

When English Isn't Enough: Rethinking English Teaching in Indonesia Through Overseas Experiences

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Abstract

The global expansion of English presents significant challenges for non-native speakers navigating its use across diverse cultural contexts. Pursuing higher education in a foreign country requires skills to adapt and be aware of local cultures to communicate effectively, even when English is used as the medium of interaction. This study examined the communication challenges experienced by Indonesian students studying in India, where English is a second language. The study was grounded in Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) framework, focusing on intercultural knowledge, skills of interpretation and interaction, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness. This study employed a mixed-methods design, utilising a five-point Likert scale and open-ended questions through an online questionnaire to collect the data from Indonesian students in India. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics and content analysis, with ICC levels classified using established scoring criteria. The study involved 55 Indonesian students in India who met the participation criteria. Results showed a high overall level of ICC with a mean score of 3.76. Additionally, language-related challenges were the most prevalent, with 23 students reporting difficulties tied to accents, pronunciation, speech pace, and unfamiliar vocabulary. Cultural differences affected 21 students, who had difficulty interpreting body language, gestures, tone, and physical interaction norms, while 11 students reported no communication challenges during their stay in India. These findings suggest that language proficiency alone is insufficient without intercultural awareness; therefore, short-term pre-departure intercultural training and the long-term integration of cultural competence into English learning are needed to better support students' communication experiences abroad.

Keywords: intercultural communication, intercultural awareness, English language teaching, curriculum development

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Introduction

English now functions as a global lingua franca, enabling communication among speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Rather than belonging to a single nation, English has evolved into multiple localised forms influenced by speakers' identities, experiences, and cultural norms. As a result, communication in English does not rely on native-speaker norms but adapts to context, intention, and mutual understanding. This dynamic use of English reflects its possible and pluralistic nature, where meaning-making depends not only on grammar and pronunciation, but also on intercultural awareness and the ability to negotiate meaning across cultural differences.

Indonesia and India share similarities as culturally rich, multilingual nations with long histories of diverse ethnic groups and local languages. However, the role and status of English differ significantly in each context. In India, English holds the status of an associate official language alongside Hindi and is widely used for administration, higher education, and interethnic communication (Dwivedi, 2015; Sharma, 2019). In contrast, Indonesia positions English as a foreign language with limited presence in everyday communication and institutional use (Daflizar et al., 2022). This is reflected in national proficiency data, where Indonesia ranks 80th out of 116 countries globally and 12th out of 23 countries in Asia (English First, 2024), with proficiency concentrated mainly in urban areas in Java. These distinctions highlight that while both countries engage with English, its functional role in society and daily interaction differs considerably.

Amid these contextual differences, an increasing number of Indonesian students are pursuing higher education in India. This situation presents an opportunity to explore how Indonesian students who come from a country where English is a foreign language navigate communication in a multilingual environment in India. A successful communication abroad requires not only linguistic competence but also intercultural sensitivity and adaptability. Insight from such research can inform English language teaching in Indonesia, encouraging a shift from traditional linguistics-focused instruction toward a more communication-oriented and interculturally responsive pedagogy.

Theoretical Framework

In the context of globalisation, individuals across countries are increasingly connected through international mobility, technology, education, and economic exchange (Sarwari et al., 2024). This interconnectedness has expanded cultural encounters, making diversity more visible and enabling a broader exchange of values, perspectives, and experiences (Abdalla & Mohammed, 2020). As cross-cultural interactions become more common, the role of cultural awareness grows increasingly significant, particularly for intercultural speakers who must be capable of recognising, understanding, and responding to cultural differences (Permatasari & Andriyanti, 2021). The development of intercultural competence influences how individuals think, behave, and perceive themselves and others, shaping their ability to interact meaningfully within diverse social contexts (Gutiérrez-Santiuste & Ritacco-Real, 2023).

Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the skills required to navigate intercultural encounters. His model consists of five key components: knowledge of one's own and others' cultures, attitudes of curiosity and openness, critical cultural awareness for evaluating cultural practices and perspectives, skills of interpreting and relating cultural meanings, and skills of

discovery and interaction, which enable individuals to engage in intercultural dialogue effectively. This framework positions language learning not merely as linguistic mastery but as a process that integrates cultural understanding, interpretation, and socially responsive communication.

