Exploring Intercultural Communicative Competence of EFL Higher Education Students: A Communal Perspective

Anugerah Febrian Syam
Email: anugerahfebrian@gmail.com
Universitas Muhammadiyah Bulukumba, Indonesia

Andi Nurhikmah
Corresponding Authors' Email: andyhykmah@gmail.com
Universitas Muhammadiyah Bulukumba, Indonesia

Sumrah AP
Email: 2015sumarah@gmail.com
Universitas Muhammadiyah Bulukumba, Indonesia

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore EFL higher education students' intercultural communicative competence in community interactions based on communal perspectives. The study will employ a qualitative approach using two types of interviews: individual (a face-to-face meeting with one community member) and small group (videoconferencing with two or three members as the representation of the student's community). Six-phase guide of thematic analysis was employed in this study. The study reveals that the message content and message relationship are displayed as important elements in community interaction. In practicing intercultural communicative competence in the community, EFL students portrayed open-mindedness, self-awareness, and nonverbal communication skills as the key characteristics of effective communication. Furthermore, the emergence of misunderstanding in community interaction is undeniably linked to speaker-related, interlocutor-related, and participant-related trigger. Therefore, EFL students addressed the use of language and the practice of tolerance to incorporate intercultural aspects in community interaction.

INTRODUCTION

Our world and communities are transforming as a result of ongoing international economic and political achievements, as well as revolutionary movements fueled by the birth of virtual societies. This is predicted to increase the number of individuals living and working in and across many cultures and societies, both physically and digitally (Mihelj, Leguina & Downey, 2019). Higher education institutions have also recognized that they must respond to this developing societal need by generating graduates who can serve as both global practitioners and contributors to society, as a result of the changing global environment.

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been identified as a trivial learning outcome in higher education, with two implications: the need to develop graduates capable of

dealing with social community complexities (Tsai et al., 2019), functioning in an intertwined global system, and addressing intercultural factions; and the need for HEI internationalization (Sá & Serpa, 2020), which has cultivated in prominence on a global scale.

Academic scholarship is increasingly requiring the formation of interculturally competent graduates (Litvinova, Andriutsa & Movchun, 2021). For EFL graduates to embrace and enhance their intercultural communicative competence in a globalized world community where English is utilized as a means of communication among varied individuals, cultures must be incorporated into English language instruction (McKay, 2018). However, in a variety of circumstances, EFL educators and students appear to neglect such a critical issue in their English language practice. Similarly, ICC is not given the attention it deserves in EFL higher education, especially when dealing with social contexts that may have a significant impact on intercultural experiences such as communities in Indonesia.

Byram describes intercultural communicative competence as the ability to negotiate each other's cultural identities or identities in a culturally varied setting (Porto & Byram, 2022). Intercultural sensitivity (affective process), intercultural awareness (cognitive process), and intercultural adroitness (behavioral process) are defined as verbal and nonverbal skills required to act effectively in intercultural interactions. According to the concept, effectiveness and appropriateness are two more characteristics that are widely related to communicative competence (Makhmudov, 2021).

In a systems-theory approach to investigating intercultural communicative competence, it is defined as a cognitive (sense-making), affective (including emotional and aesthetic tendencies, motivational and attitudinal predispositions), and operational/behavioral (flexible and resourceful) dimension (Landoll et al., 2019). Adaptability is at the heart of intercultural communicative competence and is defined as the individual's ability to suspend or modify some of the old cultural ways, learn and accommodate some of the new cultural ways, and creatively find ways to manage the dynamics of cultural difference/unfamiliarity, intergroup posture, and the stress that comes with it (Barili & Byram, 2021). The critical operating in all intercultural encounters are cultural difference/unfamiliarity, intergroup posture, and concomitant stress, and the nature of intercultural communicative competence should be viewed in this light.

