

Intercultural Communication Gaps between Local and International Teachers in a Multicultural Work Environment: A Phenomenological Study at English First Kayoon Surabaya

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ABSTRACT

The multicultural work environment in English language education institutions creates complex communication dynamics, especially when teachers from different cultural backgrounds interact within the same workplace. This study aims to explore intercultural communication gaps between local and international teachers, as well as how they maintain their face (self-image) at English First Kayoon Surabaya. The research adopts a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method and constructivist paradigm. Data collection is carried out through semi-structured in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation involving four informants (two local teachers and two international teachers). Data analysis uses the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana. The findings show that communication gaps manifest in differences in speaking styles, language use, and social distance between the two groups. When facing such cross-cultural situations, local teachers tend to use avoiding and accommodating strategies, while compromising strategies emerge in long-term interactions. This study expands the application of Stella Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory within the context of multicultural language education institutions in Indonesia.

Keywords: intercultural communication, face negotiation theory, multicultural work environment, phenomenology, English First Surabaya

BACKGROUND

The increasingly intense phenomenon of globalization has driven inevitable cross-cultural social interactions across various sectors of life, including the world of education. In research regarding intercultural communication challenges in multicultural societies, it was found that differences in values, norms, and communication styles constitute the main obstacles in building harmonious working relationships in culturally diverse environments (Masduki et al., 2025). International language education institutions such as English First (EF) Kayoon Surabaya naturally create a multicultural ecosystem, where teachers from various cultural backgrounds are required to work together within one environment.

In research on intercultural communication in multinational work environments, it is stated that intercultural communication is the process of communicating between individuals coming from diverse cultural backgrounds, and the inability to build effective cross-cultural communication can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts that reduce organizational productivity (Siregar et al., 2022). This condition is relevant to the situation in the teachers' room at EF Kayoon Surabaya, where local and international teachers face differences in communication styles that have the potential to create social distance.

Initial observations in the teachers' room at EF indicate that local teachers tend to use a lower tone of voice, mix Indonesian and English languages, and focus conversations on administrative needs. In contrast, international teachers speak at a louder volume, use English with a fast accent and slang, and debate in an assertive manner. In research on communication dynamics in the staffrooms of international education institutions, it was found that these differences in communication style are not merely linguistic, but reflect deeper differences in cultural values related to hierarchy, self-expression, and social norms (Zhang, 2024a).

In research on conflict management in multicultural teams, it is stated that conflicts often arise due to miscommunication caused by differences in language, communication styles, and cultural norms; additionally, certain cultures prefer direct and assertive communication, while others favor indirect and diplomatic communication (Sutama et al., 2025). This phenomenon mirrors the situation faced at EF Kayoon Surabaya, where differences in perception between local and international teachers regarding how they communicate with one another give rise to misunderstandings.

Referring to Stella Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory, research on intercultural communication challenges faced by Indonesian seafarers working with multinational crews explains that face refers to one's desired sense of social identity within a relational context, and conflict is behavior that inherently threatens face because it involves mismatched identity expectations (Riyanto et al., 2023). This theory serves as a relevant analytical framework for understanding communication dynamics between local and international teachers at EF Kayoon Surabaya.

This study intends to fill a gap that has not yet been widely explored: how intercultural communication gaps concretely occur in the teachers' rooms of international language course institutions in Indonesia, and how face negotiation strategies are applied within this context. The objectives of this research are: (1) to explore cultural gaps in communication interactions between local and international teachers in the teachers' room at EF Kayoon Surabaya, and (2) to understand how both groups maintain their face within a multicultural work environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural Communication in Multicultural Work Environments

Intercultural communication is the process of exchanging information, meaning, and messages between individuals coming from different cultural backgrounds. In research regarding challenges and innovations in intercultural communication, it is stated that barriers to intercultural communication include misunderstandings and cultural obstacles, while innovations include effective communication management, bicultural skills, and the use of virtual teams to enhance understanding and cooperation among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds in the workplace (Kryvobok et al., 2023).

Intercultural communication within digital contexts faces unique challenges. Differences in language, social context, cultural values, and nonverbal behavior become more prominent in digital communication, where many traditional social cues are lost. Misunderstandings can easily occur when messages are interpreted differently by recipients from distinct cultural backgrounds. This may result in conflict, poor brand image, and reduced communication effectiveness (Judijanto & Aryani, 2025).

