

Exploring University Students' Understanding of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract. Intercultural communication refers to the interaction between individuals from different lingua-cultural backgrounds. The study of intercultural communication has gained attention in the past decade as it provides an understanding of how multicultural people negotiate cultural differences in today's globalized world. This study unpacks university students' understanding of intercultural communication through online discussion forums. In particular, this article reviews their understanding and attitude towards diversity, specifically their views about ways of communication across cultures. This current research adopts a descriptive qualitative method, specifically classroom observation. There are approximately 60 students who joined the online discussion forums expressing their perspectives and ideas about what intercultural communication is. The result of this study evidently demonstrates students' understanding and positive attitudes towards intercultural communication. They are aware that ways of communication might be distinctive and multicultural ways of thinking and doing could be benefited to engage in international-context communication in today's globalized world. This study concludes the students' sufficient intercultural communicative competence and their belief towards the benefits of intercultural communication dialogue. Thus, the impact of this research has affected not only students' perceptions towards multiteity but also the implications for overcoming those communication diversities.

1. Introduction

Intercultural communication is defined as a verbal or non-verbal exchange of information that occurs between people from different culture, nationalities, race, subgroups, and customs [1]. Corresponding to this, Gudykunst and Kim [2] asserted that intercultural communication is a transactional dialogue between participants who bring their own set of attributes, such as perceptions, behaviour, and attitudes. Byram [3] also affirmed that intercultural communication emphasizes on communication across cultural boundaries and it highlights the skills to interact effectively and appropriately with people from different lingua-cultural backgrounds. He stated that intercultural communication underlines the ability to interpret, relate, acquire knowledge, value, and respect other culture. In fact, people from different cultural backgrounds may behave differently as they respectively have their own views, concepts, and ideas [4]. Thus, preparing learners with these skills to overcome cross-cultural communication should be considered in teaching and learning process.

As a matter of fact, we should acknowledge that this intertwined world followed by the rapid growth of the world's population and technology has subsequently enabled interaction among diverse population. People now have the opportunities to interact with each other without boundaries. People nowadays could communicate either face to face or through multiple means of media. In other words, intercultural communication – interaction between individuals or groups from different nationalities, geography, and habits – has become strikingly apparent. Thus, the understanding of intercultural communication is required for future professional to communicate across culture effectively and appropriately in today's global world [5] [6].

As stated earlier, intercultural communication involves several skills, which then refer to Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). ICC covers five aspects: Attitudes, Knowledge, Skills of Interpreting and Correlating, Skills of Exploration and Interaction, and Critical Cultural Awareness [7]. First, Attitudes aspect involves understanding and broad-mindedness about variety of culture which may be distinctive from the learners' perception. Second, Knowledge aspect is associated with learners' awareness of others' cultural practices and their social and individual interaction. Third, Skills of Interpreting and Correlating refers to the ability to interpret a document or an event from other culture, then analyse or correlate it with the learners' culture. Then, Skills of Exploration and Interaction implies the skills to gain new knowledge of others' cultural perspective and the ability to manage attitude in real-life interaction with others. The last aspect, which is Critical Cultural Awareness, is described as the learners' critical thinking of others' cultural practices from their own culture.

Along these lines, Deardorff [8] also emphasized ICC as the ability to apply the effective and appropriate method in intercultural dialogue based on individual's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitude. He added that there are three major elements of ICC: positive attitudes, sufficient knowledge of other's culture, and communication skills. Thus, it can be concluded that ICC includes not only learners' critical awareness of other culture but also their ability to monitor their own culture.

The research of intercultural communication have gained attention in the past decade in Applied Linguistics field. Many researchers pointed up the importance of intercultural communication awareness and the attitudes towards it at present day. For instance, Nguyen [9] mentioned the benefits of understanding intercultural communication in his study. He stated that both verbal and non-verbal communication across culture might be distinctive, e.g. Chinese people interpret silence as being calm and polite when they have thoughtful ideas in a conversation, while Australian treat silence as disengagement in communication. Communication breakdown may occur if the participants' knowledge of each other's culture is deficient. This phenomenon certainly could be avoided if the participants are aware of each other's cultural differences [9].

