# The International Students' Experiences of Their Intercultural Communication Competence in Indonesia

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# ABSTRACT

The study examined how, in the age of globalization, education had advanced to a new level where the sharing of information had transcended national boundaries and examined intercultural communication competency based on the experiences of foreign students in Indonesia. But educational establishments weren't completely equipped to meet these contemporary demands. Even though intercultural communication research is not new, concerns about emerging cultural diversity have only recently gained a lot of attention. As a result, intercultural communication competency (ICC) in educational sectors is still quite low and needs further investigation. The study used a descriptive qualitative methodology in conjunction with a case and phenomenological investigation strategy. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data, along with research material. Through the analysis of the interactive multicultural building model-which is bolstered by the ideas of intercultural communication and the internationalization of higher education-the research findings demonstrate the persistence of disparities and opinions, as well as an evaluation of the three-perspective model that serves as the main focus of the study. It consists of three processes: behavioral (intercultural adeptness), cognitive (intercultural awareness), and emotional (intercultural sensitivity). In addition, there are other difficulties that need to be overcome.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the age of globalization, cross-cultural interactions are unavoidable. There are variances based on race, nationality, ethnicity, and culture everywhere. A global citizen engages with everyone from other countries in addition to their local acquaintances. Therefore, the boundaries between different nations have gradually dissolved throughout time, bringing cultures closer together than before and fostering more contact between people within them (Babao & Adiatma, 2023). Furthermore, the internet age has increased cross-cultural and even cross-national interactions amongst individuals, thanks to social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and others. According to Statista data, 66% of people on the planet used the internet regularly in 2022. As a result, due to the current changes, people must possess a growing range of sophisticated abilities and information in order to create relationships that are suitable and productive within diversity, including differences in races, religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds (Mardhiyyah et al., 2022). Numerous researches have been done in this area to address the issues that are now present. That is why intercultural communication competence—a unique and crucial skill—is required while navigating cultural differences and issues (Zhang, 2017).

Further, he also mentioned that according to some educators, establishing intercultural competency is an ongoing process that requires consideration of three different levels of intercultural education objectives and criteria. Language awareness, cultural awareness in general, language proficiency in the target culture, and understanding of the target country's culture are all included in the first level of knowledge. The ability to use verbal and nonverbal cues, communication strategies, sociocultural competency, and communicative competence are all included in the second level of competence that is pertinent. The third level, which deals with empathy in cross-cultural communication and critical cultural awareness, is intimately related to attitude. The set of instructional goals demonstrates how the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional levels of the ICC framework have been effectively incorporated into the instruction of foreign languages.

More and more ESL teachers in the higher education have realized they must put in more effort to help language learners develop their intercultural communication competence as ICC competence has become a widely discussed topic both inside and outside the classroom where English is taught as a second language. The growth in student exchange programs run by different nations is only one of many examples of how education has reached a new level in the globalization period when the process of information exchange has crossed national borders (Chelliah et al., 2019; Findlay et al., 2011). The majority of academic institutions and societal organizations have put in place a range of international initiatives, such as student exchanges. In order to provide short-term foreign experiences and help students build skills that would presumably help them in today's global business environment, they are sending and receiving students from various nations.

International students are presently paying close attention to Indonesian universities themselves. It is well recognized that a nation's popularity among foreign students can serve as one of several indicators of that nation's success in global competitiveness. The presence of foreign students in a nation is becoming a crucial component in the internationalization of higher education, as it may foster tolerance, variety, cross-cultural understanding, increased research ability, and further progress (Suttrisno, 2023).

Intercultural communication competency is one of the most important yet sometimes disregarded aspects of working with international students, even in industrialized nations like Indonesia. A major factor in the importance of ICC in the sphere of education is the necessity for international students to adjust to a new sociocultural environment that differs greatly from their own. This is especially true with student exchange programs. (Yu & Wright, 2016)

Indonesia has a responsibility to provide international students a diverse range of experiences and values as their host country (Abidin, 2017). Indonesia will gain from favorable perceptions and reactions that are formed based on the experiences of international students because of its own worldwide experience. Ultimately, their involvement might be vital in cultivating positive ties with the host nation, offering counsel to their associates, and perhaps serving as a conduit between Indonesia and its home nation in the future. ICC may prove advantageous in planning exchange programs for students; yet, these aspects are frequently disregarded.

