Intercultural Understanding in Foreign Language Learning in an Indonesian Higher Education

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Abstract

This research paper aims to explore: a) learners' perceptions of intercultural understanding within foreign language learning; b) challenges to promote intercultural understanding within foreign language learning. This qualitative case study uses semi-structured interviews and observation of 15 learners who have participated in intercultural understanding training for six months. Data are analyzed through thematic analysis approach. The findings show that there are four categories of learners' perceptions on intercultural understanding: a) high support of intercultural understanding promotion; b) medium support of intercultural understanding; and c) low support of intercultural understanding. The finding of this study extends the debates of intercultural understanding issues within foreign language contexts. The implication of this study is that learners who have limited and non-supportive to promotion of intercultural understanding should be invited to intercultural understanding programs so that they become intercultural minded persons.

Introduction

Intercultural understanding is an important global issue particularly in globalized and technological development era. Stephen May (2009) defined intercultural understanding as "a critical strategy that can unhelpfully to essentialize and reify particular ethnic and cultural difference" (p.69). It means that intercultural understanding is a key to establish good relationship with any particular culture and ethnic communities.

Research in intercultural in Indonesian context has been done by several researchers. For example: intercultural competence in Indonesian bilingual education context (Abduh & Rosmaladewi, 2018), cultural factors influencing the implementation of bilingual instruction (Abduh, 2018), cultural awareness and commitment of internationalization of higher education (Abduh, Rosmaladewi, &

Basri, 2018), vocabulary and ICT that relates to cultural issues (Abduh & Rosmaladewi, 2017) and cognitive concept in the Indonesian national language assessment (Ramly & Abduh, 2018). All of these studies have focused on intercultural awareness, cognitive concept exploration, commitment and competence. Therefore, very few information is related to the intercultural understanding in foreign language contexts. This study fills this knowledge gap by exploring students 'perception on intercultural understanding of in foreign language classes in an Indonesian higher education context.

This study has both theoretical and practical significances. Theoretically, this study contributes to the debates on the issues of intercultural issues. Practically, this study can be a source of information for teachers and practitioners in EFL contexts.

Literature review

The literature review contains two sections: a) concept of language and culture; and b) previous research in intercultural understanding.

Concept of language and culture

Language is perceived as an abstract entity, psychological dimension, and social concept (Santana, 2012). Culture can be refer to cultural, political, symbolic, and structural dimensions of lives (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The connection of language and culture has been long studied by in the area of foreign language. The global understanding of language and cultural connection relates to an early seminal study of Whorfian hypothesis where language is part of culture (Imai, Kanero, & Masuda, 2016).

The concept of language and cultures exist reciprocally. The relationship between language and culture is illustrated by Kashima, Kashima, & Kidd (2014, p.2):

> Imagine a world without a language, then try to build a parliamentary democracy, a legal system, a stock exchange, a banking system, and myriad other infrastructures of everyday life that we have come to take for granted. Given that these institutions are cultural products, it is easy to see the role that language must have played in the constitution of human culture

The meaning is that every part of lives is only understandable and learnable when it is connected with the language. The every section of lives is part of cultural materials and values. These cultural materials and values are deciphered by the use of languages.

Previous studies in intercultural understanding

Research into intercultural understanding has been widely conducted particularly in western contexts. It is also the focus of many researchers who are concerned with foreign language learning in many different contexts. There are several important studies to be reviewed including (Rosmaladewi & Abduh, 2017)**,** Prihatin (2018), and Bacala (2018).

Rosmaladewi and Abduh (2017) investigated the collaborative culture in Indonesian polytechnics. This case study employed case study research design exploring English lecturers perception on collaborative culture. The findings of this research show that contrived collegiality has become part of the English collaborative culture that exists in Indonesian polytechnics. This study recommends that future study is important to conduct within larger setting.

Prihatin (2018) explored cross-cultural understanding syllabus and how to design syllabus that accommodate the intercultural understanding issues. Prihatin investigated 47 students and 6 teachers in an Indonesian university setting. The findings shows that there is limited representation of intercultural issues in aspect of syllabus including, lesson planning, books, competencies outcomes, and recommendation for resources book for teachers and students. The researcher recommends that a further investigation for students and teachers' perceptions of intercultural issues.

Bacala (2018) reviewed L1 and cultural interference in L2 learning. The study indicates that the intercultural interference has been limited in the context of L2 teaching and learning. Therefore, it is important for other researchers to investigate some issues of intercultural understanding within larger setting from different perspectives: teachers, students, government and intercultural activists.

From the review above, earlier studies suggest that it is recommended to conduct further study of intercultural understanding because there is still limited information of IU from non-western context. It is obvious that there is a need for an investigation into intercultural understanding particularly from students 'perspectives.Therefore, this study aims to explore students' views on intercultural understanding from non-western context, particularly in Indonesian higher education context.

Research method

This is a qualitative case study. The reason of choosing case study because the phenomena or the case in this research occurs in a natural setting (Yin, 2013). The case in this study is the intercultural understanding in foreign language class in Indonesian higher education contexts.

This study uses semi-structured interviews of 15 learners in an Indonesian

university who have participated in intercultural understanding class for six months. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. The researchers initially ask the students voluntary concern on participating the research. Then, once they approved, the researchers contacted the participants to arrange the time and place for interviews. After the interviews were transcribed completely, the researchers send the transcripts back to the participants. These process can help the strengthen the validity of the transcript content (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). These students have enrolled in cross culture understanding subject. The analysis used thematic analysis by following steps: a) reading whole transcripts of interviews; b) initial coding of the data; c) identifying the category; and d) identifying major theme.

