

## EXPLORING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN INTERCULTURAL LEARNING MATERIALS FOR EFL IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

**Eripuddin<sup>1</sup>,**

<sup>1</sup> Universitas Pasir Pengaraian, Indonesia,

✉ (e-mail) [eripuddin85@gmail.com](mailto:eripuddin85@gmail.com)

**Zeinab Abu Samak<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>2</sup> Nura English Academy, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia,

✉ (e-mail) [Zsamak@gmail.com](mailto:Zsamak@gmail.com)

**Pipit Rahayu<sup>3</sup>,**

<sup>3</sup> Universitas Pasir Pengaraian, Indonesia,

✉ (e-mail) [darariau2010@gmail.com](mailto:darariau2010@gmail.com)

**Jufrizal<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>4</sup> Universitas Negeri Padang, Indonesia,

✉ (e-mail) [jufely@gmail.com](mailto:jufely@gmail.com)

Receive in	Revised in	Accepted in
13 April 2026	25 May 2026	28 May 2026

### ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges and opportunities associated with intercultural learning materials in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) higher education through a systematic literature review. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how intercultural materials are developed, implemented, and evaluated in contemporary educational contexts. Using a systematic review approach, relevant studies published between 2020 and 2025 were identified, screened, and analyzed based on predefined inclusion criteria. The findings reveal that the implementation of intercultural learning materials is constrained by several interconnected challenges, including limited teacher competence, rigid institutional structures, and the lack of culturally diverse and contextually relevant materials. These challenges indicate that intercultural learning has not yet been fully integrated into mainstream EFL instruction. However, the study also identifies significant opportunities, particularly in the use of digital technologies, the integration of local and multicultural content, and the adoption of innovative pedagogical approaches such as experiential and drama-based learning. These opportunities provide pathways for enhancing students' intercultural communicative competence and creating more meaningful learning experiences. The study highlights the importance of aligning global perspectives with local cultural contexts, especially in institutions such as Universitas Pasir Pengaraian (UPP). Overall, this study contributes to the literature by offering a systematic synthesis of recent research and providing practical implications for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers. It also suggests directions for future research on the sustainability and scalability of intercultural learning materials in higher education.

**Keywords:** Intercultural learning materials; EFL higher education; intercultural communicative competence; systematic literature review.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the increasing interconnectedness of global societies has profoundly reshaped the orientation and objectives of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, particularly within higher education contexts. Universities are now expected to produce graduates who are not only linguistically competent but also capable of navigating complex intercultural interactions in academic, professional, and social domains. This shift reflects a broader transformation in language education, where communicative competence is no longer limited to grammatical accuracy and fluency but extends to intercultural communicative competence (ICC), encompassing attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 2021; Kramsch, 2020; Baker, 2021). Furthermore, the expansion of digital communication platforms and international collaboration has intensified the need for students to engage with diverse cultural perspectives in real time, making intercultural competence an essential component of 21st-century skills (Deardorff, 2020; Jackson, 2022). Without such competence, learners may encounter difficulties in interpreting meaning appropriately across cultural contexts,

which can lead to miscommunication and reduced effectiveness in global interactions.

In this regard, learning materials play a central role as the primary medium through which intercultural dimensions are embedded into language instruction. Teaching materials are not merely tools for delivering linguistic input but also function as cultural representations that shape learners' perspectives, values, and attitudes toward different cultures (Tomlinson, 2021; Widodo, 2020). However, a persistent issue in many EFL contexts is the dominance of monocultural and often Western-oriented materials that fail to reflect the diversity of learners' sociocultural backgrounds (Matsuda, 2020; Nguyen & Pham, 2021). Such limitations can restrict students' intercultural exposure and hinder the development of critical cultural awareness. Moreover, the lack of contextual relevance in instructional materials may reduce learner engagement and limit opportunities for meaningful communication. Therefore, the development of intercultural learning materials that are inclusive, context-sensitive, and pedagogically grounded has become an urgent priority in higher education.

