

# When Foreign Students Teach Local Children: Inverting the Intercultural Lens

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## Abstract

This reflective article explores an intercultural learning experience that emerged during the Joint Cultural Camp 2023, hosted by *Universitas Negeri Gorontalo* (UNG) in collaboration with *Institut Teknologi Sepuluh Nopember* (ITS), Indonesia. Originally designed to introduce Gorontalo's local culture to international students, the program unexpectedly transformed when participants were invited to teach in a local primary school. Through this brief yet meaningful encounter, participants and local schoolchildren experienced a reversal of roles in which teaching became a shared act of cultural discovery. Drawing on concepts of intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997) and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), this article reflects on how authentic, face-to-face interactions can promote empathy, curiosity, and pedagogical humility. It also discusses implications for English language teacher education by explaining how such localized intercultural encounters can serve as a reflective place where teachers learn to negotiate meaning, embrace diversity, and consider language as a platform to bridge gaps.

*Keywords:* cultural camp, experiential learning, intercultural lens, teaching experience

## Introduction

When *Universitas Negeri Gorontalo* (UNG), a university where I have been working in for more than fifteen years, was chosen to host the Joint Cultural Camp 2023, I imagined a week of sightseeing, performances, and friendly exchanges between us, from the International Office, to our students, participants from *Institut Teknologi Sepuluh Nopember* (ITS), and, most importantly, the locals. That year, we adopted the theme “Gorontalo unmasked: A memorable experience awaits.” With this theme, we sought to celebrate local traditions such as music, dance, and crafts to showcase the beauty of Gorontalo. What I did not anticipate was how a simple activity, namely, inviting foreign students to teach in a local primary school, would transform into a powerful lesson on intercultural learning.

As an English language educator, I have long believed that teaching is one of the most intimate forms of cultural exchange. However, during this camp, I found that it was not the language lessons or cultural performances that struck me most, but the moment when our guests, the international students from ITS, found themselves teaching local schoolchildren. That short meeting inverted the familiar dynamic of “hosts” and “visitors,” which demonstrates how learning across cultures is never one-directional. This paper, therefore, reflects on that inversion, that is, how teaching can bridge empathy and understanding between people from different cultural backgrounds.

### **Context: Setting and Participants**

The Cultural Camp 2023 was an initiative of ITS’s Directorate of Global Partnerships, created to promote internationalization among Indonesian universities. Each semester, ITS invites host institutions across Indonesia to collaborate by welcoming its international students for short-term immersion programs. UNG, located in the Province of

Gorontalo on the northern coast of Sulawesi, Indonesia, was selected as one of the hosts for the October 2023 program after submitting a proposal and presentation. At this time, I served as the Head of the International Office and was in charge of this project.

The version of the camp we designed in Gorontalo brought a distinctive local flavor. For four days, ten participants - from France (n=7), Spain (n=1), and Malaysia (n=2) were invited to experience Gorontalo's cultural identity through arts, crafts, and community engagement. They learned traditional *Karawo* embroidery, practiced *Langga* martial arts, and visited historical and ecological sites, such as the *Dulohupa* traditional house and the Whale Shark tourism area. Among these programs, visiting UNG's Laboratory Primary School became a highlight. There, the participants introduced basic foreign languages, shared songs, and played educational games with local children. What began as a literacy session soon became a cross-cultural exchange that captured the core objective of the camp: connecting people through shared acts of learning.

### **The Inverted Lens of Teaching as Cultural Encounter**

When the camp participants stepped into the classrooms of UNG's Laboratory Primary School, not all of them, I assume, felt certain or confident. Most had never taught before, especially in a foreign country, and were unsure how to connect with young learners whose English was limited. To support them, we had provided a brief orientation prior to their arrival in Gorontalo, which outlined the activities they would lead and the strategies they could use in the classroom. For example, they would teach in pairs and would be accompanied by a classroom teacher whose role was to support classroom management and to provide assistance when necessary.

