








# Integration of Cultural Experiences as an Approach to Intercultural Communication Learning for Generation Z

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**Abstract.** Intercultural communication skills are essential for Generation Z in an increasingly open multicultural society. Therefore, research is needed to understand the dynamics of social life and strategies for intercultural interaction. The main issue discussed in this article is how to integrate students' cultural experiences as an approach to intercultural communication learning. This study uses a qualitative approach with data collection methods in the form of in-depth interviews and observations. The results show that integrating cultural experiences directly experienced by participants in multicultural communities or other cross-cultural activities can shape cultural awareness, appreciation and empathy, as well as adaptability among students in supporting the development of intercultural communication skills. The results of this study indicate that the integration of cultural experiences in intercultural communication learning can develop intercultural communication competencies in a multicultural and open environment. This inspires the design of experience-based learning strategies that enable students to actively interact in diverse and inclusive communities and cultures.

**Keywords:** Intercultural communication, cultural experiences, learning approach, Generation Z

## 1. Introduction

Today's global society lives in an open social, cultural, and economic reality. Advances in communication technology have accelerated the complexity of interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds (Chen et al, 2023). This situation requires intercultural communication skills in various cultural backgrounds and social contexts based on specific goals or interests, as well as in everyday social life. Generation Z, as a generation born and raised in the digital age, requires intercultural communication competencies to face the challenges of a multicultural and open world. Although Generation Z is known as digital natives who are accustomed to diversity of information, it is important for them to have the ability to build interactions culturally (Nasution et al, 2024; Puspitasari, 2023; Niemi, 2020; Wibisono et al, 2025).

Intercultural communication is a complex process that involves understanding values, norms, verbal and nonverbal communication patterns, and the socio-historical context that shapes individual behavior in a particular society. Theoretically and conceptually, intercultural communication emphasizes the importance of strategies for managing uncertainty and dynamics in cross-cultural interactions. The goals of intercultural communication can be achieved through increased self-awareness, empathy, and the ability to adapt to changing communication situations. Intercultural communication competencies and skills cannot be learned solely through knowledge transfer in the classroom; they require direct involvement in real and authentic cultural contexts (Gudykunst, 2005; Chambers et al, 2018; Byram & Feng, 2004; Rastgoo, 2024).

Thus, the intercultural communication learning approach must be able to provide adequate space for students to experience the dynamics of cross-cultural interaction firsthand. This is to open opportunities for learners (students) in the process of internalizing the values of inclusiveness, tolerance, and critical reflection on diversity. This is in line with the concept of learning transformation, which must encourage deep and sustainable changes in individuals'

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understanding. This can only happen through a process that provides opportunities for students to revisit their past experiences and reflect on their real experiences related to their involvement in intercultural communication. In this context, direct cultural experiences such as participating in student exchange programs, joining multicultural communities, or engaging in social activities involving diverse parties can be entry points for the process of transformative intercultural communication learning (Yuzar, 2022).

The learning transformation process can occur when students critically reflect on their experiences of discomfort, confusion, or even conflict that arise in cross-cultural interactions. Through this reflection process, participants can recognize and understand their own cultural biases. Learners can make comparisons with other cultural values. This process can help learners develop a more inclusive and flexible mindset. The change in perspective that occurs through this process not only enhances cross-cultural understanding but also changes the way individuals interpret the world and their position in a particular cultural background and social context (Echcharfy, 2019). This is important for increasing the capacity of students and learners to contribute positively to a multicultural society.

The integration of cultural experiences as an approach to intercultural communication learning is also in line with the principles of experience-based learning. The principle of experience-based learning emphasizes that knowledge is not acquired solely through verbal instruction, but through a cycle of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. Thus, various experiential-based intercultural communication learning activities, such as involvement in cultural programs, field work in diverse communities, and joint discussions, can provide a strong stimulus for the formation of intercultural communication competencies (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Affective and behavioral intercultural communication competencies are far more effectively developed through experience-based learning than through a purely cognitive approach (Deardorff, 2009).

Generation Z, who are characterized by their familiarity with digital technology and broad access to information, actually emphasizes the urgency of an experience-based learning approach. Generation Z requires a participatory, contextual, and directly connected approach to intercultural communication learning. Proficiency in digital technology and broad access to information does not necessarily provide adequate understanding of the socio-cultural nuances underlying intercultural interactions. Therefore, a transformative learning strategy is needed that integrates cultural experiences into the learning curriculum. Students not only understand the concept of intercultural communication academically, but also reflect on their experiences and practice them in real contexts (Kristanti et al., 2023; Nasution & Rasyid, 2023).

