Exploring intercultural competence in children: the role of the Young Interpreter Scheme

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Exploring intercultural competence in children: the role of the young interpreter scheme

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural competence is an essential skill in today's increasing multicultural society, including in educational settings, as it facilitates effective communication and fosters inclusivity. The Young Interpreter Scheme (YIS), developed by Hampshire Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service (EMTAS), supports English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners by training their peers to provide linguistic and cultural assistance. This study examined the impact of YIS participation on primary school children's intercultural competence using a qualitative approach. Participants were 27 Young Interpreters (YIs) and 27 control students from four primary schools in England, aged 7–11 years. Data were collected at three time points: before YI training (baseline), immediately after training (post-training), and six months later (follow-up). The analysis compared the YI group with the control group, exploring changes over time in cultural awareness, emotional sensitivity, and supportive behaviours. Findings suggest that YI training broadens children's understanding of cultural differences and similarities, enhances their ability to support peers through both verbal and non-verbal communication, and fosters greater engagement with multicultural interactions. The study highlights the potential of structured peer-support initiatives in developing intercultural competence, highlighting the potential for the YIS to serve as a model for other schools globally.

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Introduction

The growing cultural and linguistic diversity in schools has created multilingual learning environments, necessitating strategies for inclusive communication and cross-cultural understanding. In England, 21% of primary school children are English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners (DfE 2024), i.e. learners who have been 'exposed to a language at home that is known or believed to be other than English' (Department for Education 2024), what is known as a heritage language (Kupisch and Rothman 2018). Given its broad definition, the EAL category inevitably encompasses an extremely heterogeneous group of learners in terms of proficiency in English and in their heritage language(s), their national, ethnic and cultural background, point of arrival in the UK, and their experience of life in their new country. Learners who join the educational system as international migrants including refugees, asylum seekers and children of economic and educational

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migrants, are typically referred to as 'new arrivals', and they are the EAL learners who are likely to have the least familiarity with the linguistic, cultural and educational practices of their host country. Regardless of migration background, moving to a new country can be a daunting experience for most children and schools can play a vital role in facilitating the transition to their new home by promoting wellbeing and a feeling of belonging (e.g. Anderson, Ortiz-Ayala, and Mostolizadeh 2024; Fazel 2015; Lahtinen et al. 2024). School is a constant in the newcomers' environment where they can experience meaningful interactions with adults and peers and learn about their new culture (e.g. Birman and Ryerson Espino 2007).

The school context for EAL learners in England is one limited by a 'curricular void' for these pupils (Leung, Evans, and Liu 2021). There is scant mention of their language development needs in the National Curriculum (Flynn and Curdt-Christiansen 2018) and no reference to them in the inspection framework for schools. Despite, or perhaps because of, this absence of policy, EAL learners needs are framed by a deficit narrative of 'othering' (Szymczyk, Popan, and Arun 2022) that focuses on lack of English as a problem rather than multilingualism as an asset. In this absence of EAL policy and strategy schools, local councils, and charities have developed various resources to support EAL learners' with varying proficiency in English (see for example The Bell Foundation).

One such scheme that is designed specifically for new arrivals, based on peer-to-peer support, is the Young Interpreter Scheme (YIS) developed by Hampshire Ethnic Minority and Achievement Services (https://www.hants.gov.uk/educationandlearning/emtas/supportinglanguages/young-interpreters-guide). The scheme is aimed at children and young people between the ages of 5 and 16 and provides training on the skills needed to make new arrivals feel safe and welcome in their new school. Because the fostering of intercultural competence is at the very essence of the YIS, investigating the effects of training on young interpreters can inform our understanding of intercultural competence in children and young people. While intercultural competence is well-researched in higher education, its development in young children, particularly through structured school-based interventions, remains underexplored.

This study advances understanding of how peer-to-peer support can enhance the classroom experience of multilingual learners by examining the impact of YIS participation on primary school children's intercultural competence. It explores how peer-mediated support shapes children's understanding of cultural differences, emotional awareness, and communication strategies. In doing so, the research contributes to new insights to a relatively underexplored area, highlighting the potential of such initiatives to foster inclusive school environments and promote intercultural competence in multilingual settings.

Models of intercultural competence

Intercultural competence is the ability to communicate and interact effectively across cultural boundaries, integrating knowledge, attitudes, and skills (Byram 1997; Deardorff 2006). It extends beyond cultural awareness, encompassing respect, adaptability, and the ability to navigate intercultural exchanges successfully. Once rooted in business and diplomacy, it is now key in education as globalisation reshapes learning (Fantini and Tirmizi 2006). In the UK, policies highlight its role in inclusive education and multilingualism (DfE 2024), yet its development in young learners, particularly through peer-supported frameworks, remains underexplored.

Various models define intercultural competence, each highlighting different developmental aspects. Byram's (1997) Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence focuses on attitudes (e.g. curiosity and openness), knowledge (e.g. cultural self-awareness), and skills (e.g. interpreting and relating) and is widely applied in language learning curricula. Similarly, Deardorff's (2006) Process Model integrates both internal (attitudes, knowledge) and external (behavioural adaptation) components, emphasising reflection and adaptability, making it particularly relevant for educational interventions. In contrast, Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural

Sensitivity (DMIS) describes a progression from ethnocentric to ethnorelative perspectives, where cultural differences are increasingly recognised and respected. These models provide a framework for understanding how peer-supported initiatives like the YIS foster intercultural competence in children.

Multilingualism, peer interaction, and intercultural competence

As multilingualism increases across schools in England (DfE 2024), many children encounter diverse cultural and linguistic stimuli, fostering intercultural competence through peer interactions. These experiences enhance communication skills, cultural appreciation, and empathy (Gerlich et al. 2010). Research shows ethnic and cultural awareness develops early, with some studies indicating that children form ethnic attitudes as young as three years old (Porter 1971). Peer interactions play a crucial role in this process. Cooperative learning, cross-ethnic friendships, and structured engagement further strengthen these (Feddes, Noack, and Rutland 2009). However, diversity alone is insufficient – without structured interventions, children may self-segregate, limiting meaningful intercultural exchanges (Halualani et al. 2004).

Targeted educational initiatives have been shown to foster intercultural competence effectively in young learners. In Portugal, Santos, Araújo e Sá, and Simões (2014) implemented cultural storytelling and interactive sessions, significantly improving children's linguistic and cultural awareness, empathy, and critical thinking. Similarly, in Poland, Dziedziewicz, Gajda, and Karwowski (2014) introduced the Creativity Compass programme, which combined cultural exploration with creative exercises to develop intercultural sensitivity. Other studies highlight the role of play and experiential learning. Acevedo (2019) found that play-based approaches help children explore cultural practices and build personal connections, reinforcing cultural awareness. In Spain, Hernández-Bravo, Cardona-Moltó, and Hernández-Bravo (2017) showed that teacher-led interventions with structured global learning improved children's intercultural knowledge and attitudes.

