Global Perspectives in English Language Teaching and Learning
Vol. 1, No. 1, January 2026, pp. 41-52 ISSN XXX-XXX

Understanding student experiences in an International Virtual Exchange: Advancing English learning and intercultural skills in a Yogyakarta English education context

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history
Received 13 November 2025
Revised 19 December 2025
Accepted 22 January 2026
Available online 31 January 2026

Keywords
Virtual exchange
English language learning
Intercultural competence
Student perceptions
Higher education

ABSTRACT

This study explores how English Education students at a private Islamic university in Yogyakarta experience and perceive the International Virtual Exchange (IVE) Project as a platform for enhancing English language learning and intercultural competence. Adopting a qualitative descriptive approach, six final-year students who participated in the IVE Project were interviewed to gain insights into their learning processes, perceptions, and reflections. Thematic analysis revealed that students experienced significant improvements in their writing skills, vocabulary acquisition, and overall confidence in using English. Moreover, the IVE platform encouraged authentic interaction, motivation, and active participation through features resembling social media environments. Beyond linguistic development, the project also fostered intercultural understanding, empathy, and pride in representing Indonesian culture in global dialogue. Students described the experience as both educational and transformative, helping them to become more open-minded and globally aware. The findings suggest that virtual exchange initiatives like IVE can bridge the gap between formal classroom learning and authentic global communication by combining language practice with intercultural collaboration. The study underscores the pedagogical value of integrating virtual exchange programs into English Education curricula to promote meaningful engagement, digital literacy, and global citizenship among EFL learners in Indonesia and beyond.

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How to Cite: Hatmanto, D.H., Nguyen, T.T.H., Humairah, F. (2026). Understanding student experiences in an international virtual exchange: Advancing English learning and intercultural skills in a Yogyakarta English education context. *Global Perspectives in English Language Teaching and Learning, 1*(1), 41- 52. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18446290

1. INTRODUCTION

In a world that is becoming increasingly interconnected, proficiency in English as a global lingua franca has never been more important for achieving success in academic, professional, and intercultural arenas. Among the four essential language skills, speaking and intercultural communication are especially crucial, as they enable learners to participate in real-world interactions including globalization and business needs (Forgor, 2020), cultural sensitivity enhancement (Mu, 2020) and educational integration (Sarnovska, 2020) that extend beyond mere grammar and vocabulary. Within the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, learners frequently find it challenging to acquire communicative competence due to insufficient exposure to genuine English conversations. To address this issue,

technology-driven initiatives such as International Virtual Exchange (IVE) have surfaced as cutting-edge platforms that facilitate collaboration among students from various countries, allowing them to partake in joint projects (Alcaraz-Mármol, 2020), discussions (LOUAHALA, 2023), and cultural exchanges through English as the communication medium (Ablakulov, 2023). These virtual exchanges provide enriching settings for enhancing English language skills and cultivating intercultural awareness—both of which are increasingly vital in our interconnected world.

In the context of Indonesia, especially within English Education programs in Yogyakarta, students frequently encounter limited chances to engage in English communication outside of their classrooms (Wahyuningsih and Afandi, 2020). Conventional teaching methods in higher education usually focus more on grammar and reading than on speaking and intercultural skills (Mulyani and Sholeh 2023), leading to passive learners who lack confidence and are inadequately equipped for real-world communication (Hanafiah, 2022). Moreover, although there are some speaking activities conducted in the classroom, the absence of ongoing and meaningful interactions with individuals from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds hampers the growth of both fluency and intercultural competence (Xiang, 2023). The advent of initiatives like the International Virtual Exchange (IVE) Project has introduced a fresh perspective in language learning—one that prioritizes experiential learning through global peer interactions (Roarty, Tuncer, & Tang, 2023). Nevertheless, how students engage with, perceive, and benefit from such programs in terms of enhancing their English language skills and intercultural awareness remains largely unexamined, particularly in the context of higher education in Yogyakarta.

Previous research has emphasized the significance of virtual exchange initiatives in fostering language acquisition and cross-cultural understanding. Studies discovered that students participating in online intercultural exchanges exhibited enhanced communicative skills and increased cultural awareness (Abid, Moalla, and Omidvar, 2020; Kor et al., 2022; Seawright, Albers, and Schanne, 2021). Likewise, investigations by other studies underscored the ways in which virtual exchanges encourage learner independence (Gillard, 2021), genuine interaction (Aquino, Tobin, and Sloan, 2023), and thoughtful cultural contemplation (Bailey and Gruber 2020). Studies have also indicated that students appreciate the chance to partake in real-time discussions with international classmates, which plays a crucial role in enhancing language fluency (Knipp Silva & Scarlota, 2021) and cultural insight (Hackett et al., 2023). Nonetheless, the majority of available studies are centered in Western or Global North settings and primarily concentrate on program structure or teacher viewpoints. There is a scarcity of empirical research in Southeast Asia, specifically Indonesia, that explores student perspectives regarding their own learning journeys through virtual exchange—particularly in terms of its impact on both English language acquisition and the development of intercultural communication skills.

