



Reconstructing English Curriculum under the MBKM Policy to Foster Intercultural Communicative Competence: Effectiveness, Challenges, and Opportunities

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Abstract

This study explores the effectiveness of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) curriculum in developing intercultural communication (ICC) competencies among students of English language education. This area currently lacks empirical evidence in the Indonesian higher education context. Using a mixed-methods design with a sequential explanatory model, quantitative data were collected through a Likert-scale questionnaire based on Kirkpatrick's four-level evaluation model and Byram's ICC framework, and further expanded upon through semi-structured interviews. The study involved 82 questionnaire respondents and five interview participants, selected using purposive sampling to capture the diverse experiences of students who had participated in MBKM for at least one semester. Findings indicate that 82.9% of students found the learning methods easy to understand, and 67% rated the material as relevant to their academic needs, reflecting positive outcomes at Kirkpatrick's Levels 1 through 4. Students also reported increased cultural awareness and opportunities for authentic interactions, aligning with the five ICC dimensions in Byram's model. However, challenges persist, including gaps in interdisciplinary understanding, heavy workloads, and inconsistent support from lecturers. These results suggest that MBKM has the potential to be a transformative platform for developing linguistic, cultural, and collaborative skills, provided that curriculum coordination and pedagogical reinforcement for lecturers are systematically implemented. Practical implications include structured study load management, standardized feedback mechanisms, and intercultural pedagogy training for lecturers. Limitations include its single-semester scope, limited participant

diversity, and reliance on self-reported data, highlighting the need for multi-institutional longitudinal research that combines perception-based and performance-based measures.

Keywords: *English language learning; Intercultural competence; MBKM program; Teaching effectiveness*

Introduction

In an era of increasing cross-cultural mobility, intercultural miscommunication remains a challenge, even among university students. Studies in Southeast Asia indicate that between 40% and 60% of students experience communication barriers in multicultural academic contexts, primarily due to a lack of cultural awareness and ethnocentrism, rather than language barriers (Kumar et al., 2023; Nurazizah et al., 2021; Rajan et al., 2021). This finding emphasizes that language learning should not solely focus on linguistic accuracy but also on developing the ability to communicate sensitively, adaptively, and ethically across cultures.

Since 2020, millions of Indonesian students have participated in academic exchanges, internships, research collaborations, or multicultural programs in various countries (Kemendikbudristek, 2024). However, several studies indicate that many language learners still struggle to interpret cultural norms, adapt their interaction styles, and communicate confidently in multicultural environments, despite their strengths in grammar and vocabulary (Fathi et al., 2025; Tatzali et al., 2025). This situation underscores the importance of developing intercultural communication competencies (ICC) as a fundamental component of English language education.

In the Indonesian context, the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program—launched in 2020—was designed to address the demands of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and global dynamics by providing flexible learning and granting students the right to study outside their study program for three semesters (Anggara, 2023; Purwanti, 2021; Putra et al., 2024). Through activities such as internships, student exchanges, research, and entrepreneurship, MBKM aims to broaden cross-disciplinary horizons and develop soft skills aligned with the needs of the workplace (Apoko et al., 2022; Hasibuan et al., 2025).

However, the reality of its implementation has not fully aligned with the policy's ideals. Recent evaluations of the MBKM program show that while the initiative has enhanced students' general communication and soft skills, only about one-third of participants reported feeling confident communicating in multicultural contexts. Lecturers likewise expressed difficulties in operationalizing intercultural objectives within their teaching practices, particularly in aligning course outcomes with global competency goals (Heriyadi, 2025; Rusdiyani et al., 2024; Zakiyyah et al., 2021). This indicates a gap between the global competency-based curriculum and the inconsistent implementation of learning that systematically supports the development of ICC.

This gap demonstrates the need for a reconstruction of the English Language Education curriculum to be more responsive to the needs of ICC development within the MBKM framework. Reconstruction should not only involve revising the syllabus and lesson plans but also include the integration of experiential learning, cultural reflection, virtual exchanges, multicultural case studies, and collaboration across campuses and countries. The curriculum needs to be designed holistically, considering interdisciplinarity, flexibility between study programs, and faculty training to guide the development of students' cultural awareness. Previous studies have also confirmed that the curriculum remains linguistically oriented and lacks adequate socio-cultural exposure (Rusdiyani et al., 2024; Tobondo, 2024; Wahyuni et al., 2023).

Given this context, this study focuses on the effectiveness of MBKM implementation in developing students' intercultural communication competencies in English Language Education. This study examines the extent to which the curriculum and learning implementation contribute to students' ICC using Kirkpatrick's (1994) four-tier learning evaluation model, which encompasses reactions, learning, behaviour, and outcomes. This approach enables a comprehensive evaluation of not only student perceptions but also behavioural changes and actual achievements in cross-cultural interaction skills.

In addition to evaluating effectiveness, this study identified key challenges in integrating ICC into the MBKM program, including a lack of intercultural content and limited contextual learning resources (Byram, 2021). Therefore, this study formulated the following research questions:

- a. To what extent is the MBKM program effective in supporting the development of intercultural communicative competence of English Education students?
- b. What main challenges do students and lecturers face when implementing the MBKM program to achieve intercultural communicative competence?
- c. What opportunities can be utilized to increase the effectiveness of the MBKM program in English learning based on intercultural communicative competence?

