

Exploring Arabic culture through literature: collaborative learning and intercultural competence in the LearnCuID initiative

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore how the LearnCuID initiative enhances intercultural competence through the study of Arabic literature. By engaging with classical poetry, folklore and contemporary novels, participants develop a deeper cultural understanding and refine their critical thinking skills. The research highlights the role of collaborative learning, thematic investigations and mentorship in fostering intercultural appreciation.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employs a qualitative approach, analyzing the experiences of four study groups within the LearnCuID initiative. These groups, composed of young European participants without knowledge of Arabic, engaged in collaborative discussions, guided mentorship and thematic exploration of Arabic literature. Data collection methods included observation of group interactions, interviews with participants and analysis of their final learning outputs.

Findings – Findings reveal that collaborative learning enhances intercultural competence by promoting active peer engagement and shared interpretations of Arabic cultural themes. Thematic explorations of literature fostered critical reflection and cultural discovery, with participants drawing meaningful connections between Arabic traditions and their own cultural contexts. The availability of resources played a crucial role in deepening understanding, while mentorship facilitated critical analysis. Challenges, such as limited translations in participants' native languages, were mitigated through innovative problem-solving, including private library networks and participant-led translations.

Originality/value – This study contributes to intercultural education research by demonstrating how literature can serve as a transformative tool for fostering cross-cultural understanding. The LearnCuID initiative's integration of collaborative learning, mentorship and curated resources presents a novel approach and the findings underscore the importance of resources, guided inquiry and collaborative frameworks in developing meaningful intercultural learning experiences.

Keywords Intercultural education, Collaborative learning, Arabic literature, Cultural competence, Translations
Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Intercultural competence is a crucial aspect of language education, emphasizing the integration of cultural understanding with linguistic skills. Rather than treating language as an isolated system, intercultural education situates it within its cultural context, fostering empathy and cross-cultural communication (Byram, 1986). Multilingual and translanguaging approaches further challenge traditional language norms, promoting inclusive education and cultural pluralism (Fang *et al.*, 2022; García, 2019).

Arabic, deeply intertwined with its cultural heritage, provides a rich framework for intercultural learning. Understanding Arabic traditions, poetry, and storytelling enhances

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learners' ability to engage meaningfully with the language (Eldin, 2015). For example, cultural elements like Arabic calligraphy, poetry, and the rich tradition of oral storytelling serve as mediums through which learners grasp not only the linguistic but also the aesthetic and historical nuances of the language (Alfataftah and Jarrar, 2018; Jamous and Chik, 2012).

This article examines the LearnCuID initiative designed to foster intercultural competence through Arabic literature. The initiative engages European participants in small, diverse study groups, exploring classical poetry, folklore, and contemporary novels. Guided by mentors and supported by curated resources, participants analyze cultural narratives, connecting them to broader societal contexts. This article investigates how collaborative learning, thematic discussions, and resource accessibility contribute to intercultural education, offering insights into literature's role in bridging cultural divides.

2. Literature review

2.1 Intercultural collaborative learning

Intercultural competence is a key objective in language education, requiring learners to navigate cultural differences effectively. It extends beyond linguistic knowledge, emphasizing cultural awareness and critical reflection (Byram, 1986; Schulz, 2007). Recent studies reinforce this emphasis on collaboration as a core mechanism for developing intercultural competence.

For instance, de Hei *et al.* (2020) found that collaborative group learning significantly improved students' intercultural awareness and communication skills in higher education settings, particularly when peer interactions were balanced and supported by structured tasks. Similarly, Murdoch-Kitt and Emans (2021) demonstrated how visual thinking tools in intercultural collaboration projects enhanced group trust and helped participants address unconscious cultural biases, leading to deeper intercultural dialog. In virtual settings especially, Alvarez (2019) highlights how structured online collaboration between culturally diverse students can simulate real-world intercultural teamwork, especially when guided by pedagogical design that supports shared goals and dialog.

A non-essentialist approach views culture as dynamic and context-dependent rather than fixed, encouraging learners to focus on communication rather than stereotypes (Ghaffour, 2022). Decolonial perspectives advocate for integrating diverse epistemologies in language education, challenging Eurocentric frameworks (Meighan, 2023; Phyak, 2021). These perspectives inform modern language pedagogy, emphasizing pluralism and inclusivity, while language is seen as a social practice, and teaching is viewed as dialogic mediation.

Language education increasingly recognizes the importance of cultural awareness, integrating cultural contexts into teaching to provide holistic learning experience, enhancing their comprehension and engagement (Maqsood *et al.*, 2024; Jawas, 2020). Teaching language in a cultural context fosters intercultural competence, allowing learners to understand and navigate differences effectively (Schulz, 2007; Byram, 2012). Cultural studies in language teaching involve situating the language within its cultural context, which can influence curriculum design and methods alongside linguistic skills, contributing to the socialization of learners (Minami, 2004). However, educators face challenges in selecting appropriate cultural content and methods for instruction.

