



Exploring Higher Education Students' Intercultural English Communication Competence

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Abstract

Globalization has made intercultural communication a necessity; it is a compelling urgency for students in 21st-century English education. Intercultural Communication Competence intercultural communication competence is essential so that students could communicate globally within various cultural backgrounds. Intercultural communication competence allows students to communicate well in any circumstances, manage their effective learning, and adjust effectively to more extensive and multiple communities by recognizing their level of intercultural communication competence. The study is undertaken to discover an accurate picture of Higher Students' level of Intercultural Communication Competence and map their ability to communicate between cultures. This study employs a case study as the research methodology. Online questionnaires and interviews were used to explore students' level of Intercultural communication competence. The data gathered were analyzed using thematic analysis. The result shows that the students have a good level of Intercultural Communicative Competence. Most of them have excellent cultural knowledge and sensitivity that will help them develop their professionalism, communication, and their learning in particular.

Keywords: Intercultural communication competence, Higher Education Students, 21-st century education

Introduction

Intercultural communication has a short history of about 50 years, and academicians recognize Hall (1963, cited in Braslauskas, 2020) as the father of this field. One of the central focuses of researchers has been the study of intercultural communication competence. Nevertheless, what is intercultural communication competence? Because competence can often be subjective and intercultural

communication competence is often subjective to individuals' cultures, it is not unusual to determine intercultural communication competence. Intercultural communication is often described as communication among people from various cultures, and many scholars restrict it to face-to-face communication (Setyono & Widodo, 2019). Intercultural Communicative competence (intercultural communication competence) has become necessary in the educational area and the English language classroom. The importance of Intercultural Communicative competence needs to be upheld by students and teachers. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) highlights the significance of cultural consciousness and recommends expanding the cultural awareness of language learners and teachers into developing their intercultural communicative competence. Intercultural communication competence has shifted to a popular term nowadays in connection with the heterogeneity of cultural communities and globalization.

Zhang (2017) affirmed that learning a foreign language is no longer about comprehending language for speaking, reading, listening, and writing but about interacting with people with different cultural identities. This shows that intercultural communicative competence is fundamental in English language classrooms, especially in Indonesia, where the students come from various cultural backgrounds. Intercultural communication competence is the capability to perform efficiently across cultures, think judiciously, and interact and work with people from different cultural backgrounds. Higher Education students need to function correctly in various cultural settings to interact and participate in the global community. By recognizing and elevating their own Intercultural Communication Competence, students will be able to communicate across cultures and contribute to the larger society by then. Intercultural communicative competence is a crucial aspect in an increasingly globalized world where we are more likely to communicate with people from various cultures and countries who have been formed by several values, faiths, and practices (Leung et al., 2014). Bennett (1998, cited in Martin, 2022) said that Intercultural Sensitivity is defined in a model consisting of 6 stages. Based on these steps, the model shows that individuals can expand their cultural directions toward individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Understanding and recognizing these six stages of cultural sensitivity will allow student teachers to allot greater insight and sensitivity to the views of those in culturally different circumstances.

The Six Stages in the level of Intercultural Sensitivity, first, Ethnocentric where An individual favors judging other people's cultures by comparing them to their own culture. The ethnocentric stage is defined in three stages of cultural sensitivity: first is Denial: In the stage of denial, people will recognize the person as a "foreigner" or "immigrant." They denied other cultures and considered their own culture as the best one compared to others. People need to think about and understand other cultures' presence to resolve the denial stage. The second stage in ethnocentric is Defense where people are going to see their culture as the most developed and connected. The dominant culture recognizes the defensive stage as an intervention on their beliefs. An individual in the defense stage can recognize their culture as subordinate to other cultures and seeing their culture as most advanced. Third stage is Minimization Where People in the minimization stage may begin to characterize the different cultures into more generalized classifications to see comparisons. People do not understand that a cultural pattern is their views, attitudes, and values, but instead, they consider that they are common and will be existed by all if they could.

