

Fostering Cross-Cultural Understanding Through Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature: Insights from Preservice ESL Teachers' Learning Experiences

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between culturally diverse learning experiences and cross-cultural understanding in the teaching of Southeast Asian multicultural literature among preservice teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL). Guided by the framework of culturally responsive teaching, it examined how specific instructional activities such as creative dramatics, visual arts projects, graphic organizers, writing workshops, and research tasks relate to the critical, empathic, and conceptual dimensions of cross-cultural understanding. The study employed a quantitative descriptive-correlational design and gathered data from 107 preservice ESL teachers enrolled in a state university in the Southern Tagalog region of the Philippines through a validated researcher-made questionnaire. The results indicated that all five learning activities were perceived as highly relevant, with research tasks and creative dramatics receiving the highest mean scores. Cross-cultural understanding was also found to be highly manifested, with empathic and conceptual understanding registering higher levels than critical understanding. Statistical analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between the relevance of culturally diverse learning experiences and the level of cross-cultural understanding. The findings affirm the pedagogical value of integrating culturally responsive strategies in literature instruction to promote intercultural awareness and appreciation. These results suggest that ESL teacher education programs should strengthen the integration of multicultural literature in the curriculum to enhance both literary competence and intercultural competence. Incorporating such approaches in teacher training may better prepare future educators to design inclusive, culturally sensitive learning environments, thereby contributing to the broader goals of equity, respect for diversity, and global citizenship in education.

Keywords: Cross-cultural understanding, Culturally responsive teaching, Learning experiences, Preservice ESL teachers, Southeast Asian multicultural literature

Introduction

As society progresses in the 21st century, rapid changes continuously shape the world, exposing students to diverse cultural backgrounds, races, nationalities, and lifestyles. In response, multicultural education has emerged as a school reform approach and a movement aimed at promoting equity, social justice, and democracy. Multicultural education seeks to redesign traditional educational practices, fostering the development of socially responsible and culturally aware individuals. Its primary goal is to ensure that all students have equal educational opportunities, regardless of their cultural background (Karácsony et al., 2022).

The need for multicultural education is particularly urgent due to the increasingly diverse student populations in schools. However, despite this diversity, school systems often lack sufficient representation of multiculturalism. These deficiencies arise from educators' inability to effectively integrate culturally relevant content and practices into their teaching (Banks & McGee, 2020). To address this gap, the use of multicultural literature—depicting a variety of cultures, values, and perspectives—can help students appreciate their own cultural identity while gaining insights into other societies. Literature serves not only as a medium for artistic appreciation but also as a tool for advancing ideological understanding (Zhang & Jin, 2025).

Multicultural literature, which represents ethnic, urban, and diverse multicultural perspectives, plays a critical role in shaping students' conceptualization of identities and cultures (Ezell & Daly, 2023). A lack of such literature in classroom activities may perpetuate social issues like racism, while the inclusion of diverse literary works can foster pride in students' cultural heritage and affirm their sense of belonging within their communities (Rushanthan & Rushanthan, 2023). In recent years, there has been a surge in literature that dispels prejudices, promotes inclusivity, and amplifies marginalized voices in the literary landscape.

Incorporating multicultural literature into the curriculum is a crucial step toward recognizing cultural differences, fostering self-worth, and achieving educational equity (Gilmetdinova, 2020). This type of literature offers authentic cultural content and narrates the experiences of minorities, addressing themes of freedom, socio-cultural experiences, and racial identity (Baumert et al., 2023). Particularly in the ASEAN region, fostering awareness of the diverse cultures and shared values among Southeast Asian nations is essential for promoting a collective ASEAN identity and reinforcing the region's unity in diversity (Bañez & Callo, 2022).

Literary texts, as cultural artifacts, offer students the opportunity to respond to, interpret, and evaluate works by synthesizing knowledge from sociology, politics, and history. Analyzing ASEAN literature, in particular, helps students develop a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural bonds that unite the region, strengthening their sense of regional identity. Such texts allow students to relate to their peers from other ASEAN countries, enhancing their sense of social connectedness despite cultural differences.

