

## **Delving into EFL graduates' intercultural sensitivity and experiences: Three Indonesian narrative case studies**

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Scholarship on intercultural sensitivity (henceforth IS) suggests expanding research in Asian countries in this topic (Choi, 2023). Addressing this lacuna, drawing upon Chen and Starosta's (2000) intercultural sensitivity scale (ISS), our narrative case study sought to explore IS level attainment by three Indonesian EFL students. We collected data from the participants through semi-structured interviews and interpreted by performing reflexive thematic analysis. The findings evidenced that the participants' voices revealed rich layers of IS levels, particularly concerning their intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and awareness. Ahmad and Zacky (pseudonyms) demonstrated a high level of IS in almost all five IS dimensions, such as showing a sense of accepting cultural diversity and a high confidence level, showing respect and empathy, being adaptive and collaborative, and showing proactive efforts. In contrast, Ayu showed a lack of proactive effort, empathy, and adaptation. Practical implications for stakeholders in education systems are presented and discussed.

### **Introduction**

As the world becomes a global village (Tirnaz & Narafshan, 2020), intercultural encounters are prevalent in contemporary social interactions. People from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds interact for various social purposes (e.g., tourism, business, hospitality, education, and technology). Since the late 20th and early 21st centuries, scholars in intercultural studies have provided empirical evidence highlighting the accentuation of intercultural communicative competence (henceforth ICC) among language learners (Deardorff, 2006; Sinicrope et al., 2007). Consequently, it has important implications for English language teaching (ELT) practices. This calls for them to be "intercultural speakers" equipped with ICC, instead of just being linguistically competent, to survive in multicultural environments (Batunan, Kweldju & Khotimah 2023; Byram, 1997; Fitriyah et al., 2024; Widiati & Hayati, 2019). Grounded on this perspective, EFL courses have therefore been geared toward developing learners' ICC (Byram, 1997; Cahyono, 2018; Deardorff, 2006).

As "the predictor of cultural competence" (Altshuler et al., 2003, p. 388), IS has been viewed as the cornerstone of developing ICC (Hammer et al., 2003). To be interculturally

competent, language learners must demonstrate profound sensitivity toward diverse cultures and display a high degree of respect toward individuals from various cultural backgrounds. In recent years, extensive lines of empirical research have been published to investigate IS from various angles (Deveci et al., 2022; Imsa-Ard, 2023; Mohammadi et al., 2023; Pasand et al., 2021; Tirnaz & Narafshan, 2020; Zhang & Han, 2019). They reached a strong consensus that they acknowledged the importance of IS as a determinant factor of learners' ICC, contributing to their professional development.

As aforesaid, contemporary research on measuring IS levels has been extensively documented. However, to the best of our understanding, there is currently a glaring scarcity of studies investigating EFL learners' IS levels in Indonesian higher education contexts. Inspired by a contemporary systematic review of studies on IS (Choi, 2023) that recommended expanding research to Asian countries, this current study aimed to bridge the above-illustrated gaps by exploring the IS levels of Indonesian EFL university students. Measuring their IS levels is critical, as they act as ambassadors and facilitators in transmitting their own culture and other cultures. This study will contribute to providing empirical evidence for the identification of the current levels of IS among participants. Practically, it can offer insights to EFL teachers, policymakers, and practitioners to develop policies or educational courses that focus on enhancing IS levels among Indonesian EFL learners. Furthermore, this current research can hopefully serve as a point of reference for future studies on IS levels contextualised in similar or resembling contexts and beyond.

## **Literature review**

### **Conceptualising intercultural sensitivity**

Intercultural sensitivity (IS) is postulated as a prerequisite for the ICC (Hammer et al., 2003). This notion is operationally defined as "an individual's ability to develop emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promote appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication" (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p. 5). Reflecting on this definition, it involves an emotional connection in understanding, appreciating, and accepting cultural differences so that individuals can communicate, interact, and behave appropriately with those from diverse linguacultural backgrounds. They further argued that IS is one of the three interconnected and distinctive components of ICC: intercultural awareness (cognitive), intercultural sensitivity (affective), and intercultural adroitness (behaviour) (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p. 5).

