

Shifts of intercultural communicative competence experienced by international students

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural communication is a vital component of modern education, necessitating efforts to enhance students' Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Achieving this requires intentional strategies, such as exposing students to international learning environments. Immersing students in international learning environments—such as through international programs or short-term overseas courses—can foster ICC development. Consequently, identifying shifts in ICC and effective strategies for its development is essential. This study was aimed at exploring the shift in ICC as experienced by international students as well as the intercultural communication problems encountered. This mixed method research was of explanatory-exploratory design with the respondents of Indonesian students taking a course in Singapore and foreign students pursuing a study in Indonesia. Data collection instruments used were questionnaires, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews. Findings of the study reveal that students taking courses in other countries improved their ICC in all four categories in terms of knowledge, attitude, skills, and awareness. Problems encountered included linguistic, social, and cultural problems.



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1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, the boundaries between nations have become increasingly blurred, particularly in the domain of education. Students are now afforded opportunities to pursue their studies in any country in the world. These opportunities are made possible through a variety of funding sources, including scholarships offered by universities, multinational corporations, and government agencies, as well as personal financial means. The widespread dissemination of information and access to international programs have significantly facilitated this educational mobility.

Given the diminished influence of national borders on education, communication too must transcend geographic, linguistic, and cultural constraints. The ability to engage effectively in global interactions necessitates intercultural communicative competence (ICC), which enables individuals to navigate complex intercultural settings with sensitivity and appropriateness (Feng et al., 2024; Zhou & Burhanudeen, 2023). In a truly interconnected world, the success of cross-cultural exchanges depends not only on language fluency but also on the awareness and application of intercultural communicative strategies.

This reality is evident in international classrooms, where English often serves as the lingua franca. However, linguistic competence alone does not guarantee effective communication. To foster meaningful intercultural interactions, students must develop the ability to interpret and adapt to diverse cultural norms and values (D'Orazzi & and Marangell, 2025; Rahiman & Kodikal, 2023). ICC, therefore, plays a central role in enabling students to collaborate, study, and build relationships with peers from different cultural backgrounds.

In both educational and professional contexts, the lack of intercultural awareness can result in miscommunication and even conflict. In international business, for example, the failure to apply culturally sensitive communication strategies may lead to misunderstandings and eventual breakdowns in collaboration (Zhou & Burhanudeen, 2023). Consequently, fostering ICC through both formal instruction and experiential learning has become a critical educational objective (Saygi & Köksal, 2024); thus, intercultural communicative competence needs to be learned, both formally and informally as has been proposed in several studies worldwide (Al-Shammari, 2021).

Equipping students with robust communicative competence is a complex task that requires intentional curriculum development. One effective strategy is the inclusion of international learning experiences, such as study abroad programs and international classroom environments, which allow students to experience cultural diversity firsthand (Feng et al., 2024). Such environments have been shown to significantly enhance students' ability to communicate across cultures and increase global awareness.

For students unable to participate in international mobility programs, it is essential to identify alternative strategies for developing ICC. These may include the integration of intercultural training modules, virtual exchange programs, and reflective intercultural learning activities within local educational settings. Research indicates that embedding intercultural practices in the classroom can be just as impactful in fostering global competence (Rahiman & Kodikal, 2023).

Although numerous studies have addressed the significance of ICC in higher education, most have focused on Western or East Asian contexts. There remains a lack of research specifically exploring the intercultural development of Indonesian students or in Indonesia contexts. The present study seeks to fill this gap by examining shifts in intercultural communicative competence among international students, with particular attention to those from Indonesia and those in Indonesia contexts. This study focuses on Indonesian and international students engaged in cross-border learning to investigate how their intercultural communicative competence evolves in these contexts.

1.1. Intercultural Communication

Communication, in its broadest sense, serves as a means of expressing thoughts, intentions, and emotions. However, the modes of communication vary significantly across cultural contexts. One of the most complex forms is intercultural communication, which involves the transmission and interpretation of messages between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds. These cultural differences influence how verbal and non-verbal signs are encoded, perceived, and decoded (Thill & Bovée, 2005). The effectiveness of such communication is shaped by factors including the participants' cultural affiliations, their relationship dynamics, and the specific context of the interaction.

Scholars generally agree that national cultural membership plays a central role in shaping intercultural communication (Byram & Fleming, 1998; Gudykunst, 2004). This perspective views communication as a reflection of cultural identity, whereby individuals perceive themselves and others through culturally shaped lenses. Cultural identity encompasses values, belief systems, language use, and cognitive patterns that influence how individuals engage with others from different backgrounds (Jackson, 2019). In this sense, intercultural communication is not only a linguistic exchange but also a negotiation of meaning rooted in cultural assumptions and worldviews.

