

Local Students' Adaptation to International Peers: Toward A Reciprocal Model of Intercultural Adaptation in An Eastern Indonesian University

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates how local Indonesian undergraduate students in Ternate, North Maluku, adapt linguistically, culturally, and socially when interacting with international peers on campus. While most research examines how international students adjust to a host culture, few studies examine how local students themselves change through sustained contact. Using an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, the study first conducted interviews and observations with ten local students and then surveyed 44 respondents to examine linguistic, cultural, social-psychological, and digital adjustments. Four themes emerged: linguistic adaptation; cultural mediation and identity negotiation; social-psychological challenge and resilience; and digital communication as an intercultural space. Survey results were descriptively consistent with these themes: 84% of respondents reported conscious code-switching, 90.9% reported some anxiety during initial contact, and empathy toward cultural difference ($M = 3.81$) emerged as the most developed dimension of intercultural communication competence. Because only local students were sampled, the study demonstrates host-side rather than bidirectional adaptation and, on this basis, proposes a theoretical model of reciprocal adaptation for future research.

Keywords: eastern Indonesia, intercultural communication competence, internationalization at home, language strategies, local-student adaptation.

ABSTRAK: Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana mahasiswa sarjana lokal Indonesia di Ternate, Maluku Utara, beradaptasi secara linguistik, budaya, dan sosial ketika berinteraksi dengan mahasiswa internasional di lingkungan kampus. Meskipun sebagian besar penelitian berfokus pada bagaimana mahasiswa internasional menyesuaikan diri dengan budaya tuan rumah, masih sedikit penelitian yang mengkaji bagaimana mahasiswa lokal itu sendiri mengalami perubahan melalui interaksi yang berkelanjutan. Dengan menggunakan desain mixed methods eksploratori sekuensial, penelitian ini terlebih dahulu melakukan wawancara dan observasi terhadap sepuluh mahasiswa lokal, kemudian dilanjutkan dengan survei terhadap 44 responden untuk mengkaji penyesuaian linguistik, budaya, sosial-psikologis, dan digital. Empat tema utama ditemukan, yaitu: adaptasi linguistik; mediasi budaya dan negosiasi identitas; tantangan sosial-psikologis dan resiliensi; serta komunikasi digital sebagai ruang interkultural. Hasil survei secara deskriptif konsisten dengan tema-tema tersebut: 84% responden melaporkan melakukan alih kode (code-switching) secara sadar, 90,9% melaporkan mengalami kecemasan pada tahap awal interaksi, dan empati terhadap perbedaan budaya ($M = 3,81$) muncul sebagai dimensi kompetensi komunikasi antarbudaya yang paling berkembang. Karena penelitian ini hanya melibatkan mahasiswa lokal sebagai sampel, temuan penelitian menunjukkan adaptasi dari sisi tuan rumah (host-side adaptation), bukan adaptasi dua arah (bidirectional adaptation). Atas dasar temuan tersebut, penelitian ini mengusulkan model teoretis adaptasi resiprokal (reciprocal adaptation) untuk dikaji lebih lanjut dalam penelitian mendatang.

Kata kunci: adaptasi mahasiswa lokal, Indonesia Timur, internasionalisasi di kampus, kompetensi komunikasi antarbudaya, strategi bahasa.

INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education has become a defining feature of contemporary academic environments across Southeast Asia. Indonesian universities have increasingly welcomed international students under bilateral scholarship schemes such as Darmasiswa and KNB (Kemitraan Negara Berkembang), bringing learners from Africa, the Middle East, East Asia, and Southeast Asia into institutions across the archipelago. This demographic shift has been especially visible in smaller cities such as Ternate, the historic capital of North Maluku Province, where the presence of international students is comparatively recent and local exposure to global cultures has historically been limited.

Much of the scholarly literature on intercultural adaptation in higher education focuses on how international students navigate new academic systems, cultural norms, and language environments (Berry, 2005; Ward et al., 2001; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Considerably less attention has been paid to the reverse relationship: how local students — those who have always lived in the host setting — adjust their own language use, communication behavior, and cultural self-presentation in response to the arrival of international peers. Bibliometric reviews of intercultural adaptation research confirm that studies centering the local, non-mobile student remain a distinct minority within a literature still dominated by the international-student perspective (Tang & Zhang, 2023; Gutema et al., 2024).

This gap is not merely a matter of who has been studied, but of what kind of process has been assumed. Much of the acculturation literature has historically treated adaptation as a one-directional process in which newcomers adjust to an existing host norm (Halualani, 2008), leaving open the theoretical and empirical question of whether — and how — host-country nationals also change through sustained intercultural contact. This study addresses that question empirically from the local-student side and, on that basis, develops a reciprocal (rather than strictly bidirectional) theoretical proposition.

