




The Role of Language Learning Strategies in Developing Intercultural Communication Skills: A Qualitative Case Study of EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

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The interconnected world of the 21st century has shifted the goal of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education from mere linguistic competence to the holistic development of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC). This study investigates the crucial role of Language Learning Strategies (LLS) employed by EFL students in facilitating the acquisition and deployment of ICC. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research explores the lived experiences of five purposively selected EFL university students in Indonesia, focusing on their strategic actions when engaging in cross-cultural interactions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and non-participant observation of simulated intercultural tasks. The findings reveal that social/affective LLS (e.g., seeking out native speakers, showing empathy) and specific metacognitive LLS (e.g., directed attention to cultural norms, self-monitoring for cultural appropriateness) are the most instrumental in developing ICC's key components: Attitudes (openness and curiosity), Knowledge (understanding cultural values), and Skills (interpreting and relating). The study concludes that explicit instruction in LLS, particularly those encouraging social and reflective engagement, is vital for transforming EFL learners into intercultural competent global citizens. This work provides pedagogical implications for EFL educators to integrate LLS training within a culturally-rich curriculum.

Keywords: Language Learning Strategies (LLS), Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), Qualitative Case Study, Intercultural Awareness, Social Strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid pace of globalization has made intercultural interaction an everyday reality, transforming English from a foreign language (EFL) into a lingua franca for global communication (English as an International Language/EIL). In this context, proficiency in English demands more than just grammatical and lexical accuracy; it necessitates the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across diverse cultural boundaries. This shift has led to the emergence of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) as an essential, non-negotiable skill for EFL learners. ICC, as conceptualized by scholars like Byram (1997), involves a complex interplay of attitudes, knowledge, and skills required to engage with people of other cultures. Without this competence, learners are highly susceptible to cultural misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and communication breakdown, even with strong

linguistic skills. Therefore, the goal of modern EFL education is to cultivate not just communicators, but also intercultural mediators who can understand, respect, and mediate cultural differences.

Language Learning Strategies (LLS) are the specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that learners use to make their learning more effective, efficient, self-directed, and enjoyable (Oxford, 1990). These strategies are broadly categorized into six groups: Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective, and Social. While LLS are primarily studied for their link to linguistic proficiency, their potential role in developing the socio-cultural and affective dimensions of ICC remains a critical area for exploration.

The theoretical link between LLS and ICC is profound. Many LLS, particularly the social and affective strategies, involve direct interaction and emotional management, which are central to intercultural encounters. For example, a Social Strategy like 'asking questions to native speakers' directly facilitates the acquisition of cultural Knowledge and the development of Skills in interpreting new contexts. Similarly, an Affective Strategy like 'lowering anxiety' or 'encouraging oneself' can foster the Attitude of openness required for engaging with a foreign culture.

Despite the recognized importance of integrating culture into language teaching, empirical research specifically detailing *how* LLS function as a mechanism for ICC development, particularly within a homogenous EFL context like Indonesia, is still limited. Much of the existing literature either focuses on LLS for linguistic skills (speaking, writing) or discusses the necessity of intercultural instruction without focusing on the learner's autonomous strategies.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a Qualitative Case Study approach. A case study is an intensive, in-depth investigation of a specific contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2014). This design is highly suitable for exploring the complex, subjective, and context-dependent process of LLS use and ICC development among a specific group of EFL learners. The qualitative nature allows for the rich description and thematic analysis of personal experiences, perceptions, and strategies.

Participants and Setting

The study participants were five (5) EFL students (conveniently labeled P1 to P5) enrolled in the English Literature program at a large public university in Central Java, Indonesia. They were selected using purposive sampling, based on their:

1. Intermediate to advanced English proficiency (to ensure communication ability does not overshadow the strategic focus).
2. Demonstrated willingness to engage in intercultural exchange activities provided by the university's international partnership programs (e.g., virtual exchange programs).