A growing body of research has sought to address these concerns by exploring various approaches to integrating intercultural learning into EFL pedagogy. Scholars have emphasized the use of authentic materials, intercultural tasks, and reflective practices that encourage learners to critically engage with cultural content and develop intercultural awareness (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2021; Porto & Byram, 2020; Sercu, 2020). In addition, the integration of digital technologies—such as virtual exchanges and online collaborative platforms—has been identified as an effective means of facilitating intercultural interaction beyond the physical classroom (O’Dowd, 2021; Helm, 2020; Godwin-Jones, 2021). These innovations have demonstrated considerable potential in enhancing students’ empathy, critical thinking, and intercultural communicative competence. Nevertheless, despite these advancements, the integration of intercultural elements into teaching materials often remains fragmented and dependent on individual instructors rather than being systematically embedded within curricula.

Within the Indonesian higher education context, research on intercultural learning materials has increasingly focused on discipline-specific applications,

particularly in drama-based EFL instruction. A series of studies by Eripuddin (2023, 2024, 2025) provide significant contributions to this area. Eripuddin (2023) conducted a needs analysis involving lecturers and students, which revealed a substantial gap between existing teaching materials and the intercultural competencies required in drama courses. The study highlighted issues such as limited cultural representation, lack of contextualization, and insufficient guidance for integrating intercultural elements into classroom practices. Building on these findings, Eripuddin (2024) developed a prototype model of intercultural teaching materials designed to enhance instructional effectiveness and support educators in managing the learning process more systematically. The results indicated that well-structured materials could improve both pedagogical outcomes and administrative organization.

Further extending this line of inquiry, Eripuddin (2025) examined the implementation of intercultural learning in drama subjects, demonstrating that drama-based pedagogy provides a dynamic and experiential space for students to explore cultural perspectives through performance and interaction. In another study, Eripuddin

(2025) investigated the revitalization of the Malay language through intercultural learning materials in higher education, particularly in Rokan Hulu. This study underscored the importance of integrating local cultural content into EFL instruction as a means of strengthening cultural identity while promoting intercultural understanding. Collectively, these studies highlight the potential of intercultural learning materials to bridge linguistic and cultural learning, particularly when they are aligned with local contexts and learner needs.

Despite these valuable contributions, a critical examination of the literature indicates that significant gaps remain. Existing studies, including those by Eripuddin (2023, 2024, 2025), tend to focus on specific instructional contexts such as drama courses or localized cultural settings, thereby limiting the generalizability of their findings across broader higher education environments (Setyono & Widodo, 2021; Susanto, 2022). Moreover, there is a lack of comprehensive systematic reviews that synthesize findings across diverse studies, resulting in a fragmented understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with intercultural learning materials (Zhou & Fang, 2022; Lee, 2023). In addition,

relatively little attention has been given to evaluating the long-term effectiveness, scalability, and sustainability of such materials in fostering students' intercultural communicative competence (Tran & Dang, 2021; Gómez Rodríguez, 2020). Practical challenges—including limited teacher training, institutional constraints, and the complexity of integrating intercultural content into existing curricula—also remain underexplored, despite their significant influence on implementation (Larzén-Östermark, 2021; Yuan, 2022; Pham & Bui, 2023). At the same time, emerging opportunities such as digital technologies, multicultural resources, and interdisciplinary approaches have not yet been examined within a cohesive analytical framework that balances both their potential and limitations (Chen, 2021; Park & Cha, 2022; Kohn, 2023). In response to these gaps, this study aims to systematically review and critically synthesize recent literature (2020–2025) on intercultural learning materials in EFL higher education. Specifically, this study seeks to identify and analyze the key challenges in developing and implementing intercultural learning materials, to explore the opportunities and innovative practices that support their

integration into EFL instruction, and to evaluate the extent to which existing research addresses their effectiveness and sustainability in enhancing students' intercultural communicative competence. Through this comprehensive review, the study is expected to provide a more holistic understanding of the field and offer practical implications for educators, curriculum developers, and future researchers.

