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Understanding Intercultural Sensitivity in Multicultural EFL Classroom: Perspective from Indonesian University Students

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Abstract

In today's globalised world, intercultural sensitivity has been extensively studied in English language teaching. However, limited research has examined how university students' multicultural backgrounds shape their intercultural sensitivity and communication in Indonesia's diverse EFL classrooms. This study examines students' intercultural sensitivity levels, focusing on Intercultural Engagement, Respect for Cultural Differences, Interaction Confidence, Interaction Enjoyment, and Interaction Attentiveness, and explores the influence of multicultural experiences on their English-language communication. Adopting a mixed-methods design, this study administered the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (questionnaire) to 53 ethnically diverse English education students in Indonesia and conducted semi-structured interviews with participants. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative interview data were analysed through content analysis, including transcription and thematic categorisation. The study found an overall moderate level of students' intercultural sensitivity. Respect for Cultural Differences and Interaction Attentiveness were categorised as high, while Intercultural Engagement, Interaction Enjoyment, and Interaction Confidence were categorised as moderate level. Students valued cultural equality and diversity, yet faced confidence gaps, cultural shock, and communication issues, though they believed multicultural experiences fostered flexibility and awareness of the language-culture connection in English learning. This study suggests implementing interactive teaching methods in fostering intercultural sensitivity.

Keywords: Intercultural Sensitivity; Intercultural Communication; Multicultural classroom; English Language Teaching

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalised world, communication across cultures has become a fundamental component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. On a global scale, this transition implies increased communication among individuals for whom English is a second or foreign language (Koch & Takashima, 2021). In this regard, Chen and Hu (2023) argued that recognising, respecting, and engaging in appropriate and successful intercultural communication is possible only with a high level of intercultural sensitivity in a multicultural setting. Effective interaction occurs when there is intercultural awareness (Puspitasari, 2023). Therefore, learning English as a foreign language and cultural sensitivity in cross-cultural communication are crucial. Intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness, and intercultural communicative competence are three interrelated but different dimensions of intercultural communication, from affective to cognitive to behavioural. Intercultural sensitivity refers to the emotional capacity to recognise and respect cultural differences as well as the willingness to engage with diversity (Chen & Starosta, 2000). Intercultural awareness is the cognitive understanding of cultural similarities and differences, including knowledge of cultural norms and values (Byram, 2021). Intercultural communicative competence builds upon both,

representing the ability to apply sensitivity and awareness in effective cross-cultural communication (Byram, 1997).

In Indonesia, because of the country's great cultural and linguistic diversity, most students are naturally multilingual, speaking Bahasa Indonesia, local languages, and hundreds of regional languages (Noprival, 2024; Syathroh et al., 2019). In this situation, they are mostly living in multiethnic societies and classrooms, where intercultural sensitivity and awareness are considered important aspects of daily communication. Intercultural sensitivity is a learning process that involves experimentation, error, and reflection, which develops intercultural competence and awareness (Puspitasari, 2023). Accordingly, in a broader context, integrating the concept of intercultural sensitivity into English teaching is crucial, as English is widely spoken by non-native English speakers worldwide. In addition, learning a foreign language involves intercultural communication simulation, experimentation, and reflection in the classroom, enabling learners to adjust to multicultural communication (Byram, 2021). Therefore, gaining the ability to perceive and feel cultural differences in more complex and subtle ways is essential to developing intercultural communication. Thus, this study examined how intercultural sensitivity and multicultural background shape students' understanding of intercultural communication, especially in the context of learning English as a foreign language.

The trend of the previous studies on intercultural sensitivity, especially from teachers' perspectives, has provided crucial insights into English teaching. Boudouaia et al. (2022) found no significant differences in the intercultural sensitivity dimensions among EFL teachers in Algeria, regardless of gender, years of teaching experience, or educational background. Meanwhile, Susilo (2019) examined the impact of second-language (L2) learning environments on pre-service Non-native English-speaking Teachers (NNETs) and found no significant effects on teaching skills, intercultural sensitivity, or an unspecified variable related to in-campus L2 environments. Uyun and Warsah (2022) in their study indicated that candidate English teachers possessed elevated intercultural sensitivity due to their awareness of cross-cultural interactions, with varying sensitivity in enjoyment, engagement, respect, attentiveness, and confidence, highlighting the importance of fostering cultural understanding among educators. Anggieta et al. (2023) investigated how three Indonesian secondary school EFL teachers conceptualise and apply intercultural sensitivity (IS) in the design of language teaching materials, recognising that educators in the globalisation era require this competence to create effective and culturally responsive learning resources. The study found that the teachers possessed an adequate grasp of IS, enabling them to design culturally sensitive materials that extended beyond superficial cultural content. Notably, the teachers demonstrated innovative integration of English expression with Javanese polite etiquette (Unggah-Ungguh) and local wisdom, including descriptions of prehistoric Sangiran archaeological sites and traditional games, to align with regional "tolerant curriculum" mandates, thereby embedding local cultural values into English language instruction while fostering intercultural competence among their students.

