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EXPLORING MUSLIM EFL LEARNERS' INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH INTERACTION WITH INDONESIAN STUDENT TEACHERS IN SATUN, THAILAND

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Abstract

Intercultural awareness is an important aspect of English language learning, as English increasingly functions as a medium of communication among speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. However, existing studies on intercultural interaction largely privilege the perspectives of visiting student teachers, leaving limited understanding of how host-school learners themselves experience and manifest intercultural awareness through face-to-face interaction, particularly in linguistically and religiously distinct settings such as Muslim communities in Southern Thailand. This study aimed to explore how intercultural awareness is manifested and experienced among Muslim EFL learners through their face-to-face interaction with Indonesian student teachers during the KKNI International Teaching Practicum at a senior high school in Satun, Thailand. The study employed a qualitative case study design involving ten Grade 11 and Grade 12 Muslim EFL learners selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, supported by field notes and classroom teaching materials, and were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework.

INTRODUCTION

English is increasingly used not merely as a foreign language to be mastered for its own sake, but as a medium of communication among speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Jenkins, 2015) . This shift has drawn growing attention in English language teaching to the communicative and intercultural dimensions of language learning, rather than to linguistic accuracy alone. Effective communication in English, particularly in multilingual and multicultural settings, depends not only on learners' linguistic competence but also on their ability to understand, interpret, and negotiate meaning across cultural boundaries (Baker, 2024) . This intercultural dimension is especially relevant for Muslim EFL learners in Southern Thailand, whose engagement with English increasingly involves interaction with Indonesian student teachers through

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

international teaching practicum programs in Satun, Thailand.

Intercultural awareness, as conceptualized by Baker (2011) , extends earlier intercultural communicative competence frameworks (Michael Byram, 1997) by treating cultural understanding as a flexible and situated capacity rather than as a fixed body of knowledge. Baker (2011) emphasizes that intercultural awareness develops through engagement with the fluid and hybrid nature of culture in lingua franca communication, where interlocutors draw on multiple, overlapping cultural resources rather than a single national framework. Within this perspective, Baker conceptualizes intercultural awareness through three levels: basic cultural awareness, advanced cultural awareness, and intercultural awareness. The third level, intercultural awareness, reflects a more dynamic understanding of culture in which learners recognize that cultural meanings are not fixed or determined solely by national boundaries, but may be negotiated and interpreted according to the interactional context. Importantly, these three levels should not be interpreted as a simple linear developmental sequence, as learners may demonstrate different aspects of cultural awareness depending on the particular interaction and context. Thus, Baker's framework positions intercultural awareness as a flexible and evolving orientation that emerges through engagement with people, cultures, and contexts.

Interaction lies at the heart of how intercultural awareness becomes observable, rather than remaining a purely internal construct. Michael Byram (1997) identifies skills of discovery and interaction as a core component of intercultural communicative competence, emphasizing learners' capacity to apply cultural knowledge under the real-time constraints of communication. This is reinforced by scholarship distinguishing intercultural approaches, which examine actual interaction between individuals, from cross-cultural approaches that merely compare group-level norms in the abstract (Baker, 2024) . Because interaction is co-constructed, individuals often communicate differently with interlocutors from other cultural backgrounds than within their own group, adjusting to the specific person they engage with rather than applying fixed scripts (Baker, 2024). Examining awareness through actual interaction therefore offers a direct window

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
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pp.113-137

into how learners respond to cultural difference in real classroom encounters, such as those between Muslim EFL learners and Indonesian student teachers.

Despite this growing theoretical emphasis, EFL learners frequently lack sufficient opportunities to develop intercultural awareness through direct, face-to-face interaction with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Qu & Chen, 2026). Even where such face-to-face contact does arise, as in international teaching practicum programs, most available accounts privilege the perspectives of visiting teachers rather than those of the host-school learners who actually participate in the interaction, leaving it unclear how learners' own intercultural awareness is manifested and perceived. In many EFL classrooms more broadly, exposure to cultural content remains largely mediated through textbooks, media, and teacher-led instruction rather than authentic interpersonal contact, limiting learners' opportunities to ask questions, negotiate meaning, and reconsider assumptions in real time (Michael Byram, 1997; Qu & Chen, 2026) . A second, related problem therefore concerns the scarcity of research examining how such face-to-face interaction actually unfolds and is experienced by learners themselves, particularly in linguistically and religiously distinct settings such as Muslim communities in Southern Thailand.

