

Promoting Intercultural Communication in CCU Classroom of EFL students by Using VCT

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Abstract

Background

Adapting to diverse communication practices prevents conflicts and promotes smoother interactions. It necessitates innovations like Virtual Culture Tour (VCT) in CCU learning. VCT provides real-world and interactive cultural learning. This research explores VCT's implementation in EFL CCU classrooms to enhance intercultural communication and surveys student responses.

Methodology

The research uses a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative data from CCU classroom observations and interviews at UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta and Maritim Class of Global English Course, and quantitative data from questionnaires surveying the students' responses.

Findings

The use of VCT in CCU classrooms has effectively promoted intercultural communication for EFL students. In formal classes at PBI UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta, VCT followed a structured process, including guided tours and virtual interactions with native speakers. Non-formal classes offered more flexibility, allowing students to explore at their own pace and engage in follow-up communication activities. Students responded positively, with 95.82% strongly agreeing on VCT's effectiveness. These findings highlight VCT's success in enhancing intercultural communication.


Conclusion

The use of VCT in CCU classrooms has promoted EFL students' intercultural communication in both formal and non-formal learning contexts because of its flexible steps of implementation. It encouraged students to respond positively to the use of VCT in CCU classrooms.

Originality

This study highlights the novelty of using VCT as a digital tool to overcome space, time, and financial barriers in promoting intercultural communication in CCU classrooms. It also explores VCT's implementation in formal and non-formal learning settings and surveys students' responses.

Keywords : Intercultural communication, CCU, VCT

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1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication has become a pressing issue in today's increasingly globalized world. As people from diverse cultural backgrounds interact more frequently, misunderstandings and conflicts often arise due to differences in communication styles, values, and social norms. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, these challenges are particularly significant. Many EFL learners must navigate cultural nuances while acquiring language skills, making it crucial for them to understand and adapt to different communication practices. This understanding helps prevent miscommunications that can lead to conflict, promoting smoother interactions in both personal and professional contexts (Dalimunthe 2022; Ma and Lucietto 2024; Sarwari et al. 2024).

The importance of intercultural communication for EFL students extends beyond avoiding misunderstandings (Li 2023). It also enhances their ability to engage meaningfully in a multicultural environment. By learning to appreciate and respect cultural differences, EFL students develop empathy and cultural sensitivity, which are vital skills in today's interconnected world (Sarwari et al 2024 ; Ma and Lucietto 2024; Dalimunthe 2022). These abilities not only improve their language proficiency but also prepare them for future opportunities in international settings. Whether in business, education, or social interactions, the competence in intercultural communication equips EFL students with the tools needed to thrive in diverse environments and fosters a more inclusive and harmonious global community (Allen 2021; Li 2023).

Therefore, the English Education Departments in Indonesia generally include the Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) course. CCU is designed to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the diverse cultural practices, beliefs, and values that exist around the world (Kusherdiana and Misran 2020; Penyusun 2021). This course aims to enhance students' cultural awareness and sensitivity, enabling them to navigate and appreciate the complexities of different cultural contexts. By exploring a variety of cultural traditions, students learn to recognize and respect the differences and similarities that characterize human societies. Such a course typically covers topics such as cultural identity, communication styles, social norms, and the impact of globalization on cultural practices. The importance of a Cross-Culture Understanding Course lies in its ability to prepare students for a globalized world where intercultural interactions are increasingly common. As societies become more interconnected, individuals are more likely to encounter people from different cultural backgrounds in both personal and professional settings. This course equips

students with the skills and knowledge necessary to communicate effectively and build meaningful relationships across cultural boundaries. It fosters an environment of inclusivity and mutual respect, which is essential for reducing cultural misunderstandings and conflicts (Kusherdiana and Misran 2020).

Incorporating technology into a Cross-Culture Understanding Course is crucial for actualizing the teaching and learning activities in a dynamic and engaging manner. The use of digital technology-based media in teaching Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) has been implemented at the English Education Study Program of UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta and at Maritime Class of Global English Course Surakarta. In efforts to foster intercultural communication, CCU lessons are delivered using Virtual Culture Tours (VCT) as a medium. This innovative tool and resource enhances the educational experience and make cultural learning more accessible and interactive (Anggara and Zamroni 2021; Catalano and Barriga 2021). It transports students to different cultural settings, allowing them to experience and explore diverse cultures firsthand. This immersive technology also makes abstract cultural concepts more tangible and memorable. By VCT, educators can create a dynamic and inclusive learning environment that prepares students for effective intercultural communication and collaboration (Evenddy and Nurlely 2022; Maulana et al. 2023).

