



Developing Intercultural Competence through Children's Literature in German Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

Mastering a foreign language requires not only linguistic skills but also the development of intercultural competence. This study aims to analyze the use of the German children's novel entitled *Emil und die Detektive* by Erich Kästner as a medium for developing students' intercultural competence in German language learning in Indonesia. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with thematic analysis of literary works. Data in the form of narratives, dialogues, and character actions were collected through listening and note-taking, then analyzed using literary analysis with reference to Michael Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) framework. Data validity was strengthened through triangulation of sources and theories. The results of the study indicate that the novel *Emil und die Detektive* embodies values of intercultural understanding, such as independence, solidarity, honesty, vigilance, and equal relations between children and adults. These values have the potential to be integrated into German language learning through discussion activities, interpretive writing, and literary appreciation. Therefore, language learning is not only oriented towards linguistic mastery but also contributes to the development of empathy, interpretation skills, cross-cultural interaction, and critical cultural awareness in line with Byram's ICC model.

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INTRODUCTION

The era of globalization and rapid technological advancement has significantly reduced geographical boundaries, making cross-border communication an essential competence. This necessity underscores the importance of learning foreign languages as a medium for international interaction. In the Indonesian context, German is one of the foreign languages that is formally taught in secondary schools and universities, as well as informally through institutions such as the Goethe-Institut and private language courses (Opik et al., 2025). The growing relevance of German reflects broader educational efforts to equip learners with global communication skills. These developments position foreign language learning as a strategic component of modern education systems.

Foreign language education in Indonesia has traditionally emphasized linguistic competence, often prioritizing grammar and structural mastery over cultural understanding. This orientation overlooks the fact that language inherently embodies the worldview, values, and social practices of its speakers. Intercultural understanding, therefore, becomes a crucial dimension of language learning, enabling learners to interpret and engage with the socio-cultural contexts embedded within a language. The integration of cultural knowledge enhances learners' ability to communicate meaningfully across diverse settings. This perspective highlights the need to move beyond purely linguistic approaches toward more holistic language education.

Intercultural understanding plays a pivotal role in facilitating effective communication, particularly in increasingly interconnected global contexts. Language structures reflect the sociocultural realities of their speakers, making cultural awareness indispensable for successful interaction. A lack of cultural understanding may lead to misinterpretation and communication breakdowns. Intercultural competence also fosters sensitivity, mutual respect, and the capacity to navigate differences constructively. These competencies contribute to international cooperation, reduce potential misunderstandings, and promote tolerance (Fernández-Fernández & López-Fuentes, 2023; Putra et al., 2020).

Various theoretical frameworks have been developed to enhance intercultural competence, among which Michael Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model is particularly influential. ICC is defined as the



ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations through an understanding and appreciation of cultural differences (Akhmad et al., 2024). Byram's model encompasses five key components: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness (Handayani, 2022). These components collectively aim to develop learners' capacity for reflective and informed intercultural engagement. The model provides a comprehensive framework for integrating cultural dimensions into language education.

The application of ICC in language learning seeks to equip students with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to function in a globalized environment. This integration can be implemented through curriculum design, instructional materials, and classroom practices that emphasize cultural awareness alongside linguistic competence. According to the *Panduan Mata Pembelajaran Bahasa Jerman* developed by the Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan Kementerian Pendidikan Dasar dan Menengah Republik Indonesia (2025), German language education aims to support communication across various contexts, including cultural understanding. Current practices, however, remain largely focused on the four primary language skills—*hören* (listening), *sprechen* (speaking), *lesen* (reading), and *schreiben* (writing)—with limited integration of intercultural competence and literary media (Fernández-Fernández & López-Fuentes, 2023; Lee, 2024). This limitation indicates a gap between curricular objectives and pedagogical implementation.

Literature constitutes a significant component of second language instruction, serving as a medium for conveying cultural values and social realities. Through literary narratives, learners encounter characters, settings, and conflicts that reflect the lived experiences of particular cultural communities. These representations enable students to understand how individuals think, act, and communicate within specific cultural contexts. Literature thus plays a vital role in fostering intercultural awareness by presenting diverse perspectives and social norms. Its integration into language learning aligns with the objectives of developing critical cultural awareness as outlined in Byram's ICC framework (Rahman et al., 2025).