The integration of cultural experiences into learning requires strategic curriculum design, culturally competent facilitators, and institutional policy support. Learning evaluations must also capture aspects of personal transformation, such as changes in attitude, empathy, and the ability to think across perspectives, which are often not measurable through conventional assessments. Students' real experiences when interacting in cross-cultural contexts, whether in academic activities, organizations, or daily social life, must be integrated into the learning process.

Based on the above description, research was conducted to examine: How can students' cultural experiences be integrated as a transformative approach in intercultural communication learning? Theoretically, the results of this study contribute to the development of an experience-based intercultural communication learning model. This study also provides practical recommendations for higher education institutions in designing curricula that are responsive to the needs of Generation Z.

## 2. Literature Review

Intercultural communication is a complex process that involves interaction between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds. The ability to communicate across cultures is an important requirement in the era of globalization. Essentially, intercultural communication skills are related to the ability to deeply understand the values, norms, and behaviors that apply in various cultures (Gudykunst, 2005). This is a necessity because all parties involved in intercultural communication come from different cultural backgrounds. Adequate intercultural communication competence can prevent misunderstandings, build harmonious social relationships, transmit messages effectively, and prevent conflicts and communication barriers (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Efforts to develop intercultural communication competence should not only touch on cognitive aspects but also emphasize the affective dimension. Appreciative attitudes, empathy, and adaptability are important in intercultural communication (Deardorff, 2009; Chen & Starosta, 1998). Competency can be improved through the integration of real experiences in the learning process (Hammer et al., 2003; Patras et al, 2025).

Generation Z, as a generation that grew up amid the development of digital technology and global culture, faces challenges and opportunities in the context of intercultural communication (Williams et al., 2012). Opportunities arise because they have the speed to adapt to change, openness to diversity, and opportunities to develop technology-

based collaborative learning (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). However, challenges arise for Generation Z because advances in communication technology sometimes neglect deep interpersonal skills, such as the ability to empathize and understand other cultures deeply. Nevertheless, several studies show that Generation Z values authenticity and empathy, which must be supported through a learning process that stimulates them to engage deeply. Thus, intercultural communication learning for Gen Z must be designed contextually and experience-based in order to foster tolerance, empathy, and adaptability in a multicultural environment (Turner, 2015; Raslie & Ting, 2020).

Cultural experiences are an important element in intercultural communication learning so that students gain an authentic and deep understanding of cultural differences. The best learning occurs through a cycle of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. The experience of interacting with individuals from different cultural backgrounds allows students to critically reflect on their own cultural values and norms as well as those of other cultures. This approach can enrich cognitive knowledge and stimulate the development of affective attitudes, such as empathy and appreciation for diversity, thereby strengthening intercultural sensitivity as an indicator of intercultural communication competence (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Deardorff, 2009).

Furthermore, direct interaction within multicultural communities or through cross-cultural activities provides a rich space for students to encounter the real dynamics of intercultural communication. This experience allows them to experience the challenges of communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds, while developing effective adaptive strategies. This type of social experience-based learning reinforces the internalization of values of tolerance, empathy, and openness to differences, which are essential in building an inclusive society (Lustig & Koester, 2010). In addition, cultural experiences also support the development of soft skills, such as flexibility, self-control, and problem-solving skills in uncertain situations. Cultural experiences can be part of an intercultural communication learning curriculum approach.

The integration of cultural experiences in intercultural communication learning for Generation Z also provides them with the opportunity to develop critical and reflective skills. Experience-based learning allows students to evaluate any stereotypes, prejudices, and cultural biases they may have. Cultural experiences open up space for critical dialogue and deep self-awareness, which are essential in shaping individuals who are able to communicate effectively and ethically in a multicultural context (Deardorff, 2009; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Students are able to adapt to cultural differences and shape them into agents of inclusive social change who value diversity.

### 3. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore students' cultural experiences in intercultural communication learning. This methodological choice is relevant to the objective of understanding how personal experiences are internalized, reflected upon, and constructed as part of intercultural communication competence. The qualitative approach is used to explore data on how students interpret their experiences in the context of social interaction, self-awareness, and cross-cultural learning dynamics (Creswell, 2013; Maring et al., 2024; Maring et al., 2025).