Chen and Starosta (1997) underlined the necessity of possessing IS among learners to support intercultural awareness and adroitness. They further emphasised that learners with higher IS levels will be able to easily adapt and navigate complex cultural differences, enabling them to thrive and live harmoniously in these diverse cultural environments. Furthermore, Chen and Starosta (2000), too, identified the five IS dimensions: (a) interaction engagement; (b) respect for cultural differences; (c) interaction confidence; (d) interaction enjoyment; and (e) interaction attentiveness. Interaction engagement refers to an individual's level of involvement when a person participates in intercultural encounters.

Respect for cultural differences concerns open-mindedness and tolerance of other cultures. Interaction confidence refers to an individual's assurance when interacting in an intercultural setting. Interaction enjoyment reflects individual reactions when talking to and interacting with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The last dimension, interaction attentiveness, refers to how much a person attempts to understand and appreciate the nuances of intercultural communications.

### **Situating previous studies on IS**

In recent decades, considerable empirical research exploring IS by employing Chen and Starosta's (2000) ISS has been prolific with various foci. An earlier empirical study (Mostafaei Alaei & Nosrati, 2018), for instance, explored Iranian EFL teachers' ICC and IS levels and the possible relationship between their ICC and IS. Through correlational analysis, they found noteworthy connections between the various ICC and IS dimensions, except for the relationship between the knowledge dimension of ICC and respecting other cultures and interaction enjoyment dimensions of IS. Further, using Chen and Starosta's (2000) ISS, Zhang and Han (2019) compared college students' IS levels situated in two different institutions in the U.S., "a mid-sized state university in the south and a small private liberal arts school in the mid-west", reporting that students in the former exhibited greater IS compared to the latter, particularly on two dimensions of the ISS.

A mixed-methods classroom-based study by Tirnaz and Narafshan (2020) contextualised in an Iranian EFL classroom examined whether the use of intercultural TV advertisements could positively impact classroom climate and increase IS. They found that the experimental group showed significant improvement in IS skills, implying the potential of intercultural TV advertisements for students to recognise, embrace, and appreciate cultural differences. More recently, previous research has acknowledged the pivotal role of IS and critical thinking training incorporated into the EFL curriculum in fostering EFL teachers' professional development (Mohammadi et al., 2023). In Thailand, Imsa-Ard (2023) further examined the relationship between the participants' ICC and IS levels, revealing significant correlations between the two variables.

Despite a myriad of previous academic literature on IS contextualized in EFL contexts, there is a call for further research investigating Indonesian EFL learners' IS. As a novelty, drawing upon Chen and Starosta's (2000) ISS, our study attempts to respond to the following research question: "To what extent do Indonesian EFL learners possess intercultural sensitivity?"

## **Method**

### **Research design**

A narrative case study methodology (Brandell & Varkas, 2001; Yin, 2018) informed the research design for exploring the IS of EFL learners. Grounded on the constructivist narrative approach (Leavy, 2023), this research method "permits the researcher to

“capture” exceedingly complex case situations, allowing for a considerable degree of detail and richness of understanding” (Brandell & Varkas, 2001, p.298).

## **Participants**

To recruit participants, we purposively invited seven prospective participants based on particular inclusion criteria suited to the research issues and their willingness to participate in the study voluntarily. Specifically, there were several predetermined criteria for participant recruitment: (1) Indonesian university EFL learners; and (2) having intercultural interaction experiences with individuals from diverse lingua-cultural backgrounds in various contexts (e.g., educational, social, or professional settings). After sending research invitations to potential participants, we informed them to contact the researchers personally if they were willing to participate in the study. As a result, Ahmad, Zacky, and Ayu (all pseudonyms) signed an e-consent form and were recruited for the study as they met our research objectives. We recruited them as the suitable “case” for this study “on the basis of typicality, uniqueness, success, and so forth, as the unit of analysis” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 39).

