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Implementation of Intercultural Communication Competence in Global Airline Services: A Case Study of Emirates Airline

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ABSTRACT

Efforts to accommodate global customer mobility often give rise to miscommunication in aviation services due to cultural disparities. Airline personnel are expected to possess effective communication competencies to navigate differences in language, values, and cultural norms to enhance customer satisfaction. This study aims to analyze the intercultural communication strategies implemented by Emirates Airline customer service in identifying the needs of customers from diverse cultural backgrounds and to evaluate the application of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC). To comprehend lived experiences of the subjects, this research employs a descriptive qualitative approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with three customer service staff, selected through purposive sampling. The findings indicate that ICC is a mechanism in navigate Customer Services in facing cultural differences. Synchronization between Motivation, Knowledge and Skills has to be daily customer services practices. Motivation act as a internal drive and as an effort to respecting diversity. Intercultural knowledge provides foundation that enabled staff interpret values, norm, and language proficieny. Skills adapt verbal and nonverbal cues, as well as avoids misunderstanding. Aligned with Samovar, intercultural communication can be succeed if there are willingness to learn and integrating system to enhance service quality, satisfaction, and loyalty within the competitive international aviation industry.

Keywords: *Intercultural Communication; Customer Service; Communication Competence; Service Strategy; Emirates Airlines.*

ABSTRAK

Meningkatnya mobilitas pelanggan global sering kali menimbulkan tantangan komunikasi dalam layanan penerbangan akibat perbedaan budaya. Personel maskapai dituntut memiliki kompetensi komunikasi yang efektif untuk menghadapi perbedaan bahasa, nilai, dan norma budaya guna meningkatkan kepuasan pelanggan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis strategi komunikasi antarbudaya yang diterapkan oleh staf layanan pelanggan Emirates Airline dalam mengidentifikasi dan memenuhi kebutuhan pelanggan dari berbagai latar belakang budaya, serta mengevaluasi penerapan Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC). Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif untuk memahami pengalaman para partisipan. Pengumpulan data dilakukan lewat wawancara dengan tiga staf layanan pelanggan yang dipilih. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan ICC berperan sebagai mekanisme utama yang membantu staf layanan pelanggan menghadapi perbedaan budaya. Integrasi antara motivasi, pengetahuan, dan keterampilan menjadi bagian penting dalam praktik pelayanan sehari-hari. Motivasi berfungsi sebagai dorongan internal untuk menghargai keberagaman, sedangkan pengetahuan antarbudaya menjadi dasar bagi staf dalam memahami nilai, norma, dan perbedaan bahasa. Keterampilan komunikasi memungkinkan staf menyesuaikan pesan verbal dan nonverbal sehingga mampu meminimalkan kesalahpahaman. Sejalan dengan pandangan Samovar, komunikasi antarbudaya yang efektif dapat diwujudkan melalui kemauan untuk terus belajar serta integrasi kompetensi antarbudaya dalam sistem organisasi. Penerapan kompetensi tersebut berkontribusi terhadap peningkatan kualitas layanan, kepuasan pelanggan, dan loyalitas pelanggan di tengah persaingan industri penerbangan internasional yang semakin kompetitif.

Kata kunci: *Komunikasi Antarbudaya; Customer Service; Kompetensi Komunikas;, Strategi Pelayanan, Emirates Airlines*.

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INTRODUCTION

The advancement of globalization and the increasing cross-border mobility of people have made interactions among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds increasingly commonplace. As one of the largest airlines in the world, Emirates Airline caters to an international customer base characterized by diverse languages, cultural traditions, values, and social norms. Consequently, the airline operates within a highly multicultural service environment, where effective communication across cultural boundaries is essential for delivering high-quality customer service and ensuring customer satisfaction.

The increasing dynamics of cross-border mobility have transformed intercultural encounters into increasingly complex communication environments. According to Fadiyakhansa et al., (2024) communication constitutes a fundamental human necessity, as it enables individuals to establish interactions that facilitate the achievement of shared goals. However, differences in communication styles across cultures may give rise to misunderstandings, which can ultimately reduce customer satisfaction. Therefore, global airlines operating in multicultural environments are required to develop effective communication strategies capable of bridging cultural differences and fostering positive service experiences for customers from diverse cultural backgrounds.

For frontline airline personnel, serving passengers from diverse national and cultural backgrounds presents unique communication challenges. To effectively address customers' needs, airlines must establish customer service functions that are capable of maintaining positive relationships with customers at the frontline. According to Fernandes and Marlius (2018), s customer service refers to activities aimed at achieving customer satisfaction by delivering high-quality services that meet customers' needs and expectations. In the context of the airline industry, customer service plays a strategic role in fostering long-term customer relationships and enhancing customer loyalty.

Consequently, customer service representatives are required to adapt their communication approaches to accommodate the cultural backgrounds of individual customers. Their responsibilities extend beyond providing flight information, facilitating ticket reservations, and assisting with schedule changes; they are also expected to handle customer complaints and respond to a wide range of service-related inquiries and needs. Accordingly, the quality of communication and interpersonal interactions demonstrated by customer service personnel significantly influences customer satisfaction and loyalty.

In practice, effective customer service communication depends not only on the speed and accuracy of responding to customer inquiries but also on the level of intercultural sensitivity demonstrated by service personnel when interacting with customers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Customer service communication has become increasingly important in the current era of globalization and heightened

international mobility, where airlines serve customers from diverse national, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. This diversity creates a range of challenges in the global aviation industry, particularly in interactions with multicultural customers. One of the primary challenges concerns language barriers that arise when passengers communicate with frontline service personnel. In this context, proficiency in foreign languages beyond English represents a valuable professional competency.

