

Cultural Intelligence Integration to Teaching English for Young Learners in Curriculum Merdeka

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigates the integration of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) into Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL) within Indonesia's merdeka curriculum. As the curriculum emphasizes differentiated learning and character development, CQ plays a crucial role in equipping students with the intercultural competencies necessary in the globalized world. Data were collected from 15 English teachers in public and private junior high schools in Kota Magelang, using semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that although many teachers intuitively apply aspects of CQ, its implementation remains inconsistent due to the limited curriculum guidance, lack of professional training, and insufficient resources. Teachers identified key benefits, including improved communication, empathy, and global awareness. The study recommends the explicit integration of CQ frameworks into curriculum design and teacher training programs. By systematically embedding CQ into TEYL, merdeka curriculum can cultivate culturally competent, empathetic, and globally minded students from an early age.

Keywords: Cultural Intelligence, intercultural competence, Kurikulum Merdeka, Merdeka Curriculum, TEYL

1. Introduction

Today's interconnected world, language education is not only about grammar, but more than that, it must include multicultural understanding and global awareness. Indonesia responded to this need by introducing merdeka curriculum (Emancipated Curriculum), piloted in 2021 and expanded nationwide in 2022/2023. There are some principles of strengthening the Pancasila student profile which cover the holistic character, contextual, student-centered activity and explorative condition (Purnawanto, 2022). This curriculum focuses on project-based learning, character development, and student autonomy, aiming to develop learners who reflect the Profil Pelajar Pancasila, expecting students to be globally aware, socially responsible, and culturally grounded. By moving away from rote learning, merdeka curriculum encourages creativity, critical thinking, and independence, allowing schools and teachers to adapt learning to their students' contexts (Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, 2022b). One approach to the implementation of the Pancasila student profile is multidiscipline project to identify the solution to environmental problem (Purnawanto, 2022). The character of the Pancasila student profile requires effort to be constructed to face the global challenge in the future global condition.

The curriculum builds on Indonesia's historical commitment to national character and civic education, which is constantly developed to meet modern demands for 21st-century skills and intercultural competence. Pancasila student profile is a long file time competence to act in line with the Pancasila values, which is the government's effort to answer its competence in the national education system (Nahdiyah et al., 2022). It promotes a flexible, holistic learning environment where students engage in meaningful projects and collaborative activities. However, the success of merdeka curriculum depends heavily on teacher readiness, culturally relevant materials, and local adaptation, especially in diverse regions. A research finding indicates that the Pancasila student profile focuses on developing the students' character and competence to face the global challenge to increase their high-value offer (Utami et al., 2023). Cultural competence is a part of merdeka curriculum implementation.

Merdeka curriculum's philosophy aligns closely with Cultural Intelligence (CQ), which is the ability to understand and adapt to cultural differences. The curriculum's student-centered, project-based approach promotes critical thinking, creativity, and character development, all of which support the Profil Pelajar Pancasila's goals of global awareness and cultural rootedness (Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, 2022a). Project-based learning / PjBL is a learning strategy that is appropriate with the Pancasila student profile because it has advantages to increase the learning results, achievements, motivation, and 4 C or collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creative thinking (Dewi, 2022). English language learning offers natural opportunities for cultural exploration through stories, songs, and interactive activities, helping young learners build CQ's core components: cultural knowledge, motivation, and behavioral adaptability (Earley & Ang, 2003). The project of the merdeka curriculum could be combined with the cultural materials so that students could develop their competences in the cultural intelligence study. They could be encouraged to identify the values of the cultural materials around their environment. Positioning the cultural study in the students' project still needs need analysis result first.

Integrating CQ in Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL) enhances essential 21st-century skills like communication and collaboration, complementing merdeka curriculum's holistic approach. Teachers' cultural awareness and adaptability are key to creating inclusive classrooms that nurture respect for diversity and curiosity. This framework highlights the

importance of culturally responsive teaching methods and positions teachers as cultural mediators who can effectively guide students in developing intercultural competence, especially in diverse settings (Byram, 1997). One of the merdeka curriculum's character is to apply project-based learning aims to develop soft-skills and construct Pancasila student character (Dewi, 2022). The holistic approach operates a significant schema of integrating cultural intelligence into the merdeka curriculum method. The student-centered learning is the main choice, but it is still controlled by the teachers to validate the process and results. Construction of the working schema is a complex process.

