

CHALLENGES FACED BY ENGLISH LEARNERS: AN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: This study investigates the challenges that English learners face when learning English through the lens of intercultural communication. As English becomes increasingly important in our global society, understanding its cultural aspects is essential. Through interviews with students, we found that many struggle with things like idioms, cultural expressions, and different ways of communicating. The design of this research is qualitative, presenting data in descriptive form. The study is conducted with English learners, using semi-structured interview instruments prepared in advance. The list of interview questions sent through digital communication platforms like WhatsApp, and students asked to respond in detail. This research uses purposive sampling, where students are selected as respondents based on specific criteria, such as their experience in learning English and the challenges they face in intercultural communication during their studies. This purposive sampling technique ensures that respondents have relevant experiences to provide insights into the challenges faced when learning English from an intercultural communication perspective. Data from the interviews analyzed using descriptive analysis. While students work hard to adapt to English-speaking norms, they often deal with issues such as anxiety and misunderstandings. This study highlights the need for better teaching methods that include cultural understanding in English lessons, helping students prepare for diverse interactions in the world.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, English, Education, Challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

Play a crucial role in global communication, English is the primary language used in various fields, including Education. It becomes mastering English an international language that is very important to learn. In today's connected world, English is more important than ever. As the main language used in international business, diplomacy, and education, English helps people from different cultures talk to each other. This ability to communicate in English is not just a practical skill; it is also crucial for building understanding and cooperation among diverse groups (Sobre, 2017).

English has become the global lingua franca, playing a crucial role in communication, business, education, and technology. For many individuals worldwide, learning English is a necessary step for academic and professional advancement. However, English language learners (ELLs) face numerous challenges, including linguistic barriers, cultural differences, and varying levels of access to quality education. Understanding these challenges and identifying effective strategies for learning English can greatly enhance the experience of ELLs and improve their language proficiency.

Becoming proficient in English is a journey that requires dedication, practice, and patience. While English language learners face numerous challenges, applying

effective learning strategies can help them overcome these obstacles. Whether through immersion, regular practice, or utilizing modern technology, learners have various tools at their disposal to achieve fluency. Mastering English not only opens academic and professional opportunities but also fosters cross-cultural understanding, making it a valuable skill in today

With globalization on the rise, the need for English proficiency has increased significantly. Many companies work across countries, international meetings are common, and digital communication is everywhere. For students studying English Education, learning this language is not only a requirement for their degree but also a key part of their future careers. As future teachers, these students will be responsible for teaching English to others, which means they need to understand not just the language but also the cultural differences that come with it. Cultural competence is increasingly important in the classroom (Devran, 2010). Future teachers must be aware of the cultural nuances that affect communication styles, expressions, and interpretations. Intercultural communication is a key part of learning English that deserves special focus (Colbert, 2005). This term refers to how people from different cultures share information and ideas. Good intercultural communication goes beyond just knowing the language; it involves understanding the cultural norms and values that shape how people express themselves and interpret what others say. In this way, English acts as a bridge, allowing people to connect and work together despite their differences. However, the variety of cultural backgrounds can also create challenges for students learning the language. These challenges can show up in many ways. Students might struggle to understand idioms, jokes, or body language that vary from culture to culture (Bowe et al., 2018). Additionally, stereotypes and biases can create barriers to effective communication, leading to misunderstandings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Understanding Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication refers to the exchange of information between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. It involves verbal and non-verbal communication, including language, gestures, tone of voice, and cultural norms. Effective intercultural communication requires cultural awareness, adaptability, and open-mindedness. Each culture has unique values, communication styles, and social norms that shape how people interact. For example, some cultures emphasize direct communication, where individuals express their thoughts openly, while others rely on indirect communication, where messages are conveyed through context and non-verbal cues. Understanding these differences is crucial for avoiding miscommunication and fostering meaningful relationships. Challenges in Intercultural Communication:

a. Language Barriers

Language differences are one of the most obvious challenges in intercultural communication. Even when individuals speak a common language, variations in dialects, accents, and idiomatic expressions can create misunderstandings. Additionally, some words and phrases may not have direct translations, leading to misinterpretations.

