

Indonesian Pre-Service English Teachers' Experiences and Perspectives on Participating in a Student Exchange Program: A Qualitative Study

Markus Deli Girik Allo¹, Roni La'biran², Adaninggar Septi Subekti³, Lemmuela Alvita Kurniawati⁴, Judith Ratu Tandi Arrang⁵, Sushy Teko Patanduk⁶

¹ Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja, Indonesia; markusdeli@ukitoraja.ac.id

² Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja, Indonesia; ronilabiran@ukitoraja.ac.id

³ Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana, Indonesia; adaninggar@staff.ukdw.ac.id

⁴ Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana, Indonesia; pipitkh@staff.ukdw.ac.id

⁵ Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja, Indonesia; sushy@ukitoraja.ac.id

⁶ Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja, Indonesia; judithratu@ukitoraja.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Student exchange programs such as Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) offer valuable opportunities for pre-service teachers to gain teaching experience, enhance language skills, and develop intercultural competence. However, limited research has explored participants' lived experiences and perspectives within these programs. This qualitative study investigated the experiences and perspectives of five Indonesian pre-service English teachers who participated in the MBKM student exchange program for one semester. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion, then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes. The findings revealed that participants experienced notable professional and personal growth. Key experiences included virtual teaching, classroom observations of diverse pedagogical methods, improved English language proficiency, and enhanced cultural adaptability. Participants also articulated their perspectives on the student exchange program across three main dimensions: the program's definition, its academic and cultural scope, and its perceived significance. They recognized the program as a platform for cross-cultural engagement and professional development. The MBKM student exchange program positively impacted the participants by broadening their pedagogical insight, fostering language development, and strengthening their readiness to teach in diverse contexts. These findings suggest that such programs are instrumental in preparing globally competent educators. This study underscores the value of student exchange initiatives in teacher education. Institutions and policymakers are encouraged to sustain and expand such programs to maximize their benefits for future educators.

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Corresponding Author:

Markus Deli Girik Allo

Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja; markusdeli@ukitoraja.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

Student exchange programs are increasingly popular in higher education, as they provide students with opportunities to gain new perspectives, develop new skills, and broaden their cultural awareness. In the context of teacher education, exchange programs can be particularly valuable, as they expose pre-service teachers to different teaching methods, pedagogies, and cultural contexts. Despite the potential benefits of student exchange programs for pre-service teachers, there is a lack of research on the experiences and perspectives of participants. By investigating the experiences and perspectives of pre-service teachers who participated in the exchange program, this study aims to fill this gap in the literature and provide valuable and perhaps unique insights into the effectiveness of exchange programs for pre-service teacher education.

Many countries are now placing greater emphasis on global competence and cultural awareness in their teacher education programs (Carter, 2020). Exchange programs can provide valuable opportunities for pre-service teachers to gain practical experience in different cultural and educational settings, which can enhance their ability to work effectively with diverse student populations (Arthur, Becker, Dressler, Crossman, & Kawalilak, 2020). Then, there is a need to evaluate the effectiveness of exchange programs in achieving their intended outcomes. While exchange programs are increasingly popular in higher education, there is limited research on their possible impacts on pre-service teacher education. This study can help to identify the benefits and challenges of exchange programs for pre-service teachers, and inform the development of future programs that are more effective in meeting their goals (Harrell, Sterner, Alter, & Lonie, 2017). In addition, this study is driven by the need to improve the quality of teacher education programs. By investigating the experiences and perspectives of pre-service teachers who participated in an exchange program, this study can provide insights into how teacher education programs can better prepare pre-service teachers for the challenges of teaching in a diverse and increasingly globalized world. Universities in both developing and developed nations use student exchange programs as the first mechanism to increase collaboration between universities (Atalar, 2020).

