Intercultural Communicative Competence Levels of Indonesian EFL Students: A Preliminary Study in a Higher Education Context

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ABSTRACT

The lack of intercultural communication skills will likely cause disharmony, misunderstanding, and even conflict in communication. To be successful in communication with native speakers depends on language skills, customs, and cultural knowledge. In the age of global communication, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching goals should be reoriented to cultivate intercultural communication competence (ICC). EFL learners should have this intercultural competence and be sensitive in order to avoid disharmony, misunderstandings, and even conflicts in communication. The main objective of this preliminary study is to reveal the levels of intercultural communicative competence among EFL students at a state university in Indonesia. A survey questionnaire was performed employing a quantitative analysis in this study. Eighty-nine students filled out the ICC questionnaire, which consisted of 20 questions. Findings indicated that most of the students had a low ICC level because they are lack of experience and knowledge in interacting and socializing with people from various cultural backgrounds. In terms of gender differences, the results showed that male students had higher levels of ICC than that female students. This research implied that intercultural topics should be included in the university's curriculum.

1. Introduction

Language and culture are interconnected (Gulbinskienė & Lasauskienė, 2014). Knowledge of different cultures is as necessary as proficiency in speaking a foreign language. At the upper education level, detailed attention ought to be paid to the culture of teaching target languages and linguistic comprehension. Language scholars have agreed that comprehension of the cultural atmosphere is important in using the language. Successful intercultural communication means more than just mastering language skills to communicate ones' ideas. In addition, it is an associated understanding of customs and culture. Besides, one of the fundamental goals of language education is to promote international understanding (Aljohani, 2016). Understanding the variations between cultures within which individuals of varied races, religions, political and social views live along is necessary.

In foreign language education, English is intertwined with multicultural issue materials depicted in a selected cultural context (Sercu et al., 2004). In Indonesia, English as the lingua franca is of paramount importance to be included in teaching and learning processes (Mairi, 2016). Previously, Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2012) emphasized that English education must prepare students with intercultural communicative competence and its application using appropriate methods to explain cultural variations and enacts harmonious and productive interconnections. Thus, to achieve such conditions, particularly for the students' intercultural ability, the teaching of culture should even be taught first as a basis and a part of learning English, which includes as one of the goals in the language learning curriculum (Cubukcu, 2013).

As an international medium of communication today, English is required to mediate across all lines of cross-cultural concepts. Thus, teaching English and teaching English culture will foreground teachers, and EFL must not ignore culture and pay attention to it in the classroom. The key purpose of this study is to reveal the levels of EFL students of their intercultural communicative competence (ICC) at one of the state universities in Indonesia.

In the age of global communication, the goals of teaching foreign languages in English must be made to develop intercultural communication skills for effective and appropriate communication. Some experts (see Byram, 1997; Chen & Starosta, 1999; Deardorff, 2009; Fantini, 2020; diseased person et al., 2007) stated that the growth of IC towards EFL students has been recognized mutually of the conclusive goals in learning English that seeks to produce them with a lot of data regarding cultural diversity, and facilitate them to remember their own cultures and respect others. However, students' understanding of the fundamental elements of the target culture may not be comprehensive if they are not complemented by systematic cultural knowledge in schools or universities. EFL students should have intercultural competence and be sensitive in order to avoid disharmony, misunderstandings, and even conflicts in communication. In order to accomplish the purpose of the study, the following research questions were formulated: (1) What are the Indonesian EFL students' levels of intercultural communicative competence (ICC)? and (2) Is there any significant differences between female and male Indonesian EFL students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC)? This present study can be a catalyst for further investigators to find some ways to increase the students' cultural knowledge and, consequently, eliminate the main barriers in intercultural communications.

1.1. ICC in EFL Classrooms

ICC could be a problematic term to describe since it is a part of many researchers' current discussions (Moeller and Nugent, 2014). In EFL/ESL contexts, ICC is seen potential to conquer one's ethnic environment in interactions with others that maintained totally different linguistic codes and a special set of values and world models (Lázár, 2007). This issue involves the learners' capability to simply accept different perceptions of the world and bear in mind of different people's variations and ways of seeing life (Byram 1997; Byram et al., 2009). In line with Byram (1997), ICC is progressing in social interactions throughout the communication process. Language students must use a foreign language to learn cultural values. The ICC cannot be increased by merely identifying and studying common cultures such as tourist

attractions, festivals, momentous events, and food. In contrast, ICC requires a deep and dynamic interactive process of intercultural relations as an individual.