Second level of Intercultural Sensitivity is Ethno relative, in Ethno relative a person can feel comfortable with various perspectives and cultures in these three stages of cultural sensitivity and may also select other cultures as their own. There are three stages in the Ethno relative level, first is Acceptance. In the acceptance stage of cultural sensitivity, a person does not significantly "agree" with the other view, but they support the other cultures as becoming just as much benefit as the one they recognize. for example, one may find that a person says, "I don't eat pork, but that doesn't mean you don't have to eat pork, either." Second level is Adaptation, When a person is in the Adaptation stage, they can undergo another culture and function according to culturally relevant. It encourages them to experience empathy in various ways by acting according to cultural rules. Within the setting of another society, involving culturally appropriate provides them the opportunity to receive new experiences and may modify the structure of their experiences. The difficulty within the Adaptation stage is to continue faithful to whom they are as a person, despite having undergone various responses in different settings. In order to function in a different environment or with a person with a diverse viewpoint, they will be able to recognize and welcome diversity in cultures and create substantial shifts in their beliefs, attitudes, and values that need to be designed. Integration is the last stage of being more culturally sensitive. At this stage, people will stay true to themselves

and move in and out of different cultures appropriately and efficiently. Because of a marginalized self-identity, they will adapt and take on various experiences from any of these cultures. In the integration stage, people will take other cultures equal to and fully adjust to a new culture. Yueqin (2013) proposed that language and culture are administered from a cross-cultural aspect. To promote intercultural communication competence, pedagogical procedures that combine contemporary thoughts and research on language, culture, and learning must be conducted.

Most of the studies that have been conducted before focused on intercultural communication and the identity owned by the teachers, not the students. They are Baker & Fang (2021), Barkhuizen (2017), Czura (2016), Gong, Hu, & Lai (2018), Gu (2016), Ishihara & Menard (2018), Lai, Li & Gong (2019), Moloney (2013), Ortactepe (2015), Pappa et.al. (2017), Porto (2019), and Vetter, Hartman, & Reynolds (2016). There is a study by Yuan & Mak (2018) that focus on students, but the focus is on identity, not intercultural communicative competence. This study will try to shed light on the literature by studying the higher students, especially the students who will be teachers in the future. Knowing in advance the intercultural communication level of these students will give benefit to their education processes from which the teacher can strengthen the intercultural communication in advance. So, this study seeks to answer the research questions: What are higher students' Intercultural English Communication Competence, and What are higher students' Intercultural Sensitivity?

Research Methodology

This research employed a qualitative case study research design in investigating higher- students' intercultural communicative competence. Qualitative research gathers data based on information from a small number of individuals to get the participants' beliefs (Creswell, 2012, p. 16). Yin (2003) explains, the case study is used in many situations to contribute to our knowledge of the individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related to phenomena". According to Yin, a case study is marked as an empirical analysis that examines a present case in-depth and in its real-world setting. From here, Yin explains how case study research develops an all-encompassing design that includes design, data gathering methods, and particular approaches to data analysis. In collecting data about

Higher Education Students' Intercultural Communication Competence, this study employs a questionnaire and Interviews. The participants of this study are 30 Higher Education Students that enrolled in an Intercultural Communication course. They already have background knowledge about cultural awareness and sensitivity and about leveling their Intercultural Communication Competence.

The questionnaire was distributed online and developed under three themes designed to measure their Intercultural Communication Competence: Intercultural Sensitivity, Professional Identity, and Cultural Education. Other than those three themes, the questionnaire was also used to measure Higher Students' levels of Intercultural Sensitivity. Semi-Structured Interviews were used to investigate Higher students' levels of Intercultural Communication Competence and their Intercultural Sensitivity.

Inductive and deductive phases of the thematic analysis were used to examine interview data. To analyze various facets of pertinent topics, the data were first grouped in accordance with specified themes theorized in the present literature. Following an inductive analysis of the interview data, specific categorizations were created under each planned theme. To become comfortable with the data, the researchers reviewed the interview transcripts four times. Anything that stood out to them as significant, intriguing, or relevant was then highlighted and coded.

All interview transcriptions were sent back to the participants to see if there was anything they would like to correct, clarify, or add to inform the analysis and help us come up with new ideas and interpretations. This was done to ensure the accuracy of the interview transcriptions and the validity of the subsequent analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The Result of this study will be displayed under 4 themes (Intercultural Sensitivity, Critical Education, Professional Identity, and Intercultural Sensitivity Level) to answer two research questions: 1) what are Higher Education Students' level of Intercultural Sensitivity? 2) What are Higher Education Students' levels of Intercultural Communication Competence.

