

Research article

Intercultural Communication Competence of Indonesian Undergraduate Students When Watching the Movie 'American History X'

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Mirjam Anugerahwati: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6659-3847>**Abstract.**

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) is important for students to understand and respond positively to other cultures. This study analyzed the ICC of students by indirect communication through watching foreign movies. American History X is a foreign movie that can engage with the ICC of undergraduate students. This study aimed to determine participants' level of interest and understanding about ICC when discussing intercultural factors. The participants included three Indonesian undergraduates from various universities who participated in the WATSUP (Watch a Movie and Speak Up) national seminar in 2021, and their responses or reactions were examined, especially responses to the American racism as depicted in American History X. The data were collected by watching the recording of the seminar. The findings indicated that the students mainly showed the development of their ICC while watching and discussing American History X. The students, who were not culturally American, were then encouraged to develop their ICC by giving reactions and comments about American culture and, in the process, they found common ground between their own Indonesian culture and foreign American culture. The students thereby became more aware of the distinct yet similar cultures and they learnt to appreciate other foreign cultures.

Keywords: intercultural communication competence, Indonesian students' cultural competence, American History X

1. Introduction

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is an important competence for students to develop cultural understanding and to respond positively to other cultures [1]. Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), as defined by Tran & Duong [2], is the students' ability to interact appropriately and effectively with other people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In today's pandemic era, there are many intercultural communication and exchanges that are happening that engage the students' Intercultural Communication Competence. Perhaps the most common and popular form of these intercultural exchanges happens in students' online conferences where the

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participants and speakers from different countries interact. Therefore, based on this popular phenomenon, this study wants to analyze the Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) of such an online conference, namely the WATSUP (*Watch a Movie and Speak Up*) National Seminar Vol.2 2021, focusing on the student participants. The selected student participants of this study are three Indonesian undergraduates from various Universities, while the data will mainly be these participants' responses or reactions, especially about racism in responding to the *American History X*'s movie - the subject of the WATSUP seminar.

The WATSUP Seminar, which was held by English Student Association "LEGATO" Universitas Negeri Malang, is considered to be a good place to conduct this study for several reasons. The first reason is that such a study can bring meaningful information on Indonesian students' ICC. During this Seminar, several participants show relevant ICC components recognized by Byram [3]: the participants' ethnocentric perspectives, appreciation of another culture, and having language competence integrated with culture insight.

The second reason is that film viewing and discussion, which were the main activities done in the WATSUP seminar, is considered to be an important site for ICC observation. This is in line with Adair-Hauck et al. [4] who endorses the use of film in observing ICC, as films serve a double purpose: film can act as authentic and meaningful input and can then further serve as items during the assessment.

This study, however, will use similar observation done mainly in the classroom, as the WATSUP seminar film discussion was arranged similar to a classroom: there was a group discussion among student participants and lectures by keynote speakers, followed by a moderated discussion. Ahnagari and Zamanian [5] have implemented similar classroom observations on students in the classroom setting. In their study, some implications for second language acquisitions can have some positive impact on intercultural communication competence. Students can learn different techniques for the application of ICC competence in a classroom context. This study intends to extend such similar observation to a different setting, which is the observation of the student participants while discussing the theme of racism in the *American History X* movie.

2. Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach that will enable the researcher to analyze the perceptions, actions, and reactions of Indonesian undergraduates who are the WATSUP (*Watch a Movie and Speak Up*) Vol.2 2021 National seminar participants.

From the total participants of 42 Indonesian undergraduates from various Indonesian Universities, this study chooses 3 participants who are most relevant to this study. The data taken from the participants are in the form of sentences or words taken from the dialogue exchange and discussions that happen during the group discussion and lecturing of the racism aspect of the movie *American History X* which is the subject of the WATSUP seminar.

