Increasing students’ intercultural communication competence by utilizing blended learning model

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Abstract
This article is a summary of a qualitative observation to the students of English Education Program, Brawijaya University, Indonesia. It tries to describe the students’ learning experiences, perception, and expectation about issues related to the contents, that is intercultural communication; and learning methodology, particularly blended learning. As foreign language students, the subjects of this observation need to achieve not only language competence but also intercultural communication competence because when they communicate with people coming from different cultural backgrounds they should understand their communication styles as a part of their culture. This research employs three parallel classes in Cross Cultural Understanding course. Qualitative observation, document analysis, and online interviews were conducted to gain students pedagogical interaction, learning experiences, and expectation about both intercultural communication competences and blended learning strategy. The study reveals that students have new perspectives about the role of culture in communication especially the use of language as a medium of communication. Students also realize that living in a multicultural society needs an intercultural awareness to avoid misunderstanding caused by prejudice and overgeneralization toward people coming from different cultural background. About the blended learning strategy applied in the course, students find it is interesting.

Keywords: intercultural, communication, competence, blended learning, awareness, misunderstanding

INTRODUCTION
Living in a multicultural society like in Indonesia needs a cross cultural awareness among the members of society. With thousands of Islands, Indonesia has thousands of different ethnics, languages, cultures, and traditions. Consequently, nearly every time we, as an Indonesian, meets people coming from different cultural background. Making contact with different cultural background people in one hand can enrich our cross cultural awareness; however, on the other hand it can make a cultural misunderstanding each other due to cultural differences.

When we are communicating with people coming from different cultural background, we need a cultural awareness, a self-concept that requires us to realize that our conversational partners might have different communication styles, non verbal communication, family values, customs, and other cultural aspects of life. In this global era, intercultural communication happens every time. The advancement of technology expands the people ability to connect to each other for any purposes. The ability to work with people from other cultures is becoming increasingly necessary in our global work environment. Even if you never travel abroad, it’s important to be ready to mix with other cultures as each year the number of immigrants is
increasing. Likewise, the number of interpersonal exchanges at the global level via video and teleconferences is becoming more frequent (Mackin, 2003).

The ability to communicate in a multicultural society and interact with people coming from other culture, often in other languages, is inherent to the success of living in a plural society like in Indonesia. Effective cross cultural communication skills are the fundamental that enhance the success transaction of communication around the world. This paper tries to describe the students’ learning experiences, perception, and expectation about issues related to the contents, that is intercultural communication; and learning methodology, particularly blended learning. As foreign language students, the subjects of this observation need to achieve not only language competence but also intercultural communication competence because when they are communication with people coming from different cultural backgrounds they should understand their communication styles as a part of their culture.

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS

For foreign language learners, just being able to use the foreign language fluently is not enough. They also should be able to use the language in appropriate cultural context. It means that they also have to understand the language function as a tools of communication, as well as the understanding of the pragmatic function of the language such as politeness and respect.

Tang (1999) states that language is a part of culture. When a person decides to learn French, for example, he or she is not merely absorbing the linguistics of the language, but everything to do with French and France. What he or she is taking in includes all the preconceptions about the French language, that it is beautiful, that it is romantic, that it is spoken along the Seine, and so on. I may be accused of stereotyping here, and perhaps I am, but this does not discount my underlying point, which is that most, if not all, languages come with some cultural associations attached. By speaking the language, therefore, one automatically (to a greater or lesser extent) aligns oneself with the culture of the language. To speak a language well, one has to be able to think in that language, and thought is extremely powerful. A person’s mind is in a sense the center of his identity, so if a person thinks in French in order to speak French, one might say that he has, in a way, almost taken on a French identity. Language is the soul of the country and people who speak it.

Meanwhile, Miladinovic(2013) adds that the link between foreign language learning and culture learning has been established by the linguists and anthropologists a long time ago. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages has concluded that through the study of other languages, students gain a knowledge and understanding of the cultures that use that language. Moreover, students cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs. Linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language. From simple, everyday things, like forms of address to appropriate ways of expressing disagreement, culture forms an integral part of the language learning curricula. In any case, in order for communication to be successful, language use must be associated with other culturally appropriate behavior, not only linguistic rules in the narrow sense.

