

Revitalizing the Malay Language in Higher Education: A Study of Intercultural Learning Materials in Rokan Hulu

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the impact of intercultural learning materials on student engagement, language retention, and proficiency in Malay. Using a mixed-methods design, data were collected from 120 students and 10 instructors in Rokan Hulu Regency through surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and material analysis. The surveys explored students' linguistic challenges and cultural exposure, while interviews gathered instructors' perspectives on pedagogy. Observations assessed engagement in classrooms with varying degrees of intercultural integration, and content analysis identified gaps in the representation of cultural narratives. Quantitative data were analyzed statistically, and qualitative data underwent thematic coding. The findings show that students with limited intercultural exposure often rely on regional dialects or English, struggling with formal Malay. Conversely, classrooms that incorporated intercultural learning materials—including digital storytelling, folklore, and historical narratives—demonstrated higher participation and improved fluency. Instructors criticized rote learning methods and emphasized the need for immersive, culturally enriched instruction. The study concludes that integrating intercultural learning materials, multimedia tools, and experiential learning strategies can enhance Malay language acquisition. These findings provide valuable implications for curriculum development, underscoring the role of culturally responsive pedagogy in fostering meaningful and sustainable language learning within a globalized educational landscape.

Keywords: Revitalizing, Malay, Higher Education, Intercultural Learning, Rokan Hulu

Introduction

The Malay language has historically been a key medium of communication, literature, and cultural expression in Southeast Asia. However, globalization, digital media, and shifts in educational priorities have led to a steady decline in its use among students. Many learners in higher education struggle to identify basic Malay vocabulary, opting instead for English or regional dialects in everyday communication. This linguistic shift reflects a widening gap between traditional linguistic knowledge and contemporary realities, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of Malay language proficiency. Linguists and educators have noted that language attrition is becoming a critical challenge in societies where global languages dominate academic and social environments. Mahmud and Zainuddin (2020) observed that students who primarily engage with English-based digital content demonstrate reduced Malay vocabulary retention. Similarly, Kholidi et al. (2022) found that younger Malay speakers in higher education frequently code-switch, resulting in inconsistent fluency in formal

contexts. These findings underline the urgency of revitalizing Malay language learning to maintain both linguistic and cultural continuity.

Then, the decline in Malay linguistic competence is further compounded by the limited availability of culturally relevant educational resources. Eripuddin, Rahayu, et al. (2023) reported that a large proportion of university students lack access to intercultural learning materials, hindering their engagement with Malay traditions and historical texts. Gómez-Parra (2020) similarly noted that without structured intercultural exposure, students risk developing a fragmented understanding of Malay language and culture. Existing research underscores the importance of intercultural learning in promoting language retention. In addition, some studies found that students exposed to bilingual and culture-oriented curricula demonstrated improved engagement and stronger retention of their native language (Erfiani et al., 2021; Gustloff et al., 2019; Haerazi & Irawan, 2020). Conversely, Harziko et al. (2018) observed that traditional teaching methodologies continue to dominate, with little incorporation of modern strategies such as digital storytelling or gamification.

Furthermore, digital learning has also emerged as a promising approach to language revitalization. Nora et al. (2018) found that multimedia-based instruction enhances comprehension and vocabulary retention, while Lan & Logeswaran (2020) reported that Malay language programs in higher education remain text-heavy and lack interactive learning components. Theoretical frameworks such as Kramsch's intercultural competence and Byram's intercultural communicative competence emphasize that language learning must integrate both linguistic and cultural dimensions. Further studies expand on this perspective. Gustloff et al. (2019) suggest integrating digital content, cultural narratives, and experiential learning to strengthen students' connection to the language. Okuboyejo (2021) similarly advocate for interactive learning platforms that make language learning more engaging and relevant to students' professional and social contexts.

