



Teachers' Beliefs of Culture in Intercultural Language Learning: A study in North Maluku

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Abstract

This study explores EFL teachers' conceptualizations of culture within intercultural language learning (ILL) through a qualitative case study of two senior high school teachers in North Maluku, Indonesia, selected via purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis and analyzed thematically. Findings reveal contrasting views and practices: one teacher embraces a dynamic view of culture (*culture as verb*), integrating local and small "c" cultures through experiential activities and reflecting Byram's notion of critical cultural awareness. The other perceives culture as static (*culture as noun*), emphasizes Big "C" culture, and relies heavily on digital resources without direct intercultural encounters, resulting in reflections that remain cognitive-affective but seldom inform pedagogy. Theoretically, this study strengthens the applicability of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (Byram, 1997) and experiential intercultural learning by illustrating how teachers' personal experiences, resource access, and pedagogical orientations shape their ability to foster intercultural competence. Practically, it highlights the need for structured professional development programs that include intercultural reflection workshops, classroom simulations with authentic cultural scenarios, guidance on integrating local and small "c" cultures, and modules on critical use of digital materials. Institutional support, such as funding for intercultural projects, access to authentic resources, and professional learning communities, is essential to reduce overreliance on digital or conventional materials and to enable contextually grounded intercultural teaching. Overall, the study demonstrates how individual and contextual factors influence teachers' beliefs and practices, offering actionable insights for policy makers and teacher educators seeking to strengthen intercultural pedagogy in EFL settings.

.Keywords: Teachers Beliefs, Intercultural Competence, Critical Cultural Awareness, EFL Pedagogy, Cultural Conceptualization

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, characterized by increasing cross-cultural mobility, foreign language learning can no longer be separated from efforts to develop Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)—the ability to interact effectively and ethically with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Byram, 2021; Hoff, 2020; Deardorff, 2006). In today's English language teaching (ELT), which takes place in multicultural and multilingual environments, ICC is considered one of the primary goals of English education at the elementary, secondary, and tertiary levels (Kiss & Weninger, 2017; Liu & Fang, 2017; Porto, 2022). In line with this, several language educators Kiss and Weninger (2017); Ribeiro (2016); Tanghe (2016) have attempted to integrate various media, such as visual texts, digital stories, and foreign films, to develop students' ICC while simultaneously enhancing their language skills. Despite these global efforts, little is known about how EFL teachers in

Indonesian peripheral contexts conceptualize ICC and integrate culture in classroom practice. This gap motivates the present study.

Furthermore, the interconnection between language, culture, and identity is increasingly emphasized as a crucial aspect that educators need to understand reflectively. Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) assert that these three aspects must be understood through context-based reflective processes. Similarly, Kramsch (2022; 1995) emphasizes that language is not merely a tool for communication; it carries cultural values and social perspectives that require critical awareness from learners. Therefore, language teaching should aim not only at linguistic competence but also at fostering students' ability to reflect on cultural differences (Tran & Duong, 2018). This principle aligns with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which underscores the importance of openness toward cultural diversity and strengthening intercultural awareness (Council of Europe, 2020). Furthermore, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2013) affirms that intercultural education is essential in building global literacy for the 21st century.

However, the awareness of the importance of cultural integration has not been fully realized in classroom practices, particularly in foreign language education. Content analyses of Indonesian EFL textbooks show that culture-related materials are often superficial, limited to brief references or national holidays rather than fostering deeper intercultural understanding (Agustina & Kencana, 2023; Riadini & Cahyono, 2021; Deswila et al., 2021). Such findings highlight that teachers play a strategic role as facilitators and cultural mediators, because they are the main agents who can transform these limited materials into meaningful intercultural experiences—a role emphasized by Liddicoat (2022).

Unfortunately, numerous studies indicate that teachers' understanding of ICC remains limited and has not been consistently implemented in their teaching practices. Batunan, Kweldju, and Wulyani's (2023) research reveals teachers' limited understanding of integrating ICC into foreign language learning. Similarly, Atmojo and Putra (2022) highlight a mismatch between pre-service EFL teachers' understanding of culture and intercultural competence, often resulting in shallow and meaningless cultural integration in the classroom. Munandar and Newton (2021) also find that although Indonesian EFL teachers know the importance of integrating cultural elements, they often face rigid curriculum demands. In a further study, Munandar (2024) notes that while teachers attempt to integrate Islamic values and local cultures into their teaching, the approaches do not sufficiently reflect the target culture. Other studies suggest that international experiences may encourage teachers' reflection on ICC, although such reflection is often inconsistently applied in actual teaching practices (Fitriyah et al., 2024).

This issue becomes even more complex when examined through specific geographic contexts, particularly in underdeveloped regions (3T areas, referring to the remote, underdeveloped, and less accessible regions of Indonesia) such as North Maluku. Despite the richness of local cultures, these are often marginalized by the dominance of Western-based teaching materials. Nguyen et al. (2024) notes that teachers in remote areas often face dilemmas between following foreign textbooks or preserving students' local values. Additionally, curriculum documents such as the Pancasila Student Profile provide limited operational guidance, leaving cultural integration heavily dependent on individual teachers' awareness and initiative. This condition is corroborated by Manuhutu et al. (2023) who demonstrate that integrating local wisdom from Maluku into English language teaching effectively builds students' character and makes learning more contextually relevant. Nevertheless, Kahar (2025) highlights that teachers in North Maluku continue to face

limitations in facilities, training, and systemic support, making local cultural integration largely reliant on personal awareness rather than curriculum-driven directives.

