

Intercultural Sensitivity and Cognitive Flexibility among Indonesian University Students

Research Overview

This study examines the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and cognitive flexibility among Indonesian university students. Based on survey data from 265 participants, the study investigates whether students who report higher intercultural sensitivity also report higher cognitive flexibility after controlling for gender, age, and academic major.

Purpose of Study

As higher education is increasingly shaped by cultural diversity, global communication, and cross-cultural collaboration, students need not only knowledge of cultural differences but also the capacity to think flexibly in unfamiliar or complex situations. This highlights the importance of examining intercultural sensitivity and cognitive flexibility together.

Intercultural sensitivity refers to individuals' affective orientation toward cultural differences, including their willingness to understand, respect, and engage with people from different cultural backgrounds. Cognitive flexibility refers to the ability to shift perspectives, generate alternative interpretations, and adapt one's thinking when facing changing or challenging situations. Although these two constructs have often been discussed separately, they may be closely related in multicultural educational contexts. Students who are more open to cultural differences may be more likely to consider multiple viewpoints, tolerate ambiguity, and adapt their thinking across social and learning situations. Conversely, students with greater cognitive flexibility may be better prepared to engage with culturally

diverse perspectives. However, empirical research on this association remains limited, particularly in Southeast Asian higher education contexts.

Therefore, this study explores the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and cognitive flexibility among university students in Indonesia, a culturally diverse society where intercultural understanding is highly relevant to educational practice. It asks: To what extent does intercultural sensitivity predict cognitive flexibility after controlling for demographic characteristics?

Research Methods

This study used a quantitative survey design. Participants were 265 undergraduate students from the Faculty of Cultural Studies, Universitas Brawijaya, Indonesia, majoring in Chinese Literature (n = 46), English Literature (n = 81), French Literature (n = 45), Indonesian Language and Literature (n = 52), and Japanese Literature (n = 41). Most participants were female (n = 199), followed by male (n = 62) and other gender identities (n = 4). Participants were mainly aged 19 to 21.

Cognitive flexibility was measured using the 20-item Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010; $\alpha = .85$), which focuses on generating alternatives, considering multiple perspectives, and perceiving control when adapting to difficult situations. Intercultural sensitivity was measured using the 24-item Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (Chen & Starosta, 2000; $\alpha = .88$), which captures affective responses to intercultural communication, including interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, and openness toward culturally different others.

Data were analyzed using hierarchical regression. Gender, age, and academic major were first entered as control variables; intercultural sensitivity was then added as the main predictor of cognitive flexibility. This approach examined whether intercultural sensitivity explained additional variance beyond demographic characteristics.

Results and Discussion

The control-variable model, including gender, age, and academic major, did not significantly predict cognitive flexibility, $F(13, 251) = 1.13, p = .331$, adjusted $R^2 = .007$. None of the demographic variables showed a significant individual association with cognitive flexibility, suggesting that students' cognitive flexibility did not differ substantially by gender, age, or major.

After intercultural sensitivity was added, the full model became statistically significant, $F(14, 250) = 10.53, p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .336$. Intercultural sensitivity was a significant positive predictor of cognitive flexibility, $\beta = 0.576, SE = 0.051, t = 11.20, p < .001$. It also significantly improved model fit, $\Delta F(1, 250) = 125.44, p < .001$. Overall, the full model explained 37.1% of the variance in cognitive flexibility.

These findings indicate that students with higher intercultural sensitivity tended to report higher cognitive flexibility, even after accounting for demographic differences. The result suggests that intercultural sensitivity is not only an affective orientation toward cultural difference but is also linked to broader cognitive capacities, such as perspective-shifting, adaptive thinking, and considering multiple alternatives.

This study contributes to discussions on intercultural learning by highlighting the connection between affective intercultural orientation and cognitive adaptability. For educators, the findings suggest that learning activities promoting intercultural engagement may also support flexible thinking. Rather than treating intercultural competence and cognitive development as separate goals, higher education institutions may benefit from learning environments that encourage students to encounter diverse perspectives, reflect on cultural assumptions, and practice adaptive thinking.

The study is exploratory and based on cross-sectional self-report data; therefore, causal claims cannot be made. Future research could examine the reciprocal relationship between intercultural sensitivity and cognitive flexibility using longitudinal, mixed-methods, or performance-based designs. Further studies may also investigate how these capacities relate to creative thinking, collaborative problem-solving, and participation in multicultural learning environments.

Keywords

Intercultural sensitivity; cognitive flexibility; higher education; Indonesian university students; intercultural learning

References

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