Recent empirical studies illustrate both the value and the limitations of current research on intercultural interaction in language education. Mahaputri et al. (2024) found that problem-based learning promoted critical intercultural awareness among Indonesian pre-service teachers, while Martin-Beltrán et al. (2023) showed that field-based interaction with diverse students helped pre-service teachers develop perspective-taking and empathy. In both studies, however, intercultural competence is examined as an outcome for teachers rather than for the learners they interact with. Comparable research in Thai EFL contexts, such as Lee et al. (2023), has examined secondary-school learners' intercultural competence, but through online rather than face-to-face instruction. The present study departs from this pattern by centering Muslim EFL learners as the primary participants in a face-to-face interactional context that remains comparatively unexamined.

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
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pp.113-137

Therefore, this study aims to explore how intercultural awareness is manifested and experienced among Muslim EFL learners through their face-to-face interaction with Indonesian student teachers during an international teaching practicum at a senior high school in Satun, Thailand. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How do Muslim EFL learners perceive their intercultural experiences and awareness during these interactions? (2) How is intercultural awareness manifested among Muslim EFL learners through their interaction with Indonesian student teachers? By addressing these questions, the study foregrounds the perspectives and experiences of host-school learners themselves, a perspective that has received comparatively little attention relative to that of visiting student teachers in the existing literature on intercultural interaction and English language education.

Addressing these questions carries both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, the study may extend Baker (2011) model of intercultural awareness, thereby contributing context-specific insight to the broader literature on intercultural awareness in EFL settings. Practically, the findings may help EFL teachers, Indonesian student teachers, and host schools design more intentional opportunities for intercultural learning within international teaching practicum programs, while also informing how such programs might better attend to the intercultural experiences of the local learners they are ultimately intended to serve.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Muslim EFL Learners

Muslim EFL learners can be understood as individuals whose religious identity as Muslims intersects with, and shapes, their engagement in learning English as a foreign language. Ghufron et al. (2024) define this intersection as an intercultural dynamic in which English learning in Islamic schools unavoidably interacts with the formation of students' Islamic identity, while Sultan (2025) characterizes Muslim learners of English as individuals for whom language proficiency carries not only communicative but also symbolic value, functioning

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

as a marker of national, religious, and global belonging. As Sabiq (2026) adds a motivational dimension, arguing that Muslim learners' engagement with English cannot be fully explained through secular motivational models alone, since religious beliefs operate as integral components of their learning motivation. These converging definitions are empirically supported by Ghufron et al. (2024) case study of four Islamic schools, which found that English learning consistently intersected with students' religious identity even when the direction of that influence varied, confirming (As Sabiq, 2026) that Muslim EFL learners cannot be studied as language learners alone but must be understood through the lens of religious identity.

Beyond definition, scholars offer contrasting views on whether English learning strengthens or threatens Muslim learners' religious and cultural identity. Sultan (2025) identifies additive and subtractive forms of identity change, while As Sabiq (2026) shows that Islamic-school learners may perceive English as compatible with religious practices such as da'wah. Similarly, Bakoko et al. (2023) found that religion had no significant direct effect on pronunciation attitudes among Muslim and Buddhist students in southern Thailand, although religious practice remained relevant to learners' awareness of their linguistic background. Taken together, these studies suggest that the relationship between English learning and Muslim learners' religious and cultural identity varies across contexts and dimensions. However, limited attention has been given to how these experiences intersect with face-to-face intercultural interaction among Muslim EFL learners in Southern Thailand. The present study addresses this gap by examining their intercultural interaction with Indonesian student teachers.

These theoretical and empirical accounts are directly relevant to the present study, which investigates Muslim senior high school learners in a Southern Thai Islamic school setting. Whereas Sultan (2025) and As Sabiq (2026) focus on university-level or general Islamic-school populations, and Ghufron et al. (2024) situate their research in Indonesian Islamic schools without an international interactional component, Bakoko et al. (2023) address Muslim EFL learners within the Thai context but focus on attitudes towards pronunciation

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

rather than on intercultural interaction with foreign teachers. The present study extends this line of inquiry to Muslim secondary-school learners in Satun Province who interact specifically with Indonesian student teachers through the KKNI International Teaching Practicum. This context adds a distinctive dimension because the interaction involves individuals who share Islamic identity while differing in nationality, language, and educational background, a combination not yet examined in the reviewed studies. Building on the situated understanding of Muslim EFL learners' experiences in Thailand offered by Bakoko et al. (2023) , the present study therefore examines how Muslim EFL learners' intercultural awareness is manifested not through abstract identity change alone, but through concrete, face-to-face intercultural classroom interaction with Indonesian student teachers.