This study examines the German children's novel *Emil und die Detektive* (1928) by Erich Kästner as a medium for developing intercultural competence. Although recognized as a classic work of German children's literature, the novel conveys universal values such as honesty, independence, solidarity, and cooperation. The study aims to identify intercultural values embedded in the text and to analyze them through the lens of Byram's ICC components. This approach positions the novel as a potential teaching resource for German language learning in Indonesian educational contexts. The following section presents a literature review to situate this study within existing research and to identify relevant research gaps (Fernández-Fernández & López-Fuentes, 2023).

Previous research has explored the role of literature in enhancing intercultural understanding through various approaches. Sholeh et al. investigated the application of a multicultural approach in literature teaching and found that it effectively increased students' tolerance and appreciation of cultural diversity. The study shares a common focus on literary texts as tools for intercultural learning but differs in its lack of integration of Byram's ICC model (Faturahman & Amin, 2025). Kudriyah's research on cross-cultural learning in German literature demonstrated improvements in students' interpretative skills through stages such as *Objektivierung*, *Weiterführung*, and *Interpretierung*. This study differs by emphasizing the explicit integration of ICC as an analytical framework.

Further studies have examined intercultural competence models in literary contexts. Safitri analyzed Byram's ICC model in the novel *Ich lerne Deutsch* and incorporated Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), demonstrating the presence of all five ICC components. Akhmad et al. highlighted the importance of integrating ICC into English language teaching, focusing on classroom applications rather than literary texts. These studies collectively underscore the importance of intercultural competence but reveal limited exploration of German children's literature as a pedagogical medium. This gap indicates the need for research that bridges literary analysis and intercultural competence frameworks.

Based on the review of existing studies, it is evident that research on literature and intercultural understanding has been conducted through multicultural and cross-cultural approaches, as well as through the application of ICC in various contexts. However, studies specifically examining Byram's ICC model in German children's literature remain limited. This study addresses that gap by analyzing intercultural values in *Emil und die Detektive* and integrating them with Byram's ICC framework. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of innovative teaching

materials in German language education. This research also aims to strengthen the role of literature in fostering intercultural competence among learners.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, with data presented in the form of words and textual representations rather than numerical values. Descriptive qualitative research emphasizes the processes of data selection, collection, quality assessment, analysis, and interpretation (Sugiyono, 2020). The focus of this research is to examine the values of intercultural understanding and their integration with Byram's *Intercultural Communicative Competence* (ICC) model in the children's novel *Emil und die Detektive*. The primary data source is the novel itself, with analytical units consisting of narrative elements, dialogues, and character actions that reflect intercultural values. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how literary texts convey cultural meanings and competencies.

Data collection is conducted through a *reading and note-taking* technique, which involves carefully examining the text and documenting excerpts that represent intercultural understanding. These excerpts are then systematically aligned with the components of Byram's ICC model. The analysis is carried out in three stages, beginning with the identification of intercultural values embedded in the text. The second stage involves categorizing the data according to the five components of ICC, namely attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. The final stage consists of interpreting these findings to reveal how intercultural competence is constructed and represented within the narrative.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, the author further elaborates on the research findings through reflective theoretical and methodological discussions as well as textual analysis. The discussion is structured into several thematic sub-sections to ensure analytical clarity, with each subheading presented in *bold italics* without numbering. The novel *Emil und die Detektive* narrates the story of Emil Tischbein, a twelve-year-old boy from Neustadt who travels alone to Berlin to visit his family. During the journey, his money is stolen by a man named Grundeis, prompting Emil to pursue the thief with the assistance of a group of local children. Under Gustav's leadership, the children collaborate strategically until the thief is apprehended and the money is recovered. Despite its child-centered narrative, the novel conveys significant intercultural values such as awareness, independence, cooperation, honesty, and adaptation to modernity.

