

From Awareness to Practice: Indonesian Pre-Service English Teachers' Perceptions and Implementation of Intercultural Communicative Competence

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Abstract

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is critical in English language education, especially in preparing future teachers to address cultural diversity in the classroom. Despite growing awareness of ICC, challenges remain in how pre-service teachers perceive and plan to implement ICC in their future teaching practices. This study investigated Indonesian pre-service English teachers' perceptions of ICC objectives and their intended integration into English language instruction. Conducted at a university in Central Java, Indonesia, the study involved 19 undergraduate pre-service English teachers who completed a questionnaire, all of whom were invited to participate in follow-up interviews. The questionnaire responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while interview data were examined through thematic analysis. The findings indicate that participants generally acknowledged the importance of ICC, particularly the knowledge dimension—such as understanding non-verbal behaviors, taboos, and levels of formality—and, to a lesser extent, attitudes like suspending judgment. However, responses also revealed inconsistencies, as many participants favored teacher-centered approaches focused on presenting cultural facts, with limited attention to deeper cultural engagement or student-centered activities. Although some participants demonstrated more comprehensive and reflective approaches, the findings suggest that many pre-service teachers have a fragmented understanding of ICC and lack clear strategies for its classroom integration. These results highlight the need for teacher education programs to explicitly address ICC objectives, foster critical intercultural awareness, and promote reflective pedagogies that support effective ICC implementation in future English language classrooms.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence, pre-service English teachers, cultural awareness, ELT.

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized and interconnected world, language education is increasingly expected to cultivate linguistic and intercultural communicative competence (Fantini, 2012). As English continues to serve as a global lingua franca, communication across cultural boundaries has become an everyday reality in academic, professional, and social contexts

(Ishikawa, 2016; Jenkins, 2012; Leitner et al., 2016). Consequently, as embraced by Islam and Park (2015) and Lorenz et al. (2021), English language classrooms must prepare learners to speak the language fluently and interact appropriately and effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Given the increasing role of English as a worldwide lingua franca, Baker (2011) argues that this situation should be addressed in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms as he claims that ELT is supposed to go beyond the predominant focus on grammar, vocabulary, and phonology based on a single native speaker variety of English. To go beyond native speakers means that English language education should include both linguistic and cultural dimensions in its curriculum.

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) refers to the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Mede & Güneş, 2019). Byram (1997) conceptualizes ICC as consisting of five interrelated components. First, attitudes encompass curiosity, openness, and a willingness to suspend judgment toward others and their cultural practices. This component emphasizes an affective orientation that prioritizes understanding over evaluation and supports the development of empathy and respectful engagement in intercultural contexts (Wang & Shen, 2023). Second, knowledge involves an understanding of one's culture and the general processes through which societies and cultures function. This includes familiarity with social norms, institutions, historical backgrounds, belief systems, and practices that influence cultural meaning-making (Garrett-Rucks, 2016). Third, skills of interpreting and relating refer to the capacity to critically analyze and compare cultural practices and meanings from both one's and others' cultural perspectives, thereby enabling deeper intercultural understanding (Hoff, 2020). Fourth, skills of discovery and interaction relate to the ability to acquire new cultural knowledge and apply it appropriately during real-time intercultural communication (Smakova & Paulsrud, 2020). Finally, critical cultural awareness is the ability to evaluate cultural phenomena—such as values, beliefs, and behaviors—in both one's own and others' cultures through a reflective and critical lens (Nugent & Catalano, 2015).

As the demand for ICC continues to grow within the field of English language teaching, the role of language teachers—particularly those still in training—has become increasingly critical. Pre-service English teachers are expected to acquire a theoretical understanding of ICC and the pedagogical competencies required to integrate it effectively into classroom practice (Vu, 2020; Hamadouch & Aoumeur, 2024). However, Karlen et al. (2023) note that many pre-service teachers worldwide still demonstrate a limited or fragmented grasp of ICC. Although they often recognize the importance of intercultural awareness, their interpretations tend to focus on surface-level cultural elements such as food, festivals, and traditional customs while neglecting deeper dimensions such as critical cultural awareness, perspective-taking, and interactional skills (e.g., Atmojo & Putra, 2022; Cheewasukthaworn & Suwanarak, 2017; Martin-Beltrán et al., 2023; Macqueen et al., 2020). This indicates a persistent gap between conceptual awareness and the ability to translate ICC into pedagogically meaningful classroom strategies.