b. Non-Verbal Misinterpretations

Non-verbal communication, such as gestures, eye contact, and body language, varies significantly across cultures. For instance, in some cultures, direct eye contact is a sign of confidence and attentiveness, while in others, it may be considered disrespectful or confrontational. Similarly, hand gestures that are positive in one culture may have negative connotations in another.

c. Cultural Norms and Values

Different cultures have distinct social norms and values that influence communication styles. For example, in collectivist cultures, individuals prioritize group harmony and may avoid open disagreements, whereas in individualist cultures, people tend to express personal opinions more freely. These differences can lead to misinterpretations of politeness, assertiveness, or respect.

d. Stereotypes and Prejudices

Stereotypes and cultural biases can affect how individuals perceive and interact with others from different cultural backgrounds. Preconceived notions about a particular group may lead to misunderstandings and hinder effective communication. Overcoming these biases requires awareness, education, and exposure to diverse perspectives.

e. Different Communication Styles

Cultures vary in their preferred communication styles. Some cultures favor high-context communication, where messages are implicit and rely heavily on context, while others use low-context communication, where messages are explicit and direct. Understanding these differences helps individuals navigate cross-cultural interactions more effectively.

2.2. Strategies for Effective Intercultural Communication

a. Developing Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness is the foundation of effective intercultural communication. Individuals should take the time to learn about different cultures, including their values, customs, and communication styles. This knowledge helps prevent misunderstandings and fosters respect for cultural diversity.

b. Practicing Active Listening

Active listening involves fully concentrating on what the other person is saying, asking clarifying questions, and providing thoughtful responses. It helps individuals understand different perspectives and ensures that messages are interpreted accurately.

c. Being Open-Minded and Adaptable

Open-mindedness allows individuals to approach intercultural interactions with curiosity and a willingness to learn. Being adaptable means adjusting communication styles based on the cultural context. Flexibility in communication fosters positive interactions and reduces potential conflicts.

d. Avoiding Assumptions and Stereotypes

Instead of relying on stereotypes, individuals should approach each interaction with an open mind and treat people as individuals rather than representatives of their culture. Asking questions and seeking clarification can help avoid misunderstandings.

e. Using Simple and Clear Language

When communicating across cultures, it is essential to use clear and simple language, especially when language proficiency varies. Avoiding jargon, idioms, and complex phrases ensures that messages are easily understood by all parties.

f. Observing and Learning from Others

Observing how people from different cultures interact can provide valuable insights into their communication styles and social norms. Adapting to these cultural cues demonstrates respect and enhances communication effectiveness.

g. Seeking Feedback

Feedback is crucial for improving intercultural communication skills. Individuals should be open to constructive criticism and willing to make adjustments based on others' perspectives. Continuous learning and self-improvement are key to becoming an effective intercultural communicator.

2.3. The Role of Technology in Intercultural Communication

With advancements in technology, communication across cultures has become more accessible. Social media, video conferencing, and instant messaging platforms allow people from different backgrounds to connect and collaborate. However, digital communication also presents challenges, such as misinterpretation of tone and cultural nuances. Practicing digital etiquette and being mindful of cultural differences in online interactions are essential for maintaining positive relationships.

2.4. The Importance of Intercultural Communication in Different Contexts

a. Business and Globalization

In the business world, intercultural communication is critical for successful international collaborations. Companies operating in global markets must navigate cultural differences to build strong relationships with clients, partners, and employees. Understanding cultural preferences in negotiation, leadership, and customer service enhances business success.

b. Education and Multicultural Classrooms

Intercultural communication plays a vital role in education, particularly in multicultural classrooms. Teachers and students from diverse backgrounds must navigate language differences, learning styles, and cultural expectations. Encouraging inclusivity and cultural exchange fosters a more enriching learning environment.

c. Travel and Tourism

Travelers frequently encounter different cultural norms and communication styles. Being culturally aware and respectful of local customs enhances travel experiences and promotes positive interactions between tourists and locals.

d. Diplomacy and International Relations

Effective intercultural communication is essential in diplomacy and international relations. Political leaders, diplomats, and negotiators must bridge cultural gaps to resolve conflicts, build alliances, and promote global cooperation.