Cultures from divergent civilizations face "relatively more abstract levels of cultural difference… develop empathy (the ability to see things from the perspective of our host culture), and learn to construct bigger cultural differences" (Shaules, 2007, p. 100). Since ICC is usually associated with the communication process, EFL pedagogies may believe that developing ICC could be a tough task, impossible to complete, as most students have very little or no chance to act with people from different cultural backgrounds in the world to develop actual intercultural communication. Empirical evidence showcases that the pedagogies within the EFL contexts are not oriented to native speakers. Therefore, making authentic intercultural relationships and communication in EFL contexts remains sophisticated. However, Byram (1997) explains that in an academic context, a culturally-diverse speaker is able to build a critical analysis of "documents" and "events" so as to remember dissension and opinions and to know "explicit and implicit values" in one's culture. Such a process does not also cater to learning culture with verbal interactions, but also reading and analyzing culture-based "documents" (e.g., news that includes native languages and "cultural events"). This could assist students to develop their ICC in EFL classrooms.

Because the ICC remains a subject of continuous discussion and analysis, it has recently been related to global literacy. Kumaravadivelu (2008) named it universal cultural awareness. Bennet (2008) and Fantini (2010) consider it as universal competency, and Focho (2011) calls it universal literacy. Bennet (2008) and Fantini (2010) contend that though ICC is viewed from multiple angles by scholars from different fields, the terms ultimately aim to attain a typical goal: the flexibility to overcome cultural variations in international society. ICC or universal literacy during this context needs social skills to get a basic comprehension of current universal affairs to figure effectively as a "global-minded individual" (SchuerholzLehr, 2007, p. 183). It speaks for social concern regarding the disputable international conflicts affecting humans concerning race, religion, gender, and social clashes. Previous studies by Nakamura (2002), Revelo (2008), and Focho (2011) focused on intercultural acknowledgment and international communication in EFL categories so that students are educated well regarding democracy principles, human rights, and respect for differences in a dogmatized and biased world.

1.2. Components of the ICC

Theoretically, as an academic model and designed for the teaching of foreign languages, ICC encompasses three elements: 1) understanding general culture (e.g., symbolic and easily observable elements) and in-depth cultural understanding (beliefs, values, and ideologies that do not seem to be observable); 2) finding, connecting, and interpreting skills that allow speakers/readers between cultures to compare and differentiate the meanings of different and unfamiliar cultures; and 3) attitudes (e.g., honesty, enthusiasm, and interest) that lead intercultural people to understand and manage with uncommon cultural traditions flexibly and completely (Byram, 1997),

With these three elements, EFL/ESL learners will likely achieve analytical intercultural acknowledgment to judge views, traditions, and products in one and

different people's cultures. The present study seeks to explore the levels of Indonesian EFL students' ICC in state and private universities and investigate if there is a significant difference between female and male students in terms of their ICC levels.

2. Method

2.1. Research design

A survey questionnaire with a quantitative analysis was employed in this study. It was used to gather and interpret numerical information in the investigated phenomenon (Creswell, 2003). This quantitative analysis is appropriate for analyzing a large group of research participants.

2.2. Respondent recruitment and research settings

This current study was conducted in one of the state universities on the northern island of Indonesia. The present study was participated by 89 Indonesian EFL students (28 females and 61 males) who had been studying Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) in the university. Table 1 showcases respondents' demographic information.

Most of the respondents (84.3%) were between the 18 and 20 age ranges. In terms of the ethnic, 74.2% were Bataknese, 12.4% were Javanese, and 5.6 % were Niasnese.

Table 1. Respondents' demographic information

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	28	31.5
Female	61	68.5
Age		
17	1	1.1
18	23	25.8
19	28	31.5
20	24	27
21	11	12.4
22	2	2.2
Ethnic		
Batak	66	74.2
Aceh	3	3.4
Nias	5	5.6
Jawa	11	12.4
Dayak	1	1.1
Malay	1	1.1
Banjar	1	1.1
India Tamil	1	1.1

Based on Table 1, most of the respondents were female, with 61 in number (68.5%, while the number of male respondents was 28 (31.5%). In terms of age, most of the respondents were in the ranges of 18 years to 21 years. The highest number of ethnic respondents was 66 (74.2%), followed by Javanese 11 (12.4%) and Nias ethnicity

as much as 5 (5.6%). Table 2 also presents the frequency distribution and percentage of respondents' answers to 20 questions.

