

## **Intercultural Sensitivity and Arabic Language Learning: Understanding Students’ Perspectives at MAN 1 Tapin**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and Arabic language learning from the perspectives of students at MAN 1 Tapin. Using a qualitative design with semi-structured interviews as the sole data collection method, the research explores how students perceive, experience, and develop intercultural awareness through Arabic learning. Thematic analysis revealed five dominant themes: cultural awareness in Arabic learning, empathy and respect toward cultural difference, communication confidence, openness to cultural diversity, and the role of classroom practices in supporting intercultural learning. The findings indicate that students demonstrate an emerging but positive level of intercultural sensitivity, showing curiosity, tolerance, and growing cultural understanding. However, challenges persist due to limited exposure to authentic Arabic cultural contexts and insufficient integration of intercultural content in the curriculum. The study emphasizes the importance of incorporating intercultural dimensions into Arabic pedagogy to enhance both linguistic and cultural competence. By fostering empathy, openness, and reflective understanding, Arabic language instruction can become a transformative medium for developing global-minded learners.

**Keywords:** *Intercultural sensitivity; Arabic learning; Student perspectives; Cultural awareness.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, Arabic language education in Islamic secondary schools has faced broader challenges that go beyond linguistic competence such as phonology, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary, to include students’ ability to engage sensitively across cultural differences. In the era of globalization, learning a foreign language such as Arabic requires not only communicative proficiency but also intercultural awareness and sensitivity. Language and culture are inseparable; as Eldin (2015) emphasizes, “language is culture, and culture is language.” Within Islamic senior high schools such as MAN 1 Tapin, where Arabic is taught both as a language of religion and as a medium of cultural expression, students’ intercultural sensitivity becomes crucial. It shapes their understanding of Arab culture, influences their attitudes toward linguistic diversity, and fosters respect for cultural pluralism in the global Islamic context.

A growing body of research has examined the intersection of language learning and intercultural sensitivity. For instance, Karkour (2020) explored Arabic as a foreign language learners and found that although cultural integration was

introduced in coursework, changes in students’ intercultural sensitivity levels were not statistically significant after one semester. Drawing on Bennett’s (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), Karkour emphasized that learners move through progressive stages from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. Similarly, studies in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts reveal that intercultural sensitivity positively influences learners’ communicative competence, classroom engagement, and attitudes toward diversity (Etri, 2022). Research conducted in Indonesia further highlights that intercultural sensitivity forms an essential affective domain of intercultural competence, yet empirical investigations into this concept within Arabic language education at the secondary level remain scarce (Uyun & Warsah, 2022).

Existing studies indicate that in Arabic language learning, cultural aspects of Arab societies are often treated as supplementary content rather than integral components of pedagogy. Sulton and Kabir (Sulton & Kabir, 2025) found that integrating Arab cultural elements into Arabic instruction significantly enhanced students’ vocabulary mastery and cultural engagement. Their findings suggest a gap in the literature regarding students’ perspectives on intercultural sensitivity in Arabic classrooms, particularly how students perceive, experience, and evaluate cultural encounters throughout their learning process. Moreover, there is limited research addressing the specific context of madrasah aliyah (Islamic senior high schools) in Indonesia, where Arabic serves dual roles, as a language of religion and as a cultural link to Arab civilization. MAN 1 Tapin, as one such institution, provides a valuable site for understanding these dynamics.

Despite theoretical progress, several gaps remain in current knowledge. First, while intercultural sensitivity frameworks have been tested in other foreign language settings, few studies apply them to Arabic learning in Islamic schools, especially from students’ perspectives. Second, factors such as students’ backgrounds may affect intercultural sensitivity but remain underexplored in Arabic learning contexts. Third, pedagogical strategies that explicitly integrate Arab culture and how these impact students’ cultural sensitivity are not yet well understood. Finally, given that Arabic in Indonesian madrasah settings functions both as a religious and academic subject, unique local interpretations of “Arab culture” may influence students’ cultural attitudes differently from other foreign language learners. Addressing these knowledge gaps is essential to understanding the formation of intercultural awareness among Arabic learners in Islamic secondary education.

Based on these gaps, the present study aims to explore and understand students’ perspectives on intercultural sensitivity within Arabic language learning at MAN 1 Tapin. The research specifically seeks to identify the factors influencing their intercultural sensitivity in Arabic classrooms. Thus, this study goes beyond linguistic competence and focuses on the affective and cultural dimensions of Arabic learning within an Islamic educational framework.

