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## Representations of intercultural communicative competence in technology use

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The ability to communicate across cultures is a crucial skill in our global workforce, especially for English language learners as a lingua franca. As technology becomes central to how learners access language and culture, it is essential to examine its role in fostering intercultural communicative competence (ICC). This study investigates how ICC is developed through students' engagement with technology in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context in Indonesia. The study is situated in Indonesia, where the growing demand for global engagement has increased the need for ESP, yet the integration of ICC within ESP remains limited. Drawing on established ICC models and processes, six Indonesian ESP students participated by documenting their daily use of English through a Day in the Life (DITL) video and semi-structured interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis (TA) generated two key themes: technology as a bridge for cultural sharing and learning about cultures through digital communication. These findings illustrate how students navigate and blend formal instruction with informal, self-directed digital practices to develop ICC. The analysis also reveals tensions between surface-level cultural exposure and deeper intercultural competence development. Implications for ESP pedagogy include encouraging the use of digital tools beyond the classroom, fostering reflection on intercultural experiences, and creating opportunities for real-world communication that challenge native-speaker ideologies.

*Keywords:* ICC, Indonesia, ESP, technology, formal learning, informal learning, reflexive thematic analysis

## Introduction

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. It has become an essential skill in today's globalized world, particularly for language learners because it encompasses linguistic proficiency, cultural knowledge, and critical cultural awareness, all of which are necessary for meaningful intercultural engagement (Byram, 1997; Jackson, 2020). In Indonesia, the increasing demand for global engagement has led to the rapid growth of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs, which aim to equip students with the English language skills required in professional and academic fields such as business, engineering, and healthcare (Hyland & Jiang, 2021). However, despite this expansion, the integration of ICC into ESP curricula remains limited. Many programs continue to emphasise technical language instruction while overlooking the intercultural dimensions that are crucial for effective communication in international contexts (Dou et al., 2023).

Digital technologies present a promising opportunity to address this limitation by enabling students to engage with diverse cultures through both formal and informal learning environments. Tools such as social media, video platforms, and virtual exchanges (VE) have been shown to support the development of ICC by facilitating authentic intercultural interactions and reflective learning (Lai, 2017; Reinders & White, 2016). In Indonesia, initiatives like the Indonesia International Student Mobility Award (IISMA) have provided valuable opportunities for students to gain intercultural experience through short-term overseas study (Aziez et al., 2024; Sudarwati et al., 2024). However, IISMA's competitive nature limits access to a small group of students, highlighting the need for more inclusive and scalable approaches to ICC development. Informal digital learning

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of English (IDLE) has emerged as one such avenue, where students engage with global content and interact across cultures using technology (Lee & Drajati, 2019; Triana & Nugroho, 2021). This study explores how Indonesian ESP students use technology to develop ICC in both formal and informal learning environments. It specifically asks: In what ways is ICC represented in students' technological practices? In this study, representation refers to how ICC becomes observable through students' digital behaviours, choices, and reflections. This includes their engagement with culturally diverse content, adaptation of communication styles in intercultural contexts, expressions of their own cultural identity, and reflections on their intercultural experiences.

## Literature review

### ICC in English language education

The question of how English language education can equip students for meaningful interaction across cultural boundaries has gained renewed urgency in recent years (Huang et al., 2024; Huang, 2023). As English continues to function as a global lingua franca, particularly in professional and academic domains, the development of ICC has emerged as a key concern, especially within ESP. Byram (1997) highlights the model of ICC that emphasizes the importance of linguistic proficiency, cultural knowledge, and critical cultural awareness as foundational components for successful intercultural communication. Deardorff (2006) emphasizes process-oriented model complements, including the internal development of empathy, openness, and adaptability as precursors to effective intercultural behaviour. Despite the conceptual clarity offered by these models, the integration of ICC into ESP curricula remains inconsistent. While scholars such as Byram and Parmenter (2012); Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) have underscored the importance of ICC in preparing learners for global communication, many ESP programs continue to prioritize linguistic accuracy and technical content. As Krasnopolsky et al. (2023) observed, this narrow focus often sidelines the intercultural dimensions of language use, leaving learners underprepared for the complexities of real-world interaction.