Furthermore, Recent literature on intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in the Indonesian educational context reflects both advancement and ongoing challenges in its implementation. Gandana and Parr (2013) highlight how the inclusion of subjects such as Intercultural Communication in teacher education aims to shift traditional views of language as neutral; however, their study reveals that the effectiveness of these subjects largely

depends on the beliefs and identity work of the lecturers, often resulting in inconsistencies between curricular intentions and classroom practices. Similarly, [Abduh and Rosmaladewi \(2018\)](#) emphasize the role of lecturers in promoting intercultural values within bilingual programs, identifying open-mindedness, reciprocal interaction, and respect for differences as key ICC components supported through both in-country and international intercultural programs. [Idris \(2020\)](#), in a large-scale study of junior high school English teachers in Yogyakarta, found high levels of intercultural attitude, skill, and knowledge across participants, suggesting a general readiness among educators to engage in culturally diverse communication, regardless of geographic teaching location.

However, [Putra et al. \(2020\)](#) point out limitations in the instructional materials themselves, finding that Indonesian English textbooks often portray culture in fragmented and superficial ways, with limited opportunities for authentic intercultural engagement. Complementing this concern, [Kiss and Weninger \(2017\)](#) argue for the use of visual texts in developing ICC, noting that learners' meaning-making processes are shaped by their cultural and individual experiences and that these interpretations can serve as rich resources for intercultural understanding. From a broader pedagogical standpoint, [Piątkowska \(2015\)](#) critiques earlier models of cultural instruction and advocates a shift toward reflective, skills-based approaches aligned with ICC principles. Together, these studies suggest that while Indonesian education has taken necessary steps toward integrating ICC, there remains a need for a more coherent alignment between curriculum, teacher preparation, and classroom practice to support the development of meaningful intercultural competence.

Although intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been widely recognized as a critical component of teacher education, limited research has explored how pre-service English teachers in Indonesia perceive this concept and how these perceptions shape their intended teaching practices. While ICC is increasingly present in educational discourse and curriculum frameworks, there remains a lack of empirical investigation into how future teachers internalize and plan to implement its principles. This study addresses that gap by focusing specifically on pre-service teachers who are still in the formative stage of their professional identity development. The novelty of the study lies in its participant focus and methodological design, which combines questionnaire and interview data to capture both the breadth and depth of the participants' understandings. Therefore, this study aims to investigate Indonesian pre-service English teachers' perceptions of ICC and explore how these perceptions contribute to their future teaching practices, specifically addressing the following questions: (1) How do pre-service English teachers perceive ICC in the context of the English classroom? and (2) How do these perceptions influence their intended integration of ICC into future teaching practices?

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data to address the research questions. Quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire developed based on (i) literature related to the intercultural approach to language teaching and ICC ([Byram, 1997, 2000](#); [Byram et al., 2002](#); [Deardorff, 2006](#); [Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006](#)), and (ii) previous studies on teachers' perceptions of ICC ([Atmojo & Putra, 2022](#); [Nindya et al., 2022](#); [Osman, 2015](#)). The questionnaire comprised five sections. Section 1 included a study description and a declaration of informed consent. Section 2 collected

demographic information from participants. Sections 3 and 4, consisting of 17 Likert-scale items, explored participants' perceptions of ICC and their perceived likelihood of integrating ICC into their future teaching practices. Section 5 provided a follow-up consent form for participation in the interview phase of the study.