Ahmad was trained as an English teacher candidate and graduated from a bachelor degree program in 2021. He is currently pursuing his masters degree in English education at a private university in East Java, Indonesia. He was hired by the International Cruise Ship Company in Miami, Florida, USA in 2016. Currently, he works as a human resource specialist at that company. Zacky completed his undergraduate degree at a private university in East Java, Indonesia, majoring in English education in 2023. He is now enrolled in a private university in East Java, Indonesia, for his masters degree in English education. He is a member of a global “English-spoken community” with more than 100 members from Egypt, Germany, Iraq, Indonesia, Korea, Thailand, Turkey, and Vietnam. Further, he has been an interpreter for about 1.5 years. He performed his duties in various events by providing translation and interpretation services for Indonesian and U.S. military personnel. Ayu received her bachelor degree in the English teacher education program at a private university in East Java, Indonesia. In 2022, Ayu took a significant step toward advancing her education by applying for a masters program in TESOL in Australia and received a scholarship from the Indonesian government called the LPDP scholarship, the Education Fund Management Agency (see Table 1).

As aforementioned, the personal experiences they shared were unique as they regularly engaged in intercultural interactions. Exploring this issue with these participants would be interesting and would make valuable contributions to the existing literature and deepen our understanding of EFL learners’ IS. To alleviate any potential pressure, we informed them that their participation in this study would not negatively affect their future relationships with the researchers. Therefore, they could withdraw at any time without facing any consequences.

Table 1: Participants' demographic profile

Pseudo -nym	Gender (Age)	Education attainment	English learning experience (yrs)	Experience living in multicultural settings
Ahmad	Male (29)	Graduate student	12	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A masters student in English education at a private university in East Java, Indonesia.</li> <li>2. Human resource specialist at the International Cruise Ship Company in Miami, Florida, USA (2016 – now)</li> </ol>
Zacky	Male (28)	Graduate student	18	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A masters student in English education at a private university in East Java, Indonesia.</li> <li>2. An interpreter:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Super Garuda Shield (2023)</li> <li>b. US Marine Corps Interpreter in Keris Marex (2023).</li> <li>c. US Army interpreter in the Initial Site Survey (ISS) for the Garuda Shield (2024).</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
Ayu	Female (26)	Graduate student	18	A student of the masters in TESOL at a tier-one university in Melbourne, Australia (2023 - now).

### Instrument

The data were all garnered from a series of semi-structured interviews with participants to generate a comprehensive picture of their IS level. In doing so, we provided them with a mutually convenient date and time to conduct the interviews. The necessary data for the study were collected between March and May 2024. We interviewed them several times, each lasting an average of 60 to 75 minutes. To encourage them to narrate their stories comfortably and avoid possible misunderstandings, all interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, the participants' native tongue, using the voice note feature of WhatsApp. In doing so, we sent all interview items through WhatsApp for flexibility in timing and scheduling to respond to the interview items. This would provide the opportunity for the participants to articulate their views comprehensively and generate more accurate findings.

The first interview established an appropriate level of personal relationship with the participants and compiled information about their demographic profiles. We then conducted a second interview two weeks later. The interviews comprised a series of open questions, which were arranged and developed suited to the research objective of the study. The interview items were developed and adapted from Chen and Starosta's (2000) ISS, comprising five categories: (1) interaction engagement; (2) respect for cultural differences; (3) interaction confidence; (4) interaction enjoyment; and (5) interaction attentiveness (Table 2). To encourage greater expression, probing questions were also asked, depending on the response to each item. All recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim in Bahasa Indonesia. In addition to conducting formal interviews with those participants, the first author conducted unstructured conversations with the participants to provide them with opportunities to elaborate on what they meant. The first author

took notes in his data collection notebook to record casual conversations, as they were not audio-recorded.

Table 2: Interview guide

No.	Categories	Items
1.	Interaction engagement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Can you tell me about your experience interacting with people from different cultures?</li> <li>2. In your opinion, what does it mean to be open-minded toward people from different cultures? Why?</li> </ol>
2.	Respect for cultural differences	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Can you describe how you show respect for the values of people from different cultures?</li> <li>2. What actions do you take to respect the behaviour patterns of people from different cultures?</li> </ol>
3.	Interaction confidence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Can you describe your confidence level when interacting with people from different cultures? Why?</li> <li>2. How do you approach interacting with people from different cultures? Do you rely on your knowledge and experience or seek guidance from others?</li> </ol>
4.	Interaction enjoyment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Can you describe any challenges or difficulties, if any, that you may have encountered when interacting with people from different cultures? Why or why not?</li> <li>2. How do you feel when you are about to interact with people from different cultures? Do you experience any nervousness, and if so, what may contribute to it?</li> </ol>
5.	Interaction attentiveness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How do you gather information when interacting with people from different cultures? Do you have any preferred methods?</li> </ol>