The atmosphere changed as the children greeted them with wide eyes and open smiles. The nervousness that the participants might have felt turned into laughter. One

participant later reflected, “When we came to the school in the morning, everyone was so nice. The welcome was amazing, and sharing our language with the children was a really good idea.” Their words echoed what many of us observed that day. The children, curious and cheerful, repeated foreign words with joyful exaggeration, while the visitors mimed, drew, and laughed their way through the lessons. There was no perfect grammar or flawless pronunciation, but only the universal language of enthusiasm shared by both the children and their “one-day” teachers.

As I observed these interactions, I realized how teaching can reveal our deepest assumptions about communication. The guests, who had come expecting to learn about Indonesian culture, found themselves in the position of teaching and adapting. They discovered that teaching is not just about transferring linguistic accuracy, but also about building connections through empathy and creativity. The local children, in turn, experienced accents, gestures, and stories shared by people they had never met before.

### **Pedagogical and Cultural Insights**

As a teacher educator, I often emphasize one essential point to my students: effective teaching begins with awareness, namely, awareness of one’s learners, one’s language, and one’s own cultural position. However, observing the foreign participants at the Laboratory Primary School reminded me that such awareness cannot be taught through lectures or theory; it must be lived. In that small, sunlit classroom, intercultural learning occurred not through explanation but through experience.

The interaction between the international students and local children illustrates what Byram (1997) calls “intercultural communicative competence” - the ability to engage with people from other cultures through empathy, curiosity, and reflection. None of the participants intentionally set out to demonstrate this competence, yet it was evident in the

way they adapted their communication, collaborated across language barriers, and showed humility when misunderstandings occurred. What mattered most was not linguistic accuracy but the willingness to understand and be understood.

The encounter also reflected experiential learning theory, particularly Kolb's (1984) idea that knowledge is constructed through cycles of experience, reflection, and adaptation. The participants learned by doing: they taught, observed reactions, and adjusted their approaches. In turn, the children learned that mastering a language is more than learning its vocabulary; it is an invitation to connect. Each gesture and shared laugh became part of a curriculum of empathy. This experience reaffirmed my belief that education, at its heart, is a cultural act. Whether through Karawo embroidery or a simple vocabulary game, the essence lies in the relationships we build and the meanings we create together. The Cultural Camp's school visit reminded me that intercultural understanding grows not from knowing about others but from being with others.

### **Implications for teacher education**

Observing how the international students taught local children deepened my understanding of how teacher education can integrate intercultural encounters meaningfully. In language teaching, we often emphasize communicative competence and classroom techniques, yet we rarely create opportunities for teacher candidates to experience communication where meaning must be negotiated in real time, and empathy becomes the most vital teaching tool. The Cultural Camp provided a space where teaching became an act of translation not only between languages but also between worldviews. For pre-service and in-service teachers alike, this type of engagement holds powerful pedagogical value. It reminds us that teaching English or any language is never neutral. It carries cultural assumptions, perspectives, and emotions that shape how

teachers and learners see one another (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). Programs like this can cultivate what I would call pedagogical humility: the readiness to listen, to adapt, and to learn from one's students.

In English language teacher education, intercultural programs can serve as reflective laboratories (Farrell, 2015). After such experiences, teacher candidates can reflect on what they learned about communication, misunderstanding, or identity in the classroom. They might examine how nonverbal communication bridged gaps or how patience became a pedagogical strategy. These reflections can then be linked to classroom practice to help future teachers design lessons that foster diversity, inclusion, and mutual respect.

### **Conclusion**

The Cultural Camp in Gorontalo was more than a series of scheduled activities. It was a living classroom where everyone became both teacher and learner. What began as a program to introduce Indonesia's local culture to foreign students developed into moments of authentic engagement. In that primary school, I witnessed something important: the human desire to connect, to understand, and to be understood.

As educators, we often look for innovative strategies to teach languages or build intercultural awareness. Yet sometimes, the most transformative learning happens in unplanned simplicity, when people meet across differences with genuine curiosity. Watching foreign students teach local children reminded me that teaching is never a one-way act. It is a dialogue, a shared journey of discovery that reshapes everyone involved. If cultural understanding can be taught, it begins in small classrooms, through hesitant smiles and improvised gestures, where we learn that difference is not a barrier but a bridge.

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