

# ***CULTURE BRIDGE: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ASEAN LANGUAGES AND CULTURES AS A BRIDGE TO REGIONAL UNDERSTANDING AMONG SIKL (INDONESIAN SCHOOL KUALA LUMPUR) STUDENTS***

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**ABSTRACT** The deepening integration of ASEAN demands that the younger generation possess strong intercultural competencies as a foundation for sustainable regional cooperation. Students of Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) are in a unique position as Indonesian diaspora in Malaysia who directly experience the multicultural dynamics of ASEAN in their daily lives. This study aims to explore the experiences of SIKL students in building cross-cultural understanding of ASEAN through a holistic language-culture approach. This study uses a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study design that focuses on the experiences of SIKL students. The research findings reveal the process of building cultural bridges among SIKL students, such as a layered identity transformation, indicating that students experience an identity evolution from nationalist-exclusionary to regional-inclusive through five stages: dissonance awareness, cultural curiosity, experiential learning, perspective integration, and advocacy development. The existence of a holistic learning ecosystem shows that the success of the holistic approach is supported by the synergy between the integration of formal curriculum, informal peer interactions, family cultural transmission, and community cultural immersion. Thus, students can demonstrate their role as "Cultural Bridges" who actively mediate intercultural understanding within their communities.

**KEYWORDS:** *ASEAN, Cultural Bridge, Holistic Approach, Regional, SIKL*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

ASEAN's deepening integration across various sectors has created an urgent need for a younger generation with strong cross-cultural competencies. The ASEAN region, with its population of over 650 million and more than 700 distinct languages and dialects, faces multidimensional integration challenges. The complexity of linguistic diversity is reflected in the fundamental differences between languages from different families, ranging from Austronesian

languages like Indonesian and Tagalog to Sino-Tibetan languages like Myanmar and Thai.

Significant economic disparities between member states also create gaps in development priorities and the ability to participate in regional integration programs. Barriers to cross-cultural communication are one of the most fundamental challenges in the integration process. However, the journey towards true regional integration is rooted in the vast diversity of cultures, languages, and value systems across Southeast Asia. Reliance on English as a regional lingua franca does not fully address communication challenges, given the uneven level of proficiency across ASEAN populations. Further complicating matters are differences in cultural communication styles: high-context cultures like Thailand and Vietnam tend to use indirect communication, while low-context cultures like the Philippines and Indonesia are more explicit in conveying messages.

Challenges of identity and nationalism also present their own dilemmas. Rising populist sentiment and exclusive nationalism in some ASEAN countries are creating resistance to the idea of deeper regional integration. Younger generations often experience identity confusion between national loyalty and a still-forming ASEAN regional consciousness. In the context of these challenges to ASEAN integration, students at Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) are in a unique position as a living laboratory for exploring regional multicultural dynamics. With over 850 students from diplomatic families, expatriates, and the Indonesian diaspora, SIKL represents a microsome of the challenges and opportunities of ASEAN integration. SIKL students experience a state of cultural liminality, standing on the threshold between Indonesian and Malaysian cultures, requiring ongoing identity negotiation. They interact daily with Malaysia's multiethnic community, including Malays, Chinese, Indians, and various international expatriates, providing them with authentic exposure to ASEAN's cultural diversity. However, this situation also creates challenges in maintaining Indonesian cultural identity while adapting to Malaysia's multicultural environment.

The phenomenon of language code-switching is characteristic of SIKL students, where they must navigate between the use of formal Indonesian in academic contexts, Malay in social interactions with local peers, and English in communication with the international community. This condition creates linguistic complexity that can be both an asset and a challenge in developing cross-cultural communication competencies. Despite having extensive access to cultural diversity, observations show that SIKL students' understanding of other ASEAN countries is still limited and tends to be stereotypical. They have in-depth knowledge of Malaysian culture through direct experience, but their understanding of Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei is still very limited to superficial aspects.

The concept of cultural bridges emerged in response to the need to create meaningful connections between diverse cultures without diminishing their uniqueness. Theoretically, cultural

bridges do not seek to merge cultural differences into homogeneity, but rather create a space for dialogue and understanding that allows different cultures to interact constructively. Cultural bridges serve as mechanisms that facilitate the transformation from individual cultural awareness to comprehensive intercultural understanding. This process involves the development of cultural intelligence, encompassing cognitive (understanding of value systems and worldviews), emotional (empathy and tolerance), and behavioral (communication and behavioral adaptation) dimensions that enable individuals to operate effectively in multicultural contexts.