Understanding different cultural values, norms, and perceptions is key to preventing and resolving conflicts arising from miscommunication or misunderstandings between groups (Gelfand et al., 2020). In multicultural environments, effective communication requires adapting one's communication style to suit audiences from different cultural backgrounds. Such adaptations include using simple language, appropriate body language, and adjusting tone and expression to avoid misinterpretation (Efendi et al., 2024).

Within organizational culture, as stated by (Prihandini et al., 2024), it can be observed that the success of airline services relies heavily on support from inclusive work values that adapt to cultural diversity. An organizational culture that fosters empathy, tolerance, and open communication has been proven to support internal integration and customer satisfaction at Garuda Indonesia. Therefore, the evolution of intercultural communication is not only a response to external issues but also a reinvestment in creating an organizational culture with global competitive advantage.

The success of intercultural communication strategies is directly correlated with managerial ability to align global vision with local operational implementation. Ganatra et al. (2021) and Ozali (2023) confirm that the transformation and development of Garuda Indonesia require leaders who are sensitive to cultural dynamics and capable of synergizing diversity into a collective strength. Thus, the study of intercultural communication strategies within Garuda Indonesia's global work environment is relevant for identifying best practices in building an airline company that is adaptive, cooperative, and competitive on a global scale (Tiana, 2025).

In research regarding intercultural communication management frameworks in multicultural organizations, it is stated that poor intercultural communication can lead to conflict, misunderstandings, and reduced organizational performance; therefore, a comprehensive framework based theoretically on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory is required to analyze cross-cultural dynamics (Mushaathoni, 2025).

Research on intercultural communication in the staffrooms of international education institutions found that personal and institutional habitus influence international teachers' perceptions of, and responses to, nuances in intercultural communication; the coping strategies applied include fostering social connections and strategic reframing practices (Lestari, 2025). These findings indicate that the teachers' room serves as a social arena where cultural negotiation takes place on a daily basis.

Face Negotiation Theory

Face Negotiation Theory, developed by Stella Ting-Toomey, explains cultural, individual, and situational factors that shape communicators' tendencies in managing situations sensitive to face. In research on intercultural communication challenges faced by Indonesian seafarers working with multinational crews, it is stated that face is an identity boundary closely tied to emotional meaning and social evaluation of an individual, and conflict is behavior that inherently threatens face because it involves mismatched identity expectations (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

Face Negotiation Theory can also be used to analyze "facework," which involves predicting individual behavior and encouraging individual improvement. The concept of "facework" is built upon several assumptions, one of which revolves around self-identity. Individuals from specific cultural backgrounds engage in face negotiation while observing their cultural norms and values. Patterns of habit are visible in how they respond to problems or, in this case, interactions (Adnjani et al., 2025).

In professional settings, differences in perception between sender and receiver of communication have the potential to create friction, which—if prolonged—may generate conflict within the organizational climate. Perceptual differences arise not only from difficulty understanding an unfamiliar language, but also from differences in value systems and nonverbal language. Aside from verbal communication, it is important to enhance nonverbal communication skills to understand other cultures, one example being the use of "face negotiation" (Samovar, 2013).

The term face negotiation refers to how individuals present "face," or their self-image, in front of others when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. Theoretically, Brown & Levinson (2016) state that face negotiation is used to understand how individuals from different cultures build relationships with one another. Within this theory, Brown & Levinson define "facework" as communication behavior performed by individuals to construct and protect their own face, as well as to build, protect, or threaten the face of others. The term "face" in this theory is also interpreted as one's desired self-image or identity emerging from a social situation (Warsa & Putri, 2024).

In research on cross-cultural conflict management and negotiation, it was found that respondents from Eastern cultures tend to favor avoiding and accommodating strategies when resolving conflicts, while participants from Western cultures are more inclined toward competing and collaborating strategies. This aligns with the individualism-collectivism orientation that forms the core of Face Negotiation Theory (Soiti et al., 2025).

In research regarding identity negotiation among international teachers in cooperative education units, it was found that the cultural identity of expatriate teachers and the ways they negotiate their face are strongly influenced by the institutional context in which they work, with distinct facework strategies applied according to the situation encountered (Nurhayati et al., 2022).