In addition to pedagogical structures, intercultural learning can be understood through its linguistic and cognitive dimensions. Key processes include conceptual transfer, applying familiar frameworks to unfamiliar cultural material (Kramsch, 2020), pragmatic adaptation, adjusting interpretation to sociocultural norms (Taguchi, 2012), and metalinguistic discourse, reflection on language use itself as a tool for intercultural negotiation (García and Lin, 2017). These practices are especially salient in literature-based intercultural learning, where meaning is encoded in metaphor, symbolism, and culturally specific references.

Recent work on translanguaging highlights how learners navigate multiple linguistic repertoires to make sense of culturally embedded texts (Fang *et al.*, 2022), while the notion of metaphorical

resonance suggests that interpreting foreign texts involves activating culturally linked imagery and emotion (Shaules, 2019). Together, these frameworks suggest that learners actively negotiate semiotic systems, moving beyond literal comprehension toward deep cultural insight.

Strategies such as cross-cultural training and the use of cultural assimilators can help promote cultural sensitivity and awareness (Jawas, 2020; Aldosari, 2013). Portfolio assessments are also suggested as a way to evaluate students' cultural awareness and intercultural competence (Schulz, 2007). Culturally sustaining pedagogy aims to sustain linguistic and cultural pluralism, promoting the value of a multiethnic and multilingual society. Dynamic skill theory suggests that language and culture learning should be interconnected, emphasizing the need for developmental progression (Shaules, 2019).

While collaborative learning is widely praised for promoting intercultural competence, some studies suggest limitations and complexities that merit critical attention. Jacobi (2020), for example, found that collaboration did not significantly reduce intercultural communication apprehension among students, especially when in-group biases and lack of motivation were present. This suggests that collaborative environments alone may not be sufficient without intentional facilitation and mutual trust. Similarly, Cho and Lee (2008) emphasized the influence of social context and cultural boundaries in shaping how information flows within intercultural groups, showing that pre-existing social networks can constrain collaboration unless actively moderated. These perspectives underscore the importance of critically examining power dynamics, group cohesion, and structural support when designing collaborative intercultural learning initiatives.

2.2 Arabic context

Incorporating art and literature into Arabic language education can significantly enhance language-and-culture learning. This approach engages students and deepens their appreciation of the interplay between linguistic and artistic expressions in Middle Eastern art (Abdelhadi et al., 2020). Implementing critical language pedagogy, inspired by Paulo Freire's "culture circles," encourages authentic dialog and problem-solving among young learners (Nelson and Chen, 2023).

Teaching culture in Arabic language curricula has traditionally been sporadic, but there is a growing interest in making it a central component. This involves setting clear cultural objectives and employing various techniques to integrate cultural knowledge into language learning (Al-Batal, 1988; Lewicka and Waszau, 2016). Integrating cultural content with technological tools can enhance intercultural communicative competence, although this area requires more resources and research (Tamimi, 2014).

Recent studies further emphasize the potential of Arabic literature and art as vehicles for cultural learning. Gao et al. (2024) found that exposure to Arabic poetry not only deepened learners' cultural appreciation but also increased their emotional connection and motivation to learn Arabic. Similarly, Khaled and Anderson (2024) explored how Arabic heritage learners used creative literary practices to express cultural identity and strengthen personal ties to the language, highlighting the value of narrative-based pedagogy in intercultural education. These findings align with earlier work emphasizing the role of cultural aesthetics in Arabic language instruction (Eldin, 2015; Abdelhadi et al., 2020), and suggest that Arabic-specific approaches, particularly those involving poetry, storytelling, and calligraphy, offer powerful tools for fostering intercultural understanding in language education.

There are difficulties in effectively integrating culture into the Arabic language curriculum, such as balancing cultural content with language instruction and addressing diverse cultural perceptions among learners (Al-Batal, 1988; Ahmed, 2011; Eldin, 2015). To overcome challenges like low student interest, innovative teaching methods and diverse learning strategies are necessary. These methods should align with students' cultural backgrounds and aspirations, enhancing the relevance of language learning to their personal and professional lives (Rusli et al., 2024; Selim, 2022).

3. Methods

Collaborative projects in intercultural education may focus on increasing language awareness and promoting intercultural dialog. These initiatives enhance the intercultural competence of participants, demonstrating that working in partnership is an effective method for promoting reflection and improving educational practices related to diversity (Santos *et al.*, 2017; Silva and Marques da Silva, 2022; Martins, 2008).

This article focuses on small study groups formed under the initiative “Learn Cultural Identity” (LearnCuID), designed to foster intercultural understanding through collaborative online learning. The four study groups were selected using a purposive sampling approach. Selection criteria included (1) the thematic focus on Arabic literature, (2) the availability of recorded group sessions and completed collaborative outputs, and (3) participants’ willingness to engage in follow-up interviews. These groups were drawn from a broader pool of LearnCuID cohorts ($n = 12$ total), but were chosen for their thematic diversity, active engagement, and completeness of data sources.

