IREELL
Indonesian Review of English Education, Linguistics, and Literature
P-ISSN: 3025-2369 **I** E-ISSN: 3021-8101
https://jurnalfaktarbiyah.iainkediri.ac.id/index.php/ireel/index

EFL Students' Intercultural Awareness in Multicultural Classroom: A Narrative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Being an intercultural speaker has become a necessity in global communication. Multicultural classes have a positive impact on intercultural learning because students from various cultural backgrounds come together to learn English. Therefore, this study aims to explore and narrate the development of intercultural awareness achieved by the students based on their experiences in a multicultural class setting. This study is a qualitative research with a narrative inquiry method. The participants in this study are three Indonesian students and two Thai students who are majoring in English Education and are in the same class at one of the universities in Indonesia. Data was collected through in-depth questionnaires with open-ended questions. The results of the study show that the students in the multicultural class have a good level of intercultural awareness. They have mastered all levels of intercultural awareness, from basic cultural awareness, advanced cultural awareness to intercultural awareness. Although they faced obstacles such as language barriers and limited exposure to the target language's culture in the class, they are able to practice tolerance and respect for different cultures. In addition, they have been able to adapt and integrate their cultural knowledge to be implemented in communication with speakers from different cultures.

Keywords: EFL students, Intercultural awareness, Multicultural classroom

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Introduction

Globalization leads English to take several roles, including being a medium of intercultural communication, an international language, a modern lingua franca, and a contact language used by speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds for communication purposes. English serves as a means of connection between individuals from diverse countries and nationalities. Meanwhile, learning about culture is an essential part of learning a language. Language and culture are interrelated. As noted by Baker (2012), the teaching and learning of a second foreign or language cannot be separated from a culture which must include linguistic competence, communication competence and cultural competence. Having good cultural competence will bring many advantages while learning languages. People can avoid conflicts and misunderstandings by learning the target language's culture.

Language and culture are inseparable and bound to each other; thus, the target language should be taught along with the teaching of the target culture (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1998). Merely instructing students about the culture of the target language is inadequate for promoting communicative competence in English as a global language. Present-day English speakers encounter not only the culture of British or American native speakers but also that of non-native speakers, who bring their own cultural values to be introduced. The objective of EFL learners is not just to interact with native speakers of English but also with non-native speakers. This implies that the target language serves as a tool for communication with individuals from around the world, across a variety of fields including science, technology, business, art, entertainment, tourism, and many more. So having good intercultural awareness will bring positive impacts when communicating with speakers from various cultural backgrounds.

Baker (2011, p. 202-205) expands on the concept of critical cultural awareness proposed by Byram and others, and outlines the components of Intercultural Awareness. The first level is Basic Cultural Awareness which involves a basic understanding of the target language's culture and how it impacts behavior, beliefs, and values, with a recognition that other cultures may differ, but without specific knowledge or the concept of culture itself. The second level is Advanced Cultural Awareness which requires an advanced awareness of

cultures as dynamic, relative, and fluid, with specific knowledge of other cultures and their potential effects on communication. At this level, intercultural communicators should be able to use cultural knowledge to predict possible areas of miscommunication, compare and mediate between specific cultural frames of reference, and move beyond generalizations. The third level is Intercultural Awareness that recognizes that cultural references and communicative practices in intercultural communication may or may not be related to specific cultures, and involves the ability to mediate and negotiate between different cultural frames of reference and communication modes as they emerge in specific examples of intercultural communication. At this level, the intercultural communicator must have an awareness of the liminal and emergent nature of cultural forms, references, and practices in intercultural communication.

Higher education provides a great opportunity for the possibility of having a multicultural class. A multicultural classroom is the type of classroom that embraces diversity and supports the teaching of knowledge based on the advantageous view point that cultural differences and family background could help effective learning for students of diverse backgrounds (Zhou, 2015). In a multicultural classroom, students from different cultural backgrounds are valued and respected, and their unique experiences and perspectives are integrated into the learning process. The foreign student exchange program from the government has a significant impact on English language learning in the multicultural classroom. Students not only learn their native language and English, but they also learn the culture and language of their foreign classmates. This highlights the importance of having intercultural awareness in a multicultural classroom. Learning about culture is an essential part of learning a language, especially in today's disruptive era where communication needs demand the ability to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds and countries. This is in line with Buttjes's (1991) statement that communicating with others who have different cultural backgrounds and ways of thinking is essential in our daily lives.

