

# Promoting Intercultural Competence in Bilingual Programs in Indonesia

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## Abstract

Most studies of intercultural competence in bilingual programs have been conducted in non-Asian contexts resulting in little information on how Indonesian educators promote intercultural values within bilingual programs. This research contributes to the body of literature that examines the promotion of intercultural values within bilingual higher education in Indonesia. It focuses on lecturers' perceptions of their strategies to teach and promote intercultural values in Indonesian higher education institutions (IHEs). Data collection employed in-depth semi-structure interviews of eight lecturers that teach in three different programs: Math; Economic and Political Science bilingual programs. The findings of this study show that intercultural competent components include open-minded attitudes, reciprocal interaction, and respecting differences. In addition, two important strategies to promote intercultural competence are in-country programs and international intercultural programs. This study has implications for the success of similar programs and the ways to gain intercultural competence within higher education contexts.

## Keywords

intercultural competence, bilingual programs, Indonesian context, policies, identity

## Introduction

Currently, there is an increasing attention on the issues of intercultural competence (IC) among scholars and researchers. This is due to people being more aware of the benefits of IC. They are more inclined to succeed in engaging and communicating with diverse ethnic groups and communities (Tili & Barker, 2015), as they tend to avoid scrutinizing others using their own values and beliefs (Chen & Starosta, 2000). This leads to a greater potential to establish a successful business relationship (Byram, 1997; Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002). More importantly, they are more tolerant and respectful of diversity (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). For these reasons, IC is undoubtedly important for people who wish to succeed in a globalized world.

IC is defined as “knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativising one's self and linguistic competence plays a key role” (Byram, 1997, p. 34). Deardorff (2011) defines IC as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 248). These authors above indicate that IC relates to three essential things: knowledge of own and other cultures, skills of own and other cultures, and attitude to own and other cultures. Interculturally competent people may be able to more easily adjust their ability

to communicate effectively according to the situation they encounter.

Research into IC has been widely conducted particularly in Western contexts but researchers often use different labels, for example, cultural diversity competence (Ho, Holmes, Cooper, & Zealand, 2004), intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1986; Chen & Starosta, 2000; Hammer et al., 2003), multicultural competence (Vera & Speight, 2003), intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997; Lo Bianco, Liddicoat, & Crozet, 1999; Sercu, 2004), intercultural literacy (Heyward, 2002), and IC in higher education (Deardorff, 2006, 2011). Despite a number of scholars using different terminology, it can be concluded that they all refer to IC.

Studies of IC in Indonesia have mainly been influenced by Byram's (1997) seminal work on intercultural communicative competence. The primary focus of his work is on identifying patterns of IC in curriculum and language teaching. Munandar and Ulwiyah (2012) examined cultural approaches on several language textbooks. Hermawan and Lia (2012) also looked at patterns of cultures in textbooks through

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sociological approach. Gandana and Parr (2013) focused on teachers' identity and cross-cultural understanding. These researchers did not identify teachers' and lecturers' understanding of IC and mostly concentrated on the content analysis of the textbooks. Therefore, IC from teachers' and lecturers' perspectives remains largely unexplored in Indonesian higher education. This article aims to address such gaps by describing lecturers' perceptions of IC and strategies to promote it within bilingual programs.

## Related Literature

### *Concept of Bilingual Education*

Bilingual education is "any system of university education in which, at a given moment in time and for a varying amount of time, simultaneously or consecutively, instruction is planned and given in at least two languages" (Hamers & Blanc, 2000, p. 321). Howard, Lindholm-Leary, Sugarman, Christian, and Rogers (2007) defined bilingual education in the form of dual language use as "any program that provides literacy and content instruction to all students through two languages and that promotes bilingualism and biliteracy, grade-level academic achievement, and multicultural competence for all students" (p. 1). For this study, bilingual education is the use of English–Indonesian as medium of instruction for teaching in tertiary levels.

### *Key Components of IC*

To frame this study, we draw from relevant sociocultural perspective theories that enable us to decipher lecturers' perceptions of IC and ways to promote IC inside the classroom and beyond classroom settings. We begin with a description of key elements of IC from sociocultural perspectives, followed by a study of research of IC on bilingualism and bilingual education contexts.

The key components of IC are knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Byram, 1997; Byram, Nichols, & Stevens, 2001; Lo Bianco et al., 1999; Sercu, 2004): (a) knowledge about a specific culture, and how social groups and social identities function, both one's own and others; (b) skills to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own; and (c) attitudes to curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other culture and belief about one's own.

