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# INVESTIGATING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE OF ENGLISH PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS: IMPLEMENTATION AND CHALLENGES IN EMBRACING RELIGIOUS MODERATION

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## **Abstract:**

*Language learning cannot be separated from cultural learning. Therefore, it is crucial to identify the intercultural competence of pre-service English teachers at UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri, focusing on their attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness reflected in their teaching practices related to religious moderation. Implementing religious moderation is important for pre-service teachers in Indonesia because Indonesia consists of various ethnicities, races and religions. In contrast to previous researches that mainly address pre-service teachers' intercultural competence, this study aims to explore the dimensions of intercultural competence and identify the challenges faced by pre-service teachers in implementing English language learning and integrating religious moderation in their classrooms. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through questionnaires, classroom observations, and in-depth interviews with 30 students, which were analysed based on Byram's theory of intercultural competence. The results showed that the prospective teachers' level of intercultural competence was at a moderate level at 3.36, as evident in their teaching practices, particularly in their approach to embracing religious moderation. However, several challenges were encountered in their implementation, such as limited*

*opportunities to interact with native speakers, low student interest in learning about culture, and limited connections between intercultural education and religious education in the curriculum. This study highlights the need for better training and curriculum integration to help pre-service teachers develop the skills and awareness needed to promote intercultural understanding and religious moderation in their future classrooms.*

**Keywords:** *Intercultural competence, Pre-service teachers, Religious moderation*

## INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are inseparable, as they shape and influence each other through human interaction. In today's globalized world, linking language teaching to the intercultural context is crucial. Liddicoat et al. (2003) view culture as the system of values, beliefs, practices, and institutions that characterize a cultural group. Therefore, language learning requires linguistic proficiency and cultural competence for meaningful communication. Byram (1997) adds that learners must develop an understanding of the norms, values, and traditions of their own and others' cultures to achieve effective interaction. These perspectives give rise to the concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), which combines language learning with cultural awareness. Kramsch (1998) also describes ICC as the ability to interpret and create meaning across cultures, while Deardorff (2009) highlights the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions that enable adaptation to diverse contexts. Similarly, Zulferdi and Nurdia (2022) state that intercultural competence involves the construction and interpretation of meaning in diverse interactions. To operationalize this, Byram (1997) proposes four dimensions of ICC—attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness—that help learners engage in effective cross-cultural communication.

English pre-service teachers from Islamic universities in Indonesia are expected to have good intercultural competence, particularly as EFL

learners who study English. This competence is also crucial for the successful implementation of the Ministry of Religious Affairs' (*Kementerian Agama*) program on Religious Moderation (*Moderasi Beragama*). Developing intercultural competence among English pre-service teachers is therefore essential, as it enables them to integrate cultural understanding into language learning and contribute to the goals of religious moderation. In addition, it enhances their effectiveness in communication, enables them to promote positive cross-cultural interactions, prepare students for active participation in a globalized world, and contribute positively in the success of the religious moderation program.

Religious moderation is a concept that promotes the idea of practicing moderation, fairness, and balance in every aspect of life in this world (Habibie, 2021). There are principles of moderation (*wasathiyah*) that are beneficial for the sustainability of a peaceful life. These principles include *Tawazzun* (balance), *I'tidal* (straightforwardness and firmness), *Tasamuh* (tolerance), *Tawassuth* (taking the middle path), *Syura* (consultation), *Ishlah* (reform), *Tahadhdhur* (cultivation of civility), *Musawah* (egalitarianism), *Aulawiyah* (prioritizing what is essential), and *Tathawwur wa Ibtikar* (dynamic and innovative). The concept of religious moderation intersects with the intercultural competence that must be learned by language learners, as both emphasize understanding, respect, and empathy toward cultural and religious differences.