The construction of the intercultural communicative competence model places a high value on language (linguistic competence), as well as identity and cultural knowledge. A comprehensive definition of international communicative competence, it is believed, should incorporate the social context and nonverbal components of communication (Fantini, 2018). The components of intercultural competence argue that the attitudes of an intercultural speaker are the foundation of intercultural competence. To be interculturally competent in a global context, it is necessary to be aware of the cultural perceptions and worldviews of the communal area. Diverse cultures have different perspectives on the physical environment and seek different techniques for managing and solving daily difficulties Dunne, 2018).

The attitudes of society toward their communal environment influence how they see and create their built community. Cultural communities build their built surroundings to reflect their worldviews of nature, which can be seen in how they design the landscape, lighting, and architecture of their homes. Aside from economic and political issues, cultural values and motivations play an important role in physical designs to satisfy specific demands. While others examine the terrain and other natural space challenges, Indonesian communities are often created to satisfy cultural values and ideas about family, privacy, gender roles, social interaction, and religious rituals (Vu, 2019). Cultural perceptions of communities, as well as interactions among individuals and organizations within those communities, influence intercultural communication in a variety of ways.

Martin, Budhrani & Wang (2019) propose six perceptual bases for investigating communities: (a) Formal versus informal: The formal and informal structures of establishments, locations, atmosphere, and power connections can encourage or decrease social interaction. (b) Warm versus cold: A warm setting stimulates engagement, such as warm greetings, smiles, the offer of a cup of tea, or a positive tone. A frigid environment discourages engagement, much as community seating arrangements are designed to encourage people to depart rather than linger. (c) Private versus public: A private community encourages more intimate conversation than a public community, which encourages impersonal conversation and public information; (d) Familiar versus unfamiliar: The level of familiarity can reduce or increase people's anxiety and discomfort; (e) Constraining versus free: We may feel powerless and anxious when we realize we have no control over the community, but we can feel psychologically comfortable when we discover we do have control over the community; and (f) Distant versus close: Physical, social, and psychological distance can increase or decrease conversation and interaction. All of the aforementioned communal variables have different degrees of influence on intercultural communication. Four distance zones are suited for various sorts of communication and interaction (Lassoued, Alhendawi & Bashitialshaaer, 2020): Personal distance (for interaction among good friends); Social distance (for impersonal transactions and engagement among acquaintances); and Public distance (for embracing, caressing, or whispering) (set around important public figures for public speaking).

To explore the role of EFL students' intercultural communicative competence in a social context, the possibility of misaligned perceptions between the roles of students' communities and ICC is becoming increasingly serious, particularly amid the Covid-19 pandemic. There has been much less research on the effects of the community on the intercultural communicative competence of EFL higher education students, whereas most studies of intercultural communicative competence have been conducted from academic perspectives with only a minor connection from communal perspectives. For example, Syam, Basri & Sahril (2020) explored how the lecturers perceive the intercultural communicative competence of EFL students in the university context; Nurhikmah, Syam & AP (2023) examined the connection between intercultural communicative competence and online language teaching; Syam, Nurhikmah, and AP (2021) investigated how the family perceives intercultural communicative competence of EFL students during learning from home protocol; and Syam, et al. (2023) researched intercultural learning supported by remote environment.

Considering the different contexts and practices, the previous studies did not fully represent the whole Indonesian social context since those studies focus on intercultural communicative competence among university and home contexts. Therefore, this present study explores the perspectives of intercultural communicative competence in a community context. Moreover, the question driving this study is "How are the EFL students' intercultural communicative competence viewed from interactions and intercultural experiences in their respected communities based on the communal perspectives?"

METHOD
Design and Materials

The study employed a qualitative approach with a semi-structured interview. This approach seems to be compatible with the main focus of the study which is to deem the communal perspectives on the English language learners who become part of their community members and their interrelationship to the realization of intercultural communicative competence in the community contexts. Two types of interviews were enrolled as materials for the study. The two types include individual/personal and small group interviews. The

individual or personal interview is applied in the form of a face-to-face meeting with a community member as the representation of the students' colleagues in their community. On the other hand, the small group interview is applied in the form of videoconferencing with two or three members as the representation of the students' community. These two types of interviews are specified into four general stages: (1) Introduction: the common exchange of names, education, work experiences, interests, small talks, and casual questions; (2) Broad questions and answers: the questions about community interests, goals, and the position in the community; (3) Topic-related question: the details on the interviewees' experiences on community interaction and how it fits in intercultural community competence including the topics of cultural elements that impact effective communication in the community, keys for effective intercultural communication in the community, misunderstanding in community, intercultural aspects in community, and how to prepare community members to communicate in intercultural contexts; and (4) Conclusion: the clarification of any questions which remains unclear and the summary of what has been stated.

