

The Relationship Between Intercultural Sensitivity and Speaking Skills: Voices in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to assess the levels of intercultural sensitivity among students and to explore the potential correlation between intercultural sensitivity and the speaking proficiency of English department students in Indonesian institutions. To achieve these goals, a descriptive study design utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods was employed. Data collection involved a questionnaire and interviews, with 64 students participating as respondents. The questionnaire included 24 items from the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS), which were answered on a four-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms. To assess speaking ability, the researcher conducted interviews focused on language and cultural descriptions, which were evaluated using a custom rubric. The findings revealed that students exhibited high levels of intercultural sensitivity in terms of intercultural attentiveness, confidence, and engagement. Additionally, they showed moderate sensitivity in interaction enjoyment and respect for cultural differences. Statistical analysis indicated a correlation between intercultural sensitivity scores and students' perceived speaking proficiency. Future research could explore different aspects of intercultural sensitivity to observe students' practical behavior in cross-cultural interactions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding linguistics is just one of the essential aspects of acquiring proficiency in a foreign language. However, it is widely acknowledged that effective communication across diverse social groups and cultures requires skills beyond mere comprehension and verbal expression in the target language, such as English. Proficiency in English is necessary, but communicative competence also demands an awareness of the diverse backgrounds of participants (Barany, 2016). Vygotsky (1994) supports this view, asserting that intercultural competence is a critical issue in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Consequently, intercultural understanding is a primary challenge that EFL students must address during their learning process. Integrating cultural awareness into language education can significantly enhance students' overall communicative abilities. Therefore, educators should emphasize the development of intercultural competence alongside linguistic skills to better prepare students for real-world interactions.

For successful communication, the primary growth of the student's understanding of both perspective language and cultural background of diverse civilizations is required. Concerning the significance of the topic, the present research focuses on intercultural competency in the affective realm. Therefore, learning a language directly with the culture is not straightforward for English Foreign Learners (EFL). The students should be aware of everything individuals have in terms of cultures and languages. According to Byram (1997), critical cultural awareness should be inserted in foreign language teaching, and foreign language teaching should be realized by the student, teacher, and lecturer who is learning the target language. It is also supported by (Yang, 2017), who argued because interaction between people from different backgrounds is more common than ever before, intercultural understanding is frequently limited due to a lack of intercultural communication competence.

Teaching international language entails a broader awareness of the distinction between language and culture, which is an important issue in modern language teaching. As a result, in this increasingly multicultural modern world, there is a need to equip learners with materials relevant to the teaching of intercultural communication to develop the learners' intercultural competency. For a successful engagement, the learner's basic progress in understanding both the perspective and cultural background of diverse cultures is critical Krajewski (2011). Concerning the significance of the topic, the current study focuses on intercultural competency in the affective domain.

Regarding the aforementioned issue, intercultural sensitivity in education is necessary to investigate before any curriculum decisions are to be taken in the school and higher education. According to Iqbal (2021), intercultural sensitivity is the design people have for others, whether related to their behavior, attitude, emotions, or views in intercultural communication. Additionally, Mozaffarzadeh and Ajideh (2019) commented that intercultural sensitivity is a significant element of the second language learning process for intercultural competence. Furthermore, Intercultural sensitivity, coupled with intercultural knowledge and competency, is essential for productive interactions throughout the global community.

The examination of intercultural sensitivity and its correlation with language learning and achievement was conducted through the frameworks of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1979) and Deardorff's work (2006). The development of research questions and data collection, particularly for speaking skills, was guided by these theories. During the design phase, relevant research literature and models were assessed to determine the insights they provide, or lack thereof, regarding the connection between intercultural sensitivity and speaking skills.

According to sociocultural theory, the development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is a social product, emerging from the interaction between individuals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This developmental process is rooted in the exchange of identities and cultures among interlocutors. Speaking in a second or foreign language frequently presents unique challenges. Student speakers must coordinate a wide range of knowledge and skills in real-time when conversing with classmates, teachers, or other speakers of the language. They must understand not only basic grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation but also how to apply this knowledge for various communicative purposes, such as engaging in formal or informal conversations, recounting past events, giving directions to strangers, and delivering academic presentations.

This study investigates the types of knowledge and skills that second language (L2) learners must acquire during their studies. The findings highlight the complexity of spoken language proficiency, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach to language education that integrates cultural understanding and practical communication skills. Based on these insights, the study makes recommendations for enhancing EFL instruction by incorporating strategies that foster intercultural sensitivity and effective speaking abilities.