In Indonesia, having friends from foreign countries is still a rare moment. However, thanks to the foreign student exchange program, students have the opportunity to directly interact with other students from different backgrounds and cultures. In this case, there are

two Thai students who participate in the student exchange program in English Education Department at one of the university in Indonesia. In Thailand, English is also as foreign language because English is not the national language of the country. This multicultural class consists of Indonesians coming from different ethnics and Thai students. The EFL students in multicultural classroom experiences an interesting view on how they might communicate with others with different linguacultures, how they cope with the unfamiliar setting, and what effects the experiences have on the development of their intercultural awareness (Santosa et al, 2019).

Previous studies have investigated the development of intercultural awareness among students in their English program (Phongsirikul et al, 2019), as well as how students' cultural awareness is cultivated through classroom experiences (Anggraini et al, 2022). Nonetheless, there has been limited exploration of the level of students' intercultural awareness, particularly among participants in multicultural classrooms. Hence, the researcher perceives this to be an exceptional phenomenon. The current study aims to examine the degree to which EFL students develop their intercultural awareness in a multicultural classroom, as well as the obstacles they encounter while learning English in such a setting.

Methods

Five EFL students were the participants in this research whichconsist of three Indonesian students and two Thai students enrolled as undergraduate students in English Education Department in a university in Indonesia who had experienced being in multicultural classroom for 1 semester.

Narrative inquiry was employed as the research design in this qualitative study. More specifically, biographical case studies, which were studies of individuals, in which the researchers elicited data from the participant and write them up as narratives, possibly for further analysis (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). In this research, the researcher used written narratives because the data were collected through open-ended questionnaire to allow the participants to elaborate and the researcher to develop the theme. As this study's focus was on the EFL students' experiences involving intercultural awareness in multicultural classroom setting and to identify their level of intercultural awareness, Baker's (2011) model of

intercultural awareness is used to collect the needed data to identify the participants' level of intercultural awareness.

Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the data in this study. This approach entails multiple reading the data, coding and categorizing the data extract, and recognizing the thematic headings (Barkhuizen et al., 2014)

Results and Discussion

The findings showed that students in the multicultural class gained a lot of cultural experience. They actively interacted in class, enabling them to learn about each other's cultures, languages, and customs. They shared stories and observed each other's behavior, leading to mutual understanding. They also practiced tolerance and respect for different cultures. Thai students were able to overcome the stereotype that learning English would be difficult in Indonesia. Instead, they were happy and motivated to learn English as well as Bahasa Indonesia.

Through interaction and communication in the multicultural class, Thai students found that Indonesian students were very friendly and willing to help when they had difficulty understanding the lecture material. Thai students were able to adapt well to cultural differences. Overall, Thai students did not experience difficulty adapting to the climate and food. The most significant obstacle they faced was the language barrier. They would not enter a place before translating first.

Indonesian students also adapted well during the multicultural class. They were able to respect Thai students' culture and saw their presence as an opportunity to learn about different cultures. The obstacle faced by Indonesian students is they had to explain more the lecture material given by the lecturer in simpler language for Thai students to understand.

Indonesian and Thai students communicated well because of class assignments and their shared hobbies, such as social media. They also exchanged information about popular cuisines in both countries and shared grammar information about the Thai language and cultural information about Thailand.

The second finding was that both Indonesian and Thai students had developed all of the level of intercultural awareness consists of basic cultural awareness, advanced cultural awareness and intercultural awareness. Further explanation and analysis are provided in the following discussion.

Basic Cultural Awareness

At this level, someone is considered to have basic cultural awareness when they are aware of their own culture and can respect other cultures. All students have shown that they have recognized their own culture and can appreciate the culture of friends from different countries. This is evidenced by statements made by the students.

Indonesian student A is aware that the friendly and open culture of the East is very different from the closed and individualistic culture of the West. However, Indonesian and Thai cultures are still similar because they are both Eastern and Asian countries.

> "*I know that Westerners usually tend to be individualistic and closed. For example, they don't like to be asked about private matters, whereas Indonesians tend to be more open and friendly. We often greet people we meet and smile.*"
>
> "*If compared to Thai culture, it seems similar to Indonesia, right? From what I see, friends from Thailand are also friendly. They tend to be quiet, maybe because of language barriers. Actually, they are kind and friendly.*"

Thai student B stated that when he first came to Indonesia, it was not too difficult to adapt because the culture is similar to Thailand. She mentioned that Indonesians are friendly. But she still needs to learn more about the Indonesian language.

> "*It's normal if I experienced a little difficulty when I first came to Indonesia, but I started to adapt easily because Indonesia is similar to my environment in Thailand.*"

The students also have a good understanding of respecting other cultures, both the target language culture and their own culture and their classmates' cultures. This is evidenced by the statement of Indonesian student C who mentioned that we should be able to respect other cultures that are different from ours.

> "*We should be able to respect other cultures. For example, we should avoid asking about age, marital status, salary, and other things that are private matters that are highly guarded by Westerners when communicating.*"

Thai student A also showed a good tolerant attitude towards other cultures.