Based on the preliminary study, it was found in some Islamic universities that cultural learning is still integrated in English language teaching. There are no specific courses, only limited materials dedicated to studying culture that are separate from English language learning. This results in students having a limited understanding of cultural learning, leading to lower intercultural competence. Additionally, Indonesia treats English as a foreign language, which means students have limited direct interaction and exposure to Western culture. Furthermore, Byram (1997) affirms that one of the critical issues in EFL classrooms consists in language teachers'

unawareness of the importance of incorporating the intercultural dimension in language classrooms.

This study is specifically situated at UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri for several reasons. First, as an Islamic state university, UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri is institutionally mandated to integrate the values of religious moderation into its academic programs, making it a strategic and representative site for this inquiry. Second, its English Education Department produces a significant number of pre-service teachers who will eventually serve as frontline educators in culturally and religiously diverse Indonesian classrooms.

Numerous studies have explored the intercultural competence of pre-service teachers. In 2021, Lei carried out a study examining the degrees of intercultural communication skills among pre-service English teachers in China. The findings indicated a moderate level of intercultural competence among these individuals. Additionally, to explore English pre-service teachers' intercultural awareness in Morocco, Echcharfy (2022) conducted a study entitled *Exploring Intercultural Awareness among Moroccan EFL Pre-service Teachers*. This is a qualitative study which found that EFL pre-service teachers displayed positive attitudes toward cultural diversity. In Indonesia, Atmojo and Tomy (2022) carried out study that attempted to gain insights into Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pre-service teachers' understanding of culture and intercultural competence. It is considered as a case study employing questionnaires and interviews. The results suggested the variance in the participants' understandings of culture and intercultural competence. This condition may obstruct the meaningful goals of cultural teaching and the effective pedagogical practices in their future EFL classrooms.

Despite the growing body of research on intercultural competence in language teaching, a notable gap still exists in the literature. As far as the researcher is aware, no previous study has looked specifically at how English pre-service teachers in Indonesian Islamic universities develop and demonstrate intercultural competence in connection with the Religious

Moderation program. Most earlier studies were either conducted in general EFL settings or in countries outside Indonesia, meaning that the unique experience of pre-service teachers who are learning to teach English while also navigating Islamic values and religious moderation principles has largely been overlooked.

Investigating the intercultural competence of English pre-service teachers is therefore significant, as it closely relates to the preparedness of pre-service teachers from Islamic universities in delivering English lessons grounded in intercultural principles and supporting the implementation of religious moderation programs so that academically, the pre-service teachers will be ready to deliver material that is more in line with local wisdom without losing their identity. Therefore, this study seeks to address the following research questions: (1) To what extent do English pre-service teachers demonstrate attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness that are reflected in their English teaching practices in embracing religious moderation at UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri? and (2) What challenges related to intercultural competence do pre-service teachers encounter in their teaching practices when promoting religious moderation at UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri?

## **METHOD**

This study implemented an explanatory mixed-method design to examine the intercultural competence of English pre-service teachers, their implementation in teaching, and the challenges of embracing religious moderation.

### **Respondents**

This study involved 30 Indonesian pre-service teachers selected from a total population of 112 students currently enrolled in English Language Education program in UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, whereby individuals were chosen based on predetermined criteria: (1) currently enrolled as undergraduate students in English Language Education program who have finished their teaching

training, (2) having completed at least one teaching practicum or micro-teaching course, and (3) willingness to participate voluntarily. This sampling strategy is considered appropriate as it enables the researcher to select information-rich cases that are directly relevant to the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study was conducted in UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri as the representative of an Islamic University in Kediri.

### **Instruments**

This study used three instruments for gathering data to investigate the intercultural competence of English pre-service teachers, their implementation in teaching practices and the challenges encountered in embracing religious moderation. These instruments included a five-point Likert scale questionnaire, observation and an in-depth individual interview. The questionnaire was designed to assess the attitudes, knowledge, mediation skills, interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness of 30 pre-service teachers. Meanwhile, observation on their teaching practice video and in-depth interview with open-ended questions were used to investigate the implementation and challenges encountered by pre-service teachers in their teaching practice while embracing religious moderation.

