

BRINGING INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES INTO GENERAL EFL LEARNING DURING COVID-19: SOME INSIGHTS

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Abstract

Studies on intercultural language learning have revolved around the descriptive report of cultural facts, adjustment to the target language's culture, and cross-cultural do's and don'ts. They have not yet exposed the issue in much detail, especially in an emergency situation. This study aims to investigate practical ideas on how to engage Indonesian Islamic higher education students with intercultural perspectives during the Covid-19 pandemic. It addresses what the teachers think about interculturality in the general EFL learning and how they accommodate intercultural perspectives during the virtual class. Using a narrative inquiry, the data were collected through semi-structured interviews and observations. The researcher employed thematic analysis and theoretical lenses on interculturality-based language learning. The study showed that interculturality in EFL learning was not only unavoidable but also indispensable. This learning suggested an equal position between teachers and students in terms of authority of knowledge and vocal participation. The teachers also accommodated the core principles of intercultural perspectives in general EFL learning through proactive construction, connection-making, social interaction, reflection, and commitment, even though they did not take place optimally during virtual learning. Here, the students engaged with one another to exchange information, link ideas, and make sense of meanings. The overall findings of this study imply the vital role of teachers in helping students recognize, appreciate, and respond to cultural variety during the virtual learning process.

Keywords: *General EFL Class, Intercultural Perspective, Islamic Higher Education, Virtual Learning*

INTRODUCTION

The students' composition in Indonesian Islamic higher education (PTKI) has undergone significant changes as it gains greater diversity. The students in PTKI are reported to come from various provinces, cities, and towns in the country; many campuses also accept students from abroad. Besides, of hundreds of thousands of prospective students who registered in 2021, 46% come from MA (Islamic high school) and *pesantren*, 42% from SMA (general high school), and 12% from SMK (vocational school) backgrounds (Pendis, 2021). There is increasing concern whether their cultural backgrounds are accommodated during the learning process while dealing with different cultures in the class is not an easy task. As the students grow and develop in their respective environments, they have created specific ways of thinking and behaving that are unique to their own community.

Studies over the past few decades have provided important information on interculturality either in the English as a foreign language (EFL) learning context or in higher education, or both. Bennett (2003), for example, proposes three intercultural competences to be developed in an EFL classroom: the competence to overcome ethnocentrism, to appreciate other cultures, and to perform appropriately in a multicultural context. Agudelo (2007) emphasizes the importance of a dialogical space to deal with different languages and cultures when teaching a foreign

language. Elena (2014) maintains that an intercultural teacher needs to step outside the traditional frameworks of thought, behaviour, and practice towards further professional and personal growth. However, Chlopek (2008) acknowledges that, when talking about culture or interculturality in a language classroom, theoreticians and practitioners often restrict themselves to the specific culture of the target language.

In higher education context, a study reveals that although English teachers are willing to support the language and culture objectives in the classroom, they usually find it difficult to deal with what to prioritize (Abdulrahman et al., 2016). The learning activities are also still concerned with comparing the various aspects of the cultural objects (Haerazi & Irawan, 2020). In addition, interculturality in the classroom is often used as a touch-up speech to promote inclusion or admit the existence of differences (Rico-Troncoso, 2021). Indeed, when conducting intercultural communication in the classroom, challenges such as stereotyping, prejudice, and ethnocentrism among the students are still inevitable (Mgogo & Osunkunle, 2020). Such facts are what probably drive Liu Yu et al. (2014) to identify the three challenges in intercultural language education, *i.e.* recognizing cultural knowledge, integrating students in classroom activities to compare and explore culture, and growing cultural awareness via cultural explorations.

