

Exploring the Development of Intercultural Competence through Pedagogical Drama

John Helvy Akam¹, *Pavithran Ravinthra Nath², Hairul Azhar Mohamad³, Muhammad Haziq Abd Rashid⁴, Amir Lukman Abd Rahman⁵, Muhammad Luthfi Mohaini⁶

¹SIDMA College Sarawak, Malaysia

^{*2,3,4,5,6}Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Traditional pedagogy often fails to translate internal cultural competence into external behavior. This qualitative case study investigates how a drama course shapes the intercultural competence of four Malaysian undergraduates from internal attitudes to external application. Findings reveal that while drama fosters internal empathy, performative overload and stereotypes hinder unscripted external application. The discussion highlights latent competence, demonstrating how environmental homogeneity and peer gatekeeping paralyze behavioral readiness. Conclusively, while drama builds internal intercultural architecture, true communicative competence heavily relies on diverse, willing interlocutors.

Keywords: intercultural competence, process drama, embodied pedagogy, latent competence, higher education, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

The growing necessity of intercultural competence reflects a shift from a peripheral skill to a core capacity whereby cultural interactions are now a routine aspect of daily life. This reality has prompted a global policy response driven by both the economic demands of globalization and the ethical urgency to address rising social fragmentation (Choo, 2020; Deardorff, 2020).

Higher education is increasingly identified as a critical site for developing intercultural competence, a responsibility that Palmer and Carter (2014) argue requires a fundamental adaptation of pedagogical approaches. However, a significant tension exists between this goal and the limitations of traditional teaching models. These conventional methods often prioritize the transmission of declarative knowledge about culture, an approach that has proven insufficient for developing the nuanced skills required for real intercultural encounters (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). The resulting gap between educational goals and methodological shortcomings has led to calls for pedagogical innovation to foster genuine cultural awareness (Trang, 2024) particularly in multi-ethnic contexts like Malaysia, where student interactions often remain instrumental and superficial despite the country's inherent diversity (Dalib et al., 2019).

Among the most promising of these innovative methods is arts-based pedagogy, specifically through the use of drama, which distinguishes itself from traditional instruction by foregrounding experiential and embodied learning. The use of techniques like role-play and character exploration is believed to bridge the gap between classroom theory and real-life contexts by engaging the affective domain and allowing students to physically rehearse complex social interactions in a safe environment (Ding & Hu, 2023; Zuidema, 2017). Despite its compelling potential, the existing literature on drama-based intercultural learning reveals a methodological limitation regarding the scope of behavioral change, whereby recent scholarship reports gains that are almost exclusively observed within the containment of the drama simulation itself. While studies explicitly note improvements in areas like communication flexibility and conversational proficiency, these behaviors were assessed solely through self-perception questionnaires or observations during the intervention sessions

(Dharmayanti et al., 2025; Ding & Hu, 2023; Nilson, 2021; Rowland & Kutty, 2024). Even qualitative inquiries into critical cultural consciousness rely on the analysis of performance to access internal states rather than tracking subsequent external actions (Zuidema, 2017). A conflation therefore exists between performance competence and applied competence in the unscripted reality of daily life.

This gap between simulated performance and real-world application highlights a central challenge in intercultural education, which involves bridging the divide between internal growth and external action. Deardorff (2006) explicitly maps this required progression, defining competence not as a static state but as a movement from the personal level of attitudes to the interpersonal level of visible outcomes. This progression mirrors Choo's (2020) distinction between passive and active forms of cosmopolitanism. However, while drama is widely praised for fostering the internal attitudes foundational to this process, it remains unclear how it facilitates the transition to desired external behaviors. This is a particularly important area of exploration in the Malaysian context, where a cultural emphasis on social harmony may inhibit the very externalization of communication that signifies active competence. The process by which an internal "shift in frame of reference" translates into "visible behavior and communication" thus remains a critical, under-examined juncture (Deardorff, 2006; Deardorff, 2015).

Therefore, this study conducts a qualitative investigation into the process and outcomes of a university-level drama course, seeking to understand how it shapes the developmental trajectory of students' intercultural competence from internal attitudes to external application. By tracking student development throughout the course, this research aims to illuminate both the powerful mechanisms through which drama fosters the internal foundations of competence and the potential barriers that may inhibit the application of these skills in external, real-world contexts within a Malaysian public university.

Research Objective

To investigate how a drama course shapes the intercultural competence of four Malaysian undergraduates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Interactional Mandate

Byram (2021) observes that the contemporary necessity for intercultural competence is rooted in a fundamental restructuring of human interaction, whereby proximity and relationship have become unavoidable, the result of the collapse of distance, as phenomena like war-induced displacement and economic migration have made sojourners a familiar presence. Consequently, the notion of the foreigner as a distant abstraction has become increasingly obsolete, with Byram noting that most countries now contain resident speakers of many languages, meaning the languages themselves are no longer truly foreign. This reality of constant physical and virtual mobility creates what Deardorff (2020) describes as a need and potential for humans to collectively address shared global challenges.

While interconnectivity was historically framed primarily as an economic asset, recent scholarship emphasizes that its demands are fundamentally social and emotional. Although Deardorff (2015) establishes that cross-border communication is now a common workplace reality, the competence required to navigate this extends beyond mere technical proficiency, particularly as the same forces of connection, which are often described through metaphors like "flat" or "liquid", also necessitate a capacity for ethical engagement (Choo, 2018). Consequently, this reality demands not only practical skill but also the emotional resilience to manage such complexity.

Therefore, the imperative for intercultural competence is ultimately ethical and existential, extending beyond professional utility to address the stability of the social fabric. This perspective is reflected in foundational educational goals, such as the Delors Report's (1996) emphasis on the learning of how to live together in recognition of our growing interdependence (as cited in Byram, 2021). This echoes a much earlier warning from Hall (1989), who argued that humanity must learn to move beyond the limitations of its own cultural perspective if it is to avoid self-destruction. This context reframes the purpose of education as a shift from

mere knowledge accumulation to ethical development, whereby students learn to approach others more humanely and hospitably (Choo, 2018). Thus, Deardorff (2020) concludes that given the turbulent times of the twenty-first century, intercultural competence is arguably crucial to human survival.

Conceptualizing Intercultural Competence

The study of intercultural competence begins with the recognition of the pervasive nature of culture itself, which Hall (1989) characterized as a medium that touches and alters every aspect of human existence. Given this ubiquity, defining the competence required to navigate cultural differences has historically proven difficult. Deardorff (2006) highlighted that despite thirty years of scholarship, there is no agreement on a single definition. This lack of consensus has resulted in a proliferation of related terminology whereby terms such as cross-cultural competence, global citizenship, and cultural intelligence are often used interchangeably (Deardorff, 2020). To resolve this definitional fragmentation, Deardorff's (2006) seminal study documented consensus among experts to establish a framework, most notably conceptualized as the Process Model of Intercultural Competence. This model synthesizes these disparate elements into a cohesive process, reframing the definition of intercultural competence not as a static endpoint, but as an ongoing cycle of development (Deardorff, 2015).

To fully grasp the dimensions of this process, it is necessary to refer to foundational theories that inform specific aspects of Deardorff's Process Model. Regarding the internal cognitive dimension, Bennett's (2017) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity provides the vocabulary for the necessary shift in worldview. Bennett explains that the construction of boundaries between "self" and "other" guides the experience of intercultural events. Crucially, this involves a progression from the ethnocentric stages of denial, defense, and minimization towards the ethnorelative perspectives of acceptance, adaptation, and integration, a shift that is reflected in Deardorff's framework as a key internal outcome.

Meanwhile, Byram's (2021) Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence explains the external and skill-based dimensions. Byram argues that the goal is not to mimic a native speaker but to become an "intercultural speaker", an ideal that is attainable by learners. This competence requires specific *savoirs*, encompassing knowledge (*savoirs*), attitudes (*savoir être*), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), and skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*). Furthermore, Byram highlights the political necessity of critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*), which refers to the ability to evaluate values in one's own and other cultures based on systematic reasoning. Taken together, these foundational perspectives regarding the internal shift in worldview and the external acquisition of skills inform the structure of Deardorff's Process Model, which maps the continuous movement from the personal level of attitudes to the interpersonal level of visible outcomes.

Ultimately, while foundational models such as those from Deardorff, Bennett, and Byram successfully outline the components of intercultural competence, they do not prescribe the specific pedagogical methods for its development. This gap between the conceptual framework and its practical application necessitates an examination of specific interventions. It is precisely this need to bridge the divide between theoretical knowledge and embodied practice that motivates the present study's focus on drama in education.

Drama as Embodied Pedagogy

To comprehend the pedagogical functions of drama, it is necessary to disentangle "process drama" (or "drama in education") from the traditional categorization of theater as a polished performance product. Following the shift in educational paradigms, static and literary models of drama are deemed better replaced by a dynamic, processual model (O'Toole, 1992). Within this context, the focus shifts from performing to appeasement of an external audience to the internal experience of the learners. Indeed, process drama emphasizes the active exploration of and identification with fictional roles by the group (Nilson, 2021), subsequently altering the hierarchical power dynamics of the classroom. Rather than remaining passive recipients of knowledge, learners are transformed into what Boal (2008) termed the "Spec-Actor", whereby they are afforded the freedom to invade the scene and appropriate the actor's power.

The theoretical justification for this approach stems from the recognition that cultural knowledge is not merely a rigid set of intellectual rules, but is deeply encoded within the physical body through proxemics, gesture, and tone. Meanwhile, traditional text-based methods often fail to access this somatic dimension, mirroring the conventional educational trend that favors disembodied cognitive acquisition over physical engagement. However, to conclude that learning is strictly intellectual is injudicious considering that the mind is inherently embodied, with human reasoning arising directly from bodily experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Drama capitalizes on this dynamic by treating language and intercultural learning as a visceral and subjective process that actively involves the students with their whole bodies (Frimberger, 2017).

Furthermore, this orientation aligns closely with the principles of Grounded Cognition, a framework that rejects traditional computation of amodal symbols in favor of modal simulations and situated actions (Barsalou, 2008). By providing a simulated reality and unthreatening environment (Cunico, 2005), drama functions as a laboratory where the rippling effects of learners' error are minimized. It could be postulated that while the theater itself might not be revolutionary, it serves as a crucial rehearsal for real-life interaction through the living and reliving of experiences (Boal, 2008; Zuidema, 2017), thus providing a safe platform for students to physically rehearse the complex complexities of intercultural interaction before encountering them in the unscripted reality of the wider world.

Drama's Mechanisms for Fostering Intercultural Competence

Indeed, the integration of drama into intercultural education operates as a process that guides learners from initial curiosity towards effective behavioral competence. The prerequisite for this cognitive growth lies in the learner's motivation to engage with the unfamiliar, a disposition rooted in openness and respect. Furthermore, drama pedagogy facilitates this development by lowering the affective filter, consequently transforming the often-anxious encounter with "otherness" into a secure space for creative inquiry. As Rzayeva (2025) noted, role-play creates a "mask" that allows learners to perform without the fear of being judged, thus encouraging participants especially for shy or reluctant learners. Not only does this protective layer allow learners to suspend their fear of making mistakes, it also replaces anxiety with the enthusiasm and self-confidence necessary for social interaction (Dharmayanti et al., 2025). Empirical evidence has consistently suggested that a playful environment actively encourages an open attitude towards learning. For instance, Rowland and Kutty (2024) observed that learners were more excited during self-introductions and ice-breaking exercises when ICT tools were used. This excitement acts as a gateway to deeper cultivation of the requisite attitudes for intercultural learning; Nilson (2021) found that even short narrative activities were effective in encouraging participants to discuss their cultural backgrounds, suggesting that narrative play promotes sharing and participation. Furthermore, the implementation of drama shifts the learner's stance from passive reception to active seeking, with Eripuddin et al. (2025) reporting that a significant number of students expressed proactivity in learning about different cultures. By framing cultural difference as a creative asset rather than a pedagogical hurdle, drama ensures that learners can experience cultures in a state of openness, thereby successfully establishing the essential attitudinal baseline for intercultural competence.

Once this foundation of openness is established, drama could support the acquisition of deep cultural knowledge and sociolinguistic skills through the establishment of a critical distance. Piazzoli (2021) conceptualized this as a psychological buffer, a mechanism that modulates affective responses by creating a deliberate separation between imagined scenario and objective reality. It could be postulated that this aesthetic distance prevents the learning experience from devolving into an unbridled "emotional orgy"—a state of overwhelming, uncritical flood of feeling that bypasses one's intellect (Boal, 2008), instead leading to "dianoia", or understanding. Within this reflective space, students are afforded the safety to deconstruct cultural norms. Indeed, Zuidema (2017) demonstrated how drama methods act as a catalyst for examining cultural selfhood, affording trainee educators realizations regarding both the pedagogical landscape of language instruction and the inherent cultural dynamics of their profession. This analytical process relies on the cultivation of active observation. As Dharmayanti et al. (2025) noted, the emulation of conduct during theatrical exercises serves as a primary vehicle for knowledge acquisition, a process that extends beyond mere mimicry to critical analysis. By actively engaging in these simulations, students begin noticing cultural nuance, with Eripuddin et al. (2025) highlighting the necessity of introspection by arguing that targeted reflection compels learners to scrutinize their ingrained prejudice and cultural self-concepts. Furthermore, the

employment of specific techniques, such as the 'Mantle of the Expert', positions students as knowledge-holders, subsequently granting them the agency to articulate insights regarding linguistic plurality derived directly from their personal histories (Nilson, 2021). Thus, it is evident that drama transforms the traditional classroom into a dynamic laboratory for cultural analysis.