In the context of this study, the researcher is also a lecturer teaching Intercultural Communication who is directly involved in the entire learning process and classroom interactions. This position allows the researcher to act as a facilitator and participant observer, enabling a more in-depth reflective dialogue between the researcher and students. This approach accommodates the principle of active involvement in the social context of the participants, where the researcher's presence is not only as a data collector but also as part of the social dynamics being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This study involved 10 key informants from students who, in terms of age, fall into the Generation Z category. For ethical research purposes, the names of the key informants are abbreviated based on their full names, namely: FW, BRN, DAF, AS, MFA, ATN, NAA, RR, NNP, MAF. These key informants were purposively selected from 32 students who actively participated in lectures on intercultural communication from March to August 2025. The criteria for determining key informants were based on considerations of ethnic and cultural background representation, their active involvement in learning activities, and their willingness to be interviewed. The application of purposive techniques in determining these informants was so that the data obtained would represent cultural diversity and allow for a deeper exploration of meaning (Smith et al., 2009). Data collection techniques were carried out through two main methods, namely in-depth interviews and participatory observation. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, with open-ended questions that allowed students to share their experiences and meanings narratively. In addition to these two methods, this study also applied a joint reflection method involving 32 students as part of the classroom learning method.

The interviews with key informants focused on three learning approaches applied in lectures on intercultural communication. **First**, the approach of identifying students based on their ethnic and cultural backgrounds. There are four cultural and ethnic backgrounds that are emphasized in the discussion, namely Sundanese culture, Javanese culture, Betawi culture, and Flores culture, in accordance with the cultural backgrounds of the participants in intercultural communication learning. This first approach is applied to learning topics on the urgency of intercultural communication, approaches to intercultural communication, elements and characteristics of culture, ethnicity, assimilation, and acculturation. Through interviews, informants (students) shared their experiences and interpretations when they were facilitated to re-recognize their ethnic/tribal origins, values, and norms that apply in their cultures. Are the values, norms, and customs that apply in these cultures still felt to have an influence on students when they are involved in intercultural communication? How do students interpret this approach? Does this approach help students understand and apply what they have learned about intercultural communication?

**Second**, an approach that explores students' experiences of involvement in social groups and communities. This second approach is applied to topics of learning about verbal and nonverbal communication, cultural differences, dimensions of intercultural communication, and cognitive and affective aspects of intercultural communication. Through interviews, informants (students) shared their experiences and interpretations when facilitated to recall events and incidents that had involved them in social communities and organizations. These experiences were real events experienced by students. These events illustrate how intercultural communication occurs and takes place. How do students interpret this approach? Does this approach help students understand and apply what they have learned about intercultural communication?

**Third**, an approach that involves students in understanding academic/scientific studies on intercultural communication. This third approach is applied to learning topics on intercultural communication from an anthropological perspective, theories and models of intercultural communication, and approaches and methodologies for researching intercultural communication. Through interviews, informants (students) shared their experiences and interpretations when involved in studying research results in the form of scientific articles, discussing research results in groups, presenting, and participating in interactive classroom discussions. How do students interpret this approach? Does this approach help students understand intercultural communication and apply it?

The interviews above provided key informants with the opportunity to reconstruct their personal and contextual experiences related to the intercultural communication learning process (Creswell, 2013). The participatory observation method was applied during the learning process, which consisted of 16 class meetings conducted through material presentations, interactive class discussions, group discussions, and social interactions in academic activities. The researcher facilitated the dynamics of communication and interaction among students from different cultural backgrounds (as mentioned above). These observations provided an overview of how values, norms, and customs in certain cultural backgrounds emerged in daily interactions among students.

The joint reflection method was carried out as part of the learning evaluation process. Through reflection, students collectively reflected on their cross-cultural experiences. This reflection involves all students, is open in nature, and is facilitated dialogically, with an emphasis on exploring students' meanings, feelings, and attitudes towards cultural differences and the accompanying communication. This technique allows for collective meaning-making that enriches the analysis results and supports the collaborative principle in qualitative research (Tracy, 2020).

The analysis process began with repeated readings of the interview transcripts. The process continued with the recording of important themes and the grouping of units of meaning that reflected the structure of the informants' experiences (Maring, 2024). The researcher interpreted the relationship between the students' personal narratives and their socio-cultural background. Ethical aspects were taken into consideration in this study. Each informant was provided with information about the purpose and methods of the research, as well as their rights as participants.

#### 4. Research Results

This section provides a comprehensive overview of the research results, which are presented in three subsections that represent three learning approaches that integrate cultural experiences, namely: **First**, describing the participants' (students') approach to self-identification in specific ethnic and cultural contexts. **Second**, it describes the approach of exploring the involvement of participants (students) in communities and social organizations. **Third**, it describes the approach of involving participants (students) in in-depth academic studies, group discussions, presentations, and interactive discussions. These three approaches seek to explain how the integration of cultural experiences directly experienced by participants (students) can shape cultural awareness, attitudes of appreciation and sympathy-empathy, and the ability to adapt in the development of intercultural communication competencies.