Teaching English as a Foreign Language always leads to the integration of language and cross-cultural understanding. In Brawijaya University, Indonesia, in Cross Cultural Understanding subject, some teaching strategies are used during the teaching learning process combined with some teaching media (picture, audio visual, pattern texts, etc). Activities such as lecturing, discussing, presenting paper and online discussion will be applied during the course.
The lecturer conducts the class by way of discussion rather than straight lecture. Students’ willingness to jump in and participate in the conversation will add greatly to the overall success of the class. In particular sessions of the meetings, the lecturer asks the students to write a single page of analysis that responds meaningfully to some aspect of the assigned reading. The assignment is not meant to summarize what students have read; rather, they provide them opportunity to focus upon some elements of the reading they find particularly engaging.

The objectives of this reading materials fall into two categories: (1) language objectives which include to broaden reading and conversational vocabulary, to develop reading skills, and to increase conversational fluency; and (2) cross cultural objectives which include to provide an understanding of cross-cultural communication, to increase students’ knowledge of cultural conflict and adjustment, and to describe patterns of communication among different cultural groups. This compilation consists of reading texts in which each chapter has two distinct sections: (1) readings and exercises about cross-cultural communication, and (2) conversational activities about designed to promote discussion of the cross-cultural communication. The focus on values, behavior, attitudes, and communication styles in the chapter readings is designed to serve cultural background for the conversational activities. Each chapter consists of: (1) pre-reading activities, (2) reading text, (3) comprehension questions, (4) discussions questions, (5) vocabulary exercises, (6) conversational activities, and (7) cultural notes.

FINDINGS

Students’ perception and learning experience

The researcher utilizes Edmodo for mediating some subject courses. It helps the researcher very much. The use of Edmodo for the Cross Cultural Understanding course was also to support the offline sessions. In the previous year, the researcher also taught this course, but using the FIB e-learning medium provided by the university, as explained in the previous part. There are some differences between the online sessions using the FIB e-learning medium and Edmodo.

Observation and interview with the students highlight three interesting issues, they are: students engagement in the teaching and learning process, students’ perception and experience about blended learning, and students intercultural awareness.

In general, students have a positive perception about the blended learning applied in the CCU classroom subject. Some students have difficulty in the beginning of using Edmodo especially when they have to register and log in to the learning media; however, they can solve the problem by discussing their friends or doing trial and error. Even one student knows how to operate Edmodo from his friend studying at other university. These followings are the students’ first experience using Edmono.

Student C. At the first time when I tried to join and sign up the Edmodo, my searching engine could not open Edmodo, I did not know why. Then I moved to use another searching engine, finally I have Edmodo. But another problem come, I do not know exactly how to use Edmodo because it has different display with the other social media that I have known. I do not know which one the right way to answer the assessment, just give a comment or I must turn in first.

Besides, the students perceive that they have more freedom when expressing opinion in the Edmodo rather in the offline session or conventional learning mode. Some students’ opinion can be described as below:
**Student D.** I feel confident if I expressing my opinion orally because I can know feedback from teacher and I immediately knew what my mistake.

**Student F.** When in traditional or oral expression, sometimes I lost what I want to say, nervous, can't review my answer/opinion. And when there is a mistake I cant edit the word I have said, say sorry is the way out. But when in Edmodo, I can more express what in my mind without nerveous. And when I don't know what to say, I just think for a while then I got what I looking for. While typing I also can review my opinion, is it right or need adjustment. When there is a mistake, I can edit it and make it right.

This research also tries to describe the students cross cultural awareness, particularly the students’ opinion about the differences between Indonesian and American culture. The lecturer asked the students to explain the differences between the way Indonesians and Americans speak and respond compliments. It was found that normatively students have a positive attitude about intercultural communication. These followings are the students’ opinion reflecting that they have a good perception about intercultural communication.