Another research conducted by Akhmadieva *et al.* [10] aimed to identify students' understanding and attitudes towards intercultural communication. The study evidently showed the respondents' understanding and positive attitudes towards intercultural communication and intercultural interaction in social networks. The majority of the participants of their study mentioned they completely acknowledged that cultural diversity existed and involving in cross-cultural communication neither make them feel any discomfort nor displeasure. In fact, such communication was considered enjoyable and interesting for them. In accord with the study of Akhmadieva, Stepanoviene's [11] research also attempted to examine the respondents' experiences and attitudes towards intercultural communication. The findings of the study demonstrated the students' openness and willingness to engage in intercultural communication. Yet, in terms of the topic, they chose to remain safe by choosing casual topics including weather, sports, mutual friends, etc. They selectively refrained from serious topics such as religious beliefs or personal matters. In essence, the informants from the study have shown their intercultural knowledge and readiness for communication across culture.

In a different study, Karakas [12] examined Turkish students' intercultural attitude towards British and non-British friends. He found that his respondents' understanding and attitude towards intercultural communication is rather complex. The informants evidently reflected both positive and negative intercultural attitudes depending on various factors and their engagement with their British

and non-British friends. Therefore, in his research, external factors and relevant circumstances might also play pivotal roles to the students' attitudes.

Overall, the studies mentioned in the previous paragraph indicated students', at large, understanding of intercultural communication and their positive attitudes towards it. In brief, there have been several research studies on intercultural communication awareness and attitudes. Yet, those studies did not provide larger variables such as gender and level of study in intercultural understanding. Thus, different from the prior research, this current research, with a larger sample size and the participants' basic knowledge of cross-cultural understanding, is going to fill this gap. In addition, this study will enrich English language learning discipline, particularly in Indonesia. This current research aims to explore university students' understanding of intercultural communication and to answer this research question: to what extent do university students understand about intercultural communication? The answers to this research questions are expected to offer an understanding of intercultural communication in general and its implication for English pedagogy in Indonesia using qualitative method, specifically classroom observation to gain rich and thick data. In other words, this research is intended to prepare learners with intercultural competence to overcome international-context communication in the future.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative method as it aims to explore social phenomena in a natural setting, which then provides natural results [13]. To be more specific, this study conducted classroom observation. Classroom observation provides direct information which focuses on details of specific areas, and it could be useful for empirical research [14]. In this study, the researcher conducted classroom observation which focused on the students' understanding and attitude towards intercultural communication practice across the globe. To collect the data, structured observation was conducted in the process of online synchronous discussion forum. The researcher provided questions related to intercultural communication theme, and the students must answer the questions based on their personal knowledge or experience. The participants could also have discussion with their friends about the topic. The questions for the discussion are as follow:

1. Different cultures may have different ways of communicating. Give examples!
2. How do you feel when you have to communicate with people from different nations?
3. What do you think about people who speak English with different varieties or accents? (other than American, Australian, or British English)

The researcher observed the discussion and minimally took part in the activities in order to gain rich data. By implementing this method, the researcher was allowed to directly gain a first-hand look at the students' knowledge and attitude towards intercultural communication in their natural setting. The data were subsequently classified into two subcategories based on the questions and key findings. The last part is analyzing and discussing the data with reference to the Intercultural Communication Competence theory by Byram and Dearsordff.

The participants in this study were undergraduate students who took Cross-Cultural Understanding class. There are 62 students joined the discussion. They were purposely selected as they have background knowledge of cross-cultural understanding. Thus, the data are expected to be relevant with the topic. Below is the Table 1, which describes the participants of the current study. There are 24 male students and 38 female students who joined the online synchronous discussion forum. The total number of the students who took part in the discussion is 62.

Table 1. The participants of the current study

Gender	Numbers of The Students Who Joined The Discussion
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Male	24
Female	38
Total	62

3. Results and Discussions

The results of this study have shown the respondents' sufficient intercultural communication competence and their positive attitudes towards intercultural communication. In this research, the students could elaborate their understanding on different communication practice across culture very well, e.g. they were able to explicitly explain several ways of greeting across nations. They also depicted positive views towards intercultural communication. They agreed that getting involved in intercultural communication might bring benefits to their life, e.g. sharpening their interpersonal skills and reducing conflict due to miscommunication across culture. This current study, as a matter of fact, confirm Byram's theory [7], in which intercultural communication competence includes the skills to interpret and respect other culture as well as relate it to our own.