These groups, each mentored by a cultural coordinator who provides guidance and facilitates discussions, consist of young adults aged 20–30 from diverse European backgrounds. Such intercultural learning initiatives are increasingly recognized for their potential to improve cross-cultural understanding and collaboration in educational contexts (Deardorff, 2006; Sinicrope *et al.*, 2007; de Hei *et al.*, 2020). These specific study groups explore themes of Arabic literature, allowing learners to explore cultural identity and understand the historical and societal context embedded within the literature. It should be noted that participants have minimal or no prior knowledge of Arabic language or culture. The initiative adopts a collaborative learning model, since participants engage in discussions, share perspectives, and collectively investigate selected topics of Arabic culture and literature.

Collaborative learning models have been shown to enhance cognitive and intercultural competence by encouraging active peer-to-peer engagement (Johnson and Johnson, 2009; Gillies, 2014). The model emphasizes peer-to-peer interaction, enhancing their understanding of intercultural nuances. Groups are provided with curated book materials relevant to their topics, consistent with findings that structured resource use supports meaningful intercultural learning (O’Dowd, 2015; Helm, 2013; Avgousti, 2018). Over a specified time frame, they engage in studying and interpreting these resources, allowing them to form comprehensive insights into their chosen themes. At the end of the study period, each group presents its findings in the form of a written output, such as a small article or book chapter. These outputs are shared within the online community of the LearnCuID initiative, contributing to a repository of collaborative cultural learning.

In this article, four LearnCuID study groups focusing on Arabic culture and literature were analyzed. These groups operated within an average one-year time frame, between 2023 and 2024, and this extended duration allowed for an in-depth exploration of the groups’ learning processes and outcomes. The methodology involved a detailed examination of their activities, processes, and outcomes, complemented by online interviews conducted with young participants to gain deeper insights. These study groups of Arabic culture were chosen from a larger pool of participants within the LearnCuID initiative. Each study group and participant explored specific topics within Arabic culture and literature, such as classical poetry, folklore, contemporary fiction, or key cultural practices. The study groups’ online interactions, collaborative discussions, and resource-sharing were closely observed, consistent with evidence on the value of interaction analysis in collaborative learning environments (Ludvigsen and Steier, 2019; Baker and Reimann, 2024). Data on the dynamics of collaboration and learning behaviors were documented. The outputs produced by each group, such as articles or book chapters, were collected and analyzed to understand their interpretations and representations of Arabic culture and literature.

To complement the observational data, online interviews were conducted with participants aged 20–30. These semi-structured interviews aim to explore their experiences, motivations, challenges, and reflections on the learning process. Key questions focused on the learning

journey and how it shaped their cultural understanding, the collaborative experiences within the group, and the impact of the initiative on their intercultural competence. The analysis employed a thematic coding approach to identify recurring themes and patterns in both the participants' responses and the group outputs.

Thematic analysis followed a six-phase approach (Squires, 2023): (1) familiarization with data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Coding was conducted iteratively, first by each author individually, followed by collaborative code refinement. Key themes included cultural symbol interpretation, collaborative knowledge-building, language adaptation, and resource mediation. Cross-checking ensured inter-coder consistency and minimized bias in interpretation. These themes included cultural discovery, knowledge acquisition, collaborative learning dynamics, and resource utilization. Insights from the interviews were synthesized with observational data to provide a holistic view of the initiative's outcomes. This approach helped capture both the subjective experiences of the participants and the objective evaluation of the outputs.

4. Results

The participants demonstrated shared characteristics that influenced their learning experiences (Table 1).

With 35 participants distributed across four study groups, each group was kept small, ranging from 8 to 10 members each, providing a balance between diversity of perspectives and active collaboration with meaningful discussions. The minimal prior exposure to Arabic ensured participants approached the material with fresh perspectives, supporting the initiative's goal of cultural discovery. The inclusion of a few participants with very basic knowledge provided a slight advantage in group dynamics, offering foundational insights where needed without detracting from the focus on cultural learning and without undermining the group's overall experience of discovery.

4.1 Cultural discovery and knowledge acquisition

Thematic exploration emerged as a cornerstone of cultural learning. One study group immersed themselves in classical Arabic poetry, focusing on the works of Al-Mutanabbi. They were particularly struck by themes of pride, resilience, and the poet's introspective reflections

Table 1. Characteristics of participants in LearnCuID Arabic study groups

Characteristic	Details
Number of participants	35 participants in total (average of ~9 participants per study group)
Age range	Predominantly 20–30 years old (average age: 26)
Academic background	- 15 from anthropology - 10 from sociology - 7 from literature - 3 from international relations
Prior knowledge of Arabic	- 30 participants had no prior knowledge - 5 participants had very basic knowledge
Geographic diversity	Participants from 12 European countries, with representation from Western, Central, and Southern Europe
Main motivations	- 13 expressed interest in intercultural competence - 11 had academic motivations related to research
Main learning goals	- 15 sought cultural insights through literature - 10 aimed to complement academic research

Source(s): Data analysis of LearnCuID Arabic study groups

on identity and purpose. The group linked these themes to modern notions of self-discovery and resilience, comparing Al-Mutanabbi's struggles with contemporary societal challenges. One participant noted, "His poetry isn't just about personal pride—it's about finding meaning in struggle, something I think resonates across cultures." This engagement provided a bridge between historical Arabic literary traditions and the participants' own experiences.