This disconnect is further compounded by the persistence of native speakerism in language education. Dovchin (2020); Holliday (2006) argue that the privileging of native English speakers as linguistic and cultural authorities continues to shape curricula and classroom practices. Aguilar (2018); Sierocka et al. (2019) highlight how this ideology reinforces Anglo-centric norms, limiting the scope of intercultural learning and marginalizing non-native varieties of English. In multilingual and multicultural contexts such as Indonesia, these limitations are particularly pronounced. Dervin (2016) calls for a broader understanding of interculturality; one that includes not only international but also national cultural diversity. Similarly, Braine (2013) emphasizes the need for ICC development that supports communication across local cultural groups, challenging binary distinctions between 'native' and 'foreign'.

### Integrating technology in formal and informal learning for ICC

Integrating technology into formal and informal learning environments has emerged as a key strategy to develop ICC in ESP. Formal learning, typically classroom-based, is characterized by structured teaching and curriculum-guided instruction where teachers intentionally foster ICC through cultural modules and relevant materials (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Widiatmoko & Winardi, 2018). However, critics such as Walton and Webster (2019) point out the limitations of formal settings in providing authentic intercultural interactions. To counterbalance this, informal learning, often technology-mediated, offers unstructured, self-directed engagement with diverse cultures via digital platforms, social interactions, and media consumption (Toffoli, 2020; Trinder, 2017). In addition, Godwin-Jones (2019); Vygotsky (1978) show that when both learning modes are blended, they create a more holistic path to ICC development, combining foundational instruction with real-world intercultural encounters.

Technological tools have significantly transformed how ICC is developed in ESP contexts, such as digital storytelling, VE, intercultural simulations, and social media interaction (Romanowski, 2017; Tutunea, 2021). Bucker and Korzilius (2015) found that simulation games improved participants' intercultural skills, while Ghaffour and Sarnou (2022) showing that multiplayer digital games enhanced engagement across diverse

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cultures. VE and telecollaboration enabled students to communicate globally and critically reflect on cultural diversity (Gutierrez-Santiuste & Ritacco-Real, 2023; Topaz et al., 2024). Additional studies highlighted the effectiveness of audiovisual media and collaborative digital storytelling in promoting cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of ICC (Hřebáčková & Štefl, 2022; Kahanurak et al., 2023). Tirnaz and Narafshan (2020) found that even simpler technologies like TV advertisements can contribute to cultural sensitivity, showcasing the wide range of tools available for intercultural education.

In Indonesia, Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), as discussed by Lee and Drajati (2019) has gained attention for enabling learners to explore global cultures through activities such as watching English films or creating digital content. Triana and Nugroho (2021) emphasized that IDLE allows learners to self-direct their intercultural learning without teacher mediation, enhancing their engagement with global Englishes and diverse cultural contexts. Furthermore, at the level of Southeast Asia, McCallum (2023) mentioned that the use of AI tools in telecollaboration task design was explored, demonstrating in language learning contexts. Similarly, Klimova and Chen (2024) reviewed the global application of AI in tertiary level and found that technologies such as VE and adaptive learning environments could foster empathy, adaptability, and effective intercultural communication. Prestridge et al. (2024) argue that human-computer-human interactions can strategically bridge formal and informal learning ecologies, enabling learners to engage in intercultural experiences that are both structured and organically emergent through digital mediation. Together, these studies underscore the potential of formal and informal digital practices to support ICC development in diverse educational settings, particularly for Southeast Asian learners.

In summary, the literature shows that while ICC is important for ESP learners, especially in global contexts like Indonesia, it is still not well integrated into many ESP programs. Most courses focus more on language skills than on helping students interact across cultures. However, digital technology offers new ways to support ICC, both inside and outside the classroom. Tools like social media, VE, and digital storytelling give students chances to connect with different cultures and reflect on their experiences. These digital practices also make ICC visible through how students communicate, express their identities, and adapt to cultural differences. This study explores how ICC is represented in the ways Indonesian ESP students use technology in their learning.

