EFL TEACHERS' CHALLENGES, STRATEGIES, AND COPING EFFORTS IN PROMOTING STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the challenges faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, the instructional strategies they used, and the coping efforts they reported in promoting students' Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) at MAS Al Washliyah 12 Perbaungan, an Islamic senior secondary school in North Sumatra, Indonesia. Using a qualitative case study design, the research involved two purposively selected EFL teachers. Data were collected in May 2026 through semi-structured interviews, one classroom observation for each teacher, and analysis of teaching documents. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. Four challenge themes were identified: limited intercultural exposure, time constraints and curriculum demands, restricted access to intercultural learning resources, and students' cultural bias and ethnocentric perspectives. The latter was based primarily on one teacher's interview account and was not directly observed. Reported instructional strategies included local and target cultural materials, digital resources, cross-cultural discussions, role-play, and a project-based activity reported by one teacher to promote local culture through English. Reported coping efforts involved technology and digital media, regular English practice, reflection and openness, and the integration of Islamic values. The evidence supporting these practices varied across interviews, observations, and documents. The study offers a context-specific account of teachers' experiences and practices; it does not measure changes in students' ICC or establish the effectiveness of the strategies.

***Keywords**: intercultural communicative competence, EFL teachers, instructional strategies, coping efforts, Madrasah Aliyah*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji tantangan yang dihadapi guru bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL), strategi pembelajaran yang digunakan, serta upaya yang dilaporkan untuk mengatasi tantangan dalam mempromosikan Kompetensi Komunikatif Antarbudaya (Intercultural Communicative Competence/ICC) siswa di MAS Al Washliyah 12 Perbaungan, Sumatera Utara. Penelitian menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif dengan melibatkan dua guru EFL yang dipilih secara purposif. Data dikumpulkan pada Mei 2026 melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, satu kali observasi kelas untuk setiap guru, dan analisis dokumen pembelajaran. Data dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña. Empat tema tantangan ditemukan, yaitu keterbatasan paparan antarbudaya,

keterbatasan waktu dan tuntutan kurikulum, keterbatasan sumber belajar antarbudaya, serta bias budaya dan perspektif etnosentris siswa. Tema terakhir terutama bersumber dari wawancara seorang guru dan tidak tercatat secara langsung dalam observasi. Strategi pembelajaran yang dilaporkan meliputi penggunaan materi budaya lokal dan budaya sasaran, sumber digital, diskusi lintas budaya, bermain peran, serta kegiatan berbasis proyek yang dilaporkan oleh satu guru untuk memperkenalkan budaya lokal melalui bahasa Inggris. Upaya yang dilaporkan untuk mengatasi tantangan mencakup penggunaan teknologi dan media digital, praktik bahasa Inggris secara berkelanjutan, pengembangan refleksi dan keterbukaan, serta integrasi nilai-nilai Islam. Dukungan bukti berbeda pada setiap temuan dan sumber data. Penelitian ini memberikan gambaran kontekstual mengenai pengalaman dan praktik guru, bukan mengukur perubahan ICC siswa atau membuktikan efektivitas strategi.

Kata kunci: kompetensi komunikatif antarbudaya, guru EFL, strategi pembelajaran, upaya mengatasi tantangan, Madrasah Aliyah

A. Introduction

English serves not only as a means of learning grammar and vocabulary but also as a tool for communication across cultures. Therefore, English language learning should provide opportunities to understand cultural values, customs, interaction patterns, and perspectives. In this context, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is essential because it makes cross-cultural communication an integral part of language learning. Byram (1997) explains ICC through five *savoirs*: attitudes of openness and curiosity (*savoir être*), knowledge of social groups and their practices (*savoirs*), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*). This framework emphasizes that intercultural learning extends beyond cultural facts to include interpretation, interaction, and critical reflection.

