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Challenges in cross-cultural collaboration: Indonesian students' experiences in international seminar presentation with NEUST peers

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the challenges experienced by Indonesian students in cross-cultural collaboration during online international seminar presentations with peers from Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology (NEUST), Philippines. This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with four students from the English Education Study Program, Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari (UMK), selected via purposive sampling. The data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological framework, including epoché, phenomenological reduction through horizonalization, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences. The findings revealed five interconnected themes: (1) psychological challenges and speaking confidence, (2) linguistic barriers in spontaneous communication, (3) challenges during academic presentations and Q&A sessions, (4) intercultural awareness and openness to differences, and (5) communication strategies and adaptation. The discussion is framed through Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence and Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence, indicating emerging intercultural awareness rather than complete competence achievement. This study implies the need for structured preparation and inclusive environments in international academic collaborations.

Keywords: Challenges, Cross cultural collaboration, International seminar presentation, NEUST peers.

Abstrak: *Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi tantangan yang dialami oleh mahasiswa Indonesia dalam kolaborasi lintas budaya selama presentasi seminar internasional daring bersama rekan-rekan dari Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology (NEUST), Filipina. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologis. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan empat mahasiswa dari Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari (UMK), yang dipilih menggunakan teknik purposive sampling. Data dianalisis dengan menggunakan kerangka fenomenologis Moustakas (1994), yang mencakup epoché, reduksi fenomenologis melalui horizonalization (penyetaraan bobot data), variasi imajinatif, serta sintesis makna dan esensi. Hasil penelitian mengungkapkan lima tema yang saling berkaitan: (1) tantangan psikologis dan kepercayaan diri dalam berbicara, (2) hambatan linguistik dalam komunikasi spontan, (3) tantangan selama presentasi akademik dan sesi tanya jawab, (4) kesadaran lintas budaya dan keterbukaan terhadap perbedaan, serta (5) strategi komunikasi dan adaptasi. Pembahasan dalam penelitian ini disusun berdasarkan kerangka Intercultural Communicative Competence (Kompetensi Komunikatif Lintas Budaya) dari Byram (1997) dan Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Model Proses Kompetensi Lintas Budaya) dari Deardorff (2006), yang menunjukkan adanya kesadaran lintas budaya yang mulai berkembang, alih-alih pencapaian kompetensi yang sepenuhnya matang. Penelitian ini menyiratkan perlunya persiapan yang terstruktur dan lingkungan yang inklusif dalam kolaborasi akademik internasional.*

Kata kunci: *Tantangan, kolaborasi lintas budaya, presentasi seminar internasional, rekan-rekan dari NEUST.*

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Introduction

The rapid advancement of globalization and digital transformation has significantly reshaped higher education, encouraging universities worldwide to strengthen internationalization through various forms of academic collaboration. UNESCO (2023) highlights that digital transformation has expanded opportunities for cross-border education through virtual mobility, online classrooms, and international academic collaboration, making higher education more accessible and globally connected. Internationalization is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education (Knight, 2004, as cited in Syahriani, 2025). In the Indonesian Islamic higher education context, this agenda is not driven solely by academic or economic considerations. Syahriani (2025) found that internationalization at two Indonesian Islamic universities was motivated by three factors: religious motivation as Islamic da'wah to present a positive image of Islam globally, compliance with national policies and accreditation standards, and institutional reputation building. This indicates that internationalization is a strategic institutional agenda, yet its success ultimately depends on how students experience cross-cultural interaction in practice.In recent years, internationalization has extended beyond traditional student mobility to include virtual exchanges, online international seminars, collaborative research, and other technology-mediated learning activities. These initiatives enable students to engage in global learning experiences regardless of geographical boundaries. Furthermore, internationalization has increasingly been recognized as a strategic approach to preparing graduates with global competence, intercultural awareness, and the ability to collaborate across diverse cultural contexts (De Wit, 2023). In this study, cross-cultural collaboration is not limited to the online seminar presentation itself. It refers to the entire collaborative process that began several weeks before the event, when Indonesian students from UMK and NEUST peers were actively involved in preparing the international webinar. This preparation included intensive cross-cultural communication to decide who would serve as the Person in Charge (PIC) for each session, negotiate the topics to be presented, coordinate the rundown of the event, and arrange technical and academic preparations. Therefore, the challenges examined in this study emerged not only during the live presentation and Q&A session, but also throughout the preparatory communication process that required sustained intercultural negotiation and coordination.Participating in international academic activities requires more than English language proficiency. Students also need the ability to understand, interpret, and respond appropriately to cultural differences. Although Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and virtual exchanges provide opportunities for students to develop confidence and broaden their global perspectives, communication in multicultural academic settings may present various challenges. These challenges include differences in communication styles, language proficiency, cultural expectations, and academic conventions. Such difficulties may become more noticeable during the preparation phase, when students must negotiate roles, topics, and rundown in English, as well as during academic presentations and question-and-answer (Q&A) sessions, when students are expected to express their ideas, understand questions, and provide appropriate responses in English. Intercultural Communicative Competence