Several researchers in various fields have investigated student exchange programs. A study by Katsumata Shah, Jactat, Yasui, and Ismailov (2023) reported that the effectiveness and user-friendliness of student exchange programs improved significantly as a result of receiving feedback. Another study by Aldén-Joyce et al. (2023) found that Tanzanian nursing students gained advantages from their participation in a student exchange program which impacted them positively both on a personal level and in terms of their future nursing careers. Jaya and Saputri (2023) discovered that students faced various difficulties during their virtual exchange program, which may arise from themselves, the coursework, or even their home institution. Additionally, their study indicated that students must identify and implement specific strategies to overcome these challenges effectively. Furthermore, Suryanto, Ayuza, and Othman (2022), reported that the involvement of students in international student exchange programs facilitated their ability to establish friendships with people from different countries, engage in conversations with native English speakers, enhance their English language proficiency, and increase their level of self-assurance. These aforementioned studies seemed to suggest the multiple benefits of joining student exchange programs for students. Previous studies about student exchange programs can be visualised using the *VOSviewer* application, and this can be seen in Figure 1.

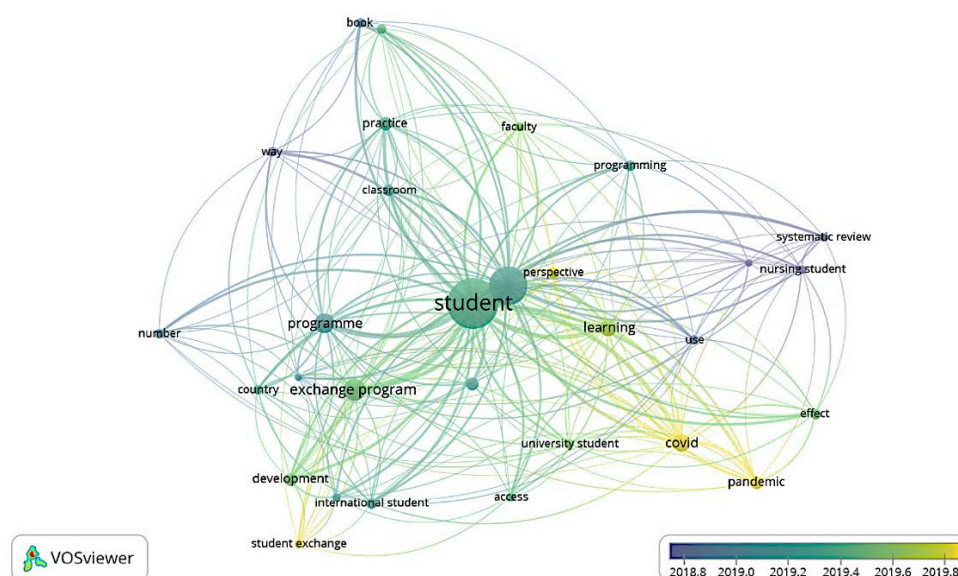


Figure 1. Visualization using *VOSviewer* by year 2018-2023 on Student Exchange Programs

Despite the reiterated benefits of student exchange programs, their effectiveness should not be taken for granted. Management of student exchange programs involves a comprehensive process that begins with planning and organizing and concludes with evaluating (Andari, Windasari, Setiawan, & Rifqi, 2021), suggesting the programs need to be continuously evaluated by the universities involved to find the possible drawbacks and areas for improvement in the future.

In Indonesia, student exchange programs are getting more popular and widespread due to the *Merdeka Belajar - Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) (Freedom to Learn) policy issued by the Indonesian Minister of Education and Culture in 2021. The policy aims to encourage students to possess various disciplines necessary for their future careers. Among various programs in this government policy is *Pertukaran Mahasiswa* (University Student Exchange). Perhaps due to this popularity, many Indonesian authors seemed to be interested in investigating various aspects of the MBKM policy (Adri et al., 2023; Herman, 2023; Syahrudin & Tambaip, 2023; Wibisono & Umiyati, 2023; Yuni et al., 2023). In their study, Adri et al. (2023) and Herman (2023) investigated the implementation of MBKM and policy related to MBKM. The study results showed that the policy to implement MBKM issued by the departments resulted in positive results. Despite the funding issues for MBKM implementation, students who joined MBKM gained many benefits, i.e., increasing creativity and innovation and improving student learning motivation. Similarly, studies conducted by Syahrudin and Tambaip (2023), as well as Wibisono and Umiyati (2023), investigated the implementation of MBKM in higher education. The results of both studies showed that MBKM was implemented in the departments as one of the policies in the curriculum. Both studies found there were many benefits for the students joining the program. However, both studies also found some challenges in implementing MBKM in higher education. In addition, Yuni et al. (2023) conducted a study on students' perceptions and attitudes of MBKM in higher education. The findings showed that the implementation of Merdeka Belajar had positive impacts on private universities, i.e., expanded networking with industry and business sectors, increasing networks with other universities, and improving education quality. Albeit the possible contributions of these studies, studies delving into details about the MBKM programs, especially the student exchange program, are necessary. Involving the participating students in such studies could also be worthwhile considering that they are the actors experiencing the program first-hand.