These findings highlight the need for intentional, developmentally appropriate interventions in fostering intercultural competence. However, peer-supported initiatives remain underexamined, presenting a key gap this study aims to address.

Peers are essential in developing intercultural competence through modelling, observation, and collaboration (Deardorff 2020). Exposure to diverse perspectives fosters empathy, cultural sensitivity, and mutual respect, while also challenging stereotypes and broadening worldviews (Slavin 2011).

Cooperative learning research links cross-cultural peer interactions to more positive attitudes toward diversity and reduced prejudice (Feddes, Noack, and Rutland 2009). Additionally, structured peer engagement strengthens communication, cooperation, and problem-solving skills, helping children navigate cultural differences effectively (Tadmor and Tetlock 2006).

However, diversity alone does not guarantee intercultural learning. Without structured opportunities, children often stay within culturally homogenous peer groups (Halualani et al. 2004). This underscores the need for interventions like the YIS, which is designed to actively foster meaningful cross-cultural interactions.

The YIS: peer support and the development of intercultural competence

As outlined earlier, the Young Interpreter Scheme (YIS), developed by Hampshire EMTAS, emerged in response to the lack of national policy and structured support for EAL provision in England. It offers schools a low-cost, structured framework for peer-mediated intercultural learning. Participating schools nominate pupils – typically those who demonstrate empathy, maturity, and a willingness to support others – to complete a series of training sessions, after which they take on a formalised role as Young Interpreters. In this capacity, pupils support the social and emotional integration of newly arrived EAL learners while also developing their own intercultural

competence. By foregrounding peer interaction, the scheme enables schools to promote inclusive practice in the ongoing absence of coherent national provision. The training is underpinned by the four dimensions of cultural intelligence identified by Earley and Ang (2003): metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural. These dimensions inform the scheme's structured sessions, which are designed to enhance children's ability to navigate linguistic and cultural diversity effectively.

Session 1: exploring feelings and becoming a YI

The first session introduces pupils to the experiences of starting school as an EAL learner. Through discussions about their own language backgrounds and school experiences, participants reflect on the challenges faced by their peers. Aligning with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 2001) this session fosters positive intergroup relations and develops metacognitive and motivational cultural intelligence through self-reflection on cultural differences.

Session 2: experiencing language barriers

The second session introduces experiencing language barriers through an empathy exercise in which pupils listen to a story in an unfamiliar language. They discuss strategies such as using pictures, gestures, and facial expressions to aid communication. This session reinforces behavioural and cognitive cultural intelligence by improving adaptability in diverse interactions.

Session 3: practicing as a young interpreter

The third session uses role-play scenarios to help pupils develop communication strategies in multicultural interactions. Through simulated situations, children learn to apply problem-solving techniques, employ non-verbal cues, and build confidence in supporting their peers. This session reinforces observational learning and enhances both motivational and behavioural cultural intelligence by encouraging active engagement in intercultural interactions.

Session 4: using the YI kit

The final session consolidates pupils' learning by encouraging them to apply their skills in real-world school settings. Pupils explore how to support peers with limited English proficiency, engaging with all four cultural intelligence dimensions outlined by Earley and Ang (2003). They refine their reflective skills (metacognitive), deepen their understanding of cultural norms (cognitive), demonstrate motivation to assist peers (motivational), and enhance their verbal and non-verbal communication abilities (behavioural).

Overall, the YIS training programme's aim is to enhance intercultural competence by fostering cultural awareness, empathy, and effective communication skills among pupils. By integrating key cultural intelligence dimensions, the programme intends to promote inclusivity, strengthen peer relationships, and equip students to navigate multicultural environments with confidence.

The current study

The current study reports on one strand of a larger mixed-methods project investigating the impact of the Young Interpreter (YI) programme on primary school pupils' intercultural competence. Despite its potential, research on the impact of the Young Interpreter (YI) programme remains limited. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the following research question: Does participation in YI training and subsequent experience as a Young Interpreter influence the development of intercultural competence, as reflected in the number of distinct intercultural

themes identified and the level of elaboration within pupils' responses to open-ended questions, compared to a control group?

Methods

Participants

The study involved 27 Young Interpreters (group A) and 27 control children (group B) from four primary schools in England; all aged between 7 and 11 years. For the participants in this study, the term bilingual (BL) is used to refer to both bilingual and multilingual children. Children across the two groups were matched on (1) attending the same school, (2) being the same age (within 3 months), (3) gender, (4) monolingual or bi/multi-lingual status, and (5) non-verbal intelligence. The demographics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

All schools implemented the YIS for this study. The key characteristics and performance indicators of the four schools are shown in Table 2.

Recruitment and ethics

Ethical approval was granted from the University of Reading. Schools were recruited between September and December 2020 using email outreach, professional networks, and targeted advertisements via EMTAS platforms. Headteachers provided institutional consent, followed by parental informed consent, with verbal assent obtained from children at each stage of data collection.

Table 1. Demographics of sample for intercultural task.

Factor	Group	
	A YI	B non-YI
Gender		
N	27	27
Male	9	8
Female	18	19
Language status		
Monolingual	9	8
Bi/multilingual	18	19
Age in years (baseline)		
7	4	1
8	5	9
9	5	7
10	13	10

Table 2. Characteristics of participating schools.

School	Location	Ofsted Rating	Total Pupils	Pupils with SEN (%)	EAL Pupils (%)	Pupils for Free School Meals (%)	Key Stage 2 Standards (%)
School 2	West Yorkshire	Good (2022)	680	7.7	21.1	31.6	64
School 3	Cambridgeshire	Good (2024)	2308	7.7	Not specified	22.6	47
School 4	West Yorkshire	Requires improvement (2023)	395	20.9	47.3	51.7	32
School 5	Northeast England	Good (2023)	255	13.5	36.9	48.6	63

Materials

Raven's Coloured Progressive Matrices Test (CPM)

The CPM is a norm-referenced test of non-verbal intelligence. It comprises 36 items of increasing difficulty, where children complete visual patterns by selecting the correct option from six choices. Raw scores were converted to standard scores and percentiles. The CPM has demonstrated good reliability (e.g. $r = .80$ test – retest; Raven, Raven, and Court 1998). It was used to ensure matched pairs across YI and control groups were within the same range of non-verbal ability, with all children achieving a standard score of at least 85 on this baseline measure.