Despite these valuable contributions, a critical examination of the literature indicates that significant gaps remain. Existing studies, including those by Eripuddin (2023, 2024, 2025), tend to focus on specific instructional contexts such as drama courses or localized cultural settings, thereby limiting the generalizability of their findings across broader higher education environments (Setyono & Widodo, 2021; Susanto, 2022). Moreover, there is a lack of comprehensive systematic reviews that synthesize findings across diverse studies, resulting in a fragmented understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with intercultural learning materials (Zhou & Fang, 2022; Lee, 2023). In addition, relatively little attention has been given to evaluating the long-term effectiveness, scalability, and sustainability of such

materials in fostering students' intercultural communicative competence (Tran & Dang, 2021; Gómez Rodríguez, 2020). Practical challenges—including limited teacher training, institutional constraints, and the complexity of integrating intercultural content into existing curricula—also remain underexplored, despite their significant influence on implementation (Larzén-Östermark, 2021; Yuan, 2022; Pham & Bui, 2023). At the same time, emerging opportunities such as digital technologies, multicultural resources, and interdisciplinary approaches have not yet been examined within a cohesive analytical framework that balances both their potential and limitations (Chen, 2021; Park & Cha, 2022; Kohn, 2023).

In response to these gaps, this study aims to systematically review and critically synthesize recent literature (2020–2025) on intercultural learning materials in EFL higher education. Specifically, this study seeks to identify and analyze the key challenges in developing and implementing intercultural learning materials, to explore the opportunities and innovative practices that support their integration into EFL instruction, and to evaluate the extent to which existing research addresses the effectiveness,

scalability, and sustainability of such materials in enhancing students' intercultural communicative competence. Through this comprehensive review, the study is expected to provide a more holistic

## METHODS

This study employed a **Systematic Literature Review (SLR)** to investigate the challenges and opportunities in intercultural learning materials for EFL in higher education. The SLR approach was selected because it enables a comprehensive, systematic, and transparent synthesis of existing research findings, particularly in areas where prior studies are fragmented and context-dependent. By integrating results from multiple studies, this method allows for the development of a more holistic understanding of intercultural learning materials and their implementation in higher education. The review process was conducted following a structured procedure adapted from the **PRISMA** guidelines, ensuring methodological rigor, transparency, and replicability. Furthermore, a thematic analysis approach was applied to interpret and categorize the data into meaningful themes aligned with the research objectives and questions. To ensure systematic organization and clarity,

and integrated understanding of the field, as well as to offer practical implications for educators, curriculum developers, and future researchers.

the research procedure was conducted through the following stages:

### a. Planning

The planning stage served as the foundation of the systematic review, focusing on defining the scope, objectives, and direction of the study. The primary aim of this research was to explore the challenges and opportunities in the development and implementation of intercultural learning materials in EFL higher education. In line with this aim, research questions were formulated to guide the entire review process, ensuring that the study remained focused and analytically coherent.

In addition, this stage involved determining the conceptual and methodological framework for the study. A thematic analysis approach was selected as the main analytical method because of its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterns across qualitative and mixed-method research. This approach allows researchers to systematically code and

categorize data, making it particularly appropriate for synthesizing findings related to complex constructs such as intercultural competence and learning materials.

Furthermore, the planning stage also included defining key concepts and establishing operational definitions for terms such as “intercultural learning materials,” “intercultural competence,” and “EFL higher education.” This step was crucial to ensure consistency during the screening and analysis processes. By clearly outlining the research focus and analytical approach at the outset, this stage contributed to the overall rigor and coherence of the study.

### **b. Screening (Systematic Mapping Study)**

The screening stage began with a systematic mapping study aimed at providing a broad overview of the research landscape related to intercultural learning materials in EFL higher education. This step was essential to identify the scope of existing studies, map key research trends, and refine the search strategy. Data were collected from major academic databases, including **Scopus** and **Web of Science**, which are recognized for indexing high-quality peer-reviewed journals. The search process employed a combination of

keywords and Boolean operators to maximize the retrieval of relevant studies. Keywords such as “intercultural learning materials,” “intercultural competence,” “EFL,” and “higher education” were used in various combinations to ensure comprehensive coverage.

The search was limited to articles published between 2020 and 2025 to capture recent developments in the field. After retrieving the initial set of articles, duplicate records were removed to ensure data accuracy. Subsequently, titles and abstracts were systematically reviewed to assess their relevance to the research topic. This stage resulted in a refined pool of studies that were potentially relevant for further analysis. The systematic mapping process not only facilitated the identification of relevant literature but also helped in recognizing dominant themes, research gaps, and emerging trends, which informed the subsequent stages of the review.