### **Procedures**

During the data collection process, before administering the questionnaire, participants were informed of the research objectives and procedures, and the researcher sought their consent to participate. The questionnaire was distributed online, and respondents completed it within the allotted time. After students completed the questionnaire, it was reviewed and screened to ensure completeness. Responses were then categorized according to the themes outlined in the instrument design, facilitating subsequent data analysis.

Next, observations were made on video recordings of pre-service teacher teaching to ensure greater accuracy and detail in data. Each video was reviewed independently by the researchers, who examined the extent to which participants demonstrated intercultural competence and integrated religious

moderation values during instruction. Meanwhile, in-depth interviews were conducted to delve deeper and more broadly into the answers and reasons previously provided in the questionnaire.

### **Data analysis**

Since this study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-method design, the quantitative data were collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data to explain and elaborate upon the quantitative findings (Creswell, 2012). In the first phase, quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically frequency counts and percentages, to portray the distribution and patterns of the respondents' attitudes. In the second phase, qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis, whereby transcribed data were systematically coded and organized into emerging themes to provide deeper insight into the reasons and meanings behind the numerical findings. The integration of both data strands occurred at the interpretation stage, where quantitative and qualitative findings were merged and compared to develop a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research phenomenon (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010). This approach enhances the richness and depth of the research findings, contributing to a more holistic interpretation of the study's objectives. Additionally, content analysis was employed to gain insights from participants' statements. These statements were interpreted within the framework of Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Pre-service teachers' intercultural communication skills and religious moderation**

To gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' intercultural competence, the researchers employed a Likert-scale questionnaire comprising 20 items. Each item was designed to measure specific components of intercultural competence, focusing on five key areas: attitudes, intercultural knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and

interaction, and critical cultural awareness.

The responses were analyzed to identify general patterns and trends in the participants' intercultural competence. The findings are summarized in the following table, which presents the mean and standard deviation scores for each component. This organization allows for clear comparison of the average performance across dimensions, highlighting both areas of strength and aspects requiring further development:

Table 1. Intercultural Competence Findings

Category	Items	Mean (Range)	Standard Deviation (Range)
Attitude	Items 1–4	3.7 (3.5–3.9)	1.01 (1.01–1.17)
Knowledge	Items 5–10	3.5 (3.0–3.6)	1.04 (0.97–1.17)
Skills of Interpreting and Relating	Items 11–13	3.4 (3.1–3.6)	1.08 (0.95–1.20)
Skills of Discovery and Interaction	Items 14–17	3.1 (3.0–3.5)	1.10 (1.02–1.15)
Critical Cultural Awareness	Items 18–20	3.0 (3.0–3.4)	1.07 (0.98–1.12)

The findings indicate that English pre-service teachers demonstrate varying levels of intercultural competence across its five components. In terms of attitude, the items reveal moderately high scores, with means around 3.7 (SD = 1.01) for Item 1 and slightly lower scores across Items 2–4, suggesting that the participants generally hold positive attitudes toward engaging in intercultural settings by motivating students and encouraging comparisons across cultural perspectives. However, the variation in responses implies that these attitudes may not be consistent among all respondents. Moving to, the knowledge component, it scores moderately, with means around 3.5 (SD = 1.04), reflecting a fair understanding of intercultural concepts. Similarly, the skills of interpreting and relating show moderate levels at 3.4 (SD = 1.08), meaning that participants can make basic cultural connections and interpretations but may lack deeper analytical abilities to

relate cross-cultural information effectively. The skills of discovery and interaction are rated moderately low at 3.1 (SD = 1.10), indicating that while participants have some capacity to explore and engage with new cultural information, limited opportunities for intercultural interaction may hinder the full development of these skills. Lastly, critical cultural awareness is moderately represented at 3.0 (SD = 1.07), implying that while participants are aware of cultural diversity, they have not yet fully developed the capacity for critical analysis of cultural contexts and biases. The overall mean score of intercultural competence among the pre-service teachers was moderate at 3.36 which collectively indicate that while pre-service teachers hold favourable intercultural attitudes and adequate knowledge, their practical intercultural skills and critical cultural awareness remain at a moderate level and warrant further development through targeted instructional interventions.