Most studies in the field of intercultural EFL learning have focused mainly on the descriptive report of cultural facts, adjustment to the target language's culture, and cross-cultural do's and don'ts. They have not yet exposed the issue in much detail, especially in an emergency situation. This current study portrays practical ideas initiated by the general EFL teachers to ensure the engagement of Islamic higher education students with intercultural perspectives during instructional activities. It specifically addresses (1) what the teachers think about interculturality in the general EFL learning and (2) how they accommodate intercultural perspectives during the virtual learning due to Covid-19. This study is of significance because such perspectives are a capital to build a community of mutual learning that can help stimulate a tolerant attitude among students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language and culture are two forms of human thoughts intricately related and dependent on each other. Humboldt (as stated in Steinberg et al., 2001) wrote that "language by its very nature represents the spirit and national character of a people" He believes that every language in the world should be a cultural embodiment of the people who speak it. In this sense, the language that a society uses will reflect or show the beliefs that it holds. Meanwhile, Masinambouw, as Chaer mentioned (1995), maintained

that language and culture are systems that naturally exist in humans. Their relationship is very close as they both influence each other. There is a tendency that culture will never live without language. Even so, the language of a society is also influenced by the culture of its people.

In recent years, culture has been claimed to be an integral part of language skills, in addition to the four traditional language skills, *i.e.* the two productive skills (speaking and writing) and the two receptive skills (listening and reading). Language learning implies cultural learning (Damen, 1997); when a teacher is training a particular language, he or she is also introducing the ways of feeling, thinking, and acting of that language. The teacher is bringing cultural customs into language learning (Brown, 2000). The teaching of a particular language will invariably entail the teaching of that language's culture. Similarly, understanding the cultural dynamics of the target language can play an essential role in language proficiency (Syarifudin & Rahmat, 2021). Therefore, language learning should give the same prominence to the four traditional language skills (each skill should support or interact with each other) and the cultural dimension.

In EFL learning, distinction between cultural perspective and intercultural perspective should be made. A cultural perspective refers to the acquisition of cultural information external to the student and is not meant to modify the student's current

identity, behaviours, values, attitudes, beliefs, or worldview. Meanwhile, an intercultural perspective emphasizes the student's transformative involvement in the learning process. Here, the learning's purpose is to decentre students from their prior attitudes and habits and help them create an intercultural identity via exposure to another culture. The lines between self and other are investigated, questioned, and rewritten (Kramsch & Nolden, 1994). The critical focus for an intercultural perspective in language teaching and learning is more than obtaining knowledge of other people and places (Liddicoat, 2005a). Hence, the primary distinction is that cultural perspective focuses on the other's culture and makes it remains external to the student. Meanwhile, the intercultural perspective highlights the importance of the students' own cultures in connecting with a new culture (Liddicoat, 2005b).

Further, intercultural perspective positions the student at the crossroads of languages, cultures, and learning. That is, intercultural understanding is a lived experience, not an abstract concept. Language, whether written or spoken, is the most important of these cultural products. For and within each student, learning involves an interaction of language and culture. Nevertheless, the student's placement is more problematic because the encultured understandings from the student's home culture collide with the encultured understandings from the target-language community (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). It is problematic

because all of the languages and cultures that the student meets have a part in the learning mediation processes. Therefore, the student is placed in an intercultural environment in which different aspects of languages and cultures are used as learning aids (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Interculturality-based learning has become an important topic to address in 21st-century education. In higher education, the implementation of intercultural perspectives must be understood to prepare students to participate in an intercultural dialogue based on mutual respect (Dawson & Ferdig, 2005). In this sense, instructional activities are expected to promote interculturality-related values, such as understanding of diversity, acceptance of differences, freedom and openness, tolerance, pluralism, and collaboration. For example, students are stimulated to engage with critical participation through discussion where questioning and arguing are made possible. Here, they are trained to support equal opportunities, democracy, and respect for human rights during the learning process. However, because such an implementation is tied to the entire educational environment and is geared toward directly influencing knowledge and positive acceptance of cultural diversity, it also entails complicated practices.

RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative study used a narrative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of the teachers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Mackey & Gass, 2016). The data were taken from a learning setting in general EFL classes (an English course for non-English department students) at IAIN Pekalongan in the academic year of 2021/ 2022. The researcher has involved several general English classes handled by two teachers representative with respect to gender and faculty. The first teacher was initialized with II (male) and teaches in the Faculty of Sharia (FASYA). He has taught the general EFL class at IAIN Pekalongan for two years. This semester, II has 500-minute-online meeting in five general EFL classes, mainly in the Islamic Family Law Department. The second teacher is initialized with EMS (female) and teaches in the Faculty of Education and Teacher Training (FTIK). She has taught the general EFL class at IAIN Pekalongan for nine years. This semester, EMS has a 100-minute online meeting in one general EFL class, i.e. in the Arabic Education Department.

Data for the study were collected from September to October 2021 through semi-structured interviews and observations. First, the semi-structured interview was chosen because it gave flexibility to the participants to answer the questions and explain the information in more detail. All the interviews were born in the Indonesian language to prevent

misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the questions. This Indonesian language choice also gave more freedom to the participants to answer the questions. Second, the observations described the instructional activities introduced by the teachers in the virtual learning. They were used to gather direct and actual information about the teaching experiences and the learning process during the virtual learning due to Covid-19 (Moleong, 2002). Two virtual observations with the Google Meet were recorded once for each teacher.

The data analysis technique in this qualitative research covered all activities throughout the investigative process, including pre-field analysis and field analysis. The researcher used thematic analysis introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyse the data. He transcribed the data that had been collected from interviews and observation to help him analyse them. The teachers' stories were then reviewed with inclusion and exclusion criteria and coded to construct analytic categories based on themes. Later, the researcher interpreted all the data with theoretical lenses on interculturality-based learning in the higher education context, more importantly with the core principles of intercultural perspective in EFL learning proposed by Liddicoat and Scarino (Liddicoat, 2008; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

What the Teachers Think about Interculturality

Culture and interculturality in language learning

Culture has been an important component of language skills, in addition to the four language abilities, as language acquisition also entails cultural learning (Damen, 1997). It means that when a teacher teaches a language, he or she is basically imparting the language's methods of feeling, thinking, and doing. When interviewed, the teachers said that culture has an important place in general EFL learning. They do realize that the English language they have been teaching contains a specific worldview or a particular philosophy, in its basic form (Wierzbicka, 1979). Culture is unavoidable in EFL learning; the linguistic form of English is not only a structural characteristic of the language. The interview also reports that, according to the teachers, culture is a framework through which meanings are communicated and understood, and it appears to be linked to the target language. It includes the information that speakers have about how the world works and how that knowledge is presented and interpreted in communication actions (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

The diverse composition of students in Islamic higher education is interesting to observe in terms of interculturality-based learning. The students' varying cultural background is believed to influence the way they learn EFL. In this sense, students from

other cultures do not abandon their cultural experiences simply because they will be studying in a new society. This notion makes sense because all humans are moulded by their cultures, and interacting across cultures necessitates acknowledging that ideas and behaviours are also established within a cultural framework (Liddicoat, 2005b). The influence of culture on EFL learning is visible during classroom observation via Google Meet, especially in pronunciation or accents, and is also confirmed in the interviews:

”We know that the way students learn the language (English) is still influenced by the habits and peculiarities of their respective regions. In terms of pronunciation, for example, there are some students who have difficulty in saying "does." They say "does" according to the way they pronounce it in their regional languages. In a situation like this, I then look for the equivalent of “does” in their local language. We find this sound in the second syllable of the Javanese *endas* (head). So, in my opinion, a person's cultural background also influences the way they learn the target language, as seen in pronunciation...” (II, FASYA)

“In my opinion, students' cultural backgrounds influence the way they learn foreign languages. Some expressions in English may differ from the culture of the person who learns them. For example, the expression 'join us' in English means '*bergabunglah bersama kami*' in Indonesian. Well, usually some of us still say 'join with us.' The word '*bersama*' is equivalent to 'with'. We use English but are still influenced by Indonesian logic. So, when teaching a foreign language, a teacher also needs to consider how the expressions in the foreign language will be understood by local students.” (EMS, FTIK)