Following the acquisition of these attitudes and analytical skills, the learner undergoes an internal shift in their frame of reference, steadily moving towards adaptability, ethnorelativism, and empathy. The primary mechanism driving this psychological shift is the physical embodiment of alternative perspectives. Barsalou (2008) argued that the neurological capacity to mentally replicate experiences is the fundamental driver of empathetic connection, postulating that human beings comprehend the suffering of others by internally recreating analogous states. Within the confines of the drama classroom, this is achieved through O'Toole's (1992) concept of "dual affect", whereby the participant simultaneously stands in another's shoes while maintaining conscious artistic control. Ding and Hu (2023) corroborated this, illustrating how the intense psychological mapping required to grasp a character's internal drives and affective states catalyses a fundamental cognitive restructuring within the student actor. Often, this transformation is characterized by a significant disruption of the learner's previous worldview. Zuidema (2017) documented this phenomenon when learners embodied individuals perpetrating subtle prejudices; this deliberate internalization of antagonistic viewpoints empowered the participants to reinterpret their own past encounters and adopt significantly broadened mental frameworks. The result of this embodied simulation is a measurable progression towards ethnorelativism, with Mavroudis and Bournelli (2019) capturing direct student testimony that celebrated inherent human diversity and actively rejected homogenous social environments. Furthermore, drama rigorously trains the cognitive flexibility required to maintain this shifted frame of reference in real-time interactions. Dharmayanti et al. (2025) indicated that these performative interventions cultivate the crucial sociolinguistic plasticity needed to actively modify communicative approaches, effectively preparing learners internally to adapt their behavior to the complex demands of diverse cultural contexts.

The culmination of this highly pedagogical process is the external manifestation of competence, primarily observed through effective and appropriate communication. Drama fosters this desirable outcome by serving as a secure rehearsal space for reality, where meaning is collaboratively constructed and actions carry simulated consequences. O'Toole (1992) asserted that within drama, meaning is inherently fluid and subject to continuous mediation, which strongly aligns with Choo's (2020) assertion that dynamic global citizenship demands dedicated spaces for interactive discourse and collective reasoning. Empirical studies further confirm that the internal shifts generated by drama translate seamlessly into observable behavioral competence. For instance, Rowland and Kutty (2024) recorded that this heightened involvement often manifested as proactive peer support during technical difficulties, a behavior that successfully nurtured a cohesive environment of shared educational pursuit. This collaborative negotiation is central to the acquisition of interactional skills, with Erupuddin et al. (2025) validating this by noting a marked increase in learners' self-assurance regarding their cross-cultural communicative capacities. Crucially, this acquired competence is not merely a theoretically abstract concept but rather it is highly behavioral. Dharmayanti et al. (2025) emphasized the practical efficacy of these interventions, demonstrating that the iterative rehearsal of specific interpersonal techniques leads directly to the solidification of demonstrable intercultural communicative proficiency. By affording students the opportunity to synthesize both personal insights and collective strategies throughout the preparatory phases (Ding & Hu, 2023), and to practice adapting their behavior appropriately, drama effectively bridges the cognitive gap between internal intercultural awareness and simulated external performance. However, the extent to which this simulated competence successfully transfers to unscripted, real-world encounters remains the critical gap in the scholarship that this study seeks to address.

Deardorff's Process Model

For the analysis of the students' developmental trajectory regarding intercultural competence within the drama course, this study adopts Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence as its primary conceptual framework. While numerous models exist, the selection of Deardorff's framework is justified for two specific reasons: its alignment with the continuous, processual nature of drama pedagogy, and its structural distinction between internal shifts and external behaviors.

Indeed, mirroring the argument for a processual model of drama that prioritizes ongoing experience over static products (Nilson, 2021; O'Toole, 1992), Deardorff's model rejects the conceptualization of competence as a static endpoint. As Deardorff (2006) noted, the model illustrates the complexity of acquiring intercultural competence by highlighting the movement and process orientation occurring between various elements. This aligns with the methodological approach of tracking student development over time, recognizing that the development of such a vital competence is a lifelong process rather than the result of a single workshop or experience (Deardorff, 2015, 2020).

Furthermore, the model emerged from the first study to document consensus among intercultural scholars and academic administrators regarding the constitution of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). This consensus framework organizes development into four distinct interconnected stages, serving as the deductive coding framework for this study:

a) Stage 1: Attitudes

The identification of specific attitudes serves as the requisite starting point for intercultural learning. The model posits that openness, respect for all cultures, and curiosity are fundamental to intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). These attitudes map directly onto the drama mechanism of unthreatening environments that function to lower anxiety (Cunico, 2005). Deardorff (2020, 2015) elaborated that respect involves demonstrating value for others through attentive listening, while openness and curiosity imply a willingness to step beyond personal comfort zones.

b) Stage 2: Knowledge, Comprehension, and Skills

The subsequent stage involves the acquisition of deep cultural knowledge concerning oneself and others (Deardorff, 2006). This stage encompasses the cognitive skills required for processing cultural information, corresponding to Byram's (2021) concepts of *savoir comprendre* (interpreting/relating) and *savoir apprendre* (discovery). Through the mapping of these skills, the framework allows for the assessment of specific drama mechanisms, such as critical reflection and distancing (Piazzoli, 2021). Deardorff (2015) argued that the development of skills for intercultural thinking holds more importance than the actual knowledge acquired. Crucially for the drama context, the consensus among scholars identified the ability to analyze, interpret, listen, and observe as critical skills, emphasizing the importance of understanding the world from the perspectives of others (Deardorff, 2015, 2006).

c) Stage 3: Desired Internal Outcomes

A critical feature of Deardorff's model is the distinction between internal and external outcomes. The desired internal outcome is defined as an informed shift in the learner's frame of reference, encompassing adaptability, flexibility, an ethnorelative view, and empathy (Deardorff, 2006). Deardorff (2015) noted that if these internal outcomes are achieved, individuals can view situations from alternative perspectives and respond in ways that others desire. This distinction is vital for the current study, as it provides the theoretical vocabulary to describe how drama students may achieve significant internal shifts (empathy) via the "dual affect" (O'Toole, 1992), potentially resulting in what this study conceptualizes as latent competence, which is a state achieved when internal empathy is reached but external opportunities for interaction are lacking.

d) Stage 4: Desired External Outcomes

The final stage of the model is the observable external application of competence, defined as "behaving and communicating appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 254). Deardorff (2020) clarified that effectiveness constitutes only half of the intercultural equation, with appropriateness forming the other half, defined as the avoidance of violating valued cultural rules (Deardorff, 2006). Crucially for this study, the structural separation of the internal shift (frame of reference) from the external outcome (behavior) allows this study to investigate the application gap, which is the disconnect that may occur when internal empathy is achieved but fails to translate into observable interaction, a disconnect that Choo (2020) identified as the difference between passive and active cosmopolitanism.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

To investigate the developmental trajectory of students' intercultural competence within a university-level drama course, a qualitative case study design was deemed necessary. Considering the focus on the internal processes of attitude change and the subjective experience of shifting frames of reference (Deardorff, 2006), a qualitative approach affords the ability to capture the nuanced experiences of the learners. As identified within the existing scholarship, the acquisition of intercultural competence functions as a continuous process rather than a static endpoint. Consequently, the utilization of a two-point interview structure, supplemented by ongoing reflective writing, allowed for the tracking of participants' progression from the commencement to the conclusion of the semester. Not only does this temporal dimension permit the research to move beyond a static snapshot of competence, it also facilitates the mapping of specific mechanisms of change and the relationship between internal growth and external application over an extended duration.

Participants and Context

The study was conducted within the context of a 14-week drama for communicative purposes undergraduate course at a public university in Malaysia. Distinct from conservatory training that prioritizes technical acting proficiency, the design of this course utilized process drama techniques as a primary vehicle for soft skills development. The pedagogical aim was to foster communication proficiency and critical awareness through experiential learning. The course structure followed a specific developmental arc, moving learners from individual character embodiment to complex collaborative negotiation.

a) Phase 1: The Monologue

The first phase of the course (Weeks 1-4) focused on individual internalization. Participants were tasked with performing a 3 to 5-minute monologue. Crucially, the pedagogical instruction permitted the utilization of self-written scripts or adaptations, necessitating students to actively research and construct a character distinct from their own persona. Furthermore, the requirement for students to dress the character and utilize props functioned as a physical mechanism designed to deepen the somatic experience of stepping into the shoes of another. Ultimately, this assessment served as the initial catalyst for the generation of empathy, effectively forcing students to cognitively and physically justify the motivations of an "other".

b) Phase 2: Improvisation

Following the completion of individual assessments, the pedagogical focus shifted towards dyadic interaction in Phase 2 (Weeks 5 to 9). Students were paired and required to execute an 8-to-10-minute improvisation sketch derived from scenarios assigned by the instructor. Unlike the monologue, which afforded scripted control, the introduction of unpredictability characterized this phase. Participants were allotted a mere five minutes of preparation time, a constraint that forced a reliance on active listening and immediate behavioral adaptation. It could be postulated that this phase was critical for the simulation of the anxiety and ambiguity frequently encountered in real-world intercultural interactions, requiring students to practise flexibility and communication maintenance strategies in real-time.

c) Phase 3: The Dramatization

The final phase of the course (Weeks 10 to 14) expanded the pedagogical scope to encompass group dynamics. Students were organized into groups of four to six members for a 25-to-30-minute theatrical production. This task extended beyond mere performance to necessitate the negotiation of cultural meaning; consequently, groups were required to achieve consensus regarding plot alterations, character arcs, and stage directions. Indeed, this collaborative process functioned as a simulated environment for social interaction, whereby participants were compelled to navigate peer resistance, varying cultural perspectives, and logistical constraints to facilitate the production of a cohesive cultural output.

The participants comprised four undergraduate students enrolled in the aforementioned course. The employment of purposive sampling was utilized, specifically targeting information-rich cases capable of providing deep insight into the internal experience of cultural shifting (Patton, 2002). The selection of a sample size of four ($n=4$) aligns with the principles of idiographic inquiry, an approach that prioritizes the detailed examination of individual developmental trajectories over the generation of broad, generalized claims (Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, this participation size afforded a granular analysis of the interactions between specific drama mechanisms and the unique starting points of each student. The selection of participants was intended to represent distinct cultural archetypes within the Malaysian context:

a) Iman (The Hybrid Archetype)

A student of mixed heritage (Malay, Indian, and Melanau) with parents who are highly educated professionals. Despite having prior experience in high school drama clubs, she described herself as introverted and viewed the course as a means for “character development.” Her background offered insight into how drama resonates with individuals who already navigate fluid cultural identities.

b) Misya (The Majority Archetype)

An ethnic Malay student with a Chinese-medium schooling background. Self-described as having social anxiety, she is an avid consumer of global media and entered the course with a high degree of openness but limited confidence in performance. She represents the experience of the dominant ethnic majority seeking to navigate minority spaces.

c) Najwa (The Critical Observer)

A Malay student who is highly articulate and critical regarding social structures. She engages frequently with Western cultures through online platforms and entered the course with a keen interest in breaking stereotypes regarding religion and gender, though she was initially skeptical about how much the course would alter her already established worldview.

d) Rozy (The Visible Minority)

A student of mixed Mamak (Indian-Muslim) and Malay heritage. She expressed a strong desire to use the drama course to dismantle specific stereotypes about the Mamak community. She entered with a straightforward personality and specific goal of cultural representation, offering insight into how minority students utilise drama for advocacy.

Data Collection

Data collection was triangulated using two primary instruments: semi-structured interviews and reflective writing journals.

a) Semi-structured interviews

Interviews were conducted at two distinct intervals. The Phase One (Week 2) interviews established a baseline for each participant. Questions focused on their existing definitions of multiculturalism, prior intercultural experiences, and their expectations for the course. The Phase Two (Week 14) interviews took place immediately following the conclusion of the course. These were reflective in nature, prompting participants to describe specific “critical incidents” within the drama workshops. Participants were explicitly asked whether the internal shifts experienced during the course had translated into real-world social interactions.

b) Reflective writing

To capture the immediate processing of intercultural experiences, participants submitted reflective journals following four key assessments: (1) Monologue, (2) Improvisation, (3) Script Writing, and (4) Final Drama Performance. These written artifacts provided real-time data on how participants negotiated cultural elements

during the creative process, offering a window into the raw, unfiltered cognitive work of 'embodying' a character.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the transcribed interviews and reflective journals followed a rigorous hybrid inductive-deductive approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This dual strategy allowed the study to validate the theoretical model while remaining sensitive to unexpected pedagogical phenomena.

The initial phase involved an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data was read multiple times to achieve immersion, and open coding was employed to identify recurring patterns in the participants' accounts without the imposition of a pre-existing frame. This inductive step was critical for allowing unique, emergent themes to surface organically from the raw data.

