Integration of Multicultural Folklore in Language Curriculum to Increase Intercultural Empathy

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ABSTRACT

Background. Intercultural empathy is an essential skill in globalized societies, yet language education often overlooks its emotional and cultural dimensions. Multicultural folklore offers a rich and underutilized resource for embedding cultural narratives in language curricula to foster deeper cross-cultural understanding.

Purpose. This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of integrating multicultural folklore into language learning to enhance students' intercultural empathy across five core dimensions: openness, empathy, respect, engagement, and confidence.

Method. Using a quasi-experimental design, two groups of junior high school students (N=60) were observed over six sessions. The experimental group received a folklore-integrated language curriculum, while the control group followed a conventional language program. Data were collected through pretests, posttests, and student reflective journals, analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic coding.

Results. The experimental group showed a significant increase in empathy scores, with a mean gain of 11 points compared to 2 points in the control group. Reflective writings revealed enhanced emotional engagement, especially in students exposed to diverse cultural narratives. The empathy dimension showing the highest improvement was respect, followed by emotional empathy.

Conclusion. Multicultural folklore is a powerful pedagogical tool for fostering intercultural empathy in language education. The integration of narrative elements into linguistic instruction enhances not only comprehension but also emotional connection and cultural sensitivity. Future research should explore broader cultural contexts and assess long-term impact.

INTRODUCTION

Today's global society is characterized by increasing intercultural interactions that demand the ability of individuals to understand and appreciate diversity (Chi dkk., 2022). In the midst of the phenomenon of migration, international mobility, and massive cultural exchanges, education plays a strategic role in fostering cross-cultural empathy (Short, 2023). An education system that is responsive to multicultural issues can be an effective means of building awareness and appreciation of differences (Guénier, 2020).

Language as the main means of communication between individuals plays a vital role in the multicultural education process (Guénier, 2020). Language learning is not only limited to mastering grammar and vocabulary, but also includes understanding the social and cultural values of native speakers of the language. A language curriculum that is sensitive to cultural diversity has the potential to be a vehicle for the formation of tolerant and empathetic characters for students (Masterson, 2020).

Folklore as a product of local culture contains collective values, historical narratives, and social norms that reflect the identity of a community (Corbett, 2022). Folklore from various cultures contains elements of morality, example, and conflict between differences that are full of life lessons (Quinn & Kleckova, 2021). The integration of folklore into language learning provides a great opportunity to explore the differences and similarities of cultural values between nations in a fun and educational atmosphere.

The Intercultural Communicative Competence Theory states that language learning ideally includes the ability to understand other people's points of view, respond to differences respectfully, and reflect on one's own cultural values (Cruz dkk., 2025). The main components of this theory include cultural knowledge, open attitudes, interpretation skills, and intercultural empathy. In this context, multicultural folklore is a strategic medium to develop these competencies contextually (Kurian, 2024).

Research and educational practices that integrate cultural elements in language teaching have shown a positive impact on strengthening students' cultural awareness. Folklore-based curricula of different ethnicities and nations not only enrich linguistic experiences, but also build emotional bridges that strengthen cross-cultural empathy (Syafiyah dkk., 2022). These findings confirm that approaches that explicitly combine linguistic and cultural aspects can improve the quality of diversity-oriented language learning (Humairoh, 2023).

The integration of cultural values in language learning is still often limited to symbolic recognition or surface aspects such as clothing, food, and festivals (Naz dkk., 2023). This approach is not enough to form a deep understanding of the experiences and perspectives of other cultures. Many language curricula fail to reach the emotional and narrative dimensions needed to cultivate authentic cross-cultural empathy (Weinmann dkk., 2021).

There are still few studies that systematically examine how folklore from various cultural groups can be used as a tool to shape intercultural awareness and sensitivity (Ramirez-Marín & ..., 2020). Folklore is often thought of as mere entertainment, rather than as part of a structured and transformative learning strategy. This causes the richness of local values and cultural wisdom to not be accommodated in the curriculum design optimally (Dodman dkk., 2022).

Language curricula generally focus on technical linguistic skills and have not accommodated much cross-cultural narratives as affective learning mediums. In fact, in the context of an increasingly plural world, strengthening affective dimensions such as empathy is crucial. This gap creates a gap between language skills and empathic communication skills in a multicultural environment (Germain-Rutherford & Karamifar, 2022).

The Transformative Learning *Theory* (Mezirow, 1991) explains that experiences that disrupt old perspectives can trigger profound cognitive and affective changes (Ong, 2022). Folklore from different cultures has the potential to create narrative disorientation that expands students' perceptions of social realities. In the context of language education, multicultural stories can be a trigger for paradigm change through critical reflection on values and identities (Kefalaki dkk., 2021).