Intercultural Sensitivity

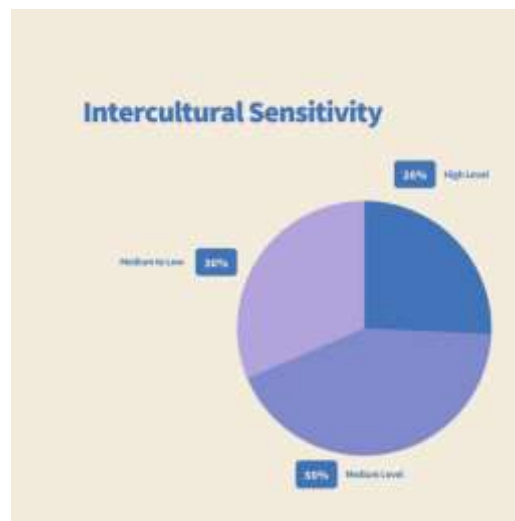


Figure 1: Intercultural Sensitivity

The online questionnaire result for theme number 1 showed that 20% of the Higher education students were considered to have a High Level of Intercultural Sensitiveness. In comparison, the other 50 % of the participants stated that they are in Medium Level of Intercultural Sensitivity and 20 % on a medium-low level. This finding showed that most of the students are in Medium Level Of cultural Sensitivities, meaning that they are pretty sensitive about the importance of other cultures and how it is essential to respect other cultures with their own culture equally. The respondents in this stage tend to categorize the different cultures into more generalized categories to see similarities and prefer to share their beliefs and behaviors.

Interestingly, from the interview result, almost all respondents think everyone is the same everywhere. Some of the respondents declared that:

"In my opinion, humans are all the equal no matter where they are because in fact we're all are social creatures who cannot survive alone. Maybe what makes everyone different are our knowledge and beliefs".

From the excerpt above, we can see that most of the respondents acknowledge and tend to accept the notion of the "humans are the same wherever they are" statement. They are convinced that humans are all the same no matter where they are, and what distinguishes them is their knowledge and beliefs. The respondents

said that to be able to be culturally sensitive toward different cultures. First, we have to think that we are all mere human beings, culture will not define them, but intelligence is. Some consequences of lack of Intercultural Sensitivity may result in cultural shock, as stated in Septiana, I., & Rahmawanti, M. R. (2020). The inability to culturally survived because of insufficient cultural sensitivity will cause cultural shock that leads to depression.

Other participants also stated about the consequences of being not culturally sensitive as follows:

"For me someone who is completely different from others is cool. People are all different and it is something we cannot control. I don't have the right to judge because it will make me intolerant".

As described above, it can be concluded that the students were fully aware of some consequences when they are not culturally sensitive, as they may become intolerant. They are making a preventive effort to not judge people with different cultural backgrounds and be sensitive to the differences. The students understand that people are born different, and there is nothing much to do but accept it. The respondents have a pretty great tolerance for other cultures and a passion for traversing other cultures. Even though society is complex for this age because it is full of uncertainty and many global opponents, all respondents seem very open and have high hope for the world. Most of the students are likely to get adapted to growing along with people with diverse cultural experiences.