On the other hand, Dollah et al. (2017) examined intercultural sensitivity beliefs of Indonesian English students in higher education and revealed that participants respect cultural differences, enjoy and engage in cross-cultural interactions, and are more accepting and eager to participate in cross-cultural dialogue. Puspitasari (2023) explored the development of intercultural sensitivity among Indonesian students in online multicultural settings, emphasising the importance of respect for diverse cultures and good attitudes. The study noted that adapting to different ideologies and lifestyles takes time and stressed the need to address preconceived ideas and stereotypes in classroom discussions. Saharani (2023) explored the development of

intercultural awareness (ICA) among five Indonesian and Thai exchange students in a multicultural classroom setting, grounded in the premise that language teaching must inherently incorporate cultural elements to prevent global miscommunication. The study found that participants achieved a strong level of ICA across basic, advanced, and intercultural levels, demonstrating the ability to avoid conflict by successfully adapting to contrasting cultural references, such as Western social norms and differing national perspectives on sex education. While language barriers emerged as the primary communication challenge, students effectively overcame these obstacles through the strategic use of simplified language, highlighting their practical adaptability in navigating cross-cultural academic environments. In a mixed-method study, Sugianto et al. (2022) investigated the relationship between intercultural sensitivity (IS) and extroversion among 96 Indonesian EFL primary school students, grounded in the premise that psychological personality traits significantly influence language learning and cross-cultural adaptability. The study revealed that students exhibited a good level of IS, alongside a high inclination toward extroversion, with the authors confirming a statistically significant positive correlation between the two variables. Notably, the findings suggest that highly extroverted children are psychologically better equipped to cultivate empathy, demonstrating positive and critically reasoned attitudes toward foreign cultural products, thereby highlighting the role of personality dispositions in shaping young learners' intercultural competence. In a quantitative study, Uyun (2022) surveyed 1,800 prospective teachers at UIN Raden Fatah Palembang and IAIN Curup to examine their intercultural sensitivity as a foundational effort to actualise multicultural education in Indonesia. The study revealed that participants demonstrated high sensitivity overall, though institutional differences emerged in the primary driving factors. UIN candidates scored highest in "interaction confidence", reflecting high self-esteem in cross-cultural encounters, while IAIN candidates excelled in "interaction enjoyment", indicating a greater affective pleasure in engaging with other cultures. The findings underscore that high intercultural sensitivity serves as a protective mechanism for prospective educators, shielding them from ethnocentrism, social conflicts, and intolerant attitudes, thereby reinforcing its critical role in preparing culturally competent teachers for Indonesia's diverse educational landscape.

Moreover, in the context of Multiculturalism in English teaching practice, few studies focus on integrating a multicultural perspective in supporting English learning and intercultural communication. Dimici and Başbay (2025) conducted an experimental study on how multicultural education can be blended into English language teaching in Türkiye. They found no significant gains in respect for diversity, critical thinking, or democracy understanding. Qualitative findings revealed meaningful improvements in intercultural competence, communication skills, self-awareness, and reduced prejudice. In the primary school category, Nathan (2023) studied Indian migrant children (IMC) in Tamil Nadu state-run schools, where Tamil is the sole language of instruction. The study found that mother-tongue-based multilingual education marginalises IMC by denying them access to their home languages and to English. A survey revealed that 100% found Tamil difficult to understand, 100% reported teachers never use their mother tongue or English, and 100% wanted English-medium education. This becomes a "multilingualism of the unequals," causing educational and economic disadvantage. In a qualitative literature review, Ardhy (2024) explored the integration of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) into modern Islamic education curricula, arguing that such institutions must prepare students to navigate an increasingly culturally and geographically pluralistic global environment. The review identifies ICC as comprising cultural awareness, cross-cultural sensitivity, and adaptive capacity, finding that while these components fundamentally align with core Islamic values such as empathy and respect,

integration faces significant resistance stemming from fears of "Western-centric" educational influences and barriers to textual reinterpretation. Despite these challenges, the study highlights that institutional collaborations between Islamic and non-Islamic schools offer critical opportunities to enhance ICC integration, suggesting a pragmatic pathway forward for embedding intercultural competence within Islamic educational frameworks.

In the policy context, Vilog (2021) examined multiculturalism and English language education in Japan during the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. The study found that existing English policies prioritise national identity and tourism over genuine multicultural engagement. While the Olympics increased interest in English learning, current reforms remain limited and may still support monolingual and ethnocentric views. Thus, Vilog calls for a shift toward a multicultural framework that promotes intercultural understanding and appreciation of diverse languages and cultures. Additionally, Yeh (2023) examined Taiwan's Bilingual Nation 2030 (BN2030) policy, which aims to improve English proficiency to enhance economic competitiveness. The study found that while the policy is economically driven, labelling it "bilingual" misrepresents Taiwan's multilingual and multicultural identity, including Indigenous languages, mother tongues, and immigrant languages. Yeh (2023) suggests the government should rename and reframe the policy to reflect Taiwan's diverse social fabric rather than risking division through misrepresentation. Lastly, a study by Chaika et al. (2021) outlines methodological approaches for cultivating poly- and multiculturalism among future foreign language teachers at the university level. They revealed that modern philosophical and educational paradigms serve as a theoretical basis for developing an integrated methodology, where poly-/multiculturalism shapes cultural behaviour and identification strategies, influenced by humanisation and global social processes.

Moreover, several studies have discussed the relationship between multiculturalism and English teachers' competence. Appel and Lee (2023) focus on the link between studying abroad throughout teacher training and the development of self-efficacy in culturally diverse learning environments, comparing teachers in England and Australia. Despite most teachers receiving multicultural training, over 70% of Australian teachers and 57% of English teachers felt unprepared for multicultural classrooms. However, studying abroad significantly predicted long-term self-efficacy, even after controlling for other factors. The study contends that initial teacher education should incorporate scaffolded study abroad opportunities to cultivate the critical intercultural understanding required in diverse educational settings. Additionally, Monfared (2025) examined English teachers' attitudes toward adopting English as an International Language (EIL) to promote multiculturalism in ELT classrooms in Turkey and Iran. Teachers held strongly positive attitudes toward multiculturalism and the idea that English belongs to all users, not just native speakers. However, most language centres still provide resources focused on native (Western) cultures, creating a gap between ideology and practice.