Participants

Considering the access and timeline of the study, this involved four communities (two English and two non-English communities) where four EFL higher education students are involved. The details of the participants of the study can be seen in Table 1.
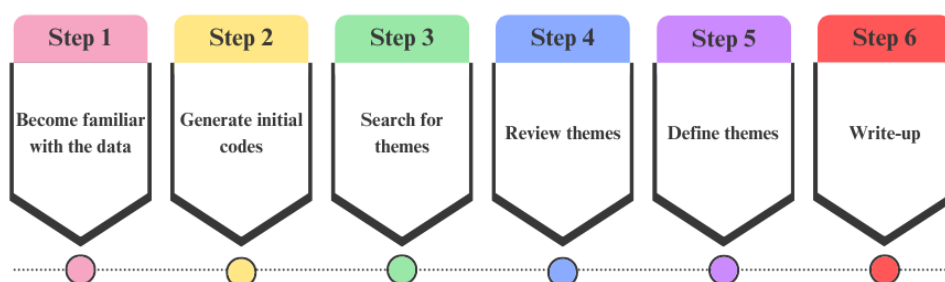
Table 1. The demography of students' communities

Community where the Students Involved	Students who Involve in the Community (pseudonym)	Length of Student Involvement in the Community	Students' Community Sector	Field of Students' Community
Community 1	Student 1	3 years	English	Debate and public speaking
Community 2	Student 2	2 years	Non-English	Religion
Community 3	Student 3	2 years	English	English literature
Community 4	Student 4	3 years	Non-English	Social and politic

Analysis of the Study

In this study, the data collection was analyzed thematically. A framework from Braun & Clarke (Byrne, 2021) was employed for conducting a thematic analysis that fits with the purpose of the study. (see Figure 1)

Figure 1. Six-phase guide of thematic analysis

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6
Become familiar with the data	Generate initial codes	Search for themes	Review themes	Define themes	Write-up

FINDINGS

The result indicates the viewpoints of students' mentors and colleagues on intercultural communicative competence in a community context. It focuses on the exploration of how community members perceive and feel when dealing with intercultural communicative competence. About the focus, here also carried out how the communal experience and illustrate competent in communication within their intercultural interactions in the community.

Elements that Carry Intercultural Communicative Competence in the Community

In looking at what elements influence intercultural communicative competence in the community, this study found that it is closely related to message content and message relationship. Message content is related to what message is being discussed, while message relationship is a term for how the message is delivered.

On the one hand, when dealing with the message content (what is said) that affects effective communication in the community, Community 1 and 4 expressed:

"The cultural element that brings impact to effective communication is language. Language is a tool of communication. It is used to express the ideas of language itself they learn from the community either verbally or non-verbally." (Community 1, 16/9/2022, 06:33)

"The thing is what's inside the language. Without a clear message, it is impossible to have mutual communication." (Community 4, 10/9/2022, 03:12)

One of the cultural elements that play an important role in communication and interaction in the community is the message content. This message content is related to what is said or sent that relates to the aspects that affect the effectiveness of communication in the community. The message content is crucial because it is the first step toward understanding what the sender is saying and providing an appropriate response. The content of the message is significant in the community because it shows the receiver the extent of one's comprehension of what is being said. The breadth of one's knowledge in the community is sometimes judged by the words chosen to convey in the conversation, the use of terms related to the topic being discussed, and how we adapt the content of the conversation to who is listening to it.

