

Cultural Immersion in English Educational Context of University of Western Australia Students in Toraja

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Abstract. The objective of this study is to examine the impact of this immersion on both the students and the local community, focusing on the preservation of Toraja cultural traditions. This study adopts a qualitative research design which is particularly suited for exploring the depth and complexity of participants' experiences and perspectives. The participants in this study include students from the University of Western Australia (UWA), faculty members from Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja (UKI Toraja), and members of the Toraja community. Participant Observation: Researchers closely observed the participants' daily interactions, behaviors, and activities during the immersion program. Detailed field notes were maintained to document the observations. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Semi-structured focus group discussions were conducted with the UWA students to explore their learning outcomes, reflections, and overall experiences of the cultural immersion program. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique where participants are chosen based on specific characteristics and their relevance to the research questions. UWA students were selected based on their active participation in the Bali Studio Program, while UKI Toraja faculty members and Toraja community members were chosen for their roles in facilitating and engaging with the cultural immersion activities. The data collected from participant observations and focus group discussions were analyzed using thematic analysis. The result of this study shows that the positive impact of this immersion on both the students and the local community, focusing on the preservation of Toraja cultural traditions. The evidence depicted that the deep and impactful engagement of UWA students with Toraja culture and the presence of UWA students in the Toraja community had a positive impact on cultural preservation efforts. The study concludes with recommendations for improving the effectiveness of such programs and calls for continued collaboration between universities and indigenous communities in the pursuit of cultural preservation.

Keywords: Cultural immersion, Toraja culture, cultural preservation, cross-cultural exchange, university collaboration

Introduction

In today's world, characterized by rapid globalization, the preservation of cultural heritage has emerged as a critical concern. Globalization, while fostering connections and exchanges across borders, also brings with it significant challenges, particularly for indigenous cultures (Borunda & Murray, 2024; Long, 2017). These cultures, often rich in history, tradition, and unique worldviews, are increasingly vulnerable to the pressures of modernization and urbanization (Ford et al., 2020).

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Modernization, which typically involves the adoption of new technologies, economic systems, and social norms, can lead to the erosion of traditional ways of life (Kansanga et al., 2019). Indigenous communities, which have often maintained their customs and practices over generations, may find their cultural expressions under threat as they encounter modern lifestyles and values that differ drastically from their own (Borunda & Murray, 2024; Harmi et al., 2022). For example, traditional languages, rituals, and artisanal crafts may be abandoned in favor of more contemporary, globally dominant languages, practices, and products.

Moreover, the homogenizing forces of global culture—often driven by mass media, global markets, and the spread of popular culture—tend to promote a more uniform set of cultural norms and practices (Bunyawanich et al., 2018). This global culture, often dominated by Western influences, can overshadow and diminish the visibility and viability of indigenous cultures (Gallagher, 2017). As a result, unique cultural identities risk being diluted or lost altogether as local traditions are replaced by or blended with those that are more globally recognized and commercially viable (Coombe, 2017).

The importance of preserving cultural heritage in this context cannot be overstated. Cultural heritage is not just about maintaining the past; it is a vital part of a community's identity and provides a sense of belonging and continuity (Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2017). It includes tangible elements like artifacts, monuments, and traditional crafts, as well as intangible aspects such as languages, rituals, and oral traditions (Hassan, 2020; Kumar & Singh, 2022). Preserving these cultural elements is crucial for maintaining the diversity of human expression and for ensuring that future generations can benefit from the wisdom, knowledge, and beauty inherent in these traditions (Lenzerini, 2023; Mosako & Rankadi, 2024). This study investigates the role of academic institutions in cultural preservation through the lens of a cultural immersion program conducted by the University of Western Australia (UWA) in collaboration with Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja (UKI Toraja).

