

Intercultural learning experiences and English communication self-efficacy among aviation vocational students

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ABSTRACT

Globalization increasingly demands graduates who are able to communicate across cultures confidently and appropriately. However, limited evidence explains how culturally diverse students in semi-military vocational settings experience intercultural learning, particularly when language barriers and differing expectations shape their academic and social adjustment. This study explores the motivations, perceived benefits, challenges, and intercultural learning experiences of foreign students enrolled at Surabaya Aviation Polytechnic. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected from 18 Timor-Leste students through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires, and analyzed using deductive–inductive thematic analysis with data triangulation. The conceptual frameworks of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), cultural intelligence (CQ), and self-efficacy in English use informed the construction of interview guides and the interpretation of findings. Results reveal six key motivations for studying abroad, mainly career advancement, institutional reputation, and program practicality. Nevertheless, students experienced a clear gap between expectations and reality. Limited interaction with local peers, regional language accents, and low confidence in using English led to reduced frequency of intercultural encounters, social withdrawal, and stagnation in ICC development. Personal factors such as introversion and language anxiety further constrained participation. The findings suggest that authentic intercultural exposure, confidence-building strategies, and structured cultural preparation are essential to support students' integration and learning. Practically, institutions should provide mentoring, communication simulations, and media-based cultural orientation to improve students' readiness, emotional regulation, and self-efficacy. The study contributes to the literature by highlighting how intercultural learning unfolds in a unique vocational aviation context and by proposing practical approaches to enhance students' intercultural development.

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization is a complex phenomenon encompassing interconnected social, political, cultural, and economic dimensions (Shah & Khan, 2023). Advances in communication technology have accelerated global interactions, reducing geographical barriers and increasing the interconnectedness of societies (Amadi, 2020; Kasych & Vochozka, 2019; Lazarova et al., 2023). As a consequence, nations are no longer able to develop in isolation and are increasingly required to adapt to the demands of globalization (Filho et al., 2021; Petricevic & Teece, 2019; Rocha et al., 2023; Suragam et al., 2021). Although globalization promotes greater connectivity, it does not necessarily lead to cultural uniformity. Instead, individuals are expected to communicate effectively

across cultural boundaries while maintaining respect for cultural diversity. Accordingly, intercultural communication has become an indispensable competence for participating successfully in the global workforce and multicultural society (Altbach, 2006; Poláková et al., 2023).

In higher education, particularly in vocational institutions preparing graduates for internationally oriented professions, the ability to interact effectively across cultures has become increasingly important. Surabaya Aviation Polytechnic represents one such institution where students from diverse cultural backgrounds—including international students and students from various regions of Indonesia—study together within a semi-military educational environment. This diversity highlights the need to foster Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), defined as the ability to communicate appropriately and effectively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Hang & Zhang, 2023; Xu et al., 2023; Zhang & Zhou, 2019). Strong ICC contributes to mutual understanding, minimizes cultural misunderstandings, and facilitates effective information exchange across national boundaries (Abugre & Debrah, 2019; Romijn et al., 2021). In aviation education, intercultural communication is particularly critical because aviation professionals routinely interact with passengers, crews, and stakeholders from various countries, requiring accurate communication of safety procedures and operational information.

Previous studies consistently demonstrate that authentic intercultural interactions, especially those involving native speakers and multicultural environments, provide richer language and cultural learning experiences than conventional classroom instruction alone. Governments and educational institutions increasingly recognize that international learning experiences promote students' linguistic development, intercultural competence, professional readiness, and personal growth (Dimitrov & Haque, 2020; Elias & Mansouri, 2023; Krebs, 2020; Lei et al., 2023). Students participating in overseas volunteer programs and other experiential learning activities have also demonstrated higher levels of intercultural competence (Malazonia et al., 2021; Wondimu & Admas, 2024). Consequently, higher education institutions are encouraged to integrate intercultural competence into their curricula through experiential learning opportunities such as intercultural workshops, exchange programs, and collaborative international projects (Carden et al., 2022; Omar, 2023; Shin et al., 2023; Ulfa & Nurcahyani, 2022).

