



The relationship between cultural awareness and participation in intercultural societal challenge

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Abstract

Student engagement with intercultural societal challenges is investigated for academic programs as the globalizing trend requires students to interact effectively in multicultural settings, yet not all students are capable of doing this. Through explanatory sequential mixed methods, with quantitative data using questionnaires and qualitative data using semi-structured interviews, this study aims to investigate the interplay between cultural awareness and participation in the programs and to find out the challenges. The respondents were seventy-three students who ever followed this program in face-to-face or online meetings. To complete the qualitative data, semi-structured interviews with four students were used. The study revealed that enhanced cultural awareness levels directly influenced student enrollment in intercultural societal challenges. Students involved in the program discussed multiple challenges which included problems with language learning associated with cultural communication issues and differences in understanding between participants. This study both adds to existing academic documents because it demonstrates how cultural understanding drives students to actively participate in international programs, thus demonstrating why formalized cultural competence training should be integrated into university learning. This study brings originality through its examination of experiential intercultural program learning which enhances student adaptability and cross-cultural communication abilities in order to fill knowledge gaps in theoretical cultural awareness research.

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INTRODUCTION

Studying language involves communication between one person and others. When someone communicates, they need knowledge and understanding of the language. According to Byram (2021), communication will be successful if someone who speaks can show the use of language in establishing and maintaining relationships. One thing people should comprehend is the culture where the language comes from. Learning a language needs learning the culture, too, because they are correlated to each other. Even in communication through students' virtual exchange, someone needs to learn about intercultural. Where if they need help understanding intercultural, it will make it difficult for them to adapt to their new learning environment (Gritsenko, 2021). Therefore, the study examines how cultural knowledge impacts virtual student exchange communication along with adaptation process while discussing the difficulties students face without intercultural competence skills and the necessity of cultural training in language learning. International education relies on virtual exchange as a necessary tool which promotes worldwide communication and cooperative learning between students. According to O'Dowd (2018) virtual exchange enables students to take part in genuine cross-cultural communication besides developing global competencies while strengthening their intercultural along with linguistic abilities. The numerous advantages of exchanges between learners still come with cultural adjustment difficulties as main obstacles. Student participation in virtual exchange requires them to face cultural shock and frustration because they need to adjust to different communication patterns and conventions. The development of intercultural competence functions as an essential tool for participants who need to learn new information while building different attitudes and improving communication skills with speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Sari (2020) establishes through his research that inadequate intercultural competence results in miscommunication of verbal and nonverbal expressions along with impaired ability to handle ambiguous situations. According to Vollum (2023) virtual exchange brings transformative change to students through their participation with both noted challenges and beneficial learning outcomes. Learning discomfort is natural yet proper support systems allow students to face challenges successfully and turn virtual exchange into an essential educational opportunity.

The global world today demands strong cultural awareness because it enables effective communication between people with different backgrounds. Virtual exchange programs have established themselves as a key platform which enables students from disparate regions to conduct meaningful discussions together with collaborative work. O'Dowd (2019) demonstrates that students participating in online intercultural programs demonstrate cultural adaptability even though they stay physically distant from one another.

Research continues to examine how much virtual exchanges help students develop their cultural awareness even though these exchanges create chances for learning about different cultures. This study uses existing research findings to investigate how cultural knowledge and involvement with international social challenges relate to each other. Five weeks of active participation occurred for researchers throughout an intercultural virtual program which they conducted alongside the University of Limerick. Students within this program conducted Microsoft Teams online meetings each week and maintained their communication through WhatsApp and email on a daily basis. The program structured 23 different groups with five students from the University of Limerick and five students selected from institutions such as University of Bengkulu, University of Lampung, University of Abou Bekr Belkaid, Tlemcen, Algeria, and Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM). The program facilitated structured intercultural exchange which gave students the chance to experience different cultures while pushing them to change how they think about and know cultural interactions. The research investigates the effects of taking part in this structured virtual exchange for students' ability to preserve and advance their cultural knowledge.

Due to the objective above, cultural awareness sometimes needs to be addressed by students when learning about intercultural languages. Kramsch (2013) states language and culture form such closely connected systems that students who know languages yet lack cultural awareness experience difficulty in meaningful interactions with people from other cultural backgrounds.