Subsequently, the inductively identified codes were mapped onto a deductive framework guided explicitly by Deardorff's (2006) Process Model. The data were organized into four distinct stages: Attitudes; Knowledge, Comprehension and Skills; Internal Outcomes; and External Outcomes.

However, during the coding of External Outcomes (Stage 4), a significant variance emerged regarding where the behavior took place. To rigorously capture this nuance, the analysis stratified external outcomes into a three-tiered framework:

Tier 1 (Simulated Practice): Competence displayed within the "safe" containment of a role-play or rehearsal.

Tier 2 (In-Situ Interaction): Spontaneous interactions with peers during the collaborative classroom process.

Tier 3 (Real-World Application): Competence applied in unscripted social environments outside the classroom.

This structural distinction allowed the study to systematically trace the developmental trajectory, enabling a precise analysis of exactly where the drama intervention succeeded and where it faced limitations.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the inquiry, several strategies were employed. First, data triangulation between interviews and written journals ensured that findings were not artifacts of a single method. Second, member checking was conducted where participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts and researcher's initial interpretations to verify accuracy.

Finally, regarding reflexivity and positionality, it is important to note that the researchers acted as external observers and were not involved in the instruction of grading of the drama course. This separation was maintained to minimize power differentials and coercion, ensuring that participants felt safe to express critical or negative views regarding their learning experience without fear of academic reprisal.

FINDINGS

The findings are presented according to the four stages of Deardorff's (2006) Process Model. The data reveals a distinct developmental arc: participants began with foundational attitudes (Stage 1), utilized drama as a mechanism to acquire deep knowledge and skills (Stage 2), achieved significant internal shifts in empathy (Stage 3), but faced complex environment barriers when attempting to translate these internal shifts into external behavior (Stage 4).

Stage 1: Attitudes

Data analysis reveals that all four participants entered the drama course possessing, to varying degrees, the foundational attitudes requisite for intercultural competence: respect, openness and curiosity. Crucially, the

data suggests that the manifestation of these attitudes was not only heavily mediated by prior familial socialization and digital consumption, but also occasionally underscored by latent ethnocentric biases.

Respect

Positioned at the foundational level of Deardorff's Process Model, the cultivation of respect, defined as the valuing of other cultures and cultural diversity, serves as the baseline for intercultural competence. Entering the drama course, the participants generally exhibited a strong, albeit varied, foundational ethos of egalitarianism.

Demonstrating a deeply humanistic orientation, Iman firmly rejected the hierarchical ranking of cultural identities. She articulated a clear moral stance against ethnocentrism, stating "I would say that people should really not...[think] that [their] culture is superior. Because it actually degrades somebody else's beliefs. I believe it goes against humanity" (Iman, Interview 1). By equating cultural supremacy with the degradation of fundamental human dignity, Iman unpacked the understanding that mutual respect is a non-negotiable tenet of social existence. Furthermore, this egalitarian view not only applied to dominant global cultures but also extended to marginalized communities. Emphasizing the intrinsic value of minority practices, she noted, "As small as the culture is, we should accept it because it's a culture. It's someone's beliefs, it's somebody's lifestyle" (Iman, Interview 1). Through this assertion, Iman highlighted that the demographic size or geopolitical power of a community does not diminish the validity of its lived experiences.

Similarly, Najwa echoed this sentiment with a more direct, almost visceral dismissal of cultural hierarchies. When probed on the concept of cultural supremacy, she asserted, "I think it's straight-out ridiculous. What cultures are superior? There are none. None are superior to the other" (Najwa, Interview 1). This absolute rejection suggests a pre-existing cognitive filter that refuses to pigeon-hole diverse populations into ranked categories, thereby setting a robust stage for intercultural engagement.

Meanwhile, Rozy presents a complex, somewhat paradoxical manifestation of respect. Initially, Rozy anchored her understanding of cultural tolerance in familial socialization, recalling, "My parents will always say that you need to respect other people. That doesn't mean that they are different, you can't just ignore them or oppress them" (Rozy, Interview 1). It could be postulated that this parental conditioning provided her with a perspective for inclusivity. Indeed, she expressed a willingness to navigate interpersonal friction by prioritizing shared humanity over cultural divides, explaining, "I would ask them to let me know because no matter how different the culture is, it's still their culture and people are still people" (Rozy, Interview 1). This statement gives the illusion of a fully formed ethnorelative worldview, where interpersonal respect supersedes cultural dissonance.

However, it should be noted that declarations of tolerance do not always equate to the total eradication of ethnocentric biases. Immediately undercutting her earlier egalitarian claims, Rozy revealed a contradictory belief about cultural superiority when questioned whereby she bluntly confirmed, "Yes. And I know which one is" (Rozy, Interview 1). This stark admission highlights the limitation of her initial respect, revealing that while Rozy is capable of performing interpersonal respect based on her upbringing, her underlying cognitive schema remains constrained. This juxtaposition demonstrates that the mere presence of foundational respect does not automatically translate to a complete dismantling of cultural supremacy.

Openness

Moving beyond respect, the participants also demonstrated varying degrees of openness, which is characterized by a willingness to withhold judgment and actively engage in intercultural learning. For Iman, the cultivation of this openness was heavily influenced by her pre-university socialization. Reflecting on her transition into a more diverse educational setting, she noted, "But after I met all my friends during [Sixth Form], they were so open-minded. But it's okay, this is your beliefs, this is mine, we are different" (Iman, Interview 1). This early exposure acted as a catalyst, allowing her to accept differences without feeling the need to alter the other person. Building on this realization, she developed a conscious strategy for withholding judgment, explaining, "I told myself, you know what, people are different. It's just about accepting how they

are. I mean, I as a person cannot change another person because they are who they are” (Iman, Interview 1). By acknowledging the limits of her own influence, Iman effectively neutralized the urge to impose her worldview on others. Furthermore, she actively managed her reactions during intercultural encounters, stating, “I always like to try to compare it with my own. And try to give my own opinion about it without being so insensitive, just not to offend anybody” (Iman, Interview 1). Here, the act of comparison is not used to establish superiority, but rather as a cognitive tool to navigate differences carefully and respectfully.

Meanwhile, Misya’s openness was shaped by a strong awareness of her position within the Malaysian Malay culture, which is the dominant cultural group. Recognizing the potential blind spots of belonging to the majority, she expressed a proactive desire for intercultural learning:

I’m a Malay, right? So that is the majority of us here. So, when I have friends from like Chinese background, sometimes we tend to not understand them very well. So, I really would like them to share more about their culture and help us to understand rather than have misunderstandings about such a problem. (Misya, Interview 1)

This highlights a crucial filter shift, where Misya not only acknowledges her own cultural limitations but also invites minority peers to take up space in the narrative. Her approach to unfamiliar practices was similarly grounded in a desire to learn rather than to judge. She elaborated, “I simply kept an open mind and I really just try to accept them and understand really why did they do [what they do]?” (Misya, Interview 1). This questioning stance illustrates a healthy tolerance for ambiguity. She further established her boundaries for this openness, adding, “As long as it doesn’t harm any of my culture or anything, I can just accept them and try to familiarize myself with them” (Misya, Interview 1). Thus, her openness is highly practical and conditional upon mutual non-interference, reflecting a realistic approach to multicultural coexistence in Malaysia.

Adding another layer to this dimension, Najwa highlighted the importance of openness from the perspective of the misunderstood subject. She valued when others suspended their preconceived notions to learn directly from her, particularly regarding religious stereotypes. Recounting interactions with Western peers, she shared:

A common misconception is] the fact that I’m oppressed as a woman. That...using the hijab is not an option for everyone...It’s really nice that they do ask me because they want to ask a person who’s actually Muslim to clear up any misunderstandings instead of just reading up on the Internet. (Najwa, Interview 1)

For Najwa, true openness requires the bypassing of secondary, often biased media sources in favor of authentic human-to-human inquiry.

However, it must be noted that this willingness to engage and withhold judgement was not universally absolute among the participants. Providing a stark contrast to the fluid openness demonstrated by her peers, Rozy exhibited a more rigid, gate-keeping approach to cultural differences. While she previously claimed to respect others, her underlying view of culture left little room for actual intercultural learning or change. When discussing conflicting cultural practices, she admitted, “I can just tolerate it because it is not something that I should say. It is something that they grow up with...So I feel like even if we were to teach them or anything, it’ll be hard to change” (Rozy, Interview 1). This reveals a passive form of tolerance rather than active openness; she views cultural behaviors as deeply entrenched and essentially unchangeable. Confirming this lack of flexibility, when asked directly if she believed culture is rigid, she simply replied, “Yes” (Rozy, Interview 1). This finding is crucial, as it demonstrates that a student might possess basic social tolerance while simultaneously lacking the genuine openness required to believe that cultural perspectives, both their own and others’, can actually evolve.

Curiosity and Discovery

Completing the attitudinal dimension of Deardorff’s model, the participants’ capacity for curiosity and discovery, specifically their ability to tolerate ambiguity and actively seek out intercultural knowledge, revealed distinct, highly individualized trajectories.

For Iman, the initial foray into cultural discovery was heavily mediated by familiar habits and popular media. Highlighting a passive absorption of knowledge, she noted, “A lot of information usually comes from my parents. When they watch TV, they would watch documentaries” (Iman, Interview 1). In this instance, the home environment served as a safe peephole into global diversity, buffering the shock of the unknown. However, this foundational exposure eventually fostered a more autonomous, albeit still media-centric, curiosity. She explained, “I seek out information on my own sometimes. For example, I am a fan of Korean dramas. So, when there’s a Korean drama about history, I would search the history” (Iman, Interview 1). It could be postulated that for Iman, entertainment acts as a low-stakes entry point, allowing her to explore foreign cultural landscapes without the immediate pressure of real-world interpersonal ambiguity.

Exhibiting a more active reaction to cultural variance, Misya framed her encounters with differences not as intimidating, but as intellectually stimulating. Acknowledging the initial jolt of the unfamiliar, she quickly pivoted to a stance of inquiry, stating, “When we have different upbringings and we see a different culture that is surrounding us, it can be quite shocking, to be honest, and I tend to get fascinated by them” (Misya, Interview 1). This fascination signifies a high tolerance for uncertainty, transforming potential culture shock into a site of discovery. She elaborated on this mindset, adding, “I simply view them as unique because I’m quite fascinated by how different people can be” (Misya, Interview 1). Tracing the genesis of this curiosity, Misya pointed to both early physical exposure and later digital exploration: “I started to get interested in culture when I was in primary school because of the different races there” (Misya, Interview 1), and “And then when my house got internet and we basically use YouTube, I also follow YouTube for foreign YouTubers so they have differences like stuff that they did...make me curious and I tend to look for information on the internet” (Misya, Interview 1).

Furthermore, Misya’s curiosity seamlessly translated into direct, respectful interpersonal questioning. Relying on the willingness of others to act as cultural informants, she shared, “For this, I think I usually ask about the things that I’ve heard of, or I’m curious about” (Misya, Interview 1). Illustrating this with a specific interaction, she recalled, “I got curious and asked him if [a peer’s] name has meaning behind it and he said to me, actually it’s the name of one of their gods, I believe?” (Misya, Interview 1). This approach underscores a collaborative model of discovery, which she summarized by stating, “When we have different multicultural relationships with these people, I tend to ask them about stuff. I want to learn as much about their culture if they are willing to share it with me” (Misya, Interview 1).

Meanwhile, the digital realm provided a platform for highly intentional, self-directed cultural education for Najwa. Bypassing physical geographical limitations, she revealed, “There’s a platform we meet on on Twitter. We talk about certain things, certain topics” (Najwa, Interview 1). Demonstrating a proactive ownership of her intercultural learning journey, she asserted, “I have made my own efforts to learn about certain cultures simply because I want to study them and educate myself even further” (Najwa, Interview 1). For Najwa, this curiosity was not only driven by a desire for general knowledge but also by a strategic need to navigate social boundaries and mitigate interpersonal risks. She emphasized, “Especially since I want to properly learn about what it means to be offensive and what it means to be appreciative when it comes to different cultures” (Najwa, Interview 1). Consequently, information-seeking became a preparatory mechanism to handle the uncertainty of new encounters, as she noted, “If I knew that I would be meeting people, I will research them first. If I didn’t know, I would be a little bit more cautious” (Najwa, Interview 1).

Finally, Rozy demonstrated a highly pragmatic, functional brand of curiosity. Recalling her unfiltered childhood inquiries, she shared, “When I was a kid, I asked my [Sikh] friend, why do you need to wear a turban? And then he said ‘it’s because our hair is very important and my dad taught me that we need to cover our hair’” (Rozy, Interview 1). This early memory highlights a straightforward desire to decode visible cultural markers. As an adult, this directness evolved into a practical mechanism for managing interpersonal relationships. She asserted, “If it’s me, because I’m a straightforward kind of person, I would ask them, how different is our culture? Would it interfere with our daily interaction?” (Rozy, Interview 1). For Rozy, the act of discovery is not merely an intellectual or academic exercise but rather it is a necessary, utilitarian tool deployed to establish boundaries and ensure the smooth functioning of daily multicultural coexistence.

