CROSS-LANGUAGE BARRIERS IN INTERNATIONAL TEACHING PRACTICE AMONG INDONESIAN EFL PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS IN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

This study examines cross-language barriers experienced by Indonesian EFL pre-service teachers during a two-month international teaching practicum (Pengenalan Lapangan Persekolahan/PLP) in Songkhla Province, Southern Thailand. Using a descriptive qualitative design combining an open-ended questionnaire with fifteen participants and semi-structured interviews with six purposively selected participants, the study mapped how language barriers varied across interactions with students, mentor teachers, and school staff, the challenges these barriers generated, and the communicative strategies participants used to manage them. Thematic analysis revealed that barriers were most intense in interactions with students because of their limited English proficiency, moderate with mentor teachers due to pronunciation and vocabulary mismatches, and shaped by reliance on Thai in interactions with school staff. These barriers produced pedagogical, professional, and psychological challenges, including instructional miscommunication, reduced classroom control, inefficient lessons, limited participation in school coordination, and declining self-confidence. Participants responded through language simplification, translanguaging in Malay and basic Thai, non-verbal communication, translation technology, and social support from mentors and bilingual students. The findings indicate that effective international teaching practice requires adaptive, multimodal communicative competence beyond formal English proficiency, with implications for pre-departure training in teacher education programs.

Keywords : *Communicative Strategies; Cross-Language Barriers; EFL Pre-Service Teachers; International Teaching Practice*

PENDAHULUAN

The growing status of English as a global language has accelerated the need for qualified EFL teachers, prompting universities to design programs that prepare pre-service teachers to perform across diverse linguistic contexts. Teaching practicums are central to this preparation because they allow undergraduate teacher candidates who are not yet certified to gain authentic classroom experience and to build pedagogical and interpersonal competence beyond campus simulations (Kim et al., 2023). This shift has given rise to international teaching practice programs, through which prospective teachers undertake part of their professional training abroad. Such programs are considered effective in cultivating cultural sensitivity and adaptability, qualities that are difficult to develop solely through coursework (Manasikana & Hartono, 2021).

Indonesian universities have increasingly embedded international teaching practice into their English Education curricula, sending pre-service teachers to countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines to broaden their professional perspectives and intercultural sensitivity (Manasikana & Hartono, 2021). Thailand is a particularly significant destination, and Southern Thailand presents an especially complex linguistic landscape: Thai is a tonal language structurally unrelated to Bahasa Indonesia or English, written in an abugida script distinct from the Latin alphabet, while provinces such as Songkhla add a further layer of complexity through Malay-speaking Muslim communities living alongside Thai speakers (Kuncahyo, 2024). For Indonesian pre-service teachers, this means navigating multiple unfamiliar languages simultaneously, a condition that disrupts classroom interaction, instructional delivery, and student participation (Turbinita, 2024).

Several prior studies have examined language barriers faced by Indonesian pre-service teachers in Thailand. Kusuma et al. (2025) and Ilyin et al. (2025) reported that limited English proficiency among students compelled pre-service teachers to adopt peer support, visual aids, and translanguaging, while Turbinita (2024) found that linguistic challenges were the most persistent obstacle affecting classroom performance and a sense of belonging in school. However, these studies largely treat language barriers as a single, generalized adaptation experience. Few have disaggregated how barriers differ across interaction partners, namely students, mentor teachers, and school staff, each of which involves distinct communicative goals and demands. Likewise, limited attention has been paid to the specific pedagogical, professional, and psychological consequences these barriers produce, or to the range of communicative strategies pre-service teachers employ to sustain effective teaching.

This study addresses that gap by separating cross-language barriers into three interaction domains and examining how their forms, consequences, and management strategies differ accordingly. Specifically, the study aims to: (1) examine how cross-language barriers vary across interactions with students, mentor teachers, and school staff during international teaching practice in Thailand; (2) investigate the pedagogical, professional, and psychological challenges these barriers generate; and (3) explore the communicative strategies Indonesian EFL pre-service teachers use to manage them. As international placements become increasingly common for Indonesian English Education students, this study is expected to contribute focused theoretical insight into cross-language barriers in international teaching practice and to inform pre-departure preparation in teacher education programs.

METODE

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to examine cross-language barriers experienced by Indonesian EFL pre-service teachers during their teaching practice in Thailand, in line with its purpose of identifying barrier types, describing the challenges they generate, and exploring participants' communicative strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Two instruments were used. An open-ended questionnaire was distributed to fifteen participants to map general patterns of language barriers and to inform purposive selection of information-rich cases for the subsequent phase. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with six purposively selected participants to obtain in-depth insight into the specific challenges and communicative strategies involved; these interviews served as the primary data source for thematic analysis, while methodological triangulation across the two instruments strengthened the credibility of the findings.

Participants were drawn from the 2022 cohort of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Negeri Surabaya who had completed a two-month teaching practicum at the kindergarten or elementary level in Songkhla Province during the 2024/2025 academic year. Fifteen pre-service teachers completed the questionnaire stage, from which six were purposively selected for interviews using a selection rubric assessing the richness of responses, the variation of barriers reported, and the diversity of communicative strategies mentioned, consistent with the principle that six to ten interviews are typically sufficient to reach data saturation in descriptive qualitative research (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Participants were assigned pseudonyms P1 to P6 to preserve anonymity.