Drawing from these findings, it is evident that Indonesian EFL teachers, particularly those in 3T regions like North Maluku, continue to face challenges conceptually and in classroom practice when implementing ICC. Prior research has mainly highlighted structural issues such as limited curriculum guidance and Western-oriented materials. However, little attention has been paid to the disconnect between teachers' cognitive and affective awareness of cultural values and the ways these are enacted in their pedagogy. Addressing this underexplored gap, the present study investigates how EFL teachers in 3T areas conceptualize culture and intercultural language learning and how these conceptualizations are reflected—or not reflected—in their daily teaching practices.

Given this background, this study lies in its concern on the different understandings of cultural concepts among two EFL teachers in North Maluku. Furthermore, this study seeks to uncover how teachers' experiences, access, and orientation influence the gap between reflection and pedagogical practice. In other words, although teachers are highly aware of cultural values, demonstrated through cognitive and affective reflection, this is not effectively reflected in their teaching practices. Thus, these points reveal a gap rarely addressed in previous EFL-ICC research.

Given these global and local dynamics and the scarcity of similar studies focusing on eastern Indonesia, this research aims to investigate how two English teachers at senior high schools in North Maluku conceptualize culture and intercultural language learning within their daily teaching practices. Through its findings, this study contributes academically to the development of ICC studies in 3T educational contexts and provides practical insights for teachers, policymakers, and curriculum developers regarding the importance of integrating local cultures in more reflective and contextual foreign language teaching.

2. Method

2.1. Research Approach and Design

This study employed a qualitative approach through an a qualitative case study method to examine in depth how EFL teachers conceptualize culture and intercultural language learning and explore how cultural values are reproduced in their classroom practices. A single-case study strategy was adopted, focusing on two senior high schools in North Maluku Province: one public school and one Islamic-based private school. These schools were selected purposively based on their cultural relevance and institutional characteristics, which align with the focus of the study.

According to Patton (1990), case selection plays a crucial role in deepening understanding of the issue being researched. Case studies not only present a general overview but also examine in-depth specific examples relevant to the problem at hand. Therefore, establishing criteria for selecting a research site is crucial (Merriam & Merriam, 1998). Therefore, the criteria for site selection included: (1) schools enrolling students aged 15–16, which represents the target demographic of this research; (2) the availability of at least one EFL teacher actively engaged in teaching and participating in classroom activities being observed; and (3) the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, which substantially emphasizes the integration of cultural elements in English language education.

2.2. Research Participants

The participant selection in this study adhered to rigorous and intentional criteria (Flick, 2014), consistent with qualitative research principles that prioritize a comprehensive examination of a particular context or phenomenon over a large sample size (Patton, 2015).

This research, as a qualitative case study, not only prioritized in-depth analysis and comprehensive understanding but also delved deep into the nuances of the chosen context, thus necessitating the involvement of two EFL teachers.

Qualitative approaches typically convey findings through verbal descriptions rather than numerical data (Tisdell et al., 2025). Consequently, the selection of a limited number of participants enabled the researcher to examine their experiences and perspectives in greater depth.

The two teachers were intentionally chosen according to defined criteria: a minimum of five years of teaching experience in North Maluku and an academic qualification in English Language Education from either a public or private university. The main factors for their selection included their reflective capacity and pertinent practical experience in incorporating local cultural values into the teaching of English as a foreign language.

2.3. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis as the primary sources of information. The interviews were conducted in two stages: (1) gathering participants' background information, including their educational history and professional experiences, and (2) exploring the teachers' perspectives on the interrelation between language and culture in teaching practices. The interview instrument was developed to address the teacher pedagogical system framework proposed by Borg (1998) and, was based on the theories of Byram (2021) and Kramsch (2011;1995;1993) on language and intercultural learning. Kramsch's concept of the "third place" and Byram's skills of interpreting and relating guide questions exploring teachers' understanding of the relationship between language, culture, and identity. Critical cultural awareness (Byram) informs questions about teachers' reflections on their own and others' cultural values. Byram's attitudes of openness and Kramsch's symbolic competence shape questions on teachers' attitudes toward cultural diversity. Practical skills are framed through Byram's skills of discovery and interaction and Kramsch's view of language as discourse and identity.

The interview topics covered teachers' understandings of EFL instruction, reflections on cultural integration, sources of pedagogical beliefs, teaching approaches, challenges encountered, and expectations for future teaching practices. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian and the local North Maluku dialect, supported by field notes and audio recordings. Informal interactions beyond the formal interview sessions were also documented as supplementary data.

In addition to interviews, document analysis was carried out to strengthen the validity of data gathered from interviews. The documents analyzed included the lesson plans (RPP) prepared by the EFL teachers. The analysis focused on identifying the integration of local cultural aspects within the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages of English language teaching.

2.4. Procedure of data analysis

Procedure of data analysis followed the procedures proposed by Creswell and Creswell (2023), emphasizing a systematic and iterative process in qualitative data analysis. The procedures involved the following six stages:

Organizing and Preparing the Data: Data from interviews, observations, and documents were organized and classified. Interview transcripts were produced verbatim, observation notes were systematically compiled, and instructional documents were categorized according to relevant themes.

Reading Through All the Data: The researcher conducted a comprehensive data reading to obtain a holistic understanding, identify key ideas, and recognize emerging patterns.

Coding the Data: Manual coding was conducted by labeling relevant segments of the data. Codes were then categorized into key themes: cultural conceptualization, intercultural language learning (ILL) practices, teacher reflections, and challenges in integrating local culture.

Developing Themes from the Coding: Identified codes were grouped into main themes that reflect the substantive meanings of the data, including: Conceptual understanding of culture, interpretation of intercultural language learning (ILL), sources shaping teachers' conceptualizations, reflections and challenges in local cultural integration.

Representing the Data: The findings were presented descriptively through narratives supported by direct quotations from interviews, observation findings, and instructional documents. This approach aimed to maintain the contextual integrity and authenticity of the data.

