

Bridging Cultures: Collaborative Learning Between Malagasy Darmasiswa Scholar and English Education Student at UKI Toraja

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the collaborative learning experiences between Malagasy Darmasiswa scholars and English Education students at Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja (UKI Toraja). The Darmasiswa program, initiated by the Indonesian government, facilitates cross-cultural academic exchange by offering scholarships to international students, including those from Madagascar. The research focuses on how these intercultural collaborations impact participants' language acquisition, communication skills, and educational development. Using qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and participant observation, data were collected from both Malagasy and Indonesian students engaged in joint learning activities. These activities encompassed intercultural workshops, language exchanges, and collaborative projects centered on cultural comparison and language practice. Preliminary findings indicate that collaborative learning fosters improved intercultural communication skills, increased language fluency, and greater cultural empathy. Both groups reported enhanced confidence in cross-cultural settings and a deeper understanding of each other's cultural perspectives. The learning environment was described as more inclusive and mutually supportive. The findings underscore the educational value of structured intercultural collaboration. Participants not only developed stronger language and communication skills but also demonstrated increased cultural awareness and engagement. These outcomes suggest that such initiatives significantly contribute to the holistic academic growth of both international and local students. The study recommends enhancing collaborative learning by integrating structured intercultural components, expanding joint activities, and promoting ongoing peer engagement. These improvements could deepen intercultural understanding and further enrich the educational experience for all participants.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Darmasiswa program, a scholarship initiative sponsored by the Indonesian government, exemplifies a commitment to fostering intercultural exchange by offering international students—such as those from Madagascar—the opportunity to study in Indonesia. This initiative is designed not only to promote cultural understanding but also to strengthen diplomatic and educational ties between Indonesia and participating countries (Woesler, 2023; Bai & Wang, 2022). One key host institution for this program is UKI Toraja, an established university in Indonesia that has welcomed Malagasy scholars into its English Education program. This unique educational context offers a fertile ground for examining how intercultural collaboration unfolds in higher education.

At UKI Toraja, the integration of Malagasy scholars into the English Education program allows for dynamic and meaningful collaborative learning between international and local students. These intercultural interactions expose students to diverse worldviews and pedagogical approaches, enhancing their cultural competence, communication abilities, and global awareness (Douglas et al., 2022; Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023). The collaborative framework established at the institution includes various structured activities—such as intercultural workshops, language exchange sessions, joint academic projects, and cultural exhibitions—that are specifically designed to bridge cultural gaps and foster inclusive education (Cores-Bilbao, 2020).

Despite the increasing emphasis on globalization and intercultural competence in higher education, there remains a lack of focused research on how scholarship programs like Darmasiswa impact both the international scholars and their local counterparts in real academic settings. This study addresses that gap by investigating the lived experiences of Malagasy and Indonesian students participating in collaborative learning activities at UKI Toraja. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on a specific, under-researched demographic—Malagasy students in Indonesia—and on the educational outcomes of their interactions with local peers in an English language learning context.

The primary research question driving this inquiry is: How do collaborative learning activities between Malagasy Darmasiswa scholars and Indonesian English Education students influence their cultural awareness and intercultural communication skills? In addressing this question, the research aims to explore how these interactions enhance cultural competence, improve language proficiency, and support both academic and social integration (Haerazi et al., 2023; Rahmawati et al., 2023). By employing qualitative methods—such as surveys, interviews, and participant observations—the study seeks to produce rich, detailed accounts of student experiences and derive practical insights for educators and policymakers.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform the design and implementation of intercultural education programs. As Eisner (2012) emphasized, education that bridges cultural divides contributes meaningfully to the development of more empathetic, informed, and globally competent citizens. The findings of this study are expected to offer valuable recommendations for optimizing intercultural collaboration frameworks and strengthening the educational value of scholarship programs like Darmasiswa. Ultimately, this research aspires to support a more interconnected academic community and reinforce the role of education as a bridge between cultures.

2. METHODS

To examine the impact of collaborative learning between Malagasy Darmasiswa scholars and English Education students at UKI Toraja, this study adopts a qualitative research approach, as recommended by Matta (2022), to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences and the outcomes of their interactions. Qualitative methods are particularly well-suited for exploring complex social dynamics and cultural phenomena, as they allow for rich, descriptive insights into human behavior, perceptions, and communication processes. This methodological approach facilitates a nuanced exploration of intercultural learning, enabling the researchers to capture the subtleties of student collaboration, cultural exchange, and language development within the academic

environment. Data collection involved multiple qualitative techniques, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and reflective journals, allowing for triangulation and a more holistic understanding of the collaborative learning experience.