Intercultural Awareness

Intercultural awareness has been most influentially defined by Baker (2011) , who conceptualizes it as an individual's understanding of how culturally based forms, practices, and frames of reference influence communication, coupled with the ability to apply this understanding flexibly during actual intercultural encounters. This definition builds upon, yet departs from, Michael Byram (1997) earlier notion of critical cultural awareness, which frames intercultural competence as the capacity to evaluate cultural practices according to explicit criteria while recognizing the non-universality of one's own cultural assumptions. Kirkpatrick (2012) situates this discussion within Asian EFL contexts, arguing that intercultural learning in such settings should prepare learners to communicate with the wide range of people encountered through English as a regional and international lingua franca, not only with native speakers. This regional framing is empirically supported by Sairattanain (2024), whose survey of Thai pre-service English teachers found that participants already associate Intercultural Communicative Competence with linguistic and cultural difference, confirming that intercultural awareness is a recognizable and researchable construct within the Thai EFL context that the present study is situated in.

Scholars nonetheless differ on how culture itself should be conceptualized

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

within intercultural awareness. Traditional approaches to language teaching tend to present culture as a stable set of facts and practices attached to a specific national group. Baker (2011) explicitly challenges this view, arguing that in English as a lingua franca contexts cultural meanings are situated, dynamic, and continually negotiated rather than fixed to a single national culture, and he therefore proposes a three-level model progressing from basic and advanced cultural awareness toward a more fluid, emergent intercultural awareness. The first level involves awareness of one's own and others' cultural patterns; the second involves a deeper understanding of cultural differences and similarities; and the third involves recognizing culture as fluid, dynamic, and negotiated through interaction. Michael Byram (1997) componential Intercultural Communicative Competence framework, while sharing Baker's emphasis on reflective engagement with culture, remains less explicitly concerned with the emergent, hybrid nature of meaning-making that Baker highlights. This tension between viewing culture as a fixed national attribute and as a fluid, interactionally produced phenomenon is demonstrated empirically by Mahaputri et al. (2024), who showed through a Problem-Based Learning intervention that critical intercultural awareness among pre-service teachers could be deliberately developed rather than treated as an inherited, static trait, supporting Baker's more dynamic conceptualization over a purely fact-based model of culture.

For the present study, Baker (2011) three-level model is adopted as the primary analytical lens because it accommodates the dynamic, emergent nature of the intercultural encounters between Muslim EFL learners and Indonesian student teachers, who share religious commonalities while differing in nationality and sociocultural background. This orientation extends the work of Mahaputri et al. (2024) and Sairattanain (2024), both of whom examined intercultural awareness among pre-service or in-service teachers rather than school-aged learners, leaving the awareness of secondary-school students themselves comparatively unexplored. By applying Baker's framework specifically to Muslim learners' awareness as it is manifested during authentic classroom interaction, rather than through instructional intervention or self-reported survey data, the present study

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

addresses this gap and contributes a learner-centered empirical account situated within the Thai EFL context that Sairattanain (2024) had previously identified as relevant but teacher-focused.

Learning Interaction

Interaction has long been regarded as a central mechanism of both language development and intercultural learning. Walsh (2011) defines classroom interaction as co-constructed discourse through which teachers and learners jointly produce meaning, emphasizing that interaction is not simply a means of transmitting linguistic input but an active site of learning. This view is theoretically grounded in sociocultural theory, which emphasizes that language learning and learners' development emerge through socially mediated interaction and culturally situated activities (Poehner & Lu, 2024). Complementing this sociocultural perspective, contemporary research on intergroup contact highlights the importance of meaningful face-to-face interaction between members of different social groups, particularly when interaction involves cooperation and relatively equal status (Bond et al., 2023). The practical relevance of this perspective is illustrated by Martin-Beltrán et al. (2023), whose field-based study examined sustained interaction between pre-service teachers and culturally diverse students, highlighting opportunities for intercultural learning through dialogue, perspective-taking, and responsive listening.