UKI Toraja implements the government-mandated MBKM program, including student exchanges. In the English Language Education Study Program, improvements have been made over two

semesters, such as upgrading facilities and peer mentoring to address technical issues and enhance teaching quality. Initially limited to internal exchanges, the program now partners with seven universities, including Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana (UKDW). While GPA improvements show positive academic impact, affective and behavioral outcomes remain less explored. This study seeks to answer: What are the experiences and perspectives of Indonesian pre-service English teachers at UKI Toraja participating in a student exchange program at UKDW?

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

The present study employed a qualitative design. Qualitative research is a methodological approach that aims to comprehend the significance and encounter of human phenomena, including behaviors, values, attitudes, and beliefs, by gathering and analyzing data that cannot be quantified (Creswell, 2007). This study used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions guided by a checklist with open-ended questions like “Is there any experience during the student exchange program that you like or dislike?” and “Did you learn something from joining the program?” Focus group discussions encouraged participants to share and build on each other’s experiences. Combining both methods enriched the data—interviews captured personal insights, while focus groups revealed collective perspectives. This approach enhanced the credibility and depth of findings for a more comprehensive understanding of participants’ experiences.

2.2 Participants and Setting

Five pre-service English teachers from UKI Toraja, four females and one male, joined an exchange program at UKDW Yogyakarta during the first semester of 2022/2023. Though national, the exchange spanned about 1,100 km between Sulawesi and Java islands, offering rich cultural and educational learning experiences.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions in January–February 2023, after the exchange program ended. Conducted in Indonesian, the sessions were recorded, transcribed, translated into English, and analyzed using Thematic Analysis. This method involved coding the data, identifying key themes, and organizing them to reflect participants' experiences. (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

2.4 Ethical Consideration

The present study took at least two ethical principles into consideration. First, the principle of autonomy was adhered where participation was fully voluntary (Gray, 2014). Second, this study maintains the confidentiality of the participants through the uses of pseudonyms throughout this research report (Israel & Hay, 2006).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the research have to be supported by sufficient data. The research results and the discovery must be the answers, or the research hypothesis stated previously in the introduction part.

3.1 Finding

Data related to pre-service teachers’ experiences and perspectives of the students exchange program were collected through interviews and focus group discussions. Here is an explanation of the data finding.

3.1.1 The experiences of UKI Toraja pre-service teachers in the student exchange program

3.1.1.1 Virtual teaching: Collaborating with other educators online and developing new teaching strategies and approaches.

The elaboration of pre-service teachers' experiences in the implementation of student exchange is sourced from interview data and Focus Group Discussions. As conveyed by Nita, the following shared her practical experience of teaching virtually during the student exchange program which she found very valuable and challenging:

"I joined the UKI Toraja–UKDW exchange and taught online for the first time. It was a valuable and challenging experience, especially as my first teaching practice."

The same thing was conveyed by Andre. He faces the biggest challenge of teaching online in terms of how to motivate students remotely. In addition, he also faced technical matters, namely the internet network and audio equipment used, as conveyed by Andre in the interview excerpt as follows:

"The biggest challenge was keeping students engaged and motivated online, along with technical issues like poor internet and audio problems."

In the focus group discussions, Andre explained the efforts he made and the solutions to every challenge he faced in virtual teaching. He took a creative step by asking for feedback from his students on the implementation of virtual teaching so that it became evaluation material for the next meeting. This was conveyed as follows:

"I try to stay calm and find creative solutions to every problem. I also take time to talk to students and listen to their input on what works and doesn't work in virtual learning."