This research focuses on describing the use of VCT in CCU classrooms of EFL to promote intercultural communication and surveying how the EFL students respond to it. Compared to some related previous studies, the research is novel in terms of using Virtual Tours in CCU learning. Here, the use of VCT in CCU learning is not merely intended to invite students to visit the provided tourist objects, but it has a further purpose of promoting intercultural communication among EFL students studying CCU in both formal and non-formal classes, especially in UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta and Global English Course.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication refers to the process of exchanging information and meaning across cultural boundaries (Allen 2021; Li 2023). According Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (Sofyan 2023) intercultural communication occurs when an individual conveys a message to another individual or group belonging to a different culture. More specifically, intercultural communication involves interactions between people whose cultures and symbolic systems differ significantly in the context of communication. It refers to the

communication that takes place between individuals or groups from distinct cultural backgrounds (Bojadjiev et al. 2023; Dalimunthe 2022; Ma and Lucietto 2024; Sarwari et al. 2024) It involves the interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds, each bringing their own unique perspectives, values, and communication styles. This form of communication is essential in an increasingly globalized world, where interactions between individuals from diverse cultures are commonplace. Intercultural communication not only encompasses verbal communication but also non-verbal cues, body language, and contextual understanding, making it a complex and multifaceted field.

The importance of intercultural communication lies in its ability to foster mutual understanding and respect among people from different cultures (Ibrahim 2022). In a world where cultural misunderstandings can lead to conflict and division, effective intercultural communication promotes harmony and collaboration. It allows individuals to appreciate the diversity of cultural practices and perspectives, leading to more inclusive and equitable interactions. This understanding is crucial in various contexts, including international business, education, and diplomacy, where effective communication can lead to successful outcomes and stronger relationships (Sarwari et al 2024 ; Ma and Lucietto 2024; Dalimunthe 2022).

In educational settings, intercultural communication plays a key role in preparing students for a globalized world (Tiurikova 2021). Educators who understand and implement intercultural communication strategies can create more inclusive classrooms that respect and celebrate cultural diversity. This approach helps students develop cultural awareness and sensitivity, essential skills for their future professional and personal lives. Moreover, intercultural communication in education encourages students to think critically about their own cultural assumptions and biases, fostering a more open-minded and empathetic worldview. By engaging with diverse perspectives, students learn to navigate cross-cultural interactions effectively, which is vital in increasingly interconnected societies. This process not only enhances their academic and interpersonal skills but also equips them to become responsible global citizens who can contribute positively to multicultural environments (Dalimunthe 2022 ; Sarwari et al 2024).

For EFL students, intercultural communication is of paramount importance because it equips them with the ability to navigate and thrive in a globally connected world. As EFL students often interact with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, understanding and

respecting cultural differences becomes crucial. Effective intercultural communication helps prevent misunderstandings that can arise from varying communication styles, social norms, and values. This understanding fosters smoother and more respectful interactions, both in personal and professional contexts. By mastering intercultural communication, EFL students can enhance their language skills and develop the cultural sensitivity needed to engage meaningfully in a multicultural environment. It also prepares EFL students for future opportunities in international settings. EFL students who are adept at intercultural communication are better positioned to succeed in such environments. They can build stronger relationships, negotiate effectively, and work collaboratively with colleagues, clients, and partners from around the world. This competence not only makes them more attractive to potential employers but also contributes to creating a more inclusive and harmonious global community. Therefore, the importance of intercultural communication for EFL students cannot be overstated, as it is integral to their personal growth, professional success, and the fostering of mutual understanding across cultures.

