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INTERSECTING CULTURES IN EDUCATION: A MIXED METHOD EXPLORATION OF INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY AMONG EDUCATION STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT
This study used mixed methods approach that examined the level of intercultural sensitivity in terms of interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. Thus, a convergent parallel mixed methods design was used since it is a type of design that could gather different but complementary data on the same topic. In quantitative phase, there were 233 education students responded to the study through random sampling. Constructed questionnaires were used to gather quantitative data. In qualitative phase, participants were those seven education students who were selected to join the one-on one in depth interview and seven education students who joined the focus group discussion. The results of this study revealed that education students were highly proficient across various aspects such as interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. Data integration of both quantitative and qualitative data results indicated that there is convergence of findings from both types of data.

KEYWORDS: *intercultural sensitivity, education students, convergent parallel, mixed method study, Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, intercultural sensitivity is increasingly important. A key challenge is the tendency to interpret experiences through one's own cultural lens, leading to misunderstandings. Cultural worldview differences further intensify these challenges. Barriers to intercultural sensitivity include prejudice, anxiety, ethnocentrism, language barriers, and assumptions of similarity. Overcoming these barriers is crucial to ensure effective intercultural communication. In multicultural regions, the demand for international talent with intercultural skills has never been more urgent (Chen et al., 2023).

At the University of Hong Kong, intercultural sensitivity is a growing concern amid increasing cross-cultural interactions. Despite efforts to improve English teaching strategies, there remains a significant lack of intercultural sensitivity, hindering effective communication. Emotional dynamics often disrupt exchanges, and language issues, such as unfamiliar slang and expressions, further complicate interactions, leaving students frustrated and disconnected in their attempts to engage across cultures (Luo et al., 2022).

In the Philippines, the University of Northern Philippines highlights a critical issue faced by international students—intercultural insensitivity among local students. This issue extends beyond academics, affecting international students' overall well-being. A lack of cultural understanding and empathy contributes to stress, anxiety, and depression, creating a hostile social environment that negatively impacts students' mental health and academic experiences (Karaman et al., 2018).

Given society's cultural diversity, the lack of sufficient education on intercultural sensitivity often leads to insensitivity, a growing social concern. Motivated by this, the researcher conducted a mixed-method study to assess intercultural sensitivity levels among education students and explore their experiences navigating cultural differences. The study aims to raise awareness and promote a deeper understanding of intercultural interactions, contributing to both individual and collective growth.

Numerous studies have explored intercultural awareness. Hazaea (2020) investigated methods for enhancing intercultural awareness through critical discourse analysis. Humphreys and Baker (2021) examined how short-term study abroad programs impact intercultural awareness among students. However, none have specifically addressed the critical aspect of students' intercultural sensitivity, an area that deserves more focused attention. The findings will be shared through conferences and relevant agencies to foster academic exchange and maximize the real-world impact of the research.

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Research Questions

1. What is the level of Intercultural sensitivity of the education students?
2. What are the lived experiences of education students with regards to intercultural sensitivity?
3. To what extent does the quantitative data corroborate with the qualitative data?
4. On the basis of the findings of the study, what intervention plan can be proposed?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilized a mixed methods design, which involves integrating both qualitative and quantitative components within the research. Mixing in this context refers to the interconnection of qualitative and quantitative elements to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research issue. This integration is crucial at various stages of the research process to enhance the overall rigor of the study (Creswell & Plano, 2011).

Participants

The study involved Education students from Kapalong College of Agriculture, Sciences, and Technology, with 233 participants for the quantitative phase and 14 for the qualitative phase.

In the quantitative phase, 233 students were sampled from a total of 1,428 Teacher Education Program students: 245 in Mathematics, 360 in Filipino, 366 in BEEd-Generalist, and 457 in English. A statistician determined the sample, including 40 from Mathematics, 59 from Filipino, 60 from BEEd-Generalist, and 75 from English. These students completed surveys assessing their intercultural sensitivity.

For the qualitative phase, 14 students were selected through purposive sampling—seven for in-depth interviews and seven for focus group discussions. Participants volunteered based on interest and met inclusion criteria: enrollment in the teacher education program and current status as a first- to fourth-year student.