More recent studies reinforce and expand upon the essential role of intercultural communication and its impact on other issues. For example, (Liu et al., 2023) argue that in the era of globalization, intercultural communication is no longer confined to national boundaries but is influenced by hybrid cultural identities formed through media, migration, and digital interaction. Similarly, D'Orazzi and Marangell (2025) emphasize that while national culture remains a strong influence, students in multicultural learning environments often develop transcultural competencies that go beyond binary

national comparisons. These findings suggest a shift from traditional views of intercultural communication as static and nationality-based toward more dynamic, context-sensitive understandings.

Furthermore, advancements in virtual education and global collaboration have redefined how intercultural communication is enacted in modern society. O'Dowd (2018) and Helm (2015) both highlight the rise of virtual exchange programs, which enable students to engage in intercultural dialogue without the need for physical mobility. These programs emphasize not only language skills but also critical cultural reflection, empathy, and negotiation—key components of intercultural communicative competence (Deardorff & Berardo, 2023).

Overall, the importance of intercultural communication lies in its capacity to foster mutual understanding, reduce prejudice, and enhance collaboration in an increasingly interconnected world. In educational and professional settings alike, intercultural competence is no longer a supplementary skill but a core requirement for effective engagement in diverse contexts (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009).

1.2. Intercultural Communicative Competence

The concept of communicative competence challenges Noam Chomsky's original distinction between linguistic competence and performance by shifting the focus from an abstract, idealized native speaker to real-world language use. This broader interpretation incorporates not only grammatical accuracy but also pragmatic effectiveness within cultural contexts. Communicative competence is now widely understood as the integration of linguistic ability with sociocultural knowledge, behavioral norms, and communicative strategies appropriate to diverse contexts (Sifakis & Tsantila, 2018). As such, linguistic code alone is insufficient; communicative competence must also reflect an understanding of mainstream cultural values and ways of thinking.

The concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has attracted increasing attention in applied linguistics and international education. (Deardorff, 2006) seminal work compared multiple definitions of ICC and synthesized them into a widely accepted definition: “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 247).

Developing ICC is especially important in the context of English as an International Language (EIL), where communication frequently occurs between interlocutors from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It is therefore essential to prepare EIL learners not only with grammatical knowledge and fluency but also with intercultural awareness and strategies for managing difference (Matsuda, 2017). The core of ICC lies in embracing “otherness” and recognizing that communication is shaped by the diverse realities, beliefs, and practices of its participants. Rather than assuming a shared set of norms, ICC encourages individuals to interpret and relate across differences (Holmes, 2017).

1.3. Components of Intercultural Communicative Competence

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is shaped by four interrelated components: cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, intercultural skills, and attitudes. Among these, cultural awareness plays a foundational role, as it allows individuals to critically reflect on their own cultural norms and how these shape communication styles and behaviors (Kostkova, 2012). Recent research affirms that becoming aware of one’s cultural conditioning is the first step toward effective intercultural interaction, enabling learners to approach cultural difference with self-awareness and reduced bias (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). This reflective process allows individuals to understand how their perceptions are shaped and how meanings can differ across cultures.

In tandem with awareness, knowledge of culture involves understanding both visible and underlying aspects of one’s own and others’ cultural practices and worldviews. It encompasses familiarity with social norms, communication behaviors, and values that drive interaction in various societies (Byram et al., 2014).

Intercultural skills are essential for applying cultural knowledge in communicative contexts. These include the ability to interpret cultural events, manage misunderstandings, and relate unfamiliar behaviors to one’s own cultural reference points. Key skills emphasized in ICC include mindfulness,

empathy, and tolerance of ambiguity (Chen & Starosta, 2012). These capabilities enable individuals to adapt during intercultural exchanges by remaining open to new perspectives and avoiding reliance on stereotypes. Students equipped with these skills are better positioned to analyze communication breakdowns and apply strategies for resolution in intercultural encounters.

Finally, attitudes such as curiosity, openness, and the willingness to suspend judgment are vital for cultivating ICC. Rather than prescribing specific values, modern intercultural education emphasizes facilitating students' autonomous development of intercultural attitudes by encouraging self-exploration and engagement with cultural difference (Neuliep, 2020). This includes helping students relativize their own cultural assumptions and appreciate the perspectives of others.

2. Method

This research employed mixed methods design, a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative research methods in a single study to understand a research problem. It is not simply a combination of two distinct strands. Instead, such a research approach merges, integrates, links, or embeds the two strands, emphasizing the key concept of integration.

To be more specific, this study was an explanatory-exploratory design that consists of first collecting quantitative data then collecting qualitative data to help explain or elaborate on the quantitative results. This explanatory design with participant selection basically consisted of two stages with quantitative research initiating and followed by qualitative research. Figure 1 describes the mixed-methods procedure to be implemented in the study.