Despite merdeka curriculum's emphasis on student-centered learning and character development, English teachers face challenges in integrating Cultural Intelligence (CQ) into their classrooms. The curriculum lacks explicit CQ guidelines. One example is Sekolah Damai or the peace school concept whose objective is to create a harmonious, inclusive, and peaceful learning environment (Istianah et al., 2023). The conducive learning environment supports the cross-cultural value implementation to in the merdeka curriculum learning practice. This condition leaves teachers without clear direction on embedding intercultural competence. The Pancasila profile is expected to give peace and harmonious values to the young generation (Istianah et al., 2023). Additionally, there is a shortage of culturally relevant teaching materials designed for young learners, limiting teachers' ability to create meaningful intercultural learning experiences (Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, 2022b). Moreover, many teachers have insufficient training in intercultural pedagogy and are lack of readiness to apply culturally responsive methods like storytelling and role-playing.

Practical issues such as large class size, limited time, instrument, learning media, social opportunity, the curriculum content, etc., make the implementation more complicated. These challenges are especially significant in culturally diverse cities like Magelang, where the need for CQ is high but support is limited. The Pancasila curriculum gives an opportunity to conduct best practices to create the desire for peace (Istianah et al., 2023). One important notice is the readiness of the material and human resource level and development. The challenge to adapt the local condition is one deep implication of the merdeka curriculum (Hidayat & Putro, 2024). The best practice of the merdeka curriculum could be varied based on the empirical necessities and an institution' vision and mission.

The cultural and social awareness in the Merdeka curriculum implementation of Teaching English for Young Learners or TEYL in Magelang city is a core problem of this research to be revealed. It is caused by three main factors. First, this research aims to reveal how far the Merdeka curriculum application could cover the diversity of school society, especially related to the diversity of students. Second, Magelang city is an ideal place for taking data because the city has a very heterogeneous society, including the school. The third is the position of TEYL study because it is the level of basic age students who need to get concepts and life skills of living in a heterogeneous society.

Based on the core problem above, this research explores the TEFY teachers in Magelang city about their experiences regarding the extent to which the linearity of resources, training, and curriculum supports effective CQ integration. The data is not about opinion, but it is the TEYL teachers' empirical experience of their teaching practice in applying the Merdeka curriculum. It investigates their instructional practices, challenges faced, and the extent to which CQ is operationalized in Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL) settings.

In addition, this research also intends to provide recommendations for professional development, resource creation, and curriculum enhancement to empower teachers as facilitators of global awareness and cultural groundedness. Ultimately, the study contributes to optimizing

merdeka curriculum's goal of producing empathetic, socially responsible, and globally competent students ready to thrive in an interconnected world.

2. Research Method

2.1 Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative case study approach, focusing on the integration of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) in Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL) within the context of *merdeka curriculum*. The case study design enables in-depth exploration of a bounded system; the experiences of English teachers in *Kota Magelang*, as they navigate CQ implementation in public and private junior high schools. This method is particularly suited to examining how and why CQ is incorporated (or not) in TEYL, considering contextual limitations and opportunities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data is totally qualitative based on the field-research application.

2.2 Case Description

This study presents a case defined as the collective practices and perceptions of English teachers regarding the integration of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) in Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL) under the *merdeka curriculum* in *Kota Magelang* (the municipality of Magelang). The case is bounded by three specific parameters: location, subject, and time. Geographically, it includes both public and private junior high schools within the municipality of Magelang. The subjects are English teachers directly involved in TEYL, and the temporal boundary is the academic year in which the data were collected, specifically the 2024/2025 academic year. The case represents its specific condition (Yin, 2018). The case is bounded context allows for a focused exploration of how CQ is understood, applied, and challenged within a specific educational environment. By concentrating on English teachers actively engaged in TEYL in *Kota Magelang's* junior high schools, the study aims to provide in-depth insights into their instructional practices, perceptions, and the contextual factors influencing the integration of Cultural Intelligence under *merdeka curriculum*. This approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play in fostering intercultural competence in young learners within this setting.

2.3 Participants

The study involved a total of 15 English teachers selected through purposive sampling. These participants were chosen based on their active roles in delivering English instruction to young learners across various junior high schools in Magelang. Their teaching experience ranged from two to twenty years, representing a wide spectrum of pedagogical perspectives. Additionally, the participants came from both public and private institutions, further contributing to the different points of view captured in the study.

2.4 Research Instrument

In line with the data collection techniques, this research applied three instrument types to collect the data. The first is the semi-structured question. The second is the classroom observation list. The last is the digital equipment to collect the assignments, lesson plans, student worksheets, and project outputs. They are explained one by one below.