Despite the increasing implementation of virtual exchange programs, there exists a significant lack of qualitative inquiry into how students within EFL contexts, such as those enrolled in Indonesian English Education programs, perceive and reflect upon their involvement in these initiatives. Most research has concentrated on outcomes or language proficiency gains (Ariawan et al., 2023; Faiqoh & Ashadi, 2023), neglecting to thoroughly investigate learners' voices, motivations, and insights regarding the process itself. The intricate ways in which students understand the advantages, challenges, and effects of their participation in the IVE Project remain largely unrecorded. This study seeks to fill this void by focusing on students' experiences and viewpoints to comprehend how virtual exchanges influence their English language learning and intercultural competencies.

This study intends to investigate how English Education students at a university in Yogyakarta understand and experience the International Virtual Exchange (IVE) Project. In particular, the research aims to address two primary questions: (1) How do students perceive the role of the IVE Project in enhancing English language acquisition? and (2) In what ways does the IVE Project facilitate the growth of intercultural communication skills among English Education students?

By illuminating students' experiences and viewpoints, this research adds to the expanding literature on virtual exchange and digital learning in EFL settings. It offers essential insights for language educators, program developers, and policymakers striving to incorporate intercultural communication elements and genuine interaction into English language programs. Additionally, the research emphasizes the transformative potential of technology-enhanced learning environments in reshaping traditional language education and fostering global competencies among university students in Indonesia and beyond.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Virtual Exchange and English Language Learning

Virtual exchange—commonly referred to as telecollaboration—has increasingly been acknowledged as an effective resource for facilitating English language learning. It involves online intercultural interactions among groups of students from diverse cultural backgrounds, utilizing internet-based communication tools as part of the educational experience (O'Dowd, 2021). Through both synchronous and asynchronous exchanges, learners engage with authentic language usage, which bolsters vocabulary development, grammatical precision, and overall communicative ability (Schenker, 2012).

Furthermore, virtual exchange offers learners valuable opportunities for meaningful language input and output, which enhances their speaking, listening, reading, and writing abilities (Belz, 2003). For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, especially in situations where exposure to English is confined to the classroom, such interactions act as an expansion of their language learning environment, fostering the growth of fluency and pragmatic understanding (Helm, 2015; Vinagre, 2016).

Recent studies have found that participation in virtual exchanges significantly enhances learners' motivation to engage with English, boosts their confidence in using the language, and heightens their willingness to communicate in authentic web-based interactions (Zhou, 2023; Yusiana, Permana, Elfiyanto & Junaidi, 2024). These findings align with communicative language teaching principles, which emphasise interaction, meaningful communication and learner autonomy (Dooly & O'Dowd, 2023).

2.2. Intercultural Communication Competence Through Virtual Exchange

Recent virtual exchange programmes have demonstrated significant gains in learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC), helping students develop cultural awareness, empathy, and effective interaction skills across diverse backgrounds (Canals, 2024; Evans Commander, Schloer & Cushing, 2022). Unlike traditional classroom contexts that often emphasise linguistic forms alone, virtual exchange immerses learners in meaningful intercultural interactions, supporting broader global perspectives and tolerance (Higgins, 2024).

Recent research into virtual exchange and telecollaboration reveals that such environments significantly enhance learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) by engaging affective, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions through structured online interaction (López-DcDto, 2023; Toscu & Erten, 2023). These task-oriented intercultural experiences prompt students to reflect on their cultural assumptions, contrast diverse viewpoints, and collaboratively negotiate meaning in ways that go beyond traditional classroom methods.

Investigations into virtual exchange initiatives show that learners participating in structured online intercultural collaborations report deeper awareness of global issues, enhanced empathy for other cultures, and improved capacity to articulate their perspectives in diverse linguistic and cultural settings (Higgins, 2024; Evans Commander, Schloer & Cushing, 2022). These findings underscore how virtual exchange can foster not only language development but also the intercultural communicative competence needed for global engagement.

2.3. Student Perceptions and Learning Experiences in Virtual Exchange

Studies have shown that participants in virtual exchange programmes report enhanced motivation, greater confidence in using English, and deeper engagement with authentic communication contexts outside the traditional classroom (Canals, 2024; Luo & Yang, 2022; Martinsen & Thompson, 2024). These findings underscore the value of telecollaborative interactions for language learning in authentic intercultural settings.

