

Developing intercultural communication competence of international students as Indonesian tourism promotion agents

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ABSTRACT

Background: As temporary residents, international students in Indonesia frequently engage in everyday intercultural interactions with local communities. These interactions not only shape their intercultural communication competence (ICC) but also position them as informal ambassadors who can promote Indonesian culture and tourism through their daily experiences and digital narratives. Building on the concept of ICC proposed by Brian H. Spitzberg, this study explores how intercultural engagement among international students contributes to the informal promotion of Indonesian tourism. **Purpose:** This research aims to examine how international students construct and develop their ICC through engagement with Indonesian culture and how these experiences indirectly promote Indonesian tourism, particularly through social media practices. **Methods:** The study employs a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of 13 international students from Thailand, the Philippines, Tajikistan, Yemen, Sudan, Libya, the Gambia, and Cambodia who are studying in Indonesia. Data were collected through interviews, observation, and analysis of the students' social media content, including posts, images, and narratives that reflect their cultural interactions and communication practices. The analysis focuses on how experiential cultural learning and relational cultural negotiation shape their intercultural communication processes. **Results:** The results reveal that international students develop ICC through continuous adaptation to their social environment. They adjust their verbal and nonverbal communication styles to align with local cultural expectations and audience preferences. Through social media storytelling and visual documentation, they share experiences of Indonesian culture, traditions, and tourist destinations, thereby promoting Indonesian tourism informally to their global networks. However, challenges remain in linguistic adaptation, particularly in mastering Indonesian and local languages such as Javanese. **Conclusions:** Intercultural engagement enables international students to develop their ICC. This study extends Spitzberg's ICC framework by highlighting international students' role as informal tourism promoters. **Implications:** This research suggests collaborative initiatives among universities, government tourism authorities, and private tourism stakeholders to strategically involve international students in broader tourism promotion programs.

Keywords: International students; promotion; Spitzberg's intercultural communication competence; tourism; universities

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the country's crucial sources of foreign exchange and a key driver of national development. Foreign exchange from tourism is obtained from domestic and foreign tourist visits. The more tourists visit Indonesia, the greater the foreign exchange potential the country receives. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, the level of foreign tourist visits is still low. According to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics, foreign tourist visits to Indonesia decreased by 4.62% to 701,930 in February 2023, compared with January 2023 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023). Meanwhile, regional-level tourist visits, such as those in Banyumas Regency, increased from 1,499,006 in 2021 to 2,656,579 in 2022. However, these tourist visits were dominated by domestic tourists (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Banyumas, 2023). In 2024, foreign tourist visits reached 13.9 million. Cumulatively, this figure increased by 19.05% from 2023. The achievement of foreign tourist visits in 2024 is the highest in the last five years since 2020. However, it is still lower than 2019 or before the pandemic, which reached 16.1 million visits. The distribution of foreign tourist visits to Indonesia by nationality in 2024 showed that the highest number of visits was from Malaysia, at 2.2 million (16.4%). Then, Australia, as many as 1.6 million (12%), and

Singapore, as many as 1.4 million (10.1%) (Kristianus, 2025).

The government needs to encourage the development of the tourism sector in five Super Priority Destinations (SPD), namely Lake Toba in North Sumatra, Borobudur in Central Java, Mandalika in West Nusa Tenggara, Labuan Bajo in East Nusa Tenggara, and Likupang in North Sulawesi. In addition, the government and community elements need to help the tourism sector in other areas, such as Banyumas Regency. Currently, international tourism promotion remains limited, despite Indonesia's very high tourism potential, not only in Bali and SPD.

The heightened internationalisation of higher education has fostered greater cross-border movement of international students (Chen, 2022; Salih & Omar, 2021; Sercu, 2023). In addition to educational globalisation, this phenomenon in Indonesia creates new sociocultural dynamics that involve intercultural communication and promote tourism. As international students become temporary residents, they also become cultural observers of the host society, and through everyday encounters with the community, its cultural practices, and social norms, they gain firsthand experience of it. Furthermore, international students may serve as unintentional or, at times, intentional, informal ambassadors of tourism

and cultural diplomacy.

While the promotion of tourism has historically involved formal actors such as government ministries, destination marketing organisations, and other professional tourism business stakeholders, in the contemporary world, informal actors, particularly tourists, expatriates, and foreign students, play an increasingly important role in the promotion of tourism through the exchange of personal stories and other informal communication, particularly through social media.

International students and scholars, because of the duration of their stay, their exposure to the host society, their intercultural relations, and their transnational social networks that extend beyond the host country, are in a unique position within this informal tourism ecosystem.

Universities bring international students to Indonesia by providing scholarships. In 2025, in Banyumas Regency, for example, active international students are spread across several universities, including Universitas Amikom Purwokerto (8 students), UIN SAIZU (23 students), Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto (over 200 students), and Unsoed (over 200 students). International students come from several countries, including Thailand, the Philippines, Tajikistan, Yemen, Turkey, Bangladesh, Sudan, Timor-Leste, Pakistan, and Libya. Based on observation, they are

sometimes involved in cultural events or the celebration of certain religious festivals at their respective campuses. However, the existence of international students has not been optimally utilized as agents of Indonesian tourism promotion.