2.3. Instrument

The instruments used in the present study were the census details type in order to gather background information such as age, gender, ethnicity, and ICC. The questionnaire by Portalla and Chen (2010) to calculate the respondents' ICC level was employed. The questionnaire includes 20 Likert-scale items with five options strongly disagree, disagree, unsure, accept, and strongly agree. The scale contains five subscales. They are behavioral flexibility (4 items), interaction stimulation (5 items), communicating appreciation (3 items), message skills (3 items), preservation of identity (3 items), and interaction management (2 items).

2.4. Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process lasted for a month. At the outset, the researchers adopted Google docs as the computerized design of the questionnaire. Then, the researchers invited their students to participate in the research. In this phase, 89 students voluntarily participated in responding to the questionnaire. The first response was released on 30 July 2020, and the last on 30 August 2020. Eighty-nine answers were prepared for data analysis. Three levels of the students' responses were documented: high, moderate, and low based on Saricoban and Oz's (2014) framework, as can be seen from table 2.

Table 2. Criteria of intercultural communicative competence level

ICC Level	Mean	Options
High	4.5-5.0	Strongly agree
	3.5-4.4	Agree
Moderate	2.5-3.4	Neither agree or disagree
Low	1.5-2.4	Disagree
	1.0-1.4	Strongly disagree

2.5. Data Analysis Procedure

To find answers to the research question, expository and inferential data were analyzed using SPSS 20. Demographic data provided overall participant characteristics under a descriptive study, frequency, and percentage. The researcher used the research problem descriptive statistics. The researchers used descriptive statistics methods for data analysis. Fisher and Marshall (2009) explained that descriptive statistics are numerical and graphical techniques used to organize, present, and analyze data. The form of descriptive statistics used to describe a variable in a sample is dependent on the level of measurement. In this study, the respondents' responses mean was first measured on each ICC axis; then, the entire segment was calculated. Saricoban and Oz (2014) clarified the results (see Table 2). The first two Likert scale response options agreed and strongly agreed are interpreted as "low ICC level". The third choice, neither agreed nor disagreed, is interpreted as "moderate ICC level". The last two responses agreed and strongly agreed, are interpreted as "extreme ICC".

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Findings

The finding showed that the students' mean scores on Q14 and Q20 (Behavioral Flexibility and Interactant Respect) were high. Their mean scores on Behavioral Flexibility, Interactant Respect, Identity Maintenance, Interaction Management, and Message Skills (Q1, Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10, Q11, Q12, Q13, Q14, Q16, Q17, Q18, and Q19) were moderate, and their mean scores in Behavioral Flexibility (Q2) was low. Among the five dimensions, it can be concluded that the group that gets the most doubt from the respondents in mean details on the table is the Interaction Relaxation and Identity Maintenance question group. Therefore, the students' ICC level is considered low due to a lack of cultural knowledge, confidence, and experience in interacting and socializing with people from various cultural backgrounds.

