



---

# Bridging Cultures through Language: Examining the Linguistic and Cultural Experiences of IISMA Awardees

Julien Arief Wicaksono<sup>\*,1</sup>, Renata Kenanga Rinda<sup>2</sup>, Nodistya Septian Indrastana<sup>3</sup>,  
Meiga Rahmanita<sup>4</sup>, Nur Afni Rachman<sup>5</sup>, Degita Danur Suharsono<sup>6</sup>, Muhammad  
Aziz Rahman Zain<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4,5,6,7</sup> *Department of Language, Communication, and Tourism  
Politeknik Negeri Jember, Indonesia*

\*Corresponding email: [julien\\_ariief@polije.ac.id](mailto:julien_ariief@polije.ac.id)

## Abstract

This study explores the pivotal role of language in fostering cross-cultural appreciation among Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) awardees. We examined the experiences of two awardees of prestigious international exchange programs to understand how language acquisition and use influenced their cultural perceptions and interactions. Using a mixed-methods approach, we conducted in-depth interviews and administered surveys to gather data on the participants' language learning journeys, intercultural communications, and shifts in cultural perspectives. The selected participants represented diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and completed exchanges in countries where they needed to navigate a foreign language. Our findings reveal that language proficiency significantly enhanced the awardees' ability to appreciate and engage with host cultures. Key themes emerged, including: 1) the role of language as a gateway to deeper cultural understanding; 2) Challenges and breakthroughs in intercultural communication; 3) The impact of idiomatic expressions on cultural insight; 4) Changes in self-perception and cultural identity through language learning; and 5) The development of empathy and cultural relativism. Quantitative data indicated a strong positive correlation between language proficiency and measures of cultural appreciation. Qualitative analysis provided rich insights into the nuanced ways language shaped the awardees' cross-cultural experiences. This research contributes to our understanding of the intricate relationship between language and culture in international education contexts. It offers valuable implications for enhancing student exchange programs and promoting global citizenship through targeted language and cultural learning strategies.

**Keywords:** *Cross-cultural appreciation, Language learning, Student exchange, Intercultural communication, Cultural empathy*

---

|| Received: 02/11/2024 || Accepted: 06/12/2024 || Published: 08/12/2024

---



---

## 1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, the ability to bridge cultural diversities has become a critical skill for global citizens. International student exchange programs, such as the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA), play a crucial role in fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. These programs offer students the opportunity to immerse themselves in foreign cultures, broadening their perspectives and developing invaluable intercultural competencies. In the core of this cross-cultural experience lies a fundamental tool, namely language.

Language is more than just a means of communication, it is an access to understanding the complicated bond of a culture's beliefs, values, and ways of thinking. For international students who navigating new cultural landscapes, language proficiency can be the key that unlocks deeper connections, richer experiences, and more awareness to cultural insights. However, the relationship between language proficiency and cross-cultural appreciation is complex and multifaceted, which deserves careful observation.

By considering this complexity relationship, this study aims to explore the pivotal role that language plays in fostering cross-cultural appreciation among IISMA awardees. By focusing on the experiences of the awardee of prestigious international exchange programs, researchers seek to discover how their language learning journeys influenced their cultural perceptions, interactions, and overall exchange experiences. The research investigated the challenges which students faced in intercultural communication, the breakthroughs they achieved, and the profound shifts in cultural perspectives that resulted from their linguistic and cultural immersion. Our investigation is guided by several key questions:

1. How does language proficiency contribute to an exchange student's ability to appreciate and engage with their host culture?
2. What roles do idiomatic expressions and linguistic nuances play in deepening cultural understanding?
3. How does the process of language acquisition in a foreign context impact an individual's self-perception and cultural identity?
4. To what extent does language learning foster the development of empathy and cultural relativism among exchange students?

By employing a mixed-methods approach, combining in-depth interviews with quantitative surveys, this study aims to provide a comprehensive picture of the language-culture nexus in the context of international student exchanges. Later, the findings of this research have significant implications for the design and implementation of international exchange programs, language learning strategies, and the promotion of global citizenship. By understanding the complex ways in which language shapes cross-cultural experiences,



---

institution can better prepare students for meaningful international exchanges and foster a more culturally aware and empathetic global community.

## **2. Literature review**

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature relevant to the study on the role of language in fostering cross-cultural appreciation among international exchange students. This paper explores several interconnected themes that form the theoretical foundation of our research, including the relationship between language and culture, the impact of language proficiency on intercultural competence, and the transformative effects of study abroad experiences on cultural perspectives.

### **2.1. Language and culture: a complex relationship**

The relationship between language and culture has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, proposed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf in the early 20th century, suggested that the structure of a language determines or greatly influences the modes of thought and behaviour characteristic of the culture in which it is spoken (Whorf, 1956). While the strong version of this hypothesis has been largely discredited, more subtle distinction interpretations continue to influence research in linguistics and anthropology.

Recent studies have provided evidence for a softer version of linguistic relativity. For instance, updated work by Athanasopoulos et al. (2021) has shown that bilinguals' perception of time can vary depending on the language they use, building upon earlier findings by Boroditsky (2018). Moreover, recent neurolinguistic research has provided new insights into the language-culture relationship. Studies by Thierry et al. (2019) and Pavlenko (2022) have demonstrated that bilingualism affects cognitive processes beyond language, influencing perception and decision-making. These findings support an alternative view of linguistic relativity and its implications for cross-cultural understanding.