### Data analysis

The process of data analysis for the current research began after the completion of all interviews with the participants. We employed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is operationally defined as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). We adopted several stages of the data analysis procedures as proposed by Widodo (2014) for the data analysis process. First, we listened to the audio-recorded data multiple times to familiarise ourselves with them. The second phase transcribed all verbal data collected from the interviews in an appropriate format. We read the results of interview transcripts repeatedly and checked them against the original audio recordings several times to ensure the accuracy of the data. Through this process, we also attempted to identify the relevant keywords for the key themes that might have emerged. The next phase was interpreting the transcribed data using both theoretical and empirical perspectives. The last stage was member checking to build data credibility. At this stage of the process, we shared the interview transcripts with the participants and allowed them to provide feedback, either confirming or refuting, to ensure the accuracy of our data interpretation.

## **Trustworthiness**

Assessing data trustworthiness in a qualitative study is crucial to demonstrate the conscientiousness of the data-generating process. As one of the strategies to achieve the highest possible trustworthiness in the study, we followed the peer debriefing strategy (Janesick, 2015). We requested one peer assistant professor specialising in ELT, who was not involved in the study, to discuss the interview questions and data analysis. We implemented any necessary modifications based on his comments. After completing the verbatim transcription of the interviews, we also engaged with a member check to reduce the potential for researcher bias and enhance the accuracy of the data by returning the transcripts to the participants (Harvey, 2015). A participant requested minor changes, and we made minor corrections before the data analysis process. The next interviews were conducted seven weeks after the second interview, intended to allow the participants to sort and eliminate unnecessary data, and to express our gratitude for the interviews.

## **Findings**

### **Interaction engagement**

Interviews on the topic of the first IS dimension, interaction engagement, frequently brought up a sense of a wide range of experiences when dealing with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. All interviewees responded to the first question by mentioning that they experienced a feeling of tremendous excitement and enjoyment. The following excerpts highlight their positive feelings:

... so wonderful, I am thrilled to engage with them. (Ahmad, interview 2, 15 April 2024).

...as an interpreter, I have had the pleasure of working with people from different (cultural) backgrounds, ... a fascinating experience. (Zacky, interview 2, 20 April 2024)

... (It is) cool. ... like a dream come true. (Ayu, interview 2, 21 April 2024).

Concerning the opinion about open-mindedness, all participants mentioned explicitly that they demonstrated a sense of cultural acceptance manifested by respecting others' beliefs, appreciating diversity, and valuing the uniqueness of each individual's cultural background. To explain more, Ahmad noted:

To me, this means embracing and respecting their beliefs and customs ... without prejudice or judgment, fostering mutual understanding and appreciation. (Ahmad, interview 2, 15 April 2024).

Similarly, Zacky and Ayu candidly remarked in their interviews:

Being open-minded means valuing unique qualities, regardless of their cultural background. ... (through) listening, showing empathy, and acknowledging that we all have different life experiences. (Zacky, interview 2, 20 April 2024)

I think (that) when we understand each other and do not disturb what people from different cultures do, I call it (being) open-minded. (Ayu, interview 2, 21 April 2024).

### **Respect for cultural differences**

The analysis of the interviews with the participants on the topic of respect for cultural differences revealed that they demonstrated their respect for cultural differences by showing empathy, appreciating cultural heritage, learning customs and beliefs, and giving compliments. Ahmed explained how he respects cultural differences, saying:

I demonstrate respect for the values of people from different cultures by actively listening, refraining from imposing my values, and showing empathy and appreciation for their cultural heritage. (Ahmad, interview 2, 15 April 2024).

Zacky and Ayu commented on this issue as follows:

Respecting other people's cultural values is important for clear communication. ... If I am unsure about something, I respectfully ask questions and seek guidance from anyone to avoid any misunderstanding. (Zacky, interview 2, 20 April 2024)

...by giving appreciation (and) compliments. For example, when my friend from another country and I are talking about our culture, at the end we compliment each other such as saying: "Wow, great (or) beautiful" (Ayu, interview 2, 21 April 2024).