To become a tourism promotion agent, individuals who have intercultural communication competencies are needed. Communication is a social activity (Safi et al., 2022). Communication, an essential and influential part of human life, enables individuals and communities to interact, share information, establish values, and fulfill their duties. Among other types and aspects of human communication, intercultural communication is modern, essential, and challenging (Mostafaei Alaei & Nosrati, 2018). However, intercultural communication between international students and local students (Indonesian) has not been optimal due to language barriers, cultural differences, and busy lecture schedules.

Intercultural communication is communication between members of different cultures (Thije, 2020). There are three factors that lead individuals to develop intercultural competence: awareness, knowledge, and skill. Becoming a culturally competent communicator must also have communicative competence (Wang & Li, 2025). Intercultural communication competence (ICC) provides a sound theoretical

framework to understand how international students navigate cultural differences and construct meaningful communication across cultures (Fan, 2021; Rohani et al., 2025). Intercultural communication competence refers to the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The concept of intercultural competence relates to the readiness to accept differences and includes both social and cultural aspects (Braslauskas, 2021; Thu, 2024).

Competence is the ability to do something well or effectively. Communication competence is the ability or a set of skilled behaviors. This competence is very contextual.

Brian H. Spitzberg (2009), defines Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) as the ability to communicate successfully and appropriately in a given situation involving diverse cultures. Spitzberg reframes the common perception of competence as a personal, individual characteristic and argues that competence is situational, relational, and subjective. Communication can be considered competent not because of any attribute someone possesses, but because others perceive it as appropriate and effective in a given cultural and contextual situation. Thus, ICC is not static or universal. It changes in reference to different cultural standards, interactional objectives, hierarchies of power, and contextual

demands. Thus, competence is always situated, negotiated, and socially constructed (B. Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Spitzberg's ICC framework centers around two evaluative components: effectiveness and appropriateness. Effectiveness refers to the degree to which communicative behaviour **achieves intended goals or outcomes**. These goals may include mutual understanding, relationship-building, persuasion or influence, information exchange, and identity or image construction. In intercultural contexts, effectiveness does not necessarily imply efficiency or dominance, but rather the successful realisation of communicative intentions without generating unnecessary misunderstanding or conflict. Appropriateness refers to the extent to which communicative behaviour conforms to the rules, norms, and expectations of a given cultural and social context. Communication is appropriate when it does not violate culturally shared values, moral standards, or relational expectations. This includes sensitivity to cultural norms and values, social roles and hierarchies, verbal and non-verbal conventions, politeness strategies, and face concerns. Appropriateness is inherently **normative** and culturally bound, meaning that what is considered appropriate in one culture may be inappropriate in another (B. H. Spitzberg, 2009). When communicating across cultures, we should not only express our views

and convey our values, but also understand the other party's culture and values, and think from the other party's perspective with respect for their culture. To achieve this goal, there should be mutual respect and a willingness to move beyond frustration arising from cultural misunderstandings (Prayusti, 2017; Turistiati et al., 2023; Zaw, 2018). To illustrate how people acquire effective communication, Spitzberg has presented a three-part model encompassing Knowledge, Motivation, and Skills (KMS). Knowledge (Cognitive Dimension) refers to what individuals know about cultures, communication processes, and social interactions. This includes cultural self-awareness, knowledge of other cultures' values, beliefs, and practices, understanding of communication rules and expectations, and linguistic and sociolinguistic awareness. Knowledge provides the cognitive foundation for accurately interpreting intercultural situations.

Motivation (Affective Dimension) concerns the desire and willingness to engage in intercultural communication. It includes openness to and curiosity about cultural differences, positive attitudes toward out-group members, a willingness to manage anxiety and uncertainty, an interest in intercultural matters, and empathy. Without motivation, knowledge and skills are unlikely to be activated in genuine

interactions.

Skills (Behavioral Dimension) refer to the actual performance of communication behaviors. These include interactions management (turn-taking, topic control), behavioral flexibility and adaptability, empathy and perspective-taking, verbal and non-verbal communication skills, conflict management, and negotiation. Skills operationalise knowledge and motivation into observable communicative behaviour. Spitzberg emphasises that no single component alone produces competence; ICC emerges from the dynamic interactions of all three components within specific contexts. A defining feature of Spitzberg's model is its contextual and relational orientation. ICC is not solely determined by the communicator, but is co-constructed through interactions with others. Competence judgments depend on cultural expectations of interactants, relationship history, power relations, social status, institutional and situational constraints. Therefore, ICC is best understood as a process, not a state, and as relationally negotiated rather than individually possessed. Spitzberg argues that the best communicators are those who face difficult situations and navigate the rules and conditions (B. H. Spitzberg, 2009; Wello et al., 2017).

Numerous studies over the last decade have examined the development of ICC among international students, particularly in host

countries with multicultural environments (Ahmad et al., 2024; Anuar et al., 2025; Brito et al., 2025). The next section summarizes a selection of studies from the last decade (2015–2025) on Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) that relate to the research titled *Developing Intercultural Communication Competence of International Students as Promoters of Indonesian Tourism*.