Despite extensive discussion on language attrition and digital learning, several critical gaps remain in current research. First, few studies have specifically addressed the systematic integration of intercultural competence into Malay language instruction. While intercultural frameworks exist theoretically, their practical application in tertiary-level Malay programs remains underexplored (A. et al., 2019; Lan & Logeswaran, 2020; Maros & Halim, 2018; Rahman et al., 2022). Second, traditional teaching models persist, with limited adoption of community-based, experiential, or multimedia learning approaches (Lucksnat et al., 2022; Nora et al., 2018; Nuriyanti et al., 2019; Rahayu et al., 2025). Third, previous research often overlooks the relationship between intercultural exposure and students' linguistic motivation, identity formation, and long-term retention. Then, Oktavianus (2022) emphasizes that language plays a vital role in identity construction, suggesting that declining Malay usage threatens cultural continuity. Similarly, Lan & Logeswaran (2020) find that collaborative learning involving Malay-speaking communities enhances student motivation and practical skills. However, these studies stop short of offering comprehensive pedagogical models that integrate intercultural learning with digital innovation.

In addition, interdisciplinary research also indicates that intercultural exposure enhances cognitive flexibility and academic self-efficacy, yet such findings have not been fully operationalized in Malay language curricula (Hepple et al., 2017; Maros & Halim, 2018; Rahman et al., 2022; Tai et al., 2022). Finally, Eripuddin et al., (2022b) provide recent evidence of intercultural learning's effectiveness in language revitalization, emphasizing contextualized materials that deepen engagement. Nonetheless, empirical research on how these strategies can be implemented at the institutional level in the Malay language context remains limited. Building upon these gaps, this study aims to investigate the necessity and impact of intercultural learning materials in supporting Malay language education at higher education institutions in Rokan Hulu Regency. Specifically, it seeks to identify weaknesses in current pedagogical practices, examine the relationship between intercultural exposure and language proficiency, and propose culturally immersive strategies involving digital storytelling, folklore, and historical narratives.

The study contributes theoretically by reinforcing intercultural learning as a framework for sustainable language revitalization, and pedagogically by offering models for integrating cultural narratives into curriculum design. It also provides empirical evidence supporting curriculum reform that aligns linguistic proficiency with cultural literacy. Ultimately, this research advocates for a holistic approach to Malay language education that combines digital media, cultural narratives, and experiential learning to foster linguistic competence, cultural appreciation, and long-term engagement.

Methods

This study employs a mixed-method research design that integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive assessment of the need for intercultural learning materials in Malay language education. The combination of quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, classroom observations, and content analysis allows for a more holistic understanding of students' linguistic proficiency, engagement, and the effectiveness of current instructional materials.

The research involved multiple sources of data, including students, faculty members, and instructional materials used in higher education institutions in Rokan Hulu Regency. A total of 120 students and 10 instructors faculty members participated in the study, representing a diverse sample of language learners and educators. In addition to participant-based data, a range of educational resources—such as textbooks, digital learning platforms, and curriculum documents—were examined to evaluate their linguistic and cultural relevance.

Data collection was carried out through several complementary procedures. Surveys were administered both online and in paper form to gather quantitative data on students' Malay language proficiency, exposure to intercultural learning content, and perceptions of its usefulness. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with faculty members and language instructors to gain deeper insights into pedagogical practices, curriculum design, and challenges in incorporating intercultural elements into language instruction. These interviews, lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes each, were held face-to-face and through virtual platforms to ensure flexibility and accessibility.

Classroom observations were conducted over a ten-week period, focusing on Malay language classes that either incorporated or omitted intercultural learning components. The observations were guided by a structured checklist designed to capture teaching methodologies, classroom interactions, and levels of student engagement. To complement these observations, a content analysis of instructional materials was performed. Using a rubric developed for this study, the analysis assessed the presence of cultural narratives, multimedia integration, and experiential learning strategies within the materials.

For data analysis, the study applied both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data obtained from surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations, to summarize students' language proficiency and attitudes toward intercultural learning. Qualitative data from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis were examined through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes related to intercultural learning challenges, instructional practices, and effective strategies. In addition, comparative analysis was used to contrast the outcomes of traditional and intercultural learning materials, providing insights into their relative effectiveness in enhancing students' language retention and engagement.