Meanwhile, observations of recorded teaching sessions and in-depth interviews were conducted to examine how pre-service teachers demonstrated intercultural competence in practice. The analysis revealed that while some cultural integration occurred in teaching, many pre-service teachers still relied heavily on local customs, such as greeting students with “*Assalamu’alaikum*” and beginning lessons with prayers. This shows that pre-service teachers have implemented tolerance that bridges local and Islamic culture with Western culture.

The interview findings show that English pre-service teachers hold positive attitudes toward intercultural engagement and actively encourage students to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds, including native English speakers. They emphasized the importance of direct interaction to build students’ confidence and awareness, as reflected in the statements,

*“I have asked students to be brave and talk to foreigners, for example, through social media” (PT-3) and “We should show that Indonesians are friendly” (PT-7).*

They also integrated comparative activities in class by contrasting Indonesian and Western cultural products, texts, and practices, such as

comparing authentic Western stories with local folktales to foster cultural reflection. Some teachers encouraged students to adopt beneficial Western values like punctuality and independence while maintaining Islamic norms, reflecting a balanced approach to cultural adaptation. In terms of knowledge, the interviews revealed that pre-service teachers had a general awareness of intercultural concepts but a limited understanding of the historical relations between Indonesia and Western countries. As stated by one respondent,

*“I don’t really understand Western history because I just don’t know much about it” (PT-5).*

However, they showed stronger knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication and cultural customs, recognizing that

*“It’s important to understand, so that when communicating, we don’t come across as offensive or disrespectful” (PT-10).*

Despite these strengths, they acknowledged gaps in understanding social structures, such as class, gender, and ethnicity in Western cultures, suggesting a need for deeper, more structured cultural instruction.

Regarding intercultural skills, the teachers demonstrated a developing ability to interpret and relate cultural differences, recognizing ethnocentrism and misunderstanding in cross-cultural interactions, though often at a surface level. One pre-service teacher stated,

*“Sometimes we still judge other cultures from our own perspective, even though in their culture, it’s considered positive” (PT-3).*

They also expressed willingness to act as mediators in cultural misunderstandings to promote mutual understanding, indicating empathy and openness. However, their limited exposure to native speakers restricted their ability to fully integrate intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills in authentic contexts. Similarly, in the skills of discovery and interaction, participants showed the ability to identify similarities and differences between Indonesian and Western cultures, such as family values and individualism, yet lacked deeper understanding due to limited real-life engagement. Finally, the teachers demonstrated foundational critical cultural awareness, being able to interpret values and ideologies and explain cultural differences, as

shown in the reflection,

*“As Muslims, we should be able to respect the customs and beliefs of other religions and cultures as a manifestation of religious moderation” (PT-7).*

Nevertheless, they expressed hesitation in applying this awareness in real intercultural situations, admitting,

*“We are theoretically capable of respecting each other; but we are still afraid whether we can practice it when faced with real situations or not” (PT-4).*

Overall, while English pre-service teachers exhibit promising intercultural understanding, further experiential learning and reflective activities are needed to strengthen their practical and critical competence in diverse classroom settings.

To examine the relationship between intercultural competence and religious moderation, participants also completed a dedicated set of questionnaire items specifically designed to assess their perceived alignment between these two constructs. The scores derived from these items yielded an overall mean of 3.6 (SD = 1.02) on a five-point Likert scale, indicating moderate agreement that intercultural competence and religious moderation are interconnected. This figure represents the mean of participants' self-reported perceptions across the relevant items and should be interpreted as reflecting the degree of perceived, rather than statistically computed, correlation between the two constructs.