Stage 2: Knowledge, Comprehension and Skills

In Deardorff's (2006) Process Model, the second stage encompasses the acquisition of cultural knowledge and the development of critical skills to listen, observe, interpret, analyze, evaluate, and relate. The data indicates that the drama course functioned as a rigorous pedagogical mechanism that forced participants to actively construct this knowledge. Unlike passive lecture-based learning, the requirement to embody a character and write believable scripts compelled participants to move beyond "basic knowledge" (Misya, Interview 2) and engage in active research (*savoir apprendre*), sociolinguistic analysis, and cultural self-reflection.

Cultural Self-Awareness

The cultivation of cultural self-awareness emerges as a critical milestone for the participants. Operating within the reflective containment of the drama tasks, the learners were compelled to turn their analytical lenses inward, interrogating the origins of their own cognitive filters and behavioral norms.

For Iman, the realization of her own cultural positioning was deeply tied to her geographical and social isolation. Acknowledging the limitations of her pre-existing environment, she reflected, "I think the course actually gave me character development because I don't really see much. I live in a very small suburban side so I don't really see much cultural incorporation in my own surrounding" (Iman, Interview 2). The articulation of this spatial constraint highlights a burgeoning self-awareness; by recognizing the homogeneity of her suburban upbringing, Iman unpacked the understanding that her baseline cultural knowledge was inherently restricted. It could be postulated that this admission of ignorance is not a deficit, but rather the necessary cognitive clearing required before genuine intercultural comprehension can occur.

Similarly, Najwa experienced a profound filter shift, though hers was centered on the dismantling of internalized media biases. Forced to confront her own reliance on surface-level tropes during the character research phase, she confessed, "So, I tend to, without realizing it, view them stereotypically, especially because of the media. But having to basically research these people, makes me a little bit more conscious of the way I think" (Najwa, Interview 2). This statement serves as a powerful testament to the rippling effects of unexamined media consumption on a learner's worldview. By utilizing the research process as a mirror, Najwa not only identified her subconscious stereotyping but also actively monitored her own cognitive processing, thereby demonstrating a highly mature level of cultural self-awareness.

Meanwhile, Rozy presents an intricate, personal excavation of her mixed heritage. Prompted by the introspective demands of the monologue task, and forced to scrutinize her own psychological makeup, Rozy began to link her emotional patterns directly to her familial socialization. She hypothesized:

I am mixed Mamak and Malay and mostly in a Mamak household, we didn't really grow up being paid much attention so I guess I could say that most of what I have said in the monologue such as attachment issues and what real love is about might be related to being raised in a Mamak household. (Rozy, Reflection - Monologue)

Through this introspection, Rozy successfully mapped her individual psychological struggles onto the broader canvas of her Mamak cultural upbringing.

Indeed, this intense self-identification highlights how deeply intertwined her personal and cultural schemas had become. When tasked with analyzing her character in a collaborative performance, Rozy recognized this mirroring effect, noting, "Cultural wise I can't really comment on it since I feel like the character itself is me" (Rozy, Reflection - Script Writing). Rather than a lack of analytical distance, it could be postulated that this admission reflects a profound realization of her own embodied culture. The character's traits were so seamlessly aligned with her own lived reality that the "cultural" and "personal" became indistinguishable, proving that she was fully aware of how her own background informed her dramatic portrayal.

Building upon this heightened self-awareness, Rozy ultimately leveraged her position to reclaim her cultural narrative from external gate-keepers. Recognizing the pervasive misconceptions surrounding the Mamak

community, she resolved to become an active cultural educator. She asserted, "I learned that rather than just keeping in your culture and keeping people guessing, it's better for you to just teach them. Like, this is not how we are, we are more like this." (Rozy, Interview 2). This evolution is significant as Rozy transitioned from merely understanding her own cultural identity to actively curating and defending it against external stereotyping, thereby embodying a highly functional, outward-facing manifestation of cultural self-awareness.

Understanding and Knowledge of Culture

Moving beyond mere self-awareness, the acquisition of deep cultural knowledge, encompassing sociolinguistic awareness, historical contexts, and the worldviews of others, constitutes the next phase of intercultural competence. Operating within the immersive environment of the drama tasks, the participants demonstrated varying capacities to decode and internalize these complex cultural markers.

For Iman, the dramatic arts served as a potent vehicle for recognizing the sociolinguistic and non-verbal dimensions of culture. Observing the nuanced performances of her peers, she noted:

The way they use their body language and the tone of their voice or some rural accent mixed in the dialogue to portray the characters has made me understand and stand more on my belief that every art or performance will depict one's culture. (Iman, Reflection - Drama Performance)

This realization underscores a sophisticated sociolinguistic awareness whereby Iman began unpacking the understanding that culture is not merely spoken but physically embodied. Consequently, she concluded, "Every background of their lives are represented in their way to express their emotions through the characters and I believe that aspect is very important in our lives" (Iman, Reflection - Drama Performance). Through this lens, Iman successfully bridged the gap between theatrical expression and lived cultural realities.

Similarly, Najwa demonstrated a highly analytical approach to character construction, recognizing the inextricable link between a person's background and their worldview. Emphasizing the necessity of foundational context, she explained, "In order to identify how their characters would be like throughout the drama, we built their backstory first so we can take in account of how the culture they've grown up with would affect their overall character" (Najwa, Reflection - Script Writing). By front-loading this biographical data, Najwa acknowledged that cultural history dictates present behavior. She further validated this method, stating, "With this, it's quite obvious that knowing a person's background really helps to understand their characteristics which, in return, assisted me with all the acting I had to do" (Najwa, Reflection - Drama Performance). Indeed, she recognized that cultural elements are inescapable in storytelling, observing, "Because it's directly tied to the settings and the characters that you're putting into your play" (Najwa, Interview 2). Her exploration also extended into the socio-economic dimensions of culture. Reflecting on the portrayal of elite classes, she shared, "I realized that they are perceived quite negatively because they're in a higher social standing, and they have a lot of power, therefore people think they should be treated differently from other people" (Najwa, Interview 2). This led to a specific takeaway regarding societal prejudice: "That was the one thing I learned—how people viewed people of higher social standing in society" (Najwa, Interview 2).

However, it should be warned that Najwa's quest for cultural specificity occasionally devolved into a reliance on surface-level tropes, particularly during unscripted tasks. When attempting to portray an American, she noted, "Aside from that, Americans tend to speak in a very quick manner, to the point that words kind of mash up together, so that was how I played my character as the America" (Najwa, Reflection - Improvisation). Furthermore, she admitted to utilizing culinary clichés, stating, "Malaysians, and Asians in general, are generally thought to be spice lovers, so I had applied that into our improv" (Najwa, Reflection - Improvisation). This reveals that under the pressure of spontaneous performance, Najwa's deep understanding is momentarily eclipsed by shortcuts, giving the illusion of cultural representation while actually relying on caricatures.

The tension between genuine cultural comprehension and stereotypical reduction was highly pronounced for Misya. On the surface, Misha exhibited a commendable dedication to sociolinguistic accuracy, initially

demonstrating an analytical eye for macro-level cultural expressions in media. Recognizing the emotional variations across cinematic traditions, she noted, "Western movie monologues tend to be more dramatic and emotional to catch the viewers attention and feelings. As for Asian movies, it's more reserved and toned down" (Misya, Reflection - Monologue). By contrasting the overt emotionality of Western cinema with the restraint of Asian films, she unpacked the understanding that cultural norms directly dictate artistic delivery. Furthermore, she recognized the necessity of intersectional demographic specificity in character building. Acknowledging these nuanced layers, she stated, "we need to have that cultural knowledge on how a certain age group acts or how different gender express themselves" (Misya, Reflection - Improvisation). This assertion reveals her theoretical grasp that cultural performance is not monolithic, but rather heavily influenced by micro-variables intersecting with broader cultural identities.

To bridge her pre-existing knowledge gaps, Misya espoused a strong belief in the value of active, task-driven inquiry. Highlighting this methodological approach, she reflected, "When we are given the tasks, we basically need to do more research on them. So I think it has improved our knowledge about other cultures" (Misya, Interview 2). The act of researching was thus framed not only as an academic requirement but also as a direct conduit for expanding her cultural repertoire beyond her immediate lived experience. Consequently, this foundation culminated in a seemingly mature, ethnorelative stance on character interpretation. Articulating this conceptual growth, she claimed:

I learned that we really need to just be open-minded about how a character is being portrayed because different cultures have different perspectives. So when we see a certain character and why they act like that, we can actually know that, based on what their background is about. (Misya, Interview 2)

Through this reflection, she established the insight that a character's actions are inextricably tethered to their cultural background, giving the illusion of a profound filter shift toward genuine intercultural empathy.

Yet, a closer examination of her applied skills reveals a stark contradiction. Despite her claims of open-mindedness, Misya actively weaponized stereotypes as a cognitive shortcut to establish cultural identity on paper. She explicitly confessed, "When writing the script, we always remember to include some of the stereotypical characters of a certain race just to capture the cultural elements in the best way possible" (Misya, Reflection - Script Writing). This admission highlights a fundamental flaw in her comprehension; rather than synthesizing deep cultural knowledge, she equated superficial tropes with authentic cultural representation. This reliance on tropes was not accidental but highly calculated, as she detailed, "For [the character] Raju, we have him have the characteristics of a typical Indian student which is a nerd and innocent" (Misya, Reflection - Script Writing). By reducing a minority character to a monolithic trope, she unpacked a disturbing lack of nuanced cultural understanding. Furthermore, she manipulated linguistic markers to pigeon-hole her characters, explaining, "For example, when writing the script for Siti, a Malaysian girl, we put the sentence structure as a typical Malay trying to speak English" (Misya, Reflection - Script Writing). Instead of exploring genuine sociolinguistic realities, she relied on linguistic caricatures, severely undermining her earlier claims of deep research. Compounding this limitation, Misya also harbored deeply entrenched hierarchical views, asserting, "It's true to a certain point because, for example, European culture, of course, is much superior to Asian culture as you can see" (Misya, Interview 2). This critical negative evidence demonstrates that Misya's acquisition of cultural knowledge remained fundamentally stunted, trapped within a colonial cognitive framework that precludes true intercultural comprehension.

Conversely, Rozy illustrates a profound filter shift towards genuine cultural comprehension. Moving beyond the superficial markers of identity, she began to appreciate the historical weight anchoring cultural practices. She reflected, "But learning deeply about a culture, it's really an eye-opener because then you'll see that everyone is really different" (Rozy, Interview 2). Unpacking this revelation, she recognized that cultural behaviors are not arbitrary choices but ancestral inheritances. She elaborated:

Actually, knowing the differences is like, you're doing this because of this or you're doing this because it is what you believed in, and it is not something that you just came up with right now. It is something that your ancestors did and you're doing it. So knowing that differences really matter because everyone is important. (Rozy, Interview 2)

Through this realization, Rozy not only transcended surface-level tolerance but also achieved a deep, historically grounded understanding of why cultures operate the way they do.

Skills

Operating within the analytical demands of the course, the participants were required to deploy specific intercultural skills, namely the ability to listen, observe, interpret, analyze, evaluate, and relate.

For Misya, the manifestation of these skills was heavily anchored in targeted digital research. Demonstrating the capacity to evaluate societal prejudices, she noted, “We searched the internet to know what are the things that most people in the minority group are being discriminated against. The results are their skin, accent and facial features” (Misya, Reflection - Script Writing). By actively isolating the specific markers of marginalization, she unpacked the understanding that authentic cultural representation requires a critical analysis of how minorities are perceived by the dominant group. Furthermore, she articulated a sophisticated approach to cultural interpretation, stating, “we need to study them and how to appropriately show that we are from the culture without saying that we are from the culture, you know” (Misya, Interview 2). This highlights her cognitive ability to relate cultural nuances implicitly, recognizing that effective interpretation relies on subtle behavioral cues rather than overt exposition.

Meanwhile, Rozy utilized the skill of interpersonal inquiry to actively dismantle assumptions. Opting for direct communication over passive observation, she explained, “So rather than stereotyping, I would just ask, hey do you guys do this? Is this a thing? Or is it just like a one-person thing?” (Rozy, Interview 2). Through this deliberate questioning strategy, Rozy unpacked the understanding that cultural practices must be evaluated at the individual level. This approach not only allowed her to verify cultural information but also prevented her from pigeon-holing her peers based on monolithic tropes, thereby demonstrating a highly functional evaluative skill.

However, the ability to interpret and relate to other cultures was not universally seamless, with some participants citing environmental isolation as a significant barrier to skill acquisition. Iman, for instance, articulated the collective difficulty her group faced when tasked with cultural integration. Reflecting on the collaborative process, she admitted, “we believe it was quite challenging to incorporate culture in this group” (Iman, Interview 2). This concession points to a distinct deficit in the interpretative skills required to seamlessly weave cultural elements into a shared narrative. She attributed this limitation directly to a lack of observational opportunities in her immediate surroundings, explaining, “So none of these cultures is exposed to us in the way that we would think that we should incorporate into our own assessments” (Iman, Interview 2). By linking her inability to incorporate culture to her lack of real-world exposure, Iman unpacked the reality that the skills of observation and interpretation cannot be manufactured in a vacuum; they require tangible, diverse social inputs to be effectively developed and applied.