2.1 Participant Selection

The participants in this study were categorized into two distinct groups actively engaged in the collaborative learning activities at UKI Toraja. The first group comprised Malagasy Darmasiswa scholars—students from Madagascar participating in the Darmasiswa scholarship program. This study focused on a representative sample of these scholars to explore their experiences and perceptions of intercultural learning. A total sampling technique was employed to capture a broad range of perspectives, taking into account factors such as gender, academic background, and previous international exposure.

The second group included local Indonesian students enrolled in the English Education program at UKI Toraja. These students participated in joint academic activities with the Malagasy scholars, including collaborative projects, workshops, and cultural exchange events. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select Indonesian students who had been actively involved in these activities. This approach ensured a diverse representation of experiences, enabling the study to gather comprehensive insights into how intercultural collaboration influenced their academic growth, cultural awareness, and language proficiency.

2.2 Data Collection Methods

The study employed a combination of qualitative data collection methods to obtain rich, in-depth insights into the participants' experiences. One of the primary methods used was semi-structured interviews, conducted with selected Malagasy Darmasiswa scholars and Indonesian English Education students. This interview format provided the flexibility to explore participants' unique perspectives while ensuring that core themes related to the research questions were systematically addressed.

The interviews focused on participants' perceptions of intercultural exchange, their involvement in collaborative learning activities, and the influence of these experiences on their academic development and personal growth. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meaningful insights.

2.3 Participant Observations

The researcher observed a selection of collaborative activities in which both Malagasy scholar and Indonesian student engage. These activities included workshops, joint projects, language exchange sessions, and cultural exchange events. The observations focused on the interactions between students, the facilitation of the activities, and the overall atmosphere of the collaborative environment. Field notes will be recorded during each observation session, capturing key events, participant behaviors, and the general dynamics of the activities.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved a combination of thematic analysis of interview and focus group data, along with a systematic review of observational field notes. This multi-method approach ensured a comprehensive and credible interpretation of the participants' experiences within the collaborative learning environment.

For the qualitative analysis of interview data, the transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involved systematically coding the data into categories aligned with the study's core research questions, such as intercultural communication, language acquisition, and academic integration. The researcher identified recurring themes, significant narratives, and key contrasts

between the experiences of Malagasy scholars and Indonesian students. This analysis provided deep insight into how the collaborative learning activities influenced students' cultural competence and language development.

In addition, notes from participant observations were carefully examined to capture the subtleties of student interactions during collaborative activities. The analysis focused on how these interactions unfolded in real time and how they contributed to students' development of cultural awareness and academic performance. Observational data were integrated with interview findings to form a holistic view of the learning environment. Particular attention was given to critical moments—such as cultural misunderstandings, successful language exchanges, or instances of effective collaboration—that illustrated key dynamics relevant to the research questions.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the results, findings from interviews and observations were triangulated. This methodological triangulation strengthened the validity of the research and allowed for a more nuanced and reliable understanding of the impact of intercultural collaboration on both Malagasy and Indonesian students.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the interview data, several key themes emerged that reflect the participants' experiences with collaborative learning at UKI Toraja. The thematic categories identified include cultural insights, language development, challenges encountered, and suggestions for program improvement. These themes provide valuable insight into the impact of intercultural collaboration on both Malagasy and Indonesian students, highlighting how such initiatives contribute to educational and personal growth in a globalized academic environment.

Participants generally expressed highly positive views regarding their involvement in collaborative learning activities. One Malagasy participant described the experience as “eye-opening,” noting that workshops and group tasks enabled them to engage with Indonesian culture and language in a more immersive way than formal instruction typically allows. They explained that despite language barriers—particularly with peers who did not speak English—they were able to communicate effectively through gestures, body language, and translation tools like Google Translate. This adaptability reflects the development of practical intercultural communication strategies.

Indonesian participants echoed similar sentiments. One student shared that collaborating with Malagasy scholars not only improved their English proficiency but also deepened their understanding of diverse worldviews and cultural practices. These interpersonal exchanges, they explained, fostered stronger social connections and mutual respect among students from different backgrounds.

When asked about specific cultural insights gained, participants highlighted a growing appreciation for Indonesia's communal values. One Malagasy student reflected on how Indonesian society often prioritizes group harmony and mutual support—values that contrast with the more individualistic tendencies in Madagascar. These realizations emerged through participation in social events, traditional ceremonies, and shared meals, where students learned the cultural significance of local customs and cuisine. Such experiences supported the development of deeper intercultural awareness and empathy.

Challenges were also noted, particularly in relation to language barriers and academic differences. Malagasy students reported initial difficulties in understanding local dialects and informal language. However, many overcame this by actively seeking clarification and embracing informal learning opportunities. Similarly, Indonesian students shared that adjusting to different group work styles required openness and frequent communication. These challenges, while at times frustrating, ultimately became learning opportunities that enhanced problem-solving, collaboration, and adaptability.