#### 4.1. First: Identification of students' ethnic and cultural backgrounds

The integration of students' cultural experiences is an important learning approach for building intercultural awareness and communication skills. One form of this integration is through reflection on self-identity, particularly by identifying ethnic backgrounds and prevailing cultural values. Based on interviews with key informants, it is known that the approach of identifying oneself within a specific ethnic and cultural background contributes significantly to students and helps them understand self-awareness, empathy, and openness to diversity.

In general, all learning topics on intercultural communication can apply the three experience-based learning approaches described in the methodology section. However, the approach of identifying students' identities within specific ethnic and cultural backgrounds is more suitable for learning topics on the urgency of intercultural communication, approaches to intercultural communication, cultural elements and characteristics, ethnic groups, assimilation, and acculturation. Through the discussion of these intercultural communication topics, students are facilitated to construct reasons why they should learn about intercultural communication. Students are also facilitated to obtain a comprehensive overview of the scope of intercultural communication. Students are also facilitated to understand the meaning of ethnicity and the mechanisms of cultural formation through the processes of assimilation and acculturation. In the process of discussing the above topics, students are given explanations and reflect on the fact that everyone involved in intercultural communication is always influenced by the values, norms, and customs that apply in a particular cultural environment.

The results of interviews and observations show that students generally acknowledge that the learning approach through exploring their own ethnic backgrounds is an experience that opens up space for reflection. Some informants stated that they had never consciously linked ethnicity with communication styles. When students were asked to identify themselves and the cultural values they lived by, whether inherited through family, community, or social environment, they realized that the communication patterns they practiced as normal were actually the result of cultural constructs. This awareness became a starting point for understanding that communication is situational and influenced by diverse cultural contexts. This view was expressed by informant, DAF, in the following interview excerpt:

*This method is very helpful. I have become more aware that each individual brings different values and perspectives based on their cultural background. This process has opened my understanding that cultural values shape the way we communicate and respond to others. By recognizing my own culture first, I feel more prepared to understand and appreciate the cultural differences of others.*

This approach through self-identification is based on the understanding that cultural identity is not something static or essentialist. Cultural identity attached to students, for example, is a social construct formed through socialization and interaction. From an anthropological perspective, culture is understood as a system of meaning that is internalized through everyday practices, including language and self-expression in communication. When students reflect on their own ethnic backgrounds, they begin to understand how culture shapes the way they think and respond to specific communication situations.

In addition to building self-awareness, this approach also provides space to develop empathy for differences. By recognizing that they themselves carry certain cultural values, students become more sensitive to the possibility that others also have different "cultural frameworks." Differences in communication style, perceptions of time, authority, or nonverbal expression are no longer considered deviations. These differences are accepted as legitimate and normal forms of cultural diversity. This awareness is important in the context of increasingly intense cross-cultural interactions in the era of globalization and multiculturalism. When explaining the differences and diversity of dialects within a single ethnic/cultural group, students are expected to realize that these differences are even greater between different cultures.

Reflecting on cultural identity is not an easy process for all students. Some informants admitted that they were not accustomed to exploring their ethnic background and cultural values in depth. This could be due to several factors, such as family openness to cultural origins, lack of cross-cultural experience, or a tendency to minimize cultural differences in a fast-paced and homogeneous modern social space. Some students even experience confusion in identifying themselves with a particular ethnicity/culture because they have never returned to their parents' hometown. In such situations, the role of lecturers as facilitators becomes important. Lecturers help to energize the class so that students are involved in a comfortable atmosphere. The creation of a safe and inclusive classroom atmosphere and space opens up opportunities for students to explore themselves and identify their ethnic/cultural backgrounds. A participatory, non-judgmental, and diversity-appreciating pedagogical approach is a prerequisite for the success of this method.

In practice, ethnic background identification is not only done through verbal statements, but also through narratives, group discussions, or reflective writing. Through this method, students learn to articulate personal experiences in an academic form, while placing them in a broader theoretical context. This integration not only strengthens understanding of the concept of intercultural communication, but also makes student experiences a valid source of knowledge in the learning process. Students are not only objects of learning, but also active subjects who bring the voices and meanings of their respective cultural contexts. The researcher's experience shows that the role of lecturers is important in this process because some students are hesitant to accept or acknowledge their own experiences as meaningful and contributing to intercultural communication learning.