2.4.1 The semi-structured interview question

The list of questions that had been given to teachers is proposed in Table 1 below. It is linear with the research problem. The questions were applied during the data collection step.

Table 1. The semi-structured interview question

The topic	The questions
Teachers' Understanding of Cultural Intelligence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In the context of teaching English for young learners, what is your idea about Cultural Intelligence (CQ)? 2. There are four main components of Cultural Intelligence, namely cognitive, motivational, behavioral, and metacognitive. What is your idea about any or each of them? 3. How does CQ influence your teaching practice and your interactions with the culturally diverse students?
Pedagogical Strategies for CQ Integration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What specific teaching methods or activities do you use to integrate cultural intelligence in your classes? Do you apply storytelling, role-play, project-based learning, or the others? 2. How do you include both local Indonesian culture and other cultures into your teaching materials and classroom activities? 3. How do you help the students to understand and respect different cultures?
Benefits of CQ Integration from Teachers' Point of View	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What benefits do you think you might see after you integrate Cultural Intelligence (CQ) into your teaching practice? What changes do you think you might see in the student's behavior towards cultural diversity? 2. How does teaching cultural intelligence help your students care about and learn about other cultures? 3. How do you see the integration of CQ supporting the goals of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila in your students?
Challenges in Implementation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What challenges do you think you will face in embedding CQ in your teaching practice under the Merdeka Curriculum? 2. What do you think about the availability of the teaching materials and curriculum guidelines in supporting CQ integration? 3. What professional development or resources do you feel would help you in integrating CQ in your classroom?

2.4.2 The classroom observation checklist

The classroom observation checklist is intended to support the main instrument of the interview. The checklist is presented in Table 2 below. It contains the fulfilled or unfulfilled data findings.

Table 2 Observation Check List

No	Criteria	Filled	Not Filled	Description
1	Teacher demonstrates respect for cultural diversity and creates an inclusive classroom environment.			
2	Teacher uses culturally responsive pedagogical techniques such as storytelling, role-playing, and project activities.			
3	Lessons include content from local Indonesian culture, target English-speaking cultures, and international cultures.			
4	Students actively participate in intercultural communication and collaborative discussions during lessons.			
5	Teaching materials reflect culturally relevant, age-appropriate content aligned with Merdeka Curriculum principles.			
6	Classroom atmosphere encourages curiosity, openness, and respectful attitudes toward cultural differences.			

2.4.3 Digital Equipment

The digital equipment consists of a laptop, a Smartphone, a printer, a scanner, which were used to collect the data of interviews, observation, lesson plans, students' worksheets, and a project.

The function is to save the documentation of the data. They give the maximum contribution to collecting and saving the documentation data.

2.5 Data Collection Techniques

To ensure a robust and triangulated case analysis, the study employed multiple qualitative data collection techniques. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow participants to articulate their experiences and insights related to CQ integration in their classrooms that followed the steps: 1) designing open-ended questions aligned with research objectives, 2) conducting in-depth interviews with the purposively sampled teachers, and 3) transcribing and verifying interview data with participants. These interviews provided rich, nuanced accounts of individual teacher practices and beliefs. Second, classroom observations were carried out to capture real-time teaching behaviors, interactions, and cultural content delivery within TEYL contexts that follow the steps: 1) developing an observation checklist based on CQ components and teaching indicators, 2) observing classroom sessions, and 3) recording notes, behaviors, and interactions dealing with the CQ integration. Finally, documentation of the instructional materials, such as lesson plans, student worksheets, and project outputs related to intercultural themes, is required by using the digital instrument. These three sources of data were used to cross-validate findings and enrich the interpretation of the case (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data collecting process had been finished in a scientific schema.

2.6 Data Analysis

After collecting the data, the next step is to analyze the data. The collected data were analyzed thematically using the combined framework of (Yin, 2018)'s approach to case study analysis and the interactive model developed by (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analysis process involved three main stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Themes were identified inductively across the various data sources and were compared to detect recurring patterns, contrasts, and significant variations. A cross-case comparison was also performed to explore differences and similarities between participants from public and private institutions, as well as across experience levels (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data presentation is very understandable.

2.7 Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were implemented. Credibility was established through triangulation of data sources—interviews, observations, and documents—and through member-checking, where participants reviewed and validated the researchers' interpretations of their responses. Transferability was enhanced by providing thick descriptions of the context and participant backgrounds, allowing readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings. Dependability and confirmability were supported by maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting the research process, decisions made during analysis, and justifications for methodological choices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The trustworthiness emphasize the accuracy of the data findings.

