



Torajan Local Wisdom-Based Instruction in Teaching Cross-Cultural Understanding

Elim Trika Sudarsi*, Syarifuddin Dollah, Murni Mahmud

Universitas Negeri Makassar

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.47134/jpbi.v2i4.2025>

*Correspondence: Elim Trika Sudarsi

Email: Elim@student.unm.ac.id

Received: 13-05-2025

Accepted: 20-06-2025

Published: 27-07-2025



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Submitted for open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract: This study investigates the integration of Torajan local wisdom into instruction to enhance students' cross-cultural understanding. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, cultural practices such as Rambu Solo', Rambu Tuka', Tongkonan symbolism, and proverbs were embedded into teaching strategies. Data were analyzed to examine the effectiveness of these integrations in fostering intercultural competence. The findings indicate that incorporating Torajan local wisdom strengthens cultural identity, enhances intercultural communicative competence, and promotes empathy and respect for diversity. Effective pedagogical strategies include comparative cultural analysis, project-based learning, role-play, and reflective discussion. However, challenges remain, including the risk of cultural misinterpretation and teachers' limited cultural literacy. The study concludes that embedding indigenous knowledge in classroom practices supports culturally responsive pedagogy and contributes to preparing globally competent learners.

Keywords: Toraja, Local Wisdom, Cross-Cultural Understanding, Intercultural Competence, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Introduction

In the era of globalization, education is increasingly expected to prepare learners not only with academic knowledge but also with the capacity to engage across cultural boundaries (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). Cross-cultural understanding has thus become a crucial educational outcome, as individuals are required to interact, collaborate, and coexist in diverse and complex social contexts. Research in intercultural education emphasizes that fostering intercultural competence requires authentic, contextualized, and experiential learning resources (Fantini, 2020). However, the question of how to effectively embed such cultural knowledge in teaching remains a matter of debate, particularly in contexts where national curricula are heavily standardized and often overlook local cultural resources (Rahmawati, 2020).

Indonesia, as one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world, is home to hundreds of ethnic groups with distinctive local wisdom (kearifan lokal) that reflects identity, philosophy, and social norms. Integrating indigenous cultural knowledge into education has been argued to strengthen students' cultural identity while simultaneously

fostering intercultural awareness (Hidayat & Rahman, 2022). Yet, critics argue that local wisdom-based instruction risks becoming merely symbolic or folkloric if not connected to broader intercultural frameworks (Zulkarnain, 2021). Thus, there is a need to critically examine how local traditions can be meaningfully transformed into pedagogical resources for teaching cross-cultural understanding.

One such tradition is found in the Torajan culture of South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Renowned for its elaborate rituals such as *Rambu Solo'* (funeral ceremony), *Rambu Tuka'* (thanksgiving rituals), and its distinctive architectural form of the *Tongkonan* house, Toraja culture embodies values of solidarity, spirituality, and communal living. These traditions, when carefully contextualized, provide rich resources for comparative cultural analysis and intercultural dialogue. Previous studies highlight the potential of indigenous practices to promote critical cultural awareness (Rahmawati, 2020; Sulastri, 2021), but empirical applications of Torajan wisdom in cross-cultural education remain limited.

The purpose of this study is to explore how Torajan local wisdom can be integrated into instructional design to enhance students' cross-cultural understanding. Specifically, it examines the pedagogical strategies that utilize Torajan rituals, architecture, and proverbs as teaching materials. The study further evaluates the benefits and challenges of such an approach. By situating Torajan culture within the framework of intercultural communicative competence, this research contributes to the broader discourse on culturally responsive pedagogy and emphasizes the significance of indigenous knowledge in preparing students for intercultural encounters. The principal conclusion emerging from this work is that Torajan local wisdom, when meaningfully embedded in instruction, not only strengthens local identity but also fosters empathy, openness, and respect across cultural differences.