This research provides both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this study expands the discourse on designing an English language curriculum based on intercultural competency within the MBKM ecosystem. Practically, these findings offer recommendations for higher education institutions in integrating intercultural learning through hands-on experiences, virtual exchanges, multicultural case studies, and faculty capacity development. The research findings are expected to form the basis for more contextual, collaborative learning strategies, oriented toward strengthening soft skills, including empathy, cultural awareness, and intercultural communication skills.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach with a sequential explanatory design, in which quantitative analysis was conducted first, followed by qualitative analysis. This design was chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of the MBKM program in supporting students' ICC. The quantitative phase aimed to identify general trends by measuring student perceptions, while the qualitative phase further explored the quantitative results by exploring students' experiences, challenges, and opportunities during MBKM program.

Research Subjects

The research subjects were active students in the English Language Education Study Program at a university in Manado. The sample selection used a purposive sampling technique, with the criteria being students who had participated in the MBKM program for at least one semester. A total of 82 students met the criteria and completed the questionnaire. This number represents the entire population of students who have completed the MBKM program in the relevant year, making it suitable for use as the basis for descriptive analysis.

For the qualitative phase, five students were selected as informants for in-depth interviews based on the following criteria: (1) having very high or very low perception scores on the questionnaire, (2) having participated in at least two different MBKM schemes, and (3) providing rich, open-ended, narrative answers. The five informants were given pseudonyms—“Nadya,” “Arhan,” “Sarah,” “Rizky,” and “Fikri”—to maintain anonymity. This selection aimed to present a variety of experiences for more comprehensive data. Data saturation was reached in the fourth interview, and a fifth interview was conducted to confirm the consistency of the themes.

Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

Data collection was conducted in the even semester of the 2023/2024 academic year (January–June 2024), aligning with the schedules of students who had completed at least one semester of the MBKM program. In the quantitative phase, the main instrument was a Likert-scale questionnaire designed based on two theoretical frameworks: Kirkpatrick's (1994) four levels of learning evaluation—reaction, learning, behaviour, and outcome—and Byram's (2021) five dimensions of the ICC: attitude, knowledge, interaction skills, discovery skills, and cultural awareness. The blueprint of indicators, sub-indicators, and questionnaire item distribution is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Blueprint of MBKM program Effectiveness Questionnaire in ICC Development

Indicator	Sub-Indicators	Item No.
Perception of Learning	Method and Relevance	1, 2
	Satisfaction and Motivation	3, 4
	Interaction in Class	5, 6
Learning Process	Learning Activities	7, 8, 9
	Lecturer Support	10, 11
	Learning materials	12, 13
Evaluation and Assessment	Midterm & Final Exams	14, 15, 16
	Academic Assignments	17, 18, 19
	Achievement Values	20
Behaviour and Implementation	Independence and Responsibility	21, 22
	Learning Applications	23, 24
	Cultural Sensitivity	25
Impact and Sustainability	Academic & Personal Development	26, 27
	Multicultural Competence	28, 29, 30

Before being used for primary data collection, the questionnaire was piloted on 20 students outside the study sample. This number is within the generally recommended range for pilot testing of attitude scale instruments, namely 15–30 respondents (Johanson & Brooks, 2010), and is proportional to the size of the study population. At this stage, the testing focused on item readability, clarity of instructions, and consistency of responses. Based on the pilot test results, three items were revised to improve clarity of language and context. Validity testing using Pearson correlation revealed that all items had an r value of ≥ 0.217 ($df = 80$; $p < 0.05$), and reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha yielded a value of 0.860, indicating high internal consistency. The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms.

In the qualitative phase, data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide explored students' experiences participating in MBKM program, the challenges they faced in cross-cultural communication, the adaptation strategies they employed, and the opportunities for developing ICC. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasting 35–55 minutes, and recorded with the participants' consent. The recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Given that the researchers were from the same study program, efforts were made to minimize bias by not interviewing students who were taught directly and by applying member checking to the analysis results.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted in stages using a mixed-methods approach. In the quantitative phase, data were analyzed descriptively by displaying percentages for each questionnaire item. The results of the analysis are presented in a percentage table to illustrate the trend in students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the MBKM program in supporting the development of intercultural communication competencies. Meanwhile, qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) data

familiarization, (2) initial coding, (3) theme discovery, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition and naming, and (6) report preparation.

Quantitative and qualitative results were integrated using a side-by-side comparison strategy, in which statistical results were supplemented with in-depth narratives from participants. To enhance the credibility and validity of the research results, method triangulation was used by comparing and confirming the questionnaire and interview results, thus gaining a deeper and more reliable understanding of the effectiveness and challenges of implementing the MBKM program in developing students' ICC.

Results

RQ1: To what extent is the MBKM program effective in supporting the development of intercultural communicative competence of English education students?

Student Perceptions of MBKM Learning

As a first step to address the research objectives regarding the effectiveness of the MBKM program in supporting the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), an analysis was conducted of students' perceptions of their learning experiences. These perceptions encompassed three main aspects: learning methods and relevance, learning satisfaction and motivation, and classroom interactions. The distribution of questionnaire responses is presented in Table 2 below.

Sub-Indicators	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Method and Relevance	The learning methods in the MBKM program are easy to understand and tailored to student needs.	11	6.1	51.2	31.7
	The material taught during MBKM is relevant to my life and future profession.	17.1	15.9	40.2	26.8
Satisfaction and Motivation	I feel satisfied taking part in English learning through the MBKM program.	14.6	13.4	40.2	31.7
	I am motivated to be actively involved in the learning process during MBKM.	13.4	18.3	41.5	26.8
Interaction in Class	Lecturers encourage active student participation during MBKM learning.	7.3	13.4	46.3	32.9
	I felt comfortable discussing with lecturers and friends during the MBKM program.	12.2	6.1	48.8	32.9

The results in Table 2 indicate that students' perceptions of English learning in the MBKM program were generally positive. The majority of students agreed that the learning methods applied were easy to understand (82.9%) and provided a space relevant to their needs (67%). These percentages suggest that the program does not merely transfer knowledge but provides meaningful exposure aligned with practical communication needs. These findings were further reinforced by interviews, which demonstrated how students directly experienced the adaptive teaching approach and its relevance to classroom contexts across study programs. It was confirmed by Nadya, who stated that,

"...lecturers are now more frequently explaining basic concepts explicitly, especially regarding language structure and cultural context. It has made me more aware of how to communicate material in a way that's understandable across backgrounds..."