Cultural diversity, a multifaceted concept, refers to the coexistence of diverse human knowledge, beliefs, customs, and practices, encompassing race, gender, religion, language, and more (Yousef, 2024). It also involves understanding how individuals navigate and respond to these differences. Promoting inclusiveness in schools and raising awareness of intercultural education benefits all students by fostering acceptance and supporting their success in an increasingly diverse world. Teachers play a crucial role in this process, as their understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity can significantly impact student outcomes (Muega, 2016).

In recognition of these challenges, this study examined the preservice English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers' cross-cultural understanding of Southeast Asian

Multicultural Literature. As future literature educators, these ESL preservice teachers have a pivotal role in enhancing students' awareness of both their own and other cultures by providing a foundation for more inclusive and culturally sensitive learning experiences. As students gain knowledge of the diverse societies that shape their world, they will also learn to appreciate cultural differences without judgment, fostering a more accepting and inclusive mindset. This is particularly important in combating prejudices, racism, and cultural appropriation, which are pervasive in contemporary society.

Through cross-cultural understanding, literature can serve as a powerful catalyst for change, promoting unity and mutual respect. This study is also expected to guide future literature teachers in their efforts to teach cross-cultural understanding effectively. The researchers believe that a comprehensive understanding of Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature will not only deepen students' appreciation of cultural diversity but also contribute to their holistic intellectual and emotional development, transforming them into lifelong learners capable of navigating a multicultural world.

This study centers on Southeast Asian multicultural literature within the framework of preservice ESL teacher education in the Philippines. While multicultural education has been extensively examined, there remains a limited focus on integrating Southeast Asian literary texts in teacher education programs. This research addresses this gap by foregrounding the regional and cultural contexts that are most relevant to preservice teachers in the Philippine setting. It acknowledges the need to prepare future educators who are capable of responding effectively to the cultural diversity present in their classrooms. The study aims to develop preservice teachers' critical and empathetic cross-cultural understanding through engagement with local and regional narratives. This focus seeks to contribute to the enhancement of multicultural pedagogy and the cultivation of culturally responsive teaching practices in language and literature education.

Objectives

This study focused on the learning experiences and cross-cultural understanding of Southeast Asian multicultural literature among preservice ESL teachers enrolled at a state university in the Southern Tagalog region during the academic year 2022-2023. The study aimed to provide useful information on how different learning activities help preservice teachers appreciate and understand cultural diversity through literature.

Specifically, this study aimed to:

1. Determine how relevant preservice ESL teachers find various cultural diversity-based learning activities, such as creative dramatics, visual arts projects, graphic organizers, writing workshops, and research, when studying Southeast Asian multicultural literature.
2. Measure the levels of cross-cultural understanding of Southeast Asian multicultural literature among preservice teachers, focusing on three aspects:
 - 2.1. Critical understanding, which refers to the ability to analyze and evaluate cultural portrayals;
 - 2.2. Conceptual understanding, which involves the acceptance and appreciation of cultural diversity and social justice;
 - 2.3. Empathic understanding, which is the emotional connection to cultural experiences found in the literature.
3. Identify the relationship between how relevant preservice teachers find the cultural diversity learning activities and their levels of cross-cultural understanding.

This study examines how culturally relevant learning experiences influence preservice teachers' development of cross-cultural understanding. The results are expected to offer valuable insights for teacher education programs in designing effective instructional strategies. Such strategies can enhance the ability of future ESL teachers to engage students with diverse

cultural backgrounds and to foster inclusive classrooms. This study aims to contribute to the improvement of multicultural education by highlighting the role of Southeast Asian multicultural literature in preparing culturally competent educators who can respond sensitively to the needs of a diverse student population.