For international students, ICC is crucial to ensuring their academic success, social integration, and cultural adjustment. In addition, ICC is a pivotal competence in tourism as it is the context in which individuals are called to represent cultures and articulate the local to the global (Apelt et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2025).

The upcoming part of the paper presents a decade-long (2015-2025) study on Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) that has relevance to our research. For international students, ICC is vital to achieve their educational goals, establishing a social network, and adapting to a new culture. Furthermore, ICC is a key competence in the field of tourism, as it is the area where individuals are expected to embody multiple cultures and speak to the local and the global.

International students attempt to immerse themselves in Indonesian culture and make cross-cultural contacts. Still, this intent was frustrated by various challenges, including the

language barrier, cultural misunderstandings, and the lack of systematic support from the university. They argued that the construction of ICC is not an automatic process and suggested that intrapersonal development of ICC requires active participation in cross-cultural contacts and the incorporation of purposeful reflective exercises (Pinariya & Sutjipto, 2021).

Moreover, other research explored the challenges faced by international students in developing ICC in the Indonesian context. This study found that students' ICC reached a higher level through purposeful interactions with local students and through participatory engagement in local communities and academia. Despite the study recognizing improvement in ICC, the authors pointed out the considerable lack in strategic and operative dimensions of behavioral communication, indicating a specific need for training in intercultural communication (Anfas et al., 2023).

In recent years, ICC has been more closely associated with internationalization and global citizenship in higher education. Through a bibliometric and content study, Wilczewski and Alon revealed that for international students, intercultural communication is a vital component for both academic and social integration. Their study demonstrated that in order to achieve active participation in a cross-cultural context beyond mere presence, a

combination of pragmatic communication and an adequate level of intercultural awareness is required, and linguistic competency is not adequate (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023).

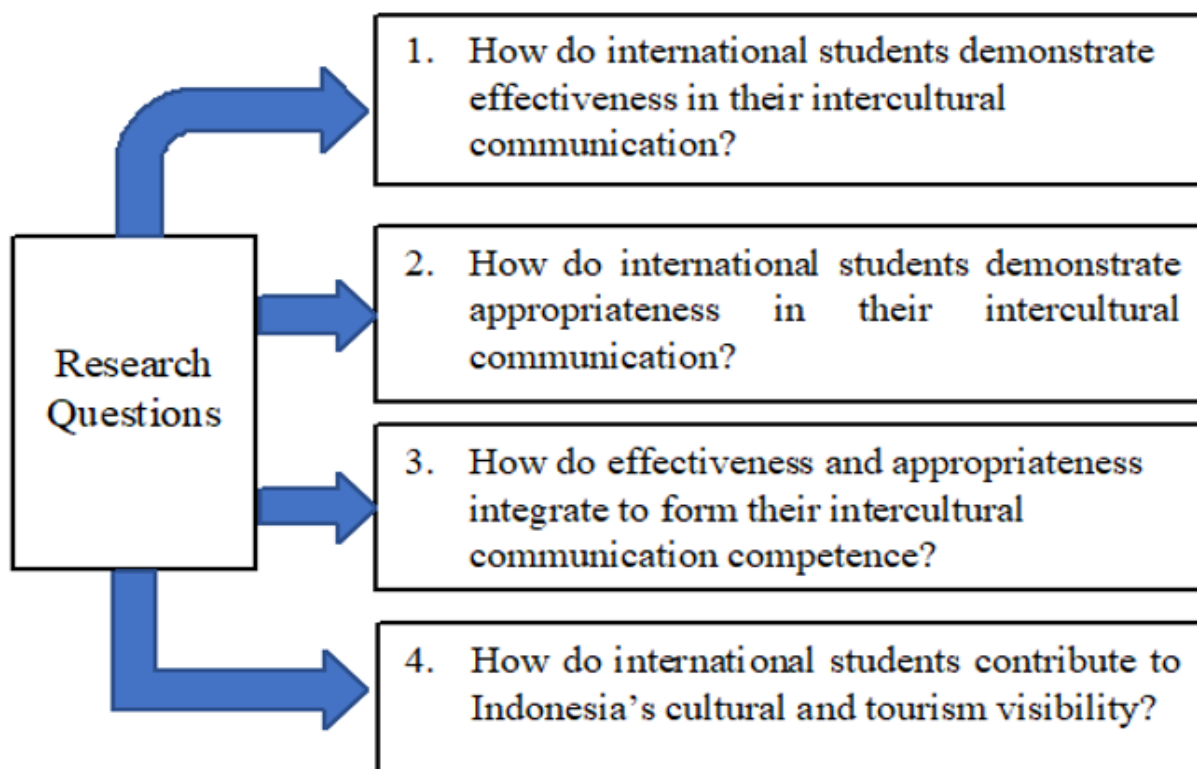
Rahmawanti et al. (2023) assessed the ICC levels of university students and discovered that most of the respondents demonstrated a fair amount of intercultural understanding, yet felt that they did not possess the necessary skills to implement intercultural communication tactics in practice. From a theory-practice gap perspective, the authors propose that educational institutions implement more tailored and practice-oriented initiatives to strengthen ICC (Rahmawanti et al., 2023).