Milton J. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) conceptualises intercultural awareness as a developmental progression from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism (Bennett, 1993). Bennett's DMIS further explains this growth as a staged progression. The model consists of two major orientations: ethnocentrism, which includes denial, defense, and minimisation, where individuals view their own culture as central and struggle to recognise or value differences; and ethnorelativism, consisting of acceptance, adaptation, and integration, where cultural differences are acknowledged, respected, and incorporated into one's thinking and behaviour. Together, these theoretical perspectives underscore that intercultural communication necessitates more than linguistic proficiency; it demands an evolving capacity to perceive, interpret, and engage with cultural diversity in ways that foster understanding, mitigate miscommunication, and promote respectful global interaction.

Research Question

Building on the increasing need for intercultural competence in global communication and the theoretical perspectives, this study aims to explore how intercultural communicative competence concepts manifest in real intercultural contexts. To align theory with lived experience, the research focuses on Indonesian students in India and examines two key aspects:

1. What is the level of Indonesian students' intercultural communicative competence using English in India?
2. What is the communication challenge faced by Indonesian students in India?

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches through a survey conducted using a questionnaire. The data were collected by circulating a questionnaire via Google Forms from July 2 to 11, 2025. The questionnaire consisted of 22 questions addressing the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of Indonesian students and their experiences communicating in English in India, along with an open-ended question regarding the communication challenges they encountered in the Indian context.

The participants of this study are Indonesian students studying in India from various academic levels, including Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral programs. Those participants have been staying in India for at least six months, as per the participants' criteria.

The data analysis employed descriptive quantitative and content analysis to interpret the findings. The ICC level was determined by calculating the mean score following the classification used by Saricoban and Oz (2014) and Shevimeel-Shania (2020): low (1.0–2.4), moderate (2.5–3.4), and high (3.5–5.0).

Findings and Discussion

Participants' Demographic Data

A total of 125 Indonesian students were reported to be studying in India across bachelor's, master's, doctoral, and student-exchange programs from June 2024 to May 2025. 104 out of 125 students were successfully contacted in July 2025, since several students had completed their studies. Based on the inclusion criteria, 82 students qualified to participate, having lived in India for at least six months. The questionnaire was distributed to all eligible students, and 55 responded voluntarily. Among the participants, 30 were male (53.6%), and 25 were female (46.4%). In terms of academic level, 12 students (21.4%) were enrolled in bachelor's programs, 31 (55.4%) in master's programs, and 12 (23.2%) in doctoral programs.

Students' ICC Level

The reliability test showed a Cronbach's alpha value of .933, demonstrating excellent internal consistency. All 22 questionnaire items were confirmed as valid, with significant correlations at the 0.01 and 0.05 levels (2-tailed). The overall Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) level of participants was high, with a mean score of 3.76.

Students' Challenge in Daily Communication

The communication challenges reported by the participants varied across language and cultural factors. The most common issue was language-related, particularly accent and pronunciation difficulties, reported by 13 students, who noted challenges understanding Indian or other non-native English accents. Another 10 students mentioned difficulty following conversations due to fast speech and unfamiliar vocabulary, including slang and mixed Hindi–English expressions. Cultural differences also played a role, with 8 students reporting confusion related to body language, gestures, and physical interaction norms, such as interpreting the Indian head movement or differing expectations for personal space. Additionally, 13 students experienced challenges related to communication styles, including directness, interruptions, and differing interpretations of tone or friendliness. Meanwhile, 11 students reported no communication difficulties during their experience in India.