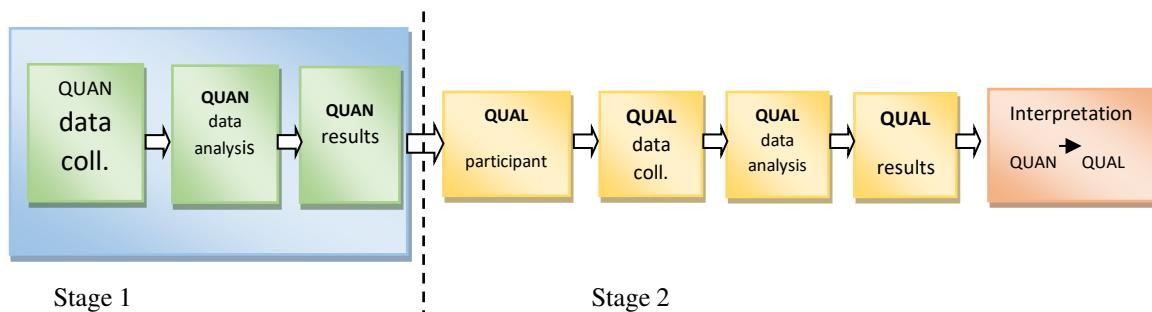


Fig. 1.The mixed-methods procedure

2.1. Participants

Participants of the present study were international students pursuing a study either in Indonesia or abroad, including:

- Seven Indonesian students who took a short course in Singapore,
- Twenty-eight foreign students who studied in international classes in several universities Malang, Yogyakarta, and Tulungagung.

These students were purposively selected as the participants of the study.

2.2. Instruments of Data Collection

With mixed-methods design employed as the methodology of the current study, a number of instruments are selected for both quantitative and qualitative data collection. For quantitative data collection, a close-ended questionnaire, an inventory, were employed. For the qualitative study, the case study, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and an in-depth interview were employed. Multi instruments were used in order to gain data validity which can be done through triangulation of information, involving multiple resources of information.

Inventories are commonly used for obtaining the data in educational research especially one quantitative in nature. To gather data dealing with the quantitative measurement in this current study, an inventory for intercultural communicative competence designed by Fantini (2007) were used with several adaptation. This inventory was selected due to its confirmed validity and reliability. There

were 48 items in the inventory, with four components, namely knowledge, attitude, skills, and awareness.

In this current study, FGD was used to gather responses regarding students' shift of Intercultural Communicative Competence as well as their problems in being international students. Furthermore, FGD was implemented to minimize students' hesitancy or shyness when interviewed one on one. There were representatives from each of the two groups to attend FGD. There were representatives of each group of respondents; they were international students taking study in Indonesia, and Indonesian students taking courses in Singapore. The discussion with Indonesians was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia while discussion with non-Indonesians was conducted in English. These were done in order to minimize language problems due to the students' limited foreign language proficiency.

In this study, semi-structured interviews were preferred over structured interviews to make the interviews more flexible and continuous. To achieve in-depth responses from the participants and to avoid language problems due to respondents' limited foreign language skills, the interview was held in a relaxed atmosphere and in the respondents' preferred language, Indonesian or English.

The in-depth interviews were conducted following the administration of FGD. The main purpose for conducting the interview was to review and confirm respondents' admitted shift of intercultural communicative competence as filled out in the inventory, their social and cultural problems during their stay in the foreign country, and their strategies to deal with the problems.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Quantitative Results (Shifts of Intercultural Communicative Competence)

Findings from the inventory are presented in this section. The inventory was adapted from the one created by Fantini (2007). Several questions were eliminated since they were not suitable to be used in the context of the present study. Several statements or questions were also revised, suiting to the conditions of the respondents.

There were 48 questions in total, each eliciting respondents' views in comparing their own Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) before and after their stay in other countries (cultures). Thus, the difference conditions of the respondents perceived ICC before and after the stay on other culture may represent the shift of ICC. These 48 questions or statements were categorized into 4 categories, namely knowledge (9 statements), attitude (13 statements), skills (10 statements), and awareness (16 statements). All the three groups of respondents responded to the similar statements of the inventory. However, the inventory given to Indonesians were written in Indonesian language while the one for non-Indonesians was presented in English. Each statement was of two sub-questions, stating before and after the stay in the community of other culture. The responses to the statements were within a Likert scale of 1 to 4 with 1 be 'not at all' and 4 be 'extremely high'. Table 1 presents the shifts of ICC as experienced by Indonesian students taking courses in Singapore.

Table 1. Shift of Intercultural Communicative Competence Experienced by Indonesian Students Taking Courses in Singapore

No	Statements	Before Departing Indonesia	Upon Returning from Singapore	Difference (Shifts)
		Knowledge		
1	I could cite a definition of culture and describe its components and complexities	2,57	3,71	1,14
2	I knew the essential norms and taboos in Indonesian culture (e.g., greetings, dress, behaviours, etc.)	2,43	3,57	1,14
3	I could contrast important aspects of Indonesian language and culture with my own	2,86	3,57	0,71
4	I recognized signs of culture stress and some strategies for overcoming it	2,43	3,43	1,00
5	I knew some techniques to aid my learning of Indonesian language and culture	1,86	3,29	1,43

