

NEGOTIATING INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION ABROAD: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY OF AN INDONESIAN JAVANESE MUSLIM PRE-SERVICE TEACHER

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ABSTRACT - An important gap in multicultural education research is the lack of systematic analysis on how intercultural experiences change pre-service teachers' identities. For this reason, this study uses an autoethnographic approach to investigate how intercultural engagement aids in the reconstruction of teachers' identities. This study uses a qualitative autoethnographic research approach, with the researcher acting as the only participant and primary research instrument, based on the theoretical framework of multicultural education. The primary source of data for the study is methodically recorded reflective journal entries made throughout the teaching internship. Sustained diary writing was used to record pedagogical experiences, emotional reactions, and cross-cultural interactions. To find patterns of identity transition, these entries were then analyzed through the use of reflexive analysis, theme categorization, coding, and iterative reading. Three interconnected themes emerge from the analysis:

(1) identity disruption and cultural dislocation; (2) pedagogical adaptation in the face of linguistic and cultural limitations; and (3) identity reconstruction via relational and reflective involvement. The findings demonstrate that multicultural education functions not only as a pedagogical orientation but also as an identity-shaping process enacted through lived intercultural experience. This study highlights the value of autoethnography in capturing identity transformation and underscores the importance of sustained intercultural engagement in pre-service teacher education.

1. INTRODUCTION

International teaching internship programs in teacher education are designed to help pre-service teachers develop intercultural competence, cultural sensitivity, and readiness to teach in multicultural environments. Through direct intercultural engagement, multicultural education is expected to encourage reflective awareness and support the development of professional teacher identity (Hanna, 2023; Kim & Lee, 2021). However, in practice, many pre-service teachers still experience difficulties in negotiating professional identity, responding to linguistic barriers, and understanding unfamiliar social norms when teaching in overseas educational settings (Maghfiroh & Asiyah, 2024; Mustikawati et al., 2023). These conditions indicate a gap between multicultural learning introduced in academic contexts and the pedagogical realities encountered in international teaching environments.

Previous studies have explored intercultural competence, global perspective development, and identity negotiation within international mobility programs (Wardhani et al., 2021). Several studies also demonstrate that intercultural teaching experiences may contribute to personal and professional development among pre-service teachers (Flores, 2020). Nevertheless, many of these studies still focus primarily on surface-level cultural adaptation, classroom management, or general intercultural adjustment without examining how professional identity is reconstructed through sustained pedagogical interaction in multicultural settings (Zulferdi & Husna, 2022). Consequently, broader implications for multicultural teacher education and reflective identity development remain underexplored (Nimasari et al., 2025).

In addition, language in previous studies is often positioned mainly as a communication tool rather than as a space where authority, identity, and professional legitimacy are negotiated in multilingual classrooms. Existing research tends to emphasize intercultural adaptation in general educational contexts while paying limited attention to the experiences of non-native English-speaking teachers working within linguistically complex environments (Pun, 2024; Rose & Galloway, 2019). (Su, 2020). demonstrate that language ideology and native-speaker expectations continue to influence English language teaching practices in Southeast Asian contexts. Similarly, (Ali et al., 2020; Nazhafah, 2021) argue that linguistic insecurity and intercultural dissonance may significantly affect teachers' professional confidence and pedagogical interaction. However, studies specifically examining how these experiences shape the identity reconstruction of Indonesian pre-service teachers in Southern Thailand remain limited.

Responding to these gaps, this study explores how multicultural education was experienced, interpreted, and redefined through the lived experiences of an Indonesian English pre-service teacher during an international teaching internship in Southern Thailand. Unlike previous studies that mainly discuss intercultural adaptation at a general level, this study specifically focuses on how linguistic barriers, intercultural interaction, and pedagogical uncertainty contributed to the negotiation and reconstruction of professional teacher identity. The study employs an autoethnographic approach to capture reflective experiences that are often overlooked in broader survey-based or descriptive intercultural studies (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022; Song, 2022).

Although the importance of multicultural education has long been recognized (Banks, 2019), recent scholarship emphasizes that effective implementation depends not only on pedagogical competence but also on opportunities for sustained, authentic intercultural engagement (Asharif et al., 2024). (Arphattananon, 2018) highlights that in the Thai educational context, intercultural learning emerges less from formal policy and more from

daily interactional encounters, negotiation of difference, and reflective meaning-making by teachers. Entering my international teaching internship in Thailand as an Indonesian pre-service English teacher, I began to experience firsthand the tension between theoretical understandings of multiculturalism and the lived realities of cross-cultural communication in schools (Diatta, 2020; Mustikawati et al., 2023)

This study aims to explore how multicultural education is interpreted and negotiated through intercultural teaching experiences in a multilingual educational environment. Specifically, the study investigates how cultural shock, language difference, and intercultural classroom interaction contributed to the reconstruction of professional teacher identity during the teaching internship program in. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to multicultural teacher education, methodologically through the use of reflective autoethnography, and practically to the development of more interculturally responsive teacher education programs.