This statement suggests that the MBKM teaching strategy is perceived as adaptive and contextual, thereby supporting a more comprehensive understanding.

Furthermore, the aspects of satisfaction and motivation, which received majority support in the questionnaire (71.9% of students felt satisfied and 68.3% were motivated), were also reflected in the interview narrative. Sarah revealed,

"...at first I was a bit uncomfortable, but over time I felt that the group discussions became more diverse and I was more motivated to be active..."

This shows that a heterogeneous learning environment actually encourages higher engagement and motivation to learn. In line with this, Arhan added

"...the presence of students from other study programs broadens the discussion perspectives. It makes it more challenging and contributes positively to the learning spirit..."

This shows that a heterogeneous learning environment encourages higher learning engagement and motivation.

Regarding classroom interaction, questionnaire data showed that students felt quite comfortable participating in discussions and felt actively encouraged by their lecturers (79.2% and 81.7%, respectively). This aligns with Rizky and Fikri's experiences, who stated,

"...we've learned to appreciate different ways of thinking. I feel like this has broadened my horizons and made me more flexible in my communication..."

"... I often have discussions with students from other study programs, and it opens my eyes to how English can be used in different contexts..."

In this way, students not only assess cognitively, but also directly experience a more open, adaptive, and collaborative classroom atmosphere, making learning more meaningful in a cross-disciplinary context.

Learning Process During MBKM

The learning process during MBKM includes the dynamics of student involvement in class activities, independence in completing assignments, support provided by lecturers, and a learning evaluation system (see table 3).

Table 3 English Learning Process in the MBKM Program

Sub-Indicators	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Learning Activities	I was active in group discussions and class activities during MBKM.	14.6	18.3	42.7	24.4
	I regularly read and understand the teaching materials provided during MBKM.	11	14.6	41.5	32.9
	I can complete MBKM tasks independently and on time.	12.2	18.3	46.3	23.2
Lecturer Support	The lecturer provided constructive feedback on my learning outcomes.	3.7	17.1	47.6	31.7
	The lecturer's explanation helped me understand the material more deeply.	12.2	12.2	45.1	30.5
Midterm & Final Exams	I understood the material well before taking the MBKM exam.	9.8	17.1	42.7	30.5
	The MBKM exam questions are in accordance with the material that has been taught.	9.8	8.5	47.6	34.1
	I did the MBKM exam independently without any help from others.	12.2	23.2	37.8	26.8

Table 3 shows that the learning process during MBKM was perceived positively by the majority of students. However, there were variations in experiences that enriched their understanding of classroom dynamics across study programs. Learning activities, for example, demonstrated high engagement, with 67.1% of students reporting that they were actively involved in group discussions and class activities. It was reinforced by the 74.4% of students who regularly read and understood the teaching materials. Furthermore, Nadya and Rizky revealed,

"...the presence of students from other study programs has allowed me to more frequently explain material in a communicative manner. This has trained me to adapt my language to different audiences, and I find this skill very useful for developing language flexibility..."

"...I often explain English concepts to students from other study programs. It was a bit awkward at first, but over time, it became more enjoyable as I learned to adapt my delivery method. This made learning more practical and less theoretical..."

This interdisciplinary situation encourages students to use English not only as an academic tool, but also as a means of genuine collaboration, in line with the spirit of MBKM, which emphasizes collaborative and contextual learning.

Regarding independence in completing assignments, questionnaire results showed that 69.5% of students felt capable of completing assignments independently and on time. It is reflected in Fikri's statement, which states:

"...when working on cross-study assignments, I often choose to write reports or presentations in English. This is a challenge, but also an opportunity to practice. I feel like initiatives like this make me more confident and consistent in using the language in different contexts..."

Although some respondents in the questionnaire stated that they experienced obstacles, interviews showed that students who successfully adapted achieved increased self-confidence and responsibility in learning.

Meanwhile, positive perceptions of lecturer support were also confirmed in interviews. 79.3% and 75.6% of students in the questionnaires assessed that lecturers provided constructive feedback and helped them understand the material. Arhan described that,

"...MBKM expands the use of English in discussions and group work. This is not only achieved through student-to-student interactions, but also through the responsive guidance and adjustments in approach provided by lecturers..."

However, the interviews also provided a critical dimension to these results. Rizky, for example, assessed that "the teaching method lacked flexibility" and suggested the use of more participatory methods such as simulations or collaborative projects.

"I think the teaching method isn't flexible enough. I suggest using more participatory methods, such as simulations or collaborative projects. With students from various study programs, these methods would be more relevant."

It provides context that positive perceptions of lecturer support are not absolute, but still require improvements in more adaptive pedagogical aspects.

The results from the learning evaluation in the questionnaire—which showed that the majority of students understood the material before the exam (73.2%) and considered the questions to be following what was taught (81.7%)—were also reinforced by Sarah's narrative, which stated that,

"The experience of cross-study discussions encouraged me to express my ideas in simpler yet precise language. This helped me better prepare for the exam."

This indicates that the learning process helps students prepare well for the assessment. However, Nadya and Fikri also criticized the aspect of integrity in exam preparation, which only received 64.6% approval in the questionnaire. Nadya emphasized:

"...assessment should not be solely based on final exams. Weekly reflections or cross-disciplinary projects would be more in line with the MBKM spirit..."

