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Looking into EFL Students' Intercultural Awareness and Its Relation with Varying Social Media Exposure and Reading Ability

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ABSTRACT

With explosive growth of technology and globalization, seeing vastly different culture has become part of our daily life as seen in social media. Students' social media exposure is closely related to their reading activity. Thus, great reading ability leads to great intercultural awareness. This study aimed to investigate EFL students' intercultural awareness and its relation with varying social media exposure and reading ability. The quantitative study employed ex-post-facto design, with participation of 183 EFL students purposively recruited from Informatics Study Program in a private university in Jakarta, Indonesia. The data collected using online questionnaires and reading tests were analyzed using SPSS 27. With this software, descriptive statistics were made to compare means, percentages, and standard deviations of students' intercultural awareness. Paired-samples t-tests were run to find out a significant difference in participants' intercultural awareness by varying social media use and reading ability. The results revealed EFL students' high intercultural awareness with no significant difference found in students' varying social media use and with a significant difference found in students' varying reading ability. In conclusion, EFL students' intercultural awareness is influenced significantly by their reading abilities rather than their social media exposure.

Keywords: EFL Students; Intercultural Awareness; Social Media; Reading Ability

INTRODUCTION

Language is influenced and formed by culture. It illustrates a culture. Therefore, cultural differences are the most serious areas causing misunderstanding, unpleasantness and even conflict during cross-cultural communication (Pujiyanti & Zuliani, 2014). This phenomenon has attracted interests of experts for several recent years (Álvarez Valencia & Fernández Benavides, 2019; Dunworth et al., 2021; Dwisusila et al., 2023; Gashi, 2021; Rui & Tong, 2021; Sobkowiak, 2019; Yurtsever & Özel, 2021). In general, those studies explored teachers and students' competence in intercultural, including how cultural differences can be managed to develop their awareness of intercultural, resulting in better classroom social activities and language achievement. In a classroom, especially in EFL context, students face two kinds of intercultural issues, namely intercultural differences among them (Winardi, 2014) and those

contained in language they strive to master (Scarino, 2009; Toyoda, 2016). In addition, if handled properly, students' increased intercultural awareness can be a useful medium to help them to be motivated to learn a language and hone language skill as proven by Kamaeva et al. (2022) concluding that having cultural awareness could develop the EFL students' listening skills and listening motivation and enhance their English language learning.

Further, with globalization increasing at incredible speed, efforts to heighten intercultural awareness can be made not only by applying classroom-based method, but also by using digital media and the Internet. Through digital platform (Belda-Medina, 2022; Dugartsyrenova & Sardegna, 2019; Karakuş et al., 2020; Kiss & Weninger, 2017; Üzümlü et al., 2020) and social media in the Internet, such as Facebook (Hassan et al., 2020), Twitter (Sawyer, 2011), Youtube (Susilo et al., 2023), Instagram (Bernadetha Nadeak, Elferida Sormin, 2021) to name a few, students will see and learn extremely large number of different cultures, both local and international, leading to their improved awareness of intercultural differences.

Moreover, being highly important in language classroom (Byram et al., 2013; Iscan et al., 2017; Kamaeva et al., 2022), intercultural awareness is always researched as a medium (Baker, 2015; Çakir et al., 2006; Hauerwas et al., 2017; Hismanoglu, 2013; Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018), not as a product of learning language. Related to the the position of intercultural awareness as a product created by language skills, the author only found research by Kim (2020). In his study, Kim found that language learning can immerse students in others' worlds, and it can foster empathy and understanding across social and political divides. Considering there has been a little research on examining language learning as media to foster intercultural awareness, the author of this present research is interested in exploring how one of English skill can pave the way to intercultural awareness development among students. The skill chosen by the author is reading ability. When Indonesian learners learn English as a foreign language, they do not have much opportunity to practice English in day-to-day communication; formal or in formal communication. Hence, in their daily life they are expected to be exposed in English. They are also expected to be involved in the context in which the language used. One of the possible activities that the learners do is by doing extensive reading (Delfi & Yamat, 2017). In other words, reading the most possible language activity that can be performed to study English in Indonesia.

In addition to the influence of social media use, reading serves as an essential means of engagement within online platforms. Reading ability involves the capacity to recognize symbols and establish meaningful connections, critical for comprehension and interpretation. Palani (2012) underscored that reading abilities allow students to understand the meaning of words both in isolation and in larger settings. Conversely, understanding the content encountered by others on social media platforms enhances individuals' comprehension of intercultural differences and the intended messages conveyed. While previous research has primarily explored the impact of various factors on intercultural awareness, little attention has been paid to quantify the extent of EFL students' intercultural awareness based on specific variables. As a result, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating how EFL students' utilization of social media and reading ability contribute to their development of their intercultural awareness. Then, to achieve this aim, the present study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do the students perceive themselves to be aware of intercultural differences?
2. Is there a significant difference in the intercultural awareness of students with varying frequency of social media exposure?