Intercultural Awareness Task (IAT)

As no suitable measure of intercultural competence for children existed, we developed the Intercultural Awareness Task, inspired by Dziedziewicz, Gajda, and Karwowski (2014) and based on Earley and Ang's (2003). Children were introduced to a scenario where a new student from a non-English-speaking country was joining their school. They personalised the scenario by selecting the student's name and country, but for illustrative purposes we will use Lin for the student's name, and China for the country of origin. Six structured questions targeted specific aspects of cultural intelligence:

(1) Cognitive cultural intelligence – Awareness of cultural norms, practices, and values (*What may be different for Lin?*) and recognition of similarities (*What might feel familiar to Lin?*).
(2) Metacognitive cultural intelligence & empathy – Consideration of Lin's emotions and adjustment challenges (*How might Lin feel about starting school?*).
(3) Behavioural cultural intelligence – Exploration of verbal and non-verbal support strategies (*How could you help Lin?*).
(4) Motivational cultural intelligence – Curiosity and engagement with different cultures (*What would you like to know about Lin's life before moving?*).
(5) Cognitive & motivational cultural intelligence – Assessment of real-world intercultural interactions (*Do you know any children from another country? Have you learned from them?*).

This task provided a structured framework to examine how children conceptualise cultural differences, similarities, and interactions, offering insight into their intercultural competence.

Procedure

Data were collected over 12 months in three phases: before YI training (baseline), immediately after (short-term impact), and six months later (longer-term impact). Participants were tested remotely via Microsoft Teams by the first author while they were at school. The session began with the imaginary scenario, where children named a hypothetical student and their country; if needed, the researcher provided these details. Questions were presented both orally and in writing on a separate PowerPoint slide, personalised with the chosen name and country. The researcher progressed sequentially through the slides, ending with a 'thank you' slide. Children responded orally, with answers audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

Content Analysis (Elo and Kyngäs 2008) was adopted to analyse children's responses to the intercultural competence task. This approach was selected because early coding indicated that word- and phrase-level distinctions offered the most meaningful comparisons between participants. This aligns with Graneheim and Lundman's (2004) view that linguistic choices can signal underlying

meaning in children's responses. NVivo (2018) was used to organise and manage the data. The analysis was structured around six predefined categories corresponding to the six open-ended questions: differences, similarities, feelings, helping the new child, enquiring about the new child, and intercultural friendships. This structure facilitated the comparison of children's responses both within and between the two groups at each time point. Analysis followed a three-phase process (Elo and Kyngäs 2008).

(1) Preparation: The transcripts were read thoroughly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the children's responses. A word frequency analysis was conducted to identify prevalent patterns and was used in a complementary manner to enhance the analysis (Guest, Macqueen, and Namey 2011). For instance, in response to question 1, 'what do you think would be different for the new child?', words like 'language', 'food', and 'school' frequently emerged. These terms were then coded based on their contextual use in complete phrases (e.g. 'they speak a different language' was coded as different language; 'they might eat different food' as different food). Coding units were single phrases or sentences that conveyed a distinct idea. Initial codes were refined as more transcripts were reviewed, with regular discussions with a colleague helping to clarify definitions and support consistency, introducing a measure of reliability in early coding.
(2) Organisation: After the first round of coding, 80 unique codes were identified across the six questions. These were reviewed in relation to the research aims, and categories were developed for codes that occurred in at least three different children's responses (Wolcott 1994). Less frequent codes, such as *different people* and *skin colour*, were noted but not developed into categories. In contrast, related codes such as *different celebrations*, *different culture*, and *different beliefs* were consolidated into a broader category of *different ways of living*. This process was iterative, with codes continually reviewed and refined across the dataset.
(3) Reporting: NVivo's matrix coding queries were used to explore frequency counts of categories across groups and time points. Initial queries provided an overview of common and divergent patterns within the full dataset. Subsequent comparisons focused on differences between YI and control children at each time point. For example, in the baseline responses to '*What might be different for the new child?*', *language difference* was mentioned 17 times by YI children and 20 times by control children. These frequency patterns were interpreted in relation to the content and quality of children's responses, consistent with the aims of Content Analysis. The emphasis remained on understanding how intercultural competence was expressed within and across categories, rather than on thematic interpretation. This structured, comparative approach allowed for both quantitative and qualitative insights.

Results

Findings are organised according to the six open-ended questions posed to children. For each question, categories were developed from the coded responses. Selected quotations are included to illustrate how ideas were expressed across the two groups. For each question, a corresponding table presents the categories, brief explanations, and the overall number of mentions by each group and timepoint to support interpretation. The example name *Lin* and the example country *China* are used throughout. Frequency tables summarising how often each group mentioned each category at each time point are provided as supplementary materials.

Theme 1 – exploring cultural contrasts

What do you think may be different for Lin living here compared to their previous country China?

Seven categories of intercultural differences were identified as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Categories, counts and descriptions for 'exploring cultural contrasts'.

Category	Description	Time 1 - A (YI)	Time 1 - B (non-YI)	Time 2 - A (YI)	Time 2 - B (non-YI)	Time 3 - A (YI)	Time 3 - B (non-YI)
Different language	Mentions of different spoken or written languages.	18	20	14	15	19	16
Different food	References to differences in meals or eating habits.	8	3	11	6	9	10
Tangible cultural differences	Mentions of concrete cultural items such as buildings, objects, or materials.	7	6	7	5	10	9
Different weather	Observations about different climates or seasons.	5	3	6	5	8	8
Different schooling	Perceptions of differences in school systems or rules.	7	3	4	5	8	8
Different ways of living	Broader cultural practices including religion, festivals, or customs.	4	3	1	5	5	2
Different clothes	References to clothing or cultural dress.	3	0	1	2	1	1

Group comparison

At the post-training assessment, YI children (Group A) demonstrated increased awareness of both visible cultural aspects (e.g. language, clothing) and less tangible elements (e.g. perspectives, ways of living, beliefs). This awareness remained evident at the follow-up assessment six months later. In contrast, Group B (non-YI children) showed little change over time, with no notable expansion in their understanding of cultural diversity.

Categories

Different language. Language was commonly identified as a communication barrier, with most children acknowledging that the new child would speak a different language. However, some YI children showed a deeper awareness of the social and academic challenges language barriers create, recognising difficulties in interaction and the need for support.

> They will speak a different language … they won't know how to interact 'cause they don't know how to talk to them. (A group child, baseline)

> Maybe she might need to go with special people who actually know her language and they would have to help her learn English. (A group child, baseline)

By follow-up, YI children showed a more nuanced awareness, acknowledging both verbal and written challenges in a school setting and shifting from individual language acquisition to a collective family experience:

> Mohammad has to learn a whole different language with his family. (A child, follow-up)

Control children, however, largely maintained a surface-level understanding, with some recognising that language barriers affect both the newcomers and the hosts:

> She might get confused about what we are saying, and if she speaks in her language, other people will get confused too. (B child, follow-up)

These findings suggest that the YIS fosters a more developed perspective on language diversity and its challenges.