For the current group of students born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, a cultural experience-based learning approach has strategic significance. This generation grew up in a highly digitally connected environment and has high exposure to global culture. However, this exposure is more visual and superficial, so it is not always accompanied by a deep understanding of the cultural structures that shape communication behavior. The existence of Generation Z in the realm of digital communication does not guarantee reflective and empathetic intercultural competence. Therefore, an approach that encourages exploration of cultural identity is relevant for forming a critical understanding of diversity and the dynamics of communication in a global context.

From the interview results, it was identified that reflection on ethnic background contributes to efforts to reduce stereotypes and prejudices. By understanding culture in depth, students are better able to avoid generalizations and one-sided judgments of other groups. This experience indirectly shapes awareness of the importance of culturally sensitive communication, namely communication that considers cultural context as an integral part of the process of conveying and receiving messages. This becomes the basis for building healthy relationships on campus, in organizations, and in broader social life.

This abstract shows that self-identification based on ethnic background in intercultural communication learning is an effective approach, both pedagogically and anthropologically. This process combines reflective, affective, and cognitive elements into a holistic and meaningful learning process. This approach not only enriches students' knowledge of diversity but also shapes open, tolerant characters who are ready to interact in a pluralistic society. Amidst the weakening of ethnic/cultural identity awareness and the strengthening of social polarization in the contemporary era, the ability to understand oneself and others through a cultural perspective has become an important academic and ethical competency.

#### **4.2. Second: Exploring learning from student involvement in communities and social organizations**

The development of an intercultural communication learning approach based on students' life experiences in higher education plays a central role in shaping contextual and applicable cross-cultural competencies. One approach that strengthens students' understanding of the dynamics of intercultural communication is to encourage them to explore their direct experiences when interacting with individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds. This approach places personal experience as an authentic source of learning that can strengthen empathetic attitudes, adaptive skills, and reflective awareness in the context of multicultural communication.

The methodology section explains that, in general, all learning topics related to intercultural communication can apply three experience-based learning approaches. However, the approach of exploring learning from students' experiences of involvement in communities and social organizations is more suitable for learning topics related to verbal and nonverbal communication, cultural differences, dimensions of intercultural communication, and cognitive and affective aspects of intercultural communication. In the process of reviewing and reflecting on these topics, students are reminded that their involvement and interaction in communities and social organizations they have experienced are real contexts of intercultural communication. It is emphasized that students are not unfamiliar with intercultural communication learning, as they have experienced it before.

Based on interview data, the majority of students stated that reflecting on their experiences of involvement in social communities, organizations, or daily life is an effective way to connect intercultural communication theory with real-world practice. They mentioned that these experiences made theoretical concepts such as ethnocentrism, stereotypes, nonverbal communication, and differences in cultural values and norms easier to understand and feel relevant. In other words, cross-cultural experiences are not merely a supplement to teaching materials, but rather a key bridge between the academic world and social reality. This is illustrated by the following interview quote from informant, AS:

*This method helped me because I was able to learn from real and memorable experiences. When I was asked to share my personal experience of living in a boarding house with friends from different ethnic groups, I clearly remembered the miscommunication I had experienced in the past. It turns out that small things, such*

*as the style of joking, tone of voice, or way of expressing criticism, can differ due to culture. This method can directly foster my empathy and awareness.*

In this context, everyday experiences such as living with friends from different ethnic backgrounds, working in multicultural groups, or being involved in inclusive organizations become rich learning environments. Students observe that cultural differences influence various aspects of communication, ranging from emotional expression, language structure, and humor styles to ways of delivering criticism or resolving conflicts. For example, differences in how opinions are expressed can lead to misunderstandings if there is no awareness of the underlying cultural norms. By reflecting on such experiences, students not only learn to understand differences but also develop more open and responsive communication strategies.

This approach is in line with intercultural competence theory, which emphasizes the importance of a combination of self-awareness, understanding of other cultures, and adaptive communication skills in intercultural interactions. Communication must be experienced, felt, and responded to in a real context. Students who have cross-cultural experiences find it easier to internalize concepts such as cultural sensitivity, equality in communication, and the importance of adapting to different social norms.

Students' personal experiences can be understood as a form of participation in cultural practices that take place in specific social spaces. Interactions that occur in communities or organizations are never separated from power relations, symbolic values, and meanings transmitted through language, gestures, and prevailing social structures. When students experience cultural differences firsthand in real situations, they are also practicing small-scale ethnography, namely observing, understanding, and reflecting on other cultural practices through direct experience. Experience becomes a learning tool that allows them to understand that culture is seen in the framework of actions that live in social interactions.

