



Profile of Intercultural Competency in Indonesian University Students

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ABSTRACT

Higher Education Institutions around the world are seeking to increase the international experience on campus for their students to prepare graduates for a globalised workforce. Intercultural friendships are one crucial setting for developing intercultural competency, but research has shown international students find it difficult to make friends with local students during study overseas. This research investigated the attitudes of local students tasked with assisting new international students as they settle into university study in Indonesia. A mixed-method questionnaire was sent to local students from the *Sahabat DIA* program at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, yielding 25 responses. Questionnaire analysis revealed a profile the hopes and motivations for local students to grow in their intercultural competence as well as acknowledging their high willingness to communicate intercultural. It was found that the primary motivation for intercultural friendship of local students was to increase their future opportunities through networking connections and forming beneficial close relationships, both intercultural and by working together with the *Sahabat DIA* organisation. A strong focus on organisational solidarity was suggested as most important for these program outcomes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institutions (HEI) around the world realize that competence in intercultural communication is now considered significant for the personal and professional success of its graduates. In the 21st century, higher education institutions have sought to internationalize curricula and encourage culturally diverse campus populations, as well as increase educational exchange opportunities and form international partnerships (Garson, 2016; Rivas & González, 2022). Although an internationalized educational context is a good step in creating the right environment for the development of intercultural communication competence (ICC), there are still significant problems in ensuring graduates truly develop in intercultural competence during their studies.

Universities often assume international and local students will mix with each other on their own, however research highlights that international students often lack friendships with host country citizens (Gareis et al., 2011). Hammer (2012) called this an “immersion assumption” and suggested that ICC development depends on active and strategic interventions that help students increase their own cultural awareness as well as their ‘cultural literacy’. Likewise, Lantz-Deaton, (2017) found that after assessing students who reported positive and frequent levels of casual intercultural contact, including having friends from other cultures, the students showed little progress in their ICC development when tested. Universities need targeted programs for their local and international students for there to be beneficial gains in student intercultural competence in an internationalized environment (Yang & Zhang, 2022).

Although there is still open debate about what components essentially comprise intercultural competence, one widely accepted definition states that intercultural competence is ‘a diverse set of abilities that enable a person to navigate complex human environments effectively and appropriately’ (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2013; González & Pérez, 2023). In this definition, the term “abilities” describes all the skills, attitudes, and knowledge necessary to interact with others from different cultural backgrounds in a way that benefits both parties (Deardorff, 2009; Huang & Wu, 2023). UNESCO summarizes that intercultural competence is acquired through a combination of experience, training and self-reflection (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2013). Literature analysis has found more than 50 different terminologies to describe intercultural competence used by researchers, but a meta-review of intercultural studies literature shows that “intercultural communicative competence” is a preferred term because by emphasizing the aspect of communication, the ICC concept is more readily based on dialogue and the formation of human relationships (Fantini, 2020; Hernández & García, 2023).

UNESCO is one global organisation that considers the development of intercultural communication competency as a critical complement to protecting human rights and driving sustainable development goals. In particular, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 4 on education, and SDG 16 (to promote just, peaceful, and inclusive societies) are closely aligned with intercultural competence (UN, 2015). This means that global peacemakers, intercultural academic researchers, and higher education institutions share a common goal to develop intercultural competencies. The last five years has seen not-for-profit global organisations such as the World Council on Intercultural and Global Competence connecting researchers and practitioners across disciplines, sectors, languages and countries to advance the knowledge, research and praxis of intercultural competence globally in the pursuit of a more peaceful world (ICC Global, 2024).

An evidence-based model for the development of intercultural competence highlights that ICC is a process where development begins with a focus on the attitudinal components necessary for good intercultural communication (Deardorff, 2009). An attitude of willingness to communicate interculturally acts as a catalyst for growing ICC by fostering openness, facilitating dialogue, and encouraging mutual understanding in diverse environments (Kassing, 1997). When individuals are willing to communicate interculturally, they are more likely to encounter diverse perspectives and experiences. Exposure expands knowledge and helps people navigate cultural differences more effectively (Kim & Green, 2023). Additionally, personal motivations for establishing intercultural friendships significantly influence ICC development by fostering people's engagement, learning, empathy, and communication resilience (Kuo & Chen, 2022). However, research also highlights various challenges in forming intercultural friendships, with the key factors being cultural assumptions, personality and identity, frequent social interactions, and less attitudes towards other cultures (Alkharusi & Segumpan, 2024). Social adjustment problems often cause international students to withdraw from social interactions, even though inter-ethnic friendship can be a means of eliminating ethnic segregation and isolation (Robinson et al., 2020; Li & Wang, 2023). Frequent social interaction minimizes communication anxiety and improves intercultural attitudes, while the lack of interaction between international students and local students affects the desire and hope to form local friendships (Alkharusi & Segumpan, 2024; Liu & Qian, 2022).