## Methods

### Qualitative data collection

Research in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), situated within the broader field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), can be approached through various methodological paradigms, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Dubey & Kothari, 2022). This study adopts a qualitative paradigm to explore the technological strategies perceived as effective in fostering ICC among Indonesian students enrolled in ESP programs. A qualitative paradigm is particularly well situated to uncover how learners construct meaning through technology-mediated interactions and navigate intercultural communication in diverse professional and social contexts (Lew et al., 2018; Mirhosseini, 2020). Additionally, An inductive approach was employed, allowing patterns and themes to emerge organically from the data without being constrained by predefined categories.

Before data collection, the study received ethical approval from the institutional ethics committee (Name University Ethics No. 2024/686). While ICC has been widely studied through interviews, surveys, and classroom observations, there remains limited methodological application that captures learners' everyday experiences. Adapted from Heinrichs et al. (2023) Day in the Life (DITL) method to explore wellbeing and identity formation, this study repurposes the approach to examine students' lived experiences across cultural and digital contexts. While DITL videos may be subject to social desirability bias, performativity, or selective representation, these aspects were not treated solely as limitations. Instead, they were considered part of the research design, which aimed to explore how participants choose to represent their intercultural experiences. Instructions and examples were provided to guide participants, but the openness of the method allowed for authentic, self-directed narratives. This approach aligns with the study's inductive orientation and its interest in meaning-making within real-world contexts. Six ESP students created a one-to-five-minute DITL video capturing their

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daily use of English in both formal and informal settings. These videos were further analysed through video transcripts and selected screenshots, which provided textual and visual evidence of students' intercultural engagement and digital practices. This multimodal dataset allowed for a deeper understanding of how ICC is enacted in real-time, situated interactions. A sample size of six appears small; however, it is appropriate for reflexive TA, which prioritizes depth of meaning over quantity. Instead of relying on the concept of data saturation, the justification draws on information power, emphasizing the richness and relevance of the data. While saturation may be referenced to meet institutional expectations, its use in reflexive TA warrants critical reflection and more nuanced consideration (Braun & Clarke, 2019b).

Following the DITL recordings, the students were interviewed to elaborate on how both formal (e.g., classroom-based) and informal (e.g., self-directed or digital) learning experiences contributed to their strategies for developing ICC. Each student participant took part in a 30–45-minute semi-structured interview conducted via Microsoft Teams to explore their experiences. Combining visual and narrative data allowed for triangulation and enriched insights into students' intercultural technologically supported experiences. To ensure confidentiality, participants' identities were protected using pseudonyms. Participant demographics included students from six different ESP programs (informatics engineering, maritime studies, agriculture, communication science, and midwifery), aged 19–22, with intermediate English proficiency levels. Selection criteria included active engagement with digital technologies for English learning and willingness to document their practices.

### Reflexive thematic analysis

This study employed reflexive thematic analysis (TA), which recognizes the researcher's subjectivity as an essential and constructive element in the interpretive process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The analysis was shaped by the professional experience of the first author, an ESP teacher in Indonesia since 2014, whose insights contribute to understanding the practical relevance of ICC in preparing students for globalized professional environments.

Data were drawn from two sources: DITL video and semi-structured interviews. The analytical process followed Braun and Clarke (2019a) on the six-phase reflexive TA framework: 1) familiarization with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) constructing themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) refining and naming them, and 6) producing the final report guided by the researcher's experiential knowledge and reflexive engagement with the data. To minimize the potential bias in theme development, reflexive TA was used, involving continuous reflection on the researcher's positionality and assumptions throughout the coding process. Themes were developed inductively from the data rather than strictly based on an existing framework and were cross-checked against the raw data to ensure they represented the students' voices and experiences.

### Findings

Through reflexive TA, two key themes were generated, illustrating how students engage with technology to navigate, reflect on, and express intercultural understanding and identity.

#### Technology as a bridge for cultural sharing

Students actively used technology to engage in intercultural exchange, collaborate across cultural borders, and share cultural experiences. These interactions often extended beyond formal academic contexts, reflecting a broader use of digital platforms for global connection.