The above explanation confirms that, according to the teachers, a culture can give distinctive (local) meanings to language by adding common connotations and connections to the everyday use of terms (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), e.g., in pronunciation and collocations. Linguistic patterns, therefore, may be viewed as culturally entrenched features that express various conceptions of the world of experience. This point indicates that there are more than translation equivalency connections between the forms of two languages because each piece of interpersonal and interactional meaning is comprehended in the context of a cultural framework that directs the interpretive process (Liddicoat, 2009). However, the issue is more complicated in terms of production (i.e. speaking and writing). For example, the researcher observed that most students forget to include *be verb* when compiling nominal sentences, such as '*they happy with us*' instead of '*they are happy with us*', due to the influence of local language. In productive skills, the students need to know how to develop language that can be understood by native speakers while also acknowledging their own status as members of a different culture, as can also be seen in the case of 'join' and 'join with' above.

Later, as everyone grows up in a specific culture, they may acquire the dominant learning perspectives. Such perspectives may influence the way a person behaves and acts. However, culture is not something fixed; students may have encounters that enable

them to transcend their culture. The researcher's observation reveals how students gradually get used to sharing knowledge between fellow classmates, unlike the dominantly used teacher-centred learning model. Below, the teachers argue whether maintaining interculturality in general EFL learning is necessary.

“Interculturality in learning is very necessary, in the sense that there is mutual acceptance of differences of opinion as long as those opinions have a reference. In the classroom, everyone may have different principles and views on life. Well, we need to respect those differences...” (II, FASYA)

“Interculturality is a necessity. I believe that the cultural differences of each student will be able to present many perspectives on a matter. Students will get many choices of information and knowledge. This is good for the learning process in the class.” (EMS, FTIK)

The statements above demonstrate that, according to the teachers, interculturality is not only unavoidable but also indispensable in general EFL learning. It implies a message that one needs to accept each other's different views. In line with it, Bryam and Zarate (1994) popularize a concept known as ‘savoir’ (knowledge) to explain some aspects of the interculturality involved in EFL learning. In general, savoir relates to understanding oneself and others and their interaction processes. That is, during interactions, individuals need to realize that they bring knowledge of their own language, culture, and interaction process (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Therefore, teachers must urge students to get to know one another in order to build mutual understanding. To make students know one another during online learning, the teachers seem to use the same way; they ask the students to work in a group during distance learning due to Covid-19. This way, in a process that is essential to learning, students can engage with one another to exchange information, link ideas, and make sense of meanings. That is, individual students, with their particular language and cultural identities and positioning, are bound in an experience with alternate identities and positioning that they must comprehend and assess (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Teachers-students position in the learning process

Teachers' teaching methods are usually influenced by their concepts about learning and how they interpret the learning environment. From the interviews, the teachers argue that general EFL learning requires active involvement from both the teachers and students. On the one hand, teachers need to deliver topics and related information according to the syllabus, and, on the other hand, students also need to get involved in learning activities. The statements above also remind us about the vital role of the teachers in making students more excited to learn and participate. Only when they feel excited with the learning will they show active

participation. Therefore, components of both the teachers and students are equally important.

The issue that can depict teachers-students position is concerned with who should speak, when the students should speak, and what they should say. The issue appears to be connected with different cultural experiences. Varied students may have had different experiences with the necessity of talking for learning as they grew up. From the observations, the teachers initiated open communication and made the students feel essential in the online class. They encouraged students to talk in either spoken mode via Google Meet or written mode via WhatsApp group (Gordon, 2014). Both teachers and students have the same opportunity to communicate and express opinions. In that situation, intercultural ideals such as tolerance, openness, collaboration, and accepting of differences are visible during the virtual learning process.