Fikri added,

"... grades focus too much on academic output, not the actual learning process. Affective aspects such as cooperation and empathy also need to be valued..."

Students not only engage in technical learning but also engage emotionally and reflectively in responding to cross-disciplinary challenges, developing independence, and enhancing their active use of English in real-life contexts. This process demonstrates that learning during MBKM provides authentic experiences and encourages more contextual and responsible learning behaviours.

Behaviour and Impact

This section explores how the MBKM program not only influences students' academic achievement but also shapes their learning behaviour, reflective attitudes, and ability to apply English in real-world contexts. This aspect is crucial because the success of MBKM is not solely measured by the classroom learning process but also by the extent to which cross-study experiences foster independence, responsibility, and communication competencies relevant to professional needs.

Table 4 The Impact of MBKM on Learning Behaviour and English Teaching

Sub-Indicators	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Value Achievement	I got satisfactory grades from studying MBKM.	11	4.9	51.2	32.9
Independence and Responsibility	I became more independent and responsible in completing assignments after participating in MBKM.	9.8	14.6	47.6	28
	I developed a more reflective learning attitude while participating in MBKM.	7.3	12.2	43.9	36.6
Learning Applications	I apply the English knowledge from MBKM in my daily life.	8.5	12.2	39	40.2
	I am more confident in using English after participating in MBKM.	6.1	14.6	45.1	34.1

Table 4 above shows that the MBKM program positively impacted student learning behaviour and achievement, both academically and in English language application. A total of 84.1% of students reported achieving satisfactory grades during MBKM. This finding is supported by Nadya's interview narrative, which states,

"...I've felt quite significant changes, especially in my confidence and speaking skills. Participating in discussions and collaborations across departments has required me to explain ideas clearly and contextually, which has ultimately impacted my academic performance..."

The indicators of independence and responsibility, which were agreed to by 75.6% of students in the questionnaire, were also strongly reflected in the participants' experiences. Rizky stated that

"...I've become accustomed to explaining linguistic terms to students from other departments, and it requires me to truly understand them before explaining. It feels like teaching practice, and it encourages me to be more responsible in my learning..."

This process not only strengthens academic understanding, but also encourages the growth of a sense of responsibility for the collaborative learning process.

Meanwhile, the strengthening of the reflective attitude acknowledged by 80.5% of questionnaire respondents was also reflected in Sarah's statement, which said,

"...I've become more active in discussions and am used to expressing my opinions in English. While not always perfect, I feel more confident because I'm used to interacting with people from different backgrounds..."

This shows that MBKM not only influences cognitive aspects, but also encourages students to conduct self-evaluations on how they learn and contribute in a heterogeneous classroom environment.

Regarding the application of English outside the classroom—which was supported by 79.2% of questionnaire respondents—Fikri and Arhan confirmed that they use English not only for academic assignments, but also in presentations, discussions, and cross-study group interactions. Fikri emphasized,

"... I feel more flexible—both in writing, speaking, and listening. MBKM has made me more aware that communication must be ethical and inclusive..."

Arhan added,

"...for me, cross-study interactions are invaluable training for the future. I've learned to simplify material to make it understandable to different audiences, and that's an important skill if I become a teacher..."

This confirms that the impact of MBKM extends beyond grades to developing interpersonal competencies that support authentic English application in various social and academic contexts. Thus, the program not only results in changes in learning behaviour but also shapes students' thinking and communication in a more responsible, contextual way, and oriented toward cross-disciplinary collaboration.

Impact on Intercultural Competence (ICC)

One important contribution of the MBKM program in English learning is strengthening students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Based on the framework developed by Byram (1997), ICC encompasses five main components: openness, cultural knowledge, interpretation and relationship skills, interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness. All of these aspects emerged in student experiences recorded in interviews.

First, the aspects of openness and empathy are depicted in Nadya's experience,

"...this program made me aware of how to communicate material in a way that can be understood across backgrounds..."

This statement demonstrates that interactions with students from other study programs encouraged her to think across perspectives and adapt her communication style to be inclusive and acceptable in a multicultural context. This reflects curiosity and openness, two fundamental attitudes in building intercultural communication.

Fikri also displays a similar attitude,

"... I feel that the learning during this program has not only improved my language skills, but also shaped my character—being more patient, open, and able to communicate with various types of people..."

This expression demonstrates a shift in attitude from individualistic to more collaborative, responsive to differences, and adaptable to the diversity of learning styles and academic cultural backgrounds.

Meanwhile, interpretation skills and intercultural relations are evident in Rizky's narrative, which reveals that,

"...there are law students who take the English literacy class...they often bring perspectives that are far from what we're used to. But that's the fun part—we learn to appreciate different ways of thinking. I feel like this broadens my horizons and makes me more flexible in my communication..."

This experience taught her to convey messages more flexibly and appreciate different ways of thinking. She says this interaction "made me more flexible in my communication"—a way of applying intercultural bridging skills to academic discussions.

Meanwhile, communicative interaction and adaptation skills are reflected in Arhan's statement which explains that,

"...the presence of students from other study programs changed the class dynamics—discussions became more expansive because of their different perspectives. But I also encountered some challenges. For example, the learning pace sometimes had to be adjusted to accommodate those unfamiliar with linguistic terms. Overall, however, it honed my ability to simplify the material, and that will be very beneficial if I become a teacher in the future."

Finally, critical cultural awareness emerged from Sarah's reflection, which initially felt awkward due to cross-study interactions. However, she later realised that the experience made her "rethink things I used to take for granted."

"At first, I felt uncomfortable having students from outside the department in our English class. But over time, I saw the benefits. When they asked questions or made comments, I rethought things I once thought were obvious. I learned a lot about how to explain things in more accessible language."