Contemporary scholars, such as Kramsch and Zhu (2020), have further developed the argument that language is not just a code for communication but a cultural artifact that carries the imprints of a society's history, beliefs, and values. This perspective is crucial for this study, as it suggests that learning a new language involves more than acquiring vocabulary and grammar, it requires engaging with the cultural context in which the language is embedded.

### **2.2 Language proficiency and intercultural competence**

Intercultural competence, a key concept in this study, has been defined by Deardorff (2006) as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes. This definition



---

underlines the multidimensional nature of intercultural competence, which goes beyond mere language proficiency. Moreover, recent opinion by Jackson and Chen (2022) has expanded the understanding of intercultural competence to include digital literacy and virtual intercultural communication skills.

Several studies have explored the relationship between language proficiency and intercultural competence. Byram (1997) proposed a model of intercultural communicative competence that integrates linguistic competence with intercultural skills and attitudes. This model suggests that language learning is intrinsically linked to the development of intercultural understanding. While Byram's model remains influential, it has been updated by scholars such as Porto and Gonzalez-Davies (2020), who have incorporated considerations of digital environments and multilingual practices.

However, the relationship is not always straightforward. Martinsen (2011) found that while language gain during study abroad was related to increased intercultural sensitivity, initial language level was not a significant predictor of intercultural development. Besides, recent research has explored the relationship between emotional intelligence and successful language learning in cross-cultural contexts. Dewaele and Li (2023) found that higher emotional intelligence correlates with greater willingness to communicate in a foreign language and more positive attitudes towards the target culture. This suggests that emotional factors play a crucial role in both language acquisition and cross-cultural appreciation.

There has been growing interest in the role of critical language awareness in developing cross-cultural competence. Kramsch and Zhang (2018) argue that fostering critical reflection on language use and its cultural implications can lead to more awareness to intercultural understanding. This approach encourages learners to examine power dynamics and cultural assumptions embedded in language practices. Kramsch and Zhang's argument (2018) on critical language awareness has been further developed by researchers like Li Wei (2022), who emphasizes the role of translanguaging in developing cross-cultural competence.

### **2.3 Study abroad and cultural perspective transformation**

Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory provides a useful framework for understanding how study abroad experiences can lead to significant shifts in cultural perspectives. This theory posits that when individuals encounter perspectives that challenge their existing beliefs, they may undergo a process of critical reflection that leads to a transformation in their frames of reference. Research by Gullekson et al. (2011) applied this theory to study abroad contexts, finding that international experiences often trigger perspective transformation, particularly in relation to cultural attitudes and self-perception.



---

While Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory remains foundational, recent scholars have expanded and refined its application to study abroad contexts. Taylor and Jarecke (2021) have updated the framework to include digital transformative experiences, particularly relevant in the post-pandemic era of international education. Their work suggests that even virtual cross-cultural encounters can catalyse perspective transformation when properly structured.

Research by Nguyen et al. (2022) builds upon earlier findings by Gullekson et al. (2011), using longitudinal data to demonstrate how international experiences trigger perspective transformation. Their study particularly highlights the role of social media in extending and reinforcing these transformative experiences beyond the physical study abroad period.

The specific role of language learning in perspective transformation has gained more attention in recent years. Santos-Menezes and Jackson (2024) argue that language learning during study abroad acts as a "double catalyst" for perspective transformation. Their research shows that the combination of linguistic challenges and cultural immersion creates a uniquely powerful environment for transformative learning. They identify three key factors: 1) linguistic vulnerability leading to increased openness to new perspectives; 2) the cognitive flexibility developed through language switching; and 3) the embodied experience of cultural norms through language use.

## **2.4 Challenges in cross-cultural communication**

### *2.4.1 Language barriers and cultural misunderstandings*

Despite the potential benefits of language learning for cross-cultural appreciation, numerous challenges can arise in intercultural communication. Barna (1997) identified six key stumbling blocks in intercultural communication, which provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the challenges that international students, including IISMA awardees, may encounter in their cross-cultural interactions. Barna (1997) identified six stumbling blocks in intercultural communication, including assumptions of similarity, language differences, nonverbal misinterpretations, preconceptions and stereotypes, tendency to evaluate, and high anxiety. These stumbling blocks are particularly relevant to our study as they highlight the intricate relationship between language proficiency and cultural understanding. The following will elaborate each stumbling block identified by Barna (1997).

#### **a. Assumptions of similarity**

This stumbling block occurs when individuals assume that people are fundamentally similar across cultures, leading to misunderstandings when cultural differences do arise. For language learners, this can manifest in assuming that concepts or social norms



---

translate directly between cultures, when in fact they may carry different connotations or implications.

b. Language differences

Beyond obvious vocabulary and grammar differences, this stumbling block encompasses the subtleties of language use, including idioms, slang, tone, and context-dependent meanings. Even advanced language learners may struggle with these nuances, potentially leading to misunderstandings or unintentional offense.

c. Nonverbal misinterpretations

Nonverbal cues, including gestures, facial expressions, personal space, and touch, can vary significantly across cultures. Language learners focused on verbal communication may overlook or misinterpret these crucial nonverbal aspects, leading to communication breakdowns.

d. Preconceptions and stereotypes

Pre-existing ideas about a culture, whether positive or negative, can colour interactions and lead to misinterpretations of behaviour. Language learners may need to consciously challenge their preconceptions to engage in authentic intercultural communication.

e. Tendency to evaluate

The inclination to judge the behaviours or values of another culture based on one's own cultural standards can hinder understanding and appreciation. For language learners, developing the ability to suspend judgment and view behaviours within their cultural context is crucial for fostering cross-cultural appreciation.

f. High anxiety

Intercultural situations can provoke anxiety due to unfamiliarity, fear of making mistakes, or concern about being misunderstood. This anxiety can impede effective communication and learning. For language learners, this may manifest as language anxiety, potentially hindering their ability to practice and improve their skills in real-world contexts.

