

Fostering Intercultural Communicative Competence in English Language Teaching at International Schools

Nurul Fitriani¹, Riska Awaliyah²

^{1,2}Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: nurulfitriani.2024@student.uny.ac.id

Abstract

As intercultural communication becomes increasingly essential in global education, effective integration of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in English Language Teaching (ELT) remains insufficiently understood, particularly in international school contexts. This qualitative case study investigated how an English teacher at Al Azhar Yogyakarta World School integrated ICC into classroom practices and the challenges encountered. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that ICC was fostered through inclusive learning environments, culturally relevant materials, and project-based learning (PBL). However, teachers faced persistent challenges in balancing curriculum requirements with intercultural objectives, addressing culturally sensitive issues, accommodating diverse student backgrounds, and accessing appropriate instructional resources. This study highlights the urgent need for sustained professional development and institutional support to strengthen teachers' intercultural pedagogical competence. By providing context-specific evidence from an international school in Indonesia, the study contributes practical insights for advancing ICC integration in ELT.

Keywords: ICC, ELT, Inclusive Learning.

1. Introduction

The development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has become a key focus in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in international schools with culturally diverse student backgrounds. Intercultural competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across different cultural contexts, encompassing not only language skills but also an understanding of cultural values, nuances, and communication styles (Byram, 1997). In the context of international schools, where English often serves as the medium of instruction among students from various cultural backgrounds, integrating ICC into the curriculum is essential to help students navigate the complexities of cultural interactions.

However, recent studies reveal that many teachers face challenges in incorporating this competence into their teaching practices. According to research by Deardorff (2021), teachers often feel burdened by time constraints and the lack of adequate resources to teach ICC effectively. Furthermore, although many teachers recognize the importance of intercultural teaching, they often lack

specialized training that would enable them to develop effective teaching methods in multicultural contexts. This is supported by findings from a study conducted by Zhang and Liu (2022), which highlight that despite awareness of the need for intercultural competence, its implementation in classrooms is frequently limited to theoretical discussions, with insufficient practical application.

This study aims to explore how English teachers in international schools integrate intercultural communicative competence (ICC) into their teaching and to identify the challenges they encounter in this process.

2. Literature Review

The Concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Intercultural communication refers to exchanges that happen between individuals from distinct national cultures (Gudykunst, 2002). This type of communication is rooted in an interpersonal perspective and focuses on the collaborative negotiation of social realities among the involved parties. Intercultural communication encompasses both verbal and nonverbal interactions between individuals from various cultural backgrounds. While it can sometimes describe an individual interacting in an unfamiliar setting, it is more frequently a reciprocal process where participants from both cultures work to enhance their communication. In contemporary contexts, intercultural communication often emerges from mass media and political influences, concerning the flow of information across nations and large groups of people.

Intercultural communication is identified as a transactional and symbolic process where individuals from diverse cultures ascribe meaning to their interactions (Novinger, 2001). The ultimate goal of developing intercultural communication competence is to prepare individuals to engage appropriately and effectively with people from various cultural backgrounds. As a result, culture is frequently regarded as the fundamental concept in intercultural communication. While intercultural communication competence manifests when individuals from different cultural backgrounds connect, this definition is overly simplistic and repetitive. To accurately grasp intercultural communication, it is essential to outline four foundational elements: culture, communication, context, and power (Martin and Thomas, 2008). Culture can be understood as the learned patterns of perception, values, and behaviors that are shared by a group of individuals and are also fluid and diverse. Communication is intrinsically linked to culture, and vice versa (Novinger, 2001).

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It is crucial to recognize that intercultural competence is a vital aspect of language proficiency and should be distinctly considered apart from the development of linguistic skills. Language educators risk limiting student success in today's interconnected world by overlooking the importance of intercultural awareness and knowledge. Griffith et al. (2016) argue that EFL/ESL classrooms need to prioritize the integration of intercultural knowledge into their language programs. This can be accomplished through the use of authentic cultural materials, fostering cross-cultural interactions and communication, and encouraging students to reflect on their artistic experiences and viewpoints.

English Language Teaching and ICC

Due to globalization, the number of non-English speaking students learning

English as a second or foreign language is increasing (Ryan, 2013). English as a second or foreign language is increasing. One fact that cannot be ignored is that students come from different cultural backgrounds and inevitably bring their culture into the English classroom.