Data Collection

The data collection procedure involved several steps, with quantitative and qualitative data gathered concurrently using parallel mixed-method techniques to compare and integrate findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Permission to conduct the study was first secured from the Office of the President at Kapalong College of Agriculture, Sciences, and Technology. Quantitative data was collected using an intercultural sensitivity survey questionnaire. To ensure consistency, the survey was administered to all participants on the same day to avoid mood variations.

Qualitative data collection included focus group discussions and one-on-one in-depth interviews to explore participants' intercultural sensitivity. Participants were asked about their availability and preferred interview locations beforehand. During the interviews, the researcher used prepared enabling questions and follow-up queries to gather comprehensive responses.

Data Analysis

After collecting all the necessary data, tabulation and analysis were conducted. For qualitative data, thematic analysis was employed, while statistical tools were utilized for the quantitative phase.

Descriptive statistics, such as mean and standard deviation, were used to evaluate participants' average responses and the variability of their answers regarding intercultural sensitivity (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

For qualitative data, responses were recorded, organized, and reduced into themes through coding. The data was presented in narratives, tables, or figures. The researcher engaged deeply with the descriptive data, repeatedly refining and categorizing themes to describe the participants' intercultural sensitivity.

This iterative process involved careful reading and rereading of data to ensure accurate theme generation and final analysis (Miles et al., 2014).

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2.Level of Intercultural Sensitivity of the Education Students

Interaction Engagement		Mean	Descriptive Rating
1.	Having an open mind to people from different cultures.	4.41	Very High
2.	Showing support with people from different cultures through verbal and nonverbal engagement.	4.22	High
3.	Engaging myself towards different cultures.	4.12	High
4.	Engaging myself with people from different cultures without hesitations.	4.10	High
5.	Avoiding situations where I will have to deal with culturally distinct person.	3.86	High
Category Mean		4.14	High
Respect for Cultural Differences			
1.	Respecting people with different cultures with their own holidays and celebrations.	4.32	Very High
2.	Allowing people with different cultures to do their traditions freely.	4.06	High
3.	Keeping an open mind and learning about different ways of life.	4.11	High
4.	Respecting the values of people from different cultures.	4.25	High
5.	Practicing self-awareness on my own beliefs and biases to not offend other people.	4.02	High
Category Mean		4.15	High
Interaction Confidence			
1.	Interacting with people from different cultures with confidence and respect.	4.24	High
2.	Finding it amazing to talk in front of people with different cultures.	3.96	High
3.	Knowing what to say when interacting with people from different cultures.	3.96	High
4.	Socializing myself as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures.	4.00	High
5.	Finding it easy to communicate with people in different cultures.	3.92	High
Category Mean		4.02	High
Interaction Enjoyment			
1.	Feeling happy when interacting with people from different cultures.	4.29	Very High
2.	Enjoying myself seeing people with different cultures perform their traditions and celebrate.	4.10	High
3.	Trying to understand their dialect to enjoy talking to them.	3.89	High
4.	Enjoying the variety and authentic food with people from different cultures like Muslim, Ata, Manubo, etc.	3.87	High
5.	Finding it good to talk and interact with people from different cultures.	3.90	High
Category Mean		4.01	High

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Interaction Attentiveness			
1.	Trying to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures.	4.01	High
2.	Knowing the do's and don'ts of people with different cultures.	3.98	High
3.	Observing when interacting with people from different cultures.	3.96	High
4.	Talking with people from different cultures with sensitivity.	4.05	High
5.	Observing my hand gestures and words in talking to people from different cultures.	3.95	High
Category Mean		3.99	High
OVERALL		4.06	High

Intercultural sensitivity among education students is high, indicating their strong ability to recognize, understand, and respect cultural differences. Zhang et al. (2024) and Magsanay et al. (2024) show that exposure to diverse cultures through coursework and field experiences fosters cultural appreciation and links cultural values to sensitivity.

Students also score high in *interaction engagement*, actively participating in cross-cultural interactions. He et al. (2023) and Van Melle & Ferreira (2023) highlight that individuals with high intercultural sensitivity engage meaningfully with others from different backgrounds, improving communication and understanding. This emphasizes the need to develop these skills in educational programs.

Respect for cultural differences is also evident. Hjerm et al. (2020) and Alrasheedi (2021) note that students value diversity, overcoming stereotypes and building relationships across cultures through hands-on learning and proactive engagement.

Interaction confidence is high, boosted by immersion programs and practical experiences. Lash et al. (2020) and Fantini (2020) suggest these experiences enhance students' confidence in cross-cultural communication and enable them to foster inclusive environments.

