

# The Improvement of Students' Awareness and Motivation to Learn English Through International Webinar: The Importance of English Competency in Building Intercultural Communication

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## ABSTRACT

*English is an international language that is the primary choice for individuals in intercultural communication with people from various nations. However, intercultural communication with foreigners is often constrained by inadequate English skills. This condition occurs in students in the Communication Studies Study Program and Digital Business Study Program, Faculty of Business and Social Sciences, Universitas Amikom Purwokerto. The student's English proficiency is relatively low. Based on interviews with around 50 English Club participants at the Faculty of Business and Social Sciences, 75% of students have basic English skills and only 25% can be categorized as the intermediate level of English. To raise awareness and motivate students to learn English, we conducted a seminar "The Importance of English Competency in Building Intercultural Communication". The seminar was facilitated by Universitas Amikom Purwokerto and Huachiew Chalermprakiet University, Thailand. It was a program of international community service and an implementation of the MoU between Universitas Amikom Purwokerto and Huachiew Chalermprakiet University. From the evaluation after participating in this seminar, participants' responses are positive. The seminar is useful and inspiring for them. More than 50% of participants plan to learn English individually through online and offline courses, both formal and informal. It was also expected that in the future the kind of seminar can be held directly (off line).*

## A. INTRODUCTION

Students of the Faculty of Business and Social Sciences (FBIS) consist of students studying in the Communication Study Program and the Digital Business Study Program. The total number of active students from the two study programs is approximately 800 students. To increase the competitiveness and competency profile of graduates from the two study programs, students are provided with English lessons. The ability to communicate in English is very important not only when students enter the world of work but also as a means of communication either directly face-to-face or through social media with people from various cultural backgrounds.

Communication Science study program students get 9 credits (3 credits per semester) for English learning programs, namely General English (English-1), English for Communication Science (English-2) and Business English. Digital Business students get 3 credits of General English and 2 credits of Business English or a total of 5 credits.

Giving English lessons in the class has partially fulfilled the learning objectives [1]. However, students' English skills, particularly in conversation and public speaking, remain extremely limited. This condition can be seen in the low interest of students in English public speaking competitions, such as in the annual National University Debating Championship or NUDC competitions, and the lack of active participation of students in seminars or public lectures in English. In practice, students are

hesitant to communicate in English with their classmates or lecturers while studying English in the classroom.

It was observed that there is an issue of students' low ability to master English, particularly at private universities. Indeed, people's levels of interest in the English language vary, and some even go so far as to publicly admit that they dislike the language [2].

English is the lingua franca or the language of instruction used in a place where there are speakers of different languages and/or cultures [3], [4][5]. The most recent ASEAN identity development is the official selection of English as the ASEAN language (work language) and lingua franca. For this reason, higher education plays an important role in providing English language learning so that students can communicate actively both orally and in writing [6]. Apart from being a means of communication with foreign nationals, learning English can also provide other benefits, one of which is increasing one's competitiveness because they are considered more competent and knowledgeable.

Most international companies require language certification results, such as TOEFL, TOEIC or the like, as one of the qualifications required to work for them [7]. Even so, many people continue to underestimate and dismiss the value of learning a foreign language, particularly English. Even though there is nothing wrong with trying new things, including learning English, which has numerous advantages, particularly in this age of globalization.

In this era of borderless globalization, humans can connect or communicate with anyone, anytime and anywhere as long as the media is connected to the internet. Aside from being a communication tool, like it or not, students need to understand English because a lot of literature needed to enrich knowledge is written in English. For example, scientific articles written in English that are published in international journals, text books in English, scientific or just entertainment broadcasts that are broadcast on various platforms using English media, and so on.

English language skills are needed in developing intercultural communication competence. Intercultural communication competence (ICC) is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in various cultural contexts. Intercultural communication can be simply defined as interpersonal communication where the two communicators have different cultural backgrounds. In the era of globalization, intercultural communication is unavoidable. With the development of information technology and social media, individuals can communicate with anyone with a different cultural background. These cultural differences include espoused values, communication styles, traditions, behavior habits, and language differences.

The importance of mastering English has been proven and the government has made it mandatory for people to learn English from elementary school to university. Infact, Acquiring English literacy skills requires additional time and effort [8].