The program is designed to offer students from the University of Western Australia (UWA) a deep and immersive experience in the cultural heritage of the Toraja people, an indigenous community residing in the highlands of South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The Toraja are renowned for their rich and intricate cultural traditions, which are integral to their way of life and worldview. One of the most distinctive aspects of Toraja culture is their elaborate funeral ceremonies, known as *Rambu Solo'*. These ceremonies are not merely rites of passage but are seen as a critical part of the journey to the afterlife. They are characterized by complex rituals that can span several days, involving the community in a series of processions, animal sacrifices, traditional music, and dances. The funeral ceremonies reflect the Toraja people's deep respect for their ancestors and their belief in the continuation of life after death. Additionally, the program will expose UWA students to traditional Toraja dances, which are vibrant expressions of the community's identity and history. These dances are often performed during important cultural events and ceremonies, each with its significance and meaning. Through participation and observation, students will gain insights into how these cultural practices embody the values, beliefs, and social structures of the Toraja people. By engaging directly with the community, UWA students will not only learn about these practices but will also gain a deeper appreciation of how the Toraja preserve and celebrate their cultural heritage in a rapidly modernizing world. This immersive experience aims to foster cross-cultural understanding, respect, and a broader global perspective among the participants. This research examines the impact of this program on both the students and the local community, emphasizing the mutual benefits of such cross-cultural exchanges.

Previous studies on cultural immersion programs have consistently underscored their significant impact on fostering cross-cultural understanding among participants (Nelson & Luetz, 2021). These programs, which immerse individuals in a different cultural environment, enable participants to experience firsthand the traditions, customs, and daily life of the host culture. Through such immersive experiences, participants develop a deeper appreciation and respect for cultural diversity, which in turn enhances their ability to navigate and engage with different cultural contexts. Moreover, cultural immersion programs play a crucial role in

contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage (Fong, 2020; Kuo et al., 2023). By involving participants in cultural practices and encouraging them to learn about and document these traditions, these programs help to sustain and promote the continued vitality of the culture. This preservation is not only beneficial for the host community but also enriches the participants' understanding of global cultural diversity, fostering a more inclusive and culturally aware society (Kohsaka & Rogel, 2021; Moric et al., 2021).

However, the specific impact of such programs on indigenous communities and the sustainability of cultural practices remains underexplored. This research builds on the existing literature by focusing on the Toraja community, whose cultural practices are considered one of the most well-preserved in Indonesia. The Toraja culture, characterized by its complex rituals and deep spiritual beliefs, provides a unique context for studying the dynamics of cultural preservation. The literature review also examines the theoretical framework of cultural exchange and its role in enhancing cultural resilience. Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine the impact of this immersion on both the students and the local community, focusing on the preservation of Toraja cultural traditions.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the research "Preserving Tradition: University of Western Australia Students in the Heart of Toraja Culture" can be built upon several key concepts and theories.

Cultural Immersion and Exchange

Cultural Immersion Theory: This research can draw from cultural immersion theory, which explores how deep engagement with another culture fosters understanding, empathy, and respect for cultural diversity. The theory emphasizes the transformative potential of direct and sustained cultural experiences in promoting cross-cultural competence (Li et al., 2024; Onosu, 2021a). **Cultural Exchange:** The concept of cultural exchange, where participants share and learn from one another's cultures, underpins the importance of reciprocal learning in preserving and appreciating cultural traditions. This is particularly relevant in the context of international students engaging with the Toraja community (Chwialkowska, 2020; Yiting, 2021).

Ethnography and Anthropology

Ethnographic Theory: The research can be grounded in ethnographic theory, focusing on the study of people and cultures from an insider perspective. By employing participant observation, the study aims to capture the lived experiences of UWA students as they interact with and learn from the Toraja community (Kurczewski, 2023; Malinowski, 2007a, 2007b). **Symbolic Anthropology:** This theoretical approach examines how symbols, rituals, and practices within a culture convey meaning. In the context of Toraja culture, the use of symbols in rituals, architecture, and art can be explored to understand how tradition is preserved and communicated to outsiders (JOURDAN & TUIE, 2006; SALZMANN et al., 2012a, 2012b; Sandarupa et al., 2021).