3. Is there a significant difference in the intercultural awareness of students with varying reading ability?

METHOD

Using quantitative approach, the study adopted an *ex post facto* research design, in which the identified variables are measured and analysed without exerting direct control over them and, although they may allow for the formulation of causal theories, they do not allow for demonstrating the existence of a cause-effect association (Arigita-García et al., 2021). The participants ($N= 183$) were first semester EFL students purposively selected from Informatics Study Program in a private university in Jakarta, Indonesia. The participants comprising 152 (83.1%) males and 31 (16.9%) females were invited to take part in this study.

Table 1. Demographic Variables of the Participants

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	152	83.1
	Female	31	16.9
	Total (n)	183	100
Age	under 20	133	72.68
	20 – above 30	50	27.32
	Total	183	100

From the three instruments used to collect the data, this study only designed a reading comprehension test based on student's need. The other two instruments were the adaptation and combination of well-established questionnaires from previous studies, namely two survey questionnaires on intercultural awareness and social media use (Monroe & Ruan, 2018; Nurudeen et al., 2023; Zorba & Çakir, 2019), (Monroe & Ruan, 2018; Nurudeen et al., 2023; Zorba & Çakir, 2019) respectively, all of which were translated into Indonesian. These questionnaires were selected for their proven reliability and validity in prior research, which ensured the consistency and strength of our data collection process. By using these established tools, we aimed to maintain strong research standards and concentrate on our study's specific goals and variables. Additionally, we benefited from widely accepted methods commonly used in academic research. All instruments were sent in the form of link of Goggle Forms to participants. Before completing the instruments, the participants had to read a consent statement included in the instruments.

Furthermore, no formal test of the significance of the relationship between the variables was conducted in this present study. The analysis focused on describing the relationships and exploring potential correlations without applying statistical significance tests. This approach aimed to provide initial insights into the associations between the variables studied. Therefore, the data analysis using SPSS 27.0 software only included descriptive statistics to examine the sample characteristics, a basic central tendency descriptive analysis (median), percentages, frequencies, and dispersion (typical deviation) was undertaken for all variables (Salavera et al., 2023) and paired-samples t-tests to prove whether there was a significant difference in participants' intercultural awareness based on various social media exposure and reading ability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

EFL Students' Self-reported Intercultural Awareness

The questionnaire on EFL students' self-reported intercultural awareness variable was measured on a multi-item Likert scale consisting 20 items. Prior to data analysis, the participants' responses to 6 items with a negative meaning (i.e.15,16,17,18,19,20) were reverse-scored to enable joint analysis with the positively worded items. The keys to averages were 4.00-4.60 = low, 4.65-5.25 = moderate, 5.30-6.00 = high. The data analysis indicated that, on average, the participants belonged to a high-level category. More specifically, 19.67% ($n=36$) of the participants showed a low level of intercultural awareness, 38.25% ($n=70$) had a medium level of intercultural awareness, 42.08% ($n=77$) indicated a high level of intercultural awareness. Table 2 (descending order) presents 20 items concerning intercultural awareness to describe the extent to which the participants perceived themselves to be aware of intercultural differences.

Table 2. *Participant's Self-Reported Intercultural Awareness*

	Items	M	SD
4	I'm willing to be friends with people coming from different cultures.	5.58	0.53
11	I respect values of people coming from different cultures or countries.	5.51	0.55
13	I avoid displaying behaviours that may pave the way for misunderstandings while interacting with people coming from different cultures.	5.49	0.68
10	I respect the ways people from different cultures or countries behave.	5.49	0.56
5	I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.	5.46	0.59
3	I accept the differences between my culture and other cultures.	5.46	0.57
2	I detect the similarities/differences between my own culture and other cultures.	5.33	0.57
1	I like learning about different cultures.	5.32	0.62
14	I tolerate/cope with the conflicts resulting from cultural differences.	5.27	0.74
12	I'm open to the ideas of people coming from different cultures.	5.27	0.70
7	I tend to wait before forming an impression of people from different cultures.	5.24	0.84
8	I try to learn about their cultures while interacting with people coming from different cultures.	5.14	0.77
9	I use my knowledge about their cultures while interacting with people coming from different cultures.	5.11	0.91
6	I like exploring lifestyles of different cultures.	5.00	0.86
18	I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures.	4.77	1.49
19	I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.	4.73	1.52
16	I don't like to be with people from different cultures.	4.70	1.54
20	I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures.	4.69	1.49
17	I find different lifestyles of people coming from different countries as strange.	4.45	1.56
15	I think my culture is better than other cultures.	4.14	1.58
	Average	5.11	0.52