(ICC), the ability to understand, interpret, and respond appropriately to cultural differences (Byram, 1997), and Deardorff's (2006) view of ICC as a developmental process involving attitudes, knowledge, and skills, are therefore used as the framing for this study.While institutions prioritize internationalization, non-academic challenges are often disregarded because host institutions prioritize academic outcomes over emotional and social support (Syahriani & Sain, 2025). In their case study of two Thai international students at an Islamic University in Indonesia, Syahriani & Sain (2025) found that social isolation due to language barriers, and difficulty in cultural adaptation were the main non-academic challenges, and institutional support was perceived as insufficient for emotional and social well-being. These findings are relevant to virtual collaboration, where psychological and linguistic barriers during preparation and presentations are also often overlooked. Recent research strengthens these findings. Diep et al. (2022) showed that cultural familiarity can reduce speaking anxiety, while Vanesa Karin et al. (2023) identified fear of judgment, nervousness, and difficulty in creating interactive media as presentation barriers. Syekh-Yusuf & Nordin, (2024) also reported that Indonesian students in international academic contexts struggle with language, culture, academic pressure, and psychological stress. Previous studies relevant to this research highlight the complexity of intercultural collaboration in Indonesian higher education. Pinariya & Sutjipto (2021) analyzed Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and revealed disparities in its affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions, while Nabilah & Nasikhin (2024) found that linguistic and cultural differences significantly hinder international students' academic engagement and require comprehensive sociocultural integration strategies. Furthermore, Feng, Abdul Aziz, & Dalib (2025) examined undergraduates' intercultural experiences using Byram's (1997) ICC framework through a qualitative study and confirmed its applicability. However, their study focused on general intercultural experiences, while the present study specifically investigates lived experiences during the full cycle of collaboration, from preparatory coordination to live presentation. Syahriani (2025) investigated leadership motivations for internationalization at two Indonesian Islamic universities using a qualitative case study with semi-structured interviews with seven university leaders from a private university (Tulip University) and a state university (Rose University). She found three motivations: religious motivation as Islamic da'wah, compliance with national policies and accreditation standards under Higher Education Law No. 12 of 2012, and institutional reputation building. However, her study focused on institutional leaders' perspectives at the policy level, while the present study examines students' lived experiences at the interactional level. Syahriani & Sain (2025) investigated the non-academic experiences of two Thai international students at an Islamic University in Indonesia using a qualitative case study with semi-structured interviews and Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis, finding homesickness, social isolation, and cultural adaptation difficulties. However, their study focused on incoming international students in a face-to-face context, while the present study examines outgoing Indonesian students from UMK during online international seminar preparation and presentations with NEUST peers. Although previous research has explored virtual collaboration in general, limited attention has been given to students' lived experiences during the full cycle of cross-cultural collaboration, from preparatory coordination to online international seminar presentations,

where participants must present their academic work and handle Q&A sessions with international audiences. Most studies have focused on virtual exchange or COIL programs in general, institutional motivations, or incoming international students, rather than on students' experiences during the preparation and presentation phases of international seminar collaboration. This indicates the need for further investigation into students' experiences in more specific forms of cross-cultural academic collaboration.Addressing this gap, the study focuses on the academic collaboration between students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari (UMK) from the 2022 cohort and NEUST peers. The collaboration in this study includes both phases: (1) the preparatory phase over several weeks, communicating to decide the PIC for each session, negotiating topics, and coordinating the rundown for the international webinar, and (2) the implementation phase, the live online international seminar presentation and Q&A session. This study aims to explore the challenges experienced by Indonesian students in cross-cultural collaboration during online international seminar presentations with NEUST peers. It specifically seeks to understand how students experience these challenges and the strategies they employ to manage them. The study is guided by the following research question: What are the challenges Indonesian students experience in cross-cultural collaboration during online international seminar presentations with NEUST peers?