Regarding the actions they took to respect cultural differences, they mentioned several actions. Ahmad and Zacky noted:

I respect the behavioral patterns of people from different cultures by observing cultural norms, adapting my communication style, and being mindful of nonverbal cues to ensure mutual respect and understanding. (Ahmad, interview 2, 15 April 2024).

... I observe and adapt to different norms such as body language and etiquette. I think genuine curiosity and commitment to continuous learning are key to promoting cultural understanding. (Zacky, interview 2, 20 April 2024).

Ayu, however, expressed a lack of active effort and empathy towards people from different cultures. As contended by Ayu:

... Just let them behave (in) what they want to ... as long as it does not disturb me. (Ayu, interview 2, 21 April 2024).

### **Interaction confidence**

In terms of interaction confidence, all participants conveyed high self-confidence levels when interacting with people from different cultures. To illustrate:

My confidence level ... is quite high, given my 8 years of experience as a human resources specialist. This has given me valuable exposure and understanding of diverse backgrounds. (Ahmad, interview 2, 15 April 2024).



It has grown significantly over my career. By continually improving my language skills and cultural knowledge, I have built a strong foundation for my confidence and flexibility. (Zacky, interview 2, 20 April 2024).

... (It is) 9 out of 10. (Ayu, interview 2, 21 April 2024).

Further, participants were questioned about how they approach interacting with individuals from different cultures. Ahmad and Zacky mentioned several approaches. Examples of the participants' responses included:

... I rely on both my knowledge and experience gained from previous interactions and seek advice and insights from colleagues ... to ensure effective communication and (show) mutual respect. (Ahmad, interview 2, 15 April 2024).

I like to use what I know ... stay open to learning from others. ... self-confidence and a willingness to learn are (the) keys to successful cross-cultural communication. (Zacky, interview 2, 20 April 2024).

Unlike the other participants who expressed the abovementioned approaches, Ayu interestingly expressed a lack of adaptation and cultural awareness. An example of her responses was as follows:

...just do what I want to do, like interacting with people of the same culture. (Ayu, interview 2, 21 April 2024).

### **Interaction enjoyment**

Next, the study sought to explore interaction enjoyment, including the challenges or difficulties they might encounter in intercultural interactions, and ask about their feelings during such circumstances. One major finding on this topic was that the participants experienced multilingual obstacles due to a lack of familiarity with other languages and cultures, differences in communication styles, difficulties in understanding dialects and accents, and differences in language proficiency level. The participants commented on this issue as follows:

... So, the difficulties I have encountered when interacting with people from different cultures include language barriers and (cultural) misunderstandings due to cultural differences, ... (Ahmad, interview 2, 15 April 2024).

There have been moments when I have faced challenges (like) language barriers (and) unfamiliar customs. Yet, I see these moments as chances for personal growth... by keeping an open dialog (and) showing empathy... (Zacky, interview 2, 20 April 2024).

Sometimes, when interacting with Chinese or Indian(s), I do not get their point ... so hard to understand their accents, ... (Ayu, interview 2, 21 April 2024).

When it comes to expressing their feelings when interacting in multicultural environments, analysis of interview data revealed that all participants mentioned explicitly that they

initially experienced nervousness. Interestingly, it can also be highlighted that Ahmad and Zacky acknowledged the importance of preparation, experience, and self-awareness in building confidence. In this regard, Ahmad propounded:

Before talking with them, I might feel a bit nervous, ... Still, my experience and preparation helped me calm myself down, so I jumped into the conversations with confidence and respect. (Ahmad, interview 2, 15 April 2024).

Zacky held the same concern:

Sometimes, I get a bit nervous before interacting with them. But I am always excited to learn and interact with them, (so) I try to embrace these opportunities with (an) open heart. Being well-prepared and recognising our shared humanity could ease any anxiety. (Zacky, interview 2, 20 April 2024).

