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METHODOLOGICAL JOURNAL**<http://mentaljournal-jspu.uz/index.php/mesmj/index>**ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN
TOURISM EDUCATION: PERSPECTIVES OF UZBEK UNIVERSITY STUDENTS
ON INDONESIA*****Feruza Komiljanovna Kurbanova****Doctor of philosophy on pedagogical sciences, acting associate professor**International Innovation University*k.feruza22051987@gmail.com*Tashkent, Uzbekistan****Ahmad Bukhori Muslim****PhD, Professor of Educational Linguistics at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia**Bandung, Indonesia***ABOUT ARTICLE**

Key words: intercultural communication, English language learning, tourism education, Uzbekistan, Indonesia, cross-cultural awareness.

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Abstract: This study investigates how English language learning shapes the intercultural communication competence of undergraduate students enrolled in English and Tourism programs at Chirchik State Pedagogical University in Uzbekistan. Drawing on semi-structured interview data collected from twenty participants, the research explores students' attitudes towards foreign cultures – with a particular focus on Indonesia their skills in cross-cultural discovery and interpretation and their awareness of cultural stereotypes. Qualitative thematic analysis reveals that English functions as a primary gateway through which students access cultural information, form international friendships by social media and develop a willingness to challenge cultural biases. Participants demonstrate a general openness towards Indonesian culture, noting shared Islamic values and an appreciation for cultural diversity, while acknowledging

significant gaps in vocabulary, cultural knowledge and direct interaction with Indonesians. The findings point to the need for curricula that integrate authentic intercultural materials, role-play simulations and exchange programs. The article concludes with practical recommendations for enhancing intercultural communication instruction within Uzbek higher education and argues that strengthening the Uzbekistan – Indonesia bilateral relationships in education and tourism could benefit both nations.

Introduction. The rapid expansion of global tourism has transformed the ability to communicate across cultural boundaries from a desirable skill into professional necessity. For students pursuing careers in tourism and hospitality, the capacity to interact effectively with visitors from diverse cultural backgrounds is as important as mastering technical knowledge of destinations or services. English, as the primary lingua franca of international tourism, occupies a central position in this process: it not only enables transactional exchanges but also mediates deeper cross-cultural understanding.

Uzbekistan, with its rich Silk Road heritage and rapidly growing tourism sector, is increasingly directing policy attention and investment towards language education and international cooperation. Within this context, the relationship between English proficiency and intercultural competence deserves rigorous academic scrutiny. Indonesia, a Muslim-majority nation in Southeast Asia with a vibrant tourism industry and a growing student exchange presence, represents a culturally meaningful reference point for Uzbek learners – one that is geographically and religiously proximate yet insufficiently explored in existing scholarship.

This article examines how twenty students of English and Tourism at Chirchik State Pedagogical University perceive and experience the relationship between their English language learning and their intercultural awareness, with Indonesia as a focal culture. It addresses three overarching questions:

1. In what ways does English language learning foster curiosity and openness towards other cultures?
2. What challenges do Uzbek students encounter when engaging in intercultural communication?

3. What educational interventions might more effectively prepare students for intercultural encounters in tourism contexts?

Literature review. Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been theorized extensively since Byram's (1997) foundational model, which identifies five interrelated components: knowledge, skills of discovery and interaction, skills of interpreting and relating, attitudes and critical cultural awareness. Byram's framework remains influential in foreign language education because it moves beyond linguistic proficiency to encompass the attitudes and behaviors required for genuine cross-cultural exchange. Deardorff (2006) similarly argues that ICC involves not only knowledge and skills but also internal attribute such as respect, openness and curiosity – qualities that must be intentionally cultivated in educational settings.

The role of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in enabling intercultural communication has received growing scholarly attention. Jenkins (2007) and Seidhofer (2011) argues that ELF interactions are inherently intercultural, requiring speakers to negotiate meaning across different linguistic and cultural systems. For non-native speakers in particular, English functions as a “neutral” medium through which cultural norms if not taught with sufficient critical awareness.

In the domain of tourism education, researchers such as Reisinger and Turner (2003) have highlighted the pivotal role of cultural awareness in shaping tourist satisfaction and service quality. Tourism professionals who lack intercultural sensitivity are more likely to generate misunderstandings or inadvertently cause offence. Accordingly, scholars have called for the integration of intercultural education into tourism curricula, arguing that language instruction alone is insufficient (Richards, 2011).