2.2 Virtual Culture Tours (VCT)

Virtual Culture Tours (VCT) is a digital platform that allows users to explore and experience different cultures from around the world through immersive virtual tours (Anggara and Zamroni 2021). These applications often utilize advanced technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and 360-degree videos to provide interactive and engaging cultural experiences. A virtual tour is a simulation of a location that provides a 360-degree view, allowing users to explore the area as if walking through it virtually. It incorporates elements such as panoramas, videos, photos, floor plans, maps, and sound, accessible via computers, televisions, or smartphones. Virtual tours can be created using cameras, smartphones, drones, and other recording devices, and are typically hosted on websites, enabling access anytime and anywhere. They are especially useful for guiding users through desired locations remotely (Ewenddy and Nurlely 2022; Kurniawan and Suprihadi 2023; Serafino Renard Siahaya 2024). Users can visit famous landmarks, historical sites, museums, and cultural festivals, all from the comfort of their own homes or classrooms. The goal of these applications is to enhance cultural awareness and understanding by providing a more accessible and interactive way to experience diverse cultural traditions and histories (Castagnetti et al. 2017).

In a cross-culture understanding class, a virtual culture tour application can be an invaluable tool for both educators and students. These applications can bring cultural

concepts to life, allowing students to virtually visit places they are studying and gain a deeper, more personal understanding of different cultures (Catalano and Barriga 2021). This immersive experience can make learning more engaging and memorable, fostering a deeper appreciation and understanding of the cultural content being studied. In addition, VCT also promotes interactive and experiential learning. Students can participate in virtual festivals, interact with digital representations of cultural artifacts, and even engage in simulated cultural practices, such as traditional dances or cooking demonstrations. These interactive elements encourage students to actively engage with the material, rather than passively consuming information. Moreover, virtual tours can be tailored to specific learning objectives, allowing educators to create customized experiences that align with their curriculum and enhance the educational value of the lessons (Wibowo et al. 2020).

Additionally, VCT offers a more inclusive and accessible way to experience different cultures. They can be particularly beneficial in educational settings where resources for physical travel are limited (Maulana et al. 2023; Zahara and Hamdu 2022). Students from diverse backgrounds and with varying physical abilities can all equally participate in virtual cultural experiences, breaking down barriers to cultural education. Furthermore, these applications can be continuously updated with new content, ensuring that the cultural information remains current and relevant. By integrating virtual culture tours into cross-culture understanding classes, educators can provide students with a dynamic and comprehensive approach to learning about the rich tapestry of global (Maulana et al. 2023; Pangestu and Rahmi 2022).

2.3 Cross-Culture Understanding (CCU)

The Cross-Culture Understanding (CCU) course at the English Education Study Program of UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta is a vital component of the curriculum, designed to enrich students' comprehension of the cultural contexts in which English is spoken. This course, worth 2 SKS (Semester Credit Units), focuses on providing students with an in-depth understanding of cultural elements from countries where English is the native language, specifically the United States and Australia (Penyusun 2021). CCU is also taught in several foreign language courses, both formally and informally. One of the foreign language courses that includes CCU learning is the Global English Course, particularly in the Maritim Class. This is a specialized class that trains students' English skills for careers in international maritime industries. By integrating cultural insights with language learning, the course aims

to prepare students for more effective and meaningful communication in English-speaking environments (Kusherdiana and Misran 2020).

One of the primary objectives of the CCU course is to introduce students to various cultural elements of the USA and Australia (Penyusun 2021). These include, but are not limited to, social norms, traditions, values, and daily practices. Understanding these cultural aspects is crucial for EFL students, as it helps them to comprehend the underlying contexts of language use, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references that are prevalent in native English communication. This cultural literacy enhances their ability to interpret and produce language that is culturally appropriate and contextually relevant (Allen 2021).

The course employs a range of teaching methods to ensure a comprehensive and engaging learning experience. Among these methods is the innovative use of VCT (Catalano and Barriga 2021). This digital tool allows students to virtually explore significant cultural sites and events in the USA and Australia, providing an immersive learning experience that goes beyond traditional classroom instruction. Through VCT, students can visually and interactively engage with the cultural landscapes of these countries, fostering a deeper connection and understanding of their cultural dynamics interactive (Anggara and Zamroni 2021; Catalano and Barriga 2021).

3. REVIEW METHOD

In investigating the use of VCT in promoting international communication in CCU classrooms, the researchers adopt a mixed-method approach of Qualitative-quantitative model. The first is employed to describe how the VCT is used in the CCU classrooms based on observation and interview, while the second is used to survey the students' response on the benefits of using VCT based on the result of questionnaire. This study is conducted at the English Education Study Program at UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta during the 2023-2024 academic year, specifically the third-semester students and at Maritime Class of Global English Course Surakarta. These two locations were chosen to allow the researcher to obtain a varied description and perspective on the implementation of VCT in CCU learning in both formal and non-formal classroom settings.