As teachers' knowledge about ICC and its teaching are influenced by their life experiences, the development of ICC knowledge and ICC pedagogy is very important. According to (Peiser & Jones, 2014), developing teachers' knowledge of ICC and ICC pedagogy plays an important role in the integration of ICC into ELT classrooms. In the integration of ICC into ELT classrooms. It is possible that teachers' concepts and teachers' perception of culture is greatly influenced by the way they perceive culture from what they learn at home and in the classroom. Those teachers studied at home and school when they were language students. They need to recognize that their knowledge input is still limited, and they acquire knowledge mostly from what they learn. They do not realize that their knowledge input is still limited and that they acquire knowledge mostly from what they learn and observe from their previous circumstances when they know the language.

Several studies have been conducted related to Intercultural Communicative Competence in English Language Teaching. Firstly, Bahlai (2019) found that international tourism students' cross-cultural communicative competence can be effectively developed in ESP classes by using interactive teaching methods such as flipped classrooms, role play, and discussion, which are very beneficial as they provide a foundation for cross-cultural communication, ensure the connection between learning and real life and thus make the development of ICC more meaningful for students. The unique course "Cross-Cultural Communication in

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Religious Tourism," which we created to develop ICC in studying international tourism, also showed its efficiency through interactive ESP methods, presentations, and discussions.

The research was conducted by Lee (2023) reveals that an ICC-focused English curriculum can enhance the motivation and attitudes of EFL secondary school students toward learning about foreign cultures, while also improving their English proficiency. Implementing a backward design model to foster experiential learning in the classroom can provide adolescent EFL learners with the necessary ICC and English language skills to effectively navigate foreign language functions in a global environment. Additionally, this teaching approach has shown promise in alleviating key challenges that impede the acquisition of cross-cultural knowledge among adolescent EFL students. In essence, EFL teachers at the secondary level can adjust this model to educate students about various cross-cultural contexts or different foreign languages to facilitate learning.

3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research design with a case study approach. A case study is a research method aimed at exploring a phenomenon in depth within its real-life context, where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined (Yin, 2018). This approach allows the researcher to gain a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the practices related to the integration of intercultural competence (ICC) by English teachers in international schools. The qualitative case study was chosen because it enables in-depth analysis of the research subjects within a unique context, thereby providing a richer and more meaningful perspective (Creswell, 2014).

The participant in this study is an English teacher at Al Azhar Yogyakarta World School. The teacher was selected purposely based on specific objectives, namely their direct involvement in teaching processes that integrate intercultural communicative competence (ICC) into English language instruction. The purposive sampling approach was employed to enable the researcher to obtain relevant and in-depth data regarding intercultural competence-based teaching practices (Patton, 2015). This study employs observation and interviews as data collection methods. The data collected is processed through data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions to ensure a thorough analysis of the findings. This method involves recording actions, expressions, and interactions that take place during classroom activities, providing tangible data on the implementation of ICC in practice.

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4. Results

The findings of this study are presented in two key sections that correspond to the research questions: how do teachers integrate intercultural competence into English language teaching, and what challenges do teachers face in teaching intercultural competence. The analysis process involved three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, ensuring a systematic approach to identifying and interpreting key insights.

1. Teacher's Integration of Intercultural Communicative Competence into English Language Teaching

Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment

The teacher emphasized the importance of fostering an inclusive learning environment that values cultural diversity. Interviews revealed that the teacher actively promotes a respectful atmosphere where students feel safe to share their cultural perspectives. Observations confirmed this approach, as the teacher set clear classroom norms to support inclusivity.

"...I always aim to create an inclusive environment where every student feels safe to share their perspectives."

Activities like sharing cultural experiences and open discussions about cultural differences were evident in classroom interactions.

1.2. Utilizing Culturally Relevant Materials

The teacher incorporated culturally relevant materials such as short stories, songs, films, and international news articles to expose students to diverse cultural perspectives. One notable example was the use of the song "We Are the World" to discuss themes of solidarity and diversity. Students were also assigned to analyze texts that showcased cultural differences, enhancing their critical thinking skills.

"...I often use short stories, films, and even songs like 'We Are the World' to introduce students to global values such as solidarity and diversity."

Observation data indicated that students engaged in group projects where they compared cultural values from local and international perspectives. These activities fostered student discussions, encouraging them to think critically about cultural issues.

Implementing a Project-Based Learning Approach

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A project-based learning (PBL) approach was employed to deepen students' understanding of intercultural competence. Students worked on projects where they researched, presented, and compared cultural elements from English-speaking countries with their own local cultures. This method enhanced their collaborative, analytical, and presentation skills. The PBL approach encouraged active learning and facilitated peer-to-peer knowledge exchange.