Student involvement in cross-cultural communities also has a significant impact on the development of empathy and social skills. Through collaborative experiences or cooperation in organizations composed of members from different backgrounds, students learn to resolve conflicts, build consensus, and appreciate diversity of perspectives. This is important for a generation that is adaptive to change but often faces challenges in building deep communication due to a digital culture that is instant, fast, and superficial. Face-to-face interaction experiences with cultural nuances enrich the social competence of this generation in a tangible way.

Some students, through a process of reflection, stated that their experiences in multicultural communities were unplanned but left a strong impression and became reflections that live on in their memories. For example, interactions with students from other ethnic groups, or with roommates who have different customs, became experiences that opened their eyes to the complexity of cross-cultural communication. This reinforces the argument that intercultural education should not only rely on lectures or theory, but also needs to include students' life experiences as part of the learning design.

The interview results also show that not all students have adequate cross-cultural experiences. Some mentioned the limitations of a homogeneous social environment or a lack of opportunities to engage in diverse communities. In this case, it is important for teachers to complement this approach with alternative strategies such as interactive simulations or case studies that can reconstruct representative conditions of intercultural communication. Facilitation from lecturers in raising the experiences of other students is also a way to broaden collective understanding in the classroom.

This personal experience-based approach is in line with the social constructivism paradigm, which views knowledge as being formed through social interaction and real experiences. Students are not merely passive recipients, but also active producers of meaning through the interpretation of their own life experiences. By integrating cultural experiences into the learning process, students build a contextual, personal, and relevant understanding of the dynamics of intercultural communication.

Experience also raises awareness of one's position in social interactions. Students begin to realize their role as agents in the communication process, as well as how their identity (race, ethnicity, religion, gender) can influence how they are seen and how they define others. This reflection is important as a basis for developing critical and ethical awareness in building equitable and inclusive communication. Through this process, students also learn to challenge stereotypes, critique their assumptions, and build more dialogical relationships in diversity.

#### **4.3. Third: Student engagement through in-depth scientific articles, presentations, and interactive discussions**

The integration of cultural experiences in intercultural communication learning can be done through an approach based on academic studies, group discussions, and presentations. This approach not only emphasizes conceptual and theoretical aspects but also develops students' critical thinking skills, communication skills, and collaborative work.

Students, known as a generation that is adaptive to technology and information, have the potential to form reflective and applicable understandings of cross-cultural issues through learning based on scientific literature and interactive discussions.

All learning topics on intercultural communication can apply the three experience-based learning approaches as described in the methodology section. However, the approach of involving students through in-depth scientific articles, presentations, and interactive discussions is more suitable for learning topics on intercultural communication from an anthropological perspective, intercultural communication theories and models, and intercultural communication research approaches and methodologies. In the process of reviewing and reflecting on these topics, students were emphasized that they could apply intercultural communication theories, concepts, and research methods in scientific research, and students were able to do so.

Based on the interview results, students generally welcomed the learning method that integrated scientific literature studies with presentation and discussion activities. They acknowledged that reading and analyzing scientific articles helped them understand key concepts in intercultural communication more systematically and deeply. The study of scientific articles provides an understanding of various theoretical approaches and empirical findings involving interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Students are not only introduced to basic concepts, but also how these concepts are applied in real case studies. This is as stated by the informant, MAF, in the following interview excerpt:

*By reading scientific articles, we learn about theories and findings in the field that enrich our knowledge. Then, when making PowerPoint presentations, we learn to simplify complex information so that others can understand it. Class discussions give us the opportunity to exchange views and learn from other friends. So we can broaden our horizons, hone our critical thinking skills, and improve our teamwork.*

The process of reading scientific literature followed by group presentations trains students to organize information, formulate main ideas, and verbally convey their research findings to an audience. These presentations not only hone public speaking skills, but also encourage students to simplify academic language into communicative material. This is particularly important in the context of intercultural communication, where the ability to convey information effectively to a diverse audience is one indicator of intercultural competence.

Class discussions followed by group presentations provide the most dynamic learning environment. Students say that discussions allow for an exchange of diverse perspectives because each group brings different articles, experiences, and points of view to the table. These discussions are not only a forum for clarifying concepts, but also an arena for critical reflection and negotiation of meaning on the cross-cultural issues being discussed. Through discussion, students are invited to compare the findings of the articles with their own personal experiences, as well as to understand the differences in interpretation that arise among their peers.