Recent studies have built upon Barna's work, providing further insights into these challenges in the context of international education. For instance, Zhou et al. (2008) examined how Chinese students navigated these stumbling blocks during study abroad experiences in the UK, finding that language proficiency played a crucial role in overcoming these barriers but was not sufficient on its own. Moreover, Goldstein and Keller (2015) explored how pre-departure intercultural training addressing these stumbling blocks could enhance students' intercultural sensitivity during study abroad programs. Their findings suggest that explicit awareness of these potential challenges can help students develop strategies to navigate them more effectively. Understanding these



---

stumbling blocks is crucial for our study, as it provides a framework for analysing the challenges IISMA awardees may face in their intercultural interactions. By examining how language proficiency interacts with these barriers, we can gain insights into the complex relationship between language learning and cross-cultural appreciation.

#### *2.4.2 The role of pragmatic competence*

Pragmatic competence, defined as the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts, has emerged as a critical component of successful cross-cultural communication. This competence goes beyond grammatical knowledge, encompassing the ability to understand and produce language that is socially and culturally appropriate in various contexts. For international students like IISMA awardees, developing pragmatic competence is crucial for navigating the complex social landscapes of their host countries.

Research by Taguchi (2015) highlights the challenges that language learners face in developing pragmatic competence and the potential for pragmatic failures to lead to cultural misunderstandings. Taguchi's (2015) comprehensive review of pragmatic competence in second language acquisition highlights several key aspects.

##### a. Developmental path

Pragmatic competence does not necessarily develop in parallel with general language proficiency. Learners may achieve high levels of grammatical competence while still struggling with pragmatic aspects of language use.

##### b. Context-dependent nature

The appropriate use of language varies significantly across cultures and social situations. What is considered polite or appropriate in one context may be perceived differently in another.

##### c. Implicit vs. explicit knowledge

While some aspects of pragmatic competence can be explicitly taught, others are acquired implicitly through exposure and interaction in the target language community.

##### d. Pragmatic transfer

Learners often transfer pragmatic norms from their first language to the target language, which can lead to misunderstandings or unintended offense.

##### e. Pragmatic failures

These occur when learners use language in ways that are grammatically correct but socially or culturally inappropriate, potentially leading to communication breakdowns or negative perceptions.



---

Understanding the role of pragmatic competence is crucial for this study on IISMA awardees' cross-cultural experiences. It provides a framework for analysing how these students navigate the subtle, often unspoken rules of social interaction in their host cultures. By examining the development of pragmatic competence alongside language proficiency, we can gain deeper insights into the processes of cross-cultural adaptation and appreciation among international exchange students.

Based on Taguchi's work, there are some recent studies which have further observed the complexities of pragmatic competence in cross-cultural contexts. As an example, Kecskes (2018) introduced the concept of "intercultural pragmatic competence", emphasizing the dynamic and co-constructed nature of pragmatic norms in intercultural interactions. This perspective suggests that pragmatic competence in cross-cultural settings involves not just adhering to target language norms, but also negotiating shared meanings and norms with interlocutors from diverse backgrounds. On the other hand, Félix-Brasdefer and Hasler-Barker (2021) examined how pragmatic norms vary across cultures, focusing on speech acts such as requests, apologies, and compliments. Their research underscores the importance of exposing language learners to a wide range of pragmatic variations to enhance their cross-cultural communication skills.

Also, the increasing prevalence of digital communication, Sykes (2018) explored how pragmatic competence manifests in technology-mediated contexts. Her research highlights the need for language learners to develop "digital pragmatic competence", which includes understanding appropriate language use in various online platforms and digital communication modes.

#### *2.4.3 Digital technologies and language learning in cross-cultural contexts*

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has revolutionized the landscape of language learning and cross-cultural communication. This digital transformation has relevance for international exchange programs like IISMA, as it offers new way for preparation, engagement, and continued learning throughout the study abroad experience. Shadiev and Yang (2020) conducted a comprehensive review of recent studies on the use of mobile technologies for cross-cultural understanding. They found that mobile-assisted language learning tools can enhance intercultural communication skills and cultural awareness when used in conjunction with structured intercultural activities. Moreover, digital platforms provide opportunities for authentic cultural exposure and interaction, fostering greater cultural awareness among language learners (Rukiati, et al., 2023; Taufan & Julien, 2022; Novawan, et al., 2021).

Digital technologies support multimodal learning experiences, incorporating text, audio, video, and interactive elements to accommodate to diverse learning styles and enhance cultural understanding. Mobile technologies enable situational and contextual learning experiences, allowing students to engage with language and culture in real-world





---

settings. Many digital tools facilitate collaborative learning experiences, enabling students to engage in cross-cultural exchanges with peers from diverse backgrounds. Reinhardt (2020) examined the role of social media in informal language learning and intercultural communication. His research suggests that platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter can serve as valuable resources for authentic language input and cultural exposure, complementing formal language instruction.

## **2.5 Empathy and cultural relativism through language learning**

### *2.5.1 Language learning and empathy development*

The relationship between language learning and empathy development has gained increasing attention in recent years, with a growing body of research suggesting that multilingualism and language learning experiences can enhance various aspects of empathy. The connection is particularly relevant to this study on cross-cultural appreciation among IISMA awardees, as empathy is a crucial component of successful intercultural communication and understanding.