The setting is an Indonesian EFL university context, characterized by limited daily exposure to the target culture and a predominantly homogenous L1 environment, which heightens the importance of proactive LLS use.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were triangulated using three primary methods to ensure richness and trustworthiness:

1. **Semi-structured Interviews:** Each participant underwent two rounds of interviews (pre- and post-intercultural task). The questions focused on their experiences, the conscious steps they take when interacting with foreigners, and their reflection on cultural misunderstandings.
2. **Reflective Journals:** Participants were asked to maintain a weekly journal over a four-week period, documenting their intercultural interactions, their feelings (affective LLS), the strategies they employed to manage communication breakdowns, and their new cultural learning (metacognitive/cognitive LLS).
3. **Observation:** Non-participant observation was conducted during a mandatory Virtual Exchange activity where the students interacted with native-English-speaking peers from partner universities. The researcher recorded observable Social LLS (e.g., code-switching, appealing for help, use of non-linguistic means) and their behavioral responses to cultural cues.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved:

1. **Familiarization:** Transcribing interviews and thoroughly reading journals and observation notes.
2. **Generating Initial Codes:** Labeling significant features of the data relevant to LLS (e.g., "P1 asked for clarification," "P3 avoided political topics") and ICC development (e.g., "realized their own cultural bias," "learned a new etiquette rule").
3. **Searching for Themes:** Grouping the codes into broader themes concerning the *type of LLS* and its *impact on ICC components*. Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of LLS and Byram's (1997) components of ICC (Attitudes, Knowledge, Skills) served as the primary analytical framework.
4. **Reviewing and Defining Themes:** Refining the themes to ensure they were distinct and accurately reflected the data, leading to the final thematic map presented in the results.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data revealed a strong correlation between the conscious use of specific LLS and the development of ICC among the EFL students. The findings are structured according to the dominant LLS categories and their resulting impact on ICC components

The Prominence of Social and Affective Strategies

The most frequently and effectively used strategies in developing ICC were Social and Affective Strategies. These strategies directly facilitated authentic interaction and managed the emotional friction inherent in cross-cultural encounters.

Strategy Category	Specific LLS Used (Examples from Data)	Impact on ICC Component
Social	Asking the interlocutor for help or clarification	Skills (Interpreting) & Knowledge (Cultural Information)
Social	Seeking out opportunities to communicate with foreigners (conversation clubs, online platforms)	Attitudes (Openness, Curiosity) & Skills (Adapting communication)
Affective	Using deep breathing or self-talk to reduce anxiety	Attitudes (Willingness to engage)

Strategy Category	Specific LLS Used (Examples from Data)	Impact on ICC Component
Affective	Developing empathy and a willingness to suspend judgment	Attitudes (Respecting difference)

- **Social Strategy as a Gateway to Cultural Knowledge:** Participants consistently reported using Social Strategies to bridge gaps not in language, but in cultural understanding. For instance, P3 noted: *"When my conversation partner mentioned 'football' and I knew they meant 'soccer', I just asked, 'Is football the same as soccer where you live?' instead of assuming. They clarified, and I learned a small cultural difference in vocabulary on the spot"*. This conscious use of the LLS 'asking for clarification/appeal for help' directly led to the acquisition of a specific piece of cultural Knowledge and demonstrated the Skill of interpretation.
- **Affective Strategies Fostering ICC Attitudes:** The reflective journals highlighted the emotional challenge of cross-cultural communication. All participants noted initial feelings of anxiety or fear of causing offense. P1's journal entry stated: *"I felt anxious, but I told myself I must be open and remember that mistakes are part of learning. I focused on listening more and not judging their directness."* This shows the deployment of the Affective Strategy of self-encouragement and the development of the crucial ICC Attitude of openness and non-judgment.

Metacognitive Strategies and Cultural Awareness

Metacognitive Strategies, which involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's learning, were critical for promoting deeper Cultural Awareness. This category distinguished the more interculturally competent students.