In terms of language development, both groups of students reported notable improvements. Malagasy scholars gained confidence in speaking and writing Bahasa Indonesia, attributing their progress to daily practice and peer feedback. Indonesian students also noted gains, especially in their ability to communicate in Bahasa Toraja, which many Malagasy participants had also begun to learn. These language skills not only facilitated smoother collaboration but also fostered a greater sense of belonging and mutual understanding.

Participants offered several suggestions for enhancing the collaborative learning program. They recommended implementing structured cultural orientation sessions before the start of joint activities to better prepare students for intercultural interactions. Additionally, they suggested more regular check-ins or feedback sessions to address emerging concerns and provide targeted language support, particularly for dealing with regional dialects and colloquial speech.

In summary, participants emphasized the positive impact of the collaborative learning program on both their academic and personal development. The opportunity to work closely with peers from different cultural backgrounds broadened their global perspectives, strengthened communication skills, and fostered meaningful cross-cultural friendships. These outcomes underscore the importance of structured, inclusive intercultural learning initiatives in higher education. The findings align with existing research on intercultural competence, which stresses the value of experiential learning and meaningful interaction in promoting cultural sensitivity, language acquisition, and global preparedness.

3.1 Cultural Insights and Expanding Perspectives

A central theme that emerged from the data was the profound cultural learning experienced by participants as a result of the collaborative activities. Both Malagasy Darmasiswa scholars and Indonesian English Education students consistently reported that engaging with peers from different cultural backgrounds broadened their perspectives and deepened their understanding of diverse cultural norms.

One notable finding came from Participant 1, who reflected on the contrast between Indonesian communal values and the more individualistic tendencies in Madagascar. They observed that concepts such as group harmony and mutual support were not only discussed but actively practiced during social events and group activities. These experiences provided tangible insights into the collectivist orientation of Indonesian culture.

Participants also highlighted the value of experiential learning through cultural immersion. Several students recounted participating in traditional ceremonies and communal meals, which allowed them to directly engage with local customs, rituals, and values. This hands-on approach to cultural exchange was perceived as far more impactful than textbook-based learning, offering authentic encounters that fostered empathy and mutual respect.

The ability to recognize, appreciate, and adapt to these cultural practices signifies a shift from ethnocentrism—where one's own culture is viewed as the norm or superior—toward ethnorelativism, a mindset characterized by understanding and valuing cultural diversity. The participants' reflections indicate that these collaborative learning experiences facilitated the development of intercultural competence by encouraging deeper cultural awareness and emotional connection. Engaging in shared cultural practices fostered empathy, challenged preconceived notions, and contributed to a more inclusive and globally aware learning environment.

3.2 Language Skills Development and Practical Application

Another significant finding emerging from the data is the advancement of language skills among participants, which both Malagasy and Indonesian students identified as a major benefit of the

collaborative learning activities. Regular, meaningful interaction played a pivotal role in enhancing their proficiency in both Bahasa Indonesia and local dialects such as Bahasa Toraja.

Participant 1 reported marked improvement in their ability to communicate in Bahasa Indonesia. They attributed this progress to daily practice and constructive feedback from Indonesian peers, which boosted their confidence and encouraged continued language use. Participant 2 echoed this sentiment and further emphasized that regular communication with both Malagasy and Indonesian students contributed to improved fluency in Bahasa Toraja, the local dialect spoken in the region.

These findings underscore the importance of authentic, contextual language use. The participants engaged in real-life conversations and collaborative tasks where language was a tool for communication and a bridge for cultural connection. This immersion created a natural language learning environment that extended beyond traditional classroom instruction.

The learning process observed here aligns with the *experiential* or *situated learning* approach, where language acquisition is facilitated through active participation in meaningful social interactions. Rather than relying solely on formal instruction, students learned by doing—applying language skills in real-world scenarios that required negotiation, clarification, and adaptation. This not only accelerated their linguistic development but also reinforced their intercultural communication abilities, contributing to a deeper, more integrated learning experience.

3.3 Challenges Faced and Overcoming Barriers

Participants identified several challenges encountered during their engagement in the collaborative learning environment at UKI Toraja, most notably language barriers and differing academic expectations. These challenges reveal important areas for improvement within the program and highlight the complex nature of intercultural collaboration.

One recurring issue was difficulty in understanding local dialects and informal language. Participant 1 noted that unfamiliar slang and regional variations in speech occasionally disrupted communication. To overcome this, they adopted a range of strategies, including asking clarifying questions, relying on non-verbal cues such as body language, and using digital tools like translation apps to aid comprehension.