Previous studies have examined intercultural sensitivity and multicultural exposure in English language teaching primarily in relation to teaching practice, teacher competency, and policy, without exploring their interconnections. Limited research has investigated the relationship between university students' multicultural backgrounds and their intercultural sensitivity in EFL learning, particularly regarding how prior cultural experiences shape intercultural communication. This indicates a significant gap in understanding the influence of multicultural backgrounds on variations in intercultural sensitivity. Addressing this gap is particularly important in Indonesia, one of the world's most culturally and linguistically diverse societies, where multilingualism and multiethnic classrooms are the norm. Given that intercultural

sensitivity is essential for effective global communication, understanding students' current sensitivity levels in multicultural classrooms is crucial for informing English teaching practices and identifying areas for improvement. Accordingly, this study investigates the following research inquiries:

1. What is the students' level of intercultural sensitivity in a culturally and ethnically diverse classroom?
2. How multiculturalism in English classrooms shapes students' intercultural communication in English learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Intercultural Sensitivity and Multiculturalism

Chen (1997) defines Intercultural sensitivity (IS) as a social perception that involves social norms (generalisation) and individual differences (interpersonal sensitivity). Further, they explained that interpersonal sensitivity aligns with intercultural sensitivity and relates to the ability to recognise the differences in others' behaviour, perceptions, and feelings. On the other hand, Bennett (1986) developed a Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), which includes two phases, ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism, as primary orientations through which people acquire an appreciation of cultural differences. The concept illustrates a shift from viewing one's own culture as the only reality to valuing various cultural viewpoints, as illustrated in Figure 1.

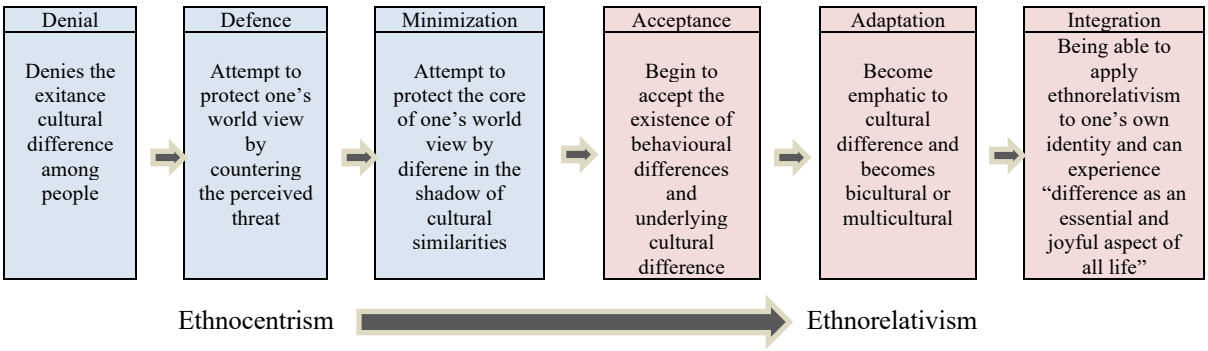

Figure 1. Bennett's (1986) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS).

Meanwhile, Dollah et al. (2017) define intercultural sensitivity as the emotional capacity to comprehend, embrace, and value both shared traits and unique characteristics across individuals, including diverse cultural, ethnic, and personal identities, and it is built on qualities such as self-confidence, self-awareness, openness, empathy, broad-mindedness, and social skills. Intercultural sensitivity is a useful ability that allows individuals to evaluate both their own culture and cultures different from their own (Sugianto et al., 2022).

Specifically, in the context of communication, Pourakbari and Chalak (2015) describes intercultural sensitivity as the emotional component of intercultural communication competence, reflecting a person's genuine readiness to recognise, value, and accept differences among cultures. Further, they elaborate that this aspect comprises six components: self-esteem, self-monitoring, empathy, open-mindedness, nonjudgmental, and social relaxation. These dimensions were derived from Chen and Starosta's (2000) concept of developing the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS). They developed this instrument to assess how

interculturally sensitive someone is based on five indicators: Interaction engagement, Respect for cultural differences, Interaction confidence, Interaction enjoyment, and Interaction attentiveness. Given the importance of this concept to intercultural communication, these dimensions served as the basis for this study's measurement of students' intercultural sensitivity. Syathroh et al. (2019, p. 1310) elaborate the terms as Interaction engagement dealing with feelings of participation in intercultural communication, Respect for cultural differences relates to how participants orient to or tolerate their counterparts' culture and opinion, Interaction confidence measures how confident the participants are in the intercultural communication setting, Interaction enjoyment measures participants' positive or negative reactions toward communicating with people from different cultures, and the last, Interaction attentiveness measures participants' effort to understand what is going on in intercultural interaction.

On the other hand, in the context of multiculturalism, Harmi et al. (2022) define it as cultural diversity, comprising human thought patterns and behaviours rooted in customs, values, language, and ideas. Meanwhile, Dienaputra (2023) argued that Multiculturalism is not merely about having a diverse population; it is defined by the formal acknowledgement of diversity through public policies, legal protections, and constitutional rules that actively support cultural differences on an equal basis. Similarly, based on Arasaratnam's (2013) review study, multiculturalism is the acceptance and support of cultural differences in society, which recognises diversity and promotes it through actions and policies. Multiculturalism fights against cultural homogenisation by recognising the equal coexistence of different cultures within a country, and while it shares pluralism's value of ethnic diversity, it goes further by addressing citizenship rights, ensuring cultural groups can freely express themselves while respecting the rights of others (Hoon, 2017).