To put it differently, this section categorically describes the students' understanding on intercultural communication and their attitudes towards it. The classifications are subdivided into two categories based on the questions given to them: a) the awareness of communication practice diversity, b) attitudes towards communication differences

3.1. The awareness of communication practice diversity

All of the participants were aware that communication practice might be distinctive across culture. They believe that each culture have their own characteristic in terms of communicating. Below is the Table 2, which summarizes the male informant's knowledge about communication practices across nations, e.g. ways of greetings, addressing, asking for help, apologizing, and thanking someone.

Table 2. The male participants' awareness of communication practice diversity

Gender	Opinions
Male	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ... In parts of Northern Europe, a quick, firm handshake is the usual thing. In parts of Southern Europe, Central and South America, a handshake is more extended and warmer, with the left hand usually touching the clasped hands or elbow... - When asking for something/ asking for help, Asian culture especially Sundanese in Indonesia rarely asks directly and they prefer to make small talk in contrast to foreign country or Western they prefer to asks directly and stay away from small talk. - An Indonesian was driving in Norway, then passed a Norwegian friend and honked his horn to say hello, but his friend turned around and asked if something had happened. It turns out that in Norway the use of the horn is considered impolite and only when there is something urgent, while for Indonesians greeting using the horn is a common thing. - Some examples of cultural differences that I will try to mention the first is, in Japan a sign of respect (say sorry, thank you) is by bowing, while in Indonesia maybe only by saying. The second example is greetings in Indonesia we can say good morning, Assalamualaikum, while in English speaking country, we can easily to say "hello" and when meeting new

people don't ask about age, better usually there are comments about the weather.

- *...if we look at the greeting between Asian and American culture, I think Asian usually calls "Mr or Sir" for older people, but American people usually calls older people just by name.*

The excerpts above evidently indicate students' awareness of ways of communication across culture. All of the students provided examples of different ways of communication across nations, e.g. ways of greeting, addressing someone, and asking for help. For instance, one of the students specifically elaborated ways of communication between Japanese, Indonesian, and people from English speaking country such as USA, UK, and Australia. He stated that bowing, non-verbal communication, is predominantly associated with Japanese greeting etiquette, while the ritual does not seem very common in Indonesia and in English speaking country. On the other hand, honking in a friendly way is considered "a ritual to greet someone" for some Indonesians, while it is not necessarily needed in Norway.

Another example is the difference of addressing someone, particularly addressing one who is older than the participant. The participant is fully aware that using title such as *Miss, Mister, Sir* when calling someone older than him is quite prevalent among Indonesians and sometimes it is viewed as a standardized communication pattern. Yet, it is considered unusual among Americans unless if it is in a very formal situation. These excerpts clearly demonstrate students' sensibility to various ways of communication practices across nations.

As a matter of fact, corroborating the findings from Stepanoviene's research, this study also confirms Byram's ICC [7], in which intercultural communication sensitivity relates to individual's knowledge and understanding about others' social interaction. Here, the informants also displayed the ability to interpret and correlate the communication practices with their own. It is worth noting that they were able to compare the communication practice from Japan and America with their native country, Indonesia.

The next data are presented in Table 3, which sums up the female participants' understanding on communication practice diversity. Here, they evidently explained different ways of greeting, respecting someone, addressing, doing a small talk, and practicing non-verbal communication across cultures.

Table 3. The female participants' awareness of communication practice diversity

Gender	Opinions
Female	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- <i>From my experience, in Russian culture, smile at the stranger is rude. But in Indonesian culture, it friendly. Then in Japanese culture, give a tip to waiter is unpolite. But in American culture, the tip is one of the way customer respect the waiter.</i>- <i>In Indonesia when they meet want to call their teacher they need to include "Bu/Pak" in front of the teacher's name. For example: Pak Budi or Bu Siti. In US you can call them with their name, but ask first. You need to ask them, how they want to be called.</i>- <i>...for example with eye contact signifying trust in the West, but can be</i>

considered rude or challenging in some parts of Asia and the Middle East. Also, there are gender rules around eye contact, with many Eastern cultures forbidding women from making eye contact with men because it shows sexual authority or interest.