Participant 2 discussed difficulties in adapting to differing academic expectations, especially in relation to group work. Unlike the more individual-oriented academic culture in Madagascar, the Indonesian approach emphasizes group harmony and collective responsibility. This cultural shift initially led to confusion, but the participant managed to adapt by seeking support and guidance from their Indonesian peers on how to navigate collaborative assignments effectively. These findings underscore the presence of high-context communication within the Indonesian cultural setting, where much of the meaning is conveyed implicitly through non-verbal cues and shared understanding rather than explicit verbal expression. For students unfamiliar with such communication norms, particularly those from more low-context or direct communication cultures, this can pose a significant adjustment challenge.

Moreover, the contrast in academic norms reflects deeper cultural differences related to individualism versus collectivism. Malagasy students, coming from a more individualistic educational context, may initially struggle with the Indonesian preference for consensus, cooperation, and group cohesion. These experiences highlight the need for intercultural competence development—not just in terms of language learning, but also in understanding differing educational practices, communication styles, and cultural values.

Importantly, the strategies employed by participants to address these challenges—such as active questioning, use of technology, and open peer communication—demonstrate adaptability and resilience in intercultural settings. These coping mechanisms are essential components of intercultural

competence, reflecting students' ability to manage cultural differences constructively and collaboratively.

3.4 Recommendations for Improvement: Enhancing the Collaborative Framework

Participants offered several constructive suggestions aimed at enhancing the collaborative learning experience, with a particular focus on the need for improved cultural preparation and language support. These recommendations underscore the importance of equipping students with the tools necessary to navigate intercultural environments effectively.

Participant 3 emphasized the value of structured cultural orientation sessions prior to the commencement of collaborative activities. Such sessions, they noted, would help students anticipate and better understand the cultural differences they were likely to encounter. Participant 1 echoed this sentiment and proposed more frequent feedback opportunities, along with targeted language support—especially in relation to dialects and informal language use—which often posed challenges during group interactions.

These suggestions align with best practices in international education, particularly the use of pre-departure or early-stage orientation programs. Providing structured cultural preparation can significantly reduce the uncertainty students may feel in unfamiliar cultural contexts, fostering greater confidence and adaptability in intercultural interactions. Likewise, ongoing feedback mechanisms and language support initiatives can help students address misunderstandings early and develop more effective communication strategies over time.

Implementing these improvements would not only enhance students' academic and social integration but also contribute to the development of deeper intercultural competence. By creating a more supportive and responsive learning environment, institutions like UKI Toraja can maximize the benefits of collaborative learning across cultures, ensuring that all participants are well-equipped to thrive in diverse educational settings.

3.5 Observation data

In September 2024, a series of observations were conducted at UKI Toraja to evaluate the dynamics of collaborative learning activities involving Malagasy Darmasiswa scholars and Indonesian English Education students. These observations focused on both formal academic settings and informal social interactions, providing valuable insights into how intercultural engagement unfolded in practice.

During a group project presentation, participants demonstrated their ability to collaborate effectively across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Bahasa Indonesia and English served as the primary languages of communication, allowing both Malagasy and Indonesian students to actively participate. The content of the project reflected a thoughtful integration of cultural perspectives, combining Malagasy agricultural practices with Indonesian environmental conservation strategies. This collaborative effort not only highlighted mutual respect but also underscored the capacity for diverse cultural knowledge to inform shared academic goals—particularly in areas like sustainable development.

Following the presentation, a cultural exchange event offered students a more informal platform to share their heritage. Malagasy scholars introduced elements of Malagasy culture through traditional performances and cuisine, while Indonesian students contributed by preparing local dishes such as *nasi goreng* and *pantollo' pamarrasan*, a traditional Torajan dish. These exchanges sparked enthusiastic dialogue about culinary customs and cultural traditions. Traditional dance performances further enriched the experience, as students from both groups participated and expressed appreciation for each other's heritage. These interactions cultivated deeper intercultural empathy and mutual respect.

Additionally, an informal social gathering held at a local café created space for more personal conversations. In this relaxed setting, students openly discussed their cultural backgrounds, daily routines, and educational experiences. These informal dialogues helped strengthen interpersonal

bonds and fostered a deeper understanding of cultural similarities and differences beyond the classroom environment.

Overall, the observations revealed that both structured academic tasks and informal social activities played a significant role in promoting intercultural understanding, enhancing language proficiency, and nurturing positive social relationships. The integration of academic collaboration, cultural exchange, and social engagement created a well-rounded and immersive learning environment, contributing meaningfully to the development of intercultural competence among participants.

The overarching goal of the research was to assess the impact of collaborative learning activities between Malagasy Darmasiswa scholars and Indonesian English Education students at UKI Toraja. The observational findings, combined with interview data, offer a holistic perspective on how such interactions support language development, academic integration, and the cultivation of intercultural awareness and empathy.