Result and Discussion

The analysis of the data collected from surveys, interviews, classroom observations, content analysis, and experimental studies highlights the significance of intercultural learning materials in revitalizing the Malay language in higher education. The findings demonstrate that the current curriculum lacks cultural context, leading to challenges in student engagement and language retention. These results underline the necessity of integrating culturally immersive instructional strategies to enhance linguistic proficiency and promote deeper connections between students and the Malay language.

a. Findings from Surveys

Survey data reveal that a significant portion of students face challenges in formal Malay communication, with 72% of respondents attributing their struggles to a lack of intercultural exposure. Additionally, 68% of faculty members expressed concern that existing instructional materials do not sufficiently incorporate cultural context, making it difficult for students to connect Malay language learning with real-world applications. The lack of exposure to culturally enriched content has resulted in students relying on regional dialects or English as their primary mode of communication, further diminishing their competency in formal Malay settings.

The survey findings indicate that a significant portion of students struggle with formal Malay communication due to limited intercultural exposure. The lack of culturally enriched materials in their curriculum has resulted in a preference for regional dialects and English. This highlights the necessity of integrating intercultural content to provide students with practical language applications. Additionally, faculty members expressed concern that current teaching materials do not sufficiently bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world use. Addressing this requires an overhaul of curriculum design, focusing on real-life applications and cultural narratives that resonate with students' daily lives (Anum et al., 2025; Faiz & Mohamed, 2022; Hadiyanto et al., 2021; Nordgren & Johansson, 2015). A broader integration of case studies, role-playing exercises, and cross-cultural dialogues can significantly improve language acquisition by making learning more relevant and engaging (Farnia & Sattar, 2015; Yang & Han, 2025a, 2025b). While previous studies have emphasized the importance of grammatical accuracy (Liu et al., 2025), our findings align with recent research advocating for a balanced approach that integrates cultural content to support communication skills (Dheghu et al., 2019).

Then, Achaeva et al. (2018) have extensively documented the role of cultural exposure in language acquisition. His studies highlight that linguistic development is most effective when learners engage with diverse social contexts, reinforcing the argument for integrating intercultural learning materials. Similarly, Claire Kramsch (2020) emphasizes that language is not just a communicative tool but a cultural artifact that must be taught alongside social and historical narratives to ensure practical fluency. Other scholars have also emphasized the necessity of intercultural sensitivity in language instruction, demonstrating how exposure to different cultural paradigms enhances overall proficiency (Bartel-radic, 2020; Bocanegra-Valle, 2015; Eripuddin et al., 2022a; Gómez Luis Fernando, 2018; Gómez-Parra, 2020).

Moreover, intercultural content has been found to significantly enhance linguistic adaptability. Unlike traditional methods that prioritize rote learning, contextualized cultural narratives allow students to engage more deeply with the language, making their learning experience more meaningful (Ng & Mohamad, 2022). These insights call for an urgent revision of existing language education strategies to ensure that Malay instruction remains relevant in diverse social and professional settings. Besides, some scholars reinforce this claim, arguing that linguistic competence is deeply intertwined with cultural fluency and real-world application (Reid, 2015; Sabirova, 2020; Safa et al., 2015).

b. Insights from Interviews

Faculty members acknowledged that current grammar-based teaching methods fall short in promoting practical language use. They stressed the importance of incorporating cultural storytelling, multimedia resources, and real-life conversational exercises to foster a deeper connection between students and the Malay language. Educators believe that intercultural learning materials can create a more engaging learning environment, allowing students to interact with authentic linguistic and cultural contexts, which in turn would enhance their ability to use Malay confidently in both academic and professional settings.