Ayu confessed that she also experienced nervousness, particularly in the first week of coming to Australia, due to the negative stereotype of Islam, as reflected in the following excerpt:

In my first week of coming to Australia, I felt nervous, but now, I do not think so. This might be from my worry (about) whether my message (was) delivered well or not. Moreover, I am worrying about whether Muslims (are) accepted in this city. (Ayu, interview 2, 21 April 2024).

### **Interaction attentiveness**

The next dimension focuses on exploring how participants gather information when interacting with people from different cultures. Ahmad and Zacky confessed that they used several methods. The excerpts are reflections of their thoughts about this issue:

... to gather information in a multicultural environment, I love to use different methods such as active listening, asking open-ended questions, conducting research, and seeking clarification to ensure understanding and respect for other cultures. (Ahmad, interview 2, 15 April 2024).

..., I (usually) gather information by combining my personal experiences, research from (the) internet, and past-present conversations with others. During my conversation, I also analysed the micro expression(s) of my (conversation) partners. (Zacky, interview 2, 20 April 2024).

However, Ayu articulated a different voice by not mentioning any specific method she employed when interacting with others from diverse cultural backgrounds. This point is best reflected in Ayu's quote:

Honestly, I do not have any (specific) method. Everything goes naturally. Just be polite. ... as long as I do not offend them, it is okay. ... (Ayu, interview 2, 21 April 2024).

## Discussion

Drawing on the five ISS dimensions (Chen & Starosta, 2000), this study explored the IS level among Indonesian EFL university students. For the first dimension, interaction engagement, the findings indicate that all participants conveyed a sense of a diverse range of experiences in dealing with individuals from different lingua-cultural backgrounds. They also demonstrated a feeling of tremendous excitement and enjoyment, showing a high level of interaction engagement, reflecting their eagerness to engage in interactions with them. The possible justification for these findings in this regard might be due to their extensive personal experiences (e.g., overseas experiences and socialising with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds), leading to the relatively high interest in interacting with them.

Our findings, obtained from participants who had overseas experience, are similar to the findings by Altshuler et al. (2003) and Deveci et al. (2022). Overseas experience means opening up opportunities to brush up on one's interaction skills with individuals of diverse lingua-cultural backgrounds and improving ICC (Anderson et al., 2006). However, personal factors such as initial competence (Anderson et al., 2006) and acculturation levels (Tarchi et al., 2019) need to be considered, as they can significantly influence learners' ICC development (Tarchi & Surian, 2022). In contrast, for those who lack overseas experience, educational stakeholders can also facilitate intercultural learning by optimising Web 2.0 online interaction services as a viable alternative for gaining exposure to diverse cultures (Batunan, Kweldju & Wulyani, 2023; Pasand et al., 2021), including Zoom-mediated intercultural telecollaborative projects (Batunan, Cahyono, et al., 2023; Freiermuth & Huang, 2021).

Another possible reason could be receiving formal education that included culture competency training programs, which in turn enhanced their interaction confidence and ICC. Our study confirms the existing literature (Pasand et al., 2021; Tirnaz & Narafshan, 2020) in claiming that cross-cultural communication projects in formal education that transmit culture-specific knowledge are linked to successful outcomes in boosting learners' interaction confidence and the development of their IS. In essence, having more interactions with individuals from diverse multicultural backgrounds will progressively grow one's self-confidence and reduce anxiety, thus increasing his/her cross-cultural sensitivity, which is consistent with earlier studies (Deveci et al., 2022; Su, 2018; Toscu & Erten, 2020).

Concerning the participants' views on open-mindedness, they responded to this interview question similarly. The interviewees argued that being open-minded toward people from distinct cultures implies accepting cultural diversity by demonstrating a mutual understanding of multiculturalism, appreciation of cultural diversity, and valuing the uniqueness of each individual's cultural heritage. This corresponds to an earlier study's findings (Abduh & Rosmaladewi, 2018). Deardorff (2006) emphasised that an individual with a greater IS will demonstrate empathy and an open-minded mindset, resulting in the ability to value diverse cultural perspectives. Openness to cultural diversity is therefore

paramount for mitigating conflicts and promoting sociocultural harmony in a pluralistic society (Larsen, 2023; Markey et al., 2023). Accordingly, teachers must engage students in authentic intercultural interactions with those from diverse cultural groups so that they can gradually gain critical cultural awareness, leading to cultural acceptance and respect for differences as the basis for the development of their IS (Tirnaz & Narafshan, 2020).