Cultural Preservation and Sustainability

Cultural Sustainability: This theory is crucial in understanding the efforts to maintain cultural heritage in the face of globalization and modernity. The research can investigate how the Toraja community balances preserving their traditions while adapting to external influences, including the engagement with UWA students (Lenzerini, 2023). **Community-Based Cultural Preservation:** The involvement of the local community in preserving cultural heritage is essential. This framework emphasizes the active role of the community in safeguarding their cultural identity while sharing it with others, particularly in educational and immersive contexts (Cozzani et al., 2017; Selmanović et al., 2020).

Intercultural Communication

Intercultural Communication Theory: This theory addresses the complexities of communication between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. The research can explore how UWA students and Toraja community members navigate linguistic and cultural differences to build mutual understanding (Deli & Allo, 2018; Holliday et al., 2004; Martin, N., Judith, and Nakayama, K., 2010; Seelye, 1984).

Material and Method

This study adopts a qualitative method (Jackson et al., 2007), which is particularly suited for exploring the depth and complexity of participants' experiences and perspectives. The qualitative approach allows for a rich, detailed understanding of the cultural immersion experience by focusing on the subjective meanings that participants attach to their interactions and reflections. The participants in this study include students from the University of Western Australia (UWA), faculty members from Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja (UKI Toraja), and members of the Toraja community. The diverse group of participants provides a comprehensive view of the cultural immersion experience from multiple perspectives. Participant Observation: Researchers closely observed the participants' daily interactions, behaviors, and activities during the immersion program (Zahle, 2012). Detailed field notes were maintained to document the observations. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Semi-structured focus group discussions were conducted with the UWA students to explore their learning outcomes, reflections, and overall experiences of the cultural immersion program (Scheelbeek et al., 2020). Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique where participants are chosen based on specific characteristics and their relevance to the research questions (Campbell et al., 2020). UWA students were selected based on their active participation in the Bali Studio Program, while UKI Toraja faculty members and Toraja community members were chosen for their roles in facilitating and engaging with the cultural immersion activities. The data collected from participant observations and focus group discussions were analyzed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). This method involved coding the data to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights related to the cultural immersion experience. Thematic analysis allowed the researchers to interpret the data systematically and draw meaningful conclusions about the impact of the immersion program on cross-cultural understanding and cultural preservation.

Results and Discussion

Results

The findings of this study highlight the profound impact of the cultural immersion program on both the participating UWA students and the Toraja community. The students' active engagement with Toraja culture and their involvement in cultural preservation efforts demonstrate the mutual benefits of such immersive experiences. By participating in traditional ceremonies, learning local crafts, and contributing to documentation projects, the students not only deepened their understanding of Toraja traditions but also played a crucial role in reinforcing and preserving the community's cultural identity. These findings underscore the significance of cross-cultural interactions in fostering cultural appreciation and sustaining cultural heritage for future generations.

Student Engagement with Toraja Culture: A Cross-Cultural Learning Experience in English Education Context

During the Bali Studio Program, UWA students actively engaged with Toraja culture through structured learning experiences that integrated English education. A key aspect of their participation involved preparing and delivering English-language presentations on various cultural topics, such as the significance of traditional ceremonies, the Toraja social

structure, and the symbolic meaning of local art forms. Observations revealed that students took this task seriously, consulting with Toraja community members to ensure accuracy and cultural sensitivity in their presentations. This process encouraged them to refine their language skills while deepening their cultural understanding. In focus group discussions, students reflected on how the experience enhanced their ability to communicate complex cultural concepts in English. One student shared, "Explaining Toraja culture in English required me to not only understand the material but also think critically about how to convey it clearly to an audience. It made me appreciate both the cultural depth and the importance of effective communication." Another student highlighted how this task increased their sense of responsibility, as they felt a duty to represent the culture accurately in an educational setting.

Beyond presentations, UWA students also engaged in experiential learning by participating in traditional Toraja dances, such as the pa'gellu' and pa'tirra', both of which hold cultural significance. Observations described students learning these dances under the guidance of local instructors, demonstrating dedication to mastering the movements and understanding the dances' symbolic meanings. Their participation in community performances was seen as a sign of respect and an effort to immerse themselves in the culture. Through discussions, students noted that learning these dances not only provided a hands-on cultural experience but also improved their ability to describe and narrate cultural practices in English. One student remarked, "Learning the pa'gellu' dance was more than just memorizing steps; it was about understanding its role in Toraja celebrations and then finding the right words to explain that experience to others." Another student emphasized the deeper connection fostered through this experience: "Performing the pa'tirra' dance made me feel integrated into the community. It was a way to engage with the culture and share my experience with others through storytelling and discussion in English."

