

## Intercultural Miscommunication in a Postgraduate Mobility Programme in Indonesia: A CCT-Guided Qualitative Study

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### ABSTRACT

*Due to the increasing role of Asian countries in global collaboration, intercultural communication research in Asia is gaining popularity. However, little is known about the intercultural interactions in intra-Asia. This study explored intercultural miscommunication in a short-term mobility programme in Indonesia through a qualitative approach. The interviewees were six postgraduates from a Malaysian university who came from China, Iran, Malaysia and Pakistan who were interviewed following the mobility programme, in English and Mandarin for Mandarin speakers. From an individual level, the researcher adopted the conversational constraint theory (CCT) to demonstrate the mechanism of intercultural miscommunication in Asia and analyse communicative strategies in intercultural conflicts. The data were coded and analysed using thematic analysis through ATLAS.ti. It is found that language, cultural, and communicative differences, and stereotypes are the barriers leading to intercultural miscommunication in intra-Asia communication. In intercultural miscommunication situations, students tend to adopt communicative strategies that prioritise clarity over face maintenance. Pre-departure training has been suggested to significantly influence the outcomes of mobility programmes. It concludes that communication in Asian countries shares many similarities, yet the differences might better not be overlooked. Overall, this study advances a nuanced understanding of intercultural miscommunication in an intra-Asian mobility setting and underscores the analytical value of CCT for examining communication tensions in such contexts.*

*Keywords: Asia; conversational constraint; intercultural miscommunication; mobility program; strategy*

### INTRODUCTION

Asia has recently been considered a role model in education, healthcare, and environmental sustainability, making the 21st century the “Asian Century” (Mahbubani, 2022). Research in various fields in Asian countries is growing substantially, including communication. Ang and Zhou (2023) highlighted that the number of international publications authored by Asian communication scholars has increased significantly. Meanwhile, the continuously closer intra-Asia dialogue might disrupt the imbalances in global knowledge production in intercultural communication (R’boul, 2022). Influenced by Eastern philosophies of Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Hinduism, Asian communication shares certain commonalities (Mei, 2019). However, with diverse cultures, languages, religions, and traditions in Asia, it is not only misleading to treat Asia as a monolith, but any general conclusions about the intercultural communication research might also not be

possible (M. S. Kim, 2010). Therefore, this signals a central problem that encourages researchers to conduct context-based research on intercultural miscommunication in the Asian region.

Globalisation has benefited the internationalisation of higher education institutions (HEIs), and mobility programmes are among the most prominent initiatives (Lugoboni et al., 2022). A number of scholars have examined the effect of mobility programmes on students, including intercultural responsibility (Nattheeraphong & Jenks, 2024), intercultural citizenship development (Ra et al., 2022), cultural intelligence (Figueroa & Hofhuis, 2024), and formation of individual identities (Arnaiz-Castro & Espejo-Mohedano, 2023), just to name a few. Figueroa and Hofhuis (2024) concluded that the development of intercultural communication competence (ICC) was the main goal of student mobility programs in HEIs. Roy et al. (2019) conducted an in-depth review of the outcome of ICC from the perspectives of intercultural awareness, sensitivity, and adaptability developed with the mobility programmes. However, the outcome of mobility programmes is not always positive. Vande Berg et al. (2009) mentioned that there was a decrease in intercultural sensitivity among male participants after attending a mobility program. Lash et al. (2022) also reported that miscommunications, such as stereotyping and ethnocentrism, were formed among some participants after participating in the mobility programmes, as cultural differences led them to interpret host responses as inappropriate.

Due to cultural and linguistic differences, miscommunication often arises in intercultural interactions. According to Lu and Habil (2023), intercultural miscommunication can raise heightened anxiety, impede the establishment of relationships, and result in discomfort in intercultural situations. Thus, intercultural miscommunication blocks the positive development of students, breaks intercultural friendships, and decreases the outcome of mobility programmes. After conducting a systematic review of the literature related to mobility programmes, few to no studies have ever focused on the intercultural miscommunication that happens within a mobility programme in Asia. Furthermore, the specific features of mobility programmes that affect outcomes have yet to be understood. As a result, this study aims to explore the intercultural miscommunications that occurred during a student mobility programme in Indonesia. Specifically, it investigates the elements contributing to the intercultural miscommunication in Asia, examines the strategies used in intercultural conflicts from the perspective of conversational constraints theory (CCT), and explores the characteristics that influence the programme outcomes. Thus, the three research questions are:

- RQ1. What factors contribute to intercultural miscommunication in the postgraduate mobility programme?
- RQ2. What strategies do the participants use to manage intercultural miscommunication?
- RQ3. What characteristics of mobility programmes does this case suggest which may influence the outcomes?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural miscommunication is defined as a dynamic, jointly constructed process of communication breakdown between individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Wagener, 2018). It usually stems from barriers of anxiety, assuming similarity instead of difference, stereotypes, prejudice and ethnocentrism (Jandt, 2025, p.41). Recognised as “noise” in communication, intercultural miscommunication seems to be a neglected issue. Holtgraves et al.

(2023) explained that miscommunication is difficult to study due to its fleeting nature and the fact that it is implicit to detect. Existing literature has examined intercultural miscommunication from communicative, cultural and linguistic perspectives. Lu and Habil (2024) examined the intercultural miscommunication cases of ESL speakers, such as different online communication styles. Subramoney et al. (2024) provided another example of how cultural differences in emotion norms cause miscommunications in intercultural interactions. These studies suggest that intercultural miscommunication does not stem mainly from cultural factors, but may also arise from communicative or interactional reasons. However, existing studies of intercultural miscommunication emphasise the elements at the national level, while giving comparatively less attention to contextual and situational factors.

Within the framework of global cooperation, student mobility is the product of internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions, such as Erasmus+ (Pozniak et al., 2025) and the Fulbright Program (Zhou et al., 2024). Student mobility usually refers to international students taking a full-time degree abroad or participating in long-term or short-term programs overseas (Jiang et al., 2023). In this study, student mobility falls into the latter scope, namely the mobility program. Studies mainly reported the positive outcomes of students' mobility programs, such as intercultural communication skills (Sisisky, 2023), academic interest and motivation (Sletnes et al., 2025), intercultural sensitivity (Nattheeraphong et al., 2025), etc. Comparative findings on the outcomes of long-term and short-term study abroad programs have been reported (Lu & Habil, 2025). Furthermore, ICC is not cultivated solely from mobility experiences but can be further developed through sustained engagement with home-country structures (Hanley & Chankseliani, 2025). Still, a few studies, such as Sjøen (2023), have documented the emergence of stereotypes during mobility programs. The reviewed studies on mobility programs are situated within Western contexts or framed as comparisons between Eastern and Western contexts. As international cooperation among Asian nations deepened, their cultural characteristics were likely to be reshaped and redefined in distinctive ways, such as in the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia (Croucher et al., 2015). However, studies of mobility programs in intra-Asia are rarely covered. This study situates the mobility program in Asia to address intercultural miscommunication and thereby fill a practical gap.

For efficient interactions of students in mobility programs, intercultural miscommunications stimulate the coping strategies at the individual level. As Healey et al. (2018) concluded, miscommunication constitutes an integral element of the communicative process, enabling flexibility to deal with the problem. For example, Tran and Vu (2018) showed the intercultural attitude drawback of the students due to language and cultural adaptation difficulties, but the agency of struggle and resistance was later developed to deal with intercultural challenges. However, interactional communication strategies during intercultural conversations have rarely been investigated to cope with intercultural miscommunication or conflict. Only a few studies have suggested the dynamic intercultural strategies, such as high- and low-context communication style switch (Wu et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the strategies discussed in the current literature often lack sensitivity to situational variation. Moreover, characteristics of programs at the institutional level, such as peer networks (Thin & Hung, 2025), homestay (Back et al., 2022), and local mentors (Cushner & Chang, 2015), were reported to facilitate functional intercultural communication in the mobility program. It was found that the quality and depth of the students' engagement with the host community were tied to intercultural competence development (Silva et al., 2026). While the characteristics that may affect Asian mobility programs remain unclear, further research is needed to identify them.