Stevan also explained the advantages of teaching virtually through a focus group discussion. He shared his experience about the flexibility of virtual teaching. According to him, virtual teaching is more effective in terms of distance and time compared to face-to-face in the classroom. As he explained as follows:

"The biggest advantage of virtual teaching is flexibility—I can teach from anywhere at flexible times, and reach distant students effectively."

Sintia shared an in-depth interview about what was the most valuable lesson from her virtual teaching experience. Her statement is still related to the experience faced by Stevan mentioned above that virtual learning is considered very effective if using the right technology and pre-service teachers should prepare a clear learning plan. As she stated in the interview excerpt as follows:

"I learned that virtual teaching works well with good technology use, clear planning, and regular student engagement."

Lita, through focus group discussions, shared her thoughts about how her experience of virtual teaching will help her in her future career as a teacher. She said that the virtual teaching activity she participated in became a very valuable learning to develop her professional career. In the future, virtual teaching will be further developed to become teachers who are more flexible and can adapt to change. This is explained as follows:

"This experience made me more flexible and better equipped to teach virtually using technology"

Pre-service teachers from UKI Toraja joined virtual teaching sessions with UKDW students, exposing them to diverse learning contexts. Through online collaboration, they developed new teaching strategies, broadened their perspectives, and improved communication and technological skills. These sessions also gave them valuable practical experience applying their theoretical knowledge.

3.1.1.2 Classroom observations: Comparing and contrasting different teaching methodologies.

In the student exchange program between Toraja Indonesian Christian University and Duta Wacana Christian University, students as pre-service teachers get the opportunity for virtual teaching exercises and virtual classroom observations. The following is Andre's experience for classroom observation through focus group discussions:

"I'm Andre, a pre-service teacher who joined an online exchange between UKI Toraja and UKDW, where I observed and learned from teachers virtually"

Further, Andre shared more about the classroom observations he conducted as part of the program. He underlined a variety of teaching methods, including group work and interactive activities:

"I observed various class simulations and was impressed by how teachers from both universities engaged students online using group work and interactive methods.."

In line with Andre, Lita shared her experience about the differences in teaching methods between pre-service teachers from Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja and Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana. Below is the statement of Lita through focus group discussions:

"I saw a strong focus on collaboration and multimedia use, which I found effective and plan to use in my own teaching."

Through the interview activity, Stevan expressed his feelings he gained from his experience with the online student exchange program related to classroom observations. He elaborated on the different teaching methods and how to engage students in an online setting.

"I learned new teaching methods, connected with UKDW peers, and became a more adaptable teacher."

As part of an exchange between UKI Toraja and UKDW, pre-service teachers observed diverse teaching methods, gaining broader insights into educational practices. By comparing styles, classroom management, and technology use, they deepened their understanding of teaching. Exposure to different cultural contexts also helped them learn how to adapt their methods to meet the needs of diverse learners.

3.1.1.3 Improved language skills

Another key theme was language improvement. Stevan shared that the exchange was a great chance to practice his language skills and interact with diverse students from UKDW.

"I joined the program to practice my language skills and interact with UKDW students."

Further, Stevan explained how the program helped to improve his language skills. He said that he practiced his English language skills by communicating with the students from Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana, who are fluent in English, as he said below through interview:

"I practiced English with UKDW students, learned new phrases, and expanded my vocabulary."

Nita, through focus group discussion, talked about the types of activities she did during the student exchange program. She portrayed the weekly online meetings where pre-service teachers would discuss various topics related to language and culture. She also elaborated on the collaborative projects namely creating videos or presentations. Below is Nita's explanation:

"We had weekly online meetings and projects that helped us practice language and learn each other's cultures."

Andre believed that the student exchange program not only has a positive impact on himself but also for all participants of the program. He explained it in a focus group discussion activity as in the following excerpt:

"Yes! The program helps improve language skills and promotes cultural exchange—great experience for pre-service teachers."

Sintia through focus group discussions invites her juniors to participate in the activities of the student exchange program. She provided facts related to the benefits of joining this program, as he conveyed below:

"I'm grateful for this program—it improved my language skills and broadened my perspective. Highly recommend it!"

Pre-service teachers can improve their language skills through online courses, virtual language exchanges, and lessons with online tutors. These options offer flexible, interactive ways to practice with native speakers, develop speaking and listening skills, and access quality instruction—similar to the benefits of a physical exchange program.