In addition to performance-based learning, UWA students contributed to cultural documentation projects that involved recording traditional practices, oral histories, and cultural artifacts. This initiative required students to conduct interviews, transcribe narratives, and compile reports in English, reinforcing their ability to process and present cultural information through academic and digital storytelling. Observations highlighted their commitment to ensuring accuracy and meaningful representation, often working closely with community members to develop comprehensive records. In focus groups, students expressed how this project enhanced their research and language skills while fostering a deeper emotional connection to the Toraja culture. One student reflected, "Documenting oral histories in English made me realize the importance of preserving cultural narratives. It wasn't just about translating words—it was about capturing the emotions and meanings behind them." Another student noted, "Creating cultural documentation helped me develop a sense of responsibility, knowing that our work could serve as a bridge for future students wanting to learn about Toraja culture through English texts and materials."

The Toraja community responded positively to the students' engagement, expressing pride in sharing their culture while appreciating the students' efforts to learn and document their traditions in an educational context. Observations noted that this reciprocal exchange strengthened cross-cultural understanding, as students became more aware of the nuances of Toraja traditions while community members recognized the role of English as a tool for cultural preservation and global communication. In focus groups, students shared how they observed this mutual appreciation. One student mentioned, "The community was eager to teach us, and in return, we were eager to learn and share what we learned through presentations and discussions in English." Another student reflected on the broader impact of their engagement: "By participating in these activities, we not only improved our cross-cultural communication skills but also contributed to making Toraja culture more accessible to a wider audience."

The triangulation of data from participant observation and focus group discussions demonstrates that UWA students' engagement with Toraja culture—through presentations, traditional dances, and cultural documentation—was both immersive and educational. Their

experiences not only enriched their understanding of Toraja traditions but also strengthened their ability to communicate cultural knowledge in English. Additionally, their involvement contributed to reinforcing the cultural identity of the Toraja community, as their active participation highlighted the significance of preserving traditions while fostering cross-cultural dialogue through language and education.

Impact on Cultural Preservation in the Educational Context

The presence of UWA students in the Toraja community had a significant impact on cultural preservation efforts, particularly within an educational framework. Their engagement in documenting oral histories and traditional practices contributed to the development of valuable educational resources that can be used for future learning initiatives. Additionally, their interest in understanding Toraja customs and language not only reinforced cultural heritage but also facilitated an immersive learning experience where both the students and the local community benefited from a cross-cultural exchange.

UWA students actively participated in the documentation of Toraja oral histories and traditional practices, approaching this task with academic rigor and respect. Their involvement included conducting interviews with community elders, recording narratives, and taking detailed notes on cultural rituals and practices. Observational data highlighted that students demonstrated a deep sense of responsibility in preserving these traditions, recognizing their importance for educational continuity. Moreover, students collaborated with local experts, including Toraja educators and linguists, to ensure the accuracy and cultural sensitivity of their documentation, thereby producing high-quality records that serve both educational and preservation purposes.

The learning process extended beyond documentation, as students also engaged with the Toraja language as part of their cultural immersion experience. Observations noted that students made an effort to learn key phrases in Toraja, especially those relevant to their research and interactions with the community. They practiced greetings, expressions used in traditional ceremonies, and specific vocabulary related to cultural practices. This linguistic engagement not only facilitated deeper communication with community members but also highlighted the role of language in cultural preservation. In focus group discussions, students reflected on how language learning enhanced their cultural understanding. One student shared, "Learning even a few words in Toraja helped me connect with the community on a different level. It made the conversations more meaningful and showed that we were truly invested in understanding their way of life." Another student emphasized the link between language and cultural identity, stating, "Language is such an integral part of culture. By learning some Toraja words, I felt like I was gaining insight into the deeper meanings behind the traditions we were documenting."