These key components of sociocultural perspectives of IC may be applicable for the contexts of Western tradition, where people are more aware of intercultural and global interaction. Different communities and different traditions may provide unique characteristics of intercultural elements. As elaborated at the end of this article, as a member of Indonesian communities and as a member of professional bilingual educators, the researchers have both a professional

and a personal interest in the topic and can offer a uniquely insider perspective on the strategies and perceptions of IC.

### *Research of IC on Bilingualism and Bilingual Education*

A number of studies have explored IC on bilingualism and bilingual education. Hornberger (2000) investigated interculturality in three countries of Latin America: Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador. She identified that these three have different views on interculturality, in which Peruvian views IC as harmonious dialogue among cultures, Ecuadorian views it as a strengthened indigenous identity, and Bolivian viewed it as a strengthened national identity based on respect for all. A recent study in Chile by Becerra-Lubies and Fones (2016) suggests teachers in Chilean contexts need to equip themselves with IC components to successfully transfer and teach in bilingual programs. What is implied in this research is that IC is related to building harmony among different ethnic groups and maintaining local identities. To build harmony, teachers are encouraged to learn culture and languages other than their own.

Other studies indicate the importance of IC in bilingual and bilingual education contexts. De Mejía (2006) suggested that the roles of teachers are important to develop IC through the integration of institutional policies on intercultural issues. The reason why IC is important for learners is due to globalization and internationalization of education (Stier, 2006).

The debate of IC has been dominated by studies conducted in Western contexts by Western scholars. Scholars such as Byram et al. (2001) and Deardorff (2006) claimed that most research on IC is derived from a Western perspective and U.S. scholars' perspectives, but there is limited work from scholars within Asian contexts. Therefore, they suggest exploring IC from non-Western perspectives would provide Eastern perspectives of IC from other cultural contexts. This research investigates Indonesian views particularly describing both lecturers on intercultural understanding and the ways of promoting intercultural understanding within diverse Indonesian education contexts. This research contributes to the development of understanding of the strategies on promoting IC within Indonesian contexts.

## Method

The case study approach was chosen to explore IC within bilingual education. A case study method is an appropriate tool to seek an understanding of the current phenomenon within a natural setting when boundaries between the phenomenon and contexts are not obviously defined and require further in-depth study (Yin, 2009). IC within bilingual programs is a complex phenomenon due to many higher education institutions implementing such programs. Such complex phenomena are better explored through the interpretive case

study (Walsham, 1995). The interpretive case study assumes that “knowledge of reality is gained only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, documents, tools, and other artefacts” (Klein & Myers, 1999, p. 69). The key question that was addressed in this article is as follows: What are lecturers’ perceptions of IC in bilingual education programs? What are the strategies to promote IC in Indonesian higher education institutions (IHEIs)?

Primary data were gained through semi-structured interviews of eight lecturer participants, each interview lasting approximately 45 min to 1 hr. All transcripts were sent back to the participants for their verification of content and meaning. This process assisted the credibility of the findings (Yin, 2009). These participants were purposively chosen because they were representative of lecturers who taught in bilingual programs. Of the eight participants, four are males and four are females. Their ages are between 30s and 50s. Four of them have master’s degrees and others have doctoral qualifications. Participants are indicated as P1 (Participant 1), P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, and P8. These participants were the lecturers who taught in bilingual programs in higher education.

The data were analyzed using NVivo qualitative software analysis version 9 (QSR International, 2014). Even though there were a small number of participants, there is a large amount of data, so that the NVivo application tool assisted the researcher to identify key categories of the data. The process of analysis follows several steps: (a) interview transcripts in word version were exported to NVivo source to create sources name; (b) all data were then analyzed through query to identify common pattern of the data; (c) all data were read through NVivo and coded (node); (d) data were classified into general nodes and subnodes; (e) the node and subnodes were visualized; and (6) the visualized nodes and transcript extracts were exported into word document.

## Findings

### Components of IC

There are three elements of IC that emerged from the interviews: *open-minded attitudes*, *reciprocal interaction*, and *respecting differences*.

**Open-minded.** The first important intercultural values raised by most participants are open-minded attitudes. Most participants acknowledge that someone should be open-minded to be able learn their own culture and other cultures (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, and P8). For example, a lecturer of Basic Social Science commented, “open mindedness aids everyone to accept diverse ways of living, different points of views and help build a tradition of appreciation of own and others—particularly an appreciation of other points of views” (P1). This indicates that an open-minded individual relates to the personal cognitive ability to appreciate own cultural elements and diversity that exist around individuals.