It is said that engaging both local and foreign students in higher education in the US and Australia, and that the beneficial interactions between them improve the scholastic, social, and cultural

experiences of domestic students (Jon, 2013). Researchers have discovered that university engagement is essential to building positive ties and developing ICC. Universities must know how to construct an ICC and make international students feel at home. In addition to imparting knowledge, they should also impart entertaining and effective communication skills and personal experience. Transforming student exchange programs into an endeavor in spite of their brief lifespan, serves as a vehicle for bringing about long-lasting, beneficial change.

Sadly, this promise is frequently unrealized, and a common grievance among students studying overseas is the dearth of opportunities for interaction with locals. A third or more of international students frequently say they have no host pals at all. Numerous studies have also revealed that due to prejudices, language hurdles, cultural differences, and pressure for academic success, local students may feel uncomfortable and hesitant to interact with overseas students. This suggests that the primary reason is now a lack of intercultural communication competency.

Numerous earlier studies have examined the variables that affect the choice of a country as a destination for higher education. However, particularly in developed nations, there is still a dearth of study on ICC awareness and its application. These explanations have piqued the researchers' curiosity regarding intercultural communication competence in light of international students' experiences in Indonesia. The purpose of the research is to present data on ICC based on the experiences of international students, the difficulties they encountered, and strategies for overcoming those difficulties. This is an attempt to assess the ICC in the context of education more thoroughly, with the goal of helping students become more competent by recognizing the significance and urgency of the ICC's involvement in a number of fields.

There are other hypotheses and thoughts that bolster the findings. The intercultural communication theory is the first one applied. Intercultural communication, happens anytime two or more people from other cultures or microcultures meet together and exchange nonverbal and spoken cues (Neuliep, 2018),. It takes place in and between a number of interrelated settings, such as the environment, perceptual, cultural, microcultural, and sociorelational contexts.

Intercultural communication can take two forms: group communication and personal communication (Effendy, 2017). The former involves communication between two individuals, while the latter involves communication between an individual and a group or groups of individuals. Additionally, Tuleja (2016) defined intercultural communication as the exchange of messages between individuals with various cultural backgrounds. It looks at how the participants' interactions are impacted by the particular cultural differences. Liliweri (2014) has explained a number of functions that are connected to the intercultural communication function, such as social functions (supervision, bridging, value socialization, entertaining) and personal functions (stating social identity, expressing social integration, increasing knowledge).

This study also makes use of intercultural communication skills as a theory. It is said that in the future global society, people from diverse cultures would only be able to interact successfully and responsibly via skilled intercultural communication. There are many issues and difficulties with intercultural communication since people from different cultures communicate and think in different ways. As a result, the ICC provides a guide for evaluating the motivations, interpretations, and intercultural communication abilities of communicators (Liu, Volcic, and Gallois, 2014)

Following a review of many ICC techniques, an interactive-multicultural construction model is discovered. With the help of this approach, individuals will be better equipped to comprehend the value, accept, and integrate cultural differences, preparing them to join the global society. Three views are used to understand the transformative process of symmetrical interdependence that it exhibits.

The affective process (intercultural sensitivity) is the initial viewpoint. This viewpoint focuses on individual emotions or mood swings brought on by particular circumstances, individuals, and places (Chen, 2010). The four fundamental characteristics that form this perspective are: self-concept (the individual's view of himself); open-mindedness (the willingness to communicate honestly and accept other people's explanations); non-judgmental attitudes (the absence of prejudice that could keep

someone from listening to others during cross-cultural communication); and social relaxation (the capacity to communicate fear or anxiety in cross-cultural communication). The cognitive process (intercultural awareness) is the second viewpoint. This viewpoint highlights how realizing the many aspects of one's own culture may alter one's perspective on the surroundings. Individuals must be self-conscious—that is, able to keep an eye on and become aware of oneself—as well as culturally aware—that is, aware of how one's own culture and other cultures influence how others think and act (Chen and Starosta, 1996). The behavioral process (intercultural adroitness) is the final viewpoint. This viewpoint places a strong emphasis on how people behave well in cross-cultural situations. This viewpoint is strongly tied to the ability to communicate effectively via both verbal and nonverbal means (Chen and Starosta, 1996).