As a result of the interchange of differences, a community of practice emerges, identifiable through three key aspects outlined by Wenger in 1999: shared participation in common practices, a readiness to engage in mutually agreed-upon endeavors, and the mutual benefit derived from the collective repertoire of its members. Consequently, intercultural sensitivity is frequently defined as the capacity

to acknowledge and engage with significant cultural distinctions, as described by Hammer et al. (2003). Increased intercultural sensitivity is related to a greater capacity for exercising intercultural competence, according to specialists in this field (Hammer et al., 2003; Penbek et al., 2012). Within cultural studies, various frameworks and models have been developed to present a more profound understanding of intercultural sensitivity by treating the concept as a mindset, a progressive stage (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1983), or a general ability for intercultural communication (Bennett & Paige, 1993; Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). Despite their differing perspectives, these models and frameworks provide a foundation for conceptualizing intercultural sensitivity. According to Chen and Starosta (1997), intercultural sensitivity is inherently tied to emotions, though it also concerns the effective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects of contact.

One of the critical issues that should be addressed in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms is intercultural sensitivity (IS). Defined by Chen and Starosta (1997) as "the ability to develop positive emotion toward understanding and appreciating cultural differences to promote appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication," IS is crucial for effective communication. Chen and Starosta (2000) further expanded on this concept, developing a 24-question Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) based on an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). This scale measures an individual's cultural awareness across five factors: intercultural engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness.

A review of EFL teaching literature reveals that most studies have concentrated on the cognitive aspects of teaching. However, some scholars have begun to explore the importance of intercultural sensitivity. For example, studies have examined socio-cultural and language learning (Abduh & Rosmaladewi, 2017a), collaborative learning culture (Rosmaladewi & Abduh, 2017), and intercultural online vocabulary acquisition (Abduh & Rosmaladewi, 2017b). Despite these efforts, the primary focus has not been on intercultural sensitivity, indicating a gap in the research that needs addressing.

Koch and Takashima (2021) conducted a study titled "Exploring Students' Intercultural Sensitivity in the EFL Classroom," which promoted IS through activities based on short stories about cultural differences. This study found that such activities encouraged students to think critically about their intercultural sensitivity by comparing and contrasting cultural differences during debates, analyses, and reflections. These findings suggest that language teachers and curriculum developers should integrate activities that foster intercultural sensitivity to indirectly influence English language learners' proficiency (Tümen & Ahmed, 2020).

Emotions play a significant role in language teaching, and intercultural sensitivity should be further researched to address cultural and affective concerns in EFL. Culture, being a continuous and evolving concept, is integral to the classroom environment and the language learning process. Therefore, educators must emphasize the importance of intercultural competence alongside linguistic skills to better prepare students for real-world interactions. Understanding the main functions of speaking, such as interaction, transaction, and performance, is essential for developing effective communicative competence. Introducing intercultural sensitivity to second language learners can enhance their language achievement by fostering intercultural communicative competence.

The current study will identify intercultural sensitivity that hasn't been studied in the context of English language learners' language learning or acquisition at Higher Education in Indonesia. Even though there has been some research on Intercultural Sensitivity, numerous uncertainties remain about the interaction between those determinants in higher education (Bayyurt 2013; Byram et al. 2002; Jackson 2011; Lo Bianco et al. 1999; Sarçoban & z 2014). As a result, the purpose of this study is to fill a gap in this area of higher education by examining students' intercultural sensitivity beliefs and providing new elements that may be beneficial to language learning and teaching, potentially leading to new studies broadening the path between intercultural sensitivity and speaking skills. Responses to the following research studies were used for this purpose

1. What are the levels of intercultural sensitivity among tertiary EFL learners?

2. Is there a significant connection between intercultural sensitivity and the speaking skills of EFL learners?

2. METHOD

This research study employed a quantitative approach. The quantitative approach used an open-ended questionnaire. The respondent of this study was selected from Tertiary EFL Learners in the academic year 2020/2021 and it consisted of 64 participants who were able to join this research. The participants were female and male. Females were more dominant than males. The technique in choosing the participants used a convenient sampling technique. In collecting the data, the researcher applied a questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of 24 items about the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) which was adopted by (Chen & Starosta, 2000). It should be answered on a four-point Likert-type scale. Then, the questionnaire guidelines were sent through the Google form. Then, the questionnaire guidelines were sent through the Google form. In collecting the data for speaking ability, the researcher did the speaking test in the form of an interview that described the language and culture.

