants' demographic data

Demographic	Pseudonym	Frequency
Age		
10	Eleora & Audrey	2
11	Moses, Mikha, Jesselyn, and Jheon	4
Gender		
Male	Moses and Jheon	2
Female	Eleora, Audrey, Mikha, and Jesselyn	4
English Proficiency		
A1	Eleora, Moses, Mikha, and Jesselyn	4
A2	Audrey and Jheon	2

Anonymity and confidentiality were secured by assigning students' pseudonyms in data compilation and reporting. Prior to the research, the researcher collected written permission from students' parents and a formal permission was granted by the school, upholding ethical standards.

4.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

The researchers utilized some instruments such as classroom observations, student interviews, and project work samples to gather data. Eight weeks were spent to observe how Byram's intercultural communicative elements were reflected in these six study participants. Six students' participants were interviewed to capture their perspectives and feelings about the learning process they engaged and their poster projects were analysed.

A thematic approach was utilized to analyse the data following these three steps: describing, analysing, and interpreting (Wolcott, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, all data from students' interviews were transcribed and member checking was also conducted to enable study participants

transcripts' validation and clarification (Candela, 2019). Next, repeated readings on students' transcripts, classroom observation, and students' projects were done and the researchers summarized these data to track weekly progress. Then, the emerging themes that align with the research questions were searched. Finally, these patterns were linked to theories about PBL and intercultural communicative competence. By having different data sources, the researchers ensured the trustworthiness of their results.

4.4 Procedures of Project-based Driven Instruction

The instructional procedure was designed by employing the PBL concept for eight weeks, aiming to promote fifth-grade elementary students' ICC. The project was developed around the central theme “*Thanksgiving Celebrations Around the World*,” culminating in the exhibition of cultural posters. This design was adopted from Byram's (1997) ICC concept that pertained to knowledge, attitude, and skills in interpreting and relating. Each meeting sought to facilitate these three cores by encouraging students to take active roles in inquiry, authentic, reflective, and collaborative learning.

Table 2. Project-based learning instruction procedures

Meeting	Objectives	Byram's 1997 ICC Elements	Project-based driven instruction
1	To expand students' cultural knowledge on Thanksgiving celebrations from four countries and build students' openness and respect towards cultural diversity	Knowledge and Attitude	Inquiry: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Exposing students to Thanksgiving traditions and celebrations in four countries and facilitating discussion with a series of questions
2	To expand students' cultural knowledge on Thanksgiving	Knowledge and Attitude	Inquiry and authentic and collaborative learning: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Engaging students in authentic learning using

	celebrations in Minahasa and build students' openness and respect towards host diversity through authentic and collaborative learning		visuals and reading texts on the Minahasa Thanksgiving, and assigning students to group discussions to explore the values in the Minahasa Thanksgiving
3	To expand students' cultural knowledge on Thanksgiving celebrations in the USA, and build students' openness and respect towards cultural diversity	Knowledge, Attitude, and Skills of Interpreting and Relating	Inquiry and authentic and collaborative Learning: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Engaging students in authentic learning using visuals and reading texts on the USA Thanksgiving, and assigning students to group discussions to explore the values of the USA Thanksgiving
4	To facilitate students' skills of interpreting and relating through reflective and collaborative learning on Thanksgiving in Minahasa and the United States, and build students' openness and respect towards cultural diversity	Attitude and Skill of Interpreting and Relating	Inquiry and collaborative learning: facilitating learners to compare and contrast cultural practices regarding and engage in group discussion regarding Thanksgiving celebrations in Minahasa and the USA
5	To expand students' cultural knowledge, foster students' skills of interpreting and relating, and build students' openness and respect towards cultural diversity through poster composition	Knowledge, Attitude, and Skill of Interpreting	Product Outcome: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Assigning students to outline their poster by selecting the images and information •Scaffolding students to organize ideas for a clear cultural comparison

6	To expand students' cultural knowledge, foster their skills of interpreting and relating, and build their openness and respect towards cultural diversity through poster composition	Knowledge & Skill of Interpreting and Relating	Authentic, collaborative, and reflective learning: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Assigning students to produce a poster composition in group work with authentic visuals and a topic
7	To build students' respect and appreciation of cultural diversity through authentic, collaborative, and reflective learning	Attitude	Authentic, collaborative, and reflective learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Students' visual presentation on Thanksgiving comparisons
8	To provide a space for students to reflect on cultural PBL instruction	Knowledge and Attitude	Reflective learning: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Facilitating students to engage in guided reflective questions to express personal understanding and experiences