4. FINDINGS

From the result of observation confirmed by the result of the interviews with the lecturers and students, the use of VCT in CCU classrooms significantly enhance intercultural communication for EFL students. Here is a clear and detailed explanation of the steps

involved in the implementation of VCT at formal class of CCU course at the third semester of PBI UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta:

4.1 Preparation and Setup

After opening the class, the lecturer asked the students to install the VCT App on their devices. The lecturers helped the students by providing clear instructions on how to download and install the app. Familiarizing the students with the Interface, the lecturers and the students spend some time exploring the app's interface. The lecturers conducted a brief walkthrough, highlighting essential features such as navigation tools, virtual tour selections, and interactive elements.

4.2 Selecting Virtual Tours

After giving the students time to familiarize themselves with the features available in VCT, the lecturers selected the virtual tour destination that align with the learning objectives. There are two countries presented in the application, Australia and USA as showed in the following picture:



Figure 1 The tour destinations in VCT

For each country, there are seven cultural tour destinations encompassing the seven cultural components, which include:

- a. Language System. This menu invites the students to explore the languages used in daily communication in Australia and USA. In Australia and USA, English is the main language besides some other languages that are very frequently used daily by several community groups.
- b. Knowledge/Education System. This menu invites the students to know about the education and knowledge system in Australia and USA.
- c. Technology System, Tools, and Innovations. This menu provides the students with technological developments and everyday tools used in Australia and USA.
- d. Art System. This menu invites the students to venturing artistic objects or places, traditional dances, art galleries, and other art-related aspects in Australia and USA.
- e. Livelihood System. This menu presents the livelihoods and work styles of people in Australia and USA.
- f. Religious System. This menu invites the students to see a graph of religions in Australia and USA, the religious life of Christians, Muslims, Atheists, Jews, and Buddhists as religions with large populations in Australia and USA, and a portrait of religious freedom and tolerance among religious adherents.
- g. Kinship and Social Organization System. This menu brings the students to understand about various rules of kinship relationships, marriage relationships, ways of interacting within the family, including general table manners in Australia and America.

Some of the cultural components presented by VCT can be seen in the following figure:

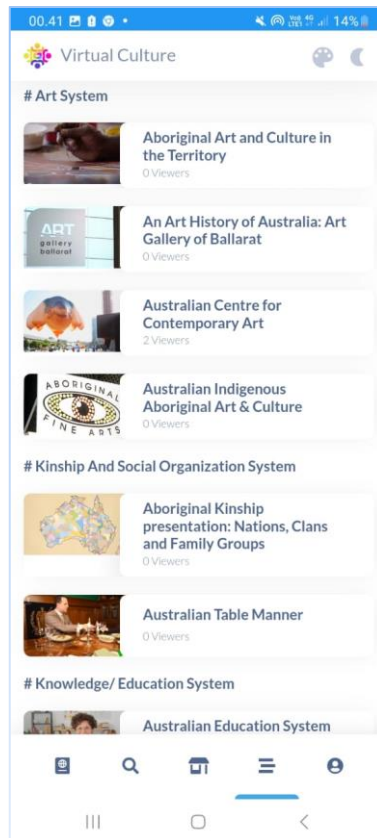


Figure 2 The cultural components presented in VCT

The lecturer provided students with background information about the selected tour. He also explained why it is relevant to the CCU course and what cultural elements they would focus on.

4.3 Guiding an interactive Tour

The lecturer and students launched the virtual tour during the class. Sometimes, he projected the tour on a screen for a shared experience and encouraged students to interact with the virtual tour by clicking on informational icons, watching embedded videos, and reading descriptions. The lecturer sometimes provided live commentary, adding context and highlighting important cultural aspects. At some points, the lecturer paused the tour to discuss particular cultural features. He asked open-ended questions to stimulate critical thinking and intercultural dialogue.

4.4 Independent Virtual Tour

In this step, the lecturer provides students with the opportunity to navigate and experience virtual space independently, allowing them to become more familiar with the features available within the virtual tour platform. This approach encourages students to explore at

their own pace, fostering self-directed learning as they can investigate areas of particular interest, revisit locations, and absorb information more thoroughly. Additionally, this independent experience supports a deeper engagement with the content and promotes digital literacy skills as students interact with various tools and resources in a virtual setting.