Despite this general importance of interaction, scholars have examined different conditions and forms through which intercultural learning may occur. Recent research on intergroup contact highlights the continuing relevance of positive, face-to-face interaction for improving intergroup relations, while also recognizing the potential role of online and vicarious contact (Bond et al., 2023). This distinction is reflected in recent empirical studies: Martin-Beltrán et al. (2023) examined authentic, face-to-face interaction in culturally diverse educational settings, whereas Glimäng & Sauro (2024) explored virtual, computer-mediated exchange among teacher candidates from different countries. Together, these studies suggest that both face-to-face and virtual interaction can provide opportunities for intercultural learning, though they differ in their

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

interactional conditions and immediacy. The present study therefore focuses on direct, face-to-face classroom interaction between Muslim EFL learners and Indonesian student teachers.

The present study aligns most closely with the face-to-face, authentic-interaction position represented by Walsh (2011) and Martin-Beltrán et al. (2023), while extending this line of research to a context that remains underexplored. Whereas previous studies have examined interaction primarily among pre-service teachers, as in Martin-Beltrán et al. (2023), or through virtual exchange, as in Glimäng & Sauro (2024), the present study investigates naturally occurring, face-to-face interaction between Muslim EFL learners and Indonesian student teachers during the KKNI International Teaching Practicum in Satun. In this setting, interaction is treated not as an instructional intervention designed to produce a predetermined outcome, but as the social context in which evidence of intercultural awareness may emerge organically, consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural view of learning and Baker (2011) emphasis on emergent cultural meaning.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how intercultural awareness is manifested among Muslim EFL learners through their interaction with Indonesian student teachers during the KKNI International Teaching Practicum at a Muslim secondary school in Satun, Thailand. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, interpretations, and reflections regarding intercultural interaction, rather than to measure intercultural awareness numerically.

A case study design was used because the phenomenon was examined within its natural and specific educational context, using multiple data sources to reveal different facets of the same bounded phenomenon (Miller et al., 2023). The case in this study was the intercultural interaction between Muslim EFL learners

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

and Indonesian student teachers during English language classroom activities at the selected school, bounded by the specific timeframe of the KKNI International Teaching Practicum (27 July–22 August 2026) and by the 10 Grade 11 and Grade 12 learners who directly experienced this interaction. The study focused on how these learners experienced and responded to the cultural similarities and differences that emerged through classroom interaction.

Data were collected primarily through classroom observation and semi-structured interviews with the selected Grade 11 and Grade 12 Muslim EFL learners, supported by field notes and classroom teaching materials. The data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to learners' intercultural awareness, including cultural knowledge and comparison, openness, respect, interpretation, and reflection, based primarily on Baker (2011) Intercultural Awareness framework, with Michael Byram (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence framework serving as complementary theoretical support.

Time and Place of the Research

This study was conducted at a Muslim secondary school in Satun, Thailand, where Indonesian student teachers carried out the KKNI International Teaching Practicum. This site was selected because it provided a naturally occurring educational context in which Muslim Thai EFL learners interacted directly with Indonesian student teachers during English language learning activities. The research was carried out from 27 July to 22 August 2026, during the period in which the Indonesian student teachers were actively engaged in classroom teaching at the school. This period allowed the researcher to observe naturally occurring intercultural interaction and subsequently explore students' experiences through interviews conducted shortly after the interaction had taken place.

Participants and Sampling

The participants of this study were Muslim EFL learners in Grade 11 and Grade 12 at the selected secondary school in Satun, Thailand. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are deliberately selected based on specific characteristics or criteria relevant to the research objectives, rather than being selected randomly (Etikan,

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

2016). The selection criteria were as follows: (1) the students were Muslim EFL learners enrolled in Grade 11 or Grade 12; (2) the students participated in English language classroom activities taught or facilitated by Indonesian student teachers during the KKNI International Teaching Practicum; (3) the students had direct interactional experience with the Indonesian student teachers; and (4) the students were willing to take part in the interview process. A total of 10 students participated in this study as the primary source of interview data, consisting of 5 students from Grade 11 and 5 students from Grade 12.

Indonesian student teachers involved in the practicum were treated as contextual participants; information arising from their classroom interaction with the students, and where appropriate, supporting information from the student teachers themselves, was used to help interpret the intercultural context in which the learners' experiences occurred. The primary analytical focus of the study, however, remained on the Muslim EFL learners' intercultural awareness.

Research Procedure

The research was carried out through the following stages:

Step 1 – Preparation. The researcher determined the focus of the study, developed the observation guide and semi-structured interview guide based on Baker (2011) Intercultural Awareness framework, and obtained permission from the school principal to conduct the study at the school.