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. Phenomenological inquiry seeks to identify shared meanings of lived experiences regarding a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design aims to reveal the core essence of human experience by examining what was experienced and how it was perceived by those involved (Moustakas, 1994). By employing this methodology, the study investigates how participants experienced cross-cultural collaboration with NEUST peers, both during the preparatory phase - communicating to decide the PIC, negotiate topics, and coordinate the rundown - and during the live presentation and Q&A session. Following Moustakas (1994), this approach seeks to reveal the essence of that experience by examining what participants experienced and how they experienced it. Following Creswell and Poth (2018), the focus is on the shared meanings participants assign to their collaboration, rather than on measuring the frequency of challenges.

Respondents

The respondents comprised four Indonesian students from the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari (UMK) from the 2022 cohorts. They were selected through purposive sampling with a criterion-based approach. Purposive sampling was used to intentionally select individuals who have direct, firsthand experience participating in cross-cultural collaborative online seminars and Q&A sessions with peers from Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology (NEUST), Philippines, to obtain rich and meaningful data (Palinkas et al., 2015). The inclusion criteria were direct involvement in the International Seminar Presentation with NEUST and willingness to share their experiences.

Instruments

The primary instruments used in this research are: Semi-structured interview guide focusing

on participants' experiences in cross-cultural collaboration. The researcher serves as the primary instrument for gathering and interpreting data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To capture the participants' lived experiences in depth, this study relies solely on a semi-structured interview guide as the primary data collection tool (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The semi-structured format offers the flexibility needed to probe deeper into students' specific challenges, attitudes, and communication experiences while maintaining a structured inquiry aligned with Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence framework.

Procedures

1. Initial Screening and Participant Selection (Purposive Sampling):

Prior to finalizing the participants, the researcher distributed a preliminary questionnaire to prospective candidates who took part in the international seminar program with NEUST peers. This questionnaire was designed to identify and screen individuals who actively experienced communication challenges or hurdles during the collaborative process. Based on these questionnaire results, participants were chosen using a purposive sampling technique. This approach was applied because, as Creswell (2014) highlights, qualitative research relies on selecting individuals who possess rich, direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation. In alignment with this view, Sugiyono (2018) notes that purposive sampling enables researchers to strategically establish sample criteria, ensuring that the gathered data directly addresses the established research objectives.

2. Conducting In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews:

Once the final participants were selected, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted—either online or offline—centering specifically on their lived experiences. This method was utilized due to the high degree of flexibility it offers; as Patton (2015) asserts, semi-structured interviews empower researchers to probe deeper into participants' perspectives and realities while maintaining a consistent topical framework. Furthermore, Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasize that open-ended interviewing fosters an environment where participants can freely articulate their viewpoints without being overly constrained by rigid questioning formats.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological data analysis framework. First, Epoché (Bracketing) was performed to set aside personal biases and assumptions to understand participants' experiences purely. Second, Phenomenological Reduction was conducted through horizonalization, where every statement was treated with equal value to identify invariant constituents, which were then clustered into themes to develop textural descriptions of what was experienced. Third, Imaginative Variation was applied to explore structural meanings from various perspectives to develop structural descriptions of how the experience was perceived. Finally, Synthesis of Meanings and Essences was carried out to integrate textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement revealing the essence of cross-cultural collaboration challenges.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

1. Overview of Participants' Experiences

This study explored the lived experiences of four Indonesian students participating in an

online international seminar presentation with students from Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology (NEUST), Philippines. Based on the semi-structured interviews, the findings revealed five interconnected themes: (1) psychological challenges and speaking confidence, (2) linguistic barriers in spontaneous communication, (3) challenges during academic presentations and Q&A sessions, (4) intercultural awareness and openness to differences, and (5) communication strategies and adaptation.