Conflict Management Strategies in Multicultural Contexts

In research on conflict management in multicultural teams rooted in local wisdom, it is stated that conflicts in multicultural teams often arise from miscommunication caused by differences in language, communication

styles, and cultural norms (Sutama et al., 2025) . Ting-Toomey identifies three primary conflict management strategies of relevance: avoiding, accommodating, and compromising.

Types of conflict within organizations can be grouped according to several dimensions. First, intrapersonal conflict, which occurs within an individual—for example, when someone experiences value dilemmas or role pressure. Second, interpersonal conflict, which emerges from differences in perspective between individuals. Third, intragroup conflict, which takes place within work teams due to differing interests or working methods. Fourth, intergroup conflict, which usually arises from differing objectives between organizational units. Within multicultural organizations, interpersonal and intergroup conflicts are often more prominent because they involve cross-cultural interactions with differing underlying value systems.

Several conflict management theories can serve as references for understanding these dynamics. One is the Thomas-Kilmann model, which identifies five conflict resolution styles: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. This model emphasizes that no single style is universally correct; rather, its effectiveness depends on the situational context. Meanwhile, Rahim (2002) developed an organizational conflict management model that highlights the importance of integration, where conflict is managed through open communication and the search for shared solutions that benefit all parties. Another theory, the interactionist approach, views conflict as a necessary element to keep organizations dynamic and prevent stagnation.

Multicultural organizations can be understood as organizations whose members come from diverse ethnic, linguistic, value-based, religious, and experiential cultural backgrounds. Cox (1994) explains that multicultural organizations have higher potential for innovation due to the diversity of ideas, yet they are also more vulnerable to conflict due to fundamental differences in ways of thinking and interacting. The primary challenge in multicultural organizations lies in managing such diversity so that it becomes a source of strength rather than division. In Indonesia, this diversity is reflected in workforce structures that include differences between regions, further reinforced by the presence of foreign workers across various sectors.

Conflict management within multicultural contexts cannot be separated from cultural sensitivity. Differences in work values, communication patterns, and perceptions of organizational hierarchy often trigger conflict. For instance, Javanese culture which emphasizes harmony and politeness in speech may clash with the more direct communication style of cultures from Sumatra. Without cross-cultural understanding, these differences in communication style can lead to misinterpretations that increase the potential for conflict. Therefore, conflict management strategies in multicultural organizations must be grounded in intercultural communication skills and a willingness to respect differences (Marlina, 2025) .

In research on intercultural sensitivity and conflict management styles within cross-cultural contexts, it is stated that the avoiding strategy reflects low concern for both self and others during conflict situations, and is typically used when individuals seek to maintain harmony without addressing issues directly (Yu & Chen, 2008) . The accommodating strategy involves high concern for others but low concern for self, where individuals attempt to satisfy the other party's needs while sacrificing their own (Feria & Wulandari, 2024) .

In research regarding conflict resolution in intercultural communication, it is stated that convergence strategies aimed at supporting harmony among community members prove more effective than divergence strategies; additionally, cultural values such as uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation influence conflict resolution strategy choices through the development of emotional intelligence, including compromise, accommodation, and integration (Nurhayati et al., 2022) .

Encoding/Decoding: Non-Linear Communication and the Active Audience

Stuart Hall's reception analysis theory discusses encoding/decoding. Starting from Stuart Hall's definition: simply put, encoding is the process of creating messages in accordance with specific codes, while decoding is the process of using those codes to interpret or make sense of messages (Himam, 2021) .

The Encoding/Decoding theory developed by Stuart Hall explains that communication is not merely a linear process between message sender and receiver, but a process involving production, circulation, use, and

reproduction of meaning. From this perspective, the sender (encoder) constructs messages based on specific codes, language, values, and social contexts, while the receiver (decoder) actively interprets messages according to their own experiences, knowledge, and cultural backgrounds. Consequently, the meaning received is not always identical to the meaning intended by the sender, as the interpretation process is influenced by various social and cultural factors (Annisa et al., 2023) .