Participation in intercultural virtual societal challenges allows learning with real-time, cross-cultural interactions that would be difficult to do offline. It provides an opportunity for intercultural communication, where students can interact with peers from different countries and cultures. Kortessmaa (2023) highlighted that virtual team communication should build relations and meaningfulness to increase students' motivation and keep their spirit in facing challenges in virtual

exchange. Although many challenges are faced by the students, Fonseca et al. (2021) found intercultural experiences could help them to develop ideas and global issues in their minds and combine them with other disciplines worldwide.

Participation in intercultural societal challenges can be done offline. In some universities, intercultural participation can be done through student exchange. It usually focuses on learning about culture, food, traditional music, and many other things that correlate to students' context. However, this program has the same cultural challenge. The scope of intercultural societal challenges is larger and correlates with racism issues, cultural conflict, and intercultural conflict. The researchers think the objective of student exchange is also to make the students appreciate each other in all cities and develop the ability to contribute internationally to intercultural learning. It is supported by Stewart & Seauve-Rantajääskö (2020), who found the process model for the development of Intercultural competencies contains four domains, or phases along the continuum: 1) nature of communications and reserving judgments; 2) tolerance, curiosity, and discovery; 3) openness and adaptability; 4) the cycle of accepting diversity. The researchers can predict that participation in intercultural societal challenges also has the phrase above, which relates to the student's cultural awareness.

Multiple investigations focus on the cultural awareness and virtual exchange relationship to identify how these elements develop Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and critical cultural awareness (Öztürk, 2022). Through virtual exchange students from various backgrounds find opportunities to partner with each other which develops their skills to adapt across cultures along with their communication competence (Simon-Cereijido, 2023; Siergiejczyk, 2020). Students develop superior understanding of diversity together with equity and inclusion in physical or online learning settings through this initiative (Petropoulou, 2021). Literature together with literary texts proves to be an efficient approach for students to merge language abilities with cultural knowledge according to research conducted by Isariyawat, et al (2020). Educators should implement teaching strategies which promote student understanding of cultural orientation because inadequate cultural awareness leads to delayed linguistic capabilities. Teachers act as essential elements in student intercultural engagement by creating valuable learning experiences and developing critical thinking capabilities (Demirbilek, 2021; Karimova, 2023; Griffith & Lim, 2024). Virtual collaboration stands as an effective method for increasing Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) awareness and fostering teamwork also supports students in developing multicultural competencies through the creation of culturally influenced products (Lopes et al., 2022). Virtual exchange programs mandate students to show empathy and adaptability as well as creativity while working in multicultural settings thus achieving transformative learning in global education (Cheikhrouhou, 2021).

Although many studies have examined the role of cultural awareness in language learning and classroom interactions, fewer have looked at how cultural awareness affects participation in intercultural societal challenges in English Language Teaching (ELT). While intercultural competence in ELT is widely recognized, there needs to be more research on how this competence leads to active participation in addressing real-world issues like inequality, environmental problems, and cultural integration. This research gap focuses on understanding how cultural awareness influences learners' engagement with these broader societal challenges and how it can be better included in the ELT curriculum. However, through participation in societal challenges, the researchers would like to investigate whether their awareness of culture can be further increased through intercultural programs. This study aims to examine the relationship between cultural awareness and the intercultural exchange societal challenge program.

This research is important for several reasons. First, it helps connect language education with socio-cultural involvement, showing how cultural awareness in ELT can enable students to engage in solving intercultural societal problems. By exploring this relationship, the study will provide insights into how ELT can go beyond teaching language skills to also build intercultural competence, which is essential in today's global society. This program can increase the relationship between students, share information related to cultural diversity and students' experiences, and provide strategies for fostering more effective global partnerships in education. Additionally, the findings will contribute to developing teaching strategies that encourage students to address global issues, fostering social responsibility and understanding across cultures. This research can also guide the design of curricula, teacher training, and classroom practices to prepare students better to navigate and contribute to an increasingly connected and diverse world.

The researchers will investigate the research questions below in this study:

1. Is there a correlation between cultural awareness and participation in intercultural Societal Challenges between the University of Limerick, Ireland, and some universities in Indonesia?
2. What experience have students faced in participation in intercultural societal challenges?