This implies that while pre-service teachers generally understand the interconnectedness of intercultural competence and religious moderation, some aspects require stronger integration within the teacher education curriculum. Interview findings further reveal that participants are aware of the importance of intercultural skills in promoting religious moderation, as they believe teachers should not be fanatical about a single culture or religion but should appreciate and respect diverse perspectives. As one participant stated,

*“Implementing religious moderation is important in English language learning because we, as teachers, must be able to show which Western cultures are good and which should not be imitated” (PT-5).*

However, their understanding of religious moderation tends to be limited to tolerance, as reflected in statements such as

*“I agree with tolerance as an embodiment of religious moderation, but I do not know the details of the principles of religious moderation” (PT-1).*

This may be caused by pre-service teachers' limited conceptual understanding, they may have developed a surface-level interpretation of religious moderation because their prior educational experiences predominantly framed moderation as simply "tolerating differences" rather than as a more complex set of values religious moderation. Their knowledge of religious moderation remains at a declarative level — knowing what it is — rather than reaching a deeper procedural or critical level of understanding that would allow them to enact and apply it meaningfully in diverse contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This possibility could be due to the institutional context, where UIN Syekh Wasil has not yet fully implemented an understanding of religious moderation. Therefore, more meaningful religious moderation learning is needed so that students can understand it more deeply. In addition, this indicates a superficial grasp of the broader tenets of religious moderation, which include *Wasathiyah* (the middle ground), *Tawazzun* (balance), *I'tidal* (justice), *Tasamuh* (tolerance), *Tawassuth* (moderation), *Syura* (consultation), *Ishlah* (reconciliation), *Tahadhdhur* (civilization), *Musawah* (equality), *Aulawiyah* (priority), and *Tathawwur wa Ibtikar* (innovation and creativity). Some participants also admitted that moderation and cultural values are rarely emphasized in English classes due to a stronger focus on language skills, as illustrated by PT-10:

*“The practice of religious moderation and cultural learning in the classroom is still very limited because I focus more on students' language skill achievement.”*

Taken together, the questionnaire, observation, and interview data converge on a consistent picture: English pre-service teachers at UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri demonstrate moderate levels of intercultural competence, with attitudes being the strongest dimension and skills of discovery and interaction

the least developed. While they display awareness of the value of cultural diversity and religious moderation, a gap exists between their theoretical understanding and practical classroom implementation. This gap is evident across all three data sources — in the moderate questionnaire scores, the teacher-centred and culturally limited practices observed in teaching videos, and the interview admissions of hesitation and insufficient preparation. These patterns form the basis for the discussion that follows.

### **Challenges of Intercultural Competence and Religious Moderation in Teaching Practices**

To explore the challenges encountered by pre-service teachers in practicing intercultural competence while embracing religious moderation, in-depth interviews were conducted to gather detailed data of their teaching experiences. One of the challenges reported by participants was the difficulty of finding equivalent expressions between English and their native language. This issue is not just about vocabulary, as it reflects the complex relationship between language and culture. The inability to accurately translate culturally loaded concepts often limits teachers' ability to convey meaning effectively in intercultural contexts. As one participant noted,

*“Sometimes I get confused when looking for terms that are similar to their English equivalents, for example, the word ‘tawadhu’ or ‘takdim’ to a teacher; it’s a bit difficult to find an equivalent word” (PT-2).*

Another major concern was students' limited exposure to multicultural interactions, which obstructs their development as culturally competent communicators. Without opportunities to engage with native speakers or authentic intercultural settings, students struggle to internalize cultural values beyond theoretical understanding. As some participants stated,

*“Sometimes it is difficult to provide real examples when teaching culture because students have never had direct contact with Western culture, only seeing it through social media or TV” (PT-7), and “Facilities that facilitate multicultural interactions are very limited, resulting in students lacking experience” (PT-10).*