Encoding is the process of converting ideas or information into symbols, signs, or messages that can be transmitted through communication media. Conversely, decoding is the process of translating and interpreting messages by the receiver to derive understandable meaning. The effectiveness of both processes is strongly influenced by the suitability of the codes used, media characteristics, communication context, and the presence of noise that may distort meaning. Thus, effective communication depends not only on message delivery but also on the receiver's ability to interpret messages in line with the meaning constructed by the sender.

Within mass communication studies, Encoding/Decoding theory positions the audience as an active party in interpreting media messages. The audience may accept, negotiate, or even reject the meaning offered by the sender based on their own frames of reference. Therefore, this theory is widely used to understand how media messages, information, and communication symbols are produced, interpreted, and understood differently by various audience groups (Gunarso et al., 2024) .

According to Delya et al., (2022) reception analysis is used to examine influence within meaning-making processes in media based on audience experiences. This theory seeks to understand how audiences interpret messages offered by media, as well as their experiences consuming media content (Hadi , 2011). Stuart Hall describes the encoding-decoding method as a way to interpret audience perceptions; in this method, the process of making meaning from received messages is interpreted in similar ways. Within the message reception process, three elements exist knowledge frameworks, production relations, and technical infrastructure which may reveal differences in understanding meaning between encoding and decoding stages (J. Stanley Baran & Dennis K. Davis, 2003:270 in Rahman et al., 2017) In this context, Stuart Hall identifies three dimensions of media messages that can be interpreted by society: 1. Dominant Reading, 2. Negotiated Meaning, 3. Oppositional Decoding (Fatihan & Ajibulloh, 2024) .

Hall's representation theory views media as an arena for meaning construction rather than a neutral mirror of reality. Within this approach, representation is understood as a discursive practice that selects, arranges, and emphasizes certain elements so that audiences accept a specific cultural depiction as natural (Rahmayana et al., 2026) .

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method focused on individuals' lived experiences. The paradigm employed is constructivism, which views social reality as something constructed through social interaction, experience, and individual interpretation. In research on phenomenological research design, it is stated that phenomenological analysis is carried out through systematic data organization, starting from identifying significant statements and grouping these statements into meaning units, then proceeding to construct descriptions of the informants' essential experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) .

The research was conducted at EF Kayoon Surabaya, located at Jalan Kayoon No. 42, Surabaya, East Java. Informants were selected through purposive sampling and consisted of four individuals: two local teachers (Firly, 26 years old; Ghina, 27 years old) and two international teachers (Patrick, 31 years old; Merve, 30 years old). Informant selection was based on the intensity of communication interactions within the teachers' room and their ability to explain cross-cultural experiences. Informants were chosen using purposive sampling techniques with the following criteria: (1) being an active teacher at EF Kayoon Surabaya for at least one year; (2) having high interaction intensity with teachers from different cultural backgrounds; and (3) being willing to participate in in-depth interviews. The selection of four informants was based on the principle of information richness in phenomenological research: choosing participants considered capable of providing deep experiences related to the studied phenomenon.

Data collection was carried out through three techniques: (1) semi-structured in-depth interviews guided by an interview outline based on Face Negotiation Theory; interviews lasted 45–60 minutes per informant and were recorded with participant consent. Interview results were transcribed verbatim before analysis; (2) direct observation of communication interactions in the teachers' room; and (3) documentation in the form of field notes and supporting data.

Data analysis in this research uses the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. After all interview data were transcribed verbatim, the researcher conducted analysis in sequential stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During open coding, the researcher identified significant statements related to intercultural communication experiences between local and international teachers. Next, in axial coding, codes with shared meanings were grouped into relevant categories and sub-themes. In selective coding, these categories were integrated into main themes representing the essential experiences of informants regarding intercultural communication gaps and face negotiation strategies.

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the research, the researcher applied several data validation strategies. First, source triangulation was performed by comparing data obtained from local teachers and international teachers, as well as field observation results and documentation. Second, member checking was conducted by reconfirming transcription results and data interpretations with informants to ensure meaning aligned with their intended experiences. Third, peer debriefing was carried out through discussions with academic supervisors and colleagues with expertise in intercultural communication, to obtain critical feedback and minimize researcher subjectivity bias. Through these procedures, this study aims to enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of its findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of Research Location: EF Kayoon Surabaya

English First (EF) Kayoon Surabaya is an international-standard English language learning center located at Jalan Kayoon No. 42, Surabaya, East Java, and has been operating since 1996. As an English language education institution, EF brings together local and international teaching staff within one multicultural work environment. The teaching staff structure consists of Academic Managers/Coordinators, local teachers, and international teachers (native English teachers) who collaborate in daily learning processes. The teachers' room at EF Kayoon functions as the primary setting for social and professional interaction between both groups of teachers, creating an intense daily arena for intercultural communication.