English Teaching in Indonesia's Multicultural Context

Given that Indonesia is a diverse country with many ethnic groups, tribes, and religions (Syathroh et al., 2019), since then, Anggraini et al. (2021) have proposed a principle that promotes multiculturalism and intercultural interaction in educational approaches, especially in English teaching. In this context, a multicultural atmosphere creates a promising foundation for integrating intercultural sensitivity into English classrooms. Additionally, Uyun and Warsah (2022) stated that, among the objectives of multicultural education, mastering intercultural competence is a primary goal; the initial competency that students and teachers are required to acquire is intercultural sensitivity. These notions indicate that both multiculturalism and intercultural sensitivity provide an essential basis for effective intercultural communication. This means that learning English, which is mostly aimed at communication with people from diverse cultures, requires greater exposure to the concepts of multiculturalism and intercultural sensitivity in practice, especially in the Indonesian context. This idea aligns with a sociocultural perspective, as Puspitasari (2023) views language learning as an interpersonal process mediated by language within a social and cultural setting.

In the context of gaining English proficiency, Susilo (2019) argued that EFL teachers in Indonesia are not only required to take formal learning courses but also to have informal exposure to foreign culture outside the classroom. Therefore, Susilo further stated that EFL learners need intercultural sensitivity for successful intercultural communication, and this concept is applicable for both EFL teachers and students. This argument aligns with Puspitasari (2023), who described that in Indonesia, students struggle with foreign language learning due to classroom-based teaching methods that limit real-life interaction, preventing them from

grasping pragmatic norms. She emphasised the need to improve linguistic and teaching methods by incorporating cultural norms from the target community. Given these facts, intercultural sensitivity and students' multicultural backgrounds are crucial aspects that support the development of intercultural communicative competency, especially in learning English.

METHOD

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design, collecting quantitative and qualitative data concurrently. Quantitative data were gathered through a questionnaire administered to 53 students to assess their levels of intercultural sensitivity, while qualitative data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 6 participants to look deeper into how students' cultural backgrounds shape their intercultural communication in English learning. Both datasets were analysed separately: quantitative data using descriptive statistics and qualitative data using content analysis, before being integrated during interpretation to triangulate findings on students' intercultural sensitivity in multicultural EFL classrooms.

Research Instruments and Data Collection

This study employed two primary instruments for data collection: a questionnaire and an interview. For quantitative data collection, this study employed a questionnaire adapted from the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) by Chen and Starosta (2000). This questionnaire is a highly reliable testing tool extensively used to evaluate people's intercultural sensitivity across numerous nations (Chen & Hu, 2023). This instrument has been extensively used in English language teaching across numerous nations, such as by Boudouaia et al. (2022), Çiloğlan and Bardakçı (2019), Moradi and Ghabanchi (2019), and Su (2018). This questionnaire consists of 16 questions measuring six topics within intercultural sensitivity: Intercultural Engagement (4 questions), Respect for Cultural Differences (4 questions), Interaction Confidence (4 questions), Interaction Enjoyment (2 questions), and Interaction Attentiveness (2 questions). The questionnaire, using a five-point Likert scale, was circulated via Google Forms to participants. The scoring system was Strongly Disagree: 1, Disagree: 2, Neutral: 3, Agree: 4, and Strongly Agree: 5, and the negative statements were reverse-coded. Negative word items were reverse-coded using a five-point Likert scale inversion (Strongly Disagree: 5, Disagree: 4, Neutral: 3, Agree: 2, and Strongly Agree: 1), ensuring that higher scores consistently represented higher levels of intercultural sensitivity.

For qualitative data, the study used semi-structured interviews focused on participants' backgrounds, perspectives on living in diverse cultural settings, learning English from a cultural diversity perspective, and how understanding cultural diversity affects their foreign language learning. Before conducting the interview, the questions were thoroughly reviewed and discussed with an experienced English teacher from the University of Lampung in Indonesia, with more than 15 years of experience in English language teaching and research. Finally, due to participants' geographic distance, interviews were conducted online via WhatsApp calls in English, lasting 30-40 minutes each, and all sessions were audio-recorded. The interviews were conducted in English, beginning with a general topic about participants' backgrounds and then moving to a specific topic. When needed, follow-up questions clarified or expanded answers, enabling participants to discuss personal, professional, and social aspects of learning English.
The data collection was conducted during the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year, from the 24th to the 30th of April 2025. The data collection obtained formal permission from the Education Authorities at STKIP PGRI Bandar Lampung. Moreover, all participants voluntarily participated in the study and provided informed consent.

Participant

Research subjects were selected using purposive sampling to meet specific criteria: undergraduate students who have local language as a mother tongue and Bahasa Indonesia as a second language, who grew up in or live in a multicultural society, and students of English education who are part of multicultural English classrooms. Based on the criteria, the respondents were 53 university students from diverse ethnic backgrounds from the Department of English Language Education of the Institute of Teachers Training and Education PGRI Bandar Lampung, Indonesia. There were students from the third (19), fifth (14), and seventh (17) semesters, and a small number from the ninth semester (3). The participants were predominantly 71.7% female (38 students) and 28.3% male (15 students). By ethnic background, the largest group is Javanese, comprising 27 respondents (50.9%). The 9 Balinese respondents accounted for 17% of the total. Lampungnese respondents totalled 7, representing 13.2%. Bataknese numbered 4 respondents, representing 7.5%, and Sundanese also had 4 respondents, making up 7.5% of the representation. The smallest group is Palembangnese, with 2 respondents (3.8%). This distribution reflects the cultural diversity in English classrooms.

On the other hand, 6 students (3 female and 3 male) participated in the interview session, with diverse ethnic backgrounds and experiences in multicultural settings while learning English. Each represented 6 major ethnics group in the classroom (Balinese, Lampungnese, Bataknese, Sundanese, Palembangnese). This selection reflects the context of Lampung Province, Indonesia, which is marked by high ethnic diversity, with the Javanese forming the largest group, the indigenous Lampung people constituting the second-largest group, and other ethnic groups following (Fakhrurozi et al., 2025).