On the other hand, when dealing with message relationship (how it is said) that affects effective communication in the community, community members implied:

"The process of delivering messages among members in the community impact significantly to maintain the communal relationship." (Community 2, 10/9/2022, 04:50)

"The key point here is to portray the way you deliver your language. I mean language style. Some people perform soft-delivery language, while others use a high tone. Recognizing those types of styles as cultural elements will impact effective communication." (Community 3, 16/9/2022, 02:43)

Another element that has an impact on effective communication in the community is the message relationship (how it is said). In this element, the way we convey messages contributes to community interaction. As the sender formulates a message, her or his filters influence the content of the message and how it is delivered. When the sender conveys the message, it encounters the receiver's filters. The receiver's filters are made up of personality preferences and values, in addition to being shaped by all dimensions of cultural diversity. The filters also called noise, color, and shape how the sender constructs the message and how the receiver interprets the message. This noise influences the content and meaning of the message.

Characteristics that Reflect Intercultural Communicative Competence in the Community

Discussing the characteristics that reflect intercultural communicative competence in the community, this study finds that it is closely related to three things: open-mindedness, self-

awareness in communication, and appropriate non-verbal communication skills. Open-mindedness is having the ability to consider other viewpoints and try to show empathy for others, even if it is in a disagreement position. Self-awareness in communication is having a clear understanding of own personality, main thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Appropriate non-verbal communication skills are having a skill that contains open body language, a kind smile, a calm voice tone, and numerous other directive gestures.

On the first hand, when dealing with the characteristic that reflect intercultural communicative competence, Community 3 commented:

"Interact in the community depends on our daily practices. If a person likes to practice him/herself being closed-minded then surely it affects community interaction. Learn to live with different people with different cultural backgrounds. If you train yourself to be open-minded, to have multiple perspectives then it will finally affect your social life." (Community 3, 16/9/2022, 4:40)

One of the characteristics that influence effective intercultural communication in the community is open-mindedness. Open-mindedness is a mindset behavior that tends to consider various things or see various points of view before giving certainty or responding to something. In addition, people who have open-mindedness behave very sensitively and always show empathy for others even though they are not following their habits. Having an open-minded behavior is closely related to the broadness of thinking and a lot of experience, so people who have this kind of behavior often associate themselves with other people due to the sensitivity they get from that experience. Performing this aspect while interacting in the community will generate a relationship of belonging and create a respectful and helpful environment within the community.

On the second hand, Community 4 delivered different standing point when dealing with the characteristic of intercultural communicative competence.

"Pay attention to your communication topics. Be sure to discuss topics that are in line with the community. For example, we are in a community that is concerned about educational issues, which means that our focus is education. We discuss a lot about education and that makes communication more intense. So prepare ourselves to be contributed to the community by familiarizing ourselves with topics and issues regarding the movement of the community and in the end, it creates the term called harmony or community understanding I think." (Community 4, 10/9/2022, 05:20)

Another characteristic that influences effective communication in the community is self-awareness. This second characteristic has its significance where an understanding of oneself will determine the way we interact in the social environment, especially in the community. This will create functioning self-control to ensure that the communication that is established in the community can be controlled properly because this behavior ensures that we stay on track in interacting. In addition, having self-awareness in communication makes us free from excessive types of interactions and leaves ego attitudes in conversation, and can measure the character and communication behavior of people.

On the third hand, another different viewpoint concerning the characteristic of intercultural communicative competence following this below statement from Community 1.

"The aspect I think as the key to effective communication refers to our communicative behavior. Communication is not only about verbal delivery. It is undeniable that nonverbal communication is also important. It does not follow that if we can use a verbal instrument elegantly, we will be able to communicate effectively. But, the most influential aspect of communication in society is our unspoken words. Behave

appropriately or present a nonverbal instrument to effectively and indelibly impress members of the community." (Community 1, 16/9/2022, 08:12)

The last characteristic that can affect intercultural communicative competence in a community perceived by a community member is non-verbal communication. It is undoubtful that communication relates more to non-verbal presentation. It does not mean that using verbal instrument elegantly help shape effective communication. However, the most influential thing within communication in the community is the unspoken words. Behave appropriately or present non-verbal instruments accordingly to impress effectively and unforgettably among members of the community.