Several studies have suggested a link between language learning and increased empathy. For example, Dewaele and Wei's (2012) influential study found a positive correlation between multilingualism and cognitive empathy, laying the groundwork for further exploration of this relationship. Cognitive empathy, the ability to understand others' mental states, is especially important in cross-cultural contexts where individuals must navigate diverse perspectives and worldviews. Moreover, Dewaele et al. (2022) explored the links between multilingualism, emotional intelligence, and cognitive empathy. Their findings indicated that individuals who use more languages in their daily lives scored higher on both emotional intelligence and cognitive empathy measures. This suggests that the experience of navigating multiple linguistic and cultural contexts may enhance overall emotional and empathetic capabilities.

Zarrinabadi et al. (2021) conducted a study on the relationship between willingness to communicate in a foreign language and intercultural empathy. They found that students with higher willingness to communicate in their L2 demonstrated greater intercultural empathy, suggesting that language learning experiences may foster a more empathetic stance towards other cultures. In line with this finding, Schrier et al. (2023) explored the role of language learning in developing cultural empathy through a mixed-methods study involving study abroad participants. They found that language proficiency gains were positively correlated with increases in cultural empathy, particularly when students engaged in meaningful interactions with host culture members.

### *2.5.2 Cultural relativism and linguistic relativity*

Cultural relativism, a concept rooted in anthropology, suggests that an individual's beliefs, values, and practices should be understood within their own cultural context. Linguistic relativity, often associated with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Whorf, 1956),



---

suggests that the structure of a language influences its speakers' worldview and cognition. While the strong version of linguistic relativity, linguistic determinism, has been largely discredited, research continues to explore more clear versions of this hypothesis. Kramsch (2014) argues that learning multiple languages can foster a meta-linguistic awareness that promotes cultural relativism and a more nuanced understanding of cultural differences.

The interaction between cultural relativism and linguistic relativity has become an increasingly important area of study in the fields of linguistics, anthropology, and intercultural communication. This relationship is particularly relevant to our research on IISMA awardees, as it provides a framework for understanding how language learning can influence students' perceptions and interpretations of diverse cultural practices. Pavlenko (2022) conducted a comprehensive review of recent studies on linguistic relativity and bilingualism. Her findings suggest that learning a new language can lead to cognitive restructuring, influencing how individuals perceive and categorize the world. This restructuring may facilitate a more relativistic approach to understanding cultural differences. Moreover, Pot et al. (2020) investigated the effects of multilingualism on cognitive flexibility and cultural perspective-taking. Their study found that individuals who regularly use multiple languages demonstrated greater cognitive flexibility and were more adept at adopting culturally relative perspectives.

### **3. Method**

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of how language influences cross-cultural appreciation among IISMA awardees. The research utilized a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2023), simultaneously collecting both qualitative and quantitative data.

#### **3.1 Participants**

Two IISMA awardees (1 male, 1 female), both 5th semester students from non-English departments at Politeknik Negeri Jember, participated in the study. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in linguistic backgrounds. The study's focus on IISMA awardees may limit generalizability to other exchange programs. Limitations include the small sample size and potential self-selection bias.

#### **3.2 Quantitative data collection**

Quantitative data were collected through a purpose-designed online survey administered via Google Forms. The survey employed a 5-point Likert scale to measure cultural appreciation, consisting of 25 items adapted from established cross-cultural competence assessment tools (Bennett, 2021). The survey's content validity was established through expert review by two cross-cultural communication specialists, and pilot testing with five similar students not included in the main study.



---

The survey encompassed five main sections: demographic information, Language proficiency self-assessment, cultural appreciation scale, language use patterns, cultural experiences. Prior to full implementation, the survey underwent a reliability analysis, achieving a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, indicating strong internal consistency.

### **3.3 Qualitative data collection**

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted via Zoom. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' explicit consent. To ensure interview reliability, a stable internet connection was verified before each session, and a backup recording method was implemented using a secondary device. The interview questions covered four primary topics: language learning experiences, cultural encounters and challenges, perceived relationship between language proficiency and cultural understanding, and critical incidents in cross-cultural communication.

### **3.4 Qualitative Data Analysis**

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis following Nowell et al.'s (2017) refined framework for conducting and evaluating thematic analysis. Qualitative data analysis software QSR NVivo 20 was used to facilitate systematic coding and theme identification. The analysis process involved: familiarization with the data through repeated reading, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and data were anonymized to protect participants' identities.

## **4. Findings and discussion**

### **4.1 Findings**

#### *4.1.1 Students' background*

There were two participants selected to join this research. They were homogeneous in terms of age, nationality, and mother tongue. However, there was diversity in terms of gender and city of origin.

The demographic analysis of the participants reveals that both individuals are 21 years old, indicating that the sample consists entirely of young adults. This specific age range suggests that the participants might be at a similar stage in their academic or, in this case, likely completing or nearing the end of their undergraduate studies. This shared academic context may contribute to common goals such as professional development, career preparation, or expanding global networks. Their similar life stage likely fosters a sense of eagerness for growth and exploration, making them receptive to new cultural



---

experiences and opportunities for personal development through international programs like IISMA. The age factor also implies that both participants are in a transitional phase, where they are becoming more independent and open to new cultural perspectives. A study has shown that individuals in this age are more likely to experience personal growth and increased cultural empathy when exposed to new cultural settings (Kinging, 2021). Moreover, this specific life phase is often associated with openness to new ideas, cognitive flexibility, and the development of intercultural competencies (Jackson, 2018).