Methodology

Research Design

The primary aim of this research was to examine preservice teachers' learning experiences and cross-cultural understanding of Southeast Asian multicultural literature. A descriptive-correlational research design was employed, as it involves collecting and analyzing data to gain insights into current conditions and the behavior or functioning of individuals or groups at the time of the study. Additionally, this design allows for the use of statistical methods to determine the strength of relationships between two or more variables. According to Hoy & Adams (2023), quantitative research involves gathering and interpreting numerical data to identify trends, averages, and hypotheses, as well as to examine causal relationships and generalize findings to larger populations. For this study, a self-constructed questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from the respondents of the study.

This method was chosen as it is most suitable for interpreting data and for validating hypotheses or objectives concerning relationships between variables. Chattamvelli & Shanmugam (2023) explain that descriptive statistics provide basic information about the data collected in a study, while Miksza et al. (2023) note that the primary goal of a descriptive-correlational study is to describe relationships between variables without attempting to establish causality. This approach is appropriate for the current study, as the researchers sought to explore correlations between preservice teachers' assessments of the relevance of Southeast Asian multicultural literature and their cross-cultural understanding.

Subjects of the Study

The respondents of this study were the preservice ESL teachers of a state university in the Southern Tagalog region, the Philippines. Out of a total population of 107 preservice ESL teachers, a sample size of 84 was determined using the Raosoft Sample Size Calculator with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents in the study. This distribution provides a comprehensive understanding of the sample population and supports the interpretation of the study's findings.

Table 1 Distribution of Respondents

Year Level	Pre-service ESL Teachers	
	Population	Sample Size
First Year	36	29
Second Year	35	26
Third Year	36	29
Total	107	84

Data Gathering

A self-constructed questionnaire served as the primary data-gathering instrument in this study, developed through a systematic process to ensure content relevance, alignment with the study objectives, and psychometric soundness. It was designed to measure two major constructs: the perceived relevance of cultural diversity-based learning experiences in the study of Southeast Asian multicultural literature, and the manifestation of cross-cultural

understanding across three dimensions: critical, empathic, and conceptual understanding. The final version consisted of 25 items divided into two sections. The first section, on perceived relevance of cultural diversity-based learning experiences, contained 5 items, each representing one instructional strategy: creative dramatics, visual arts projects, graphic organizers, writing workshops, and research-based activities. The second section, focusing on the manifestation of cross-cultural understanding, consisted of 20 items measuring critical understanding, empathic understanding, and conceptual understanding, with each dimension represented by five items.

The initial draft of the instrument was reviewed by five experts in literature pedagogy, multicultural education, and educational measurement to ensure that each item was clearly stated, relevant, and aligned with the study objectives. Feedback from the expert panel was used to revise or remove items as necessary, resulting in the final 25-item version. The instrument was pilot-tested with 30 preservice ESL teachers who were not part of the main study. Reliability analysis of the pilot test yielded a weighted overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, indicating high internal consistency. Subscale reliability coefficients were as follows: creative dramatics (0.88), visual arts projects (0.87), graphic organizers (0.85), writing workshops (0.89), research-based activities (0.90), critical understanding (0.86), empathic understanding (0.88), and conceptual understanding (0.87). These results confirm that the instrument is internally consistent and suitable for use in the main study.

After confirming the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, the final version was distributed to the participants. Authorization for the questionnaire's dissemination was obtained from the relevant authorities. Due to the hybrid classroom environment demanded by the pandemic, the questionnaire was administered via Google Forms. Participants responded to questions using a fixed alternative format, selecting from predetermined response options. This approach ensured consistency in data collection and facilitated the comparison and analysis of responses across participants.

The response scale used in the questionnaire was categorized as follows: 3.50–4.00 indicated that the item was Highly Relevant or Highly Manifested; 2.50–3.49 represented Moderately Relevant or Moderately Manifested; 1.50–2.49 signified Slightly Relevant or Slightly Manifested; and 1.00–1.49 denoted Least Relevant or Least Manifested.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, and Pearson correlation to determine the relationship between the respondents' learning experiences and their cross-cultural understanding of Southeast Asian multicultural literature.

Results

The results are presented in the following tables, which are organized to align with the specific objectives of the study. These tables display the data in a structured format, providing a clear representation of the findings based on the collected data.