Triggers that Hinder Intercultural Communicative Competence in the Community

Discussing the factors that can hinder intercultural communicative competence in the community, three triggers tend to be perceived by the community members. These are categorized as speaker-related trigger, interlocutor-related trigger, and those related to the interaction between the participants.

First trigger that can cause misunderstanding between individuals in the community as Community 2 pointed out:

"The source of communication, when the message was received, we did not hear it directly from the first source but had gone through several processes. So the message was not fully conveyed." (Community 2, 10/9/2022, 06:36)

This community member emphasized that the trigger that causes misunderstanding in interaction in the community is because there is a problem with the source of communication. In this case, the communication source is called a speaker-related trigger.

Beside that factor, different point was stated by Community 3 when dealing the cause of misunderstanding between individuals in the community.

"The source of misunderstandings among individuals within the community is the lack of knowledge possessed by the members themselves. Due to the lack of knowledge, they find it difficult to interpret what they have listened to from others. As a consequence, they misunderstand and result in thinking badly of others." (Community 3, 16/9/2022, 6:10)

This next trigger that affects the interaction of individuals in the community and causes misunderstandings is due to the listener problem. This shows that the misunderstanding is also the responsibility of the listener or it is also called an interlocutor-related trigger.

Different from others, Community 1 and 4 perceived similar point when dealing with the trigger that can cause misunderstanding among individuals in the community.

"The lack of good communication in the community is sometimes due to a lack of mutual trust." (Community 1, 16/9/2022, 09:45)

"The lack of trust of each member and too strong cultural differences" (Community 4, 10/9/2022, 07:26)

Statements from these two community members show that the triggers that cause misunderstanding are not always related to speakers and interlocutors, but other factors related to participants' interactions which also play a significant role in communication within the community.

Flexibilities that Address Intercultural Communicative Competence in the Community

Discussing the flexibilities that can be addressed as an essential part of the community, two issues tend to be perceived by the community members. These issues are related to language usage and tolerance.

Considering one of the flexibilities which is addressed as an essential intercultural aspect in the community, Community 4 pointed out:

"The cultural aspect I usually address is language, especially polite expressions used in the community. Also, I address polite behavior. I do it very often when contacting members of the community." (Community 4, 10/9/2022, 10:17)

Community member argues that the cultural element he often associates with the community is the use of language. In this case, it is more focused on the use of a polite strategy in communicating between community members.

Different consideration was delivered by Community 1 regarding the flexibility which is addressed as an essential intercultural aspect in the community.

"I think it goes back to each of us how to behave open-minded and has tolerance. Respect cultural differences." (Community 1, 16/9/2022, 10:50)

This opinion as expressed by community member relates to tolerance as an important intercultural element in communicating with fellow members in the community. Being open-minded and respecting other cultures is the key to interacting in the community.

3.5 Roles that Foster Intercultural Communicative Competence in the Community

Scrutinizing the role of an individual's own culture that foster effective communication in the community, three issues tend to be perceived by the community members. These issues are related to the role of self-knowledge, the role of self-claim, and recognition.

In relation the role of an individual's own culture that impact effective communication in the community, Community 3 stated:

"Starting from ourselves by understanding the culture that exists in our community and recognizing things that will have an impact on our interactions in the community will create good competence between members in intercultural interaction within the community." (Community 3, 16/9/2022, 12:40)

The role of own culture in the community is reflected as an inherent identity of oneself. This role comprises the concept of 'Who am I?'. Self-knowledge represents the knowledge about the self, such as what one knows about the self.

Another concern stated by Community 4 when covering the role of an individual's own culture in the community that has a big impact to effective communication.

"Pay attention to how people will see us in the community, win their hearts, how we make a good impression on members in the community." (Community 4, 10/9/2022, 12:35)

The role of our own culture in the community is further identified as how other people view us. This role comprises the concept of 'who are they?'. Self-claim represents how the self is claimed in public.