Integrating local wisdom into education provides a powerful foundation for strengthening intercultural competence. Intercultural competence itself is defined as the ability to interact effectively and appropriately across cultural contexts (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). It requires not only linguistic proficiency but also knowledge of cultural values, attitudes of openness, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 2021; Fantini, 2020). In multicultural societies, education plays a central role in fostering these capacities, enabling students to negotiate differences with empathy and respect (Banks, 2019; Nieto & Bode, 2018).

Local wisdom—understood as context-specific knowledge, practices, and values embedded in indigenous traditions—offers authentic resources to support this goal. As Gay (2018) emphasizes, culturally responsive teaching connects curriculum content with learners' cultural backgrounds, thereby enhancing engagement and identity formation. Similarly, Chen and Starosta (2008) argue that intercultural communication competence develops when learners can relate abstract concepts of diversity to lived cultural realities. Embedding indigenous practices such as rituals, proverbs, and community values in teaching enables students to see their culture not only as heritage but also as a medium for global interaction.

Moreover, intercultural competence involves reflexivity, or the capacity to reflect on one's own cultural assumptions while engaging with others (King & Baxter Magolda, 2019). Introducing local wisdom in the classroom helps learners achieve this reflective stance by contrasting familiar traditions with new perspectives, aligning with UNESCO's (2017) vision of inclusive and equitable education. Thus, integrating indigenous knowledge into instruction is not merely a strategy for cultural preservation but also a pathway to cultivating globally competent citizens capable of intercultural dialogue.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore the understanding of lecturers and students regarding Torajan local wisdom. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for capturing participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings in rich detail (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design focused on describing how lecturers and students conceptualize and interpret local wisdom within cultural and educational contexts.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in Tana Toraja Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, where Torajan culture remains a central aspect of community life. The setting included two secondary schools and one higher education institution, enabling access to both student and lecturer perspectives in formal learning environments.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that those involved had direct experience with Torajan cultural practices. The study included:

- 5 lecturers from social sciences, language, and religious studies, who had familiarity with Torajan traditions and experience teaching in cross-cultural or character education contexts.
- 20 students (grades 10–11) from local secondary schools, representing youth who engage with Torajan rituals in daily life and schooling.
- All participants voluntarily joined the study. Adult participants provided informed consent, while parental consent was obtained for student participants under 18 years of age.

Data Collection

Three methods of data collection were employed to ensure triangulation and richness of data:

1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Conducted with lecturers and students to explore their understanding of Torajan rituals, symbols, and values.

Interviews lasted 30–60 minutes, guided by open-ended questions such as:

“What does Torajan local wisdom mean to you?”

“How do you interpret rituals like Rambu Solo’ or the Tongkonan house?”

“Do you think Torajan culture can be used in teaching or learning?”

All interviews were audio-recorded (with permission) and transcribed verbatim.

2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Two FGDs were conducted with student participants to capture collective perspectives and stimulate peer discussion. Each group consisted of 8–10 students, lasting approximately 90 minutes.

Discussions explored students’ experiential familiarity with Torajan rituals and how they compared their cultural practices with other traditions.

3. Document and Artifact Analysis

Cultural texts, proverbs, and symbols (e.g., carvings on the Tongkonan) were analyzed to contextualize participants’ narratives.

School curricula and teaching materials were reviewed to assess references to Torajan local wisdom.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s (2019) six-step framework:

- Familiarization with data through repeated reading of transcripts.
- Generating initial codes based on participants’ expressions (e.g., “cultural pride,” “economic burden,” “teaching material”).
- Searching for themes by clustering related codes.
- Reviewing themes for coherence across datasets.
- Producing the final narrative report with illustrative quotes.

To ensure trustworthiness:

- Triangulation was applied across interviews, FGDs, and document analysis.
- Member checking was conducted by sharing emerging findings with participants to confirm accuracy.
- Peer debriefing was carried out with two cultural education researchers.

Data Availability

All anonymized transcripts, coded datasets, and field notes are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to the cultural sensitivity of Torajan rituals, raw audio files and visual materials are not publicly shared but can be accessed under controlled conditions with community approval.