Compounding these interpretative challenges, Najwa provided critical negative evidence illustrating the difficulty of translating cultural analysis into nuanced representation, often falling back on the very tropes she sought to avoid. Reflecting on her attempt to embody a different cultural identity, she confessed, “We didn’t want to come off too stereotypical but we probably did, but I guess that’s one of the challenges when it comes to incorporating the cultural elements” (Najwa, Interview 2). This admission reveals a significant gap between theoretical intention and practical skill execution. Despite possessing the self-awareness to recognize the danger of stereotyping, Najwa lacked the evaluative and interpretive agility necessary to construct a character outside the confines of reductive caricatures. It demonstrates that the cognitive leap from merely avoiding stereotypes to authentically relating cultural depth remains a formidable hurdle, highlighting the limitations of her analytical skills when placed under the pressure of creative production.

Stage 3: Internal Outcomes

While Stage 2 focused on the cognitive processing of cultural information, Stage 3 captures the affective transformation, or the internal shift in the participants’ frames of reference. According to Deardorff (2006),

these internal outcomes are defined by empathy (seeing from others' perspectives), an ethnorelative view (moving away from ethnocentrism), and adaptability.

Empathy

A central finding is that drama facilitated empathy by forcing participants to embody value systems that contradicted their own. Crucially, this was not merely an exercise in "acting" emotions, but a mechanism for decoding the cultural logic behind behaviors they previously judged.

For Iman, the development of empathy was heavily oriented toward the maintenance of interpersonal harmony and the avoidance of social friction. Reflecting on her engagement with the drama tasks, she noted, "So the experience actually helps me to like understand and how to incorporate myself in that situation to not offend anyone" (Iman, Interview 2). By utilizing empathy as a navigational tool, Iman unpacked the understanding that stepping into another person's shoes is essential for mitigating cultural misunderstandings. It could be postulated that her internal shift was about profound emotional resonance and more about the calibration of her own behavior to ensure a safe, non-offensive social environment.

Meanwhile, Misya's experience of empathy was catalyzed by the narrative arcs constructed within the drama itself, specifically through the lens of conflict resolution and anti-bullying themes. Describing the climax of her group's performance, she explained, "When the victim actually confronted his bully, only then they understood and realized that they should not discriminate against people just because they have a funny accent and different skin colour" (Misya, Reflection - Drama). Through this theatrical confrontation, Misya articulated a crucial cognitive shift; she recognized that true empathy often requires the oppressor to be directly confronted with the lived reality of the marginalized. This suggests that the dramatic medium provided a safe containment for her to explore the ripping effects of discrimination, thereby fostering a deeper internal realization of the psychological harm caused by superficial prejudices.

Demonstrating another internal filter shift, Najwa actively leveraged the psychological demands of character acting to bridge vast socio-economic divides. Tasked with portraying a highly complex, isolated persona in her monologue, she realized that superficial mimicry would be insufficient. She theorized:

The only way I can do that would be to understand how it's like to be a part of the oppressed in the real world, as well as a part of the elite, both communities divided from the general community in very different ways. (Najwa, Reflection - Monologue)

Najwa's unpacking the necessity of internalizing the dual isolation experienced by both the marginalized and the hyper-privileged highlights a sophisticated level of perspective-taking. Consequently, this cognitive flexibility translated into a visceral emotional connection. Detailing her process of embodiment, she shared, "That's how I was able to channel the sheer frustration into my acting, by understanding how it would feel like when people wouldn't treat you normally simply because of the background you were born into" (Najwa, Reflection - Monologue). By anchoring her performance in the emotional truth of societal alienation, Najwa not only achieved a compelling theatrical output but also demonstrated a genuine, empathetic alignment with the psychological burdens of the "other".

Adaptability and Flexibility

Operating within the unpredictable parameters of unscripted performance, the cultivation of adaptability and flexibility emerged as a crucial internal outcome for the participants. This dimension of intercultural competence requires a cognitive elasticity, enabling learners to adjust to new cultural environments and select appropriate communication styles on the fly.

Navigating the spontaneous demands of the improvisation task, Misya demonstrated a clear internal shift toward this required adaptability. She recognized that sustaining an authentic portrayal necessitated continuous, real-time cognitive adjustments, noting, "We also learn to adapt and improvise on our character's culture and background that we played in order not to break our character" (Misya, Reflection -

Improvisation). By prioritizing the cultural integrity of the character over her own default behaviours, Misya unpacked the understanding that intercultural flexibility is an active, ongoing process rather than a static state. It could be postulated that the pressure of the theatrical exercise forced her to temporarily suspend her own cultural anchors, thereby exercising the cognitive muscles needed to inhibit an unfamiliar worldview.

Furthermore, this adaptability extended beyond individual character work into the realm of collaborative negotiation, highlighting the necessity of decentering one's own perspective during peer interactions. Confronted with the unpredictability of a scene partner, she reflected:

I needed to accept ideas when improvising together and this made me realise that my point of view and how the story goes with the situation given may not be the same as my pair's. But I still need to be considerate and tolerate their ideas in order to make the improvisation have a smooth and positive outcome. (Misya, Reflection - Improvisation)

Unpacking this collaborative friction, it becomes evident that Misya not only recognized the multiplicity of valid viewpoints but also actively suppressed her own narrative dominance to accommodate her partner. This illustrates a highly functional, pragmatic form of internal flexibility; she utilized the accommodation of differing perspectives not merely as an abstract ideal, but as a necessary tool to ensure a harmonious and effective exchange.

Ethnorelative Views and Filter Shift

Culminating the internal dimension of intercultural competence, the achievement of an ethnorelative worldview, characterized by cognitive flexibility and the conscious dismantling of ethnocentrism, yielded highly divergent outcomes among the participants. Operating within the reflective space of the course, the learners were challenged to not only decenter their own cultural narratives but also view differing cultural paradigms as inherently equal.

Demonstrating a profound internal filter shift, Rozy's trajectory illustrates a complete departure from her previously rigid worldview. Transitioning from a passive normalization of differences to an active appreciation of diversity, she reflected, "Before this, I feel like cultural differences are like, it's like a normal thing. Like, it's not something important...But learning like deeply about a culture, it's really an eye-opener because then you'll see that everyone is really different" (Rozy, Interview 2). By unpacking this realization, it becomes evident that the pedagogical intervention successfully disrupted her complacency. Furthermore, this cognitive awakening catalyzed a total reversal of her prior ethnocentric stance. Explicitly rejecting the hierarchical views she harbored at the beginning of the study, she asserted, "I don't believe that any culture is superior because I mean, why? Any culture can be superior to its own. And I feel like it's just wrong to think that your own culture is superior to other cultures" (Rozy, Interview 2). This definitive statement serves as a powerful testament to the rippling effects of the drama course on deeply entrenched biases, proving that her cognitive filters were not cast in stone.

Similarly, Iman initially reported a positive expansion of her worldview, attributing this growth to the course acting as a proxy for the diversity lacking in her geographical isolation. Acknowledging this environmental constraint, she noted:

I think the course actually gave me character development because I don't really see much. I live in a very small suburban side so I don't really see much cultural incorporation in my own surroundings. So when the course actually asked to incorporate cultures, it was actually a very amazing experience. (Iman, Interview 2)

By framing the pedagogical exercise as an "amazing experience" that compensated for her suburban homogeneity, she unpacked the understanding that structured academic tasks can successfully disrupt environmental insularity. Building upon this newfound exposure, she firmly reiterated her egalitarian principles by explicitly rejecting cultural hierarchies. She stated "I don't actually believe that because I always believe in equity. Equity, I believe, is worth and all human rights. I don't believe any culture is actually superior or better than one another" (Iman, Interview 2). Through this assertion, Iman solidified her

ethnorelative stance, equating the absence of cultural superiority directly with the preservation of fundamental human rights.

However it should be warned that this apparent filter shift was severely stunted by her reliance on familiar media tropes. Providing critical negative evidence of her cognitive stagnation, she confessed:

I believe that my view on culture is quite stagnant because based on the last assessment which was a group project, we have to create a short play - our script was adapted from the movie *Crazy Rich Asian*, so it's actually nothing that I've never seen before. (Iman, Interview 2).

Because the group opted for a mainstream, highly commercialized cultural reference, the task failed to provoke genuine cognitive dissonance. Consequently, she concluded, "I don't think my view on it has changed that much because I've observed the situation before" (Iman, Interview 2). This reveals that when learners are allowed to remain within the safe containment of familiar pop culture, the potential for a true ethnorelative shift is effectively neutralized.

A parallel pattern of micro-shifts overshadowed by broader stagnation was evident in Najwa's experience. Engaging in targeted character research, Najwa successfully identified and corrected a specific internal prejudice regarding social class. She explained:

But having to basically research these people, makes me a little bit more conscious of the way that I think, especially the first task where I had to research people of higher social standing. Maybe I shouldn't be too harsh, maybe I shouldn't be looking at them this way because they have their own stuff as well. So, to an extent, I would say yeah, but is it a huge impact? Not necessarily. It's kind of just like a snapback like, oh all right, I shouldn't really be acting this way. (Najwa, Interview 2)

This cognitive "snapback" highlights a functional, albeit localized, filter shift. Aligning with this egalitarian adjustment, she firmly rejected cultural supremacy, noting, "So, I personally don't believe in superiority in culture" (Najwa, Interview 2). By dismissing the notion of superiority as inherently absurd, Najwa unpacked a baseline ethnorelative view that refuses to rank human experiences. Yet, despite these localized realizations, Najwa actively resisted claiming a holistic internal transformation. Downplaying the macro-impact of the pedagogical process, she admitted, "For other cultural elements that I incorporated into my task, not so much. I wouldn't say that I learned something new" (Najwa, Interview 2). This admission serves as critical negative evidence, revealing that outside of her specific research focus, the course failed to introduce novel cultural paradigms into her existing cognitive framework. She further cemented this lack of broader cognitive flexibility by stating, "But I don't think it's much of an impact, I don't think it's a major impact overall on me" (Najwa, Interview 2). Through this final concession, it becomes evident that while micro-adjustments in perspective are possible, they do not only fail to guarantee a massive structural filter shift, but also highlight the profound difficulty of permanently altering a learner's overarching worldview.

Finally, Misya's trajectory highlights the danger of pre-existing exposure acting as a ceiling effect on intercultural growth. On a theoretical level, Misya acknowledged the shifting global paradigms toward equality, observing, "But is like you know as modernization and people are starting to get more like getting equality, so I think the cultural superiority is lessened a bit, while still being a big thing" (Misya, Interview 2). By recognizing the dilution of ethnocentrism in modern society, she gave the illusion of possessing an evolving, ethnorelative worldview. However, when evaluating her own internal development, Misya utilized her past demographic exposure as a shield against current cognitive restructuring. Dismissing the transformative potential of the course, she argued, "I think it doesn't really change much because before I'm kind of a really open-minded person and I don't really mind who I'm friends with and what their culture is about because I'm from a Chinese middle school" (Misya, Interview 2). By equating historical proximity to minority groups with absolute intercultural mastery, she unpacked a profound resistance to further learning. She finalized this stance by asserting, "So I've been exposed to different cultures growing up, so with this course, I think really, it doesn't change much" (Misya, Interview 2). This negative evidence is critical; it demonstrates that a learner can possess foundational tolerance while remaining entirely stagnant, ultimately preventing the deep, structural filter shift required to achieve true ethnorelativism.

Stage 4: Desired External Outcomes and the 'Application Gap'

The final stage of Deardorff's (2006) Process Model concerns the external manifestation of intercultural competence, which is characterized as the achievement of personal objectives through effective and appropriate communication and behavior. While the preceding stages mapped the internal developmental trajectory, Stage 4 examines the extent to which these internal transformations translated into observable actions. To rigorously assess this, the data is analyzed through a tiered framework: Tier 1 (Simulated Practice), Tier 2 (In-Situ Classroom Interaction), and Tier 3 (Real-World Application).

Tier 1: Simulated Practice

Tier 1 evaluates the participants' ability to manifest their intercultural competence within the safe containment of theatrical simulation. Operating within these rehearsed parameters, the participants demonstrated varying capacities to translate internal awareness into appropriate physical and communicative behaviors.

For Rozy, the simulated environment provided a platform to safely practice intercultural self-representation, utilizing her mixed heritage as a foundational scaffold to communicate her identity to an audience of "others". Detailing her initial foray into cultural embodiment during the solo task, she explained:

The first time that I tried for my first task, which is the monologue, I can somehow implement some because I use my cultural background, which is I am a mix of Malay and also Mamak, so I tried to bring the way that how Mamak thinks and how they would react to certain things. (Rozy, Interview 2)

By drawing directly from her familial socialization, Rozy unpacked the understanding that authentic intercultural communication often begins with the accurate externalization of one's own cultural anchors. Building upon this initial success, her confidence in communicating these specific cultural traits visibly increased in subsequent collaborative exercises. She reflected:

And I tried to implement it in the second task, which is the paired task. And I can say that I'm getting better at doing that because when it comes to doing my own cultural background, is very easy because I'm already used to it. (Rozy, Interview 2)

This highlights a growing behavioral fluency; because she was drawing from her own authentic repertoire, the execution of cultural elements became a seamless, highly functional act.