### **3. Selecting**

The selecting stage involved a more rigorous evaluation of the studies identified during the screening process. At this stage, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure that only relevant and high-quality studies were included in the

final analysis. The inclusion criteria required that the studies be peer-reviewed journal articles, published between 2020 and 2025, focused on EFL or ESL contexts in higher education, and explicitly addressed intercultural learning or teaching materials. In contrast, studies were excluded if they were conducted outside the field of language education, focused on primary or secondary education, were not peer-reviewed, or lacked sufficient methodological clarity.

Each article was carefully assessed based on these criteria through a full-text review. This process ensured that the selected studies were not only relevant to the research topic but also methodologically sound. In some cases, a scoring or prioritization approach was used to determine the most suitable studies for inclusion. This stage played a critical role in narrowing down the dataset to a manageable number of high-quality studies, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the review findings.

#### 4. Data Analysis (Synthesis)

The final stage involved the analysis and synthesis of the selected studies using a thematic analysis approach. This process aimed to identify recurring patterns, key themes, and relationships

across the studies in order to answer the research questions. The analysis began with an in-depth reading of each selected article, followed by the coding of relevant data segments. These codes were then grouped into broader categories, which were further organized into three main themes: (1) challenges in the development and implementation of intercultural learning materials, (2) opportunities and innovative practices supporting intercultural learning, and (3) effectiveness and sustainability of such materials in EFL higher education.

The thematic analysis allowed for a systematic comparison of findings across different studies, enabling the identification of common issues and emerging practices. In addition, the analysis went beyond descriptive summarization by critically interpreting the relationships between themes and their implications for teaching and learning. To enhance the contextual relevance of the findings, the synthesized results were interpreted in relation to the context of Universitas Pasir Pengaraian (UPP). This contextualization was supported by previous studies conducted in this setting (Eripuddin, 2023, 2024, 2025), particularly in relation to drama-based instruction and intercultural material development. This

step enabled the study to bridge global research insights with local educational practices.

### 5. Validation of Findings

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the results, a validation process was conducted. This involved cross-checking the identified themes with the research questions and comparing findings across multiple studies to ensure consistency. The use of clearly defined inclusion criteria and a systematic review framework contributed to reducing potential bias in the selection and analysis of studies. In addition, the iterative nature of thematic analysis allowed for continuous

refinement of codes and categories, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected the data. The alignment between the findings and the research objectives further strengthened the validity of the study. Overall, this validation process ensured that the conclusions drawn from the review were reliable, well-supported, and relevant to both global and local contexts of EFL higher education.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

Table 1. Challenges in Intercultural Learning Materials in Higher Education

Category	Sub-Category	Description of Findings	Implications
<b>Pedagogical</b>	Limited teacher competence	Lecturers lack understanding of intercultural communicative competence and how to integrate it into teaching	Need for intercultural training and professional development
	Traditional teaching practices	Teaching focuses on grammar and language form rather than cultural meaning	Shift toward intercultural and communicative approaches
<b>Institutional</b>	Curriculum rigidity	Fixed curriculum limits flexibility to include intercultural content	Curriculum redesign is required

Category	Sub-Category	Description of Findings	Implications
<b>Materials</b>	Lack of institutional support	Limited policies, training, and resources for intercultural learning	Strengthen institutional support systems
	Lack of cultural diversity	Materials are dominated by Western perspectives	Develop culturally inclusive materials
	Limited local content	Lack of integration of local or indigenous culture	Incorporate local culture into materials

The findings indicate that challenges in intercultural learning materials are multidimensional, involving pedagogical, institutional, and material-related factors. From a pedagogical perspective, lecturers often lack sufficient understanding of intercultural communicative competence, which limits their ability to integrate cultural elements effectively into teaching. This condition results in teaching practices that focus more on grammar and language form rather than cultural meaning and interaction. Consequently, students may not develop the skills needed to engage in meaningful intercultural communication. In addition, the lack of structured professional development programs further constrains lecturers' ability to improve their intercultural teaching practices. These issues highlight the need for continuous training and pedagogical transformation in higher education.