Critical Education

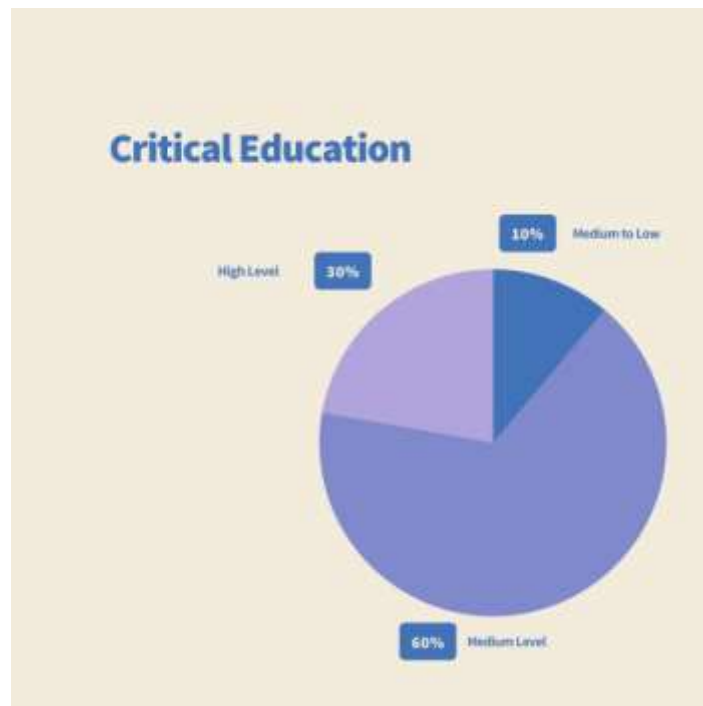


Figure 2: Cultural Education

Seven questions measure students' critical intercultural education, they are classified into two groups: teachers' personal, collegial consideration, and critical education, or we can interpret as teaching reflection and beliefs in learning. While, from the setting of the respondents, 10% of them never have practice in teaching. In terms of critical education, all respondents' views on learning are pretty alike. Nearly all respondents do not view elite institutions as the greatest and the only basis for forming well-behavior learners.

All of the respondents also assume that the Indonesian curriculum still has many constraints and should intensify the educational values more to contend with other nations, as seen as follows:

"Education in Indonesia can be stated to have many lapses and fallacious goals, maybe the laws implemented are done to enhance the educational values, but what appeared in fact are not as effective as they should be."

The excerpt above is from all the respondents who agree with "Indonesia should heighten the educational value so we could contend with other nations." This kind of statement could prove their views on education, especially in Indonesia as the country they live in. All of the respondents have the same beliefs and feeling about the statement, which suggests they want the most beneficial for learning.

In terms of critical intercultural education, all respondents appear to have a strict and great expectations of a teacher's enthusiasm and professionalism. Teachers must engage with diversity and the different expectations required by the surrounding society. Notwithstanding the increasing number of immigrant students at schools worldwide, research proves that teachers usually lack the knowledge, skills, and sometimes motivation necessary to cope successfully in culturally heterogeneous classes (Taylor & Sobel, 2001). As a student in Indonesia, almost all respondents do not appear to be picky about the students they have to teach and the school where they have to teach. The respondents' answers also conclude that the Indonesian curriculum still has a lot of weaknesses and restraints and should increase the pedagogical values more so we could contend with other nations.

Professional Identity

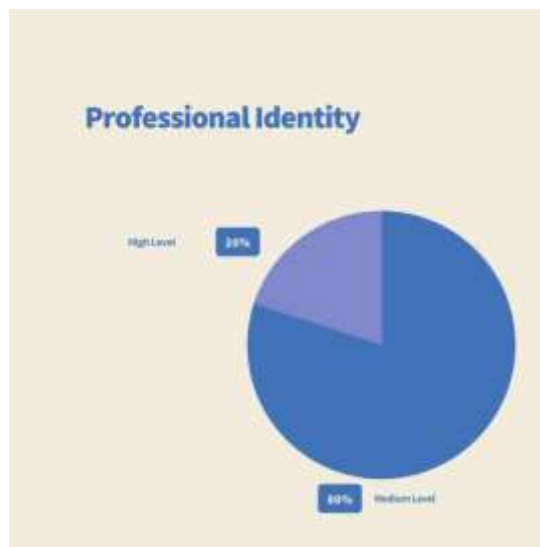


Figure 3: Professional Identity

In terms of Higher student professional identity, the researcher concentrated on their self-concept and self-esteem in revealing their professional identity. From the study, it can be concluded that only 20% of the respondents have great confidence about their appearances as professionals. At the same time, 80 % of the participants declare themselves as clumsy and careless people. This issue was indicating that most of the students have low self-esteem in proclaiming themselves

as professionals. Students feel not good enough to display their profession and capability as academicians when dealing with other cultures. When students are in diverse cultural settings, they have low self-esteem regarding their professional identity.

In professional identity, the researcher discovered that most respondents encounter intercultural communication moments such as communicating with foreigners and teaching in formal or non-formal educational institutions. Meanwhile, for personal, and professional identity, almost all respondents had characteristics of a collective society. Almost all respondents also seem uncomfortable when someone breaks the rules, which means they notice the world around them and keep their cultures and norms.

It has revealed in their answers that most of them are find someone who differs from them and does not get unsettled when someone takes things differently from what they are usually doing. It can be represented as follow:

“Someone who is fully distinct from me in managing things is okay. Maybe it will need some time for me to adapt to them at first, but it is exciting to meet people who are entirely different from me. Comprehending all the contrasts between us will let me prepare myself to adjust to that kind of circumstance”.