Intercultural communication is an essential skill in today's interconnected world. While cultural differences can present challenges, adopting effective communication strategies, such as cultural awareness, active listening, and adaptability, can lead to meaningful and productive interactions. As globalization continues to bring people from diverse backgrounds together, fostering intercultural understanding and respect becomes increasingly important. By embracing cultural diversity and improving communication skills, individuals and organizations can navigate cross-cultural interactions successfully and contribute to a more inclusive and harmonious world.

2.5. Challenges Faced by English Language Learners

a. Language Barriers and Difficulties

One of the most prominent challenges faced by ELLs is the complexity of the English language. English has a vast vocabulary, irregular grammar rules, and various exceptions that make it difficult for non-native speakers to master. Pronunciation can also be a major obstacle, especially with words that contain silent letters or different spellings for the same sound (e.g., “though,” “tough,” and “through”).

Additionally, idioms and slang expressions further complicate learning. For example, an expression like “it’s raining cats and dogs” might confuse learners unfamiliar with figurative language. Such nuances make mastering English a continuous learning process.

b. Cultural Differences

Language learning is deeply tied to culture, and English learners often experience cultural differences that can affect their understanding and communication. Non-verbal communication, such as gestures and facial expressions, may vary across cultures and lead to misunderstandings. Moreover, the way people structure conversations, express politeness, or use humor differs significantly in different cultures, making social interactions challenging for ELLs.

c. Confidence and Anxiety

Many ELLs experience anxiety when speaking English, particularly in front of native speakers. Fear of making mistakes, mispronouncing words, or not being understood can make learners hesitant to speak. This anxiety often slows down their progress, as language acquisition is best achieved through practice and interaction.

d. Educational and Technological Barriers

Access to high-quality English education is not uniform across the globe. Some learners may not have access to well-trained teachers, interactive learning materials, or immersion programs. Additionally, not all ELLs can afford private tutoring or

language courses. With the rise of technology, online learning resources are widely available, but not all learners have reliable internet access or the necessary devices to benefit from digital learning platforms. The digital divide remains a barrier for many aspiring English learners.

e. Lack of Practice Opportunities

Language learners need exposure and real-life practice to reinforce their skills. However, many ELLs live in environments where English is not commonly spoken, limiting their opportunities to practice outside of the classroom. Without regular interaction with native speakers or proficient English users, progress can be slow.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design, presenting data in descriptive form. The research is conducted with English learners from various backgrounds, using semi-structured interview instruments prepared in advance. The interview questions will be sent through digital communication platforms like WhatsApp, and students will be asked to provide detailed responses.

The study adopts a purposive sampling technique, selecting students as respondents based on specific criteria, such as their experience in learning English and the challenges they face in intercultural communication during their studies. This method ensures that respondents have relevant experiences to provide insights into the difficulties encountered when learning English from an intercultural communication perspective (Sugiyono, 2015). The collected interview data will be analyzed using descriptive analysis to identify common themes and patterns in students' experiences and perspectives.

Table 1. Participants background

Participants	Age	English learning began at	Language mastery
WA	21 years old	10 years old	Indonesia, Java (local language), English
RM	25 years old	15 years old	Indonesia, English, Java (local language)
SS	21 years old	10 years old	Indonesia, English
RW	12 years old	-	Jambi (local language), Indonesia, English, Melayu (local language), java (local language)
RZ	13 years old	-	Indonesia, English

4. RESULTS

4.1 Language Learning and Intercultural Communication: A Participant-Based Analysis

Language learning is a complex process influenced by multiple factors, including age of acquisition, exposure to different languages, and cultural background. The participants in this study, all English Education students, come from diverse linguistic and cultural settings, which shape their experiences in intercultural communication. Their backgrounds, as presented in Table 1, provide valuable insights into how early exposure, multilingualism, and cultural influences impact their learning journey.