However, in some cultures such as Indonesia, vigorous verbal engagement by students in the classroom is seen as inappropriate. According to such cultures, the teacher is the only one who can provide students with information, and teaching-learning circumstances are intended to supply students with the teacher's knowledge competence. The authority of knowledge and vocal participation in the class portray the teachers-students position:

“... Personally, I want students to be able to actively voice their opinions, as long as they (the opinions) are conveyed

in a good manner. I am very happy when there are students who argue with me, especially when they bring clear references. This (practice) will be able to liven up the atmosphere of lectures in the class. Knowledge may come from students too.” (II, FASYA)

“In higher education, teachers need to position themselves as guides and facilitators for students. Meanwhile, students are subjects in the learning process. In their role as subjects, they must be active in all things, such as asking, responding, arguing, adding information, and so on. Moreover, in this age of technological advancement, they should not rely on knowledge and information only from teachers...” (EMS, FTIK)

Although active vocal participation is unusual in Indonesia, the teachers still want students to voice their opinions. They are even happy if the students exchange arguments with the teachers. They understand that technological advances will allow students to search for information and knowledge independently. Besides, the learning itself is intended to make students more conscious of their own interpretative system. They make sense of things and convey those things to others, both inside and outside of cultures and languages (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). In short, the authority of knowledge in the classroom may come from both the teachers and students' side.

How Intercultural Perspectives are Accommodated

From the various language activities initiated by the (male) teacher, the researcher observes that general EFL learning brings the students to a practice of confronting numerous alternative interpretations to decentre the students and develop a response to meaning as a consequence of cultural engagement. The teacher gives students the opportunity to convey their thoughts and understand the perspective of other people (e.g. fellow students and author) through reading activities. He also invites students to recognize, discuss and negotiate the values contained in other cultures, such as through watching films. At this point, the boundaries between self and other are investigated, problematized, and rewritten here (Kramsch & Nolden, 1994). Such learning activities have helped confirm that the teacher promotes a transformative learning that consider the students' experiences.

Furthermore, in interculturality-based language learning, the students' learning experiences, which come from various cultural backgrounds, should be given ample attention. The teachers place the students as language users and give attention to what each student offers to the learning process and what they must pay attention to as users of a new language (Firth & Wagner, 1997). The following statements by the teachers illustrate a writing activity in the general EFL class considering the students' cultural experiences.

“When asking students to write, I previously gave an explanation of how to write well. But because this is a general EFL class or an ESP class, I don't require them to write according to the strict rules in English. The most important thing is that they read topics that they like and are good at (as basic knowledge for them to write), in this case, studies related to their major.” (II, FASYA)

“Basically, I let them write their own way. They may start with the main point directly or with general information around the topic. (It is) according to their needs and abilities. However, sometimes I suggest that they write down the main points right away.” (EMS, FTIK)

The statements above imply that the teachers accommodated the writing habits that apply to students' culture. The teachers allow the students not to immediately write the topic sentence or the main point at the beginning of the paragraph. In this practice, writing seems to have been shaped by the cultural scripts for speaking. Indeed, the students' cultural background encourages them to talk around a particular topic before they come to the main focus of a specific conversation. The students' cultural experiences are accommodated in general EFL learning.

Creating opportunities through which students relate to each other

Usually, during the learning process, some students see peer contact as a beneficial way of receiving help and sharing knowledge. Those students also think that, as learners, they have an

individual obligation to encourage one another and work in peer groups, especially when studying in multicultural settings. On the other hand, students with different cultural background may choose to forgo engagement for the sake of learning because they associate it with competitiveness. Intercultural perspective can be seen in creating opportunities through which students relate to each other.

“Of course, I give freedom to students regarding the way they interact with each other. This issue is part of their rights. However, I always encourage them to be willing to share their insights and knowledge, even though they (insights and knowledge) are still limited. I prefer students to share with each other than compete. Knowledge will be broader when shared, discussed, and collaborated....” (II, FASYA)

“I free students to choose how to interact with fellow students. In virtual classes, I am happy to see them interacting with each other, and that interaction has something to do with learning materials. But in online classes, managing students to interact in terms of knowledge is usually challenging.” (EMS, FTIK)

The statements above explain that even though the teachers do not specifically manage how students should relate to one another, they still encourage them to share their insights and knowledge. From the online observation, the teachers frequently ask the students to discuss and collaborate, especially in completing in-group assignments. Discussion and collaboration are believed to be able to facilitate active engagement in interpreting and creating

meaning when students are interacting with one another (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). However, both the discussions and collaborations are primarily accommodated in a simple way, i.e. when responding to assignments. The teachers understand that virtual learning has significantly changed the way students interact with one another in the learning process (He, 2007).