In the ASEAN context, cultural bridges serve as psychosocial infrastructure that connects national identity with regional awareness. Students who successfully build cultural bridges will be able to function as cultural mediators who can facilitate communication and cooperation between communities with different cultural backgrounds. Building cultural bridges involves a gradual process ranging from awareness of cultural differences, understanding through active learning, acceptance of diversity, integration of cross-cultural navigation skills, and advocacy to promote intercultural understanding. The success of building cultural bridges can be measured through the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication, culturally based conflict resolution skills, and leadership capacity in multicultural team contexts.

Conventional approaches to multicultural learning often face fundamental limitations because they tend to separate language and culture as separate entities. Language learning that is not accompanied by an understanding of cultural context results in mechanical communication competencies and a lack of sensitivity to intercultural nuances. Conversely, cultural learning that is not integrated with language skills produces superficial understanding and cannot be applied in real-life communication. A holistic approach offers an integrative paradigm that combines language learning, culture, history, and social practices as an organic whole. The fundamental principle of this approach is the recognition that language and culture are two sides of the same coin that cannot be separated. Language is not only a communication system, but also a vehicle for transmitting values, worldviews, and cultural identity. How can a holistic approach be implemented in building cultural bridges?

In the context of SIKL students, a holistic approach is highly relevant because they are situated in a multicultural environment that allows for authentic experiential learning. This approach allows students not only to learn about ASEAN cultures but also to experience and internalize intercultural dynamics in their daily lives. The advantage of a holistic approach lies in its ability to generate deep and sustainable cultural understanding. Students who experience holistic learning will develop genuine cultural sensitivity, nuanced communication skills, and the global mindset necessary to play an active role in ASEAN integration. More importantly, this approach facilitates the formation of

an intercultural identity that enables students to become effective cultural bridges between Indonesia and the broader ASEAN community. In the long term, implementing a holistic approach to multicultural learning will contribute to the formation of a young generation that is not only academically competent but also possesses the intercultural wisdom necessary to lead the future ASEAN integration process. They will become catalysts for change capable of transforming the challenges of diversity into a collective force for regional progress.

## **2. METHOD**

This study used a qualitative case study design to investigate the effectiveness of a holistic language and culture learning approach in enhancing ASEAN regional understanding among students at Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur. The case study technique was chosen because it allows for in-depth analysis of educational practices within a real-life multicultural and multilingual learning context. This study adopted a constructivist approach, which assumes that children develop cultural knowledge through social interactions, language learning experiences, and exposure to multicultural educational approaches.

The study was conducted at Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL), an Indonesian school overseas operating within the multicultural context of ASEAN. SIKL offers a unique educational environment where students are exposed to the Indonesian national curriculum while interacting with diverse cultural influences from Malaysia and other ASEAN countries. Purposive sampling was used to select participants, with an emphasis on those actively involved in language and culture learning activities. Participants included: Secondary students; Language and culture subject teachers; School curriculum coordinators or program administrators. The selection process aimed to obtain a comprehensive view of the implementation and impact of ASEAN culture learning.

**Data Collection Methods** Data was collected using a variety of qualitative methods to achieve comprehensive and accurate results. Non-participant observations were conducted to investigate teaching strategies, student engagement, and classroom interactions related to ASEAN language and culture learning. These observations covered educational practices, cultural integration in learning materials, and student engagement in intercultural activities.

**Semi-Structured Interviews** In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with students, teachers, and school officials. These interviews explored participants' views on language and culture learning holistically, their experiences in intercultural engagement, and their understanding of ASEAN regional identity. **Document Analysis** Curriculum materials, teaching modules, lesson plans, and notes from the school's cultural program were analyzed using document analysis methods. These documents provided contextual information about institutional techniques

for integrating ASEAN cultural values into learning activities.