Several studies highlight the importance of integrating intercultural dimensions into English language teaching, although implementation remains challenging. Omar (2024) emphasizes the need for systematic ICC integration in EFL education, while Ghaffour and Chehri (2024) identify challenges such as limited time and learning support. Mkhitaryan and Udumyan (2023) and Tadjieva (2024) examine strategies for developing ICC in EFL classrooms, while Youfi and Brigui (2024) investigate its understanding and

practice in EFL education. These studies establish the importance of ICC, teacher readiness, and instructional approaches. However, further contextual investigation is needed to understand how teachers experience challenges, select strategies, and address obstacles in their daily teaching.

These issues are particularly relevant to Madrasah Aliyah, where English language learning must accommodate national curriculum demands and an educational framework grounded in Islamic values. Teachers need to develop students' language abilities while helping them understand cultural differences without disregarding their identities and values. Respect, tolerance, empathy, and ethical behavior can provide common ground for discussing cultural diversity. Nevertheless, this relationship needs to be examined through teachers' practices and explanations in specific contexts rather than assumed to apply uniformly across all madrasahs.

This study was conducted at MAS Al Washliyah 12 Perbaungan, in Serdang Bedagai Regency, North Sumatra. The challenges faced by EFL teachers at this school, their strategies for promoting ICC, and their efforts to address obstacles have not yet been explained in detail. This gap does not imply that previous studies have overlooked ICC challenges or strategies; rather, these aspects need to be examined together within a specific Madrasah Aliyah context. This approach also distinguishes practices reported in interviews from those documented through classroom observations and instructional materials.

This study aims to: (1) identify the challenges faced by EFL teachers in promoting students' ICC at MAS Al Washliyah 12 Perbaungan; (2) explore their instructional strategies; and (3) examine their efforts to address these challenges. Theoretically, Byram's (1997) ICC framework guides the interpretation of instructional materials, interactional activities, and intercultural reflection. Practically, the findings are expected to provide a context-specific account that may inform EFL teachers and researchers in similar educational settings.

B. Method

This study used a qualitative case study design to explore two EFL teachers' experiences, perceptions,

and practices at MAS Al Washliyah 12 Perbaungan, focusing on intercultural integration in English teaching. Qualitative research examines participants' meanings within social contexts (Creswell, 2014), while case studies investigate phenomena within defined settings and boundaries (Fahmi, 2024). Data collection took place in May 2026.

Purposive sampling selected teachers with over three years of experience, direct involvement in English teaching, experience integrating cultural elements, and willingness to participate. The participants were TA, with 18 years of experience teaching Grade X, and DWN, with 23 years teaching Grades XI and XII. Codes were used to protect their identities.

Data were collected through three techniques: semi-structured interviews, one classroom observation per teacher, and document analysis. Interviews explored teachers' experiences, perceptions, strategies, challenges, and coping efforts; they were conducted in Indonesian, recorded with consent, and transcribed. Observations documented cultural elements, classroom activities, student participation, and challenges. Document analysis covered available syllabi, modules, lesson plans, teaching materials, and relevant school documents. An English education expert validated the instruments before data collection.

Analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) interactive model: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were repeatedly reviewed, coded, categorized, and developed into themes addressing the three research questions. Cross-source comparisons examined evidentiary support without assuming every theme was supported by all sources. Interviews represented reported experiences and practices, observations documented classroom events, and documents showed content explicitly included in written materials.

Because the study involved two teachers at one school, each observed once, the findings provide a context-specific account rather than statistical generalizations. Students were not participants, and their ICC development was not measured. Therefore, the study does not

establish strategy effectiveness or improvements in students' ICC.

C. Result and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings on the challenges EFL teachers faced in promoting ICC, the instructional strategies they used, and their efforts to address the identified challenges. The findings are drawn from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, with each source considered according to the evidence it provides. The discussion interprets these findings in relation to Byram's (1997) ICC framework and relevant previous studies, while distinguishing teachers' reported practices from observed activities and documented evidence.