The data collected by the committee of WATSUP from Zoom Meeting video recorded of two breaks out room and main room which have the chosen participants show the ICC components from WATSUP seminar. From this data collection, we analyze participants by observing each of the participants' activities during the Seminar by observing and interpreting the comments and verbal and non-verbal reactions of the chosen participants. These chosen participants are assessed based on the most relevant Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) components that this study wants to investigate. The appropriate competencies are based on the ICC components set forth by Wilberschied [6], Lázár et al. [7] and Byram [3], which are: first, the ability to continually recognize ethnocentric perspectives, misunderstandings, and conflict as related to cross-cultural situations, and having the ability to understand and explain the origins of conflict and mediate situations appropriately to avoid further misinterpretation [3]; second, demonstrating appreciation for the language and culture of people of other cultures [7]; third, having language competence (sociolinguistic and discourse competence) that is integrated with knowledge of and insight into the culture of the other [6].

3. Findings and Discussion

In general, Intercultural Communication Competence is shown in the WATSUP seminar while student participants were giving what were initially Indonesian ethnocentric perspectives, which developed into appreciation of foreign American culture, using English language competence integrated with Indonesian and American cultural insights, when they were responding to the topic of racism in *American History X* movie. In detail, the initial Indonesian ethnocentric perspective is shown by student participants while giving their early opinions to American culture depicted in the movie. The appreciation of American culture was then given by the student participants after they were made more aware of their own culture and the foreign American culture, by understanding more about the movie. This deeper understanding was enabled because the student participants had their English language competence integrated with Indonesian and American cultural insights to achieve this understanding. This process was proven

when they can explain more from the scenes of the movie during the discussion with the speakers. This Intercultural Communication Competence, in essence, was shown during the seminar by the student participants, based on their improved knowledge and understanding of the cultures of Indonesia and America.

First of all, the student participant had enough English language competence to enable them to reach an initial understanding of the intercultural message from the movie *American History X*. As Wilberscheid [6] believes that having language competence, including sociolinguistic and discourse competence, that are integrated with knowledge of and an insight into the culture of the other, enables students to develop Intercultural Communication Competence. With the student participants having enough English competence, student participants can correctly understand what was going on in the movie and make a correct interpretation of the intercultural message.

A significant example was given by one of the student participants. Student A explained one later scene in the *American History X*, in which the main character, Derek, who has been a neo-Nazi before that point, finally realizes that his racial hatred towards the African American people is wrong.

Student A said:

“When Derek realize (his false racial hatred), he said that he is lucky to know and aware that his perspective to the black people is wrong. He was aware that he was pissed off and trust others people negative talk to black people. Derek kills the black people make him tired of being pissed off, and then Derek realizes that what was his done is wrong. I was so touched when Derek finally realized his mistakes and returned to his family.”

From this opinion, this student participant correctly understood what happened in the movie and this student showed empathy from the scene. Showing such emotion by an Indonesian student reacting to a foreign American message, proves that intercultural communication was happening and that Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) had played a part. This intercultural communication happened during the seminar while discussing the movie, because the student participants are Indonesian with an Indonesian cultural perspective, viewing the movie that contains American culture told an American perspective. When student participant gives an opinion based on Indonesian cultural perspective to American culture, they have communicated cross-culture.

Next, Intercultural communication competence is initially shown by the student participants by having good enough connection and appreciation of American culture

through what is happening in the movie. This was shown while the student participants feel some positive connection with the protagonists who are Americans.

An example of this is when Student Participant B showed their empathy which is anger while Danny, the protagonist's younger brother, was killed by an African American bully from his school.

“Why the black people killed Danny while Danny and Derek have realized their perspective to black people was wrong? Danny and Derek have opened positive minds to the black people, but the black people did not realize the awareness of Danny and Derek. I do not know for sure that the black people did not realize or did not believe Danny and Derek, but why don't the black people meet with Danny and Derek to make sure that they have not disliked them again?”

This quote showed empathy to Danny and Derek, the white American protagonists of the movie. The Student participants feel anger because Danny and Derek have developed open and positive understanding of the African American people, but the African American gangsters still wanted to do Derek and Danny harm. Then, student participants disagreed with the action of the African American bully who kills Danny. The student participants thought that if the African American people did not believe Danny and Derek, these people should discuss their differences first. The student participants put themselves in the positions of the whites and the blacks in the movie, although the student participant was of course still an Indonesian.