Faris & Arslan (2025) cited a study demonstrating that Spanish companies operating in Germany achieved greater business success when workplace interactions were conducted in German rather than English. This finding suggests that communicating in customers' native or preferred language can enhance service effectiveness in other international industries, including aviation. Accordingly, the ability to communicate in the same language as passengers can significantly enrich the customer experience, particularly for international travelers.

For aviation professionals, English proficiency is an indispensable competency, as English serves as the international standard and the primary medium of verbal communication within the global aviation industry, including customer service operations. Nevertheless, the ability to communicate effectively through both verbal and nonverbal communication while demonstrating sensitivity to the cultural norms of customers from different countries constitutes an additional competitive advantage. Such competencies contribute to more meaningful customer interactions, strengthen customers' positive perceptions of the airline and its brand, and ultimately enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty.

From a verbal communication perspective, misunderstandings frequently arise due to difficulties in pronunciation and the use of foreign languages. Passengers who communicate in languages other than English often require the assistance of translation applications or other communication aids, which may prolong the communication process and reduce service efficiency. From a nonverbal communication perspective, customers from high-context cultures tend to rely more heavily on implicit cues, including body language, facial expressions, and gestures, to convey meaning. Consequently, a failure on the part of customer service personnel to accurately interpret these nonverbal cues may result in misunderstandings and negatively affect the overall service experience. Samovar et al. (2010) said that there are five elements of culture consists of history, religion, values, social organization, and language. Language allows people share ideas, ideology, and information about their groups. Languange have a meaning that relates to specific culture.

One of the essential components of intercultural communication is the ability to interact effectively using the languages and communicative cues of people from different cultural backgrounds. According to Qothrunnada et al., (2024) Intercultural communication refers to the process of exchanging messages between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, encompassing differences in language, values, norms, and social identities such as race, ethnicity, and nationality. In this context, Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is defined as an individual's ability

to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural interactions (Spitzberg, 1997.) Effectiveness refers to the ability of communication to achieve its intended objectives, whereas appropriateness denotes the extent to which communicative behaviors conform to the cultural norms, expectations, and social conventions of the interaction partner.

Intercultural communication competence is particularly important because intercultural interactions frequently involve differences in perceptions, communication styles, and message interpretation. Individuals who possess a high level of intercultural communication competence are better equipped to adapt their communication behaviors, minimize the likelihood of misunderstandings, and establish more constructive and harmonious relationships across cultural boundaries. Within the context of international airline services, intercultural communication competence plays a crucial role in enhancing service quality, fostering customer trust, and ultimately improving customer satisfaction and loyalty.

According Samovar et al., (2010) people tend to taken culture for granted and below the conscious level. Culture is transmited trough imitation, shaped by observation. There are 6 characteristic of culture : (1) culture is learnes, (2) shared, (3) transmitted form generation to generation, (4) based on symbol, (5) culture is dynamic, (6) an integrated system. Culture can be examined because of several factors such : uniqueness of each individual, stereotyping, objectivity, communication can not always be a cure for cultural complexity.

Special case that can be examined regarding cultural complexity involved customer-related issues encountered by Emirates Airline. There are often attributable to cultural differences, which may lead to discomfort and, ultimately, customer dissatisfaction. Inappropriate forms of greeting, the use of intonation perceived as impolite in certain cultures, or the use of technical terminology that customers do not fully understand may undermine the quality of interactions between customer service representatives and customers. Such situations can negatively affect customer satisfaction, damage the airline's corporate image, and weaken customer loyalty. Therefore, customer service representatives are expected to adapt their communication styles to accommodate the cultural backgrounds of individual customers. This adaptability is essential for delivering effective, culturally appropriate, and satisfying service experiences.

The importance of effective communication in customer service has also been demonstrated in previous research. For example, Ramadani et al., (2022) examined the influence of communication and customer service quality on customer satisfaction within the tourism service industry. Their findings revealed that communication exerted a stronger influence on customer satisfaction, accounting for 72.6% of the observed effect compared with other service-related factors. These findings underscore the pivotal role of effective communication in shaping positive service experiences and enhancing customer satisfaction.

In the context of Emirates Airline, customer expectations regarding service quality are exceptionally high. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of intercultural communication dynamics has become increasingly important for maintaining the airline's high standards of service excellence. Rijal & Tomohardjo, (2024) found that differences in communication styles, cultural stereotypes, and prejudice frequently constitute major barriers to effective intercultural service delivery. Seemingly minor aspects of communication, such as eye contact, the manner of expressing refusal, and the physical distance maintained during interactions, may be interpreted differently depending on customers' cultural backgrounds. If not managed appropriately, these differences may escalate into interpersonal tension, resulting in customer complaints and, ultimately, decisions to discontinue using the airline's services.

Similar findings were reported by Dyahjatmayanti & Febrianto (2023) in a study conducted at Supadio International Airport, Pontianak. Their research demonstrated that service effectiveness largely depends on the communication patterns employed by airport staff, including the quality of interpersonal relationships among employees and the effectiveness with which flight-related information is communicated to passengers. These findings further highlight the critical role of effective and culturally appropriate communication in delivering high-quality services within the international aviation industry.

Previous studies have primarily examined passenger services within domestic aviation contexts or have focused on communication mediated through digital platforms. In contrast, the present study addresses the complexity of face-to-face intercultural communication in the context of international airline services. Moreover, while earlier research has explored intercultural communication from the perspectives of airline personnel and passengers, this study specifically investigates how Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is developed and implemented among customer service representatives, who serve as the airline's frontline personnel. By focusing on customer service representatives, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the competencies required to effectively manage intercultural interactions and deliver high-quality services in a multicultural aviation environment.