In addition, when it comes to activities that might help people learn about other cultures, the goal is to allow communications that expose both human similarities and cultural differences. This kind of communication is usual since every single one of us is a cultural being. Given a problematic situation where communication frequently relies on textual communication via online forums (Milheim & Fraenza, 2014), the following statements show whether inviting students to purposeful communication is necessary.

“To be honest, asking students to actively communicate through Google Meet is not an easy job. However, I always try to get them to actively communicate and share their opinions. Usually, I apply the reward and punishment model, although so far I have never given punishment. The rewards I give are often in the form of points or grades.” (II, FASYA)

“To encourage students to communicate with each other, I usually ask questions about certain topics and request them to comment on each other. I also provide a stimulus in the form of points (grades). Sometimes, I also take a personal approach.” (EMS, FTIK)

The statements above illustrate that, according to the teachers, inviting students to communicate in their capacity as intercultural beings is necessary. Nevertheless, this task is never easy. The teachers usually use reward and punishment strategies; those who participate in the classroom would be given some points. The participation can be in the form of asking questions, sharing additional pieces of information, giving feedback or general comments, etc. This classroom experience is seen as practical to provide open space for interpretation and meaning-making of knowledge (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Encouraging students to link what is new with what is already known

In certain cultures of learning, instead of being analytical, interpretive, or evaluative, writing refers to writing answers, replicating the teacher's notes, or repeating information obtained from other sources. Such a practice can discourage students to be an intercultural learner. In this case, intercultural perspective can also be seen in encouraging students to link what is new with what is already known. The teachers specifically propose critical engagement with the act of writing as follows:

“... I ask students to apply critical thinking and analysis when writing, so that they don't just duplicate writing. I asked them to read scientific papers first so that they (papers) could be used as material for writing. But I admit

the results of their work (writings) are not too critical. This is also the part that I need to evaluate.” (II, FASYA)

“I encourage students to write whatever they want to write, without worrying that the content of their writing is not in accordance with the culture or traditions prevailing in society. I free them to put their thoughts in writing.” (EMS, FTIK)

The statements above show that, in English writing activities, the teacher (male) asks students to first read relevant articles as a preparation for writing. This method enables them to interact with the writers' various thoughts and still think critically. In addition, the teacher (female) also allows students to write according to their interests without fearing that the contents of their writings are against the traditions of the community. In general, this act of writing can express the students' starting position and, later, connect them to new thoughts (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Likewise, for some students, reading is about receiving the meanings that the writer has established. That is, reading is a neutral act, a process of obtaining information from a text written by a certain author. This reading practice is analytical, interpretive, or evaluative. The portrait whether the teachers encourage students to connect to critical dialogue with the writer's viewpoint is described as follows:

“I ask students to comment on certain articles or passages. Then, I asked them to give alternative views apart from the author's view” (II, FASYA).

“I invite them to apply critical thinking and critical reading. I remind them to understand the author's background, so that they can understand his/her point of view. However, my suggestion is often not fulfilled by students in the general EFL class. This suggestion is effective usually in Critical Reading classes for students of the English Education Department.” (EMS, FTIK)

As in writing, in reading activities the teachers also ask students to think critically. In this sense, when the teachers ask students to read a certain article, they also ask them to examine the author's background and give an opinion of the author's thoughts. This way, the students will be able to connect beyond their own cultural perspectives and understand meaning across linguistic and cultural divides (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). The author's thoughts help students define their own position and come up with new thoughts in responding to issues being discussed.