3. Results

The findings are presented into three sub-sections. The first is the interview findings which is represented by the table 3. The second is the classroom observation finding which is represented by the table 4 and its description. The last is the description of the teaching-learning material usage.

3. 1 Findings of the Semi-Structured Interview

The interview findings were presented by following the flow of this research frame work. It is presented by the table 3 below. It gives complete description of the interview results or findings.

Table 3. The semi-structured interview findings

The topic	Findings
Teachers' Understanding of Cultural Intelligence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Description of "respectful," "open-minded," and "aware of cultural differences," emphasizing the importance of recognizing and valuing diversity within their classrooms. 2. The teachers explained that their awareness of cultural sensitivity and intercultural competence largely developed through direct experience teaching students from various cultural backgrounds, which required adapting their approaches to meet diverse needs. 3. Furthermore, some teachers highlighted that participation in regional workshops and professional development sessions contributed to their growing understanding of intercultural dynamics and the importance of fostering inclusive learning environments. 4. Few teachers were familiar with these specific dimensions as conceptualized in academic literature, indicating that while they intuitively practiced elements of CQ, formal training and deeper conceptual understanding remain limited.
Pedagogical Strategies for CQ Integration	Teachers employed a range of culturally responsive instructional methods. These included comparative discussions about holidays, traditions, and communication styles between Indonesia and English-speaking countries. Role-playing was widely used to simulate intercultural communication scenarios, such as visiting another country or writing letters to international pen pals.
Benefits of CQ Integration from Teachers' Point of View	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teachers agreed on the positive outcomes of CQ in TEYL. Many noticed an improvement in students' communication skills, especially in terms of politeness, active listening, and managing misunderstandings 2. CQ-rich instruction also led to increased empathy and acceptance among students from different ethnic or religious backgrounds. 3. Several teachers mentioned that exposure to diverse cultural narratives helped reduce stereotypes and build a stronger sense of curiosity about the world.
Challenges in Implementation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The most common challenge was the absence of explicit CQ outcomes or detailed guidelines within the merdeka curriculum framework. 2. Next, teachers faced a shortage of culturally relevant teaching materials especially resources that are age-appropriate and engaging for young learners, especially the related materials with the local culture and wisdom. 3. Time constraint was also stated as a major obstacle. Teachers thought that project-based cultural activities, which are central to merdeka curriculum's student-centered approach, often demanded more preparation and classroom time than they could realistically allocate within their busy schedules.

3. 2 Results of the Classroom Observation

The classroom observation findings are presented by the table 4 below. It informs which data was found, and which is not found. It is based on the objective observation.

Table 4 Observation Check List Findings

No	Criteria	Filled	Not Filled	Description
1	Teacher demonstrates respect for cultural diversity and creates an inclusive classroom environment.	√		Teachers showed their respect towards cultural diversity and successfully created an inclusive classroom environment
2	Teacher uses culturally responsive pedagogical techniques such as storytelling, role-playing, and project activities.	√		Teachers used culturally responsive pedagogical methods like storytelling, role-playing, and project activities, which were confirmed as practices in the classroom
3	Lessons include content from local Indonesian culture, target English-speaking cultures, and international cultures.	√ (Partially)		Lessons incorporated content from local Indonesian culture, target English-speaking culture, and international cultures, but this inclusion was still partial, implying some inconsistency or superficial treatment of these cultural themes.
4	Students actively participate in intercultural communication and collaborative discussions during lessons.	√ (Partially)		Students participated actively in intercultural communication and collaborative discussions, but this participation was also partial, suggesting variation in engagement levels or opportunities.
5	Teaching materials reflect culturally relevant, age-appropriate content aligned with Merdeka Curriculum principles.		√	Teaching materials had not reflected culturally relevant, age-appropriate content aligned with Merdeka Curriculum principles.
6	Classroom atmosphere encourages curiosity, openness, and respectful attitudes toward cultural differences.	√		The classroom atmosphere fostered curiosity, openness, and respect toward cultural differences, which was a positive and encouraging indicator.

Thus, it can be concluded that while teachers demonstrated effective inclusive practices and culturally responsive teaching methods, the integration of diverse cultural content and student intercultural engagement happened to a moderate degree. Moreover, a big gap remained in the adequacy of teaching materials to fully support Cultural Intelligence integration in alignment with the curriculum.

3. 3 Results of the Teaching-Learning Materials Usage

Concerning the teaching-learning material usage, the teaching materials used in the classroom mainly included local Indonesian culture, like traditional stories, customs, and local wisdom.