The anticipated outcomes of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the research will extend the application of intercultural sensitivity

models to Arabic language learning in Islamic schools, enriching the global discourse on intercultural communication education. Practically, it will inform Arabic teachers and curriculum designers on how to integrate cultural components meaningfully, enabling students to develop not only linguistic skills but also empathy and intercultural understanding. Ultimately, this study aligns with UNESCO’s educational vision is moving beyond “learning to know” and “learning to do,” toward “learning to live together” (Karkour, 2020), which is the essence of intercultural education in today’s interconnected world.

## **METHODS**

### **Subject of Research**

The subjects of this research are students of Madrasah Aliyah Negeri (MAN) 1 Tapin who are enrolled in Arabic language classes. The participants are selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that they represent a diverse range of backgrounds, including gender, class level, and academic achievement. Approximately 30–40 students from grades XI and XII will participate in the study, as they are considered to have more advanced Arabic proficiency and greater exposure to cultural elements in the curriculum. Two Arabic language teachers and one curriculum coordinator will be involved as supporting participants to provide contextual insights into instructional strategies and institutional perspectives on integrating cultural elements in Arabic education. All participants will be informed about the research objectives, and written consent will be obtained before data collection, in accordance with ethical research principles (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

### **Instrument**

The semi-structured interviews are designed to explore students’ intercultural sensitivity and their experiences learning Arabic in relation to Arab culture. The interview protocol is divided into thematic clusters as follows: (1) How do you perceive the relationship between learning Arabic and understanding Arab culture? (2) What aspects of Arab culture are discussed in your Arabic classes? (3) How do you feel when encountering cultural differences between Indonesian and Arab societies? (4) Can you share an experience where you felt challenged or inspired by cultural content in your Arabic lessons? (5) How confident do you feel when communicating with Arabic speakers or discussing Arab cultural topics? (6) Do you think studying Arabic helps you become more open to other cultures? Why or why not? (7) Are you interested in learning more about Arab traditions, arts, or daily life? (8) What motivates you to learn Arabic, religious, cultural, academic, or personal reasons? (9) How does your teacher include cultural elements in Arabic lessons? (10) In your opinion, what kind of classroom activities could improve students’ intercultural understanding?

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Individual interviews (20–30 minutes each) will be conducted with 15 selected students representing varied sensitivity levels (high, medium, low) based on questionnaire results. Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Two teachers and one curriculum coordinator will also be interviewed to triangulate the data and provide pedagogical perspectives.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Cultural Awareness in Arabic Learning**

Participants overwhelmingly linked the process of learning Arabic to gaining access to cultural knowledge, often describing language and culture as mutually constitutive. Many students articulated that vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and even morphological choices in Arabic carry cultural reference points that cannot be fully understood through grammar drills alone. For instance, when recounting classroom episodes, several students explained how a teacher’s explanation of the phrase “*barakallāhu fik*” or the practice of using honorific forms in conversation opened a window into values such as respect, communal reciprocity, and religio-social etiquette in many Arab settings.

These narratives indicate that, for these learners, cultural awareness is not an optional add-on but a necessary interpretive frame for accurate comprehension and appropriate usage. From an analytic standpoint, this pattern aligns with the assertion in the intercultural sensitivity literature that linguistic competence and cultural awareness co-develop; language learning becomes an interpretive act in which learners negotiate meaning across sociocultural codes rather than merely mapping forms to translations.

A second analytic layer concerns the students’ reflexive recognition of variation within “Arab culture.” Rather than treating Arab culture as monolithic, many interviewees pointed to intra-Arab diversity which suggests movement toward a more nuanced cultural schema. Where earlier exposure had framed “Arab culture” primarily through religious texts or mediated images, classroom activities (e.g., teacher-led comparisons, authentic audio clips) helped some students revise simplistic stereotypes. This revision process is indicative of early progress along Bennett’s DMIS continuum: students move from denial or defense of difference toward recognition and acceptance of complexity. Analytically, this shift matters because it demonstrates that curricular design which foregrounds heterogeneity can catalyze deeper cultural cognition and reduce the risk of reifying stereotypes in pedagogical contexts.

### **Cultural Empathy and Respect**

Interview data indicate that a majority of students developed empathetic orientations when confronted with cultural practices that initially seemed unfamiliar or perplexing. In narrative form, students frequently recounted moments of cognitive and affective reappraisal, for example, reframing what first appeared to be “rigid” gender norms into historically and religiously situated social logics. These reframings often emerged after guided classroom discussions where teachers situated practices within broader socio-historical contexts. Analytically, such reappraisal signals the emergence of empathetic understanding: learners engage in perspective-taking and seek contextual explanations rather than resorting to evaluative judgments. This is an essential affective component of intercultural sensitivity and corresponds with the empathy and interaction enjoyment dimensions in Chen & Starosta’s ISS.