Intercultural miscommunication research is moving from a national focus to an individual one, incorporating situational factors like urgency. Sun and Shi (2024) criticised that intercultural communication research primarily reflects cultural characteristics. Although the most influential of cultural classifications is that of Geert Hofstede at the national level, intercultural communication research is expected to evolve to an individual level (Kirkman et al., 2006). This is because intercultural communication research should consider various contexts, including those of cultural, individual and situational levels (M. Kim, 2017). Singelis and Brown (1995) argued for the mediating role of self-construal on intercultural communication, which formed links of culture's influence on behaviour at the individual level. M.-S. Kim (1994) identified five conversational constraints, including clarity, avoiding hurting the hearer's feelings, nonimposition, avoiding negative evaluation by the hearer, and effectiveness, to explain the communication comparison between individualistic-collectivistic orientations. Preferences for efficiency and social appropriateness in conversations vary according to situational, relational, and personal factors, which in turn shape the acceptability of behaviours used to achieve interactional goals (Kellermann & Park, 2001). This perspective is useful for examining how participants in intercultural encounters balance efficiency and social appropriateness in specific situations. Cultural values are reflected in the relative importance of the conversational constraints, which in turn affect choices of conversational strategies in conflict resolution, compliments, and requesting (M.-S. Kim, 1994), etc. In this study, CCT was used not simply as a background framework but as an interpretive lens for analysing how participants managed communication miscommunications in intercultural interactions.

## METHODOLOGY

The researchers adopted a qualitative method because intercultural miscommunication is multidimensional within the social sciences and often difficult for interactants to recognise. The qualitative method is particularly effective in culturally sensitive and diverse research contexts, as it provides practical means to explore process-oriented and individualised research questions (Lee, 2024). To reduce the potential interpretive basis of the study, the methodology section provides a full contextual description of the mobility program, and the interviews focused on concrete episodes. This study was conducted within a mobility program in Makassar, Indonesia, organised by a Malaysian university that recruited both Malaysian and international students. Only postgraduate students in the Language Academy who had successfully passed their proposal defence and were currently on campus were eligible to participate. The Indonesian mobility program lasted five days, including inter-university exchange and cooperation, activities of an academic symposium, and cultural immersion experience, such as touring the city museum. Participants were recruited from the mobility program purposefully for their direct and invited to take part in follow-up interviews. For the purpose of ensuring data diversity, participants from diverse backgrounds were invited to take part in this research on intercultural miscommunication, representing different nationalities, genders, and academic levels. Six participants voluntarily took part in the interview, including one Chinese, one Iranian, one Pakistani, and three Malaysian students. Data from the six participants is enough for the analysis because they generate rich accounts of participants' experiences in a bounded mobility context. The demographic information of the participants is listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Demographic information of the six participants

Participant	Nationality	Gender	Academic level	Interview
<b>P1</b>	Malaysian	Female	PhD	Online
<b>P2</b>	Malaysian	Male	PhD	Online
<b>P3</b>	Iranian	Male	PhD	Online
<b>P4</b>	Pakistani	Female	PhD	Face to face
<b>P5</b>	Malaysian	Female	Master	Online
<b>P6</b>	Chinese	Female	PhD	Online

The researchers collected the data on intercultural miscommunication using semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to remain focused on the research questions while still exploring pertinent ideas that may come up in the course of the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Cases of intercultural miscommunication both among participants and between participants and Indonesians were collected. The protocol covered four parts, including the introduction of the research and the interviewees, cases of intercultural miscommunication, strategies to deal with intercultural miscommunication, and suggestions for the mobility program. The interviews were conducted either online or face-to-face, depending on participants' preferences and availability. For example, one participant initially agreed to a face-to-face interview but later switched to an online format due to a busy schedule. The interviews were carried out in English, except for one Chinese participant who preferred Mandarin to express her ideas more clearly. The interviews were approved by the institutional administration of the Language Academy. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and participated voluntarily and anonymously. They signed the informed consent form prior to the interview, and the interviews were recorded using a voice recorder.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, with the recordings converted into text word-for-word. The process of verbatim transcription involves transforming audio or video material into written text, capturing each word exactly as spoken to preserve the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data (Loubere, 2017). To ensure translation quality, the researcher first transcribed the Chinese interview verbatim and translated it into English. The first researcher is fluent in both Chinese and English. The translation was then cross-checked for accuracy by the third researcher, a translation expert, and no major discrepancies were found. Then, the transcriptions were imported to ATLAS.TI Version 25 for data analysis. ATLAS.ti is a powerful tool for data coding, enabling users to import diverse types of data and develop analytical themes (Trindade et al., 2018).

Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within data. The researchers followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis, including familiarising data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Transcripts were first read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Guided by the research questions, initial coding was then conducted in relation to factors contributing to intercultural miscommunication, strategies to cope with intercultural miscommunication, and program characteristics that influence its outcome. Codes were subsequently grouped into themes through iterative comparison to the data. The three research questions were answered through the data analysis. Specifically, RQ1 was answered by analysing the cases in which intercultural miscommunication occurred among the participants. RQ2 and RQ3 were answered by categorising the coping strategy and characteristics of the mobility program.

## FINDINGS

Guided by the research questions, this section presents the findings of the study according to the themes that emerged from the data, namely language barriers, cultural barriers, communication barriers, strategies for managing intercultural miscommunication, and suggestions for improving the mobility program.

RQ1. What factors contribute to intercultural miscommunication in Asian mobility programs in the postgraduate mobility program?

Generally, international students reported more intercultural miscommunications than those from Malaysia during the mobility program. Although participants shared certain similarities in their interactions with Indonesians, instances of intercultural miscommunication primarily arose from language, cultural and communication differences (Figure 1). The language barriers are mainly due to homonyms and terminology. The cultural barriers involve factors such as stereotypes, power distance, and different worldviews toward time and religious practice, whereas the communication barriers concern differences in elaborateness versus succinctness and direct versus indirect communication styles.

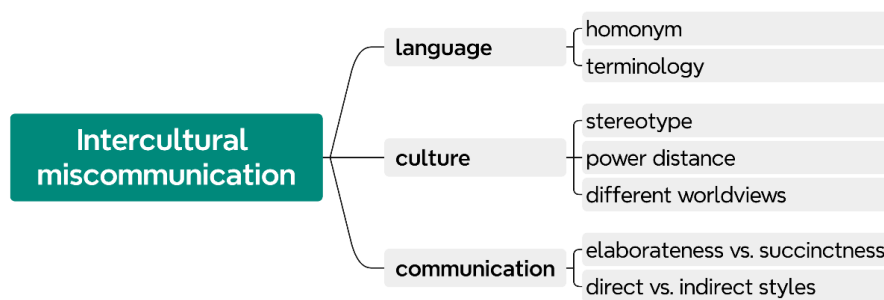


FIGURE 1. Factors contributing to intercultural miscommunication

### LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Students from Malaysia reported similar language structures between Malay and Indonesian. However, they also mentioned the differences between the two languages that cause intercultural miscommunication. P2, a male Malaysian participant, highlighted that his main linguistic challenge arose from homonyms, as words with similar spelling and pronunciation frequently caused misunderstanding during communication (Khan, 2024). He described confusion when a Malaysian word was used in an Indonesian context; although the words looked similar, they carry different meanings. As a result, cross-linguistic homonymy reduces clarity and consequently leads to intercultural miscommunication.

I do face a small number of misunderstandings, especially pertaining to word usage and meaning. I tend to speak in the local language, which is Indonesian, as I have quite a good experience and knowledge of this language. But sometimes, I didn't know the word in **the Indonesian language**, so I used a **Malaysian word** that caused misunderstanding.

[P2, male Malaysian, PhD]

Students from international backgrounds experienced intercultural miscommunication arising from differences in terminology related to food and transportation. For example, P4, who is a female PhD from Pakistan, experienced intercultural miscommunication in a local restaurant. She intended to order a beverage and asked the waiter to explain the menu; however, what she received was a sweet dish similar to pudding, leaving her disappointed and still thirsty. Thus, intercultural miscommunication occurred due to the terminological confusion between the words “drink” and “dessert”, resulting in an unintentional violation of the clarity constraint.

It was difficult to decide on the food or anything because they just didn't know how to answer our questions. Like in a restaurant when we were ordering food, I asked the waiter, “What is good? What is bad? What is this thing? What is that thing?” Because the food was purely Indonesian, they were unable to explain it properly. There was something like **pudding** in a bowl, but I wanted to have something to **drink**.

[P4, female Pakistani, PhD]

For another example, there is a different understanding of the word “taxi”. P3, who is a male Iranian, shared his experience when he asked the receptionist in the hotel to book a taxi, a four-wheeled vehicle. In Indonesia, however, the term “taxi” can include a motorcycle taxi. Thus, shared terminology does not guarantee shared meaning, and this violation of the clarity constraint consequently leads to intercultural miscommunication.