4.2 Early Exposure to English and Language Mastery

The participants exhibit variation in their English learning journeys, with some beginning as early as 10 years old, while others started later, such as at 15 years old or through informal learning without a defined starting point. WA and SS, for instance, both began learning English at the age of 10, allowing them more years of exposure to the language before entering higher education. This early start likely provided them with a strong foundation in the language, giving them more time to develop their skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

In contrast, RM, who started learning English at 15 years old, may have faced more challenges in language acquisition due to the later onset. Research suggests that starting a language at a younger age allows for greater linguistic flexibility and a better grasp of pronunciation, grammar, and fluency. However, older learners often develop metacognitive strategies that help them catch up quickly. RM's ability to master English despite a later start reflects determination and adaptability, qualities essential for effective intercultural communication.

RW and RZ, on the other hand, did not specify an exact starting age for English learning, which may indicate a more informal or situational learning experience. RW, in particular, speaks multiple languages, including Jambi (local language), Indonesian, English, Melayu (local language), and Java (local language). This extensive multilingualism suggests that RW has been navigating different linguistic and cultural contexts from an early age, potentially facilitating adaptability and intercultural awareness.

4.3 The Role of Multilingualism in Intercultural Communication

Multilingualism plays a crucial role in intercultural communication, as it enables individuals to switch between languages depending on social and cultural contexts. All participants speak Indonesian as their primary language, while several also have proficiency in local languages such as Java, Melayu, and Jambi. This linguistic diversity highlights the importance of regional and cultural identity in communication.

For example, WA and RM are fluent in Java, a widely spoken local language in Indonesia. Java has its own cultural nuances, honorifics, and linguistic structures that shape how speakers interact with others. Exposure to multiple languages like this allows individuals to develop intercultural sensitivity, as they must constantly

adjust their communication styles based on social hierarchy, politeness levels, and context.

RW, as the most multilingual participant, is accustomed to navigating different linguistic frameworks. With exposure to four local languages in addition to English, RW's experience in switching between languages likely enhances adaptability in intercultural communication. Having to shift between different cultural norms and expectations fosters flexibility, an essential skill in cross-cultural interactions.

4.4 Challenges and Adaptations in Intercultural Communication

Despite their English proficiency, these students still encounter challenges when communicating across cultures. Even though English serves as a common global language, cultural differences in communication styles, body language, and social expectations can lead to misunderstandings. For instance, while Indonesian communication norms tend to emphasize indirectness and politeness, Western communication styles may be more direct. Adjusting to these differences requires awareness and practice.

Participants like RM, who learned English later in life, may have initially struggled with language barriers in academic and social settings. However, their experience in overcoming these challenges likely provided them with a deeper understanding of the difficulties that other non-native English speakers face. This awareness can make them more empathetic communicators in intercultural environments.

Moreover, RW's experience with multiple languages suggests familiarity with code-switching, a common strategy among multilinguals. Code-switching—the practice of alternating between languages within a conversation—helps facilitate understanding when navigating different cultural and linguistic landscapes. For instance, RW might use Jambi or Melayu in informal community settings while relying on Indonesian and English in academic or professional environments. This ability to shift between languages and cultural contexts is a valuable skill in intercultural communication.

The diverse language learning experiences of these participants illustrate how multilingualism, early exposure, and cultural background shape intercultural communication skills. While early exposure to English provides a strong foundation, later learners can still achieve high proficiency through strategic learning and adaptability. Multilingualism enhances cultural sensitivity, enabling individuals to navigate complex social interactions across different linguistic and cultural contexts.

As globalization continues to connect people from diverse backgrounds, the ability to communicate across cultures becomes increasingly valuable. The experiences of these participants demonstrate that language learning is not just about acquiring vocabulary and grammar—it is also about understanding cultural nuances, adapting to different communication styles, and embracing diversity. Their journeys highlight the importance of continuous learning, openness, and intercultural competence in today's interconnected world.

The researcher then classified the question's answer with the indicators of research questions. Based on the interviews, the researcher found the challenges of the students in class.

4.1.1 The specific challenges when learning English as a Culture

In this question, the researcher wants to know more about students specific challenges faced by students in class. The question is *“What are the specific challenges when learning intercultural communication, especially regarding English culture?”*.