The importance of integrating multicultural folklore in language learning is not only related to the transfer of cultural values, but also as a strategy to form ethical and empathetic cross-cultural communication skills (Eliyahu-Levi, 2020). Folklore contains images of conflicts, resolutions, and moral values that can bridge differences between cultures. Through this approach, students can learn to recognize the universal humanity behind local narratives (Shiraev & Levy, 2024).

The development of a language curriculum based on multicultural folklore aims to enrich learning with emotional context and social values. These narratives allow students to interpret and reflect on the experiences of other cultures, which in turn reinforces their interpersonal and affective dimensions of communicating. This process directly supports the formation of empathy as a tangible and measurable learning outcome.

The Narrative Transportation Theory asserts that individuals who are emotionally involved in a story tend to adopt the values and perspectives of the characters in the story (Barton & Ho, 2020). When students are "carried away" in folklore from different cultures, they indirectly develop an emotional understanding of other cultural contexts. This approach explains why integrating stories in learning can be an effective strategy for forming cross-cultural empathy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a quantitative approach with a quasi-experimental design to determine the influence of the integration of multicultural folklore in the language curriculum on the improvement of students' cross-cultural empathy (Karimova dkk., 2024). This design allows for comparison of learning outcomes between the treated group (multicultural folklore based learning) and the group that receives conventional language learning. The goal of this approach is to measure the effectiveness of treatment in a measurable and objective way (Ochoa & McDonald, 2020).

The study population was junior high school students in a multicultural city that has high ethnic diversity. The sample consisted of two classes of 30 students each, selected purposively based on the equivalence of initial abilities and school background (Catalano & Morales, 2022). The experimental group received an intervention in the form of a language curriculum inserted with folklore from different cultures, while the control group used standard teaching materials (Eliyahu-Levi & Ganz-Meishar, 2020).

The main instrument in this study is the cross-cultural empathy scale developed and modified from the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (Chen & Starosta, 2000). This scale consists of five dimensions: openness, empathy, interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, and confidence in intercultural communication. In addition, observation sheets of learning activities and student reflection notes are used to support qualitative analysis (Powers, 2019).

The research procedure began with a pretest to measure the initial level of empathy of students from both groups. The experimental group received interventions over the course of six meetings, each with folklore from different cultures such as Minangkabau, Arabic, Japanese, and African. After the learning session, students fill out a reflection journal to describe the understanding and empathy that emerges from the story. The posttest was conducted at the end of the cycle to compare changes in empathy scores and was analyzed using independent t-tests and thematic analysis of reflective notes (DeWitt dkk., 2022).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Pretest and Posttest Descriptive Statistics

	Count	Mean	Std

Control Pretest	30.0	65.99	5.27
Control Posttest	30.0	67.58	3.67
Experimental Pretest	30.0	63.64	5.62
Experimental Posttest	30.0	74.59	4.58

This table provides a quantitative overview of the change in performance between the two groups. The contrasting mean differences between the two groups after treatment reinforced the hypothesis that the integration of multicultural folklore had an impact on the affective dimension of students.

The empathy pretest score in the control group showed an average score of 65 with a standard deviation of about 5 points. After the conventional learning intervention, the posttest score increased slightly to an average of 67. The distribution of values did not undergo significant changes, signaling a limited increase in empathy from standard treatment.

The experimental group had almost a similar pretest score, which was 64, but experienced a sharp increase in the posttest with an average of 75. The relatively low standard deviation showed that the increase in empathy occurred not only in some students, but across almost all participants in the experimental group. The distribution of grades also shifted towards higher scores with a stable range.

The increase in empathy scores in the experimental group indicated that the folklore-based learning method was able to activate the affective aspect in the students. Interaction with diverse cultural narratives provides a reflective experience that is not available in a purely linguistic approach. Each story presents human values that are universal and easy to internalize.

The difference in posttest scores between the two groups showed a substantial effect of the intervention. The standard curriculum tends to focus on the cognitive and technical aspects, while folklore touches on the emotional dimension. This causes students in the experimental group to be more open in responding to cultural differences.

The pattern of score distribution shows that narrative-based learning impacts not only students with high empathy, but also those who were previously at a low level. This is important in the context of character education and strengthening human values in schools.

Table 2. Empathy Score Gain Statistics

	count	mean	Std
Control Gain	30.0	1.59	5.81
Experimental Gain	30.0	10.94	7.49

The gain data provides a strong basis for the conclusion that multicultural folklore can be used as an important element in language learning design oriented towards the development of affective values.