Thanksgiving-themed poster project followed adapted stages from Bell (2010), Blumenfeld and Krajcik (2006), Blumenfeld et al. (1991), Larmer & Mergendoller (2010), and Thomas (2000) as follows. First, in the initiation stage, the teacher brought an authentic and real-life topic, Thanksgiving Day traditions and celebrations, across nations such as India, Indonesia, Japan, and the USA, facilitated by stories and visuals. The teacher led learners in a dialogue guided by a series of enquiries. During this period, students explored Thanksgiving traditions and celebrations in Minahasa and the USA more. Second, students discussed and planned their tasks, roles, and timeline in the planning and design phase. Third, in the research step, students worked collaboratively in groups to research more information about

the traditions and celebrations, mainly focusing on visual resources. Fourth, in the creation part, students designed the project as an outcome to showcase their understanding of comparison and contrast in Thanksgiving Day in Minahasa and the USA. Fifth, they presented their Thanksgiving posters to classmates and the teacher. Finally, in the reflection phase, students reflected on their learning trajectory and made meaning of it.

5. Findings

This study zoomed in on the use of Thanksgiving-themed poster project facilitated the development of fifth-grade students' intercultural communicative competence. A dataset amassed over 8 weeks of classroom observations, student interviews, and samples of students' project work revealed development in Byram's (1997) three ICC elements: knowledge, attitude, and skill of interpreting and relating.

5.1 How does the enactment of project-based learning enhance students' intercultural communicative competence??

5.1.1 *Building up students' cultural knowledge through cultural exposure and the inquiry process*

At the beginning of the project, students demonstrated little knowledge repository about Thanksgiving traditions worldwide beyond their immediate context. When they were asked about Thanksgiving traditions, the most responses appeared centred on local family gratitude practices without awareness of global variations regarding gratitude. Students' insights were mainly sourced from their personal experiences with local customs. As Eleora commented, *"I only know how we celebrate Thanksgiving in my family, but I didn't know other countries actually have the same, like Happy Thanksgiving" (Eleanore's story).*

Study participants demonstrated significant improvement in their cultural knowledge through their engagement in PBL, which emphasizes authentic, inquiry-based, and collaborative learning. Authentic and collaborative learning, the hallmark of PBL, were put into practice when students were exposed to real-life topics related to different Thanksgiving traditions and celebrations with the use of authentic resources and collaboration on this topic. Students took ownership of their own learning by processing the information and exploring Thanksgiving traditions and celebrations in the inquiry process. Their ability to identify and describe key aspects, such as traditional foods, historical backgrounds, and social meanings embedded in each celebration, is evident. The authentic, inquiry-driven, collaborative instruction encouraged students to actively seek information, ask questions, explain and clarify, discuss with each other, and make meaningful cultural connections, which enhanced their factual and conceptual knowledge of diverse cultural practices. Students created a poster on Thanksgiving celebrations showing their more balanced and comprehensive understanding of the commonalities and distinctions between the two cultures. Students' engagement with project-based learning instruction has expanded students' cultural repertoire and horizon about the products and practices of their home and target cultures.

5.1.2 Stimulating openness and respect through authentic learning

Students engaged in real-life topics stemming from their immediate environment with the use of authentic learning resources and took an active role in processing the information by working collaboratively with their peers. Guided by their teacher, these study participants began to showcase a shift in their attitudes toward cultural diversity. Students started expressing curiosity, interest, and respect for cultural traditions different from their own.

The authentic, inquiry, collaborative, and reflective learning stimulated openness and respect as students recognised similarities and differences in how gratitude is expressed across cultures. This positive change in attitude was seen during the poster presentations and group discussions, where students expressed appreciation for the values found in both American and Minahasan Thanksgiving traditions. Reflecting on the reflective phase in PBL instruction, many student participants became more open-minded and curious, demonstrating their keen interest in learning cultures beyond their classrooms. Furthermore, these study participants exhibited their increased appreciation for differences in celebrating the traditions as the project carried on. Students' engagement and enthusiasm during the discussion sessions signify this notable attitudinal shift. Audrey, one of the participants, highlights, *"It was fascinating to observe how these two cultures express gratitude, even though the celebration is not the same at all. By engaging in this activity, I want to discover more about other cultures"* (Observation in Week 2). Likewise, Moses points out, *"I learned different cuisines eaten in the Thanksgiving celebration. American Thanksgiving has Turkey, and Minahasa has Dodol and Nasi Jaha"* (Observation in Week 3). These expressions showed an evolving openness and respect for cultural practices across borders and a recognition of shared human values, such as gratitude.

Authentic learning, anchored in real-life issues, through collaborative and reflective instruction piqued students' curiosity and stimulated students to get more involved by listening intently, posing questions, and evaluating cultural values comparatively. These activities hold a pivotal role in supporting this attitudinal development. In addition, teachers' engagement in guided assistance and support for facilitating students' comprehension with the use of authentic resources, discussion sessions, and

poster creation assisted these students participants to understand a universal form of expression for gratitude in a transcultural context. Students gradually demonstrated a stronger willingness and more open-mindedness to negotiate and make meaning of cultural differences without judgment.