Integrated Theoretical Framework

Rather than treating each relevant theory as an independent lens, this study integrates four theoretical strands into a single explanatory architecture linking contact to competence. Internationalization at home (IaH) provides the institutional frame, describing the intentional integration of intercultural dimensions into the domestic campus environment for students who do not physically cross borders (Beelen & Jones, 2015); systematic reviews confirm that ICC gains are not confined to internationally mobile students (Soulé et al., 2025; Karimova et al., 2023; Simões & Sangiamchit, 2023), and can be deliberately cultivated through classroom-based cultural-metacognition training (Huang, 2023). Intercultural communication competence (ICC), as articulated by Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006), supplies the outcome construct: Byram identifies five components (attitudes, knowledge, interpreting/relating skills,

discovery/interaction skills, critical cultural awareness), while Deardorff's process model links internal outcomes (flexibility, empathy, an ethnorelative view) to external, effective communication, and argues ICC is not exclusive to mobile individuals.

Contact hypothesis theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) supplies the mechanism connecting exposure to outcome: under conditions of equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support, cross-group contact reduces prejudice and increases empathy. Finally, linguistic mechanisms — Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis, translanguaging (Garcia & Wei, 2014), and Norton's (2000) investment — are treated as a single linguistic-adaptation sub-mechanism explaining how interaction with international peers translates into linguistic gain and identity work. Together, these strands form a single conceptual model in which internationalization at home creates the structural condition for contact, contact activates linguistic, cultural, and psychological adaptation mechanisms, and these mechanisms build intercultural agency and, cumulatively, intercultural communication competence.

Building on this integrated framework, the gap this study addresses can be stated in terms of actor, mechanism, and context: the local, non-mobile student remains under-examined relative to the internationally mobile student; the specific pathways translating sustained contact into competence gains for this actor remain unclear; and this pathway has rarely been examined in geographically peripheral Indonesian settings such as Ternate, where limited English instruction, lower digital connectivity, and strong local cultural traditions may condition adaptation differently than in cosmopolitan metropolitan universities. Ternate is theoretically motivated rather than merely convenient: its historical connections to global trade through the spice route (Andaya, 1993) coexist with these contemporary conditions, and when international students — such as the Palestinian and Saudi Arabian students documented at the research site — arrive on campus, local students face communicative demands their prior education may not have anticipated. Recent scholarship on translanguaging (Eren, 2024) and cross-cultural adjustment in Asian higher education (Cao & Meng, 2022; Cao et al., 2024; Oduwaye et al., 2023) confirms these dimensions remain active, unsettled areas of inquiry.

Existing studies tend to conceptualize adaptation as a one-directional process centered on the internationally mobile student, leaving the host-side, local-student pathway comparatively under-theorized. This study addresses that gap empirically from the local-student side by asking: how do local students in an internationalized eastern Indonesian university adapt linguistically, culturally, and socially to sustained contact with international peers, and what social-psychological and digital dimensions accompany this adaptation? Because the study does not itself collect data from international-student participants, the term "bidirectional adaptation" is used throughout this manuscript strictly as a theoretical proposition about the broader phenomenon of internationalization, rather than as an empirical claim demonstrated by the present data.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Poth, 2018): a qualitative phenomenological-informed strand (semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation) was conducted first to identify local students' lived experience of intercultural adaptation, and its themes were then used to construct a structured quantitative survey instrument (n = 44) administered to a larger, more disciplinarily diverse sample. The qualitative strand was prioritized to illuminate subjective processes of adaptation and identity negotiation; the quantitative strand was designed to describe how widely these qualitatively identified patterns were reported across a broader respondent base. Consistent with the exploratory sequential logic, the survey is treated in this manuscript as providing descriptive evidence consistent with the qualitative themes, rather than as an independent validation of them.

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at Universitas Muhammadiyah Maluku Utara (UMMU), a private university in Ternate, North Maluku Province, Indonesia, accredited 'Baik Sekali' (Very Good) by Indonesia's National Accreditation Board for Higher Education (BAN-PT Decree No. 708/SK/BAN-PT/Ak/PT/X/2023, valid 2023–2028). The qualitative strand purposively sampled ten local undergraduate students (six women, four men, aged 19–23) across the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, and the Faculty of Engineering. The survey strand expanded the sample to 44 local undergraduate respondents (36 women, 8 men) drawn from the Faculties of Health Sciences, Engineering, Economics, Education, Social and Political Sciences, Law, and Agriculture (Table 1).

The 44 local student respondents were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling: an open invitation was disseminated through cohort chat groups, campus social media, and the university's International Office (KUI), after which enrolled respondents recommended other local student peers similarly engaged with international students.

