



Students' Perception About Intercultural Competence (IC) in English Speaking Class

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to find out students' views on intercultural competence in learning English speaking. This competence is seen as a fundamental aspect in building effective cross-cultural communication, especially in the context of foreign language learning. The research utilized mixed methods, involving 30 second semester students from Universitas Mercu Buana Yogyakarta who were enrolled in Speaking course. Data collection was conducted through an intercultural competence questionnaire, semi-structured interviews in Focus Group Discussions, direct classroom observations, as well as open-ended questions. From the quantitative results, it was found that students have a high level of cultural awareness and openness, but their cultural knowledge and cross-cultural communication skills are still classified as moderate to low. Meanwhile, qualitative data analysis showed that students understood the importance of cultural insights to support speaking skills, but they felt that the learning process had not fully supported the development of intercultural competence optimally. Based on these findings, this study recommends that cultural elements be integrated more deeply in the teaching of speaking, so that students can be better prepared to face the challenges of global communication. The findings of this study are expected to be a reference in the development of intercultural competence-based English language learning curriculum in higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

The globalization and cross-country interaction requires humans to be able to adapt and communicate. In mastering English, it is not enough only in the grammatical aspect, but it must also include the ability to communicate cross-culturally (intercultural competence). As expressed by Wang et al. (2021), this ability is very important to equip students to be able to interact with people from various cultural backgrounds. English-speaking classes are the right place to hone this skill. By incorporating cultural elements into learning, students can understand the meaning behind expressions and

communication habits from other cultures (J. Lee & Song, 2020). Therefore, English language learning should integrate intercultural values thoroughly in its curriculum.

Intercultural competence is a set of abilities that includes cultural awareness, communication skills, and empathy for diversity (Byram, 1997). According to Byram, ICC consists of five main components: attitude, knowledge, interpretation and relationship-building skills, discovery and interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness. However, students often face obstacles in developing ICC due to the lack of opportunities to interact directly with foreign cultures (Yang et al., 2025). Strengthening ICC in English language learning is believed to increase students' cultural awareness and adaptability (T. Y. Lee et al., 2023). Through speaking classes, students can practice communication while understanding cultural differences in real life. Therefore, it is important to examine how students' perceptions are formed during this learning process.

In speaking class, students are not only asked to voice their opinions, but they are also asked to adjust the way they communicate to a particular cultural context. This is very important so that the message can be received both linguistically and socioculturally. Students who have intercultural skills tend to speak more confidently (Nguyen et al., 2022). Cultural simulations and cross-cultural discussions have also been shown to improve oral communication (Tambunan et al., 2021). Therefore, good speaking skills must be combined with adequate understanding of different cultures.

Learning English as a lingua franca now focuses on strengthening intercultural skills rather than linguistic mastery (Chen & Starosta, 2012). Cultural knowledge and the ability to interpret meaning in different contexts are prerequisites for ICC. Better intercultural literacy can help students communicate well and increase their cultural sensitivity (Wang et al., 2021). Speaking classes provide students with the opportunity to improve their language skills and interact with people from different cultures. According to Byram (1997), interpretation, relationship building, and effective interaction are all skills that are built here. Students' perceptions of these experiences are crucial to assessing ICC teaching strategies in the classroom.

Although ICC is essential, its implementation in the classroom is still difficult. Due to the lack of adequate training and teaching resources, some teachers face difficulties in creating materials that illustrate intercultural principles. Therefore, teaching guidelines that allow for the systematic integration of cultural elements are needed. Understanding how students view ICC is important so that teachers can adjust their teaching approaches to meet students' needs and difficulties.

According to Jang and Kim (2023), positive perceptions of cross-cultural education can improve students' critical thinking skills and increase their participation in classroom discussions. Students' perceptions have an impact on their application of language skills in real life. Yusuf and Anwar (2020) found that students who recognize

the importance of having intercultural skills use English more often. Therefore, studying how students view the world is crucial to creating a curriculum that is in line with the needs of the world.