Table 3. Frequency distribution and percentage by the respondents' responses

Q	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Undecided		Agree		Strongly Agree		Total		min	max	mean	sd	mod	med
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%						
Q1	1	1.12	15	16.85	39	43.82	21	23.6	13	14.61	89	100	1	5	3.34	0.96	3	3
Q2	12	13.48	24	26.97	20	22.47	23	25.84	10	11.24	89	100	1	5	2.94	1.24	2	3
Q3	5	5.62	10	11.24	38	42.7	21	23.6	15	16.85	89	100	1	5	3.35	1.07	3	3
Q4	8	8.99	14	15.73	32	35.96	25	28.09	10	11.24	89	100	1	5	3.17	1.11	3	3
Q5	4	4.49	10	11.24	33	37.08	27	30.34	15	16.85	89	100	1	5	3.44	1.04	3	3
Q6	7	7.87	14	15.73	15	16.85	25	28.09	28	31.46	89	100	1	5	3.6	1.29	5	4
Q7	3	3.37	12	13.48	35	39.33	26	29.21	13	14.61	89	100	1	5	3.38	1.01	3	3
Q8	5	5.62	7	7.87	48	53.93	24	26.97	5	5.62	89	100	1	5	3.19	0.88	3	3
Q9	3	3.37	11	12.36	18	20.22	24	26.97	33	37.08	89	100	1	5	3.82	1.16	5	4
Q10	5	5.62	15	16.85	41	46.07	13	14.61	15	16.85	89	100	1	5	3.2	1.09	3	3
Q11	5	5.62	18	20.22	34	38.2	17	19.1	15	16.85	89	100	1	5	3.21	1.12	3	3
Q12	5	5.62	14	15.73	29	32.58	29	32.58	12	13.48	89	100	1	5	3.33	1.07	4	3
Q13	3	3.37	10	11.24	32	35.96	27	30.34	17	19.1	89	100	1	5	3.51	1.03	3	3
Q14	14	15.73	18	20.22	23	25.84	22	24.72	12	13.48	89	100	1	5	3	1.28	3	3
Q15	2	2.25	2	2.25	7	7.87	22	24.72	56	62.92	89	100	1	5	4.44	0.9	5	5
Q16	5	5.62	16	17.98	42	47.19	16	17.98	10	11.24	89	100	1	5	3.11	1.02	3	3
Q17	0	0	8	8.99	38	42.7	31	34.83	12	13.48	89	100	2	5	3.53	0.84	3	3
Q18	0	0	11	12.36	19	21.35	30	33.71	29	32.58	89	100	2	5	3.87	1.01	4	4
Q19	2	2.25	5	5.62	37	41.57	25	28.09	20	22.47	89	100	1	5	3.63	0.97	3	4
Q20	1	1.12	4	4.49	11	12.36	12	13.48	61	68.54	89	100	1	5	4.44	0.95	5	5

Table 3 presents frequency distribution and percentage by the respondents' responses. The finding showed that the students' mean scores on Q14 and Q20 (Behavioral Flexibility and Interactant Respect) were high, their mean scores on Behavioral Flexibility, Interactant Respect, Identity Maintenance, Interaction Management, and Message Skills (Q1, Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10, Q11, Q12, Q13, Q15, Q16, Q17, Q18, and Q19) were moderate, and their mean scores in Behavioral Flexibility (Q2) was low. Among the five dimensions, the Interaction Relaxation and Identity Maintenance question group was responded 'undecided' by most of the respondents. Therefore, the students' ICC levels are considered low due to a lack of cultural knowledge, interaction confidence, and experience in interacting and socializing with people from various cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, based on the respondents' answers to the 20 questions, the ICC level was classified or grouped.

Table 4. ICC level by gender

Gender * Level ICC Crosstabulation					
			Level ICC		Total
			low	high	
Gender	Male	Count	11	17	28
		% within gender	39.3%	60.7%	100.0%
	Female	Count	39	22	61
		% within gender	63.9%	36.1%	100.0%
Total		Count	50	39	89
		% within gender	56.2%	43.8%	100.0%

Based on Table 4, the following results are obtained: of the 89 respondents studied, it was found that 50 (56.2%) respondents had a low ICC level, while 39 (43.8%) respondents had a high ICC level. Of the 28 males, 11 (39.3%) had a low ICC level, while 17 (60.7%) had a high ICC level. Out of 61 women, 39 (63.9%) had low ICC levels, while 22 (36.1%) had high ICC levels. It can be concluded that men (60.7%) had a higher chance than women (36.1%) to enter the high ICC level group.

3.2. Discussion

Lack of students' cultural knowledge and experience in interacting and socializing with people from various cultural backgrounds were the main obstacles in establishing intercultural communication competence. As a matter of course, we need to increase the students' ICC to break down cultural barriers, build awareness of cultural norms, and enhance self-awareness and communication skills. This research was conducted to reveal the level of intercultural communication competence among EFL students at a university in Indonesia. The findings above are examined in this section in order to find answers to the research questions that aim for this report. This report delivers several findings as to the ICC level of EFL students. The following is a structured discussion of findings and previously formulated research questions.

3.2.1. Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) Levels

The present study reveals that, among these five subscales, the students' ICC levels are considered low, particularly in Interaction Relaxation and Identity Maintenance. Saricoban (2014) shared that one possible reason for these findings is a lack of capacity to communicate across cultures and a lack of openness to various cultures and tolerance for ambiguity.