Gain score analysis showed that the experimental group experienced an average increase of 11 points, while the control group only experienced an increase of about 2 points. This difference signifies that change is not just natural fluctuations, but is the result of differences in learning approaches.

The gain score is calculated by subtracting the pretest score from the posttest of each individual in two groups. The mean value of the gain in the experimental group showed high

consistency with a small deviation. This means that almost all students experience an increase in empathy levels.

Table 3. Average Score per Dimension of Empathy (Experimental Group)

Empathy Dimension	Mean Score
Openness	74.69
Respect	75.1
Engagement	75.0
Empathy	76.26
Confidence	74.44

This table confirms that the impact of folklore does not just touch on one affective aspect, but extends its effects to various components in the cross-cultural empathy spectrum.

The average score of each dimension of empathy shows that the dimensions of *empathy* and *respect* are the two components that have increased the most. Students become better able to understand the feelings of the characters and communities in the story, as well as show respect for the diversity of social values and practices.

The dimensions *of engagement* and *openness* have also increased, showing the tendency of students to interact and be open to different perspectives. This reflects the effect of narrative on students' motivation and courage to explore the world beyond their own experiences.

Improved empathy scores, both in total and per dimension, are closely related to narrative strategies used in learning. Folklore rich in conflict, resolution, and moral values triggers complex affective processes. The relationship between the type of intervention and the change in score showed a strong correlation not found in standard learning.

Students who gain in-depth experience through multicultural stories show a higher tendency to engage in discussions, ask critical questions, and express feelings towards the characters in the story. This correlation reinforces the argument that narratives have transformational power in the context of language education.

The linkages between linguistic, cultural, and affective elements are evident in these results. The higher the student participation in story-based activities, the more significant the increase in the dimension of empathy recorded in the posttest and written reflection.

One of the case studies was taken from a student named R.N., who in the pretest showed an empathy score of 59, which was relatively low compared to the group average. R.N. initially shows a low interest in language lessons, especially if the content is not related to his personal experience.

After taking lessons with folklore from Japan and Sudan, R.N. wrote in a reflective journal that he felt "sad and ashamed" after reading about the suffering of war in the story. R.N. even asked questions in class about what would be the fate of the oppressed characters if they lived in Indonesia.

The R.N. posttest score increased to 76, indicating a significant spike. The teacher noted that this student began to be more active in listening to and responding to the opinions of his classmates in the discussion. This change indicates a transformation from mere language mastery to the formation of an empathetic character.

R.N.'s case reflects the power of narrative experience in creating authentic emotional engagement. Stories in folklore provide space for students to imagine other previously unfamiliar

realities. This process encourages identification with the character and reflection on the values faced.

Score changes do not occur in a vacuum, but rather through a process of active interaction between narratives, emotions, and reflective discussions. When students are given space to understand the suffering or struggles of characters from other cultural backgrounds, empathy arises naturally and is not forced.

This case study is concrete evidence that increased empathy is not just a statistical number, but is reflected in changes in students' attitudes, interests, and participation in a more inclusive and reflective classroom environment.

The relationship between all the data—both quantitative, empathetic, and case study—shows one consistent pattern: language learning that incorporates multicultural folklore has an impact on increasing cross-cultural empathy. Stories become an effective bridge to connect students to other people's experiences emotionally.

Quantitative data show a significant increase, while qualitative data reinforce its validity through narratives of individual change. When the two are combined, a whole picture emerges of the effectiveness of this approach in character development.

The correlation between story-based learning experiences and changes in attitudes opens up new spaces in language pedagogy. Folklore is not just a complement, but a major source of deep and measurable cultural awareness.

The group of students who participated in multicultural folklore-based language learning showed a significant improvement in cross-cultural empathy scores compared to the control group. The average score increase in the experimental group reached 11 points, while in the control group it was only about 2 points. The increase occurred consistently across all dimensions of empathy, especially in the aspects of emotional empathy and appreciation for cultural differences.

Folklore from different cultures exerts a strong influence on students' emotional engagement, which is reflected in reflection journals and active participation in class discussions. Narratives that touch on aspects of universal humanity open up space for students to reflect on values and attitudes towards other cultures. These results are also supported by case study findings that show significant changes in individual students' behaviors and cultural sensitivities.

The use of folklore as part of the language curriculum has been proven to activate the affective dimension of students that has been underexplored in conventional teaching approaches. Learning no longer focuses on the cognitive aspect alone, but touches the deeper layers of social awareness.