Findings and Discussion

The findings show that there are four categories of learners' perceptions on intercultural understanding: High support of intercultural understanding activities, medium support of intercultural understanding, and low support of intercultural understanding.

High support of intercultural understanding activities
This is a strong initiative to promote intercultural understanding. There are indicators of high support of intercultural understanding. Several students indicate that:

Learning other cultures and anything about others are very important (Student 1)

I believe having intercultural conversation and dialogue is strongly important (Student 3)

I like to support any intercultural activities such as dialogue and sharing (Student 6)

Whatever the issues and activities of intercultural understanding, I strongly support them (Student 8)

We have created a forum that supports intercultural dialogue among university students (Student 11).

It can be seen from the excerpts of the students that learners who are keen and strongly support the intercultural understanding activities have very positive attitude towards intercultural issues. The significance activities from learners who strongly support the intercultural understanding are not only classical classroom learning of other cultures, but more importantly intercultural conversation and dialogue, intercultural activities including intercultural festivals and celebrations. These cultural celebrations and festivals are seen as form of symbolic cultures

(Bolman & Deal, 2008) that symbolizes different ethnic and cultural dimensions.

Medium support of intercultural understanding
The second categories of students are those who supports on intercultural understanding, issues and activities. The indicators of this category reflect in their perceptions as follows:

> I like to participate in any intercultural workshop if there is an invitation, I don't really strong on it (Student 2)
>
> I like learn and participate for example training to learn other culture, it is good" (Student 4)
>
> I support them [any activities in intercultural understanding] let say not much but medium Student 5)
>
> I support, in medium term, for any intercultural activities such as movie and any creative project (Student 7).

This indicates that some students' perceptions on intercultural understanding activities have medium support for example in the project like movie that contains cross cultural issues. The examples of supportive activities in this category are watching intercultural movies, intercultural training, and intercultural invitation events. These cultural events reflect the connection between language and culture (Imai et al., 2016) where language plays important roles in developing and shaping the values and material cultures.

Low support of intercultural understanding
The indicators of low support on intercultural understanding have shown by some participants in this research as follows:

> As long as no conflict, no need to learn other culture (Student 14)
>
> Learning other culture depends on every individual, we don't need to push it (Student 15)
>
> I join it when I have time, no need to plan it (Student 12)
>
> No really support, but if any activities [intercultural activities], I will join (Student 13)
>
> My culture is important so no need to learn other culture (Student9)
>
> They need to learn our culture first, so that we can learn others (Student 15)

It shows that individual understanding of other culture is part of individual responsibility. Low participation on intercultural activities and issues rely on each student's decision whether to participate or not on intercultural issues.
The findings above add the debates of issues on intercultural understanding. This particularly important findings by the extension of previous studies (Abduh, 2018;

Abduh & Rosmaladewi, 2018) on the issues of intercultural understanding. In addition, this study provides further information on intercultural understanding from students perspective that is suggested by earlier researchers (Bacala, 2018; Prihatin, 2018). The implication of this study is that students can identify some perceptions of those who support and those who do not the intercultural understanding. For teachers, it is an important tool to understand the category of students' views on intercultural issues.

The results of the perceptions on intercultural understanding of students can affect their support on their subjects. The impact is that learners who have high support on appreciating cultural differences can respect any cultural dissimilarities occurring around them. On the contrary, the limited support to cross cultural understanding can still participate to their subjects with low enthusiasm to other learn others.

Conclusion

These four attitudes of students have significant implications for teaching and learning: high support of intercultural understanding promotion; medium support of intercultural understanding; low support of intercultural understanding; non-support of intercultural understanding. These findings have practical information for researchers and become references for educators on indicators students 'category on intercultural issues. The implication is that it is important to provide intercultural activities that are enjoyable and involving many students from different ethnic and cultural background. It is important to conduct further research within multiple sites and larger samples.

The findings of this study has the global relevance to study of the connection between language and culture in Japan (Imai et al., 2016) and language and culture (Kashima et al., 2014), and intercultural competence (Abduh & Rosmaladewi, 2018). The findings of this study extend intercultural understanding the previous studies by adding category of learners' attitudes toward intercultural dimension: high, medium and low support to intercultural understanding.

The recommendation is that it is important for teachers and learners to promote intercultural understanding within the scope of foreign language learning. In addition, educational institutions may identify groups of learners who are strongly supportive to intercultural understanding to become volunteers to promote cross culture understanding. The educational institution may also encourage learners to learn other cultures through series of cultural performance, workshops, seminars and cultural exchange programs.

Pedagogical implication

The limited understanding of other cultures has pedagogical implications: a) there is potential judging other culture based on their own values; b) there is limited appreciation of culture; c) limited understanding of other cultures may lead to limited acknowledgment and teaching of other cultures.
On the other hand, The strong understanding of other cultures has several pedagogical implications: a) learners will appreciate differences and acknowledge similarities of other cultures; b) learners will possess strong motivation and spirit of experiencing and living in cultures other than their own ones; c) teachers can teach and facilitate learners easily about harmony and conflict in certain cultures; d) the respect and tolerance among cultural diversity may exist not only in school or university contexts, but also in wider community settings.

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