Table 1. Blueprint of Intercultural Sensitivity Questionnaires

No	Dimension	Total items	Scale
1	Interaction Engagement	7 Items (1,11,13,21,22,23,24)	
2	Respect for Cultural Differences	6 Items (2,7,8,16,18,20)	4 (Strongly Agree)
3	Interaction Confidence	5 Items (3,4,5,6,10)	3 (Agree)
4	Interaction Enjoyment	3 Items (9,12,15)	2 (Disagree)
5	Interaction Attentiveness	3 Items (14,17,19)	1 (Strongly Disagree)
Total 24 Items			

The scale was adapted for Turkish culture, yielding a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.72, indicating adequate reliability (Bulduk et al., 2011). Speaking scores were initially assessed by a researcher and subsequently verified by an English lecturer with a master's degree in teaching. To address the first research question, the collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine learners' intercultural sensitivity levels. This analysis was based on the level categorization outlined by Dollah et al. (2017). The descriptive approach allowed for a detailed understanding of how intercultural sensitivity manifests among learners, providing valuable insights into their readiness to engage in culturally diverse interactions. These findings can inform targeted interventions to enhance intercultural competence in language education.

Table 2. The level of ISS

No	Levels	
1	Poorly sensitive to intercultural issues	0 – 1.5
2	Fairly sensitive to intercultural issues	1.6 – 2.5
3	Highly sensitive to intercultural issues	2.6 – 3.5
4	Very Highly sensitive to intercultural issues	3.6 – above

The researcher employed a descriptive research design with a quantitative approach to address the second research question. This study utilized a correlational survey model to analyze a significant issue, aiming to answer the questions posed. In the first phase of data collection, the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) was administered to students who consented to participate in the study. In the second phase, participants' interview scores were obtained, providing a measure of their speaking ability. This two-step data collection process allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the relationship

between intercultural sensitivity and speaking skills. By correlating the ISS scores with interview performance, the study aimed to uncover potential links between cultural awareness and language proficiency, thereby offering insights that could enhance educational practices in multicultural settings.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

There are several possible explanations for this result. First, the profile of the participants may have influenced the findings, reflecting their diverse backgrounds and experiences. Additionally, the results concerning the participants' levels of intercultural sensitivity provide insights into their ability to navigate cultural differences. Lastly, the data on the relationship between intercultural sensitivity scores and speaking scores highlight the significant interplay between cultural awareness and language proficiency, suggesting that higher intercultural sensitivity may enhance speaking abilities. This correlation underscores the importance of integrating intercultural training into language education programs.

3.1. Findings

3.1.1. Profile of Participants

Females make up more than half of the participants in this study (figure 1), whereas males make up less than half of the participants.

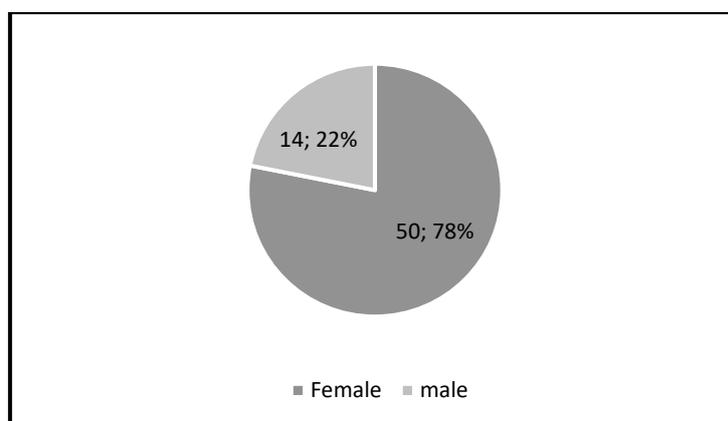


Figure 1. Participants' gender background

It connected to age, there were various age backgrounds of the participants in this study (figure 2). The balance was roughly between 18 and 24 years old.