The exploration of contemporary Arabic novels offered a window into modern societal dynamics and cultural shifts. For instance, participants studying Naguib Mahfouz's *Palace Walk* were fascinated by its portrayal of family structures and generational differences in a rapidly changing society. They discussed how the novel depicted the tensions between tradition and modernity, a theme they connected to global experiences of cultural transition. One participant explained, "The way the characters navigated these changes reminded me of how my grandparents talk about their own experiences with modernization back home."

The study of cultural symbols in Arabic literature enriched participants' understanding of the interconnectedness between art, spirituality, and daily life. Participants analyzing Arabic poetry identified recurring motifs of nature—such as the desert, palm trees, and the moon—as symbols of resilience, beauty, and the passage of time. One participant reflected, "The desert wasn't just a setting; it represented endurance and introspection, which helped me appreciate the depth of this cultural perspective." Similarly, the use of calligraphy in literature was discussed as both an artistic and spiritual expression, with one participant noting, "The beauty of the script itself felt like a reflection of the culture's reverence for language and meaning." They linked these cultural symbols to the broader cultural emphasis on aesthetics and interconnectedness.

Participants' collaborative discussions further enhanced their cultural learning. These interactions enabled them to share interpretations and refine their understanding through multiple perspectives. One participant remarked, "Hearing my groupmates' insights made me realize how layered these texts are. Together, we could unpack meanings that none of us might have seen alone." In the folklore group, participants compared elements from Arabic tales with those in their own cultural traditions, discovering unexpected similarities. A participant observed, "In both Arab and European folklore, wisdom is often personified—like in animals or clever characters—showing how cultures use similar tools to communicate values."

Participants also displayed metalinguistic awareness and pragmatic adaptation as they encountered culturally rich or untranslatable concepts in Arabic texts. For example, while interpreting the word *karam* in a poem by Al-Mutanabbi, a participant remarked: "It says 'generosity,' but that doesn't capture how it's tied to honor and the entire hospitality tradition." This led the group to compare cultural models of giving, uncovering deeper meanings through cross-linguistic reflection. Similarly, another participant noted that "the desert isn't just a place—it's like a metaphor for solitude, strength, and timelessness," demonstrating metaphorical resonance and conceptual transfer from Arabic literature to personal frameworks.

Through this exploration, participants moved from unfamiliarity to a state of meaningful engagement. Such engagement underscores the critical role of cultural exploration in breaking barriers and fostering intercultural appreciation, with a transformative power of Arabic literature in fostering cross-cultural understanding (Ababneh, 2024). Furthermore, the integration of art and literature in pedagogy has been shown to enrich learners' cultural and linguistic understanding, amplifying their connection to the target culture (Abdelhadi *et al.*, 2020). The journey demonstrates how cultural discovery serves as a bridge to connect initially unfamiliar contexts, enhancing both personal and societal growth through the lens of literature (Gao *et al.*, 2024).

4.2 Collaborative learning dynamics

The collaborative nature of LearnCuID groups played a central role in participants' cultural learning experiences. Working in small, diverse study groups fostered a sense of shared

purpose and mutual engagement, allowing participants to navigate their learning journeys collectively. Through structured group discussions, shared resource analysis, and joint output creation, participants developed intercultural competence and a deeper understanding of Arabic culture.

The small group size (an average of 9 participants per group) facilitated meaningful interactions and robust discussions. Participants often highlighted how diverse perspectives enriched their understanding of the texts. For instance, one participant shared, “When we read Al-Mutanabbi’s poetry, I focused on the imagery, but my teammate saw a deeper connection to the poet’s historical context, which completely changed how I interpreted it.” This exchange of ideas allowed group members to explore themes they might have otherwise overlooked, enhancing their overall engagement with the Arabic literature and culture.

Collaboration was especially evident during thematic investigations. In the folklore study group, participants divided responsibilities to explore various tales from *One Thousand and One Nights*. One member focused on the narrative structure of “The Fisherman and the Jinni,” highlighting its cyclical storytelling technique. Another analyzed the moral undertones of “The Merchant and the Parrot,” drawing parallels between the parrot’s cleverness and wisdom traditions in global folklore. A participant noted, “By splitting up the stories and then coming back together, we got to see how each tale fit into the bigger picture of cultural storytelling—it was like piecing together a mosaic.”

The mentorship provided by cultural coordinators was another vital aspect of the collaborative process. Coordinators guided group discussions, posed thought-provoking questions, and ensured that participants stayed focused on their objectives. A participant reflected, “Our mentor didn’t give us answers but asked questions that made us think more critically. It felt like we were uncovering the culture together, rather than just being taught about it.” This approach encouraged active participation and critical thinking, key components of effective collaborative learning.

Group dynamics evolved over time, with participants developing stronger bonds as they progressed. Initially, some groups faced challenges, such as uneven participation or differing levels of familiarity with the study materials. However, as they engaged in collaborative tasks, these issues were gradually resolved. A participant from the group studying Naguib Mahfouz’s *Palace Walk* explained, “At first, it was hard to get everyone on the same page, but once we started diving into the family dynamics in the story, we found common ground. It was like the text brought us closer together.”