Interpreting the Findings: The findings were interpreted by linking the results to existing theories and previous studies while considering the local context. The interpretation aimed to generate theoretical and practical implications for enhancing intercultural-based EFL teaching practices in marginalized regions (3T areas) such as North Maluku.

2.5. Data analysis

The method used in this study is qualitative analysis. Interviews data are analyzed using the deductive method through thematic content analysis. The obtained data was used for comparison and discussion in order to generate an accurate representation of the participant's responses. The researcher organized, categorized, and analyzed data systematically to find common patterns across data sets to answer research questions.

3. Results

3.1. Findings

Teachers' Conceptualizations of Culture

The interview data revealed that the two participating teachers Sangadji and Fangare, both senior high school EFL teachers from North Maluku understood culture as essential to national or regional identity. However, a significant distinction emerged in how each teacher conceptualized the relationship between local and foreign cultures within the context of foreign language teaching. The following table summarizes the differences in their conceptual perspectives:

Table 1. Comparison of Teachers' Conceptualizations of Culture and Intercultural Language Learning

Conceptual Aspect	Sangadji	Fangare
Cultural Approach	Dynamic Culture: Culture is viewed as evolving, open, and integrative between local and foreign values.	Static Culture: Culture is seen as a fixed identity of a nation or region.
Cultural Focus	Both Big 'C' Culture (identity, cultural products) and small 'c' culture (norms, etiquette, social practices).	Primarily focused on Big 'C' Culture (national identity, clothing, food); less

Understanding of Culture	Culture as Verb: Culture is understood as a living, dynamic, contextual process that crosses borders through local and foreign practices. This view of culture aligns with Dervin's (2016) notion of Interculturality as Process.	emphasis on small 'c' culture. Culture as Noun: Culture is perceived as stable, symbolic, and static. This aligns more with passive Transculturality—accepting foreign culture for practical reasons without engaging in intercultural reflection.
Purpose of Culture Teaching	To foster awareness of local identity while encouraging openness to foreign cultures through social practices.	To introduce foreign culture (particularly American) for language access purposes, while emphasizing preserving local culture as identity.
Attitudes towards Foreign Culture	Critical and Reflective: Foreign culture is presented for comparison and balanced with local culture.	Pragmatic: Foreign culture (American) is chosen for practical reasons, to facilitate language learning rather than foster deeper intercultural understanding.

Based on the table above, Sangadji embraced the perspective of culture as process (Culture as Verb), which is dynamic, border-crossing, and reflective of local-global interplay (Dervin, 2016). His understanding also reflected elements of an ecological perspective that recognizes the interconnectedness of local and global identities within language learning. In contrast, Fangare viewed culture as a fixed entity (Culture as Noun), oriented towards symbolic identity. His pedagogical choices were more pragmatic, prioritizing language access over reflective intercultural engagement.

Sangadji demonstrated an understanding of culture that went beyond Big 'C' Culture, such as food, clothing, and national identity, to include small 'c' culture, encompassing norms, etiquette, and everyday social practices. His perspective was reflected in his statement:

“Saya rasa aspek budaya yang perlu diajarkan itu masalah kepatutan... bagaimana mereka menjamu orang, tatakrama...” (“I think the cultural aspects that need to be taught are matters of appropriateness... how they welcome guests, manners...”)

Through this statement, Sangadji emphasized the importance of familiarizing students with social values relevant to intercultural interactions, rather than merely introducing cultural products. Furthermore, he also expressed the significance of embedding local culture within the learning process when discussing foreign cultures:

“Saya menyisipkan budaya-budaya kearifan lokal ketika pembahasan budaya luar negeri.” (“I insert elements of local wisdom when discussing foreign cultures.”)

The statement above indicated Sangadji's awareness of the need to balance local and foreign cultures, with local culture frequently presented as a point of comparison or a reinforcement of students' identities. For Sangadji, culture was not merely knowledge but a part of identity that should be a source of pride on the global stage. He stated:

"Budaya kita itu sesuatu yang sangat kita banggakan di luar negeri." ("Our culture is something we should be proud of when we are abroad.")

This remark reflected Sangadji's view of culture as a representation of national identity that must be preserved and promoted amid globalization. Similarly, Fangare's understanding of culture also aligned with the notion of culture as national identity. He explicitly mentioned:

"Menurut pandangan saya budaya itu identitas suatu daerah atau negara." ("In my view, culture is the identity of a region or a country.")

This statement indicated that Fangare tended to position culture within Big 'C' Culture, focusing on tangible and symbolic elements closely tied to national identity, such as clothing, food, and social customs. Fangare also emphasized the importance of preserving local culture amid the teaching of foreign languages, as reflected in his statement:

"Kita jangan lupa budaya kita sendiri." ("We should not forget our own culture.")

This remark suggested Fangare's awareness of the importance of maintaining a balance between introducing foreign cultures and preserving local culture as part of students' identity formation. Additionally, Fangare explained that in practice, he preferred American culture as a reference point in teaching English due to pedagogical considerations, particularly the ease with which students could comprehend the accent.

"Saya cenderung ke American style... siswa lebih mudah memahami aksennya." ("I tend to favor the American style... students find it easier to understand the accent.")

It indicated that Fangare's selection of target culture in language teaching was based on practical considerations to facilitate students' comprehension of the language.

Both Sangadji and Fangare recognized the importance of integrating culture within foreign language teaching. They acknowledged the need to balance local and foreign cultures and regarded culture as essential to national identity formation. However, both teachers emphasized Big 'C' Culture as a symbol of identity. In contrast, the integration of small 'c' culture emerged more in social habituation or as a complementary element in the learning process.