Different food. Food was consistently recognised as an aspect of cultural diversity across all time points. Most children provided general observations, likely due to their young age and limited experience with different foods. However, one control child born in Italy made a more detailed comparison based on personal experience:

> And the food because in Italy we usually eat lasagne and here we eat like cottage pie, which is not an Italian dish. (B, post-training – born in Italy)

These findings suggest that direct exposure to different cultures enhances children's awareness of culinary diversity.

Tangible differences. Children identified tangible cultural differences such as buildings, shops, electronics, and furniture, with mentions increasing over time. However, their understanding was often surface level, focusing on listing differences rather than their impact. Some YI children acknowledged economic disparities, though responses occasionally reflected stereotypes. One child linked the UAE's wealth to better school meals:

> The wealth in the country … the Emirates, if I'm correct, it's really wealthy, and England is less wealthy, so if they go on school dinners, there's gonna be lower-class food than they'd normally expect. (A child, post-training)

Some responses reflected external influences, such as a child describing Mexico in stereotypical terms:

> In Mexico, they are kind of weird, just songs and dancing. (A child, follow-up)'

While children recognised tangible differences, some responses reflected stereotypes, underscoring the need for deeper engagement.

Theme 2 – exploring cultural similarities

What do you think might be the same and feel familiar for Lin?

This theme explores cultural similarities, reflecting participants' ability to identify commonalities that bridge cultural boundaries and create familiarity. Nine categories of intercultural differences were identified as shown in Table 4.

Group comparison

YI children increasingly recognised similarities in more categories over time, particularly in 'Everyday Items,' 'Family,' and 'School-related' aspects, suggesting a growing awareness of universal

Table 4. Categories, counts and descriptions for 'exploring cultural similarities'.

Category	Description	Time 1 - A (YI)	Time 1 - B (non-YI)	Time 2 - A (YI)	Time 2 - B (non-YI)	Time 3 - A (YI)	Time 3 - B (non-YI)
School	Mentions of school-related similarities (e.g. going to school, classroom routines).	11	7	11	11	9	8
Everyday items	References to familiar objects or items (e.g. tables, shops, water bottles).	3	8	7	6	10	13
Family	Mentions of shared family structures or relationships.	5	5	6	4	5	6
People	Observations about people being present everywhere or being similar.	5	0	4	3	4	3
Routine	Comments on daily patterns or routines that might be consistent.	3	2	3	3	1	0
Having friends	Mentions of maintaining or forming friendships.	3	1	3	3	2	2
Food	References to food types or eating habits that might be familiar.	2	2	3	2	3	4
Games and leisure	Mentions of recreational activities such as sports or games.	2	3	1	2	3	3
Language	References to shared or known languages.	2	1	1	1	1	1

experiences. In contrast, control children focused on the same similarities at each time point, showing little variation. This indicates that YI children developed a broader understanding of cultural commonalities, likely influenced by their participation in the YIS.

Categories

Similarities between schools. Children widely recognised schooling as a consistent experience across countries. Frequently mentioned topics included attending school, subjects taught, teachers, classrooms, and activities.

> The learning might be the same but like just in a different language. (A child, post-training)

Beyond academic content, some children recognised the consistency of school life, including friendships, playtime, and lunchtime:

> School, friends, playtime and lunchtime and teachers. (A child, baseline)

Overall, children's responses reflected an awareness that education transcends geographical boundaries, reinforcing their intercultural competence. However, their understanding was often oversimplified, with limited recognition of the differences in educational systems, teaching methods, and school environments across countries.

Family

Everyday items. This category highlights children's recognition that, despite cultural differences, many aspects of daily life are universal. They identified houses, toys, school supplies, shops, and household items as shared across countries, helping a new child adjust. Children also acknowledged basic human needs, demonstrating an understanding of common life necessities.

> Just normal things like that we need in our life. (A child, follow-up)

Overall, children displayed an emerging intercultural competence by recognising that many aspects of daily life remain unchanged across cultures.

Theme 3 – emotional awareness: understanding the new child's feelings

How do you think Lin might feel about starting school in this country?

Table 5. Categories, counts and descriptions for 'emotional awareness: understanding the new child's feelings'.

Category	Description	Time 1 - A (YI)	Time 1 - B (non-YI)	Time 2 - A (YI)	Time 2 - B (non-YI)	Time 3 - A (YI)	Time 3 - B (non-YI)
Nervous	Feelings of anxiety or apprehension	15	12	22	18	23	21
Scared	Feelings of fear or being frightened	12	15	11	8	9	12
Excited	Positive anticipation or enthusiasm	8	4	6	7	6	7
Worried	Feelings of concern or unease	4	8	7	4	4	3
Confused	Lack of clarity or understanding	2	3	4	3	3	1
Shy	Feelings of timidity or reservation	4	1	2	1	1	2
Anxious	Feelings of unease or nervous anticipation	0	0	1	3	2	2
Sad	Expressions of sorrow or unhappiness	3	0	2	0	0	0
Curious	Interest in learning or discovering more	3	3	0	2	1	0

This theme reflects children's ability to recognise and understand the emotions a newly arrived child may experience. Nine adjectives describing emotional states emerged as shown in Table 5.

These terms demonstrate an awareness of the emotional complexity involved in adjusting to a new school and culture.

Group comparison

YI children predicted a broader range of emotions than Group B, including more positive and neutral feelings. At Times 2 and 3, they were twice as likely to mention excitement and were the only group to identify curiosity, reflecting a greater awareness of varied emotional responses. They also recognised sadness more frequently, while Group B did not mention it at any time point, indicating greater emotional sensitivity. These differences suggest that YI children acknowledged both the challenges and potential positives of transitioning to a new environment, whereas Group B's responses remained more limited in emotional range.

Categories

Nervous and scared. Children consistently identified nervousness as the most common emotion for the new child, alongside frequent references to feeling scared. This shared understanding highlights children's awareness of the challenges of entering a new school environment in an unfamiliar country. Many simply stated 'nervous' or 'scared' without elaboration, while others provided deeper insights into the causes of this anxiety. A key concern was the language barrier, with children recognising how difficulties in communication could lead to nervousness and fear of misunderstanding:

> If I were going from England to Spain and started new, I'd definitely be nervous … they might not even know what I'm saying. (A child, post-training)

Another common theme was making friends, with children empathising with the social difficulties of being new:

> Probably a bit nervous, there would be a lot of children. (B child, follow-up)

One child expressed concern that the new student might be bullied because of their nationality, stating:

> Maybe quite scared because people may bully her 'cause she's from a different country. (A child, baseline)

This response shows the child's awareness of potential prejudices a newcomer may face and the importance of forming connections. Children recognised that belonging and friendship could ease the new child's nervousness, supporting a smoother transition into the school community.