Gender is another important factor that shapes the cross-cultural experiences of the participants. In terms of gender, there is a balanced representation, with one male and one female participant. While the sample size is small, gender can influence how individuals engage in intercultural communication. Research suggests that women may be more accustomed to relational aspects of communication and tend to adopt more collaborative and empathetic approaches when interacting with others, especially in intercultural contexts (Gudykunst, 2003; Merritt & Papa, 2021). Men, on the other hand, may approach intercultural situations with a focus on assertiveness or problem-solving. This gender dynamic could influence how the participants perceive and respond to cultural norms in their host countries.

All participants are Indonesian citizens (WNI), reflecting a uniform nationality. The cities of origin are distinct, with one participant from Malang and the other from Jember. Although both participants are from Java and share Bahasa Indonesia as their mother tongue, their cities of origin, Malang and Jember, bring subtle differences in their sociocultural backgrounds. Java itself is a diverse island, with variations in cultural practices and levels of exposure to globalization. A participant from a more urbanized area like Malang might have had more exposure to English and international influences, which could shape a more globalized outlook on language learning and cross-cultural communication. In contrast, a participant from Jember may have experienced less direct contact with foreign languages or cultures, potentially influencing their approach to language learning in a new cultural context.

These regional distinctions highlight the complexity of linguistic and cultural identity in Indonesia, where a national language (Bahasa Indonesia) coexists with numerous local languages and dialects. The participants' preference for identifying Bahasa Indonesia over Javanese as their mother tongue reflects a broader national trend toward linguistic unification for practical and educational purposes. This linguistic shift, while promoting national cohesion, may limit the participants' initial adaptability to learning other foreign languages like Chinese. However, their shared linguistic background allows for a relatively homogeneous starting point in their cross-cultural journeys, offering insight into how Indonesians from different regions adapt to foreign language environments (Gorter & Cenoz, 2017).



The participants' self-reported language proficiency highlights the central role of English as a global lingua franca in their cross-cultural experiences. The analysis of language proficiency reveals that both participants have reported a moderate proficiency in English (*lumayan*). This suggests that while they are not highly fluent, they possess a functional command of the language. This level of proficiency aligns with trends seen among students from non-English-speaking countries who participate in global exchange programs, where English serves as the primary language for academic and social interaction (Macaro, 2018).

Moderate proficiency in English allows participants to engage in essential academic tasks, but it may limit their ability to fully integrate into local cultures, especially in non-English-speaking regions. Nevertheless, participants may leverage digital technologies such as language apps, online translation tools, and virtual learning platforms to supplement their language skills and facilitate communication (Godwin-Jones, 2020). In fact, translation apps and online resources have become critical for international students managing multilingual environments, particularly when immediate language acquisition is not feasible.

In contrast, when it comes to Chinese, both participants indicated they are not proficient (in Indonesian: *tidak mahir*). Both participants reported that they have no proficiency in Chinese, despite one participant studying in Taiwan. This disparity illustrates the challenges students face when immersed in a language that is not commonly taught in their home countries. For the participant in Taiwan, reliance on English and digital tools may have been necessary for daily interactions, underscoring the importance of pragmatic competence—the ability to effectively use language in context-specific ways (Taguchi, 2019). Chinese's complexity as a tonal language with a non-Latin script presents additional hurdles, requiring a more deliberate and immersive approach to learning than languages like English. This suggests that Chinese is not a language they are comfortable with, highlighting a significant difference in their proficiency between these two languages. This data points to English as a more commonly acquired second language among the participants, while Chinese presents more of a challenge or is less frequently learned, although one of them was studying in Taiwan during IISMA.

#### 4.1.2 Students' perspectives towards language proficiency and culture

In the first part, the participants were asked whether learning a new language changed their views of their own culture. This question explores whether they gained new insights or felt more connected to their heritage after being exposed to different linguistic structures. The first participant answered: "*I don't think it changed a lot*". This participant feels that learning a new language did not significantly alter their perspective on their own culture. This may indicate that their cultural identity remains stable despite external linguistic influences. A different opinion found from another participant. The participant said that "*It added insight and changed the way I think because new languages*



---

*offer a new way of understanding the world*". Here, the participant acknowledges that learning a new language expanded their worldview and helped them see their culture from a different angle. This suggests that language learning is not just a linguistic skill but also a tool for cultural reflection.

The following question probes how learning a language might alter one's understanding of the associated culture. The first participant said, "*It doesn't change thoroughly, but knowing the language gives a deeper understanding of how people express themselves*". This highlights that while learning a language does not completely transform cultural perception, it provides valuable insights into how people in that culture communicate and express their identity. A contrary opinion was delivered by another participant. He said, "*I became more understanding of the meaning behind certain expressions and behaviours*". This participant emphasizes the cultural nuances that become clearer when he understands the language. Language serves as a key to deeper comprehension of cultural values and expressions.

The next question tries to investigate how accents and dialects affect perceptions of speakers from other cultures. Both participants agree that accents and dialects affect perceptions of speakers from other cultures. The participant said, "*Sometimes accents and dialects can change the way I perceive someone*". This response points to the influence of accents on perceptions. Accents can sometimes lead to biases or judgments about a speaker's intelligence, competence, or social status. In line with the first response, the second participant said, "*Accents affect perception because just like language, they reflect a speaker's identity and background*". Here, the participant suggests that accents are a key part of one's cultural identity. They shape how people are perceived in cross-cultural interactions, sometimes leading to stereotyping or assumptions.