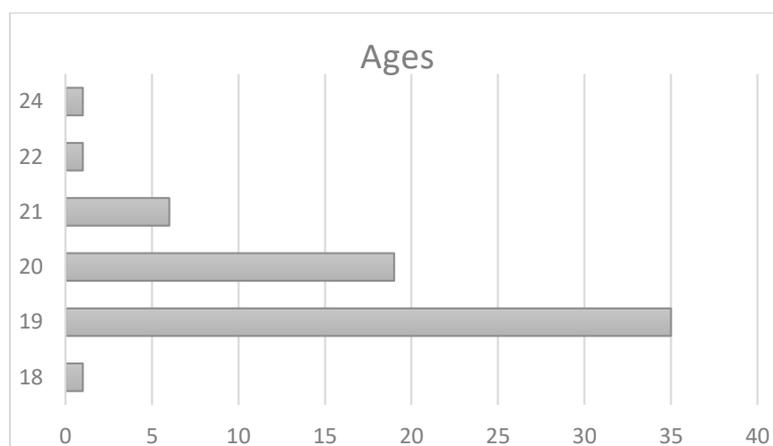


Figure 2. Participant's age

3.1.2. The Intercultural Sensitivity Dimension

The preliminary investigation inquiry is to identify the level of learners' intercultural sensitivity. The result shows the level of the variation in each dimension in detail as below:

Intercultural Engagement

This line (Figure 3) shows that the study participants enjoyed engaging with people from diverse cultures (3.23). They preferred to wait while establishing impressions about counterparts from cultural differences (2.80), and participants were open-minded to people from different cultures (3.02). In addition, participants gave positive responses to different counterparts during interactions (2.92) and generally avoided situations where they would have to deal with culturally-distinct persons (2.70). They respected different verbal and non-verbal interactions (2.83) and felt enjoyment toward these differences (3.14). These findings suggest that while participants are generally receptive to intercultural interactions, there remains some hesitation that could be addressed through targeted intercultural training. This balance of openness and caution indicates the nuanced nature of developing intercultural sensitivity among learners.

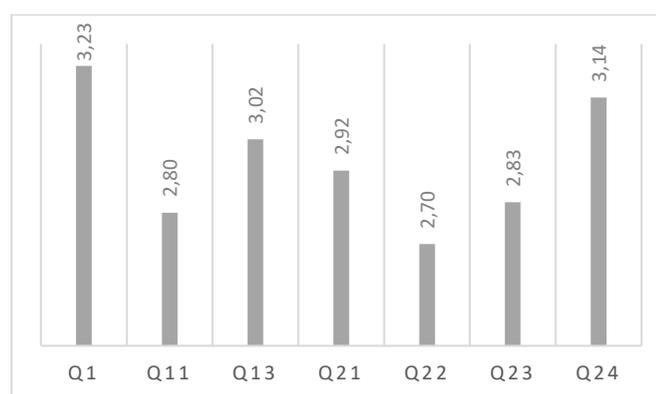


Figure 3. Intercultural Engagement

The graph indicates that participants enjoyed the intercultural engagements that occurred when they interacted with individuals from diverse backgrounds and circumstances. It shows that the average score was 2.95, reflecting a high sensitivity to interculturalism. This high average score suggests that participants not only felt comfortable but also found value in these intercultural exchanges. The enjoyment derived from such interactions highlights the participants' positive attitudes towards cultural diversity. These results underscore the importance of fostering environments that encourage

and facilitate intercultural engagement, as they contribute significantly to the development of intercultural sensitivity and competence.

Respect for cultural differences

This graph (figure 4) reflects that participants were not narrow-minded (2.23), and tended to enjoy talking and walking with others from different backgrounds (2.41). Then, the participants respect a value (3.28), and way from different cultures (2.75). In addition, they accept the perspective or view of other people during interaction (2.08), and they respect others (2.30).

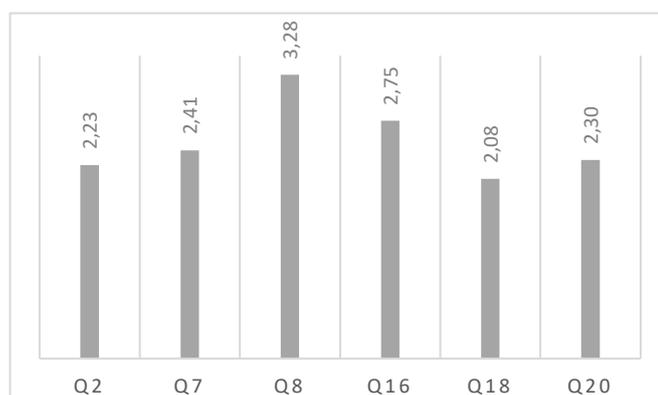


Figure 4. Respect for cultural differences

In other words, the respect for cultural differences of learners shows an average score was 2.51 which is fairly sensitive to interculturalism.