3.1.1.4 Personal growth: Adapting to new cultural norms and communicating effectively with the pre-service teachers from different backgrounds

No less interesting experience from interview sessions and group discussions with pre-service teachers from UKI Toraja is personal growth. They shared their experiences of adapting to new cultural norms and communicating effectively with pre-service teachers from different backgrounds. As conveyed by Sintia the following through focus group discussions:

"The program helped us adapt to new cultures through weekly calls, group discussions, and virtual cultural tours with partners from the other university."

Lita talked about the most challenging part of adapting to different communication styles. She learned that there are many different ways of thinking and doing things and that it is important to be understanding and accepting of those differences. As she conveyed below:

"The most valuable lesson I learned was to be open-minded and respectful of other cultures. I became more aware of different perspectives and my own cultural biases, which will help me in working with diverse students."

Nita recommended the exchange program to other pre-service teachers since this program is a great way to gain new perspectives and learn more about different cultures and she gained a lot from the program, both personally and professionally. As she stated below:

"It's a great way to gain new perspectives, learn about other cultures, and connect with pre-service teachers. I grew personally and professionally"

Participating in an exchange program pushes individuals out of their comfort zones, leading to personal growth through new skills, perspectives, and resilience. For pre-service teachers, adapting to

new cultural norms builds empathy and cultural competence, while effective communication with diverse groups enhances their ability to teach and connect with others.

3.1.2 The perspective of UKI Toraja pre-service teachers in the student exchange program

UKI Toraja pre-service teachers view the student exchange program through three aspects: definition, dimensions, and significance. Lita described it as a chance to collaborate with students from other universities, both locally and internationally, and to share cultural experiences:

“The student exchange program provides opportunities for students to study at partner universities in other countries or the same country. This program is designed to promote cultural exchange and to provide students with a global perspective.”

In line with Lita's concept, Sintia also understands the student exchange program as an opportunity to introduce each other and learn about each participant's culture. She then added that participants in the program are selected based on academic performance and personal qualities. As follows, interview quotation:

“The program lets students study at another university and experience different cultures, with participants chosen based on academics and personal qualities.”

Stevan also stated that the student exchange program is a program that is implemented in the learning process in the classroom and outside the classroom. He further stated that the participants of this program may live in the destination university with lodging intended by the university or can be chosen by the participants themselves. In addition, according to Stevan, this program is carried out for one semester. Here are the concepts understood by Stevan conveyed through interviews:

“Students join classes, join cultural activities, and live with hosts or in student housing for a semester or year”

Nita responded and gave her definition by not only looking at the time of implementation and location of cooperation partners but also looking at who the parties involved in this program are. As she said in the following interview excerpt:

“As a pre-service teacher, I see the exchange program as a chance to study at another university through institutional partnerships, often with local hosting”

Andre gave his perception as well by adding that this program is beneficial in terms of academic, cultural, and personal experience of the participants. As he said the following:

“The exchange students will have the opportunity to learn about the culture and language of the host university, as well as to gain valuable academic and personal experience.”

After UKI Toraja pre-service teachers perceive the definition and concept of the students exchange program, then they also perceive the dimensions of this program. As mentioned by Nita, the dimension of student exchange is a program for academic horizons and cultural understanding, as she said the following in an interview excerpt:

“The exchange program between UKI Toraja and UKDW offers students a chance to expand their academic and cultural horizons”

Andre perceives the dimensions of student exchange by reviewing his experience in participating in this program. He stated that this program is related to various academic activities such as attending lectures, participating in seminars and workshops, and conducting research in a different academic environment. He presented this as follows:

“From my experience of this program, I have learned that the program offers various academic activities such as attending lectures, participating in seminars and workshops, and conducting research in a different academic environment.”

Stevan also conveyed the dimensions of the student exchange program from the point of view of academic culture, as he conveyed as follows:

“In this program, students have the chance to interact with local students and faculty, learn about the local culture, and participate in various cultural activities.”

Sintia also sees that this program is not only focused on classroom learning activities but also at the global community level. As he conveyed as follows:

“I believe that the academic activity in this student exchange program is designed to provide a well-rounded learning experience that extends beyond the classroom and into the global community.”