The participants experienced various challenges when communicating in English with international peers. These challenges involved nervousness, limited confidence, difficulties expressing ideas spontaneously, and understanding different English accents and speaking speeds. Nevertheless, the participants attempted to overcome these difficulties through preparation, active listening, the use of simple English expressions, and requests for clarification.

Following Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological approach, the findings are presented through participants' significant statements, followed by interpretations of their shared experiences.

2. Textural Description: What the Participants Experienced

A. Psychological Challenges and Speaking Confidence

One of the most prominent findings was the psychological pressure experienced by participants when communicating in English with NEUST students. Although they had prepared their presentation materials, they still experienced nervousness and lacked confidence when interacting directly with international peers.

Participant S explained that preparation did not completely eliminate nervousness:

> "I feel quite prepared, as I have already gone over the material and practiced on my own several times. However, I still feel a bit nervous because I will be interacting directly with students from other countries." (S)

Similarly, participant T described feeling less confident because of the possibility of making mistakes when speaking English:

> "I was afraid of mispronouncing words or being unable to express my meaning properly." (T)

This concern was also reflected in participant R's experience, who explained that although she was enthusiastic about participating in the seminar, she initially questioned her ability to communicate effectively with international students:

> "Before the activity started, I felt nervous and wondered if I could interact and talk well to them and if they would understand what I was saying." (R)

Participant AS also experienced similar psychological pressure due to her limited English-speaking ability:

> "Before the seminar started, I felt very nervous because my English-speaking ability was still limited. I was afraid that

> NEUST students would not understand what I wanted to say." (AS)

These statements indicate that nervousness and fear of making mistakes were common experiences among the participants. Their concerns were not merely related to understanding the presentation materials but also to their ability to communicate effectively and be understood by international audiences.

The findings suggest that psychological challenges influenced participants' confidence, particularly when they were required to speak spontaneously. These experiences are consistent with Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) concept of foreign language anxiety, which explains how anxiety and fear of negative evaluation can affect learners' communication in a foreign language.

However, the participants' experiences also indicate that nervousness did not prevent them from participating. Instead, their involvement in the seminar provided opportunities to gradually develop confidence through direct interaction.

B. Linguistic Barriers in Spontaneous Communication

Another significant finding concerned the linguistic difficulties experienced by participants when expressing ideas and understanding spoken English. The interviews revealed that these difficulties involved selecting appropriate vocabulary, constructing sentences, pronunciation, grammar, and understanding unfamiliar accents and speaking speeds.

Participant S described the difficulty of expressing ideas fluently:

> "For example, when I want to express an opinion, I sometimes need time to think of the right English words." (S)

Participant T also explained that she sometimes struggled to express ideas because she needed additional time to translate her thoughts into English:

> "Sometimes, I already know what I want to say in Indonesian, but when I have to change it into English, I need more time." (T)

These experiences demonstrate that having an idea does not necessarily mean that students can immediately express it in English. The process of selecting vocabulary and constructing appropriate sentences sometimes interrupted the flow of communication.

In addition to speaking difficulties, participants also experienced challenges in understanding the English used by NEUST students. Participant R explained that differences in pronunciation and speaking speed affected her listening comprehension:

> "Some parts were understandable, but there were also parts that I could not understand because of their speaking speed and Filipino accent." (R)

A similar experience was reported by participant AS, who explained:

> "There were some parts that I could understand, but there were also parts that I could not understand because they spoke with quite fast intonation and had a Filipino accent." (AS)

These responses indicate that linguistic barriers occurred in both productive and receptive communication. Productive difficulties involved expressing ideas and constructing sentences, whereas receptive difficulties involved understanding different accents, intonation, and speaking speeds.

The findings are related to Nation's (2001) perspective on the importance of vocabulary knowledge in language use and communication. However, the participants' experiences further demonstrate that effective communication requires not only vocabulary and grammatical knowledge but also the ability to process spoken language and formulate responses under spontaneous conditions.

C. Challenges During Academic Presentations and Q&A Sessions

Academic presentations and Q&A sessions represented particularly challenging situations for the participants. Although they had prepared their presentation materials, communicating academic information in English to an international audience created additional psychological and linguistic pressure.