Cultural knowledge, openness, and effective communication skills are three main components of intercultural competence. All three are essential for learning to speak because they help students convey ideas in a way that is appropriate to other cultural contexts. Combining these three elements can produce flexible and proficient speakers around the world. Improving students' ability to speak English is related to intercultural sensitivity. Students who have high cultural sensitivity have positive perceptions and greater confidence in speaking, according to Fitriani & Pratiwi (2022). This shows how important it is to learn to speak in real situations.

In speaking class, students are not only required to express their opinions, but also to adjust their communication style according to the cultural context. This is important so that the message conveyed can be accepted linguistically and socio-culturally. (Nguyen et al., 2022) found that students with high levels of intercultural competence tend to be more confident and fluent in speaking. In addition, activities such as cultural simulations and cross-cultural discussions have been shown to be effective in improving oral communication skills (Tambunan et al., 2021) . Therefore, good speaking skills must be accompanied by adequate cross-cultural understanding.

Based on the background, the questions were (1) How do students perceive intercultural competence in English-speaking classes? (2) What do students think about the importance of intercultural competence in their speaking performance? The purpose of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of how students perceive intercultural skills in English-speaking classes and the degree to which they perceive intercultural skills as an important component in improving their speaking ability.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research used a mixed method approach, which is a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. According to Sugiyono (2013), a research method is a scientific way to obtain data with certain goals and uses, which includes rational, empirical, and systematic aspects. The participants of this research were 30 students from University Mercubuana Yogyakarta (UMBY) from English Education Study Program Semester 2. This class was chosen because they were taking the Speaking course and were students who not only came from various regions in Indonesia but there were also students from abroad who participated in student exchanges. It is unique because it does not only talk about culture in Indonesia, but also foreign culture with all its uniqueness.

Research Procedure

This research was conducted with the following procedures : Participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire about their background and their experiences in communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds. Participants were asked to do a practice speaking exercise related to intercultural competence. Focus group discussion: After the practice speaking exercise, participants were asked to participate in a semi-structured focus group discussion to discuss their experiences in developing intercultural competence.

The FGD was conducted over a 30-minute session, during which participants were divided into small groups. Each group was assigned to discuss several guiding questions related to the concept of *Intercultural Competence (IC)* .

Data Analysis

The two main instruments used in this study were a questionnaire and semi-structured focus group discussion (FGD) interviews. The questionnaire, which consisted of two open-ended questions, was designed to measure students' perceptions of intercultural competence (IC). The dimensions of IC defined by Byram (1997) include attitude, knowledge, skills, and availability.

Interculture Competence Questionnaire

To measure respondents' perceptions of cross-cultural competence, they were given a questionnaire consisting of twelve statements. In accordance with Byram's (1997) theoretical framework, these statements cover several key components of intercultural ability, such as cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, and cross-cultural communication skills. A Likert scale of 1-5 was used to determine the respondents' level of agreement with each aspect of cross-cultural competence. This scale is given from 1 to 5 for each statement in the questionnaire, where 1 means “strongly disagree” and 5 means “strongly agree”.

Data Processing: Quantitative data was processed from the questionnaire data. A Likert scale was used to convert each respondent's answer into a numerical score. Subsequently, the scores for each statement were summed and averaged to produce an overview of the level of cross-cultural skills on each element. **Descriptive Analysis:** This analysis analyzes the average score of each statement and key aspects, such as cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, and communication skills. The results of this analysis can be displayed in the form of a table or percentage chart to show the distribution of respondents' answers in each category. For example, you can show the percentage of students who agree or strongly agree with a particular statement, as well as the average score for each statement.

Interpretation of Results: Once the descriptive analysis is complete, you can analyze the data and compare it to previous theories. For example, most students scored high on the cultural awareness aspect but scored low on cultural knowledge.

This is in line which states that students tend to have high cultural awareness but moderate to low cross-cultural communication knowledge and skills. To understand students' ability to interact across cultures, this interpretation is very important.

Byram's (1997) theoretical framework of intercultural competence is fundamental to this analysis process. This framework divides IC into five main components: attitude, knowledge, interpretation and relationship skills, discovery and interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness. Therefore, the analysis of the questionnaire data is not only numerical but also directly related to the theory underlying the study.

