ADAPTING COMMUNICATION IN MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOMS: EVIDENCE FROM INDONESIAN PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS IN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract
The increasing diversity of students in global education has transformed classrooms into multicultural environments that demand adaptive and effective communication. In such contexts, teachers are required not only to deliver content but also to navigate linguistic and cultural differences that may influence classroom interaction. This study examines the communication strategies used by Indonesian pre-service teachers during their teaching practicum in multicultural classrooms in Australia. A qualitative case study approach was employed involving five pre-service teachers. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, and analyzed inductively to identify patterns of communication practices and challenges. The findings indicate that effective communication strategies include understanding student characteristics through systematic observation, utilizing adaptive instructional media, adjusting learning objectives to students' abilities, and applying flexible teaching roles. Major challenges identified include language barriers, diverse student behavior, and mismatched learning pace. These challenges were addressed through multimodal communication strategies such as gestures, visual aids, and interactive classroom management techniques. This study highlights the importance of adaptive and culturally responsive communication in supporting effective teaching and learning in multicultural classroom settings.
Keyword: Communication Strategies, Multicultural classroom, Student Teachers.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of globalization and technology has significantly transformed the education sector, particularly by increasing cross-border academic mobility and interaction among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. UNESCO (2025) reported that more than 6.3 million students are currently studying outside their home countries, with an annual increase of approximately 5–6% since 2015. This phenomenon indicates that educational environments are becoming increasingly multicultural, requiring adaptive learning approaches that are responsive to diversity. In this context, classrooms are no longer homogeneous spaces but dynamic environments where students differ in terms of language, culture, values, and communication styles.

The emergence of multicultural classrooms highlights the importance of multicultural education as a foundation for creating inclusive and equitable learning environments. Multicultural education emphasizes respect, tolerance, and appreciation of diversity while promoting equal learning opportunities for all students (Harahap, 2024; Nurasmawi & Ristiliana, 2021). According to Apriani et al. (2021), multicultural education reflects the reality of society, which consists of individuals from diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds. Therefore, teachers are required to possess not only pedagogical competence but also intercultural competence to effectively manage diversity in the classroom (Cherng & Davis, 2019).

One of the key competencies required in multicultural learning environments is communication. Communication in the learning process is

defined as an interactive exchange of messages between teachers and students to achieve shared understanding and learning objectives (Kurniawan et al., 2023). Effective communication strategies play a crucial role in determining the success of the learning process, as they influence students' engagement, comprehension, and participation (Mulyani et al., 2022). In multicultural classrooms, communication becomes more complex due to differences in language proficiency, cultural norms, and communication styles, which can potentially lead to misunderstandings and ineffective learning interactions (Wibawa & Sumarwan, 2023; Faith & Emuobosa, 2025).

Previous studies have shown that communication barriers are one of the main challenges in multicultural education. Linguistic differences, cultural perceptions, and variations in communication styles can hinder the delivery and interpretation of learning messages (Rifa'i et al., 2025). Furthermore, research by Abacioglu et al. (2023) indicates that culturally responsive communication significantly affects student engagement in diverse classrooms. In addition, nonverbal communication, such as gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice, has been found to play a vital role in supporting verbal communication and enhancing student understanding (Hu & Wang, 2023). These findings suggest that effective communication in multicultural classrooms requires a combination of verbal and nonverbal strategies. In the context of teacher education, international teaching practicum programs provide valuable opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop intercultural competence and communication skills. Studies have shown that such programs enhance cross-cultural awareness and professional competence among pre-service teachers (Abakirov et al., 2025; Hasymi & Nurkamto, 2023). However, despite these benefits, many pre-service teachers still face difficulties in implementing effective communication strategies in real classroom settings, particularly in multicultural environments (Opheim, 2025). Most existing studies focus on general intercultural competence or perceptions of teaching experiences, rather than examining specific communication strategies applied during teaching practice. This indicates a research gap in understanding how communication strategies are practically implemented by pre-service teachers in multicultural classrooms, especially in international teaching contexts. Limited studies have explored how pre-service teachers adapt their communication strategies to overcome linguistic barriers, manage classroom dynamics, and foster student engagement in culturally diverse environments. Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze the communication strategies employed by Indonesian pre-service teachers during their teaching practicum in multicultural classrooms in Australia. Specifically, this study seeks to (1) identify the communication barriers faced by pre-service teachers and (2) examine the implementation of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies in multicultural learning contexts. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the development of effective communication practices in multicultural education and provide practical insights for improving teacher training programs in global contexts.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design to explore the communication strategies of Indonesian pre-service teachers in multicultural classrooms. The research was conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of real teaching experiences in an international practicum context. The subjects of this study consisted of five Indonesian pre-service teachers from Universitas Negeri Semarang who had participated in a teaching practicum program in Australia in 2025. The participants were selected using purposive

sampling based on their experience in teaching in multicultural classrooms. The participants represented different educational levels, including elementary school, junior high school, and senior high school, with two participants from each level. Data were collected through multiple techniques, including observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted to understand classroom interactions and communication practices. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants' experiences, strategies, and challenges in communication. Documentation, such as field notes, recordings, and teaching materials, was used to support and validate the data obtained from observations and interviews.