The data of EFL students' self-reported intercultural awareness variable were also analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent sampe *t-tests*. These were mainly utilized to find out whether there was a significant difference in participants' intercultural awareness if seen from the aspects of gender (i.e. male and female) and age (i.e. under 20 and 20-above 30). The former analysis ($t(181)=-1.856$, $p=.065$, $r=-.366$) demonstrated that there was a significant difference between male respondents ($M=5.08$, $SD=0.52$) and female respondents ($M= 5.27$, $SD= 0.53$), with male respondents scoring lower than female respondents. Despite the fact that the female students scored higher on average than the male students in both the overall and category strategies, the effect size value indicated the gender difference was minor. Whereas, the analysis on the latter ($t(181)=0.312$, $p=.755$, $r=.052$) found no significant difference between participants under 20 years old ($M=5.12$, $SD =0.52$)

and those of 20-above 30 years old ($M=5.09$, $SD=0.53$). These results add to the body of research evidence that the female students surpass males in developing intercultural awareness and that students below 20 years of age have a higher intercultural awareness than those of above 30 years old.

Frequency of social media exposure and EFL students' Intercultural awareness

The instrument in the form of questionnaire comprising 12 statements was applied to measure the participants' frequency of social media exposure. Responses from the questionnaire were quantified based on Likert Scale. To facilitate this, the responses were classified into: low (2.83-3.67), moderate (3.75-4.50) and high (4.58-5.42). The findings indicated that overall participants have medium frequency of social media exposure as shown by 30.05% ($n=55$) of the participants had a low frequency of exposure, 56.83% ($n=104$) demonstrated a medium frequency and 13.11% ($n=24$) displayed a high frequency.

Having measured the participants' frequency of social media exposure, it was time to answer the second research question as to whether there is a significant difference in intercultural awareness of participants with varied frequency of social media exposure. A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to see the statistical difference regarding the relation of varying frequency of social media exposure with participants' intercultural awareness. Participants were divided into three groups by their level of frequency, namely group 1 (4.00-4.60): low frequency; group 2(4.65-5.25): medium frequency; group 3(5.30-6.00): high frequency) The analysis ($F(2,180)=1.251$, $p=.289$, $r=.014$) showed that there was no significant difference at the $p > .05$ level in participants' intercultural awareness for all groups. The actual difference in mean scores among the groups was small as seen in the effect size of eta squared of .014. Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD test also revealed that there was no significant difference among group 1 ($M=5.02$, $SD=0.48$), group 2 ($M=5.16$, $SD=5.56$) and group 3 ($M=5.10$, $SD=0.44$).

Reading ability and EFL students' intercultural awareness

To evaluate the participants' level of reading ability, the researcher used a test of reading comprehension, with the scoring estimated out of 20 items of question. The test results were then quantified by giving 5 points for every correct answer. Mean and standard deviation of the test were presented in the following Table 4. Before revealing how good the reading ability of participants, the test results were grouped into: low (10.00-35.00), moderate (40.00-65.00) and high (70.00-100.00). The findings indicated that overall level of reading ability participants possessed was moderate as indicated by 15.85% ($n=29$) of the participants showed a low reading ability, 63.93% ($n=117$) had a moderate reading ability and 20.22% ($n=37$) displayed a high reading ability.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Participants' Reading Comprehension Test Result

Item	Min	Max	M	SD
20	10.00	100.00	52.95	16.62

The next step was to see the statistical difference regarding the relation of varying reading ability with participants' intercultural awareness. To facilitate it, the researcher performed a one-way between-groups analysis of variance. Participants were categorized into three groups according to their reading ability level (group 1: low level; group 2: medium level; group 3: high level). The analysis ($F(2,180)=5.541$, $p=.005$, $r=.058$) showed that there was a statistically significant difference at the $p < .05$ level in participants' intercultural awareness for the three groups. Despite reaching statistical significance, the actual difference

in mean scores among the groups was small as seen in the effect size of eta squared of 0.58. Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD test revealed that the mean score for group 2 ($M=5.14$, $SD=0.49$) did not differ significantly from group 3 ($M=5.22$, $SD=0.54$). Group 1 ($M=4.83$, $SD=0.56$) is significantly different from either group 2 or group 3.