Interactive act in negotiating meaning across many perspectives

In certain cultures, a teacher is a knowledgeable source of information. He or she is also someone who has a recognized role in the community and has continuous impact through moral and intellectual advice as an adult. The ethical concerns in the class are

usually connected to questioning and debating with and in front of the teacher. For students with such cultural backgrounds, learning is a crucial cultural-social act; it is not only a means of enhancing the knowledge or getting certifications. Intercultural perspective can be seen in interactive act in negotiating meaning across many perspectives. Questioning and arguing in the class is seen as follows:

“One day there was a student who disagreed with the material in class. According to him, what he learned on campus was different from what he had learned in high school. Then we share our opinion. For me, this kind of difference of opinion is acceptable. Possibly, this is due to different prior knowledge. I don't mind at all, as long as the students have no special intention to bring down their teacher. Knowledge is broad, and I shouldn't limit knowledge to just what I've learned and believed in...” (II, FASYA)

“Once again, I believe that teachers are guides and facilitators for students, while students are subjects in the learning process. However, in the online learning process, as it is today, the role of the teacher as a guide is a bit neglected, or not so visible. Teachers are less flexible in giving examples to students on how to convey good arguments. As a result, ethics and politeness issues sometimes arise in classroom interactions. I understand the consequences of this distance learning, and, in general, no problem.” (EMS, FTIK)

The statements above indicate that, according to teachers, the source of information is not limited to teachers only; the

teachers provide space for students to take a role in the meaning-making process. For the teachers, knowledge is broad and should not be limited only based on what they learn and believe alone. Through questioning and debating, the students' contextualized interactional system and other such systems that they encounter have a reciprocal connection, linguistically and culturally. In such a language experience, the students are always in dialogue with various forms of communication (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). However, the researcher's observation finds out that the exchange of information has not taken place optimally during virtual learning due to Covid-19.

Further, critical interaction for learning is sometimes tied to cultural beliefs of confronting people and, hence, a bad practice. The teachers' thoughts on critical participation by the students are described as follows:

“I am very happy when there are students who are critical during the discussion. I appreciate. I have never had a problem with students who have different opinions about the material I teach. I support this (practice) because it can provide additional information for other students. I also ask students independently to dig up more information related to the material I teach. The more references the better...”
(II, FASYA)

“Just as I said above, that equality of rights, openness, and freedom are values that must be lived in universities. As a teacher, I certainly want students to be able to actively participate in learning, such as asking questions and arguing.

I just want them to understand and apply the material well.”
(EMS, FTIK)

The statements above tell that the teachers appreciate students who have different opinions on the topic or material being taught. They support this practice because it can provide additional information for other students. The teachers do not mind if they should argue with students. They assume that critical engagement in the form of debate and dispute is considered useful and vital since it may enrich pedagogic circumstances, i.e. the process of knowledge creation. Critical engagement to negotiate meaning across many perspectives is a good thing to do.

Making students mindful of how they perceive and learn

How students perceive and learn about the language (known as reflection) is an important aspect of intercultural learning. In intercultural learning, reflection is often an affective and a cognitive activity. Reflection is affective in the sense that any interaction with a variety of people has the potential for emotional influence, which the students must examine and interpret. It is cognitive when it refers to studying the expectations and attitudes that students take to the process of communication and that they discover in other people's communication (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Both activities should be a matter of routine practice.

“To monitor student learning activities, I usually ask them to rewrite what they have learned during this semester in the form of a journal (portfolio). This activity becomes a kind of final project. However, in the midst of this pandemic atmosphere, I rarely ask them to present the journal.” (II, FASYA)

“I frequently ask them to summarize the material they have just learned. The summary was then delivered orally and virtually in front of students. Sometimes I also ask some questions about the material to ensure their understanding of what has been written or summarized.” (EMS, FTIK)

The statements above imply that reflections concerning intercultural learning in general EFL class have not been well accommodated. The researcher's observation reveals that reflective activity in the said class is carried out only to monitor students' understanding of what has been learnt in the class. In fact, the teachers also admit that, due to limited time in virtual learning, rarely do they ask students to present what has been studied in the class. Nonetheless, strategies to make students aware of how they perceive and learn are accommodated by in-group discussions explained before. Such a discussion allows students to interact with multicultural others with the potential for emotional effects that need to be understood and responded to by the students.