The process of co-creating final outputs, such as articles or book chapters, further highlighted the collaborative spirit of the initiative. Groups worked collectively to synthesize their findings, blending individual insights into cohesive narratives. In the group exploring Arabic calligraphy and poetry, members incorporated their analyses of specific symbols—such as the crescent moon and palm trees—into a broader discussion of how art and literature reflect cultural identity. A participant noted, “Writing the article together was a challenge, but it was also rewarding. Seeing how all our pieces fit together made me realize how much we had learned as a team.”

Participants consistently emphasized the value of learning from each other’s perspectives. One member from the folklore group summarized this sentiment: “We all came from similar but different backgrounds, so each of us brought something unique to the table—whether it was a literary analysis, a historical insight, or even just a fresh perspective.” Another participant added, “The group dynamic wasn’t just about learning Arabic culture—it was about learning how to collaborate across cultures.”

These collaborative exchanges frequently required participants to negotiate meaning across multiple languages. Although group discussions were conducted in English, several participants referenced original Arabic terms and compared translations across their native languages (e.g. Polish, French and Italian). One participant explained: “We found that in French, the phrase for ‘the gaze of the moon’ sounded romantic, but in Arabic, it had spiritual overtones. We had to talk through that difference.” These dialogs reflect both pragmatic

sensitivity and the translanguaging process, as participants constructed intercultural meaning through linguistic mediation and group reflection.

Overall, the collaborative learning dynamics within the LearnCuID initiative transformed the participants' experiences, fostering both intellectual and interpersonal growth. Collaborative frameworks become effective in breaking down cultural barriers and promoting teamwork across cultural contexts, as shown in studies of cooperative learning models (Rubtsova *et al.*, 2023; Salma, 2020). This collaborative approach underscored the power of collective learning in breaking down cultural barriers and building meaningful connections, further emphasizing its importance in contemporary intercultural education (Rubtsova *et al.*, 2023; Osman *et al.*, 2011).

4.3 Mentorship and resource utilization

The mentorship provided by cultural coordinators and the innovative access to curated resources played a pivotal role in the success of the LearnCuID initiative. The network's pioneering structure, which included collaboration with private Arabic library collectors across various European countries, proved to be a unique and transformative element in the participants' learning process. These resources, combined with expert guidance, significantly enhanced the participants' ability to engage with Arabic culture and literature.

The initiative's integration of a network of private Arabic libraries, contributed by collectors and housed mostly in private houses and areas, provided study groups with access to rare and diverse materials. This network ensured that participants could explore authentic Arabic texts, which would otherwise be inaccessible to them. For instance, a group studying *One Thousand and One Nights* relied on a translated version with detailed annotations that were contributed by a private library in France. These annotations provided insights into historical and cultural nuances, such as the symbolic role of hospitality in Arab storytelling. One participant noted, "The materials we accessed through this library network were incredible. The annotations helped us understand not just the stories but the traditions behind them."

Another group, focusing on classical Arabic poetry, benefitted from digitized manuscripts provided by a private collection in Germany. These resources included works by Al-Mutanabbi with detailed calligraphic illustrations that enriched the group's analysis. A participant remarked, "Seeing the original calligraphy was eye-opening. It gave us a sense of how deeply intertwined poetry and art are in Arabic culture." The availability of such resources enabled participants to connect the literature to its aesthetic and cultural contexts, and participants consistently highlighted the transformative impact of having access to rare and authentic resources through the library network.

The mentorship provided by cultural coordinators further enhanced the participants' engagement with these resources. Coordinators acted as guides, helping participants navigate complex materials and encouraging critical engagement with the texts. For instance, a group studying Arabic poetry struggled to interpret the philosophical undertones in Al-Mutanabbi's verses, particularly those discussing the relationship between man and destiny. The mentor prompted them to consider the historical context of the Abbasid period, including political instability and intellectual flourishing, to better understand the poet's existential reflections. A participant noted, "Our mentor challenged us to think about how historical events shaped the poet's worldview, which made the verses feel more alive and relevant."

Mentors also played a crucial role in helping participants connect the dots between different resources. In the group exploring Arabic calligraphy and poetry, the mentor encouraged participants to analyze how recurring symbols, such as the crescent moon and palm trees, were represented in both visual and literary art forms. This interdisciplinary approach deepened the group's appreciation of the cultural significance of these motifs. One participant commented, "Our mentor showed us how to look beyond the text and see the connections between literature, art, and everyday life in Arabic culture."

The collaborative nature of the resource network was especially useful in supporting the diverse needs of study groups. Participants shared materials across groups through an online repository, enabling cross-pollination of ideas and interpretations. For instance, a participant from the folklore group accessed visual references to storytelling scenes depicted in Arabic calligraphy, which had been shared by the poetry group. Reflecting on this, a participant stated, “Being able to see how different groups interpreted similar themes using different materials was incredibly inspiring—it expanded our understanding of the culture.”