METHODS

This section describes the research approach used, respondents involved in the study, if any, which should be kept confidential, instruments, procedures of collecting the data, and ways of analyzing the data. The blueprint of the instrument may be provided if necessary. Commonly used statistical formula should not be put in this section.

The researchers used mixed method with explanatory sequential mixed methods. The respondents for quantitative method taken by purposive sampling where the respondents were seventy-three students who had participated in the *Intercultural Societal Challenge* program. The respondents answered the questionnaire about their activities relate with *Intercultural Societal Challenge* as online or offline. For qualitative method, the researchers took the participants as purposive sampling who represent their experience in *Intercultural Societal Challenge* as online or offline. All the respondents and participants had asked their informed consent by researchers. The response rate was 100%, as all invited participants agreed to take part in the research. To minimize potential biases, confidentiality and anonymity researchers did not take the personal demographic information to ensure privacy.

In this approach, the researchers first collected and analysed quantitative data, and then qualitative data was gathered to gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the underlying reasons, motivations, or meanings behind the patterns identified in the quantitative phase. In collecting the data for qualitative research, the researchers used an online questionnaire to determine if there was any positive significance of the relation between cultural awareness and participation in students' exchange. To obtain deeper information about the student's cultural awareness of participation in intercultural societal challenges, the researchers used semi-structured interviews with eight questions. The study employed a framework of semi-structured, open-ended questions, allowing participants to express their thoughts and share their experiences on their terms (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Where the independent variable is cultural awareness, and the dependent variable is participation in intercultural virtual societal challenges. In this study, the researchers used a quantitative design using a questionnaire and statistical analysis. Creswell (2018) then explained more about mixed methods; they relied on the premise that gathering various forms of data offered a more comprehensive insight into a research issue than just relying on quantitative or qualitative data by itself.

The respondents for completed the questionnaire were seventy-three and interview were four students who had followed students' exchange. Seventy-three students filled out questionnaires and four students underwent thorough interviews as participants in this study. The selected participants possessed student exchange program experience which provided them vital knowledge of intercultural interactions. The research used purposive sampling because its main goal was to collect student data from those who participated in virtual exchange activities and encountered intercultural issues.

Every participant received an informed consent before the research activities began in order to uphold ethical standards. The respondents received complete information about research objectives while learning their participant rights and understanding their responses would remain confidential. The participants retained the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without encountering any negative effects. The research conducted careful ethical considerations by allowing participants to choose voluntarily while using confidential data protection and maintaining participant anonymity.

The selection process used three main criteria which combined participant engagement with exchange program activities and interview readiness and cultural background range to secure comprehensive participant representation. Essential criteria were established to decode the complete picture about cultural awareness and involvement with intercultural societal issues.

The research was initiated with an extensive survey to extrapolate findings to a broader population. Subsequently, in a later phase, the research concentrates on qualitative, open-ended interviews to gather in-depth perspectives from participants to clarify the initial quantitative survey results.

The selection process used three main criteria which combined participant engagement with exchange program activities and interview readiness and cultural background range to secure comprehensive participant representation. Essential criteria were established to decode the complete picture about cultural awareness and involvement with intercultural societal issues.

The study started with detailed surveys to obtain data about student cultural awareness along with their intercultural competence levels. The questionnaire distributed 19 items which were organized into two distinct sections about cultural awareness (10 questions) as well as intercultural competence (9 questions). The 10 cultural awareness questions from Gardenswartz and Rowe (2010) evaluated cultural diversity basic knowledge through yes/no responses. The 9 questions regarding intercultural competence used Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model (Ahsa, 2024) and employed a Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Disagree to Strongly Disagree. The survey examined five essential domains consisting of knowledge alongside interpretation and connection abilities and discovery abilities along with interaction skills and attitudes and awareness elements. An expert-designed survey assessed students' perceptions regarding their intercultural communication frame of mind and capabilities to take part in online exchange experiences.

The research collected additional qualitative data through interviews which were conducted after the survey stage. The interview questions had a semi-structured format with seven items derived from Schumann's Acculturation Model (Schumann, 1986). The survey document contained supplementary questions that corresponded with questionnaire statements which assessed students' cultural adjustment and their methods for navigating international encounters and coping with related obstacles. Each participant gained an opportunity for detailed responses through the semi-structured methodology without compromising data collection consistency.