No	Statements	Before Departing Indonesia	Upon Returning from Singapore	Difference (Shifts)
6	I could contrast my own behaviours with those of Indonesia's in important areas (e.g., social interactions, basic routines, time orientation, etc.)	2,43	3,57	1,14
7	I could cite important historical and socio-political factors that shape my own culture and Indonesia's culture	2,29	3,14	0,86
8	I could cite various learning processes and strategies for learning about and adjusting to the host culture	2,29	3,14	0,86
9	I could describe common interactional behaviours among people of my own country or among Indonesians or people from other countries in social and professional areas (e.g., family roles, team work, problem solving, etc.)	2,14	3,29	1,14
Attitude				
10	While in Indonesia, I could discuss and contrast various behavioural patterns in my own culture with those in Indonesia	2,57	3,86	1,29
11	While in Indonesia, I interact with Indonesians (I didn't avoid them or primarily seek out my compatriots)	2,57	3,57	1,00
12	While in Indonesia, I learn from my hosts (Indonesia), their language, and their culture	2,57	3,29	0,71
13	While in Indonesia, I try to communicate in Indonesia language or English and behave in "appropriate" ways, as judged by my hosts	2,57	3,29	0,71
14	While in Indonesia, I deal with my emotions and frustrations with Indonesia's culture (in addition to the pleasures it offered)	2,86	3,43	0,57
15	While in Indonesia, I take on various roles appropriate to different situations (e.g., in the family, as a volunteer, etc.)	2,43	3,43	1,00
16	While in Indonesia, I show interest in new cultural aspects (e.g., to understand the values, history, traditions, etc.)	3,00	3,29	0,29
17	While in Indonesia, I try to understand differences in the behaviours, values, attitudes, and styles of Indonesians	3,00	3,57	0,57
18	While in Indonesia, I adapt my behaviour to communicate appropriately in Indonesia (e.g., in non-verbal and other behavioural areas, as needed for different situations)	2,71	3,43	0,71
19	While in Indonesia, I deal with different ways of perceiving, expressing, interacting, and behaving	2,86	3,57	0,71
20	While in Indonesia, I interact in alternative ways, even when quite different from those to which I was accustomed and preferred	2,14	3,14	1,00
21	While in Indonesia, I deal with the ethical implications of my choices (in terms of decisions, consequences, results, etc.)	2,71	3,57	0,86
22	While in Indonesia, I suspend judgment and appreciate the complexities of communicating and interacting interculturally	3,14	3,86	0,71
Skills				

No	Statements	Before Departing Indonesia	Upon Returning from Singapore	Difference (Shifts)
23	I demonstrate flexibility when interacting with persons from the host culture	3,00	3,71	0,71
24	I adjust my behaviour, dress, etc., as appropriate, avoid offending Indonesians	3,00	3,71	0,71
25	25. I am able to contrast the Indonesia's culture with my own	3,43	3,86	0,43
26	I use strategies for learning Indonesian language and about Indonesia's culture	3,00	3,71	0,71
27	I demonstrate a capacity to interact appropriately in a variety of different social situations in Indonesia's culture	3,14	3,71	0,57
28	I use appropriate strategies for adapting to Indonesia's culture and reducing stress	2,57	3,43	0,86
29	I use models, strategies, and techniques that aid my learning of Indonesian language and culture	2,57	3,43	0,86
30	I monitor my behaviour and its impact on my learning, my growth especially on Indonesian language and Indonesia's culture	2,71	3,29	0,57
31	I use culture-specific information to improve my style and professional interaction with Indonesians	2,71	3,29	0,57
32	I employ appropriate strategies for adapting to my own culture after returning home	3,29	3,57	0,29
Awareness				
33	I realize the differences and similarities across my own and Indonesian language and culture home	2,86	3,57	0,71
34	I realize my negative reactions to these differences (e.g., fear, ridicule, disgust, superiority, etc.)	2,00	3,14	1,14
35	I realize how varied situations in Indonesia's culture required modifying my interactions with others	2,57	3,71	1,14
36	I understand how host culture members viewed me and why	2,00	3,00	1,00
37	I see myself as a "culturally conditioned" person with personal habits and preferences	2,43	2,86	0,43
38	I realize responses by Indonesians to my own social identity (e.g., race, class, gender, age, etc.)	2,43	3,14	0,71
39	I am aware of the diversity in Indonesia's culture (eg. differences in race, class, gender, age, ability, etc.)	2,57	3,86	1,29
40	I realize the dangers of generalizing individual behaviours as representative of the whole culture	2,86	3,71	0,86
41	I realize Indonesians' reactions to me that reflected their cultural values	2,29	3,29	1,00
42	How my values and ethics were reflected in specific situations	2,71	3,57	0,86
43	I realize the varying cultural styles and language use, and their effect in social and working situations	2,71	3,57	0,86
44	I realize my own level of intercultural development	2,57	3,86	1,29
45	I realize the level of intercultural development of those I worked with (other	2,43	3,29	0,86