3.5.1 Intercultural Understanding and Interaction

a. Cultural Insights and Appreciation

The cultural exchange between Malagasy Darmasiswa scholars and Indonesian English Education students at UKI Toraja emerged as a vital component of their collaborative learning experience. This interaction offered both groups meaningful insights and fostered a deeper appreciation for one another's cultural heritage. Through shared experiences and daily interactions, participants developed greater intercultural sensitivity and awareness.

Malagasy students reported that their time in Indonesia significantly enriched their understanding of the host culture, particularly in areas such as social norms, traditional practices, and everyday life. They expressed gratitude for the opportunity to actively participate in Indonesian festivals and community events, which enabled them to engage directly with local traditions. These immersive experiences allowed them to observe and internalize Indonesian values in a way that extended beyond academic learning. As Haykal et al. (2024) emphasize, such experiential engagement is essential for developing intercultural competence, as it allows students to navigate and understand cultural nuances first-hand. The Malagasy scholars' participation in local rituals and communal gatherings contributed to a more authentic and profound connection with Indonesian life, reinforcing the educational value of real-world cultural immersion.

On the other side, Indonesian students described their interaction with Malagasy scholars as equally enlightening. They were particularly fascinated by Madagascar's distinctive cultural expressions, including its traditional cuisine, social customs, and everyday practices. Many students noted that their curiosity and respect for foreign cultures grew as a result of these direct encounters. Wahab (2007) underscores the significance of face-to-face cultural engagement in fostering intercultural understanding—a point clearly reflected in the students' experiences. Learning about Madagascar through interpersonal relationships, rather than relying solely on textbooks or classroom instruction, made the learning process more vivid, personal, and impactful. This exchange broadened the Indonesian students' global perspectives and deepened their appreciation for cultural diversity.

Overall, the cultural exchange fostered a process of mutual enrichment. Both Malagasy and Indonesian students benefitted from meaningful, direct interactions that promoted empathy, curiosity, and mutual respect. These experiences not only enhanced their intercultural competence but also contributed to dismantling stereotypes and building lasting cross-cultural relationships. The findings reaffirm the importance of incorporating structured cultural exchange programs into academic settings to cultivate global awareness, mutual understanding, and a more inclusive educational environment.

b. Enhanced Cross-Cultural Communication

The cultural exchange between the Malagasy scholar and Indonesian students played a significant role in enhancing cross-cultural communication skills for both parties. For the Malagasy participant, engaging in cultural exchange activities served as a valuable opportunity to improve their ability to communicate with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Immersed in a new environment, the scholar learned to interpret and respond to local verbal and non-verbal cues, such as body language, social etiquette, and conversational norms unique to Indonesian culture (Laycock et al., 2017). This required them to adjust their communication style to effectively engage with their Indonesian peers. As a result, they became more adept at expressing themselves in ways that were both respectful and culturally appropriate, demonstrating an increased capacity to navigate cultural nuances.

Similarly, Indonesian students found the presence of the Malagasy scholar to be a powerful learning experience that heightened their cultural awareness. Through direct interaction, they became more attuned to subtle differences in communication styles and more conscious of how their own cultural norms influenced their behavior. Engaging with someone from a different cultural background encouraged them to practice active listening and cultivate empathy—both essential components of effective cross-cultural communication (Y. Liu & Wang, 2023). This exposure helped Indonesian students appreciate varying degrees of directness and formality in communication, prompting greater openness and sensitivity in their interactions.

Overall, the exchange facilitated a mutual development of intercultural communication competence. Both the Malagasy scholar and the Indonesian students refined their ability to engage with individuals from diverse cultural contexts, which is increasingly critical in today's interconnected world. As Lifintsev and Wellbrock (2019) suggest, such exchanges underscore the importance of adaptability, empathy, and cultural sensitivity in fostering meaningful and respectful cross-cultural relationships. The experience not only enhanced their communication skills but also reinforced the broader value of intercultural understanding in academic and social settings.

3.5.2 Language Development

a. Improvements in Language Proficiency

The cultural exchange between Malagasy scholars and Indonesian students led to notable improvements in language proficiency for both groups. Many Malagasy students reported significant gains in their English language skills due to consistent practice and regular interaction with Indonesian peers. They particularly valued the opportunity to use English in authentic, real-life contexts, which helped build their fluency and boost their confidence. In addition to English, immersion in an Indonesian-speaking environment further enhanced their linguistic development. Engaging in daily conversations, academic discussions, and social interactions allowed them to refine their Indonesian language abilities in a practical and immersive way. This constant exposure helped them grasp nuances such as idiomatic expressions, regional accents, and informal speech patterns. As Dea et al. (2022) suggest, such immersive learning environments are particularly effective in strengthening language skills. Similarly, S. Liu and Kinginger (2021) emphasize that navigating diverse communicative situations fosters self-assurance in language use—a crucial component in achieving proficiency.