Data Analysis

For the quantitative data analysis, the questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive quantitative analysis, validity, and reliability tests using IBM SPSS (version 31). Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated as descriptive statistical measures to characterise students' intercultural sensitivity across the measured constructs. To determine students' intercultural sensitivity level, the range of mean scores between 1 and 2.5 was labelled low, 2.5 to 3.5 moderate, and 3.5 to 5 high. (Moradi & Ghabanchi, 2019; Nameni & Dowlatabadi, 2019). Validity and reliability tests were presented in Tables 1 and 2. McNeish (2018) stated that the purpose of the reliability test was to show that the scale consistently measures an identical construct and that the measurement utilised in this study does so. The instrument's reliability was determined by Cronbach's alpha (α), indicating that the study's questionnaire items are reliable for additional interpretation.

Table 1. The Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.942	16

The alpha Cronbach may be classified as low, moderate, or high in second language studies and education. The low value is less than 0.35, the moderate value is between 0.35 and 0.70, and the high value is greater than 0.70 (Chang, 2021). Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. As shown in Table 2, the Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.942 for the 16 items, indicating excellent internal consistency.

Table 2. Instrument Validity Test

Item	r-count (Pearson Correlation with Total)	r-table (df = 51, α = 0.05)	Sig. (2-tailed)	Status
IE1	.744**	.271	.000	Valid
IE2	.717**	.271	.000	Valid
IE3	.731**	.271	.000	Valid
IE4	.714**	.271	.000	Valid
RCD1	.718**	.271	.000	Valid
RCD2	.725**	.271	.000	Valid
RCD3	.747**	.271	.000	Valid
RCD4	.771**	.271	.000	Valid
IC1	.712**	.271	.000	Valid
IC2	.722**	.271	.000	Valid
IC3	.750**	.271	.000	Valid
IC4	.701**	.271	.000	Valid
IEnj1	.722**	.271	.000	Valid
IEnj2	.729**	.271	.000	Valid
IA1	.731**	.271	.000	Valid
IA2	.743**	.271	.000	Valid

Note:
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). r-table value for df = 51 at α = 0.05 is 0.271.
IE : Intercultural Engagement
RCD : Respect for Cultural Differences)
IC : Interaction Confidence)
IEnj : Interaction Enjoyment)
IA : Interaction Attentiveness)

The validity of the 16-item questionnaire was examined using Pearson product-moment correlation analysis. With a sample of 53 respondents (df = 51) and a significance level of 0.05,

the critical r-value was 0.271. The analysis revealed that all items correlated significantly with the total score, with r-values ranging from .701 to .771 ($p < .01$). Since all r-count values exceeded the r-table value of .271, every item was declared valid. The highest correlation was found for item B6 (r = .771), while item C4 demonstrated the lowest yet still acceptable correlation (r = .701). Taken together, these results confirm that the 16-item questionnaire is both reliable and valid for measuring the intended construct (Tables 1 and 2).

The interview results were analysed using a content analysis approach. Qualitative content analysis is a systematic approach for examining qualitative data that addresses both descriptive content (leading to categories) and interpretative content (leading to themes), and it inherently involves varying levels of description and interpretation, since all analytical processes require interpretation and no description is entirely objective (Lindgren et al., 2020). The data analysis began with transcribing the audio-recorded interviews, followed by creating preliminary categories based on themes identified as the data were read. After that, these original themes and categorisation were examined and improved to ensure they were accurate and pertinent. Given that the first author is an Indonesian researcher and the second an Indian researcher, the authors' positionalities provide both an internal contextual understanding and an external viewpoint during data analysis.

The interview findings were subsequently integrated with the quantitative results during the interpretation phase to complement and contextualise the statistical data. Qualitative themes, including students' confidence gaps, cultural shock, communication issues, and perceived benefits of multicultural experiences, were used to explain the quantitative findings on intercultural sensitivity levels. This triangulation provided a more comprehensive understanding of how multicultural backgrounds shape intercultural communication in EFL learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Intercultural Sensitivity Level of Indonesian English Students

To answer the first research question, what is the students' level of intercultural sensitivity in a culturally and ethnically diverse classroom? The questionnaire results are analysed based on five factors presented in Table 3: intercultural engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the Students' Intercultural Sensitivity Level.

Intercultural Engagement (IE)	N	Mean	SD
I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts.	53	3.226	0.537
I am open-minded to people from different cultures.	53	3.83	0.606
I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally-distinct person.	53	3.151	0.563
I often show my culturally-distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues.	53	3.151	0.563
Overall mean score		3.34 (Moderate)	

Respect for Cultural Differences (RCD)	N	Mean	SD
I respect the value of people from different cultures.	53	4.132	0.615
I respect the ways people from different cultures.	53	4.17	0.606
I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures.	53	3.811	0.585
I think my culture is better than other cultures.	53	3.66	0.512
Overall mean score		3.94 (High)	
Interaction Confidence (IC)	**N**	**Mean**	**SD**
I am pretty sure of myself and comfortable in interacting with people from different cultures.	53	3.491	0.5
I find it very hard to talk in front of people from different cultures.	53	2.774	0.603
I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures.	53	3.132	0.674
I can be as sociable as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures	53	3.472	0.536
Overall mean score		3.21 (Moderate)	
Interaction Enjoyment (IEnj)	**N**	**Mean**	**SD**
I often get discouraged when I am with people from different cultures.	53	3.245	0.67
I often feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures.	53	3.377	0.557
Overall mean score		3.31 (Moderate)	
Interaction Attentiveness (IA)	**N**	**Mean**	**SD**
I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures.	53	3.434	0.496
I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures.	53	3.774	0.537
Overall mean score		3.60 (High)	
Overall Intercultural Sensitivity Level		**3.47 (Moderate)**	

SD (standard Deviation)
N (Number of participants)

Drawing on Chen and Starosta's (2000) intercultural sensitivity framework, the results show that the students' moderate overall score of 3.47 reflects a solid yet improvable foundation in cross-cultural competence. Their strongest performance emerged in respect for cultural differences (mean: 3.94), indicating that students demonstrate open-mindedness, expressive confidence, and genuine acceptance of others' cultural identities. Similarly, Interaction attentiveness is categorised as high (mean: 3.60), indicating that students possess robust self-

monitoring skills to recognise intercultural challenges and make appropriate behavioural adjustments.