Expert professionals validated both questionnaire and interview questions for reliability before testing the instruments on selected small student groups. Researchers maintained ethical standards for informed consent as well as confidentiality and voluntary participation throughout every stage of the research process.

In collecting the data, the questionnaire was created using Microsoft Forms to facilitate easy administration and completion. Microsoft Forms functioned as the data gathering instrument because users can develop organized web-based surveys which automatically accumulate responses and supply live data monitoring along with simple result transfer capabilities. The system enables easy survey engagement for participants who use various devices which maximizes their data collection efficiency and convenience. Then, the researchers sent the link to the Microsoft Form via email to the chair of the virtual exchange. After receiving the email with the link, the chair of the virtual exchange forwarded the link to all the participants via email or another communication channel (e.g., a group messaging app or team platform). The researchers specified a deadline for participants to complete the questionnaire (e.g., 1–2 weeks) to ensure timely responses. In the email to the chair, the researchers should also include a reminder about this deadline.

A few days before the deadline, the researchers requested the chair send a reminder email to participants, encouraging those who still needed to fill out the form to do so. This helped increase the response rate. Once the questionnaire responses were submitted, the researchers accessed the collected data via Microsoft Forms. The tool automatically compiled responses into an Excel sheet, making it easier for the researchers to analyse the results.

The researchers adapted a 19-item survey to gauge how students understand cultural differences and their intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The researchers executed various stages throughout the instrument development process to establish its validity and reliability. Two sections made up the questionnaire structure. The questionnaire section on Cultural Awareness contained ten adapted questions from Gardenswartz and Rowe (2010) that examined student knowledge about diverse cultures in addition to their understanding of cultural variations. The ICC questions made use of a 4-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree (Byram's ICC Model - Ahsa, 2024) for this research.

The questionnaire contained questions to assess intercultural communicative competence by measuring five essential components. Knowledge (understanding different cultures), participants need skills which enable them to analyze cultural meanings and interpret connections between them, students require the ability to both discover and actively interact with (new cultural

contexts), attitudes (openness and curiosity toward other cultures), and awareness (self-reflection on cultural differences).

The instrument passed expert examination and pilot-stage testing before its administration phase. The initial testing phase included a few students who evaluated uncertain survey statements while improving question readability. The last version passed statistical measurements for accuracy and reliability purposes to gather research data. Researchers utilized semi-structured interview questions directed at students with their foundation in Schumann's Acculturation Model (1986) while corresponding to the questionnaire areas. A seven-part open-ended inquiry formed the structure of the interviewed questions to study students' experiences of cultural adaptation as well as their difficulties and achievements. An experts assessed the validity of interview questions to validate that they contained appropriate content about participants' point of view.

The questions were validated by an expert in language education, who is a lecturer at STKIP Muhammadiyah Pagar Alam and a postdoctoral student at the State University of Semarang.

This questionnaire was distributed via email to the chair of the virtual exchange using a Microsoft team form link, and then she distributed it to all participants. Where the participants were seventy-three respondents from some universities, such as University of Limerick, University of Bengkulu, University of Lampung, University of Abou Bekr Belkaid, Tlemcen, Algeria, and Universidad Complutense de Madrid – UCM and other whoever followed students' exchange.

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews as an additional research method to better understand how cultural awareness impacted participation in the societal intercultural exchange challenge program. The interview questions emerged from Schumann's Acculturation Model (1986) which mirrored the main concepts of the questionnaire. The survey concentrated on examining students' program-related experiences coupled with their encountered challenges plus their responses to cultural adaptations and program benefits acquired.

Through purposive sampling the researchers chose four participants who participated actively in the program and delivered useful information for their study. Internet-based video communication platform Zoom enabled flexible assessment through live conversation sessions. The participants granted consent to record their sessions that lasted between 30 to 45 minutes each. Expert assessment validated the interview question validity and reliability by confirming their correspondence with research objectives.

Data analysis

Once all the data had been gathered, the researchers started their analysis on the quantitative questionnaire data after collecting all necessary information. The researchers conducted a completeness and consistency check on the 19-item questionnaire responses. The compiled data was organized into Cultural Awareness through 10 yes/no questions as well as ICC through 9 Likert-scale questions. Statistical calculations processed Likert-scale question responses through numeric assignment (SA = 4, A = 3, D = 2, SD = 1). General trends were summarized by calculating descriptive statistics which contained mean values and standard deviations and frequency distribution results. Using SPSS, the researchers conducted a Pearson's correlation that analyzed the relationship between cultural awareness and participation in intercultural societal challenges. The interpretation of Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) happened between -1 to +1 while a value of +1 showed perfect positive connection, zero indicated absence of connection and -1 presented a perfect negative correlation.