This review was motivated by the ever-growing importance of the ICC in the 21st century, especially with respect to the global economy and multicultural societies. The review outlined several ICC components that students need to possess to serve effectively as international cultural intermediaries, including the capacity to empathize with and respect other cultures. The role of international students in strategic communication has not been widely addressed in previous studies. Although there is a substantial volume of work on ICC among international students, the role of international students, particularly in the informal cultural ambassadorship, has been largely overlooked (Sarwari et al., 2024). There are almost no

studies on the integration of ICC and tourism promotion roles. There is a wide body of literature on ICC and professional preparedness in tourism. However, little has been done on how to purposefully cultivate international students as tourism promotion agents through structured ICC activities.

This study explores the development of ICC among international students in Indonesia and how this development leads to the informal promotion of Indonesian tourism. In addition, this study aims to contribute to both the interdisciplinary field of tourism and ICC by drawing on ICC theory and the practice of tourism promotion. It offers practical implications for higher education institutions and tourism stakeholders in Indonesia. The significance of this research is that it focuses on national tourism research. This research is not only appropriate for the tourism office in Banyumas and Universitas Amikom Purwokerto, but also for universities with international students. Based on the background described above, the research questions are illustrated in Figure 1.

The objectives of this study are to explore the effectiveness of international students' intercultural communication, analyse the appropriateness of international students' intercultural communication, explore the integration of effectiveness and appropriateness in shaping intercultural communication



Source: Researchers, 2025

Figure 1 Research Questions

competence, and assess the contribution of international students to Indonesia's cultural and tourism visibility.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative, phenomenological research method. It is based on the views or perspectives of participants (research informants). The researchers summarize and analyze a collection of interviews (stories and opinions from informants, observation results, and literature reviews, then process them into a report.

A phenomenological study describes the general meaning of several individuals'

experiences related to concepts or phenomena (Neubauer et al., 2019). In this study, the researchers described the experiences of research informants of intercultural communication skills and adaptation strategies of international students to Indonesian culture. Furthermore, the researchers conducted a comprehensive study of Spitzberg's concept of intercultural competence. Then the researchers developed Spitzberg's idea into an intercultural-communication-competence framework for tourism promotion. There are 13 key informants (2 women and 11 men) involved in this research (2 from Tajikistan, 1 from the Philippines, 3 from Sudan, 1 from Yemen, 3 from Thailand, 1 from Cambodia, 1 from the Gambia, 1 from

Libya). Two informants are the Public Relations and International Relations sections that handle international students at universities, as significant others who know and understand international students' communication skills.

According to Schutz, in the process of social interactions, there is an exchange of motives; the exchange of actors' motives is called the reciprocity of motives (Gugutzer, 2020; Siagian & Tike, 2019). Through interpreting others' actions, individuals can adjust their subsequent actions to align with those of others. To do this, individuals must understand the meaning, motive, or intention behind other people's actions. Motives in the phenomenological perspective, according to Schutz, are the configuration or context of meaning that appears to the actor as the basis for the meaning of his behavior (Gyollai, 2022). Research with a phenomenological approach, in Schutz's view, is reduced, namely, to the first category of knowledge, which is personal and unique to each individual. The second category of knowledge is typification, which has been formed and embraced by all members of a culture and comprises myths, cultural understanding, and common sense. Thus, social research is an effort to develop models of conceptual systems and to assess the relevance of research subjects, as these things can be observed in everyday life (Sohn, 2017).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are structured around the research questions. It integrates the informants' subjective experiences (emic perspective) with the researchers' analytical framework (etic perspective), particularly through Spitzberg's dimensions of Appropriateness and Effectiveness.

Intercultural communication effectiveness among international students can be observed in their daily interactions with local Indonesian students and the surrounding community. These students have to grapple with new academic and social settings, where they have to comprehend and appreciate cultural subtleties that often starkly contrast with their own cultural practices. For instance, communication challenges may arise in Banyumas, where there are specific local cultural and dialectical peculiarities.

Academic and social interactions can be severely limited, if not impossible, for many of these international students due to their command of the language, or rather the lack of it, particularly those students who are not conversant with the languages in academic and social interactions (Seregina et al., 2019). This is the reality for many students who are not acquainted with the Indonesian language-English instructions. For example, students from Patani in Thailand, like many other

students from Malay-speaking countries, have the advantage of being able to comprehend Malay, which is structurally and lexically close to Indonesian. However, they may still find it difficult to voice their ideas in Indonesian, which makes it even more challenging for them to participate in academic and social interactions due to the fact that they possess limited English language competence. English should be a medium for facilitating communication and bridging cultural differences (Meltareza & Wiryany, 2024).

Likewise, international students who are Arabic speakers but who are not proficient in English or Indonesian face further challenges. Specifically, communicating with teachers, who typically do not know Arabic, represents a substantial problem. To resolve this issue, teachers tend to call upon student colleagues who speak Arabic to assist in the translation of messages from Arabic into English. This means, however, that an even greater effort must be made to learn Indonesian and English to facilitate communication in an academic environment.