4.5 Follow-up Activities

The lecturer organized a series of cultural exchange projects, enabling students to interact directly with arranged native speakers from the cultures they were studying. These exchanges took place through Google Meet, providing a convenient and accessible platform for live conversations. By engaging in real-time dialogue with native speakers, students could practice language skills, learn authentic expressions, and gain first-hand insights into cultural practices, beliefs, and values. This experience not only improved their linguistic proficiency but also deepened their cultural understanding, allowing them to appreciate nuances that might be missed in textbooks alone. Through these sessions, students were encouraged to ask questions, share their own perspectives, and discuss various topics, ranging from daily life and traditions to global issues affecting their respective cultures.

On the other hand, the implementation of VCT in non-formal class of CCU was simpler compared to its implementation in formal class as previously explained. The following are the steps for using VCT in non-formal classes of Maritime Class at Global English Course, aimed at promoting the students' intercultural communication skills:

a. Preparation and Setup

During the setup phase, the instructor guided students in downloading and installing the VCT app on their devices. He provided clear instructions, helping students troubleshoot any issues with installation. After installation, both the instructor and students spent time familiarizing themselves with the app's interface. The instructor highlighted key features, including navigation tools, options for virtual tour destinations, and interactive elements within the app. The initial stage went smoothly as no difficulties were encountered since the VCT application is indeed designed to be easy to install and use on various types of devices.

b. Conducting Virtual Tours based on students' preferences

Unlike the previous CCU classes, in this class, the selection of tour destinations and the implementation of the tour were carried out directly based on students'

preferences. There was no strict guidance during the tour. The instructor simply reminded students not to skip any information available throughout the virtual tour. The students were given an extended session to complete the tour, with the option to repeat or continue it outside of class time, and they were encouraged to ask questions about anything unclear or confusing during the tour. The instructor also informed the students that in the next session, they would have the opportunity to practice direct communication with two native speakers from the countries they visited virtually. This aimed to initiate intercultural communication, supported by the CCU knowledge they had gained from using the VCT. In this step, the students felt free to visit Australia and USA virtually and see how diverse the culture in those countries compared to their own culture.

c. Interactive Activities

The instructor paused the tour after 45 minutes because the course session was coming to an end. At this stage, the instructor posed several questions and asked students to respond based on their exploration of the virtual tour. The questions included students' assessments of which education system they preferred between the two countries, whether they noticed any distinctive artistic features from one of the countries, and which country they found more interesting. These questions were designed to encourage students to reflect on their experiences and articulate their thoughts regarding the cultural elements they encountered.

d. Follow-up Activities

The instructor encouraged students to research specific cultural aspects that intrigued them by connecting students with native speakers through online platforms. This activity was conducted to deepen their intercultural experience by providing students with authentic insights and perspectives, allowing them to engage directly with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. By facilitating these conversations, the instructor sought to deepen students' intercultural understanding and enhance their global awareness, fostering not only language skills but also a more profound appreciation for cultural diversity. This approach encouraged students to view cultural learning as an active, engaging process, bridging theoretical knowledge with real-world experiences. In this activity, the instructor observed how the students practiced their intercultural communication skills, noting how the newly acquired knowledge about their

conversation partner's culture from participating in VCT could prevent them from experiencing miscommunication caused by cultural background differences.

Responding to those activities of using VCT in CCU classrooms, the 96 students as respondents have shown overwhelmingly positive. The interactive and immersive nature of virtual tours has made learning about different cultures more engaging and enjoyable. Many students have expressed that the visual and experiential elements of the VCT provide a deeper understanding of cultural contexts compared to traditional textbook learning. By virtually visiting cultural landmarks, attending festivals, and exploring everyday life in the USA and Australia, students feel more connected to the material and motivated to learn. These responses were recorded by questionnaires and interviews that inquired about several points regarding their assessment of the use of VCT, which was generally perceived positively as follows:

Question 1: The Virtual Cultural Tour (VCT) helped me better understand cultural diversity.