The key difference between them lay in their pedagogical orientations. Sangadji highlighted the importance of familiarizing students with both local and international social norms contextually, including through intercultural comparisons and the reinforcement of local identity. In contrast, Fangare prioritized the practicality of selecting the target culture to facilitate students' understanding of the foreign language, while still underscoring the importance of preserving local culture as a national identity.

These findings indicate that the teachers' conceptualizations of culture were not abstract theoretical constructs but were deeply rooted in their immediate sociocultural environment. First, the peripheral context of North Maluku, with limited access to authentic intercultural encounters, prompted both teachers to emphasize local culture as a source of identity and pride. Sangadji explicitly framed culture as "something we should be proud of when we are abroad," revealing how regional identity functions as a counterbalance to global

influences. Second, personal trajectories shaped their views: Sangadji's experience in community cultural events led him to highlight everyday social norms and etiquette, while Fangare's exposure to American media made him favor "American style" pronunciation to meet students' communicative needs. Finally, classroom realities such as scarcity of materials and students' linguistic readiness, drove practical pedagogical decisions. Fangare's reliance on digital resources and his focus on Big 'C' topics such as food and costume reflect an attempt to provide accessible cultural content despite limited intercultural interaction. Collectively, these factors illustrate that their cultural conceptualizations were dynamic negotiations between theory and lived experience, underscoring the importance of professional development that addresses both conceptual and contextual dimensions.

Teachers' Interpretations of Intercultural Language Learning (ILL)

To clarify the differing approaches used by the two teachers in integrating language and culture into their teaching practices, the following table compares the key aspects that distinguish how Sangadji and Fangare interpreted and enacted Intercultural Language Learning (ILL).

Table 2. Comparison of Teachers' Interpretations of Intercultural Language Learning (ILL)

Aspect of Comparison	Sangadji	Fangare
Core Understanding	Language as a bridge to understand culture	Language and culture must go hand-in-hand
Purpose of ILL	Enhancing intercultural perspectives through direct experiences (tourism community)	Enriching knowledge of both teacher and students
Teaching Strategy	Real-life intercultural engagement with foreigners	Teaching pragmatic norms and politeness in cross-cultural contexts
Example in Practice	Invites foreign tourists to interact with students	Explains cultural taboos (e.g., privacy topics)
Focus of Learning	Experiential, reflective, contextual	Pragmatic, normative, cognitive
Orientation	Developing intercultural competence through experience	Building awareness of cultural communication norms

The interviews with both teachers, Sangadji and Fangare, revealed a fundamental understanding of the inseparable relationship between language and culture in foreign language education. Both teachers believed that language and culture are interconnected elements that should be taught simultaneously. Both Sangadji and Fangare explicitly emphasized this through similar statements. Sangadji stated:

"Bahasa itu hanya sebagai jembatan untuk memahami budaya lain." ("Language is only a bridge to understand other cultures.")

Meanwhile, Fangare affirmed:

"Tidak bisa kita pisahkan antara bahasa dan budaya... dia harus berjalan beriringan."
(*"We cannot separate language from culture... they must go hand-in-hand."*)

These statements illustrated a shared understanding that foreign language teaching should not be limited solely to linguistic mastery but should also serve as a medium to comprehend the target language community's way of life, norms, and socio-cultural values. Both teachers viewed language education as a means to broaden cultural horizons for both teachers and students.

Sangadji associated language learning with developing intercultural perspectives through his involvement in the tourism community. He explained:

"Saya kadang mengajarkannya bersamaan... untuk membandingkan budaya kita seperti apa dan budaya mereka seperti apa." (*"Sometimes I teach them together... to compare what our culture is like and what theirs is like."*)
"Saya gabung di komunitas pariwisata supaya bisa undang turis ke kelas." (*"I joined a tourism community to invite tourists to class."*)

Meanwhile, Fangare perceived culture-based language teaching as a way to expand knowledge for both parties, as reflected in his statement:

"Dengan mengajarkan bahasa Inggris melalui budaya... menambah wawasan saya dan siswa." (*"Teaching English through culture... enriches both my knowledge and my students'."*)

Although both teachers shared a similar perspective on integrating language and culture, their practical approaches revealed differences in orientation. Sangadji emphasized experiential learning, providing students with direct engagement with foreigners through tourism community activities. This approach offered authentic experiences to help students better understand cultural diversity and develop intercultural communication skills more concretely.

In contrast, Fangare emphasized cross-cultural pragmatics in everyday communication, particularly regarding politeness norms. He provided examples of social norms students needed to understand in intercultural communication, such as the prohibition of asking personal questions in some cultures. He stated:

"Jangan menanyakan hal-hal privasi seperti umur, pekerjaan, agama." (*"Do not ask about private matters like age, occupation, or religion."*)

Both teachers demonstrated an awareness that integrating culture into language teaching offered reflective and educational benefits for both teachers and students. However, the difference in approach was evident in Sangadji's focus on first-hand experience, while Fangare emphasized normative communication practices and social etiquette relevant to other cultures.

In sum, both Sangadji and Fangare viewed foreign language teaching as part of developing students' intercultural competence. They understood that language skills should

be accompanied by an awareness of cultural values, whether through direct experience or learning social norms inherent in the target language communities.

Sources Shaping Teachers' Conceptualizations of Culture and Intercultural Language Learning (ILL)

This section outlines the sources that shaped the conceptualizations of culture and intercultural language learning (ILL) held by the two teachers, Sangadji and Fangare. Although both teachers recognized the importance of integrating language and culture in foreign language education, the influences that shaped their understanding differed considerably. Sangadji was primarily influenced by formal education and direct intercultural experiences, whereas Fangare relied more heavily on digital sources and the national curriculum. To clarify these differences, the following table is provided.