Interaction enjoyment is another strength, with Li et al. (2020) and Feng et al. (2023) noting that students who enjoy intercultural interactions adopt culturally responsive teaching methods, promoting inclusivity in classrooms.

Finally*, interaction attentiveness* is high, as students demonstrate mindfulness during cross-cultural exchanges. Akcin (2023) and Al-Naabi et al. (2023) show that attentive students can adjust to cultural norms, facilitating effective cross-cultural dialogue.

Table 3. Lived Experiences of the Education Students in Regard to the Intercultural Sensitivity

Probed issues	Core ideas	Code/ Category	Essential Theme	Theory
Strategies in communicating well with people from different cultures	• Adopting culturally sensitive communication • Enhancing communication by being culturally sensitive	Culturally sensitive communication strategies	Responsible Speech Communication	Communicative Competence Theory
	• Using clear speech and mindful gestures, reflecting patience and respect • Prioritizing inclusive and neutral language • Being mindful and ensuring that one's words do not offend the person they are speaking with.	Mindful Language Choices and Gestures		
	• Recognizing the importance of understanding and respecting different cultures	Understanding diverse cultures	Cultivating Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity	Intercultural Communication Competence Theory

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	• Embracing diverse cultures without judgment prevents stereotyping communication • Understanding beliefs to tailor approach and responses accordingly			
	• Respecting sacred spaces and interacting with indigenous groups. • Respecting others' cultural norms and practices • Showing empathy towards traditions of others	Respecting Norms and Practices		
	• Being sensitive to ensure clear and respectful communication in a global context • Prioritizing active listening, respect for cultural differences and perspectives	Sensitivity to Diverse Perspectives		
	• Employing background checks on different cultures • Proactively seeking clarification on any confusion or lack of understanding from others • Employing research on different cultures in a specific area • Conducting background checks to ensure effective communication	Background Checks and Research		
Notable struggles encountered in communicating with people from different cultures	• Potential misunderstandings or lack of awareness • Cultural misunderstandings due to questioning or stereotyping of certain cultures • Misunderstandings stemming from cultural differences	Misunderstanding during conversation	Language Barriers in Communication	Communication Accommodation Theory
	• Difficulty in selecting appropriate words • Need to clarify unfamiliar terms or expressions • How to respond appropriately to their cultural nuances and expressions	Communication Encoding Issues		
	• Language barriers complicating communication due to diverse language • Uncertainty about whether they understand our language or what is being said.	Language Difference		

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Overcoming changes in communicating with people from different cultures	• Taking the lead in adapting to changes in communication • Adapting one's communication style to foster a comfortable and inclusive atmosphere • Adapting to their cultural norms and practices	Adapting Communication Inputs	Adaptability and Adjustment in Communication Style	Communication Accommodation Theory
	• Through adjustment and adaptation • Deeming essential to adjust the communication style to accommodate sensitivity	Adjusting Communication Style		
Techniques and strategies in handling difficult circumstances in communicating with people from different cultures	• Being a respectful and compassionate communicator • Respect is crucial for better communication • Approaching interactions with respect and empathy	Respectful Communication	Promoting Respect in Cross-Cultural Communication	Face Negotiation Theory
	• Communicate respectfully, acknowledging and respecting the cultural beliefs of others • Emphasizing the importance of understanding cultural norms and communication styles	Respecting Cultures		
	• Providing them with respectful and attentive treatment • Adapting communication styles and approaches to be respectful and sensitive to cultural differences.	Respectful treatment and approach		
Lessons learn in adjusting feeling in to deal with people from different cultures	• Emphasizing the importance of maintaining emotional control • Remaining neutral to avoid hurt feelings, and • Learning to manage one's emotions when interacting with people from different cultures	Maintaining and Managing Emotions	Emotional Intelligence in Intercultural Communication	Emotion Regulation Theory
	• Ability to adjust emotions • Adjusting feelings when interacting with people from different cultures through open-mindedness	Adjusting Feelings		

Responsible Speech Communication. The study found that participants practiced responsible speech, reflecting intercultural sensitivity through careful word choice and respect for cultural context. This helped avoid misunderstandings and offense. Their use of inclusive language promoted positive interactions, aligning with Hymes' (1972) Communicative Competence Theory, which emphasizes the importance of modulating speech for mutual understanding. Cao (2023) noted that interculturally sensitive individuals use empathy and respect in diverse settings, while Mykhalchuk and Ivashkevych (2020) highlighted that such individuals understand cross-cultural communication norms, fostering inclusive dialogue.