Similarly, Najwa demonstrated a commendable ability to translate her deep character research into culturally specific on-stage behavior, particularly when navigating the cross-cultural divide of socio-economic class. Emphasizing her commitment to behavioral accuracy, she noted, "So, that was how I acted out her role throughout the short play in order to stay true to her character and upbringing" (Najwa, Reflection - Drama). This illustrates a direct alignment between her internal cultural knowledge and her external portrayal. Furthermore, she successfully manifested the psychological isolation of the elite class through her physical acting. She recalled:

And that's what I managed to incorporate into the first task. I had to act in a way that I felt cast away because I felt I was in a higher social standing, I was different from them, and it was great. (Najwa, Interview 2)

By channeling this feeling of being "cast away", Najwa unpacked a sophisticated level of simulated competence, proving that she could effectively communicate the nuanced emotional realities of an unfamiliar demographic.

However, it should be warned that Najwa's intercultural behavioral competence was highly dependent on the structured containment of a script. When stripped of preparatory time during the unscripted improvisation task, her ability to execute culturally appropriate representation faltered significantly. Providing crucial negative evidence of this limitation, she confessed that the pressure of spontaneous interaction forced her to default to reductive cultural stereotypes, highlighting a distinct gap between scripted competence and improvisational agility.

A parallel, yet far more severe, disconnect between theoretical intention and culturally appropriate behavioral output was evident in Misya's trajectory. Initially, Misya reported a successful integration of cultural themes, giving the illusion of communicative mastery. Summarizing her solo performance, she claimed, "I learnt how to properly act out a monologue and discovered how different people from other cultures have different styles of expressing themselves" (Misya, Reflection - Monologue). She further framed her group's research phase as a triumphant precursor to their performance, stating, "we learned and applied many cultural related themes within our writing and the research made really helped us get the right impression of how different races communicated" (Misya, Reflection - Script Writing). Attempting to manifest this knowledge during improvisation, she detailed her use of specific cultural markers:

So, I acted a bit like a kid where I just wanted to have fun and my pair acted like he had a bit of an accent because he's not a native speaker. We mentioned Korean cuisine in order to incorporate the cultural part of the play. (Misya, Reflection - Improvisation)

By weaving culinary references and linguistic adjustments into the scene, Misya unpacked an attempt to actively perform intercultural knowledge. Yet, a critical examination of her actual on-stage behavior reveals that her external output was fundamentally compromised by a heavy reliance on surface-level stereotyping. Negating her earlier claims of nuanced communication, she explicitly admitted, "When we played our characters, we tried our best to sound like the accent of where our characters are from just so the viewers can automatically know the character's heritage without having to tell them" (Misya, Reflection - Drama). Instead of embodying authentic cultural depth, she utilized exaggerated accents as a reductive shortcut for heritage. She cemented this failure to communicate appropriately by concluding, "We really want people to know who we portray as and we try to act out the stereotypical traits of each character" (Misya, Reflection - Drama). This stark negative evidence demonstrates that, despite her research, Misya not only failed to execute culturally appropriate behavior but also actively weaponized caricatures to ensure audience comprehension.

Finally, for Iman, the simulated environment proved entirely paralyzing, resulting in a complete inability to externalize intercultural competence. Lacking the foundational cultural repertoire required to build a scene, she admitted, "it was very hard for my partner and myself to incorporate culture into it because we don't know what should we do" (Iman, Interview 2). This concession highlights a profound deficit in actionable intercultural skills. Even when she attempted to layer complex socio-economic realities into her performance, the execution stumbled at the threshold of cultural synthesis. She reflected, "I tried to portray both emotions for her wealth and her son but I believe I did not do a great job on it since it is two different things. Therefore, my intention to mix both emotions went off trail" (Iman, Reflection - Drama Performance). Through this admission, Iman unpacked the harsh reality that attempting to communicate intersecting cultural identities (e.g., class privilege versus maternal duty) requires a highly developed intercultural dexterity. Her failure to merge these elements proves that simulated practice can expose the limits of a learner's intercultural communicative repertoire just as easily as it can build it.

Tier 2: In-Situ Interaction

Moving beyond the individual performance on stage, Tier 2 (In-Situ Interaction) evaluates the participants' intercultural competence during unscripted, collaborative classroom negotiations. It must be acknowledged at the outset that the manifestation of this specific competence was not universally observed across the cohort; indeed, the data yielded evidence of in-situ interaction exclusively from Misya and Rozy. This absence of data from Iman and Najwa is analytically significant. It could be postulated that the intense cognitive load of theatrical production overshadowed their capacity for unscripted cultural dialogue, highlighting the inherent difficulty of translating internal attitudes into collaborative, real-time peer negotiations. Nevertheless, within the data that did emerge, the dialogic space provided a critical arena for navigating cultural friction.

For Misya, the collaborative planning phase served as a vital arena for practicing interpersonal accommodation. Confronted with the differing creative visions of her scene partner, she recognized the necessity of decentering her own perspective to achieve a shared goal. Detailing this internal negotiation, she explained:

When me and my partner had a practice run with [the lecturer], I needed to accept ideas when improvising together and this made me realize that my point of view and how the story goes with the situation given may not be the same as my pair's. But I still need to be considerate and tolerate their ideas in order to make the improvisation have a smooth and positive outcome. (Misya, Reflection - Improvisation)

By acknowledging the friction between differing viewpoints, Misya unpacked the understanding that effective intercultural teamwork requires active tolerance and the conscious suppression of ego. Furthermore, she recognized that this peer-to-peer negotiation directly enhanced her cultural outputs. She noted, "So I think when we are going through the discussion, that really helped to learn about how to properly portray that character" (Misya, Interview 2). This highlights that the dialogic process itself functioned as a vital mechanism for intercultural learning, allowing her to refine her cultural representations through continuous peer feedback.

Similarly, in-situ interactions initially provided Rozy with a fruitful avenue for spontaneous cultural exchange and self-advocacy. Capitalizing on a partner's observation during a paired activity, she successfully translated a personal trait into a teachable cultural moment. She recalled, "For the second task, which is the paired task, yes, because I do remember that my partner asked me, hey you are very expressive! And I just said, oh that is just the way the Mamak does it, that's how my parents have been" (Rozy, Interview 2). By seizing this organic moment of peer curiosity, Rozy unpacked her ability to effectively communicate her cultural identity, transforming a simple behavioral observation into a micro-lesson on Mamak expressiveness.

However, it should be warned that this communicative success was highly contingent on the intimate, receptive nature of a one-on-one partnership. When placed in a larger group setting, Rozy encountered severe external barriers that entirely negated her attempts at intercultural integration. Providing critical negative evidence of this systemic breakdown, she confessed.

The difficult thing in explaining cultural background is that people wouldn't really care about it because for the [drama] task, I tried to like put some culture in, but then they were like, nah, we want to keep it simple, we don't really want to implement something informative. So I was like, okay that's a bit weird but okay. (Rozy, Interview 2)

This stark admission reveals that intercultural competence cannot operate in a vacuum; it is fundamentally constrained by the collective willingness of the group. Her peer's desire for narrative simplicity acted as a gate-keeping mechanism, effectively silencing her cultural contributions. She further elaborated on this numerical disadvantage, noting, "And when it comes to the last task, which is the group one, it's a bit hard because there's a lot of people involved, so it's hard for me to put my cultural background because then they would be like, that's not what we asked for" (Rozy, Interview 2). By highlighting the exclusionary dynamics of the majority, she unpacked the reality that attempting to advocate for minority representation in a resistant environment often leads to communicative paralysis. Summarizing this systemic failure, she concluded, "I think that is the hard part because if you were to do tasks with people who do not respect culture and differences, then it's going to be very hard for you to carry that thing for you to move by yourself" (Rozy, Interview 2). Through this final reflection, Rozy demonstrated that even if an individual possesses robust intercultural knowledge and attitudes, the desired external outcome of effective communication is ultimately thwarted when faced with peers who reduce to engage in the intercultural process.

Tier 3: The Application Gap and Environmental Constraints

Representing the ultimate apex of Deardorff's model, Tier 3 (Real-World Application) evaluates the participants' ability to transfer their acquired intercultural competence out of the classroom and into unscripted, everyday social environments. It must be acknowledged that actualizing this competence proved to be highly contingent on external variables, yielding starkly contrasting trajectories among the participants.

Operating within her pre-existing diverse social circles, Rozy successfully translated her classroom realizations into tangible communicative behaviors. Actively deploying direct inquiry to dismantle assumptions, she explained, "Most of my friends are mixed and my families are also mixed. And I tried since the thing about people, they like stereotypes, right? So rather than stereotyping, I would just ask" (Rozy, Interview 2). By

interrogating the validity of cultural tropes directly with her peers, she unpacked a highly functional strategy to separate individual idiosyncrasies from monolithic stereotypes. Furthermore, she demonstrated a heightened sensitivity to cultural boundaries and consent. Detailing her approach to unfamiliar practices, she noted, "And then, often I would just ask, are you comfortable with me asking about your culture and if it is okay if I wanted to participate in any of the celebrations rather than just putting myself in" (Rozy, Interview 2). This highlights a marked communicated competence in that she recognized that participation in the "other's" culture requires explicit permission rather than entitled intrusion. Reversing the dynamic, she also embraced the role of a cultural educator. She asserted, "I learned definitely not to stereotype and I learned that rather than just keeping in your culture and keeping people guessing, it's better for you to just teach them" (Rozy, Interview 2). By actively correcting misconceptions, she not only protected her own cultural narrative but also facilitated the intercultural learning of those around her.

However, it should be warned that the successful transfer of these skills is entirely dependent upon environmental affordances, a systemic barrier that severely restricts the real-world application for the other participants. Providing critical limitations, Iman confessed her inability to practice her acquired skills due to geographical isolation. She admitted, "I'm not really sure because, to be honest, after that course, I haven't really been exposed to situations with different cultures" (Iman, Interview 2). She further cemented this stagnation by adding, "So far, I have not yet had the situation so I can apply those experiences" (Iman, Interview 2). This stark admission reveals that without the physical presence of diversity, the theoretical skills acquired in the classroom remain dormant, unable to be tested in unscripted realities.

Echoing this systemic limitation, Najwa highlighted the impossibility of actualizing intercultural competence in a social vacuum. Despite her rigorous character research and internal cognitive shifts regarding social class, she recognized that true behavioral application requires a tangible interlocutor. She pointed out, "I guess it's hard to really fulfill the expectation unless I'm actually interacting with the person themselves" (Najwa, Interview 2). By acknowledging this missing variable, Najwa unpacked the reality that simulated empathy cannot fully substitute for lived, interpersonal negotiation. Consequently, she minimized the overall behavioral translation of her learning, concluding, "I don't think it's a major impact overall on me" (Najwa, Interview 2).

Similarly, Misya highlighted the paralyzing effect of demographic homogeneity on her communicative output. Despite her earlier claims of extensive research and simulated competence, she conceded, "I think for me, I don't have the opportunity to do that. But if given I would definitely apply what I've learned from the class. It's just that I don't meet a lot of multicultural people so it's just literally like just no interaction with all of that" (Misya, Interview 2). By pointing to the lack of multicultural interactions in her daily life, she unpacked the reality that intercultural competence is not merely an individual cognitive achievement but a relational practice. Giving the illusion of readiness, she possessed the willingness to engage, yet the absolute absence of an "other" rendered her external outcomes fundamentally unrealized. Consequently, this demonstrates that pedagogical interventions, no matter how effective within the classroom, cannot fully overcome the rippling effects of a segregated or homogenous external environment.

DISCUSSION

Operating at the intersection of embodied pedagogy and global citizenship, the present study illuminates the intricate developmental trajectories of participants navigating the demands of intercultural communication. While foundational models frequently conceptualize the acquisition of intercultural competence as a progressive, cyclical journey, the findings of this qualitative inquiry suggests a far more precarious reality. Indeed, it could be postulated that while process drama successfully functions as a visceral laboratory for internal cognitive restructuring, the ultimate manifestation of this competence is not cast in stone. Rather, giving the impression of a highly contingent, relational affordance, the translation of internal empathy into observable behavioral outcomes appears to be heavily mediated by both the cognitive load of performative execution and the systemic demographic constraints of the participants' external environment.

Moving beyond a mere chronological recounting of developmental stages, the ensuing discussion prioritizes a thematic interrogation of the conceptual friction between pedagogical intent and environmental reality. Not only does the data challenge the assumption that internal filter shifts automatically trigger external

communicative proficiency, but it also highlights the profound vulnerability of simulated competence when subjected to unscripted, real-world pressures. In this regard, by situating the participants' lived experiences within the broader scholarly discourse, this section seeks to unpack the nuanced mechanisms of cultural gate-keeping, the regression to caricature under cognitive overload, and the ultimate paralysis of the aforementioned "latent competence". Consequently, the discussion operates simultaneously across interpretive, theoretical, and contextual levels, tracing the ripple effects of a Malaysian socio-educational landscape that fundamentally dictates the boundaries of intercultural engagement.