This awareness is a form of critical cultural awareness, specifically the ability to critically examine personal assumptions about communication norms while simultaneously learning to understand diversity in academic practice.

Thus, students' experience in the MBKM program not only enhances linguistic and academic skills but also significantly strengthens their intercultural competence. They learn to become communicators who are not only technically effective but also ethical, inclusive, and adaptive to multicultural contexts. The MBKM program, with its collaborative design across study programs, significantly contributes to building students' intercultural communicative competence, which is highly relevant in facing the challenges of globalization and the intercultural workplace.

RQ2: What do students and lecturers face the main challenges in implementing the MBKM program to achieve intercultural communicative competence?

Challenges in Understanding the Material

Although the implementation of MBKM has generally received a positive response, understanding the learning material remains a major challenge for students, particularly in cross-program learning situations. This challenge arises from the mismatch between the depth of the material, the academic background of the participants, and the uneven learning pace (see table 5).

Table 5 Quality and Level of Difficulty of MBKM Learning Materials

Sub-Indicators	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Learning materials	MBKM teaching materials are structured in an interesting and easy-to-understand manner.	11	23.2	34.1	31.7
	I had difficulty understanding some of the material taught during MBKM.	22	9.8	39	29.3

The questionnaire results indicated significant challenges in understanding the material during the MBKM program. Although 65.8% of respondents stated that the MBKM teaching materials were designed in an engaging and easy-to-understand manner, 68.3% also reported experiencing difficulties in understanding some of the material. This disparity indicates a gap between curriculum design and actual student engagement, particularly in the context of heterogeneous, cross-study program classes.

This finding was reinforced through interviews with students. Nadya revealed

“...some of them are less familiar with linguistic terms or academic rhetoric, so I have to simplify the way I convey ideas...”

It highlights the importance of translanguaging and interdisciplinary communication skills in MBKM learning. The need to adapt language styles creates an additional burden that is not always anticipated in instructional design.

Furthermore, Arhan said that equalizing the level of material reduced the intellectual challenge for him as a student in the English study program.

“...sometimes the discussion becomes too basic... I feel less challenged academically...”

It highlights the pedagogical dilemma of balancing the depth of material with the inclusivity of participants across disciplines—an issue that requires more adaptive curriculum strategies.

Sarah added that differences in student readiness slow down the pace of learning and tend to be inconsistent. She said,

“... the class tends to slow down... I felt less focused because of this adjustment...”

This statement aligns with quantitative data, which shows that one-third of respondents did not feel that the material was delivered effectively.

Overall, the quantitative and qualitative data confirm that challenges in understanding the material in MBKM stem from differences in academic backgrounds, learning rhythms, and perceptions of depth. For more effective and meaningful learning, teaching materials in an interdisciplinary context need to be designed with principles of pedagogical flexibility and intercultural sensitivity, enabling them to reach diverse learners without compromising academic quality.

Challenges in Workload Management

Another aspect that is a challenge in implementing MBKM is the management of academic workload, which, although considered beneficial by most students, also creates its own stress in practice (see Table 6).

Table 6 Benefits and Academic Workload in the MBKM Program

Sub-Indicators	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Academic Assignments	MBKM assignments help me understand and apply the material studied.	9.8	13.4	42.7	34.1
	The number of assignments given during MBKM is still within reasonable limits.	9.8	13.4	41.5	35.4
	I feel that the MBKM assignments significantly increase the study load.	4.9	14.6	50	30.5

Table 6 indicates that the majority of students perceived the MBKM assignments as beneficial in helping them understand and apply the material (76.8%). Furthermore, 76.9% stated that the number of assignments given was within reasonable limits. However, 80.5% of respondents also acknowledged that these assignments significantly increased the study load. This tension between positive perceptions of the pedagogical value of assignments and the academic pressure experienced by students indicates the complexity of managing the study load during the MBKM program.

These results are further clarified through qualitative data that reveal a variety of student experiences. Nadya describes,

"... assignments from two study programs overlap in terms of submission times, severely limiting my study time. The grading system also lacks transparency, especially outside my study program, so I'm a bit confused about the standards being used..."

Sarah also highlighted that time constraints led her to rush through assignments without deep reflection. She stated that

"...sometimes I just do assignments to fulfill my obligations. Study time becomes irregular, and the grading system is still too rigid, like a regular class, even though the MBKM context is different..."

This aligns with the 23.2% of quantitative respondents who did not feel the MBKM assignments were helpful in understanding. This means that while the majority found the assignments useful, time pressure and workload can obscure their potential as reflective learning tools.

Rizky added that the lack of synchronization of deadlines between classes is a major obstacle to managing priorities and concentration. He said,

"...in one week, there can be three to four major assignments from different courses. This can be very distracting. The assessments also don't always consider collaborative or reflective aspects, which are crucial in the MBKM system..."

This shows that a study load that is considered "reasonable" quantitatively, can turn into significant stress if not handled through coordinated and realistic schedule planning.

Furthermore, students also raised issues regarding the evaluation and feedback system. Fikri stated that he rarely received clear feedback from lecturers.

"The biggest challenge is the grading system. Some professors give me challenging assignments but don't provide clear feedback, so I don't know where I'm going wrong or what needs to be improved. In terms of time and assignments, I'm quite overwhelmed, but I'm trying to adjust by creating a personal study schedule."

Meanwhile, Arhan criticized some lecturers for placing too much emphasis on the end result rather than the learning process. He said,

"...some lecturers only assess final products like papers or presentations, without considering the learning process and student engagement. However, to me, those are just as important..."