Relevance of learning experiences studying Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature

This section presents the respondents' perceptions of the relevance of cultural diversity-based learning experiences in the study of Southeast Asian multicultural literature. The areas examined include creative dramatics, visual arts projects, graphic organizers, writing workshops, and research.

Table 2 shows the relevance of five learning activities in the study of Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature based on mean scores and their corresponding verbal interpretations across five learning outcomes. All learning activities received ratings within the highly relevant

range, with mean values between 3.63 and 3.71, surpassing the minimum requirement for high relevance.

Research ranked highest overall with a mean score of 3.71. The outcome involving understanding one's own cultural identity consistently recorded the highest mean scores, ranging from 3.68 to 3.79. This finding indicates that students consider self-awareness a vital aspect of their engagement with multicultural literature. Valuing the unique perspectives of various cultural groups was rated highly by all learning activities, with mean scores from 3.64 to 3.75. This result reflects an appreciation for cultural diversity among students. The capacity to relate to universal experiences that transcend cultural boundaries also obtained high relevance scores, suggesting that the learning activities effectively promote empathy and cultural connection.

Table 2 Relevance of learning experiences studying Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature

Item Statements	Learning Activities									
	Creative Dramatics		Visual Arts Project		Graphic Organizers		Writing Workshops		Research	
	$\bar{x}$	VI	$\bar{x}$	VI	$\bar{x}$	VI	$\bar{x}$	VI	$\bar{x}$	VI
1. Understand one's own cultural identity.	3.79	HR	3.71	HR	3.68	HR	3.69	HR	3.75	HR
2. Value the unique perspectives of various cultural groups.	3.75	HR	3.70	HR	3.70	HR	3.64	HR	3.73	HR
3. Connect to the universal experiences that cut across cultures.	3.64	HR	3.61	HR	3.58	HR	3.60	HR	3.73	HR
4. Critique indifferences of experiences by specific cultural groups.	3.48	MR	3.65	HR	3.55	HR	3.65	HR	3.68	HR
5. Develop commitment into taking action to create a more just and equitable world.	3.57	HR	3.58	HR	3.62	HR	3.59	HR	3.68	HR
Overall	3.65	HR	3.64	HR	3.63	HR	3.64	HR	3.71	HR

Legend: 3.50-4.00 (Highly Relevant), 2.50-3.49 (Moderately Relevant), 1.50-2.49 (Slightly Relevant), and 1.00-1.49 (Least Relevant)

Critiquing the indifferences experienced by particular cultural groups showed some variation. Creative Dramatics received a mean rating of 3.48, falling under moderate relevance, while the other activities remained within the highly relevant category, scoring between 3.55 and 3.68. This suggests that not all learning methods equally support critical reflection on social inequities. The development of commitment toward creating a more just and equitable society received high relevance scores from all learning activities, ranging from 3.57 to 3.68. This outcome points to the role of these instructional approaches in fostering social responsibility.

The results emphasize the effectiveness of varied learning activities in cultivating cultural understanding, critical awareness, and social engagement through Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature. The consistently high relevance scores across activities support the use of multiple pedagogical approaches to enrich student learning.

Manifestation Level of Cross-cultural Understanding of Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature

This study measured the levels of cross-cultural understanding of the Southeast Asian multicultural literature among the preservice teachers along its three key dimensions: critical, emphatic, and conceptual understanding. By analyzing how literature from this diverse region influences readers' perceptions and interactions with different cultures, the research provides insights into how such texts foster deeper intercultural connections. The following tables present data on these dimensions, offering a comprehensive overview of how multicultural literature contributes to broadening cross-cultural perspectives.