The research instrument consisted of an interview guide developed based on key aspects of communication strategies, including identifying communication targets, use of media, message objectives, and the role of the communicator. The instrument was designed to capture both verbal and nonverbal communication practices in multicultural classroom settings. Data analysis was conducted using an interactive model consisting of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The data were analyzed inductively to identify patterns, themes, and categories related to communication strategies. To ensure data validity, triangulation techniques were applied by comparing data from different sources and methods. This methodological approach enabled a comprehensive analysis of communication strategies used by pre-service teachers in managing multicultural classroom interactions.

RESULTS AND DISCCUSION

This study examines how Indonesian pre-service teachers implement communication strategies in multicultural classrooms in Australia. The findings focus on five main aspects: communication barriers, understanding communication targets, media usage, message objectives, and the role of the communicator.Communication barriers identified in this study are categorized into linguistic, behavioral, and structural challenges. Linguistic barriers occur due to difficulties in pronunciation, accent, and vocabulary. One participant stated, "Their pronunciation is a bit difficult to understand, and the students speak very fast, so sometimes I don't catch everything" (LZ). In addition, communicators often experience vocabulary limitations, "Sometimes... I don't know the English for what they're saying. I usually just open my phone and use Google Translate" (AO).

Behavioral barriers arise from highly dynamic classroom interactions. Students were described as very active and sometimes disruptive. One participant explained, "When they're quiet, they're really quiet, but when they're active, they're really active. Students who are usually very active are usually disrespectful" (AO). In addition, students often ask spontaneous and out-of-context questions, "Sometimes they always say whatever is on their mind without thinking about whether it disturbs the class or not" (LZ). Structural barriers were related to mismatches between lesson plans and students' learning pace. One participant stated, "The plan was 1 chapter in 4 meetings, but it ended up taking 6 meetings because they didn't understand and couldn't be forced" (AO). In some cases, lessons had to be postponed, "Because the class was not conducive or the students were not interested, I had to postpone it to the next meeting" (MC). These findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Dimensions of Communication Barriers

No	Aspect	Description	Evidence
1	Linguistic	Pronunciation and vocabulary difficulties	"Their pronunciation is difficult…" (LZ)
2	Behavioral	Active and disruptive classroom behavior	"Students are very active…" (AO)

3	Structural	Mismatch in learning pace and planning	"1 chapter became 6 meetings…" (AO)

In response to these challenges, pre-service teachers developed several communication strategies. The first strategy was understanding communication targets through systematic observation. Participants conducted observations for approximately two weeks, including shadowing mentor teachers and recording field notes. One participant stated, "I observed for two weeks, then memorized the children's names... I made field notes every day to identify their character traits" (LZ). In addition, teachers received information about students with special needs: "The mentor teacher explained about ADHD, syndromes, and even had an exit card for students with mental health issues" (MC). The second strategy was the use of adaptive instructional media. For lower-level students, concrete media such as puppets were used. "For small classes, we use puppets because videos are too fast and confuse them" (YA). For higher-level students, digital media such as PowerPoint, videos, and interactive platforms were more frequently used. "I most often use PPT, flip cards, and TikTok videos for practical material" (AO).

The third strategy was the adjustment of message objectives. Teachers initially expected students to have higher language proficiency; However, these expectations were modified after classroom observation. One participant stated, "Initially, I thought they could speak Indonesian, but in the end, the focus became on learning vocabulary and speaking up" (AO). The fourth strategy is the flexible role of the communicator. Pre-service teachers acted as facilitators, classroom managers, and peers. Informal communication was used to build engagement: "I taught in a relaxed manner, using 'supp guys,' so they were more engaged" (AO). At the same time, classroom control strategies were applied, such as providing structured choices: "We gave them the choice of sitting quietly or moving to a chair and working on the worksheet" (YA), and using non-verbal signals: "If the class started to get noisy, I clapped my hands to regain focus" (SM). Overall, the findings show that communication in multicultural classrooms involves complex challenges and requires adaptive strategies that respond to students' characteristics and classroom conditions.

The findings of this study demonstrate that communication in multicultural classrooms is not a linear process of message delivery, but rather a dynamic negotiation of meaning shaped by linguistic diversity, classroom interaction patterns, and contextual learning conditions. This confirms the perspective that communication in education is socially constructed and influenced by cultural and situational factors (Almulla & Al-Rahmi., 2023). The linguistic barriers identified in this study, including pronunciation difficulties, vocabulary limitations, and accent differences, highlight the gap between language competence and instructional demands. While previous studies have identified language barriers as a major challenge in multicultural classrooms (Sharma, 2023), the findings of this study provide a more nuanced understanding by showing that these barriers are not merely obstacles, but also trigger the development of adaptive communication practices. Pre-service teachers did not rely solely on verbal communication but shifted toward multimodal strategies, such as gestures, visual aids, and translation tools. This indicates a transformation from language-dependent communication to meaning-centered communication, where understanding is prioritized over linguistic accuracy.