Overall, the mentorship and resource utilization within the LearnCuID initiative exemplified an innovative approach to intercultural education. The pioneering library network, combined with skilled mentorship, enabled participants to explore Arabic literature and culture with depth and authenticity. This dual approach not only enriched their academic understanding but also fostered a profound respect for the cultural heritage embedded within the texts (Angelides *et al.*, 2007; Sachpasidi *et al.*, 2025).

4.4 Presentation and knowledge sharing

The culmination of the LearnCuID initiative was the creation and presentation of research outputs by each study group. These outputs, which were of a private and internal nature, reflected the participants’ collective learning and interpretations of Arabic culture and literature.

The outputs produced by the study groups—ranging from analytical essays to thematic summaries and creative reflections—were deliberately kept private, shared only within the LearnCuID network. This decision emphasized the initiative’s focus on intercultural learning as a personal and collaborative journey, rather than a public or performative exercise. As one participant explained, “Knowing that our work was for our community allowed us to take more creative risks and focus on what we learned, and not just on making it polished for an audience.”

Each group’s output demonstrated a unique engagement with their chosen topic, blending academic rigor with creative insights. For example, the classical poetry group produced a comparative essay analyzing the themes of resilience and destiny in Al-Mutanabbi’s poetry. They supplemented their analysis with modern parallels, such as comparing the poet’s existential musings with the reflections of 20th-century European existentialists. A participant shared, “We were encouraged to connect the poetry to universal themes, which helped us realize how much this literature can resonate beyond its original context.”

The folklore group created a thematic map of recurring motifs in *One Thousand and One Nights*, such as the use of magic to resolve moral dilemmas. Their presentation included visual aids, such as illustrated story arcs and digital storytelling techniques. One participant remarked, “We focused on how the fantastical elements in the tales could mirror real-life values, like the importance of wisdom and resourcefulness.”

The calligraphy and poetry group exploring Arabic calligraphy and poetry created a visual and textual presentation that examined the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of Arabic script. They incorporated their analyses into a digital book, combining images of calligraphic art with explanatory notes. One member reflected, “We wanted our work to reflect the beauty and depth of the art we studied—it was as much a creative process as it was analytical.”

The act of presenting their findings was integral to the learning experience. Participants were required to articulate their interpretations and engage with feedback from their peers and mentors. This collaborative feedback loop further deepened their understanding. One participant explained, “Presenting our work wasn’t just about sharing—it was about learning from each other’s perspectives and refining our ideas in real-time.” The presentations provided participants with a sense of accomplishment and closure. Reflecting on the process, a participant shared, “It was rewarding to see all our efforts come together in a final project. It felt like we had created something meaningful, even if it was just for us.”

By keeping the outputs within the LearnCuID community, the initiative emphasized the importance of shared learning and trust. Participants often exchanged their work with other groups, fostering cross-group insights and discussions. For example, the folklore group's thematic map inspired the calligraphy group to explore visual representations of storytelling motifs in their final presentation.

This process encapsulated the participants' journey from cultural unfamiliarity to informed engagement, highlighting the role of intercultural education in fostering meaningful connections. These participatory and reflective processes enhance self-awareness and intercultural competence while fostering collaborative relationships and mutual recognition (Caetano *et al.*, 2020). Carefully structured intercultural education initiatives have demonstrated the ability to build respect and understanding through the integration of personalized and creative outputs, aligning with the principles of transformative pedagogy (Biasutti *et al.*, 2021).

4.5 Challenges and problem-solving

A significant challenge faced by participants was the lack of translated Arabic literature in their native European languages. While most participants had a near-perfect proficiency in English, they expressed a strong preference for engaging with literary works in their native languages, particularly when dealing with texts that carried deep and extensive meanings. Reading in their native tongue allowed them to engage more comfortably and thoroughly with the cultural and thematic nuances of the works.

Participants from countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Portugal reported difficulty accessing translations of Arabic literature in their native languages. Available texts were often outdated or incomplete, lacking the cultural annotations that contextualize key literary and thematic elements. One participant from Hungary shared, "We found translations of *One Thousand and One Nights* in Hungarian, but they were simplified versions for children and completely missed the depth of the original tales." Another group working on classical Arabic poetry struggled to access annotated editions in Italian, which limited their ability to understand cultural and historical nuances. A participant remarked, "We could read the poems, but without annotations, we were left guessing about the significance of certain metaphors or historical references."

To address this challenge, the LearnCuID initiative developed a multi-faceted approach. Participants and mentors sourced English translations that were more readily available and richly annotated. These translations served as intermediary resources, helping participants gain access to interpretations that were otherwise inaccessible in their native languages. A member of the folklore group noted, "We used an English edition of *One Thousand and One Nights* with extensive footnotes, and while it wasn't in our native language, it gave us the depth we needed to truly understand the stories." The network of private Arabic libraries and collectors played a crucial role in mitigating this challenge. Some collectors contributed translated materials or rare bilingual editions of texts that provided cultural insights alongside the original Arabic.