- *People in Indonesia tend to do a small talk before they deliver their actual intention, for example "today's weather is good, do you want to accompany me to the mall?"*
- *Shaking hands has various meanings depending on the culture of a country. In Indonesia, shaking hands can be interpreted as opening formal communication, reconciliation, congratulating, and conveying empathy. But most countries in the East, including Turkey, view the handshake as an aggressive gesture.*

Similar to the male respondents, the female participants also demonstrate their awareness of communication practice diversity. All the female students acknowledged different social interaction system including ways of greeting, addressing someone, making non-verbal contact, and performing request. The first example displayed the respondent's intercultural experience with Russian. Here she explained the difference between Indonesian and Russian non-verbal communication practice such as smiling at a stranger. She assumed that smiling at a stranger in Indonesia is considered friendly, while it is uncommon in Russia.

Another different non-verbal communication is making an eye contact. One of the students believed that making an eye contact indicates trust in the West setting, whilst it is sometimes treated as a challenge and sexual attraction (for men who look at women and vice versa for a long period of time) in Middle East setting. In terms of performing request, one participant provides a good example by elaborating how Sundanese (Indonesian) uses certain strategy to ask for help. She asserted that Sundanese conventionally tends to employ indirect request strategies rather than direct ones.

Fundamentally, the result of this study supports Deardorff's theory about ICC. Similar to the male informants, the female respondents also displayed the understanding of communication practice across culture. They realize that people from different lingua-cultural background may bring their own attribute when they have interaction, thus, communication practice may be distinctive across culture. Moreover, the female students have also shown their ability to correlate the communication practice difference with their own culture. In other words, they have demonstrated their intercultural communicative competence by displaying their sufficient knowledge of other's cultures [8].

3.2. Attitudes towards intercultural communication

Based on the online discussion, most of the students reflect positive attitudes towards communication differences. They agreed that different ways of communication, accents, lexical choice were all related to individual's identity and they stated they positively accepted the diversity although they may need some adjustment to overcome the differences. Below is the Table 4, which specifically expresses the male participants' critical attitudes towards intercultural communication practice.

Table 4. The male participants' attitudes towards intercultural communication

Gender	Opinions
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Male

- *I am very happy if I can communicate with foreign people. because I can learn their language and know what is polite and not polite in their country. and I also like tongue twisters from other countries, if I can pronounce tongue twisters in their language correctly I will be very happy.*
 - *I feel really excited and I will ask everything about his culture also what they do in their country. I would like to be his/her best friend. there will be a lot of excuses because of the differences in culture. I think that I will make a lot of miscommunication but that would be a lesson for me.*
 - *I don't really mind when people bring up their accent because it is just who they are and their identity. However, I find it difficult to understand their speech if they have a heavy accent (in the case of Scottish accent) so I always try to identify the key words like names, places, verbs, and things*
 - *For me personally, I have no issue with people with different English accents, I think it would make the language itself and the people more colorful. Also implying the pronunciation is understandable or even "correct", different accents could make a statement such as " There is no the better accent and you should be proud of where you came from", I think that's also in line with statement from our Governor a few years ago about Sunda English, "Fluent of English with Sundanese accent"*
 - *Mostly nervous. Do they speak the same language as me? If they can speak Indonesian/English, what is their proficiency? Do we understand the same slang/customs? I would maybe start a bit of formal/standard English to reduce ambiguities then start trying to be more friendly and such according to my habits (with attention to how they respond and respond appropriately)*
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The male participants explicitly elaborate their positive views towards intercultural communication. They have shown their openness towards cross-cultural communication. In fact, they believe that getting involved in intercultural communication will benefit them as they will gain new knowledge such as politeness strategies, variety of accents, and certain conceptualization in certain countries. One of the students have even demonstrated his broad-mindedness by asserting that no accent is better than another. He is aware that the world is multi-ethnic and accents could be associated with one's identity. In brief, the participants in this study have actively displayed their tolerance towards difference by embracing those diversities.

Additionally, they also stated that they completely do not mind having international-context interaction, which, of course will involve communication practice diversity. Yet, one of the participants critically justified his argument by stating that is necessary to be familiar with his conversation partner's language proficiency, understanding on slangs, and formal and informal language usage to make the conversation efficient. Thus, sharpening knowledge about communication culture is unquestionably required to prepare learners to overcome communication across culture in the future. As Deardorff and Byram mentioned, ICC implicates positive attitudes towards diversity and it refers to acceptance and respect to other's cultural practices with open manner [7] [8]. The last

data are portrayed in Table 5. Table 5 includes the female respondents' opinions as well as their views about intercultural communication practice.