It is interesting that because of their Indonesian perspective, the student participants made conjectures due to their relative ignorance of the racial problem in the United States. It is worthwhile to note that student participants showed curiosity about the reason why white people disliked black people in the movie, and why black people dislike white people. The student participants wanted to know the history behind this racial hatred. The student participants expressed a variety of reasonable thoughts behind this hatred. One student participant thought that, maybe, the reason why white people was irritated with black people because in the past the black people made mistakes while white people's employment. Another student participant thought that perhaps the black people was irritated after the white people made fun of their mistakes, so the black people dislike them and wanted revenge. Still another student participant thought that if they dislike each other only for different skin color. It was ultimately not understandable to the student participants because they think different skin colors cannot be the reason for hatred. This confusion perhaps stems from their having made their conjectures on their own Indonesian experiences and cultural background. This

view is based on their having not aware of racial problems occurring in their own Indonesian settings.

It can be concluded that up until this point, the student participants are having enough ICC to acknowledge and try to process the intercultural material given by the movie. However, at this point, some students still thought that it was all the Americans' fault and that their own Indonesian culture does not experience such problems or weaknesses. At this point, the student participants do not yet realize that their own culture may be having the same cultural and social problems as the American culture. This is showing that the student participants still see their own culture as being better; thus the student participants at this time did not truly realize that they were having an ethnocentric point of view while interpreting the intercultural message of the American History X movie. This brings us to the next development of the ICC during the seminar.

The Intercultural communication competence by this time reaches the level, shown by the student participants, as unconsciously having an Indonesian ethnocentric perspective. Student participants gave an Indonesian ethnocentric perspective by judging that their own culture is more tolerant than American culture. Student participants compared Indonesian and American cultures using an Indonesian ethnocentric perspective, judging that Indonesian culture was more tolerant.

This is seen firstly when the student participants did not understand why Americans cannot be tolerant to each other. The student participants showed understanding during the scene when Derek killed the black people and the black people later killed Danny.

Another example is when the student participants showed empathy to Derek. This happened when Derek finally realized his mistake and become a better person, opening his positive mindset to the black people as good people and stopped doing violence. However, Derek's neo Nazi gang does not show tolerance to Derek's new perspective. The gang is angry and expels Derek and his brother Danny out of the gang because the gang thinks that Derek betrays them. These scenes made the student participant believed that white people and black people did not have tolerance for each other, and this made student participants angry as these people cannot show tolerance like the students participants do in their Indonesian setting.

Therefore, the student participants blame the characters in the movie as racists: both Blacks or Whites are violent. One student participant blame Danny as racist and the black kid bully as racist. The white and black kids bully each other, and in the end, Danny is killed by the black bully kid.

“They bully each other because of the different skin color? They still a kid, how can they do that. The black kid kills Danny, why is he can think to kill? And where can he get that gun? I disagree with what they have done and their (American) education.”

From these quoted talks, student participants showing disagreement with racism in America, and implicitly blaming the American gun culture and American education, making that assumption most likely based on their supposedly better Indonesian education and background.

Student participants at this time were not truly aware of the racism in their real-life Indonesian setting, compared to their awareness of Racism in an American setting brought to them by the movie. Thus, they were more aware about American racism than Indonesian racism. The student participants at this time thought that Indonesia has more tolerance and less racism, and America has the worse tolerance.

The student participants reason to give these opinions is that students seeing the Indonesian and American insight about the different types of treatment when facing racism. In later discussions, student participants compare that racism in American was done by killing or physically harassing, while racism in Indonesia was done by mocking and staying away from the people of the ethnicity whom they disliked. These insights can be seen by the student participants comparing the reality in Indonesia and America. An example of American racism done by killing or physically harassing is while student participants watching the movie *American History X*. Then, the student participants explain racism in Indonesia which were shown only by mocking each other, disagreement, or dislike to other. The cause of this was different beliefs, ethnicities, or races. It is worthwhile to note that the students at this point also find similar grounds to connect with the foreign American setting and its problematic racial issues. The student participants thought that people are the same even though they have a different race, beliefs or skin color. Student participants thought that all humans must be respected and have mutual respect for each other. Such common grounds then five way to the next development of the student participants' ICC.