Participant S explained that maintaining confidence was her greatest difficulty during the presentation:

> "My main challenge is overcoming nervousness and maintaining self-confidence. Even though I have prepared the material and practiced on my own, I still feel nervous when I have to give a live presentation." (S)

Similarly, participant T explained that she was concerned about mispronunciation, forgetting prepared sentences, and failing to explain the material clearly. She stated:

> "I was afraid of saying the wrong words, forgetting the sentences I had prepared, or being unable to explain a particular section properly." (T)

In contrast, participant R reported that although she initially felt nervous, she successfully completed her presentation:

> "Although I felt nervous, I was still able to deliver the material smoothly. My nervousness started to disappear after I finished the presentation." (R)

Participant AS also experienced nervousness when presenting academic material in English. However, she managed to complete the presentation and felt relieved afterward.

The Q&A session created another difficulty because participants were required to understand questions and formulate responses without extensive preparation time. Participant S described the experience as challenging because she needed to understand the questions before providing accurate answers.

Participant R explained that she sometimes needed additional time to understand the questions:

> "There are some questions that make me need to think longer before answering, especially since I want to make sure that I understand the intent of the question correctly." (R)

Meanwhile, participant AS described a specific situation in which she did not initially understand a question from a NEUST student:

> "At first, I did not understand the meaning of the question. Therefore, I asked them to repeat the question until I really understood what they were asking." (AS)

After understanding the question, she was able to provide an answer.

These findings demonstrate that the Q&A session required participants to perform several communication processes simultaneously, including listening, interpreting questions, organizing ideas, and expressing appropriate responses in English.

Unlike prepared presentations, Q&A interactions required immediate responses. Consequently, participants experienced greater pressure when processing English and formulating answers. These experiences indicate that spontaneous academic interaction requires both linguistic competence and psychological readiness.

D. Intercultural Awareness and Openness to Differences

The interviews also revealed that participants became aware of differences in communication styles between Indonesian and NEUST students. These differences were particularly noticeable in English accents, intonation, speaking speed, and ways of expressing opinions.

Participant S explained:

> "The differences lie in English accents and the way opinions are expressed. While we all use English for academic activities, each person has a different communication style." (S)

Similarly, participant AS noticed differences in pronunciation and speaking speed:

> "One of the differences I noticed was the way of communicating, especially in terms of accent and intonation when speaking English." (AS)

Participant T also recognized that students from different countries might have different communication habits and academic experiences. She emphasized that these differences should not be interpreted as evidence that one communication style is better than another.

Furthermore, the participants generally perceived NEUST students as friendly and open. Participant R explained that their friendliness helped reduce her initial nervousness:

> "My nervousness slowly disappeared because the NEUST students were very friendly and open to us." (R)

Participant S also reflected on the importance of respecting differences:

> "Despite our different cultural backgrounds, we are still able to communicate and understand one another." (S)

These experiences suggest that participants gradually recognized communication differences as natural aspects of intercultural interaction rather than negative characteristics. Their willingness to listen, understand, and respect different communication styles helped them maintain interaction despite initial difficulties.

The findings reflect Byram's (1997) concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), particularly the dimension of attitudes (savoir être), which emphasizes openness, respect, and willingness to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds.

However, the findings primarily demonstrate participants' awareness and acceptance of communication differences. They do not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that participants developed comprehensive knowledge of Filipino cultural practices or fully achieved all dimensions of intercultural competence.

E. Communication Strategies and Adaptation

Despite experiencing psychological and linguistic challenges, the participants demonstrated several strategies to maintain communication during the seminar. These strategies included preparing presentation materials, practicing beforehand, listening carefully, using simple English sentences, remaining calm, and requesting repetition or clarification.

Participant S explained that she preferred using simple sentences and remaining calm when communicating:

> "The strategy I use is to remain calm, listen carefully, and use simple sentences." (S)

Similarly, participant T described focusing on the main message rather than grammatical perfection:

> "I try to focus on the main message I want to convey rather than worrying too much about grammatical perfection." (T)

Participant R also emphasized the importance of preparation and active listening:

> "The strategy I used during the seminar was to prepare myself by studying and practicing before the activity began." (R)

Meanwhile, participant AS explained that asking for repetition helped her overcome difficulties during the Q&A session:

> "I asked the NEUST students to repeat the question until I understood its meaning." (AS)

These responses indicate that participants actively attempted to manage communication difficulties instead of withdrawing from interaction. Their strategies were not limited to improving language production but also involved developing more effective ways to understand and respond to international peers.