Additionally, a lack of student interest in cultural topics and insufficient curriculum emphasis were identified as major barriers. Many pre-service teachers observed that students often view cultural learning as secondary to language skill development, reducing their motivation to engage with intercultural materials. As one participant admitted,

*“Students are too focused on language learning, and sometimes they do not pay much attention to cultural education” (PT-4).*

Furthermore, participants noted that cultural learning and religious moderation are not explicitly integrated into the curriculum. The lack of guidelines results in cultural elements appearing only minimally in lesson plans, even though they need to be learning outcomes. As participants expressed,

*“My hope is that cultural learning will be included in the curriculum so that students can learn in a focused way—not only concentrating on language skills but also continuously improving their cultural knowledge” (PT-2), and “The religious moderation program is still integrated into other subjects rather than being a dedicated subject, so students only understand that religious moderation is about tolerance; they lack a deeper understanding of its principles” (PT-8).*

In summary, these findings highlight that linguistic, pedagogical, and curricular challenges hinder the full realisation of intercultural competence in English teacher education. A comprehensive strategy involving curriculum reform, teacher training, and greater intercultural engagement is essential to address these challenges effectively.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings reveal that English pre-service teachers generally demonstrate a moderate level of intercultural competence. Their attitudes toward intercultural engagement are positive, with a mean score of 3.9, indicating openness to interacting across cultures and encouraging students to compare cultural perspectives. This aligns with Fantini (2009), who states that positive attitudes are foundational to intercultural competence. Notably, however, a positive attitude does not automatically translate into

intercultural action. The observed tendency of participants to open lessons with Islamic greetings and prayers, while rarely initiating structured cross-cultural dialogue, suggests that their positive orientation remains largely dispositional rather than pedagogically operationalised. The variation among responses suggests uneven exposure to intercultural training, supporting Young and Sachdev's (2011) observation that enthusiasm fluctuates without structured intercultural education. As Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006) emphasize, positive attitudes alone are insufficient unless supported by formal instructional frameworks.

The knowledge component, with a mean of 3.5, shows that pre-service teachers have basic understanding of intercultural concepts but require enrichment. What is analytically significant here is the asymmetry within the knowledge dimension itself: participants demonstrated relatively stronger familiarity with verbal and non-verbal communication norms than with historical and socio-structural knowledge about Western societies. This uneven knowledge profile is consequential, as Byram (1997) distinguishes between knowledge of social groups and their products and knowledge of the processes of social interaction, both of which are necessary for genuine intercultural understanding. Kramsch (1993), however, challenges the assumption that increased cultural knowledge alone produces intercultural competence, arguing instead that teachers must develop the capacity to occupy a "third place", a critical space between cultures, rather than merely accumulating cultural facts. The present findings suggest that participants have not yet reached this stage, as their knowledge remains descriptive rather than critically reflexive. Similarly, skills of interpreting and relating are moderately developed, showing that while pre-service teachers can connect cultural meanings, they lack deeper analytical ability. Bennett (2004) and Kim and Papadopoulos (2016) argue that experiential learning is vital to build these higher-order interpretive skills. Thus, intercultural experiences such as simulations or collaborative projects, are essential.

Furthermore, the skills of discovery and interaction are moderately

low, reflecting limited opportunities for genuine intercultural engagement. Paige et al. (2009) and Jiang (2011) state that exchange programs or immersive experiences can significantly strengthen these competencies. Likewise, critical cultural awareness is moderately represented, suggesting awareness of diversity but insufficient ability to critically analyze cultural assumptions. This dimension is particularly significant in the Indonesian Islamic educational context, where critical cultural awareness must be understood not only in Byram's (1997) secular terms but also in relation to the Islamic concept of Wasathiyah, or the middle way.