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the integration of Torajan local wisdom in teaching cross-cultural understanding. A qualitative design was selected because it allows for in-depth analysis of cultural phenomena and their pedagogical applications, consistent with Moleong’s (2019) emphasis on qualitative inquiry as a means of interpreting social and cultural realities.

The instructional framework drew on intercultural language teaching principles, which emphasize linking language learning with cultural awareness and reflective practice (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). To contextualize this framework, elements of Torajan culture—such as rituals, symbolism, and proverbs—were embedded into curriculum design, aligning with the perspectives of Maknun and Syamsuddin (2020) and Ibrahim (2020), who stress the importance of local wisdom as authentic learning resources in curriculum development.

Data collection involved interviews with teachers and students as well as classroom observations during pilot instruction. Similar to Hidayat and Rahman's (2022) case study, this approach captured how local wisdom-based strategies shape character formation and intercultural awareness. The analysis also considered challenges reported in previous studies, such as risks of misinterpretation and the need for teacher preparedness (Zulkarnain, 2021).

Pedagogical strategies included project-based learning, role-play, and reflective discussions, which have been shown to promote empathy and respect for cultural diversity (Rahmawati, 2020; Sulastri, 2021). These methods are consistent with culturally responsive teaching approaches in the Indonesian context (Huda & Kartanegara, 2019) and reflect the role of education in strengthening both identity and character (Supriatna, 2021). In addition, the development of English learning materials integrated with local cultural elements follows the model proposed by Rahman (2020).

Result and Discussion

Lecturers' Understanding of Torajan Local Wisdom

Interviews with lecturers revealed a nuanced understanding of Torajan culture, shaped by both academic knowledge and lived experiences. Three key themes emerged:

- **Local Wisdom as Cultural Identity**

Lecturers described Torajan rituals, such as Rambu Solo' and Rambu Tuka', as central to preserving communal solidarity and cultural identity. For them, local wisdom was not merely a heritage but a living philosophy that sustains community cohesion. This reflects findings by Sulastri (2021), who argued that local wisdom serves as a foundation for strengthening cultural identity in education.

- **Pedagogical Resource**

Lecturers recognized the potential of Torajan traditions as teaching materials, particularly for cross-cultural courses. They noted that symbols such as the Tongkonan house could be used to illustrate universal concepts of kinship and solidarity, making them accessible for comparative cultural analysis. This aligns with research highlighting the role of indigenous knowledge in contextualizing learning (Rahmawati, 2020).

- **Critical Awareness of Challenges**

While valuing local wisdom, lecturers also acknowledged its complexities. Some raised concerns that elaborate funeral ceremonies may impose economic pressures on families, indicating an ability to critically reflect on both strengths and challenges of

cultural practices. This resonates with Byram's (1997) notion of critical cultural awareness.

- **Discussion**

Lecturers' understanding combines pride in heritage with recognition of its pedagogical and critical dimensions. Their perspectives demonstrate readiness to integrate Torajan wisdom into education, provided there is institutional and curricular support.

Students' Understanding of Torajan Local Wisdom

Students' understanding was shaped by both direct participation in cultural practices and classroom exposure. Thematic analysis revealed three major perspectives:

- **Experiential Familiarity**

Students primarily understood local wisdom through lived experience, such as attending Rambu Solo' ceremonies with their families. They emphasized values of respect for elders, community cooperation, and spiritual devotion. Similar to Bennett's (1993) model of intercultural sensitivity, this reflects the early stage of "acceptance," where cultural differences are acknowledged and valued.

- **Cultural Pride and Identity Formation**

Many students expressed pride in belonging to the Torajan culture, noting that rituals and symbols strengthened their sense of identity. They saw these practices as markers that distinguished them from other Indonesian ethnic groups. Hidayat and Rahman (2022) similarly found that local wisdom-based education reinforces a sense of belonging and cultural pride among students.