The researchers maintain accuracy during the process of transcribing verbatim the four Zoom interviews which were recorded. The researchers conducted a thematic analysis using Schumann's Acculturation Model (1986) to discover main themes about intercultural engagement obstacles and cultural adaptation methods alongside benefits of intercultural participation. The researchers analyzed the transcripts by hand before finding common patterns throughout the participant responses. The authors performed a content analysis that validated emerging themes by linking them to the quantitative evaluation to confer robustness to their discoveries. The research used conjugate qualitative and quantitative methods for detailed insights about the cultural awareness factors that influence participation in societal intercultural challenges.

The researchers coded the answers of participants based on the theme of the questions. There were four participants involved: P1, P2, p3, and P4. Researchers analyzed the interview data to find important themes about cultural sensitivity as well as adaptability and communication

issues. Quantitative analysis software processed the recorded discussion by transcribing the data and assigning codes to group them into overarching categories. A structured display follows which presents the themes extracted from interview questions together with participant responses. The table 1 following was thematic analysis of interview responses.

Table 1. Thematic analysis of interview responses

Interview Questions	Theme Identified	Description
1. Do you think participating in the intercultural virtual societal challenge helped you improve your cultural awareness?	Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity	Understanding and respecting cultural differences in communication and behavior.
2. How do you feel participating in the intercultural virtual societal challenge?	Emotional Intelligences	Emotional responses to intercultural experiences, including excitement, surprise, or difficulty in adaptation.
3. Emotional responses to intercultural experiences, including excitement, surprise, or difficulty in adaptation.	Cultural Sensitivity and Respect	Recognizing the significance of culture in shaping interactions and perspectives.
4. What was your challenge when following this program?	Adapting to Cross-Cultural Collaboration	Difficulties in adjusting to different cultural communication styles and expectations.
5. What new experiences did you gain from this program?	Adapting to Cross-Cultural Collaboration	Exposure to new cultural perspectives and ways of interaction.
6. What challenges did you face in communicating in this program?	Adaptability in Communication	Overcoming language barriers, different communication styles, and online interaction difficulties.
7. What benefits do you feel you gained from this program?	Cultural Awareness and Global Mindset	Developing intercultural competence and improving communication skills.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding 1: The correlation between cultural awareness and participation in intercultural societal challenges

To know the correlation between cultural awareness and participation in intercultural societal challenges, the data from seventy-three respondents was analysed using personal correlation from ten questionnaires about cultural awareness and seventy-three respondents. The following was Table 2, which described the results of the questionnaire on cultural awareness.

Table 2. Summary of questionnaire results on cultural awareness

Questionnaire Number	Indicators	Respondents Answer	
		Yes	No
1	Cultural sensitivity in perceptions	71	2
2	Adaptability in Communication	61	12
2	Group-Oriented Communication	64	9
3	Group-oriented communication	68	5
4	Cultural Sensitivity to Greetings	47	26
5	Nonverbal Sensitivity	53	20
6	Nonverbal Sensitivity	49	24
7	Cultural Sensitivity to Communication Styles	55	18
8	Adaptability to Hierarchical Structures	55	18
9	Awareness of Physical Space and Proxemics	40	33
10	Sensitivity to vocal tone and volume	64	9

Table 2 above concluded that respondents showed strong cultural awareness in areas such as cultural sensitivity in perceptions, adaptability in communication, group-oriented communication, and sensitivity to vocal tone and volume. These areas suggested a solid foundation for understanding and respecting cultural differences in communication. Nonverbal sensitivity, cultural sensitivity to greetings, awareness of physical space, and cultural sensitivity to communication styles showed more mixed responses, indicating these were areas where further development and cultural training may be beneficial. The least recognized aspects were physical space and proxemics, highlighting the need for more attention to nonverbal cues like body language and proximity in intercultural interactions.