Intercultural Communication Gaps in the Teachers' Room

Observations and in-depth interviews reveal significant communication gaps between local and international teachers, manifesting in three main dimensions. Direct quotations are presented to strengthen finding credibility and demonstrate the connection between the researcher's interpretations and participants' actual experiences.

First, differences in verbal communication styles. Local teachers tend to speak with a lower tone of voice and use a mix of Indonesian and English, while international teachers speak English at a louder volume, with a fast accent and slang terms that are often difficult for local teachers to understand. In research on intercultural communication in diverse workplaces, it is stated that the most common intercultural communication barriers include language gaps and fluency differences, variations in communication styles, as well as differences in customs and social expectations. These barriers can slow collaboration, affect work morale, and create avoidable conflicts (Khan et al., 2024) .

Firly explained:

“Sometimes I have to ask them to repeat what they said because they speak so fast. I understand English, but some terms and slang they use are quite hard to understand.”

Ghina also expressed:

“I feel more comfortable speaking in a slow, careful tone. Meanwhile, some international teachers speak very directly, so I need time to understand what they mean.”

Patrick stated:

“For me, speaking directly is normal and efficient. However, I noticed that some local teachers prefer a softer approach when discussing work-related issues.”

Second, patterns of informal segregation. During break times, both groups tend not to mix, and interactions remain limited to formal smiles. International teacher Patrick stated that local teachers appear less open to discussing topics outside of work. Meanwhile, local teacher Firly revealed that differences in accent and speaking speed among international teachers make it difficult for him to follow conversations comfortably. In research on employee perceptions of intercultural communication at a South African university, it was found that the absence of consistent strategic communication guidelines leads employees to feel uncomfortable during cross-cultural interactions and causes them to limit engagement with culturally different groups (Mushaathoni, 2025) .

Patrick explained:

“Sometimes I feel that local teachers are friendly, but they tend to stay within their own group during breaks. It can be difficult to start casual conversations.”

Merve expressed:

“I wanted to know more about my local colleagues, but I felt they were sometimes hesitant to join conversations outside work topics.”

Firly stated:

“It’s not that I don’t want to socialize, but sometimes I worry I won’t be able to follow their conversations, so I prefer gathering with people I’m already familiar with.”

Third, differences in interpreting nonverbal communication. International teachers tend to be more physically expressive (open laughter, large gestures), while local teachers express themselves more reservedly. These differences are often misinterpreted by both parties: local teachers perceive international teachers as overly dominant, while international teachers view local teachers as passive or unenthusiastic (Deng et al., 2023) .

Ghina explained:

“When they speak while laughing loudly or using lots of hand movements, I initially thought they were angry or dominating the conversation.”

Patrick stated:

“In my culture, smiling, laughing, and using gestures are signs of openness. I was surprised when some local teachers appeared uncomfortable with that.”

Merve added:

“I learned that silence does not always mean disagreement. Sometimes it is a way of showing respect.”

The communication gaps identified above can be understood more deeply through Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding theory. This theory explains that communication is not merely a linear process between message sender and receiver, but a process involving production, circulation, use, and reproduction of meaning (Annisa et al., 2023). From this perspective, the sender (encoder) constructs messages based on specific codes,

language, values, and social contexts, while the receiver (decoder) actively interprets messages according to their own experiences, knowledge, and cultural backgrounds.

Within the context of interactions between local and international teachers at EF Kayoon, mismatched codes were found between both groups. International teachers as encoders may believe that speaking loudly and expressively demonstrates openness and enthusiasm. However, local teachers as decoders from collectivist cultural backgrounds that value politeness and gentleness in speech interpret this style as dominance or aggression. Conversely, when local teachers use indirect communication (for example, nodding without speaking or using lengthy, roundabout sentences), international teachers accustomed to direct and assertive communication interpret this as vagueness or lack of contribution.

