

Exploring Intercultural Learning Experiences: A Phenomenological Study of Bilingual Elementary Teacher Education Students in Student Mobility Programmes to Taiwan, Philippines, and Thailand

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Abstract

This study was motivated by the importance of cross-cultural learning experiences in strengthening the competencies of prospective primary school teachers in the global era. The purpose of this study was to explore the learning experiences of bilingual students in the Elementary Teacher Education Study (ETE) Programme who participated in off-campus learning programmes in three countries, namely Taiwan, the Philippines, and Thailand. A phenomenological approach was used to understand the meaning of students' learning experiences in different cultural and educational environments. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and analysis of relevant documents, then analysed using the Miles and Huberman model. Five bilingual students took part in this study through in-depth interviews and document analysis. The results showed that off-campus learning experiences had a significant impact on improving students' language skills, cultural adaptation abilities, and pedagogical understanding. Students also revealed that these experiences broadened their knowledge of innovative learning methods, enhanced their cross-cultural communication skills, and strengthened their competencies as prospective educators. These findings have important implications for the development of curricula and educational policies that support cross-cultural learning for Elementary Teacher Education students.

INTRODUCTION

The level of education in a country is one of the important factors that determine the future success of a nation (Jafari-Sadeghi, Kimiagari, & Biancone, 2020; Ohene, 2021; Shavkidinova, Suyunova, & Kholdarova, 2023). Higher education plays an important role in realizing these goals through the cultivation and empowerment of the Indonesian nation, as well as education for national life and the advancement of science. In achieving these educational goals, the curriculum prepared by each higher education institution is based on the National Standards for Higher Education, as stated in Law No. 12 of 2012 in Article 35, Paragraph 2. One of the higher education institutions that supports the success of the nation's future is Surabaya State University (UNESA). UNESA, in improving academic and infrastructural aspects, implements the Independent Learning–Independent Campus curriculum, which provides opportunities for students to master science and technology in accordance with the demands of the times and the needs of the workforce.

Cultural migration and exchange activities such as immigration, transnational studies, and multilingual learning are becoming increasingly frequent, accompanying the development of globalization and international trade. With so many countries interacting, people need to understand, absorb, and accept cultural influences that differ from their own, enabling them to

adapt to the rapid development of an increasingly modern society. The purpose of this adaptation is to bridge differences and encourage understanding and cooperation across nations. Consequently, cultural learning activities have a significant impact on people's mindsets. Experiences based on the study of various cultures are known as intercultural experiences, which refer to direct or indirect contact or interaction with elements or members of foreign cultures (Hu et al., 2017).

Learning about foreign cultures can lead individuals to seek new ideas from different cultural contexts and integrate them innovatively, thereby expanding conceptual categories in the brain (Wang, 2018). Shen and Yuan (2015) summarize the study of Maddux and others, who concluded that both long-term and short-term intercultural experiences enhance individual creativity, with increased cognitive fluency being one of the most evident results. There are two main reasons for this phenomenon. First, individuals with long- and short-term intercultural experiences tend to possess a broader understanding of different cultures, which allows them to build connections among ideas from diverse cultural sources. The second reason is that extensive exposure to different cultures can create cognitive dissonance, challenging fixed patterns of thought. Such a state encourages individuals with intercultural experiences to overcome rigid cognition, abandon conventional problem-solving methods, and stimulate creative thinking. Furthermore, exposure to foreign cultures positively affects learning mindsets, enabling individuals to form comprehensive emotional responses, such as admiration for achievements or recognition of excellence in other cultures, which can further foster creativity. Thus, the study of foreign cultures reveals that intercultural experiences generate important cognitive benefits in the era of globalization.

Intercultural learning, which requires individuals to learn and adapt to foreign cultures, is closely related to bilingualism. Bilingualism plays a crucial role in sociocultural and psychological cognitive functions, extending beyond cross-language communication. It is strongly associated with cognitive abilities that have become a popular topic in pedagogy and psychology in recent decades (Acharya, Sidana, Nagar, & Acharya, 2024; Bauer, Sánchez, Wang, & Vaughan, 2021; Coderre, 2015; Fox, Corretjer, & Webb, 2019). Most researchers argue that bilingual instruction and intercultural experiences do not burden learners or hinder their development. On the contrary, the essence of bilingual teaching and intercultural experiences lies in their role as cultural, economic, and political resources essential for both individuals and nations. One of the activities that students can participate in is international student mobility.