The effectiveness of intercultural learning, however, is influenced not only by institutional support but also by students' individual characteristics and motivations. Learning motivation has long been recognized as one of the strongest predictors of academic engagement and learning outcomes. Motivation is commonly categorized into intrinsic motivation, driven by personal interest and enjoyment, and extrinsic motivation, driven by external rewards or expectations (Bandhu et al., 2024; Urhahne & Wijnia, 2023). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) explains that students are more motivated when their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled (Bin Abdulrahman et al., 2023; Hari Rajan et al., 2024; Manninen et al., 2022; Quynh et al., 2021; Sigalingging et al., 2023). Other motivational perspectives, including achievement goal theory, expectancy-value theory, social cognitive theory, goal-setting theory, and flow theory, similarly suggest that students' expectations of success, self-efficacy, meaningful goals, and immersive learning experiences collectively shape their willingness to engage in challenging learning environments (Chazan et al., 2022; Eccles & Wigfield, 2020; Gold & Ciorciari, 2020; Han, 2021; Hudig et al., 2023; Jia et al., 2024; Martins et al., 2024; Wang & Xue, 2022). These theoretical perspectives indicate that motivation not only supports academic achievement but also encourages students to actively participate in intercultural learning experiences.

Another important factor contributing to successful intercultural interaction is Cultural Intelligence (CQ), which refers to an individual's capability to function effectively in culturally diverse situations. CQ consists of four interrelated dimensions: cognitive (knowledge of cultures), metacognitive (awareness and regulation of thinking during intercultural interactions), motivational (interest and confidence to engage across cultures), and behavioral (the ability to adapt verbal and nonverbal behaviors appropriately) (Romijn et al., 2021; Van Dyne et al., 2012). Previous studies suggest that students possessing higher levels of CQ are better equipped to adapt to multicultural learning environments and overcome communication barriers.

Despite these competencies, students participating in cross-cultural learning frequently encounter various challenges. Unrealistic expectations about the host culture, cultural

misunderstandings, language barriers, stereotypes, and prejudice may hinder effective communication and reduce students' confidence in intercultural interactions (Aladegbaiye et al., 2021; Cox et al., 2022; Fibbi et al., 2021; Tenzer et al., 2021). These challenges become even more complex in technology-mediated communication, where reduced nonverbal cues and varying levels of digital literacy influence interaction quality (Voordijk, 2023). Emotional barriers, including fear of making mistakes or being negatively evaluated, may also discourage students from engaging in intercultural communication. Nevertheless, successful intercultural experiences are expected to foster empathy, cultural awareness, and professional development (Li, 2020). Therefore, effective intercultural education should not only improve students' language proficiency but also develop their confidence, cultural intelligence, critical reflection, and adaptive communication skills (Carden et al., 2022; Shin et al., 2023).

Although previous research has extensively examined intercultural communication competence, cultural intelligence, and learning motivation, several limitations remain. Most existing studies have been conducted in comprehensive universities using quantitative approaches and standardized measurement scales, providing limited understanding of students' lived experiences in vocational education contexts. Furthermore, relatively little is known about how students from diverse cultural backgrounds perceive their educational experiences within semi-military aviation education environments, where discipline, multicultural interaction, and professional preparation intersect. Understanding students' motivations, expectations, challenges, and perceived benefits in such unique settings is essential for designing educational strategies that effectively prepare graduates for global professional environments.

To address this gap, the present study employs a qualitative approach to explore the subjective experiences of culturally diverse students at Surabaya Aviation Polytechnic. Specifically, this study aims to investigate students' learning motivations, expectations, intercultural communication challenges, and perceived benefits throughout their educational experiences. By providing a richer understanding of how students interpret and navigate intercultural learning in a vocational aviation context, this study contributes to the literature on intercultural education and offers practical implications for developing educational programs that foster globally competent graduates.

METHOD

This section describes the methodological approach used to address the research objectives. To investigate the intercultural learning experiences of students from diverse cultural backgrounds enrolled at Surabaya Aviation Polytechnic, this study employed a qualitative case study design using semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. This method was selected because it provided researchers with a comprehensive understanding of the study's issues, including the reasons, obstacles, and experiences of students participating in the program over three years or six semesters of education.

The study involved 18 students from Surabaya Aviation Polytechnic, comprising eight men and ten women from Timor-Leste. Ten of these individuals were in their third year, and eight were in their second year. Since they had undergone a longer process of adaptation and intercultural interaction than recently enrolled first-year cadets, selecting cadets with at least a second year as the sample was intended to facilitate broader reflection on their experiences, challenges, and learning outcomes at the polytechnic. Due to time constraints and the need to preserve confidentiality at the polytechnic, this decision was made after consultation with the research team. Semi-structured interviews (30–45 minutes) and open-ended questionnaires were administered via Zoom and Microsoft Teams from April 18 to April 24, 2024. The main question, "What is the biggest challenge you face when interacting interculturally using English?" was one of the 12 main questions that addressed motivation, obstacles, self-efficacy, and international conduct.