This type of learning process places students as active subjects in the creation of knowledge. They do not merely receive information, but are also involved in the process of shared meaning-making. Academic study-based learning and group discussions reflect an active learning approach, where understanding is not built through memorization, but through exploration, collaboration, and reflection. Interaction in ethnically and culturally diverse groups requires them to understand each other's different working styles, ways of thinking, and ways of expressing ideas. This, in turn, strengthens cultural sensitivity and adaptability in complex communication situations. They learn that successful communication depends not only on mastery of theory, but also on interpersonal skills and openness to differences.

Students also acknowledge the challenges of this method. Some mention that the academic language used in scientific articles is often difficult to understand, especially when written in technical terms. The complexity of these readings can be an obstacle if not accompanied by adequate facilitation and guidance from lecturers. Therefore, the role of educators in bridging the gap between the academic world and the world of student experience is very important. Lecturers not only act as sources of information, but also as learning facilitators who encourage dialogue, guide understanding, and direct discussions to remain relevant and productive. Generation Z, who have an advantage in accessing digital information sources, need guidance in understanding and evaluating the quality and relevance of academic information.

Group presentations are a form of exercise in building confidence and the ability to convey ideas in public. Presentation skills are important in academia, especially in multicultural situations. Students are trained to construct logical arguments, use scientific evidence, and communicate ideas to diverse audiences. In the context of intercultural communication, these skills are essential to avoid misunderstandings and build constructive working relationships. The integration of cultural experiences through academic study also fosters critical reflection on the position of students. When reading articles on issues such as cultural discrimination, stereotypes, or value conflicts, students not

only understand these issues conceptually, but also begin to reflect on how they are reflected in their own lives. This kind of reflection strengthens social awareness and ethical sensitivity in building an inclusive and just society.

**Table 1:** Benefits of an intercultural communication learning approach based on cultural experience.

No.	Learning Approach	Benefits Experienced by Students for Intercultural Communication Learning
1.	Identification of students with specific ethnic and cultural backgrounds.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Fostering awareness of personal ethnic and cultural identity.</li> <li>b. Helping students understand that communication is influenced by each individual's cultural background.</li> <li>c. Developing empathy, openness, and appreciation for differences.</li> <li>d. Providing a reflective foundation for building intercultural communication skills.</li> </ul>
2.	Exploration of learning from student involvement in communities and social organizations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Connecting theory with real-life experiences of cross-cultural interaction.</li> <li>b. Providing contextual understanding of the challenges, misunderstandings, and successes of intercultural communication.</li> <li>c. Encouraging reflective learning from one's own experiences and those of others.</li> <li>d. Cultivating adaptive attitudes, tolerance, empathy, and the ability to work together in diversity.</li> </ul>
3.	Student involvement through in-depth scientific articles, presentations, and interactive discussions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Deepening conceptual understanding and theoretical insight through scientific literature.</li> <li>b. Training critical, analytical, and systematic thinking skills.</li> <li>c. Honing presentation skills, effective communication, and teamwork.</li> <li>d. Enriching perspectives through interactive discussions that link theory with real-world experiences.</li> </ul>

Source: Compiled based on interviews with informants.

### 5. Discussion: Integrating Cultural Experiences Into Intercultural Communication Learning

Intercultural communication learning requires the integration of cognitive, affective, and real social practice aspects. Students need more than just theoretical understanding; they must be involved in experiences that allow them to realize that communication is always influenced by cultural values, norms, and symbols. Intercultural communication competence can only develop through increased self-awareness, empathy, and adaptability in cross-cultural situations (Gudykunst, 2005; Deardorff, 2009). The results of this study underscore that a cultural experience-based approach has a strategic role for Generation Z, who grew up in the digital age, but still requires a deep understanding of cultural complexity (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Sarwari et al., 2024).

**The first approach**, students are facilitated to identify themselves within a particular ethnic and cultural backgrounds has proven to be an effective gateway to building cultural identity awareness. The reflection process helps students realize that the way they communicate, respond, and interpret messages is shaped by cultural values that have been internalized since childhood. This awareness is in line with the social identity view that individuals construct meaning of self based on group affiliations, including ethnicity (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Reflection on ethnic identity not only increases self-awareness, but also fosters empathy, reduces stereotypes, and opens up space for acceptance of diversity (Deardorff, 2009). In the context of pedagogy, lecturers play an important role as facilitators in creating a safe space that allows for inclusive and reflective exploration of students' cultural identities (Putri & Kristanto, 2023).