Inclusion criteria were: (a) active enrolment, having completed at least the third semester; (b) demonstrable involvement as a peer mentor, international-student organization officer, or close friend of an international student; and (c) voluntary participation with signed informed consent. Respondents' duration of interaction with international peers fell into three exposure bands capturing variation in experiential depth: short-term (1-3 months, ~25%, typically orientation mentors describing initial language-adjustment challenges), medium-term (4-11 months, ~50%, describing social-psychological adaptation and everyday life), and long-term (≥ 1 year, ~25%, senior students or KUI officers offering perspectives on institutional change and mature cross-cultural relationships).

The sample was predominantly female (81.8%, verified against the raw survey dataset). Although this distribution is directly supported by the survey

dataset, the specific reasons for the gender imbalance were not systematically recorded during recruitment. The imbalance is therefore acknowledged as a potential source of sampling bias and is considered when interpreting the findings; it is revisited in the Limitations section.

Instrument Development

The 34-item closed-ended questionnaire was developed from 21 qualitative subthemes identified in the interview and observation data — spanning linguistic strategy, cultural mediation, social-psychological response, digital communication, institutional support, and self-perceived reciprocal identity change — together with a 5-point Likert self-assessment of five researcher-developed intercultural competence indicators mapped conceptually onto Byram's (1997) and Deardorff's (2006) ICC dimensions rather than an independently validated instrument. The instrument was administered to 44 local undergraduate students. No formal expert review or pilot test was conducted prior to the main survey; accordingly, it should be understood as a researcher-developed descriptive instrument rather than a formally validated standardized scale, a limitation revisited below.

Data Collection

Data were collected through three complementary instruments: semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and a structured online questionnaire. Each interview participant was interviewed individually for approximately 60–90 minutes, covering first encounters, communication strategies, challenges, and reflections on cultural identity. Observation sessions were conducted across 12 weeks in campus locations including the library, student canteen, and faculty common rooms, yielding 28 recorded naturally occurring interactions. The questionnaire was completed by 44 local undergraduate students.

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following an iterative process of familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, development and refinement of themes, and interpretation of the relationships among themes. The analysis was primarily inductive while remaining informed by the study's integrated theoretical framework. Rather than treating the analysis as a formal phenomenological study, the research adopted a qualitative interview-based approach informed by a phenomenological sensibility, particularly in attending to participants' descriptions of their experiences of intercultural interaction, language adjustment, cultural negotiation, and social-psychological challenges.

In line with the reflexive thematic analysis approach adopted in this study, Cohen's kappa was not retained as a measure of intercoder reliability. The study did not employ a formal independent double-coding procedure intended to establish statistical agreement between coders. Instead, the credibility of the

qualitative interpretation was strengthened through an audit trail of analytical decisions, reflexive discussion during the interpretation process, and member checking with four interview participants. This approach was considered more methodologically consistent with the reflexive and interpretive orientation of the thematic analysis than a codebook approach relying on statistical intercoder agreement.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher occupied an insider position within the research setting, as the researcher was a lecturer at the university where the study was conducted and also served as Head of the Cooperation and Public Relations Bureau (formally, Head of Public Relations and International Affairs), a position independently corroborated by the researcher's listing as lead compiler and signatory of the university's own 2021–2025 Strategic Plan for Cooperation and Public Relations (Universitas Muhammadiyah Maluku Utara [UMMU], 2021). This institutional position provided close access to the intercultural environment examined in the study and facilitated familiarity with the institutional context, local students, and international student interactions. Such proximity also enabled the researcher to observe naturally occurring forms of interaction and cultural mediation within the university environment.

At the same time, the insider position may have influenced participants' responses and the interpretation of their experiences. Participants may have perceived the researcher not only as an academic researcher but also as an institutional representative, potentially affecting how openly they communicated their experiences. The researcher therefore recognized the possibility of positional influence throughout the research process. To enhance the credibility of the interpretation, member checking was conducted with selected interview participants to clarify whether the researchers' interpretations adequately reflected their reported experiences. The researcher also maintained awareness of the distinction between institutional familiarity and analytical interpretation when interpreting interview and observation data. Consequently, the findings are presented as contextually situated interpretations of local students' experiences rather than as objectively detached representations of intercultural interaction.

Quantitative Analysis

Survey responses were analyzed descriptively (frequency distributions and means) using Python-based statistical computation. Consistent with the sample size ($n = 44$) and the descriptive, exploratory purpose of the survey strand, results are reported and interpreted as descriptive evidence rather than as support for generalizable or causal claims.

Mixed-Methods Integration

Qualitative and quantitative strands were integrated through a joint display (Table 2) in which each qualitative theme is paired with the proportion of survey respondents whose answers were consistent with that theme, following an

exploratory sequential integration logic in which the quantitative strand describes the prevalence of patterns first identified qualitatively. This integration is descriptive rather than confirmatory: convergence between strands indicates that a qualitatively identified pattern was also commonly endorsed on the survey, not that the survey independently validates the qualitative finding.

