

STUDENTS' AWARENESS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION

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Abstract. This study examines students' awareness of cultural differences in classroom communication, focusing on verbal and nonverbal aspects. The study uses a quantitative descriptive design, and data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to elementary school teacher education students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The results of the study indicate that students have a high level of cultural awareness, particularly in recognizing variations in speaking styles, questioning patterns, gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact across cultures. The findings also indicate that students who have previous multicultural learning experiences have a higher level of awareness compared to those who do not have such experiences. These results suggest that cross-cultural experiences play an important role in shaping students' understanding of communication diversity in academic settings. Overall, this study underscores the importance of promoting intercultural awareness in university classrooms to support more effective and respectful communication. Future research is recommended to use qualitative approaches for a deeper exploration of the dynamics of intercultural interactions.

Keywords: Cultural Awareness, Intercultural Communication, Classroom Communication, Verbal Communication, Nonverbal Communication

Abstrak. Penelitian ini menelaah kesadaran mahasiswa terhadap perbedaan budaya dalam komunikasi di dalam kelas, dengan fokus pada aspek verbal dan nonverbal. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain deskriptif kuantitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terstruktur yang diberikan kepada mahasiswa prodi pendidikan guru sekolah dasar dengan latar belakang budaya yang beragam. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa memiliki tingkat kesadaran budaya yang tinggi, terutama dalam mengenali variasi gaya berbicara, pola bertanya, gestur, ekspresi wajah, dan kontak mata antar budaya. Temuan juga menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa yang memiliki pengalaman pembelajaran multikultural sebelumnya memiliki tingkat kesadaran yang lebih tinggi dibandingkan dengan mereka yang tidak memiliki pengalaman tersebut. Hasil ini mengindikasikan bahwa pengalaman lintas budaya berperan penting dalam membentuk pemahaman mahasiswa terhadap keberagaman komunikasi di lingkungan akademik. Secara keseluruhan, penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya mendorong kesadaran antarbudaya di kelas universitas untuk mendukung komunikasi yang lebih efektif dan saling menghormati. Penelitian selanjutnya disarankan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif untuk eksplorasi yang lebih mendalam mengenai dinamika interaksi antarbudaya.

Kata Kunci: Kesadaran Budaya, Komunikasi Antarbudaya, Komunikasi Kelas, Komunikasi Verbal, Komunikasi Nonverbal

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization and growing student mobility have turned higher education institutions into multicultural spaces focusing on the interaction of learners from a variety of linguistic, ethnic, and cultural traditions. As educational settings become more varied students are now expected not simply to understand course content but also to negotiate differences in culture that affect the way they communicate, expect and interpret (TingToomey & Dorjee, 2019). In these settings, intercultural communication sensitivity is the necessary condition for developing effective communication and preventing misconceptions, as well as enhancing learning conditions that promote inclusiveness in the process of learning (Gudykunst 2018).

Communication both in language and non-language ways varies across cultures. Verbal is speaking, such as whether a culture has levels of addressing or “politeness” formulas or if it even takes turns the same way. For instance, some cultures promote active engagement with people whereas others perceive frequent talking as rude or disrespectful (Neuliep, 2020). Forms of nonverbal communication, including direct eye contact, gestures, pauses in conversation (silence), posture and the amount of physical distance between individuals also differ greatly between cultures. Hall (1976) in his influential work argued that high context cultures depend more on implicit messages and nonverbal communications compared low-context cultures, which tend towards explicitness and directness. These variations affect how students perceive their peers' motives and actions in the classroom encounter.

Insensitivity to these cultural norms may lead to misunderstanding, lack of engagement, communication discomfort or tension. What is considered confidence in one culture, for example, may be interpreted as arrogance in another. Meanwhile, silence can also be taken as consent, misunderstanding or politeness from the perspective of culture (Chen & Starosta, 2000). Therefore, students who lack intercultural competence may face challenges in participating in communication activities, working successfully on group projects, and interacting significantly with people from different cultures. Conversely, students with a greater level of awareness are more capable of understanding different forms of communication, adapt their own behavior and prevent misunderstandings (Deardorff, 2020).

In Indonesian higher education, intercultural communication is becoming a topic of greater interest as academic institutions develop relationships beyond their national borders and open their doors to foreign students and English-taught curricula in increasing numbers. Nevertheless, it is claimed that many Indonesian students are limited in terms of cultural differences related to the communication norms and they tend to perceive things only from

what they believe as their own culture when communicating with peers (Suryani, 2018). It may result in communication gaps, especially among multicultural classes and programs with international students. Falahatpisheh (2025) in a recent study emphasizes that international students in Indonesian classrooms often have difficulty understanding local communication style, at the same time the local student tries to cope with various communicative demands.

In the light of such, to explore students' knowledge about cultural differences in classroom communication is warranted. Knowing what their awareness are gives us some indication where students may face challenges that impede effective classroom interaction and to inform teachers' intercultural training, communication skills workshops or instructional interventions that facilitate more seamless intercultural engagement. In this regard, a question is to be asked about whether students "realize," "understand," and "respond" cultural diversity appropriately in the process of cross-cultural learning, which will be the subject of this research paper.