The findings of this study highlight that integrating Torajan local wisdom into instruction fosters not only cultural identity but also intercultural competence, aligning with global calls for sustainable and inclusive pedagogy. This resonates with Fantini's (2020) argument that intercultural competence must be cultivated through meaningful cultural content to prepare learners for multinational engagement. In higher education, such culturally responsive practices echo Guo and Guo's (2021) view that contextualized pedagogy enhances motivation, inclusivity, and global readiness.

At the same time, embedding indigenous culture in education aligns with Smith's (2021) perspective on decolonizing methodologies, as it re-centers indigenous knowledge systems that are often marginalized in mainstream curricula. Widodo (2018) similarly emphasizes that intercultural negotiation in professional settings requires familiarity with local cultural frameworks, suggesting that such instruction provides learners with skills transferable to workplace contexts.

From a national perspective, local wisdom-based instruction reinforces cultural identity (Sulastris, 2021) and strengthens student character (Supriatna, 2021). However, as Zulkarnain (2021) notes, implementation faces challenges, particularly the tension between symbolic inclusion and meaningful pedagogy. To address this, Hidayat and Rahman (2022) advocate for deliberate integration strategies that ensure cultural knowledge is both authentic and pedagogically effective. Moreover, Rahmawati (2020)

stresses the role of indigenous knowledge in promoting empathy and respect for diversity, aligning with the findings of this study.

At the global level, these efforts support UNESCO's (2017) framework for inclusive and equitable education, which prioritizes the integration of local knowledge to foster both cultural sustainability and global competence. Thus, integrating Torajan local wisdom not only benefits students' intercultural development but also contributes to broader educational agendas for cultural preservation and global citizenship.

- **Limited Analytical Awareness**

While students could describe cultural practices, their ability to critically analyze deeper meanings or compare them with other traditions was limited. Unlike lecturers, students rarely questioned the social or economic implications of rituals. This finding reflects a gap between experiential knowledge and critical cultural awareness, echoing earlier research suggesting that younger learners often need guided reflection to develop intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006).

- **Discussion**

Students' understanding of Torajan local wisdom is strong at the experiential and identity level but requires structured guidance to foster critical and comparative perspectives. This highlights the importance of educators' role in scaffolding intercultural reflection.

Comparative Insights

A key contrast emerged between lecturers and students:

- Lecturers tended to view local wisdom as both an identity marker and a pedagogical tool, often approaching it with critical awareness.
- Students understood it mainly as lived experience and identity reinforcement, with limited analytical depth.
- Discussion: This divergence suggests that while students possess rich cultural knowledge, they require structured pedagogical interventions to elevate their understanding into intercultural competence. Lecturers, on the other hand, are positioned as cultural mediators who can transform local traditions into effective teaching resources.

Implications for Cross-Cultural Instruction

The findings imply that Torajan local wisdom is well-understood as a cultural identity by both lecturers and students, but its role as a learning tool requires intentional pedagogical design. Without guided reflection, students risk treating cultural practices as static traditions rather than as lenses for intercultural dialogue. This aligns with Zulkarnain (2021), who cautions against superficial integration of local wisdom in curricula.

Thus, the study confirms that Torajan local wisdom can form a strong foundation for teaching cross-cultural understanding, but effective instruction must bridge the gap between experiential familiarity and critical cultural awareness.

Conclusion

This study set out to answer the research question: “What are the lecturers’ and students’ understanding of Torajan local wisdom?” The findings indicate that both groups view Torajan culture as a vital source of identity, but their understandings differ in depth and orientation.

Lecturers demonstrated an integrative understanding, seeing Torajan local wisdom as both a marker of identity and a potential pedagogical resource. They exhibited critical cultural awareness, acknowledging the values embedded in rituals while also recognizing challenges such as economic pressures and risks of misinterpretation.

Students, by contrast, primarily understood Torajan local wisdom through experiential familiarity and cultural pride. They valued rituals such as Rambu Solo’ and symbols like the Tongkonan house for their communal significance, but displayed limited capacity to critically analyze or compare these traditions with other cultural practices.