The student participants then had a discussion with the keynote speakers, which allowed them to understand more about what was happening in the film and find more similarities between the American and the Indonesian cultural settings. Most importantly, one student participant asked whether there were similar racism going on in Indonesia and was explained how such racism also happened in Indonesia.

After knowing the racism going on in their Indonesian setting, the student participant now can be more aware of such problems, and because of that, the student participants

get more appreciation to American cultural problems. For this stage, Intercultural communication competence is finally shown by the student participants when the student participants get over their ethnocentric perspective and finally can understand that American culture is no worse or better than their own Indonesian culture. This shows that the student participants can fully appreciate American culture.

In detail, this happens when the student participants discussed the racism in Indonesia and America, then they feel anger and disagreement for both of them. One student participant said:

“I just remember that Indonesia has the same tragedy of racism, take the example of Sampit tragedy. They kill each other because of the differences ethnic.”

From such comment, the student participant is shown to be finally aware that racism in Indonesia and America is similar and they show disagreement to such.

Then, the participant suspended judgment that Indonesia is more tolerant. Finally, the participant showed a more open, positive mindset to American culture. One student participant was quoted as saying:

“Not all American culture is the worse than Indonesia. I just remember realize that Indonesia has cultural weakness too.”

Based on the findings in this study, it can be concluded that the student participants in the end developed Intercultural communication competence while responding to intercultural message in the WATSUP seminar from watching and discussing the *American History X* movie. After student participants give their reaction when facing the racism in America through Indonesian ethnocentric perspective, finally at the end of the discussion, they were made aware that what happened in America was also happening in Indonesia. In the end, student participants can fully appreciate American culture.

4. Conclusions

The three main competence of Intercultural Communication Competence to this study has been shown by the student participants. Based on this competence, the participants can compare and study foreign culture with their own culture in the WATSUP seminar. In these seminars, the participants' responses and reactions a disagreement, anger, and scared are mainly shown after watching the movie *American History X*. In *American History X* movie took the Intercultural message of American Racism, it has delivered to the Indonesian participants, and the culturally-non-American participants are encouraged to give reactions and comments about American culture, thereby proving the Indonesian

participants' intercultural communication competence. At the end of student participants discussion, they are more aware of the differentiation of culture and they can appreciate other cultures. This implies that student participants interest to discuss cross-culture and they are becoming more understanding about their own culture as their own identity.

Intercultural Communication Competence is shown in WATSUP seminar while student participants are giving Indonesian ethnocentric perspectives, appreciation of American culture, and having English language competence integrated with Indonesian and American cultural insights while responding to racism in *American History X* movie. The Indonesian ethnocentric perspective is shown by student participants while giving their opinion to American culture. Then, the appreciation of American culture was given by the student participants while they were aware of their own culture. Besides that, student participants also having English language competence integrated with Indonesian and American cultural insights, this is proven while they explain the scene of the movie. This competence was delivered by the student participants based on their knowledge of Indonesian and American culture.

After the student participants respond and react, the student participants' are mainly show the development of their ICC while watching and discussing the movie *American History X*. The discussion and observation of the movie bring them to communicate with a foreign cultural material which was delivered to the Indonesian participants through the movie. The culturally-non-American student participants were then encouraged to develop their ICC by giving reactions and comments about American culture and in the process, they find common ground between their own Indonesian culture and foreign American culture. In the end, they were more aware of the distinct yet similar cultures and they can appreciate another foreign culture. This also implies that student participants were interested to discuss intercultural material and that they can become more understanding about their own culture and foreign cultures through media such as a movie.

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