Another evidence highlites that Cultural Inteligence serves as a foundational skill that allows airline function effectively (Suthatorn & Charoensukmongkol, 2018). If airline personnel have high level of cultural intelligence, cabin crew member can develop greater intercultural communication competence (ICC) and service attentiveness.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study seeks to address the following research question : How do Emirates Airline customer service representatives implement intercultural communication competence when serving customers from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore the intercultural communication practices employed by Emirates Airline customer service representatives in delivering services to customers from diverse cultural backgrounds. To achieve this objective, the study adopts a qualitative case study approach, enabling an in-depth examination of intercultural communication within real-life service interactions. Data will be collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis to develop a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of intercultural communication in customer service encounters. The findings of this study are expected to provide both contextual and practical insights into the implementation of intercultural communication within the international aviation industry. Furthermore, the results are anticipated to serve as a foundation for the development of intercultural communication training programs aimed at enhancing service quality, strengthening customer satisfaction, and fostering customer loyalty in an increasingly competitive global airline industry.

METHODS

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach. Descriptive qualitative research is a contextual form of inquiry that positions human participants as the primary instrument of the research and is conducted within natural settings, where data collection predominantly yields qualitative data. This approach was selected because the study seeks to explore the lived experiences of Emirates Airline customer service personnel in managing intercultural interactions during service encounters.

According to Creswell & Creswell (2020.) qualitative research focuses on developing knowledge grounded in a constructivist worldview, in which meaning is derived from individuals' lived experiences, social values, and historical contexts. Such an approach aims to generate theoretical insights or identify patterns that emerge from participants' interpretations of their experiences. Creswell. & Creswell (2020) further argues that qualitative research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the central phenomenon under investigation, the participants involved, and the context in which the study is conducted. In addition, qualitative research requires the selection of an appropriate research design that is conceptually aligned with the objectives of the study.

Accordingly, this research employs a case study methodology to investigate the phenomenon under examination. The case study approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of the dynamics of intercultural communication practiced by Emirates Airline customer service representatives within authentic service settings. By focusing on a specific organizational context, this method facilitates a comprehensive understanding of how intercultural communication competence is enacted in everyday customer service interactions.

To explore how Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is implemented by Emirates Airline personnel, this study employs in-depth interviews

as the primary data collection method. This instrument was designed to elicit detailed accounts of the experiences, perceptions, and communication strategies adopted by Emirates Airline customer service representatives when interacting with customers from diverse cultural backgrounds. The interview protocol was developed to explore participants' experiences in addressing cultural differences, adapting their communication styles, managing intercultural conflicts, and evaluating the effectiveness of their communication approaches in serving customers from highly diverse cultural backgrounds. In particular, the interviews focused on the three core dimensions of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) proposed by (Spitzberg, 1997), namely motivation, knowledge, and skills. These dimensions served as the analytical framework for examining how customer service representatives navigate intercultural interactions and deliver culturally appropriate service within the context of international airline operations.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model of qualitative data analysis developed by Miles & Huberman (1994)This analytical framework comprises three interrelated and concurrent processes: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The model was employed to systematically analyze the interview data, identify patterns of intercultural communication, and integrate the interview findings with observational data. Data reduction involved the processes of selecting, simplifying, organizing, and transforming the raw data into a more focused form that aligned with the objectives of the study. Subsequently, the data were presented in the form of a systematic narrative, enabling the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research context and identify recurring themes and communication patterns.

The final stage consisted of conclusion drawing and verification, during which the researcher interpreted the meanings emerging from the data, examined relationships among the identified themes, and continuously verified the credibility of the findings through an iterative analytical process. To enhance the trustworthiness of the data, member checking was conducted through repeated confirmation with all three participants. This procedure ensured that the interpretations accurately reflected the participants' lived experiences and were consistent with the theoretical concepts employed in the study. Accordingly, qualitative data analysis in this research was not conducted as a linear sequence of procedures but rather as an interactive and iterative process that continued throughout the entire research process (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The study involved three participants who were directly engaged in customer service operations at Emirates Airline. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their professional experience and direct involvement in intercultural customer interactions. The participants represented three different organizational roles: Senior Customer Sales and Service, Customer Sales and Service Team Leader, and Customer Sales and Service Officer. The inclusion of these three positions was intended to capture perspectives from different levels of responsibility and professional experience in providing customer service. The nCustomer Sales and

Service Team Leader contributed a managerial perspective by overseeing frontline operations and coordinating communication strategies, whereas the Customer Sales and Service Officer provided practical insights based on direct, day-to-day interactions with customers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Meanwhile, the Senior Customer Sales and Service participant offered a broader perspective derived from extensive operational experience and long-term engagement in handling intercultural service encounters. According to Sugiyono (2018), purposive sampling is employed to obtain rich, in-depth data from participants who meet specific criteria established by the researcher. This sampling technique enables researchers to select individuals who possess substantial knowledge of, and direct experience with, the phenomenon under investigation, thereby generating data that are both relevant and information-rich.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the context of international airline services such as Emirates Airline, intercultural communication constitutes a critical factor in determining the effectiveness of customer service delivery. Customer service representatives interact with passengers from diverse cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds, making the ability to adapt to cultural differences essential for delivering high-quality service and creating positive customer experiences.

Based on the findings of in-depth interviews with three participants a Senior Customer Sales and Service, a Customer Sales and Service Team Leader, and a Customer Sales and Service Officer this study found that Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) plays a pivotal role in addressing the challenges associated with multicultural interactions. The findings indicate that the three core dimensions of ICC motivation, knowledge, and skills should be consistently demonstrated and integrated into customer service practices. Together, these competencies enable customer service representatives to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries, respond appropriately to customers' diverse needs and expectations, and deliver culturally responsive services that enhance customer satisfaction.