Some groups undertook the task of translating sections of the texts themselves, relying on external translators with better proficiency in English or Arabic to bridge the gap. A participant from the classical poetry group stated, "We translated parts of Al-Mutanabbi's poetry ourselves, and while it was challenging, it gave us a deeper appreciation for the language's complexity." In certain cases, the initiative sought private funding to commission translations, a resource-intensive approach that allowed participants to access materials tailored to their needs. A participant noted, "Our group received a translated excerpt of *Men in the Sun* with detailed annotations funded by private sources. It was costly, but it made all the difference in understanding the text."

These resource-intensive strategies had a profound impact on the participants' ability to engage with Arabic literature. The availability of annotated translations enhanced their

understanding and deepened their appreciation of the cultural and linguistic richness of the texts. One participant reflected, “Having access to annotated materials, even in English, made us realize how much meaning lies beyond the words—it’s in the history, the context, the unspoken.” The collaborative effort to bridge the translation gap also fostered a sense of ownership among participants. Translating sections of the texts or working with donated materials required teamwork, problem-solving, and creativity.

The lack of translated Arabic literature in participants’ native languages posed a significant challenge to this initiative. However, through innovative strategies, including the use of intermediary English translations, private sources, and collaborative efforts, this barrier was effectively addressed. These solutions finally underscored the value of resourcefulness and collective effort in overcoming obstacles to intercultural education (Zagood *et al.*, 2023; Husni and Newman, 2015; Lazim, 2023).

5. Discussion

5.1 Intercultural competence through thematic exploration

Participants started with minimal prior knowledge of Arabic culture, reflecting the initiative’s aim to provide a fresh learning environment unencumbered by preconceived notions. By the conclusion, they demonstrated significant growth in their cultural understanding. This progression aligns with research emphasizing the importance of situating language within its cultural context to foster authentic engagement (Eldin, 2015; Abdelhadi *et al.*, 2020; Khaled and Anderson, 2024).

One of the most significant markers of intercultural competence was participants’ ability to draw parallels between Arabic cultural themes and their own cultural traditions. This ability to navigate cultural differences and recognize shared human experiences underscores the success of the initiative in achieving its intercultural goals (Byram, 1986; Abdelhadi *et al.*, 2020; de Hei *et al.*, 2020).

Thematic investigations encouraged participants to analyze literature not as isolated texts but as cultural artifacts reflecting broader societal contexts. These thematic investigations also revealed important linguistic markers of intercultural competence. Participants frequently demonstrated conceptual transfer, drawing connections between unfamiliar metaphors in Arabic texts and analogous cultural references in their own traditions (Kramersch, 2020). In analyzing poetic constructs like the desert as solitude or the moon as witness, learners engaged in metaphorical resonance, interpreting symbolic imagery through culturally adaptive frameworks (Shaules, 2019).

5.2 Translanguaging and pragmatic adaptation

Discussions often involved translanguaging, as participants moved between English, Arabic root words, and their native languages to unpack meaning (Fang *et al.*, 2022; García and Lin, 2017). For instance, during the group’s interpretation of the term *karam* (often translated as “generosity”), one participant noted that the literal translation lacked the spiritual and social depth conveyed in Arabic, prompting a deeper discussion on pragmatic adaptation and the challenges of cultural equivalence (Taguchi, 2012). Such instances reflect the internalization of intercultural learning not only as content but as a practice of reflective, multilingual negotiation.

These insights were enriched by access to resources provided by the initiative’s library network of rare bilingual and annotated texts. The participants’ ability to translate discoveries into collaborative outputs highlights their transition from cultural novices to informed contributors, with a deeper appreciation for the interconnectedness of language, art, and culture (Tamimi, 2014; Lazim, 2023).

5.3 The role of collaboration and mentorship

The collaborative framework encouraged peer-to-peer learning, a critical component in developing intercultural competence (Gillies, 2014; Johnson and Johnson, 2009). Participants

consistently highlighted the value of diverse perspectives within their groups, since discussions enriched their understanding of the text's themes, such as the tension between tradition and modernity (Ababneh, 2024; de Hei *et al.*, 2020).

The role of mentorship further supported collaboration. Mentors not only guided participants through complex materials but also facilitated discussions that encouraged critical thinking. This approach ensured that participants remained active agents in their learning journey, rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Sachpasidi *et al.*, 2025; Helm, 2013).

5.4 Access to cultural resources

One of the major challenges was the lack of translated Arabic literature in participants' native languages, which initially hindered their ability to engage deeply with the texts. This issue aligns with broader concerns in intercultural education about the accessibility of authentic materials in minority languages (Tamimi, 2014; Darwish, 2019). Strategies to overcome this barrier—such as leveraging annotated English translations, accessing rare resources through private library networks, and undertaking in-house translations—were instrumental in this direction.

The preference for reading literary works in participants' native languages, despite their proficiency in English, underscores the importance of linguistic comfort in engaging with complex cultural themes. Annotated translations provided a middle ground, offering detailed cultural context while allowing participants to work collaboratively to interpret and adapt the materials. This collaborative translation process itself became a learning experience, as participants engaged in the linguistic and cultural challenges of rendering Arabic texts into their own languages (Husni and Newman, 2015; Zagood *et al.*, 2023). The cost of commissioning custom translations posed a significant logistical challenge but was justified by its impact. Participants who accessed translated excerpts with extensive cultural annotations reported a deeper emotional and intellectual connection to the texts. This underscores the critical role of resource accessibility in fostering meaningful cultural engagement (Al-Batal, 1988; Abdelhadi *et al.*, 2020).