Actually, in my country, when you say “taxi,” it's only a car. You cannot call a motorbike or motorcycle a taxi. But I had this experience in Indonesia. I asked the receptionist at the hotel to hire a taxi for me, but when I saw a two-wheeler motorbike, and the driver gave me a helmet, it was actually **shocking** for me.

[P3, male Iranian, PhD]

#### CULTURAL BARRIERS

Cultural barriers related to stereotypes, power distance, and differing worldviews toward time and religious practices were reported by participants in the mobility program. Several participants reported their views on the Iranian PhD students. Before the mobility program began, the person in charge created an online chat group using the application WhatsApp. The group was used to post notifications about the trip to Indonesia, collect students' information for flight bookings, and respond to their inquiries. Through online interaction, a stereotype of rudeness toward the Iranian student emerged, likely due to his manner of asking questions. As a result, when the students began their trip to Indonesia, most of them avoided communicating with him. P5, who is a female Malaysian master student, shared her experience of how stereotypes could hinder intercultural communication.

I think my impression is that he's always himself. He **didn't follow** most of the people in the group. He just acted as he wished. That was the first impression. So, I have this stereotype about him. When I met him, I tried **avoiding** him.

[P5, female Malaysian, master]

P4 shared her view that the stereotype of the Iranian student as a harsh and rude person also discouraged her from communicating with him. However, she noted that he once helped her with her luggage, revealing his gentle side. This suggests that stereotypes do not always reflect reality but can lead to intercultural miscommunication. This stereotype reflects a violation of the “avoiding negative evaluation by the hearer” constraint, thereby hindering intercultural communication from occurring in the first place. Additionally, it was the way of talking that caused the intercultural miscommunication.

I felt like when I met him, first of all, I just wanted to avoid him because his style of talking was too loud. It's like we already have the stereotype. That's all, he's a **harsh, rude** person. So, I **don't want to communicate** with him. But he took care of my luggage and bought juice as well. So, I can feel he's a **nice** person. Maybe it's his **way of talking in his culture**.

[P4, female Pakistani, PhD]

Furthermore, it was the Iranian student's tendency not to follow the group and his manner of asking too many questions that caused additional intercultural miscommunication. As Asia is generally characterised by high power distance, individuals are often discouraged from challenging authority figures. P5 emphasised that most participants tended to follow instructions and remain quiet to show respect toward authority or in the host context, sharing how asking too many questions in the group and asking about the prepared food were considered improper. The act of asking too many questions was perceived as a violation of the nonimposition constraint, placing a burden on the hearer, and thus contributed to intercultural miscommunication.

It's fine for him to ask; it's just that there were too many questions, sharing **what he's thinking now, sharing his feelings right away**—maybe a bit extra. But we mostly avoid sharing too much or asking too much. He also **kept asking about the food**. If Malaysians don't like the food, you **just accept** it, you let it pass. We don't want to put it on the other person.

[P5, female Malaysian, master]

Besides asking questions, P3, the Iranian student, shared another example from his perspective, explaining how seating arrangements shaped by different perceptions of power distance can lead to intercultural miscommunication. Taking a group photo with members from the cooperative universities was challenging because of the large number of staff and students. The Iranian student suggested adding a row of chairs in the front. The leaders and professors were then seated in those chairs because of their higher positions. However, he felt it was unfair when he was not allowed to sit, as it had been his idea. As a result, intercultural miscommunication arose from the clash between the emphasis on effectiveness or fairness and the norms of power distance, which determine what is considered appropriate or inappropriate behaviour across cultures.

I wanted to create another line of students in order to frame all the students in one picture. I tried to bring chairs, yeah, to put in front of the lecturers and sit down, but they told me, "Don't sit here, you are students, not lecturers." It was not his position to say such things, and I didn't like his nature (the cameraman). It was **my suggestion**, but **they didn't let me sit** in the chair.

[P3, male Iranian, PhD]

Additionally, different worldviews toward time and religious practice were reported by the participants. P6, a female Chinese PhD student, described making several requests to Indonesian hotel staff for items such as a hairdryer and a comb. She expected to receive it immediately after calling the receptionist, as she adhered to a strict schedule and valued punctuality, a reflection of a monochronic time orientation. However, the receptionist's delayed response reflected a more flexible, polychronic approach to time that is common in Indonesian culture. Intercultural miscommunication arose when P6 interpreted the delay as disrespectful, while for the staff, the response was considered normal and unproblematic. This incident demonstrates a violation of the effectiveness constraint, as the task was not accomplished within the expected time, leading to perceived communicative failure.