Being Aware of the Surroundings

The value of environmental awareness is presented as an essential competence for navigating unfamiliar social contexts. Emil's mother's warning about safeguarding money reflects not only parental concern but also the transmission of cultural knowledge regarding urban risks. This is illustrated in the excerpt: "Außerdem ist er immer gut, wenn man ein paar Mark in der Tasche... Pass mir ja gut auf, dass du es nicht verlierst." ("Besides, it's always good when you have a few marks in your pocket... Be careful that you don't misread it."). The narrative constructs vigilance as a preventive social practice that must be maintained in public spaces. Emil's interaction with fellow passengers, particularly Grundeis, demonstrates how trust based on outward appearances can weaken this vigilance, as shown in: "The Mitreisenden sahen auch nicht gerade wie Diebe und Mörder aus." ("The fellow travelers didn't exactly look like thieves and murderers either."). This finding indicates that awareness is a dynamic competence shaped through direct experience in modern social environments.

Independence

Independence is depicted as a socially constructed competence influenced by familial expectations and situational demands. Emil's determination not to burden his hardworking mother reflects an early internalization of responsibility, as seen in: "Er hatte seine Mutter sehr lieb... da wollte er nicht faul sein." ("He loved his mother very much... so he didn't want to be lazy."). His mother's decision to allow him to travel alone to Berlin demonstrates a cultural perspective that encourages autonomy while maintaining implicit trust. Emil's attempt to secure his money independently—"Er nahm eine Nadel... nun kann nichts passieren." ("He took a needle... now nothing can happen.")—illustrates proactive problem-solving behavior. Although the strategy ultimately fails, it emphasizes that independence is a developmental process rather than a flawless ability. The narrative thus frames independence as an experiential and evolving competence.

Solidarity and Cooperation

The values of solidarity and cooperation are reflected in the collective actions of the Berlin children who assist Emil. Emil's personal problem evolves into a shared responsibility addressed through coordination and division of roles. This is evident in the statement: "Zwei bleiben hier... Fünf oder sechs stellen wir als Stafetten auf..." ("Two will stay here... We'll put five or six together as relay teams..."). The children's organized efforts demonstrate the emergence of informal yet effective social structures. The successful capture of Grundeis—"Und drei Minuten später war Herr Grundeis umringt." ("And three minutes later, Mr Grundeis was captured.")—highlights the effectiveness of collective action. Solidarity is therefore constructed as a social competence rooted in communication, trust, and shared objectives.

Honesty

The value of honesty is articulated through ethical deliberations within the group regarding acceptable actions. The Professor's rejection of the idea of stealing the money establishes a clear moral boundary, as reflected in: "Wenn wir ihm das Geld klauen, sind wir selber Diebe." ("If we steal his money, we are thieves ourselves."). This positions honesty as a guiding principle in collective decision-making rather than merely a prescriptive norm. Emil's acknowledgment—"Wenn ich jemandem heimlich was wegnehme, bin ich ein Dieb." ("If I secretly take something, I am a thief.")—demonstrates his capacity for moral reasoning. The narrative portrays honesty as the result of reflective ethical awareness shaped through social interaction. This reinforces the importance of moral dialogue in developing intercultural competence.

Modernity

The representation of Berlin as a modern city is conveyed through vivid imagery of urban life. The description "Autos, Straßenbahnen, zweistöckige Autobusse... And hohe, hohe Häuser." ("Cars, trams, double-decker buses... And high, high houses.") illustrates the complexity and dynamism of metropolitan environments. This modern setting is contrasted with Emil's experience of anonymity, as expressed in: "Vier Millionen Menschen lebten in Berlin, und keiner interessierte sich für Emil Tischbein." ("There are four million people living in Berlin, and no one takes interest in Emil Tischbein."). The narrative presents modernity not only as material progress but also as a social condition requiring adaptability. It highlights the challenges of navigating large, impersonal urban spaces. This dual representation underscores the transformative impact of modernity on individual experience.

Children and Adults Positioned on Equal Ground

The relationship between children and adults in the novel reflects a progressive perspective on children as competent social actors. Recognition from adults, such as Mr. Kästner's remark—"Ihr seid wirklich drei Prachtkerle." ("You three are such remarkable young men.")—legitimizes the children's contributions. Interactions between children and authority figures, including the police, are portrayed as collaborative and respectful. These interactions demonstrate a relatively egalitarian dynamic in which children's perspectives are acknowledged. The narrative challenges traditional hierarchical views of childhood. It positions children as active participants in social processes rather than passive recipients of adult guidance.