This brief literature review has explored intercultural competence development as a crucial graduate outcome for university students preparing to enter the global workforce and contribute to change and peace-making efforts in their own countries. As higher education institutions become increasingly internationalised, it is important that university students are given the opportunity to understand intercultural competence deliberately and proactively so that they can develop the necessary targeted knowledge, communicative skills and respectful attitudes.

Developing intercultural competence is a transformational learning process, whereby people gain new perspectives that actively combat racism and ethnocentrism. However, a clear understanding of intercultural communication competence components and processes (intercultural communication theory) must be at the core of attempts to internationalize curriculum and campus, in addition to the conducting of educational exchange programs (Martínez & Sánchez, 2022). Intercultural training objectives must be realistic, based on obtainable outcomes. It is counterproductive to set forth unattainable expectations, which may happen when a competency that develops over a lifespan is abbreviated into a singular workshop or theoretical exercise.

Because of these things, university policy and practice may need to be enhanced if producing graduates with higher levels of intercultural competence is to become a realised outcome of internationalisation. Whatever strategies chosen for developing intercultural competence, reflection and accurate assessment measures must also be in place to determine the quality and effectiveness of internationalisation efforts, using evidence-based scales to measure quality of intercultural competency student outcomes (Zhou & Lee, 2023). The process model for development of intercultural competence as proposed by Deardorff (2006; Bilefsky, 2023) demonstrates that even without the right knowledge or highest skills, a person with the right attitudes can still achieve a degree of effective intercultural communication.

Within the last five years, the UNESCO Story Circles method has been made freely available as a concrete tool that can be used to foster intercultural development, representing a human rights-based approach to intercultural competencies that is grounded in decades of research and highly flexible to suit many contexts around the world (Deardorff, 2020; Schröder & Müller, 2023). By making use of these tools and with routine assessment, universities can honestly offer international education opportunities in the pursuit of a more peaceful world.

Indonesian universities are increasingly receiving scholars from all over the world, especially from developing countries. There is a rich resource of cultural diversity to be benefitted from, for both international students and local students, if only they are guided through an intentionally developed and reflection driven process such as the UNESCO Story Circles. Where intercultural friendship forms, there is the potential for increased curiosity, empathy, understanding and acceptance that brings cultures beyond tolerance and into a state of inclusion and peace that promotes human rights for all and drives sustainable development.

The present research investigated the attitudes of local Indonesian students involved in a university program that assists new international students to settle into university study in Indonesia. This research represents a preliminary study to consider whether a strategic ICC development intervention such as UNESCO Story Circles may be suitable to this context. Therefore this research asks: what are the motivations, hopes, and level of willingness to communicate interculturally of local students who are especially involved in interacting with international students?

2. METHODS

This research was conducted in collaboration with the Directorate of International Affairs (DIA) of the Indonesian Education University (Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, UPI) in Bandung, West Java. The DIA office is tasked with organizing services for international students and the university's international partnerships. One program called 'DIA Friends' (*Sahabat* DIA) organizes local students as volunteers to help international students who have just entered Indonesia in their transition to Indonesian life and university study.

The application of mixed-method research was used to assist in obtaining a clearer profile of the potential for development of local students' intercultural competence. Research permission was obtained from DIA and invitations to complete questionnaires were sent to students from the program organizers three times within a one-week period.

This research developed a questionnaire that contained both quantitative and qualitative questioning. Personal demographic data was not collected to ensure confidentiality and encourage participants' freedom of expression. The uniquely developed questionnaire includes fifteen questions (15) in three sections.