In contrast, with a moderate category and score of 3.34, interaction engagement reveals that students show certain empathetic qualities and a willingness to take part in cross-cultural interactions, but participation remains inconsistent. Similarly, interaction enjoyment scored moderately at 3.31, indicating that while students hold a somewhat non-judgmental attitude, they do not fully experience affective pleasure in embracing diverse perspectives or reserving judgment during cross-cultural encounters. Lastly, although categorised as moderate, interaction confidence registered the lowest mean score (3.21), indicating that students demonstrate adequate but not optimal self-assurance in intercultural exchanges, thus representing the primary area for improvement.

According to Byram and Wenger's (2018) theoretical perspective, this moderate proficiency represents a typical phase within multicultural settings, where students possess basic intercultural awareness yet have not achieved the deeper attitudinal and behavioral integration required for advanced competence. Given that this study's participants represent diverse ethnic backgrounds and engage in daily cross-cultural encounters within their academic environment, their overall score of 3.47 suggests that meaningful exposure alone is insufficient; structured pedagogical reinforcement is essential to elevate their capacities.

Students' Perspective on Cultural Diversity and Learning English from Cultural Aspects

To answer the second research question, the interview examined students' perspectives, experiences, and attitudes toward cultural diversity in their social and learning environments. The students' cultural backgrounds, perspectives on living in a culturally diverse community, respect for cultural diversity and equality, learning English from a multicultural perspective, and perspectives on how the understanding of cultural diversity affects their foreign language learning are presented in this section.

1. Students' Cultural Backgrounds

The students view cultural diversity as a positive and meaningful part of their lives, and they often compare their experiences at home with those on campus. Most acknowledge that their home villages are not completely uniform, but they describe these places as having one dominant ethnic group. For instance, Student A notes, "I am Sundanese, and where I live, the majority is Sundanese, but there are other tribes, too. While on my campus, I also interact with friends from different ethnicities." Similarly, Student D states, "I am a Javanese, and I am living in a society where most people are Javanese, but I have neighbours and classmates from different ethnicities, such as Lampungnese, Balinese, and Sundanese." Student F adds more detail about his village:

> I live in a village where most people are Lampungnese. However, some people are Javanese, Balinese, and a small number of Bataknese. So, my social life in my home village is quite diverse. However, my campus fellows are more ethnically varied (Student F).

These comparisons show that moving to Bandar Lampung does not mean encountering diversity for the first time; rather, it means experiencing a greater range of ethnic backgrounds than what they knew before. The students respond to this broader diversity with enthusiasm. Student B expresses this by saying, "My classmates are mostly Javanese and Lampungnese,

and few Bataknese, and Balinese like me. Some of their accents are quite strange but have their uniqueness. However, I am living in society diverse in terms of ethnicities." In this view, differences in accent are seen not as obstacles but as interesting and distinctive traits. Student C offers the most vivid description, calling the classroom 'a melting pot' and explaining that "the way we share our thought during class discussion is influenced by our cultural background. Each and everyone have their own unique characters." This comment connects cultural diversity to the learning process, suggesting that students are aware of how their backgrounds affect classroom interactions. Overall, these responses show that the students not only recognise the cultural variety around them but also appreciate it as something that enriches their social and academic lives.

2. Living in a Culturally Diverse Community

Students reported varied initial experiences when entering the culturally diverse environment of their campus. For some, this transition was marked by uncertainty and apprehension, particularly for those coming from more homogeneous backgrounds. Student A, for example, described feeling a sense of cultural shock, stating:

> For the very first time, I joined the multicultural community on campus. As my previous life was living with the Sunda community, I had a cultural shock. I worried they might not accept me in the community because I speak differently (Student A).

This concern about acceptance based on linguistic difference reflects a common anxiety among students facing unfamiliar social settings. Other students, while coming from relatively diverse home environments, still found the campus setting a demanding adjustment. Student C noted:

> Since I was raised in a diverse society, everything feels normal. I do not notice any problems appearing in my social life. However, when I joined for the academic purpose of my university student journey, I entered a new place in a modern city where people are more diverse. I need time to adjust, and I feel shy interacting with them (Student C).

Here, even students with prior exposure to diversity acknowledged that the broader ethnic diversity on campus required a period of adjustment. Communication styles emerged as a particular challenge during this adjustment phase. Student F observed, "The way we speak sometimes it is different, some are too direct than me, some are too indirect while talking. It takes some time to adjust, and I feel not really enjoy at the beginning." This discomfort with differing communication norms highlights how cultural differences can initially create friction in interpersonal interactions. For students belonging to minority ethnic groups, the challenges were often intensified by feelings of insecurity. Student D admitted, "Since my ethnicities are very few, sometimes I am not confident enough to mingle. Feel shy to start interaction." This lack of confidence reflects how minority status within a diverse setting can hinder social participation. Despite these initial difficulties, however, the students' perspectives evolved positively over time. Student E captured this shift in attitude, stating, "After I met my friends, now I realise that they are so kind and helpful, they are not as what I was thinking before. Stereotype on certain ethnicities are still there." This statement reveals a nuanced outcome: while stereotypes persist, personal interaction and friendship have enabled students to move beyond preconceived notions and recognise their peers' goodwill. Overall, these narratives show that although the journey into a culturally diverse community may begin with anxiety, shyness, and communication barriers, it ultimately leads to more open-mindedness and

appreciation for others, suggesting that direct contact plays a crucial role in fostering positive intercultural relationships.