Thus, this study seeks to examine students' understanding of cultural differences in classroom communication based on their perception of verbal and nonverbal differences, interpretation of communication cues, and how awareness affects student involvement and interaction in the classroom. Raising the awareness of intercultural communicative competence is vital not only for academic achievement but also necessary to equip students with the capability to operate effectively in a highly globalized world. This article explores students' awareness of cultural differences in classroom communication, including verbal and nonverbal aspect.

METHOD

This research employs a descriptive quantitative research design. The instrument is employed to delineate and evaluate students' awareness of cultural difference in classroom communication. The researcher collects quantitative data by using Likert-type questionnaire which will help the researcher to see the patterns of students' awareness, perception on difference between verbal and non-verbal communication, and what are roles on factors determining intercultural communication awareness. A descriptive methodology is suitable, since the research seeks to provide an understanding of students' awareness with no variable manipulation.

This research was taken in Primary Teacher Education of Pohuwato University. The participants of this research were the students of Primary Teacher Education Department. The participants were purposively sampled as students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds who routinely come into contact. Such context is favorable, since it naturally

involves some chances of intercultural communication that helps researcher to recorded real perceptions and awareness towards cultural values. Another aspect the learning climate fosters is that of diversity, which fits with the purpose of this study to examine the influence of cultural differences on students' communication in class. According to Sugiyono (2018) purposive sampling is the process of selecting samples based on predetermined consideration which follows the desired criteria for finding out a certain number of samples used as an object study. This method can be used when your sample is relevant to your research problem.

The main instrument in this study is the Likert scale (12 items measuring four indicators, including, awareness of cultural difference; Perceptions of verbal communication differences; Interpretations of nonverbal cues; The influence of cultural adaptation to classroom interaction). Participants rate each item on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree somewhat, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree somewhat and 5 = strongly agree). The items of the questionnaire derive from well-rooted theories on intercultural communication, such as Chen and Starosta (2000), Hall (1976) and Gudykunst (2018), therefore also granting for their theoretical basis with respect to the study.

Data is obtained when researcher gets licence from course lecturer or establishment. This questionnaire is then made available to the participants, who may receive it by approaching a study assistant (i.e. in a printed version) or through an online platform, for instance google forms. Students are allowed enough time to complete the questionnaire anonymously, promoting honest answers and minimizing bias. Once the responses are gathered, the researcher sorts them out and gets ready for analyzing the data. Descriptive statistical analyses are applied to the data. The average of all scores obtained for each question item is computed to obtain students' awareness on individual indicators. These mean values for each statement are read against a three-point scale, ranging from low awareness, moderate awareness to high awareness. The total scale score is an indication of overall awareness and it has been obtained by summing up all items. If applicable, the results can also be summarized by bar charts or tables to facilitate a better understanding of the obtained data. This method enables the researcher to offer a comprehensive description of students' awareness, without using sophisticated statistical techniques, which is appropriate for a mini research report.

To appraise the quality of the instrument, Content Validity has utilized Expert judgment are a lecturer specialized in IC or research methodology. Reliability is evaluated by Cronbach's Alpha, with >0.70 , which was acceptable. A simple pilot test could also be applied to assess the intelligibility and coherence of the items prior to applying the questionnaire in the full sample

RESULT

Overall Awareness Level

Description of Quantitative Data Demonstrated in the Findings Students' overall understanding with regard to cultural differences in classroom communication is high ($M = 3.82$, $SD=0.432$) mean score when averaged on five-point Likert scale). A majority (over 50%) of the respondents show a high degree of awareness that culture plays a role in communicating behaviours during classroom interaction.

Table 1. Overall students' cultural awareness

Awareness Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)	Mean
High	72	72%	3.82
Moderate	18	18%	—
Low	10	10%	—
Total	100	100%	—

The findings reveal that 72% of students are high awareness type, whereas only 10% are low awareness. This indicates that, while the majority of students understand differences in communication styles between cultures, some are still insensitive to these differences.

Verbal Communication Awareness

They also had a high awareness of cultural differences when communicating verbally. The clues show that they're aware different cultures may have different ways of speaking, questioning, and expressing their thought.

Table 2. Verbal communication awareness

Verbal Communication Indicator	Agree (%)	Mean	Category
Differences in speaking style across cultures	68%	3.75	High
Differences in questioning style	65%	3.70	High
Differences in expressing opinions	72%	3.80	High
Difficulty adapting to direct vs. indirect styles	24%	—	Low–Moderate

The results reveal that 68–72% of students acknowledge cross-cultural variation in verbal behaviors. However, 24% still report difficulty in adapting their communication style when

interacting with peers from cultures that prefer more direct communication. This indicates that although awareness is high, some students still struggle with practical application.

Nonverbal Communication Awareness

Nonverbal Communication Differences Students also demonstrate greater awareness for differences in nonverbal communication. They understand that making eye contact with people, gesturing or facial expressions may vary in significance across cultures.