Table 3 Manifestation Level of Critical Cross-cultural Understanding of Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature

Item Statements	Mean	Interpretation
1. Distinguish authentic cultural depictions in text.	3.33	MM
2. Justify characters' actions based on their ethnicity and value system.	3.46	MM
3. Examine the soundness of characters' perspectives.	3.49	MM
4. Evaluate the accuracy of portrayals of ethnic characters.	3.55	HM
5. Write a critique on cultural representations in Southeast Asian literature.	3.27	MM
Overall	3.42	MM

Legend: 3.50-4.00 (Highly Manifested), 2.50-3.49 (Moderately Manifested), 1.50-2.49 (Slightly Manifested), and 1.00-1.49 (Least Manifested)

Table 3 presents the manifestation levels of critical cross-cultural understanding among students of Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature. The mean scores for five key indicators range from 3.27 to 3.55, with an overall mean of 3.42. This places the general level of critical cross-cultural understanding within the moderately manifested category. The highest mean score was recorded for the ability to evaluate the accuracy of portrayals of ethnic characters, with a value of 3.55. This suggests that students demonstrate a relatively strong capacity to assess how ethnic characters are represented in literary texts.

Other items, including distinguishing authentic cultural depictions in texts, justifying characters' actions based on ethnicity and values, examining the soundness of characters' perspectives, and writing critiques on cultural representations, received mean scores between 3.27 and 3.49. These reflect moderate levels of critical engagement with cultural content.

The moderately manifested overall score indicates that while students show an emerging awareness and critical insight into cross-cultural issues within Southeast Asian literature, there remains room for further development. Strengthening instructional strategies that deepen analytical skills may enhance students' critical understanding and enable more nuanced critique of cultural representations.

Table 4 Manifestation Level of Emphatic Cross-cultural Understanding of Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature

Item Statements	Mean	Interpretation
1. Recognize the cultural beliefs from which characters draw their actions.	3.62	HM
2. Acknowledge the difficulties faced by characters due to their ethnicity/race.	3.06	MM
3. Connect to the characters' emotions from life tribulations.	3.63	HM
4. Provide advices or moral supports to colleagues experiencing similar problems with those illustrated in literary texts.	3.51	HM
5. Advocate social justice and equality as a result of reading literary texts.	3.51	HM
Overall	3.57	HM

Legend: 3.50-4.00 (Highly Manifested), 2.50-3.49 (Moderately Manifested), 1.50-2.49 (Slightly Manifested), and 1.00-1.49 (Least Manifested)

Table 4 displays the manifestation levels of emphatic cross-cultural understanding as demonstrated by students in their study of Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature. The overall mean score of 3.57 falls within the highly manifested category, indicating a strong presence of empathy in students' engagement with the texts. Among the individual items, the ability to connect with the emotions of characters facing life challenges and to recognize the cultural beliefs that inform their actions received the highest mean scores of 3.63 and 3.62, respectively. These results reflect students' deep emotional resonance and awareness of cultural contexts within the literature.

The capacity to provide advice or moral support to peers encountering similar issues, along with advocacy for social justice and equality inspired by the readings, also demonstrated high manifestation levels, each with a mean of 3.51. These findings highlight the development of prosocial attitudes linked to literary engagement. The only item that fell within the moderately manifested range was the acknowledgment of difficulties experienced by characters due to ethnicity or race, with a mean score of 3.06. This suggests some variability in students' recognition of social challenges depicted in the literature.

These findings reveal that students display a high degree of empathy as they relate to characters and cultural experiences in Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature. This underscores the potential of literature to cultivate emotional understanding and social responsibility among learners.

Table 5 presents the manifestation levels of conceptual cross-cultural understanding among students studying Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature. The overall mean score of 3.64 places this dimension within the highly manifested category, indicating a strong conceptual grasp of cross-cultural principles.