Observations also revealed that the UWA students' engagement had a positive impact on the Toraja community itself. Community members were highly engaged and enthusiastic when sharing their knowledge of traditional practices, oral histories, and language. The process of having their cultural practices documented by students appeared to evoke a strong sense of pride and validation within the community. Elders and educators expressed appreciation for the students' genuine interest, often commenting on how this engagement reinforced the importance of passing down cultural knowledge to future generations. Focus group discussions with the students further supported this observation. One student remarked, "The community members were excited to teach us not only about their traditions but also about their language. It felt like our learning process encouraged them to keep sharing and preserving their heritage." Another student reflected on how their participation strengthened the community's cultural identity: "Seeing the elders so passionate about teaching us made me realize how much their culture means to them. It was inspiring to witness how language and storytelling keep traditions alive."

The triangulation of data from participant observation and focus group discussions demonstrates that the UWA students' engagement in cultural documentation, language

learning, and traditional knowledge sharing had a profound impact on both cultural preservation and education. Their involvement not only produced valuable educational materials but also fostered a renewed sense of pride among Toraja community members in their linguistic and cultural heritage. The students' commitment to understanding and communicating Toraja customs—both through research and language practice—was met with reciprocal enthusiasm, leading to a dynamic exchange that reinforced the importance of preserving traditions for future generations. This finding underscores the educational value of cultural immersion programs, highlighting how they contribute to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage while enhancing students' intercultural competence and multilingual awareness.

Discussion

Student Engagement with Toraja Culture: A Cross-Cultural Learning Experience in English Education Context

The findings from this study, which highlight the active and meaningful engagement of UWA students with Toraja culture, align closely with previous research on cultural immersion in educational contexts and its role in fostering cross-cultural understanding, language learning, and cultural preservation.

The students' deep engagement with Toraja traditions—through cultural presentations, traditional dance learning, and documentation projects—demonstrates how immersive learning environments enhance intercultural competence and cross-cultural communication skills. This aligns with findings from Corder and U-Mackey (2015), who emphasize that immersive experiences are crucial for developing language skills, cultural awareness, and intercultural adaptability. Similarly, Paige et al. (2009) found that students participating in cultural immersion programs reported significant growth in their ability to engage with different cultural and linguistic contexts. In this study, UWA students not only deepened their understanding of Toraja culture but also developed communication skills essential for cross-cultural interactions, particularly as they navigated language barriers and sought to convey their learning effectively in English and Toraja.

A key element of student engagement in this study was language learning as part of cultural immersion. Students actively practiced key phrases in the Toraja language, particularly in contexts relevant to their cultural presentations and interactions with community members. This aligns with research by Kinginger (2011), which highlights that linguistic engagement in study-abroad and cultural immersion programs significantly enhances students' ability to develop intercultural communication skills and language awareness. The students' attempts to learn and use Toraja phrases contributed to a more authentic engagement with the culture, reinforcing the idea that language is a fundamental aspect of cultural identity. This aligns with Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence model, which suggests that meaningful interactions, facilitated by language learning, lead to deeper cultural understanding and appreciation.

Moreover, the reciprocal impact of cultural immersion—where both the students and the host community benefit—was evident in this study. The findings align with Kastenholz and Gronau (2020), who argue that cultural immersion not only benefits learners but also has a positive effect on the host community's sense of cultural identity. In this study, the Toraja community responded positively to the students' engagement, expressing pride in sharing their traditions and language. This mutual appreciation reflects Maakrun and Kearney's (2020) concept of "mutual transformation," which suggests that both participants and host communities experience meaningful personal and cultural growth through immersive learning experiences.

The UWA students' involvement in cultural documentation projects—which included recording oral histories, preserving traditional practices, and compiling educational resources—also reflects broader discussions on the role of education in cultural preservation. This finding is consistent with Cozzani et al. (2017), who highlight that cultural immersion

programs can contribute to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. The students' documentation work not only enriched their learning but also provided valuable educational materials for both the local community and future international learners. This reinforces the idea that student engagement in cultural immersion programs has both educational and cultural sustainability benefits.