Step 2 – Selecting Participants. Eligible Grade 11 and Grade 12 Muslim EFL learners who had direct interactional experience with the Indonesian student teachers were identified and selected using the purposive sampling criteria described in Section 3.3. Each selected student signed a consent form to confirm their willingness to participate in the interview.

Step 3 – Classroom Observation. The researcher conducted non-participant classroom observation during English language learning activities involving the Indonesian student teachers and the selected learners, in order to identify how intercultural awareness was manifested through naturally occurring classroom interaction. Field notes were recorded during and immediately after each observation session.

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

Step 4 – Data Collection through Interviews. Following the observation period, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected students to explore their experiences, perceptions, interpretations, and reflections regarding their interaction with the Indonesian student teachers. Interviews were conducted flexibly in English and Thai according to each participant's language proficiency and comfort, so that language would not become a barrier to expressing their intercultural experiences.

Step 5 – Recording and Transcription. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Responses given in Thai were translated into English for the purposes of analysis while the original meaning was preserved as closely as possible; both the original Thai transcripts and their English translations were retained for verification purposes.

Step 6 – Data Analysis. The interview transcripts, observation notes, and field notes were analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to the learners' intercultural awareness.

Step 7 – Establishing Trustworthiness. The findings were examined through the trustworthiness strategies described in Section 3.7 to ensure that the results were credible and accurately grounded in the collected data.

Research Instrument

The researcher served as the main instrument in collecting and interpreting the qualitative data. To support the data collection process, five supporting instruments were used: a semi-structured interview guide, an observation guide, field notes, an audio recorder, and classroom materials used during the learning activities.

Interview guide. The semi-structured interview guide was developed based primarily on Baker (2011) Intercultural Awareness framework. The questions were designed to explore students' perceptions of their intercultural experiences, recognition of cultural similarities and differences, attitudes toward cultural differences, and interpretations of cultural practices encountered during interaction with the Indonesian student teachers. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions when participants provided

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

responses that required further clarification or elaboration.

Observation guide. The observation guide was developed primarily based on Baker (2011) Intercultural Awareness framework and was used to document observable manifestations of intercultural awareness during classroom interaction. The observation focused on students' recognition of cultural similarities and differences, openness and respect toward cultural differences, interpretation of cultural practices, and reflective responses to intercultural encounters. Michael Byram (1997) framework was used as complementary theoretical support in interpreting students' intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and interactional responses.

Field notes. Field notes were used to record contextual information and notable classroom events that occurred during the observation sessions. The notes included students' participation, verbal and non-verbal responses, classroom interaction, and relevant intercultural moments that could support the interpretation of interview and observation data.

Audio recorder. An audio recorder was used during the semi-structured interviews to ensure that participants' responses could be captured accurately and transcribed verbatim. The recordings were subsequently transcribed and, when necessary, translated from Thai into English for analysis.

Classroom materials. Classroom materials used by the Indonesian student teachers, including presentation materials, activities, games, and other learning resources, were also considered supporting data. These materials provided contextual information about the intercultural content and interactional activities experienced by the participants.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2006) six-phase approach. The analysis involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for potential themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and field notes were examined systematically to identify recurring patterns related to the participants' intercultural experiences and

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

awareness.

Baker (2011) Intercultural Awareness framework was used as the primary analytical lens. The framework guided the interpretation of students' recognition and understanding of cultural differences, their openness and respect toward cultural differences, and their interpretation of cultural practices and intercultural encounters. The framework was used to organize and interpret the emerging patterns rather than to impose predetermined conclusions on the participants' experiences.

Michael Byram (1997) framework was used as complementary theoretical support, particularly in interpreting students' intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and interactional responses. Thus, Baker's (2011) framework served as the main framework for analyzing intercultural awareness, while Michael Byram (1997) concepts were used to provide additional theoretical interpretation of relevant findings.

The analysis involved both interview and observation data. Interview data were analyzed to identify participants' perceptions, experiences, and reflections, while observation data were examined to identify observable manifestations of intercultural awareness during classroom interaction. The two sources were then compared to identify convergence, complementarity, or differences between what students reported in the interviews and what was observed during classroom activities. Field notes and classroom materials were also considered to provide contextual support for interpreting the findings.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, this study considered credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, following Lincoln (1990) criteria for qualitative research. Several strategies were employed.

First, credibility was supported through triangulation of classroom observation, student interviews, and field notes. Comparing information from different data sources helped the researcher examine the consistency and richness of the findings.