Although virtual exchange provides rich opportunities for intercultural learning, recent studies show that its effectiveness varies depending on several factors. Common challenges include technical constraints, mismatched expectations between partners, and intercultural misunderstandings, along with differing levels of participants' digital competence (Ala-Kortesmaa & Muñoz, 2023; Çiftçi, 2022). These findings highlight the need for thoughtful design, sufficient technical support, and continuous reflection to ensure inclusive and pedagogically meaningful virtual exchange experiences (Canals, 2024).

Although virtual exchange has gained considerable attention globally, focused research on students' perceptions and experiences in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, remains limited. The ASEAN

SHARE (2022) mapping study of virtual exchange initiatives across ASEAN countries revealed that while several institutions have piloted intercultural online learning, implementation remains uneven and largely descriptive. Most of the published research on virtual exchange originates from European and North American contexts, where students typically enjoy greater digital access and institutional support (Helm, 2024). In contrast, Indonesian research has only begun to explore the pedagogical and intercultural implications of telecollaboration, highlighting the need for deeper investigation into learners' perspectives and local realities (Fitriani et al., 2023). Given the region's diverse technological infrastructure and socio-educational conditions, localized studies are essential to design virtual exchange models that are inclusive, context-sensitive, and responsive to Southeast Asian learners' needs (ERIA, 2022).

2.4. Integration of Virtual Exchange in Indonesian Higher Education

Indonesia's higher-education institutions have begun to adopt virtual exchange and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) as part of their internationalisation strategies, offering cost-effective global learning opportunities without physical mobility (Hackett et al., 2023; Roqueta-Vall-llosera et al., 2024). Empirical studies of COIL and virtual exchange show promising outcomes for intercultural competence and student engagement across disciplines, but implementation in many Indonesian universities remains uneven—constrained by institutional readiness, infrastructure, and differing levels of staff experience with international online collaborations (Anggadwita, 2024; IPB University COIL reports, 2022). These findings indicate both the potential and the need for more locally situated research and capacity building to scale COIL/virtual exchange effectively in the Indonesian context (Hackett et al., 2023; Roqueta-Vall-llosera et al., 2024).

Research on English education in Indonesia shows that classroom practice still often privileges form-focused instruction and written assessment, which can leave students underprepared in oral communication and intercultural interaction (Geria, 2022; Liem, 2021). Indonesian EFL learners continue to experience speaking anxiety, limited opportunities for authentic oral practice, and difficulties with fluency and pronunciation — problems documented in recent empirical studies (Mustamir, 2024; Daflizar, 2024). Virtual exchange and COIL initiatives have been proposed as promising solutions because they provide structured opportunities for meaningful communicative practice and cultural immersion without the costs of physical mobility (Hackett et al., 2023; Fitriani, Sari, & Mulyadi, 2023). However, although some Indonesian institutions have piloted international online collaborations, robust empirical evidence about how Indonesian students specifically engage with virtual exchange — and how such programs impact their speaking development and intercultural learning — is still limited, underscoring the need for focused, context-sensitive research (ASEAN SHARE, 2022; ERIA, 2022).

In conclusion, the existing literature underscores the promise of virtual exchange in improving English language proficiency and fostering intercultural understanding. Research indicates that these programs can boost learner engagement, enhance language fluency, and cultivate global awareness. Nevertheless, the majority of studies are conducted in Western settings, with scant attention paid to student experiences in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia. It is essential to investigate how students enrolled in Indonesian English Education programs perceive and engage with these virtual exchanges. This study aims to fill that void by examining students' insights on how the International Virtual Exchange (IVE) Project aids their English learning and the development of their intercultural communication skills.

3. METHOD

This research utilized a qualitative descriptive research methodology to investigate students' perceptions and experiences while engaging in the International Virtual Exchange (IVE) Project. A qualitative method was chosen to gather rich, narrative insights, enabling the researcher to delve into how students interpreted their language acquisition and intercultural interactions. The descriptive aspect of the research aimed to authentically represent the voices and realities of the participants within their natural settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The study took place in January 2025 at the English Education Department of a private Islamic university in Yogyakarta. This location was selected due to its proactive involvement in the IVE Project and the availability of students who had successfully completed the program. Six final-year students were involved in the research, chosen through purposive sampling (Patton, 1990). The criteria for selection encompassed active participation in the IVE Project, which included engagement with the platform,

interaction with international peers, and thoughtful reflection on cultural content. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were utilized throughout the research.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, facilitating both directed and unplanned responses. The interviews spanned roughly 30 to 45 minutes and were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to promote clarity and comfort among participants. All interviews were recorded with permission and complemented by field notes. The interview guide centered on participants' perspectives regarding the IVE Project's influence on English learning and intercultural communication, alongside the challenges and advantages they perceived.