- a. ‘I still have some difficulty learning English culture, especially in the context of proverbs. Their expressions and idioms are very different from those in Indonesian. I also struggle to adjust to how English speakers express things, particularly with the use of various tenses. This is very different from Indonesian, which does not have tenses’. (Student 1)
- b. ‘Understanding how to communicate with people from different cultures is very important. I feel afraid to start conversations and lack confidence in expressing myself in another language”. (Student 2)
- c. ‘In terms of communication styles, we often tend to be verbose when speaking. When we want to express this in English, it’s difficult to find the right words. In English, the expression can be quite simple. We can just say it directly. Additionally, the way we express ourselves with certain phrases is also a challenge’. (Student 3)
- d. ‘Of course it is a challenge. But challenges are there to be conquered. The important thing is not to be a brawler carrying a food container. I think UAD English Education students can be said to be ready to teach English. But unfortunately, since we haven’t adapted to English culture since we were born and we just learned it as our second language, it will be a little difficult to teach English as a culture. By means, we cannot fully teach the students about it, only based on books and the common information collected from google’. (Student 4)
- e. ‘To teach English as a Culture I think we might be able to depend on the internet nowadays. Well, even though we don’t experience it directly, but now we can "watch" how English as a culture is. So my answer about the resources that we need to overcome cultural communication challenges is "open-mindedly exploring the internet and equipping ourselves with a lot of uncommon knowledge about English as a culture’. (Student 5)

4.1.2 The Impact of English culture influences personal communication styles

In this question, the researcher wants to know how learning English culture influences personal communication styles. And also assesses the overall learning experience, including confidence and adaptability in diverse communication contexts. The question is *“How does learning about English culture impact communication styles and learning experiences?”*

- a. ‘Personally, I will need some time to adapt to how my peers communicate. I don’t find it difficult, because I believe Indonesians have the ability to blend in easily. It only takes time to improve communication with others. The impact I feel is that my knowledge of other cultures is expanding. Even though communication must use "makeshift" language or body language, the more I am exposed to their culture, the better I can adapt and build mutual understanding’. (Student 1)

- b. 'We tend to imitate the accent or speaking style of the language we are learning'. (Student 2)
- c. 'Our proficiency certainly influences our speaking style when speaking in English, or what we commonly call accent". (Student 3)
- d. 'Motivation to improve the English language skills of children who will become future leaders'. (Student 5)

4.1.3 Challenges in Teaching English as a Language and Culture

The question is *"Do you see this as a challenge when teaching in the future, specifically regarding teaching not just English as a language, but also as a culture?"* Analyze whether teaching English as both a language and a culture presents challenges for you in the future. Explore how these challenges may affect your teaching approach and classroom dynamics.

- a. 'Of course, this presents a challenge. However, challenges are meant to be faced. It's important not to be arrogant. I believe that English Education Department UAD students are ready to teach English. Unfortunately, since we haven't been immersed in English culture since birth and only learned it as a second language, we will have some difficulty teaching English as a culture. This means we cannot fully teach students about it, relying only on books and common information gathered from the internet'. (Student 1)
- b. 'Perhaps we only understand the language, but our understanding of the culture is still lacking. We need to differentiate which aspects of the culture are good to teach and which are not'. (Student 2)
- c. 'This is certainly a challenge, as not all cultures align with ours. We need to choose wisely'. (Student 3)
- d. 'Of course it is a challenge, because not all cultures are suitable for us. We have to be smart in choosing'. (Student 4)
- e. 'From this intercultural communication class, it has been quite supportive for me to prepare myself for the future'. (Student 5)

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 The specific challenges when learning English as a culture

Based on the interview results, students shared several challenges they face when learning English as a culture. One student mentioned having difficulty with English proverbs and idioms, noting that these expressions are very different from those in Indonesian. They also struggle with how English speakers use various tenses, which adds to the challenge. This shows that understanding cultural differences and language structures can be complex. Research indicates that idioms and proverbs are often deeply rooted in cultural contexts, making them challenging for language learners (Kecskes, 2018).

Another student expressed that knowing how to communicate with people from different cultures is important, but they feel afraid to start conversations and lack confidence in speaking another language. This fear can prevent students from engaging in communication, as anxiety often makes it harder to learn and use a new language. Studies have shown that anxiety can negatively impact language learning and communication, leading to avoidance behaviors (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012).