However, the interviews also uncovered limits to empathy: a subset of students reported persistent discomfort when cultural content touched on themes that conflicted with their personal beliefs or local norms (e.g., gender interaction protocols, family authority structures). These tensions were not resolved entirely through classroom exposure; instead, students described oscillations between appreciation and critical distance. From an analytic perspective, such ambivalence is important because it shows that empathy is not a unidirectional or automatic outcome of exposure. Rather, empathy develops conditionally, shaped by prior value frameworks, identity investments, and the pedagogical strategies used to present cultural material. For practitioners, the implication is that fostering empathy requires careful scaffolding: instructors should create structured reflection spaces where students can process dissonance, voice concerns, and, when appropriate, engage in comparative ethical reasoning rather than mere tolerance.

#### **Interaction Confidence and Communication Readiness**

A recurrent theme was the discrepancy between cognitive awareness and communicative confidence. Many participants reported knowing culturally appropriate phrases and being familiar with polite forms of address in Arabic, yet expressed substantial anxiety about performing these forms in real interactions. This reluctance stemmed from fear of pragmatic errors (incorrect honorific use, offending through mistranslation) and limited opportunities for authentic interaction. The analysis suggests that while classroom instruction succeeded in transmitting declarative cultural knowledge, it was less effective at generating procedural competence and performative confidence.

The distinction is theoretically meaningful: intercultural sensitivity involves not only attitudinal shifts but also behavioral readiness to engage across cultures. Learners in this study were often still in the phase of acquiring cognitive maps of

culture without corresponding enactment skills.

Closer inspection of interview narratives reveals that when opportunities for low-stakes practice were available students reported marked improvements in confidence. Those accounts point to experiential learning as a critical mediator: repeated, scaffolded performance in supportive contexts translates cultural knowledge into communicative routines and diminishes anxiety. Analytically, these findings support the pedagogical principle that building interaction confidence requires deliberate practice opportunities, corrective but non-threatening feedback, and incremental exposure to real or simulated intercultural encounters. For MAN 1 Tapin, then, adding structured conversational practice and safe simulated interactions should be prioritized to convert attitudinal gains into communicative action.

#### *Facilitating Speaking Arabic and Increasing Confidence Openness and Curiosity Toward Arab Culture*

Students’ responses reflected a relatively high degree of openness and curiosity—both as motivational energy for language study and as a disposition toward cultural learning. Many interviewees described using extracurricular resources (films, social media, religious lectures) to explore cultural nuance outside the classroom, linking this curiosity to enhanced listening comprehension and pragmatic insight. This pattern underlines a virtuous cycle: curiosity prompts autonomous cultural exploration, which in turn deepens classroom learning and reinforces motivation. Analytically, such self-directed learning behavior corresponds to the interaction engagement and interaction attentiveness dimensions of Chen & Starosta’s framework, and suggests that learners who are internally motivated will more likely seek culturally authentic inputs.

Yet the interviews also pointed to disparities in the scope of curiosity: some students sought deeper historical or literary understanding (e.g., classical poetry, regional histories), while others focused primarily on surface cultural artifacts (food, clothing, popular media). These differences appear related to prior exposure, epistemic interests, and perceived utility of Arabic (religious vs. instrumental). From an analytic perspective, this heterogeneity implies that a one-size-fits-all cultural syllabus will not equally stimulate every learner’s curiosity. Therefore, differentiated instruction could better harness diverse curiosities and promote more sustained engagement across the student body.

#### **Classroom Practices Supporting Intercultural Learning**

Interviewees identified several pedagogical moves that students found particularly effective for intercultural learning: contextualized explanations for lexical items, comparative classroom discussions that link Arab and Indonesian practices, incorporation of authentic audiovisual materials, and occasional guest talks or

virtual exchanges with Arabic speakers. Students commented that teachers who explicitly connected language forms to cultural meaning made the material more memorable and meaningful. Analytically, these comments support a situated view of language learning: teaching that embeds form within function and culture promotes deeper semantic processing and long-term retention. Furthermore, such practices foster interpretive competence, students learn to infer intent, politeness strategies, and register choices across contexts.