Out of 96 students who completed the questionnaire, 89 (92.7%) selected 'Strongly Agree,' while 7 (7.29%) chose 'Agree.' ADS (the student who selected 'Strongly Agree') explained that "VCT helped me to grasp cultural nuances and contexts, so I feel I got better understanding about cultural diversity". Similarly, AW (the student who selected 'Agree') stated that "Seeing cultural sites and practices firsthand through virtual tours helps them understand cultural references, idiomatic expressions, and social norms better".

Question 2: Using the VCT made me feel more confident in communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds.

For this question, 87 (90.62%) students selected 'Strongly Agree,' 8 (8.33%) selected 'Agree,' and 1 (1.04%) selected 'Neutral'. HB (the student who selected 'Strongly Agree') explained that "VCT fosters a deeper appreciation and understanding of cultural diversity. With this knowledge, I feel more equipped to approach intercultural interactions with empathy and respect". D (the student who selected 'Agree') explained that "After participating in virtual conversation in interactive activity session, I can practice intercultural communication in a safe and supportive environment. This practice reduces my fear of making mistakes and builds my confidence in expressing myself effectively". CN (the student who selected 'Neutral') explained that "Because I'm still new at this Global English Course, I'm not very

confident in practicing speaking yet. I also don't fully understand the VCT content. I'll try again next time."

Question 3: The interactive session of the VCT enhanced my learning experience.

Here, 94 (97.91%) students selected 'Strongly Agree,' while 2 (2.08%) chose 'Agree.' AAZA (the student who selected 'Strongly Agree') stated "The interactive session of the VCT made the learning process more engaging and enjoyable. It helped me retain the information better and apply it in practical situations". ABD (the student who selected 'Agree') stated "The interactive session encouraged me to actively participate instead of just passively listening, which made the learning experience more dynamic and improved my understanding of the cultural topics discussed".

Question 4: I found the VCT to be an engaging tool for developing intercultural communication skills.

Answering this, 94 (97.91%) students selected 'Strongly Agree,' while 2 (2.08%) chose 'Agree.' NL (the student who selected 'Strongly Agree') said "The VCT offered an engaging way to learn about different cultures. By exploring the tour and following interactive session, I gained practical insights that improved my intercultural communication skills." ABD (the student who selected 'Agree') said "The VCT made learning about intercultural communication exciting and interactive. It helped me feel more confident and open-minded in cross-cultural interactions."

Question 5: I would recommend the use of VCT in CCU learning to promote students' intercultural communication skills.

For the last question, 96 (100%) students selected 'Strongly Agree'. AH said "I completely agree! VCT could provide an engaging way for us to practice intercultural communication in real-life contexts." In similar opinion M said, "It will help us better understand diverse cultures while improving our communication skills."

Thus, from the result of the questionnaire and interviews, 95.82% students strongly agree with the implementation of VCT in CCU classrooms to promote intercultural communication got positive responds from the students.

5. DISCUSSION

The use of Virtual Culture Tours (VCT) in the Cross-Culture Understanding (CCU) course is instrumental in promoting intercultural communication for EFL students by creating an engaging and immersive learning environment. Although the implementation steps may vary slightly between formal and non-formal classrooms, VCT has proven to make the learning experience more meaningful. The difference in implementation steps demonstrates that VCT is highly flexible, making it suitable for use in various classroom contexts, whether formal or non-formal. In formal classes such as at the third semester of PBI UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta, the use of VCT is more closely supervised by lecturers to ensure that learning activities align with the course syllabus. Meanwhile, in non-formal class such as at Maritim Class of Global English Course, the use of VCT appears more flexible adapting to students' preferences.

The steps of the implementation of VCT allow students to take virtual tours of the countries they are studying and the interactive communication practices that enhance the learning process and create an environment where students actively engage with the content (Castagnetti et al. 2017). In formal classrooms, VCT helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, offering students a more immersive and dynamic learning experience. Similarly, in non-formal settings, it provides flexibility and accessibility, making it easier for learners to engage at their own pace. VCT's ability to incorporate multimedia elements, such as videos and interactive maps, enriches the learning environment and appeals to various learning styles (Maulana et al. 2023; Wibowo et al. 2020; Zahara and Hamdu 2022). By virtually visiting cultural landmarks, participating in festivals, observing daily life in countries like the USA and Australia, and having practices to communicate with natives virtually, the students gain firsthand experience of different cultural contexts (Eveddy and Nurlily 2022; Maulana et al. 2023). This exposure helps them understand cultural nuances, social norms, and values more deeply than traditional textbook learning could. The visual and interactive elements of VCT make learning about culture more tangible and memorable, enabling students to better grasp and retain cultural knowledge (Catalano and Barriga, 2021). This understanding is essential for effective intercultural communication, as it allows students to interpret and respond to cultural cues more accurately.