The participants also reported changes in their confidence and communication

behavior after interacting with NEUST students. Participant S explained:

> "I try to focus more on the core message rather than worrying too much about making mistakes." (S)

Participant AS similarly described becoming more accustomed to the accents of NEUST students:

> "After interacting several times, I started to become familiar with the way they spoke. I also became more comfortable communicating with them." (AS)

These experiences suggest that adaptation occurred through repeated interaction, practical communication strategies, and changes in participants' attitudes toward making mistakes.

The findings are consistent with Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence, particularly the importance of openness, respect, and communication skills in developing effective intercultural interaction.

3. Structural Description: How the Participants Experienced the Challenges

The structural description explains the conditions that shaped participants' experiences during the international seminar. Based on the interviews, several conditions influenced how the participants experienced psychological, linguistic, and intercultural challenges.

First, the international seminar required participants to communicate in English with students from another country. This unfamiliar academic environment created psychological pressure, particularly because participants were concerned about making mistakes and being misunderstood.

Second, the spontaneous nature of communication intensified their linguistic difficulties. While presentation materials could be prepared beforehand, responding to questions required participants to understand and formulate answers immediately. As participant S explained, she needed time to construct appropriate English sentences before responding.

Third, differences in English accents and speaking speeds influenced participants' listening experiences. Participants R and AS specifically reported difficulties understanding certain explanations delivered by NEUST students. These experiences demonstrate that communication challenges were influenced not only by participants' English proficiency but also by differences in spoken language patterns.

Fourth, the social atmosphere influenced how participants managed their challenges. The friendliness and openness of NEUST students helped reduce participants' nervousness and encouraged them to continue interacting. Finally, preparation and active participation played important roles in adaptation. Participants attempted to overcome their difficulties by practicing presentations, listening carefully, using simple sentences, and requesting clarification when necessary.

Taken together, these conditions demonstrate that participants' experiences emerged from the interaction between individual psychological factors, linguistic demands, and the intercultural academic environment.

4. Discussion in Relation to Previous Studies and Theoretical Framework

A. Foreign Language Anxiety and Communication Confidence

The findings demonstrate that nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and limited confidence influenced participants' communication during the international seminar. These experiences support Horwitz et al.'s (1986) concept of foreign language anxiety.

This is parallel to Syahriani & Sain (2025), who found that two Thai international students felt isolated and did not feel they belonged because of language barriers. In the present study, participants experienced the same mechanism in a virtual setting: anxiety did not appear only during the live presentation, but already during the preparatory phase over several weeks, when they had to communicate with NEUST peers in English to decide the PIC, negotiate topics, and agree on the rundown.

B. Linguistic Competence and Spontaneous Interaction

The participants experienced difficulties selecting vocabulary, constructing sentences, and understanding accents and speaking speeds. This is consistent with Syahriani & Sain (2025), where P1 stated, "Even though I was surrounded by people, I felt isolated because I couldn't connect with them." In the present study, participants were connected via chat and Zoom to coordinate PIC, topics, and rundown, yet they often felt unable to connect because they needed more time to translate their thoughts and decode the Filipino accent.These findings indicate that communication competence involves both the ability to express ideas and the ability to understand spoken language in real-time interaction.

Therefore, international seminar activities should provide opportunities to improve vocabulary, listening comprehension, spontaneous speaking, and the ability to negotiate meaning during academic discussions.

C. Intercultural Communicative Competence

The findings also demonstrate the relevance of Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence framework.The participants showed openness toward differences in accents and communication styles. They attempted to understand their international peers rather than immediately judging differences negatively. These experiences reflect the dimension of attitudes (savoir être), particularly openness and respect toward people from different cultural backgrounds.Furthermore, their efforts to become familiar with different accents, request clarification, and adjust their communication strategies demonstrate selected aspects of the skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire). The findings also relate to Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence, which emphasizes respect, openness, and interactional skills as important elements of intercultural communication.

However, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of emerging intercultural awareness and developing communication skills rather than the complete achievement of all dimensions of intercultural competence.