Table 5 Manifestation Level of Conceptual Cross-cultural Understanding of Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature

Item Statements	Mean	Interpretation
1. Develop tolerance of practices that differ from own cultural orientation.	3.54	HM
2. Accept beliefs or perspectives of people from minority or ethnic groups.	3.65	HM
3. Embrace cultural diversities or variations among social and ethnic groups.	3.07	MM
4. Avoid prejudices or biases of people from other cultural orientations or religious affiliations.	3.63	HM
5. Uphold social equality and justice in every aspect of life.	3.68	HM
Overall	3.64	HM

Legend: 3.50-4.00 (Highly Manifested), 2.50-3.49 (Moderately Manifested), 1.50-2.49 (Slightly Manifested), and 1.00-1.49 (Least Manifested)

Students demonstrated the highest levels of manifestation in accepting beliefs or perspectives of minority or ethnic groups (mean = 3.65), upholding social equality and justice (mean = 3.68), and avoiding prejudices or biases toward individuals of different cultural or religious backgrounds (mean = 3.63). These findings reflect a well-developed attitude of respect and fairness towards cultural diversity. Developing tolerance for cultural practices different from one's own received a highly manifested rating with a mean of 3.54, suggesting that students generally appreciate cultural differences. The ability to embrace cultural diversities among social and ethnic groups was moderately manifested with a mean of 3.07. This indicates some variation in the extent to which students internalize and express acceptance of cultural plurality.

The results highlight students' overall strong conceptual understanding of cultural diversity, tolerance, and social justice. This level of conceptual cross-cultural understanding demonstrates the capacity of Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature to shape learners' attitudes and values toward inclusivity and equity.

Table 6 Summary Table of Cross-cultural Understanding of Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature

Cross-cultural Understanding	Mean	Interpretation
Critical Understanding	3.42	Moderately Manifested
Emphatic Understanding	3.57	Highly Manifested
Conceptual Understanding	3.64	Highly Manifested
Grand Mean	3.54	Highly Manifested

Table 6 summarizes the overall levels of cross-cultural understanding demonstrated by students through their engagement with Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature. The three dimensions assessed—critical, emphatic, and conceptual understanding—show varying degrees of manifestation.

Critical understanding registered a mean score of 3.42, indicating a moderate level of manifestation. This suggests that students are developing analytical skills to critically evaluate cultural representations, though further growth is needed to reach a higher level of proficiency. Emphatic understanding obtained a mean of 3.57, falling within the highly manifested range. This reflects students' strong ability to empathize with characters' experiences and cultural contexts, highlighting emotional engagement as a key aspect of their learning. Conceptual understanding recorded the highest mean score at 3.64, also classified as highly manifested.

This outcome points to students' well-established acceptance of cultural diversity, tolerance, and commitment to social justice.

The grand mean of 3.54 confirms that, overall, students exhibit a highly manifested cross-cultural understanding. These results imply that Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature effectively fosters multiple dimensions of cross-cultural competence, with particular strength in empathy and conceptual appreciation.

Relationship between the Respondents' Learning Experiences and Cross-Cultural Understanding of Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature

Table 7 presents the relationship between the respondents' assessment of the relevance of cultural diversity-based learning experiences and their cross-cultural understanding of Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature. The correlation between these variables was analyzed using the Pearson r formula.

Table 7 Relationship between the Respondents' Learning Experiences and Cross-Cultural Understanding of Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature

Learning Experiences	Cross-Cultural Understanding		
	Critical Understanding	Empathic Understanding	Conceptual Understanding
	(r, p)	(r, p)	(r, p)
Creative Dramatics	0.579 ($p=0.000$)	0.594 ($p=0.000$)	0.608 ($p=0.000$)
Visual Arts	0.622 ($p=0.000$)	0.596 ($p=0.000$)	0.642 ($p=0.000$)
Graphic Organizers	0.536 ($p=0.000$)	0.529 ($p=0.000$)	0.559 ($p=0.000$)
Writing Workshops	0.534 ($p=0.000$)	0.604 ($p=0.000$)	0.606 ($p=0.000$)
Research	0.741 ($p=0.000$)	0.611 ($p=0.000$)	0.867 ($p=0.000$)

The analysis revealed consistently positive and statistically significant correlations ($p < .001$) between all measured learning experience subdimensions and cross-cultural understanding subdimensions. This indicates a strong and consistent association between the variety of learning experiences provided and the degree of students' cross-cultural understanding. The highest correlation was observed between Research and Conceptual Understanding ($r = 0.867$), suggesting that research-oriented activities are closely aligned with students' ability to synthesize, integrate, and contextualize multicultural concepts. This result affirms that research-based tasks encourage students to engage in deeper analysis, establish connections between diverse cultural narratives, and develop a more comprehensive understanding of ASEAN multicultural contexts.