Challenges in Teaching Intercultural Competence

2.1. Balancing Curriculum Demands with Intercultural Content

Balancing curriculum demands with intercultural content was a notable challenge for the teacher. The teacher highlighted that integrating cultural content into the mandated curriculum required careful planning to ensure students still achieved key learning objectives. This challenge was compounded by limited time to cover all aspects of the curriculum.

"...The main challenge is finding a balance between introducing relevant cultural issues and adhering to the curriculum."

This statement highlights the tension between the need to cover the mandated curriculum and the desire to introduce relevant cultural issues. The process requires teachers to make thoughtful decisions about which cultural elements are most essential and relevant to the learning objectives. Teachers must ensure that cultural topics are not perceived as "extra content" but as integral to the curriculum.

2.2. Addressing Sensitive Cultural Issues

Addressing culturally sensitive issues posed another challenge. Some cultural themes, while essential, could be controversial or unfamiliar to certain students.

"...Certain cultural issues or traditions may be sensitive or unfamiliar to some students, and I have to ensure that the materials used are not biased or skewed towards one particular culture."

This statement underscores the complexity of navigating cultural sensitivity in a classroom with diverse student backgrounds. Cultural issues often carry personal, historical, or societal significance that can evoke emotional responses from students. Teachers must remain mindful of these sensitivities to maintain a respectful learning environment.

2.3. Limited Availability of Teaching Resources

A significant challenge for the teacher was the limited availability of culturally inclusive resources. It was noted that finding materials to accommodate

students with different learning styles (audio, visual, kinesthetic) was difficult. This required the teacher to create or adapt existing resources.

2.4. Managing Diverse Student Backgrounds

The diversity of student backgrounds presented challenges related to accommodating different learning preferences, cultural values, and experiences. To address this, the teacher utilized flexible grouping and differentiated learning activities.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study emphasize the critical role of teachers in fostering intercultural competence within English language teaching. Teachers play an essential role in creating an inclusive learning environment that values diversity, supports student engagement, and promotes respect for cultural differences. By incorporating culturally relevant materials, such as short stories, songs, films, and international news articles, teachers provide students with authentic exposure to diverse cultural perspectives. This approach aligns with Harmer's (2009) advocacy for the use of authentic materials in language teaching and supports Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, which emphasizes the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for intercultural interaction.

The implementation of project-based learning (PBL) further enhances student engagement by encouraging collaborative exploration of cultural issues. Through group projects, students analyze and present on cultural themes, allowing them to compare local and global cultural values. This approach not only fosters peer-to-peer learning but also supports Tomlinson's (2017) principles of differentiated instruction, which emphasize active learning tailored to students' diverse needs and preferences.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study identifies several challenges faced by teachers in integrating intercultural competence. Balancing curriculum demands with intercultural content is a significant hurdle. Teachers are often required to ensure that lessons align with curricular goals while also incorporating cultural themes. This dual responsibility can place a strain on time and resources. Additionally, the task of addressing culturally sensitive issues requires teachers to be facilitators of thoughtful and respectful discussions. These challenges are echoed in the work of Suprayogi and Valcke (2016), who underscore the complexities of teaching culturally diverse classrooms.

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Another major challenge is the limited availability of teaching resources that adequately support diverse cultural perspectives. Teachers often have to create or adapt materials to cater to students' unique learning styles, as seen in the work of Shareefa et al. (2019), who identify resource limitations as a significant barrier in intercultural education. Furthermore, managing diverse student backgrounds requires teachers to differentiate instruction to accommodate varying learning preferences and experiences. Tomlinson's (2001) framework on differentiated instruction provides a useful lens for understanding how teachers modify content, process, and products to meet the needs of all learners.

The practical implications of these findings underscore the importance of teacher training and professional development focused on intercultural competence. Teachers need to develop facilitation skills for handling sensitive discussions, designing culturally responsive lessons, and adapting learning materials to meet the diverse needs of their students. Schools and educational stakeholders should support the creation of culturally inclusive teaching resources and promote project-based learning as an effective strategy for fostering intercultural competence. Projects that encourage students to analyze, present, and reflect on cultural themes contribute to the development of empathy, critical thinking, and global awareness.

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Write down the Institutions/institutions that assist in research, especially funding support for your research. Also include individuals who have assisted you in your studies such as Advisors, financial supporters or possibly other supports (if any).

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