From an institutional perspective, rigid curricula and limited flexibility hinder the integration of intercultural content into teaching materials. Many institutions still emphasize standardized outcomes, which reduces opportunities for incorporating intercultural dimensions in learning. The absence of clear policies and institutional support further limits innovation in teaching practices. As a result, lecturers often rely on individual initiatives rather than systematic implementation. This situation creates inconsistency in how intercultural learning is applied across programs. Therefore, stronger institutional commitment is needed to support intercultural education.

In terms of materials, the dominance of Western-oriented content and the lack of local cultural representation present significant challenges. Many teaching materials do not reflect the cultural backgrounds of students, which

reduces their relevance and engagement. This imbalance limits opportunities for students to connect their own cultural identity with global perspectives. As a result, intercultural learning becomes less meaningful and less contextualized. The lack of locally grounded materials also

restricts the development of culturally responsive teaching practices. Therefore, it is essential to develop materials that integrate both global and local cultural elements.

Table 2. Learning Materials in Higher Education

Category	Sub-Category	Description of Findings	Implications
<b>Technological</b>	Digital platforms	Online tools enable access to diverse cultural resources and global interaction	Promote digital-based intercultural learning
	Virtual exchange	Interaction with international peers through online platforms	Enhance authentic intercultural communication
<b>Cultural</b>	Local culture integration	Use of local cultural content in teaching materials	Strengthen cultural identity and relevance
	Multicultural resources	Availability of diverse global cultural materials	Broaden students' perspectives
<b>Pedagogical Innovation</b>	Experiential learning	Use of interactive methods such as projects and simulations	Increase student engagement and critical thinking
	Drama-based learning	Contextual and performative learning activities	Enhance empathy and intercultural competence

The findings reveal that technological advancements provide significant opportunities for enhancing intercultural learning materials in higher

education. Digital platforms enable students to access diverse cultural resources and interact with global communities. Through virtual exchange programs, learners can communicate with peers from different cultural backgrounds.

This interaction helps develop authentic intercultural communication skills. In addition, technology expands learning beyond traditional classroom boundaries. Therefore, digital integration plays a crucial role in supporting intercultural learning.

Another important opportunity lies in the integration of local and multicultural content into learning materials. The inclusion of local culture makes learning more relevant and meaningful for students. It also helps learners connect their cultural identity with global perspectives. At the same time, access to multicultural resources broadens students' understanding of cultural diversity. This approach encourages critical reflection and intercultural awareness. As a result, culturally inclusive materials enhance both engagement and learning outcomes.

Furthermore, pedagogical innovations offer effective strategies for promoting intercultural competence. Experiential learning methods, such as project-based learning and simulations, encourage active student participation. These approaches create interactive environments where students can engage with cultural contexts. Drama-based learning, in particular, provides opportunities for students to explore

cultural roles and perspectives. This method fosters empathy, creativity, and critical thinking. Overall, innovative pedagogies significantly contribute to the effectiveness of intercultural learning materials.

## **Discussion**

### **Discussion of Challenges in Intercultural Learning Materials**

The findings of this study indicate that challenges in intercultural learning materials are deeply rooted in pedagogical, institutional, and material dimensions, which are consistently highlighted in recent research. From a pedagogical perspective, many lecturers still demonstrate limited understanding of intercultural communicative competence, resulting in teaching practices that prioritize linguistic accuracy over cultural meaning (Byram, 2021; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2021; Baker, 2021). This gap between theoretical frameworks and classroom implementation reflects a broader issue in EFL education, where intercultural components are often treated as supplementary rather than integral (Sercu, 2020; Porto & Byram, 2021). Moreover, the lack of professional development opportunities prevents lecturers from acquiring the necessary skills to design and implement intercultural materials effectively (Yuan, 2022; Pham &

Bui, 2023). Similar findings have been reported in Southeast Asian contexts, where teachers face difficulties in integrating intercultural elements into language instruction (Nguyen & Tran, 2022; Widodo, 2021). In the context of Universitas Pasir Pengaraian (UPP), previous studies also reveal that lecturers struggle to incorporate intercultural perspectives into drama-based learning due to limited pedagogical guidance (Eripuddin, 2023). Therefore, pedagogical limitations remain a fundamental barrier that must be addressed through systematic training and capacity building to ensure effective intercultural teaching.