Last concern came from the other two community members (Community 1 and 2) in relation to the role of an individual's own culture in the community as recognition.

"Seeing the extent to which the culture we carry has similarities and differences with the culture of the people in the community." (Community 1, 16/9/2022, 16:30)

"Never let the cultural differences between community members become a bridge that causes interactions to become rare. Putting aside the things that hindered it had to be done." (Community 2, 10/9/2022, 11:45)

The role of self-culture according to these two community members is reflected in what relationships are like in the community. This role comprises the concept of 'What is our relationship?'. The recognition represents one's perception of the social representation of personhood and how others accept self-claims.

Discussion

The study reveals five sets of essential intercultural communicative competence viewed from EFL students' interactions and intercultural experiences in their respective communities based on communal perspectives. These sets comprise as elements, characteristics, triggers, flexibilities, and roles. The visualization can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Intercultural Communicative Competence in Community Context
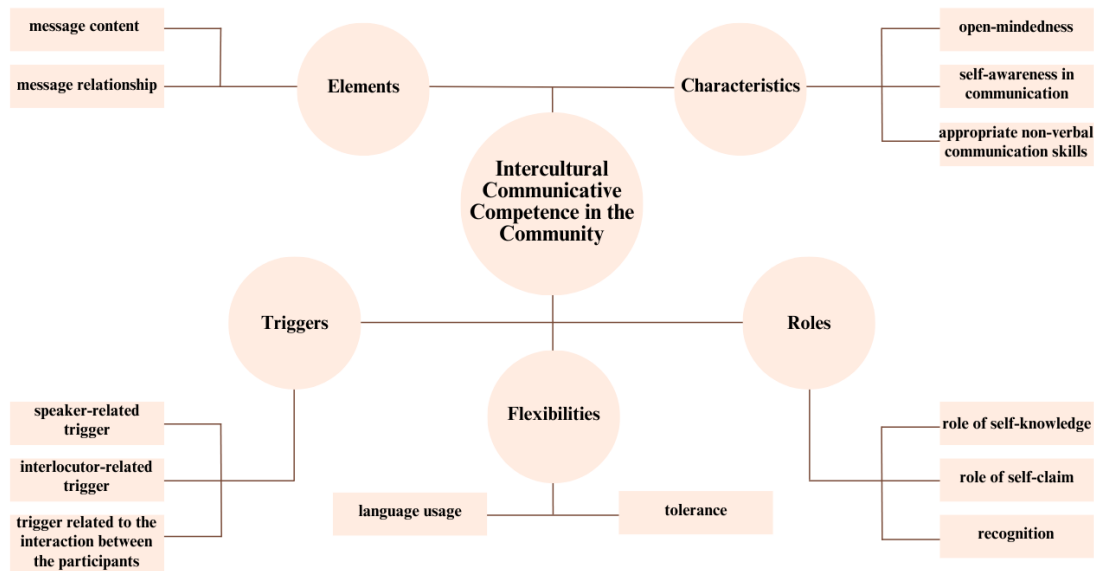
The first category is related to the elements that carry intercultural communicative competence in the community. EFL students who involve in the community should carry out message content and message relationship as the elements of intercultural communicative competence. Furthermore, the message content is one of the cultural elements that play an important role in community communication and interaction. This message content is related to what is said or sent about the aspects that affect the effectiveness of community communication. The message content is important because it is the first step in understanding what the sender is saying and responding appropriately. In line with this, Ergün & Avcı (2018) stated that the message's content is important in the community because it demonstrates to the receiver the extent of one's comprehension of what is being said. Another element that has an impact on effective communication in the community is the message relationship (how it is said). In this element, the way we convey messages contributes to community interaction. As the sender formulates a message, her or his filters influence the content of the message and how it is delivered. When the sender conveys the message, it encounters the receiver's filters. The receiver's filters are made up of personality preferences and values, in addition to being shaped by all dimensions of cultural diversity. About this, Korbak et al. (2021) emphasized that the filters, which are also called noise, color and shape how the sender constructs the message and how the receiver interprets the message. This noise influences the content and meaning of the message.