In line with these findings, recent research by Annisa et al. (Annisa et al., 2025) on Indonesian students' reception of multicultural-themed content shows that audiences from collectivist cultural backgrounds tend to engage in negotiated reading when encountering messages that do not fully align with their cultural frameworks; this means they accept part of the meaning while simultaneously negotiating and adjusting it. The findings of this study align with Zhang (2024a), who found that teachers' rooms in international education institutions serve as arenas for ongoing cultural negotiation. Zhang demonstrated that differences in communication styles, social expectations, and daily interaction habits often become sources of discomfort in cross-cultural working relationships. Results from EF Kayoon Surabaya reinforce these findings by showing that language differences, slang use, and variations in interpreting nonverbal communication are the primary factors creating social distance between local and international teachers.

The same phenomenon occurs in EF's teachers' room, where local teachers do not fully reject (oppositional reading) or entirely accept (dominant reading) the communication styles of international teachers, but instead occupy a continuous negotiating position. In research on representation and decoding in multicultural classrooms, Fuchs (2023) confirms that the decoding process is always influenced by identity factors such as social class, ethnicity, language, and gender, making meaning-making regarding cross-cultural messages highly contextual and personal (Jauhari et al., 2025).

Face Negotiation Strategies in Cross-Cultural Interactions

Based on data analysis, three main strategies used by local teachers to maintain their face were identified, in line with Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory framework.

First strategy: avoiding. Local teachers tend to remain silent, change the subject, or avoid directly expressing disagreement when facing situations that could potentially trigger conflict. In research on cultural communication within conflict management styles in the globalization era, it is stated that cultural communication differences influence how individuals manage conflict; in collectivist cultures, conflict avoidance strategies are chosen to maintain harmony and prevent losing face in front of others (Sasmi et al., 2024).

Ghina expressed:

"If something makes me uncomfortable, I usually stay silent first rather than saying it directly."

Firly explained:

"I don't want bigger misunderstandings to happen, so sometimes I avoid discussions that could lead to conflict."

Patrick observed:

"I noticed that some local teachers rarely express disagreement openly even when they have different opinions."

Second strategy: accommodating. Local teachers demonstrate willingness to adapt to international teachers' communication styles for example, by actively using English exclusively or avoiding topics considered sensitive. In research on 21st-century intercultural communication competence, it is stated that active involvement in

multicultural environments and availability of interaction allow individuals to improve their intercultural communication competence, including the ability to accommodate differences (Sarwari et al., 2024) .

Firly stated:

“I try to use English more often so communication becomes easier for everyone.”

Ghina explained:

“I try to adjust how I speak and choose words that international teachers will understand more easily.”

Merve said:

“I appreciate that local teachers make an effort to communicate in English even when it is not their first language.”

Third strategy: compromising. In long-term interactions, local and international teachers gradually find a balance point. International teacher Merve began adjusting her speaking speed and reducing slang use. Local teacher Ghina became more confident asking clarifying questions. In research on phenomenological studies of Indonesian-Malaysian intercultural communication, it was found that intercultural communication adaptation processes take place gradually and require sufficient time and interaction intensity to reach a mutually beneficial balance point (Faradhina et al., 2022) .

Merve expressed:

“Over time, I started speaking more slowly and avoiding slang because I realized it helped communication become smoother.”

Patrick stated:

“We gradually found a middle ground. I became more aware of cultural sensitivities, while local teachers became more confident in expressing their ideas.”

Ghina explained:

“Now I’m more confident asking for clarification if there’s something I don’t understand. Communication feels more comfortable than before.”

Interestingly, the face negotiation strategies identified are closely correlated with the three decoding positions proposed by Stuart Hall: dominant-hegemonic reading, negotiated reading, and oppositional reading (Hall, 1980 in Fatihan & Ajibulloh , 2024).

First, the accommodating strategy practiced by local teachers reflects a dominant reading of messages conveyed by international teachers. Local teachers fully accept the communication codes used by international teachers (exclusive English use, direct speaking style) without significant resistance. This position allows interactions to proceed smoothly in the short term, yet carries risks of power imbalance within long-term cross-cultural relationships.