In short, the benefits of learning English are as follows: 1) Make it easier to communicate with others. Because of its universal nature, English is one of the most widely used languages in the world. So, if we master English, we can communicate with people from various countries easily, 2) Understand technology. By mastering English, we know how to operate a technology such as computers, smartphones, internet, software and other technologies, 3) Career Development. In the current era of globalization, English is quite vital and a mandatory requirement to be able to work in certain companies, for example as Public Relations, presenters, business managers, and other professions. Even though not all jobs require English, mastering English is a plus point in itself which will be very useful for one's career.

The problems which are faced by students of the Faculty of Business and Social Sciences can be explained as follows:

- a. Internal problems : 1) Lack of interest in learning English because English is difficult to learn, 2) There is no time to learn English, 3) There is no partner to learn English, 4) Fear of speaking English because if you make a mistake, other people will laugh at you or be considered stupid, 5) Feeling that English is not very important to learn because they rarely or even do not interact with foreigners.

- b. External problems: 1) Lack of English learning facilities such as the existence of a language lab, 2) library in the new building that prepares light readings in English, 3) Lack of motivation from outside individual students in learning English, 4) Lack of opportunities for students to interact and communicate with students or lecturers who use English as media of communication.

Based on the description above, we held Seminar on improving awarneses and motivation to learn English in developing intercultural communication competence for students of the Faculty of Business and Social Scinece, Universitas Amikom Purwokerto. The implemenation of the seminar is an international community service which was held in collaboration between lecture of communication science study program of Universitas Amikom Purwokerto and Huachiew Chalermprakiet University, Thailand.

## B. IMPLEMENTATION AND METHOD

In general, the method of implementing the community service includes procedures or stages of activities carried out by the Implementation Team (Lecturers and students) of Universitas Amikom Purwokerto [9]. Methods of implementing activities as follows:

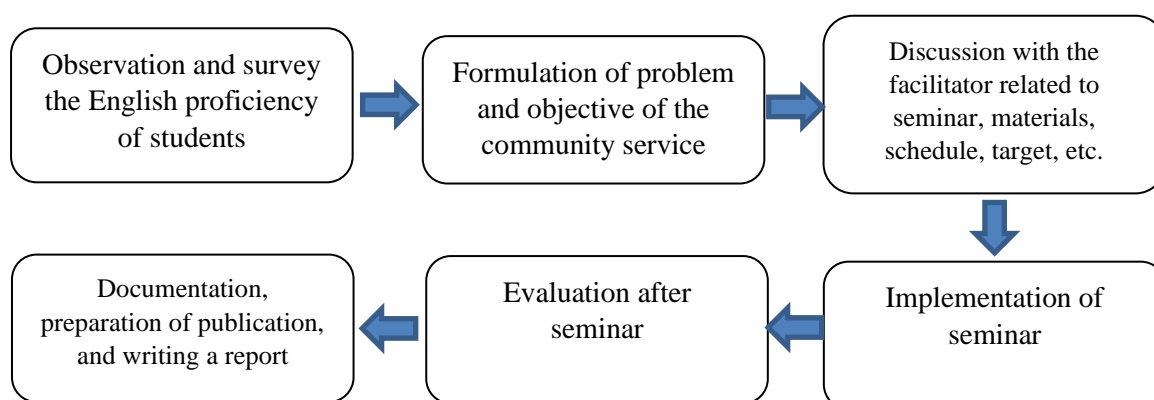


Figure 1. Method and Implementation

Lectures carry out observations of the English language skills of students. Observations were made by conducting interviews with 50 students who were interested in joining the English club organized by the faculty. In addition, we observed students' English skills during the process of learning English in class and during seminars that use English. We formulated problems faced by students in learning English. Based on the formulation of the problems faced by students, it was necessary to have a motivation session by the expert to improve students' awareness and motivation to learn English so that they could build intercultural communication. Evaluation was made to determine the effectiveness of the seminar implementation. Questionnaires were distributed to all participants to find out find out suggestions and input on the implementation of the seminar and subsequent improvements.