Internationalization of higher education is the final idea employed in the study. Enhancing the quality of education, attracting foreign students, and forming partnerships are the main goals of internationalization of higher education, which encompasses a variety of tactics or initiatives aimed at integrating international education into the current curriculum (Maringe & Foskett, 2012). Ellingboe (as cited by Gopal, 2011) defines the internationalization of higher education as the intricate processes used to incorporate global perspectives into institutions of higher learning by enlisting stakeholders as a reaction and adaptation to an increasingly varied, global, and dynamic external environment. The internationalization of higher education has also been defined by Zolfaghari and Sabran in Gopal (2011) as the incorporation and infusion of an international dimension as a fundamental component of a university's curricula.

## 2. METHOD

In order to address the issue formulation, the research employs a case study and phenomenology study method together with a descriptive qualitative methodology. According to Rossman and Ralis (2017), this method is thought to be able to give a broad overview of concepts and designs in order to provide detailed information regarding study subjects. Use in order to gain a deeper understanding of the current problems and to make use of them for assessment. According to Yin (in Farquhar, 2012), a case study is an empirical investigation that delves deeply into a current phenomenon and its real-life environment, particularly when the lines separating the phenomenon from its setting are blurry. It centers on a specific unit, which increases the specificity or depth of the research's analysis and findings. It is additionally backed by the phenomenological study approach, which involves working with a limited number of participants to identify patterns and connections while closely examining the significance of each person's unique life experience (Dimandja, 2017).

From July 2023 to November 2023, the study was conducted. The interactive multicultural building model, which is comprised of three perspectives—the emotive, cognitive, and behavioral—is the focal point of the intercultural communication competency theory approach. Semi-structured interviews and literature reviews are used in the research as methods for gathering data. A total of ten interviews are performed, comprising eight foreign students from two universities in Jember (one from France, two from Japan, three from Australia, one from Singapore and one from South Korea) and two representatives from the university team (from Indonesia).

In terms of the literature review, the research uses material from a variety of current sources to support and enhance the data gleaned from the interviews. By comparing data from many sources, source triangulation ensures the veracity of data interpretation. The research employs Miles and Huberman's (in Afrizal, 2014) three-stage data analysis methods for data codification, data display, and conclusions making.

#### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The importance of intercultural communication ability rises as humankind encounters more cultural variety. People with different cultural backgrounds will never truly comprehend one another

without this proficiency. Research is being done to learn more about Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) based on the experiences of international students in Indonesia, the difficulties they encounter, and strategies for overcoming those difficulties, in an effort to identify this ability. The methods for studying intercultural communication ability that are then covered result in a three-perspective model that serves as the main focus of the study.

The affective process (intercultural sensitivity) is the primary point of view. This viewpoint focuses on individual emotions or shifts in emotions brought on by specific circumstances, individuals, and places. In connection with this, foreign students participating in study exchange programs in Indonesia talk about their capacity to regulate the emotions and sentiments triggered by various circumstances, people, and surroundings.

Eight students who were interviewed stated that they have this capacity, adding that changes in moods or personal emotions occur often. Nevertheless, this emotion occurs more frequently when individuals experience a range of cultural differences while visiting a foreign nation since not many things are very unsettling or dissimilar from their own culture.

One student from France (personal correspondence, July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023) talked about how she felt uneasy when individuals in Jember would frequently take a picture and videotape her without her consent. The students from Japan and South Korea also dealt with something like that, too. According to her, a lot of Indonesians don't even know what private space is, let alone respect it; she claims that everyone in jember is always requesting or yelling that you take pictures everywhere you go (personal correspondence, July 8<sup>th</sup> 2023).

The students from Japan and South Korea (personal correspondence, July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023) also explained that they frequently experienced emotional changes in an academic setting due to having to adjust to new people, situations, and classroom atmospheres. They believed that students in Indonesia attended loud courses where there were a lot of singings and yellings, and that this is very typical for the local students. They consider it insulting to the instructors and other students, as well as being unprofessional.

However, the majority of student exchange participants who were questioned admit that they could still manage and handle the changes in a professional manner despite all of the changes and difficulties they encounter. They demonstrated this by asking the Indonesian to stop or explain that their culture is different, rather than becoming irate or agitated. They demonstrated this skill further by telling how they are able to keep their composure and not display anger in the face of adversity and diversity.