In addition, being open-minded assists individuals to be culturally sensitive. A lecturer of Business Communication indicated that an “open-minded [person] can accept the diversity of situations so that everyone can be more progressive in that situation” (P3). We can interpret this as an open-minded individual can react and respond to the situation appropriately which can avoid confusing and problems. Similarly, a lecturer of Basic Statistics further elaborates on the importance of being an open-minded person:

Being open minded assists them to recognize others who are different from them. . . [Individuals] who have this ability tends to survive in a multicultural environment. . . this is important in a global world nowadays. (P2)

Being an open-minded person enhances the possibilities of accepting new ideas suggested by others. This is an important value to help individuals cope with diversity of new ideas, innovations, and inventions. Students believe an open mind-set cannot simply be taught and debated in the classroom, but can become more prominent through experience. A lecturer of Entrepreneurship commented that “not everybody accepts new things, it takes time, but if you are an open-minded person you can learn new things faster” (P5). In addition, some other lecturers add that open-minded people relate to “accept diversity” (P4), “think positively to anyone” (P7), and “be able to recognize the uniqueness of each person” (P8). This implies that an individual who is inclusive tend to be far more progressive than those who are not, particularly learning new things and accepting diversity in a globalized world.

**Knowledge of reciprocal interaction.** Reciprocal interaction is the second important theme raised by participants in relation to IC. Most participants in this study argued that a knowledge of reciprocity helps individuals to establish successful relationships with others (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, and P7). For instance, a lecturer of Entrepreneurship claims that reciprocity “increases the likelihood of a successful relationship between one person and others and between one institution and others” (P5). Similarly, another participant supports that “such types of people normally think about what and how to contribute positively to others rather than to take benefit from others” (P1). Thus, reciprocity can be considered as a way of establishing mutualism, where individuals interact with and benefit one another.

Reciprocity should become an underpinning value when an individual and institution interact with others. A lecturer of Leadership suggested that “an individual student can start establishing reciprocal relationships beginning from small classroom contexts then in larger settings, sharing knowledge and skills among each other” (P6). This suggests that reciprocal interactions should be practiced from a small group of communities which can then be transformed in wider interactions and partnerships. In the context of

institutional levels, he provides an institutional illustration of how to establish reciprocal interactions:

In student exchange programs, they [students] no longer pay their tuition fees to overseas partner universities or vice versa international students who come to study here don't have to pay their tuition fee. . . . That is the reciprocity. (P6)

Another important aspect of reciprocity is that local students can get along with international students and others. A lecturer of International Politics argues, "Students should be equipped with knowledge of reciprocal interaction so that local students can get along with international students, since many of them come here" (P7). Similarly, another lecturer claims that "being mutual in relationship is important because you also think of others." This suggests that an individual who possess the values of reciprocity can maintain harmonious relationship with others and can easily create partnership with others.

**Respecting differences.** Respect the diversity of different cultures is another important theme emerged from interviews. It is related to the attitude of respecting the uniqueness of individuals. A lecturer of Fundamentals of Mathematics explains, "The attitudes of respecting diversity will help people to recognize that everyone in the world is unique and different" (P8). He suggests a better way to build this intercultural understanding of identity is through "an in-depth identifying and understanding about ourselves first and then begins to learn about others." He, however, acknowledges the challenge of building this attitude because many people see "differences as not a good thing and as impediment."

Another lecturer who teaches Entrepreneurship adds,

One of the pivotal values that everyone here should know and be aware of is how one can support the understanding of similarities so that he can acknowledge that there is the same thing in this life . . . and the other is that one does have to respect differences. . . .because everybody is unique. (P5)

Correspondingly, this attitude relates to the desire to appreciate others. A lecturer of Management argues that "to respect other people views and ideas, you have to understand their views as to why we are similar and why we are different" (P4). She asserts that "people cannot just assume they know other people without being part of them . . . We have to grow our own first, then we can appreciate others" (P4).

What has shown in this theme is that an individual who wants to respect others should begin with respecting oneself. Respecting oneself means identifying own portraits of cultural and ethnic identities. Through this a person may acknowledge that he may be unique and possess certain characteristics that other people do not own. Then an individual can recognize other people as unique and different from one another. If people see themselves as different from others,

they tend to judge others who do not belong to their group of communities.