Focus Group Discussion

Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with four main questions to obtain more in-depth qualitative data. Fantini (2009) emphasizes the importance of real experiences in the development of IC, and this method allowed for a more detailed and contextual exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives regarding cross-cultural interactions. To find out how students understand cross-cultural competence (IC), the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) data was analyzed thematically. It started with questions about what students know about intercultural competence (IC), what they think they know about IC, their cultural identity, and their feelings when interacting with people from different cultures.

Byram's (1997) theory divides IC into several main components. The results of this analysis make it possible to determine how students' intercultural attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness are formed and affect English language learning. This result is in line with Wang et al. (2021) and Liddicoat & Scarino (2013), who emphasize that IC development through language learning requires deep cultural understanding and real cultural interaction experiences. With this combination of qualitative and quantitative data, the research can provide a comprehensive picture of how students perceive and experience intercultural skill development. In addition, the research can discover the challenges and opportunities for implementing intercultural approaches in the English language classroom.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study involved one class as a subject to explore students' perceptions after completing the learning process. The questionnaire, both closed and open-ended, was adapted from the INCA (Intercultural Competence Assessment) framework.

Table 1.

Results of Student Questionnaire on Perceptions of Intercultural Competence (IC)

Category	Statement	Purpose / Description	Like rt Scale	Mea n Score	% Agree – Strong	Interpretati on

					ly Agree	
Cultural Awareness	I can identify cultural differences in communication	Measures the ability to recognize differences in communication styles and cultural contexts	1-5	4.12	77.77%	High cultural awareness
	I understand how cultural values influence communication	Measures understanding that cultural values affect communication	1-5	4.63	92.59%	Very good awareness
	I am aware of my own cultural perspective	Measures awareness of one's own cultural background influence on communication	1-5	4.51	92.59%	High self awareness
Cultural Knowledge	I have deep knowledge about other cultures	Measures knowledge about other cultures, including customs, norms, and traditions	1-5	2.48	14.82%	Low cultural knowledge
	I understand communication norms in different cultures	Measures understanding of formal and informal communication norms across cultures	1-5	3.13	44.44%	Moderate knowledge
	I can explain verbal and non-verbal intercultural differences	Measures ability to explain verbal and non-verbal intercultural differences	1-5	2.86	37.03%	Limited understanding
Communication Skills	I can adjust my communication	Measures ability to adapt	1-5	3.41	60.60%	Fair adaptability

	style to different cultures	communication styles across cultures				
	I can avoid misunderstandings caused by cultural differences	Measures ability to prevent misunderstandings due to cultural differences	1-5	2.35	18.52%	Low preventive ability
	I can negotiate meaning when cultural ambiguity occurs	Measures ability to maintain communication during cultural ambiguity	1-5	4.08	76.67%	High negotiation ability
Attitude & Openness	I value perspectives from different cultures	Measures appreciation of different cultural viewpoints	1-5	4.67	92.59%	Very high openness
	I am open to different communication practices	Measures openness to foreign communication practices	1-5	3.95	67.86%	Fairly high tolerance
	I am interested in learning more about other cultures	Measures curiosity and willingness to learn about other cultures	1-5	4.73	92.59%	Very high cultural curiosity

Based on the table, for the statement has different answers and the researcher only wrote the total as a whole in percentage form. However, the researcher describes in detail through a diagram for each statement to find out the students' answers and understanding of Intercultural Competence (IC) according to the questionnaire using a Likert scale of 1-5 in the following order: (5) strongly agree, (4) agree, (3) neutral, (2) disagree, 1 (strongly disagree).

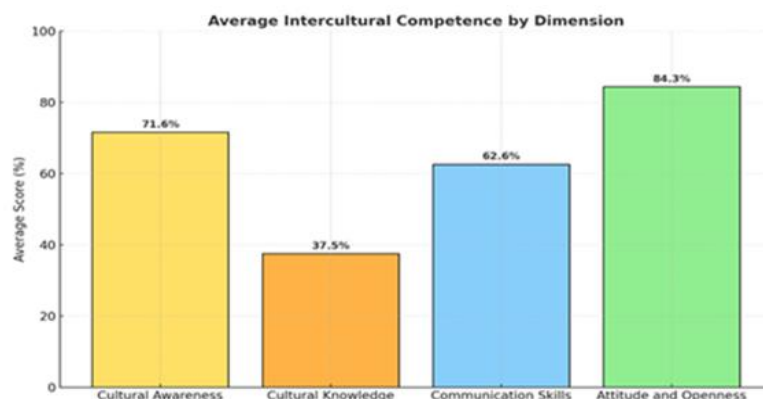


Figure 1.