Indonesian higher education institutions have responded to the challenge faced by foreign students in the English-only instruction context by embedding language training in the curriculum to assist students in learning the Indonesian language. Learning Indonesian,

while useful for social purposes, is critical for academic language skills to be developed, including the language of study, assignments, discussions, and the course literature. Semi-structured interviews with students showed that in addition to the formal instruction through Indonesian Language courses, many international students use translation apps to assist the learning process. That statement is as explained by informant 3 from Tajikistan, "The apps facilitate us understanding and communication socially and academically" (Informant 3, personal communication, December 8, 2025).

The use of translation apps is also explored, as there are limitations in accessing the information and nuances that language can convey, even at the academic level. International students require an extended period of time and sustained effort to achieve mastery of Indonesian, especially concerning the language of instruction and the language of scholarship. This level of faculty and peer support is crucial to their success. As students progress, they gain confidence to fulfill their academic obligations and participate more fully in their university communities and the host social culture. Although it is a challenging process, mastering the language of instruction and the language of scholarship enhances international students' sense of agency and overall experience in

Indonesia.

Students who have a strong command of the English language in addition to comprehension of the Indonesian language have, comparatively, an easier time gaining the necessary skills to grow their intercultural communication competencies. Gaining the skills of intercultural communication, while being a personal benefit, also provides a major contribution to the overall diversity of the community. It has been shown that higher degrees of social and academic success among international students correlate positively with the presence of intercultural communication skills. Pertaining to this particular situation, it has been observed that international students have the ability to extend graciousness and constructive criticism to the local students and staff. International students engage in class debates, group work, and social gatherings to streamline their communication functions, in order to close the existing cultural gaps and to positively increase the overall understanding.

The effectiveness of intercultural communication is multidimensional. Local Indonesian students also gain insights from their cross-cultural counterparts, enhancing the collaborative cultural learning space. This kind of reciprocal cultural learning adds value to the learning process. It allows for the development of empathy, respect, and collaborative skills.

A case in point is the cultural perspective exchange during discussions in classes, and the informal social spaces during inclusive religious activities. This kind of social interaction helps to dispel cultural stereotypes and fosters an appreciation of the richness of multicultural societies. The cross-cultural communication skills of international students in Banyumas are not limited to the classroom. A great number of students consider themselves community members and participate in cultural/socio-communal activities, including volunteering as foreign students for intercultural communication courses. This kind of civic engagement enables international students to apply their cross-cultural communication skills and enhances their ability to engage with people from different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds.

The scope and effectiveness of intercultural communication among international students in Banyumas is the result of many individual and collective experiences. While intercultural communication takes practice and dedication, these students are not only integrating into the multicultural environment of Banyumas but are also acquiring skills that will be highly valuable for their future careers and personal lives.

Intercultural communication competence involves the understanding of two integral points: the within-stage and the between-stage. These points, as Gudykunst hypothetically illustrates,

level a person's capacity to communicate cross-culturally. As is the case with the within stage, a person is convinced that they have the skills to communicate across various cultures; however, that person is more fond of the notion than the reality. Such a person is still in the beginning stages of applying or even understanding the skills of cross-cultural communication fully. This stage is more about the self-belief or the self-assessment of a person's competence regarding the ability to handle situations where several cultures are in play. A person may have the requisite knowledge regarding the cultural norms, behaviors, and communication styles; however, that person may still remain ill-equipped to deal with very challenging cultural scenarios, or the person may still remain a novice. In contrast, stage two, or the between-stages, is a far more proficient position of intercultural communication competence. Here, a person is able to communicate with members of various cultural communities and offer perspectives beyond his or her own. Unlike the self-assessment approach evident at the within stage, the between stage is marked by a cohesive ability to communicate in a sophisticated manner, with the ability to adapt communication styles to the context of the situation. This stage demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the cultural variables that are at play in the various intercultural communication contexts. A

communicator at this level of competence does not just interact with individuals of differing cultural backgrounds, but also seeks to build, foster, and sustain understanding, trust, and respect among the interactants (Holubnycha et al., 2019).

Based on Gudykunst's model, international students' intercultural communication competence ranges from within the model. At this level, students believe that they possess the capacity to communicate intercultural; however, this belief could be unfounded. Many students possess a potentially accurate self-appraisal; however, most do not have the experiences that illustrate the level of flexibility and high context among various socio-cultural environments. These students are expected to develop greater awareness of existing cultural differences and to expand their communicative repertoire accordingly to develop more complex communication strategies.

According to the analysis of the narratives of the informants, international students exhibit appropriateness based on their deliberate efforts to alter their behaviors to fit the culturally expected norms. This dimension, which exemplifies B. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009), describes the phenomenon of behaving with respect to the rules and guidelines of a specific cultural and social environment, and therefore, is a reflection of ongoing social

learning. International students understand the concept of respect and politeness, especially towards people of higher authority. However, international students are socialized to practice this behavior towards everyone, including their classmates. Formal language, which students from Asian and Middle Eastern countries use in the educational systems, is a signal of respect. In foreign educational systems, it has been observed that although the use of formal language is a sign of respect and deference, it is transcended by the use of a social tool that integrates and fosters collaborative and professional relationships. Nevertheless, it has been observed that most students, once they understand the meaning of deference, respect, and informal language in cultivating a welcoming and safe environment for everyone, will extend their informal language use towards people, irrespective of their position, age, or authority. The findings of the study also confirmed that the use of informal language in social interaction is not limited to the educational environment.