A closer look at our findings related to the dimension of respect for cultural differences further shows that the interviewees demonstrated high respect for cultural differences. The findings add some support to the existing literature on IS (Pasand et al., 2021; Su, 2018) in which a high respect for cultural differences was also found. This is a clear indication that the participants did not regard their own culture as superior to other cultures and showed respect for other beliefs and values by showing empathy and appreciation, seeking guidance from anyone to avoid any misunderstandings, and giving compliments. It is worth mentioning that individuals with low levels of ethnocentrism demonstrate a greater level of acceptance of cultural diversity (Su, 2018). These findings also resonate with what has been recorded in the literature (Nameni & Dowlatabadi, 2019), highlighting that the participants from the four major Iranian ethnic groups did not hold cultural superiority and demonstrated respect for other beliefs and values.

Regarding the actions they took to respect the behavioural patterns of people from different cultures, we found that the statements from Ahmad and Zacky represented many ways to respect them, such as observations of cultural norms, the adaptation of communication styles, being mindful of nonverbal cues, and continual learning. This indicates that they were fully aware of cultural diversity and took the necessary steps to respect and acknowledge those who were culturally different. Not surprisingly, they could easily adapt their behaviours by showing proper attitudes and flexibility, echoing past research (Toscu & Erten, 2020). Theoretically, grounded on the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennet, 1986), their actions were in the stage of ethnorelativism consisting of acceptance, adaptation, and integration. Ayu's statement, however, indicated a passive attitude demonstrating a lack of active effort that could be harmful to effective communication, as she neglected to actively engage with the interlocutors.

With respect to the participants' responses on interaction confidence, they recapped that they had high confidence levels in intercultural interactions. These findings are also compatible with previous research findings (Deveci et al., 2022; Pasand et al., 2021) reporting that learners had more sociable, confident, and attentive feelings. This might be due to the adequate cultural knowledge that could have been acquired through their previous personal experience of living in multicultural environments, which in turn boosted their confidence in intercultural contacts (Deveci et al., 2022). What is emphasised here is that the more learners participate in cross-cultural interactions, the more their confidence increases and vice versa (Su, 2018). Teachers must therefore encourage them to have frequent contact with intercultural speakers and immerse themselves in the culture of the target language to bolster their IS development (Deveci et al., 2022; Pasand et al., 2021; Su, 2018; Zhang & Han, 2019).

This study also revealed that Ahmad and Zacky showed positive attitudes (e.g., adaptive, collaborative, mutually respectful, and open-minded) while interacting with culturally different people. During the interview, the participants frequently used a wide variety of affective terms (e.g., comfortable, curious, enthusiasm, and empathy). Theoretically, we found that their statements represented the stage of ethnorelativism (Bennet, 1986) manifested by possessing important qualities to grasp and adjust to cultural norms, values, and customs, being willing to compromise, and respecting others. These characteristics are unquestionably important in intercultural communications because individuals with these feelings will achieve more complex intercultural experiences and tend to be able to easily resolve common cultural issues such as asserting the superiority of their own cultures and attempting to isolate themselves from those who are culturally different (Mellizo, 2017; Sinicrope et al., 2007).

Another noteworthy finding from the study is that the three participants underscored the complexities of cross-cultural communication by experiencing multilingual barriers that lead to cultural misunderstanding. Specifically, Ayu confessed that these barriers were due to different interlocutors' accents, potentially leading to communication breakdowns. Although the acceptability of the liberation accent has grown in the ESL/EFL context, Ayu still assumed that the standard accent remains crucial for communication in intercultural environments as a good model for ESL/EFL learners, which is in harmony with Tsang (2020) claiming that English accents remain crucial in global communication. In response, teachers need to provide their students with adequate exposure to various English accents to familiarise them with the accents used by English users from around the world by, for example, engaging them with the integration of technology (e.g., social media) to create a learning space within virtual environments (Lee, 2023; Mahaputri et al., 2024). In addition to experiencing accent as an impediment in intercultural communications, different language proficiency levels are another factor precluding the participants' IS development, corroborating previous findings (Nameni & Dowlatabadi, 2019; Rasouli & Moradkhani, 2021).