Motivation to Engage in Intercultural Interaction

One of the affective dimension of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is motivation. Motivation means individual's internal willingness and openness to engage in intercultural interactions. Within the context of international airline services such as Emirates Airline, motivation can be understood as the driving force that encourages customer service personnel to deliver prompt, accurate, and culturally respectful services to customers from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The interviews indicate that the motivation of Emirates Airline customer service personnel is primarily influenced by two key factors: professional motivation and personal motivation. A Senior Customer Sales and Service participant explained that the motivation to interact with international passengers stems not only from professional responsibilities but also from curiosity and a genuine desire to learn about different cultures:

> *"Kami setiap hari melayani penumpang dari berbagai negara, jadi saya merasa tertantang sekaligus senang bisa berinteraksi dengan mereka. Dari situ saya belajar banyak hal baru, terutama cara mereka berkomunikasi dan mengekspresikan sesuatu yang berbeda dari budaya kita."* (We meet passengers from different countries every day, so it's both challenging and enjoyable to interact with them. I've learned a lot from those experiences, especially about how people from different cultures communicate and express themselves in ways that are different from ours) (Customer Sales and Service Officer, interview January 2, 2026)

This statement suggests that the participants' motivation extends beyond fulfilling job responsibilities. Instead, it is also driven by a genuine personal interest in understanding how individuals from different cultural backgrounds think, behave, and communicate. Such findings are consistent with the concept of integrative motivation, which refers to an individual's intrinsic desire to understand another culture more deeply and to establish meaningful interpersonal relationships across cultural boundaries.

> "*Kalau kita tidak punya semangat untuk memahami pelanggan, bisa salah bicara atau salah sikap. Karena Emirates itu dikenal dengan hospitality-nya, jadi saya selalu berusaha memberikan komunikasi terbaik supaya pelanggan merasa dihargai*." (If we're not genuinely willing to understand our customers, it's easy to say the wrong thing or come across the wrong way. Since Emirates is known for its hospitality, I always do my best to communicate in a way that makes every customer feel respected and appreciated. (Customer Sales and Service Officer, January 2, 2026).

The professional motivation demonstrated by the participants reflects a strong commitment to maintaining high standards of service delivery. Within the context of Emirates Airline, such motivation is closely aligned with the organization's commitment to service excellence and its core value of respecting cultural diversity. This commitment encourages customer service representatives to consistently provide high-quality, culturally responsive services while ensuring that customers from diverse backgrounds feel respected and valued throughout their service experience.

Furthermore, a Senior Customer Sales and Service participant explained that interacting with customers from different cultural backgrounds provides a profound sense of personal and professional fulfillment:

> "*Kalau bisa membuat pelanggan dari negara lain merasa nyaman, itu rasanya menyenangkan. Kadang mereka bilang terima kasih dengan cara yang berbeda, dan dari situ saya belajar cara menghargai budaya mereka."* (It's always rewarding when I can make customers from other countries feel comfortable. They often have different ways of saying thank you, and those experiences have taught me how to better understand and appreciate their cultures) (Customer Sales & Service Agent, January 2, 2026).

They suggests that motivation in intercultural communication extends beyond job performance; it also encompasses the emotional satisfaction derived from successfully establishing meaningful relationships across cultural boundaries. The participants expressed a sense of pride when they were able to understand customers effectively, and these positive experiences served as a continuous source of motivation to further develop their intercultural communication competence. The willingness to understand passengers from diverse cultural backgrounds represents a fundamental component of effective intercultural communication strategies. Without such motivation, airline personnel may be less likely to demonstrate empathy or fully recognize the specific needs and expectations of customers from different cultural backgrounds. Conversely, a strong motivation to remain open-minded and adapt quickly enables customer service representatives to foster harmonious interactions and create positive service experiences for international customers.

The findings further indicate that three key factors motivate customer service personnel to develop greater awareness of cultural differences in their daily professional practice. These include (1) professional commitment to delivering high-quality global customer service, (2) personal interest in cultural diversity, and (3) emotional satisfaction derived from establishing positive relationships with international customers. Collectively, these factors constitute the foundation of effective and sustainable Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), enabling customer service representatives to communicate appropriately across cultures while maintaining high standards of service quality in an international aviation environment.

These findings are consistent with the study conducted by Balakrishnan et al., (2021), which identified motivation, together with knowledge and skills, as a significant determinant of effective intercultural communication in multinational work environments. The study further demonstrated that individuals with higher levels of intercultural motivation tend to be more adaptable, open to cultural diversity, and willing to engage with people from different cultural backgrounds. As a result, they are better equipped to foster harmonious interpersonal relationships and facilitate effective communication in culturally diverse workplaces.

In the context of the present study, similar patterns were observed among Emirates Airline customer service personnel. Their intrinsic willingness to understand cultural differences, combined with a strong sense of professional

responsibility, enabled them to communicate more effectively with international customers and to cultivate positive service experiences despite cultural and linguistic differences. These findings reinforce the proposition that motivation constitutes the foundational dimension of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), as it encourages individuals to engage openly in intercultural interactions and serves as the driving force for developing the knowledge and communication skills required for effective cross-cultural service delivery.

Knowledge to Adapt in the Cultural Context

Knowledge in this study refers to the cognitive dimension of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC). According to Spitzberg (1997) knowledge provides the cognitive foundation that enables individuals to adapt their communicative behaviors to the social and cultural contexts of their interaction partners. In the context of intercultural communication, knowledge encompasses an understanding of the values, norms, customs, and communication practices of other cultures. Such understanding enables individuals to interpret behaviors more accurately, avoid cultural misunderstandings, and communicate in a manner that is both effective and culturally appropriate.

Within a multinational service environment such as Emirates Airline, intercultural knowledge plays a pivotal role in delivering high-quality customer service. The airline serves passengers from diverse national, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, each of whom brings distinct expectations, communication preferences, and service needs. Consequently, customer service representatives are expected to possess not only operational expertise but also a comprehensive understanding of cultural differences in order to tailor their communication strategies to the characteristics of individual customers.