Thus, although assignments in the MBKM program are viewed as an effective learning tool and within reasonable quantitative limits, in practice, there are hidden challenges stemming from coordination between study programs, asynchronous assignment rhythms, and minimal feedback. Therefore, assignment load management in MBKM needs to be designed systematically and responsive to the dynamics of students across disciplines—not only through regulating the number of assignments, but also through flexible time design, transparent evaluation, and reflective teaching strategies.

Challenges in Interaction and Mentoring of Lecturers

One of the main challenges faced by students in the MBKM program lies in interactions with lecturers and academic mentoring mechanisms. Based on the results of the thematic analysis, three prominent problem patterns emerged: inconsistent quality of interactions between lecturers, the lack of a structured mentoring mechanism, and lecturers' communication styles that are less adaptive to the context of interdisciplinary learning.

Some students did report experiencing open and supportive interactions with their lecturers. Nadya, for example, appreciated the inclusive attitude of some of the lecturers.

"... some lecturers are very open and understanding of the diverse backgrounds of their students. They encourage discussion and reflection, even providing space for students to express their opinions from their respective disciplinary perspectives. But not all lecturers are like that. Some tend to be formal and difficult to engage in discussions beyond the material"

However, he also emphasized that the experience is not uniform. "Not all lecturers are like that," he added, noting that some are "formal and difficult to engage in discussions with." This inconsistency creates an imbalance in the quality of academic communication, potentially undermining students' sense of security and trust, especially those from outside the teaching program.

Arhan revealed another challenge: the lack of structured mentoring mechanisms. He felt like he was "left to fend for himself," especially when it came to understanding unfamiliar course content.

"...in some classes, I felt really helped because the lecturers actively provided feedback and were open to consultation. But in others, I felt like I was 'left to my own devices'..."

Sarah reinforced this statement by giving an example of how the lecturer did not adjust his teaching method even though he had difficulty following the material from another study program:

"... the lecturer did not provide a different approach, only relying on written material..."

This situation indicates that the pedagogical approach used tends to be uniform and less responsive to students' diverse academic backgrounds—even though the spirit of MBKM actually demands flexibility and adaptability in teaching.

Furthermore, Rizky highlighted that some lecturers still exhibit overly normative communication patterns with minimal feedback. He said,

"...some lecturers are genuinely active in encouraging student participation through online discussions and collaborative assignments, and that's very helpful. But others are overly normative, rarely even providing feedback. I think lecturers also need specific training on how to handle multidisciplinary and multilevel classes, as in the MBKM scheme."

Fikri also added that a lecturer's overly formal communication style can directly impact students' self-confidence. He admitted that he felt uncomfortable participating actively.

“... I felt inferior because the lecturer's communication style was more formal and instructional...”

This shows that in addition to mastery of the material, the way lecturers interact also plays an important role in creating an inclusive classroom climate, encouraging participation, and supporting the development of intercultural competence.

Challenges in interaction and mentoring lecturers during the implementation of MBKM cannot be viewed solely as technical issues, but rather involve structural and cultural aspects of the teaching process. The success of MBKM depends not only on curriculum design and content, but also on the lecturers' ability to deliver an inclusive, responsive, and communicative learning approach. Therefore, cross-disciplinary pedagogical training and strengthening lecturers' communication skills are strategic steps to ensure the effective implementation of MBKM that is equitable and meaningful for all students.

RQ3: What opportunities can be utilized to increase the effectiveness of the MBKM program in English learning based on intercultural communicative competence?

Opportunities from Student Reflective Experiences

Students' experiences during the MBKM program demonstrate its significant potential for fostering reflective learning, both academically and personally. Questionnaire results indicate that the majority of students perceived a positive impact from their involvement in the program (see table 7).

Table 7 The Reflective Value of the MBKM Experience

Sub-Indicators	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Academic and Personal Development	MBKM helps me develop my academic and personal skills in a sustainable manner.	7.3	8.5	48.8	35.4
	I feel the MBKM program provides a meaningful learning experience even though it only lasts one semester.	11	9.8	47.6	31.7

The questionnaire results showed that the majority of students felt a positive impact from their involvement in the program. 84.2% of students agreed or strongly agreed that MBKM supports long-term academic and personal development. Furthermore, 79.3% of respondents stated that, despite the program only lasting one semester, the experience was still meaningful and left a lasting impression.

The results of this questionnaire not only illustrate students' positive perceptions of the MBKM experience but also reflect the strong reflective space formed during the learning process across study programs and diverse socio-cultural contexts. In the context of intercultural communicative competence (ICC)-

based English language learning, this reflective space is a crucial element in developing intercultural awareness and strengthening academic identity.

Further analysis from the interview data reinforces the meaning behind these figures. Nadya, for example, reflected on how intercultural interactions within the MBKM program necessitated a more inclusive communication strategy. She stated,

“...it's not just about learning English, but also about learning to communicate ideas to audiences from diverse backgrounds. I think this kind of interdisciplinary approach could be developed into a truly cross-disciplinary and cross-lingual joint project or collaborative assignment...”

This experience not only strengthens linguistic competence, but also hones the ability to respond to diversity strategically and empathetically—one of the core elements of intercultural competence.

Sarah also described how diverse classroom dynamics enriched her understanding of varying communication styles and perspectives. She stated that

“...students not only interact with fellow PBI students, but also learn to appreciate the perspectives and communication styles of students from diverse backgrounds. This greatly supports the development of an open and empathetic attitude in language...”

This reflects a reflective process that is not only cognitive, but also affective and social.

Meanwhile, Fikri emphasized the importance of experiences outside the classroom, such as involvement in English-based community service programs. He stated that

“...explaining simple things in easy-to-understand language really trains my skills as a future teacher...”