Part 1 of the questionnaire contained two short-answer questions regarding participants' initial motivations for joining the program and asked for estimates of the number of international people they met in order to obtain a profile of the diversity of experiences available to local students through the DIA Friends program. Responses to short answer questions regarding motivation were coded and themes determined based on the thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Part 2 of the questionnaire contained a contextually translated version of the Intercultural Willingness to Communicate Scale (IWTC), which has been previously validated (KOÇAK, 2022; Kassing, 1997). The IWTC scale contains twelve statements regarding

situations in which a person may choose to communicate. Six statements (6) are intercultural situations and the other six are general communication situations. For the purpose of this research the IWTC scale was translated into Indonesian and some general situations modified to reflect common student experiences. Willingness to communicate intercultural was assessed by summing the results of a 5-point Likhert scale (see **Table 1**), resulting in a maximum possible score of 30. A score of 15 and below was considered a low willingness to communicate intercultural, and a score of 16 and above was accepted as a high willingness to communicate intercultural. The internal consistency of the contextual IWTC scale was checked by calculating Cronbach's alpha.

Table 1. Contextual Intercultural Willingness to Communicate Scale

Skala Likhert 'sangat tidak sesuai' sampai 'sangat sesuai'	On a Likhert scale of 'very inappropriate to 'very appropriate'
1. Saya senang untuk berbicara dengan sahabat.	1. I like to talk to my friends.
2. Saya senang untuk berbicara dengan pasangan atau pacar.	2. I like to talk to my partner or girlfriend.
3. Saya senang untuk berbicara dengan seseorang yang dianggap berbeda dengan saya.	3. I like to talk to someone who is considered different from me.
4. Saya senang untuk berbicara dengan seseorang dari negara lain.	4. I like talking to someone from another country.
5. Saya senang untuk berbicara dengan dosen.	5. I like to talk to lecturers.
6. Saya senang untuk berbicara dengan seseorang dari budaya yang hanya sedikit saya ketahui.	6. I would like to talk to someone from a culture I know little about.
7. Saya senang untuk berbicara dengan penjual di toko.	7. I am happy to talk to the salesperson in the store.
8. Saya senang untuk berbicara dengan seseorang yang ras atau sukunya berbeda dengan saya.	8. I enjoy talking to someone whose race or ethnicity is different from mine.
9. Saya senang untuk berbicara dengan kerabat atau anggota keluarga.	9. I like to talk to relatives or family members.
10. Saya senang untuk berbicara dengan seseorang yang berasal dari budaya lain.	10. I would love to talk to someone from another culture.
11. Saya senang untuk berbicara dengan seseorang di kampus.	11. I am happy to talk to someone on campus.
12. Saya senang untuk berbicara dengan seseorang yang dapat berkomunikasi dalam bahasa Indonesia sebagai bahasa asing.	12. I am happy to talk with someone who can communicate in Indonesian as a foreign language.

Section 3 of the questionnaire contained one short answer question that asked participants to consider what advice they would like to give to new members of the program. This question was designed to provide feedback to the DIA Friends program administrators in an indirect manner to eliminate social desirability bias (Larson, 2019).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

Diversity of Cultural Experience through DIA Friends

The majority of international students entering study at UPI come from Africa, Central Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia. The student participants in this research had never met international students from South America (other than Saint Lucia), Canada, Europe (other than Russia) or the Middle East (see **Table 2**). Around half the questionnaire participants had experienced a small number of intercultural encounters during the course of the program (0-9 people), while the other half had the chance to establish intercultural relationships with ten or more people (see **Table 3**).

Table 2. Countries represented by international students at UPI

Africa	Central Asia	East Asia	South-East Asia	Others
Nigeria	Turkmenistan	Japan	Thailand	USA
Ghana	Pakistan	Korea Selatan	Filipina	Russia
Sudan	India	China	Malaysia	Australia
Togo	Uzbekistan		Vietnam	Saint Lucia
Uganda	Kyrgyzstan		Timor Leste	
Tanzania	Tajikistan			
Sudan				
Madagascar				

Table 3. Range of Relationship Experience by Number

Number of International Students assisted	Survey Participants (n=25)
Not yet experienced	2
Less than 10	10
Around 10	4
More than 10	9

Knowing the country of origin for the majority of international students who enter study at UPI will originate from Africa and Asia may allow program training that focuses on raising the culturally relevant knowledge of local students to be targeted to these continents.