Later, the participants were also asked if it is possible to fully appreciate a culture without knowing its language. The first participant straightly disagrees with the statement. She said, "*No. If I can't understand, how could I respect and appreciate?*". This participant feels that language is fundamental to cultural appreciation. Without understanding the language, they argue, it is difficult to fully grasp and respect the culture. Whereas the second participant seems agree with the statement. He replied "*Yes, because you can respect a culture through its customs, arts, and behaviours*". This participant believes that cultural appreciation can happen through other mediums like art, traditions, and social practices, even without knowing the language.

#### *4.1.3 Challenges experienced by the students in joining exchange program*

The next part focuses on the hurdles people face when interacting with others from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The first statement from participant is "*Learning how to say it is okay, but learning how to act in different situations is the hardest*". This answer highlights that while vocabulary and grammar are crucial, understanding cultural diversity and social contexts is the bigger challenge. This reflects



the complexity of cross-cultural communication, where non-verbal and cultural norms play significant roles. As an addition, another participant added *“The biggest challenge is the lack of language knowledge, differences in habits, and customs”*. This response underscores the dual challenges of language and cultural habits. Misunderstandings can arise not only from linguistic differences but also from cultural practices that are unfamiliar to outsiders.

Both participants agree that the use of international language plays crucial role in communication among people from different countries. When participants were asked which language they consider essential for international communication and why, they viewed English as the international language. The participant said *“English. Easy to understand, commonly used language in international contexts”*. This response emphasises the global dominance of English as a practical choice for communication across borders. English is perceived as a lingua franca due to its widespread usage, especially in formal settings such as diplomacy, business, and education. The simplicity and familiarity of English make it an affordable choice for many participants.

#### *4.1.4 Roles of digital technology in enhancing cross culture communication*

The last aspect focuses on the use of technology when interacting with others from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Both participants agree that technology helped them a lot. The first participant explained *“Digital translation application helps him to communicate with foreigner”*. These tools helped students communicate effectively in situations where their language proficiency was limited, especially in multilingual settings. While not always perfectly accurate, translation apps provided immediate assistance in cross-cultural interactions, allowing respondents to engage in conversations they might otherwise have avoided. As an addition, another participant added *“The translation apps allowed me to successfully order food and ask questions even though I did not speak the local language fluently”*. Moreover, both participants further explained that Google Translate’s conversation mode enabled two-way dialogue by translating spoken words immediately. This underpins those respondents in the IISMA program mentioned using this app when navigating daily life, such as when ordering food or engaging in basic social exchanges.

## **4.2 Discussion**

This part explores the findings of the analysis on language proficiency and cultural perceptions among the IISMA scholarship awardees. The discussion expands on the impact of empathy and cultural relativism, pragmatic competence, and the role of digital technologies in language learning, particularly in a cross-cultural context. These elements are crucial for understanding how language learning fosters intercultural competence and shapes individuals’ engagement with diverse cultures. Recent literature in language learning and intercultural communication is used to contextualize the findings and deepen the understanding of these concepts.



---

#### *4.2.1 Language proficiency and cultural awareness*

Participants' moderate proficiency in English and lack of proficiency in Chinese reveal how language competence can influence intercultural communication. Learning a new language not only enhances one's ability to communicate but also fosters empathy and cultural relativism. As discussed by one participant, learning a new language changed their worldview, allowing them to see things from multiple perspectives. This is consistent with research that suggests that language learning enhances empathy, as it involves understanding the world through the lens of another culture (Byram, 2021).

Empathy in language learning is the ability to put oneself in the position of a person from another culture, recognizing the challenges they face in communicating their thoughts and emotions in a non-native language. It fosters deeper cultural understanding and reduces ethnocentrism, leading to more meaningful intercultural interactions (Dewaele & Wei, 2012). Language learners are often exposed to the values, traditions, and emotions embedded in linguistic expressions, which helps them appreciate cultural diversity and practice cultural relativism, the ability to evaluate another culture based on its own values rather than one's own (Holliday, 2018).

#### *4.2.2 Challenges in cross-cultural communication*

The analysis of the challenges in cross-cultural communication reveals that language learners not only need linguistic proficiency but also pragmatic competence to navigate social interactions effectively. Participants noted that while learning vocabulary and grammar is manageable, understanding the social context in which a language is used is much more challenging. Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately in different social contexts, considering factors such as politeness, formality, and cultural norms (Taguchi, 2015).

For instance, one participant highlighted the difficulty of understanding how to act in different social situations despite knowing the language. This echoes the work of Kasper and Rose (2003), who argue that pragmatic competence is essential for successful intercultural communication because it involves not just what is said, but how, when, and why it is said. Misunderstandings often arise not from a lack of linguistic knowledge, but from differences in pragmatic expectations across cultures. This underscores the importance of teaching not only the linguistic structures of a language but also the cultural norms and pragmatic rules that govern its use.

Furthermore, the "Face Negotiation Theory" proposed by Ting-Toomey (2017) highlights that cultural differences in communication styles can lead to conflict and misunderstandings. In high-context cultures, for example, much of the meaning is conveyed through non-verbal cues and contextual factors, whereas in low-context cultures, explicit verbal communication is key. Participants' experiences of difficulty in navigating these differences underscore the need for intercultural competence in addition to language proficiency.





---

#### *4.2.3 The role of empathy and cultural relativism in language learning*

One of the recurring themes in the data is the role of empathy in cross-cultural interactions. Several participants indicated that learning a new language helped them see the world from another perspective, which aligns with the broader research on the role of empathy in intercultural communication. Empathy allows individuals to understand the emotional and cognitive experiences of people from other cultures, which is crucial for effective communication (Dewaele & Wei, 2012).