Table 3. Nonverbal communication awareness

Nonverbal Communication Indicator	Agree (%)	Mean	Category
Eye contact meanings differ across cultures	70%	3.90	High
Gestures vary between cultures	68%	3.85	High
Facial expressions interpreted differently	72%	3.92	High
Difficulty interpreting nonverbal cues	15%	—	Low

Average scores (3.85–3.92) indicate that there is the highest level of nonverbal awareness among all components measured in this study. Approximately only 15% of the students seem to experience such problems interpreting nonverbal signals suggesting generally strong nonverbal sensitivity.

Influence of Multicultural Experience

Students who had some experience of exposure in a multicultural context, such as learning with foreign teachers and attending international programs revealed identified significantly greater levels of cultural awareness.

Table 4. Influence of multicultural experience on awareness

Student Group	Mean Awareness	Category
Students with multicultural or international experience	4.02	Very High
Students without multicultural experience	3.60	Moderate–High

The results indicate a positive effect of multicultural experience in greater cross-cultural awareness and the implications for various academic experiences on the development of intercultural competence are articulated. Combined findings overall results indicate that students have a high awareness of cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication, with mean scores consistently falling within the upper end of all three-point scales mentioned above. But there are also real challenges, particularly in acclimating to direct communication.

The results clearly indicate the importance of increased cross-cultural communication training, exposure to diverse classrooms and inclusive teaching strategies to further develop students' intercultural competence

DISCUSSION

The content of this study shows that students seem to be relatively aware of cultural differences in the classroom setting. On a 5-point average scale of 3.82, it suggests that students generally appreciate the impact of culture on communication styles, behavior patterns and expectations. This finding reinforces previous literature which has indicated the influence of cultural background on communicative effectiveness and exchange behaviour in academic environment (Gudykunst & Kim, 2017). The level of awareness about this concept is high, indicating that students are becoming more aware of the multi-cultural nature of classrooms, particularly at higher education.

Students also had high levels of awareness with respect to verbal communication, i.e. cultural differences in speech styles, questioning and expressing points of view were well-noted by the students. This is consistent with Hall's (1976) notions of high-context versus low-context communication and how direct and indirect means of expression differ between cultures. The discovery that 24% of students remain in difficulty with directness indicates that these contemporary challenges are culturally constituted, and are consonant with enduring struggles identified by Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012) who point out that directness is often difficult or non-normative for those from collectivist cultures. However, although there is a good understanding of the problem, ability to adjust communication behavior lags behind.

Results further indicate students have an even greater sensitivity to nonverbal communications with mean scores ranging from 3.85-3.92. This echoes the study by Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd's (2016) study that nonverbal information is important in cross-cultural interactions and its interpretations can be difficult to understand especially considering meanings differ substantially from one culture to another. For instance, eye contact and facial gestures can be interpreted in opposite ways depending on cultural standards. Only 15% of children face challenges in understanding nonverbal cues Children have developed some intercultural sensitivity The low percentage of students who find difficulty in comprehending nonverbal cues indicates that much among them already possess certain knowledge and skill yet, there is scope for pick-up thereby proving it distant from encyclopaedia-generated knowledge.

Furthermore, as the result indicates, students with a multicultural background demonstrate a significantly higher level of awareness (mean = 4.02) than those without it (mean = 3.60). This finding is consistent with Deardorff's (2006) model of intercultural competence, focused on experiential learning—through contact, including with international peers or faculty as a potential conduit to intercultural. Exposure to different cultural contexts can help students understand more accurately the communication behaviors in which they are engaged, and their own assumptions about culture. These findings were also consistent with the results of a study by Jackson (2020), who found that intercultural learning is considerably enhanced in situ, through interaction, as opposed merely to theoretical teaching.

The major implications of the findings point to students developing an understanding of cultural sensitivity, but their skill in effectively engaging in intercultural communication is lagging. As the literature suggests, awareness in itself should not be confused with intercultural competence (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Competence is not just knowing, but also will, attitude and suitable behavioral reactions in actual contacts. Thus, institutions might perceive the inclusion of intercultural communication training, culturally responsive teaching strategies, and increased opportunities for students to participate in multicultural-learning experiences as valuable. In sum, the findings of this study are consistent with the literature suggesting that cultural awareness plays a key role in facilitating communication in heterogeneous classrooms. However, regular exposure, scaffolded practice, and formal instruction in intercultural communication are still necessary to develop students' proficiency and prepare them for academic and professional contexts that are more globalized.

CONCLUSION

Students' perception of cultural differences in the classroom communication was investigated. The descriptive quantitative results reveal that a majority of the students are aware of how culture affects verbal as well as non-verbal communication. Most students are aware that how we speak, ask questions and interact with our face, hands and eyes can look different in other cultures. The findings also reveal that students with multicultural experiences like having interactions with international lecturers or classmates tend to have a higher awareness. This indicates that where students have experienced different cultural environments they tend to understanding and are able to interpret communication differences.

In sum, according to the current study findings, students are conscious of diversity in societies and acknowledge its necessity for achieving competent and respectful communicative practices. The results also emphasized the necessity for educators to maintain

the efforts of promoting intercultural understanding in learning environment. It is also possible that a larger sample size or qualitative research techniques to develop some of these questions further (how awareness of culture might work through student engagement and interaction) could lead to greater insight in these areas

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