Table 1
Students' Communication Challenges

Communication Challenge Category	Sub-category	Number of Students	Few Samples of Students' Answers
Language	Accent/ Pronunciation	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding different English accents, especially Indian or other non-native accents, was difficult at first. I often had to ask people to repeat themselves (Student 20) The accent and how they pronounce the words are a bit challenging for people who come to India for the first time (student 42) I still can't really adjust to my friends' accent (student 18)
	Speak too fast and Unfamiliar word/phrase	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sometimes they speak too fast and use some words that I have never heard of (student 1) Some friends speak very fast, especially when they're excited. It can be hard to catch everything they're saying in real-time (student 21) Use of local slang and Hinglish. Many of my Indian friends mix Hindi and English in conversations. Sometimes I don't understand the slang or Hindi phrases they use, which makes it hard to follow the conversation (student 18)
Cultural Difference	Body language/ gesture	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sometimes don't understand their body language (student 11) How they treat foreigners like me, in case of touching, I mean, in India, they (guys) are common to touch the other guy, but in Indonesia, that thing is absurd and weird (student 29). Understanding when a head bobble means "yes," "maybe," or "I have no idea what you just said." It was like learning a new dialect without subtitles (student 46)
	Others	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Indonesia, we tend to be more indirect and polite when expressing disagreement. But I noticed that some of my friends from other countries are more direct, which sometimes felt too blunt or confusing (student 22) Some people sometimes cut my sentences when I tried to explain something which they thought was right (student 33) Our different speech intonations often make me misunderstood (student 45) I feel that when women are overly friendly (smiling often) to men, it is considered that we are flirting (student 50)
No challenge		11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I don't face any difficulty (student 12) There are no issues (student 5) No problem (student 6)

Table 1 illustrates that 80% of all participants (44 students) faced communication challenges in various categories, 42% (23 students) in the language challenge category and 38% (21 students) in the cultural differences category. Meanwhile, 20% of all participants (11 students) faced no communication challenges.

Recommendations and Program Development

Competency in intercultural communication is a crucial aspect that enables individuals to observe, be open, interpret, and relate effectively, as well as be critically aware of cultural differences. Moreover, applying intercultural communication competency in daily interactions results in effective intercultural dialogue. On the other hand, intercultural sensitivity, according to Bennett's DMIS, reveals how an individual perceives themselves in relation to others.

The findings highlight that English proficiency alone does not guarantee successful communication, as students with high ICC levels still experienced challenges that required greater tolerance and acceptance of cultural differences. The results show that, although students understand the importance of ICC, the findings in Table 1 (samples of students' answers) reflect limited intercultural sensitivity, as several students viewed cultural differences through an ethnocentric lens and struggled to acknowledge or value diversity. This suggests that language competence must be supported by intercultural awareness to facilitate more effective and meaningful communication and minimise misunderstanding.

To address the intercultural sensitivity issues, short-term and long-term programs can be designed to strengthen preparatory programs for students before they study in India. Therefore, based on the findings, this study suggests implementing a short-term pre-departure intercultural program to address students' limited intercultural sensitivity despite their awareness of ICC. Given that English proficiency alone was insufficient and some students exhibited ethnocentric orientations, an online pre-study program is proposed for Indonesian recipients of Indian government scholarships, as their dispersed geographic locations make offline implementation impractical. The program should introduce India as a multicultural and multilingual society, highlight local language diversity, and emphasise cultural similarities between India and Indonesia to foster openness and tolerance. This initiative could be jointly coordinated through collaboration between the Indonesian and Indian Ministries of Education or their respective embassies, thereby strengthening students' intercultural awareness and preparedness prior to their academic mobility.

As a long-term strategy, this study recommends integrating intercultural competence into English language instruction in the Indonesian English teaching curriculum, particularly within communication-oriented courses, to systematically develop students' intercultural awareness. Given that English in the Indonesian context is primarily used for interaction with speakers of other nationalities, embedding cultural competence into English learning can better prepare students for intercultural communication and support the development of sustainable intercultural communication competence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although students demonstrate a high level of intercultural communicative competency, they continue to experience challenges, particularly related to language differences such as accent and intonation, as well as cultural variations in gestures and

communication styles. These findings indicate that English proficiency alone is not enough and must be complemented by intercultural awareness to minimise misunderstanding. Therefore, integrating cross-cultural learning into English education and providing structured pre-departure preparation programs are essential. Future collaboration with Indonesian and Indian institutions could support the development of a specialised cross-cultural short course to better prepare students for intercultural interaction

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