Table 3. Comparison of the Sources Shaping Teachers' Conceptualizations of Culture and Intercultural Language Learning (ILL)

Aspects of Comparison	Sangadji	Fangare
Primary Sources	Formal Education (CCU), Teacher Professional Training, and National Curriculum	Digital media and National Curriculum
Supporting Sources	Personal Experience, Social Media	Social Media, Internet, <i>Profil Pelajar Pancasila</i>
Direct Intercultural Experience	Engagement with Native speaker/ foreigner, community-based	None
Value Orientations	Local and Religious Value	Practical, Technology, Curriculum-based
Approach	Holistic (Theory, Experience, Local Values)	Theoretical, Based on Secondary Sources
Characteristics	Reflective, Critical, Contextual	Adaptive, Independent, Technology-Savvy
Strengths		Lack of Direct Intercultural Experience
Weaknesses	Limited Resources	

As shown in the table, a range of formal sources such as coursework in Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU), teacher professional training programs (Program Profesi Guru/PPG), and the national curriculum—shaped Sangadji's understanding of culture and ILL. These structured, institutionally organized experiences provided theoretical grounding and pedagogical frameworks. In contrast, informal sources, including personal intercultural encounters with native speakers, community-based interactions, and social media engagement, enriched his conceptualization by offering practical insights and real-world perspectives beyond the classroom. Sangadji explicitly highlighted that courses on Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) and pedagogical theories equipped him with the knowledge to implement culture-based approaches in his classroom. He emphasized:

“Yang paling terasa itu dari sisi kompetensi pedagogi... sangat membantu saat diterapkan di kelas.” (“What I feel most is from the pedagogical competence... it helps when applied in class.”)

In addition to formal education, Sangadji's personal experiences and exposure to social media contributed to shaping his perspectives on cultural diversity. He acknowledged that much of his knowledge about foreign cultures was obtained from various media, particularly through digital content. However, he was also aware of the potential negative impacts of such sources, as reflected in his statement:

“Kita banyak dapat info dari konten kreator luar... tanpa mengingkari adanya sisi negatifnya.” (“We get much information from foreign content creators... though we cannot deny there are negative sides.”)

“Selain itu, setiap kurikulum juga memuat nilai-nilai budaya, yang dalam Kurikulum Merdeka secara khusus diintegrasikan melalui Profil Pelajar Pancasila.” (“In addition, every curriculum also incorporates cultural values, which in the Merdeka Curriculum are specifically integrated through the Pancasila Student Profile.”)

Moreover, Sangadji underscored the significance of filtering foreign cultural influences through local and religious values. He recognized that not all aspects of foreign cultures were appropriate or worth adopting, necessitating a selective approach to preserve cultural identity. He remarked:

“Tidak semua budaya itu bagus... kita harus membentengi diri dari hal-hal negatif juga.” (“Not all cultures are good... we must protect ourselves from negative influences too.”)

These findings indicate that Sangadji's conceptualization of culture and ILL developed through a synergy of multiple influences. His theoretical foundation was built through formal coursework in Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) and professional training (PPG), which provided concrete frameworks for integrating culture in language teaching. This knowledge was reinforced by direct intercultural experiences, including informal conversations with foreign visitors and participation in community-based activities, which gave him firsthand insight into cultural negotiation. Media exposure, particularly through international digital platforms, broadened his awareness of global practices while simultaneously sharpening his critical stance toward potentially negative cultural influences. Finally, his commitment to local and religious values acted as a constant filter, guiding him to select cultural content that aligns with local norms and to emphasize cultural pride in his classroom. Collectively, these interrelated dimensions such as formal theory, lived experience, digital engagement, and local value orientation, explain why his conceptualization can be described as genuinely holistic rather than merely additive.

In contrast to Sangadji, Fangare's conceptualizations of culture and ILL were primarily shaped by digital media, the curriculum, and practical teaching experience rather than formal training. Fangare explicitly stated that technology and the internet were his primary sources of knowledge about cultural diversity. He noted:

“Saya mengetahui tentang perbedaan budaya... dari teknologi... internet.” (“I learn about cultural differences... through technology... the internet.”)

Through digital media, Fangare engaged in self-directed learning to understand cultural differences. He did not indicate having attended any formal intercultural training, suggesting that his understanding was primarily shaped by online references accessed independently.

Additionally, the Merdeka Curriculum and the Profil Pelajar Pancasila provided further guidance that heightened Fangare's awareness of integrating culture into his teaching. However, Fangare acknowledged limitations in his understanding due to a lack of direct intercultural experiences. He admitted:

“Saya mengalami sedikit hambatan, saya tidak memahami sepenuhnya tentang budaya luar... belum pernah ke luar negeri.” (“I face some difficulties. I do not fully understand foreign cultures... I've never been abroad.”)

This admission highlighted a gap in direct intercultural experience, rendering Fangare's understanding more theoretical and reliant on secondary sources, without the benefit of practical, cross-cultural interactions.

While both Sangadji and Fangare drew upon informal sources such as digital media, their conceptual foundations differed regarding formal educational background. Sangadji was supported by strong foundations in formal education, training, and local values, whereas Fangare depended more on self-directed learning through technology and alignment with the national curriculum.

Sangadji appeared more reflective and selective in filtering foreign cultures through the lens of local values and pedagogical experience. In contrast, Fangare adopted a more pragmatic stance, relying on technology due to his limited opportunities for direct intercultural engagement and lack of specialized training.

These two teachers reflected differing social contexts in shaping their conceptualizations of culture and ILL. Sangadji demonstrated stronger grounding in formal pedagogical experiences and reflection on local values. At the same time, Fangare represented teachers who engage in independent learning within the digital era, supported by curriculum guidance but constrained by the absence of direct intercultural experience.