Excited. YI children demonstrated a broader understanding of excitement, recognising both social and educational opportunities in transitioning to a new school. They frequently linked excitement to making new friends:

> She might be feeling excited to meet new people and make new friends. (A child, baseline)

While control children also identified excitement, their responses were more limited, often focusing on play and immediate social interactions. For YI children, excitement extended beyond social aspects to include learning and personal growth:

> Excited to make new friends and [learn a new] language and learn a lot of new things. (A child, follow-up)

YI children were more likely to acknowledge that excitement coexists with nervousness, demonstrating a more nuanced emotional awareness:

> She would definitely feel scared and nervous but then after a while she would get used to it. (A child, follow-up)

These findings suggest that YI children, likely influenced by their training, recognised excitement as part of a complex emotional transition, encompassing social, educational, and personal dimensions, whereas control children tended to focus on simpler, immediate experiences. The YI children in this study also showed a sophisticated understanding that a newcomer's experience in transitioning to a new school is likely not defined by a single emotion. Instead, they recognised that it would probably be a blend of various emotions all coexisting in the newcomer's emotional landscape.

> She might feel confident, she might feel scared, confused, worried, sad, she might feel sick. Sick because she's sick of meeting new people, she's worried, she's confused. (A child, post-training).

These insightful perspectives reveal their depth of emotional comprehension, marking their empathetic ability to grasp the complexity of the newcomer's emotional journey.

Theme 4 – fostering a supportive environment

What could you do to show Lin you know things are different? And to help her?

This theme highlights children's willingness to offer kindness, practical support, and inclusivity to help a new pupil adjust. They identified nine methods of helping as shown in Table 6.

Group comparison

Both groups demonstrated a shared understanding of the importance of social inclusion and practical support, however, subtle differences were present. At all testing points, some Group B children were unable to suggest a way to help. In contrast, all YI children consistently provided at least one strategy, demonstrating a more proactive and confident approach to peer support. At Times 2 and 3, a clear distinction emerged in the use of non-verbal communication strategies, such as gestures, drawing, and visual aids. These techniques were only mentioned by Group A, indicating that non-verbal support strategies were not intuitive but were a direct result of YI training. While both groups demonstrated an understanding of social inclusion, Group A's responses showed a broader and more structured range of support strategies following YI training, particularly in their use of non-verbal communication and emotional inclusion.

Categories

Showing the new child around. There was an inherent understanding from both groups across all timepoints that familiarising a newcomer with the physical layout and the workings of the school

Table 6. Categories, counts and descriptions for 'fostering a supportive environment'.

Category	Description	Time 1 - A (YI)	Time 1 - B (non-YI)	Time 2 - A (YI)	Time 2 - B (non-YI)	Time 3 - A (YI)	Time 3 - B (non-YI)
Show them around the school	Offer a school tour or guidance on navigating the environment.	13	10	7	13	15	14
Help with English language	Assist with understanding or speaking English.	8	8	6	10	11	11
Be their friend	Express intention to form a friendship.	8	5	4	6	5	5
Play with them	Mention playing together as a form of support.	2	1	5	2	3	3
Introduce them to people	Suggest introducing the new child to others.	3	2	3	1	3	2
Make them feel welcome	Aim to make the child feel included and comfortable.	5	3	2	4	3	3
Help them in general	General offers of help without specific details.	3	2	2	3	1	0
Don't know what to do	Express uncertainty or lack of ideas on how to help.	0	0	0	3	0	2

would be helpful. Children provided practical suggestions, such as introducing the newcomer to different classes and daily routines:

> Well, I would first show her around the school, and I would show her what type of classes we do and everything that we usually do and stuff like that. (A child, baseline)

Some responses demonstrated consideration of language barriers, with children proposing visual aids to assist navigation:

> I would draw a small map of the hallway, so he knows where his room is and everything, but write it in Chinese using Google Translate. (B child, baseline)

By follow-up, some children also expressed an interest in understanding the newcomer's prior experiences, integrating a comparative approach:

> I'll try to show him what we do [here] and what is new in our school, and I would probably ask him 'what's different to your school from our school? (A child, follow-up)

Both groups demonstrated a commitment to helping new pupils acclimate, suggesting that showing them around was seen as an essential form of support.

Helping with English. Children frequently mentioned helping the newcomer with English, recognising language as a key barrier to integration. Their responses reflected various approaches, including teaching basic vocabulary, using bilingual skills, and employing technology to support communication.

> I may try to help her with some English, like some normal school words like 'hello,' 'whiteboard,' 'rubber.' (A child, baseline)

Another strategy mentioned several times was to make use of their bilingualism.

> Maybe if I know how to speak their language, I could translate for him. (A child, follow-up)

Or to make use of technology for translation.

> I probably need to use Google Translate. (B child, baseline)

The use of bilingual abilities and translation apps remained consistent across time points, showing a practical approach to overcoming language barriers.

> Be their friend.

Friendship was frequently mentioned to support the newcomer, with children recognising the importance of companionship in easing social transitions. Many responses highlighted offering friendship as a direct means of inclusion:

> I could offer to be her friend. (A child, baseline)

Some children identified friendship to prevent loneliness:

> You could be friends with them, so they don't feel lonely. (B child, post-training)

Others suggested introducing the newcomer to their existing friends:

> I'll show him every single one of my friends so he can become one of us and be our friend. (A child, follow-up)

Across time points, friendship remained a central strategy, reinforcing its perceived role in helping newcomers feel welcome.

Non-verbal communication. At Times 2 and 3, non-verbal communication was exclusively mentioned by YI children, demonstrating the direct impact of YI training. At the post-training

assessment, immediately after training, children introduced gestures, visual aids, and body language as communication strategies. By follow-up, after working as YIs, their responses indicated greater confidence and integration of these methods into their interactions with EAL peers. Children highlighted the role of actions:

> I could use actions to help her and whilst I'm using actions, I keep saying what I want to say in English, so she'll pick it up as we go along. I'll be skipping and I'll go 'this is called skipping' so she could pick it. (A child, post-training)

Some recognised the value of visual aids:

> If you didn't understand the language, you could use actions, point at things, and draw it. (A child, post-training)

Another student proposed the use of body language for communication:

> I could use my body language to show them what things are called (A child, post-training)

By follow-up, children demonstrated a deepening understanding and proficiency in strategies taught during their training:

> I think I should just do sign language or writing in the air the name. I will go ahead and gesture to come to me and then we can show her around the school (A child, follow-up)

> You know those keychains that have pictures like 'eat' or 'lunch'? I could have one and show him with that.' (A child, follow-up)

> Well first you would have to like make a good first impression like smiling and then you might gesture to them to come over here and then you can show them something that they wouldn't understand before and you can help them understand it and you can point to things and say it in the English language.' (A child, follow-up)

As YI children gained real-world experience as interpreters, their responses also reflected an awareness of peer collaboration and structured support systems.