Trustworthiness

To enhance trustworthiness, the researcher maintained an audit trail of analytical decisions, engaged in reflexive discussion during the interpretation process, and conducted member checking with four interview participants. These procedures were used to examine the coherence and credibility of the emerging interpretations, consistent with the reflexive thematic analysis approach adopted, rather than to establish statistical intercoder reliability.

Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. All participants provided informed consent after being briefed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used in interview excerpts, and survey responses were anonymized prior to analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study integrates findings from ten in-depth interview participants and 44 survey respondents to provide both depth and descriptive breadth of evidence on local students' adaptation to international peers in Ternate. Table 1 summarizes the demographic composition of the survey sample.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents (n = 44)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	36	81.8
	Male	8	18.2
Interaction Frequency	Very rarely	23	52.3
	A few times per month	7	15.9
	Almost every day	6	13.6
	1–2 times per week	5	11.4
	3–4 times per week	3	6.8

Linguistic Adaptation Strategies

The thematic analysis identified linguistic adaptation as the most pervasive response among local students. All ten interview participants reported making deliberate adjustments to their language use, and the survey provides descriptive evidence consistent with this: 36% of respondents identified lexical simplification as their primary strategy, followed by speaking entirely in English despite limited proficiency (25%), and code-switching between Indonesian and English (23%) (Figure 1).

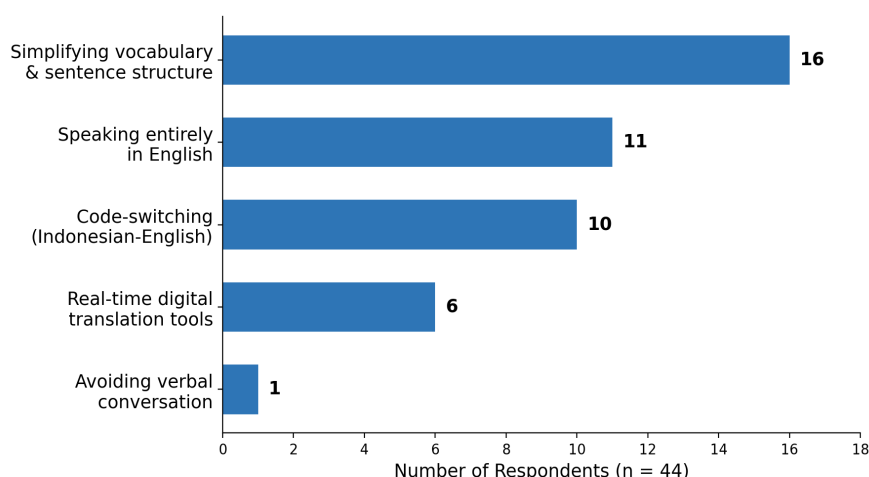


Figure 1. Primary Language Strategies Used by Local Students (n = 44)

Interview accounts illustrate this pattern: an orientation-period mentor (M-1) used digital text (WhatsApp) to ease a new peer's language anxiety, while a practicum groupmate (M-2) translated complex lecture terminology to prevent academic frustration — showing that linguistic mediation extended into academic as well as social communication.

Beyond the primary strategy, 84% of respondents (37 of 44) reported being at least "fairly conscious" of code-switching when they perceive comprehension difficulty in their interlocutor, with 59% describing this switching as highly deliberate. This is consistent with Garcia and Wei's (2014) translanguaging framework: rather than representing incomplete competence, code-switching functioned strategically, with participants describing drawing on Indonesian for complex content and English as a contact language for academic vocabulary.

Linguistic preparation also emerged as a common practice: 34% of respondents always prepare key vocabulary before important academic encounters, while a further 25% do so occasionally. Regarding perceived impact on English competence, 82% reported moderate-to-strong improvement that they attributed to sustained interaction with international peers. These self-reported perceptions are consistent with, though do not causally test, Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis and Norton's (2000) notion of investment.

Cultural Mediation and Identity Negotiation

Seven of ten interview participants described conscious efforts to explain and contextualize North Malukan culture for international peers, a practice termed cultural mediation. The survey provides descriptive evidence consistent with this finding: 50% of respondents reported explaining local culture "enthusiastically and in detail," often supplementing verbal explanation with photographs or short videos, while 30% used brief explanations anchored in cultural equivalence.

Interview accounts illustrate this: a final-project partner (M-6) explained local politeness norms to prevent misunderstanding; a sports-club officer (M-4) used weekly badminton to ease social anxiety organically; and, at 18 months of

interaction, a close friend (M-10) offered the most developed account of identity negotiation, describing an international peer who remained rooted in their home culture while becoming highly adaptive to local social life.