The DMICC, ICCS, SEIELUS, and IIFS were part of the study's theoretical framework; they were not quantitative instruments but rather conceptual guides for open-ended survey data and interviews. The main framework, DMICC, focused on the development of intercultural competence through intercultural education, intercultural experience, and personality traits (Ahmed, 2022;

Chauvin et al., 2020; Ertay & Gilanlioglu, 2024). Key elements like intercultural conduct, intercultural cognition, communication skills, emotion management, attitudes, self-efficacy in intercultural English use, and students' experiences of intercultural interactions were identified under the guidance of ICCS, SEIELUS, and IIFS (Ertay & Gilanlioglu, 2024; Kabir & Sponseller, 2020). These frameworks were not employed as psychometric tools; rather, they were simply used to provide interview questions and subjects for group analysis.

The six stages of thematic analysis, data recognition, initial coding, topic discovery, theme review, theme definition, and report writing, were used to examine the collected qualitative data. The current theoretical framework guides this recurrent process. To find ideas outside established concepts, use inductive coding and deductive category methods (DMICC, ICCS, SEIELUS, IIFS). This study used a qualitative triangulation approach to compare data from semi-structured interviews with open-ended survey questions in order to guarantee the quality and trustworthiness of the data (Schretzlmaier et al., 2022). Several viewpoints from a literature study are incorporated into this approach. Keywords from responses were extracted and discussed by the research team to reduce bias. The students selected as participants provided informed consent after the researchers provided a brief description of the study's goals and data privacy policies. Additionally, the researchers talked with potential volunteers to find a time that wouldn't interfere with their Polytechnic coursework. English was used for the interviews. To preserve the authenticity of the data, the research team recorded the audio responses. To protect interviewees' privacy and ensure transparency in resolving any issues, the researchers' identities and personal information were kept confidential or anonymized. This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and qualitative research guidelines.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate the intercultural learning experiences of International students at Surabaya Aviation Polytechnic. The thematic analysis generated four interrelated findings: students' motivations for studying abroad, the mismatch between pre-departure expectations and actual intercultural encounters, language-related barriers, and the role of self-efficacy in shaping interaction patterns. These themes indicate that intercultural learning was not merely influenced by institutional exposure, but also by students' confidence, emotional regulation, and access to meaningful interaction with local peers.

Data were examined thematically using a deductive-inductive methodology and triangulation techniques, drawing on interviews and an open-ended survey administered to eighteen students. Professional growth, comfort and security, positive expectations before departure, enthusiasm for new experiences, the practicality of the educational experience, and a sense of duty to study abroad were identified as the six main reasons for undertaking the study abroad. Eight of the eleven students reported that attending Surabaya Aviation Polytechnic improved their employment prospects and enhanced their cultural and language skills, making professional growth the most common incentive. Educational standards were a major draw, according to one participant (P1): "I look at the quality when choosing a higher education institution, and I see the Surabaya Aviation Polytechnic as being much more advanced." I thus require this certification in order to make it easier for me to work in the aviation sector."

These motivations can be interpreted as a combination of extrinsic, relational, and professional orientations. Career advancement and institutional reputation reflect extrinsic and future-oriented motives, whereas comfort, security, and peer support indicate the importance of relational assurance in students' decision-making. This pattern suggests that students' decision to study abroad was shaped not only by academic aspirations but also by perceived emotional safety and social familiarity.

Additionally, 10 of 18 students reported feeling secure and comfortable, primarily because of connections they had formed with seniors who had previously attended the school. "Because I had developed strong bonds with a number of seniors, we frequently spoke about campus life and the environment, and they shared their academic experiences." Participant 6 (P6) stated, "That gave my

family and me more confidence about continuing my studies abroad." Their decision-making process was heavily influenced by additional practical study-related factors, such as a shorter study period and proximity to their home country. Due to the absence of specific programs at their home universities, several students felt compelled to continue their studies overseas; this was more a result of external pressure than of internal motivation. A tiny percentage of students reported feeling pressured by family or institutional expectations to study overseas.