Diagram of Percentage of Student's Response (Likert scale)

The results showed that students' perceptions of intercultural competence (IC) in speaking classes varied based on competency categories. In the Cultural Awareness category, most students showed a high level of awareness of cultural differences in communication. A total of 77.77% of students agreed that they could identify cultural differences, with an average score of 4.12. Awareness of the influence of cultural values on communication reached the highest score, which was 4.63, agreed by 92.59% of students, indicating very good cultural awareness.

However, in the Cultural Knowledge aspect, the results showed lower scores. Only 14.82% of students reported having in-depth knowledge of other cultures, with an average score of 2.48, indicating low knowledge. Understanding of communication norms across cultures was at a moderate level (average score of 3.13), with 44.44% agreeing. The ability to explain verbal and non-verbal differences was also still limited, with an average score of 2.86 and only 37.03% agreeing.

In the Communication Skills category, the results showed a fairly good level of adaptability. As many as 60.60% of students felt able to adjust their communication style to different cultural contexts, with an average score of 3.41. However, the ability to prevent misunderstandings due to cultural differences was rated low (average score of 2.35), agreed by only 18.52% of students. In contrast, the ability to negotiate meaning when cultural ambiguity occurs showed positive results (score of 4.08, agreed by 76.67%).

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that students have a good level of awareness and openness towards intercultural aspects. However, there are gaps in cultural knowledge and practical communication skills in cross-cultural contexts.

Cultural Awareness

The findings show that students have a high level of cultural awareness, aligning with Byram's (1997) intercultural competence theory, which emphasizes the importance of cultural awareness as a component of intercultural communication competence.

Students who are aware of cultural differences can better adapt in cross-cultural interactions (Byram, 1997).

Cultural Knowledge

The low level of cultural knowledge among students indicates a need for curriculum reinforcement focusing on this aspect. According to Baker (2020), a deep understanding of culture is crucial in the context of using language as a lingua franca. A curriculum that strengthens cultural literacy can help students develop the knowledge needed for effective communication in a global context.

Communication Skills

Students do not have the ability to avoid misunderstandings, but their ability to adjust the way they speak shows quite good adaptability. Intercultural communication skills involve the ability to identify and resolve misunderstandings that can arise due to cultural differences, according to Chen and Starosta (2022). Therefore, a more structured teaching approach is needed that emphasizes this ability.

Positive Attitude Towards Cultural Diversity

Students' openness and interest in learning more about other cultures reflects the potential for developing intercultural competence. According to Jang and Kim (2023), positive perceptions of intercultural education can encourage student engagement in classroom discussions and enhance critical thinking skills.

Students who are open and interested in learning about other cultures show potential for developing intercultural skills. Positive perceptions of intercultural education can help students engage more in class discussions and think critically, according to Jang and Kim (2023).

Awareness of the Term Intercultural Competence

Most students are not familiar with the term "Intercultural Skills (IC)." However, once taught, they were able to understand the basic concept of IC, which is the ability to interact and communicate with people from different cultures. This shows that students can understand well the ideas contained in it, even though the term may sound unfamiliar. This is in line with Deardorff's (2020) research, which states that talking between people with different cultural backgrounds and beliefs can help deal with conflict and foster a culture of peace.

Students' Understanding of Intercultural Competence (IC)

Students defined IC as the ability to understand and appreciate cultural differences and adapt in cross-cultural communication. They gave specific examples by saying, "IC is the ability to communicate with people from different cultures without offending them," and "To me, IC means being able to understand and appreciate the customs of others who are different from us." The general belief that IC includes awareness, knowledge and skills in interacting with different cultures is in line with this definition (Kim in Samovar et al., 2015).