When asked about their feelings when interacting with people from diverse lingua-cultural backgrounds, all participants mentioned that they sometimes felt nervous. However, they also noted the importance of prior intercultural experiences and preparation to overcome social anxiety. As noted in the interview excerpt, Ayu also expressed her anxiety about the negative stereotypes of Islam that possibly affected her study in Australia, making her feel unwelcome and isolated. To break down this negative stereotype, universities play a crucial role in fostering interculturally friendly environments. This can be achieved by accepting student exchange (Deardorff, 2006) and devising a program that incorporates intercultural-related topics to improve their language proficiency, sharpen their ICC skills, and raise awareness of negative stereotypes, echoing some research findings (Deveci et al., 2022).

On interaction attentiveness we found that Ahmad employed various methods (e.g., active listening, asking open-ended questions, conducting research, and seeking clarification) to collect information when interacting with people from different cultures. This data suggests a respectful and inclusive approach to cross-cultural interactions. Unlike Ahmad

who has extensive overseas experience, Zacky has never travelled to other countries. Therefore, he learned cultural knowledge from the Internet and social media as the major media for gathering information about individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. This aligns with the published literature (Nameni & Dowlatabadi, 2019; Pasand et al., 2021) reporting that the participants used the Internet and social media to discover and learn another cultural knowledge. Meanwhile, Ayu did not mention any specific method for interacting with people from different cultures. What can be highlighted from these data is that having a particular strategy for intercultural interactions may be helpful, but it is not always necessary. As long as we can treat others respectfully and politely, we can be successful intercultural speakers.

## **Conclusion**

Our study documents three Indonesian EFL learners' IS levels by presenting empirical evidence that enriches the existing body of literature on ICC for EFL learners, particularly in portraying the participants' IS levels as reflected through their attitudes when interacting in intercultural encounters. The participants' voices revealed rich layers of their IS levels, particularly concerning their intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and awareness. The findings implicate that Ahmad and Zacky demonstrated a high level of IS in almost all five dimensions of IS by demonstrating a sense of accepting cultural diversity and a high level of confidence, showing respect and empathy, being adaptive and collaborative, and showing proactive efforts. Although they initially felt nervous when interacting with people from culturally different backgrounds, their prior experience in intercultural interactions and careful preparation could handle this negative feeling. However, Ayu's voice was slightly different. Although she confessed that she had a high self-confidence level when interacting in intercultural environments, she showed a lack of active effort, empathy, and adaptation. In response, we strongly recommend that educational stakeholders devise intercultural learning training that can promote intercultural communication in language classrooms with more contact with intercultural speakers to gain real-life intercultural experiences.

## **Pedagogical implications**

This study poses pedagogical implications for educational stakeholders (e.g., EFL teachers, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers). From a practical perspective, our findings showcase the current participants' IS levels. We suggest devising plans and proper intercultural training programs to promote more real-world intercultural contact with intercultural speakers from around the globe. Moreover, utilising authentic materials, such as textbooks, English websites, newspapers, magazines, and social media, can be another alternative to teaching culture and directly exposing learners to multicultural environments. From a research perspective, this study shows the relevance of the ISS (Chen & Starosta, 2000) in exploring Indonesian EFL learners' IS levels. This opens a direction for future studies guided by this IS scale to examine other prospective participants in different settings.

## Limitations and recommendations

After discussing the implications of the study, a note of caution should be sounded about its limitations. First, the data in the study were garnered from a small number of participants. Therefore, the study's findings limited the ability to extrapolate the research findings to other research contexts (e.g., EFL contexts in other Asian countries and secondary education level contexts). Future research on this issue needs to explore alternative methodologies such as longitudinal quantitative or mixed-methods procedures, with larger sample sizes in diverse geographical regions, ethnicities, and countries to facilitate broader generalisations. Second, the participants' IS levels were gauged solely through individual semi-structured interviews. Thus, interested researchers may partially replicate our study by using other data collection instruments, such as questionnaires, observations, and reflective journals, to triangulate the data and achieve deeper understandings of this issue.

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