## C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The international webinar was held on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023 via zoom meeting. The facilitator of the webinar is Dr. Khwancanok Suebsook, Head of Department of English Studies, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Huachihew Chalermprakiet University, Thailand. She holds a doctoral degree from Thammasat University, Thailand. The reason why she was chosen to be speaker in this international webinar: 1) English is the second language for Thai people like in Indonesia. Other than that, Thai people use Thai scripts in their daily writing. So, it is not that easy for them to learn English. It would be powerful for the facilitator to explain how to learn English until she mastered English. In other words, even though English is not Thai people first language and they less likely to speak English in daily life, they are still motivated to learn English because English is very important. 2) The webinar is also one of implementations of MoU between Universitas Amikom Purwokerto and Huachiew Chalermprakiet University, Thailand.

There were 123 students joint the international webinar. They showed their enthusiasm to join and pay intention to this event. The Head of Communication Science study program delivered her welcoming speech to the speaker and the participants. She stated that English competency is very important in the era of globalization. People can communicate with other people around the world so the intercultural communication cannot be avoided.

The facilitator of the international webinar, Dr. Khwancanok Suebsook explained the following knowledge:

1. The important roles of English are as follows: a) an international language for global communication, b) an official language of a country e.g. The United States, The United Kingdom, The Philippines, India, c) a working language for business, transnational cooperation and international organizations e.g. the ASEAN Community, the United Nations. Those 3 terms are commonly used for classifying different roles of English, the context of English language teaching and the types of language acquisition (how people acquire English language).
2. The use of English can be categorized as ENL, ESL, and EFL. The description is as follows: a) ENL –English as a Native Language. The context / situation where English is used as a native language of people in native English-speaking countries (England, America, Australia, New Zealand) and where English plays a role as a predominant language being widely used in all domains of life. b) ESL –English as a Second Language. The context / situation where English is used or learnt as a second language by non-native English speakers in non-English speaking (the Outer Circle –e.g. the Philippines, Singapore, India and other colonial countries), and where English has played a role in many important domains as an official language, a second language taught in schools. c) EFL –English as a Foreign Language. The context / situation where English is used or learnt as a foreign language by non-native English speakers in non-English speaking (the Expanding Circle- Thailand, Japan, Brunei, Laos, Vietnam, Hong Kong) and where English is used in some particular domains such as education, trade, business areas.

We need to know these contexts: ENL, ESL and EFL as English plays different roles in different countries, knowing the contexts where our interlocutors are from can help an English user get some background information about our interlocutors and English language use in their contexts. E.g. anticipating about the variety of English he/she would use to communicate and his /her cultural backgrounds.

As an information for the participants, the following is global English users

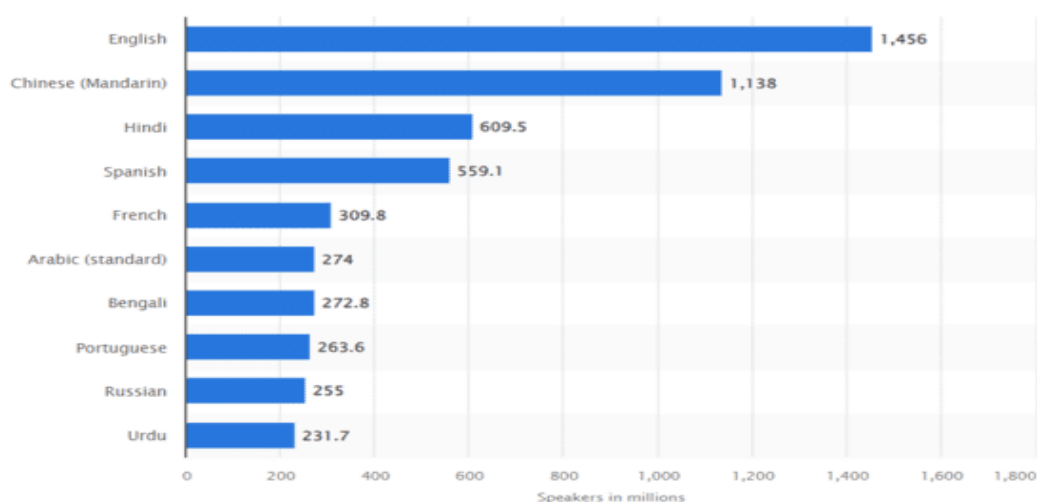


Figure 2. The Most Spoken Languages Worldwide in 2023 (by Speakers in Millions)

Resource:

According to Figure 2, English will be the most widely spoken language in the world in 2023. English becomes a means of communication for people. The speaker emphasized that we should learn English regardless of our circumstances.