Intercultural confidence

This graph (Figure 5) reflects that participants felt relatively confident about themselves while interacting with people from different backgrounds (3.31). Despite this confidence, they found it somewhat challenging to communicate with others from different backgrounds (2.39), indicating areas where intercultural communication skills could be strengthened. Participants demonstrated a moderate level of savvy in communicating with those from different cultures (2.72). Additionally, they were sociable (2.84) and generally felt confident during interactions with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (2.97). These findings suggest that while participants possess a reasonable degree of intercultural competence, there is room for improvement in their ease of communication and overall interaction skills. Enhancing these skills could further bolster their confidence and effectiveness in intercultural engagements.

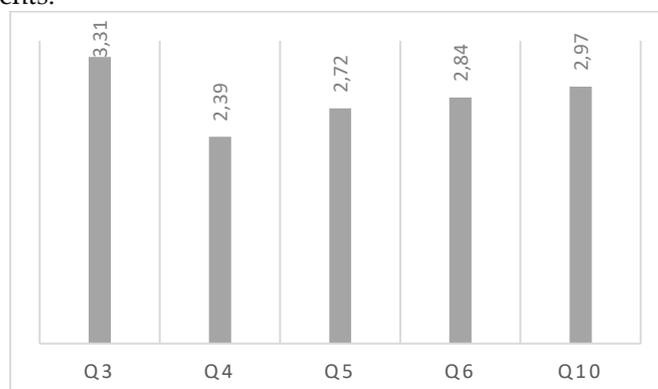


Figure 5. Intercultural confidence

It can be inferred that the dimension of learners' intercultural confidence shows an average score was (2.85) which is highly sensitive to interculturalism.

Intercultural enjoyment

This graph (figure 6) reflects that participants are not prone to getting angry easily when talking with people from different cultures (2.34). They frequently felt discouraged when interacting with individuals from other cultures (2.63). Then, the participants feel ineffective when communicating with individuals from other cultures (2.33).

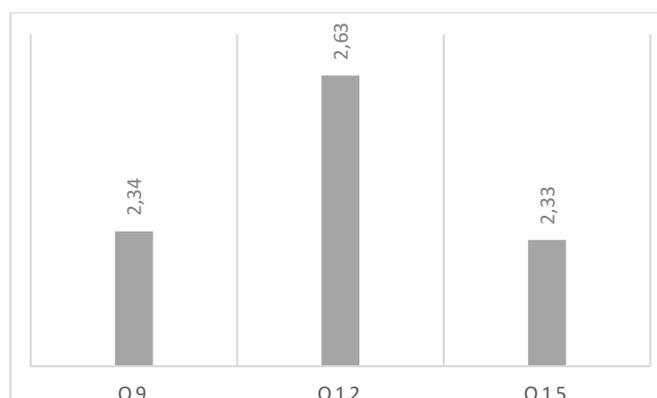


Figure 6. Interaction enjoyment

The implication is that the dimension of learners' intercultural enjoyment shows an average score was (2.43) which is fairly sensitive to interculturalism.

Intercultural Attentiveness

This graph (figure 7) reflects that participants when dealing with individuals from various cultures, are keen observers (3.05). When engaging with individuals from various cultures, they attempt to incorporate as much information as possible (3.11). Then, the participant is perceptive of the nuanced meanings conveyed by their culturally unique counterpart during the engagements (2.5).

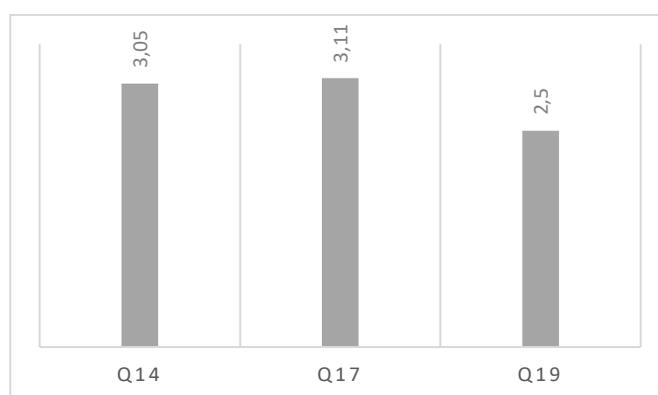


Figure 7. Intercultural Attentiveness

It can be inferred that the dimension of learners' intercultural attentiveness shows an average score was (2.89) which is highly sensitive to interculturalism.

