



Indonesian EFL Undergraduates Perceptions of Intercultural Learning in a Cross-Cultural Understanding Course

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ABSTRACT

English language learners are expected to interact with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds in the globalized world. As a result, intercultural competency is now a crucial part of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). This study investigates how EFL students view the contribution of Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) classes to the development of intercultural competency. 10 undergraduate EFL students who had enrolled in a CCU course at Universitas Teuku Umar participated in semi-structured interviews to gather data using a qualitative method. The results show that CCU courses improve students' understanding of cultural diversity, empathy, openness, communication skills, and cultural awareness. In addition, students claimed that conversations in the classroom and exposure to real cultural activities helped them challenge stereotypes and develop more positive views toward different cultures. According to the study's findings, CCU courses are crucial in helping EFL students develop intercultural competency and get ready for global communication.

Introduction

The aim of English teaching has shifted gradually as cultures become more integrated. Learners are encouraged to build cross-cultural communication skills in addition to language fluency (Tran & Duong, 2018; Liddicoat, 2018). The information, attitudes, abilities, and awareness required to communicate effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds are referred to as intercultural competence (Alaei & Nosrati, 2018; Zhou, 2018). Because effective communication demands more than just grammatical knowledge, intercultural competency has emerged as a key objective in language education (Tran & Duong, 2018; Porto, 2018). Alaei and Nosrati (2018) argue that students who are more interculturally competent are more sensitive to cultural differences and communicate more successfully in multicultural settings. However, students frequently have few opportunities for direct interaction with native speakers and other cultural communities, establishing intercultural competency is especially crucial in EFL environments (Hazaea, 2019; Sercu, 2018). Besides, research has shown that cultural knowledge, attitudes, awareness, and interaction skills are among the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of intercultural competence (Hazaea, 2019; Chen, (2018). Similarly, Sobkowiak (2019) discovered that the development of intercultural competence is strongly in line with learners' motivation, language skills, and international experiences.

According to Wu and Marek (2018), CCU courses offer students chances to study cultural values, beliefs, practices, and communication styles. Students learn to value cultural variety and identify cultural parallels and differences through debates, projects, and reflective exercises (Gómez Rodríguez, 2018). To meet this demand, many universities have implemented Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) courses, which expose students to a variety of cultural point of views and customs (Wu & Marek, 2018), including at Universitas Teuku Umar in Indonesia. These classes are expected to help students understand other cultures while encouraging them to consider their own cultural identities (Gómez Rodríguez, 2018).

Intercultural learning fosters global citizenship, empathy, and tolerance in language learners, according to research (Wang & Dai, 2018; Byram et al, 2018). Further, exposure to intercultural information reduces ethnocentric attitudes and increases learners' critical cultural awareness (Wang & Dai, 2018). In addition, it has been demonstrated that international language training approaches enhance linguistic proficiency and intercultural communication abilities (Tran & Duong, 2018; Lee, 2018; Liaw, 2018). Hence, knowing how students view CCU courses might give important information on how intercultural competency grows in EFL contexts (Baker, 2018)

Based on the explanation above, the purpose of this study is to find out how EFL students' perceptions of CCU courses' role in fostering intercultural competency. Specifically, this study examines how students perceive the contribution of CCU courses to their appreciations of cultural diversity. Moreover, other additional factors influencing of CCU courses are also explored in this study.

Methods

In order to investigate EFL students' opinions regarding the contribution of Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) courses to the development of intercultural competency, this study used a qualitative research design. Because it enables researchers to have a thorough grasp of participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations surrounding a certain event, a qualitative technique was chosen (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was carried out in an Indonesian university where the English Language Education curriculum includes CCU.

10 undergraduate EFL students who had finished enrolling in a CCU course became the participants. To guarantee that every participant had relevant experiences pertaining to the research issue, they were chosen by purposive sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2019). Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data, giving participants the freedom to voice their opinions while enabling the researcher to discuss important intercultural competency-related topics (Kallio et al., 2020). Each interview was held in a comfortable environment to promote open conversation and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

The data were examined using thematic analysis following the methodology given by Braun and Clarke (2021). This approach included getting familiar with the data, creating preliminary codes, finding themes, going over and improving themes, and coming up with a final interpretation. By allowing participants to see interview summaries and verify the accuracy of the interpretations, member checking was carried out to increase the reliability of the results (Nowell et al., 2020).