Students' Indigenous Cultural Identity

Students shared various aspects of culture, such as beliefs and religion, when asked about the indigenous culture they grew up in. Most students consider Islam as the religion they were born into, which has an impact on their values and habits in daily life. Students noted that regional languages such as Javanese, Sundanese, Batak, and the languages of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were the first languages they learned before learning Indonesian and other foreign languages. Some students also said that traditional arts such as gamelan, batik, or regional dances are part of the culture they have known since childhood. Students also create their own cultural identity. Students from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan identified themselves as members of specific ethnic groups, such as Javanese, Sundanese or Batak. Intercultural ability depends on this awareness of cultural identity. In the multidimensional model of intercultural competence developed by Byram (1997), curiosity and openness are important components in building intercultural competence.

Feelings When Interacting with Different Cultures

Interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds, students experience a range of feelings. Some feel uncomfortable or worried about making mistakes, but most people are intrigued and interested in learning new things. For example, one student said, "My experiences interacting with people from different cultures have often been characterized by misunderstandings due to language and accent differences, which left me confused and unable to understand what they meant. However, the experience has given me a lot of knowledge about different cultures and how to put myself in the context of other cultures." Students' perceptions of intercultural speaking skills in the classroom were positive, according to the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected through interviews and questionnaires.

The majority of students showed a high awareness of cultural differences in communication. They were also open to the views of other cultures and valued their opinions. This is indicated by the high percentage of awareness and attitude indicators. This is in accordance with the theoretical framework proposed by Fantini (2006) and Byram (1997). Students understood the concept of Intercultural Competence (IC) after the explanation, but many did not know the term. This suggests that students do not have in-depth knowledge of other cultures, and they have good cultural awareness. Only a small percentage of students believe they have sufficient knowledge, which may limit their ability to interact cross-culturally. Although students feel adaptable in communication, they still lack the ability to avoid misunderstandings due to cultural differences. This shows that, although awareness is present, pragmatic communication skills still need to be improved.

Some students said they felt awkward or anxious when interacting with people from different cultures. This can lead to a lack of communication and increase the

likelihood of misunderstandings. Each student has different experiences with interacting with other cultures, so their perception of the importance of IP varies depending on their background. There may be bias in the data collected by this study if only questionnaires and interviews are used. Case studies or direct observation, for example, can provide more comprehensive information. Educational institutions should incorporate IC into their curriculum to increase students' understanding and awareness to improve intercultural competence. It is also highly recommended to offer more in-depth programs on various cultures, such as seminars, workshops or cultural exchanges. Students can interact better if given intercultural communication training, such as how to avoid misunderstandings. Inviting students to participate in cross-cultural activities is also important as it can enhance their understanding and experience of intercultural interactions. To get a more complete picture of students' perceptions and experiences related to intercultural competence, more diverse research methods are also needed.

This research is needed to gain a better understanding of students' ability to interact interculturallly. Educational institutions can create more efficient intercultural competence development strategies by identifying students' awareness, knowledge and skills and the difficulties they face. This is especially important in the current era of globalization, where cross-cultural interactions are increasing and the ability to communicate with people from different backgrounds is becoming increasingly important. Lustig and Koester (2013) state that intercultural communication enables the exchange of different ideas, perspectives and information. This can be beneficial in various fields, such as technology, business and education. Consequently, this research helps to develop better methods to prepare students to become intelligent global citizens.

CONCLUSION

Students' perceptions of intercultural speaking skills in the classroom were positive, according to the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected through interviews and questionnaires. The majority of students showed a high awareness of cultural differences in communication. They were also open to other cultures' views and valued their opinions. This is reflected in the high percentage of awareness and attitude indicators. The theoretical framework proposed by Fantini (2006) and Byram (1997) is consistent with this.

Recommendation

The researcher provides some suggestions based on these findings. English teachers are expected to explicitly integrate cultural elements into speaking materials and activities, such as cross-cultural discussions, culture-based role plays, or intercultural communication case studies. They can also provide examples of socially

and culturally appropriate communication and discuss various communication styles from different cultures, and encourage students to actively learn about other cultures. Future researchers can expand the scope of the study by involving students from different semesters or from other institutions, and use more diverse triangulation methods to strengthen data validity. Future research can also focus on creating an intercultural competence-based speaking learning model.

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