### 3. Intercultural communication in globalized workplace

English currently plays a dominant role as a working language in business and transnational corporations. English is a pathway to global markets, stronger competitiveness and professional development [8]. People working in a wide range of areas need to communicate in English in their professional lives [11]. The study concludes that the use of English helps users achieve better intercultural understanding, making intercultural relations clear, productive, and timesaving [12].

The study contributes to the development of the essence of the concept of an international language in its relation to culture, the formulation of factors for a particular language to acquire global status, the development of the notion of a lingua franca, and the promotion of intercultural understanding [13].

### 4. Recommendations for English speakers in intercultural communication

Broader competency is required for an English speaker. Three dimensions to consider when communicating in English in intercultural communication: a) Language awareness- cognitive abilities to negotiate multiple English varieties (from knowledge and exposure to different varieties of English), b) Sociolinguistic sensitivity - awareness of dialect differences, identity. Considerations (e.g. male, female, seniors), contextual constraints (e.g. types of situations), and cultural sensitivity (do & don't), c) Negotiation skills - the skills are such as code switching, speech accommodation (e.g. interpersonal strategies: rephrasing, repair, gestures, clarification, topic change, and so on).

Several questions were raised by participants during the Q&A session, and the facilitator responded to them as well as gave students advice. Most students are not comfortable speaking English. In fact, self-confidence is essential when speaking English. The facilitator suggested that students recognize that English is not their first language. English is a foreign language for Thais and Indonesians. The majority of Indonesians do not speak English on a daily basis. As a result, mistakes in using English or communicating in English are common. People who are not confident in their ability to speak English may be afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at by others. It is acceptable to make mistakes. Making mistakes teaches students how to improve their English.

English is a skill as well as a knowledge. It means that in order to improve our English, we must practice. Practice can help us become fluent in English. The ability to use English confidently is the result of mastering the language [14].

Learning English requires ongoing improvement. It is preferable to know what English skills we lack and want to improve before learning how to improve them. This is beneficial so that the process of improving English skills can be more focused and effective. Listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills are the four aspects of English proficiency that must be studied and mastered properly. In reality, someone may have mastered the ability to write and speak English but lacks mastery of reading and listening skills. Others have an advantage in mastering speaking and reading skills, but not in listening and writing.

It is very simple to evaluate our own abilities. Students should simply consider which of these four aspects is the most difficult for them to master. To make the process of improving our English language skills more effective, it is best to begin by focusing on the aspects of English in which we are less proficient. For example, the first two weeks will be spent solely on learning to read and listen. The following two weeks are spent simply trying to improve your English skills in areas such as writing and speaking that you have already mastered. However, there is nothing wrong if you immediately try to master the four aspects of English proficiency.

When learning a language, students can improve several skills at the same time through a fun learning process. For example, while watching a movie, students can practice both their listening and speaking skills. Listening to music can also help students improve their English skills. When we listen to music, we will learn how to properly pronounce words. Listening to music can also help students



expand their vocabulary. Students can also improve their English skills by playing games. Playing scrabble, for example. Speak English with their friends. We don't have to be afraid of being wrong when we talk in English with our friends. Precisely chatting with friends in English can help students learn and correct each other if they have incorrect word pronunciations. The process of learning English is made more enjoyable by watching movies, making an English diary, and reading English-language books. Reading books is also one of the most effective ways to improve reading and writing skills in English.

Some students were concerned about their English accents. There is debate over whether a British or an American accent is superior. Actually, both are excellent. Neither is superior to the other. We don't have to be concerned about the accent. It is acceptable for us to speak English with an Indonesian accent. The important thing is that we can communicate with one another. We understand what people have said to us, and they understand what we have said to them. If we study English in order to continue our education in the United Kingdom, we will learn British English. We can even see western films with various English accents, some with an American accent and others with a British accent.