Discussion

Michael Byram conceptualizes *Intercultural Communicative Competence* (ICC) as a constellation of abilities enabling individuals to interact effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. This competence plays a central role in foreign language learning, as linguistic mastery cannot be separated from an understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which language operates. The application of ICC can be facilitated through literary media integrated with cross-cultural approaches (Kudriyah, 2009). Teachers are therefore required not only to develop appropriate pedagogical strategies but also to possess a deep understanding of the cultural contexts embedded in literary texts. Empirical findings further indicate a strong correlation between engagement with foreign literature and the development of intercultural competence (Heggerness, 2021), while ICC itself encompasses five components: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, as cited in Safitri, 2016; Prisyayuna, 2023; Tambunan et al., 2025).

The value of vigilance introduced through Emil's mother reflects the ICC component of attitudes, particularly openness combined with reflective awareness of one's own behavior. Her advice functions as a cultural bridge between Neustadt, characterized by close-knit social relations, and Berlin, a modern urban space marked by anonymity and individualism. This contrast highlights the importance of balancing trust with caution when navigating unfamiliar environments. The narrative demonstrates how cultural awareness is constructed through lived experience rather than abstract instruction. This aligns with the notion that intercultural competence requires the ability to respond appropriately within diverse social contexts (Deardorff, as cited in Ramirez et al., 2018).

The dimension of knowledge is illustrated through the novel's depiction of German social life in the 1920s. The contrast between Neustadt and Berlin provides insight into cultural practices, economic conditions, and patterns of mobility within German society (Byram, as cited in Safitri, 2016). Elements such as the use of the Mark currency and intercity travel enrich the socio-historical context of the narrative. These details enable readers to understand not only the storyline but also the broader cultural framework in which it unfolds. Such contextualization supports the development of intercultural awareness through literary engagement.

In pedagogical practice, the integration of intercultural dimensions fosters students' awareness of the inseparable relationship between language and culture. Within German language learning, this awareness equips students to communicate appropriately in diverse contexts. When utilizing *Emil und die Detektive* as instructional material, educators may emphasize themes such as urban life in Berlin while exploring its social and historical dimensions. Activities such as role-play and reflective discussion can be employed to connect literary content with students' personal experiences. The use of digital learning media further enhances engagement and accessibility in contemporary classrooms (Muhammad et al., 2024; Syahputra, 2025).

Emil's independence illustrates the interplay between knowledge and critical cultural awareness. His journey to Berlin at a young age reflects cultural values related to autonomy and responsibility within German society. This representation encourages comparative reflection between different cultural perspectives on childhood independence. Students are invited to evaluate these differences critically through discussion and interpretation. Such processes contribute to the development of intercultural sensitivity and openness (Julaikah & Darni, 2025; Koto, 2021).

The values of solidarity and cooperation exemplify the ICC component of skills of discovery and interaction. Emil's collaboration with Gustav and the Berlin children demonstrates the ability to negotiate roles and work collectively in complex situations. These interactions are grounded in empathy, mutual respect, and shared objectives. The narrative portrays cooperation as an essential social competence in unfamiliar environments. Such representations highlight the importance of collaborative problem-solving in intercultural contexts.

From a pedagogical perspective, these values can be integrated into classroom practice through interactive learning strategies. Role-play and case-based learning allow students to simulate real-life scenarios similar to those experienced by the characters. Group discussions encourage active participation and the development of communication skills (*sprechen*). These activities also enable teachers to assess students' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities (Ningsih & Shasrini, 2024; Sembiring, 2020). This approach supports both linguistic and intercultural development simultaneously.

The value of honesty is articulated through ethical deliberation among the characters regarding the retrieval of the stolen money. The Professor's refusal to justify theft establishes a moral boundary grounded in reflective judgment. This situation illustrates the ICC component of attitudes, particularly the capacity for ethical reflection. Honesty is presented not as a prescriptive rule but as a socially negotiated principle. The narrative also contributes to the knowledge component by portraying ethical norms within German cultural contexts.