Second, member checking was conducted where appropriate by clarifying

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

participants' intended meanings, particularly when interview responses were translated from Thai into English. This process helped minimize misunderstanding or misinterpretation of participants' statements.

Third, transferability was supported by providing a detailed description of the research setting, participants, interactional context, and data collection procedures, allowing readers to determine the relevance of the findings to other similar contexts.

Finally, dependability and confirmability were supported through systematic documentation of the research process, including observation records, interview transcripts, coding decisions, and analytical notes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Muslim EFL Learners' Intercultural Experiences and Perceptions

This section addresses the first research question, namely how Muslim EFL learners perceive their intercultural experiences and awareness during their interactions with Indonesian student teachers. Thematic analysis of the ten interview transcripts (S1–S10) generated four themes: (1) Novel and Meaningful English Learning Experiences, (2) Emotional Dynamics of Intercultural Interaction, (3) Recognition of Thai–Indonesian Cultural Similarities and Differences, and (4) Curiosity and Reflective Reconstruction of Understanding. Each theme is presented below together with supporting participant quotations, interpretation, and its relation to Baker (2011) framework and to previous studies.

1. Novel and Meaningful English Learning Experiences

Most participants described their lessons with the Indonesian student teachers as noticeably different from their regular English classes. The difference was not only linguistic but experiential: students reported genuine, informal communication rather than routine grammar-focused instruction.

"What's different is that I got to actually use English and converse with people of a different language and culture." (S1)

"Their teaching was very fun — they liked to talk, liked to ask questions, and did group activities." (S2)

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

"Studying and talking together was a lot of fun — I didn't need to be afraid of speaking right or wrong." (S3)

These accounts indicate that the Indonesian student teachers' informal, activity-based teaching style reduced the psychological pressure typically associated with EFL production and created space for authentic, low-anxiety language use. This finding is consistent with the classroom observation data, in which all four observed sessions (A–D) recorded the use of PowerPoint presentations, games such as "Same or Different" and "Change One," and circle-based free discussion as supporting factors for participation.

In relation to Baker (2011) model, this theme corresponds most closely to what Baker terms practice-oriented intercultural awareness — the enactment of intercultural knowledge in real, situated communication, as opposed to a purely conceptual understanding of culture. The students were not simply told about cultural difference; they lived it through spontaneous, activity-embedded interaction. This resonates with Syifaa et al. (2021) study of Indonesian pre-service teachers in the SEA Teacher Project, which found that informal, exchange-based teaching situations were themselves a primary vehicle through which intercultural awareness developed, rather than a by-product of explicit cultural instruction. Similarly, Maesaro & Wijirahayu (2025) , examining teaching internships between Indonesia and Thailand, reported that authentic classroom interaction — rather than formal orientation sessions — was the strongest contributor to participants' intercultural skill development. The present findings suggest that these dynamic holds true from the receiving learners' side as well, not only for the visiting student teachers.

2. Emotional Dynamics of Intercultural Interaction

A recurring pattern across almost all participants was an emotional trajectory that began with excitement mixed with nervousness, and gradually moved toward confidence.

"At first I'm a little excited/nervous, but over time I become more confident." (S2)

"I feel excited, though sometimes also worried — afraid that what I say might not be understood." (S4)

"I feel excited; sometimes also a bit scared because I don't quite understand them,

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

since they speak with a fast accent." (S6)

"I feel more confident talking with a foreigner than with a Thai English teacher." (S5)

This emotional pattern was corroborated by the classroom observation data: hindering factors recorded in Observations A, B, and D explicitly noted "lack of confidence and shyness among some students," while reflective notes in Observation D described previously quiet students becoming "more engaged once the game started." The convergence of interview and observation data strengthens the credibility of this theme.

Baker (2011) Intercultural Awareness (ICA) model does not foreground affect as a discrete component, focusing instead on knowledge, attitude, and interpretation. However, the affective trajectory identified here appears to function as a precondition for the attitudinal openness that Baker's model does emphasize: students who moved from anxiety to confidence were also the ones who reported the clearest gains in openness (see Section 4.2.2). This pattern is echoed in Syifaa et al. (2021) study, which identified "psychological stress" as one of the intercultural experiences reported by the visiting Indonesian teachers themselves — suggesting that affective strain during early-stage intercultural contact is a shared experience on both sides of a short-term teaching exchange, rather than being unique to the host-country learners.