Intercultural knowledge serves as a fundamental guide for customer service representatives in adapting their communication strategies to ensure that interactions remain both effective and culturally appropriate. Such knowledge enables frontline personnel to recognize cultural differences, anticipate customers' communication preferences, and adjust their verbal and nonverbal behaviors in accordance with the social norms and expectations of their interaction partners.

Several specific examples emerged from the observations and interview findings. One prominent example concerns the differences between European and Asian communication styles. The participants demonstrated a basic understanding of the distinctive communication characteristics associated with these cultural groups. They explained that European passengers generally adopt a direct and explicit communication style, expressing their intentions and expectations clearly. In contrast, passengers from many Asian cultures tend to communicate in a more polite, indirect, and relationship-oriented manner and are often more sensitive to tone of voice and interpersonal courtesy.

> *"Selama bekerja di Emirates, saya belajar bahwa setiap pelanggan punya cara komunikasi yang berbeda. Misalnya, pelanggan dari Eropa biasanya lebih langsung, sementara dari Asia lebih sopan dan tidak suka nada bicara yang terlalu tinggi. Jadi kita harus bisa menyesuaikan gaya bicara supaya mereka merasa nyaman."* (Since working at Emirates, I've learned that every customer communicates differently. For instance, European customers are usually more direct, while many Asian customers tend to be more polite and don't respond well to a loud tone of voice. So we always try to adjust the way we speak to make them feel comfortable). (Customer Sales & Service Agent, January 2, 2026

Based on the interviews, Emirates Airline customer service personnel possess a strong level of intercultural knowledge, particularly in recognizing the behavioral patterns, communication preferences, and cultural practices of customers from different countries. This knowledge has been developed through a combination of professional experience, internal training programs, and continuous interactions with international passengers.

One of the intercultural challenges identified during the study involved serving customers from the Middle East who had limited proficiency in English. In such situations, customer service representatives relied on translation applications as a communication aid to bridge language barriers and ensure that essential information was conveyed accurately. Although this approach occasionally prolonged the service process, it enabled staff to maintain effective communication and minimize misunderstandings.

The findings further suggest that the development of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is a gradual and continuous process, requiring both cultural knowledge and the ability to respond appropriately to cultural differences. Competence in intercultural communication extends beyond linguistic proficiency and encompasses an understanding of verbal and nonverbal communication, symbols, social norms, cultural values, and interactional conventions. Such competencies cannot be acquired solely through theoretical instruction but must be cultivated through systematic training and sustained practical experience in multicultural service environments. According to Perrodin et. al. (2024) airline staff have to increased effort to incorporating mindfulnesss techniques and blend it into corporate level training system for English language proficiency. Anxiety can increase mispronounciation, information clearness. So it important to keep mindful in giving services to international passenger to avoid misunderstandings..

To equip customer service personnel with the competencies required to respond effectively to customers from diverse cultural backgrounds, Emirates Airline provides structured intercultural communication training. These training programs are designed to enhance employees' cultural awareness, strengthen their communication

skills, and prepare them to adapt their communication strategies to the expectations and cultural norms of international customers.

> "*Kami sering ikut pelatihan tentang cultural awareness dari Emirates, seperti cara melayani pelanggan dari India, Eropa, atau negara-negara Arab. Tapi yang paling banyak saya pelajari justru dari pengalaman langsung, karena setiap hari ketemu orang dari negara yang berbeda."* (We often take cultural awareness training at Emirates, where we learn how to serve customers from places like India, Europe, and the Middle East. But I've actually learned the most from real-life experience, because every day I meet people from different countries) (Customer Sales & Service Agent, interview January 2, 2026).

The understanding of customers' cultural practices and service expectations enables customer service representatives to adapt their communication style, word choice, and service approach in accordance with customers' cultural norms and expectations. Such adaptability contributes to more effective interactions and enhances customers' overall service experience.

Furthermore, a Customer Sales and Service Officer explained that much of their intercultural knowledge has been acquired through direct interactions with international customers, complemented by structured training programs provided by Emirates Airline. The airline systematically supports the development of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) through comprehensive internal training initiatives designed to enhance employees' cultural awareness and communication capabilities. Nevertheless, participants emphasized that direct experience remains the primary source of intercultural knowledge, enabling customer service representatives to refine their cognitive understanding of cultural diversity and apply this knowledge effectively in real-world service encounters.

Aligned with the study conducted by Fiani and Chaniago (2024), which argues that intercultural knowledge is acquired not only through formal education but also through continuous social learning within the workplace. Their study demonstrates that employees with greater exposure to culturally diverse environments are better able to interpret nonverbal cues and accurately understand the contextual meaning of intercultural communication.

Similarly, Balakrishnan et al (2021) found that extensive cultural knowledge enables service employees to interpret implicit communication more effectively and reduces the likelihood of intercultural misunderstandings in international customer service settings. Taken together, these findings reinforce the notion that intercultural knowledge is a dynamic competency that develops through the integration of formal training and experiential learning. Such knowledge equips customer service representatives with the cognitive capacity to recognize cultural differences, adapt their communication strategies appropriately, and deliver culturally responsive services in multicultural environments.

Based on the interview and the review of previous literature, it can be concluded that the intercultural knowledge of Emirates Airline customer service personnel is developed through a combination of formal training and practical experience gained in multicultural service environments. A comprehensive understanding of the values, customs, and communication styles of customers from diverse cultural backgrounds enables customer service representatives to communicate effectively, adapt their communication strategies appropriately, and minimize the risk of intercultural misunderstandings.