We needed some combs, hair dryers, etc., and called the front desk, which was a little slow. In fact, the **concept of time** may be different. The expectation of things, especially in this kind of service industry, is that maybe we think, I have this demand, you must satisfy me **immediately**. [

**P6, female Chinese, PhD]**

P4, a Pakistani Muslim, shared her experience of differing views toward her religious practice regarding her choice not to wear a scarf, and she felt somewhat judged by Indonesians. Her decision not to wear a scarf was personally appropriate according to her comfort. However, she perceived that others evaluated her negatively because it conflicted with local religious expectations. Although both Pakistani and Indonesian people shared an Islamic background, their differing cultural norms surrounding religious expression created implicit expectations of appropriateness. This case demonstrates that differing interpretations of religious practice can lead to a violation of the avoiding negative evaluation constraint.

In Pakistan, nobody ever questioned my religion or assumed I belonged to another faith. But in Indonesia, people often made assumptions based only on appearance or attire. If a girl was **not wearing a hijab** or scarf, they thought she was **not Muslim**. In Pakistan, we don't judge anyone like that, whether she wears a scarf or not. In Indonesia, I felt bad sometimes because people mentioned many times things like, "This is for Muslims," or asked, "Are you Muslim or not?"

**[P4, female Pakistani, PhD]**

#### COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

The communication barriers arise from differences in elaborateness versus succinctness and direct versus indirect communication styles. P6 described her experience with contrasting ways of expression. Influenced by a high-context communication style, Chinese speakers often leave much information unspoken, relying on shared understanding. In contrast, people from other cultural backgrounds tend to express information more explicitly. As a result, Chinese speakers may appear to talk less and convey ideas in a more general manner than their counterparts. Consequently, intercultural miscommunication occurs when conversational constraints, particularly the expectation for clarity, are not aligned across cultures.

I think foreigners seem to pay more attention to details when speaking. If you ask them a question, their description is very **detailed**. And then, let me say, just two sentences-Chinese people like to talk in **general** terms. I can't really explain that feeling, but sometimes I feel ashamed. People want to know more, but I feel uncomfortable when I can't say it.

**[P6, female Chinese, PhD]**

Likewise, intercultural miscommunication could arise because the communicative expectation of explicitness differs. For example, P4 described her experience of trying on traditional attire in a museum setting. The absence of an explicit notice about payment violated her expectation of transparency. However, the host culture of Indonesia may operate with implicit contextual norms, assuming that visitors would naturally understand that such services require payment. The behaviour of the museum staff reflected a low priority on directness, which consequently led to a violation of the conversational constraint of clarity.

Inside the museum, there was a room with princess attire. A person was standing there, taking care of it if anyone wanted to try. So, I wore that dress and took some pictures. But after removing the clothes and the jewellery, he just asked me for money. It's **not proper**. There **should be some notification** or something written inside that place, saying that for wearing those dresses, you have to pay.

**[P4, female Pakistani, PhD]**

RQ2. What strategies do the participants use to manage intercultural miscommunication?

#### STRATEGIES

In instances of intercultural miscommunication and conflict, participants were found to prioritise communicative strategies that emphasise clarity and explicitness rather than those oriented toward maintaining face. In the case of trying on clothes at the museum, where intercultural miscommunication occurred, P4 stated that she directly refused to pay and left. This response demonstrates a clear conflict management and communication strategy, reflecting a higher priority on asserting clarity and fairness rather than maintaining face or avoiding imposition.

I **just** asked, “Why are you asking for money now? You should have told me earlier.” I **just** said, “You’re wrong.” I didn’t pay anything; I **just** came out of that museum.

**P4, female Pakistani, PhD]**

P3 described an instance of intercultural miscommunication that occurred within peer interaction, not between host and guest, but among students with differing cultural perceptions of appropriateness. The case illustrates a value-based misunderstanding arising from conflicting expectations regarding appropriate behaviour and power distance. Furthermore, P3 observed that the strategy used by the other student during the tense interaction was clarity-oriented, emphasising directness even though it risked provoking face concerns. Consequently, driven by hierarchical cultural value, the other student demonstrated a high priority on clarity, ensuring the listener fully understands the intent. This strategy reflects a deliberate emphasis on clarity over face maintenance in intercultural miscommunication.