Teachers' Self-Reflection and Cultural Awareness

The following section compares the intercultural reflections between the two teachers, Sangadji and Fangare, as identified through interviews and classroom observations. This comparison includes aspects such as the focus of reflection, attitudes toward foreign cultures, implementation in teaching, cultural awareness, and perspectives on integrating culture and technology. The table below illustrates the differences in how each teacher conceptualizes, reflects upon, and implements cultural values within the context of English language teaching.

Table 4. Intercultural Reflection in Language Teaching between Two Teachers

Aspects of Comparison	Sangadji	Fangare
Focus of Reflection	Balancing local and foreign cultures	Personal knowledge enrichment
Attitude towards Foreign Cultures	Critical, aiming to prevent students from cultural bias	Aware of limited cultural understanding

Implementation in Teaching	Practical application: local accents, contextual materials	Theoretical knowledge only, no practical implementation
Cultural Awareness	Critical Cultural Awareness	Individual reflection, not yet linked to practice
Culture & Technology	Adaptive, critical of Western cultural dominance	Aware of the importance of technology integration
Attitude towards Foreign Cultures	Critical, aiming to prevent students from cultural bias	Aware of limited cultural understanding

Sangadji's self-reflection on culture within language teaching demonstrates a strong critical awareness of the importance of maintaining local cultural identity amid the pressures of globalization. He recognizes that students are often easily influenced to perceive foreign, particularly Western, cultures as superior to their own. For this reason, Sangadji emphasizes the necessity of cultivating students' critical awareness to prevent them from falling into biased perspectives. He stated:

"Kita harus memastikan jangan sampai mereka merasa semua yang dari luar itu bagus semua." ("We should ensure that they do not think everything from abroad is always better.")

This statement shows that Sangadji's reflection is cognitive but also affective and performative, as he actively integrates this awareness into his teaching practice. He is also aware of the dominance of Western, mainly American, culture in English language textbooks. Nevertheless, he strives to balance this by contextualizing his teaching methods:

"Buku itu kebanyakan Amerika yang dominan... jadi materi audio listening saya kombinasikan dengan aksen saya sendiri." ("Most textbooks are dominated by American content... so I combine my own accent with the listening materials.")

Sangadji's statement about combining his accent with the listening materials illustrates his adaptive and critical stance towards the target culture's dominance, which is not always relevant to his students' local context.

In contrast, Fangare's self-reflection on culture primarily focuses on enriching his knowledge and understanding. He acknowledges the positive impact of culture-based learning in broadening his own perspectives, as he stated:

"Saya senang... itu menambah pengetahuan saya... membuka wawasan saya." ("I enjoy... It expands my knowledge... it broadens my perspective.")

However, Fangare's reflection tends to remain at the cognitive and affective levels and has not yet developed into performative action within his classroom practices. He admitted that he has not actively incorporated local cultural practices into his teaching, although he includes theoretical materials on local culture.

"Kalau praktik secara langsung saya tidak membawa budaya lokal... saya hanya kasih materi-materi lokal saja." ("Regarding practical activities, I have not brought local culture into the classroom... I only include local materials in theory.")

Furthermore, Fangare recognizes his limited knowledge of foreign cultures as a challenge in implementing intercultural language learning:

"Kalau saya belum memahami budaya-budaya dari berbagai negara... itu kendala saya." ("Since I do not fully understand the cultures of various countries... that's my limitation.")

Nevertheless, he is aware of the importance of integrating both cultural elements and technology as part of a relevant language teaching strategy:

"Guru juga jangan hanya fokus pada metode pengajaran bahasa tapi juga menyisipkan unsur budaya dan teknologi." ("Teachers should not only focus on language teaching methods but also incorporate cultural and technological elements.")

Overall, Sangadji demonstrates a more mature, critical reflection that has been translated into concrete actions in the classroom, particularly in efforts to balance the influence of target cultures with local cultural elements. Meanwhile, Fangare's reflection is more focused on cognitive and affective enrichment for personal development and has yet to evolve into the practical implementation of cultural elements in teaching.

Sangadji tends to operate within critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997), consciously fostering students' critical attitudes toward foreign cultures. In contrast, Fangare's reflections remain largely at the individual level, aimed at personal enrichment, and are not yet fully connected to transformative pedagogical practice.

3.2. Discussion

The analysis revealed apparent differences in how Sangadji and Fangare conceptualize culture within the context of intercultural language learning (ILL). Sangadji views culture as a dynamic process (*culture as verb*), emphasizing the integration of local culture and *small 'c' culture* through real-life experiences, such as his engagement in local tourism communities. This finding aligns with previous studies emphasizing the importance of adapting learning materials to local contexts and employing experiential learning strategies to foster intercultural competence, despite challenges related to resource limitations (Novita & Purwati, 2021; Kamila et al., 2025). Similarly, Lee et al. (2023) highlight the significance of cross-cultural experiences, including virtual ones, in enhancing students' intercultural competence, which resonates with Sangadji's contextual approach. Furthermore, Mohamad and Nurkamto (2025) underscore the critical role of formal training and direct experience, as exemplified by Sangadji's professional background, while Mu and Yu (2023) emphasize the effectiveness of reflective approaches, aligning with Sangadji's teaching practice.

Conversely, Fangare conceptualizes culture as a static entity (*culture as noun*), focusing on Big 'C' Culture and pragmatic linguistic access to American English. His practice remains largely theoretical and lacks direct experiential engagement, a condition also noted by Kamila et al. (2025). Huang (2021) similarly suggests that explicit instruction in intercultural competence can be effective, albeit highly dependent on the learners' context. Wang et al. (2021)) further emphasize the value of critical reflection on texts, which reflects Fangare's current approach. The evidence from these two cases illustrates that differences

in teachers' understandings and practices may be shaped by personal experiences, access to resources, and pedagogical orientations, but these insights remain preliminary and require further validation with larger samples.

Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) emphasize that the integration of language and culture is fundamental in foreign language education, which aligns with Byram's (2021) concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Within this small exploratory study, the practices of the two teachers reveal notable contrasts. Sangadji highlights experiential learning through engagement with tourism communities, providing students authentic interactions with foreign speakers—an approach consistent with Byram's (2021) notion of experiential intercultural learning. Yang (2017) likewise underscores the value of such real-life experiences, while Bennett (1986) notes their benefits for both teachers' and students' intercultural skill development.

Equally important, Fangare's reflective–cognitive stance offers its own pedagogical value. By emphasizing the pragmatic aspects of intercultural communication—such as awareness of politeness norms and cross-cultural pragmatics—he demonstrates how intercultural competence can be fostered through careful analysis and metacognitive tasks even when direct interaction is limited. Baker (2015) highlights the importance of cognitive and reflective understanding in building intercultural awareness, and Huang (2023) shows that metacognitive reflection can enhance students' intercultural competence without face-to-face encounters. Similar findings by Phongsirikul and Thongrin (2019) indicate that reflection through instructional materials and journaling can raise EFL learners' intercultural awareness despite the absence of direct experiences. Studies by Gong et al. (2022), Safa and Tofghi (2022), and Cancino and Nuñez (2023) further suggest that while teachers may cognitively grasp the importance of ICC, classroom implementation often remains partial. Taken together, these preliminary observations highlight the complementary potential of both experiential and reflective approaches, while underscoring the need for broader research to confirm their impact in diverse EFL contexts.

Both Nafisah et al. (2024) and Yaprak and Ozmen (2025) affirm that teachers' beliefs and practices related to ICC are significantly shaped by their personal experiences, learning resources, and social contexts. Therefore, variations in ILL practices are not merely a matter of methodological choice but reflect teachers' access to intercultural experiences.

Findings on the sources shaping conceptualizations of culture and ILL reveal significant differences between Sangadji and Fangare. Sangadji developed his understanding through formal pathways such as university courses (CCU) and professional teacher training (PPG), providing solid theoretical and pedagogical foundations for integrating culture into language education. These experiences have led Sangadji to adopt a more reflective and selective approach when engaging with foreign cultures, carefully considering local and religious values, in line with ecological approaches to intercultural learning (Atkinson, 2014). Moreover, his engagement with digital media is a complementary rather than primary source, allowing him to balance external references with local identity.

In contrast, Fangare relies heavily on digital media and the national curriculum (Pancasila Student Profile) as his primary sources of cultural knowledge. His reliance on technology and self-directed learning reflects the reality of many teachers in the digital age who build intercultural understanding pragmatically without direct experience or formal training. However, his lack of authentic intercultural interactions poses a challenge, leaving his cultural conceptualizations largely theoretical and dependent on secondary sources. Zhang et al. (2024) highlight that pre-service teachers with intercultural experience demonstrate more authentic ICC practices, while those relying solely on formal education

tend to remain at the theoretical level. Batunan et al. (2023) also find that teachers supported through institutional backing and formal training, including telecollaborative exchanges, are more successful in implementing ILL than those relying solely on independent digital resources. These comparisons show that access to learning resources, real-life experiences, and educational backgrounds significantly influence how teachers conceptualize culture and ILL (Young & Sachdev, 2011).

Findings on teachers' self-reflection and cultural awareness reveal differences in the level of reflection and cultural awareness between Sangadji and Fangare in the context of foreign language education. Sangadji demonstrates more mature and critical reflection, aligning with Byram's (2021;1997) concept of critical cultural awareness, which emphasizes the need to critically evaluate one's own and foreign cultures in the learning process. He recognizes the potential dominance of target cultures (Western) in teaching materials and actively strives to balance this through the reinforcement of local identities, both linguistically and culturally. His reflection spans cognitive, affective, and performative dimensions, as evidenced by his efforts to adapt his teaching practices to his students' local contexts. These findings align with studies by Kusumaningputri and Widodo (2018) and Acquah and Commins (2015), affirming that deep critical reflection through reflective journaling and discussions significantly contributes to teachers' transformative cultural awareness.

Conversely, Fangare's self-reflection remains cognitive mainly and affective, focused on personal knowledge enhancement without translating into concrete classroom practices. His awareness of his limited understanding of foreign cultures also indicates that his reflection centers more on personal development than pedagogical transformation. This finding is supported by Madrid Akpovo (2019), who found that teachers engaging solely in cognitive reflection without integrating it into practice often fail to enact meaningful changes in teaching. While Fangare recognizes the importance of integrating culture and technology, he has yet to implement this consistently. This comparison highlights that teachers' critical reflection and cultural awareness are greatly influenced by their experiences, pedagogical orientations, and willingness to adapt their teaching practices, with Sangadji appearing better prepared to apply intercultural teaching principles in a contextualized and critical manner.

This study indicates that personal experiences, access to resources, and pedagogical orientations strongly shape teachers' understandings of culture and intercultural learning. Sangadji views culture as a process (*culture as verb*) and emphasizes direct experiences. Fangare views culture as a fixed entity (*culture as noun*) and relies on digital sources without direct engagement. Both agree on the importance of integrating language and culture, but differ in practice.