### *Strategies to Promote IC*

There are two strategies used by lecturers to promote and engage intercultural values within bilingual programs: intercultural and language engagement through in-country programs, and intercultural engagement through overseas immersion.

*Intercultural and language engagement through in-country programs.* Participants in this study identified several key forms of immersion activities including English debating, language club, students clubs, and writing clubs. The reason for including club activities here is that these club activities use English and Indonesian as the media of instruction and communication. The following section describes the nature and structure of each of these activities.

Debating community is the first type of intercultural and language engagement. The focus of debating community activities on campus is to use English effectively and to learn the culture of English speaking countries in expressing reasonable, logical, and meaningful flows of arguments. Developing confidence and competence in English is also crucial for debating national events such as the National University English Debating Championships (NUEDC) and globally through the World University English Debating Championships (WUEDC). These bilingual activities foster the need to invest in excellent English competence. A lecturer argues,

The university debating community encourages participants to speak fluently, logically and meaningfully. The English speaking and debating skills are the two important ones; besides being a knowledgeable debater. . . .more importantly they learn about others. (P6)

Language clubs are other informal activities conducted on campus that invite students from diverse backgrounds. Examples of activities in these clubs include language training, bilingual drama performances, multicultural week festivals, English speech competitions, and English spelling bee contests. These events are held in sequential order during the academic year.

It is interesting to note that language clubs activities not only involve local students but also involve international students studying there. These bilingual activities are designed to support students to improve their language performance and engage with people from different ranges of countries and cultures. A lecturer in International Politics was amazed with students' community initiative: "I have stumbled upon students talking in groups during several weeks prior to semester break, I talked to them, and they were groups of student communities of language learners. They were aware

of how important the language and learning other culture were . . . They learned not only English language and culture but also Mandarin, and Japan” (P8). Moreover, a lecturer of Basic Social Science suggests that “the immersion experience can be created locally, groups of local students, expatriates and lecturers who have native English speaking backgrounds” (P1). This indicates that language clubs not only engage students to learn about the international national languages, but more importantly they learn the cultures of other countries. This can assist them to express and use the languages they learn in culturally appropriate contexts.

The third intercultural and language engagement activities prevalent within on-campus communities were the international activities organized by the United Nations (UN) campus club. Some examples of the UN model activities included UN meetings on decision making and problem solving of world issues and practicing key roles of world influential leaders in the UN. The activities used one of the working and official languages of the UN, which is English. The UN model truly enhances students’ abilities not only to investigate social and world issues but also to enhance their English ability as they discuss real societal problems. A lecturer of Business claims that

the UN model gives them opportunities to act, play the roles and functions as world leaders. They can imitate how they speak, and even how they treat people in the forum. They have learned such models through videos and the Internet.

Finally, the strategy to build intercultural understanding is through cognitive input about other cultures. There are two ways of teaching learners about other cultures. A lecturer of Business Communication states that learners can learn how to behave inclusively through “reading articles or books about other cultures, watching videos, and listening to stories about other cultures, and attending a lecture on intercultural understanding” (P3). This lecturer also asserts that learners should “experience directly in a culturally diverse environment and grouping students whose backgrounds differ from each other.” In addition, a lecturer of Management extends this practical example of becoming intercultural competent graduates “by exposing students internationally through different ranges of academic collaborations with partner universities overseas such as university to university exchange programs” (P4).

These voluntary immersion activities within on-campus communities are important as they support students to engage, interact, and become involved with diverse cultural backgrounds. These intercultural and bilingual activities are essential to support the development of cultural and bilingual competencies of students in higher education programs. As a result, it is argued that these broad varieties of exposure activities can provide maximum exposure to culture and international language development. Thus, involving students in these language and cultural activities helps establish

friendships and networks within the local on-campus communities.

*Intercultural engagement through overseas immersion.* Participants in this study identified three categories of overseas immersion activities including short-term, mid-term, and long-term immersion activities. A short-term overseas activity is an overseas program between 1 and 4 weeks duration. The examples of short-term overseas immersion programs are seminars, conferences, short courses, short training, short workshops, and summer courses. Nearly all participants of this study argued that even though it is short exposure, it is crucial for them to gain exposure to international learning opportunities and overseas cultures.