- **Directed Attention for Cultural Cues:** Participants who reported actively using the Metacognitive Strategy of 'directed attention' (focusing specifically on non-verbal cues, tone of voice, and interaction patterns) showed a higher ability to interpret cultural context. P4, for example, detailed a process of comparing: *"I consciously watch how my international friends interact with their local friends compared to how they interact with me. When I see differences, I try to understand the 'why' this is how I learned about differences in body language and turn-taking in conversations."* This reflective practice directly leads to the ICC Skill of interpreting and relating different cultural practices.
- **Self-Monitoring and Self-Correction:** The Metacognitive Strategy of 'self-monitoring' was essential in preventing or resolving communication breakdowns. P2 described an incident where she inadvertently used a formal address with a young American peer: *"I used 'Sir' without thinking, and I saw his face. I immediately thought, 'Is this culturally appropriate for his age and our relationship?' I then quickly self-corrected and asked, 'Can I just call you by your first name?' This saved the conversation."* This conscious, real-time reflection demonstrates the acquisition of the ICC Skill of adapting behavior.

Cognitive and Compensation Strategies for Linguistic Barriers

While the focus was on cultural aspects, Cognitive and Compensation Strategies were still vital, primarily to maintain communication flow when linguistic barriers threatened to impede the cultural exchange. The use of Compensation Strategies like 'code-switching' or 'circumlocution' allowed the learners to keep the interaction going, thereby preserving the opportunity for cultural exchange. *"I used my native language words when I couldn't find the English equivalent for a complex cultural concept, and then explained it in simpler English. The goal was to keep the cultural point clear, even if the language wasn't perfect,"* said P5, illustrating a strategy that supports communicative effort.

DISCUSSION

The findings strongly support the notion that language and culture are inseparable, and that the learner's strategic agency is the mechanism that binds LLS to ICC development. The study affirms that ICC is not a passive knowledge set but an active, strategic process. The key contribution here is the empirical distinction between LLS used for purely linguistic fluency (e.g., repeating, memorizing) and those used for *intercultural fluidity* (e.g., asking for clarification on customs, self-monitoring for cultural appropriateness).

The dominance of Social and Affective LLS aligns with Byram's model, which places Attitudes (openness, curiosity) at the foundation of ICC. By actively using social strategies to engage and affective strategies to manage their emotions, the students demonstrated the necessary Attitude to become successful intercultural learners. Furthermore, the effective use of Metacognitive LLS highlights the importance of reflection and critical thinking—not just on the foreign culture, but on the learners' *own* cultural perspective as a reference point for understanding others. This critical component of LLS is essential for developing global competence.

The results emphasize that educators must move beyond simply providing cultural facts (Big-C Culture) and instead teach students *how to learn* culture (small-c culture) by explicitly integrating LLS training that focuses on observation, reflection, and proactive social engagement. Conversation clubs and virtual exchanges, as informal and authentic learning environments, proved to be ideal settings for the spontaneous activation and cultivation of these LLS.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study confirmed a vital link between the deliberate use of Language Learning Strategies (LLS) and the successful development of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) among EFL university students. The strategies were not simply tools for language acquisition but were actively employed by learners as instruments for cultural mediation. Specifically, Social Strategies served as the direct channel for experiential learning and acquiring cultural knowledge, while Affective and Metacognitive Strategies were indispensable for cultivating the foundational Attitudes (openness, non-judgment) and higher-order Skills (self-monitoring, interpretation) required for ICC.

The findings carry significant pedagogical implications for EFL education:

1. **Explicit LLS Training:** Educators should systematically integrate training on social, affective, and metacognitive LLS into the curriculum, not just as study habits, but as *intercultural skills*.
2. **Creation of Authentic Interaction Spaces:** Learning environments, such as conversation clubs, virtual exchanges, and task-based activities, that encourage authentic cross-cultural interaction are essential for students to practice and internalize these strategies.
3. **Focus on Reflection:** Activities that mandate self-reflection (e.g., reflective journals) should be used to help students critically compare their own cultural norms with others, enhancing their metacognitive awareness.

Limitations and Future Research: As a small-scale qualitative case study, the findings are not generalizable. Future research should employ mixed-methods designs with a larger sample size to quantify the relationship between LLS and ICC across different EFL contexts. Further studies could also explore the role of specific LLS in developing the distinct components of ICC (e.g., the relationship between memory strategies and the retention of cultural facts) and investigate the impact of teacher training on the effective implementation of a strategy-based, intercultural curriculum.

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