This helped students connect what they learned in English to their own culture, making learning more meaningful and helping them feel proud of where they came from. Teachers used these materials to build students' awareness and respect for their local culture.

However, the materials did not include enough information about English-speaking countries or other international cultures. This means students did not get a full experience of different cultures beyond their own. The study shows a need to create better teaching materials that balance local and global cultures. This will help students understand and respect many cultures, which is an important part of cultural intelligence in learning English for young learners.

4. Discussion

To cope with the challenges in integrating Cultural Intelligence (CQ) within Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL) under *merdeka curriculum*, a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach is essential. The emphasis here is on professional development that equips teachers with practical, culturally responsive instructional strategies such as storytelling, role-playing, and intercultural projects. These methods not only foster intercultural competence but also actively engage young learners in meaningful cultural exploration. Continuous training and mentoring programs are vital to build teachers' confidence, enhance adaptability, and ensure sustained pedagogical growth in culturally diverse classrooms.

It is also important to create and share teaching materials that are culturally relevant and designed together by curriculum developers and cultural experts. These materials should match the local culture and the needs of young learners. Such resources help teachers connect theory with real-life practice and allow students to experience learning that reflects their own cultural backgrounds.

Additionally, *merdeka curriculum* should include clear guidelines for Cultural Intelligence (CQ), with specific learning goals and ways to measure progress. Involving local communities and cultural groups can make lessons richer by giving students real opportunities to experience different cultures outside the classroom, helping them understand and respect others better. Finally, setting up regular checks and feedback systems will help improve the curriculum based on teachers' and students' experiences, making sure CQ teaching stays effective and lasting. This well-rounded approach supports *merdeka curriculum's* goal to develop students who are globally aware, socially responsible, and proud of their culture, ready to succeed in a connected world.

Responding to these, the findings from this case study provide rich insight into the ways in which English teachers in Magelang city understand and apply the principles of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) within the framework of *merdeka curriculum*. Based on interviews, observations, and analysis of teaching documents, five major themes emerged: (1) understanding of CQ, (2) pedagogical strategies for CQ integration, (3) benefits perceived by teachers, and (4) challenges.

4.1 Teachers' Understanding of Cultural Intelligence

The teacher's unconscious understanding of positive terminology of cultural intelligence implies some aspects. Based on the interview, they had applied the positive side of CQ without understanding the concept of CQ itself. It implies their attitude of giving respect and open-mindedness towards various cultures. Cultural intelligence is one of the predictors to attitude, teaching professionalism, and social justice (Karatas & Han, 2022). The cultural competence has a significant impact on the teachers' teaching practice in classes whose various students from various cultural backgrounds. It supports the teachers'

effort of adaptation because they have had the previous knowledge. The positive attitude of teachers because of CQ awareness supports the effort of constructing a conducive classroom situation. The awareness of applying the CQ concept and formulation increases the teacher's teaching practice quality. The involvement of intercultural competence indicates positive results for the teacher-training students' practice (Sjøen, 2023). The cultural competence could be taught to the teachers', so that they could apply it to create a harmonious and conducive classroom setting. The school stakeholders could manage it in a proper situation. Investigation of the international students' adjustment to the variable of cultures is a potential hypothesis to study the cultural involvement (Malay et al., 2023). Strategies should be involved to adapt various cultures in facing the academic difficulties to the Chinese university students (Wu et al., 2022). Positive assumption of CQ is the first modal to construct good character of teachers to teach every class positively. The positive attitude of respect as the implementation of CQ needs to be trained because it represents how to find out their link with students related with the English teaching-learning practice. CQ awareness is the first modal too to build empathy feeling to students.

CQ understanding cannot be gained by natural talent because it is the result of a learning and training process. Teachers' answer that their lack of knowledge of the CQ concept and knowledge limits their ability to develop themselves. Moreover, teachers do not know the CQ concept in total, but they have practiced the CQ unconsciously. The concept, training, and evaluation of CQ needs to be given continuously to English teachers so that they can manage their attitude rather than do it all autodidactically. The knowledge and skill of applying social justice increase the teachers' cultural intelligence, which also affects to their teaching professionalism (Karatas & Han, 2022). The teachers' basic understanding of cultural intelligence influences their wise and socially just decisions in the teaching-learning practice. It also represents how the teachers' perspective extends to view the social problem in the classroom condition. There is significant impact of implying the cultural reinforcement to the teachers' competence to face the global challenge (Abdallah & Alkaabi, 2023). This suggests a need for more targeted professional development to bridge the gap between practical experience and theoretical frameworks, which will enable teachers to apply CQ more systematically and effectively in their classrooms (Ang et al., 2006). The balance of theory and practical practice of cultural intelligence is a need for English teachers to be masters in conducting maximum.