3. Respect for Cultural Diversity and Equality

Students demonstrated a strong commitment to cultural equality and mutual respect across all ethnic groups. Their responses consistently rejected the notion of ethnic superiority, emphasising instead that every culture deserves equal recognition. Student C expressed this view plainly, stating, "Oh, not at all; I think all people are equal." This direct affirmation reflects a fundamental belief in the inherent worth of every individual, regardless of their ethnic background. Similarly, Student B acknowledged the demographic reality of Indonesia's ethnic composition while firmly rejecting any hierarchical implications, noting, "Even though the Javanese is the majority ethnic group in Indonesia, I feel all ethnicities are equal." This statement is significant, as it demonstrates that awareness of numerical majority does not translate into a belief in cultural dominance. Student D further reinforced this position by expressing personal pride in their own ethnicity without diminishing others, saying, "I am proud to be Javanese, but other ethnicities also need to be respected, and I do not think my ethnicity is superior to others. We have our uniqueness." Here, the student strikes a balance between cultural identity and inclusivity, acknowledging that each ethnic group possesses its own distinct characteristics worthy of appreciation. Beyond personal values, students also rooted their perspectives in Indonesia's national philosophy. Student F invoked the country's foundational motto, stating, "In Indonesia, we have Bhineka Tunggal Ika, which means unity in diversity, so from this standpoint, everybody is equal no matter what." This reference suggests that the students' commitment to equality is not merely an individual stance but is also shaped by the broader cultural and ideological framework of their society. Overall, these responses indicate that students reject ethnocentrism and embrace a worldview grounded in equality, mutual respect, and the recognition of each culture's unique value. Their views appear to be informed by both personal conviction and the national principle of unity in diversity, reflecting a mature understanding of intercultural harmony.

4. Learning English from a Multicultural Perspective

Students recognised that learning English involves more than mastering vocabulary and grammar; it also requires an understanding of the culture associated with the language. They viewed cultural awareness as an essential component of effective communication, particularly in avoiding misunderstandings. Student D emphasised this point, stating:

> I think it is crucial because learning a new language requires the understanding of the context and situation of the conversation that might be very diverse in various languages, so it is necessary to understand the target language culture to minimise misunderstanding in comprehending context while studying English (Student D).

This view highlights the student's awareness that language use is deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts, and that grasping these contexts is key to accurate comprehension. Student B expanded on this idea by explaining the close connection between language and culture, noting:

> Both the language and culture of the target language (English) are crucial for learners since the way the native speakers think and behave, as well as their culture, has a strong

> relation to their language. So, we can learn their language through their culture, too (Student B).

This statement suggests that students see culture not merely as an additional subject but as an integral pathway to understanding the language itself. Beyond theoretical understanding, students also valued the practical benefits of learning English in culturally diverse classrooms. Student E described this experience as a form of simulation for real-world communication, stating:

> Learning English need an understanding and capability to translate not only our language to English but also translating certain behaviour, body language, communication style of our own language into English native language version or English as international language speakers. Since we are in diverse cultural background classrooms, what we experience of day-to-day class is like a simulation training to use English used for communication across countries (Student E).

Here, the student perceives the diverse classroom environment as a valuable training ground where they can practice not just linguistic skills but also intercultural communication competencies. Overall, these responses indicate that students view cultural diversity in their classrooms as both a learning objective and a practical resource. They understand that mastering English requires cultural sensitivity, and they appreciate that their multicultural setting provides authentic opportunities to develop the skills needed for global communication.

5. The Understanding of Cultural Diversity and Foreign Language Learning.

Students reported that their understanding of cultural diversity positively supports their English learning in multiple ways. They found that exposure to different cultures helped them not only grasp English more effectively but also gain deeper insights into their own languages and cultural practices. Student E illustrated this through the study of idioms, stating, "Yes, for example, when I study idioms in English, I learn more about idioms in my language and my culture because those are close to the cultural context of both languages, and I know more about both relations when I learn English idioms." This suggests that learning English idioms serves as a bridge, allowing students to draw comparisons and recognise connections between their native language and English. Student A highlighted another challenge, namely the limitations of direct translation, explaining:

> Translating word to word does not always work. For example, the word 'shrug' in English is hard to find in the translation of 'Bahasa Indonesia.' It is because we do not have that gesture. Therefore, from this case, we understand that English people have that specific gesture, and we do not, so we know more about other cultures and understand our culture more (Student A).

This observation reveals that learning English also deepens students' awareness of cultural differences in nonverbal communication, while simultaneously fostering reflection on their own cultural norms. Student C connected these insights to their personal background, noting that growing up in a multiethnic society has cultivated valuable interpersonal skills. They explained:

> I think grown up in multiethnic society with different culture, I understand that the way people think, behave, express their feeling and communicate is diverse and we need to be more flexible and tolerant about it. When I learn English, I know that this language

> has certain characteristic to express feeling, communication, and certain body language. Also, I know that mostly the moment I use English I will use this with people around the world with different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, being Bataknese living in Indonesia, it helps me a lot to understand intercultural communication (Student C).

Here, the student views their multicultural upbringing as an advantage, equipping them with the flexibility and tolerance necessary for engaging with English as a global language. Student B extended this perspective to the practical realities of English use, emphasising the diversity of spoken English itself. They observed:

> Tone and articulation in speaking are diverse, especially from different ethnicities and different mother tongues. Some ethnicities in Indonesia speak with high and low tone depending on their ethnicities. Similarly, some of them speak fast and some other are slow. In English in use context, it depends on who use this language in communication, because most of non-native English have some many varieties in English use. And finally, I realised that we have to compromise and culturally aware in any possible circumstances when communicate to people from different backgrounds (Student B).