The lowest, although still moderate, correlation was found between Writing Workshops and Critical Understanding ($r = 0.534$). While writing activities contribute to students' critical engagement, this relatively weaker association suggests that current workshop approaches may require enhancement in order to more effectively foster analytical thinking and critical reflection on multicultural literature. This finding points to the potential need for writing activities that are explicitly structured to incorporate literary criticism, intercultural analysis, and comparative evaluation of texts representing various ASEAN cultures.

These findings imply that the integration of varied and interactive learning experiences, particularly those that emphasize research, can substantially enhance cross-cultural understanding in the study of Southeast Asian multicultural literature. Instructional practices may therefore benefit from embedding research tasks that require comparative and contextual analysis of literary works, facilitating classroom dialogues that explore the socio-historical background of ASEAN nations, and designing writing activities that move beyond descriptive

responses toward critical examination of cultural representation. Such pedagogical strategies are essential in equipping learners with the analytical and reflective skills needed to appreciate cultural diversity and to actively participate in intercultural dialogue within the ASEAN context.

Discussions

The results indicate that preservice ESL teachers possess a high level of critical, emphatic, and conceptual cross-cultural understanding through their engagement with Southeast Asian Multicultural Literature. This outcome affirms the capacity of varied learning experiences such as creative dramatics, visual arts projects, writing workshops, graphic organizers, and especially research activities, to develop cross-cultural competence among teacher candidates. The positive and significant correlations between these learning activities and cross-cultural understanding highlight the importance of diverse instructional approaches that foster active participation and reflection (Bañez, 2016; Bañez & Callo, 2022).

The pronounced manifestation of emphatic and conceptual understanding shows that preservice teachers do more than cognitively recognize cultural differences; they also emotionally connect with and appreciate diverse cultural perspectives. Such emotional involvement is vital in nurturing socially responsible attitudes and culturally sensitive dispositions, which are necessary attributes for educators working in multicultural settings (Paetsch et al., 2016). The moderate level of critical understanding, although still significant, suggests an emerging ability among preservice teachers to analyze and evaluate cultural representations with discernment. This skill is crucial in equipping future teachers to guide learners in critical reflection and in challenging cultural biases (Walker, 2023).

Research activities demonstrate the strongest relationship with conceptual understanding, emphasizing the value of inquiry-based and reflective learning experiences in developing deeper cultural insight and social justice awareness. This supports the argument that teacher education programs must incorporate research-oriented tasks to cultivate analytical and critical thinking skills related to culture and diversity (Tarrayo, 2022). Other activities such as graphic organizers contribute to understanding but may require supplementation with more engaging and critical pedagogies to maximize impact.

Integrating Southeast Asian multicultural literature in teacher education aligns closely with the cultural realities of the Philippine classroom and the ASEAN region. This regional focus addresses a notable gap in the literature, which often privileges Western texts, and promotes a more inclusive and contextually relevant multicultural pedagogy (Bañez & Callo, 2022). Preservice teachers exposed to local and regional narratives are better prepared to respond to the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their future students.

The findings also imply a need to intensify the development of critical cross-cultural skills among preservice teachers. Advancing critical consciousness is essential for enabling educators to facilitate meaningful cultural critique and social justice advocacy within their classrooms. Strengthening this dimension will contribute to producing educators who are not only culturally aware but also capable of fostering transformative learning experiences that challenge inequities (Castellví et al., 2019).