The mindset or approach of viewing the cultural study and competence for both teachers and students is the relationship among the language, culture, and social interaction competence. Those three factors support one another in a systemic order that needs to be implied first when teachers and students would like to recognize the cultural intelligence study. The language and culture make a large contribution to the intercultural communication (Boumaza & Baker, 2025). In the scope of social interaction, it could be more complex because it is related to the surrounding environment that needs to be understood by both teachers and students. An assumption that's often faced is the characteristic of cultural value, including subjective, political, and highly contextualized debate (Hadley et al., 2025). The social competence covers various areas from the perspective that could be developed depending on the necessities. The perspective needs to be developed by understanding the students' personal cultural background. The study of cultural and ethnic differences includes various factors of stereotypes, threats, conflict history, and age (Yotes & Croucher, 2024). From this

perspective of combining the three factors, the teachers should be careful to consider any potential effect.

4.2 Pedagogical Strategies for CQ Integration

The use of methods and strategies in the proper portion determines the success of the CQ implementation. The teachers' answer and the classroom observation also represent the fact that the proper method of teaching could imply the value of CQ properly, e.g., the use of role-play could demonstrate how to give respect to one another in various identity backgrounds. Role-play is a significant training that gives impact to the teachers' communication skills (Dharmayanti et al., 2025). Project-based learning, such as researching and presenting cultural practices around the world, was seen as especially effective. Some teachers designed lessons where students reflected on their own cultural identity before exploring others. Project-based learning, or PjBL is a useful instrument that influences the language and culture assessment results (Mohamad, 2021). In the last, some teachers admitted that they integrated the lessons to the text-books, whose a superficial cultural value. Only a few had developed dedicated lesson plans focused on intercultural competence (Byram, 1997). They need to be trained to be more creative to develop both materials and methods of cultural intelligence integration to their classroom activities. The strategies of managing the diversity of culture in a class, especially ELT, needs serious preparation rather than spontaneous action. It gives a better opportunity to conduct a harmonious and conducive ELT classroom.

The teachers' personal approach is the recommended step to begin interaction based on cultural maintenance. Students need to be guided to understand and practice the basic concept of cultural intelligence. Identity performance based on the culture study could be carried out through multimodal approaches (Wang et al., 2025). Mentorship is a figuration practice in the cultural work (Lesage & Zhang, 2025). Moreover, the personal approach is also intended to identify the students' mental readiness to obtain and practice the cultural intelligence concept. Mental health of students needs to be maintained through avoiding getting the negative issues and practices (Stoll et al., 2025). The teachers should accompany students to develop cognitive ability in various areas. Six areas for students to obtain success in the social condition consist of social, family, aspirational, navigational, linguistic, and the supported resistant (Jackson-Cole & Chadderton, 2025). The personal approach must be prepared in a convenient plan so that it is not just taken for granted.

Encouraging students to practice the interaction based on the cultural emphasis is the second step of guiding the students to get the maximum cultural intelligence competence. The practice could be carried out through both real social practice and an artificial social practice in the ELT classroom. The classroom dialogues could emerge through three-dimensional improvement of oral production, meaningful participation, and the visual literacy ability (Vrikki et al., 2025). The most important thing is to strengthen students' passion and confidence to practice the interaction based on the cultural intelligence concept. It needs the teachers' creativity to construct a classroom setting, e.g., using the role play technique. Every individual should be encouraged to be a public and daily cultural ambassador to participate in creating, developing, and advocating for foreign language education (Rojas, 2025). The practice should also reflect the students' daily activities so that it is connected to their empirical situation. The cultural differences are found to be negotiated in the daily practice through the cultural logic (Guo, 2025). Digital and physical communication give equal contribution to the cultural identity negotiation (Boumaza & Baker, 2025). Moreover, the situation of the surrounding environment could

be a model and inspiration for the teachers to conduct classroom interaction with the students.