This study's findings provide theoretical and practical contributions, especially for EFL instruction considering cultural differences. The theoretical contribution of this study is that it offers a new perspective within the ICC literature by introducing the concept of island-based culture, which has limited access to cross-cultural experiences. Furthermore, this study not only reveals theoretical claims but also reveals how teachers' cultural understandings result in different pedagogical practices or behaviors. Ultimately, this study bridges the gap between cultural concepts, instructional design, instructional implementation, and student learning outcomes, particularly in cultural learning in EFL classrooms. This study makes theoretical contributions highlighting the significance of contextual teacher professional development, which aims to raise teachers' cultural understanding and equip them to apply what they've learned practically. Second, the results show that an experiential learning strategy can help students integrate local and small 'c'

culture, which other teachers can use as a model for making language learning relevant to students' real-life experiences. Teachers frequently resort to digital and conventional media due to a lack of access to intercultural resources and experiences, as shown in this study. This circumstance gives rise to practical suggestions about the significance of equitable access to intercultural experiences, such as through online exchange programs, collaboration between schools, or the usage of authentic media. The study concludes by stressing the importance of viewing intercultural reflection as a method of instruction rather than an awareness alone, emphasizing the collaborative nature of the educational process. Thus, it is necessary to accompany reflection with the development of ICC-oriented assessments, reflective activity designs, and culture-based lesson plans to bring reflection to a tangible implementation level, fostering collaboration within the educational community.

Practically, this study underscores the necessity of establishing planned and thorough teacher training programs to enhance intercultural competence in language instruction. Such training programs must incorporate numerous essential components, including reflection seminars, learning simulations, explicit guidance on local culture integration, and modules on the judicious use of digital materials. Reflection seminars, as a transformative tool, are indispensable for enhancing intercultural understanding and sensitivity. These sessions provide a platform for educators to critically assess their cultural assumptions and values, and compare them with the perspectives of different cultures. This reflective process is a catalyst for educators to adopt a more open and critical approach to cultural diversity in the classroom, inspiring them to make a significant difference in their teaching.

Furthermore, learning simulations that replicate genuine cultural circumstances, such as role-playing exercises or cross-cultural case analyses, are a practical and effective way to enhance instruction. These simulations empower educators to design lessons that not only impart factual cultural information but also stimulate student interpretation, conversation, and interaction with diverse cultural perspectives, instilling confidence in their teaching methods.

Third, training programs must include explicit guidance on methods for incorporating local culture and "small c" culture (i.e., norms, values, and quotidian social activities) into the framework of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This integration seeks to render language learning more pertinent, contextual, and significant for students, while circumventing the unilateral predominance of the target culture.

Moreover, the inclusion of a module on the strategic use of digital materials is empowering for educators. This module equips them with the skills to select, modify, and assess online resources while being mindful of potential cultural preconceptions or prejudices. Training programs also provide opportunities for collaborative interactions with international educators, such as webinars, joint projects, or cross-national communities of practice, further expanding teachers' intercultural perspectives and reinforcing their sense of control.

The success of this project is contingent upon ongoing institutional support from educational institutions and administrative bodies. This support may encompass the allocation of specific financing for intercultural initiatives, such as funding for cultural exchange programs, language immersion trips, or the development of multicultural teaching materials. It also includes access to genuine educational resources (such as cultural media, original texts, or contacts with individuals from diverse cultures) and the formation of professional learning communities for educators. This support will provide teachers with

sufficient space and tools to cultivate contextual, thoughtful, and significant intercultural learning.

4. Conclusion

This study highlights significant differences in the conceptualizations and practices of intercultural language learning (ILL) between two EFL teachers in North Maluku. Sangadji views culture as a dynamic process (*culture as verb*) and demonstrates experiential, reflective, and contextual teaching practices, emphasizing the integration of local and *small 'c' cultures*. He actively implements the principles of critical cultural awareness in the classroom to balance the influence of foreign cultures with students' local identities. In contrast, Fangare perceives culture as a static entity (*culture as noun*), focuses on *Big' C' culture*, and relies on digital sources without direct intercultural experiences. His reflections are cognitive-affective, aimed more at personal enrichment than driving pedagogical change. These findings affirm that personal experiences, resource access, and pedagogical orientations influence teachers' understandings and practices. By foregrounding the voices of teachers from a peripheral 3T region, this research provides an empirically grounded perspective that expands current discussions of Intercultural Communicative Competence beyond urban and well-resourced contexts, offering a critical reference point for policy makers, curriculum designers, and future comparative studies.

Theoretically, this study reinforces the relevance of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (Byram, 1997) and experiential intercultural learning approaches, which stress the importance of real-life experiences in developing intercultural competence. Practically, the findings underscore the urgency of designing structured teacher training programs that combine intercultural reflection workshops, classroom simulations with authentic cultural scenarios, and guidance on integrating local and small 'c' cultures into EFL lessons. Such programs should also include modules on critical use of digital materials and collaborative exchanges with international educators. Furthermore, schools and local education offices need to provide sustained institutional support, such as funding for intercultural projects, access to authentic resources, and professional learning communities, to enable teachers to foster meaningful and contextually grounded intercultural learning.

However, this study's scope is limited, involving only two teachers from a specific region, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the data lacks triangulation through student perspectives or longitudinal study, which could provide deeper insights into the dynamics of intercultural teaching practices. Future research should include more participants from diverse regions and adopt longitudinal or action research approaches to more holistically capture the evolving nature of intercultural language learning (ILL) practices. Future research should involve a larger and more diverse pool of teachers across different educational settings, including rural, urban, and semi-urban areas, to explore how contextual variations shape intercultural teaching practices. It would also be beneficial to integrate student perspectives and conduct longitudinal or action research to trace how teachers' intercultural orientations and pedagogical strategies evolve over time. Additionally, future studies could examine the impact of specific intercultural training programs on teachers' classroom practices and student outcomes, thereby offering more robust evidence for policy and curriculum development. Overall, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on intercultural language teaching in the Indonesian EFL context by highlighting the importance of critical reflection, experiential learning, and institutional support in fostering contextually relevant intercultural competence.

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