Regarding identity, 73% of respondents indicated that intercultural interaction had moderately or strongly strengthened their pride in local cultural identity, while only 7% reported any weakening. This pattern is consistent with Norton's (2000) framework of investment and identity. At the same time, selective disclosure was common — 36% reported always actively managing which cultural aspects they present — revealing an ongoing tension between cultural pride and concern about misrepresentation.

Social-Psychological Challenges and Resilience

Social anxiety was reported at varying levels among the local students. Of the 44 respondents, 11 (25.0%) reported being very anxious, 17 (38.6%) fairly anxious, and 12 (27.3%) slightly anxious, while 4 (9.1%) reported no anxiety. Thus, 40 respondents (90.9%) reported at least some degree of anxiety when interacting with international students. These findings indicate variation in the intensity of anxiety rather than a uniform experience among local students.

The finding that 90.9% of respondents reported at least some degree of anxiety should be interpreted descriptively rather than as evidence of a generalized prevalence of intercultural anxiety. The distribution also shows substantial variation in intensity, with 25.0% reporting very high anxiety, 38.6% fairly high anxiety, and 27.3% slight anxiety. Interview accounts further suggest that anxiety was particularly noticeable during initial interactions, when some students reported difficulty retrieving vocabulary or concern about making errors in English. These experiences indicate that linguistic uncertainty may accompany early intercultural interaction, while the variation across respondents suggests that students do not experience such challenges uniformly.

Interview accounts add depth here: a close classmate (M-5) supported a peer through a homesickness phase peaking around month four or five by sharing home-cooked meals; a longer-term friend (M-7) managed clinic administration when her peer fell ill; and a boarding-house neighbor (M-3) helped a newly arrived peer with everyday domestic needs — together showing that support extended from emotional care into practical caregiving.

Negative and Divergent Cases

Although the dominant pattern indicated increasing opportunities for intercultural engagement, the qualitative data also revealed divergent experiences. Not all local students experienced the same level or pace of adaptation. One source of variation was the students' academic affiliation: local students from different study programs had fewer opportunities for regular interaction with international students because their academic schedules and learning environments did not consistently overlap, resulting in more limited intercultural exposure than students who shared classes or activities with international students.

A second divergent pattern concerned self-confidence. Some local students did not report an increase in confidence in communicating with international students despite participating in intercultural encounters, indicating that exposure to intercultural interaction alone did not uniformly produce greater communication confidence. A third pattern involved differences in the pace of adaptation: some local students required a longer period to become comfortable interacting with international students. Rather than treating adaptation as a uniform or linear process, these cases suggest that students' experiences varied according to their opportunities for interaction, initial linguistic confidence, and individual adjustment processes.

These divergent cases are important because they qualify the dominant findings of the study: intercultural engagement among local students was not uniformly experienced, and opportunities for interaction did not automatically result in increased confidence or equally rapid adaptation for all participants. The findings therefore point to the importance of considering individual and contextual variation when interpreting local students' roles in internationalized higher education.

Despite this, resilience was the dominant long-term response reported: 82% of respondents either analyzed what went wrong and actively sought to improve (48%) or tried again with a different strategy (34%) following a communication breakdown, compared to 18% who reported reducing their initiative to interact. Regarding conflict, a culturally embedded pattern of conflict avoidance was reported by 45% of respondents, who preferred indirect or delayed confrontation. This pattern is more precisely described in terms of harmony orientation, face concerns, and indirectness in conflict management rather than attributed directly to a broad national-culture trait, and is discussed further, with appropriate qualification, below.

Institutional support data reveal a tension: while 82% rated support as at least "fairly adequate," interview and open-ended data suggest that structured, intentional programming remains the most frequently cited barrier to deeper integration (25% of segregation-factor responses). Longer-exposure informants illustrate this gap: an International Office (KUI) volunteer (M-8) guided peers through campus bureaucracy and mental-health services, while a student-community officer (M-9) advocated for bilingual guidebooks and simpler visa renewal — showing that some local students moved from peer support into institutional advocacy.

Digital Communication as an Intercultural Space

Digital platforms, particularly WhatsApp and Instagram, functioned as important sites of intercultural interaction for all interview participants and were also prominent among survey respondents: 43% used a combination of platforms depending on context, and 39% relied primarily on WhatsApp. Digital communication offered distinct advantages — 52% found it "much easier" to express complex ideas in text with the aid of translation tools — but also distinct

risks: 57% reported at least occasional digital miscommunication arising from tonal ambiguity or differing norms around response time and emoji use.

Observation Findings

The 28 observation records provided concrete evidence of how local students facilitated international students' linguistic, cultural, social, institutional, and everyday life adaptation. Local students frequently acted as language mediators — shifting to English, using gestures, or typing translations on their phones — and introduced everyday colloquial expressions, showing that language adjustment extended beyond formal classroom interaction into spontaneous peer communication. As cultural mediators, they explained local traditions and politeness norms, often embedded in everyday activities such as guided tours, shared meals, and community festivals rather than delivered as formal instruction. They also played a substantial role in campus orientation — accompanying new arrivals on tours, introducing them to lecturers, and helping them navigate administrative procedures and WhatsApp cohort groups — and supported social integration through group assignments, informal gatherings, and introductions to neighbors and landlords, creating repeated opportunities for contact with the immediate environment.