Religious moderation in the Indonesian context, as articulated by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag, 2019), encompasses a cluster of interconnected principles including balance (*Tawazzun*), justice (*I'tidal*), tolerance (*Tasamuh*), and reconciliation (*Ishlah*), among others. Understood in this way, critical cultural awareness and religious moderation are not parallel but overlapping constructs: both require the capacity to evaluate one's own cultural and religious position in relation to others without descending into either fanaticism or indifference. The present findings suggest that participants conflate religious moderation with tolerance alone, which represents only one principle within a broader normative framework. This has practical consequences: a teacher who understands moderation only as tolerance may acknowledge cultural difference without possessing the analytical tools to navigate it ethically or pedagogically. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) highlight the importance of reflective practice to develop this dimension, yet current training appears to lack structured reflection activities. A targeted intervention might involve the incorporation of reflective journals, case-based discussions of real intercultural incidents, and explicit instruction in the principles of Wasathiyah as an indigenous framework for intercultural ethics in Islamic teacher education.

It is, overall, the intercultural competence of English pre-service teachers can be described as moderate but developing, with strong attitudes and foundational knowledge, yet weaker skills and critical awareness. The

findings also reveal a positive but varied relationship between intercultural competence and religious moderation, supporting Deardorff's (2006) argument that understanding religious perspectives enhances intercultural communication. As Byram (1997) notes, integrating intercultural and religious awareness can help teachers create inclusive classrooms that respect diversity.

The study also identifies several challenges, including linguistic difficulties in translating cultural terms, limited exposure to native speakers, low student interest in cultural learning, and the absence of explicit curriculum integration. These challenges align with Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006), who highlight the need for structured intercultural learning within teacher education. Addressing these barriers through curriculum enhancement and experiential learning can strengthen teachers' readiness to promote both intercultural competence and religious moderation.

The findings reveal that English pre-service teachers at UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri demonstrate potential, but require systematic improvements in training and curriculum. Strengthening intercultural and religious moderation content, providing practical exposure, and fostering critical reflection will equip future educators to navigate cultural and religious diversity more effectively and contribute to inclusive, tolerant education practices.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study finds that English pre-service teachers at UIN Syekh Wasil Kediri have a moderate level of intercultural competence, with an overall mean score of 3.36. Their attitudes are the strongest dimension, showing openness to cultural engagement and a willingness to connect students with different cultural perspectives. However, their practical skills especially in discovery, interaction, and critical cultural awareness remain the least developed. This gap shows that having good attitudes is simply not enough; teachers need real, structured opportunities to practice and reflect on intercultural engagement. Similarly, while pre-service teachers understand

that religious moderation and intercultural competence are connected, their grasp of religious moderation tends to stop at tolerance, missing the broader principles of Wasathiyah that are central to Indonesia's Religious Moderation program.

Several challenges get in the way of deeper development. Pre-service teachers find it hard to give students meaningful cultural experiences, largely because students have little to no direct contact with native speakers or multicultural settings. Low student interest in cultural learning and the absence of dedicated space for intercultural and religious moderation content in the curriculum make things harder still. As participants shared, cultural learning tends to be treated as secondary to language skill development, and religious moderation is folded into other subjects rather than taught in a focused and meaningful way. These barriers point to the urgent need for curriculum reform and better-designed teacher preparation programs that treat intercultural and religious moderation education as core priorities, not afterthoughts. Comprehensive training programs and curriculum integration will better prepare future teachers to foster intercultural understanding and support the principles of religious moderation in their classroom.

This study has limitations worth acknowledging. It was conducted in one institution, relied on self-reported data, and captured only a single point in time, which naturally limits how widely the findings can be applied. Future research would benefit from following pre-service teachers over a longer period to see how their competence grows across different stages of training. Studies that test specific interventions such as virtual cultural exchanges, reflective journaling, or modules explicitly teaching the principles of Wasathiyah would help identify what actually works. Developing a reliable tool to measure religious moderation as part of intercultural competence in English Language Teaching would also be a meaningful contribution to the field, both for research and for guiding how teacher education programs are built and evaluated.

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