Students who developed proficiency in the use of polite language tended to strengthen their social networks and to gain support from both fellow students and the faculty. The link made between politeness and social triumph stressed the significance and value of international students' general well-being. This is reflected in

the statement by the following informant 4 from Sudan:

I realised that using simple polite expressions like *terima kasih*, *maaf*, and *permisi* really helped me connect with Indonesian people. When I spoke more politely, others seemed more open and willing to support me (Informant 4, personal communication, December 8, 2025).

Learning and adopting these new social practices means international students adjust to and operate within two contrasting cultural systems: the use of honorifics (as a form of respect) in their cultures versus the more informal, egalitarian, and unhierarchical means of address in their new schools.

Regardless of the social context, especially in the more private and culturally enclosed spheres of student community, family, and ethnic group enclaves, the Indonesian international students still overtly and unambiguously practice the habit of addressing other older persons as "*Ibu*", "*Bapak*", and "*Kakak*". The more informal the use of the Indonesian language among the group, the more inclusion is obtained. This is particularly evident in peer groups. Additionally, the informal use of Javanese in a peer group is lauded and rewarded within the entire community as well as among the educators. The better one is able to use Javanese, the better appreciated and welcomed one is. It is this collective informal use of Javanese that fosters the academic community

and the more inclusive use of Javanese.

Furthermore, knowing a regional language elevates one's social and professional status. This is the ability to navigate and adapt to different contexts as well as to understand and respect the culture of the host community, and the willingness to cross borders and integrate into different cultural settings. When a new group of international students arrives, they are usually accompanied by some Indonesian students who will serve as mentors or guides and will be available to assist and answer any questions or queries they may have.

The Indonesian students help international students adjust to their environment, such as navigating school procedures, settling into new cultural practices, and providing everyday multifaceted support. The relationships formed over time give a sense of support and belonging to Australia, as this type of support is often needed. Non-verbal communication was crucial in the adaptation process. Numerous respondents from Asia and the Middle East identified the need to understand and adapt to varying degrees of spatial boundaries, touch, and eye contact. A Thai student described the culture in Indonesia as having a taboo preventing one from pointing with their feet and from touching others' heads. This suggests a high degree of knowledge (cognitive dimension) and motivation (affective dimension) to avoid cultural faux pas.

The importance of using an appropriate address and the non-verbal practice of head bows was equally noted. Informant 1 from Yemen commented:

In my country, we show respect to our teachers and elders, but in Indonesia, the respect shown is much greater. For example, students kiss lecturers' backs of palms. It's ok, but I prefer just putting my right hand on my left chest as we do in Yemen (Informant 1, personal communication, December 8, 2025).

The other 13 students are the same as informant 1 and do not kiss lecturers' or elders' backs of palms, regardless of gender. All informants are Muslim, so their behaviour follows Islamic norms for interacting and communicating with others.

Since all informants from Thailand, Libya, Gambia, Sudan, Tajikistan, and the Philippines are Muslim, they think that shaking hands with the same gender is acceptable. However, they tend to avoid physical contact with the opposite sex. Considering all of this, the respondents' demonstration of the skill of appropriateness across various social contexts is a true testament to their remarkable behavioural elasticity and adaptability, a vital part of Spitzberg's Skills dimension.

Food is a primary means of non-verbal communication of culture. They could be an opening or closing communication channel in the early stages of migration. An example here

is international students in Indonesia. The local cuisine 'spicy shock' phenomenon stems from the widespread use of a high volume of spice content to which the Indonesian people are accustomed. The students have to endure the "pain" of the spice to eat. They have to develop an answer to the complex questions that arise from the potentially damaging integration of their psychological self and the environment.

Over time, people are used to the local food. They can eat and enjoy food that would have been too spicy in the past. This process involves significant psychological self-control and adaptation to a new culture and environment that is often called cultural resilience. Students have, in a sense, 'integrated' into the local culture by eating the local food. They now have a unique story to share. This will be culturally significant for tourism in the future.

In Indonesia, the strong community and religious context means that appropriateness also requires consideration of local religious practices, such as dress code, food taboos, and prayer times, as well as community obligations, such as participation in local activities. Interviews with staff from the Public Relations/International Relations offices indicated that students who assimilated more readily showed this type of sensitivity.

Recognition and respect for cultural and religious values in the environment help

International students from Muslim-majority countries adapt more easily. Most of the students are Muslims, and this shared religion allows them to feel advantageously different from others in the university environment. Their differentness, for example, will be in the observance of the fast of Ramadhan. Other participants who are non-Muslims will perform their activities as usual and will likely be very busy during that period. Muslim students will be praying at the prescribed times during the day. This will be the case for the whole month of Ramadhan. These activities themselves will provide a sense of comfort and help in achieving integration in the social and academic contexts, which is not very easy.