2. METHOD

This study employed qualitative research with an autoethnographic design to explore how multicultural education was experienced, interpreted, and redefined through my teaching practice as an Indonesian English pre-service teacher in Thailand. Qualitative research was considered appropriate because the study focused on lived experience, reflective meaning-making, and identity transformation within a real intercultural educational setting. Autoethnography allowed me to connect my lived experiences with broader cultural, pedagogical, and social meanings. (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022) explain that autoethnography “transforms self-narrative into an analytic text,” enabling educators to examine how identity, culture, and power interact in real teaching contexts. This design was the most appropriate for my research questions, which focused on how I encountered and negotiated cultural shock, language difference, and cultural diversity in my teaching journey. Rather than seeking generalizable findings, I aimed to generate deep, contextual insights about intercultural learning and reflective growth

I viewed myself as both the participant and research instrument, constantly interpreting, questioning, and reframing my own experiences in dialogue with theory and pedagogy. Autoethnography offered the necessary methodological freedom and reflexivity to make sense of those complexities. This study took place during my internship program at a secondary school in Yala, Southern Thailand, from July to September 2025. The school serves students aged 12 to 16, representing various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Most of them had limited English proficiency and little exposure to foreign teachers. Teaching in this environment required me to navigate linguistic barriers, cultural norms, and pedagogical expectations different from those in Indonesia.

As the sole participant, I took on a dual role as a teacher implementing lessons and as a researcher observing and reflecting on my actions, emotions, and decisions. My position as both an insider (educator within the classroom) and an outsider (foreign guest in a new culture) created dynamic tensions that enriched my reflections. Before conducting this study, I obtained permission from my host institution and ensured that all individuals mentioned in my reflections remained anonymous. I used pseudonyms and omitted any identifying information to maintain confidentiality and respect ethical standards.

Data were collected solely through my personal reflective diary, which served as both the site and source of my inquiry. Throughout my teaching internship program in Thailand, I consistently wrote in my diary after each

school day, documenting not only what occurred in the classroom but also my internal responses to those experiences. These entries captured moments of cultural adjustment, language-related frustration, pedagogical experimentation, and emotional negotiation as I learned to navigate an unfamiliar educational environment. Writing became an integral part of my meaning-making process because it allowed me to transform immediate experiences into reflective narratives that revealed the interplay between my identity as an Indonesian pre-service teacher and the multicultural realities of Thai classrooms.

I treated my diary not simply as a personal journal but as an evolving analytic text. The primary research instrument in this study was the researcher himself, supported by a reflective diary. To guide the reflection and analysis process systematically, the instrument grid used in this study is presented in Table 1.

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Item</i>
<i>Emotional Disorientation</i>	Feelings of confusion, discomfort, and unfamiliarity in intercultural situations	Reflective responses toward culture shock experiences
<i>Identity Disruption</i>	Changes in self-perception as a teacher	Reflections on shifting beliefs and professional identity
<i>Adaptation Process</i>	Strategies for coping and adjustment	Narratives related to adaptation and classroom negotiation
<i>Linguistic Barriers</i>	Misunderstanding and communication breakdowns	Reflections on language-related difficulties
<i>Pedagogical Adaptation</i>	Gestures, visual aids, and simplified language	Teaching strategies used in multilingual classrooms
<i>Classroom Cultural Norms</i>	Silence, collectivism, and respect patterns	Observations of students' cultural behaviours
<i>Identity Transformation</i>	Empathy, humility, and adaptability	Reflections on personal and professional growth

Table 1. Research Instrument Grid

The data were analyzed through thematic and reflective narrative analysis. I revisited each diary entry through repeated reading, annotation, coding, and reflective rewriting to move from description to interpretation, transforming lived experience into analytic data. This reflective process aligns with participatory and reflective approaches that position reflection not merely as introspection, but as a systematic pedagogical and analytical practice (Nimasari et al., 2025). To enhance credibility, I engaged in self-reflexive validation by questioning assumptions, examining emotions, and identifying potential bias. I also discussed selected entries with academic mentors as a form of peer debriefing to ensure analytic coherence and trustworthiness. Through this process, the diary functioned as both a methodological and ethical space linking the personal, pedagogical, and theoretical.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Pre-Arrival Stage: Initial Intercultural Exposure

The pre-departure stage was characterized by initial hesitation regarding participation in the international internship program and unfamiliarity with the overseas educational environment. After arriving at Don Mueang International Airport in Bangkok, unfamiliar linguistic and social situations were encountered during early interaction in Thailand. The first intercultural interaction occurred during communication with local people using Pattani Malay. Although similarities between Pattani Malay and Indonesian Malay were initially expected, several differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and intonation were identified during conversation.