Commitment to valuing within and across languages and cultures

Intercultural perspective can also be seen in commitment to valuing within and across languages and cultures. Such a commitment can be manifested in the continued growth of intercultural sensitivity by always attempting to better understand oneself and others (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). This intercultural sensitivity usually exists in circumstances that promote open learning space for all and respect people in diversity. In practice, intercultural fluency would be discouraged in circumstances that potentially generate cultural and pedagogic distance between students and teachers. The open learning space for intercultural sensitivity is described as follow:

“First, I motivate them to dare to speak (in Google Meet) or write comments (in WhatsApp groups). I respond to their comments one by one. I give equal opportunities to all students, without discrimination. I really appreciate and give points for those who want to share their views on something. Usually like that...”(II, FASYA)

“Actually, an open learning space is something that is normal in universities. It does not need to be specially created. What we need to work on is how we don't create a 'discriminating learning space' in the classroom. Well, I try to give equal attention to all students during learning. I show learning resources that can be accessed by all students so that it is easier for them to get the information.” (EMS, FTIK)

The statements above inform that the teachers, first of all, provide equal opportunities to all students, without discrimination. They ensure that learning resources and teaching materials are accessible to all students. After that, as previously explained, the teachers allow students to express their opinion and get involved in the perspective exchange (e.g. fellow students and author). They invite students to recognize, discuss and negotiate the values contained in other cultures, such as through watching short films.

However, this intercultural commitment necessitates a constructive response to experiences with people from many cultures. It is an active attitude to be in diversity rather than a passive approach to difference. Diversity is understood as a reality in which one lives and acts, not an external world (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2010). Commitment to valuing within and across languages and cultures requires students' continuous efforts to interpret their environment to understand themselves and others.

Below is what the teachers say about such commitment:

“I see that students are quite good at appreciating the differences and uniqueness of others during this virtual learning, both in terms of culture and language. However, I assume that they have grown up in a pluralistic society (before joining my class). They learn from the environment in which they live.” (II, FASYA)

“I think they can accept differences, as long as these differences do not have a significant impact on themselves, such as saying or doing something that contains elements of SARA. In general, they are quite curious to know the

difference. Students have no problem with diverse cultural backgrounds.” (EMS, FTIK)

The statements above confirm that, in general, the teachers consider that the students are quite good at appreciating the differences and uniqueness of others during virtual learning due to Covid-19. The environment, in which the students live, has prepared them to recognize, value, and live in differences.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

The current study aimed to investigate what the teachers think about interculturality in general EFL learning and how they accommodate intercultural perspectives during virtual learning. This study has shown that (1), according to the teachers, interculturality in EFL learning is not only unavoidable but also indispensable. There, the students engage with one another to exchange information, link ideas, and make sense of meanings. The learning suggests an ‘equal’ position between teachers and students in terms of authority of knowledge and vocal participation. This study has also shown that (2) the teachers have accommodated intercultural perspectives in general EFL learning through many ways. Here, the teachers create opportunities through which students relate to each other; the teachers encourage students to link what is new with what is already known; the teachers initiate interactive acts in negotiating meaning across many perspectives;

the teachers make students aware of how they perceive and learn; and the teacher promotes intercultural sensitivity, or commitment to valuing within and across languages and cultures. In interculturality-based EFL learning, the boundaries between self and other are investigated, problematized, and rewritten.

In general, the core principles of intercultural perspective have been visible in general EFL class even though they do not take place optimally during virtual learning due to Covid-19. The overall findings of the study imply the vital role of teachers in helping students recognize, appreciate, and respond to cultural variety during the virtual learning process. In this sense, learning cannot be adequately described as transferring new information from the teacher to the students because they do not enter the learning process as if they are vacuums. The students bring their past knowledge and experiences to their learning environment. Intercultural perspectives in this EFL learning also imply languages and cultures as venues of interactive participation in the act of meaning-making. Such perspectives entail the student's transformative involvement in the learning process. However, the generalizability of those findings is subject to certain limitations as future studies on the similar issue should involve more English teachers and more observations in order to provide a better understanding of this matter.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researcher would like to thank the LITAPDIMAS KEMENAG 2021 Program for the research funding. Thanks are also expressed to the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments that make this research paper better.

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