3. Recognition of Thai-Indonesian Cultural Similarities and Differences

Participants readily identified concrete cultural markers that distinguished Thai and Indonesian practices, ranging from dress and greetings to gender-related social norms.

"I saw differences — for example, at school the way of dressing is different, and in showing respect: in Thailand we say 'sawasdee,' but in Indonesia they do 'salam.'" (S1)

"It changed — for example, regarding men and women: in Indonesia they can shake hands ('salam') with each other, but for Muslims in Thailand, salam is not allowed unless it's with a family member." (S6)

S6's observation is particularly notable because it reflects a religiously grounded social norm rather than a purely national-cultural one, indicating that participants were distinguishing not only Thai–Indonesian differences but also differences

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

located within their shared Muslim identity. This finding is consistent with the classroom observation sheets, in which Indicators 1, 8, and 9 (recognition of, comparison of, and explanation of cultural differences) were marked positively across all four observed sessions.

Within Baker (2011) framework, this theme reflects basic cultural awareness — the foundational level at which learners notice and categorize surface-level cultural forms and practices before moving toward more critical, relational understanding. Semchuchot et al. (2021), studying Thai flight attendants' intercultural sensitivity when communicating with Muslim passengers, similarly found that religiously grounded behavioral norms (e.g., appropriate greeting and physical contact) were among the most salient markers of difference noticed by their participants, paralleling S6's finding here. Dianing Kartika et al. (2026) likewise reported a significant increase in Indonesian and Thai students' awareness of cultural diversity following structured cross-cultural engagement activities, supporting the view that guided, activity-based exposure — such as the "Same or Different" game used in this study's classrooms — is an effective vehicle for developing this foundational level of awareness.

4. Curiosity and Reflective Reconstruction of Understanding

Beyond simply noticing difference, several participants described a process of revising prior assumptions about Indonesian culture after direct interaction.

"It changed — for example, about Indonesian horror movies. After meeting and asking the Indonesian teacher, I learned it's not actually as scary as I thought." (S10)

"Before, I thought their food would be similar to Thai food, but after actually meeting them, I realized their food is different." (S5)

"Before, I understood it one way, but after talking with them I realized it's actually different — for example, with food: they eat spicier food than Thai people." (S7)

These accounts show a shift from a-priori assumption to experience-based revision, indicating that direct interaction functioned as a corrective mechanism against prior stereotypes. This pattern was less visible in the observation data, which captured that "students express new understanding" (Indicator 10) but did not record the specific content of what was revised — illustrating how interview

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

data provided interpretive depth that observation alone could not reach.

This theme corresponds to the more advanced levels of Baker (2011) model, in which learners move beyond static categorization toward the ability to relate and reinterpret their own frames of reference in light of new cultural input. The reciprocal nature of this reconstruction is also reflected in Syifaa et al. (2021) findings, where the visiting Indonesian teachers themselves reported having to renegotiate assumptions about "beliefs and religious dissimilarity" during the exchange — suggesting that assumption correction in this type of short-term intercultural teaching exchange is a two-directional process rather than one confined to the host-country learners.

4.1 Manifestations of Intercultural Awareness Through Interaction

To answer the second research question, the observed and reported experiences were interpreted using Baker (2011) Intercultural Awareness framework as the primary analytical lens. The findings were organized into three analytical dimensions that emerged from the data and were consistent with the framework: (A) knowledge and recognition of cultural differences, (B) openness and respect toward cultural differences, and (C) interpretation of cultural differences. These dimensions were used to examine how intercultural awareness was manifested through students' interactions with the Indonesian student teachers.

The first-dimension concerns students' recognition and understanding of cultural similarities and differences between Thailand and Indonesia. The second concerns students' attitudes toward cultural differences, particularly their willingness to engage with and respect practices that differed from their own cultural and religious experiences. The third concerns students' attempts to interpret, compare, and make sense of cultural differences encountered during classroom interaction. Michael Byram (1997) concepts were used as complementary theoretical support where relevant to further interpret students' attitudes, knowledge, and interactional responses.

4.2 Knowledge of Cultural Differences

Manifestation of knowledge was evident in participants' ability to name specific cultural content — language, food, dress, and social norms — rather than referring

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

to cultural difference in only general terms.