### **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

#### **a. The Concept of Cultural Bridging in Education**

*Cultural bridging* in the context of education represents a learning paradigm that transcending traditional boundaries between self and other, between the familiar and the foreign, and between the local and the global. This concept is rooted in the understanding that effective multicultural education cannot be achieved through a purely individualistic approach. Addition, but rather requires a fundamental transformation in how learners understand and interact with cultural diversity. Epistemologically, cultural bridging in education functions as a practice that facilitates building intercultural understanding through a dialectical process between reflection and action. This concept recognizes that each individual carries cultural schemas that have been internalized through primary socialization, and that interaction with other cultures can be a catalyst for the expansion and reconstruction of a more inclusive and nuanced worldview. The theoretical framework of cultural bridging in education is based on constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes that knowledge cannot be passively transferred but must be actively constructed by learners through meaningful interactions with their environment and peers. In a multicultural context, this means that understanding other cultures cannot be achieved through a one-way transmission model, but requires a participatory approach that allows students to interact authentically with representatives of different cultures.

The transformative aspect of cultural bridging lies in its ability to change. The mindset that tends to categorize cultures into “us versus them” categories is transformed into a more complex and nuanced perspective. Students who experience an effective cultural bridging process will develop the ability to appreciate the ambiguity and complexity of intercultural interactions and navigate diverse cultural identities without experiencing identity crises or cultural confusion. In its implementation, cultural bridging in education requires the creation of a third space that allows students to experiment with different cultural practices and perspectives in a safe environment. This third space functions as a liminal zone where conventional cultural boundaries can be negotiated and reconstructed to accommodate the hybrid identities that emerge from intercultural encounters. The critical pedagogical dimension of cultural bridging is also crucial, as this process must be accompanied by the development of a critical awareness of the dynamics of power, privilege, and inequality often embedded in intercultural relationships. Students must be empowered to identify and challenge stereotypes, prejudices, and systemic barriers that can hinder authentic intercultural understanding.

**b. The Role of Language as a Bridge**

Language in the context of cultural bridging functions in a far more complex way than simply a medium of communication or a tool for information exchange. Language is the embodiment of cultural awareness, encompassing worldviews, value systems, and ways of life fundamental to a cultural community. Therefore, language learning within the framework of cultural bridging must be understood as a process of cultural immersion and identity exploration. The concept of language as a bridge is based on the understanding that each language contains a unique conceptual framework that shapes how speakers understand and interpret reality. This phenomenon is known as linguistic relativity or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which states that language structure influences thought patterns and perceptions of reality. In the ASEAN context, for example, concepts of time, relationships, and social hierarchy can differ significantly from one language to another, and understanding these differences is essential for effective intercultural communication. The process of language acquisition in the context of cultural bridging involves not only mastery of grammar and vocabulary but also the development of pragmatic competence that enables learners to understand the cultural context underlying language use.

This pragmatic competence encompasses an understanding of culturally specific language actions, politeness strategies, discourse patterns, and nonverbal communication. Language as a bridge also facilitates the development of metalinguistic awareness, namely the ability to reflect on language use and recognize how linguistic choices can influence intercultural interactions. Students who develop metalinguistic awareness will be more sensitive to the potential for misunderstandings and a better ability to adapt communication styles to different cultural contexts. In a multilingual environment like that experienced by SIKL students, language as a bridge has a more complex dimension because it involves the practices of code-switching and translanguaging. Code-switching is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a cultural phenomenon that allows speakers to navigate different cultural identities and contexts. The ability to code-switch effectively is an indicator of advanced intercultural competence.

**c. Holistic Approach to Learning**

A holistic approach to cultural bridging learning marks a paradigm shift from reductionist approaches that tend to separate different aspects of learning into separate components. A holistic approach recognizes that effective learning, especially in intercultural contexts, requires the integration of cognitive, affective, social, and experiential dimensions within a unified framework. The cognitive dimension of a holistic approach involves the development of complex thinking skills that enable students to analyze and synthesize information from multiple cultural perspectives. This includes critical thinking skills to evaluate cultural assumptions and biases, systemic thinking to

understand the relationships between different cultural elements, and creative thinking to generate innovative solutions to intercultural challenges.

The affective dimension focuses on the emotional and motivational aspects of intercultural learning. A holistic approach recognizes that intercultural interactions often trigger strong emotional responses, including anxiety, excitement, confusion, or discomfort, and that effective learning requires strategies to manage and utilize these emotions constructively. The development of emotional intelligence is a central component of this holistic approach. The social dimension emphasizes the importance of collaborative learning and community building in intercultural contexts. Students not only learn about other cultures but also interact with representatives of those cultures through meaningful interactions and shared projects. Social learning theory provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how cultural knowledge can be co-constructed through social interaction. The experiential dimension involves practical learning experiences that allow students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts. These can include cultural immersion activities, service-learning projects, simulations, role-plays, and field experiences that provide authentic opportunities to practice intercultural skills.