These short-term immersion courses are compulsory because they are assessed and are required to abide with all rules and regulations set by the partner universities overseas. A lecturer claims that “the activities such as summer courses or short courses will be categorized as compulsory for them, for the students presenting their papers in international conferences overseas are counted as an international exposure course” (P8). He adds “summer courses that take place in English speaking countries will improve students’ confidence in using English and begin to immerse with their culture.”

The mid-term overseas immersion activities are the events conducted overseas for periods of 1 to 6 months. Examples of mid-term overseas activities are community service programs, student-exchange programs, and internship programs. All participants in this study value international workplace programs as they provided them with exposure to international working cultures and use of English in a real working environment. One lecturer indicates, “This [international exposure program] makes students more familiar and engaged with the culture and English” (P1). In addition, a lecturer of Basic Statistics (P2) highlights the necessity of overseas mid-term immersion activities. In his words, “Indonesian higher education institutions have to be fully engaged particularly with ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) communities in order to get to know each other well” (P2). He notes,

with the agreements have been made with some institutions in Malaysia and Singapore, students can experience in internship programs in those ASEAN countries. These programs do have an impact on their language and personal experiences. Malaysia and Singapore, as we know, use English as their formal language of education in schools. (P2)

This implies that learners can engage and get connected from other communities within the ASEAN territory.

Finally, long-term overseas immersion activities are those events conducted overseas for longer periods of time: in excess of 6 months. Examples of long-term overseas formal immersion activities include 6-month programs and double

degree programs. Longer term exposure to English speaking universities enables students to establish person to person networks and friendships, thus developing their English more naturally and experiencing academic life-changing opportunities. A lecturer of Basic Social Science comments on these long-term immersion activities: "At the moment we have established several partnership agreements with universities where students can undertake double degree programs" (P1).

Despite being a high cost program, overseas immersion activities are considered crucial in exposing students to international learning cultures. They are fundamentally worthy and often facilitate life-changing experiences. The mid- and long-term overseas exposure activities, however, cost more than the short-term ones. As a result, only some students can afford mid- and long-term exposure activities with most of them choosing short-term ones due to financial constraints.

### Discussion

The theme of open-mindedness reflects the intercultural attitude and the theme of respecting difference (Byram et al., 2001). The theme of reciprocal interaction extends the notion of IC within bilingual contexts. More importantly, this study identifies unique strategies of promoting IC. Earlier studies have not discussed both in-country intercultural engagement and overseas immersions as ways to acquire, engage, and learn other cultures. What is most important for learners who possess cross-cultural knowledge and skills is it enables them to recognize, accept, behave, and survive in a multifaceted global environment. Thus, bilingual education programs can transform students' desire and expectation of becoming interculturally competent graduates.

The IC within bilingual programs can be implemented effectively in both in-country and international exposure programs. The in-country programs can be much affordable, despite the lack of native English speaking experiences. The involvement of native English speaking lecturers and students can improve in-country intercultural programs. The implication is that the in-country intercultural programs will be the model for intercultural exposures as it delivers a set of quality contents that caters both local and international students.

The implication of this study is that learners who wish to learn and identify their own cultures should participate in a number of intercultural engagements within their country. While learners who wish to experience, engage, and learn other cultures should participate in overseas immersion programs, learners who have the desire to acquire, immerse, and understand their own and other cultures are strongly encouraged to participate in both intercultural engagement activities: in-country and overseas programs. Thus, participating in these programs helps establish intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and awareness, for example, Byram (1997); Byram et al. (2002); Deardorff (2006); Heyward (2002); Lo Bianco et al. (1999); Sercu (2004). This cross-cultural knowledge, attitudes,

and awareness enabled participants to recognize, accept, behave, and survive in a multifaceted global environment.

### Conclusion

This article offers insightful information of lecturers' perceptions of and the strategies used to promote IC. They portray that learners are to be more inclusive, aware of their own culture and acquire more understanding of other cultures, acknowledge commonalities, and respect differences. More importantly, learners have to be able to interact harmoniously and reciprocally with *people from cultures other than their own*. This research was carried out within universities in an Indonesian context and the findings may provide additional perspective on how learners imagined themselves to be interculturally competent graduates, particularly in developing countries, after participating in bilingual programs. Our in-depth exploration of the phenomenon and the result can possibly contribute to insightful theoretical and practical knowledge to the community particularly within similar contexts of this study. Future research needs to explore within multiple settings and broader population so that it can extend our findings by providing more comprehensive evidence to bolster the findings in this article.

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