Seventy-three respondents completed nine questionnaires about participation in intercultural societal challenges. Table 3 describes the questionnaire results on participation in intercultural societal challenges.

Table 3. Summary of questionnaire results on participation in intercultural societal challenges

Questionnaire Number	Indicators	Respondents	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Cross-cultural awareness	communication	6	25	36	36
2	Cross-cultural skills	communication	11	37	22	3
3	Cultural sensitivity	awareness and	7	29	32	5
4	Language proficiency	and communication styles	6	27	35	5
5	Emotional intelligence		7	42	22	2
6	Problem-solving in diverse teams		10	29	29	5
7	Cross-Cultural Skills	Communication	15	31	24	3
8	Trust and relationship building in teams		13	32	26	2
9	Language proficiency	and communication styles	6	24	30	13

Table 3 showed a strong awareness of the importance of cross-cultural communication (Q1) and language proficiency (Q4 & Q9), as well as a decent recognition of cultural awareness and sensitivity (Q3). This indicated that respondents generally understand the importance of communication across cultures and the role of language and cultural sensitivity in ineffective interactions. Cross-cultural communication skills (Q2) and emotional intelligence (Q5) showed lower levels of agreement, indicating that while awareness was high, respondents might feel less confident or skilled in applying these concepts. Problem-solving in diverse teams (Q6) and trust and relationship building (Q8) could also benefit from more focus, as these are critical components of successful cross-cultural collaboration. Building cross-cultural communication skills and emotional intelligence and improving problem-solving abilities in diverse teams should be prioritized for further development to translate awareness into effective practice. Table 4 showed the relationship between cultural awareness and participation in intercultural societal challenges.

Table 4. Relationship between cultural awareness and participation in intercultural societal challenges

Cultural Awareness		Pearson Correlation	1	.235*
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.045
Participation in intercultural societal challenges		N	73	73
		Pearson Correlation	.235*	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.045	
		N	73	73

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The correlation between cultural awareness and participation in intercultural societal challenges is 0.235. This value indicated a weak positive relationship between the two variables. In other words, as

cultural awareness increases, participation in intercultural societal challenges also tends to increase, but the relationship was relatively weak. The p-value for this correlation was 0.045. Since the p-value was less than 0.05, this indicated that the correlation between cultural awareness and participation in intercultural societal challenges was statistically significant at the 0.05 level. This meant the observed relationship was not due to random chance and was considered valid statistically. Conclusion There was a statistically significant positive correlation ($p < 0.05$) between cultural awareness and participation in intercultural societal challenges, with a correlation coefficient of 0.235, indicating a weak positive relationship between the two variables.

Finding 2: Students' experience in participation in intercultural societal challenges

The research studied intercultural societal challenges through seven questions directed at four participants using semi-structured interviews. P1, P2 and P3 took part in intercultural interactions which brought them social challenges yet P4 had previous virtual intercultural societal challenge experience. Analysis of responses followed a categorization system based on Schuman's three-interview structure according to Seidman (2006).

Thematic analysis of participant remarks uncovered four main themes that capture their communication experiences - cultural sensitivity in perception, adaptability in communication styles, group-level communication preferences and nonverbal awareness skills with structural awareness of hierarchy. The following section presents research findings based on the investigated themes to explain how participants handled their intercultural interactions and challenges.

The analysis of participant responses identified two essential elements which were cultural sensitivity and awareness together with emotional intelligence in intercultural environments. Drilling down into participant experiences required them to categorize their statements according to these themes.

1. Cultural awareness and sensitivity

Participating in intercultural societal challenges allowed participants to expand their knowledge of different cultural aspects which included traditional practices and social communication styles. Their responses illustrate this development:

"I know much better about traditional culture, such as music and leaders from other cities, so participating in intercultural influences my cultural awareness." (P1)

"I learned about traditional food and how they communicate with each other. They also organize traditional parties as a routine agenda. This made me realize the variety of cultures and improved my cultural awareness." (P2)

"I love variety of cultures after following and participating in intercultural societal challenges." (P3)

"Participating in intercultural societal challenges increases my cultural awareness, although I had some problems with language and the way of communication. Their way of speaking is slightly different from Indonesia; they tend to use longer expressions. However, I managed to navigate all the activities." (P4)

People exposed to intercultural experiences acquire cultural appreciation and develop wider viewpoints according to recorded responses. The initial phase of work brought communication obstacles because of language barriers and distinct styles of interaction between participants.