Behavioral challenges observed in this study further reinforce that communication effectiveness is inseparable from classroom interaction dynamics. The active and expressive nature of students in Australian classrooms reflects a cultural

difference in communication styles, where participation and critical engagement are encouraged. This finding aligns with Abacioglu et al. (2023), who argue that culturally diverse classrooms tend to produce higher interaction intensity. However, this study extends the argument by demonstrating that high participation does not automatically lead to effective communication unless it is supported by appropriate classroom management strategies. Therefore, communication competence in multicultural settings should be understood as an integration of interaction management and message delivery. Structural barriers, particularly the mismatch between lesson planning and students' learning pace, challenge the assumption that standardized instructional design can be applied universally. The need to extend lesson duration and adjust instructional targets suggests that learning in multicultural classrooms requires flexibility and responsiveness. This finding supports Du Plooy, et al., (2023), who emphasizes the importance of adaptive learning structures. At the same time, this study contributes by showing that flexibility is not only a pedagogical adjustment but also a communication strategy, as it directly affects how messages are structured, delivered, and interpreted.

The communication strategies identified in this study can be systematically interpreted through Effendy's communication framework, which includes identifying communication targets, selecting appropriate media, adjusting message objectives, and defining the role of the communicator. The initial process of observing student characteristics reflects the principle of audience analysis, which is fundamental in communication theory. However, this study expands the concept by demonstrating that audience analysis in multicultural classrooms involves not only cognitive aspects, but also cultural sensitivity and behavioral awareness.

The use of adaptive media and game-based learning strategies further illustrates the integration of communication and pedagogy. Previous research has shown that interactive media can enhance engagement and reduce communication barriers (Muir, et al., 2022; Waang, 2023; Ali, 2025). This study confirms these findings while adding that media selection must be contextually grounded, particularly in terms of students' developmental levels and cultural familiarity. For example, concrete media were more effective for younger learners, while digital interactive tools were more suitable for higher-level students. This indicates that media effectiveness is not universal, but contingent upon the characteristics of the communication target. The adjustment of message objectives observed in this study reflects the application of scaffolding principles, where complex material is simplified into manageable steps (Reiser, 2023). However, beyond scaffolding, this study suggests that message adjustment also represents a strategic redefinition of learning goals. Instead of focusing on linguistic mastery, pre-service teachers prioritized functional communication, such as vocabulary recognition and confidence in speaking. This finding contributes to the development of a more pragmatic approach to language teaching in multicultural contexts.

Furthermore, the role of pre-service teachers as communicators was found to be dynamic and multifaceted, encompassing roles as facilitators, peers, classroom managers, and cultural mediators. This supports previous research emphasizing the importance of relational communication in enhancing student engagement (Hu & Wang, 2023). However, this study extends the concept by highlighting the need to balance relational closeness with instructional authority. The use of informal communication styles to build rapport, combined with structured classroom control strategies, reflects an adaptive communication model that is responsive to

both emotional and instructional needs. Overall, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by integrating communication theory, intercultural education, and classroom practice into a cohesive framework of adaptive communication strategies. The findings suggest that effective communication in multicultural classrooms requires not only linguistic competence but also cultural awareness, flexibility, and the ability to align communication strategies with classroom management practices. From a theoretical perspective, this study proposes that communication strategies in multicultural classrooms should be understood as adaptive systems rather than fixed techniques. From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of incorporating intercultural communication training, adaptive teaching strategies, and real classroom simulations into teacher education programs. These implications are essential in preparing future teachers to effectively navigate the complexities of global and multicultural educational environments.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that communication in multicultural classrooms requires adaptive, flexible, and context-sensitive strategies to address linguistic, behavioral, and structural challenges. The findings show that Indonesian pre-service teachers implement communication strategies through four key aspects: understanding student characteristics, utilizing adaptive instructional media, adjusting message objectives, and applying flexible communication roles. These strategies enable teachers to overcome major barriers, including language differences, dynamic student behavior, and mismatched learning pace. The results highlight that effective communication is not solely determined by language proficiency, but by the ability to integrate verbal and nonverbal communication, manage classroom interaction, and respond to diverse student needs. This study contributes to the development of communication strategy frameworks in multicultural education by emphasizing the importance of adaptive and culturally responsive approaches. Practically, the findings suggest that teacher education programs should incorporate intercultural communication training, classroom management skills, and real teaching simulations to better prepare pre-service teachers for global classroom environments. Future research is recommended to explore communication strategies in broader contexts and with larger participant groups to further strengthen the generalizability of these findings.

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