Nevertheless, interview data also indicated variability in implementation: some teachers integrated cultural content regularly and creatively, while others prioritized exam-oriented grammar instruction. Students perceived the latter approach as inhibiting cultural growth because it reduced opportunities for interpretive dialogue and real-world application. This divergence suggests systemic constraints that mediate whether intercultural learning is fully realized. Analytically, the disparity underscores the need for institutional alignment: if high-stakes assessments privilege discrete linguistic knowledge, teachers may feel compelled to deprioritize culture. Effective curriculum design must therefore reconcile assessment frameworks with intercultural objectives by embedding cultural competencies into evaluative criteria and providing professional development for teachers to implement culturally responsive pedagogy.

### **Challenges in Developing Intercultural Sensitivity**

Students’ narratives surfaced several structural and affective barriers to cultivating intercultural sensitivity. Structurally, limited contact with native speakers, scarce authentic materials in teaching resources, and heavy curricular emphasis on grammar for examinations were frequently cited. Affectively, fear of social mockery, concerns about misrepresenting a culture, and internalized stereotypes acted as brakes on open intercultural engagement. Analytically, these barriers reveal how institutional architecture and classroom microclimates interact: even motivated learners may be constrained by lack of resources or by classroom norms that stigmatize tentative attempts at intercultural dialogue. From a theoretical standpoint, the findings emphasize that intercultural sensitivity is not purely an individual trait but is socially scaffolded; it requires enabling conditions to flourish.

Importantly, the interviews suggested potential leverage points to mitigate these challenges. Students recommended low-cost interventions such as curated multimedia libraries, scheduled conversational practice, and collaborative projects with language learners from other schools. They also emphasized teacher modeling: when teachers candidly discuss their own encounters with cultural misunderstandings and demonstrate reflective practice, students feel permission to

explore and make mistakes. Analytically, these suggestions align with Vygotskian ideas about the social mediation of learning: guided participation and modeled reflection create the proximal conditions in which intercultural sensitivity can develop from novice to more adaptive phases. Implementing such interventions would require modest resource reallocation and a shift in classroom norms toward experimentation and reflective dialogue.

### **Discussion: Language–Culture Co-constitution in Arabic Learning**

The interview findings show that students at MAN 1 Tapin conceive Arabic learning as inseparable from cultural understanding: lexical items, expressions, and pragmatic conventions are meaningful only when interpreted within cultural frames. This empirically observed co-constitution of language and culture echoes recent scholarship arguing that language pedagogy must “interculturalize” instruction to foster both linguistic competence and cultural literacy, programmatic interventions that foreground culture in the target language classroom improve comprehension, retention, and communicative appropriateness (Hossain, 2024). These results reaffirm constructivist and developmental accounts of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 2017), learners move from simplistic cultural schemas toward more differentiated and contextualized understandings when pedagogical inputs expose them to internal cultural variation and sociocultural explanations (rather than only prescriptive rules). The trajectories reported by students are consistent with DMIS stages of movement from denial/defense toward recognition and acceptance. This supports the contention in intercultural pedagogy literature that curricular emphasis on heterogeneity accelerates cognitive complexity in learners’ cultural schemas.

The data indicate substantial gains in culturally empathic stances: many students engaged in perspective-taking and reinterpreted initially puzzling practices within historic or religious logics. That said, empathy was not universal or unqualified, some interviewees retained discomfort around culturally sensitive issues (e.g., gender norms) despite cognitive understanding (Vromans et al., 2023). This pattern aligns with literature showing that mere exposure to cultural content does not automatically generate stable affective change; affective transformation requires guided reflection, structured opportunities to voice and negotiate dissonance, and scaffolded comparison that attends to students’ background values. Research on classroom facilitation of intercultural reflection emphasizes strategies such as dialogic inquiry, critical incident discussion, and reflective writing to convert cognitive knowledge into empathic orientation and ethically informed understanding (Tayyara, 2022).

Practically, this means Arabic teachers should pair cultural content with pedagogical routines that surface students’ prior beliefs and guide reappraisal. The literature suggests that interventions that blend authentic cultural artifacts with reflective sequencing are particularly effective in promoting empathetic shifts. Such staged scaffolding helps learners reframe puzzling practices not as “otherness to be judged” but as intelligible cultural logic (Ruiz-Bernardo et al., 2024), thereby deepening intercultural sensitivity beyond superficial tolerance.