This study was conducted at a university in Central Java, Indonesia. It involved 19 undergraduate pre-service English teachers who completed a questionnaire and were invited to participate in follow-up interviews. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted both face-to-face and online to accommodate participants' preferences and availability. Semi-structured interviews can take various forms, with face-to-face interviews being the most traditional; however, online interviewing has become an increasingly common method of data collection in social science research (Balushi, 2018). For online interviews, participants responded using a combination of voice and text messages to express their views, with interview questions sent in advance via text. As Salmons (2012) notes, the choice of interview medium may be influenced by the type of data preferred by the researcher—such as visual, verbal, or textual—or by the participant's level of access, familiarity, and convenience. In the face-to-face interviews, questions were posed directly, and individual responses were audio-recorded. According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), recording interviews allows researchers to remain fully engaged in the conversation without the distraction of note-taking, thereby enhancing rapport and facilitating the collection of more prosperous, more authentic data.

In data analysis, the survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, measures of central tendency, and measures of variation for Likert-scale items. Calculating the mean and standard deviation allowed for identifying patterns and variations to know participants' perceptions (Stantcheva, 2023). Interview transcripts were first produced from the audio or video recordings for the qualitative data. The transcripts were then read repeatedly to identify affluent, detailed segments and potential contradictions (Smith et al., 2021). This process involved identifying conceptual patterns and relationships, helping to deepen the understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives (Smith et al., 2021). The final step involved a holistic reflection on the findings and their significance in addressing the research objectives and questions.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Pre-service English teachers' perceptions of ICC

The first section of the survey examined the extent to which participants perceived the importance of ten ICC objectives. These objectives were rated using a four-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from 4 (definitely necessary), 3 (somewhat important), 2 (somewhat not required), and 1 (definitely not essential).

Table 1. Participants perceived the importance of selected ICC objectives

No	Objectives	Mean	SD
1.	Knowledge of non-verbal behaviors of interactions and related taboos	3.63	0.496
2.	The ability to make evaluative analysis of documents and/or events that refer to students' ideological perspectives and values	3.53	0.513
3.	The ability to identify significant references within and across cultures and elicit their connections	3.21	0.713

4.	The ability to elicit from English speakers concepts and values of documents or events	3.05	0.705
5.	Knowledge about regional dialects and varieties and how others perceive them	3.16	0.898

The results reveal that among the five ICC objectives presented, participants rated knowledge of non-verbal behaviors of interactions and related taboos as the most important ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.496$), indicating a strong consensus on the relevance of culturally appropriate non-verbal communication. This is followed by the ability to make evaluative analysis of documents or events referring to students' ideological perspectives and values ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.513$), reflecting a recognition of the importance of fostering critical cultural awareness. In contrast, lower mean scores were found for objectives that involve more interpretive or interactional skills. The ability to identify significant references across cultures ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.713$), the ability to elicit concepts and values from English speakers ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.705$), and knowledge of regional dialects and how they are perceived ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.898$) all received relatively lower ratings and higher standard deviations. These results indicate more significant variability in participants' perceptions of these more nuanced or interaction-based components of ICC.

In the interview phase, participants were asked to share which ICC objectives they considered essential and to explain their reasoning. Their responses were generally consistent with the survey results, with most participants indicating that all ICC objectives were essential or somewhat important in the context of English language teaching. Two goals were most frequently emphasized: knowledge of non-verbal behaviors and related taboos and knowledge of levels of formality in language and behavior. Participants highlighted that understanding culturally appropriate gestures, facial expressions, and behavioral norms is essential for effective communication in English, particularly when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds.

For example, PT1 stated, *"I think it is important to know about the behaviors or habits of the people that we talk to,"* reflecting an awareness that communication in English includes cultural expectations beyond language use. PT15 echoed this, saying, *"It is important to know what is considered as taboo and not taboo, acceptable and unacceptable behaviors by their culture,"* emphasizing the need for intercultural sensitivity to avoid miscommunication. Similarly, PT11 remarked, *"Knowing how they do what they usually do in their culture or country is important. How they address and behave in front of their elders or people they just met and so on,"* suggesting that understanding social conventions across cultures is a necessary aspect of teaching English. These responses indicate that participants view cultural knowledge not only as background information but as a practical tool for supporting students' successful communication in diverse intercultural contexts.