"I saw differences in language — the Indonesian teacher's English accent... cultural differences in language and their way of life." (S4)

"I also saw differences in food, clothing, and way of life through the teacher's PPT presentation." (S9)

This is directly confirmed by the observation data: every observation sheet contains an explicit section, "A. Knowledge of Cultural Differences," recording that students asked about Indonesian beliefs, food, and customs, and that a two-way language exchange took place between students and the Indonesian teachers. The convergence between the two data sources indicates that knowledge-building was not an isolated cognitive event reported only in interviews, but an observable classroom practice.

This pattern aligns with Dianing Kartika et al. (2026) , who documented a measurable pre-to-post increase in Indonesian and Thai students' factual cultural knowledge following structured cross-cultural community engagement, indicating that even relatively short, activity-based exposure can produce identifiable gains in this component of Baker (2011) model.

4.3 Attitudes of Openness and Respect

Openness was manifested in several forms: passive acceptance (already expecting difference), active appreciation of difference, and — notably — openness that remained bounded by personal or religious norms.

"I accept the differences, see their value, appreciate them, and I'm more open to people from other cultures." (S2)

"I respect others more, within appropriate boundaries — I see the value in and appreciate differences." (S4)

"Yes, I became interested and curious, but within limits — for things they don't want to share, we shouldn't force it; we should only learn what they're ready and willing to share." (S2)

The observation data corroborates the presence of openness at the behavioral level: all four observations recorded high rates of willing communication and cooperative participation, reaching "about 100% of students participated willingly" in Observation D. However, the specific pattern of religiously or personally bounded openness identified in the interviews was not something the

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

observation protocol was designed to capture, since it concerns an internal disposition rather than an observable behavior.

Baker (2011) attitude component, adapted from Michael Byram (1997) notion of curiosity and openness, does not explicitly theorize openness as something that can be simultaneously present and self-limited by the learner's own cultural or religious framework. The bounded form of openness found in this study therefore represents a context-specific elaboration of Baker's attitude component, one that is particularly salient given the participants' identity as Muslim learners in Southern Thailand. This nuance parallels Semchuchot et al. (2021) , who found that Thai service providers' intercultural sensitivity toward Muslim passengers involved a similar norm-conscious accommodation — openness exercised carefully within recognized religious boundaries rather than as unconditional acceptance.

4.4 Interpretation of Cultural Differences

Interpretation was manifested primarily through participants' ability to compare, explain, and revise their understanding of cultural practices rather than simply listing them.

"After seeing them talk with their friends, I realized their language isn't exactly the same [as Thai Malay], though it is similar." (S8)

"I've come to see the value in and appreciate differences, and I'm more open to people from different cultures." (S10)

This corresponds to the observation sheets' "C. Interpretation of Cultural Differences" sections, which recorded that students "explained the differences they noticed and shared their own experiences" and "gained new understanding regarding language differences between the two cultures." As in Section 4.1.4, the observation data confirms that interpretation occurred, while the interview data reveals its specific content and the nuanced, sometimes partial nature of the revision (e.g., "not exactly the same, though similar").

This finding supports Baker (2011) argument that interpretation in intercultural awareness is rarely a binary shift from ignorance to full understanding, but a gradual, context-specific recalibration of existing frames of reference. It is also consistent with Syifaa et al. (2021) , who found that Indonesian pre-service teachers demonstrated varying levels of interpretive sophistication depending on

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.113-137

the specific cultural practice encountered, rather than a uniform level of intercultural awareness across all domains.

Across both research questions, the supporting and hindering factors recorded in the observation sheets — engaging learning media and group discussion as supporting factors, and language barriers, limited class time, and shyness as hindering factors — were consistently mirrored in participants' own accounts of vocabulary difficulty, accent-related misunderstanding, and lack of confidence. This convergence across two independent data sources strengthens the credibility of the four themes identified for RQ1 and the three manifestations identified for RQ2, while also indicating that the depth and richness of interview data complemented, rather than merely duplicated, the breadth of the classroom observations.

CONCLUSION

In response to RQ2, intercultural awareness was found to manifest across three analytical dimensions derived from the data and interpreted through Baker's (2011) framework. Knowledge and recognition of cultural differences were manifested through students' ability to identify and describe specific cultural content rather than referring to cultural differences only in general terms. Openness and respect toward cultural differences were manifested not as unconditional acceptance but, for a number of participants, as openness that remained consciously bounded by personal or religious norms. This finding provides a context-specific elaboration of the attitudinal dimension of intercultural awareness in this Muslim EFL context. Interpretation of cultural differences was manifested through participants' gradual, and at times partial, recalibration of their understanding of specific cultural practices.

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