Finally, the study's findings support the notion that cross-cultural learning experiences foster mutual respect and intercultural sensitivity. The positive reception of UWA students by the Toraja community, alongside the students' genuine efforts to learn and engage respectfully, aligns with Matthews et al. (2021), who found that cultural immersion experiences promote greater empathy, understanding, and respect between cultures. Furthermore, this study's results align with Arghode et al.'s (2022) model of intercultural sensitivity, which suggests that meaningful intercultural exchanges enhance students' adaptability, critical thinking, and ability to engage with diverse cultural perspectives.

Impact on Cultural Preservation in the Educational Context

The finding that UWA students' involvement in the Toraja community had a significant and positive impact on cultural preservation efforts aligns with and expands upon existing research on cultural immersion programs, intercultural competence, and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

The UWA students' role in documenting oral histories and traditional practices, which created valuable records for future educational and cultural initiatives, echoes the findings of Selmanović et al. (2020), who emphasized the importance of cultural immersion programs in preserving intangible cultural heritage. Salazar's research suggests that when participants engage in documentation, they not only learn about the culture but also actively contribute to its preservation by creating resources that can be used by future generations. This aligns with the observation that the UWA students' documentation efforts were both meticulous and respectful, ensuring the accuracy and cultural sensitivity of the records they produced.

Furthermore, this finding is consistent with the work of Adewumi (2022), who argued that the documentation and recording of cultural practices play a crucial role in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, particularly in communities where such traditions are at risk of being lost due to modernization and globalization. The UWA students' involvement in preserving these practices through documentation supports Adewumi's assertion by providing the Toraja community with tangible records that can help maintain their cultural identity over time.

The renewed sense of pride among Toraja community members, observed as a result of the students' interest in their customs, supports the theory by Dutton (2019), the mutual transformation in cultural immersion programs. Bennett posited that immersion experiences not only benefit the participants but also have a reciprocal effect on the host community, leading to a strengthened sense of cultural identity and pride. The enthusiasm with which the Toraja community engaged with the students and the pride they felt in seeing their traditions valued and preserved are clear manifestations of this mutual transformation process.

This finding also correlates with findings from Onosu (2021), who highlighted how cultural immersion can lead to a sense of validation and empowerment within the host community. By showing genuine interest and respect for Toraja customs, the UWA students reinforced the community's cultural identity, making the community members feel that their heritage was important and worthy of preservation. This, in turn, encouraged the community to take an active role in sustaining their cultural practices, demonstrating the cyclical nature of cultural pride and preservation.

The UWA students' deep engagement in the preservation of Toraja culture also contributed to their intercultural competence, a concept extensively explored in the works of Deardorff (2023). According to Deardorff, intercultural competence involves the ability to understand, respect, and effectively interact with people from different cultures. The students' participation in documenting Toraja culture, combined with their respectful approach to

learning and preserving these traditions, exemplifies the development of such competence. Immersive experiences like this help participants move from ethnocentric stages of understanding to more ethnorelative stages, where they recognize and appreciate cultural differences. The reciprocal appreciation observed between the UWA students and the Toraja community supports this model, as both groups benefited from the cultural exchange.

This study's findings reinforce and expand upon the existing body of research on cultural immersion programs. The UWA students' active participation in documenting and preserving Toraja cultural practices not only enriched their intercultural competence but also had a significant impact on the community by fostering a renewed sense of pride and reinforcing cultural identity. The mutual benefits observed in this cultural exchange highlight the dual role of immersion programs in both preserving intangible cultural heritage and enhancing cross-cultural understanding. By aligning with previous research, these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how cultural immersion can serve as a powerful tool for cultural preservation and intercultural learning.

Conclusion

The result of this study shows the positive impact of this immersion on both the students and the local community, focusing on the preservation of Toraja cultural traditions. The evidence depicted that the deep and impactful engagement of UWA students with the Toraja culture and the presence of UWA students in the Toraja community had a positive impact on cultural preservation efforts. The study concludes with recommendations for improving the effectiveness of such programs and calls for continued collaboration between universities and Indigenous communities in the pursuit of cultural preservation.

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