Among every question that students received, Q1, Q3, Q8, Q10, Q15, Q16, Q 17, and Q19 were answered 'undecided'. Portalla and Chen (2010) grouped the questionnaire questions above into several groups, namely; Behavioral Flexibility items are 2, 4, 14, and 18; Interaction Relaxation items are 1, 3, 11, 13, and 19; Interactant Respect items are 9, 15, and 20; Message Skills items are 6, 10, and 12; Identity Maintenance items are 8, 16, and 17; Interaction Management items are 5 and 7. In our case, Questions 1, 3, and 9 are included in Interaction Relaxation. Questions 8, 16, and

17 are included in Identity Maintenance, question 10 included in Message Skills, and the 15th question Interactant Respect. It can be concluded that the group that gets the most doubt from the respondents is the Interaction Relaxation and Identity Maintenance question group.

Bennett (2009) contended that any lack in the ICC level can lead to conflict and misunderstanding. But it is critical to remember that obtaining ICC is a lifetime learning experience. And the results can also change over time and get better if students can explore and are willing to understand different cultures and backgrounds. When people from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds engage socially, they carry their knowledge of their own and other people's cultural surroundings with them (Byram 1997). Gulbinskienė and Lasauskienė (2014) unveiled that understanding the cultural context of day-to-day conversational conventions such as greetings, farewells, forms of address, thanking, making requests, giving or receiving compliments means more than just being able to produce grammatical sentences. It entails comprehending the ideas and values represented by the many forms and usages of the language and knowing what to say to whom and in what conditions. Therefore, learners should be able to communicate and interact with people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, stepping out of their own outlook and adopting another (Saricoban, 2014).

3.2.2. Differences between Female and Male Students in Terms of ICC Levels

Table 3 represents ICC levels by gender difference which answered the research question 2. Of the 89 respondents studied, it was known that 50 respondents had a low ICC level. Of the 28 men, there were 11 with low ICC levels, and of the 61 women, there were 39 with low ICC levels. It can be concluded that men had a higher chance than women to enter the high ICC level group. Concerning gender differences at the ICC level, the study results show that male respondents received higher levels than female respondents in the ICC level group. Male students responded to the ICC questionnaire well compared to their female correlative. These findings do not correspond to the previous studies (Matveev 2002; Patricia 2005; Mirzaei & Forouzandeh 2013) that inform the same male and female ICC levels score. More recently, Tosuncuoglu's (2019) study also revealed that gender does not affect ICC levels.

Consistently, gender theorists have rejected the notion that biology plays an outsized role in the differences between men and women and argue that social interactions are usually responsible for almost all the behavioral and personal differences between the sexes that our culture conditions us to expect. Therefore, our understanding of gender relations is almost completely culturally based (interactional) (Miller & Yang Costello, 2001; Sperling, Ferree, & Risman, 2001). The findings reveal a gap among the competency of male and female students in terms of their ICC levels. The existing literature on gender and intercultural communication theories that address intercultural communication in terms of gender differences are not exclusively documented. These findings highlight the need for more research using quantitative and qualitative methods with larger samples to investigate ICC differences by gender difference.

4. Conclusion

This current study investigates the Indonesian EFL students' ICC levels and whether female and male students had significant differences in the ICC levels. The research findings have shed light on the fact that the ICC levels of university students in Indonesia are still low, and it turns out that there are differences in ICC levels based on gender. According to the rates by gender, men (60.7%) had a higher chance than women (36.1%) to enter the high ICC level group. It implies that there is a significant difference between men and women in terms of their ICC levels. The findings designated that Indonesian EFL students positively perceive ICC but do not have enough empirical experiences. These findings pinpoint the impact on their language learning success and proper language usage. As a result, teachers, program designers, and academic stakeholders must consider the sociocultural backgrounds of their students and be cautious and thoughtful in selecting appropriate materials and pedagogical techniques for specific teaching practices. This can be done, for example, through exchange programs, sending students to different conferences held in foreign countries, or inviting scholars from other countries to participate in joint seminars, workshops, etc., and thus, providing opportunities for students to interact with people from culturally diverse backgrounds.

The limitation of this study is placed at its scope that was limited to 89 Indonesian EFL students. The number of respondents can affect the generalizability of the findings. Future studies with a larger sample size can result in more precise and valid findings. Further research can also explore the students' ICC through interviews, observation, or a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Thus, the results of the study would be reliable.

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