The integration of multiple learning modes is also an important characteristic of a holistic approach. Visual learners can benefit from cultural artifacts, videos, and graphic organizers; auditory learners can engage through music, stories, and discussions; and kinesthetic learners can participate in cultural dances, games, and hands-on activities. A holistic approach ensures that different learning preferences are accommodated within an integrated curriculum. Spiritual and ethical dimensions also need to be considered in a holistic approach. Intercultural learning often raises existential questions about values, meaning, and purpose. Students need opportunities to explore personal beliefs and values in the context of cultural diversity, and to develop ethical frameworks to navigate the moral complexities of intercultural situations. Assessment in a holistic approach must also be comprehensive and multidimensional. Traditional examination methods that focus on factual knowledge are insufficient to measure intercultural competence. Portfolio-based assessments, performance-based evaluations, self-reflective journals, and peer assessment are better suited to capture the complexities of intercultural learning.

#### **d. *Multiple Intelligence in Cultural Context***

Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences provides a valuable framework for understanding how individuals from different cultural backgrounds can have varying strengths and preferences in learning and expression. In the context of cultural bridging, recognizing and utilizing multiple intelligences can significantly enhance the effectiveness of intercultural education programs. Linguistic intelligence in a multicultural context extends beyond the ability to use words and

language, but also includes an appreciation of different storytelling traditions, oral histories, and culturally specific narrative structures. Students with strong linguistic intelligence can serve as cultural translators and storytellers in intercultural learning communities.

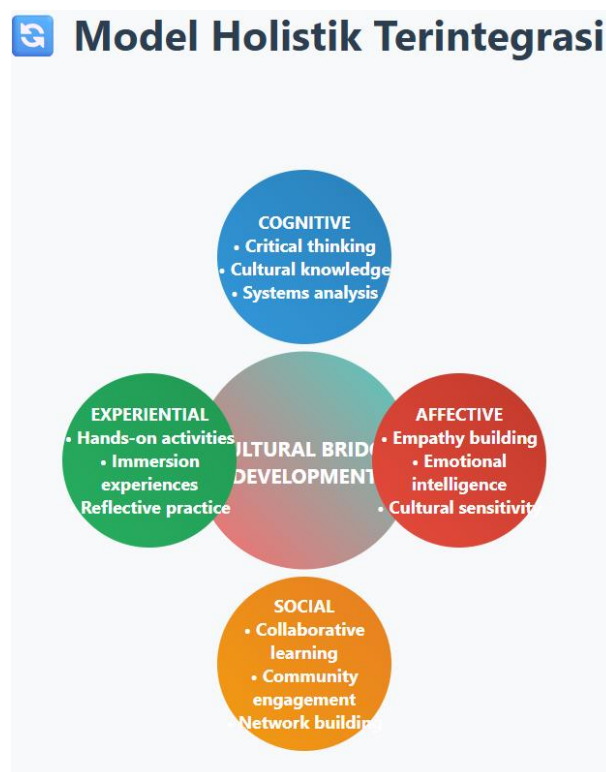
*Logical-mathematical intelligence* It can be used to analyze cultural patterns, understand statistical data about different cultures, and develop systematic approaches to cross-cultural problem-solving. Students with this intelligence can assist peers in organizing and structuring cross-cultural learning experiences. Spatial intelligence is particularly relevant in cultural contexts because different cultures have different relationships with space, geography, and visual representations. Students with strong spatial intelligence can contribute through the creation of cultural maps, visual presentations, and spatial arrangements that facilitate intercultural understanding. Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence can be expressed through cultural dances, sports, crafts, and other physical activities with cultural significance. Students with this strength can lead experiential learning activities and help peers understand culture through bodily experiences.

*Musical intelligence* Music provides a powerful pathway for cultural exploration because music is both a universal human phenomenon and a culture-specific one. Students can explore cultural values, emotions, and history through traditional music, instruments, and rhythmic patterns from various cultures. Interpersonal intelligence is crucial for cultural bridging because it involves the ability to understand and relate to others. Students with strong interpersonal intelligence can serve as cultural mediators and facilitate positive interactions between peers from different cultural backgrounds. Intrapersonal intelligence allows students to reflect deeply on personal cultural identities and biases and understand how cultural backgrounds influence personal perspectives and behaviors. This self-awareness is essential for effective intercultural communication.