The second category concerns with the characteristics that reflect intercultural communicative competence in the community. Having open-mindedness, activating self-awareness in communication, and using appropriate non-verbal communication skills are considered key characteristics of EFL students to be competent in intercultural communication in the community. Open-mindedness is a mindset behavior that tends to consider various things or see various points of view before giving certainty or responding to something. In addition, people who have open-mindedness behave very sensitively and always show empathy for

others even though they are not by their habits. Having an open-minded behavior is closely related to the broadness of thinking and a lot of experience, so people who have this kind of behavior often associate themselves with other people due to the sensitivity they get from that experience. Following this, Peacock & Cowan (2019) stated that performing open-mindedness while interacting in the community will generate a relationship of belonging and create a respectful and helpful environment within the community. The second aspect in this category is significant in that understanding oneself determines how we interact in the social environment, particularly in the community. This will develop functioning self-control to ensure that the established communication in the community can be properly controlled because this behavior ensures that we stay on track in interacting. Furthermore, Hinner (2020) asserted that having self-awareness in communication frees us from excessive types of interactions, leaves ego attitudes in conversation, and allows us to measure people's character and communication behavior. Nonverbal communication is the final aspect in this category that can affect effective intercultural communication in the community as perceived by community members. It is undeniable that nonverbal communication is more important. It does not imply that using verbal instruments elegantly aids in the formation of effective communication. However, the most influential aspect of community communication is the unspoken words. In agreement with this, Ebrahimi, Afraz, and Samimi (2019) stated that appropriately behaving or presenting nonverbal instruments effectively and unmistakably impresses members of the community.

The third category depicts the triggers that hinder intercultural communicative competence in the community. Identifying the factor of the speaker, the interlocutor, and the relationship between the participants can make a huge impact for EFL students in avoiding misunderstanding that occur within the community interaction. Moreover, the first trigger that causes misunderstanding in community interaction in this category is a problem with the source of communication. The communication source in this case is known as a speaker-related trigger. The listener problem is the next trigger that affects the interaction of individuals in the community and causes misunderstandings. This demonstrates that the misunderstanding is also the listener's fault, also known as an interlocutor-related trigger. In contrast to the others, the triggers that cause misunderstanding are not always related to speakers and interlocutors, but other factors related to participant interactions play a role as well.

The fourth category deals with flexibilities that address intercultural communicative competence in the community. Becoming flexible in the use of language and the portray of tolerance is beneficial for EFL students when participating in the community. The language usage is more focused in this case on the use of a polite strategy in communicating between community members. Another community member's viewpoint is that tolerance is an important intercultural element in communicating with fellow community members. Having the ability to optimize language use and tolerance of ambiguity is necessity for EFL students in this multicultural world system.

The last category relates to the roles that foster intercultural communicative competence in the community. Understanding the role of one's own culture in the community is reflected as an inherent identity of oneself in intercultural communicative competence. This role encompasses the idea of self-knowledge that represent the knowledge about oneself such as what one knows about oneself. The role of one's own culture in the community is defined further as how others perceive us. Another role encompasses the idea of self-claim that represents how one asserts oneself in public. The role of recognition is reflected in the community's relationships. The concept of recognition is included in this role. Similar to this,

Halgin, Glynn & Rockwell (2018) further explained that one's perception of the social representation of personhood and how others accept self-claims is represented by recognition.

CONCLUSION

Achieving the level of intercultural communicative competence for EFL students in the community, it truly depends on how students see themselves and learn how cultural diversity is practiced in the community. Recognize as important cultural elements in interacting with the message content and message relationship displayed in the community. Open-mindedness, self-awareness, and nonverbal communication skills can be useful in practicing intercultural communicative competence in the community. It is undeniable that the emergence of misunderstanding in community interaction is frequently associated with speaker-related, interlocutor-related, and participant-related trigger. To avoid this, addressing intercultural aspects in the community can be accomplished by paying attention to language use and grounding tolerance.

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