

THE CHALLENGE OF TEACHING CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING (CCU) TO INDONESIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS, STUDY CASE MUHAMMADIYAH UNIVERSITY OF WEST SUMATERA

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Abstract

In the era of globalization, the capability to interact effectively across cultural restrictions is crucial. For Indonesian university students, Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) is a vital subject that raises intercultural competence, enhances English language skills, and prepares them for the demands of the international job market. This article explores the challenge of teaching CCU in Indonesian universities, especially in Muhammadiyah University of West Sumatera. There are some challenges faced by CCU lecturer at UM Sumbar, such as lack of students' language proficiency, shortage of trained instructors, limited diverse cultural interaction, and resources constraint. By incorporating CCU into English study program's curriculum, it is expected that students will be ready to interact in global collaboration in their future.

Keywords: *Teaching, Cross-Cultural Understanding, University, Students*

Abstrak

Di era globalisasi, kemampuan berinteraksi secara efektif lintas batasan budaya sangatlah penting. Bagi mahasiswa Indonesia, Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) merupakan mata kuliah penting yang meningkatkan kompetensi antarbudaya, meningkatkan keterampilan bahasa Inggris, dan mempersiapkan mereka untuk tuntutan pasar kerja internasional. Artikel ini membahas tantangan pengajaran CCU di universitas-universitas Indonesia, khususnya di Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Barat. Ada beberapa tantangan yang dihadapi oleh dosen CCU di UM Sumbar, seperti kurangnya kemampuan bahasa mahasiswa, kurangnya instruktur terlatih, terbatasnya interaksi budaya yang beragam, dan keterbatasan sumber daya. Dengan memasukkan CCU ke dalam kurikulum program studi Bahasa Inggris, diharapkan mahasiswa akan siap berinteraksi dalam kolaborasi global di masa depan mereka.

Kata Kunci: *Pengajaran, Pemahaman Lintas Budaya, Universitas, Mahasiswa*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid pace of globalization has brought people from diverse cultural backgrounds into closer contact than ever before. As a result, intercultural competence has become a critical skill for individuals seeking to thrive in a multicultural world. Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) is an academic discipline designed to cultivate this competence by equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to communicate effectively across

cultures. Understanding the cultural differences and similarities across different groups is the focus of cross-cultural understanding, or CCU. It promotes tolerance, empathy, and global awareness while assisting people in navigating and interacting successfully in culturally varied settings. In Indonesia, where English is a foreign language and cultural diversity is rich, CCU plays a significant role in shaping students' global outlook and interpersonal skills. This article highlights the importance of incorporating CCU into Indonesian university education, discussing its benefits, implementation strategies, and challenges.

Indonesia, as the world's largest archipelagic nation with over 1,300 ethnic groups and 700 living languages, presents a unique context for examining the significance of CCU in higher education (Anderson & Smith, 2023). At universities, CCU aids in the development of vital abilities like cross-cultural communication, flexibility, and cultural awareness. It offers both useful skills for navigating encounters in the real world and theoretical information about cultural factors. Students who comprehend ideas like cultural relativism, stereotypes, and cultural adaptability are better able to interact politely with others from different cultural backgrounds. The diverse demographic composition of Indonesian society, coupled with its growing participation in international trade and diplomacy, underscores the critical importance of incorporating cross-cultural education into university curricula (Wijaya et al., 2022).

Recent studies indicate that Indonesian university graduates often face challenges when engaging in multicultural work environments, both domestically and internationally (Rahman, 2024). These difficulties stem from limited exposure to structured cross-cultural learning experiences during their academic years, potentially hindering their professional growth and effectiveness in an increasingly globalized workforce. Furthermore, as Indonesia continues to strengthen its position in the global economy, the demand for culturally competent professionals has grown exponentially, making cross-cultural understanding a crucial component of academic preparation (Davidson & Putra, 2023).