Furthermore, this intercultural knowledge contributes not only to the delivery of high-quality customer service but also to reinforcing Emirates Airline's corporate image as a global airline committed to service excellence, cultural diversity, and professionalism. The findings suggest that intercultural knowledge represents a critical cognitive dimension of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), providing the foundation upon which customer service representatives can make informed communication decisions and deliver culturally responsive services in an increasingly diverse international aviation environment.

Skills to Apply Appropriate Behavior in Cultural Context

Intercultural communication skills represent the behavioral dimension of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), encompassing an individual's ability to apply effective communication strategies that are appropriate to the cultural context of their interaction partners. According to the model proposed by Spitzberg (1997), the skills dimension includes the ability to adapt to diverse cultural situations, regulate emotions, and employ appropriate verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors during intercultural interactions. These competencies enable individuals to translate their intercultural knowledge and motivation into effective communicative actions.

Within the context of Emirates Airline, the intercultural communication skills of customer service representatives are developed not only through professional experience but also through structured organizational learning initiatives. The airline systematically enhances employees' intercultural competencies through a range of internal training programs designed to strengthen communication effectiveness, cultural adaptability, and service quality when interacting with international customers. Such initiatives equip customer service personnel with the practical skills required to respond appropriately to culturally diverse situations while maintaining the high standards of professionalism and service excellence that characterize Emirates Airline.

The interview findings indicate that all participants reported receiving regular training provided by Emirates Airline, with a particular emphasis on cultural awareness, customer handling, and communication skills. These training programs not only provide employees with a foundational understanding of cultural differences

but also equip them with the practical skills required to apply appropriate communication strategies when serving customers from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The participants explained that these training initiatives are designed to prepare customer service representatives to respond effectively to a wide range of intercultural situations encountered in daily operations. Through scenario-based learning, role-playing activities, and practical case discussions, employees develop the ability to adapt their communication style, manage intercultural interactions professionally, and deliver culturally responsive customer service. As a result, intercultural communication skills become an integral component of their professional practice rather than merely theoretical knowledge.

> *"Kami mendapat training khusus dari Emirates tentang bagaimana melayani pelanggan dari berbagai negara. Misalnya, cara berbicara dengan pelanggan dari Timur Tengah yang biasanya lebih ekspresif, berbeda dengan pelanggan dari Eropa yang lebih formal. Dari situ saya belajar bagaimana menyesuaikan sikap dan cara bicara supaya komunikasi tetap berjalan baik."* (Emirates provided us with special training on how to handle customers from different cultural backgrounds. For instance, customers from the Middle East are often more expressive, while customers from Europe may prefer a more formal approach. Through this training, I learned how to adapt my attitude and the way I communicate so I can build better interactions with different types of customers) (Customer Sales & Service Team Leader, January 2, 2026)

As an illustration, participants described distinct communication approaches when serving customers from Middle Eastern and Western cultural backgrounds. Based on the interview findings, the researcher identified that customers from Middle Eastern cultures generally expect services that are prompt, efficient, and delivered with confidence. Consequently, timely and decisive service delivery is often perceived as an important indicator of service quality by these customers.

In contrast, customers from Western cultural backgrounds tend to place greater value on clear, detailed, and transparent explanations regarding service procedures, policies, and the rationale underlying operational decisions. Providing comprehensive information and justifying service-related decisions therefore contributes to building trust, reducing uncertainty, and enhancing customer satisfaction among Western passengers.

> *Kadang pelanggan dari Timur Tengah ingin dilayani dengan lebih cepat dan tegas, sedangkan pelanggan dari negara Barat lebih menghargai penjelasan yang detail. Kalau kita tidak tahu kebiasaan mereka, bisa salah sikap dan membuat mereka tidak puas."* (Sometimes, customers from the Middle East expect quicker and more straightforward service, while Western customers usually appreciate detailed explanations. If we don't understand their cultural preferences, we might approach them in the wrong way and it could affect their

> satisfaction) (Customer Sales and Service Team Leader, January 2, 2026)

The participants' responses indicate that the training programs provided by Emirates Airline play a significant role in enhancing customer service representatives' ability to adapt their communication to different cultural contexts. These programs strengthen employees' intercultural communication skills by enabling them to respond appropriately to customers with diverse communication styles and cultural expectations. Practical skills such as adjusting tone of voice, maintaining appropriate eye contact, interpreting nonverbal cues, and responding sensitively to cultural differences are regarded as essential for establishing effective communication and fostering positive relationships with customers.

Furthermore, the Customer Sales and Service Team Leader explained that intercultural communication skills are also reinforced through internal training programs focusing on service recovery and conflict management. These training initiatives prepare customer service representatives to remain calm, patient, and professional when handling challenging service situations involving customers from diverse cultural backgrounds.

> *"Dalam training, kami diajarkan bagaimana menghadapi pelanggan yang marah tanpa memperburuk situasi. Kita belajar mendengarkan, meminta maaf dengan sopan, dan mencari solusi yang bisa diterima oleh pelanggan dari budaya manapun*." (During the training, we learned how to deal with upset customers without escalating the situation. We were taught to listen, give a polite apology, and find solutions that work for customers from different cultural backgrounds) (Customer Sales & Service Team Leader, January 2, 2026)

This quotation illustrates that effective intercultural communication skills extend beyond speaking politely. They also encompass the ability to regulate emotions, accurately assess interpersonal situations, and adapt communication strategies to customers' psychological and emotional states. These competencies reflect the practical application of the behavioral dimension of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), demonstrating customer service representatives' flexibility, emotional intelligence, and empathy when interacting with customers from diverse cultural backgrounds.

In addition, a Customer Sales and Service Officer explained that Emirates Airline conducts scenario-based role-play training, in which customer service representatives practice responding to a wide range of service situations involving customers from different cultural backgrounds. These simulation exercises are designed to help employees apply intercultural communication principles in realistic service encounters, strengthen their problem-solving abilities, and build confidence in handling culturally diverse interactions.