Institutional challenges further complicate the implementation of intercultural learning materials in higher education. The rigidity of curricula and the lack of institutional policies supporting intercultural education limit the flexibility needed for innovation (Setyono & Widodo, 2021; Susanto, 2022). Many institutions continue to emphasize standardized outcomes focused on linguistic proficiency, thereby marginalizing intercultural competence (Lee, 2023; Zhou & Fang, 2022). Additionally, limited access to institutional resources, including training programs and teaching materials, creates barriers for lecturers attempting to

adopt intercultural approaches (Larzén-Östermark, 2021; Gómez Rodríguez, 2020). In many cases, the implementation of intercultural learning depends on individual initiatives rather than institutional frameworks, leading to inconsistencies in practice (Tran & Dang, 2021; Pham & Bui, 2023). This issue is also evident in UPP, where the integration of intercultural materials has not yet been systematically embedded in the curriculum (Eripuddin, 2024). Consequently, without strong institutional support, the sustainability of intercultural learning initiatives remains uncertain. Thus, institutional reform and policy support are essential to ensure the consistent and sustainable integration of intercultural learning in higher education.

Material-related challenges represent another significant barrier to effective intercultural learning. The dominance of Western-oriented content in EFL materials limits the representation of diverse cultural perspectives and reduces their relevance to students' local contexts (Matsuda, 2020; McKay, 2021). This imbalance often leads to a disconnect between learners' cultural identities and the content presented in the classroom (Widodo, 2021; Kohn, 2023). Furthermore, the lack of locally grounded materials

restricts opportunities for students to engage with their own cultural backgrounds in intercultural learning (Setyono & Widodo, 2021). In Indonesian contexts, including UPP, the limited integration of local culture—such as Malay cultural values—has been identified as a key limitation (Eripuddin, 2025). This issue reduces the potential of intercultural materials to foster both global awareness and local identity. Additionally, the scarcity of high-quality intercultural materials makes it difficult for lecturers to design effective learning experiences (Chen, 2021; Park & Cha, 2022). Therefore, the development of culturally inclusive and context-sensitive materials is crucial to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of intercultural learning.

Overall, the challenges identified in this study demonstrate that the implementation of intercultural learning materials is not merely a pedagogical issue but a systemic one involving multiple interconnected factors. The interplay between limited teacher competence, institutional constraints, and inadequate materials creates a complex environment that hinders effective intercultural learning. These findings suggest that addressing only one aspect is insufficient, as improvements must occur simultaneously across

pedagogical, institutional, and material dimensions. In particular, strengthening teacher capacity, reforming curriculum structures, and developing culturally relevant materials should be prioritized. Without such integrated efforts, intercultural learning initiatives are likely to remain fragmented and ineffective. Therefore, a holistic and strategic approach is required to overcome these challenges and ensure meaningful intercultural learning in higher education.

### **The Opportunities in Intercultural Learning Materials**

Despite these challenges, the findings of this study reveal several opportunities that can significantly enhance the development and implementation of intercultural learning materials in higher education. One of the most prominent opportunities is the advancement of digital technology, which has transformed the landscape of intercultural learning. Digital platforms, virtual exchange programs, and online collaboration tools enable students to engage in authentic intercultural communication with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds (O'Dowd, 2021; Helm, 2020; Chen, 2021). These technologies provide access to a wide

range of cultural resources and facilitate interaction beyond geographical boundaries (Kohn, 2023; Park & Cha, 2022). As a result, students can develop intercultural competence through real-life communication experiences rather than relying solely on textbook-based learning (Baker, 2021; Lee, 2023). In contexts such as Universitas Pasir Pengaraian (UPP), where direct international exposure may be limited, digital tools offer a practical and effective solution. Thus, digital technology represents a strategic opportunity to expand and enrich intercultural learning in higher education.