Indonesian students also experienced meaningful language development during the exchange. Their interaction with the Malagasy scholar provided regular exposure to the French and Malagasy languages, particularly in casual conversations. While formal instruction in these languages may have been limited, informal exchanges allowed Indonesian students to acquire basic vocabulary, common greetings, and expressions that are frequently used in everyday settings. Many of them noted that these real-world interactions offered more effective language learning experiences than traditional classroom instruction. This exposure also deepened their cultural awareness, helping them recognize how

language reflects broader cultural values and social behaviors. The presence of a native Malagasy speaker offered a unique opportunity to appreciate the complexities of language acquisition, especially in the context of cross-cultural communication.

Overall, the exchange created a dynamic and interactive environment where language learning was driven by necessity, curiosity, and real-life application. For Malagasy scholars, the focus was on achieving fluency in Indonesian through immersive engagement, while for Indonesian students, it involved developing foundational skills in French or Malagasy and understanding the linguistic aspects of another culture. As Gao (2023) points out, these language improvements were central to building stronger communication skills and forging deeper intercultural connections. The experience underscored the role of language as a powerful bridge in promoting understanding and meaningful interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds.

b. Challenges with Language Barriers.

The cultural exchange between Malagasy scholars and Indonesian students revealed several communication challenges stemming from language barriers. Malagasy students, despite having some prior exposure to Indonesian, encountered difficulties in navigating the complexities of the language. Elements such as regional dialects, colloquial expressions, and informal slang used by their Indonesian peers often proved confusing. These subtleties, while commonplace for native speakers, posed significant hurdles for the Malagasy participants, especially during academic discussions or social interactions that required fluency in local idiomatic language. Misunderstandings were not uncommon, and at times, these communication gaps led to feelings of frustration or exclusion, limiting the scholars' ability to fully engage in both academic and community life.

Indonesian students also faced challenges in their interactions with the Malagasy scholar. Many found it difficult to understand the Malagasy accent and specific French vocabulary that occasionally surfaced during conversations. Pronunciation differences, unfamiliar intonation patterns, and the occasional use of Malagasy cultural references or idiomatic phrases added layers of complexity to communication. These linguistic differences sometimes hindered spontaneous dialogue and made it harder for Indonesian students to respond appropriately in casual or collaborative settings. The lack of familiarity with the Malagasy language also limited their ability to explore deeper cultural exchanges, as language remained a barrier to mutual understanding.

In addition to disrupting communication, language barriers occasionally resulted in feelings of isolation for both groups. Malagasy scholars may have felt disconnected due to their limited ability to fully express themselves or grasp the intricacies of the local language. At the same time, Indonesian students sometimes expressed uncertainty about how to communicate meaningfully with their international peers, which could lead to hesitation or reduced interaction. These dynamics, if left unaddressed, risked creating missed opportunities for deeper intercultural learning and collaboration.

To mitigate these challenges, both groups often turned to alternative communication strategies such as gestures, visual aids, simplified language, or translation tools. Some participants also made individual efforts to improve their language proficiency through additional study or peer support. As Nguyen (2022) notes, overcoming language barriers in intercultural contexts requires patience, empathy, and a commitment to understanding others despite linguistic limitations. The experience ultimately emphasized the importance of these qualities in facilitating meaningful connections and fostering inclusive cross-cultural engagement.

Although language barriers presented significant obstacles, they also highlighted the essential role of language proficiency in enabling effective and enriching cultural exchanges. The difficulties faced by both Malagasy scholars and Indonesian students underscore the need for sustained language

support and resources in future programs. Addressing these needs not only supports more fluent communication but also enhances the overall quality and depth of intercultural interactions.

3.5.3 Academic Integration

a. Academic Collaboration and Success

Academic collaboration between the Malagasy scholar and Indonesian students at UKI Toraja proved to be a valuable component of the cultural exchange, offering both groups significant opportunities for growth and mutual learning. The Malagasy scholar reported that working on joint academic projects provided them with a clearer understanding of the academic standards and expectations within the institution. These collaborative experiences helped them feel more integrated into the academic community and were instrumental in navigating coursework more effectively. Support from Indonesian peers, particularly in adapting to local academic norms, contributed to a sense of belonging and academic confidence.

From the Indonesian students' perspective, partnering with the Malagasy scholar in group projects and other academic activities broadened their perspectives and improved their collaborative competencies. They noted that the diverse insights offered by their Malagasy counterpart introduced new ways of thinking and problem-solving. Exposure to different academic backgrounds and cultural interpretations enriched classroom discussions and deepened their understanding of global issues. The integration of these diverse viewpoints contributed to a more dynamic and inclusive academic environment, where both sides were encouraged to think critically and reflect on their own academic assumptions.