The study found an unreasonable gap between the expectations students held prior to departure and those they encountered in the field regarding intercultural interactions. Many students anticipated integrating with ease by using English extensively and participating in meaningful cross-cultural exchanges. In actuality, though, their interactions seemed constrained. "I had anticipated learning about numerous cultures and speaking English with plenty of people every day before coming here. Actually, I was with my Timor-Leste buddies most of the time. Participant 9 stated, "I occasionally felt suddenly at a loss to speak with the local students." Contrary to their original assumptions, not all of them used formal English, leaving some students perplexed and unprepared when they had to interact with local pupils or the community. In actuality, a variety of regional languages were used for communication.

For international students, language barriers pose a significant obstacle to their educational experience, as many believe their language proficiency is insufficient. Everyday discussion, which frequently includes regional languages and distinctive local accents, was difficult for students to grasp. Unlike local students who speak with distinctive regional accents, international students often grasp English in a formal manner. "Actually, the local students and the social environment here are friendly and very tolerant, but they communicate in a mix of their regional languages, so I have difficulty translating what they're saying," stated Participant 12 of an open-ended poll. This circumstance makes students less comfortable participating in casual chats outside of academic settings. Language problems remain a primary source of anxiety, leading to a reluctance to use English even during technical talks due to differences in communication styles.

The language barrier experienced by students was not limited to formal English proficiency. Rather, it emerged from the difference between classroom-based English and the multilingual realities of everyday interaction, where Indonesian, regional languages, accents, and informal expressions were frequently used. This condition made students feel that their English competence was insufficient for spontaneous communication, even when they were able to use English in academic or technical contexts.

The interview findings also indicated that several students cited personal factors as influencing the quality of cross-cultural relationships. Participant 11 stated, "Sometimes I choose to avoid it rather than being unsure and lacking confidence to ask about it." "In direct interactions, sometimes I feel anxious about not understanding and lack confidence to repeat questions related to it, so I choose to avoid it," acknowledged Participant 7. This also holds true for pupils with an introverted mindset, who prefer listening to engaging in cross-cultural social interactions. Participant 8 stated, "Sometimes I also realize the introverted nature of lacking confidence, not daring to initiate conversations in the intercultural sphere in English, unless I am invited to socialize first." Students often develop relationships with peers from the same nation as a consequence. "I feel comfortable hanging out with peers from the same country because it makes communication easier," Participant 2 remarked. [Table 1](#) presents a thematic analysis of the questions and summaries, highlighting frequently recurring answers.

A recurring pattern across participants' responses was the link between low confidence and avoidance behavior. Students who felt uncertain about their ability to understand or respond appropriately tended to withdraw from interaction rather than seek clarification. This avoidance reduced their exposure to authentic communication, thereby limiting opportunities to develop intercultural communicative competence.

Table 1. Summary of Themes, Representative Evidence, and Analytical Interpretation

Theme	Representative Findings	Representative Evidence	Analytical Interpretation	Related Framework
Motivation for Studying Abroad	Students were primarily motivated by career advancement, institutional reputation, aviation-specific programs, and recommendations from senior students. Feelings of safety and social support also influenced their decision.	"I see the quality of higher education as being more advanced than others, with a focus on aviation." (P1)	Students' decisions were shaped by a combination of extrinsic motivation (career prospects, institutional quality) and social-related motivation (family confidence and peer support), indicating that educational and relational factors jointly influenced study-abroad decisions.	Self-Determination Theory (SDT); Learning Motivation
Expectations and Reality of Intercultural Learning	Participants expected frequent English communication and intensive intercultural interaction but experienced limited engagement with local students after arrival.	"I thought I would interact actively with people around me every day." (P9)	The findings reveal a clear expectation–experience gap, suggesting that international mobility alone does not automatically generate intercultural learning without structured opportunities for meaningful interaction.	Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC); DMICC
Barriers to Intercultural Interaction	Students experienced difficulties understanding local accents, regional languages, and informal communication. Language anxiety and emotional insecurity reduced their willingness to participate in conversations.	"Language limitations and low self-confidence make it difficult for me to communicate." (P12)	The language barrier extended beyond English proficiency to include informal multilingual communication. This reduced students' confidence and limited spontaneous intercultural engagement.	Cultural Intelligence (CQ); Emotional Regulation
Impact of Self-Efficacy on Interaction	Students with lower confidence preferred interacting with peers from the same country and avoided initiating conversations with local students.	"Sometimes I don't understand local conversations, so I prefer to spend time with fellow countrymen." (P2)	Low English self-efficacy contributed to interaction avoidance, reducing the frequency of intercultural encounters and slowing the development of intercultural communicative competence.	SEIELUS; IIFS; ICC Development

Discussion

The central argument emerging from this study is that intercultural learning in vocational aviation education depends not only on students' exposure to an international environment but also on the quality, frequency, and emotional safety of intercultural interaction. Although students were physically located in a multicultural educational setting, their intercultural development was

constrained by limited interaction with local peers, language anxiety, and low self-efficacy in spontaneous English communication.