An informatics engineering student, Miftahul developed an online game on his mental health journey and used social media to connect with international users who shared similar interests. He stated: 'As a person who has experienced mental health issues and until now, I still remember my anxiety, so I created a mental health

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game. Besides, I use social media to find someone overseas who has similar interests in game development'. From those interactions, he learnt neutrality and open-mindedness, fostering meaningful intercultural dialogue. While Miftahul's engagement with international users demonstrates initiative in seeking intercultural dialogue, his focus on 'neutrality and open-mindedness' suggests a tendency toward cultural relativism rather than the critical cultural awareness that Byram (1997) identifies as essential for ICC. The absence of explicit reflection on power dynamics or communicative adaptation in his account raises questions about the depth of intercultural learning occurring through these informal channels.

Another student in the same program, Helmiya created an Internet of Things (IoT) project inspired by her mother's gardening routine. She stated: 'I tried to look for the nearest problem in my environment. My mom likes to plant a lot, like tomatoes and some other plants. She must work hard to give them water, and because in our major we learnt Internet of Things (IoT), so I plan to why not create something as simple as possible but useful for her.' In addition, she engaged in online gaming communities where English served as the primary medium of communication. Through these interactions, she gained exposure to diverse cultural viewpoints, contributing to her intercultural competence, a skill she anticipates will be beneficial in her future professional endeavours.

A maritime student, Isyana joined a virtual meeting with a mangrove expert studying in Germany, organized by an ocean diving club (see Figure 1). In the DITL video she stated: 'I had a discussion about mangrove with a friend from abroad'. From the follow-up interview, the student thought that although the expert was Indonesian who resided in Germany, his international academic background provided a global perspective. She shared: 'As maritime students, we will plant mangrove as the strategy to save our nature. We made a national socialisation on the importance of mangrove for our earth. Thus, we invited an Indonesian expert in mangrove residing in Germany for the study.' The student highlighted the importance of expanding maritime knowledge through international collaboration, though she acknowledged that 'I am actually not fluent in English, but I have so much English exposure'.

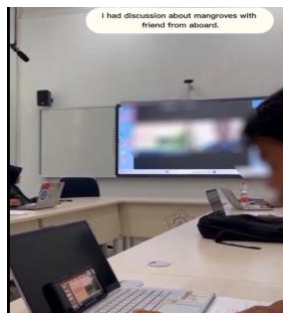


Figure 1. Student had a virtual meeting

An agriculture student, Rendra took initiative to use the Episoden app to converse with individuals from Myanmar and Japan, gaining insights into civil conflict and work culture (see Figure 2). These conversations helped him develop respect for diverse perspectives and prepared him for participation in an international summer course, where he discussed agricultural innovations across different regions. He stated: 'We discussed agriculture in each country. The unique thing is a country in Africa which is known as a dry place, they have innovation in the agriculture sector.'

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Figure 2. Student used Episoden platform

These examples of technology use demonstrate that these students are not only leveraging digital tools for academic and personal expression but also actively engaging in intercultural dialogue. The experiences underscore the vital role of English education in fostering ICC and preparing learners for global collaboration in an increasingly connected world. However, the predominance of surface-level cultural encounters and limited evidence of critical reflection suggest that while technology facilitates intercultural contact, it does not automatically lead to deep intercultural competence without structured support and guided reflection.

### Learning about cultures through digital communication

Students also used digital tools and English-language resources to enhance their understanding of different cultures and improve their communication skills. These strategies often supported both academic and personal development in formal and informal settings.

A communication science student Anisa accessed English websites and journals to complete academic tasks more effectively and engage with international peers as she shared that: 'I also do my homework and my projects from the university using international journals ... So, it's helpful for me using English to support my education, to support my activities in daily life.' This exposure not only supported her academic development but also helped her navigate multicultural environments confidently, such as during her trip on a professional occasion in Singapore with 300 students from various backgrounds.

A midwifery student Aqila took initiative to use an English e-book to learn vocabulary and conversational expressions and practiced them anonymously on TikTok live sessions (see Figure 3). She remarked: 'I learned e-book English for communication. The material is quite simple and easy to understand, but I'd rather just learn more vocabulary here'. This approach allowed her to build confidence in using English without fear of making mistakes, a skill she anticipates will be valuable in her future professional interactions. Aqila's use of anonymous TikTok sessions reveals both the potential and limitations of informal digital learning. While building confidence is valuable, the anonymous nature of these interactions limits opportunities for sustained intercultural relationships and deeper cultural understanding. This tension between safety and depth warrants further investigation in ESP pedagogy.