**Student H.** If we talk about directness, it must be very different between American and Indonesian. There are a lot of factors that influenced their way to utter. Cultural factor give the biggest effect. In Indonesia, the people tend to speak or share their idea in detail with a lot of metaphors, addition, and politeness in their utterances. Therefore, in United States, people tend to speak directly straight to the point what they want to say. This also affected by the cultural that they have. In United States and some western countries, the politeness is not the important thing for them. Their main goal is their message is delivered. No matter how it delivered. The sooner is better. So, they likely speak to the point.

**Student I.** Indonesian conversation style tend to be "ping-pong" style because they are influenced by a cultural thought such as politeness. If they speak directly, especially for the younger, Iti will be impolite. They have to say in conversation in polite and humble way. They have to choose the best diction that sometimes lead them into small talk and create lot of intended meaning. That's why it's called "ping-pong" style. Because they make simple utterances become complicated of twist in and out.

**Student J.** If someone gives any compliment to others, people will say thank you or another responses like “are you serious, it is not like that” and so on. In Indonesia, compliments are positive things that bring people together but in American, they don’t need any compliments because they might think it is such a scarce or taboo for the example, if you compliment an American person on how well she did something, she's likely to claim that anyone could have done it or to point out the bits she could have done better.

**Student K.** I think American people tend to use directness in their conversation. They will say ‘yes’ if what they mean is yes, and ‘no’ if what they mean is no. However, in my culture, sometimes people will say ‘yes’ and ‘no’ for unclear meaning. For the example, when I offer ‘bakso’ to my friends from my culture, they will say ‘no’ in which sometimes the meaning is they want to be offered ‘bakso’ once or more times to make sure that my offering is real and not only to show my politeness to them, because on the other way, maybe my offering is just to show politeness and not really an offering. Let see when I offer ‘bakso’ to American people. They will say ‘yes’ if they want to eat ‘bakso’ and ‘no’ if they don’t want it.

**Student L.** I think Indonesian conversation style is more “bowling”. In a conversation, when a person is talking, the other one will faithfully wait until he knows the right time to talk. Actually, he is bored and wants to interrupt him. In order to show politeness, he listens to what he says. I think, it will happen to people in general, but for me, when I quite close with someone
and we are in same age, I think it’s no problem if we interrupt to each other in a conversation. I will give the example directly to explain this. When I say, “How beautiful your dress”, to my female friend, perhaps she will say, “Yours is better”. She seems to refuse it, but actually in her heart she wants to say thanks. It’s indirectness. Perhaps other people will say thank you directly to appreciate the compliment. I think that’s it, Sir. Thank you.

Student M. In my opinion, my culture (Indonesian) is very family orientated. And also Indonesian culture often shows value of politeness above the directness. Indonesian culture likes to focus on quality and Indonesian people believe in social responsibility (that is your responsibility to society). So if you want to say something to someone, you have to choose the right words or the polite words to convey your meaning. So your utterances will not hurt their feeling or will not make them feel not appreciated. In the other hand, Americans are more direct, open and honest than many other countries and nationalities. American culture is very independent and individual orientated. And American people tends to value directness (say what you mean) over being polite. So American people is more direct in the way they say what they want to say/what they mean, although it can be hurt the hearer’s feel. Americans like to focus on efficiency and tend to worry more about.

Student N. Compliment as a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes to someone, usually the person addressed, for some good (thing, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer. Compliments vary from one culture to another. Compliments are generally paid and appreciated in the Western culture. However, in the Eastern culture, when compliments are paid, they are either rejected or denied.

CONCLUSION
Using blended learning in university classrooms currently is inevitable. The sophistication of technology enables both lecturers and students interact in synchronous and unsynchronous learning mode. This research found that students have new perspectives about the role of culture in communication especially the use of language as a medium of communication. Students also realize that living in a multicultural society needs an intercultural awareness to avoid misunderstanding caused by prejudice and overgeneralization toward people coming from different cultural background. In this learning strategy students have a positive perception about the blended learning applied in the CCU classroom subject. Some students have difficulty in the beginning of using Edmodo especially when they have to register and log in to the learning media; however, they can solve the problem by discussing their friends or doing trial and error. Students also perceive that they have more freedom when expressing opinion in the Edmodo rather in the offline session or conventional learning mode.

References


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