A third student talked about communication styles, saying they tend to be wordier when speaking in Indonesian. When trying to express themselves in English, they find it hard to find the right words because English often requires a more direct way of speaking. This reflects the difficulties students have in adjusting their communication styles to fit English-speaking norms. High-context cultures, like Indonesia, often rely on indirect communication, while low-context cultures, such as those in English-speaking countries, value straightforwardness (Puumala, 2015).

These challenges highlight the need for better support in language education. By addressing these issues, teachers can create more effective and welcoming learning environments that help students feel more confident in understanding and using English in different cultural contexts.

5.2 The Impact of English culture influences personal communication styles

Learning about English culture has a big effect on how students communicate and their overall learning experience. As students dive into English culture, they change how they express themselves, which helps them connect better with others. One student mentioned that it takes time to adapt to how their peers communicate, saying, “I believe Indonesians have the ability to blend in easily.” This shows that people can adjust their communication styles when they are exposed to new cultures. The student also pointed out that learning about different cultures helps them understand others better, which is important for building friendships.

Another student shared that they often mimic the accent or speaking style of the language they are learning. This imitation helps them fit in and feel more comfortable speaking English. A third student noted that their skill level in English affects how they speak, suggesting that as they improve, their communication style changes, including their accent and confidence.

These comments highlight how learning about English culture helps students become more flexible in how they communicate. This flexibility is essential for connecting with others and understanding different viewpoints. Being able to adapt is especially important in today’s world, where we often interact with people from various backgrounds (Molinsky, 2020). The insights from these students show that learning about English culture greatly influences how they communicate. Exposure to new cultural norms allows them to adjust their communication styles (Ryan et al., 2011). This adjustment builds their confidence, making them more willing to talk and share their thoughts in English.

Research supports these ideas. For instance, (Puumala, 2015) explains that different cultures communicate in various ways. High-context cultures, like Indonesia, often use indirect communication, while low-context cultures, such as those in English-speaking countries, prefer to be more direct. This difference means that students need to adapt to fit in with English speakers, which can help them become better communicators.

5.3 Challenges in Teaching English as a Language and Culture

Teaching English as both a language and a culture comes with real challenges for educators. One student pointed out that while these challenges are tough, they are important to face. They mentioned that many future teachers, like those in English Education Department UAD, may be ready to teach English but might struggle with

cultural knowledge since they haven't grown up immersed in English culture. This highlights a gap between knowing the language and understanding the culture, which can make teaching less effective. Research supports this idea, showing that understanding culture is key to helping students connect what they learn to real-life situations (Byram, 2020).

Another student shared that even if they understand the language well, their grasp of the culture is still limited. This is a common issue in language teaching; educators need to figure out which parts of the culture are appropriate and helpful to teach. Misunderstandings can arise if cultural aspects are not accurately represented (Kramsch, 1993). This student's point emphasizes the need to focus on teaching cultural elements that truly enhance the learning experience.

A third student noted that the challenge is heightened because not all cultures fit neatly together. This means teachers need to be careful about what cultural content they include in their lessons. It's essential for educators to be sensitive to cultural differences and aware of how teaching certain practices or values can impact students. Research shows that being culturally responsive can create a more inclusive classroom and help students from different backgrounds understand each other better (Gay, 2018)

In summary, these insights highlight that teaching English as both a language and a culture requires a thoughtful and caring approach. Educators must recognize their own limitations while working hard to give students a well-rounded understanding of both language and culture.

6. CONCLUSION

Learning about intercultural communication, especially English culture, is very important for students today. Knowing English helps not only with language skills but also with building better relationships with people from different backgrounds. However, this study found that English Education students at Ahmad Dahlan University face specific challenges when learning English and understanding other cultures. The results show that students have a hard time with idioms and cultural expressions that are different from their own language. Many students also feel anxious when speaking English, which affects their confidence and makes them less willing to participate in conversations.

Additionally, students mentioned difficulties in changing their communication style to fit English-speaking norms, as the direct way of speaking in English can be very different from the more indirect style they are used to. These challenges highlight the need for teachers to recognize and help students with these issues. By focusing on these challenges, educators can create a better learning environment that supports students in developing both their language skills and their understanding of different cultures. This will help prepare students to communicate effectively in a diverse world.

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