International student mobility refers to a learning activity outside the study program, lasting up to three semesters, both on and off campus (Collins, Ho, Ishikawa, & Ma, 2017; Roy, Newman, Ellenberger, & Pyman, 2019; Teichler, 2017). It includes eight possible types of activities: student exchanges, internships/work placements, teaching assistance in educational institutions, research, humanitarian projects, entrepreneurial activities, independent studies/projects, and community service/thematic real-work lectures (Independent Learning Guidebook, 2020). UNESA has implemented international student mobility since the beginning of the 2020 academic year. Although initially hindered by various obstacles, the program resumed smoothly after the Covid-19 outbreak subsided, consequently enhancing the quality of student education.

Several previous studies on the impacts of students' participation in off-campus learning programs (Jufriadi et al., 2022) state that the implementation of the Independent Learning–Independent Campus curriculum improves students' communication, creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration skills in cross-cultural contexts. This improvement results from students' opportunities to study in different learning environments. Moreover, the program fosters an innovative learning culture that develops teamwork and time-management skills (Insani et al., 2021).

Earlier research has examined the benefits of international mobility programmes on students' language development and cultural understanding, for instance, among teacher education students in Europe and Australia (Steele & Leming, 2022; Liu et al., 2023; Papadopoulou et al., 2022). However, most of these studies focus on Western contexts, while research on the learning experiences of bilingual elementary teacher education students in Southeast Asia remains limited. Academic mobility in this region features unique cultural characteristics and education systems that create learning experiences distinct from those of Western settings. Mobility programmes in Southeast Asia—particularly those in Taiwan, the Philippines, and Thailand—offer diverse educational and cultural environments. Yet, little research has provided in-depth descriptions of how students experience cross-cultural learning in these contexts.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the cross-cultural learning experiences of bilingual elementary teacher education (ETE) students who participated in mobility programmes in Taiwan, the Philippines, and Thailand. The research question guiding this study is: What are the intercultural learning experiences of bilingual ETE students participating in mobility programmes in Taiwan, the Philippines, and Thailand?

METHOD

This research is a qualitative research with a phenomenological study type. The study focuses on individual experiences and interpretations of the world. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the essence of social phenomena from the perspective of those who perceive them (Cresswell, 2016). There are two common variations of phenomenological studies, namely descriptive phenomenology (Husserlian) and Interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology (Heideggerian) (Lopez & Willis, 2004). This study uses descriptive phenomenology because of its important approach in areas that have little or no evidence of previous research (Morrow et al, 2015).

This study focuses on finding out the bilingual learning experiences of bilingual students of the ETE Study Program who are involved in off-campus learning programs in Taiwan, the Philippines, and Thailand and knowing how these students interpret and respond to their learning experiences in the context of interculturalism and bilingualism. In this study, there are 5 students who are informants in this study, the table of respondent profiles is as follows.

Table 1. Profile respondents

Respondent's Name	International Student Mobility Programs	Implementing Countries	Duration of Activity
RL	SEA Teacher Philippines	Philippines	1 month
RR	Student Exchange	Thailand	1 month
CMA	SEA Teacher Philippines	Philippines	1 month
FS	Summer Camp	Taiwan	1 week
AH	Summer Camp	Taiwan	1 week

The data collection technique used a data collection method that focused on in-depth interviews and narratives as the main steps in making explanations and descriptions of experiences experienced in life. In addition, the documentation method is also used to provide evidence in the research conducted that the results of this study are valid. The data analysis techniques used by the researchers were in accordance with Milles and Huberman, as shown in the stages listed in Figure 1.