Result and Discussion

1. Increased Cultural Awareness

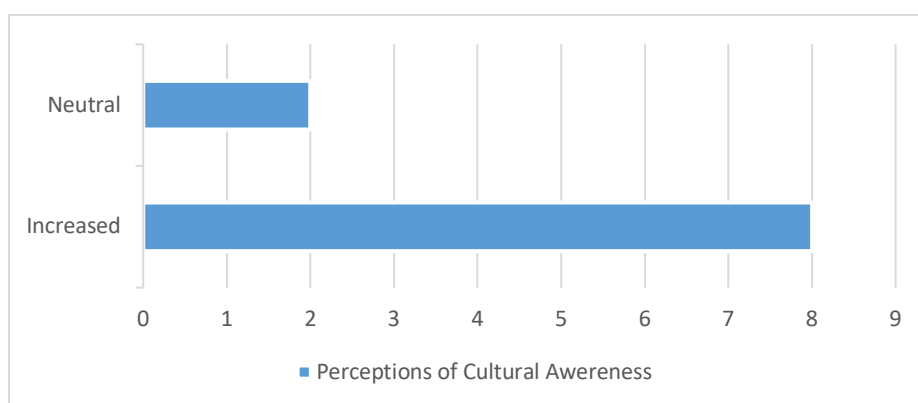


Figure1. *Perceptions of Cultural Awareness*

The majority of participants stated that their comprehension of cultural diversity was expanded by the CCU course. 8 students explained that they were able to identify cultural differences more objectively after learning about the traditions, customs, and communication styles of other nations. This result is consistent with earlier research showing that intercultural education develops cultural awareness and comprehension (Gómez Rodríguez, 2018; Wang & Dai, 2018).

2. Reductions of Stereotypes

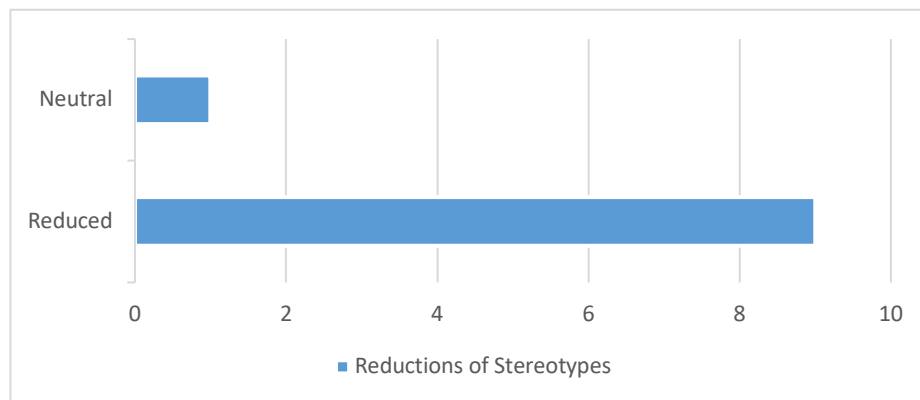


Figure 2. *Perceptions of Stereotypes*

Nearly all participants claimed that their preconceived notions about different societies were dispelled when they were exposed to real cultural facts. This result lends credence to Hazaea's (2019) state that via critical reflection, intercultural learning enables students to transcend preconceptions. Similarly, involvement with global issues fosters crucial intercultural understanding, according to Gómez Rodríguez (2018).

3. Improved Communication Skills

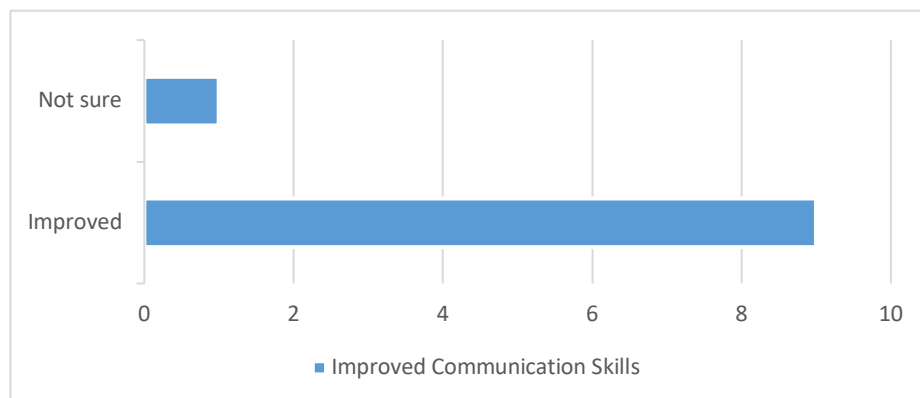


Figure 3. *Perceptions of Communication Skills*

Based on the data, 9 students mentioned that CCU course equipped them to interact with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, while the rest of them are unsure their communication skill improved when participating in the course. When engaging with others, they learnt how to modify their communication styles and prevent misunderstandings. These results align with research showing that intercultural training improves conversational skills in EFL contexts (Tran & Duong, 2018; Alaei & Nosrati, 2018).