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Cultivating Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity. The study showed that intercultural sensitive individuals increase their awareness of cultural practices, enhancing respectful engagement. This aligns with Martin and Hammer's (1989) Intercultural Communication Competence Theory, which emphasizes cultural self-awareness for effective communication. Alam (2020) and Hajeer et al. (2023) support this, suggesting that higher intercultural sensitivity improves appreciation of cultural diversity and communication.

Language Barriers in Communication. Participants faced language barriers, prompting them to adjust their communication strategies. This aligns with Giles' (1980) Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), suggesting individuals modify their communication style to enhance understanding. Zhang and Zhou (2021) and Akylbek et al. (2023) support this, noting that language barriers drive individuals to simplify language and use nonverbal cues to improve communication, fostering intercultural competence.

Adaptability and Adjustment in Communication Style. The study found that participants adapted their communication styles to enhance intercultural sensitivity, aligning with Giles' (1980) CAT. Presbitero (2021) and Uecker and Schmidt (2019) confirm that adapting communication behaviors strengthens intercultural sensitivity and understanding.

Promoting Respect in Cross-Cultural Communication. The study revealed that intercultural sensitive education students promoted respect through thoughtful communication. This supports Ting-Toomey's (1988) Face Negotiation Theory, emphasizing facework in maintaining positive interactions across cultures. Tajeddin and Alemi (2021) and Serpell (2021) suggest that individuals with higher intercultural sensitivity are better equipped to engage respectfully in cross-cultural communication.

Emotional Intelligence in Intercultural Communication. The study found that education students with intercultural sensitivity used emotional intelligence to manage their emotions in communication, avoiding offense. This supports Gross's (2008) Emotion Regulation Theory, which suggests emotion management helps maintain respectful interactions. Şahin and Akçay Bekiroğlu (2023) and He et al. (2023) emphasize that emotional intelligence enables individuals to adapt their communication style and foster better cross-cultural understanding and trust.

Table 4.Joint Display Salient Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Aspect or Focal Points	Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Findings	Nature of Data Integration	Axiological Implications
Students' intercultural sensitivity in terms of interaction engagement	Table 2 on the level of intercultural sensitivity of education students in terms of interaction engagement item no. 1 about *having an open mind to people from different cultures* with a mean of 4.41	Table 9 on lived experiences of education students in regard to the intercultural sensitivity, has code of *understanding diverse cultures and sensitivity to diverse perspectives* highlighting the essential theme *cultivating cultural awareness and sensitivity*.	Merging-Converging	Students with intercultural sensitivity understand diverse culture and develops openness during interactions
	Table 2 on the level of intercultural sensitivity of education students in terms of interaction engagement item no. 2 *showing support with people from different cultures through verbal and non-verbal engagement* with a mean of 4.22.	Table 9 on lived experiences of education students in regard to the intercultural sensitivity, with a code of *culturally sensitive communication strategies and mindful language choices and gesture* highlighting the essential theme *responsible speech communication*.	Merging-Converging	Students pay respect with people with different cultures by cultivating responsible verbal and non-verbal communication during conversation
Students' intercultural sensitivity in terms of respect for cultural differences	Table 3 on the level of intercultural sensitivity of the education students in terms of respect for cultural differences item no. 2 *allowing people with different cultures to do their*	Table 9 on lived experiences of education students in regard to the intercultural sensitivity, with a code of *respecting norms and practices* highlighting the essential theme of *cultivating cultural awareness and sensitivity.*	Merging-Converging	Students manifest intercultural sensitivity though allowing people to do their traditions as form of acknowledgement and respect on each other's norms and practices.

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	traditions freely with a mean of 4.06.	Table 7 on lived experiences of education students in regard to the intercultural sensitivity, having a code of *respecting cultures and respectful treatment and approach* highlighting the essential theme of *promoting respect in cross-cultural communication*.		
Students' intercultural sensitivity in terms of interaction confidence	Table 4 on the level of intercultural sensitivity of the education students in terms of interaction confidence item no. 1 *interacting with people from different cultures with confidence and respect* with a mean of 4.24	Table 9 on lived experiences of education students in regard to the intercultural sensitivity, with a code of *respectful communication* highlighting the essential theme of *promoting respect in cross-cultural communication.*	Merging-Converging	Students with intercultural sensitivity demonstrate confidence and respect in cross-cultural communication contexts.
	Table 4 on the level of intercultural sensitivity of the education students in terms of interaction confidence item no. 3 *knowing what to say when interacting with people from different cultures* with a mean of 3.96.	Table 9 on lived experiences of education students in regard to the intercultural sensitivity, with a code of *adjusting communication style* highlighting the essential theme *intercultural sensitivity for respectful and effective communication*.	Merging-Converging	Students exemplifies knowledge on their interaction with different cultures by adjusting and adapting communication styles to ensure effective communication.