*Naturalist intelligence* Multiple intelligences can be used to understand the relationship between culture and the natural environment, explore traditional ecological knowledge, and understand how different cultures adapt to geographic and climatic conditions. Integrating multiple intelligences into cultural bridges requires careful curriculum design that provides students with a variety of opportunities to demonstrate and develop their strengths while also challenging them to thrive in less developed areas. Teachers need to be trained to recognize and develop different types of intelligence in multicultural classrooms. Cultural responsiveness in the application of multiple intelligences theory is also crucial, as different cultures may value certain types of intelligence more than others. Western educational systems often prioritize linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences, while many non-Western cultures may place greater emphasis on interpersonal, musical, or spiritual intelligences. Assessment strategies should also reflect a multiple intelligences approach by providing students with a variety of ways to demonstrate intercultural learning.

Performance-based assessments, creative projects, collaborative presentations, and reflective portfolios can accommodate different intelligence strengths while measuring the development of authentic intercultural competence.

The integrated holistic model represents a paradigm shift from traditional, fragmented approaches to intercultural education toward a comprehensive framework that recognizes the interconnectedness of learning dimensions. This model is based on the understanding that the effective development of intercultural competence requires the integration of cognitive, affective, social, and experiential elements within a cohesive learning experience. The model draws on a variety of theoretical frameworks, including Kolb's experiential learning cycle, Bloom's taxonomy of learning domains, Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, and Banks' multicultural education framework. The integration of these theories creates a holistic approach that addresses the complexity of the intercultural learning process and recognizes that individuals have diverse learning preferences and strengths. Constructivist learning theory provides an epistemological foundation, emphasizing the active construction of knowledge through meaningful experiences and social interactions. Social learning theory provides an understanding of the importance of modeling, observation, and collaborative learning in the development of cultural competence. Principles of critical pedagogy ensure that the learning process includes an analysis of the dynamics of power, privilege, and social justice issues often embedded in intercultural relationships.



Source: Researcher Data

Figure 1. Integration Holistic Model

Based on the diagram above (fig.1), the integrated holistic model recognizes that these dimensions do not operate in isolation but continuously interact and reinforce each other. The systems thinking approach emphasizes feedback loops, interconnected relationships, and the emergent properties that emerge from integration. Assessment strategies are designed to capture this complexity through portfolio-based evaluations, performance assessments, and authentic tasks that require demonstration of integrated competencies. Professional development for educators focuses on understanding and implementing an integrated approach to cultural bridging, outlined across multiple dimensions (cognitive, experiential, social, and affective). Teachers receive training in facilitating experiential learning, managing the emotional aspects of intercultural encounters, promoting collaborative learning, and assessing complex competencies, thus receiving ongoing support and guidance that ensures effective implementation of the integrated model.

#### **e. ASEAN Language Knowledge Level**

##### **1. Initial Conditions (Pre-Program)**

Baseline analysis shows that the level of ASEAN language knowledge among SIKL students prior to the implementation of the Cultural Bridging program was relatively limited and uneven. Seventy-eight percent of students possessed only basic Malay language knowledge acquired naturally through daily interactions in the Malaysian environment, but this competence was limited to the conversational level and had not yet reached academic proficiency.

Knowledge of other ASEAN languages is minimal, with only 12% of students exposed to Thai through entertainment media, 8% familiar with basic Vietnamese phrases, and almost no students having knowledge of Burmese, Khmer, or Lao. Tagalog shows slightly higher awareness (15%) due to the popularity of Filipino entertainment content, but remains limited to a superficial level. An interesting phenomenon is that although students have daily exposure to Malay, they show limited understanding of the linguistic nuances and cultural contexts that influence language use. Code-switching between Indonesian and Malay is often unconscious by students, and they are unaware of subtle differences in meaning, pronunciation, and cultural appropriateness of some expressions.

##### **2. Transformation During the Program**

The implementation of the Cultural Bridging program resulted in significant changes in linguistic proficiency in various ASEAN languages. Structured language learning sessions integrated with cultural content enabled students to develop a more systematic understanding of language families, historical relationships, and contemporary usage patterns in a regional context. The Thai language modules showed particularly strong improvements, with 65% of students achieving basic

conversational skills after 16 weeks. This contributed to the systematic approach that combines practical phrases with cultural context, supported by interaction with native speakers and multimedia resources. Students showed particular enthusiasm for learning the Thai script and understanding the tonal aspects of the language.