The study's findings support earlier research by showing that Surabaya Aviation Polytechnic students' desire to study overseas is multifaceted and influenced by social, cultural, educational, economic, and personal variables (Welesilassie & Nikolov, 2024; Zheng et al., 2023). Since students frequently see studying abroad as a long-term investment that can enhance their credentials and career prospects, extrinsic and career-oriented motives like professional development, program practicality, and mandatory requirements are closely related to extrinsic motivation (Casas Trujillo et al., 2020; Trang & Phuong, 2023). Previous research demonstrating that economic factors, including living expenses, financial assistance, and scholarship availability, have a major impact on students' decision-making processes lends credence to this perspective (Callender & Melis, 2022; Casas Trujillo et al., 2020; Mitic & Wolniak, 2022; Moneva et al., 2020; Trang & Phuong, 2023). Additionally, student interest in studying abroad is greatly influenced by educational characteristics, including program quality, research possibilities, and institutional reputation (Bowden et al., 2021; Dwivedi et al., 2023; Esteban et al., 2020; Hübner et al., 2021). Programs that offer opportunities to enhance language proficiency and professional skills, such as intercultural communication competencies that are increasingly crucial in the global job market, also attract students.

In the aviation vocational context, career-oriented motivation is particularly significant because English and intercultural communication are directly connected to future professional roles involving passengers, crews, instructors, and aviation stakeholders from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, students' motivation to study abroad should be understood not only as an academic aspiration but also as preparation for occupational mobility in a global aviation environment.

Social variables significantly affect intrinsic motivation, including curiosity, enthusiasm, appreciation of novel experiences, and a sense of well-being. Students' preparedness for overseas experiences is shaped by their desire to learn about foreign cultures, their academic curiosity, their personal growth, and the support of their families (Franco & Ortega, 2024; Yue & Lu, 2022). Studying abroad is sometimes seen as a chance to develop independence, resilience, and self-assurance, all of which have a direct bearing on intercultural adaptation (Shengyao et al., 2024). It has been demonstrated that students are more inclined to seek adventures overseas when they get social support, emotional support, and peer influence (Fanari et al., 2021; Welesilassie & Nikolov, 2024; Zheng et al., 2023). According to De Prada et al. (2022) and Lee and Lee (2020), many students are driven by a desire to broaden their perspectives, acquire new ways of living, and develop intercultural competencies that are increasingly important in a globalized society. Additionally, their desire to participate in international education is influenced by their knowledge of social justice and global challenges (Ferguson & Brett, 2025; Oldac, 2023).

However, Participant 9 exhibited perplexity when confronted with the facts on the ground, indicating a disconnect between expectations and reality. When students first arrive, their excitement is sometimes not matched by sufficient preparation for the cultural challenges they will face. Many anticipate extensive cultural exposure, but in reality, there are few interethnic contacts, which reduces the full advantages of cross-cultural learning and might cause disappointment, as has also been shown in earlier studies. Intercultural communicative competency (ICC) development is further constrained by a greater emphasis on language proficiency than cultural awareness (Nghia, 2019; Trang & Phuong, 2023; Yasmin et al., 2022). ICC stagnation, the development of stereotypes, and a restricted capacity to decipher nonverbal social cues are all consequences of this circumstance. Participant 12 highlighted linguistic hurdles, such as regional language usage and accent variations, as major causes of poor SEIELUS. Despite having a solid command of academic English, overseas students find it difficult to comprehend casual discussions, which makes them reluctant to participate fully. This supports other studies that found a connection between communication avoidance and low self-efficacy (Carden et al., 2022; Shin et al., 2023).

This finding challenges the common assumption that international mobility automatically produces intercultural competence. The participants' experiences indicate that mobility provides potential exposure, but intercultural learning occurs only when students actively participate in

sustained, reciprocal, and meaningful communication. Without institutional facilitation, students may remain socially close to their compatriot groups, resulting in limited intercultural growth.