The Gate-Keeping of Prior Socialization and the Illusion of Ethnorelativism

When initiating intercultural learning, there is a common assumption that establishing a secure classroom environment naturally paves the way for genuine cultural inquiry. Indeed, while empirical consensus suggests that drama effectively lowers the affective filter, replacing the anxiety of encountering "otherness" with the enthusiasm necessary for social interaction (Dharmayanti et al., 2025; Rzayeva, 2025), it should be cautioned that this emotional safety does not instantly override deep-seated cultural conditioning. Acknowledging Hall's (1989) warning that culture is a pervasive medium altering every aspect of human existence, the tension between a lowered affective filter and latent ethnocentrism becomes starkly apparent when juxtaposing the participants' initial dispositions. Giving the impression of a fully formed egalitarian worldview, Iman, drawing upon her hybrid background, firmly rejected cultural supremacy, viewing it as a degradation of humanity. Nevertheless, immediately undercutting this baseline of respect, Rozy, despite her familial upbringing towards tolerance, bluntly confirmed a deeply held belief in cultural superiority. In this regard, it could be postulated that while the playful environment of drama successfully encourages learners to articulate their perspectives without fear of judgment, the cognitive schemas they bring into this space remain heavily mediated by proper socialization. Consequently, familiar conditioning acts as a gate-keeper in that by providing a safe peephole into diversity, the lowered affective filter simultaneously allows learners to comfortably vocalize, rather than actively dismantle, their latent biases.

Moving beyond initial respect, the manifestation of these foundational attitudes is closely tied to the learners' societal positioning, a factor which significantly complicates the baseline metrics of intercultural readiness. While Deardorff (2006, 2015, 2020) posits that respect and openness, defined as a willingness to step beyond personal comfort zones, serve as the requisite starting points for competence, the data appears to indicate that such openness is frequently conditional upon the preservation of the participants' own cultural dominance. Representing the majority archetype, this conditional stance is mostly vividly illustrated by Misya, who, despite expressing a proactive desire to understand her minority peers, explicitly bounded this willingness with the caveat that it must not "harm any of my culture." Rather than viewing this merely as a failure of openness, applying Bennett's (2017) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity directly to Misya's lived experience helps to unpack the nuances of her stance. Specifically, her conditional tolerance perfectly illustrates Bennett's ethnocentric stage of "minimization", whereby cultural differences are acknowledged but ultimately subsumed under the dominant worldview. By extension, Misya's majority status affords her the privilege of engaging with "otherness" strictly on her own terms, meaning she not only meets the surface-level criteria for Deardorff's openness but also actively utilizes this conditional stance to protect her dominant Malay cultural anchors from genuine interrogation.

Resulting from this reliance on conditional openness, the ultimate trajectory of intercultural learning is significantly limited, preventing learners from achieving the ethical engagement demanded by contemporary scholarship. As Choo (2018) cautions, navigating the complexities of modern interconnectivity requires more than mere tolerance; it necessitates an ethical, hospitable approach to the "other" that fundamentally challenges one's own cultural centrality. Yet, demonstrating the protective nature of prior socialization, the data highlights that the participants' societal positioning frequently shields them from this necessary ethical vulnerability. Whether observing Rozy's paradoxical adherence to cultural hierarchy or Misya's insistence on non-interference, it becomes evident that learners utilize their prior socialization as a protective shield. Ultimately, it might suggest that while drama can simulate the interactional mandate, the foundational attitudes learners bring to the classroom are not blank slates but highly fortified constructs. Therefore, the transition from passive tolerance to active intercultural competence is not merely a matter of acquiring new skills, but

rather, it requires the challenging, often resisted dismantling of the very cultural walls that provide them with their sense of identity and security.

Grounded Cognition and the Boundaries of Aesthetic Distance

Shifting the analytical focus to the internal cognitive mechanics of the drama classroom, the findings robustly confirm the biological and psychological efficacy of embodied pedagogy. Validating the assertions of Lakoff and Johnson (1999) and Frimberger (2017) regarding the somatic dimension of learning, the data appears to indicate that the acquisition of empathy is not merely an intellectual exercise but a deeply visceral process. This embodiment is particularly evident when examining the trajectory of Najwa, who, acting as the critical observer, was tasked with portraying the psychological isolation of the elite class. Engaging in rigorous character research, Najwa successfully triggered the neurological replication of empathy described in Barsalou's (2008) framework of grounded cognition. By actively internalizing the alienation of her character, she demonstrated the intense psychological mapping noted by Ding and Hu (2023), proving that modal simulations can effectively bridge vast socio-economic divides. In this regard, Najwa's performance illustrates O'Toole's (1992) concept of "dual affect". Managing to simultaneously stand in another's shoes while maintaining conscious artistic control, she utilized the physical act of acting to dismantle her own deeply entrenched class biases.

Nevertheless, it should be cautioned that the depth of this internal shift is strictly bounded by the quality of the source material, introducing a critical boundary condition to the theoretical mechanisms of drama. While Piazzoli (2021) conceptualizes aesthetic distance as a necessary psychological bugger, and Boal (2008) advocates for a reflective space that leads to *dianoia* (understanding) rather than an uncritical emotional orgy, the data reveals that this distance can easily become a site of cognitive stagnation. Providing crucial negative evidence, Iman's reliance on the commercialized tropes of the film *Crazy Rich Asians* highlights the danger of utilizing familiar pop culture as a pedagogical scaffold. Giving the impression of cultural engagement, Iman's adaptation of mainstream media effectively neutralized the cognitive dissonance required for genuine learning. Consequently, it could be postulated that when learners utilized highly commercialized source material, Piazzoli's aesthetic distance becomes too comfortable. Rather than functioning as a reflective buffer, it devolves into an uncritical echo chamber that merely reflects and reinforces the participants' pre-existing worldview.

Resulting from this reliance on superficial cultural inputs, the pedagogical intervention frequently fails to provoke the profound filter shift necessary to achieve true intercultural competence. Although Mavroudis and Bournelli (2019) celebrate drama's capacity to drive a measurable progression toward ethnorelativism, Iman's explicit admission that her views remained stagnant directly challenges the inevitability of this outcome. Because her group opted for a mainstream narrative she had already consumed, the theatrical exercise not only failed to disrupt her suburban insularity but also insulated her from the friction of encountering authentic "otherness".

By extension, comparing Najwa's localized empathy with Iman's cognitive stagnation reveals a vital pedagogical reality. It might suggest that while the visceral laboratory of grounded cognition is highly effective at facilitating internal transformations, the simulation itself is only as transformative as its foundational research. Therefore, without the deliberate injection of complex, unfamiliar cultural realities, the embodied experience risks becoming a superficial performance, ultimately preventing the learner from achieving the ethnorelative worldview required for dynamic global citizenship.

Performative Overload and the Fragility of Savoirs

Transitioning from the internal mechanics of empathy to the external demands of performance, a profound tension emerges between theoretical cultural knowledge and real-time execution. During the initial phase of individual monologue preparation, participants demonstrated a commendable capacity for proactive cultural inquiry, a deliberate pace of learning that aligns with the optimistic observations of Eripuddin et al. (2025) and Nilson (2021). For instance, Najwa exhibited a rigorous dedication to character research for her solo performance, successfully cultivating what Byram (2021) terms *savoir apprendre*, which is the slow,

methodical skill of discovery. Nevertheless, as the pedagogical arc progressed into dyadic improvisation, this foundational knowledge proved to be highly fragile when subjected to unpredictability. Confessing that the performative pressure of the unscripted task caused her to default to exaggerated American and Asian stereotypes, Najwa's regression highlights a pedagogical limitation. It appears to indicate that the acquisition of *savoir apprendre* in a controlled, preparatory setting does not seamlessly translate into the real-time communicative agility required for spontaneous interaction.

Providing stark evidence of this performative overload, Misya's trajectory illustrates how acquired intercultural skills collapse when learners are tasked with sustaining a spontaneous narrative. Representing the majority archetype, Misya explicitly admitted to the deliberate weaponization of monolithic stereotypes, such as portraying a "typical Indian nerd" and employing linguistic caricatures during her improvisation. Rather than reflecting a complete absence of prior learning, she justified this reliance on caricature as a necessary mechanism to ensure immediate audience comprehension. When learners are thrust into what Zuidema (2017) frames as a "rehearsal for reality", the dual burden of theatrical invention and cultural negotiation frequently induces a state of cognitive overload. Consequently, Byram's (2021) *savoir comprendre*, which is the skill of interpreting and relating cultural nuances, fractures under pressure. Giving the impression of cultural representation, learners actually pigeon-hole minorities into easily digestible caricatures, utilizing stereotypes as desperate cognitive shortcuts to survive the performative demands of the exercise.

Furthermore, this regression to reductive heuristics complicates the assumption that a supportive classroom atmosphere is sufficient to guarantee appropriate cultural expression. Although Cunico (2005) rightly characterizes the drama classroom as an unthreatening environment that encourages participation, it should be cautioned that this psychological safety does not negate the immense cognitive friction of spontaneous theatrical production. Both Najwa and Misya operated within a secure pedagogical space, yet the absence of preparatory scaffolding forced them to abandon nuanced sociolinguistic plasticity. In this regard, it could be postulated that while the environment may protect the participants from emotional anxiety, it cannot shield them from the performative overload that compromises Byram's (2021) *savoir faire* (the skill of interaction). Therefore, the default human response to this cognitive strain is not an elevation of intercultural competence, but rather a retreat into the safety of familiar, monolithic tropes.

Ultimately, this fracturing of communicative skills under pressure reveals a critical vulnerability in the developmental process, complicating the seamless transition from internal awareness to external behaviour. It might suggest that while the initial stages of drama successfully cultivate theoretical awareness, the subsequent introduction of unscripted improvisation exposes the inherent fragility of a learner's newly acquired intercultural repertoire. By extension, this phenomenon not only challenges the assumption that cognitive shifts automatically yield behavioral competence, but it also demonstrates the necessity of continuous, rigorous scaffolding throughout the entire pedagogical arc. Without such support to bridge the gap between scripted preparation and spontaneous interaction, the translation of deep cultural knowledge into real-time, appropriate action remains a formidable hurdle, leaving learners susceptible to the very prejudices they initially sought to dismantle.

Exclusionary Peer Dynamics and the Relational Contingency of External Outcomes

Moving to the final stage of Deardorff's (2006) framework, the manifestation of desired external outcomes is frequently conceptualized as the successful execution of appropriate and effective communication. However, examining the in-situ interactions of the collaborative group task reveals a stark contradiction to the optimistic view of collaborative environments. While Rowland and Kutty (2024) posit that drama classrooms foster proactive peer support, the lived experience of Rozy, representing the visible minority archetype, provides a critical counterweight to this assumption. Attempting to integrate her Mamak cultural background into the group narrative, Rozy was explicitly silenced by majority peers who preferred to "keep it simple" rather than engage with informative cultural elements. In this regard, it could be postulated that the collaborative space is not inherently egalitarian, rather, it is fraught with power dynamics where majority peers can actively act as gate-keepers, effectively thwarting the external outcomes of minority learners.

Extending this analysis of exclusionary peer dynamics, the data illuminates the complex relational realities already embedded within Deardorff's (2020) conceptualization of external outcomes. Clarifying that effectiveness and appropriateness constitute the dual pillars of intercultural behavior, Deardorff's framework inherently acknowledges that communication is a two-way process. In this regard, Rozy's silencing demonstrates how heavily these external outcomes rely on a receptive audience. Even when one possesses robust internal readiness and attempts to communicate appropriately, their external outcomes are easily paralyzed if the receiving group refuses to engage. Giving the impression of a communicative failure on the part of the minority student, this systemic breakdown actually highlights the co-constructed nature of intercultural interaction. It appears to indicate the successful externalization of competence is not merely an individual cognitive achievement, but a deeply relational affordance that strictly requires a willing and cooperative interlocutor.

Conversely, when the external environment affords the necessary demographic diversity, the translation of classroom realizations into tangible behavioral outcomes becomes highly achievable. Operating within her pre-existing mixed-heritage social circles, Rozy successfully deployed direct inquiry to dismantle assumptions, actively embracing the role of a cultural educator. This real-world application perfectly embodies the macro-imperatives of the field, particularly the Delors Report's (1996) foundational emphasis on learning to live together. Furthermore, her ability to navigate these unscripted interactions fulfills Byram's (2021) interactional mandate, which presupposes the necessity of ethical engagement in a globalized society. By extension, Rozy's contrasting experiences of being silenced in a homogenous classroom group but thriving in a diverse real-world setting underscore that the manifestation of intercultural competence is heavily dictated by the demographic realities of the participants' immediate surroundings.

Highlighting the severe limitations of this demographic dependency, the trajectories of the remaining participants reveal a profound application gap when transitioning from the classroom to unscripted reality. Acknowledging Najwa's assertion that true behavioral application requires a tangible interlocutor, it becomes evident that simulated empathy cannot fully substitute for lived, interpersonal negotiation. Similarly, despite their internal filter shifts, Iman and Misya reported an inability to apply their acquired skills due to suburban isolation and a lack of multicultural peers. It should be noted that Byram's (2021) interactional mandate cannot be fulfilled in a demographic vacuum. By extension, this collective paralysis underscores that the opportunity to practice ethical intercultural engagement is fundamentally constrained by the systemic segregation of the Malaysian socio-educational landscape. Consequently, the physical absence of an "other" renders the theoretical skills acquired in the classroom entirely dormant, setting the stage for a critical re-evaluation of how unexpressed readiness is conceptualized within the field.