I asked about the food in the restaurant. I wanted to tell them that I don’t eat chicken. I had to ask—it was my right to ask. But another student interrupted me. She told me, “**Stop asking** about food. It’s **not correct** to ask all these questions about food. We are **only students**; we have to follow their instructions and **be obedient**.” I don’t know why she reacted like that.

**[P3, male Iranian, PhD]**

P5 described a moral conflict involving respect for nature. Believing in the importance of respecting the land, she tried to stop another student from picking a flower from a bush. The other student, not taking her advice seriously, might have considered it a normal act of personal enjoyment. However, when her initial reminder was ignored, P5 shifted to a direct and corrective strategy, scolding him to make her stance clear. This escalation from politeness to direct confrontation highlights the tension between clarity and relational harmony in morally challenging intercultural encounters.

There was a student, and he plucked a flower from the bush in front of the museum. I tried to be polite and told him not to, but he didn’t seem to care at all. So, I **scolded** him and told him not to do that. It’s a historical place. Do not take flowers from there because we need to respect their land.

**[P5, female Malaysian, master]**

RQ3. What characteristics of mobility programs does this case suggest may influence the outcome?

#### PRE-DEPARTURE TRAINING

Most participants mentioned the need for pre-departure training and noted that the lack of such preparation caused inconvenience during the mobility program. P2, who is a Malaysian, emphasised the importance of pre-departure training specifically related to Indonesian culture, such as learning appropriate greeting practices.

The program should conduct a **briefing for the participants before going** to certain countries. The brief can include basic greetings, how to greet people, and their famous recommendations or recommendations of a must-try food. So that the participants will be more ready, well-informed about the country and culture of the people they will be meeting.

[P2, male Malaysian, PhD]

P3, an Iranian student, also emphasised the need for pre-departure training on Indonesian culture. Thus, both Malaysian students, whose culture is relatively similar to Indonesia's, and students from other countries highlighted the importance of such preparation.

Actually, there should have been lectures. There should have been at least **one lecture explaining Indonesian culture** before we interact with them.

[P3, male Iranian, PhD]

P1 also mentioned the reason for not considering pre-departure training, which is that there are not too many differences between them and Indonesia.

I think if you are a Malaysian, then you will **not have many barriers** in terms of communication.

[P1, female Malaysian, PhD]

#### CULTURAL IMMERSION

Learning does not take place naturally when in mobility programs, and more cultural immersion activities are expected, such as cultural presentation, research exchange, etc.

Maybe have **more presentations** where we can communicate and express Malaysian culture. I think maybe the students on their campus could also have presented about their own culture.

[P1, female Malaysian, PhD]

P4 highlighted the need to enhance the cultural immersion experience in the mobility program. She emphasised the importance of matching participants' academic levels to ensure meaningful intellectual and cultural exchange. By pairing postgraduate students with peers of similar academic standing, the program could foster deeper discussions, promote research-oriented interaction, and create more balanced opportunities for mutual learning.

If you are taking postgraduate students, then the students on the other side should also be PhD or postgraduate students, or at least knowledgeable and with a research background. Because when I went to the university there, we only met some undergraduate students, not postgraduates, so there **wasn't much opportunity** for real research or academic exchange.

[P4, female Pakistani, PhD]

## DISCUSSIONS

Unlike previous studies on mobility programmes that focus on participants' intercultural competence as an outcome, this study explored instances of intercultural miscommunication within the Indonesian mobility program. Cases of miscommunication were reported even among participants from Asian countries. This was because the barriers leading to such miscommunication resulted from differences in language, culture, and communication styles, which are often overlooked but nevertheless exist. Moreover, stereotypes were also found to be a factor that hindered effective intercultural communication from taking place. These findings mirror Mailin et al.'s (2023) study concerning language barriers, differing communication styles, and cultural stereotypes, which are some significant challenges in intercultural communication in Indonesia. Moreover, in urgent situations of intercultural miscommunication, the strategy of clarity is preferred over relational harmony. Contextual factors of the interaction have a stronger influence than shared cultural values on the overall use of facework (Cai & Donohue, 1997). As a result, clarity-oriented or face-threatening strategies may be adopted in urgent situations to ensure that the message is fully understood by the listener, even if the communication style may appear impolite or lack appropriateness.