> Yeah, like telling if anyone knows like the language that he speaks I'll just go get them 'cause we have Young Interpreters so we can just look on the posters and find whoever we need.' (A child, follow-up)

> Like the people who speak like the same language, like interpreters like me, who would help him.' (A child, follow-up)

These responses show that YI training provided children with a broader set of strategies, including peer collaboration, problem-solving, and non-verbal communication. The absence of these techniques in the control group suggests they were a direct outcome of the training. By follow-up, YI children had internalised these methods, applying them naturally to support their peers and foster inclusion.

Theme 5 – curiosity about different cultures

What would you like to know from the new child about their life in their home country before moving here?

This theme reflects children's curiosity about the new child's life before relocation, demonstrating an open-minded attitude and a desire to broaden their perspectives. Across all time points, their questions focused on seven categories as shown in Table 7.

Group comparison

Overall, there were no substantial differences between the groups. However, shifts in focus emerged over time. YI children posed more questions post-training, particularly about school and food, indicating heightened engagement with these cultural aspects. In contrast, Group B's questioning patterns remained stable, with a more consistent distribution across topics.

Table 7. Categories, counts and descriptions for 'curiosity about different cultures'.

Category	Description	Time 1 - A (YI)	Time 1 - B (non-YI)	Time 2 - A (YI)	Time 2 - B (non-YI)	Time 3 - A (YI)	Time 3 - B (non-YI)
Ask about life in general / home country	Questions about general lifestyle, family, or experiences in the home country.	11	9	16	9	9	12
Ask about specific concepts	Questions about cultural specifics like festivals, traditions, or clothing.	11	13	6	8	11	9
Ask about school	Enquiries about school life, routines, or subjects.	3	5	9	4	10	3
Ask about food	Interest in food habits or traditional dishes.	4	5	11	4	6	3
Ask about friends	Questions about their friends or social life.	6	6	1	3	4	4
Ask about games and leisure activities	Interest in play, hobbies, or sports in the home country.	3	4	6	3	5	4
Ask about language	Questions relating to spoken or written language.	4	1	5	4	3	4
Ask about life in general / home country	Questions about general lifestyle, family, or experiences in the home country.	11	9	16	9	9	12

Categories

Life in general. Children expressed wide-ranging curiosity about their peer's life before moving to England:

> What was it like? Was it different? How was it? How did they live? I just like to know cause they're from a different country; it could be a bit different to ours. (A child, baseline)

> I would like to know how was the people? Who was your friends? Did you like your school? I would have lots of questions like What were the festivals there? What did you like to do in your spare time over there? (B child, post-training)

Some children posed highly specific questions, seeking unique details about their peer's home country:

> I want to know the reason why she and her parents moved away. And what was the reason for coming in this country. (B child, baseline)

> I want to know whether they saw whether they lived near the rainforest or not. If they did live near the jungle, I would want to know if they saw any cool animals. (A child, post-training)

These responses illustrate children's natural curiosity and openness to learning about cultural diversity.

School. Both groups showed strong interest in the new child's schooling experiences, asking about subjects, teaching methods, and school environments:

> I'd like to know more about his school life. What subjects he learned, what's his favourite subject? (B child, baseline)

> What did she learn there? What lessons do they learn? Do they go to school every day? (A child, follow-up)

These inquiries demonstrate children's interest in both similarities and differences in education, reflecting their desire to connect and expand their understanding of diverse learning experiences.

Theme 6 – multicultural connections

Do you know any children from another country? Have you learnt anything from them?

Table 8. Categories, counts and descriptions for 'multicultural connections'.

Category	Description	Time 1 - A (YI)	Time 1 - B (non-YI)	Time 2 - A (YI)	Time 2 - B (non-YI)	Time 3 - A (YI)	Time 3 - B (non-YI)
Yes – peer in school	Mentions of a friend or classmate from another country within the school environment.	19	19	18	18	23	22
Someone outside school	References to individuals from other countries outside the school setting (e.g. neighbours, cousins).	3	1	1	7	0	2
No identification	Responses indicating uncertainty or inability to identify anyone from another country.	4	7	7	1	3	4
Learnt something from peer	Mentions of learning something (e.g. language, customs) from a culturally different peer.	4	2	7	8	15	7

This theme examined children's engagement with peers from different backgrounds. The primary focus is on the category 'Learnt something from a peer', as it provides the most dynamic insight into cross-cultural interactions. The remaining categories – 'Yes – peer in school,' 'Someone outside school,' and 'No identification' – helped establish the presence and sources of multicultural connections. They frequency counts are shown in Table 8.

Group comparison

Both groups reported similar familiarity with peers from other countries at Times 1 and 2. By follow-up, after six months as YIs, these children showed increased recognition of peers from different backgrounds and a rise in reported learning from them. This suggests that the YI scheme initially broadened cultural networks and later deepened cross-cultural engagement.

Categories

Learnt something from a peer. Although many children reported knowing a peer from another country, fewer indicated that they had learned something from them. This trend was consistent across groups and time points, suggesting that while multicultural environments provide opportunities for interaction, they do not always translate into conscious learning experiences. However, YI children reported learning from their peers more frequently over time. The key areas of reported learning were language, religion, food, and climate differences.

Language. Children most commonly reported learning words and phrases in their peers' native languages, particularly at Times 2 and 3. YI children provided more specific examples of language learning, while Group B participants often mentioned learning a language without elaborating on what they had learned. Some responses captured the process of acquiring new vocabulary:

> Yes. She taught me some Spanish 'uno, dos, tres,' and 'hola.' (A child, post-training)

> Yes, Adela told me how to say, 'Oh my god!' in her language, in Slovakian. (A child, follow-up)

Other children expressed awareness of the challenges involved in language learning:

> She knows Korean. She taught me how to speak a bit of Korean. Korean is hard. It took a month for me to learn one word. (A child, follow-up)

These responses indicate an appreciation for both the linguistic diversity within their school and the difficulties of learning a new language.