Lita also mentioned the dimensions of this program in three scopes, namely cultures, languages, and educational systems. As she conveyed as follows:

“The student exchange program aims to promote cultural exchange and to help students broaden their horizons by experiencing different cultures, languages, and educational systems.”

In addition to the concept and dimensions, UKI Toraja pre-service teachers also perceive the significance of the student exchange program. Through interviews such as those conveyed by Lita that the student exchange program can enhance students' language skills, cross-cultural communication, and ability to adapt to different environments:

“Participating in the student exchange program can enhance students' language skills, cross-cultural communication, and ability to adapt to different environments.”

Sintia views that the student exchange program is a significant program to develop intercultural competence and to gain valuable skills and knowledge that they can apply in their future careers:

“It is a great opportunity for students to develop their intercultural competence and to gain valuable skills and knowledge that they can apply in their future careers.”

Stevan perceives that this program is important for building fundamental cooperation and relationships with each party. With this good relationship, they can start a better career in the future:

“The exchange program helps students improve language skills, gain new perspectives, understand different educational systems, and build valuable connections for their future careers.”

Nita added that the student exchange program benefits the community by applying the knowledge possessed by the participants. Thus, the knowledge can be felt directly by the community:

“The program lets students explore new subjects, learn research methods, and engage in cultural and community activities”

The research shows that pre-service teachers from UKI Toraja have a positive view of their student exchange experience with UKDW. They understand the program's purpose—cultural exchange, academic enrichment, and personal growth. They also recognize its social, cultural, and academic dimensions and see it as a valuable opportunity for developing skills and global competencies. Interviews confirm they find the program meaningful and beneficial for their professional and personal development.

3.2 Discussion

Findings from interviews and discussions reveal that UKI Toraja pre-service teachers gained valuable experience through their exchange with UKDW. Key areas include virtual teaching, classroom observation, language improvement, and personal growth. Despite challenges, the program significantly supported their professional and personal development.

3.2.1 Virtual Teaching

Pre-service teachers like Nita and Andre found virtual teaching both valuable and challenging. Nita viewed it as a key learning experience, while Andre struggled with student engagement and technical issues, which pushed him to find creative solutions and adapt quickly. Stevan highlighted the flexibility of online teaching, and Sintia emphasized the importance of using technology effectively and having clear lesson plans. These experiences show that, despite challenges, virtual teaching promotes professional growth and enhances technical and communication skills. According to a study by Allen et al. (2018), this adaptability can lead to increased reflective practice among educators, prompting them to rethink and refine their instructional strategies. Research by young and Shishido (2023) found that online teaching environments often necessitate continuous professional development. Educators engaged in virtual teaching frequently participate in webinars, online courses, and professional learning communities to enhance their skills, which fosters ongoing professional growth. A study by Hsu and Chen (2019) highlighted that virtual teaching environments significantly improve teachers' technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge (TPACK). Teachers become more proficient with educational technologies, which is essential for effective online instruction. Research by (Haleem et al., 2022) indicated that the necessity of using various digital tools and platforms in virtual teaching enhances educators' digital literacy, making them more adept at integrating technology into their teaching practices.

3.1.2 Classroom Observations

Classroom observations during the exchange program allowed pre-service teachers to explore different teaching methods. Andre and Lita noted the use of group work and interactive activities at UKDW, which inspired them to reflect on and improve their own approaches. Stevan emphasized student engagement online, while Lita highlighted collaboration and multimedia use. These insights broadened their understanding of effective teaching and encouraged adaptability and innovation. A study by (Santos, 2020) found that classroom observations during international exchange programs allow pre-service teachers to observe a variety of teaching methods and educational practices. This exposure helps them understand the strengths and weaknesses of different pedagogical approaches. According to research by (Maijala, 2020), observing classrooms in different cultural and educational contexts introduces pre-service teachers to innovative teaching techniques that they may not encounter in their home country. This broadens their instructional repertoire and encourages the adoption of best practices. Classroom observations encourage critical reflection on one's own teaching practices. A study by (Fadime, 2019) emphasizes the importance of reflective practice in teacher education, noting that observing different methodologies helps pre-service teachers reflect critically on their own pedagogical choices and improve their teaching strategies. Classroom observations provide practical insights that bridge the gap between educational theory and real-world practice. According to Arseven (2018), experiential learning through observations allows pre-service teachers to see the application of theoretical concepts in actual classroom settings, enhancing their understanding and teaching effectiveness.