5.1.3 Enhancing students' cultural interpretation through inquiry practice in project-based learning

Students' cultural interpretation was identified during Week 4-7 when students analysed traditions of Thanksgiving in Minahasa and the USA comparatively. It demanded that they analysed, expounded, and related the cultural interpretation behind these distinct practices.

These moments associated with comparative discussion between Minahasan and American Thanksgiving served as a platform for developing students' interpreting and relating skills. At first, student participants had difficulties to examine cultural symbols beyond the analysis of surface-level elements. Yet, during the course of the project, their ability to deduce cultural expressions and connect them to their own experiences improved. During the discussion, one student reported, Mikha says, "*At first, I only saw the food, but now I understand that both celebrations show respect to family and community*" (Observation Week 4). Mikha's remark unveiled the appearance of skill in cultural relating and interpreting. She could pinpoint a clear difference in cultural practice and connect her understanding to the underlying value of gratitude. This incident shows a development from surface-level observation to deeper cultural understanding.

The skill of interpreting and relating was enhanced with the enactment of poster-making, where the student participants had to select cultural symbols, organise information, and represent comparisons visually, which required synthesising and interpreting what they had learned. The final

presentations reflected not only factual recall but also a growing capacity to connect cultural meaning across contexts.

5. 2 In what respect do the students engage with project-based learning activities related to intercultural content??

5.2.1 Enhancing student engagement through authentic and collaborative learning

Students made evident a sustained active engagement throughout the project with the intercultural tasks. The use of authentic resources and collaborative group work appeared to foster a sense of excitement and curiosity, particularly when delving into new cultural elements from India, Japan, and the United States, and local traditions such as the Minahasan Thanksgiving celebrations from Indonesia. Students showed keen interest in visual representations and were excited to discuss about comparative analysis in Thanksgiving celebrations. Jesselyn reported, *"I like working with my friends to make the poster because we learned about new cultures. It was fun to share our ideas"* (Interview in Week 6).

Figure 1 Students worked hand in hand to create posters



Over the course of the project, study participants exhibited excitement and proactive participation in intercultural activities. Jesselyn's sharing corresponds with other students' voices reflecting enhanced engagement and motivation through project-based learning.

5.2.2 Fostering students' motivation through authentic learning

The current research displayed students' visible improvement in motivation through their participation in culturally responsive pedagogy through project-based learning (PBL). It could be observed from the interview with Jheon. Jheon commented, "*Learning about Thanksgiving foods from America and India was enjoyable. I gained understanding about their traditional dishes*" (Interview in Week 7). It suggested how learning about different cultural traditions such as Thanksgiving foods from various countries could make students curious and make the lessons more enjoyable. Jheon's voice portrays how PBL fosters learners to become more immersed in language learning. In addition, the findings also indicate that rich cultural content can encourage students to engage proactively in the exploration of new cultural ideas.

5.2.3 Challenges in understanding unfamiliar cultural concepts

Despite their proactive engagement, students showed their initial confusion and hesitation when they encountered unfamiliar cultural elements or practices. For example, when these students explored American Thanksgiving, some of them appeared uncertain regarding Thanksgiving dinner or the history of Thanksgiving. Audrey narrated, "*At first, I felt uncertain because I had little knowledge about American Thanksgiving. Fortunately, after speaking with my friends and teachers, I gained a better understanding (Observation in Week 8)*". Students initially hesitated or were uncertain when encountering unfamiliar cultural concepts or tasks requiring critical reflection.

These kinds of periods of uncertainty were common in young learners' early learning phase and early intercultural exposure, indicating students' cognitive and interpretive challenges and development. This situation could be mitigated with the teacher's guidance and peer

collaboration. Supportive scaffolding in promoting deeper intercultural understanding is pivotal in EFL classrooms.

6. Discussion

Taken together, rooted in project-based instruction, the Thanksgiving-themed poster project, enlarged Indonesian EFL primary students' cultural repertoire and insights, nurtured their openness and respect, and boosted their cultural interpretation. This finding corroborated the findings of Feraza & Furumura (2022). Beyond cultural learning, the poster project has stimulated their engagement and motivation to learn English, which echoes earlier studies that underscore the affordances of PBL in inspiring students' engagement and motivation (Aubrey, 2022; Yang et al., 2025). All in all, these results imply that PBL is a promising instructional strategy for advancing students' ICC while cultivating affective engagement in learning English.