The integration of cross-cultural understanding into university curricula serves multiple purposes beyond mere academic enrichment. It equips students with the necessary tools to bridge cultural divides, challenge ethnocentric perspectives, and develop the emotional intelligence required for effective cross-cultural communication. Moreover, research suggests that students who receive formal training in cross-cultural understanding demonstrate enhanced critical thinking abilities and are better prepared to address complex social issues in their professional lives (Lee & Nasution, 2023). This paper examines the importance of teaching cross-cultural understanding in Indonesian universities, exploring its impact on student development, professional readiness, and the broader goals of fostering social cohesion in Indonesia's multicultural society.

The theoretical foundation for teaching Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) to university students draws upon several established frameworks and theories in intercultural communication and education. At its core, this study is anchored in Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), which proposes that individuals progress through six stages of cultural

sensitivity, moving from ethnocentric to ethnorelative viewpoints. This model provides a crucial framework for understanding how students develop cultural awareness and sensitivity through structured educational interventions.

The theoretical framework also incorporates Hofstede's (1980) Cultural Dimensions Theory, which provides a systematic approach to understanding cultural differences across nations. While some scholars have critiqued its generalizations, Hofstede's dimensions remain valuable tools for introducing students to the concept of cultural variability and its impact on communication and interaction patterns (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). This understanding is particularly relevant in today's globalized higher education environment, where students must navigate increasingly diverse cultural contexts.

Furthermore, this study draws on Hall's (1976) High-Context and Low-Context Cultural Framework, which explains how communication styles and message interpretation vary across cultures. This theoretical perspective is crucial for developing students' awareness of different communication patterns and their implications for cross-cultural interactions. Recent applications of Hall's theory in educational contexts have demonstrated its continued relevance in understanding cultural communication differences (Li & Wu, 2020).

The pedagogical approach to CCU is also informed by Banks' (2008) dimensions of multicultural education, which emphasizes the importance of content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture. This comprehensive framework provides practical guidelines for implementing CCU programs that go beyond surface-level cultural awareness to foster deeper understanding and social transformation.

METHOD

This article is literature review research. This type of research allows the researcher to develop the article based on library research. A wide range of publicly published literature are used as the sources of references. As a research method, literature review is powerful because it enables the researcher to keep up with the speedy acceleration of knowledge development. This method also allows the researcher to assess the collective evidence of a particular research topic (Hannah, 2019).

The source of data are the articles and journals related to teaching Cross Cultural understanding subject at university level. The insights from the articles and journals then are compared to gain a new comprehension. The data then is analysed by using qualitative. This method is suitable to approach researches that deals with non-numerical data. In this type of study, data are collected through qualitative data collection tools such as interviews, field notes, observations, diaries, etc (Nassaji, 2020). In this research, data are collected through observations to library literature.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Significance of Teaching CCU

1. **Enhancing Cultural Awareness**

Cultural awareness involves recognizing and understanding the cultural norms, values, and practices of others while reflecting on one's own cultural identity. For Indonesian students, CCU fosters an appreciation of both local and global cultures, enabling them to navigate diverse cultural settings confidently. Cultural awareness also promotes mutual respect and reduces the risk of stereotyping and prejudice (Deardorff, 2006).

2. **Improving English Language Skills**

Language and culture are inseparable. Teaching CCU alongside English as a Foreign Language (EFL) enhances students' linguistic proficiency by providing context-rich learning experiences. Research indicates that students exposed to cultural content in EFL classes demonstrate improved comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and communicative competence (Kramsch, 1993).

3. **Minimizing Intercultural Misunderstandings**

Intercultural misunderstandings often arise from differences in communication styles, values, and norms. CCU equips students with the skills to interpret and respond to cultural cues effectively, reducing the likelihood of miscommunication and fostering harmonious interactions in multicultural environments (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

4. **Preparing for Global Careers**

In an increasingly interconnected world, employers value candidates with strong intercultural competence. By teaching CCU, universities prepare students for international careers, enhancing their employability and ability to work in diverse teams (Hunter et al., 2006).