No	Statements	Before Departing Indonesia	Upon Returning from Singapore	Difference (Shifts)
46	program participants, Indonesians, co-workers, etc.) I realize factors that helped or hindered my intercultural development and ways to overcome them	2,29	3,29	1,00
47	I realize how I perceived myself as communicator, facilitator, mediator, in an intercultural situation	2,57	3,29	0,71
48	I realize how others perceived me as communicator, facilitator, mediator, in an intercultural situation	2,57	3,29	0,71
	AVERAGE	2,62	3,46	0,84

As can be seen in Table 1, it is obvious that Indonesian students taking courses in Singapore experienced changes in their intercultural communicative competence in all four categories: knowledge, attitude, skills, and awareness. The average ICC coefficient before departing to Singapore was 2.62 which means that students were in the position of 'not really competent in their ICC'. Upon the completion of the course in Singapore, students improved their ICC to be 3.46 which conveys their 'quite competent' of ICC. The difference was averagely 0.84.

Tabel 2 below presents the shift of ICC experienced by foreign students taking courses in Indonesia. The respondents have lived in Indonesia for one to three years.

Table 2. Shift of Intercultural Communicative Competence Experienced by Foreign Students Taking Courses in Indonesia

No	Statements	Before Studying in Indonesia	Sometime after Studying in Indonesia	Difference (Shifts)
Knowledge				
1	I could cite a definition of culture and describe its components and complexities	2,37	2,89	0,52
2	I knew the essential norms and taboos in Indonesian culture (e.g., greetings, dress, behaviours, etc.)	2,19	3,14	0,96
3	I could contrast important aspects of Indonesian language and culture with my own	2,07	3,11	1,03
4	I recognized signs of culture stress and some strategies for overcoming it	1,96	3,04	1,07
5	I knew some techniques to aid my learning of Indonesian language and culture	1,82	3,14	1,32
6	I could contrast my own behaviours with those of Indonesia's in important areas (e.g., social interactions, basic routines, time orientation, etc.)	2,07	2,96	0,89
7	I could cite important historical and socio-political factors that shape my own culture and Indonesia's culture	1,96	2,93	0,96
8	I could cite various learning processes and strategies for learning about and adjusting to the host culture	2,07	3,18	1,11
9	I could describe common interactional behaviours among people of my own country or among Indonesians or people from other countries in social and professional areas (e.g., family roles, team work, problem solving, etc.)	2,04	3,18	1,14
Attitude				

No	Statements	Before Studying in Indonesia	Sometime after Studying in Indonesia	Difference (Shifts)
10	While in Indonesia, I could discuss and contrast various behavioural patterns in my own culture with those in Indonesia	2,14	3,29	1,14
11	While in Indonesia, I interact with Indonesians (I didn't avoid them or primarily seek out my compatriots)	2,29	3,25	0,96
12	While in Indonesia, I learn from my hosts (Indonesia), their language, and their culture	2,25	3,50	1,25
13	While in Indonesia, I try to communicate in Indonesia language or English and behave in "appropriate" ways, as judged by my hosts	2,36	3,25	0,89
14	While in Indonesia, I deal with my emotions and frustrations with Indonesia's culture (in addition to the pleasures it offered)	2,61	3,36	0,75
15	While in Indonesia, I take on various roles appropriate to different situations (e.g., in the family, as a volunteer, etc.)	2,29	3,11	0,82
16	While in Indonesia, I show interest in new cultural aspects (e.g., to understand the values, history, traditions, etc.)	2,36	3,32	0,96
17	While in Indonesia, I try to understand differences in the behaviours, values, attitudes, and styles of Indonesians	2,52	3,46	0,95
18	While in Indonesia, I adapt my behaviour to communicate appropriately in Indonesia (e.g., in non-verbal and other behavioural areas, as needed for different situations)	2,30	3,39	1,10
19	While in Indonesia, I deal with different ways of perceiving, expressing, interacting, and behaving	2,59	3,14	0,55
20	While in Indonesia, I interact in alternative ways, even when quite different from those to which I was accustomed and preferred	2,33	3,04	0,70
21	While in Indonesia, I deal with the ethical implications of my choices (in terms of decisions, consequences, results, etc.)	2,50	3,14	0,64
22	While in Indonesia, I suspend judgment and appreciate the complexities of communicating and interacting interculturally	2,41	3,25	0,84
Skills				
23	I demonstrate flexibility when interacting with persons from the host culture	2,41	3,07	0,66
24	I adjust my behaviour, dress, etc., as appropriate, avoid offending Indonesians	2,44	2,82	0,38
25	I am able to contrast the Indonesia's culture with my own	2,22	3,07	0,85
26	I use strategies for learning Indonesian language and about Indonesia's culture	2,15	3,14	0,99
27	I demonstrate a capacity to interact appropriately in a variety of different social situations in Indonesia's culture	2,11	3,07	0,96
28	I use appropriate strategies for adapting to Indonesia's culture and reducing stress	1,96	3,04	1,07
29	I use models, strategies, and techniques that aid my learning of Indonesian language and culture	2,44	2,96	0,52
30	I monitor my behaviour and its impact on my learning, my growth especially on Indonesian language and Indonesia's culture	2,30	3,11	0,81