As far as personal and professional identity is involved, the respondents as Indonesian students reasonably scored high in the questions distributing with aspects of the collective society. In a collective society, human relationships are supposed to be necessary. Naturally, people strive to keep a greater sense of friendship. People's success in such communication will depend on securing and sustaining human connections. The students felt that when it comes to diversity within their profession, sometimes they need time to adjust themselves to the situation entirely. Even though most of the students did not correctly address themselves as professionals, deep down inside, they are analyzing the situation before they take appropriate action to the circumstances.

Discussion

Mekheimer (2019) stated that intercultural communicative competence is determined by the presence of cognitive, affective, and behavioral abilities that help to shape direct communication across cultures. Therefore, real intercultural communicative competence needs attitudes and attitudes connected to

intercultural understanding and sympathy. Knowledge and sensitivity of the part of the self in communication and the capacity to indicate and study from one's intercultural backgrounds are needed. Indonesian Higher education students have quite a satisfactory level of Intercultural Communication Competence. It is necessary to recognize that acquiring Intercultural Communication Competence is lifelong learning (Zhang, et.al., 2022). When people with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds communicate socially, they deliver their knowledge about their cultural circumstances (Byram, 2014). Therefore, learners should communicate and interact with people from different cultural and linguistic environments, walking out of their appearances. They should be skilled in coping with various interpretations of truth. According to Bennett (1998, cited in Martin, 2022), any deficiency in the Intercultural Communication Competence level can lead to friction and confusion. It should also be remarked that any absence of consideration of shifts in learning cultures can lead to difficulty and failure in language education.

According to Bennett (1998, cited in Martin, 2022), any lack in Intercultural Communication Competence level can lead to conflict and misunderstanding. It should also be noted that any lack of consideration of variations in cultures of learning can lead to frustration and subsequent failure in language classrooms. To prevent this thing to happen, people need to be able to analyze their level of Intercultural Communication Competence and act accordingly. This study try to find out about the level of Intercultural Communication Competence of Higher Education Students, and their Intercultural Sensitivity as an important part of Intercultural Communication Competence itself.

In term of Cultural Sensitivity, almost all respondents can be regarded as having good cultural sensitivities based on their responses, which can be classified in the adaptation stage of ethno-relative level, which is considered a high one, although some of the respondents are still in the minimization stage of the ethnocentric level. It can be concluded that 80 % of the participants are culturally sensitive and have a good tolerance in multicultural settings even though there are still some students in the ethnocentric level where they only recognize their culture only.

In intercultural sensitivity, the higher education students are mostly in medium-high level, and only 30 % are in medium-low level. This means that in terms of

intercultural sensitivity, students can position themselves in other shoes and keep their tolerance when it comes to multicultural settings. In terms of professional identity, all of the students are at a medium-high level. It means that the students can state their identity clearly as professionals. However, most students did not feel confident enough when dealing with their physical appearance in a multicultural environment. In critical Intercultural Education, 90 % of the students are at a medium-high level. It means that the students felt that they could adjust in critical intercultural settings. In summary, all the components of Intercultural Communication Competence measured in this study; the respondents have a medium-high level on their Intercultural Communication Competence. Higher education students recognized their own Intercultural Communication Competence and were able to adjust and communicate in different settings that involve diversity.

The online interview results also pointed out that all respondents acknowledge how intercultural communicative competence is essential. Students in Indonesia, especially those majoring in a foreign language, need intercultural communicative competence to intensify their interaction and cultural consciousness later when they become professionals. However, without direction to question and reflect upon the possible learning in such situations, there is the danger that students will escape into familiar ways of seeing culture without including new learning into professional practices. That reason also applies to higher education students, so they will become professional teachers who depend on language skills and could interact well in intercultural circumstances since intercultural communicative competence could influence foreign language teaching techniques, methods, and ideas (Eken, 2015).

Conclusion and Suggestion

This study has found that intercultural communicative competence is important for higher education students. This study has its limits on the students on pre-service teachers of language because intercultural communication is a very important skill that must be owned by the students. This will enable them to function well in society. Even the students have had intercultural communication competence, there are more rooms for improvement. Further study can be conducted to broaden the

literature of intercultural communication competence. Other researchers can further study about the relation of students' intercultural performance and their intercultural awareness. Implementing certain techniques or using certain materials can also be done in a classroom by applying classroom action research to develop higher students' intercultural communicative competence.

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