Willingness to Communicate Interculturally

In the quantitative part of the questionnaire, all questionnaire participants reported being 'very highly willing' to communicate interculturally, with a median score of 28. The lowest score was 22, while 10 people scored the maximum of 30. The Cronbach's alpha value for this scale was calculated at 0.77. This value is lower than previously reported in the research, but is still considered an acceptable level of internal consistency, meaning the IWTC questions reliably measure the same concept (George & Mallery, 2003).

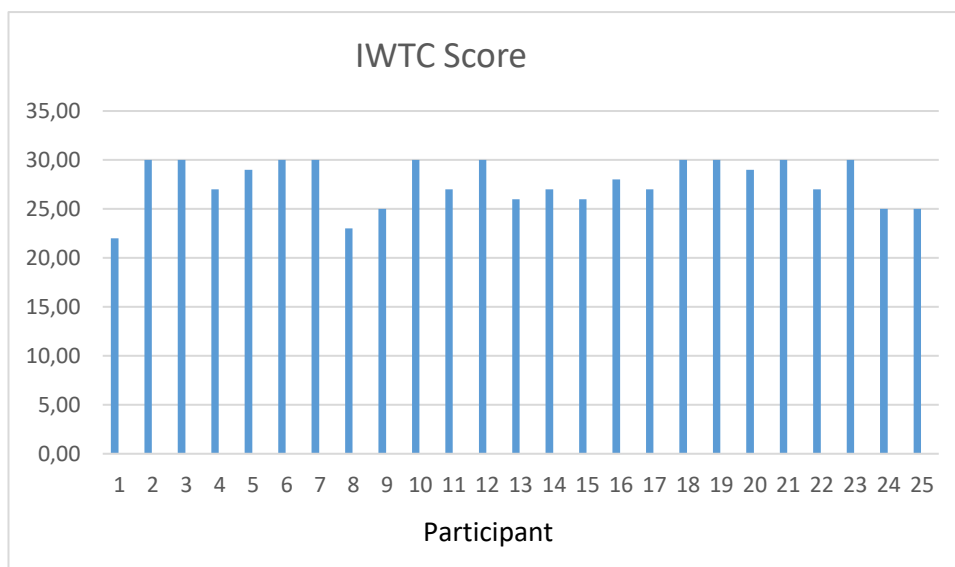


Figure 1. Scores gained from part 2 of the questionnaire (Intercultural Willingness to Communicate)

It is interesting that no participant reported experiencing a low level of willingness to communicate interculturally (See **Figure 1**). While this questionnaire didn't probe into any negative relational experiences that might reduce communication willingness, it may be assumed that the overall experience of local students in the DIA Friends program doesn't seem to lower their desire to form intercultural friendships.

Motivational Factors for DIA Friends

The reported motivation factors of DIA Friends students overall shows their high potential to develop intercultural communication competencies in the context of mutually beneficial intercultural friendships. Through thematic coding it was found that participant short answer responses referred to a desire to develop all three main intercultural competency components described in the literature (knowledge, attitudes and skills). Specifically, three key elements of intercultural competence found in this research were themed using the terms: international knowledge, future opportunities, and friendship. Example response combining elements:

“My initial motivation [to join DIA Friends] was to learn about diversity, meet new friends and help the international office carry out its duties.”

1. International Knowledge

A less common but recognized motivation for local students to engage interculturally is the acquisition of international knowledge. In particular, students want to learn about other cultures and about the diversity of the world. A repeated word relating to this learning was 'exposure.' Thus it seems that local students feel that having exposure to people from other countries will open up new perspectives and add to their own experience as global citizens more broadly.

Example responses:

"I am very interested in the international world and languages to get to know new cultures, this organization provides a platform to connect with international students and international-related programs."

"My motivation is to be connected and exposed to the international world and internationalization."

2. Future Opportunities

'Creating opportunities' was the most frequently repeated motivation by questionnaire participants. This theme contains the hope that the knowledge and communication skills gained from intercultural relations, as well as good references from university programs, can provide opportunities for local students in the future either in continuing their studies or in workplace applications. There was a repeated use of human resource networking jargon such as 'make connections.' Improving English speaking skills and confidence in communicating was a direct motivation to invest in relationships with international students.

Example responses:

"I also want to apply my English skills and improve them by interacting with foreign students. Also, I want to add my experience to my resume when applying for jobs."

"I want to develop English language skills and expand connections with friends from various countries."