> *"Kami sering latihan dengan simulasi. Misalnya ada pelanggan yang kurang paham bahasa Inggris, atau pelanggan yang menuntut dengan cara keras. Dari latihan itu kita belajar bagaimana mengatur nada bicara, pilihan kata, dan ekspresi wajah supaya tetap sopan dan profesional*." (We often do role-play exercises during training. For example, we practice handling customers who may not fully understand English or customers who express their concerns in a more demanding way. From these exercises, we learn how to adjust our tone, choose the right words, and use appropriate facial expressions while staying polite and professional) (Customer Sales & Service Team Leader, January 2, 2026)

Through these scenario-based training programs, customer service representatives gain not only practical experience but also develop situational communication skills that are essential for effective intercultural interactions. By engaging in realistic service simulations, employees learn to respond appropriately to culturally diverse situations, refine their decision-making abilities, and apply adaptive communication strategies in real-time customer encounters. These experiential learning activities enable staff to translate intercultural knowledge into effective behavioral practices, thereby strengthening their overall Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC).

Tange & Jæger (2021) which reported that intercultural communication training significantly enhances employees' adaptability, empathy, and self-confidence when managing multicultural interactions in global workplaces. Their research demonstrates that experiential training methods, particularly simulation- and role-play-based learning, improve employees' ability to recognize cultural differences, regulate their responses appropriately, and communicate more effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds

The present study indicates that Emirates Airline's systematic investment in intercultural communication training has contributed substantially to the development of employees' behavioral competencies. The combination of structured training and continuous practical experience enables customer service representatives to respond flexibly to intercultural situations, manage emotionally demanding interactions professionally, and deliver culturally responsive services that support customer satisfaction and reinforce the airline's reputation for service excellence.

Beyond formal communication training, the development of intercultural communication skills among customer service personnel in the aviation industry also depends on employees' intrinsic motivation and underlying mindset. In multicultural service encounters, customer service representatives are expected to demonstrate the sensitivity and flexibility required to adapt their communication to customers from diverse cultural backgrounds. This ability is commonly referred to as intercultural sensitivity, which enables individuals to recognize, appreciate, and respond appropriately to cultural differences during interpersonal interactions.

The development of intercultural sensitivity requires a shift in employees' perspectives from ethnocentrism toward ethnorelativism. Bennett (1993), as cited in Handoko et. al. (2022) defines ethnorelativism as the capacity to understand and interpret communication behaviors within the cultural framework of others rather than through one's own cultural assumptions. In the context of international airline services, this means that customer service representatives are expected to interpret passengers' behaviors, communication styles, and expectations according to the customers' cultural backgrounds and communicative intentions, rather than relying solely on their own cultural norms.

Furthermore, Handoko et al (2022) emphasize the importance of acceptance as a fundamental stage in the development of intercultural competence. Acceptance refers to employees' willingness to embrace the realities of intercultural communication as an integral part of their professional responsibilities. For customer service personnel, this involves recognizing that every customer, regardless of nationality, language, religion, or cultural background, deserves equal respect and high-quality service. Such an orientation encourages employees to respect diverse cultural values, avoid cultural bias, and provide equitable treatment to all customers. Consequently, intercultural communication competence is not merely reflected in technical communication skills but also in the attitudes of openness, respect, and cultural inclusiveness that guide employees' interactions with customers from around the world.

An effective intercultural communication in the airline industry extends beyond the acquisition of communication techniques. Rather, it requires the integration of motivation, knowledge, skills, and intercultural sensitivity, enabling customer service representatives to communicate with empathy, adapt to cultural diversity, and deliver culturally responsive services in accordance with the expectations of a global customer base. This holistic approach strengthens service quality while reinforcing Emirates Airline's commitment to service excellence and customer-centered international hospitality.

Halim et. al., (2025) in their study Strategy of Cultural Adaptation of Foreign Teachers in Multicultural Classrooms at Springfield, employed the acculturation model to explain the process of adaptation within multicultural environments. Although their study was conducted in an educational context, the concept of acculturation is equally relevant to the international aviation industry, where customer service personnel interact with passengers from a wide range of cultural backgrounds.

In the context of airline services, customer service representatives are required to undergo a process of acculturation, whereby they gradually move beyond culturally bound communication habits and adopt more culturally adaptive communication practices. This process does not imply abandoning one's own cultural identity; rather, it involves developing the flexibility to adjust communication behaviors in response to the cultural expectations and interaction styles of customers.

Such adaptability is essential for fostering harmonious interpersonal relationships and achieving effective communication in multicultural service encounters.

For the acculturation process to be successful, employees must demonstrate openness, empathy, and flexibility when engaging with culturally diverse customers. These personal attributes enable customer service representatives to recognize cultural differences as opportunities for meaningful interaction rather than as barriers to communication. Consequently, intercultural adaptation becomes a continuous learning process that enhances both communication effectiveness and service quality.

Based on the explanation, intrinsic motivation plays a crucial role in facilitating the acculturation process. Ergün et al., (2026) concluded that although cognitive knowledge and behavioral flexibility contribute significantly to effective communication with international customers, intrinsic motivation exerts an even greater influence by encouraging employees to engage in more constructive, customer-oriented interactions while reducing reliance on coercive or confrontational communication strategies. In other words, employees who are internally motivated are more likely to approach intercultural encounters with empathy, patience, and a genuine willingness to understand customers' perspectives.

Accordingly, international airlines should consider complementing technical communication training with initiatives that foster employees' intrinsic motivation. Developing an organizational culture that encourages curiosity, openness, and intercultural engagement can strengthen employees' intercultural communication skills, support sustainable customer relationships, and ultimately enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. Such an approach reinforces the view that effective Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is shaped not only by knowledge and behavioral skills but also by the internal motivation that drives employees to engage positively with cultural diversity.