This study contributes significantly to the discourse on multicultural education in teacher preparation. It demonstrates that Southeast Asian multicultural literature, combined with varied and interactive learning activities, enhances preservice teachers' cross-cultural competence at cognitive, affective, and analytical levels. These insights provide a foundation for curriculum planners and teacher educators to design programs that promote culturally responsive teaching and social justice education in the Philippine context. The significant positive correlations found between the perceived relevance of cultural diversity-based

learning experiences and the levels of cross-cultural understanding indicate that purposeful integration of such literature cultivates both cognitive and affective competencies among preservice ESL teachers (Bañez, 2024). These competencies are essential in recognizing and challenging inequities embedded in dominant cultural narratives. By engaging with literary works that reflect the histories, struggles, and aspirations of various Southeast Asian communities, preservice teachers enhance their capacity to critically examine systems of exclusion, develop empathy for marginalized groups, and commit to equitable pedagogical practices. This heightened cross-cultural awareness, as evidenced by the study findings, equips them to design and implement instruction that values representation, fosters inclusivity, and affirms the identities of all learners. Thus, the incorporation of Southeast Asian multicultural literature emerges not only as a medium for linguistic and cultural development but also as a transformative educational strategy that prepares future educators to become active agents in promoting fairness, equity, and social justice in diverse classroom contexts.

Conclusion and suggestions

As highlighted in this paper, studying and understanding Southeast Asian multicultural literature significantly enhances appreciation for diverse literary works and academic fields. It fosters a holistic perspective, acceptance of individual differences, and an appreciation of cultural backgrounds. Integrating culturally-focused learning exercises improves engagement with literature and promotes equitable treatment across critical, empathic, and conceptual dimensions, thereby increasing empathy for diverse viewpoints and cultural preferences.

Incorporating various learning activities that emphasize cultural diversity enriches students' understanding and critical thinking skills. It also encourages an open-minded approach to the complexities of culture when teaching Southeast Asian multicultural literature. Such activities provide opportunities for both teachers and students to enhance their awareness and adaptability. Implementing a learning guide centered on Southeast Asian multicultural literature can effectively raise awareness about the importance of cultural diversity among students and educators, thereby stimulating interest in the subject.

Higher education institutions are well-positioned to support teachers in managing multicultural courses. They can offer workshops that present teaching strategies for integrating literary studies effectively. Additionally, institutions should work to maintain and develop learning resources, such as the aforementioned learning guide, to ensure the continued effective teaching of multicultural literature in evolving educational contexts.

New knowledge and the effects on society and communities

Contemporary society is undergoing continuous transformation, with students increasingly engaging with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, nations, and lifestyles. This dynamic fosters movements toward equality, social justice, and democracy, alongside the advancement of multicultural education. Multicultural education plays a crucial role in building positive self-esteem and mitigating feelings of exclusion among students. It offers vital opportunities for fostering respect, empathy, and inclusion. Additionally, multicultural literature serves as an essential instructional tool that broadens students' perspectives and enhances their understanding of diversity both within the classroom and globally. It educates students to appreciate individuals from varied cultural contexts.

The study assesses preservice ESL teachers' evaluations regarding the relevance and manifestation levels of cross-cultural understanding through various activities, including visual

arts projects, creative dramatics, graphic organizers, writing workshops, and research. These activities are intended to enhance students' engagement with multicultural literature.

The findings reveal that diverse learning strategies, such as creative dramatics, visual arts projects, graphic organizers, writing workshops, and research, are considered highly relevant and effective. These methods significantly contribute to respondents' knowledge of various cultures, beliefs, values, and principles. The study indicates that respondents exhibited a high level of cross-cultural understanding of Southeast Asian multicultural literature, encompassing critical, empathetic, and conceptual dimensions. This suggests that respondents are proficient at embracing and appreciating diverse cultures. Furthermore, a substantial correlation exists between the relevance of cultural diversity-based learning experiences and the level of cross-cultural understanding of Southeast Asian literature.

These findings emphasize the positive impact of employing varied learning strategies on students' educational experiences and outcomes. The use of this learning guide is expected to motivate, innovate, and engage students, thereby supporting their academic success. Consequently, this contributes to the educational attainment and development of individuals within society, as evidenced by their academic performance. While this summary provides an overview of learning experiences and cross-cultural understanding of Southeast Asian multicultural literature, it is important to recognize that further research and emerging discoveries in this field may yield more nuanced findings and insights.

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