"I realize that I have to respect Indonesian customs while I am here. I learned a lot about the hospitality of the Indonesian people. Indonesian friends often help me in class to understand English learning."

Advanced Cultural Awareness

At this second level, someone understands the cultural details that need to be understood to avoid conflicts due to cultural misunderstandings. One should also understand that all cultures are valuable and have their own uniqueness. Conversely, no culture is superior to another. This reflects that the person is able to sort out the good and bad sides of a culture but still can respect that culture.

The students have demonstrated that they have advanced cultural awareness. Indonesian student B explained that he is very proud to be part of Indonesia which consists of various ethnicities and languages. Indonesia has a very diverse culture, but it does not make it a better culture than others.

"I love and am proud of Indonesia, but I think all cultures are equal. None is better or worse. It all depends on the context of each culture."

In addition, she even explained that even though other cultures are very contrasting with Indonesian culture, we should not judge that it is wrong. We simply need to avoid cultures that are less suitable for our culture. She gave further examples of cultures of partying and free sex that are not common in Indonesia. But we simply need to avoid those cultures, not judge that it is a bad culture. This is to avoid conflicts in communication.

"As far as I know, Westerners love to party and associate freely. This is somewhat contrary to Indonesian culture. But we don't automatically assume that it is negative and judge that the culture is bad. Just avoid it instead of causing problems or offending Westerners."

Indonesia student A stated that she is quite close to Thai students. She communicates actively because she often makes group assignments with Thai students and shares the same hobby of taking selfies and using social media. She mentioned that socializing with

Thai friends opens his eyes to the fact that Thai culture is very unique. Thais tend to like spicy and sour food. The language used also has a level of politeness, similar to the use of Javanese language. There is a difference in pronunciation when speaking to male or female interlocutors. This makes her happy to learn about Thai culture through her Thai friends. She can appreciate and understand that every culture has its own values that must be upheld and respected.

> *"I often make group assignments with Thai friends so we are quite close. I often help to explain what the lecturer has said. I learn a lot about Thai culture that makes me like it, such as their spicy and sour cuisine. The language also uses politeness markers. When we talk to men, it will be different from when we talk to women. All cultures are unique and we should respect that."*

Thai student A also demonstrated that she has advanced cultural awareness. She stated that although she comes from Thailand, she feels comfortable with Indonesian culture. Indonesian friends who are friendly and often help her, make her appreciate Indonesian culture. She added that Indonesian and Thai cultures are similar, so she did not experience much culture shock. She will not compare which culture is better because she thinks all cultures are the same.

Thai student B has a slightly different statement from Thai student A. She admits to experiencing more culture shock in Indonesia. For example, she cannot easily distinguish Muslims in Indonesia because there are still Indonesian Muslims who do not wear headscarves. This is different from Thailand where it is easy to distinguish between Muslims and non-Muslims by looking at their headscarves. But this does not make her feel that it is negative, instead it makes her realize the cultural differences that she must respect.

> *"Culture shock. This person can't tell if this person is Muslim or not. Because the people here are Muslims who don't wear veils. When going to buy food like Eh, is this Islam? But after staying for a while, oh okay, people here have Muslims who don't wear veils."*

Intercultural Awareness

At this stage, someone is able to integrate their cultural sensitivity to communicate interculturally with speakers of other languages. Moreover, someone has the ability to mediate and negotiate, combined with sensitivity towards the original form of a culture, as a reference and practice in intercultural communication. When faced with speakers from different cultures, they are able to communicate and practice using cultural references that they have understood about that culture.

Overall, the students already have a good level of intercultural awareness. The students state that intercultural awareness can be reflected in the communication that takes place in class, both orally and in writing. The students are able to practice good intercultural communication.

Indonesian student A shared her experience of practicing role-play in their Speaking class. During the role-play, the students tend to draw references from Western culture, for example, when they want to meet someone, they will make an appointment first. This is different from Indonesian culture where there is no need to make an appointment before meeting someone.

> "*When communicating, we should also use our knowledge of culture. We know that it is not polite to visit without making an appointment first in Western countries. So when we practice role-play, we practice making appointments before meeting someone. It's different in Indonesia where we can visit even if there is no appointment beforehand.*"

Indonesian student B also stated something similar to the previous student. She mentioned that in Indonesia, many things are still considered taboo to talk about, such as sex education. Whereas in Western countries, this is seen as normal learning because on the positive side, we can protect young people to be careful in their social interactions. Indonesians tend to be conservative towards things that are considered outside of morality and norms. So, we need to be able to sort out what can be discussed and what cannot be discussed, depending on the cultural perspective.