3. Friendship

Unsurprisingly given the name of the program, friendship was a focus topic and represented the overall theme of responses. Students frequently mentioned establishing friendships as their motivation for joining the program. Friendship could be considered a step beyond simply forming advantageous connections by being a context that is mutually beneficial. Interestingly, local students considered the DIA Friends program to be a group context where they would form friendships with other local students as well. The implications of this will be explored in the following section.

Example response:

"I want to meet and hang out with other friends who have the same interests as well as meet international student friends."

Hopes of DIA Friend Members

Of the 25 questionnaire responses (n=25), the final question (short answer) yielded 20 responses (80% response rate). Thematic analysis revealed one main theme that should be considered highly relevant for improving the DIA Friends program, namely the value of organizational solidarity.

Organizational Solidarity

When asked to provide advice to prospective future DIA Friends local students, participants primarily shared their personal motivations in seeking international connections to open up future opportunities and to help DIA become an organization that provides the best services to international students. They recommended that in order to maximize the potential benefits of the program, both DIA Friends and DIA staff need to show 'proactivity' and enthusiasm in the form of good communication and attendance at regular events. Being

active in building internal relationships was often characterized by the term 'bonding'. Problems that can damage organizational solidarity were identified as absence and lack of communication.

Example response:

"Hopefully there will be more bonding events."

"Hopefully we can be more active and contribute again as Friends in helping DIA UPI."

The theme of organizational solidarity includes the hope of DIA Friends members to form strong relational bonds *with each other*. From this it can be seen that the DIA Friends program is expected by local students to function as *a group effort* as they assist foreign students. While the focus of their hope was to establish close intercultural friendships, they believed this would happen in the context of taking an active role in DIA activities overall. It was believed that the more activities participated in, the greater the experience and thus greater benefits in the form of enhanced skills and opportunities.

3.2. Discussion

Intercultural friendship has been highlighted in this research as a mutually beneficial environment for developing intercultural competencies. By combining quantitative intercultural communication willingness scores with thematic analysis of short answer questions regarding motivations and hopes, this research concludes that the strength of the DIA Friends program is that it provides a way for students who are already eager to engage cross-culturally to do so in a way that serves the university community and increase their own future opportunities. From this profile, there are two main descriptions of experiences that can be promoted and deliberately developed by the DIA Friends program.

The first profile gained by this research is the communication experiences that may be expected for DIA Friends members. Not a single participant self-reported a low level of willingness to communicate intercultural. Although the questionnaire did not investigate negative relational experiences, which might reduce willingness to communicate, it can be assumed that the overall experiences of DIA best friend members did not decrease their motivation and hope to pursue intercultural friendships. A significant factor for success of the program is the local student being willing and able to communicate in English. However successful communication requires developing an understanding of cultural assumptions and blind spots, not just sharing a common language. Knowing that many international students entering UPI will come from Africa and Asia might allow for preparatory student training programs that focus on increasing culturally relevant knowledge targeted from these continents. Program organizers can also encourage DIA Friends members that good communication with each other is also important for the success of the program. Having some clear communication guidelines for the organisation may help students know what is expected of them throughout the program and enable the formation of friendships between local and international students.

The second picture revealed from this research is that of the internal motivation and hopes that encourage local students to form intercultural friendships. Although students had

personal motivations for joining the program, their short answers revealed their hope to collaborate with local fellow students who were considered potential friends and people who shared similar interests. The themes of bonding and solidarity demonstrate their desire to function as a group in an effort to help foreign students. This desire for group work can be fulfilled by DIA through the facilitation of peer mentoring groups that include critical reflection on their experiences in forming intercultural friendships. However, the hope for a spirit of investment in the Friends of DIA program activities must be understood in the context of the reality of competing college commitments during the semester. It is therefore recommended that opportunities for reflection on the program be carried out systematically throughout the semester as an expected component part of existing training or events run, rather than as an additional time commitment.

4. CONCLUSION

In this way, with a clear profile of the motivations and expectations of local students in the DIA friends program, DIA organizers can better understand how to equip and guide their students so that their competence in intercultural communication can be further developed. The research questionnaire itself provided the students involved with the opportunity for self-reflection and self-evaluation, which are important elements for achieving ICC growth from their intercultural experiences. Therefore, this research has provided an initial step towards further action research, where through collaboration with the university institution, local and international students can take advantage of international higher education opportunities and develop the competencies they need for the future.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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