D. The Gap Between Institutional Agenda and Student Experience

This study complements Syahriani (2025), who found that leaders view internationalization as a strategic agenda driven by policy compliance and reputation.

The present study shows how that agenda is experienced at the student level: as concrete, demanding work of negotiating PIC, topics, and rundown in a second language. This also extends Syahriani & Sain (2025), who concluded that universities were helpful with academic things, but left students on their own for social and cultural adjustment. The same pattern appeared here: students received academic direction for the webinar, but had to find their own strategies to navigate intercultural coordination during preparation. Therefore, support should be provided throughout the full collaboration cycle, not only on the day of the seminar.

5. Synthesis of Meanings and Essences

Based on the four participants' experiences, the essence of cross-cultural collaboration during international seminar presentations can be understood as a process of overcoming communication uncertainty through preparation, interaction, and intercultural openness.

Initially, participants experienced nervousness, limited confidence, and concerns about communicating in English. These difficulties became more noticeable during spontaneous discussions, academic presentations, and Q&A sessions.

However, the participants attempted to manage these challenges through preparation, active listening, simple English expressions, and clarification requests.

Their interactions with NEUST students also helped them recognize that differences in accents and communication styles were natural aspects of intercultural communication.

Overall, the shared meaning of their experiences was not the complete absence of psychological or linguistic barriers. Rather, it was their willingness to continue communicating, adapt to unfamiliar situations, and learn from direct intercultural interaction.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the challenges experienced by Indonesian students during cross-cultural collaboration in an online international seminar presentation with students from Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology (NEUST), Philippines. Based on the experiences of four participants from the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari (UMK), the findings demonstrate that international academic collaboration involved interconnected psychological, linguistic, and intercultural challenges.

The findings revealed that psychological challenges, particularly nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and concerns about being misunderstood, influenced the participants' confidence when communicating in English. These experiences were especially noticeable during spontaneous interactions and question-and-answer sessions, when participants had limited time to understand questions and formulate appropriate responses. In addition, linguistic difficulties involved not only selecting vocabulary and constructing sentences but also understanding different accents, intonation, and speaking speeds. These challenges demonstrate that communicating in an international academic environment requires both the ability to express ideas and the ability to understand others during real-time interaction.

Despite these difficulties, the participants demonstrated several strategies to maintain communication. They prepared their presentation materials, practiced before the seminar, listened carefully, used simple English expressions, and requested repetition or clarification when they did not understand questions. These strategies helped them manage communication difficulties and continue participating in the academic interaction. Their experiences also indicated that the friendly and open interaction they perceived from NEUST students contributed to a more comfortable communication environment.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of intercultural awareness in cross-cultural collaboration. Through direct interaction, participants became more aware of differences in accents and communication styles and recognized the importance of openness, respect, and willingness to understand others. These experiences reflect selected dimensions of Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence, particularly attitudes of openness and skills of discovery and interaction. They are also consistent with Deardorff's (2006) perspective that respect, openness, and interactional skills are important elements of intercultural competence. However, these findings indicate emerging intercultural awareness and adaptive communication practices rather than the complete development of all dimensions of intercultural competence.

Overall, the study concludes that cross-cultural collaboration is not simply an activity in which students use English to exchange academic information. It is also a learning process through which students encounter communication uncertainty, manage psychological and linguistic barriers, and develop greater openness toward different communication practices. The shared essence of the participants' experiences lies in their willingness to continue communicating despite their limitations and in their efforts to adapt through preparation, interaction, and reflection.

Based on these findings, universities and English language educators are encouraged to provide students with more opportunities to participate in international academic activities, particularly seminars, presentations, and interactive discussion sessions. Such activities should be supported by adequate preparation, opportunities for spontaneous speaking practice, and an inclusive communication environment that encourages students to express their ideas without excessive fear of making mistakes. Through these opportunities, students may strengthen their English communication abilities while developing intercultural awareness and the confidence needed to participate in international academic collaboration.

Nevertheless, this study involved only four Indonesian students from one university and focused on their experiences in a particular online international seminar. Therefore, the findings are context-specific and should not be generalized to all Indonesian students or all international academic collaborations. Future research could involve a larger and more diverse group of participants, include perspectives from students at partner universities, and examine how intercultural communication experiences influence students' language development and intercultural competence over a longer period.

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