3.1.3. Correlation between intercultural sensitivity scores and speaking scores.

The study sample highlights the importance of the connection between speaking and ISS scores for volunteers. It obtained the Pearson product-moment correlation. When computing the Pearson Multiplication Correlation Coefficient, a coefficient below 0.30 indicates a weak correlation, and a coefficient less than 0.05 suggests that the results are statistically significant, as outlined by Büyüköztürk in 2006.

Table 3 Results of Pearson product-moment correlation between intercultural sensitivity scores and speaking scores.

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Speaking Test	75.31	1.967	64
ISS Level	70.98	6.879	64

Correlations			
		Speaking Test	ISS Level
Speaking Test	Pearson Correlation	1	-.322**
	Sig. (2-Tailed)		.009
	N	64	64
ISS Level	Pearson Correlation	-.322**	1
	Sig. (2-Tailed)	.009	
	N	64	64

What emerges from the results reported here is that there was a correlation between speaking and intercultural sensitivity levels in students of higher education. It indicates that the speaking test $.009 < 0.05$ then the ISS level $.009 < 0.05$. In summary, the sig. (2-tailed) value is less the 0.005. Furthermore, the table of descriptive statistics shows the mean score of students' speaking test of 75.31 then the ICC level of 70.98.

3.2 Discussion

According to these data, it can be inferred that the participants in this study show two levels: fairly sensitive to interculturalism and highly sensitive to interculturalism. Intercultural attentiveness, intercultural confidence, and intercultural engagements are included as *highly sensitive to interculturalism*. Then, interaction enjoyment, and respect for cultural differences are included as *fairly sensitive to interculturalism*. Regarding the cognitive and emotional dimensions, the participants in this research can engage with people from people with different backgrounds. It can be deduced that the participants were more respectful of others and eager to engage in communication with people from various backgrounds. This discussion can be inserted into the framework proposed by Chen (1997). The conceptualization of intercultural sensitivity means the majority of participants have a high "positive emotion toward understanding and appreciating cultural differences," and as a result, they also support appropriate and effective actions in intercultural communication. Interestingly, the research (Bal, 2020) had the same result as this study, the result reported that the English as a foreign language participant scored highly on intercultural sensitivity. Then, Learners' IS levels did not differ between male and female students, nor did it matter which language knowledge class they were enrolled in. In line with this, the research conducted by Dollah et al., 2017; Uyun Warsah, 2022; Uyun, 2022) entitled "*Intercultural Sensitivity in Higher Education*". The researchers found that there were three items of intercultural sensitivity namely cultural engagement, respect for cultural differences, and

interaction enjoyment. Those are important and will add to a better knowledge of international characteristics and intercultural discussions around the world.

The observed difference between intercultural sensitivity scores and speaking scores in this study was not insignificant, introducing a new dimension to the English learning context. Despite the lack of a direct correlation between intercultural sensitivity and speaking ability, it does not imply that intercultural sensitivity is irrelevant to English learners' proficiency. On the contrary, fostering intercultural sensitivity among foreign language learners can enhance their ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries. This finding contrasts with the report by Çiloğlan and Bardakçı (2019), titled "The Relationship Between Intercultural Sensitivity and English Language Achievement," which identified a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between intercultural sensitivity and English language achievement. Their study indicated that higher intercultural sensitivity scores were associated with higher language competence levels, without significant differences between female and male participants.

To embrace and accept both cultural and language diversity, it is essential to cultivate empathy and tolerance toward diverse cultures. This study offers new insights into the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and speaking ability, differing from previous research findings. Developing spoken language proficiency is a complex process that goes beyond mastering individual linguistic skills; it involves enhancing communication abilities in various social contexts. It is important to note that the generalizability of these results is limited, as they are based on students' perceptions rather than their actual behaviors in the learning process.

4. CONCLUSION

From the present study, it can be concluded that there is no significant relationship between intercultural sensitivity, an affective element of intercultural communication ability, and language achievement, specifically in terms of speaking skills. Despite the lack of statistical significance in the relationship between Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) scores and English language achievement, the study notes that ISS does influence learners' perceptions of cultural differences. Consequently, language educators and curriculum designers should consider integrating activities and teaching methods that promote multicultural sensitivity to indirectly enhance the proficiency levels of English language learners. Future investigations might explore different measures of intercultural sensitivity to observe students' practical behavior when interacting with others in cross-cultural contexts. Although this study has limitations, it suggests that involving a broader range of stakeholders, such as curriculum developers, lecturers, trainers, and policymakers, in research on intercultural issues could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural sensitivity in second language acquisition.

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