Additionally, Islamic practices that require structure, such as daily prayer and fasting, enhance one's discipline and time management, which in turn improve their academic performance and social skills. This flexibility is not limited to the Islamic religion; among students, Islamic practices are used to explain integration and adaptation in a new environment. Islam promotes values such as respect for others, community, and moderation, all of which positively aid students in new, foreign educational settings. In this light, universities that consider the needs of Muslim students, for instance, through designated praying areas, provision of halal meals, and other supportive

facilities, create space for students to focus on their studies and personal growth.

Incorporating effectiveness and appropriateness for ICC (intercultural communication competence) is especially complex for international students as they embark on their academic and social journey in different countries. The dimensions of appropriateness and effectiveness are important for students in overcoming and succeeding in intercultural encounters. The development of these two dimensions helps students move from only knowing cultural expectations to using and applying these different cultural expectations.

The effectiveness of communication for different cultures and ethnic groups is the successful attainment of the purpose for which communication was intended, and the successful reception and understanding of the message (Ademolu, 2023; Aririguzoh, 2022). For international students in Indonesia, these competencies are important in the establishment of the students in the academic and social community. As mentioned, the level of command of the language is often an obstacle to the effective communication of students. Particularly for students who come from countries that have a close linguistic relationship (such as Patani, Thailand, and the speakers of the Arabic language), their ability to express themselves is severely limited,

although they may have a full understanding of the communication rules. For example, a number of students may have an understanding of the spoken language of the occupants of the academy, but the language of the academy is controlled by a high degree of specificity.

Within-stage of intercultural competence by Gudykunst captures the Beginners' Stage, where students believe they can communicate across cultures, but do not possess the depth needed to implement the abilities, within the wide breadth of possibilities. Although participating in social casual environments may come easily to some, others may not be able to meander around the social environments of casual and academic environments. For example, some students from Middle Eastern backgrounds may find it easy to communicate with some of their teachers. However, they do not possess adequate proficiency in the target language, whether Indonesian or English, to communicate with teachers academically. They may need sufficient academic proficiency that is indicative of being able to use academic language in the target language. For example, a Patani student in a lecture may be able to translate basic instructions into English but would not be able to converse in the language to the extent of participating in an academic debate. They may find it difficult to translate the lecture and, as a result, will find it difficult to

be an active contributor to the academic debate. However, with the assistance of an academic language course and peer collaboration, that student will be able to fulfil an active and responsible role in the academic environment.

In an ICC context, 'appropriateness' comes from Spitzberg's definition of 'appropriateness' as the ability to follow the guidelines and expectations of a specific cultural and social context. International students must demonstrate appropriateness to be socially accepted and to achieve academically. In ICC, 'appropriateness' implies the internalization of the local customs, attitudes, and behaviors of the social milieu, such as politeness, the display of control and dominance, and the observance of social and religious taboos. Such behaviors typically come from a process of imitation, interaction, and the experience of positive and negative feedback from the peer and the mentoring system. In foreign educational systems, students from collectivist cultures (notably, certain regions of Asia and the Middle East) tend to show high levels of deference to authority through formal speech and interaction, as well as hierarchical positioning. However, many Indonesian students identify that while authority should be respected, a more relaxed and less formal approach to politeness is the norm. For example, while many of his peers would adopt a more formal approach to polite speech in

addressing a lecturer, an Indonesian student would consider that a less formal approach to be more egalitarian and thereby cultural, and more relaxed than the norm. Initially, a Thai student might find the tendency to address lecturers by their first names and use informal speech less comfortable and less accommodating.

By interacting with Indonesian students and observing the Indonesian social practices, students become acclimatized to a more relaxed communication style that combines both formality and informality. This style of communication enhances their social integration and collaboration.

Furthermore, students demonstrate their cultural assimilation by respecting local religious and cultural practices. In Indonesia, students who embrace local practices, such as participating in religious ceremonies, tend to integrate more seamlessly into the university community. Being aware of religious practices, such as leaving for prayer, fasting during Ramadan, and taking prayer breaks, is a form of cultural assimilation that fosters positive relationships with local students and staff.

Incorporation of the effectiveness and appropriateness component of ICC highlights both an adjustment and a process of reciprocal learning. As international students learn to communicate in Bahasa Indonesia, they learn what communication is considered appropriate in

a particular sociocultural context. Consequently, the international students enhance their ICC by learning to communicate in a respectful and culturally appropriate manner. This dual ability is predominantly observed in international students, as this specific strategy of respectful communication is considered polite and is mentioned in the local context. Students who incorporate appropriate sociolinguistic titles, as well as respectful body posture, gaze avoidance, and other communicative acts, facilitate the development of positive rapport with their local peers and instructors. Such students are able to surpass the expectations of an instrumental goal of communication and construct an atmosphere of reciprocal respect, which enriches their social and academic life.