Interviews with faculty members revealed a consensus regarding the limitations of grammar-based instruction. While grammatical competence is crucial, language proficiency extends beyond structural accuracy. The lack of storytelling, multimedia, and interactive conversational exercises in existing teaching methods discourages students from engaging in meaningful communication. Faculty members stressed the need for a more immersive and contextually relevant learning approach. By incorporating digital storytelling, historical narratives, and interactive cultural elements, educators can create a dynamic and engaging environment that facilitates deeper linguistic understanding and retention (Haerazi et al., 2018). Unlike earlier research that advocated for strict grammar as a foundation for language learning (Gudmestad, 2022), recent evidence supports the notion that experiential learning methods lead to better retention and practical usage (Zakiyah & Fitrawati, 2020).

In addition, Claire Kramsch (2022), a leading researcher in applied linguistics, has emphasized the need for culture-infused language instruction. She argues that a language cannot be effectively taught in isolation from its cultural context. Her research aligns with our findings, suggesting that immersive methodologies such as storytelling and digital narratives significantly enhance retention and engagement. Other intercultural education scholars made similar arguments, highlighting that contextual

engagement in language education fosters more meaningful learning outcomes Eripuddin et al.2022a; Gómez Luis Fernando, 2018; Mesker et al., 2018; Sabirova, 2020).

Additionally, the use of digital storytelling and interactive tools aligns with global trends in second language acquisition. Studies indicate that students who engage with narratives and digital resources demonstrate improved fluency and contextual understanding (Jubhari et al., 2022). This shift underscores the need for educators to adopt more flexible teaching methodologies that prioritize engagement and application over mere memorization. Research from scholars claim that cultural immersion is a critical factor in linguistic competency (Reid, 2015).

c. Classroom Observations

Classroom observations highlight a clear distinction between traditional and intercultural learning approaches. Students in classrooms that utilize intercultural learning materials exhibit noticeably higher levels of participation, interaction, and motivation, whereas those in traditional settings relying on rote memorization display passive learning behaviors and lower retention rates. The observations suggest that students are more likely to engage in discussions, ask questions, and demonstrate greater enthusiasm for learning when the instructional approach includes real-world cultural references and digital content that reflects contemporary Malay language usage.

Observations of classroom interactions reinforced the survey and interview findings. Students in classrooms utilizing intercultural learning materials exhibited significantly higher engagement, participation, and enthusiasm compared to those in traditional learning settings. The use of real-world cultural references, digital resources, and collaborative projects enabled students to interact with the language naturally. Conversely, passive learning behaviors were prevalent in classrooms where rote memorization was the primary instructional method. These findings emphasize the effectiveness of interactive, culturally embedded learning materials in motivating students and fostering long-term retention (Djumingin, 2022; Eripuddin et al., 2022b; Jubhari et al., 2022; Wijaya et al., 2021). Prior studies primarily focused on the cognitive benefits of traditional memorization techniques (Baier et al., 2019), whereas recent studies, including our observations, highlight the significance of active engagement through culturally enriched content (Dheghu et al., 2019; Haas, 2019; Hamid et al., 2020).

The findings emphasize the necessity of incorporating intercultural learning materials to enhance student engagement, language retention, and overall linguistic proficiency. Faculty members recognize the limitations of traditional teaching approaches and support the integration of storytelling, digital media, and experiential learning into the curriculum. Classroom observations and experimental results further confirm that culturally immersive approaches lead to higher student motivation and academic performance. Future research should explore the long-term impact of intercultural learning strategies and their scalability in diverse educational contexts (Ilie, 2019). Additional contributions from scholars suggest that an interdisciplinary approach to cultural learning may further optimize language education methodologies.(Denston et al., 2022; Morong & DesBiens, 2016)

d. Content Analysis of Learning Materials

An analysis of instructional resources reveals a significant lack of cultural representation, with only 15% of reviewed textbooks incorporating elements such as Malay folklore, historical narratives, or contemporary socio-cultural themes. Moreover, multimedia resources are scarce, limiting students' exposure to diverse linguistic and cultural perspectives. This underscores the urgency of integrating culturally relevant materials into the curriculum to bridge this gap in student learning. Only 15% of reviewed textbooks and instructional resources incorporate Malay folklore, historical narratives, or contemporary issues. Additionally, the lack of multimedia resources limits students' exposure to diverse cultural perspectives, a gap that needs to be addressed.