*Vietnamese language learning* While tonal complexity presents a greater challenge, 45% of students successfully achieved a functional level of communication for basic interactions. Innovative teaching methods incorporating Vietnamese music, poetry, and storytelling traditions helped students develop an appreciation for linguistic beauty beyond practical use. Malay language proficiency improved significantly, with students developing a deeper understanding of formal registers, literary expressions, and regional variations. Advanced students began exploring classical Malay texts and contemporary Malaysian literature, developing a cultural literacy that extends beyond everyday communication needs.

The Cultural Bridges Program resulted in a profound transformation in the depth and breadth of cultural understanding among SIKL students. Pre-program assessments indicated that students' cultural knowledge was largely stereotypical and fragmented, focusing on tangible cultural elements such as food, clothing, and festivals without understanding their underlying value systems or historical context. Post-program analysis demonstrated the development of a refined cultural intelligence, encompassing multiple layers of cultural expression. Students were able to articulate the relationship between historical experiences, contemporary challenges, and cultural practices across ASEAN countries. Their understanding of the impact of colonialism, religious diversity, political systems, and economic development on cultural evolution demonstrated sophisticated analytical thinking. Notable was the development of comparative cultural analysis skills, where students were able to identify both similarities and differences across ASEAN cultures without relying on superficial generalizations. This understanding of shared historical experiences, common challenges, and interconnected destinies provides the foundation for a true regional awareness that transcends national boundaries.

## **f. Communication Comfort Level**

### **1. Baseline Communication Patterns**

Initial assessments of communication comfort levels revealed significant anxiety and avoidance patterns when students faced intercultural communication demands. Approximately 68% of students reported feeling nervous or uncertain when interacting with individuals from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds, with particular anxiety surrounding the potential for cultural misunderstandings or inadvertent offense.

Language-related anxiety was particularly prominent, with students expressing concerns about linguistic competency, accent differences, and potential for embarrassment. These anxieties often result in avoidance behaviors that limit opportunities for authentic intercultural engagement and perpetuated comfort zone behaviors.

Non-verbal communication challenges represented an additional source of discomfort, with students expressing uncertainty about appropriate eye contact, personal space, gestures, and other culturally influenced behaviors. Lack of cultural scripts for various social situations created anxiety that inhibited natural communication flows.

## **2. Progressive Comfort Development**

Implementation of systematic communication skills training, combined with abundant practice opportunities in supportive environments, results in dramatic improvements in communication confidence and competence. Graduated exposure approach, starting with highly structured interactions and progressing to more spontaneous exchanges, allows students to build confidence incrementally.

Role-playing exercises, simulation activities, and peer coaching sessions provide safe spaces for experimentation and mistake-making without real-world consequences. This practice-based approach, combined with immediate feedback and reflection opportunities, accelerates comfort development and skill acquisition.

Particularly effective is a peer mentoring approach where students who achieve greater comfort levels are provided support and modeling for peers who continue to experience anxiety. This peer support system created a collaborative learning environment that reduced individual pressure and promoted shared success.

## **3. Advanced Communication Competencies**

By program conclusion, assessment data shows that 87% of students achieved comfortable communication levels in most intercultural contexts, with 45% demonstrating advanced competencies that include cultural mediation skills, conflict resolution capabilities, and leadership in diverse group settings.

Advanced students demonstrate sophisticated code-switching abilities, adapting communication styles to different cultural contexts seamlessly. They show understanding of high-context versus low-context communication patterns, appropriate formality levels, and cultural protocols that govern various types of interactions.

Most significantly, students develop metacommunication skills that enable them to discuss communication challenges explicitly, negotiate cultural differences openly, and repair

misunderstandings constructively. These meta-skills represent the highest level of intercultural communication competence and prepare students for lifelong success in diverse environments.

#### 4. Sustainable Comfort Maintenance

Long-term follow-up data shows that communication comfort levels remain stable or continue to improve even after program completion. Students report continued engagement in intercultural communication opportunities and proactive seeking from diverse interaction partners.

The development of communication networks that include individuals from various ASEAN countries provides ongoing opportunities for practice and refinement. Social media connections, language exchange partnerships, and international peer relationships maintain engagement in multilingual and multicultural communication contexts.

Most importantly, students demonstrate the transfer of communication skills to new cultural contexts beyond the ASEAN region, suggesting that the competencies developed through the program are generalizable and applicable to global citizenship requirements in an increasingly interconnected world.