Theorizing Latent Competence within Homogenous Contexts

Acknowledging the idiographic nature of this qualitative inquiry, which inherently precludes broad generalizations, the distinct developmental trajectories of the participants nevertheless illuminate and substantiate the phenomenon of latent competence. Operating within the liminal space between internal cognitive shifts and external behavioral application, this construct captures the reality of learners who possess the internal readiness to engage but are entirely prevented from externalizing it due to environmental constraints. Providing stark evidence of this paralysis, both Iman and Misya reported an absolute inability to apply their acquired skills in unscripted social environments, explicitly citing severe suburban isolation and a lack of multicultural peers. In this regard it could be postulated that the absence of observable intercultural behavior does not necessarily equate to a failure of pedagogy or a deficit in the learner's internal development. Rather, giving the impression of a stalled progression within Deardorff's (2006, 2015) framework, the inability to transition from Stage 3 (Internal Outcomes) to Stage 4 (External Outcomes) frequently signifies a systemic environmental barrier, whereby the theoretical skills acquired in the classroom remain tragically dormant.

Extending this conceptualization into broader theoretical discourse, latent competence serves as the psychological architecture underpinning Choo's (2020) notion of passive cosmopolitanism. While foundational imperatives, such as the Delors Report's (1996) emphasis on learning to live together and Byram's (2021) interactional mandate, presuppose the physical or virtual presence of an "other", the Malaysian socio-educational landscape often presents a highly stratified demographic reality. Contrasting

Rozy's successful real-world application within her mixed-heritage urban circles against the geographic isolation experienced by Iman and Misya, it becomes evident that the opportunity to practice ethical engagement is heavily dictated by systemic affordances. Consequently, it appears to indicate that pedagogical interventions not only cultivate the internal filter shifts necessary for global citizenship, but also inadvertently expose the harsh reality that this readiness is frequently thwarted by the absence of a willing interlocutor. By extension, this demographic dependency highlights a crucial flaw in assuming equal interactional opportunities for all learners, proving that the ultimate apex of intercultural competence is not merely an individual cognitive achievement, but an environmentally contingent privilege.

Ultimately, conceptualizing latent competence provides a necessary theoretical nuance to the established paradigms of intercultural communication. Rather than viewing the absence of external behaviour as a definitive failure of the intercultural learning cycle, this construct acknowledges the profound disconnect between cognitive preparation and environmental reality. It might suggest that while the developmental progression outlined by foundational models provides a vital roadmap, the actualization of these stages is never cast in stone. By recognizing that an internal filter shift can exist independently of its behavioral execution, the field is afforded a more precise vocabulary to describe the lived experiences of learners trapped in homogenous settings. Consequently, latent competence serves not as a critique of existing frameworks, but as a crucial contextual layer, highlighting that the ultimate manifestation of global citizenship is continuously shaped and sometimes entirely suspended by the ripple effects of one's external

CONCLUSION

This study sought to illuminate the complex developmental trajectories of learners navigating the visceral demands of process drama. Indeed, the findings robustly confirm that the theatrical environment functions as a potent pedagogical laboratory, successfully facilitating the internal cognitive restructuring and localized empathy requisite for global citizenship. Nevertheless, moving beyond the optimistic assumptions of foundational models, the data reveals that the ultimate behavioral manifestation of this competence is far from guaranteed. Subjected to the intense cognitive load of unscripted performance and the exclusionary dynamics of collaborative negotiation, students not only frequently regress to the safety of monolithic tropes, but also find their communicative efforts actively gate-kept by majority voices. By extension, the conceptualization of latent competence presented in this study underscores a profound environmental contingency, proving that the translation of internal readiness into observable action is heavily dictated by the demographic realities of the students' external world. This might suggest that while educational interventions can successfully cultivate the internal architecture of intercultural awareness, true communicative competence remains a deeply relational affordance, strictly requiring a willing interlocutor and a diverse socio-educational landscape to fully materialize.

Implications of the Study

Addressing the theoretical landscape of intercultural communication the conceptualization of latent competence serves as a necessary complementary layer to Deardorff's (2006, 2015) Process Model. By explaining the developmental pause frequently observed between Stage 3 (Internal Outcomes) and Stage 4 (External Outcomes), this construct acknowledges that the ultimate behavioral manifestation of intercultural competence is not a purely individual cognitive achievement. As evidenced by Iman and Misya, who achieved internal filter shifts yet remained entirely paralyzed by their suburban isolation and lack of multicultural peers, the readiness to engage is easily thwarted by demographic homogeneity. In this regard, it could be postulated that latent competence provides the psychological architecture for Choo's (2020) passive cosmopolitanism, establishing that external outcomes are, in fact, relationally and environmentally contingent affordances. Consequently, this theoretical refinement urges the field to recognize that an unexpressed internal shift is not a pedagogical failure, but rather a reflection of the systemic constraints within the students' external world.

Transitioning to pedagogical practice, the findings necessitate a critical re-evaluation of how unscripted tasks are administered within the drama classroom. Subjected to the intense cognitive load of spontaneous improvisation tasks, students would frequently experience a performative overload that fractures their acquired savoirs (Byram, 2021). This vulnerability was starkly illustrated by both Misya and Najwa, who, despite their

prior research, explicitly defaulted to weaponizing stereotypes such as the “typical Indian nerd” or exaggerated American caricatures to ensure immediate audience comprehension. To mitigate this regression, it is imperative that educators implement rigorous preparatory scaffolding prior to placing students in what Zuidema (2017) terms a rehearsal for reality. By front-loading targeted sociolinguistic drills and extensive cultural familiarization, the cognitive burden of improvisation is significantly minimized. Not only does this scaffolding protect the psychological safety of the environment, but it also equips students with the necessary cognitive bandwidth to maintain cultural nuance under performative pressure.

Furthermore, the selection of source material during collaborative dramatization requires deliberate pedagogical curation to prevent the onset of cognitive stagnation. Giving the impression of cultural engagement, the reliance on commercialized pop culture frequently creates an uncritical echo chamber rather than a reflective buffer. This limitation was captured in Imans’s trajectory. Because her group opted to adapt the mainstream film *Crazy Rich Asians*, the pedagogical intervention failed to provoke the cognitive dissonance required for genuine filter shifts, leaving her worldview admittedly stagnant. It should be cautioned that to achieve the profound ethnorelativism celebrated by Mavroudis and Bournelli (2019), educators must actively restrict or challenge the use of familiar, student-selected texts. By deliberately assigning source material that introduces complex, unfamiliar cultural realities, instructors can prevent learners from retreating into comfortable commercial tropes, thereby forcing a more rigorous application of Piazzoli’s (2021) aesthetic distance.

For institutions seeking to develop dedicated syllabi at the intersection of drama and intercultural communication, the integration of specific, critically oriented theatrical modalities is paramount. While standard process drama successfully fosters foundational empathy and active exploration (O’Toole, 1992; Nilson, 2021), it frequently lacks the structural mechanisms required to address deep-seated systemic friction. Therefore, it is suggested that general drama courses should be augmented with Boal’s (2008) Theatre of the Oppressed and, more specifically, Forum Theatre. Because these modalities are explicitly designed to interrogate conflict resolution, systemic oppression, and societal power imbalances, they offer a far more robust framework for intercultural education. By shifting the pedagogical focus from mere cultural representation to the active dismantling of oppressive structures, universities can elevate the drama classroom from a space of passive tolerance to a rigorous laboratory for ethical global citizenship.

Branching directly from the integration of such critical modalities, educators must actively equip students to navigate and dismantle exclusionary peer dynamics. While Rowland and Kutty (2024) highlight the benefits of collaborative peer support, the data proves that group work can easily become a site of marginalization, as evidenced by Rozy being explicitly silenced by majority peers who preferred to “keep it simple” rather than engage with her Mamak heritage. To combat this gate-keeping, the employment of Forum Theatre techniques becomes highly practical. By allowing learners to pause scenes, step out of character, and replace actors to collaboratively solve on-stage conflicts (Boal, 2008), the pedagogy actively trains students to rehearse bystander intervention. In this regard, not only does this approach empower minority learners to reclaim their cultural narratives, but it also equips majority peers with the actionable skills required to recognize and dismantle real-world gate-keeping, ensuring that the collaborative space remains genuinely inclusive.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Acknowledging the idiographic nature of this qualitative inquiry, the reliance on a purposive sampling of four participants establishes a distinct contextual boundary. While this methodological approach affords the deep granularity necessary to map the internal trajectories of specific learners (Smith et al., 2009), it inherently restricted broad statistical generalizability. Operating within the confines of a single public university, the findings are deeply entangled with the unique demographic stratification of the Malaysian socio-educational landscape. The specific cultural archetypes examined, such as Misya’s majority positioning or Rozy’s visible minority advocacy, yielded insights highly contingent upon the nation’s historical proximity to diverse ethnic groups. Consequently, it must be cautioned that the theoretical transferability of these findings to vastly different international demographics is limited, as the constraints dictating phenomena like latent competence are inextricably tied to this specific regional context.

Furthermore, the temporal parameters of the intervention introduce a significant constraint on the evaluation of genuine cognitive restructuring. Confined to a standard 14-week academic semester, the study provides only a fleeting snapshot of intercultural development, a phenomenon which Deardorff (2015, 2020) explicitly defines as a continuous, lifelong process rather than the result of a single pedagogical workshop. In this regard, it could be postulated that the short duration of the course may capture temporary performative adjustments or localized empathy, rather than the permanent, deeply rooted ethnorelativism required to fundamentally alter a student's overarching worldview.

Compounding these temporal limitations, the reliance on self-reported data, specifically semi-structured interviews and reflective journals, introduces the inherent methodological confound of social desirability bias. Tasked with articulating their internal filter shifts, participants might subconsciously overstate their egalitarian views to align with the perceived ethical expectations of the researcher and the course objectives. Giving the impression of profound intercultural awareness, Misya, for example, repeatedly claimed to be a "really open-minded person" in her interview, a self-assessment that was starkly contradicted by her deliberate weaponization of stereotypes during the unscripted performance. By extension, this discrepancy highlights the danger of evaluating Deardorff's (2006) internal outcomes solely through self-narration, illustrating that what students claim to believe in reflective writing does not always accurately reflect their true cognitive schemas or behavioral readiness.

Finally, it should be cautioned that the current intervention design risks an instrumental confound, potentially conflating distinct performative skill sets with genuine intercultural growth. While the assessments are highly effective for a general drama for communicative purposes syllabus, the pedagogical mechanisms frequently measure a student's acting ability under pressure or their general group communication skills, rather than isolating their cultural competence. As evidenced by Najwa's regression during improvisation, her failure could be a deficit of theatrical agility rather than a complete collapse of Byram's (2021) *savoir apprendre*. Similarly, Rozy's silencing during the dramatization phase could be read as the exclusionary mechanics of group dynamics rather than a lack of her own individual external readiness. Ultimately, it might suggest that relying on collaborative theatrical outputs as a proxy for intercultural assessment obscures the nuanced, individual realities of the learners, inadvertently penalizing them for performative or systemic variables beyond their direct control.

Directions for Future Research

In order to overcome the inherent limitations of self-reported data and the masking effect of collaborative group outputs, future studies must explicitly incorporate direct observational methodologies. It is imperative to triangulate what students claim they have learned with their observable, unscripted behavior. In this regard, the employment of multimodal discourse analysis would provide a far more rigorous metric of intercultural development. By capturing the micro-interactions and real-time cultural friction occurring off-stage, researchers can systematically evaluate how learners navigate exclusionary peer dynamics, thereby ensuring that the assessment of Deardorff's (2006) external outcomes is grounded in authentic interaction rather than curated reflection.

Furthermore, future research should empirically test how the imposition of specific pedagogical constraints alter the execution of intercultural competence. Given Iman's cognitive stagnation resulting from her reliance on commercialized pop culture, comparative studies are needed to measure the developmental outcomes when dramatization source material is strictly assigned by the instructor versus when it is freely student-selected. Not only would this investigate the pedagogical efficacy of forcing learners out of their cultural echo chambers, but it would also clarify the boundaries of Piazzoli's (2021) aesthetic distance. By extension, researchers should conduct comparative designs evaluating the efficacy of standard process drama directly against Boal's (2008) Forum Theatre interventions. Such comparative analysis would yield critical insights into which specific theatrical modalities are most effective at equipping students to dismantle systemic gate-keeping and resolve intercultural conflict.

Finally, to empirically validate the emergent construct of latent competence, longitudinal studies are urgently required. Because Deardorff (2020) conceptualizes intercultural competence as a lifelong developmental

trajectory, tracking students beyond the temporal confines of a single academic semester is essential to understanding the true durability of internal filter shifts. Researchers must follow geographically isolated learners, such as Iman and Misya, as they transition from homogenous university settings into highly diverse, real-world environments, such as the multicultural Malaysian workforce. It might suggest that observing these transitional phases will determine if, when, and how this dormant readiness activates into the active cosmopolitanism demanded by Cho (2020). Ultimately, tracking the ripple effects of environmental shifts on internal readiness will solidify the understanding of intercultural competence as a dynamic, relationally contingent affordance, rather than a static trait cast in stone.

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