Local students further assisted with everyday life navigation — transportation, market shopping, household security, and communication with local community officials — extending peer support beyond the university into the surrounding community. Finally, the observations revealed elements of reciprocal cultural exchange: local students introduced international peers to local food and cooking practices while also learning about their countries of origin, positioning local students as learners as well as cultural informants. Overall, the 28 records show local students performing interconnected roles — language mediator, cultural explainer, campus guide, social connector, and community liaison — complementing the interview accounts by demonstrating how intercultural support was enacted through concrete everyday practices.

Thematic Structure of Adaptation

Rather than presenting the 21 coded sub-themes as a bibliometric-style co-occurrence network of unspecified methodology, the structural relationships among themes are described narratively here. The linguistic theme is the most densely connected to other themes, linking code-switching, lexical simplification, translanguaging, and linguistic preparation to perceived English-competence gains. The cultural-mediation theme shows a clear path from cultural mediation through cultural pride and selective disclosure toward identity negotiation, while the social-psychological theme connects social anxiety to both resilience and institutional support, with perceived segregation emerging as a related risk when institutional support is weak. The digital theme is comparatively more peripheral but maintains a direct link to both linguistic adaptation (via code-switching in text) and cultural mediation (via visual sharing).

Quantitative Synthesis: Joint Display of Qualitative Themes and Survey Prevalence

Table 2 presents a joint display integrating the qualitative themes with the proportion of survey respondents whose answers were consistent with each theme. Across the four adaptation themes, between 61% and 84% of respondents provided answers consistent with the corresponding qualitative pattern.

Table 2. Joint Display: Qualitative Themes and Survey Prevalence (n = 44)

Adaptation Theme	n	%	Data Source
Linguistic Adaptation (simplification, code-switching, translanguaging)	37	84.1	Interview + Observation + Survey
Cultural Mediation & Identity Negotiation	35	79.5	Interview + Observation + Survey
Social-Psychological Challenges (anxiety, resilience)	36	81.8	Interview + Observation + Survey
Digital Communication as an Intercultural Space	27	61.4	Interview + Observation + Survey
Self-perceived reciprocal behavior change (theoretical implication only — see note)	32	72.7	Survey only

Self-Assessed Intercultural Competence

Self-assessed intercultural competence (Figure 4; 5-point Likert scale, author-developed items conceptually mapped to Byram's and Deardorff's ICC dimensions) shows that empathy and respect toward cultural difference is the most developed self-assessed dimension (M = 3.81), followed by explaining local culture (M = 3.33) and adapting communication style (M = 3.32). Initiating conversation in English (M = 3.10) and managing intercultural misunderstanding constructively (M = 3.07) were the least developed self-assessed dimensions.

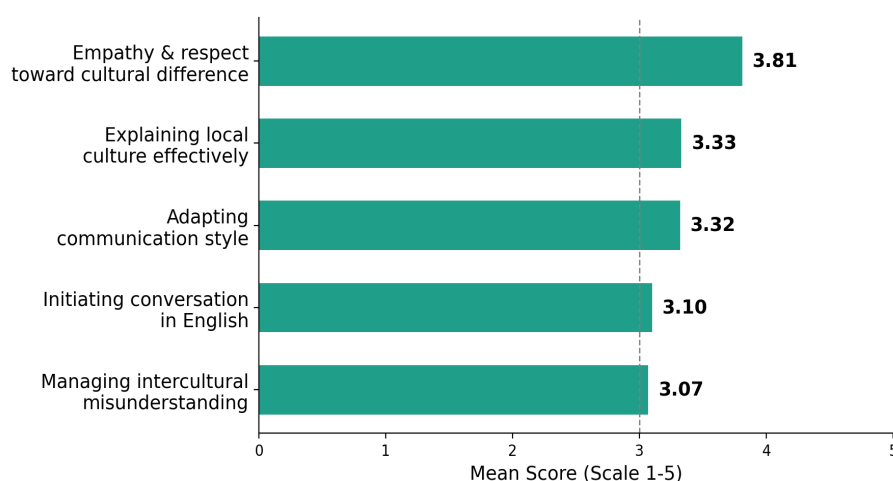


Figure 4. Self-Assessed Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) Dimensions (Mean Scores, n = 41-44)

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Intercultural Communication Competence among Local Students