This reflection shows that students recognize the variability of English pronunciation and delivery across different speakers, and they understand that effective communication requires cultural sensitivity and adaptability. Overall, these responses indicate that students perceive cultural diversity not as a barrier but as a valuable asset in their English learning journey. Their experiences with multicultural environments have fostered skills such as flexibility, tolerance, and cultural awareness, which they consider directly applicable to the challenges and opportunities of learning and using English in international contexts.

Discussion

According to the analysis, students' intercultural sensitivity is consistently linked to their perspectives on multiculturalism in English learning. This study examined two research questions: (1) students' levels of intercultural sensitivity in multicultural EFL classrooms, and (2) how multiculturalism shapes students' intercultural communication in English learning. The quantitative findings revealed that Respect for Cultural Differences and Interaction Attentiveness were categorised as high, while Interaction Engagement, Interaction Enjoyment, and Interaction Confidence were categorised as moderate. These results were consistent with the qualitative data. Students demonstrated strong respect for cultural differences, embracing equality, diversity, and the uniqueness of different cultural backgrounds, underpinned by the Indonesian philosophy of Bhineka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity). Similarly, high Interaction Attentiveness reflected students' awareness of the challenges and benefits of multicultural learning environments, which they viewed as mini intercultural communication simulations that helped them understand the interconnection between language and culture. This awareness suggests that students possess robust self-monitoring skills to recognise intercultural challenges and adapt their behaviour accordingly.

The moderate scores for Interaction Engagement, Enjoyment, and Confidence do not indicate insufficiency but rather highlight areas requiring pedagogical attention. The qualitative data revealed that many students grew up in relatively homogenous ethnic environments before moving to diverse urban or academic settings, requiring significant adjustment and adaptation. This explains why their engagement in cross-cultural interactions, while present, has not yet reached a firm or consistent level. Similarly, students reported experiencing culture shock and

unfamiliar communication styles, which may reduce their enjoyment and confidence in intercultural encounters. However, students also recognised that these challenges are part of the learning process, which explains why their scores remained moderate rather than low. As Byram and Wenger's (2018) theoretical perspective suggests, students in multicultural settings typically demonstrate basic intercultural awareness but require structured pedagogical reinforcement to achieve deeper attitudinal and behavioural integration. This finding is particularly relevant in the Indonesian context, where students from diverse ethnic backgrounds navigate daily cross-cultural encounters within their academic environment. While these encounters provide valuable exposure, intentional teaching strategies, such as interactive and collaborative learning activities, are essential to enhance students' intercultural sensitivity and communication skills.

At this point, English classrooms should actively support students' intercultural engagement, enjoyment and interaction confidence, creating a more open and flexible learning environment for students participating in cross-cultural interactions. In this situation, Byram (2021) offered an option: if students acquire interaction skills with the help of teachers, the teacher can integrate the learning process, promoting learning autonomy and adjusting the form of instruction and learning. This suggestion aligns with the Chang et al. (2020) statement that a more realistic setting should be used for language learning and learning should be implemented in real-world contexts so that students can relate word meanings to their circumstances. Moreover, teachers with intercultural awareness are also important to support the teaching and learning process in developing students' intercultural communicative competency. In this scenario, Etri (2023) explained that English teachers require intercultural sensitivity due to the increased demand for English in the globalised world and the rise in border crossings. Therefore, teachers can transfer their experience and perspective on intercultural communication to their students. Further, these findings can inform teachers and curriculum developers to design lessons that enhance students' interaction, collaboration, and direct intercultural communication. This approach is expected to improve enjoyment, engagement, and confidence, leading to comprehensive intercultural communicative competence.

Additionally, the ultimate objective of the Foreign Language (FL) curriculum is to become increasingly competent in intercultural discourse (Gu, 2015). More precisely, in the field of English language instruction, the ability to communicate effectively across cultures in English represents the foremost requirement in the current age of globalisation, enabling people to fulfil their professional obligations (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). Therefore, since English is being used as an International Language (EIL), teaching English must pay attention not only to linguistic competence but also communicative competence (Byram et al., 2002). This will support the global community requirement that, according to Sarwari et al. (2024), they should communicate openly, accept differences, join cultural activities, use technology for interaction, and engage practically with people from diverse cultures.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the students exhibit moderate intercultural sensitivity. Among the five measured factors, students showed high levels of respect for cultural differences and interaction attentiveness, followed by moderate levels of intercultural engagement and interaction enjoyment, as well as interaction confidence. These quantitative results were supported by interview data, and qualitative findings revealed that students' multicultural backgrounds shape their intercultural communication in complex ways. While students demonstrated strong respect for cultural diversity and awareness of the language-culture connection, they also reported

challenges, including lack of confidence, cultural shock, and communication difficulties when adapting to diverse academic settings. Notably, awareness of multiculturalism does not automatically translate into active engagement, enjoyment, or confidence in cross-cultural communication.

These findings lead to several pedagogical implications. English teachers should implement interactive and collaborative teaching methods that provide structured opportunities for direct intercultural interaction. Teachers with strong intercultural awareness are essential to guide students through the learning process and promote learning autonomy. Curriculum developers should design lessons that enhance interaction, collaboration, and real-world communication. By integrating these approaches, English classrooms can better prepare students to become effective and respectful communicators in a globalised world.

However, this study has limitations that should be acknowledged. The study was conducted at a single institution with a relatively small sample size (53 questionnaire respondents and six interview participants), which limits generalisability. Future research should consider larger, more diverse samples and observational or longitudinal methods to capture the development of intercultural sensitivity over time.

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