Table 5. The female participants' attitudes towards intercultural communication

Gender	Opinions
Female	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="437 629 1347 831">- <i>It fascinates me how one culture can profoundly and entirely affect the language used in a specific region. I assume it must be a very long history of how a foreign language can be adapted into the local culture and still exist until today. Also, in my opinion, there is nothing wrong with people speaking different kinds of English since language itself is constantly evolving and adapting to the current world's development.</i> <li data-bbox="437 864 1347 999">- <i>For me, getting to know people from different countries is a different kind of fun. because that way we can know each other's culture, introduce our culture, and of course a lot of information that we get. that way we learn to be able to respect each other's culture.</i> <li data-bbox="437 1032 1347 1234">- <i>I will feel anxious and maybe a little bit of nervous because i'm afraid of making mistake that i'm not aware of. Moreover, being with people from different nation itself seems like a challenge for me. However, on the other side i feel curious and excited as I'm looking forward of what kind of things i would be experiencing. And by slowly to do something I've learned so far in communicating across culture.</i> <li data-bbox="437 1267 1347 1469">- <i>In my opinion, it is interesting because of the difference in accents that characterizes a country. The existence of differences in accents and ways of pronunciation is unique for each country, besides cultural and environmental differences are factors that make each accent different in each country. Therefore each accent must be unique and interesting to me.</i> <li data-bbox="437 1503 1347 1599">- <i>It would be fun but I would also feel scared. I like to learn new things from their country and to be able to learn their culture but I'm afraid that the culture will teach bad things.</i>

The excerpts above have indicated the female participants' positive attitudes towards intercultural communication as well as the male students. For instance, one of the respondents analyzed the long history attached to one culture which could affect their language use and how the world is continually evolving, which provokes intercultural communication. Thus, the ability to accept communication differences is viewed to be one of the significant skills for today's globalized world.

Another participant confirmed that getting into cross-cultural communication is considerably exciting as the advantages they gain assuredly outweigh the drawbacks. They perceived that the benefits of getting involved in intercultural communication is that it will expand and broaden their knowledge about other cultures, and they will be able to introduce their own culture to the world.

Interestingly, one of the respondents have displayed her concern about the drawbacks of getting involved in intercultural communication; that she will feel nervous and learn something so-called bad. Therefore, the ability to interpret other cultural practice, evaluate it, critically analyze it, and correlate it with our own culture is profoundly useful to overcome cross-cultural communication.

As a matter of fact, the result of this study is in tune with Akhmadieva's research. Most of the informants have demonstrated their positive attitudes towards intercultural communication. They actively displayed their excitement about getting involved in intercultural communication as it will enable them to gain new knowledge. They agreed that having interaction with people from different lingua-cultural background seemed to be fun and exciting although they will need some adjustment to accommodate themselves and clearly to avoid misunderstanding across culture. In fact, this research endorses Byram's and Deardorff's ICC; that intercultural communicative competence involves positive attitudes such as willingness to get involved in intercultural language exchange and the act of withholding judgments towards different communication practices, e.g. different accents, lexical choice, etc. [7][8]

4. Conclusion

This article focuses on a conceptual discussion of how university students comprehend intercultural communication and how they respectively view it. The findings of the current study sum up the respondents' ample intercultural communicative competence and their positive attitudes towards it. Most of the students are able to elaborate communication practice across nations as well as their own traditions and customs. In terms of the attitudes, both male and female students affirmed that having communication with people from different nations ignites their excitement and they could draw benefits from it. Through intercultural interaction, they could learn something new and this could conclusively expand their knowledge about this multi-ethnic world. In other words, they positively viewed intercultural communication as a way to develop the awareness of culturally different people in this interconnected world. In summation, this present study, corroborating the findings from the prior research, endorses Byram's and Deardorff's ICC, which implies the students' skills to gain new knowledge of others' cultural practice and the ability to manage their positive attitude towards the differences. However, this current research could only describe the respondents' understanding and attitudes through an online discussion forum and some of the students have not experienced real-life intercultural interaction yet. Hence, further research should consider the participants' real intercultural experience more carefully to fully explore their intercultural attitudes.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express gratitude for financial support given by UNIKOM

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