3.1.3 Improved Language Skills

The exchange program greatly improved pre-service teachers' language skills. Stevan and Nita noted gains in vocabulary and communication through regular interaction with UKDW students. Activities like weekly meetings and projects supported practical language use and cultural exchange. Andre and Sintia also highlighted enhanced language proficiency and cultural understanding, with Sintia recommending the program for its valuable linguistic and cultural benefits. Research by (Durbidge, 2019) on the impact of study abroad programs demonstrates that immersive environments play a crucial role in enhancing language proficiency. Students who participate in exchange programs are exposed to authentic language use in daily interactions, which accelerates their language learning process. A study by (Perez & Poole, 2019) found that students in exchange programs develop higher levels of communicative competence, including improved fluency, pronunciation, and conversational skills, due to the necessity of using the target language in real-life contexts. A study by (Reinhardt, 2019) on second language acquisition highlights that authentic practice in a native-speaking environment, as provided by exchange programs, leads to significant improvements in language skills compared to classroom-based instruction alone.

3.1.4 Personal Growth

The exchange program fostered personal growth by exposing pre-service teachers to new cultural norms and perspectives. Sintia and Lita noted improved empathy and cultural competence through adapting to different communication styles. Nita and Andre highlighted the value of open-mindedness and respect for other cultures. Activities like group discussions and virtual cultural excursions deepened this growth, supporting both personal and professional development. Research by (Nguyen et al., 2018) highlights that exchange programs significantly enhance participants' cultural sensitivity and adaptability. By living in a different cultural environment, pre-service teachers encounter new social norms, customs, and traditions, which broaden their cultural awareness and understanding. According to a study by (Ockerman et al., 2024), exposure to diverse cultural settings through exchange programs helps in developing intercultural competence. This competence includes the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of other cultures, which is a crucial aspect of personal growth. According to Ceo-DiFrancesco et al. (2020), exchange programs often lead to significant personal reflection and identity formation. The experience of living in a different culture allows pre-service teachers to reflect on their own cultural identities and values, fostering personal growth and self-awareness.

3.1.5 Perspective on the Student Exchange Program

Pre-service teachers from UKI Toraja saw the exchange program as offering academic, cultural, and personal benefits. Lita and Sintia viewed it as a chance for cultural exchange and learning, while Stevan and Nita noted its structured mix of academic and extracurricular activities. Andre and Sintia emphasized cultural immersion and community engagement. Overall, the program enhanced language skills, cultural competence, and professional readiness, helping participants become more adaptable and effective educators. Research by Ingraham and (Almulla & Al-Rahmi, 2023) indicates that student exchange programs provide substantial academic benefits, such as improved subject matter knowledge, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Exchange programs expose students to different educational systems and methodologies, enriching their academic experience. As noted by Canals (2020), exchange programs often lead to significant improvements in language skills. Being immersed in a new linguistic environment enhances language acquisition, which is a valuable academic benefit. A study by Chwialkowska (2020) highlights that student exchange programs significantly enhance cultural competence and sensitivity. Participants gain a deeper understanding of cultural diversity and are better prepared to engage in a multicultural world.

4. CONCLUSION

The experiences and perspectives of UKI Toraja pre-service teachers in the student exchange program with UKDW reveal the profound impact of such programs on both professional and personal development. Participants reported valuable gains in virtual teaching, classroom observations, language skills, and personal growth. These findings imply that student exchange programs play a crucial role in equipping future educators with global competencies, intercultural awareness, and adaptability needed in diverse educational contexts.

Given the positive outcomes, it is recommended that teacher education institutions continue to support and expand similar exchange initiatives, integrating structured reflection and mentorship to maximize learning. Future research could explore the long-term effects of such programs on teaching practice and professional identity, as well as examine the experiences of participants from diverse regions to gain broader insights into the effectiveness of student exchange programs in teacher education.

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