Communication frequently involved repetition and clarification because certain expressions could not be immediately understood. Another early observation occurred during an international sport-stacking competition attended by students from several countries, including Malaysia, China, Germany, India, and Singapore. The event involved multilingual interaction among participants, teachers, and audiences from different cultural backgrounds. Students from the host school actively participated in the international competition and interacted with foreign participants during the event.

Figure 1. International sport-stacking competition in Hat Yai.



Environmental Observation Stage: Culture Shock within the School Community

Culture shock emerged more visibly after daily interaction within the Yala school and surrounding community. Although the area was predominantly Muslim, several cultural and religious practices differed from those commonly encountered in Indonesia. One significant observation occurred during the Ashura commemoration parade organized by the school community. The event involved public processions, banners, traditional music, collective performances, and ceremonial activities conducted by students and local residents. Participants wore coordinated traditional clothing and gathered around decorated parade structures during the event.

Another observation involved social interaction patterns within classrooms. During lessons, students consistently remained silent and avoided direct eye contact when asked questions. Most responses were delivered in low voices, and students generally waited for the teacher to initiate communication. Similar interactional patterns were also observed outside the classroom, particularly during school activities and communal gatherings. Collectivist

practices were documented during daily school activities. Teachers frequently shared meals together, collaborated during school programs, and participated collectively in institutional routines. Students also demonstrated cooperative behavior during classroom and extracurricular activities.



Figure 2. Ashura commemoration parade organized by the school community in Yala.

Teaching Practice Stage: Language Difference in Classroom Interaction

Language difference became one of the most frequently documented challenges during classroom teaching activities. Most students demonstrated limited English proficiency, while communication through Malay was constrained by dialect differences between Indonesian Malay and Pattani Malay. During classroom interaction, verbal explanation often produced misunderstanding and delayed responses. Students occasionally remained silent after receiving instructions, particularly when explanations combined English vocabulary and Indonesian-influenced Malay pronunciation. Several pronunciation patterns influenced by local linguistic systems were identified during speaking activities.

For example, students commonly replaced the English /v/ sound with /w/, producing expressions such as “wery” instead of “very,” “wideo” instead of “video,” and “wolleyball” instead of “volleyball.” Differences in Pattani Malay pronunciation were also documented during interaction with students and local teachers. Communication frequently involved repetition, gestures, translation tools, and contextual clarification during classroom activities. To



facilitate classroom interaction, teaching activities incorporated gestures, physical demonstrations, illustrated books, drawings, visual materials, and translation tools. Vocabulary instruction frequently used illustrated books containing topics such as animals, daily activities, classroom objects, and colors. Visual cards and picture-based activities were repeatedly used during pronunciation and vocabulary exercises

Figure 3. Vocabulary teaching activity using visual learning materials during classroom instruction.

Final Integration Stage: Cultural Exchange through School Activities

The final stage of intercultural engagement emerged through participation in school and community activities outside regular classroom instruction. One of the most significant activities involved participation in the district-level sports festival organized by the school. During the preparation process, I was asked to train students in Tapak Suci, an Indonesian martial art. Training sessions were conducted regularly with dormitory students before the public performance. Students practiced movement coordination, martial art sequences, and group formations during rehearsal activities. The sports festival involved representatives from multiple schools, district educational authorities, and local community members. During the performance, students presented Tapak Suci movements in front of audiences attending the event.

The activity became part of a broader intercultural interaction in which Indonesian cultural performance was introduced within the Southern Thai educational environment. Additional observations regarding cultural diversity were documented through everyday interaction in public spaces. During travel activities, drivers rarely used horns aggressively and generally waited patiently during traffic congestion. Similar orderly behavior was observed in markets, school canteens, and public queues where individuals waited calmly during transactions and communal activities. Another observation concerned the role of mosques within the local community. Mosques functioned not only as places of worship, but also as centers for community gathering, information sharing, and social coordination during religious and educational activities. Mosques also functioned as spaces for community announcements, religious meetings, and coordination of social activities involving teachers, students, and local residents.

Figure 4. Leading the Tapak Suci martial arts demonstration.