Samovar Characteristic of Cultural related to Emirates Global Services

Samovar defines culture as something that not granted or initiate, but it socialized by process called enculturation. Enculturation involved training and social interaction. In relation to Emirates Airlines, customer services staff develop their competence trough cultural organizational learning include language traning and motivational training as well as continuous practical experience. It helps to respond international passenger appropriately.

Regarding to communication cues, according to Samovar, culture is a symbolic system. Meaning is shared through language. For nonverbal cues, gesture, eye contact, and tone Customer Services must master symbols to be effective. Customer services have to interprete nonverbal signals such maintaining eye contact and physical distance. The differences between Asian and Western in tone of voice such Asian prefer using polite and indirect style.

Samovar et al., (2010) notes culture is an integrates system where values, belief, and ideology act as guideline of behavior. For Emirates context intercultural knowledge serves as a guideline to respond any cultural communication between Customer Service and international passengers. For instance, Western tend to receives detailed explanation and transparence. Middle Eastern tend to be efficien and delivered passionately.

Emirates Airline operate in with a foundation in traditional Islamic an Arab value. Customer Services staff have to recognize such religious obligation to avoid discomfort and dissatisfaction. As mention in findings that Emirates identified motivation as a foundational of component of ICC, Customer Services have to be genuine willingness to learn about other cultures. Airline encourage shift from enthnocentrism toward ethnorelativism where staff interpret passenger behavior within customers cultural framework rather than their own.

CONCLUSION

The business environment of the airline industry has become increasingly dynamic and highly competitive. As international airlines serve customers from diverse cultural backgrounds, communication with stakeholders particularly passengers has evolved into a complex and challenging process. Customer service representatives are required to navigate cultural, linguistic, and behavioral differences while maintaining high standards of service quality and customer satisfaction. This indicate that communication challenges frequently arise from language barriers, including difficulties in interpreting both verbal and nonverbal cues. Differences in language proficiency, communication styles, and culturally specific expressions may hinder mutual understanding between customer service representatives and international passengers. Such barriers increase the likelihood of misunderstandings and may negatively affect the overall customer experience.

Furthermore, complaints raised by international passengers often require customer service personnel to manage situations that extend beyond routine operational procedures. In many cases, employees must exercise professional judgment, intercultural sensitivity, and effective service recovery strategies to restore customer trust and preserve positive relationships. These situations demand not only procedural knowledge but also the ability to respond flexibly and empathetically to customers whose expectations are shaped by different cultural norms.

In addition, inaccurate interpretations of passengers' behaviors or inappropriate responses to intercultural situations may generate negative perceptions of both the service encounter and the airline as a whole. Consequently, the ability to interpret customers' communication accurately and respond in a culturally appropriate manner becomes a critical component of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC). Such competence enables customer service representatives to

minimize communication breakdowns, manage intercultural conflicts effectively, and deliver culturally responsive services that strengthen customer satisfaction and reinforce the airline's global reputation for service excellence.

To address the risks arising from intercultural communication differences, airline customer service personnel require not only intercultural awareness but also well-developed communication skills and extensive practical experience in managing multicultural interactions. These competencies enable employees to respond effectively to culturally complex situations while maintaining professionalism and service quality. Consequently, proactive mitigation strategies are essential to prepare customer service representatives for the diverse challenges that may arise during daily service operations. Effective mitigation extends beyond technical communication training. It requires continuous competency development through structured learning, experiential practice, and organizational support that fosters intercultural awareness and adaptability. By anticipating potential communication barriers and equipping employees with appropriate intercultural competencies, airlines can reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings, manage customer complaints more effectively, and enhance the overall service experience.

The communication strategies implemented by Emirates Airline customer service representatives extend beyond the timely and accurate delivery of information. They emphasize the ability to adapt communication styles to customers' cultural contexts through openness, empathy, and the use of respectful and inclusive language. Such an approach enables customer service personnel to establish meaningful interactions with passengers from diverse cultural backgrounds while minimizing the risk of intercultural misunderstandings.

Through continuous professional development initiatives including cultural awareness training, service recovery programs, and cross-cultural service simulations customer service representatives develop greater intercultural sensitivity as well as the verbal and nonverbal communication skills necessary to respond appropriately to customers from different cultural backgrounds. These training programs equip employees with the practical competencies required to recognize cultural differences, adjust their communication behaviors accordingly, and manage intercultural service encounters with confidence and professionalism. This holistic approach enables customer service representatives to build trust, strengthen relationships with international passengers, and deliver service experiences that are both culturally appropriate and personally meaningful. Consequently, intercultural communication becomes not only a supporting competency but also a strategic organizational capability that enhances customer satisfaction, reinforces customer loyalty, and strengthens Emirates Airline's competitive position within the global aviation industry.

The implementation of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) comprising the three core dimensions of motivation, knowledge, and skills provides a valuable framework for airline customer service personnel in designing

communication briefings, developing training programs, establishing operational procedures, and managing stakeholder-related issues, particularly those involving passengers from diverse cultural backgrounds. By integrating ICC into these organizational practices, airlines can better prepare frontline employees to navigate the complexities of intercultural interactions while maintaining high standards of service quality.

ICC itself not only can delivered by individuals. It beyond individual because organization have to be proactive and commited to do cultural adaptation and maintaining services recovery as a part of maintaining competitive edge in the global aviation industry (Kuo et al., 2013). Another future recommendation from Chung & Min (2024) is company have to give support for employee. It can be growth job position, performance based incentives. Not only to see the capable employee but also enthusiast engaging with a global passenger.

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