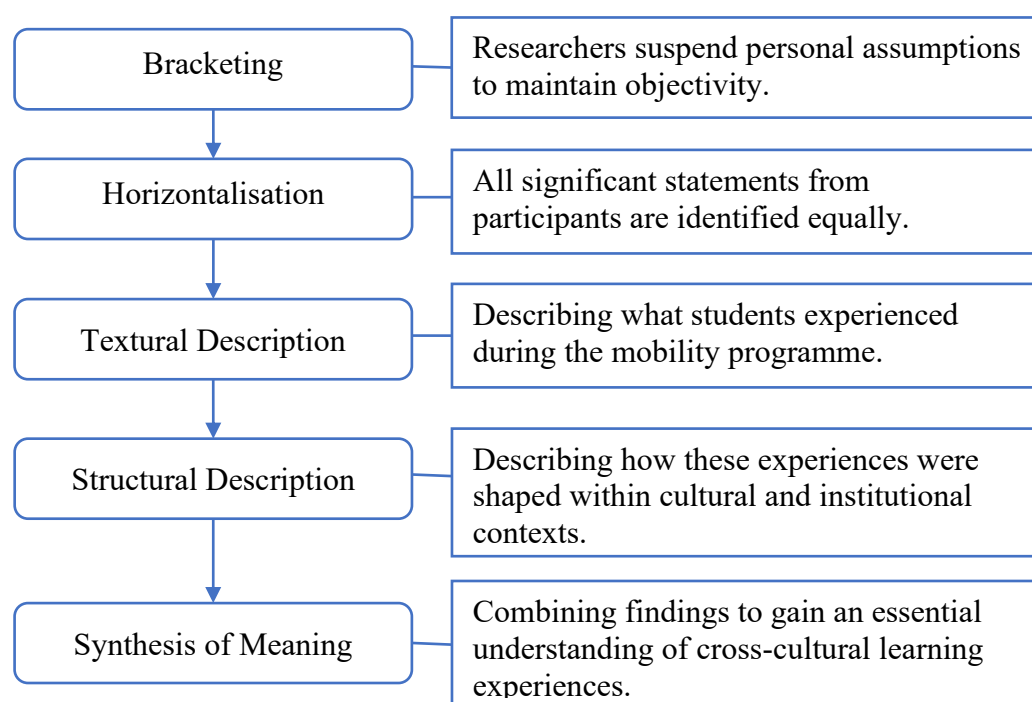


Figure 1. Data Analysis Flowchart

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The learning experience of bilingual students of the ETE study program who are involved in off-campus learning programs in Taiwan, the Philippines, and Thailand is very diverse. The diversity of experiences is due to the different activities carried out. Based on the results of interviews with FSA students regarding the activities carried out, namely:

“... In the summer camp program, we have language classes in Taiwan, we also visit tourist attractions and places of worship, then we also do culinary tours, and make crafts, we teach NCUE friends to learn the language and introduce Indonesian games, and there is also teaching sign language.”

Furthermore, different activities were also carried out by RL based on the results of interviews conducted by RL students conducting the SEA Teacher program in the Philippines, while the activities were based on the results of the interviews as follows

"... My activity is to teach students in the Philippines the details of the activity, namely there is an orientation that is more about the introduction of the school environment. Starting from how many classrooms, rooms, facilities, then how many teachers, in what subjects, then what time the student enters, what time does the student go home, then what else is the activity there like, how do we get introduced to the environment and what the activities are doing. Then if the second week we are teaching assistants, we teach in the classroom but are still assisted by one friend, we are given like peers to help us handle one room, then the third is real teaching, we have to handle one class, so we teach independently. For week 4, it's more of an evaluation and free time to work on accountability reports or activity reports for one month."

Based on the two explanations, FSA which conducts a summercamp in Taiwan and RL which conducts an internship program in the Philippines show two opposite activities. Summer camp activities learn more about culture, language, and the environment. So that the implementation of this summer camp emphasizes more on cultural learning activities from the countries visited, while in internship activities in the Philippines, students work more on learning plans and their implementation in the classroom. Nevertheless, students also get the opportunity to learn about Filipino culture.

The two statements also have similarities in terms of practical activities and social interaction. Practical activities and social interaction are essential components of the learning experience of students involved in off-campus programs. These two components make a significant contribution to the development of academic competence and social skills. Both include activities that make students interact with others (Ziegler, 2015). Therefore, practical activities and social interaction in international programs can strengthen the academic, social, and cultural skills needed in the context of global education.