Students' Intercultural Sensitivity in Terms of Interaction Engagement. Students with intercultural sensitivity understand diverse cultures and develop openness during interactions, fostering respect for cultural diversity. Plamadeala (2023) noted that this understanding promotes a willingness to learn from different perspectives. Jensen et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of openness and flexibility in intercultural interactions, helping build positive relationships. Students navigate diverse cultural contexts effectively, enhancing mutual understanding. Shen (2023) highlighted the role of respectful verbal and non-verbal communication, ensuring culturally appropriate exchanges. Van Maele et al. (2021) stressed mindfulness in communication to foster mutual respect and understanding.

Students' Intercultural Sensitivity in Terms of Respect for Cultural Differences. Students demonstrate intercultural sensitivity by respecting cultural traditions and norms, reflecting an ethnorelative mindset. Dang (2020) noted that supporting others' traditions fosters mutual respect, essential for effective cross-cultural interactions. Balakrishnan (2022) argued that awareness of cultural differences helps students navigate diverse contexts, creating appreciative environments that validate cultural values.

Students' Intercultural Sensitivity in Terms of Interaction Confidence. Students with intercultural sensitivity show confidence in cross-cultural communication. Openness, respect, and curiosity form the basis of intercultural competence. Lugman (2023) observed that such attitudes enable students to engage confidently and appreciate diverse perspectives. Nelson and Luetz (2021) emphasized the importance of a non-judgmental mindset, supporting successful cross-cultural adaptation. Werle et al. (2023) noted that adapting communication styles is essential for effective engagement, a key indicator of intercultural sensitivity. Yu (2021) stressed the need for students to adjust communication to cultural contexts, demonstrating appreciation for the complexities of cross-cultural interactions.

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Intervention Scheme Based on the Findings of the Study				
Problems	**Objectives**	**Activities**	**Person In-Charge**	**Time Element**
Lack sufficient awareness and understanding of cultural differences	To increase cultural awareness and sensitivity among education students	Intercultural Immersion Experiences. A series of organized field trips or outreach opportunities are facilitated twice per academic year, exposing education students to diverse cultural communities, traditions, and perspectives through immersive learning experiences.	School Organizations	Once every semester
Lack of effective cross-cultural communication skills	To provide education students with practical strategies for communicating and building connections across cultural differences.	Cross-Cultural Communication Workshops and Simulations. Mandatory workshops and simulation activities are held each semester for all education students, providing hands-on training in cross-cultural communication skills, such as active listening, nonverbal awareness, and adapting communication styles to different cultural norms through role-playing scenarios like parent-teacher conferences or addressing misunderstandings, enabling students to effectively communicate and build positive relationships across cultural differences.	School Organizations	Once every semester

Intercultural Immersion Experience. Intercultural immersion offers hands-on learning, exposing education students to diverse cultures and perspectives. Salar et al. (2020) noted that such experiences challenge biases, fostering empathy and respect for cultural differences. Fisher et al. (2021) highlighted that immersion deepens understanding and equips students with skills to navigate cross-cultural interactions, enhancing interpersonal and professional competence.

Cross-Cultural Communication Workshops and Simulations. Workshops and simulations improve students' cross-cultural communication. Judd and McKinnon (2021) emphasized that workshops build cultural sensitivity and prepare students for real-life interactions. Akumbu et al. (2023) highlighted simulations as active learning tools, offering safe spaces to test strategies and adapt communication in diverse cultural scenarios.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, the study shows that education students exhibit strong intercultural sensitivity in various aspects, including interaction engagement and respect for cultural differences. Thematic analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data confirmed these findings, with key themes such as responsible speech, cultural awareness, and adaptability. Based on these results, interventions like intercultural immersion and communication workshops are recommended to further enhance students' cultural awareness and communication skills.

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