ICC Dimension	n	M	SD	Item Wording (translated from the original Indonesian instrument)
Empathy & respect toward cultural difference	42	3.81	0.94	Showing empathy and respect toward cultural differences
Explaining local culture	42	3.33	1.07	Explaining local culture to foreigners effectively
Adapting communication style	41	3.32	1.06	Adapting to communication styles from different cultures
Initiating conversation in English	42	3.10	1.30	Initiating conversation with international students in English
Managing intercultural misunderstanding	44	3.07	1.19	Managing intercultural misunderstanding constructively

Regarding the theoretical proposition of reciprocity, 73% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had actively and consciously changed their behavior, communication patterns, and self-presentation in response to the presence of international students, while 9% disagreed. Because this item reflects local students' own self-perception rather than independently observed or dyadically verified behavior change, it is interpreted here as descriptive evidence consistent with local students' active agency in adaptation, and as a basis for the theoretical proposition of reciprocal adaptation developed in the Discussion — not as confirmation that adaptation occurred symmetrically on both sides.

Additional Survey Evidence: Cultural Brokerage and Contact Intensity

Two additional survey items provide direct quantitative support for local students' role as cultural brokers. Asked whether they had acted as a "bridge" between international students and the local community, 31.8% (n = 14) had done so "a few times, although unprepared," and 22.7% (n = 10) "often, and enjoy this role"; combined, 54.5% (n = 24) had performed some broker role, nearly half feeling underprepared — evidence that cultural brokerage is common but largely unsupported. A related item on jointly "co-constructing" new cultural understanding found 22.7% (n = 10) reporting this occurred often and meaningfully, versus 29.5% (n = 13) not at all — suggesting reciprocal meaning-making occurs for a meaningful minority but is neither universal nor systematically fostered. Regarding contact intensity, a cross-tabulation of interaction frequency against self-assessed empathy shows group means ranging narrowly from 3.5 to 4.33 across bands (n = 3-21 per group); given the small subgroup sizes, these differences are descriptive only.

Discussion

Local Students as Intercultural Agents

The findings of this study both confirm and extend existing theoretical accounts of intercultural adaptation and language learning, while remaining bounded by an important design constraint: because only local students were sampled, the discussion below distinguishes empirically demonstrated host-side adaptation from the theoretical proposition of reciprocity, which the study supports conceptually but does not itself verify from both sides of the interaction. The results demonstrate that local students in Ternate are not passive recipients of internationalization policies but active agents who develop linguistic, cultural, and social strategies in response to contact with international peers — a claim well supported by the convergence of interview, observation, and survey evidence in Table 2. What remains a theoretical implication rather than a demonstrated finding is the stronger claim that this agency amounts to "bidirectional" change equivalent to the adaptation international students themselves undergo.

Linguistic Accommodation as Mechanism

The prevalence of code-switching and lexical simplification (84%) is consistent with Garcia and Wei's (2014) translanguaging theory: bilinguals draw on all available linguistic resources to communicate meaning, challenging deficit-oriented views of code-switching in Indonesian EFL contexts (Lauder, 2008) and instead framing local students' bilingual repertoires as assets. Mechanistically, sustained informal contact — rather than formal instruction alone — is a plausible pathway for English development, consistent with, though not a causal test of, Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis.

Cultural Brokerage: A Central Theoretical Contribution

One of this study's most promising findings is the emergence of local students as intercultural brokers who actively translate North Malukan cultural norms for international peers rather than merely accommodating linguistically. The tension between strengthened cultural pride (73%) and concern about misrepresentation (36% selectively disclosing) shows brokerage is not costless, requiring continuous management of what to represent and how — reinforced by evidence that 54.5% had performed some broker role, nearly half feeling unprepared, characterizing brokerage as an emerging but currently unsupported and institutionally unrecognized form of informal labor (see Practical Implications).

Digital Interaction as an Extension of ICC

The digital communication findings extend the ICC framework to a dimension Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006) did not explicitly address. WhatsApp and Instagram interactions linked to both linguistic adaptation (text-based code-switching) and cultural mediation (visual sharing), while introducing risks — tonal ambiguity, differing response-time norms — absent from face-to-face contact, suggesting digital platforms mediate rather than simply replicate

offline adaptation processes. This parallels evidence that social-network-site use shapes international students' acculturation and wellbeing depending on how platforms are used (Hofhuis et al., 2023), suggesting a similar adaptive-versus-risk duality may hold on the international-student side.

Anxiety, Resilience, and Institutional Support

The social-psychological challenges documented here — anxiety (90.9%), conflict avoidance (45%) — suggest internationalization does not automatically generate positive outcomes without effortful adaptation. Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis requires equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support for positive contact; the first three were often present informally, but structured institutional support was inconsistently delivered despite positive perceptions of its adequacy — a perceived-versus-structural gap that bounds how far contact alone can drive positive adaptation.