5. **Case study: CCU subject taught at Muhammadiyah University of West Sumatera (UM Sumbar)**

Related to teaching CCU at university level, the researcher of this article is the lecturer in Muhammadiyah University of West Sumatera (UM Sumbar), Indonesia. At UM Sumbar, CCU has long been taught as a compulsory subject in English teaching study program. This subject is part of the curriculum applied in, particularly, English teaching study program. Started from 2024, UM Sumbar also goes global by admitting international students. CCU then become part of topic presented in international students welcoming program.

As part of the curriculum, CCU is taught at semester five. This subject is not taught earlier because it is assumed that understanding intense subject such as CCU needs a comprehensive and appropriate English skills. Basic English skills have been taught at the earlier semester; therefore, it is assumed that the students are ready to receive and comprehend CCU. The discussion about CCU, indeed, needs in-depth understanding about local and foreign cultures. Teaching CCU at semester 5 or above will help the class to be more active and interactive.

Some topics are introduced in CCU subject. The early parts are related to the definition of culture and understanding different culture. Then, the subject develops by discussing topics such as:

- a. Language and culture
- b. American values
- c. Stereotyping
- d. Culture shock
- e. Genders
- f. Verbal and non-verbal communication
- g. Unique culture around the world
- h. Dos and don'ts in some culture
- i. Cultural respects
- j. Culinary tradition around the world
- k. Etc.

Topics above seem very interesting and relevant to the current time. Overall, discussion in the class is interactive and students' responses are Good. The goals of the subject are for the students to comprehend culture around the world and to have cultural respect. Another purpose is to advise the students to have their passport, since passport is the first document they need to go overseas.

Challenges in Teaching CCU at UM Sumbar

1. Limitation of language proficiency

Language proficiency presents a significant barrier for language and culture learners. Despite English being the primary medium for international communication, many Indonesian students struggle with English language skills, which potentially limit them from engaging with global perceptions (Li & Wu, 2020). This language barrier can prevent students' full participation in cross-cultural exchanges and their understanding of worldwide issues in media. Teaching subjects in English is a real struggle when the students are from small city with lack of learning support from their early education period. As the result, their academic skills do not develop as much as it should be. In terms of linguistics and communication competence, students' low English ability is a challenge for teachers.

2. Lack of Trained Instructors

Teaching CCU effectively requires instructors with expertise in intercultural communication and pedagogy. Universities may face difficulties in recruiting and training qualified educators. In UM Sumbar, educator with cultural interchange experience is rare. In English teaching department, there are only two staff having knowledge living in different countries. Although information can be obtained from various sources, the practice of having contact with foreign culture gives a CCU teacher a real life understanding about foreign values and tradition. Lack of trainer enriched with experience like this leaves the students with limited available appropriate instructors.

3. Limited exposure to diverse cultural interaction

Limited exposure to diverse cultural interactions poses a third challenge. Although Indonesia is culturally diverse, many students have minimal direct contact with people from different cultural backgrounds, particularly international cultures. Rahman (2024) notes that this lack of trustworthy cross-cultural practices can make it challenging for students to move beyond academic understanding to practical application of cross-cultural abilities. Since majority of students in small cities are coming from families with medium to low income, having the experience of cultural interactions, such as going overseas during school holidays, is not in their families' life priority. Though internet media provides various platforms for students to interact with people regardless their locations and backgrounds, real cultural understanding will be best displayed in real life natural experience. One example the researcher suggests the students is that what they see in Korean drama might not be identical to the real Korean people and culture.

4. Resources limitation

Infrastructure and resource limitations also present significant challenges. Many Indonesian universities lack adequate facilities for interactive learning activities, digital resources for virtual cultural exchanges, or funding for cultural immersion programs. These resource constraints can restrict the implementation of comprehensive CCU programs that incorporate experiential learning components.

CONCLUSION

Teaching Cross-Cultural Understanding to Indonesian university students is essential for developing the intercultural competence needed in a globalized world. CCU increases cultural awareness, language skills, and employability while fostering mutual respect and reducing misunderstandings. Despite challenges, integrating CCU into university curricula through innovative strategies and strong institutional support produce substantial benefits for students and society.

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