2. Emotional intelligence in intercultural engagement

Intercultural interactions among participants prompted different emotional responses that showed their emotional intelligence abilities in social adaptation to new environments. Participants either enjoyed their time in this experience but others first experienced anxiety because of their language abilities.

"I had fun participating in intercultural societal challenges. Although I faced many challenges at first, I gradually adapted to the new culture over time." (P2)

"I felt nervous because my English isn't very good. I was afraid my language skills would cause misunderstandings or make others uncomfortable." (P4)

The behavioral patterns when meeting foreigners demonstrate why people need emotional adaptability when engaging with other cultures. At first participants encountered multiple obstacles but eventually learned to feel secure while managing difference between cultures.

The third question indicated cultural sensitivity and respect. The ability to detect cultural differences during communication and adapt appropriately is defined as Cultural Sensitivity as P4 said as following:

"This program makes me curious to learn about other countries' cultures and increases my skills in communicating with them better." (P4)

This response reflects cultural sensitivity as P4 acknowledges the need to improve communication skills when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Valuing cultural diversity in social environments represents a fundamental aspect of respect because doing so demonstrates appreciation for its important role. It was showed by these answers:

"This program is very important because we can learn from each other about their culture, starting from communication, food, and language." (P3)

"I feel sharing culture is a better program to teach us about diversity." (P4)

The statements show respect by underlining the necessity of cultural learning and mutual comprehension according to both P3 and P4.

The next section was about details of their experience, starting from the fourth and fifth questions, which indicated adapting to cross-cultural collaboration and communication. Their answer was the following:

1. Adapting to cross-cultural collaboration

"I feel insecure because I joined the students around the cities, and I feel homesick because it's the first time I've followed this program." (P1)

"I must request the taste of the food because the taste of food is very different. I also have a problem with language because I must slow down my voice. And I feel sick for the first time because of the different weather." (P3)

Students show adaptation challenges from cultural and environmental variations through their responses which include homesickness as well as unfamiliar food tastes and adapting to the new climate.

2. Adapting to cross-cultural communication

"I feel a little shocked when a long day in getting lectures, all lecturers using traditional language. So, I ask them to use the Indonesian language because I don't understand." (P2)

"I have a problem with their accent in communication. And I must force my brain to speak English all the time." (P4)

The responses demonstrate communication challenges regarding language differences as well as challenges with accents and difficulties understanding regular or localized dialects.

The last section was about reflecting on the meaning of their experience which indicated cultural competence and global awareness as follows:

1. Cultural competence

"I enlarge my knowledge about various cultures, and I can respect them." (P1)

"This program improved my cultural awareness and helped me realize there are many cultures around the cities. We can share our culture and respect each other." (P3)

"I have had a great experience in sharpening my skills, and I can learn about their accent."
(P4)

The participants demonstrate cultural competence through their ability to understand diverse backgrounds and their respect for them. Intercultural settings require participants to value cultural awareness together with respect and effective communication abilities.

2. Global awareness

"I got a new way of learning. I have had many experiences adapting to various cultures. I can survive and learn outside my hometown." (P2)

"I enjoyed this program, and I hope Indonesia can be an international language, too. And learning about race made me realize that we must respect each other." (P4)

Participating in the exchange program led participants to develop worldwide awareness by witnessing cultural diversity and adaptation methods and global communication practices.

The statements showed that the participants' cultural awareness was fostered by participation in intercultural societal challenges. The students felt happy and could manage new challenges. The participants' positive thinking made them survive and overcome the challenges. They had many challenges and new experiences, such as adaptation to language, food, habits, accent in communication, and many others. Although they had many challenges, they could survive, and this program gave them new knowledge, new experiences and new friends.

Discussion

The research examined two essential questions about cultural awareness and intercultural societal challenge involvement between the University of Limerick and selected Indonesian universities. Research must examine these questions because cultural awareness affects students' dedication to intercultural programs while revealing the obstacles and rewards students encounter during their participation.

This study established a correlation between cultural awareness and intercultural societal challenge involvement yet the relationship proved to be fairly weak. Multiple factors could explain this result because the program length combined with methods of interaction and student attributes like motivation and language level. Data findings were supported by interview insights which enabled researchers to discover both advantages and struggles in intercultural involvement among students. This research analyzes the connections between cultural awareness and intercultural participation by reviewing existing literature in detail.