Discussion

The first research question focused on assessing students' perceptions of their intercultural awareness. The data revealed that the participants demonstrated a high level of intercultural awareness. This finding can be attributed to the students' regular exposure to diverse cultural backgrounds within their classroom environment, as the majority of participants were Indonesian EFL students accustomed to interacting with peers from various cultures. This aligns with Yurtsever & Özel (2021), arguing that familiarity with diverse cultures enhances learners' intercultural awareness and fosters social and cultural skills necessary for navigating cultural differences. Similarly, Winardi noted that Indonesian classrooms are hubs of cultural diversity, although different levels of cultural awareness may exist among students (2014). While these studies confirm the presence of intercultural awareness among EFL students, they do not delve into the specific extent of Indonesian students' awareness in the classroom. Therefore, our study is crucial as it provides a detailed exploration of this phenomenon, contributing novel insights into the depth of intercultural awareness among Indonesian EFL students.

Further, for EFL students, their interaction in the language classrooms becomes cross or intercultural as it inevitably includes an integration of the target culture and native cultures of any individual. Knowing culture undergoes a process of knowing differences, similarities, or uniqueness of any cultural element which discloses itself as cultural awareness (Yurtsever & Özel, 2021). Some previous research find out that the importance of developing intercultural awareness and competence in a language classroom (Baker, 2011; Dunworth et al., 2021; Rutgers et al., 2021). Therefore, it is important for the language teachers of EFL students in Indonesian to develop the students' intercultural awareness during the class.

The second research question asked: Is there a significant difference in the intercultural awareness of students with varying frequency of social media exposure? The analysis in the previous section revealed that participants generally have medium frequency of social media exposure. This capacity is triggered by the fact that learning language in the current EFL context suggests learners more times to scroll their phone screens, while most of them do not include learning language via social media as their main choices. People adopt social networking sites, probably because they want to meet and make new friends, find old friends, pass idle time, join interest groups, blog for friends and family, create and share photos, videos and music, express own style (Mansumittrchai et al., 2012). The classification of the participants was then used to examine the significant difference in intercultural awareness among participants if seen from the aspect of social media exposure. The analysis found no significant difference in participants' intercultural awareness for all groups, with group 2 (participants with moderate frequency) scoring the highest. It is in accordance with the answer of the first research question mentioning that intercultural awareness highly depended on people's mingling with others, like in social media. It can be concluded if the student's frequency of social media use is moderate, their intercultural awareness will be the same.

The last research question focused on a significant difference in the intercultural awareness of students with varying reading ability. The analysis of the reading skill data revealed that the most participants were in a medium-level category. One main factor influencing the participants is their background as stated by Alowalid et al. (2018) that successful readers tended to emphasize global meaning and background knowledge rather than grammatical aspects. The poor prior knowledge contributes to the low level of reading

comprehension (Cahyono & Widiati, 2006). It can be interpreted that medium background in reading contributes to medium reading skill in EFL context. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers solve this problem by using texts with various themes, especially multicultural, for EFL student's reading assignment so that they can expand the background knowledge useful to improve their reading ability. Answers to the last research question also demonstrated a significant difference in intercultural awareness among three classified groups (low, moderate, and high) and a small effect size. The results further showed that no significant difference was found between group with moderate and high levels and there was a significant difference between group with low level and others.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicated that the EFL students had a high level of intercultural awareness, suggesting that most students were used to studying with their peers coming from different culture. Last but not least, the study proved that the more students know others' different culture, the higher intercultural awareness they will develop. This conclusion can be a reason for EFL teachers to incorporate different cultures in English speaking countries in the reading texts or online materials that can improve the variables measured in this research.

Despite the fact that all research questions were addressed, this research still illustrated several limitations. The first was related to the participant size, with more males than females taking part in this study. This might be as result of the fact that in Indonesia the number of male students majoring in engineering field, such as Informatics, is always higher than their female counterparts. This condition will affect greatly the Type I error of the t-test. Therefore, it is important for future studies in the same interest to use equal sample sizes that obtained results can be statistically powerful, especially when exploring difference in gender. Another limitation in this study was related to the instruments for data collection, especially the one used to measure the participants' intercultural awareness. There must be some classifications in the statement items so that the analysis can be conducted in more detailed ways.

Nevertheless, the researchers believe that the study can still provide enough evidence to make several recommendations for action to do by parties involved in EFL learning such as policy makers, teachers, classroom practitioners and other researchers. Firstly, it is recommended that policy makers explicitly include intercultural contents in the materials used to teach English, such in reading texts, either in printed or in online format. It is expected to develop intercultural awareness among learners. Secondly, it is important that EFL teachers not only emphasis on the inclusion of intercultural topics in their materials, but also design online assignments encouraging their students to more frequently use social media as platform to study English, while developing their awareness of intercultural differences. The more exposure for something educational, the better results will be obtained. Finally, it is advisable that educational researchers keep researching intercultural awareness in the EFL classroom to help them formulate effective policies because meeting many people from vastly different culture and background in an EFL classroom, especially in Indonesia, is unavoidable.

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