Furthermore, VCT fosters interactive learning atmosphere, which is crucial for developing intercultural communication skills (Ibrahim 2022). Students can practice their communicative skills that enhance their ability to articulate cultural insights and negotiate

meanings, which are key components of intercultural communication (Tiurikova 2021). By discussing their observations and reflections with their native partners, students develop a more nuanced understanding of different cultural perspectives and improve their ability to communicate across cultural boundaries. The practical application of cultural knowledge through VCT not only boosts students' language skills but also prepares them to interact more effectively and respectfully in diverse, multicultural settings (Evenddy & Nurlely 2022).

This use of VCT in CCU classrooms is responded positively by the students because of the immersive and interactive learning experience it provides. The results from the questionnaire and interviews demonstrate a highly positive perception of the Virtual Cultural Tour (VCT) in enhancing students' understanding of cultural diversity and intercultural communication skills. Regarding Question 1, most students (92.7%) strongly agreed that the VCT improved their understanding of cultural diversity. Testimonials such as ADS's comment about grasping cultural nuances and AW's appreciation of the immersive visual experience highlight the effectiveness of the VCT in fostering cultural awareness. By exposing students to cultural contexts through virtual tours, VCT creates a realistic yet accessible platform for exploring and learning about diverse traditions, idiomatic expressions, and social norms.

For Question 2, a significant number of students (90.62%) felt more confident in communicating with individuals from different cultural backgrounds due to VCT. HB expressed how the platform deepened their cultural appreciation and empathy, enabling respectful intercultural interactions. Similarly, D credited the interactive nature of the VCT for providing a safe environment to practice communication, thus building confidence. However, CN's neutral response reflects the challenges of acclimatizing to new learning environments and understanding the content fully, indicating that while VCT is largely successful, additional support for new learners could enhance its impact.

The interactive sessions, as addressed in Questions 3 and 4, were particularly appreciated for their engaging and dynamic nature. Nearly all students (97.91%) strongly agreed that these sessions enriched their learning experiences, with AAZA noting improved information retention and application in practical settings. Similarly, the tool was highly endorsed for fostering intercultural communication skills, as evidenced by NL's comment about gaining practical insights and ABD's recognition of the tool's ability to make learning interactive and exciting. The unanimous support for Question 5, where all students

recommended VCT for future CCU learning, underscores its effectiveness and potential as a valuable educational resource. This collective enthusiasm highlights VCT's role in bridging cultural gaps, enhancing communication skills, and creating an engaging learning experience that students find both enjoyable and beneficial.

These results of questionnaires and interviews reflect the advantages of VCT as explained by Castagnetti et al. (2017), Catalano and Barriga (2021), Ibrahim (2022) and Evenddy & Nurlely (2022) that include *first*, VCT enables the cultural concepts to be live by allowing students to virtually visit places they are studying so the learning become more engaging and memorable. *Second*, VCT fosters deeper appreciation and understanding of cultural content while promoting interactive and experiential learning. *Third*, through activities shown in the tours, the students actively engage with the material rather than passively consuming it. *Fourth*, VCT provides inclusive and accessible cultural experiences, especially for those with limited travel opportunities or diverse physical abilities.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the use of Virtual Culture Tours (VCT) in the Cross-Culture Understanding (CCU) course has been shown to be effective in promoting intercultural communication skills among EFL students. The implementation of VCT is flexible, as demonstrated by the different steps applied in the formal CCU classes for third-semester PBI students at UIN Raden Mas Said and the non-formal Maritime Class of Global English Course. The steps offer students a hands-on and engaging method for learning about various cultures, transforming abstract ideas into concrete and memorable experiences. Through virtual visits to cultural landmarks and participation in local practices, students gain a comprehensive understanding of cultural nuances, social norms, and values, which are essential for successful intercultural communication. For those benefits, the students respond positively to the use of VCT, proven by the results of questionnaire and interviews in which the 95.82% students strongly agree with the implementation of VCT to promote intercultural communication in CCU classrooms.

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