Second, the compromising strategy developed in long-term interactions represents negotiated reading a position where message receivers (local teachers) generally accept dominant codes but negotiate and modify them according to their own cultural contexts and interests. In this position, local teachers do not merely accommodate but also actively reshape shared meanings and communication norms. This aligns with findings from Markova (2022) who states that cross-cultural interactions involve an encoding-decoding-encoding cycle where new meanings are produced through continuous negotiation at the receiver level, before being encoded again in modified form.

Third, the avoiding strategy can be understood as a passive form of oppositional reading. Local teachers “read” international teachers’ direct and assertive communication styles as threats to their face, and in response, they choose to withdraw from interactions. However, unlike active opposition that openly rejects and fights against dominant meanings, avoiding here represents hidden resistance intended to protect self-image without triggering open confrontation.

These findings also support research by Sarwari et al. (2024), which states that intercultural communication competence develops through continuous interaction processes and direct experience in multicultural environments. In this study, both local and international teachers showed improved communication adaptation abilities after engaging in regular interactions over a certain period. This process is reflected through changes in communication behavior, such as using more understandable language, reducing slang use, and increased confidence to ask for clarification when misunderstandings occur. Within multicultural education contexts, Lestari (2025) found that international teachers in international institution teachers’ rooms often experience mismatches between expectations and interaction realities (habitus-field disjuncture), which they respond to with strategies such as promotion of social connections and practice of strategic reticence (Zhang, 2024b). These findings enhance our understanding that face negotiation is not only performed by local teachers but also by international teachers, each using strategies aligned with their own cultural orientations.

International Teachers’ Perspectives on Intercultural Communication

Research results show that intercultural communication gaps are not only experienced by local teachers but also by international teachers. International teachers face challenges understanding communication norms applicable within Indonesian work environments, particularly regarding indirect communication, tendencies to avoid conflict, and the importance of maintaining harmonious social relationships.

Patrick expressed:

“At first, I found it difficult to know whether local teachers agreed or disagreed because they rarely expressed their opinions directly. In my culture, people usually say what they think openly.”

This statement demonstrates differences in communication orientation between individualist and collectivist cultures. In more individualist cultures, openness and direct opinion expression are considered forms of honesty and communication efficiency. Conversely, in collectivist cultures like Indonesia, opinions are often expressed more carefully to maintain interpersonal relationships and avoid potential conflict.

Merve also explained:

“I realized that silence does not necessarily mean disagreement or lack of interest. Sometimes it is a way of showing respect or avoiding uncomfortable situations.”

These findings show that international teachers undergo cultural learning processes to understand meanings of nonverbal communication that differ from their home cultures. This situation aligns with Stuart Hall’s decoding concept, where message meanings are not always interpreted identically by individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Additionally, international teachers implement various forms of communication adjustments to build more harmonious working relationships.

Patrick stated:

“Over time, I learned to be more patient and give colleagues more space to express themselves in their own way.”

Meanwhile, Merve expressed:

“I started speaking more slowly, reducing slang expressions, and checking whether my colleagues understood what I meant.”

These statements show that international teachers do not only act as parties bringing foreign culture into the work environment, but also actively adapt to local culture. This adaptation process reflects the compromising strategy within Face Negotiation Theory, where both groups seek common ground to enable more effective communication.

Results from this study also support findings from Deng et al. (2023), which indicate that international teachers need to adjust their communication expectations when working in culturally different contexts. The ability to understand local communication norms plays an important role in building effective professional relationships and creating inclusive work environments. Thus, intercultural communication gaps at EF Kayoon Surabaya are phenomena experienced by both teacher groups. Both local and international teachers engage in meaning negotiation processes, communication behavior adjustments, and face management to build more inclusive working relationships within multicultural settings.

DISCUSSION

Implications of Face Negotiation Theory

This study's findings strengthen the relevance of Face Negotiation Theory within multicultural language education institution contexts. The three identified strategies (avoiding, accommodating, compromising) are sequential: starting with avoiding in early interaction stages to reduce cultural uncertainty, continuing with accommodating as a form of active adaptation, and reaching compromising as a more mature form of long-term adjustment.

In research on conflict management in multicultural teams, it is stated that diverse cross-cultural perspectives not only produce improved problem-solving and creativity, but also require commitment to inclusivity and adaptability even though they do not always eliminate conflict (Faradhina et al., 2022). This mirrors dynamics found in EF Kayoon Surabaya's teachers' room, where communication gaps are not automatically resolved but managed through face negotiation strategies.