Empathy in intercultural communication also promotes cultural relativism, the ability to understand and evaluate a culture by its own standards rather than imposing one's cultural norms. Cultural relativism is a key component of intercultural competence, as it fosters an appreciation for cultural diversity and reduces judgmental attitudes (Holliday, 2018). The participants who gained new insights into their own and other cultures through language learning are likely exhibiting higher levels of cultural relativism, which is essential for successful intercultural exchanges.

#### *4.2.4 Digital technologies in language learning and cross-cultural communication*

The role of digital technologies in language learning has become increasingly prominent in recent years, particularly in cross-cultural contexts. The use of language-learning apps, online platforms, and social media allows learners to interact with native speakers, access authentic cultural materials, and practice their language skills in real-world contexts. Several studies have highlighted how digital tools can enhance intercultural competence by providing learners with opportunities for cross-cultural engagement that would otherwise be difficult to achieve (Kern, 2014).

Digital technologies allow for asynchronous and synchronous communication with people from different cultures, fostering both language acquisition and cultural exchange. For example, platforms like Tandem or HelloTalk allow learners to practice languages with native speakers, while also discussing cultural norms, values, and traditions. This creates an immersive experience that can accelerate both language proficiency and intercultural understanding (Thorne, 2013).

One of the key benefits of digital tools is their ability to provide authentic, contextualized learning experiences. Learners can watch videos, participate in forums, or engage in discussions that are culturally relevant, enabling them to understand not just the language, but how it is used in various social contexts. This is crucial for developing pragmatic competence, as learners can observe how native speakers use language in real-life situations, which helps them understand the subtleties of politeness, formality, and other cultural norms (Taguchi, 2015).

However, the dependence on English in digital spaces also presents challenges, as noted by one participant who mentioned biases and misunderstandings even when using a common language. Research by Pennycook (2017) suggests that while digital platforms



---

can democratize language learning, they may also reinforce linguistic hierarchies, where English dominates and marginalizes other languages. This raises important questions about how digital tools can be used to promote linguistic diversity and cross-cultural understanding without imposing a single global language.

#### *4.2.5 Preserving linguistic diversity in the digital age*

In an increasingly globalized world, preserving linguistic diversity is critical, and digital technologies play a dual role in both supporting and undermining this goal. On one hand, the internet provides a platform for the documentation and revitalization of endangered languages, offering tools for learning and engaging with minority languages (Austin & Sallabank, 2017). On the other hand, the dominance of English and other major languages on digital platforms risks sidelining smaller languages and cultures, further contributing to language endangerment.

Participants' acknowledgment of the importance of preserving linguistic diversity reflects a broader awareness of these dynamics. The belief that linguistic diversity allows for a deeper understanding of cultural heritage aligns with research showing that language is deeply intertwined with identity, worldview, and cultural history (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2020). The digital age offers both opportunities and challenges for maintaining this diversity, and educational initiatives must be designed to ensure that smaller languages are given equal visibility and importance in online spaces.

## **5. Conclusion**

Language learning and cultural understanding are significantly connected, as revealed through this study of IISMA scholarship awardees' experiences. This study contributes to the field of language learning and intercultural communication by shedding light on how language proficiency fosters cross-cultural appreciation among IISMA awardees. It highlights the pivotal role of language in developing empathy, cultural relativism, and pragmatic competence. Specifically, participants demonstrated that language learning not only enhances communication skills but also deepens their understanding of cultural nuances, such as idiomatic expressions and social norms. For instance, participants navigated significant linguistic challenges, particularly in Chinese, while leveraging digital tools to bridge communication gaps in real-world interactions. This study underscores the transformative potential of language learning in reshaping cultural perceptions and fostering global citizenship.

The research also revealed challenges, including limited language proficiency and difficulties with cultural adaptation, illustrating the complex interplay between language and cultural understanding. These findings emphasize the importance of integrating pragmatic and cultural learning into exchange programs to better equip students for intercultural encounters.



---

While these findings are insightful, it is important to contextualize them within the study's limitations, including a small sample size and reliance on self-reported data. Future research should expand the participant pool and incorporate longitudinal methods to capture the dynamic nature of language acquisition and cultural integration. Despite these limitations, the study provides a valuable framework for enhancing the design of international exchange programs and fostering intercultural competence through language education.

### Acknowledgement

The research paper was funded by the Research and Community Service Center (P3M) of Politeknik Negeri Jember in 2024. The authors gratefully acknowledge the support and funding which has made this publication possible.

### References

- Athanasopoulos, P., Bylund, E., Montero-Melis, G., Damjanovic, L., Schartner, A., Kibbe, A., Riches, N., & Thierry, G. (2021). Language and thought: A new meta-analysis of the linguistic relativity hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 147(11), 1186-1204.
- Austin, P. K., & Sallabank, J. (2017). Language documentation and language revitalization. In K. Rehg & L. Campbell (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of endangered languages* (pp. 843-865). Oxford University Press.
- Barna, L. M. (1997). Stumbling blocks in intercultural communication. In L. A. Samovar & R. E. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural communication: A reader* (8th ed., pp. 370-379). Wadsworth.
- Bennett, M. J. (2021). Developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 76, 45-61.
- Boroditsky, L. (2018). Language and the construction of time through space. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 22(7), 651-660.
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M. (2021). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence: Revisited (2nd ed.)*. Multilingual Matters.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2023). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (6th ed.)*. Sage Publications.
- Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(3), 241-266.