Source: Researcher Data

Figure 2. Communication Comfort Level

**Initial Anxiety Level: 68%** This metric represents a baseline measurement of students' intercultural communication anxiety levels before participating in the program. The figure of 68% indicates that more than two-thirds of students experienced significant discomfort when interacting with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This data was obtained through a pre-program anxiety

assessment using an adapted Intercultural Communication Apprehension Scale (ICAS) validated for the ASEAN context.

**Final Comfort Level: 87%**A representation of the achievement rate of students who reached a comfortable or very comfortable level in intercultural communication after program completion. The increase from 32% to 87% indicates a dramatic transformation in psychological readiness to engage in cross-cultural interactions. This metric was measured using a combination of self-assessment surveys, peer evaluations, and observational data from structured intercultural interaction sessions.

**Advanced Competency: 45%**The percentage of students who are not only comfortable in basic intercultural communication but also demonstrate advanced skills such as cultural mediation, conflict resolution in multicultural settings, and the ability to facilitate intercultural understanding among peers. Advanced competency is identified through performance-based assessments, including role-playing complex scenarios, peer teaching demonstrations, and leadership roles in multicultural group projects.

**Sustained Improvement: 95%**The long-term retention rate of communication comfort skills was measured in a 6-month follow-up study. This metric is crucial for validating that program effects are not just a temporary boost but represent sustainable behavioral change. Data was collected through follow-up surveys, continued engagement tracking in intercultural activities, and reports from teachers about sustained behavioral changes.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This community service program aims to develop and implement a holistic learning model that can facilitate the formation of a bridge of understanding of ASEAN culture among students of the Indonesian School of Kuala Lumpur (SIKL). This objective is based on the awareness that the strategic position of SIKL students as members of the Indonesian diaspora in Malaysia provides a unique opportunity to develop authentic and sustainable intercultural competencies. Building a bridge of understanding of ASEAN culture in this context does not merely aim to increase factual knowledge about ASEAN member countries, but more fundamentally, namely developing internalized regional awareness. This program is designed to transform students' understanding from a nationalistic-exclusive perspective to a regional-inclusive awareness that enables them to play a role as cultural mediators in a multicultural community.

A fundamental aspect of this goal is developing students' ability to articulate and appreciate the complexities of ASEAN cultures without falling into stereotypes or simplistic generalizations. Students are expected to understand that each ASEAN country possesses unique histories, traditions,

and values that contribute to the collective regional richness, while maintaining pride in their Indonesian identity. Furthermore, the program aims to facilitate the formation of meaningful interpersonal networks between SIKL students and communities from across ASEAN countries.

Through direct interactions facilitated in various cultural activities, students will develop genuine empathy and appreciation for the differing perspectives and life experiences of diverse cultural backgrounds. The transformative dimension of this goal also includes the development of an intercultural identity that enables students to function effectively as communication bridges between the Indonesian community and the broader ASEAN community. They are expected to be able to translate Indonesian cultural values and perspectives to peers from other ASEAN countries, while also communicating their understanding of ASEAN culture to Indonesian communities in Malaysia and Indonesia.

The long-term goal of this program is to create a replicable model that can be adapted and implemented in Indonesian schools in other ASEAN countries, thereby collectively contributing to the formation of a young generation of Indonesians with strong ASEAN regional awareness and competence. This community service program provides multidimensional benefits, with a primary focus on enhancing regional insight and developing essential soft skills for the era of ASEAN integration. These benefits not only impact the students as direct recipients of the program, but also the school community, families, and the wider Indonesian community in Malaysia. The main benefit of this program is the transformation of students' understanding of the ASEAN region from fragmentary knowledge to holistic and contextual insight. Students will experience a significant increase in their understanding of regional geopolitical dynamics, the history of ASEAN's formation and development, and the strategic role of each member state in the regional cooperation architecture.

The regional insight developed through this program is multi-layered, encompassing an understanding of the diversity of political systems, economic structures, and development priorities that are different but complementary. Students will understand how these differences can actually become a source of collective strength through the principles of complementarity and comparative advantage in regional cooperation. The cultural intelligence developed enables students to understand the nuances of intercultural communication, including high-context versus low-context communication styles, the importance of concepts in Asian cultures, and various culturally sensitive social protocols. This insight will be invaluable in the context of regional business, diplomatic, and academic cooperation.

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