4.3 Benefits of CQ Integration from Teachers' Point of View

Based on findings, one of the main benefits of CQ implementation to students is to improve communication and interaction skills across different backgrounds. The communication skill based on the CQ application is about how to manage their use of language when giving a speech to different people with different backgrounds. Students could recognize at least the proper dictionary based on the speaking partners' background. In the interaction skill, they could manage their physical attitude when being involved in social interaction in class. Importantly, teachers observed that students who engaged with CQ-related content became more confident in expressing themselves and showed greater interest in global issues (UNESCO, 2013). These behavioral changes are closely related to the goals of the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila*. ELT students' cultural awareness gives a positive attitude for cross-cultural communication (Belli, 2018). There is a strong correlation of the teachers' and students' cultural awareness to create a positive ELT classroom. Culture should be taught simultaneously with the language teaching and learning because culture takes an important rules in daily ELT classroom activities (D. B. M. Rojas, 2024). Culture and ELT learning is a proper combination to construct students' active and positive profile so that they can manage their ELT process in proper condition. On the other hand, the other factors could also support the system. Technology and language integration open rice opportunities to enlarge the language learning experiences (Hossain, 2024). Integration of culture and ELT needs proper preparation and process.

The benefit of the CQ integration could also be understood as the process of giving a humanistic feeling to students, especially the empathy and adaptation preparation. The humanistic feeling could be applied to various action types. Students could be more empathetic and sensitive to their classmates and environment. Emotion perception is the process of identifying and interpreting affective stimuli from various sources (Li et al., 2025). Maintaining emotion for social interaction is one of the benefits of the humanistic feeling application. Empathy could be developed, although it is not related to cultural study directly (Tsang et al., 2025). Another representative of the humanist feeling is how to give equal respect to all persons with different life backgrounds. Education should encourage the environment to promote equitable social conditions for minority students (Jackson-Cole & Chadderton, 2025). In the end, the humanistic feeling also encourages students to be more active in collaborating and caring for other persons and their classmates. Collaborative work encourages students to construct their empathy (Tsang et al., 2025). Intercultural mutualism is carried out through the co-adaptation and co-creation (Guo, 2025). The humanistic feeling could be gained through cultural intelligence training and practice.

4.4 Challenges in Implementation

The existence of proper guidelines for cultural intelligence of CQ is the most challenging thing for English teachers to construct and develop their CQ knowledge and skills. It is a task for experts or practitioners of social studies in education to provide the proper guidelines for CQ to English teachers. It must be specific for the English teachers because it could be related to the Western culture study. At least, the practitioner could help them by selecting the proper CQ learning materials for the English teachers. Teachers need guidelines to keep their mind and actions to be in the proper track to avoid giving mistakes to ESL students (Morrison, 2013). The guidelines should be managed properly so that it is not a spontaneous

action. English teachers need trial to be professional teachers to manage multilingual learners for promoting cultural adaptation (Babinski et al., 2024). ELT teachers must be able to manage the multiple conditions of students. If the guidelines cannot be followed properly, this lack of clear indicators or defined expectations leaves many teachers uncertain about how to accurately assess and measure their students' development in intercultural competence, making it difficult to track progress or provide targeted support. Understanding the relationship between language and culture that needs to be taught simultaneously and should be supported by the proper motivation (Rashid et al., 2021). English teachers' enthusiasm must be supported by proper guidelines and a proper classroom.

Not only for the English teachers, but also the existence of the CQ learning materials or guidelines is also needed by the English learners. They need to be provided with the proper guidelines for their level as ESL. For the education quality, material of teaching-learning should include the heterogeneity and multiplicity of cultural aspects (Saemee & Nomniam, 2021). In addition to this challenge, teachers also faced difficulties finding teaching materials that were culturally relevant and sensitive to the students' local context. Many existing resources, often imported or designed for different cultural settings, did not really reflect the cultural backgrounds, traditions, and everyday experiences of the students. This leads to teachers' inability to create lessons that truly resonate with students and foster authentic Cultural Intelligence (CQ). The policy makers and stakeholders should give a second option of cultural sense in the ELT text book to develop intercultural competence (Hosseinzadeh et al., 2022). The ELT textbook should contain target and native culture in varying degrees (Deswila et al., 2021). Meanwhile, research in similar multicultural education settings highlights the importance of incorporating local culture into teaching materials to enhance student engagement, cultural identity, and intercultural understanding. Without materials that connect to students' own cultural realities, lessons might feel abstract or disconnected, reducing the effectiveness of CQ integration. Thus, developing culturally responsive and contextually appropriate teaching materials is greatly needed to support the achievement of merdeka curriculum's goals, which are fostering both global awareness and cultural grounding in young learners.