No	Statements	Before Studying in Indonesia	Sometime after Studying in Indonesia	Difference (Shifts)
31	I use culture-specific information to improve my style and professional interaction with Indonesians	2,19	3,00	0,81
32	I employ appropriate strategies for adapting to my own culture after returning home	2,33	2,86	0,52
Awareness				
33	I realize the differences and similarities across my own and Indonesian language and culture home	2,56	3,25	0,69
34	I realize my negative reactions to these differences (e.g., fear, ridicule, disgust, superiority, etc.)	2,37	3,11	0,74
35	I realize how varied situations in Indonesia's culture required modifying my interactions with others	2,37	3,11	0,74
36	I understand how host culture members viewed me and why	2,33	2,93	0,60
37	I see myself as a "culturally conditioned" person with personal habits and preferences	2,30	2,89	0,60
38	I realize responses by Indonesians to my own social identity (e.g., race, class, gender, age, etc.)	2,19	2,93	0,74
39	I am aware of the diversity in Indonesia's culture (eg. differences in race, class, gender, age, ability, etc.)	2,11	3,04	0,92
40	I realize the dangers of generalizing individual behaviours as representative of the whole culture	2,12	3,04	0,92
41	I realize Indonesians' reactions to me that reflected their cultural values	2,19	3,21	1,03
42	How my values and ethics were reflected in specific situations	2,22	2,93	0,71
43	I realize the varying cultural styles and language use, and their effect in social and working situations	2,15	3,21	1,07
44	I realize my own level of intercultural development	2,26	3,11	0,85
45	I realize the level of intercultural development of those I worked with (other program participants, Indonesians, co-workers, etc.)	2,22	3,18	0,96
46	I realize factors that helped or hindered my intercultural development and ways to overcome them	2,11	3,18	1,07
47	I realize how I perceived myself as communicator, facilitator, mediator, in an intercultural situation	2,19	3,14	0,96
48	I realize how others perceived me as communicator, facilitator, mediator, in an intercultural situation	2,44	3,11	0,66
AVERAGE		2,25	3,12	0,86

As viewed in Table 2, foreign students studying in Indonesia experienced changes in their intercultural communicative competence in all four categories: knowledge, attitude, skills, and awareness. The average ICC coefficient before pursuing study in Indonesia was 2.25 which means 'not really competent in their ICC'. After some time living in Indonesia, students improved their ICC to be 3.12 which conveys their 'quite competent' of ICC. The difference was averagely 0.86.

The difference of progress of ICC experienced by foreign students (0.86) seemed to be slightly higher than that of Indonesian students taking courses in Singapore (0.84). This could be due to the duration of stay in the community of different culture, with foreign students in Indonesia experiencing one to three years of stay while Indonesians taking courses in Singapore of one to three months. However, the difference was very slight and not significant so that conclusion could not be confirmed.

Presented in average coefficient of every category, the following tables show the improvement of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in each category of knowledge, skills, attitude, and

awareness. All respondents showed improved coefficient of ICC in all four categories, and all these improvements were significant.

Table 3 presents the summary of shifts of ICC experienced by Indonesian students taking courses abroad (in Singapore) in each category. As can be seen in the table, all shifts show significant increased coefficient of ICC, with the highest increase in category of awareness. Increase on knowledge category positioned second while increase on attitude category positioned third. The lowest increase was on skills category.

Table 3. Summary of Shifts of ICC Experienced by Indonesian Students Taking Courses Abroad

No	Items	Means		t-value	Sig.
		Before Starting Courses Abroad	Sometime after Completing Courses Abroad		
1	All items (All Categories)	2.62	3.46	- 22.396	0.000
2	Knowledge Category	2.37	3.41	- 14.456	0.000
3	Attitude Category	2.70	3.48	- 11.214	0.000
4	Skills Category	2.94	3.57	- 10.966	0.000
5	Awareness Category	2.49	3.40	- 15.661	0.000

Table 4 shows the increase of ICC coefficient as experienced by foreign students pursuing study in Indonesia. Increased coefficient of ICC was found significant in all the four categories: knowledge, attitude, skills, and awareness. The highest increase was found on the knowledge category, followed by attitude category that positioned the second highest and awareness category positioned the third highest. The lowest increase of ICC was found at skills category.

Table 4. Summary of Shifts of ICC Experienced by Foreign Students in Indonesia

No	Items	Means		t-value	Sig.
		Before Starting Study in Indonesia	Sometime after Living in Indonesia		
1	All items (All Categories)	2.53	3.27	- 19.920	0.000
2	Knowledge Category	2.30	3.14	- 16.318	0.000
3	Attitude Category	2.68	3.39	- 12.262	0.000
4	Skills Category	2.53	3.24	-5.799 -	0.000
5	Awareness Category	2.56	3.27	- 11.738	0.000

Further analysis on the increase of each category reveals that ICC increase in knowledge category was always found the highest or the second highest. This could be because knowledge was the very first step to go through before reaching other categories. To step on the other categories, knowledge is a must to master. On the contrary, increase ICC in skills category was always the lowest. This could be due to the fact that skills to successfully communicate across cultures are the hardest to attain. Implementation of knowledge, attitude, and awareness on the cross-cultural communication skills could be the hardest due to the complexity and the more hindrances encountered in the practice.