Religion. A small number of children across both groups reported learning about different religious beliefs from their peers. They described gaining insights into religious practices, customs, and restrictions:

> I've heard about Ayomi's gods. In her country, Hinduism is one of the main religions in Sri Lanka. (A child, baseline)

> I know Muslims. I have a lot of Muslim friends. They taught me about Henna? the God they believe in, no, I think it's Allah, things like that. (B child, post-training)

These responses suggest that peer interactions provided an opportunity for children to learn about religious diversity in an informal setting.

Food and climate. Food was frequently mentioned, although often without specific examples. One child described learning about a traditional Ghanaian dish:

> My friend comes from Africa, Ghana. And basically, they have this special dish that they eat with their hands and is also spicy. (B child, post-training)

Children also expressed interest in climate differences, with one noting:

> She used to say that whenever it snowed it always used to be lots of snow, it wasn't like here where if it snows just like a sprinkle, it used to be up to her knees. (A child, baseline)

Beyond language, religion, and food, children reported learning about various cultural aspects, including different festivals, sports, and currencies. While these exchanges likely contributed to greater cultural awareness, they were largely individual experiences rather than widespread trends.

Discussion

This study explored whether participation in the Young Interpreter Scheme affected children's intercultural competence, focusing on their understanding of cultural contrasts, similarities, emotional awareness, supportive behaviours, curiosity about different cultures, and multicultural connections. While all children demonstrated an awareness of cultural diversity, the findings suggest that YI training broadened their perspectives, deepened their engagement, and refined their communication strategies.

Exploring cultural contrasts

Children in both groups identified multiple cultural differences, but YI children demonstrated greater depth and variation in their responses over time. This suggests that YI training supported a more structured approach to recognising and articulating cultural contrasts. However, Banks (2017) notes that while children can identify cultural differences, their understanding often remains surface level. While YI training broadened the range of contrasts children could articulate, it may not have fully bridged this gap in deeper cultural understanding. Nonetheless, the YIS appears to foster a shift towards ethnorelativism, as outlined in Bennett's (1986) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), by encouraging children to engage more critically with cultural diversity.

Despite the positive impact of YI training, some responses indicated reliance on stereotypes, reflecting the challenges in developing nuanced intercultural awareness in young learners. This supports the argument that structured educational interventions are necessary to guide children beyond generalised perspectives (Kramsch 1993). Moreover, while the YIS is not explicitly designed to enhance intercultural competence, its structured peer-support model appears to provide a framework for engaging with cultural diversity in a meaningful way.

Exploring cultural similarities

Recognising cultural similarities is an important aspect of intercultural competence, as it fosters a sense of connection between individuals from different backgrounds. The YI children identified a broader range of similarities over time, particularly in areas such as family life, school, and daily routines. This reflects growing cognitive cultural intelligence (Earley and Ang 2003) and aligns with Brislin et al's (2006) view that individuals with high cultural intelligence understand both similarities and differences across cultures.

The findings also support Acevedo's (2019) argument that intercultural learning involves not just identifying contrasts but recognising shared experiences. However, Bennett's (2017) concept of minimisation – where individuals overemphasise similarities while downplaying differences – must also be considered. While acknowledging commonalities can foster inclusivity, an overreliance on this perspective may lead to a superficial understanding of cultural diversity. This highlights the need for interventions that encourage children to appreciate both cultural uniqueness and shared human experiences.

Emotional awareness: understanding the new child's feelings

Children demonstrated an ability to predict a range of emotions that a newcomer might experience, with YI children identifying a wider variety of emotional responses, including curiosity and sadness, more frequently than the control group. This suggests that YI training may enhance children's emotional awareness and empathy, key components of metacognitive cultural intelligence (Earley and Ang 2003). The findings align with Hoffman's (1984) four stages of empathy, as children moved beyond self-focused perspectives to consider the newcomer's emotional experience. Additionally, Santos, Araújo e Sá, and Simões (2014) found that interventions aimed at fostering intercultural competence can enhance empathy. While YI children demonstrated high levels of empathy in understanding how a new child might feel, this study did not specifically assess whether training directly influenced their empathic development. However, their ability to recognise both challenges and potential positives of cultural transitions suggests a broader intercultural sensitivity.

Fostering a supportive environment

The study underscores the role of structured guidance, such as the YIS, in equipping children with strategies to support peers from diverse backgrounds. The responses at baseline primarily revolved around offering friendship and general assistance, reflecting the supportive ethos already present in these schools. However, by Times 2 and 3, YI children introduced more practical and empathetic approaches, including simplified English, non-verbal communication, and gestures, demonstrating a deeper awareness of how to assist EAL peers. These findings align with Gerlich et al. (2010), who found that structured intercultural interventions enhance children's problem-solving and communication skills. They also support Szuba's (2016) research in bilingual settings, which found that children naturally adopt various verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to bridge linguistic gaps. The YI training appeared to reinforce and extend these natural tendencies, providing children with a more structured toolkit for supporting newcomers.

From the perspective of the Cultural Intelligence (CQ) Model (Earley and Ang 2003) YI children displayed high behavioural CQ by adapting their communication methods to accommodate linguistic and cultural differences. Similarly, their willingness to modify their approach to meet the needs of an EAL peer reflects adaptation and integration in Bennett's (1986) DMIS model. While traditionally applied to adults, this model appears to have relevance in a school context, where children engage with multicultural peers and adjust their behaviours accordingly.

Curiosity about different cultures

Children demonstrated a sustained interest in learning about the hypothetical new child's life before moving to England. The YI children posed a greater number of questions across various cultural domains, particularly immediately after training, suggesting that structured interventions like the YIS may heighten curiosity about cultural diversity.

These findings align with Santos, Araújo e Sá, and Simões (2014) who observed increased curiosity following an intercultural competence intervention. Notably, food emerged as a key point of interest, reflecting its role as a universal and accessible cultural touchpoint. This curiosity about cultural norms and daily life also corresponds with Flavell's (1979) concept of metacognitive strategies, in which individuals actively seek to acquire cultural knowledge.

According to Bennett's (2017) acceptance stage of intercultural sensitivity, children in this study actively sought to understand cultural nuances rather than merely acknowledging differences. Their curiosity-driven questions about school systems, daily routines, and social customs suggest a developing awareness that cultural diversity extends beyond language and appearance.

Multicultural connections

The findings highlight children's recognition of multicultural friendships, challenging Volet and Ang's (1998) claim that young children tend to self-segregate based on cultural similarities. Many children described interactions with peers from different backgrounds, although fewer reported actively learning from these exchanges.

The YI children were more likely to report gaining knowledge from international peers over time, particularly in areas such as language, religion, and food. This supports Feddes et al.'s (2009) findings that structured intercultural interventions can foster more meaningful cross-cultural friendships. Furthermore, the increase in YI children identifying multicultural connections suggests that participation in the programme may encourage children to recognise and engage more deeply with cultural diversity in their social environment.