Data were analyzed using the six-stage thematic analysis procedure of Braun and Clarke (2022): familiarization with the dataset, generation of initial codes, generation of initial themes, theme development, theme refinement and naming, and report writing. Three final themes were aligned with the research questions: variations of cross-language barriers across interaction partners, challenges caused by these barriers, and communicative strategies used to manage them. Trustworthiness was established through triangulation of questionnaire and interview data, member checking of interview summaries, a systematic audit trail of the coding process, a reflexive journal to minimize researcher bias, and thick description of the research setting to support transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the questionnaire and interview data showed that cross-language barriers were not uniform but varied according to the interlocutor involved. Barriers were most pronounced in interactions with students, moderate in interactions with mentor teachers, and shaped by limited English use among school staff. With students, the dominant obstacle was their limited English proficiency, which frequently caused instructions to be misunderstood; P1 reported that kindergarten students “really didn't understand English at all,” while P2 noted that only two students in the class could understand and use English. Lexical confusion compounded the problem, as illustrated by P3's account of students mishearing “cow” as a similar-sounding Thai word for rice. These findings align with Turbinita et al. (2023), who found that low student proficiency was a primary source of communication difficulty, while extending that work by

showing that such barriers extend beyond instructional exchanges into everyday classroom interaction.

Interactions with mentor teachers were comparatively easier, since most mentors possessed functional English, yet misunderstandings still arose from pronunciation and uncommon vocabulary, as when P4 misheard “breakfast” as “big fat.” This suggests, consistent with Natasya and Harisma (2025), that cross-language communication depends not only on grammatical mastery but on shared understanding of pronunciation and word usage in context. Interactions with school staff were the most constrained, as most staff relied primarily on Thai for daily communication; P5 explained that staff “have very limited English, so we needed Google Translate or help from teachers,” and P2 observed that translation apps were used more often than direct speech. Together, these patterns indicate that the intensity of language barriers tracked the level of English exposure associated with each social role within the school.

These barriers generated challenges across pedagogical, professional, and psychological dimensions. Pedagogically, miscommunication forced repeated explanations, as P1 described having to clarify instructions twice, while P4 reported that simple commands such as “silent please” went unrecognized, undermining classroom control. This corroborates Walsh's (2006) view that effective classroom language use is fundamental to teaching, and aligns with Chasanah and Sumardi (2022), who found that language barriers reduce instructional effectiveness in multilingual classrooms. Learning efficiency also suffered, with P2 noting that a single lesson period stretched into two because of repeated re-explanation. Professionally, language barriers limited participation beyond the classroom; P1 described school meetings as effectively one-way because non-English-speaking staff could not engage in dialogue, restricting pre-service teachers' ability to contribute ideas.

Psychologically, the barriers eroded participants' confidence and increased self-monitoring. P4 attributed her reduced confidence directly to mutual incomprehension with school members, while P2 described becoming more cautious in word choice for fear that certain English terms might carry unintended negative meanings in Thai. These findings extend Kim et al. (2023), who argued that cross-linguistic stress in international placements can shape pre-service teachers' professional identity over time, and Imamyartha et al. (2023), who identified anxiety and self-doubt as common outcomes of communication breakdown during practicums. Collectively, the results show that the consequences of language barriers were not confined to communication itself but extended into classroom management, professional participation, and self-perception.

To manage these barriers, participants employed several communicative strategies consistent with problem-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), in which individuals act directly on the source of difficulty rather than withdrawing from it. The most common strategy was simplifying English; P4 explained that she “stopped using complete sentences and spoke more directly” after realizing simpler phrasing was better understood. Translanguaging was also prominent, particularly the use of Malay, which P5 described as “the key when students did not understand what we meant,” alongside gradual incorporation of basic Thai vocabulary, supporting García and Wei's (2014) view that effective multilingual communication draws on all available linguistic resources rather than a single language.

Non-verbal communication served as a fast, low-cost alternative when verbal channels failed; P6 noted that gestures were often quicker than opening a translation application, while P4 used facial expressions to convey emotion when words were not understood. Technology, especially Google Translate, was used extensively across all interaction types, including projected

translations during lessons, consistent with Ilyin et al. (2025) on the role of translation technology in cross-language teaching contexts. Finally, social support from mentor teachers and bilingual students functioned as a relational bridge; P5 described the mentor teacher as one who "helped bridge communication between other school members and us," while P1 enlisted Malay-speaking students to relay meaning to classmates. Overall, these combined strategies indicate that successful communication in international teaching practice depends on flexible, multimodal adaptation rather than English proficiency alone, reflecting the convergence principle of Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 1973).

KESIMPULAN

This study found that cross-language barriers experienced by Indonesian EFL pre-service teachers in Thailand varied according to interaction partner, being most intense with students due to limited English proficiency and classroom-instruction misunderstanding, moderate with mentor teachers due to pronunciation and vocabulary mismatches, and shaped among school staff by a strong reliance on Thai in daily and administrative communication. These barriers produced pedagogical challenges in instructional delivery and classroom management, professional challenges in school coordination and participation, and psychological challenges that reduced participants' confidence and increased communicative caution. To manage these barriers, participants relied on language simplification, translanguaging in Malay and basic Thai, non-verbal communication, translation technology, and social support from mentor teachers and bilingual students, demonstrating that effective international teaching practice depends on adaptive, multimodal communicative competence rather than formal English proficiency alone. These findings suggest that pre-departure training for international teaching programs should explicitly build communicative flexibility, basic host-language familiarity, and structured mentoring support, while future research could examine these dynamics across larger samples and additional regional contexts to deepen understanding of how cross-language barriers shape pre-service teachers' professional development abroad.

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