Every activity carried out by students certainly raises challenges faced by students, one of which is felt by RL

"... because in the Philippines the English used also has a different accent, they will use Tangsis or Tagalog English, and there are some pronunciations that may be different, so what is done is more customizable."

The next challenge was also felt by RR students

"... The challenges I experienced, of course, when teaching, there were students who were not fluent in English and still understood Thai better."

The challenges experienced by students can be concluded to be language differences. Challenges can be in the form of communicative understanding, teaching adjustments, and the expansion of linguistic skills (Lee, 2021). Students have difficulty understanding the variations of accents and terms used in daily communication, so students face the next challenge, namely teaching adjustments. Facing differences in accent variations, students need to adjust the way

they deliver material so that it is easier for students to understand. In addition, the expansion of linguistic skills is also an obstacle for students because they have to learn some basic phrases in Filipino and Thai. This very striking language difference or language barrier is certainly a challenge for students to communicate with local residents. Especially for students who carry out the teaching process for foreign students. They need to understand what the student is saying and vice versa, so that the material can be well received by the student. Therefore, facing difficulties in learning two or more languages requires the development of effective strategies to improve comprehension and communication skills.

This is in accordance with the results of interviews by RL students:

"... Yes, I relearned the language accent there and then adjusted the language more. I honed my ability to adjust the language there and continued to use studying with peer tutors."

Based on the results of interviews with RL students, students use various strategies to overcome difficulties in bilingualism, such as studying in groups, utilizing technology, and practicing intensively. From the development of this strategy, of course, students feel a significant improvement in communication skills and the ability to work in intercultural teams. This increase is important for professional success in an increasingly intercultural work environment (Walkington, 2014).

The methods that have been carried out by RL students are included in the contextual-based learning method by learning foreign languages and directly practicing them in real life while abroad. A study by Cheng (2021) showed that the application of contextual methods in bilingual teaching can increase active engagement and strengthen linguistic skills. In addition, students can also take advantage of technology to overcome difficulties in learning a new language. Research by Nguyen and Tran (2023) supports this approach by showing that the use of technology in bilingual learning not only improves language skills, but also increases confidence in communicating.

Based on the challenges obtained, students have a deep understanding of the culture and values of the country they visit. They become more aware of cultural differences and their impact on the learning process. A better understanding of interculturalism helps students become more adaptive and open to different cultural perspectives.

This was felt by CMA students as the results of the interview were as follows

"... There is an influence on personal development in my opinion because I am required to be more adaptive to the new environment and adjust to the food, cultural customs, and food there."

Based on the results of the interview, students showed the influence of positive and adaptive attitudes towards the intercultural environment. They reported an increase in tolerance and acceptance of different cultures. This positive attitude shows that the off-campus learning program has succeeded in developing students' interpersonal skills and cultural awareness. The interpersonal skills shown by students are to improve communication skills in the form of interpreting different cultural cues; broaden perspectives and empathy through interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds; skills to adapt to different approaches, thoughts, or habits; and the development of cooperative capabilities (Dickson & Bamford, 1995). Not only that, the experience of learning cultures from abroad can improve students' cognitive skills

(Dasen, 2022). This is because students study foreign cultures that involve understanding the norms, values, customs, and languages spoken by Taiwan and the Philippines. These activities involve the process of thinking, analyzing, and absorbing information which is part of the cognitive aspect. Some students also feel the influence on their academics.

CONCLUSION

The intercultural learning experiences of ETE students participating in mobility programs in Taiwan, the Philippines, and Thailand highlight significant linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical growth. Through immersion in bilingual and multilingual environments, students enhance their communication skills, English fluency, and ability to adapt to local languages. Their engagement with diverse communities and education systems nurtures cultural sensitivity, empathy, and adaptability, while classroom observations and collaborations with local teachers enrich their pedagogical understanding and inspire innovative teaching approaches. Collectively, these experiences promote personal and professional development, equipping students with teamwork, flexibility, and global perspectives essential for multicultural education. Future research could investigate the long-term impact of such intercultural experiences on students' teaching practices and their ability to implement culturally responsive pedagogy in their home institutions.

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