The collaborative exchange created a unique platform for cross-cultural academic partnerships through activities such as joint research, co-authored papers, and shared participation in seminars and workshops. These experiences encouraged meaningful intellectual engagement and often led to innovative ideas and improved academic outcomes. As participants exchanged feedback and engaged in peer learning, they developed stronger communication and research skills that extended beyond the classroom. However, the collaboration was not without challenges. As Abuarqoub (2019) notes, language barriers and differing academic traditions sometimes hindered effective teamwork. Misalignment in communication styles, expectations, and familiarity with academic conventions required both sides to practice patience and adaptability.

To overcome these obstacles, participants employed various strategies, including the use of bilingual resources, clarification of project goals, and open discussions about expectations. Drobot (2022) emphasizes the importance of cultural awareness in academic collaboration, and this awareness played a crucial role in enabling participants to bridge differences in academic practices and align methodologies. Despite initial difficulties, the participants demonstrated a strong commitment to collaboration, which ultimately strengthened their academic relationships and contributed to long-term professional development.

In conclusion, the academic collaboration between Malagasy and Indonesian participants highlighted the transformative potential of intercultural engagement in higher education. While challenges related to communication and academic norms were present, they also served as opportunities for growth, resilience, and innovation. The experience reinforced the value of cross-cultural teamwork in promoting academic success, fostering global awareness, and laying the foundation for continued research partnerships in the future.

b. Challenges in Academic Settings

During the cultural exchange, some Malagasy scholars encountered challenges in adapting to different academic approaches and group work dynamics. They noted that early misunderstandings regarding group roles, responsibilities, and project expectations sometimes led to confusion and inefficiencies. Differences in communication styles and prior academic experiences contributed to these

difficulties, particularly in collaborative settings where clear coordination was essential. Despite their willingness to contribute, the lack of initial clarity occasionally hindered smooth participation and integration within group activities.

Indonesian students also observed similar challenges, pointing to variations in educational backgrounds and academic norms as factors that complicated collaboration. Coordinating tasks and aligning expectations required extra effort when team members approached problem-solving or task management differently. Some students suggested that establishing clearer guidelines at the start of group projects—such as defining roles, setting timelines, and holding regular check-ins—could significantly enhance the collaborative process. These adjustments, they believed, would foster greater understanding and improve the overall effectiveness of cross-cultural teamwork.

3.5.4. Social Integration and Relationships

a. Building Friendships and Networks

The cultural exchange between the Malagasy scholar and Indonesian students played a pivotal role in fostering friendships and cultivating a sense of belonging within the university community. The Malagasy scholar expressed that participating in social activities and group events was instrumental in helping them integrate into campus life. These informal gatherings provided opportunities to interact with Indonesian peers in relaxed, supportive settings. Through shared meals, cultural festivals, and campus events, the scholar felt more connected to their Indonesian counterparts and appreciated the welcoming atmosphere that these experiences fostered.

Indonesian students, in turn, valued the opportunity to build relationships with the Malagasy scholar, noting that the presence of someone from a different cultural background enriched their social environment. They appreciated the unique perspectives and cultural diversity the scholar brought into their circles. Collaborative activities, both academic and social, helped bridge cultural and social gaps, creating inclusive spaces where students from different backgrounds could connect and thrive. These shared experiences fostered empathy, mutual respect, and an appreciation for intercultural dialogue.

The exchange facilitated not only personal friendships but also the expansion of academic and professional networks. By working together on group projects, attending workshops, and engaging in extracurricular activities, participants were able to connect with peers, mentors, and professionals from a variety of disciplines. As Vilas-Boas et al. (2018) suggest, close collaboration in academic and social settings allows individuals to develop deeper interpersonal bonds by learning about each other's backgrounds, values, and lived experiences. These interactions nurtured mutual understanding and often led to continued collaboration beyond the duration of the exchange.

Professionally, the relationships formed during the program opened pathways to future research opportunities and interdisciplinary collaboration. The exchange helped participants establish a broader network of contacts, enhancing access to diverse knowledge, resources, and support systems. This network-building was not limited to the confines of the university—many participants remained in touch after the exchange, continuing to share insights, collaborate on academic work, and support each other's career development.

In summary, the social and professional connections developed during the exchange had a lasting impact on both Malagasy and Indonesian participants. Beyond strengthening intercultural friendships, these relationships fostered an inclusive academic culture and contributed to the formation of a more globally connected professional community. The experience underscored the powerful role of social interaction in promoting long-term engagement, cultural understanding, and academic collaboration.

b. Challenges in Social Integration

The process of social integration for Malagasy scholars and Indonesian students during the exchange program involved a series of challenges that influenced their ability to connect and fully

engage within each other's social environments. Some Malagasy students reported initial difficulties in adapting to local customs and social norms, often feeling out of place during the early stages of their stay. Differences in daily behaviors, communication styles, and social etiquette required them to make continuous adjustments, which, at times, led to feelings of discomfort or hesitation in social settings.