While continuing their ICC journey, international students spend time in Indonesia, and in their migratory process, move from the within stage to the between stage. Here, they have the opportunity to more fully develop the capacity to flexibly and appropriately adapt how they communicate across various cultural and contextual dimensions. At this level, participants not only rely on their self-assessed competence to communicate, but rather demonstrate a combination of multiple peer, self, and community communication, as well as faculty, and intercultural situational communication. Advancement of communication in this

capacity is self, peer, and community-driven. An illustration of this: An international student may have initially experienced challenges and barriers with respect to the language and cultural aspects of the host society. Eventually, this student may end up serving as a cultural bridge between her home country and Indonesia. She may participate in cultural exchanges, become a language sponsor, and contribute actively and appropriately to classroom discussions.

Overall, the combination of effectiveness and appropriateness enhances international students' intercultural communication competence. Both dimensions rely on the students' grasp of the linguistic and cultural elements, and as students' understanding of these frameworks grow, so does their competence in these dimensions. Students progress from the within stage, where they begin to foster some level of confidence in their capacity to interculturally communicate, to the between stage where they articulate intercultural ideas with fluidity and appropriateness across diverse contexts. Such progress is bound to elevate their ICC level. By enhancing their communication effectiveness and cultural appropriateness, international students enrich the host institutions' cultural diversity and heighten their intercultural competence, gearing them up for broader international engagements in the future.

International students exploit various social media platforms to document their experiences in Indonesia. Documenting trips to tourist sites on Instagram has become a common practice among socially active students. Participating in these activities provides students with immersive experiences of Indonesia's diverse offerings. Students frequently visit tourist sites such as Baturraden, Wonosobo, and Yogyakarta, where they capture and document their experiences for future reference.

Posting about weekend adventures in Indonesia brings awareness to the country as a place for tourism. Their photos and captions showcase the beauty of Indonesia with a particular focus on its culture, nature, and people. Even with the language barrier of the host country, the informants adapted to promote tourism by using photos and videos, using captions in the language of the target audience, or using photos of nature, food, and people. In these cases, effective communication means that the use of language was not perfect. Instead, the successful exchange of ideas, especially persuasive ones, was the driving force in the use of the target language.

My family and most friends on my social media don't speak or understand Indonesian, so I have to use my language. I have nice photos and interesting stories to share. They enjoy my posts (Informant 2, personal communication, November 21, 2025).

During the interviews, students' family and friends expressed admiration and curiosity about the possibility of visiting Indonesia. In some cases, this even motivated family members to visit Indonesia as a result of the students' personal reports. However, most of the students' families and friends have an interest, but the means and distance of international travel are a barrier to them.

This also shows that social media can build international students' social networks, and it can also be a tourism promotion tool that can increase interest in traveling to Indonesia based on international students' own experiences. Many international students are unable to share their experiences in creative ways, such as through storytelling or better photos. While their intentions may be clear, the content produced fails to capture the potential offered by the tourist experiences available to them. This shortcoming opens up a space for universities and tourism businesses to design first, local culture and content creation cross-training for international students. Students equipped with photography, narrative, and digital marketing skills can better embellish and communicate the tourist experience in Indonesia, students captured content. Such training aims to turn students into content creators and fake ambassadors of Indonesian tourism. This also provides space for international students to fit

into the Indonesian tourism industry. They have the ideal position to be digital content creators in promoting Indonesian tourism destinations. They will be within their personal network, and their contribution will be in support of a sustainable global tourism marketplace. Additionally, their position as visitors and residents gives them a unique perspective on the Indonesian nation and enables them to offer that perspective to the global audience, which contrasts with the traditional marketing and advertising perspective.

During an informal lunch, the international

students shared their travel experiences visiting various tourist destinations in Indonesia and discussed how they documented and shared these experiences through their personal social media platforms.

The integration of content creation skills into training for international students would improve their social media skills and create a three-way win-win-win situation for the students, the university, and the tourism industry of Indonesia. This creative strategy will be the first of its kind for the tourism promotion of Indonesia, using the student-generated authentic



Source: Image generated using AI, 2026

Figure 2 A Circular Model of Intercultural Communication Competence of International Students as Indonesian Tourism Promotion Agents

content to promote the country's tourism and exotic destinations globally.

Figure 2 illustrates a Circular Model of Intercultural Communication Competence of International Students as Indonesian Tourism Promotion Agents. The model highlights how various components of intercultural competence, such as knowledge, attitudes, communication skills, and cultural awareness, interact dynamically to enable international students to effectively promote Indonesian tourism while engaging with diverse cultural audiences.

CONCLUSION

This study proposes a developmental sequencing model of intercultural communication competence, in which appropriateness precedes effectiveness during early intercultural adaptation. Drawing on Brian H. Spitzberg, the findings show that international students initially prioritise culturally appropriate behaviour before gradually achieving communication effectiveness through ongoing interaction and everyday cultural engagement. This reframes intercultural communication competence as a dynamic, staged process rather than a simultaneous balance of dimensions.

This study also extends intercultural communication into the digital context by positioning international students as hybrid

agents, both cultural intermediaries and informal tourism ambassadors. Through digital platforms such as Instagram, they contribute to peer-driven, experience-based digital tourism promotion, highlighting a shift from institutional to decentralised storytelling.

For further research, comparative studies are needed to validate this developmental model across contexts, particularly regarding the role of language proficiency and institutional support. Further research should also examine how digital platforms shape the visibility and impact of international students in promoting tourism and cultural understanding.

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