This study goes beyond examining differences in language, culture, communication styles, and personal factors such as stereotypes by explaining the process of intercultural miscommunication. From the perspective of CCT, intercultural miscommunication primarily occurred due to violations of the rules of clarity and, in some cases, appropriateness. This is consistent with M. Kim's (2017) view concerning communication breakdown that typically occurs because interactants usually disagree about the effectiveness or social appropriateness of one another's communication strategies. Moreover, the strategies adopted to manage intercultural miscommunication or even conflict tend to be clarity-oriented. As a result, intercultural miscommunication can sometimes be a positive phenomenon as it promotes greater transparency and openness in communication, serving as a starting point for more effective intercultural understanding. This aligns with the study that focuses on the importance of competence development, particularly in the role of creativity in ensuring effective intercultural communication (Braslauskas, 2021). A framework of intercultural miscommunication and the coping strategies in this specific case from the perspective of CCT is created (Figure 2).

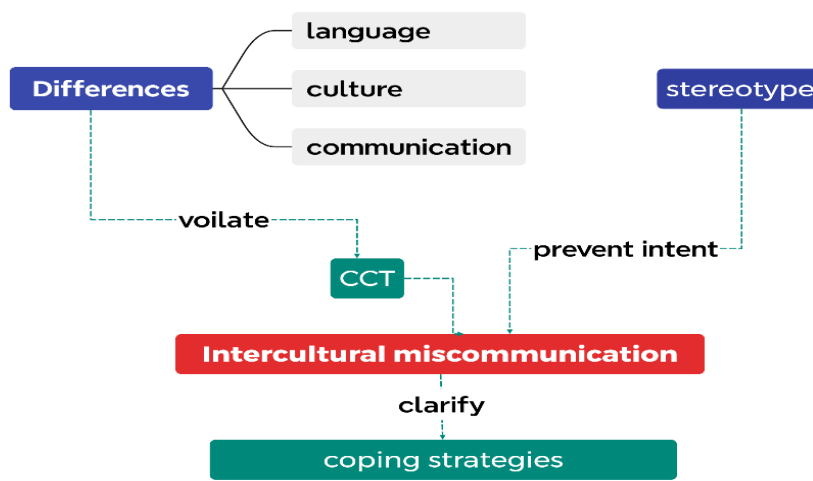


FIGURE 2. Process of intercultural miscommunication

Pre-departure training and cultural immersion activities in programme design are crucial to the overall outcomes of a mobility program. This case suggests that pre-departure training is ignored due to similar language, culture, and communication style. However, the absence of pre-departure training can become a missing link that hinders participants' adaptation and engagement in the host countries. This finding mirrors Kosman et al.'s (2023) arguments in that institutions adopt a more systematic and coherent approach to preparing students, which can help minimise potential risks while enhancing the overall benefits of mobility programmes. Pandor et al. (2025) also highlight the challenging yet rewarding nature of immersion experiences. The findings of this study, together with previous research (Marina & Rajprasit, 2016), encourage programme designers to integrate systematic intercultural preparation before and after the mobility programme. Such efforts could intervene in potential miscommunication, develop effective communication strategies, and transform intercultural challenges into meaningful learning experiences.

This study has some limitations. The small sample size limited the number of intercultural miscommunication cases that could be identified, which are inherently difficult to capture and analyse. Moreover, both parties involved in an intercultural communication case were not interviewed in order to avoid potential conflicts between participants. Additionally, the participants' nationalities were not sufficiently diverse, which limits the representativeness of the findings. Future mobility programmes could pay attention to the limitations and improve the intercultural miscommunication research and problems.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study examined individual and contextual predictors of intercultural miscommunication, the effectiveness of different coping strategies, and evaluated programme designs. From the perspective of CCT, this case suggests that intercultural miscommunication often arises from violations of clarity and appropriateness rules, influenced by differences in language, culture, and communication styles, as well as personal factors such as stereotypes. The findings of this case highlight the importance of incorporating pre-departure training and cultural immersion activities into programme design to help participants prevent intercultural miscommunication and transform potential misunderstandings into meaningful learning opportunities. Building on previous research (Marina & Rajprasit, 2016) and calling for more targeted intercultural components within English for Professional Communication courses, this study recommends that mobility programmes include explicit training on intercultural miscommunication and strategies for managing it effectively. Prospective research could further examine intercultural miscommunication in other intra-Asian mobility programmes and conduct longitudinal research to trace how communication strategies are being developed.

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