The result showed a correlation between cultural awareness and participation in intercultural societal challenges between the University of Limerick, the University of Bengkulu and some universities in Indonesia. Although the correlation between cultural awareness and participation in intercultural societal challenges the strength of the relationship was relatively weak. The researchers concluded there were some factors influenced on them. First, short-term in following this program could influenced the weak correlation because the limited time and meeting by online made the weak sense in making relation and exchanging the cultures awareness and active participation. Second, the students' personal motivation, language proficiency, or differing levels of interest in intercultural engagement, might have influenced their participation independently of their cultural awareness levels. According to Nhem (2020) teachers who lack intercultural competence might also prohibit students from active cultural exchange participation. The study presents student viewpoints and their experiences while participating in these programs instead of focusing on teacher involvement with adapting teaching materials. Instructional elements together with student motivation act as primary influences on shaping cultural awareness during education. Therefore, while cultural awareness appears to be a contributing factor, it is likely one of several variables that affect participation in intercultural activities. Future research could explore these factors further to gain a more comprehensive understanding of what drives student engagement in such programs.

This result was supported by Rets (2023), who said their finding was the students' experience in virtual exchange influences participants' perceptions of their intercultural learning. The similarity of this research was that the same program about intercultural and different studies could be done online and offline, and this study found a correlation between cultural awareness in this program. In line with the same study, Karimova (2023), found that students' cultural and linguistic skills improved through

collaboration and intercultural interactions. It made the students realize this program could be done at home and meet international students.

In addition, Siergiejczyk (2020) reported using this program for intercultural exchanges improved students' speaking as they could practice directly with native speakers and be aware of diversity and traditional cultures by using online. Wang (2018) added that cultural lesson was very important in English teaching. Cultural awareness was influenced by students' and teachers' knowledge of the culture. That's why students' competencies about culture should be large, using some strategies to enrich them in cultural background. Mehany (2024) showed in their study the score of cross-cultural awareness in cognitive and affective improved after the treatment.

From the thematic analyses of the interviews, the researchers got some findings about students' experience in participating in intercultural societal challenges. The students got many experiences to improve their cultural awareness, although some challenges made them survive and adapt to the new conditions. The program made them realize that diversity and culture are unique and that they need to appreciate each other. It was supported by Öztürk & Eksi (2022), who said that virtual exchange facilitates projects among all students from different countries, background and this intercultural interaction set the stage for the development of ICC (Intercultural Communicative Competence) and critical cultural awareness. Previous studies also found there were challenges in guiding virtual exchange to finish a project (O'Dowd, 2019). The challenges discussed are based on insights drawn from one-on-one interviews with higher education teachers and international students from Finland, Italy, Denmark, Germany, Latvia, and Turkey. A total of twenty individuals were interviewed. Analysis of the interview data revealed six key challenges in multicultural classrooms: language barriers, misunderstandings of cultural attitudes toward others, unequal communication, varying cultural norms for interaction, different learning styles, and difficulties adapting to technology (Demirbilek, 2021).

CONCLUSION

According to the results and discussion above, this research found there was a correlation between cultural awareness and participation in intercultural societal challenges. Although the score of correlation showed a weak positive correlation, the significant values were statistically significant. It could be influenced by some factors, such as the total of the respondent and their condition in completing the questionnaire, which made the result have a weak positive correlation.

That's why the researchers tried to interview the participants who represent this program to participate in intercultural societal challenges online or offline. The participants showed there was a correlation between their cultural awareness and participation in intercultural societal challenges. The participants described the challenges they faced in participating in this program. In the end, they felt many benefits in participating in this program, such as cultural awareness, appreciating someone, sharpening their communication, and others.

This research will contribute to developing teaching strategies that encourage students to address global issues, fostering social responsibility and understanding across cultures. This research could also guide the design of curricula, teacher training, and classroom practices to prepare students better to navigate and contribute to an increasingly connected and diverse world. Virtual or face-to-face intercultural programs could develop this research. Suggestion for the next researchers: this program hoped to involve students for a longer time in participating in intercultural societal challenges, and the students hoped to help each other; in other words, they had high social interaction.

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