This identity reflection approach is particularly relevant for Generation Z, who, despite being familiar with global culture, are often less accustomed to critically exploring cultural identity. Rapid digital exposure is not always accompanied by a deep understanding of the cultural structures that shape communication (Turner, 2015; Wibisono

et al., 2025). Therefore, ethnic identity reflection becomes a learning strategy that not only enriches academic knowledge but also shapes students' character to be more inclusive in facing contemporary social polarization. From an experiential learning perspective, this practice is also in line with the reflection cycle that emphasizes the importance of linking concrete experiences with conceptual understanding (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

**The second approach**, namely exploring students' experiences in communities and social organizations, emphasizes the importance of contextual learning. Through direct interaction with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, students become aware of variations in communication styles, emotional expressions, and social structures. This experience supports the view that intercultural competence cannot be built through lectures alone, but must be achieved through real-life practices that enable the internalization of values of tolerance and empathy (Lustig & Koester, 2010). The interview results show that students are able to connect intercultural communication theories, such as ethnocentrism and nonverbal communication, with their daily experiences, making academic concepts more meaningful.

The experience of involvement in the community also reflects a participatory ethnographic approach that views social interaction as a source of cultural knowledge (Maring et al., 2024). Students not only observe but also reflect on differences through other cultural perspectives, resulting in more open adaptation strategies. This is in line with the findings of Gillespie (2016) and Smaoui (2021) that cross-cultural experiences enrich social skills, such as collaboration, conflict resolution, and self-awareness in multicultural communication. However, this study also found that not all students have access to adequate cross-cultural experiences. Therefore, alternative strategies such as cultural simulations and case studies are needed so that all students have equal learning opportunities (Tracy, 2020).

**The third approach**, which is student engagement through scientific article reviews, group discussions, and interactive presentations, complements the previous two approaches by providing a more in-depth conceptual framework. Students gain an understanding of intercultural communication theories, models, and empirical studies that can be used to analyze their own experiences. This process is in line with the view that scientific literature serves as a means of strengthening systematic understanding while training critical thinking skills (Byram & Feng, 2004; Niemi, 2020).

Group presentations and class discussions demonstrate that students are not merely passive recipients but active producers of meaning through the negotiation of perspectives (Chambers, 2018). Discussions allow them to compare theory with actual experiences, while honing interpersonal skills in diverse communication situations. This activity aligns with the principles of participatory pedagogy, which encourages students to actively participate in creating knowledge (Echcharfy, 2019). While understanding complex academic literature presents challenges, the role of lecturers is crucial in bridging technical language with students' experiences to ensure learning remains relevant (Kristanti et al., 2023).

The integration of these three approaches above, namely cultural identity reflection, community engagement, and academic study, can create a complementary learning ecosystem. Personal experiences foster self-awareness, social interactions build empathy and adaptation, while academic exploration strengthens conceptual frameworks. Together, these three approaches produce contextual, reflective, and transformative intercultural communication learning (Hammer et al., 2003; Patras et al., 2025).

Thus, the integration of cultural experiences in intercultural communication learning not only enriches conceptual understanding but also serves as a vehicle for character development. Students are prepared to become inclusive, tolerant, and critical individuals in facing multicultural social dynamics. These findings also provide a practical contribution to higher education, namely the need for curriculum design that combines identity reflection, social engagement, and academic study to develop ethical and inclusive intercultural communication competencies (Nasution & Rasyid, 2023; Puspitasari, 2023).

## 6. Conclusion

This study shows that integrating cultural experiences into intercultural communication learning is a meaningful approach to developing intercultural communication competencies in Generation Z students. The method of self-identification in ethnic and cultural contexts helps students understand that their communication patterns are shaped by cultural constructs, thereby fostering awareness and empathy toward diversity. The method of exploring students' involvement in social communities enriches their direct intercultural experiences. This enables students to develop adaptive communication strategies and strengthen their social sensitivity. The method of studying academic research, group discussions, and interactive presentations brings together conceptual dimensions with practice. This stimulates critical thinking skills and reflective understanding of the dynamics of inclusive and open communication.

These three methods construct an experience-based learning approach that intertwines personal, social, and academic experiences. This becomes a solid pedagogical foundation in shaping a generation that is open, tolerant, and capable of building ethical and inclusive intercultural communication. Cultural experience-based intercultural communication learning not only enriches theoretical understanding but also becomes a medium for character building and inclusive awareness.

To encourage the integration of experience-based intercultural communication learning, higher education institutions need to systematically integrate cultural experiences into the intercultural communication learning curriculum. This can be done through identity reflection methods, community participation, and literature reviews and participatory discussions. The role of lecturers as facilitators is crucial in creating a comfortable environment for students in the process of exploring cultural identity and fostering open dialogue across perspectives. To address the limitations of intercultural experiences among students, educational institutions should provide intercultural exchange programs involving multiethnic communities.

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