4. DISCUSSION

My experience in Yala demonstrated that multicultural education involves more than adapting to a new cultural environment; it also requires continuous negotiation of professional identity within unfamiliar pedagogical

and social contexts. The findings indicate that intercultural learning develops gradually through lived experience, reflective engagement, and everyday classroom interaction rather than through immediate cultural adjustment alone (Lutovac & Assunção Flores, 2021). Similar to previous studies, the experiences documented in this study confirm that culture shock is a dynamic process characterized by uncertainty, disorientation, and intercultural negotiation (Schartner & Young, 2025; Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). However, previous research has largely framed culture shock as a personal or social adjustment issue with limited discussion of its influence on professional teaching practice. In contrast, the findings of this study demonstrate that culture shock within educational settings also involves pedagogical uncertainty and professional disorientation. Throughout the teaching process, I was required not only to adapt socially, but also to interpret unfamiliar classroom behaviour, negotiate instructional expectations, and make pedagogical decisions within different cultural norms. These experiences reflect the dynamic nature of teacher identity, which is continuously reconstructed through professional practice, social interaction, contextual experience, and institutional power relations within educational settings (Dugas, 2021; Narayanan, 2022). The findings therefore extend previous research by showing that professional identity development in intercultural teaching contexts is shaped through the interaction between cultural adaptation, reflective practice, and pedagogical negotiation (Bowen et al., 2021; Song, 2022)

Language difference also emerged as a central factor influencing classroom interaction and pedagogical negotiation during the internship program. Previous studies frequently frame language barriers as technical problems associated with limited linguistic proficiency and communication (González, 2021; Rose & Galloway, 2019). However, the findings of this study indicate that language functioned not only as a communicative tool but also as a space where identity, authority, and professional confidence were continuously negotiated.

This finding aligns with multilingual and translanguaging perspectives emphasizing that classroom interaction involves relational and social meaning-making beyond grammatical competence alone (Pacheco et al., 2019; Wei & Lin, 2019). During classroom interaction, gestures, simplified language, visual materials, and non-verbal communication became important strategies in facilitating understanding between teacher and students. Unlike previous studies that primarily discuss language barriers in terms of instructional difficulty, this study demonstrates that linguistic limitation also shaped how professional identity and pedagogical authority were experienced in intercultural classrooms. Similar findings regarding emotional reflexivity and identity negotiation in multilingual teaching environments have also been discussed by (Cai et al., 2022; Gong et al., 2021). These findings therefore extend existing literature by positioning language negotiation as both a pedagogical and identity-related process within multicultural education contexts (Kiaer & Ahn, 2023).

Cultural diversity within the school and surrounding community further shaped the process of intercultural learning and pedagogical adaptation. Previous studies on culturally responsive teaching emphasize the importance of aligning instruction with students' cultural backgrounds and learning characteristics (Gay, 2018; Sultan et al., 2020). Other researchers also argue that intercultural teaching requires educators to engage with students' broader social and cultural identities rather than focusing solely on instructional adaptation (Dzerviniks et al., 2024; Hagenaaers et al., 2025).

Consistent with these perspectives, the findings of this study show that intercultural teaching extended

beyond classroom instruction into everyday social interaction and cultural interpretation. Students' silence, indirect responses, and avoidance of direct eye contact initially appeared as disengagement during classroom interaction, yet these interactional patterns reflected culturally situated expressions of politeness and respect within the local educational context. Similar observations regarding silence, relational communication, and intercultural interpretation in Asian educational settings have also been discussed by (Kalogerogianni, 2025; Yu, 2023).

Consequently, this study highlights that culturally responsive teaching involves not only instructional adjustment but also emotional, relational, and interpretive engagement with students' cultural perspectives. The process of intercultural identity development identified throughout this study is summarized in Figure 5. The figure illustrates how cultural encounters, language negotiation, reflective practice, and pedagogical adaptation interacted continuously during the teaching internship process.