Moreover, the interview findings suggest that participants placed the most significant emphasis on the knowledge component of the ICC framework, particularly cultural knowledge relevant to communication. However, their responses primarily focused on understanding other cultures—such as non-verbal behaviors and social norms—while omitting reference to knowledge of their own culture, which is also an essential element of ICC. In addition to knowledge, the attitude component emerged as the second most valued aspect, with a particular focus on the ability to suspend judgment and engage with cultural complexity. This objective was explicitly mentioned by four participants and was reflected

in related attitudes, such as promoting empathy, openness, and sensitivity when encountering cultural differences.

For instance, PT9 stated, *“Knowing how they do what they usually do in their culture or country is important so we do not prejudice or stereotype someone because of that,”* highlighting the link between knowledge and the need to reduce bias. PT13 emphasized, *“Suspending judgment and prejudice is critical because it emphasizes empathy, openness, and the ability to approach intercultural interactions without preconceived notions or biases.”* Similarly, PT5 noted that *“suspending judgment is crucial because it promotes empathy, understanding, and respectful communication.”* In addition to this, some participants also mentioned the importance of developing students’ readiness to adopt culturally appropriate behaviors and raising students’ interest in diverse perspectives—further reflecting the attitudinal dimension of ICC.

The interview findings reinforce the central role of cultural knowledge in participants’ conceptualizations of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). As reflected in PT1, PT15, and PT11 comments, participants emphasized the importance of understanding behaviors, taboos, and social conventions in other cultures. This suggests that cultural knowledge is perceived as supplementary and an essential communicative tool for navigating intercultural interactions (Abrams, 2020; Holliday, 2018). Such emphasis aligns with Byram’s (1997) notion of *savoirs*, or knowledge of social groups and their cultural practices, which forms a foundational element of ICC. However, consistent with previous research on pre-service teachers’ understandings of ICC (Taylor et al., 2016; Atmojo & Putra, 2022; Cheewasukthaworn & Suwanarak, 2017), the type of knowledge referenced by participants was primarily limited to observable and external aspects of other cultures, such as non-verbal communication and etiquette. There was a minimal acknowledgment of the need to understand one’s cultural background—an essential component of ICC that enables learners to engage in meaningful comparison, reflection, and perspective-taking (Byram, 2008). This intense focus on external cultural norms reflects a surface-level approach to intercultural learning, in which culture is treated as a static collection of facts rather than a dynamic, interpretive process (Munandar & Newton, 2021). A more comprehensive intercultural education must include the cultivation of interpretive and relational skills, such as the skills of discovery and interaction, which enable individuals to engage with unfamiliar cultural contexts in thoughtful, adaptive ways (Sobkowiak, 2016; Gómez-Rodríguez, 2018).

In addition to knowledge, the attitude component of ICC—particularly the ability to suspend judgment—was recognized by some participants as essential to fostering intercultural empathy and openness. Statements from PT9, PT13, and PT5 emphasized the need to reduce prejudice and approach cultural differences without bias (Tirnaz & Narafshan, 2018; Oberste-Berghaus, 2024; Murray, 2022). These perspectives reflect Byram’s (2021) emphasis on openness, curiosity, and readiness to revise cultural assumptions, which he identifies as crucial affective dispositions in intercultural communication. Moreover, these findings echo the results of Osman (2015), whose study also found that pre-service teachers valued the ability to suspend judgment as one of the most critical aspects of ICC. Participants’ references to empathy, perspective-taking, and student readiness to engage with diverse cultures further support the emerging role of intercultural attitudes in their evolving professional identities. However, similar to previous findings (Nindya et al., 2022), this study suggests that participants’ awareness of ICC

components is still somewhat fragmented. While they recognize the relevance of both knowledge and attitude, their ability to articulate how these aspects translate into teaching strategies remains limited. This reinforces earlier conclusions by [Banjongjit and Boonmoh \(2018\)](#), who found that ICC is often acknowledged in theory but insufficiently addressed in classroom practice. Nonetheless, the presence of attitudinal awareness in participants' reflections signals a potential entry point for deeper engagement with ICC if supported by appropriate teacher education interventions.