4. Enhanced Global Perspectives

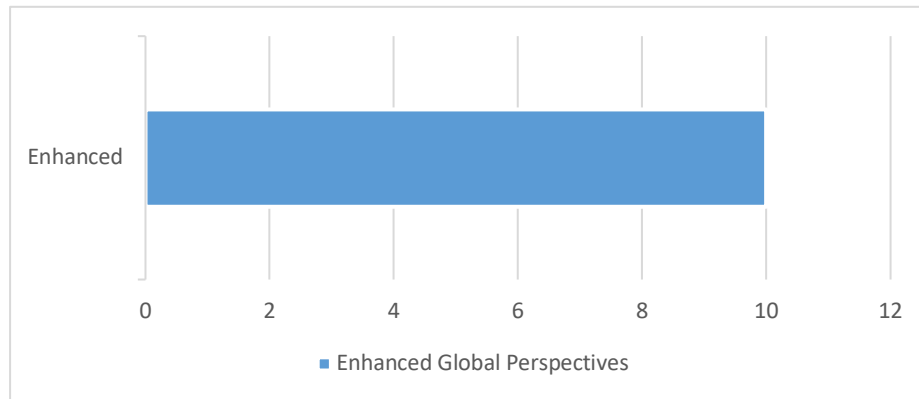


Figure 4. *Perceptions of Global Perspectives*

All participants said that the CCU course inspired them to think globally and piqued their interest in global perspectives. They understood the value of intercultural competency for upcoming educational and career prospects. Sobkowiak (2019), who emphasized the connection between learners' preparedness for global involvement and intercultural competency, supports this observation.

Overall, the results of the study show that by promoting cultural awareness, empathy, communication skills, and global perspectives, CCU courses greatly help in the development of cross-cultural understanding (Wu & Marek, 2018; Tran & Duong, 2018; Hazaea, 2019).

5. Development Empathy and Open-Mindedness

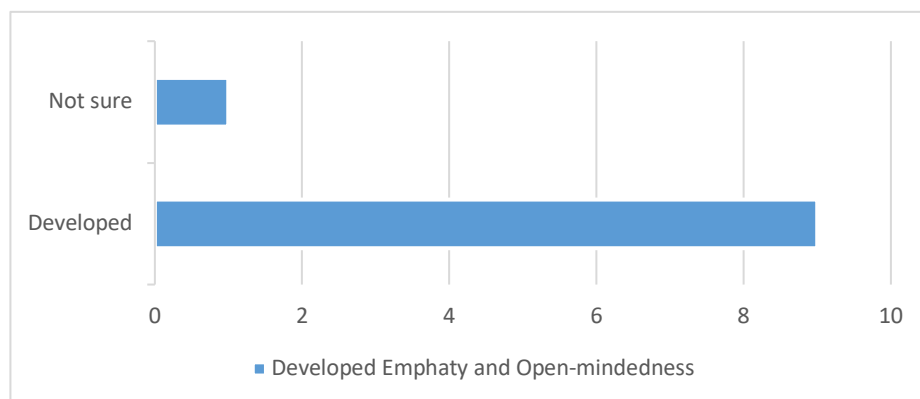


Figure 5. *Perceptions of Empathy and Open-mindedness*

Nearly all participants underlined that classroom discussions allowed them to view cultural challenges from many angles. 9 students reported that they grew more appreciative of cultural differences and less judgmental. Wu and Marek (2018) observed similar results, finding that intercultural learning contexts promote diversity appreciation and empathy.

Conclusion

This study investigated how EFL students perceived the contribution of Cross-Cultural Understanding classes to the growth of intercultural competency. According to the results, CCU courses help students in developing their cultural awareness, empathy, open-mindedness, and communication skills. Learners acquire the abilities and mindsets required for effective cross-cultural communication through exposure to various cultural viewpoints. In order to adequately prepare students to engage in an increasingly globalized world, intercultural content must be incorporated into EFL courses.

In order to provide more thorough insights, future research may examine the evolution of intercultural competence utilizing larger samples and mixed-method approaches. This study also has a limitation in that some participants were unwilling to elaborate their opinions during the interviews. So, the future study is encouraged to promote more comfortable interview to facilitate open and detailed responses from the participants.

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