> "*What feels different is that Indonesians still consider some topics taboo, such as sex education. Whereas, for this day and age, sex education is very important so that our*

generation does not engage in free sex. It is very different from Western countries, which are more open about sex education."

Indonesian student C added that when interacting with Thai friends, she found that things like sex education and heterosexuality were more commonly found and discussed more openly by Thai people. This is evidenced by the legalization of genders other than male and female. In Thailand, people also do not find it strange for heterosexual people, minimizing bullying or exclusion by Thai society. This is in contrast to Indonesia, where heterosexuality is still considered taboo and there is exclusion of people who experience sexual deviation. For this issue, Thailand is more open than Indonesia. This is where understanding the culture of a language is important so that we can avoid the possibility of touching on sensitive topics or issues from that country.

"*One of the famous things in Thailand is the lady boys. It seems that they are more open to people with sexual deviations. They are more accepted there. Whereas in Indonesia, such people are considered to be avoided and ostracized by society.*"

"*So we have to be careful in choosing conversation topics. What is common here may not be normal there.*"

Thai student A gave her opinion about learning English in a multicultural environment. According to Thai student A, learning English in Indonesia makes her more excited about learning because she have to master both English and Indonesian because if there is something she doesn't understand, alternative communication using Indonesian can be used. When asked to write a descriptive text about her favorite food in Indonesia, she wrote about "ayamgeprek," which is a typical Indonesian cuisine. This shows that Thai student A has been able to place themselves and adapt to Indonesian culture and customs.

"*Learning English in a multicultural class has helped me a lot in learning English because I also have to learn Indonesian. We usually use Indonesian as an alternative explanation.*"

"*My experience is in Writing class. When asked to describe my favorite Indonesian food, I chose ayamgeprek because it's delicious.*"

Thai student B said that they feel happy when Indonesian friends ask about Thai culture. They will gladly tell their friends who are interested in Thai language and culture. That way, they can learn each other's culture and language. They love their own culture but are open to learning about other cultures.

"I feel happy when friends ask about my culture. We can learn from each other."

While studying English in a multicultural class, the biggest obstacle felt by the students is the language barrier. Indonesian students only understand their native language, Indonesian, and English. They do not have the ability to understand Thai language. Meanwhile, Thai students' ability in Indonesian and English is still not advanced. This often causes a lag of understanding among students. To overcome this, they communicate using simple and easy-to-understand words and speak more slowly. Eventually, this problem can be overcome. Thai students' ability in Indonesian and English also improves as they stay and study longer in Indonesia. Additionally, cultural learning in the class is still lacking because cultural learning is not specifically and explicitly taught. Cultural learning is still integrated and implicit, so students have to search for learning sources and other media in learning culture.

To form an intercultural speaker, sufficient knowledge about the target culture is not enough. Someone must be able to integrate the cultural knowledge in communicating with speakers from different cultures. This is to avoid miscommunication and conflicts. They must have sensitivity in sorting out what is good and bad so as not to offend others. Moreover, intercultural awareness makes someone love their own culture more but does not make it better than other cultures because all cultures are equal, there is no better or worse one. Kramsch (1993) asserts that we cannot be competent in a language if we do not have sensitivity to its culture, and know how that culture relates to our language or culture.

Intercultural awareness formed during the multicultural class also has a very positive impact on language learning. Students become more careful in speaking and avoid topics or habits that are contrary to other cultures. Moreover, the multicultural class also makes students more motivated to learn other cultures. This is supported by the statement of

Brislin and Yoshida (1994) cited in Wang (2006) stating that being aware of culture and cultural differences will help people monitor their ethnocentrism, respect and be sensitive to others who are culturally different, and also be comfortable with differences.

Conclusion

The research findings indicate that students in the multicultural class have a fairly good intercultural awareness. Students have mastered all levels of intercultural awareness, ranging from basic cultural awareness, advanced cultural awareness, to intercultural awareness. Students in the multicultural class gain a lot of cultural experience. They interact actively in class, allowing them to learn about each other's cultures, languages, and customs. This opens up their knowledge and insight into cultural and linguistic diversity. They share stories and observe each other's behavior, which helps them understand and appreciate each other's cultures. They also practice tolerance and respect for different cultures. Moreover, they have been able to integrate their cultural knowledge into their communication with speakers from different cultures. They are adaptable and have a good level of intercultural awareness.

One thing to note is the need for students to improve their language proficiency to reduce language barriers during communication. Exposure to direct cultural learning in class is still lacking, even though it is a multicultural class. Teachers should increase explicit cultural learning in the classroom. Students should also be able to independently learn about cultures from various other sources and media to become intercultural speakers who can communicate interculturally. Finally, for future researchers, there is a need for more detailed research on intercultural awareness in multicultural classroom settings with more complex participants, settings, and methods.

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