Pre-service English teachers' future practices in promoting ICC

To explore participants' perceptions of how they would integrate ICC into their future teaching practices, the questionnaire included items designed to assess their likelihood of incorporating ICC objectives into English language instruction. Specifically, Section 4 of the questionnaire asked participants to rate how they would implement selected ICC objectives in their future classrooms. A four-point Likert scale was used, with the following options: often (4), once in a while (3), rarely (2), and never (1). The results in Table 3 reflect participants' perceived likelihood of integrating ICC into their English language teaching.

Table 2. Participants intended frequency of using ICC-related classroom activities

No	Objectives	Mean	SD
1.	Providing students with sufficient facts about foods, greetings, etc.	3.0	0.94
2.	Ask students to find information about a particular practice.	2.89	1.05
3.	Exposing students to materials that allow them to recognize the diversity.	2.84	1.01
4.	Briefly presenting facts about the culture of English-speaking countries.	2.84	0.90
5.	Ask students to find information about a product in the target country.	2.42	1.12
6.	Effective questioning of culturally relevant activities.	2.63	1.07
7.	Asking students to find information about particular perspectives	2.74	0.81

The results in Table 3 show that participants were most likely to integrate surface-level cultural content, such as providing students with facts about food, greetings, and customs ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.94$). This was followed by asking students to investigate particular cultural practices ($M = 2.89$) and exposing them to materials highlighting cultural diversity ($M = 2.84$). In contrast, more interpretive or interactive activities—such as encouraging students to explore cultural perspectives ($M = 2.74$), engage in critical questioning ($M = 2.63$), or investigate cultural products ($M = 2.42$)—received lower ratings. These findings suggest that while participants showed a willingness to include cultural content, their focus leaned toward factual and teacher-centered approaches rather than student-driven or critical intercultural engagement.

Furthermore, in the interview phase, participants were asked to design culture-related teaching materials and activities they would adopt in their future English language classrooms. Building on the survey findings, most participants indicated a preference for two main types of activities: (1) providing students with factual information about foods, greetings, and customs from English-speaking countries (knowledge), and (2) asking students to research specific cultural practices and share their findings with peers (skills of discovery and interaction). These responses reflect a continued emphasis on factual cultural

knowledge, with many participants aligning with the activities presented in the questionnaire. However, several participants also introduced culture-based activities not included in the survey, offering a broader view of how they envisioned implementing ICC objectives.

For example, PT12 stated, *"I would show them the difference in greetings and lifestyle of other countries,"* while PT14 explained, *"About how to greet, what gestures and facial expressions mean in other countries, and certain expressions that are taboo."* Similarly, PT11 noted, *"I would provide the students with information about customs and habits, values, as well as challenges and opportunities in communicating and negotiating between cultures."* These responses suggest a strong focus on transmitting cultural knowledge, highlighting a teacher-centered approach. Their emphasis on conveying factual and behavioral information is consistent with the knowledge component of ICC and reflects a relatively limited view of intercultural learning as content delivery rather than interactive engagement. Although they also mentioned exposing students to cultural diversity, their descriptions lacked explicit reference to student involvement in reflection or critical analysis, indicating a less developed integration of the interpretive and attitudinal dimensions of ICC.

In contrast, other participants (PT2, PT4, PT6, and PT7) offered more student-centered and comprehensive responses. While they also valued providing cultural information, they proposed additional activities such as cultural comparisons, discussion of cultural products, role-playing, and reflective journaling. For instance, PT2 shared, *"I would teach the students about how to greet people in several countries... Then I would ask them to compare it to our own culture that is Indonesian or Javanese culture."* Similarly, PT4 said, *"I would use movies... Then, the students can discuss what culture is different or similar from their own and how they think about it."* Participants PT6 and PT7 emphasized the use of diverse materials and methods, including authentic texts, videos, role-plays, case studies, and reflective journals, to support intercultural communication skills.