Rather than attributing conflict avoidance to a broad claim of "Indonesian collectivism" (Hofstede, 2001), which risks cultural essentialism, it is better understood as harmony orientation, face concerns, and indirectness — dispositions shaped by, but not reducible to, a single national-culture dimension, likely interacting with the intimate context of a small, non-anonymous campus.

Divergence from Prior Research and the Ternate Context

The magnitude of adaptation reported here is notably higher than typically documented in the international-student literature, which more often finds contact remaining superficial even where both groups are willing to engage (Cao & Meng, 2022; Gutema et al., 2024). This more plausibly reflects structural conditions than disposition: unlike large metropolitan universities where international students form a small fraction of a much larger body, Ternate's compact campus and small international cohort meant local students encountered the same peers repeatedly — conditions Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis identifies as conducive to deeper, not superficial, contact. This institutional context is corroborated by UMMU's signed 2021-2025 Strategic Plan for Cooperation and Public Relations, which establishes international partnership networks and English-language communication as institutional priorities (Universitas Muhammadiyah Maluku Utara [UMMU], 2021); the study's empirical findings, however, derive solely from its own survey, interviews, and observations. Ternate's historical identity as a spice-trade node (Andaya, 1993) also appears, based on interview accounts, to be actively invoked by local students as a source of cultural pride and hospitality norms — offered here as a plausible contextual interpretation rather than a demonstrated mechanism.

Theoretical Implications

This study extends ICC research by showing that ICC development is not limited to individuals who physically cross borders, lending weight to internationalization at home (Beelen & Jones, 2015); contributes to language-socialization research through conscious code-switching (84%) consistent with

sociocultural theories of learning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006); and, through the emergence of local students as intercultural brokers (54.5%), suggests a need to reconceptualize stakeholder roles in internationalized settings. The host-side evidence here is offered cautiously as support for a theoretical proposition of reciprocal — rather than demonstrated bidirectional — adaptation, testable through future dyadic research.

Practical Implications for Higher Education

Practically, given that only 43% perceive ICC as explicitly integrated into their curriculum, institutions should embed it as an assessable learning outcome, and extend language support to local students given that 82% report proficiency gains through informal contact alone. Since cultural brokering is already performed informally by half the local population, universities should recognize and reward this labor — e.g., through cultural-ambassador or peer-mentoring credentials — addressing the 25% who cited absent cross-cultural programming as a driver of perceived segregation. For policy, UMMU's strategic plan commits to aligning with the national MBKM framework (UMMU, 2021), and its BAN-PT accreditation (2023) situates it within the national quality-assurance framework against which such indicators are assessed; local-student ICC gains could be considered an additional internationalization indicator. Universities outside Java, where international-office infrastructure is thinner, may be settings where local students already informally absorb the cultural-mediation function; targeted capacity-building could formalize this role.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. The sample ($n = 44$ survey respondents; $n = 10$ interview participants), drawn from a single university and skewed toward female respondents (81.8%) for reasons not systematically recorded, is not statistically representative of Indonesian higher education generally; multi-site designs are needed. Both strands relied substantially on self-report data — observation data broadly converged with interview and survey accounts but were not designed as an independent check on specific percentages and should be read as complementary rather than fully corroborating. The survey instrument was researcher-developed without formal expert review or pilot testing, limiting confidence in its precision. The cross-sectional design captures a single point in time; longitudinal research could illuminate developmental trajectories. Finally, because only local students were sampled and results are reported descriptively given the modest sample size, the study demonstrates host-side adaptation but cannot verify reciprocity, and findings should not be generalized beyond this site without replication and future dyadic research including international students' perspectives.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the adaptation processes of local undergraduate students to international peers at a university in Ternate, North Maluku,

contributing empirical evidence on host-side, local-student adaptation in internationalized higher education. Through an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design combining interviews, classroom observation, and a 44-respondent structured survey, four interconnected and empirically convergent themes were identified: linguistic adaptation strategies (84.1% prevalence), cultural mediation and identity negotiation (79.5%), social-psychological challenges and resilience (81.8%), and digital communication as an intercultural space (61.4%). The study makes three primary contributions: it provides triangulated empirical support for local students as active agents in their own cultural adaptation, a perspective underrepresented in international-student-centered literature; it extends the ICC framework to digital intercultural communication practices central to contemporary student life; and it develops the concept of local students as intercultural brokers as a theoretical contribution offering host-side evidence consistent with — though not proof of — a broader, theoretically proposed reciprocal model of internationalization, testable through future dyadic research.

The practical implications remain significant for Indonesian universities navigating internationalization: investing in structured intercultural programming, extending English language support to local as well as international students, and training faculty to leverage the intercultural learning potential of mixed student cohorts. With 73% of respondents reporting conscious behavioral change in response to intercultural contact, Ternate — with its distinctive trading history and emergence as a host city for international students — offers a rich, context-specific setting for continuing this line of research.

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