The LearnCuID initiative offers several insights into best practices for intercultural education, particularly in contexts involving linguistic and cultural diversity. First, the initiative's collaboration with private Arabic library collectors represents a novel approach to addressing resource limitations in intercultural education. This model could be replicated in other contexts to improve access to culturally significant materials, highlighting the potential of public-private partnerships in education (Abdelhadi *et al.*, 2020).

5.5 Balancing linguistic comfort and cultural authenticity

The emphasis on collaborative learning allowed participants to engage with diverse perspectives and refine their interpretations through peer discussions. This aligns with research on cooperative learning, which emphasizes the role of group interaction in developing intercultural competence (Johnson and Johnson, 2009; Rubtsova *et al.*, 2023). The inclusion of reflective components, such as group presentations and written outputs, further reinforced participants' learning by encouraging them to articulate and synthesize their insights (Biasutti *et al.*, 2021; de Hei *et al.*, 2020).

The participants' preference for reading in their native languages highlights the need to balance linguistic accessibility with cultural authenticity. Annotated translations and bilingual texts emerged as effective tools in this regard, enabling participants to engage deeply with the material while accommodating their linguistic preferences. Future initiatives could explore additional strategies, such as creating multilingual digital repositories or integrating machine translation tools with expert curation to enhance accessibility (Husni and Newman, 2015; Lazim, 2023).

The role of cultural coordinators in facilitating discussions and guiding participants through complex themes was pivotal. This mentorship model ensured that participants

remained engaged and that their interpretations were grounded in cultural context. Expanding this mentorship approach to include experts from diverse cultural backgrounds could further enhance the depth and breadth of intercultural education initiatives (Sachpasidi *et al.*, 2025).

5.6 Limitations and future directions

While the current article focuses specifically on European participants engaging with Arabic literature, it is acknowledged that this may be a unidirectional model of intercultural learning. This design provided valuable insights into how learners interpret unfamiliar traditions, but it did not include reciprocal engagement from Arabic-speaking participants. This one-sided structure, while pedagogically sound for focused exploration, may constrain opportunities for mutual recognition and shared identity negotiation. Future research and program designs should consider bidirectional models that enable learners from different cultural backgrounds to engage with each other's literary and historical traditions, fostering deeper intercultural dialog grounded in reciprocity.

In addition, while quantitative techniques such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) or Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) can yield important insights in later-stage or large-scale research, they are not applicable to the current exploratory design. The article did not involve standardized survey instruments or statistically generalizable variables. Instead, it focused on in-depth, context-specific data including open-ended interviews, group interaction transcripts, and collaboratively produced textual outputs. That said, future iterations of the LearnCuID initiative may benefit from mixed-method approaches, combining thematic analysis with structured assessment tools to track intercultural competence development across diverse participant groups.

6. Conclusion

Intercultural education has the potential to transform how individuals engage with diverse cultures by fostering understanding, empathy, and collaboration across cultural boundaries. This research clearly demonstrated that collaborative learning, when implemented through small, diverse groups supported by mentorship, was central to participants' development of intercultural competence. The group-based structure of the LearnCuID initiative created space for dialog and mutual interpretation, mirroring evidence from prior research that collaborative models encourage deep engagement with unfamiliar cultures (Gillies, 2014; Johnson and Johnson, 2009).

Thematic investigations of Arabic literature, including poetry, folklore, and contemporary fiction, allowed participants to draw meaningful parallels between Arabic traditions and their own cultural backgrounds. These thematic discoveries were supported by curated resources and the integration of symbolic and artistic elements (e.g. Arabic calligraphy), underscoring the importance of culturally immersive and multimodal learning experiences (Abdelhadi *et al.*, 2020; Gao *et al.*, 2024). The results suggest that such exposure to cultural symbols plays a significant role in shaping empathy and reflection across contexts.

Mentorship was a key catalyst in facilitating critical analysis and sustained engagement. Participants highlighted the impact of guided questioning and context-building, especially when navigating philosophical or abstract literary themes. These findings validate mentorship's role as an enabler of reflective, dialogic learning in intercultural contexts (Sachpasidi *et al.*, 2025).

Furthermore, the use of private library networks and annotated translations addressed significant challenges in accessing Arabic literature. Participants' ability to engage with rare texts, supplemented by creative translation efforts, enhanced cultural interpretation and knowledge acquisition. These strategies proved transformative in overcoming linguistic and resource-related barriers—supporting the broader claim that intercultural education must prioritize accessibility alongside authenticity (Tamimi, 2014; Lazim, 2023; Husni and Newman, 2015).

Ultimately, the initiative not only enabled learners to move from cultural unfamiliarity to meaningful engagement, but also fostered transferable intercultural skills, such as collaboration, reflective inquiry, and creative output. These outcomes reflect and reinforce the broader goals of transformative intercultural education: to build competencies that empower learners to navigate cultural complexity with nuance, respect, and curiosity.

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Further reading

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