The interview findings provide deeper insight into how pre-service teachers envision the integration of ICC in classroom practice. Participants' proposed activities ranged from teacher-centered cultural transmission to more student-centered, experiential learning approaches. For many, the focus remained on delivering factual content about other cultures—such as greetings, gestures, taboos, and lifestyle differences—reflecting the knowledge dimension of [Byram's \(1997\)](#) ICC model. For example, PT12 and PT14 highlighted the importance of teaching students observable behaviors, while PT11 expanded the scope slightly by including challenges in intercultural communication. These examples illustrate a continued emphasis on surface-level culture, where the goal is to inform rather than engage ([Li et al., 2024](#); [Wang & Wang, 2024](#)). This teacher-centered orientation aligns with findings by [Wang et al. \(2024\)](#), who found that teachers often equate intercultural learning with knowledge delivery rather than fostering deeper intercultural understanding.

Although such knowledge is a necessary foundation, it is insufficient for building complete intercultural competence. As [McConachy \(2022\)](#) argues, effective ICC instruction requires more than awareness—it involves the development of interpretive, relational, and reflective skills. In this study, only a subset of participants (PT2, PT4, PT6, and PT7) proposed activities that align with these more complex dimensions of ICC. Their suggestions—such as cultural comparisons, movie discussions, role-playing, and reflective journaling—demonstrate a shift toward learner-centered practices that encourage students to explore

cultural perspectives, engage in interaction, and reflect critically on their experiences. These findings echo previous studies (e.g., Byram, 2008; Porto & Zembylas, 2022; Vu, 2020) emphasizing that fostering ICC requires pedagogical approaches supporting perspective-taking, empathy, and critical awareness.

Role-playing, for instance, offers students a simulated environment to practice intercultural interaction, allowing them to apply cultural knowledge while navigating ambiguity and difference (Reid, 2015)—an essential aspect of the skills of interpreting and relating and skills of discovery and interaction (Byram, 1997). Similarly, the use of authentic materials, such as videos and case studies, provides contextualized exposure to diverse cultural norms and language use, enabling learners to connect classroom content with real-world communication (Kiss & Weninger, 2017; Garrett-Rucks, 2016; Smakova & Paulsrud, 2020) as proposed by PT6 and PT7, reflective journaling fosters critical cultural awareness, a core component of ICC that encourages students to question assumptions and examine cultural phenomena from multiple perspectives (Nugent & Catalano, 2015; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). These response variations highlight a key challenge in ICC implementation: while some pre-service teachers demonstrate emerging pedagogical strategies that reflect multiple ICC dimensions, others rely heavily on transmissive approaches. According to Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) and Garrett-Rucks, P. (2016), meaningful intercultural learning requires learners to engage in reflection on both self and others, moving beyond cultural facts toward dialogic understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated Indonesian pre-service English teachers' perceptions of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and how those perceptions influence their intended classroom practices. The findings indicate that participants generally recognized the importance of ICC and expressed a positive orientation toward incorporating intercultural elements into their future teaching. The knowledge component, particularly cultural facts such as non-verbal behavior and taboos, emerged as the most consistently valued aspect of ICC. Participants demonstrated a tendency to prioritize surface-level cultural content, reflecting a conceptual focus on observable and factual information rather than interpretive, relational, or critical dimensions. However, data from interviews revealed a more nuanced picture. While some participants maintained a teacher-centered approach grounded in knowledge transmission, others proposed more dynamic, student-centered activities—such as cultural comparisons, role-playing, and reflective journaling—that addressed broader ICC components, including skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. These responses suggest that despite an initially limited conceptual understanding, some participants were able to translate ICC principles into pedagogically meaningful strategies. This points to a gap between theoretical familiarity and practical application, yet also reflects a willingness to engage with ICC more deeply when prompted through reflective inquiry.

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