The use of multicultural literature in language learning broadens students' understanding of diverse cultural perspectives. Literary texts serve as a medium for exploring universal values such as honesty while contextualizing them within specific cultural settings. Classroom activities may include interpretative analysis, comparative reflection, and integration of intercultural perspectives. These approaches enhance students' ability to engage critically with cultural differences (Ningsih & Shasrini, 2024; Sanjani & Rochmaniah, 2023). Literature thus becomes a powerful tool for fostering intercultural competence.

Berlin, as depicted in the novel, functions as a multicultural space where various ICC components converge. Emil's interactions with urban society demonstrate skills of interpreting and relating, as well as discovery and interaction. His experiences illustrate the process of adapting to a complex and unfamiliar environment. The recognition he receives from authorities reflects a relatively egalitarian relationship between children and adults. This dynamic supports the development of critical cultural awareness.

The integration of ICC components into teaching practice can be achieved through interactive and reflective methods. Students may analyze Emil's experiences in adapting to urban life and compare them with their own cultural contexts. Discussions can explore differences between rural and urban social structures as well as individual adaptation strategies. Such activities promote deeper engagement with intercultural concepts (Bradley & Mohamed, 2011). This approach reinforces the connection between literary analysis and real-world application.

Critical cultural awareness can ultimately be cultivated through diverse instructional strategies, including role-play, discussion, reading, and digital integration. The novel *Emil und die Detektive* offers significant potential as a teaching resource that extends beyond linguistic objectives. Its implementation requires educators to contextualize the historical setting and facilitate meaningful cultural comparisons. Through this approach, children's literature functions as a cultural artifact that encourages reflection and cognitive engagement (Opik et al., 2025). The novel embodies all five components of Byram's ICC, making it a valuable resource for both language instruction and literary appreciation in Indonesian educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

The novel *Emil und die Detektive* by Erich Kästner narrates the journey of Emil Tischbein, a twelve-year-old boy who travels alone from Neustadt to Berlin, encounters the experience of theft, and collaborates with a group of Berlin children to resolve the crisis. Beyond its adventurous plot, the narrative embodies a range of intercultural values that can be systematically analyzed through Michael Byram's *Intercultural Communicative Competence* (ICC) framework. These values correspond to the five components of ICC, namely attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. The novel thus functions not only as a literary text but also as a medium for intercultural learning. Its thematic richness provides a comprehensive basis for examining the interplay between language, culture, and social interaction.

Emil's vigilance and sense of responsibility reflect the attitudinal dimension of ICC, particularly openness and reflective awareness in unfamiliar contexts. His independence and experiences in Berlin integrate knowledge with critical cultural awareness, encouraging readers to compare cultural norms and child-rearing practices between German and Indonesian contexts. The solidarity and cooperation demonstrated with the Berlin children exemplify the skills of discovery and interaction, highlighting the importance of collaboration in complex situations. The ethical deliberation surrounding the stolen money illustrates the development of moral reasoning, reinforcing both attitudes and knowledge components. Emil's engagement with urban society and law enforcement further demonstrates skills of interpreting and relating, while also fostering the capacity to evaluate cultural practices critically.

From a pedagogical perspective, the novel offers substantial potential for German language education in Indonesia. It contributes not only to the development of linguistic competence but also to the cultivation of intercultural awareness, social interaction skills, and universal values such as honesty, solidarity, and responsibility. The integration of literary texts into language instruction can be enhanced through interactive methods, including role-play, discussion, case-based learning, and digital media utilization. These strategies enable educators to align literary learning with the development of ICC in a holistic manner. As a result, students are better equipped to engage in meaningful intercultural communication.

The effective implementation of this approach, however, depends on several practical considerations. These include the proficiency levels of both teachers and students in German, access to appropriate literary resources, and educators' understanding of German cultural contexts. The selection of literary texts must also be aligned with national educational values, including Pancasila and the *Merdeka Curriculum*, to ensure relevance and contextual appropriateness. Careful planning is therefore required to maximize the pedagogical benefits of literary integration. Within this framework, *Emil und die Detektive* emerges as a text that encompasses all five components of Byram's ICC and holds strong potential as an instructional resource for both language learning and literary appreciation in Indonesian educational settings.

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