Research in the Central Asian context remains comparatively limited. Studies on English language education in Uzbekistan have predominantly focused on structural reforms and policy dimensions (Hasanova, Shadieva, 2008), with scant attention devoted to how learners perceive the cultural dimensions of language learning. The present study seeks to contribute to this gap by situating Uzbek students' experiences within established ICC frameworks and generating empirical evidence to inform curriculum design.

Methodology. This study adopts a qualitative research design, consistent with the interpretivist paradigm. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty undergraduate students at Chirchik State Pedagogical University, enrolled in either the English Philology or Tourism Management groups. The samples comprised students from various year

groups, ensuring a range of experience levels. English learning histories ranged from two to ten years, reflecting considerable diversity in linguistic exposure.

Interview questions were structured around Byram's (1997) ICC model and covered five thematic areas:

- a) Demographic background and prior knowledge of Indonesia;
- b) Attitudes towards cultural curiosity and openness;
- c) Skills of cultural discovery and interaction;
- d) Skills of interpreting and relating Uzbek culture to others and
- e) Critical cultural awareness, including perceptions of cultural stereotypes.

Interviews were conducted in English and audio-recorded with participants' consent. Verbatim transcriptions were subsequently subjected to thematic analysis following the six-phase procedure: familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, review, definition and reporting.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout: participation was voluntary and anonymous. Pseudonyms and group codes were used in reporting. The data yield rich insights into the experiences of Uzbek learners navigating the intersection of language learning and intercultural competence.

Results and discussion. English as a gateway to Cultural Curiosity

A dominant theme across the interviews was the perception of English as an enabling tool for cultural exploration. Nearly all participants reported that their engagement with the English language had heightened their curiosity about foreign cultures, including Indonesia. One Tourism student articulated this sense of expanded horizons by stating that learning English "started to open the world" for her, while an English Philology student described the experience as "like opening a window to the world", noting that most documentaries and articles about Indonesia were accessible only through English. These metaphors suggest that English is experienced not merely as a communicative code but as a key that unlocks informational and cultural access.

Social media and digital platforms emerged as the primary channels through which this curiosity was expressed and sustained. Participants mention using YouTube travel vlogs, Instagram accounts, podcasts and language exchange applications such as Speakpal to access cultural content in English. Several students had formed online connections with Indonesians through these platforms, discussing topics ranging from education and cuisine to daily lifestyle. This finding corroborates Thorne's (2003) concept of "cultural artefacts" embedded in digital

communication tools and aligns with broader research demonstrating that informal digital engagement can significantly augment formal classroom instruction in developing intercultural awareness.

Knowledge of Indonesia and Cross-Cultural Perceptions

Participants' knowledge of Indonesia varied considerably, but a number of consistent patterns emerged. The most widely recognized aspects were Indonesia's island geography, its Muslim-majority population and the international fame of Bali as a tourist destination. Several students spontaneously identified Borobudur and Prambana as historically significant sites, while a smaller number demonstrated awareness of Indonesian cultural practices such as Wayang shadow puppetry or traditional music forms like gamelan. This superficial but generally positive image of Indonesia reflects what Bennett (1993) describes as the "ethnorelative" beginning – an awareness of cultural difference that has not yet been deepened through substantive engagement.

Notably, shared Islamic faith was frequently cited as a basis for perceived cultural similarity between Uzbekistan and Indonesia. Participants expressed the view that common religious values – such as hospitality, respect for elders and communal food-sharing practices – created a natural affinity between the two peoples. One student observed that Indonesians "don't wear shoes inside the house" and "respect each other," practices that she considered analogous to Uzbek customs. While this sense of affinity is culturally productive, it also risks eliding the substantial differences that exist between the two societies in terms of history, governance arts and social organization.

Communication Challenges and Skill Gaps

Despite the positive attitudes expressed, participants identified a range of practical difficulties in intercultural communication. Vocabulary limitation was the frequently cited challenge: students reported being unable to translate culture-specific Uzbek concepts into English. Terms such as gap (a neighbourhood gathering), hashar (communal voluntary work), or mahalla (a traditional community unit) lack direct English equivalents, requiring students to resort to paraphrase or contextual explanation. This phenomenon reflects what Kramsch (1993) terms "third place" negotiation, in which speakers must construct shared meaning that belongs fully to neither their source nor target culture.