This pattern aligns with propositions from Face Negotiation Theory regarding collectivist cultural orientations: research on intercultural communication in international institution staffrooms found that teachers from collectivist cultures tend to prioritize group harmony and avoid direct confrontation, reflected in the dominance of avoiding and accommodating strategies during early interaction stages (Ting-toomey, 2007).

Face Negotiation Theory explains why individuals from collectivist cultures tend to choose specific strategies, driven by the need to protect their own face and others' face during situations that threaten social identity. Meanwhile, Encoding/Decoding theory explains how meaning-making processes occur when messages encoded within one cultural code system must be decoded within a different cultural code system.

When these two theories are combined, it becomes clear that intercultural communication gaps are not merely issues of differing speaking styles or languages, but rather failures in encoding-decoding processes rooted in differing face orientations. Messages encoded by international teachers with the intention of demonstrating openness (based on self-face orientation and individualist culture) are decoded by local teachers as threats to collective face, triggering avoiding or accommodating strategies as self-protection. Conversely, when local teachers use indirect communication to maintain harmony, international teachers accustomed to direct communication may decode these messages as uncertainty or lack of engagement.

This pattern aligns with propositions from Face Negotiation Theory regarding collectivist cultural orientations: research on intercultural communication in international institution staffrooms found that teachers from collectivist cultures tend to prioritize group harmony and avoid direct confrontation, reflected in the dominance of avoiding and accommodating strategies during early interaction stages (Ting- Toomey , 2007).

This study's findings expand the application of Face Negotiation Theory within international language education institutions in Indonesia. While research by Soiti et al. (2025) shows that individuals from collectivist cultures tend to choose avoiding and accommodating strategies in conflict management, this study demonstrates that

these strategies are not static. Through continuous interaction, local and international teachers can move toward more collaborative compromising strategies. Additionally, results from this study reinforce arguments from Mushaathoni (2025), who states that multicultural organizations require communication frameworks capable of bridging cultural differences through inclusive communication policies and practices. Within EF Kayoon Surabaya's context, this need is visible in the importance of cultural orientation programs, cross-cultural communication forums, and organizational support for informal interactions between teachers. Recent research by Research latest by Zhang (2024) at Sino-French partnership institutions reinforces these findings by showing that temporal and hierarchical dissonances often serve as primary barriers to cross-cultural integration in teachers' rooms, requiring strategic redistribution of intercultural capital to achieve smoother integration (Zhang, 2024b).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study finds that intercultural communication gaps between local and international teachers in EF Kayoon Surabaya's teachers' room manifest in three dimensions: differences in verbal communication styles, patterns of informal segregation, and differences in interpreting nonverbal communication. These three dimensions stem from fundamental differences in cultural values related to social hierarchy, self-expression, and politeness norms.

When facing such gaps, local teachers apply face negotiation strategies sequentially: avoiding in early stages, accommodating as a form of active adaptation, and compromising in long-term interactions. This pattern aligns with propositions from Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory regarding collectivist cultural preferences for conflict management and self-image maintenance.

Theoretically, this study expands the application of Face Negotiation Theory within multicultural language education institutions in Indonesia. Practically, it shows that effective intercultural communication management requires organizational support through cultural orientation programs, intercultural communication training, cross-cultural dialogue forums, and inclusive communication policies. Furthermore, institutional leaders must actively play a role in creating interaction spaces that enable local and international teachers to build shared understanding, so that cultural diversity becomes a source of collaboration and innovation rather than communication gaps.

This study has several limitations. First, the relatively small number of participants means findings are not intended to be generalized, but rather to provide deep understanding regarding intercultural communication experiences at EF Kayoon Surabaya. Second, the research was conducted at only one institution, so other organizational contexts may produce different dynamics. Third, observations were conducted over a limited period, so long-term changes in communication patterns could not be observed comprehensively.

Practical implications of this study indicate that multicultural education institutions need to strengthen intercultural communication orientation programs, facilitate cross-cultural interactions between teachers, and develop inclusive communication policies. Management support through the role of coordinators or leaders as cultural mediators is also important to reduce communication gaps and build more collaborative work environments. In doing so, cultural diversity can become a source of learning and strengthened cooperation within educational organizations.

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