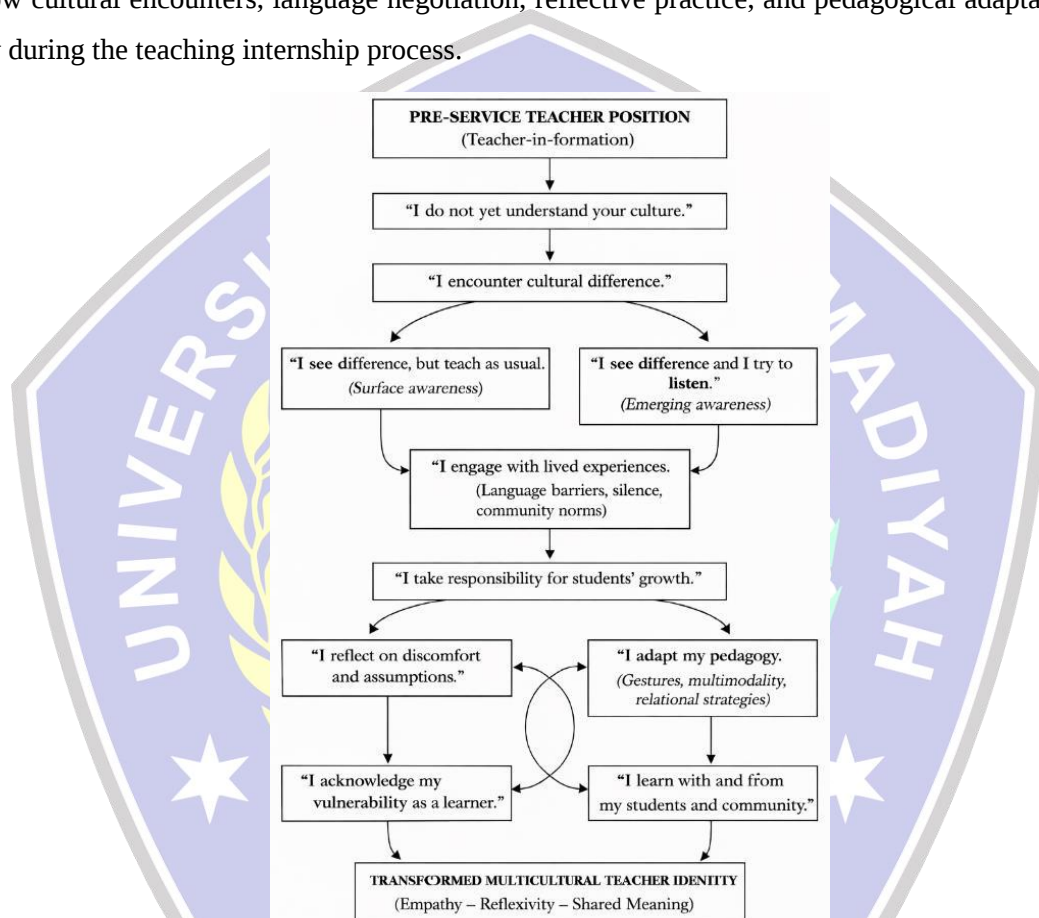


Figure 5: The diagram of identity reflections as a pre-service teacher

As presented in Figure 5, identity development did not occur as an immediate transformation but emerged gradually through recurring experiences of uncertainty, classroom negotiation, cultural interaction, and reflective engagement. Taken together, these findings indicate that identity development in intercultural teaching contexts is recursive rather than linear. Professional growth emerged through ongoing negotiation involving classroom interaction, linguistic limitation, emotional uncertainty, and reflective decision-making. Rather than functioning solely as barriers, moments of confusion and intercultural difficulty became important experiences contributing to intercultural awareness and pedagogical growth (Dabbagh & Nazari, 2026; Karim et al., 2024).

The findings also reinforce perspectives viewing teacher identity as dynamic, contextual, and continuously shaped through social interaction and reflective practice (De Carvalho, 2021; Foreman-Brown et al., 2023).

Therefore, this study contributes to multicultural teacher education by offering a process-oriented understanding of intercultural teacher development grounded in reflective. Despite these contributions, this study remains limited by its context-specific autoethnographic design involving a single participant. The use of reflective diary entries as the primary data source may also introduce interpretive and self-representation bias because the analysis was closely connected to my positionality as both participant and researcher. Although reflexive analysis and peer debriefing were employed to enhance credibility, subjectivity cannot be entirely separated from the interpretive process within autoethnographic inquiry (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022; Wiesner, 2021). Therefore, future research is encouraged to involve multiple participants, comparative intercultural settings, or collaborative reflective approaches to provide broader insights into intercultural teacher identity development and multicultural pedagogical practice.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that intercultural teaching experiences play a critical role in shaping the professional identity of pre-service teachers. Through an autoethnographic approach, the findings reveal that identity transformation emerges from the dynamic interaction between cultural dislocation, linguistic challenges, and pedagogical adaptation in real teaching contexts. The study highlights that multicultural education should not be understood solely as a pedagogical framework, but as a lived and reflective process that reshapes teachers' perspectives, practices, and sense of self. These findings contribute to existing scholarship by providing a systematic reflexive analysis of identity reconstruction within a non-Western intercultural context. Future research is encouraged to expand this inquiry through collaborative or comparative studies to deepen understanding of intercultural teacher development across diverse educational settings.

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