1. Challenges Faced by EFL Teachers in Promoting ICC

The analysis identified four challenges: limited intercultural exposure, time and curriculum constraints, limited intercultural learning resources, and students' cultural bias and ethnocentric perspectives. Intercultural exposure and resource limitations were supported by three data sources, while time constraints were mainly supported by interviews and observations. Cultural bias was derived primarily from TA's interview and was not observed as a specific student response.

First, limited intercultural exposure refers to insufficient direct interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds. TA described students' understanding as largely theoretical, while DWN emphasized limited opportunities for cultural contact. Observations showed intercultural learning through classroom discussions and comparisons rather than direct interaction. Documents addressed global issues and social interactions but did not indicate direct intercultural communication activities. Thus, all three sources contributed different evidence for this theme.

Second, time constraints and curriculum demands arose from the need to meet language objectives and curriculum targets within limited lesson time. TA explained that cognitive targets and examination preparation reduced opportunities for cultural exploration, while DWN also mentioned time and resource limitations. Observations reflected

difficulties integrating ICC into curriculum demands, but documents provided no clear independent evidence. These findings align with previous research on ICC implementation challenges and time constraints in EFL teaching (Ghaffour & Chehri, 2024; Omar, 2024).

Third, limited intercultural learning resources involved insufficient textbooks, materials, and facilities supporting ICC. DWN mentioned resource, time, and facility limitations, while TA noted that textbooks emphasized language competence over ICC. Observations indicated limited explicit support for ICC, and documents contained cultural elements that did not always explore intercultural issues in depth. Thus, including cultural content does not necessarily mean that materials explicitly develop interpretation, interaction, or critical cultural awareness.

Fourth, cultural bias and ethnocentric perspectives emerged mainly from TA's account that some students judged foreign cultures according to local norms. DWN emphasized limited cultural experience rather than bias. Observations recorded no specific biased responses, and documents provided no direct evidence. Therefore, this theme represents TA's perception of potential difficulties, not evidence of the prevalence or degree of student bias.

2. Instructional Strategies for Promoting ICC

The findings identified five strategies for promoting ICC: local and target-culture materials, digital resources, intercultural discussions, role-playing, and project-based activities. Evidence varied across strategies: discussions and role-playing were observed in both classes, digital resource use was mainly interview-reported, and project-based learning was primarily reported by TA.

Local and target-culture materials connected students' experiences with broader cultural practices. TA reported using tourist destinations, folk tales, mosque architecture, afternoon tea traditions, and politeness strategies. However, not all examples were confirmed in observed lessons. TA's observation recorded local examples such as rujak buah and cendol and cultural comparison, but did not confirm direct

use of target-culture materials. DWN's observation explicitly documented comparisons between local and foreign cultural practices. TA's documents included local culture but did not explicitly document target-culture materials or direct comparisons. Thus, evidence for local materials was clearer across sources.

Digital resources were reported by both teachers to address limited access to cultural information. DWN mentioned intercultural videos, while TA reported using YouTube and online platforms. Observations and documents did not independently confirm their use for intercultural purposes. Although authentic materials may facilitate cross-cultural understanding, this study did not assess their impact on ICC (Huynh & Dan, 2022; Jain, 2024).

Intercultural discussions were reported by both teachers and observed in both classes. Topics included celebrations, social values, cultural practices, and comparisons between Indonesian and other cultures. Students responded to questions and shared opinions, although discussions were largely teacher-guided and participation varied. Documents included discussion activities but did not establish that they consistently involved intercultural comparison.

Role-playing was reported by both teachers and observed in both classes. Activities included greeting guests from different cultural backgrounds and simulated conversations using English. These observations confirm implementation during the lessons, but do not establish how effectively students adapted their language to cultural norms or demonstrate measurable effects. Previous studies identify simulations and interaction as opportunities to practice communication in social contexts (Kamila et al., 2025; Yusri & Andriyanti, 2025).

Project-based activities emerged mainly from TA's interview, which described digital brochures or short English videos promoting local culture and architecture to foreign tourists. TA's teaching module included a video project, but the evidence did not establish systematic cultural comparison or critical analysis. DWN's project-oriented assignments also could not be classified as ICC-focused PjBL. Therefore, the evidence supports describing TA's project as an

activity introducing local culture through English, not as confirmed cultural-comparison learning or evidence of improved ICC.