Another significant opportunity lies in the integration of local and multicultural content into learning materials. The inclusion of local culture allows students to connect their own cultural identity with global perspectives, thereby fostering a more meaningful and relevant learning experience (Byram, 2021; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2021). This approach aligns with the concept of culturally responsive teaching, which emphasizes the importance of contextualizing learning within students' cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2020; Nieto, 2020). In the case of UPP, the incorporation of Malay cultural elements has been shown to enhance student engagement and intercultural awareness

(Eripuddin, 2025). At the same time, the availability of multicultural resources enables students to explore diverse cultural perspectives and develop a broader understanding of global issues (Porto & Byram, 2021; Zhou & Fang, 2022). This dual focus on local and global culture supports the development of intercultural communicative competence in a more holistic manner. Therefore, integrating local and global cultural content is a key opportunity for creating more relevant and impactful intercultural learning materials.

Furthermore, pedagogical innovation plays a crucial role in enhancing intercultural learning materials. Approaches such as experiential learning, project-based learning, and simulation activities provide interactive and engaging learning environments that promote intercultural competence (Kolb, 2021; Liddicoat, 2021). Among these approaches, drama-based learning has been identified as particularly effective in fostering empathy, perspective-taking, and cultural awareness (Kao & O'Neill, 2021; Even, 2020). Through drama activities, students can explore cultural roles and social interactions in a dynamic and meaningful way. Previous studies conducted in UPP also highlight the effectiveness of drama-based instruction in

integrating intercultural elements into EFL learning (Eripuddin, 2024; 2025). These approaches encourage active participation and allow students to experience intercultural communication in simulated real-life contexts. As a result, students are better prepared to engage in intercultural interactions in both academic and professional settings. Thus, innovative pedagogical approaches serve as a powerful means to maximize the effectiveness of intercultural learning materials.

In summary, the opportunities identified in this study demonstrate that intercultural learning materials have significant potential to be enhanced through technological, cultural, and pedagogical innovations. The integration of digital tools, local cultural content, and

## CONCLUSION

This study has systematically examined the challenges and opportunities associated with intercultural learning materials in EFL higher education. The findings indicate that the implementation of such materials is still constrained by interconnected challenges, including limited teacher competence, rigid institutional structures, and the lack of culturally diverse and contextually relevant

experiential learning approaches creates a supportive environment for developing intercultural competence. These opportunities not only address existing limitations but also open new pathways for more engaging and meaningful learning experiences. Importantly, the combination of global and local perspectives allows for a more balanced and context-sensitive approach to intercultural education. However, the successful realization of these opportunities depends on the alignment between innovation and institutional support. Therefore, leveraging these opportunities requires a strategic and coordinated effort to ensure their sustainability and effectiveness in higher education.

resources. These issues suggest that intercultural learning has not yet been fully embedded within mainstream language education, where linguistic competence often remains the dominant focus. As a result, intercultural elements tend to be treated as supplementary rather than integral components of instruction. This condition highlights the need for a more comprehensive and coordinated approach

that addresses pedagogical, institutional, and material dimensions simultaneously. Without such integration, efforts to enhance intercultural learning are likely to remain fragmented and less effective.

At the same time, the study reveals significant opportunities that can be leveraged to improve the quality and effectiveness of intercultural learning materials. The use of digital technologies, the integration of local and multicultural content, and the adoption of innovative pedagogical approaches provide promising pathways for fostering intercultural communicative competence. In particular, aligning global perspectives with local cultural contexts—such as those found in Universitas Pasir Pengaraian (UPP)—can create more meaningful and relevant learning experiences for students. These opportunities not only enhance student engagement but also support the development of critical thinking, empathy, and cultural awareness. Therefore, the effective utilization of these innovations requires deliberate efforts to connect technological, cultural, and pedagogical dimensions within a unified instructional framework.

Building on these findings, it is essential for higher education institutions to adopt a strategic approach that strengthens teacher competence, reinforces institutional support, and promotes the development of culturally responsive materials. Professional development programs should be designed to equip lecturers with the knowledge and skills needed to implement intercultural pedagogy effectively. At the institutional level, curriculum reforms and supportive policies are necessary to ensure that intercultural competence becomes a core learning outcome rather than an optional addition. Furthermore, the integration of digital tools and interactive teaching methods, such as experiential and drama-based learning, should be encouraged to provide authentic intercultural experiences. Future research is also needed to explore the long-term impact and scalability of intercultural learning materials across diverse educational contexts. In this way, intercultural learning can be more effectively sustained and contribute to preparing students for communication in an increasingly globalized world.