The plausible explanation for the absence of high-order aspects, such as skills of discovery and interaction and critical awareness, lies in early learners' intellectual readiness, restricted experiential base, and restricted linguistic repertoire. Students from six to eleven are typically in the concrete operational stage, and their ability to mull over abstract concepts is underdeveloped. Their best learning experience is gained through sensory-rich inputs, which are tangible and concrete (Piaget, 1972). Young learners have relatively narrow world-life experiences, restricted experiential base, making it cognitively challenging for them to discuss socio-cultural and politically related topics that require a more expansive contextual understanding and insights. Their restricted linguistic repertoire compounds this challenge, enabling them to articulate and conceptualize abstract concepts (Muraki et al., 2023).

Specifically, the absence of skills of discovery and interaction can be attributed to the fact that introducing diverse cultures to these students was an initial attempt to introduce them to cultural diversity, in the absence of previous first-hand experience to interact with individuals from global cultures. As Batunan et al. (2023b) emphasized, skills of discovery and interaction necessitate real-time connection and interaction with people from global cultures. Sufficient cultural repertoire and stimulated conversations/interactions help them navigate successfully and put this skill into operation. Without such experiences, these skills are unlikely to grow. Critical cultural awareness is considered the highest and overarching purpose for intercultural language education (Byram, 1997). Young learners are forming their identities and belonging. They learn by absorbing things around their immediate environment, including internalizing values, norms, and beliefs passed down from parents and society. Consequently, their cultural orientation is more receptive than critical. More importantly, measures to develop critical cultural awareness require extensive cultural exposure and long-term developmental goals (Deardoff, 2006).

As Thomas (2000) argues, the hallmarks of project-based instruction are collaboration, inquiry, and authentic learning, which explains why students developed their cultural knowledge, respect, openness, and the skill of interpreting. In comparison to textbook-oriented instruction, PBL emphasizes the importance of authentic learning experience as textbook driven instruction sometimes presents biased cultural representation. The application of embodied experience from students' immediate environment, promotes their engagement in knowledge building.

The favourable outcome that nurtures students' openness and respect could be attributed to the teacher's deliberate endeavour to provide a secure environment for peer learning. In addition, the interactional practices

such as presenting ideas, listening to diverse points of view from peers, asking questions, answering questions, and collaborating to achieve goals, have facilitated open and respectful discussion. In other words, PBL should be combined with purposeful and deliberate facilitation to cultivate these attitudes. PBL cultivates students' skills of interpretation. Unlike rote memorization and completion of textbook exercises, PBL requires the study participants to analyze information, compare and contrast, and interpret cultural meaning to complete the tasks. As a result of this demand, students become active knowledge constructors rather than passive receivers.

Students' improved engagement and motivation in learning by means of their engagement with project-based learning aligns with the literature that places students as the heart of learning, fostering students' active engagement in learning (Thomas, 2000). During the project enactment, they developed learning ownership and agency by planning, executing, and monitoring the projects in collaboration with their groupmates, achieving the set goals. These practices showcase the increment of students' agency, an outcome falling short in teacher-directed instruction. The engagement in PBL motivated the students better in learning because it provided hands-on and authentic activities, enabling them to work on real-life contextual activities (Brunsmeir, 2017; Cameron, 2001; Salbilah, 2019; Stoller, 2006). Without such activities, PBL will simply tend to repeat groupwork design.

Two paramount practical implications can be gleaned from the current investigation. First, as engagement and motivation are the means for scaffolding students' ICC, experiential, contextual, and real-life activities should be stressed in PBL for young learners as they learn best from tangible and concrete materials aligned with their cognitive development. Second, topics in PBL should shift from concrete to more abstract areas to allow students' optimum cognitive development.

7. Conclusion

This study has showcased the implementation of PBL to cultivate ICC among fifth-grade students in the Indonesian elementary education context, an under-researched population and context in studies related to intercultural education.

Despite the findings, a few limitations in terms of generalizability, timeframe, and data gathering warrant further attention. First, this study was undertaken with a particular group of fifth-grade Indonesian pupils, which may restrict the generalizability of the results to other settings. Second, the present study only lasted for eight meetings and covered a Thanksgiving celebration and traditions topic of four countries, which may have limited students' chances to explore global diversity more deeply. In the future, similar projects need to involve more extended engagement in ICC-driven projects to give students wider intercultural experiences framed from action research or explanatory action research paradigms, offering a richer understanding and interpretation. Some classroom interactions were not recorded, and these interactions might supply valuable data to showcase how intercultural learning takes place in real time. Future studies should document all classroom sessions to capture the interactional dynamics of the instruction.

As this present investigation revolves on project-based instruction involving only EFL primary Indonesian students, further investigation should compare two different project-based instruction (intercultural exchange meeting with peer collaborators across the globe and classroom-based project) to see which one is the most effective in promoting students' ICC. Furthermore, future research can probe into how project-based learning might

be tailored to students' age as a means to scaffold more complex constructs, such as skills of discovery and interaction and critical intercultural awareness.

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