Pronunciation and accent recognition also presented difficulties. Participants who had interacted with tourists from Korea, Japan or non-English-speaking European countries noted that non-standard English accents were frequently difficult to comprehend. Several students

also acknowledged a lack of confidence or self-esteem as barriers to initiating intercultural exchanges. One Tourism student described imagining foreign interlocutors as native English speakers, which generated anxiety about making grammatical errors. This aligns with Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, suggesting that emotional barriers can impede even linguistically proficient learners from engaging in spontaneous cross-cultural communication.

Direct experience with Indonesian interlocutors was notably limited. The majority of participants reported no face-to-face or sustained online interaction with Indonesians and those who had engaged online typically described brief exchanges about education, daily life or food rather than substantive cultural dialogue. This gap in direct intercultural contact represents a significant barrier to developing the deeper cultural understandings that Byram's ICC model requires.

Stereotypes and Critical Cultural Awareness

Participants' engagement with cultural stereotypes about Indonesia was uneven. The most prevalent stereotype identified was the reductive equation of Indonesia with Bali and beach tourism – a view that several students themselves recognized as oversimplifies. One student noted that “some people think Indonesia is only about Bali and beaches, but in reality it has hundreds of ethnic groups and traditions.” Others mentioned the misconception that all Indonesians are Hindu, when in fact the majority are Muslim. The capacity to recognize and critically interrogate such stereotypes is a core dimension of Byram's (1997) critical cultural awareness and its emergence in student responses suggests that English language instruction had, in some instances, promoted genuine critical reflection.

Several participants also reflected on how learning about other cultures through English had transformed their own stereotypical thinking. One student described her evolution from a person who “only knew what she/he heard about a country” to someone who now searches for evidence before accepting stereotypes. This metacognitive shift is significant: it represents not merely the acquisition of cultural facts of transformation that ICC education aims to foster.

Implications for Curriculum Design

Participants offered a range of pedagogical suggestions that converge with established best practices in ICC education. Most prominently, students called for more speaking practice and real-life communication simulations, including role-play scenarios involving tourists and cultural explanations. Several students emphasized the value of authentic materials – documentary films, travel blogs and intercultural case studies – as supplements to grammar-

focused instruction. The recommendation to invite foreign educators or visiting speakers to university campuses was raised by multiple participants as a means of providing authentic intercultural exposure within an institutional setting.

There was also widespread endorsement of student exchange programs, particularly with Indonesian universities. Given that several institutions in Uzbekistan have existing cooperative agreements with Indonesian counterparts, this represents a practically achievable mechanism for expanding direct intercultural contact. One student noted that such exchanges would allow participants to “broaden their horizon” and develop more nuanced understandings of both their host and home cultures.

Conclusion. This study has examined how English language learning shapes the intercultural communication competence of Tourism and English students in Uzbekistan, with a particular focus on attitudes towards and knowledge of Indonesia. The findings reveal that English functions as a transformative gateway to cultural curiosity, enabling students to access information, form international connections and critically reflect on cultural stereotypes. At the same time, significant challenges remain: vocabulary gaps, limited direct interaction with Indonesians and affective barriers to spontaneous cross-cultural communication all constrain the depth of intercultural engagement that students can currently achieve.

On the basis of these findings, several recommendations are advanced for educators and curriculum designers in Uzbek higher education. First, English language instruction in Tourism programs should be reoriented from grammar-centered to communication-centered approaches, incorporating authentic materials, intercultural simulations and exposure to diverse English accents. Second, culture-specific vocabulary instruction should be embedded in language courses, equipping students with the linguistic resources to explain Uzbek cultural concepts to foreign interlocutors. Third, institutional partnerships with Indonesian universities should be expanded, leveraging existing cooperative frameworks to create meaningful student exchange opportunities. Fourth, digital literacy instruction should be integrated into language courses, guiding students to use social media and online platforms not merely for entertainment but as structured tools for intercultural learning.

More broadly, this study argues that the development of Uzbekistan-Indonesia bilateral relations in education and tourism is both timely and mutually beneficial. The shared Islamic heritage, comparable approaches to hospitality and complementary tourism profiles of the two countries provide a natural foundation for deeper cooperation. By investing in the intercultural competence of the next generation of tourism professionals, Uzbekistan can enhance not only

the quality of its tourism services but also its standing in an increasingly interconnected global community.

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