Figure 3. Student used live TikTok platform

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These findings suggest that students are not only learning about other cultures through digital communication but also using technology as a powerful tool to connect, collaborate, and share their ideas across cultural boundaries as they learn English, ultimately enhancing their intercultural competence and global readiness. Yet the findings also reveal a pattern of instrumental language learning that prioritises functional communication over critical intercultural engagement, highlighting the need for pedagogical interventions that bridge this gap.

## Discussion

In answering the research question: In what ways is ICC represented in students' technological practices?, the findings reveal that students engage with digital tools in ways that reflect key aspects of ICC, such as linguistic development, cultural exposure, and intercultural interaction. However, these representations also prompt critical reflection on the depth, intentionality, and contextual relevance of such engagement, particularly within Indonesia's multilingual and multicultural educational landscape.

In the Indonesian context, where English is taught as a foreign language and where cultural diversity exists both nationally and internationally, the development of ICC is especially complex. Students' use of technology to connect with international peers through online games (by Helmiya), social media (by Miftahul, Aqila), and virtual meetings (by Isyana, Rendra) demonstrates a growing awareness of global cultures. While these interactions are often informal and unstructured, they may reflect alternative pathways to intercultural engagement. Drawing on translingual and mundanity insights from Dovchin and Canagarajah (2019), those practices, can be seen as forms of linguistic resistance and relational agency, challenging dominant assumptions that critical awareness must emerge through formal, academic practices. Students' self-selection of preferred technologies and inclusion of friends and other relational elements suggest intentionality and engagement with intercultural meaning-making. Rather than evaluating these students' activities against established ICC frameworks, this study considers how students may be reshaping what intercultural competence looks like in digitally mediated and multilingual settings.

There is a gap between what students do informally online and what they learn in formal ESP classes. Rendra and Aqila took the initiative on preferred technologies without the lecturer's guidance. Students communicate and explore different cultures through digital platforms, but these activities are rarely connected to what happens in the classroom. Instead, students rely on their own efforts to build intercultural understanding. This reflects a common concern that ESP programs in Indonesia often focus too much on grammar and technical skills, and not enough on cultural learning (Krasnopolskyi et al., 2023). Meanwhile, ideas from translingualism and everyday life (Dovchin & Canagarajah, 2019) help us see these informal practices differently, not as side activities, but as meaningful ways students use language and relationships to learn across cultures. These everyday interactions challenge traditional views of how intercultural skills are developed, and show that informal digital experiences can offer valuable learning opportunities that formal education has not fully unpacked.

A critical finding that challenges dominant assumptions is the students' choices to engage with not only native speaker communication peers but also local (Indah meeting an Indonesian residing in Germany) and non-native speaker (Rendra meeting a Myanmar person). This suggests that students' reliance on English language resources, while still influenced by native-speakerism, the actions of participants in this research indicated an emerging awareness of non-native speakerism. This represents a significant departure from traditional ESP approaches that prioritise native-speaker norms, suggesting that students are beginning to critically reflect on and challenge traditional norms, moving towards a more inclusive understanding of English language use. The dominance of native speakerism, as noted by Dovchin (2020) and Holliday (2006), continues to shape students' perceptions of linguistic and cultural authority. Many students equated English proficiency with global access and personal success, yet this often came at the cost of engaging with diverse Englishes or valuing local cultural identities. As Wilkinson (2020) argued, such views risk reinforcing hierarchical language ideologies that privilege native-speaker norms over ICC. In this context, the concept of the intercultural speaker becomes crucial, one who can navigate and negotiate meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries, rather than merely replicate native norms. In a country like Indonesia, where local languages and cultures are rich and

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varied, this raises concerns about the marginalization of local interculturality. As Dervin (2016) argued, ICC should not only prepare learners for international communication but also for navigating cultural diversity within their national context.