In addition, three Australian students clarified that although they believed they could regulate their emotions, they had several experiences that demonstrate this is not the case. They acknowledge that it takes time to fully comprehend a culture, and that it is difficult to avoid taking emotions into account in daily life when one is from a different cultural background. According them (personal correspondence, September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2023), initially, they found it difficult that it took them some time to understand that Indonesians are highly sensitive and that their feelings should be spared.

The cognitive process (intercultural awareness) is the next viewpoint. This viewpoint stresses how knowing the many aspects of people's cultures can cause one to alter their perceptions of their surroundings (Chen and Starosta, 1996). In keeping with this viewpoint, every international student we spoke stated that they might alter their own thought processes by appreciating the diversity and cultures of others. When students study abroad, even they presume that this has become a requirement. This usually occurs because they have prior experience, whether it be from being used to living and growing up in homes or situations with members of different nationalities or from having lived overseas. A declaration from German students from Rhine Waal University serves as the example.

Understanding another culture is necessary for effective communication. Coming from a place where variety is so pervasive, it has always been in the Singaporean student's habit to adjust to other cultures. Diversity is and always will be a part of his life as his family is a blend of Chinese and Filipino cultures. (personal correspondence, September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2023). Additionally, he said that if he wants to

comprehend other people's cultures and customs, he usually attempts to read between the lines of what they are saying and try to put himself in their shoes. He doesn't mind if people make gestures in my direction since he understands that non-verbal communication in my own culture might offend someone. Non-verbal communication is a cultural trait that is difficult to remove.

The behavioral process (intercultural adroitness) is the final viewpoint. This viewpoint places a strong emphasis on how people behave well in cross-cultural situations. This viewpoint has a lot to do with the ability to communicate effectively both orally and nonverbally. Consistent with the earlier viewpoint, every international student interviewed admits to having the capacity for both verbal and nonverbal communication with individuals from different cultures. This usually occurs because despite the fact that there are several instances in Indonesia where individuals are unable to comprehend one another or vice versa, they are nonetheless able to regularly meet their demands. The French student (personal correspondence, July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023) notes that nonverbal cues like hand gestures and facial expressions are used to explain and communicate when speaking in English is not possible. She continues by stating, according to the state: "I grew up with learning four languages. I come from a varied family and nation. I discovered in learning so many languages that learning words alone is insufficient; one also has to master body language, gestures, and mental patterns. I so strive not to generalize but rather feel quite at ease assimilating into other people's cultures as long as I understand them".

Based on the three viewpoints, all international students who were questioned generally acknowledged that they already possessed the necessary skills for intercultural communication. Two Indonesian representatives, however, have made contradictory claims (personal correspondence, November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023). They described how, in their observation of the international students, they sometimes exhibited annoyance and hostility against others who approach them. Friends from Indonesia also mention that some international students appeared irate because Indonesians talked slowly and were often late.

In addition to the three viewpoints, the research analyzes the difficulties encountered and solutions for implementing intercultural communication skills based on the experiences of foreign students in Indonesia. Based on these assertions, disparities and differences of opinion persist, along with an evaluation of intercultural communication competencies. International students believe they possess strong intercultural communication abilities, while host students hold a different view. The disparity between the requirements and assessments thus demonstrates the necessity for education, training, and special initiatives to establish a common understanding of ICC and to prepare students for exchange programs in both their home and destination countries.

According to the university staff, a common challenge encountered by students taking part in exchange programs is that language teacher might operate as a barrier to academic success. However, cultural differences can result in difficulties in social factors and frequently generate misunderstandings. The group also admits the lack of personal friendships among the majority of Indonesian student exchange participants. Regarding the strengths and shortcomings of the student exchange participants, the Asian international students from different countries stated that because the cultures of these countries are typically comparable to Indonesian culture, foreign students from other Asian countries do not really have big issues or disadvantages. Conversely, cultural understanding turns into a major shortcoming for pupils from non-Asian nations.