## REFERENCES

- Baker, W. (2021). Intercultural communication and English as a lingua franca: Rethinking concepts and goals in intercultural communication. *Language Teaching*, 54(4), 481–494.
- Byram, M. (2021). Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence: Revisited. *Multilingual Matters*.
- Chen, X. (2021). Digital tools and intercultural communication in language learning: A systematic review. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 34(5–6), 789–812.
- Eripuddin. (2023). Analysis of lecturers' and students' needs toward intercultural learning material for drama subject. *Journal of English Education Studies*, 5(2), 101–115.
- Eripuddin. (2024). Prototype model of intercultural teaching materials for drama subjects to support the completeness of educator administration in the learning process. *International Journal of Instruction*, 17(1), 233–248.
- Eripuddin. (2025). Fostering intercultural learning in drama subjects at higher education. *Journal of Language and Cultural Education*, 13(1), 45–60.
- Eripuddin. (2025). Revitalizing the Malay language in higher education: A study of intercultural learning materials in Rokan Hulu. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 15(1), 89–102.
- Even, S. (2020). Drama pedagogy and intercultural competence: A theoretical framework. *Scenario*, 14(2), 45–60.
- Gay, G. (2020). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Gómez Rodríguez, L. F. (2020). Intercultural competence in higher education: A critical perspective. *Profile Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 22(1), 15–30.
- Helm, F. (2020). The long and winding road... The evolution of virtual exchange in higher education. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 3, 1–19.
- Kao, S. M., & O'Neill, C. (2021). *Words into worlds: Learning a second language through process drama*. Ablex Publishing.
- Kohn, K. (2023). English as a lingua franca and intercultural communication. *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, 12(1), 1–20.
- Kolb, D. A. (2021). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (2nd ed.). Pearson Education.

- Larzén-Östermark, E. (2021). Intercultural competence in teacher education: Challenges and opportunities. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 5(3), 67–82.
- Lee, J. S. (2023). The role of intercultural competence in English language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 57(2), 456–478.
- Liddicoat, A. J. (2021). Intercultural language teaching and learning: New perspectives. *Language Teaching Research*, 25(3), 345–362.
- Liddicoat, A. J., & Scarino, A. (2021). *Intercultural language teaching and learning* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Matsuda, A. (2020). Preparing teachers to teach English as an international language. *Multilingual Matters*.
- McKay, S. L. (2021). Teaching English as an international language: Principles and practices. *Oxford University Press*.
- Nguyen, T. T. M., & Tran, T. Q. (2022). Intercultural competence in EFL classrooms: Teachers' perspectives. *Asian EFL Journal*, 26(3), 112–130.
- Nieto, S. (2020). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education* (7th ed.). Pearson.
- O'Dowd, R. (2021). Virtual exchange and internationalising the classroom. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 34(7), 1021–1040.
- Park, E., & Cha, J. (2022). Digital intercultural communication in online learning environments. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 70(4), 1453–1470.
- Pham, H. T., & Bui, T. (2023). Challenges in implementing intercultural language teaching in higher education. *System*, 112, 102945.
- Porto, M., & Byram, M. (2021). Developing intercultural citizenship education through language teaching. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 34(3), 221–236.
- Setyono, B., & Widodo, H. P. (2021). Intercultural language learning in Indonesian higher education. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 11(2), 345–356.
- Sercu, L. (2020). Teaching intercultural communicative competence: Current challenges. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 20(1), 1–15.
- Susanto, D. (2022). Curriculum development and intercultural competence in EFL contexts. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 54(5), 678–695.

- Tran, T. T., & Dang, H. T. (2021). Intercultural competence and higher education: A systematic review. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 40(7), 1423–1438.
- Widodo, H. P. (2021). Designing culturally responsive English language materials. *TESOL Journal*, 12(3), e567.
- Yuan, R. (2022). Teacher professional development for intercultural competence. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 112, 103624.
- Zhou, Y., & Fang, F. (2022). Intercultural communication competence in EFL education: A review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 845132