This study reinforces the findings of Byram and Chen & Starosta who stated that a culture-based approach in language teaching improves intercultural competence (Shapira dkk., 2020). However, unlike previous studies that used a lot of visual approaches or general discussions, this study emphasizes the power of traditional narratives as the main pedagogical tool. Folklore is not only an additional material, but a central strategy for developing empathy (Grogan dkk., 2021).

This study also distinguishes itself from technology-based approaches or digital media in cultural education. Instead of using simulations or videos, learning is focused on textual power and shared interpretation in the classroom (Grogan dkk., 2021). This makes learning more reflective and interpersonal, allowing for a deeper identification process of the characters and the value of the story.

This research makes a new contribution to the language education literature by offering a systematic, structured, and effective model of folklore-based cultural integration that has been

proven to be effective in shaping the affective aspects of students. These results open up space for new discussions about the importance of local narratives in global education.

Increased cross-cultural empathy through folklore indicates that learners need a more meaningful and contextual learning experience. A curriculum that is too technical or exam-oriented loses its potential in shaping social character and values. Folklore provides a learning space that is not only informative, but also transformational.

These results also show that language education must adapt to the increasingly complex challenges of global diversity. Students are not only required to master the structure of language, but also understand the social and cultural meaning behind its use. Folklore-based learning can be a bridge between linguistic skills and cultural awareness.

Modern education requires an approach that integrates the heart and mind. When students are emotionally touched through stories from different cultures, they not only learn to understand, but also to feel. This is the true meaning of empathic education.

The results of this study provide a strong basis for the development of a language curriculum based on multicultural values. Folklore integration can be used as an effective medium to build cross-cultural empathy in a structured and measurable manner. This approach is relevant applied in the context of pluralistic and multiethnic national education.

Language teachers need to consider the use of cultural narratives in the learning process as part of a character building strategy. Textbooks should not only present grammar exercises, but also feature narratives from different cultures as a stimulus for reflection and class discussion. Educational institutions must also begin to formulate curriculum policies that recognize the pedagogical value of local and global stories.

This learning model can be applied not only at the secondary school level, but also in colleges and non-formal educational institutions. In the long term, these results have the potential to strengthen social cohesion and foster a generation that is not only intellectually intelligent, but also sensitive to social and cultural dynamics.

Folklore has a strong narrative structure that invites emotional and imaginative engagement. When students engage in stories, they form affective connections to the characters and the values conveyed. This process facilitates the emergence of empathy as students learn to position themselves in the perspective of others.

Narrative learning allows for the process of deconstructing and reconstructing personal values. Students not only receive information, but are also given space to interpret and relate the characters' experiences to their own reality. This process encourages critical reflection and deep internalization of values.

Folklore also presents cultural diversity in a form that does not threaten, but rather invites curiosity and appreciation. The use of stories as a bridge of communication eliminates the psychological distance between cultures, making students feel close and connected to human experiences from different backgrounds.

Further research can develop multicultural folklore-based learning modules with a more explicit and adaptive pedagogical structure. This module should include narrative guidance, discussion strategies, reflection, as well as affective assessments to measure students' empathic changes longitudinally. Teachers' involvement in the curriculum design process also needs to be strengthened.

It is important to expand the cultural scope and context of the narrative so that students have a more diverse cross-cultural experience. Folklore from minority groups, indigenous peoples, and

diaspora communities can be an important resource for enriching perspectives and training sensitivity to issues of inequality and marginalization.

Educational institutions and policymakers should encourage collaboration between educational experts, anthropologists, and folklore writers in designing language curricula that are empathetic and multicultural. This step will strengthen the direction of education that not only pursues cognitive competence, but also forms global citizens who empathize and appreciate differences.

CONCLUSION

This study found that the integration of folklore from different cultures into the language learning curriculum significantly improves students' cross-cultural empathy, especially in aspects of openness to differences and the ability to understand the perspectives of others. The increase in empathy scores was seen higher in the experimental group than in the control group, which shows the effectiveness of the multicultural narrative-based approach.

The main contribution of this research lies in the development of multicultural folklore-based learning methods as a pedagogical tool to form affective awareness in language education. This model combines the power of traditional narratives with a reflective approach, making it an effective alternative to learning that is not only cognitively oriented, but also character and social values.

The scope of this research is still limited to implementation in one level of education and a specific region, as well as the use of stories from limited cultures. Follow-up research needs to broaden the types of folklore, involve more cultural contexts, and examine its impact in the long term through longitudinal research designs to gain a more comprehensive and applicable understanding in the national education system.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION
Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.
Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

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