It should be noted that both British and American English are perfectly acceptable. Of course, if we learn both language accents, our vocabulary will grow [15]. Here are a few examples: Go on vacation (American: Go on vacation, British: Holidays), Campus (American: University, British: College). Some of these words may be familiar to us, but we are not sure whether they are English or American. Even mentioning the word 'football' can cause confusion; instead, mention soccer or football. Furthermore, the spelling of words differs between British and American English. Color (American English), colour (British English), and so on are all very familiar examples. The following are a poster and some pictures of international webinar:



Figure 3. Poster of the Webinar

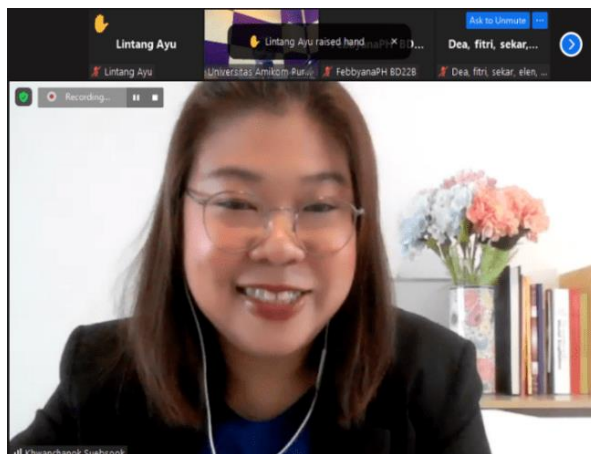


Figure 4. Dr. Khwanchanok Suebsook

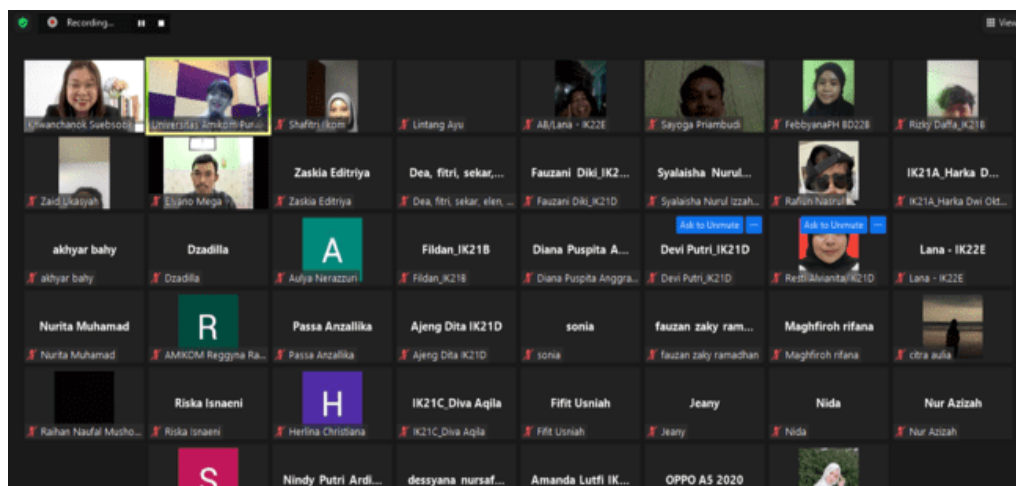


Figure 5: Speaker and Participants in the International Webinar

## CONCLUSION

In order to communicate successfully in intercultural communication, an English user should 1) be aware of the diversity of interlocutors are different in their native language and cultural backgrounds, 2) be open-minded to respect and accommodate to different varieties of English, 3) have language awareness, sociolinguistic sensitivity and negotiation skills or strategies.

The seminar participants were enthusiastic about the international webinar since the speaker delivered seminar material using simple English which was relatively easy to understand with moderate speed (not too fast and not too slow). In addition, if the participants do not understand the meaning, the MC and moderator help translating it into Indonesian language. Based on the evaluation of the semi-narrative participants, they were motivated to improve their English skills either formally through English courses or studying English on campus. In addition, participants can learn English independently by studying on their own via YouTube, online media or in groups with friends who like English or have the same interests.

It is suggested that to further improve the English language skills of the participants, at the Faculty, Study Program level or through the community or Student Association guest lectures are held with native speakers, there are visits to a country that uses English, watching English films together, etc. The role of the lecturer in creating an English-speaking classroom or campus atmosphere at certain moments is expected by most of the seminar participants.

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