Indonesian students also acknowledged that navigating cultural differences in interpersonal interactions demanded sensitivity, patience, and intentional effort. While many made efforts to create a welcoming environment for their Malagasy peers, they recognized that miscommunications or misunderstandings occasionally arose. These were often rooted in cultural assumptions or differing interpretations of social behavior. Despite their goodwill, Indonesian students noted that creating inclusive social spaces required more than just hospitality—it required an ongoing awareness of cultural nuance.

One of the most persistent obstacles to social integration was language. Although both groups shared some level of proficiency in a common language, often English or Indonesian, subtle linguistic differences, including idioms, tone, or informal expressions, sometimes led to confusion or feelings of exclusion. As Mustafa et al. (2023) explain, even when a shared language exists, effective communication is not guaranteed. These barriers often limited participation in casual conversations or group interactions, particularly in unstructured or informal settings where language flexibility plays a crucial role in making connections.

Cultural stereotypes and preconceived notions further complicated social integration. According to Miller et al. (2012), stereotypes can subtly influence behavior and expectations, leading to misunderstandings or social distance. Both Malagasy scholars and Indonesian students may have encountered biased assumptions—whether overt or unintentional—that affected their willingness to engage openly. Breaking through these barriers required deliberate openness and a commitment to understanding each other beyond surface-level cultural representations.

Another challenge involved navigating social structures and networks. Malagasy scholars, as newcomers, often faced difficulties establishing their place within existing Indonesian social circles. Simultaneously, Indonesian students sometimes struggled to incorporate their international peers into established social routines. These barriers highlighted the importance of structured support systems—such as intercultural workshops, social mixers, and peer mentoring programs—to facilitate smoother integration and promote inclusion.

A central factor in social integration was the development of a sense of belonging. As Gidron and Hall (2020) emphasize, feeling accepted within a new cultural environment involves balancing the preservation of one's cultural identity with adaptation to new social norms. Both Malagasy scholars and Indonesian students had to navigate this complex process. Building trust, finding shared experiences, and developing mutual understanding were essential steps toward establishing meaningful relationships and feeling truly connected.

Despite the challenges, the experience of overcoming these obstacles often led to increased personal growth and deeper intercultural awareness. By engaging in open dialogue, participating in inclusive activities, and receiving targeted support, participants were better able to adapt, connect, and contribute to a diverse and collaborative environment. Ultimately, these efforts enriched the exchange experience and highlighted the value of intentional, culturally responsive approaches to social integration.

3.5.5. Overall Effectiveness and Recommendations

a. Positive Impact of Collaborative Learning

Both Malagasy scholars and Indonesian students agreed that the collaborative learning activities were highly effective in promoting intercultural understanding and improving language proficiency. As noted by La'biran and Dewi (2023), participants appreciated the structured opportunities for meaningful engagement, which allowed them to share perspectives, practice communication skills, and

learn from each other's cultural backgrounds. These interactions fostered mutual respect and created a dynamic learning environment that benefited all involved.

To further enhance the impact of such programs, participants recommended increasing the frequency of structured cultural orientation sessions to help ease the transition into new academic and social contexts. They also emphasized the need for additional language support to address communication challenges more effectively. Suggestions included clearer guidelines for group projects to ensure smoother collaboration and more opportunities for informal social interactions, such as cultural exchanges, peer bonding events, and casual gatherings. These initiatives, they believed, would strengthen interpersonal connections and deepen the overall intercultural experience.

4. CONCLUSION

The observations conducted on September 2024, reveal that the collaborative learning activities between Malagasy *Darmasiswa* scholar and Indonesian English Education student at UKI Toraja have been highly effective in fostering intercultural understanding and enhancing language skills. The group project presentation demonstrated successful collaboration, with participants integrating and respecting each other's cultural perspectives on sustainable development. The cultural exchange event, featuring traditional foods and performances, not only enriched participants' cultural knowledge but also facilitated genuine appreciation and dialogue between the two groups. The informal social gathering further strengthened personal connections and provided a relaxed setting for deeper cultural exchange. Overall, these activities have significantly contributed to building meaningful relationships, improving language proficiency, and promoting a broader cultural awareness. The findings underscore the importance of both structured and informal interactions in creating a supportive and enriching environment for intercultural learning. Future programs can benefit from incorporating more structured cultural orientations and tailored language support to address specific challenges and further enhance the collaborative experience.

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