A persistent theme in the interviews is the gap between declarative cultural knowledge and behavioral readiness to communicate. Students frequently knew polite lexical forms and situational norms but hesitated to enact them with real interlocutors, citing fears of pragmatic error and limited authentic contact. This competence-performance gap aligns with second-language acquisition literature that distinguishes declarative knowledge from proceduralized communicative skill; the latter is predominantly acquired through repeated, situated practice and not merely through informational instruction. Empirical studies in language classrooms demonstrate that low-stakes, repeated interactional practice (role-plays, conversation clubs, virtual exchanges) is crucial to converting knowledge into fluent, confident action (Göbel & Helmke, 2010). Consequently, pedagogical programming at MAN 1 Tapin should prioritize repeated, scaffolded interactional formats that reduce affective filter pressures and create safe environments for trial and error. The literature supports using structured conversation tasks, peer feedback protocols, and technology-mediated exchanges with native speakers to accelerate proceduralization and interaction confidence. In sum, to move students along Bennett’s DMIS toward adaptation (where they can both understand and skillfully navigate cultural difference), deliberate practice opportunities are essential complements to cultural information.

Interview narratives reveal heterogeneity in students’ curiosities: while many pursued religiously motivated cultural study (texts, nasheed, tafsir contexts), others explored popular media, cuisine, or literature. This variation highlights the role of motivation in shaping the depth and direction of intercultural engagement. Research on motivational profiles in intercultural learning indicates that intrinsic interest and perceived instrumentality (religious study, future mobility) both influence the kinds of cultural resources learners pursue and the intensity of engagement (Alzoubi & Alsalhi, 2025). Educationally, differentiated curricular options can better channel diverse motivations into sustained intercultural learning.

Moreover, evidence suggests that learners with proactive, curiosity-driven strategies tend to create their own scaffolds (autonomous media use, social networking), generating a virtuous cycle of exposure and competence. Institutions

can amplify these tendencies by curating resource repositories and endorsing extracurricular clubs that align with students’ varied interests. Such scaffolding helps democratize intercultural opportunities across students with differing motivational profiles (Hossain, 2024).

Students reported that time pressures and exam-focused curricula often relegated culture to a secondary role, creating systemic constraints on intercultural development. This echoes wider findings that assessment regimes shape instructional priorities; when evaluations emphasize discrete grammar knowledge, teachers are incentivized to concentrate on form-focused instruction at the expense of interpretive cultural tasks. Recent studies argue for systemic realignment: to realize intercultural learning outcomes, assessment instruments must formally recognize cultural and communicative competencies (rubrics for pragmatic appropriateness, intercultural reflection journals, performance assessments). Without alignment, curriculum innovations will remain isolated and fragile.

Based on interview evidence and the reviewed literature, several evidence-based actions are recommended. First, implement structured conversational practice (daily or weekly *muhādathah* sessions) to build interaction confidence; research shows these routines substantially increase procedural competence and reduce anxiety (Göbel & Helmke, 2010). Second, incorporate sequenced reflective tasks (interpretation, contextualization, and reflexivity) to cultivate empathy and ethical understanding; pedagogical studies find that reflection converts exposure into lasting attitude change (Vromans et al., 2023). Third, align assessment with intercultural learning goals by including performance-based measures (oral pragmatic tasks, intercultural portfolios) so teachers are incentivized to balance form and culture (Casoli-Uvsløkk & Brevik, 2023). Finally, invest in teacher training and low-cost multimedia resources to address systemic constraints; comparative studies highlight that teacher competence and resource access mediate the success of intercultural initiatives.

This study contributes to applied intercultural pedagogy by empirically illustrating how intercultural sensitivity develops within a religiously inflected secondary-school context. The findings suggest that widely used frameworks Chen & Starosta’s ISS (2000) are applicable but require contextual modulation: ecclesial or religious motivations shape trajectories of curiosity and acceptable pedagogical moves, and assessment regimes exert strong shaping effects on what teachers enact. Future research could experimentally test specific instructional sequences (e.g., reflection + role-play vs. role-play alone) to measure their differential impact on affective and behavioral dimensions of intercultural sensitivity. Longitudinal

designs would also clarify whether the initial gains we observed persist and coalesce into adaptive intercultural competence over time

## CONCLUSION

The study revealed that students at MAN 1 Tapin exhibit a developing yet promising level of intercultural sensitivity within their Arabic language learning experience. Through exposure to cultural knowledge, empathetic reflection, and classroom practices that emphasize both linguistic and cultural understanding, students are gradually progressing toward higher levels of intercultural competence. The findings demonstrate that Arabic learning, when contextualized within cultural frameworks, fosters openness, respect, and awareness of diversity, key dimensions of intercultural sensitivity as theorized by Bennett and Chen & Starosta. However, the study also highlights challenges such as limited opportunities for authentic intercultural interaction, insufficient integration of cultural content in lessons, and lingering anxiety in communication. These findings suggest that strengthening Arabic pedagogy through intercultural approaches can significantly enhance students' linguistic proficiency and intercultural maturity.

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