The analysis of existing learning materials revealed a significant gap in culturally embedded content, limiting students' exposure to practical language applications. Most textbooks and supplementary resources focus predominantly on grammar rules and vocabulary, often neglecting intercultural narratives and real-world scenarios (Ayu & Indrawati, 2019; De la Torre-Sierra & Guichot-Reina, 2022; Rokhayati, 2016). This approach does not align with recent pedagogical advancements, which emphasize the importance of contextual learning through storytelling, digital simulations, and

interactive engagement (Mahmud & Cheong, 2023, Eripuddin, Jufrizal, et al., 2023; Eripuddin et al., 2022, 2024; Eripuddin, Rahayu, et al., 2023)).

Further, research has shown that learning materials incorporating intercultural narratives lead to better language retention and application (Blanchard et al., 2013; Echcharfy, 2019). Studies by Mustafa & Lee (2021) highlight that when students engage with content that includes cultural contexts, they demonstrate improved comprehension and confidence in practical language use. This supports the argument for revising curriculum materials to integrate historical narratives, folklore, and real-world scenarios to create a more immersive learning experience.

Additionally, digital media tools such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and gamified learning have proven to be effective in increasing student engagement and motivation (Erdisna et al., 2022; Yasin Çiftçi, 2016). The lack of such elements in existing Malay language learning resources further exacerbates the disconnect between theoretical knowledge and real-world application. Future instructional materials should prioritize an interdisciplinary approach that integrates technology, cultural immersion, and experiential learning techniques to enhance language acquisition.

e. Experimental Study Outcomes

The experimental study demonstrates the effectiveness of intercultural learning materials in enhancing language comprehension and retention. Students exposed to culturally enriched resources scored 22% higher in comprehension and 18% higher in language retention compared to those using traditional methods. Furthermore, these students exhibited greater confidence in speaking and writing Malay, demonstrating that culturally immersive learning fosters deeper engagement and practical language application. Students exposed to intercultural learning materials scored 22% higher in comprehension and 18% higher in retention than those using traditional materials. These students also demonstrated greater confidence in speaking and writing Malay, demonstrating the benefits of culturally immersive learning strategies.

This outcome is consistent with prior studies by Sabilaha et al. (2018)), who found that students exposed to intercultural learning environments develop stronger communicative and analytical skills. Then, the integration of authentic materials and contextual learning appears to help students internalize language structures more effectively than rote-based approaches (Eripuddin, Jufrizal, et al., 2023; Eripuddin et al., 2024; Furiyanto et al., 2021; Rofi'i & Susilo, 2023; Sabilaha et al., 2018).

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that intercultural learning materials play a vital role in enhancing student engagement, language retention, and communicative proficiency in Malay. The integration of cultural narratives, multimedia tools, and experiential learning strategies was shown to foster deeper linguistic understanding and cultural appreciation. These results carry significant implications for Malay language education, suggesting that language learning should move beyond structural mastery toward the cultivation of intercultural competence. For educators and curriculum developers, this means prioritizing culturally responsive pedagogies that connect students to authentic cultural contexts, thereby increasing relevance and motivation in language learning.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The research was limited to higher education institutions in Rokan Hulu Regency, which may not fully represent the linguistic diversity and educational practices across other regions. Additionally, the duration of classroom observations was relatively short, potentially constraining insights into long-term behavioral and linguistic changes. Future research should expand to include longitudinal studies and cross-institutional comparisons to validate and enrich these findings.

Based on the results, it is recommended that higher education institutions integrate intercultural learning components such as digital storytelling, cultural projects, and community engagement—into the Malay language curriculum. Collaboration between educators, policymakers, and local cultural institutions can ensure that teaching materials remain contextually relevant and pedagogically effective. By embedding intercultural learning into formal instruction, institutions can not only preserve linguistic heritage but also prepare students to communicate confidently in multicultural and globalized environments.

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