In addition, another challenge is the allocation of time for preparing a proper project-based learning method, which includes the CQ values. It is also related to the basic curriculum program. It needs special management of the teaching-learning program in the school. Merdeka curriculum gives a flexible design and plat for the local wisdom and enabling students' character based on the cultural responsibility (Amiruddin et al., 2025). English textbooks related to the merdeka curriculum correlate to the national identity to promote intercultural understanding (Fitrianni et al., 2025). This challenge was heightened by the fact that some teachers felt personally underqualified in this area, citing limited exposure to foreign cultures themselves, which affected their confidence and ability to model cultural adaptability for their students. Related to the process of ELT, these barriers highlight the need for more structured support, including clear curricular guidelines, accessible teaching materials, comprehensive training programs, and realistic time management strategies to empower teachers in effectively fostering Cultural Intelligence in young learners under merdeka curriculum (Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, 2022b). The other challenge to propose the project based on student-centered activity in the merdeka curriculum for the cultural materials is about the quality of the textbooks and activities. The culture value distribution in an English text book needs to be balanced that include product, practice, persons, perspective, and communities (Khoeriah et al., 2024). Local material for

curriculum has the potential to strengthen the national education goals, which emphasizes the community identity (Amiruddin et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the advantage could also be gained from the application. Merdeka curriculum can propose culture-based nationalism in the micro materials and activities of the cultural diversity and local wisdom respect (Wahyudi & Wuryandani, 2024). Obstacles in the project of cultural intelligence implication in ELT could be managed in a proper masterplan.

Another challenge is to prepare an environment that is ready to serve the cultural study materials, samples, and setting for students. One of the environmental preparations is to serve the leadership of the cultural intelligence study. The teachers must be able to take the classroom leaders to guide the students to practice the cultural intelligence. The leadership dimension to the culture-based management in an organization or institution covers accountability, approach, and focus (Chua et al., 2023). The condition of the classroom also needs to be prepared by implying a respectful attitude towards one another. Engagement with community includes the adaptation to local, political, and social context in the flexible and dynamic condition (Cantillon & Baker, 2025). External and internal factors could change the various factors inside an organization, including the leadership (Chua et al., 2023). The preparation of cultural intelligence study and practice is a complex process, so it needs serious maintenance. The teachers should calculate the impact in relation to the students' basic life background.

Another challenge is to manage the students' various personal backgrounds. Students in a classroom could come from various life backgrounds. Moreover, if it is related to local value or belief, the teachers or the school should be careful with the cultural intelligence study. The teachers must select the study materials so that they will not contradict the local values. The teachers should be aware of the local wealth to nurture the local creativity (Mambu et al., 2025). Another personal background that needs to be aware of is the potential difference in the group. Some research found that there are still some negative attitudes toward the minority groups (Yotes & Croucher, 2024). The local value of every student could be different. This is why the teachers must protect against potential conflict in the classroom among the students. In the post-culturalist perspective, the conflict of local practice could happen in a classroom (Mambu et al., 2025). The teachers must be aware of the potential social conflict in the classroom when teaching the cultural intelligence concept. Skill, creativity, and social justice struggle to influence how the cultural works (Lesage & Zhang, 2025). Managing the students' various personal backgrounds is a skill for the teachers.

Finally, many teachers proposed that schools facilitate real or virtual intercultural exchanges, such as partnerships with schools abroad or cultural appreciation days. Such initiatives would offer students authentic exposure to diversity and reinforce classroom learning (Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, 2022a).

5. Conclusions

This case study highlights the critical importance of integrating Cultural Intelligence into Teaching English for Young Learners under the *merdeka curriculum*. English teachers in Kota Magelang recognize CQ as a valuable competency for fostering empathy, intercultural communication, and global awareness. However, the current implementation remains inconsistent, often hindered by structural and resource-based limitations. To bridge the gap between recognition and practice, it is important for educational policymakers to embed

explicit CQ learning outcomes into curriculum guidelines and provide teachers with the necessary training and resources. Integrating CQ across subjects and grade levels, supported by interdisciplinary projects and authentic cultural exposure, will further enhance its impact. By doing so, the *merdeka curriculum* can more effectively prepare young learners to become culturally competent and socially responsible citizens in an increasingly interconnected world.

To address these challenges, teachers suggested several actionable recommendations. First, they kindly demanded the inclusion of CQ-focused competencies and indicators in the merdeka curriculum. Second, they emphasized the importance of professional development workshops focused on intercultural pedagogy, both theoretical and practical. Third, teachers recommended the development of a national standard of teaching resources and lesson plans that integrate CQ.

The process, findings and discussion of this research could be applied for cultural study inside the TEYL application. It could be the convenient reference for English teachers or practitioners to prepare and practice the cultural intelligence study to their social and teaching practice. The cultural study in ELT or other subject needs serious preparation and management because it could be fragile to get social conflict because of wrong concept and application.

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