The gap between formal ESP instruction and students' informal digital practices represents both a challenge and an opportunity. While the disconnect highlights the limitations of current curricula, students' self-directed engagement with technology demonstrates agency and resourcefulness that could be leveraged pedagogically. However, without scaffolding and critical reflection, these practices risk remaining at the level of cultural tourism rather than developing into transformative intercultural competence. The question becomes not whether to integrate these informal practices, but how to do so in ways that foster critical cultural awareness while respecting students' autonomy and creativity.

Students demonstrated adaptability and confidence in digital spaces, with several employing strategies that facilitated intercultural dialogue, collaborative reflection, and critical engagement with cultural difference. These practices highlight the potential of technology to support meaningful ICC development, especially when learners actively engage with diverse perspectives and reflect on their intercultural experiences. While these engagements varied in depth and structure, they indicate that digital tools can foster intercultural competence when used intentionally and reflectively. As Prestridge et al. (2024) and Toffoli (2020) emphasize, meaningful ICC development requires a blending of formal and informal learning ecologies, where digital tools are used not just for access but for guided intercultural exploration.

The findings also illuminate how ICC development through technology remains uneven and contested. While students demonstrate agency in seeking intercultural encounters, the quality of these interactions varies significantly. Some students engage primarily in transactional exchanges focused on information gathering, while others begin to develop more nuanced understandings of cultural complexity. This variation suggests that access to technology alone is insufficient for ICC development; rather, the pedagogical framing and reflective practices surrounding technology use determine its effectiveness in fostering deep intercultural learning.

## Conclusion with future direction

This study has illuminated the multifaceted ways in which Indonesian ESP students represent ICC through their technological practices. From informal interactions on digital platforms to the strategic use of online resources for language and cultural learning, students demonstrate a growing engagement with global and intercultural contexts. These practices reflect key dimensions of ICC, including linguistic development, openness to cultural diversity, and the capacity for intercultural interaction. However, the findings also reveal critical gaps in the depth and intentionality of these engagements. While students show adaptability and curiosity, their digital practices often lack the reflective and structured support necessary for fostering deeper intercultural understanding. The persistence of native speaker ideologies and the marginalization of local cultural identities further complicate the development of ICC in Indonesia's multilingual and multicultural landscape.

To address the challenges and bridge the divide between informal digital practices and formal ESP curriculum, teachers could adopt pedagogical frameworks that integrate digital literacies with intercultural learning. Such approaches can scaffold students' experiences, promote critical cultural awareness, and encourage meaningful reflection on intercultural encounters. ICC is represented in students' technological practices through their efforts to communicate across cultures, access global knowledge, and navigate diverse perspectives. However, these practices still offer limited opportunities for students to foster deeper, more critical, and culturally grounded intercultural competence.

While this paper recommends integrating digital tools and fostering reflective engagement, it does not prescribe specific strategies for curriculum redesign. Instead, it invites teachers and researchers to consider How can classroom practices draw on students' lived digital experiences without reinforcing dominant language ideologies? What kinds of tasks might encourage critical reflections on power, identity, and communicative adaptations? Furthermore, with the increasing presence of AI in language learning and



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communication, though not directly addressed in this study, it is worth considering how ESP pedagogy might evolve to support ethical, critical, and intercultural engagement with such technologies.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The self-selected nature of participants may have resulted in a sample of students already motivated to engage with technology for intercultural learning, potentially overlooking those who face barriers to digital engagement. The single time-point data collection through DITL videos captures only a snapshot of students' practices, unable to track ICC development over time. Additionally, the study's focus on students' self-reported practices and representations may not fully capture the complexity of their actual intercultural competence development. Future research should address these limitations through longitudinal designs, more diverse sampling strategies, and complementary methods that assess ICC development through multiple lenses.

Future research is needed to explore how digital pedagogies can be designed to foster transformative intercultural learning and how students' informal practices can be leveraged to enrich formal educational experiences. Further inquiry is needed into how valuing both global and local interculturality can better prepare ESP students to navigate diverse cultural contexts within Indonesia and beyond. In doing so, teachers and researchers can work toward a more inclusive, critically engaged, and contextually grounded model of ICC in ESP education.

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