Fikri's reflection shows how MBKM provides a concrete practice space for students to internalize their professional roles, as well as fostering awareness of transformative pedagogical values.

The opportunities emerging from students' reflective experiences in the MBKM program are strategic and substantial. When supported by an adaptive and contextual pedagogical approach, MBKM can serve as a medium for strengthening academic character and intercultural competency, which are highly relevant in contemporary English language learning. More than just a space for academic exchange, MBKM serves as a social laboratory where students reflect, grow, and develop self-awareness as individuals capable of adapting and communicating effectively in diverse environments.

Potential for Strengthening Intercultural Competence

One of the most significant opportunities offered by the implementation of the MBKM program is strengthening students' intercultural competence, particularly in the context of English language learning, which demands sensitivity to social and cultural diversity. Questionnaire results indicate that students' experiences in this program significantly contributed to increasing their awareness, skills, and readiness to interact in multicultural environments (see Table 8).

Table 8 Strengthening Intercultural Competence through the MBKM Program

Sub-Indicators	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Cultural sensitivity	I am more sensitive to cultural differences after participating in MBKM.	12.2	12.2	45.1	30.5
Multicultural Competence	I feel more prepared to face a multicultural society after participating in MBKM.	11	6.1	41.5	41.5
	The MBKM experience broadened my horizons and perspectives on cultural differences.	8.5	18.3	35.4	37.8
	I feel that MBKM has shaped my character as a future educator who is adaptive and open.	12.2	20.7	39	28

The results indicate that 75.6% of students became more sensitive to cultural differences, and 83% felt better prepared to face a multicultural society after participating in the MBKM program. Furthermore, 73.2% of students stated that MBKM broadened their perspective on cultural differences, and 67% felt their character as future educators became more open and adaptable. These figures reflect consistent strengthening of the affective, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions of intercultural competence.

Interview data provide deeper insight into the meaning behind these quantitative results. Rizky, for example, described his experience in cross-study discussions as a "pragmatic exercise in communication." He emphasized that the ability to adapt terminology and speaking style is essential in multi-background academic interactions. This experience demonstrates that intercultural sensitivity develops not solely from theoretical learning but through direct engagement in the complex and diverse dynamics of communication.

Sarah added that intensive interaction with students from various study programs fosters empathy and openness in language. She stated, "Interactions like these greatly support the development of openness and empathy in language," which directly reflects the attitude dimension in Byram's (2021) intercultural competency model. This attitude is a crucial foundation for fostering inclusive and effective communication in the classroom and community.

Experiences outside the classroom also strengthen the intercultural skills dimension. Fikri recounted how his involvement in English-based community service required him to convey information to audiences with diverse social and educational backgrounds. He called it "real practice in intercultural communication." It demonstrates that MBKM creates an authentic context for developing the adaptive communication skills needed in ICC-based English teaching.

Interestingly, several students also demonstrated critical awareness of the program's potential for improvement. Nadya suggested that MBKM include intercultural communication training at the beginning of the program, while Fikri suggested training for lecturers on how to manage multidisciplinary classes. This perspective emphasizes that students are not merely recipients of experience but also reflective actors who understand the importance of systemic support to strengthen intercultural learning outcomes.

Thus, these results confirm that, when managed with a holistic and contextual pedagogical approach, MBKM has significant potential as a learning medium for intercultural communicative competence that is authentic, comprehensive, and meaningful. Learning experiences occur not only in the classroom but are expanded through social interaction, critical reflection, and character development rooted in diversity.

Discussion

MBKM: An Effective Learning Space for Intercultural Competence

MBKM, as an interdisciplinary learning policy program, serves as an adequate academic space for developing intercultural communication competencies (ICCs). This effectiveness is determined not only by formal academic activities but also by how learning methods, material relevance, and classroom interactions foster reflective, collaborative, and inclusive learning experiences. It aligns with Level 1 – Reaction in Kirkpatrick's evaluation model, where the quality of the learning experience and participants' perceptions serve as early indicators of program success. These findings support Lo (2024), who asserted that experiential learning increases motivation and engagement, particularly in intercultural contexts. When learning is designed adaptively and contextually, the classroom atmosphere is not only academic but also social—a space for the negotiation of meaning, empathy, and collaboration across diverse backgrounds.

The effectiveness of MBKM is also reflected in increased understanding and communication skills through hands-on learning experiences, in line with Level 2 – Learning in Kirkpatrick's model and the findings of Yang et al. (2021) regarding student exchange practices. Interaction between lecturers and students is a key factor, as emphasized by D'Orazzi and Marangell (2025), who demonstrated that multidisciplinary interactions can strengthen intercultural communication skills. On the other hand, Neville et al. (2023) caution that interdisciplinary learning can be less effective if it is not accompanied by adequate pedagogical training for lecturers. This tension demonstrates that the development of interdisciplinary competency depends not only on the curriculum but also on the quality of teaching practices. In this context, intercultural competence can develop through a reflective, dialogical, and supportive teaching approach, even without extensive formal training.

Beyond cognitive aspects, the MBKM learning process also demands student independence, the ability to accept feedback, and a readiness to face interdisciplinary academic challenges. It aligns with Markey et al. (2023), who assert that a diverse learning environment fosters critical thinking and adaptability. However, as Leal-Rodríguez and Albort-Morant (2019) point out, these benefits can potentially be diminished if not supported by structured and continuous feedback mechanisms. It demonstrates that MBKM has excellent potential, but its success is not automatic.

Thus, MBKM not only provides adaptive and relevant learning experiences but also builds a foundation of intercultural skills through interaction, reflection, and collaboration across study programs. However, this effectiveness depends on the quality of the learning design and consistent mentoring. Strengthening the pedagogical capacity of lecturers, aligning workloads, and establishing standardized feedback mechanisms are essential to ensure that the benefits of MBKM do not just remain a fleeting experience but develop into a sustainable transformation of students' intercultural behaviour.