In the meantime, in relation to the program that is implemented in an attempt to address the issues that are currently present, the student exchange participant who is interviewed clarifies that there isn't a specific program meant to prepare them. This is subsequently verified by the universities, both from Indonesia and foreign university partners. Nevertheless, some general activities or efforts are implemented, which are separated into online and conventional. In terms of online activities, the university uses a variety of social media platforms, such as websites, emails, and posts on Instagram and Facebook. In terms of offline activities, there are a few that take place: pre- and during-departure briefings; a full day of orientation program that provides information about the nation, city, language, culture, and customs; academic information (such as online sessions and academic activities); campus posters; advisor recommendations; classroom visits and city tours.

The international students also mentioned that Indonesia's government's participation in the advancement of intercultural communication skills is still viewed as passive. The Indonesian government does not provide pupils with specialized training in communication skills; instead, it just takes part and instructs students to grasp the fundamentals. Universities should be compelled or directed to create a unique program linked to the ICC, with Indonesia as its target audience as well as international communities, with the support or involvement of the government as the primary policyholder. This may be a component of the government's plan to assist Indonesia in becoming a ready and sought-after location for education.

This demonstrates once more that the ICC has not gained enough attention or importance from a variety of sources, including the government, colleges, and students. The researchers suggest that there should be a program similar to familiarization for intentional students, especially to understand the cultures and master intercultural communication competence at least in their destination country, since efforts to prepare foreign students have become necessary.

In order to optimize the approach taken to establish ICC, help or support from a number of sources is required, including the university as the primary service provider; international students as the primary participants in cross-cultural communication activities; friends as helpers and conversation partners; and the government as key players who can influence regulations that could have a variety of effects on the growth of ICC.

Not withstanding all of the difficulties, international students are generally happy that they chose Indonesia as their study abroad location and encourage other students to consider Indonesia for their future participation in the student exchange program. They clarify, though, that this advice only holds true if the students choose to develop their personal, social, communicative, and adventurous qualities rather than expand their academic knowledge. If touring is more important to you than getting a topnotch education, they suggest visiting Indonesia. In the meantime, international students also mentioned that they selected Indonesia for a number of reasons, such as safety, language, and currency, a wide range of cultural experiences, the possibility of Indonesia emerging as a major player in the region or worldwide, the ability to provide their students with more options, and the opportunity to forge closer ties with ASEAN neighbors.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

People today need more sophisticated abilities and knowledge to create suitable and productive relationships within diversity because of the current developments. When navigating cultural differences, one specific and vital skill is badly required: intercultural communication competence (ICC). As a result, the researchers are curious to learn more about ICC from the perspectives of international students studying in Indonesia. The purpose of the research is to offer information on ICC based on the experiences of foreign students, the difficulties they encountered, and strategies for overcoming them.

A large percentage of students believe they have affective, cognitive, and behavioral components of ICC, according to the research. Their statement, which is based on a variety of events they had while visiting Indonesia, demonstrates this. Even yet, there are still disparities and disagreements, and when students' intercultural communications skills are evaluated, classmates who are Indonesians make contradictory remarks. They describe how, in their observation of student exchange participants, they frequently witness people looking irritated and acting in a certain way toward someone who approaches close to them.

Some Indonesian friends also mention that some foreign students appear irate because Indonesians don't talk straight to their points and are often late. The university team further states that language employed by professors as a barrier to academic considerations is one of the typical challenges experienced by students taking part in student exchange programs. While social barriers are sometimes caused by cultural differences, which frequently lead to misunderstandings, the group also concedes that the majority of Indonesian student exchange participants don't have many close pals.

There isn't a specific curriculum designed by their home institution, an Indonesian university, or the government to equip students (both foreign and Indonesian) in response to the current issues. It is established that the ICC has not yet gained enough attention from different parties or established itself as a priority. Since it is now required to prepare international students, purposeful students should participate in a program similar to familiarization, with a focus on understanding the cultures and developing intercultural communication skills, at least in the place of destination. Assistance or support from a variety of parties is required to maximize the strategy used to develop intercultural communication (ICC). These parties include the government, which can facilitate the development of regulations that could have a significant impact on the development of ICC, friends, foreign students, and the university, which serves as the primary institution providing services.

These findings demonstrate that the government, academic institutions, and students in Indonesia have not given the ICC enough importance or attention. In order to get the best outcomes possible in the context of intercultural communication, more consideration and examination of the issues surrounding this skill are still necessary. Further research on the functioning of the ICC in other countries will be suggested, as the current study is restricted to the experiences of international students in Indonesia.

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