According to this research, students with low self-efficacy are more likely to avoid interacting with native speakers, which slows the development of intercultural competence and leads them to choose to interact only with students from the same country (Carden et al., 2022; Shin et al., 2023). This results in low intercultural interaction frequency (IIFS) and suggests that participants have not yet reached the 'integration' stage of the DMICC model. Beyond language, barriers such as limited cultural tolerance, stereotypes, and low emotional intelligence cause students to maintain a psychological comfort zone and avoid local socialization. Interview data confirm that this inclination is reinforced by a lack of self-efficacy stemming from language barriers. Cultural intelligence (CQ), which includes cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral aspects, influences intercultural competence in addition to language proficiency (Romijn et al., 2021; Van Dyne et al., 2012). Students with low CQ are less able to correctly decipher communication cues. As a result, limited engagement with native speakers hinders the development of intercultural competence and perpetuates low self-efficacy. When it comes to fostering confidence and adaptability in cross-cultural communication, direct engagement is far more successful than classroom-based instruction (Malazonia et al., 2021; Wondimu & Admas, 2024).

From the perspective of DMICC, the participants appear to remain at an early adaptation stage, where awareness of cultural difference exists but active integration into intercultural interaction remains limited. Similarly, the CQ framework helps explain why students with limited motivational and behavioral CQ struggled to initiate communication, adjust to local accents, and manage uncertainty in daily encounters. SEIELUS further clarifies that low confidence in using English reduced students' willingness to participate in intercultural communication.

Participants 7 and 8 admitted that these interaction hurdles are made worse by personal traits like social anxiety and introversion. According to Emotional Regulation in ISCS, introversion prevents students from initiating cross-cultural conversations unless they are prompted to do so. According to the study's findings, strategic intervention is necessary to address the underdevelopment of intercultural communication skills (ICC) and self-efficacy, particularly due to the absence of genuine encounters with native speakers. It is essential to have a strong sense of self-efficacy and the capacity to adjust to cultural differences. It is possible to attain increased ICC and self-efficacy without being in an international setting. A viable alternative is to provide supplementary resources to enhance cultural preparedness, such as films, documentaries, and visual materials about nations with excellent education systems. These media may be used as indirect experiences to increase pragmatic knowledge in English communication, cultivate intercultural sensitivity, and boost self-efficacy. Additionally, as demonstrated by earlier research demonstrating enhanced student abilities, intercultural role-playing or simulations based on professional settings can give students experience in cross-cultural communication (Omar, 2023; Ulfa & Nurcahyani, 2022).

Practically, institutions should design pre-departure and post-arrival intercultural support programs. These may include peer mentoring with local students, guided intercultural tasks, aviation-based communication simulations, pronunciation and accent familiarization sessions, and reflective discussion groups. Such programs would help students transform passive exposure into active intercultural learning. Therefore, a useful and pertinent initial step toward ICC, reducing language anxiety, and enhancing students' intercultural communication abilities is to increase structured cultural exposure through media and communication simulations. This strategy provides a long-term solution to students' inadequate preparation for cultural differences overseas.

The contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that intercultural learning among international vocational aviation students is shaped by the interaction between mobility, language self-efficacy, cultural intelligence, and institutional support. Unlike studies conducted in general higher education settings, this study highlights the distinctive challenges of intercultural learning in a semi-military vocational aviation environment. Because the study involved a specific group of Timor-Leste students in one aviation polytechnic, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific rather than broadly generalizable. Nevertheless, the themes provide transferable insights for

vocational institutions that host international students in highly structured professional education settings.

CONCLUSION

The motives, advantages, and experiences of foreign students from Timor-Leste at Surabaya Aviation Polytechnic were qualitatively examined in this study. Students have a variety of reasons for studying overseas, particularly for professional growth, career development, and security, according to the study's thematic and triangulated analysis. This study identified a discrepancy between expectations and the interactions encountered. Low self-efficacy (SEIELUS) and stagnated growth in intercultural competence (DMICC) are attributable to identified constraints, including language difficulties, such as difficulty understanding local accents, and low confidence in using English for technical purposes. As a result, students are more likely to socialize with compatriots, reducing the frequency of cross-cultural encounters and limiting their ability to fully benefit from an international education. To help students overcome obstacles in the polytechnic study environment, educational institutions must provide mentoring that enhances students' self-efficacy and cultural intelligence (CQ), including improved emotional regulation and communication skills.

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