3. Teachers' Coping Efforts to Address Challenges

This study distinguished instructional strategies, used during teaching, from coping efforts intended to address challenges. Four efforts emerged: technology and digital media, continuous English exposure, reflection and openness, and Islamic values. However, evidentiary support varied across themes.

Both teachers reported using digital media to compensate for limited intercultural exposure and learning resources. However, observations and documents did not independently confirm this use. Thus, technology represents a reported coping effort rather than a practice verified in every lesson.

Continuous English exposure was emphasized mainly by DWN, while TA mentioned an English Club as extracurricular support. If the data only indicate a proposal, it should not be presented as an implemented program. Observations contextualized classroom English use but did not establish sustained practice outside lessons or its outcomes.

Reflection and openness were reported as ways to encourage students to appreciate cultural differences and consider other perspectives. Although classroom interactions provided relevant context, observations documented no specific instances of ethnocentric bias. Therefore, these efforts represent pedagogical orientations, not proven changes in students' attitudes. In Byram's (1997) framework, they relate to openness and curiosity and critical cultural awareness, whose development was not measured.

Islamic values provided a contextual framework for intercultural learning. TA explicitly connected ukhuwah insaniyah (human brotherhood) and religious moderation with ICC, while DWN emphasized respect, empathy, openness, and positive attitudes without explicitly making the same connection. This theme relied on interviews and lacked independent confirmation through observations or documents. It therefore reflects teachers' stated perspectives and objectives, not demonstrated improvements in students' competence. In Madrasah

Aliyah, these values may support discussions of diversity while maintaining cultural and religious identities, provided interpretations remain grounded in the data.

4. Integrated Discussion Through Byram's ICC Framework

ICC promotion was shaped by limited intercultural exposure, curriculum demands, resource availability, and students' readiness to engage with cultural differences, consistent with previous studies (Ghaffour & Chehri, 2024; Omar, 2024; Nafisah et al., 2024). This study contributes a context-specific account of two teachers' challenges and responses at one Madrasah Aliyah.

Byram's (1997) framework explains the relevance of cultural materials for knowledge, discussions for comparing perspectives, role-playing for simulated interaction, and reflection for openness and critical cultural awareness. However, these activities do not demonstrate development of all five *savoirs*, as students' ICC was not directly assessed.

The data sources provided different evidence: interviews captured teachers' experiences and intentions, observations documented activities in two lessons, and documents reflected written learning materials. Digital media use was supported mainly by interviews, role-playing by interviews and observations, and target-culture materials unevenly across classes. These distinctions kept conclusions proportionate to the evidence.

In the Islamic educational context, respect, empathy, and moderation offer relevant foundations for discussing cultural differences. However, the findings do not establish that both teachers interpreted or implemented the relationship between Islamic values and ICC similarly. The study highlights teachers' choices and challenges while identifying opportunities to connect cultural knowledge, interpretation, interaction, and critical reflection more explicitly.

D. Conclusion

This study examined the challenges, strategies, and coping efforts of two EFL teachers in promoting ICC at MAS Al Washliyah 12 Perbaungan. Four challenges emerged: limited intercultural exposure, time and curriculum constraints, limited learning resources, and cultural bias. The last

theme mainly reflected TA's interview and was not observed as a specific student response.

Strategies included local and target-culture materials, digital resources, discussions, role-playing, and TA's project-based activities promoting local culture through English. Observations supported discussions and role-playing, while digital resource use was mainly interview-based. Evidence did not establish that all projects explicitly promoted cultural comparison or that the strategies improved students' ICC.

Reported coping efforts involved technology, continuous English practice, reflection and openness, and Islamic values, with varying evidentiary support. These findings reflect two teachers at one madrasah, not all EFL teachers or measured student outcomes. Future research should include more schools and teachers, repeated observations, student perspectives, and direct ICC assessments.

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