3.2. Linguistic Challenges

During the practice of intercultural communication respondents mentioned they encountered hindrances. These were elicited in the focused group discussions and interviews. Hindrances varied, ranging from linguistic problems to socio-cultural problems.

Indonesian students taking courses abroad (for example to Singapore) encountered linguistic problems during their stay in other country. Those problems covered all language components including lexical, grammar, and intonation problems. Despite the pre-departure preparation the respondents went through and the adequate mastery of English the respondents possessed, they confirmed that they yet faced those linguistic problems.

Rima claimed that the problems arose due to the fact that different countries use different codes even though they speak the same language.

“Singapore has its own language called Singlish and they speak it very quickly. It’s not the formal English that we usually learn. So sometimes we ask them to repeat their conversation, that’s at the beginning. So sometimes they, because they also have Malay, sometimes they make it easier for us to understand by e... using Malay, translated into Malay”

Her prior learning of English and the short pre-departure training was not adequate to keep her away from the hindrances.

“Previously I studied Mam, but not too deeply, I searched on the Internet about ee, what it’s like, Singaporeans are like, how they communicate, and what their slang is like, when they speak there is the prefix “La”, and their grammar is not the same as usual.”

Foreign students pursuing study in Indonesia experienced a more serious problems because they did not have adequate pre-departure training prior to their leaving for Indonesia. Nathan, an Indonesian and Netherland student, who took a ‘credit transfer’ in Universitas Gajah Mada Yogyakarta, stated that still he faced problems related to the use of English and Indonesian language.

Sometimes I understand them but sometimes I understand 50 percent of the things they say but below 50 percent I don't know. And that's sort of difficult for me (giggling) because sometimes the 50 percent that I don't understand is really important. I mean that's the same thing when I was in the Netherlands basically. Because I understand some of the vocab. But some of the words I don't understand is important. And if I missed that and I tried to jump in, they would almost always correct me “No, we're talking about this.”(Nathan, a student from Groningen University of Netherlands)

A more serious problem was encountered by Jacob who was native Netherland.

“I also have to say that I didn't expect that there would be so much Bahasa taught in class. If I would have known, I might have perhaps put more effort in learning it and so... we're here now for two months. Three months to go. And actually if I look back I would advise other people that will come here to take bahasa class, not only for university purposes. But just... I also think it's for your personal life. It's really nice because all sorts of people on the street that don't always speak English that well and I think it's nice if you can speak a little bit of Bahasa. So I know some words and other basics but like really ordering something like “Can I have this?” is already hard. And I will just literally say, “Two nasi goreng...”

Similar statement was mentioned by a Thailand student who pursue a degree in Yogyakarta. He could speak Melayu language fluently, but still he encountered problems.

“Sometimes even though the language is similar... between Indonesian and Malay. But the vocabulary is different, the accent is different so it's also a problem.”

3.3. Social-Cultural Challenges

Living in a new community means living in a new culture. This is hard to do since we are forced to leave our comfort zone and start to experience new life. As mentioned by respondents, the hindrances they experienced while taking a study or a course in another country were due to differences of socio-cultural factors, including but not limited to peer relationship, teacher-student relationship, and man-woman relationship.

Ninda mentioned that she was surprised to realize that maintaining peer relationship in Singapore was harder because they have different habits or culture. While in Indonesia it is not common or even it is not allowed to go out of home late at night or to drink alcohol, such a situation was considered normal among Singaporeans. To maintain good peer relationship, then, Ninda had to explain the situation to her Singaporean fellows.

"Activities that we don't normally do. Not that we don't normally do them but we rarely do them but they are common. For example, maybe drinking alcohol or going out late at night." (Ninda)

The rules in grooming was also different and could cause problems. As a muslim, Nadilah wears hijab, and she covers most of her body parts. Living in Singapore, she was a little bit surprised to see her other female friends wear open swimsuit. Again, in this case, she must be very careful explaining to her friends that she was expected to put on hijab and cover most parts of her body as to follow Islam rules.

"So, for example, drinking, or swimming in a bikini, Ma'am, that makes us a bit... especially me, wow, even though I'm Malay, I mean, if you're Malay, the culture is almost the same as Indonesia, but they are free, they are freer there" (Nadila)

Another problem encountered by Indonesian student taking a course in Singapore was that related to teacher-student relationship. In Indonesia, teacher is a role model that is respected, and students are expected to respect the teacher highly. This could result in a high power-distance relationship between teacher and students, in which the relationship between students and teacher is not really close because of the power relationship.