While many children reported knowing peers from different countries, fewer described active learning experiences. This distinction suggests that while multicultural school environments provide opportunities for exposure, structured interventions may be necessary to facilitate meaningful intercultural exchanges (Halualani et al. 2004).

Interpreting the findings: the role of the YIS in developing intercultural competence

The findings suggest that while all children demonstrated an awareness of cultural diversity, participation in the Young Interpreter Scheme (YIS) enhanced their ability to engage more deeply with cultural differences and refine their communication strategies. YI children exhibited greater depth and variation in their understanding of cultural contrasts and similarities, moving beyond surface-level observations towards a more reflective approach, aligning with models of intercultural competence (Bennett 1986; Earley and Ang 2003). However, some children still struggled to recognise cultural similarities, reinforcing the need for structured guidance.

YI children also demonstrated greater emotional awareness, recognising a wider range of emotions a newcomer might feel, including both challenges and positive experiences. This aligns with research on empathy in intercultural settings (Hoffman 1984; Santos, Araújo e Sá, and Simões 2014), though further research is needed to determine whether this was a direct outcome of training.

Supportive behaviours evolved over time, with YI children moving beyond offering friendship to using more practical strategies such as non-verbal communication and simplified language. This aligns with the behavioural dimension of cultural intelligence (Earley and Ang 2003) and suggests that training equips children with actionable skills to assist their peers more effectively.

Curiosity about different cultures increased immediately after YI training, with YI children asking a wider range of questions about a newcomer's background. This reflects cognitive and motivational intercultural competence (Bennett 2017), though it remains unclear whether this curiosity was sustained long term.

Finally, YI children reported more frequent and meaningful multicultural interactions, particularly in language, religion, and food. By follow-up, they were more likely to identify having international peers and report learning from them, supporting research on structured peer support schemes fostering authentic intercultural exchanges (Díaz-Lefebvre 2004; Killen et al. 2002).

Overall, these findings highlight the value of structured peer-led initiatives in fostering intercultural competence. While exposure to diversity alone is insufficient (Halualani et al. 2004), the YIS provided a framework for deeper engagement with cultural diversity, communication refinement, and peer support. However, the impact of training is shaped by individual and contextual factors, which are considered in the following discussion on limitations and implications.

Implications for education and intercultural training

The findings of this study have important implications for the development of intercultural competence in primary education. The Young Interpreter Scheme (YIS) demonstrates that structured peer-led initiatives can play a significant role in fostering cultural awareness, empathy, and communication skills among children. However, the broader implications extend beyond the YIS, highlighting the need for more intentional approaches to intercultural education.

The importance of structured intercultural education

Simply placing children in diverse environments does not guarantee meaningful intercultural learning (Halualani et al. 2004). Without structured interventions, children may not engage deeply with cultural differences or may rely on stereotypes to understand diversity. The YIS provides a model of how guided peer interaction can enhance cultural intelligence by encouraging children to reflect on both differences and similarities in meaningful ways. Schools should consider implementing similar structured programmes to complement natural exposure to diversity, ensuring that children develop a more nuanced understanding of cultural differences.

Enhancing peer-supported learning approaches

The study reinforces the role of peer-supported learning in developing both cognitive and behavioural aspects of cultural intelligence. YI children demonstrated an increasing ability to adapt their communication strategies, such as using non-verbal communication, simplifying language, and employing visual aids to support EAL peers. These findings suggest that peer-led support schemes can be effective in fostering practical intercultural skills that extend beyond traditional language assistance. Schools should consider embedding elements of peer-led cultural mediation into their wider inclusion strategies, ensuring that children are equipped with both linguistic and social-emotional tools to support newcomers.

Supporting emotional and social inclusion in schools

The YI children's ability to recognise a broad range of emotions in newcomers highlights the importance of social-emotional learning (Hoffman 1984; Santos, Araújo e Sá, and Simões 2014). While YI training may not have directly influenced empathy development, it provided a structured space for children to consider the emotional challenges faced by peers from different backgrounds. This suggests that intercultural competence training should incorporate explicit discussions on emotions, identity, and belonging to foster deeper social inclusion in schools. Future iterations of the YIS could integrate more reflective exercises on the emotional experiences of EAL students, further enhancing its impact on social cohesion.

Encouraging long-term engagement with cultural diversity

Curiosity about different cultures increased immediately after training but requires sustained engagement to have a lasting impact. The findings suggest that while YI training can prompt children to ask more questions and engage with cultural differences, ongoing opportunities for exploration are necessary to prevent interest from diminishing over time. Schools could integrate more opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue, such as cultural exchange activities, multilingual storytelling, or partnerships with diverse communities, to reinforce and extend the benefits of initiatives like the YIS.

Implications for policy and teacher training

The success of the YIS in fostering cultural awareness highlights the need for greater emphasis on intercultural education at a policy level. Current curricula often focus on language acquisition for EAL students but may not address the intercultural competencies needed for effective inclusion. Policymakers should consider embedding structured intercultural education within primary school curricula, ensuring that all students – not just those involved in peer-support programmes – develop the skills and attitudes necessary for navigating a multicultural society.

Additionally, teacher training should incorporate intercultural competence frameworks to help educators facilitate meaningful discussions on cultural diversity. Training on how to support peer-led initiatives like the YIS could ensure that schools maximise their impact, fostering a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment.

Future directions

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of the YIS in developing intercultural competence, further research is needed to explore its long-term impact. Future studies should examine whether the intercultural awareness and engagement fostered by the YIS are sustained beyond primary school and how participation influences children's attitudes towards diversity in later years. Expanding research to a larger and more diverse sample would also provide deeper insights into how demographic factors shape intercultural competence development.

By integrating structured peer-led programmes, fostering social-emotional learning, and embedding intercultural education within broader policies, schools can create more inclusive environments that prepare children for an increasingly globalised world. The findings of this study underscore the potential of initiatives like the YIS to serve as a model for other educational settings, both nationally and internationally.

Conclusion

This study shows the impact of the Young Interpreter Scheme (YIS) in fostering intercultural competence among primary school children. YI training enhanced children's ability to recognise cultural differences and similarities, develop more empathetic responses, and adopt practical strategies for supporting peers. The scheme also contributed to a more inclusive school environment, reinforcing the value of multilingualism and cultural mediation.

While the findings highlight the benefits of structured peer-led initiatives, further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of YI training and its broader applicability. Schools implementing such programmes play a vital role in promoting cultural understanding, equipping children with the skills to navigate diversity with confidence and empathy.

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