Success Hampered by Structural and Implementation Challenges

Despite its promise, the effectiveness of MBKM is not felt equally by all students. Differences in academic backgrounds create knowledge gaps, making it difficult for some students to understand cross-disciplinary material or unfamiliar terminology. Although many find the material engaging, a significant proportion also report difficulty understanding it. It suggests that interdisciplinary learning requires differentiated instruction, scaffolding, and diagnostic assessment—conditions that have not yet been fully met.

Although MBKM shows strong potential in developing intercultural communication competencies, its effectiveness is not felt equally by all students. Differences in academic backgrounds create gaps in understanding cross-disciplinary concepts, resulting in some students having difficulty keeping up with the learning pace. This situation suggests that the success of interdisciplinary learning depends not only on curriculum design but also on differentiated instruction, scaffolding, and diagnostic assessment—components that require greater pedagogical preparedness. These findings align with Darling-Hammond et al. (2020), who emphasized that ability heterogeneity requires adaptive learning strategies that cannot be standardized across study programs.

Assignment management is another challenge that disrupts learning continuity. Theoretically, assignments serve as a medium for deepening concepts and encouraging reflection, but in practice, they can create cognitive overload when not coordinated across courses. It supports Smith's (2025) view that experiential learning loses its effectiveness if the academic load is not systematically structured. This irregularity also has implications for the development of ICC, as cross-disciplinary assignments require time to analyze differing cultural perspectives, not

simply to complete academic products.

Furthermore, the uneven quality of lecturer mentoring also impacts outcomes. Within the Kirkpatrick Level 3 framework, cultural competence is measured not by theoretical understanding, but by the application of adaptive behavior in real-life situations. At this point, the lecturer's role as a facilitator of dialogue, a provider of feedback, and a catalyst for reflection becomes crucial. However, some lecturers tend to use normative communication and minimal discussion, resulting in inconsistent internalization. This situation confirms the findings of Chin et al. (2025), who asserted that uneven mentoring hinders students' confidence and initiative in intercultural interactions.

Thus, the challenges of implementing MBKM are not merely practical but also structural in nature. The success of ICC development is not automatic, as is often assumed in national policy discourse. Instead, it relies on a systematic design that includes curriculum synchronization, balanced learning loads, and consistent feedback mechanisms. Without these elements, MBKM risks producing superficial engagement—students actively participate in activities, but fail to achieve the intercultural behavioral transformation that is at the core of ICC.

MBKM as a Social Laboratory to Sharpen ICC

Beyond serving as a means of academic learning, MBKM serves as a social space where students negotiate differences, build intercultural awareness, and develop cross-contextual communication skills. Within this framework, MBKM can be understood as a “social laboratory” that enables students to authentically test and apply intercultural communication competencies, rather than merely teaching them in a theoretical setting. This perspective aligns with Byram's (2021) ICC framework, which places curiosity, openness, cultural knowledge, discovery and interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness at the core of developing intercultural competencies. Interaction across study programs, multidisciplinary collaborative work, and involvement in foreign language-based activities serve as arenas for honing reflection, empathy, and adapting communication styles.

Elias and Mansouri (2023) assert that immersion in a multicultural environment broadens perspectives and strengthens adaptability, and these are the conditions that MBKM replicates on a local scale. However, as Deardorff and Jones (2012) caution, intercultural learning does not automatically result in value or behavioral transformation. Without a structure for sustained reflection, intercultural interactions risk becoming merely fleeting experiences, rather than internalized processes.

Therefore, practices such as reflective journaling, peer feedback, and post-activity discussions are crucial for transforming classroom activities into significant intercultural learning. If these practices are consistently implemented, MBKM has the strategic potential to produce graduates who are not only linguistically competent but also possess cultural sensitivity and the ability to communicate

effectively in multicultural environments—in line with global demands for intercultural language and citizenship education.

From the perspective of Kirkpatrick's model, these findings suggest that the process of developing ICC in students extends beyond the realm of perception or knowledge (Levels 1–2) to manifest in concrete behavioral changes (Level 3). Students demonstrate the ability to adapt their language style, choose inclusive communication strategies, and apply empathy in interactions across study programs—indicators of the internalization of intercultural competence. At Level 4, these achievements contribute to students' readiness to face professional and multicultural contexts, evident in their ability to collaborate in interdisciplinary teams, navigate differing perspectives, and complete tasks based on the negotiation of meaning. Thus, MBKM not only produces a positive learning experience but also has a tangible impact on students' behavior and global competence.

Conclusion

This study confirms that the implementation of Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) in the English Education Study Program is generally effective in strengthening students' intercultural communication competencies (ICC). This effectiveness is reflected in increased openness, the ability to adapt language choices in multidisciplinary interactions, and cultural awareness aligned with Byram's ICC framework. These findings suggest that developing ICC need not rely on international experience, as local academic spaces can serve as meaningful intercultural arenas when learning is designed in a dialogical, reflective, and collaborative manner.

However, these positive results have not been felt evenly. Gaps in understanding across study programs, uncoordinated workloads, and varying quality of lecturer mentoring indicate that the success of MBKM is not automatic but rather depends on consistent design and implementation. To optimize its impact, cross-program coordination, standardized feedback and guidance, and intercultural pedagogy training for lecturers are needed. This study is also limited to a single institution with a homogeneous linguistic context and perceptual data, which makes the findings more contextual. Further studies should involve institutions with greater diversity, employ longitudinal designs, and incorporate performance assessments to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term impact of MBKM on student ICC development and global readiness.

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