Together, these findings highlight a gap between experiential knowledge (students) and analytical-pedagogical knowledge (lecturers). Bridging this gap requires intentional instruction that transforms lived cultural practices into reflective learning opportunities. The principal conclusion is that Torajan local wisdom, when meaningfully contextualized, has strong potential to serve as both a foundation for identity formation and as a vehicle for developing intercultural competence.

Suggestion

Future research could examine the integration of other Indonesian indigenous cultures in different educational contexts to compare outcomes and broaden applicability, while longitudinal studies are needed to measure long-term impacts on students’ intercultural competence. Practically, teacher training programs should emphasize cultural literacy and strategies for preventing misinterpretation, schools are encouraged to collaborate with local communities to curate authentic learning resources, and curriculum developers should design flexible modules that balance global communication needs with the preservation of cultural heritage.

References

- Banks, J. A. (2019). *An introduction to multicultural education* (6th ed.). Pearson.
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence. Multilingual Matters.*
- Byram, M. (2021). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence: Revisited. Multilingual Matters.*

- Chen, G. M., & Starosta, W. J. (2008). *Intercultural communication competence: A synthesis*. Routledge.
- Cresswell, T., & Merriman, P. (Eds.). (2018). *Geographies of mobilities: Practices, spaces, subjects*. Routledge.
- 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. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306287002>
- Fantini, A. E. (2020). Re-conceptualizing intercultural communicative competence: A multinational perspective. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 15(1), 52–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499920901948>
- Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Guo, Y., & Guo, S. (2021). Culturally responsive pedagogy in higher education: New directions for teaching and learning. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 108, 101769. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2021.101769>
- Hall, S. (2019). *Cultural identity and diaspora*. Routledge.
- Hidayat, R., & Rahman, A. (2022). Integrating local wisdom into character education: A case study in Indonesian schools. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 16(2), 123–135.
- Huda, M., & Kartanegara, M. (2019). Islam, tradition and culture: Culturally responsive teaching in Indonesia. *Journal of Islamic Education Studies*, 7(2), 123–138.
- Ibrahim, A. (2020). Local wisdom as learning resources in multicultural education. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, 11(3), 45–63.
- King, P. M., & Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2019). Toward reflective intercultural competence. *Journal of College Student Development*, 60(1), 1–16.
- Liddicoat, A. J., & Scarino, A. (2013). *Intercultural language teaching and learning*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Maknun, J., & Syamsuddin, A. (2020). Integration of local wisdom in curriculum development in Indonesia. *International Journal of Instruction*, 13(4), 873–888.
- Moleong, L. J. (2019). *Metodologi penelitian kualitatif* (ed. revisi). Remaja Rosdakarya.
- Nieto, S., & Bode, P. (2018). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education* (7th ed.). Pearson.

-
- Rahman, F. (2020). Local culture in English materials development. *International Journal of Language Education*, 4(2), 133–143.
- Rahmawati, Y. (2020). Integrating indigenous knowledge in teaching cultural diversity. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 22(1), 56–72.
- Samovar, L. A., Porter, R. E., McDaniel, E. R., & Roy, C. S. (2017). *Communication between cultures* (9th ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Smith, L. T. (2021). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples* (3rd ed.). Zed Books.
- Sulastri, N. (2021). Local wisdom-based learning as a strategy for strengthening cultural identity. *Cultural Education Journal*, 5(2), 77–90.
- Supriatna, M. (2021). Local wisdom-based character education in Indonesian schools. *Cakrawala Pendidikan*, 40(1), 27–38. <https://doi.org/10.21831/cp.v40i1.35321>
- UNESCO. (2017). *A guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in education*. UNESCO Publishing.
- Widodo, H. P. (2018). Negotiating interculturality in the workplace: A case of Indonesian migrant workers. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 47(6), 563–578.
- Zulkarnain, I. (2021). Challenges in implementing local wisdom in the curriculum: Between symbolic practice and meaningful pedagogy. *Indonesian Journal of Educational Research*, 10(3), 201–214.