"for example, on campus, we Indonesian students must really respect our lecturers or teachers. While they treat their lecturers or teachers the same as them. Yes, I think that is also the rule of developing countries. In developed countries, most students also behave like friends to their lecturers or teachers." (Nadila)

On the one side, the close relationship between teacher and students as such the situation in Singapore gives benefit to students since they can more freely express their ideas or complaints without a burden on the power distance relationship. The lecturer can also express her/his advises more freely. However, on the other side, such a situation is not suitable in Indonesia. Indonesia culture determines that the older should be respected, that the teacher is highly respected.

Another problem Indonesian students encountered was regarding man-woman relationship. In Indonesia, the cultural norms say that man and woman are allowed to have a close relationship under certain conditions. For example, no hugging between man and woman unless they are siblings or married or have an intimate relationship. Differently, man and woman relationship in Singapore is much closer and intimate. They commonly hug each other to express greetings or welcoming. Such a taboo act in Indonesia is considered common in Singapore.

"Ee, when it comes to adjusting, we adapt but by not joining in, Ma'am, so for example we don't hug like that. When we don't hug a guy, we say verbally that "we're sorry, we're not hugging" if it's salim, just salim like that, ee, they understand." (Ninda)

3.4. Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the positive impact of immersion programs on the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among students engaging in cross-cultural education. Participants' experiences align with earlier assertions that such programs significantly enhance students' adaptability and communication abilities across diverse cultural settings. This supports foundational arguments, such as those by Alptekin (2002), who emphasized the role of internationalized educational experiences in fostering ICC. Guo (2015) further elaborated that the duration and depth of immersion are critical factors in maximizing these benefits, with longer stays leading to more profound language and cultural understanding. More recently, Lalita (2024) confirmed that sustained exposure to foreign cultural environments promotes both linguistic proficiency and cultural sensitivity among students. Such findings are also in line with Roshid et al. (2025) who highlight the essential role of intercultural communication in English language education in the South global context of Bangladesh.

However, this study highlights that intercultural learning is not without its challenges. Students, whether Indonesian nationals studying abroad or international students residing in Indonesia, often face linguistic barriers and socio-cultural adjustments that hinder their ICC development. These findings resonate with broader global research. For example, Chinese international students in Malaysia encounter complex adaptation challenges, including language barriers within an English-medium instruction (EMI) environment and the cultural dynamics of Malaysia's predominantly Islamic context (Xue & Singh, 2025). Similarly, the difficulties reported in this study, such as the struggle to understand local dialects (e.g., Singlish in Singapore) or Bahasa Indonesia for foreign students, reflect the universal nature of language as both a tool and a barrier in intercultural communication.

Further, the social and psychological aspects of adaptation are equally significant. Students shared experiences of discomfort when navigating unfamiliar social norms, including differing views on gender interactions, religious practices, and social activities like nightlife and alcohol consumption. These insights parallel findings from intercultural research in Western and Asian settings, where mismatches in cultural expectations often contribute to stress and adjustment difficulties (Sheu & Manzie, 2025).

The challenges identified align with Byram's model of ICC, which suggests that real-life engagement with different cultures fosters key competencies such as attitudes of openness, skills of interpretation, and critical cultural awareness (Byram et al., 2014). This study confirms that direct immersion, whether in the form of physical study abroad or peer interactions, provides essential opportunities for these competencies to flourish. Yet, the uneven adaptation experiences suggest a need for structured support mechanisms, including pre-departure orientation, language training, and cultural sensitivity workshops.

Additionally, recent studies emphasize the evolving role of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in ASEAN higher education. Suoc et al. (2025) reported that while the use of ELF facilitates academic success, it also introduces communication challenges such as grammatical inconsistencies and anxiety, which are particularly prevalent in multicultural classrooms. These findings mirror the linguistic hurdles encountered by participants in this study.

In light of these challenges, recent research advocates for integrating virtual intercultural exchanges alongside traditional immersion programs. Such digital platforms broaden access to intercultural experiences for students unable to travel abroad, promoting equitable opportunities for ICC development (Hille et al., 2016; O'Dowd, 2018). These virtual initiatives can complement face-to-face interactions, helping students develop the necessary skills and confidence to navigate diverse cultural landscapes.

4. Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the linguistic and socio-cultural challenges faced by international students in Southeast Asia, specifically within the context of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) development. While immersion programs significantly enhance students' ICC by fostering adaptability, language proficiency, and cultural sensitivity, they also present persistent barriers. These include difficulties with local dialects, varied communication styles, and social norms related to peer relationships, gender interactions, and teacher-student dynamics.

The findings confirm that language barriers remain a significant hurdle, even for students with prior language training, due to context-specific linguistic nuances such as Singlish or regional dialects. Similarly, socio-cultural differences—from religious practices to social behaviors—further complicate adaptation, underscoring the need for more comprehensive pre-departure preparation and ongoing cultural support.

To better support students' ICC development, institutions should integrate structured cultural orientation, language programs, and virtual exchanges to complement traditional immersion experiences. These approaches can help mitigate the emotional and communicative stresses identified in this research, fostering more inclusive and supportive environments for intercultural learning.

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