- 
- Dewaele, J. M., & Li, W. (2023). The link between trait emotional intelligence and foreign language anxiety. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 45(1), 136-158.
- Dewaele, J. M., & Wei, L. (2012). Multilingualism, empathy and multicompetence. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 9(4), 352-366.
- Félix-Brasdefer, J. C., & Hasler-Barker, M. (2021). *Pragmatics in the foreign language curriculum: Speech acts and the development of interactional competence*. Routledge.
- Godwin-Jones, R. (2020). Building the porous classroom: An expanded model for blended language learning. *Language Learning & Technology*, 24(3), 1-18.
- Goldstein, S. B., & Keller, S. R. (2015). U.S. college students' lay theories of culture shock. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 47, 187-194.
- Gorter, D., & Cenoz, J. (2017). Language education policy and multilingual assessment. *Language and Education*, 31(3), 231-248.
- Gudykunst, W. B. (2003). *Cross-cultural and intercultural communication*. SAGE Publications.
- Taufan, G. T., & Wicaksono, J. A. (2022). Students' Perspectives of HelloTalk Application: A Case Study. *Journal of Language, Communication, and Tourism*, 1(1), 1-11.
- Holliday, A. (2018). *Understanding intercultural communication: Negotiating a grammar of culture (2nd ed.)*. Routledge.
- Jackson, J. (2018). *Interculturality in international education*. Routledge.
- Jackson, J., & Chen, X. (2022). Intercultural competence in the era of digital communication: Implications for student mobility. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 26(3), 265-281.
- Kasper, G., & Rose, K. R. (2003). *Pragmatic development in a second language*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Kecskes, I. (2018). *Intercultural pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
- Kern, R. (2014). Technology as Pharmakon: The promise and perils of the internet for foreign language education. *Modern Language Journal*, 98(1), 340-357.
- Kinginger, C. (2021). Language learning in study abroad: The multilingual turn. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 41, 33-54.
- Kramsch, C. (2014). Teaching foreign languages in an era of globalization: Introduction. *Modern Language Journal*, 98(1), 296-311.
- Kramsch, C., & Zhang, L. (2018). *The multilingual instructor*. Oxford University Press.
- Kramsch, C., & Zhu, H. (2020). The multilingual turn in foreign language education. *Modern Language Journal*, 104(2), 381-400.
- Li Wei. (2022). Translanguaging as a practical theory of language. *Applied Linguistics*, 43(3), 432-452.
-



- 
- Macaro, E. (2018). *English medium instruction: Content and language in policy and practice*. Oxford University Press.
- Martinsen, R. (2011). Predicting changes in cultural sensitivity among students of Spanish during short-term study abroad. *Hispania*, 94(1), 121-141.
- Merritt, A., & Papa, R. (2021). *Language, gender and leadership: Exploring women's leadership language in culturally diverse contexts*. Routledge.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Novawan, A., Alvarez-Tosalem, S. M., Ismailia, T., Wicaksono, J. A., & Setiarini, R. B. (2021, January). Students' experiences of online English language learning by using YouTube. In *The First International Conference on Social Science, Humanity, and Public Health (ICOSHIP 2020)* (pp. 220-226). Atlantis Press.
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1-13.
- Pavlenko, A. (2022). *Bilingualism and thought: A critical examination of the Whorfian hypothesis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pennycook, A. (2017). *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. Routledge.
- Porto, M., & Gonzalez-Davies, M. (2020). *Language education and emotions: Research into emotions and language learners, teachers and translators*. Routledge.
- Pot, A., Keijzer, M., & De Bot, K. (2020). The language barrier in migrant aging. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 23(9), 1139-1157.
- Reinhardt, J. (2020). Metaphors for social media-enhanced foreign language learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 53(2), 234-242.
- Rukiati, E., Wicaksono, J. A., Taufan, G. T., & Suharsono, D. D. (2023). AI on learning English: Application, benefit, and threat. *Journal of Language, Communication, and Tourism*, 1(2), 32-40.
- Santos-Menezes, I., & Jackson, J. (2024). Language learning as a catalyst for perspective transformation in study abroad contexts. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 88, 101-115.
- Shadiev, R., & Yang, M. (2020). Review of studies on technology-enhanced language learning and teaching. *Sustainability*, 12(2), 524.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2020). *Linguistic genocide in education—or worldwide diversity and human rights?*. Routledge.
- Sykes, J. M. (2018). Digital games and language teaching and learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 51(1), 219-224.
- Taguchi, N. (2015). Instructed pragmatics at a glance: Where instructional studies were, are, and should be going. *Language Teaching*, 48(1), 1-50.
- Taguchi, N. (2019). *Second language pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
-



- 
- Thierry, G., Athanasopoulos, P., Wiggett, A., Dering, B., & Kuipers, J. R. (2019). Unconscious effects of language-specific terminology on preattentive color perception. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116(9), 4265-4270.
- Thorne, S. L. (2013). Digital literacies. In M. R. Hawkins (Ed.), *Framing languages and literacies: Socially situated views and perspectives* (pp. 192-218). Routledge.
- Ting-Toomey, S. (2017). Identity negotiation theory. In Y. Y. Kim (Ed.), *The international encyclopedia of intercultural communication* (pp. 1-6). Wiley.
- Whorf, B. L. (1956). *Language, thought, and reality: Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. MIT Press.
- Zarrinabadi, N., Ketabi, S., & Abdi, R. (2021). Facilitating willingness to communicate in the second language classroom and beyond. *TESOL Quarterly*, 55(2), 560-587.
- Zhou, Y., Jindal-Snape, D., Topping, K., & Todman, J. (2008). Theoretical models of culture shock and adaptation in international students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(1), 63-75.