Thematic analysis was employed to examine the data, adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step methodology. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, translated into English, and analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding to uncover significant patterns. Member checking was utilized to bolster credibility, enabling participants to confirm the accuracy of transcriptions and interpretations (Levitt et al., 2018). Codes were organized into categories, and overarching themes were crafted to address the research questions.

To promote reliability, the research employed credibility tactics like member checking and keeping a detailed audit trail of analytical choices. Ethical clearance was secured from the institution, and participants provided their informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were upheld consistently during the research process.

4. FINDINGS

This chapter outlines and analyzes the results of the research that examined students' views on the International Virtual Exchange (IVE) Project in promoting English language acquisition and enhancing intercultural communication abilities. Information was gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with six seventh-semester students from the English Language Education Department at a private university in Yogyakarta. Following Creswell's qualitative framework, the results are organized thematically, with each theme corresponding to one of the two research questions, accompanied by interpretation and relevant literature.

4.1. Students' Perceptions of the IVE Project in Facilitating English Language Learning

4.1.1 Improvement in English Language Skills

A significant theme highlighted by the data pertains to the enhancement of English language abilities, especially in writing. Five out of six participants clearly mentioned that the IVE Project aided them in advancing their English skills. One participant remarked, "I believe my writing abilities have progressed because I can express myself on various topics that I find engaging" (P1.7), suggesting that tailored content selections fostered more impactful writing. She also observed a slight improvement in her reading skills as a result of engaging with posts from international peers (P1.8), indicating that passive exposure may have also improved her comprehension.

Another student remarked, "Over time, I have become more adaptable and find greater enjoyment in writing" (P2.7), indicating not just an enhancement in writing skills but also in self-assurance and motivation. Although improvements in writing were the most frequently highlighted, there were also mentions of speaking abilities. One participant recognized some advancements in speaking but characterized it as "a bit… not too substantial, since we seldom converse directly" (P3.12), alluding to the rarity of live Zoom sessions. Conversely, another student perceived those infrequent sessions as advantageous, noting that "live activities such as Zoom meetings… can enhance my speaking skills" (P4.8). Curiously, another student underscored the comprehensive aspect of the IVE Project: "I could even hone my English skills because they communicated in English" (P5.2). This indicates that even minimal exposure to English in genuine intercultural settings fostered language utilization across various skills.

These narratives suggest that the IVE Project facilitated language growth by providing learners with a genuine audience, pertinent content, and the liberty to articulate their interests. The genuine nature and social aspect of the interaction inspired them to engage more profoundly with the language. These observations align with Ismailov (2021), who stated that interaction with international peers in

meaningful situations enhances the development of various English language skills, particularly in writing and vocabulary.

4.1.2 Increased Confidence in Using English

Confidence emerged as a significant psychological benefit of engaging in the IVE Project. Two students clearly articulated that the experience enhanced their self-assurance. One student remarked, "My confidence has increased… to speak, or open discussions" (P2.11), connecting confidence with verbal communication and interaction. Another participant highlighted her improvement in writing confidence, pointing out that regular writing practice made her feel more skilled and expressive (P6.12).

This feeling of confidence appears to be derived from having a secure, genuine, and non-critical environment in which to use English. The platform provided students with the opportunity to engage, receive constructive feedback, and connect with international peers without the stress of formal evaluation. These observations are consistent with Nguyen-Liwan-Mai (2020), who stressed that virtual exchanges diminish language anxiety and foster confidence through authentic interaction with peers.

4.1.3 Vocabulary Expansion

Another important discovery pertains to vocabulary enhancement. Two participants noted that the IVE Project aided them in broadening their vocabulary. One participant stated, "The IVE Project truly assists me in honing my writing skills, and I am also able to acquire new vocabulary" (P2.4), while another remarked, "I have acquired a significant amount of new vocabulary and have further practiced my writing abilities" (P3.10). Vocabulary development was perceived to happen organically—through engaging with peers' posts, leaving and reading comments, and taking part in discussions.

This suggests that vocabulary learning was incidental and contextual, emerging from communicative interactions instead of mere memorization. It highlights the importance of input-rich, socially interactive platforms in facilitating language acquisition. This observation supports Ismailov's (2021) conclusion that VE participants frequently cultivate a more extensive vocabulary through contextual exposure and interaction in informal environments.

4.1.4 Motivation to Improve English

Three participants expressed that their desire to learn English grew after becoming part of the IVE Project. One participant stated, "I feel more enthusiastic about practicing and enhancing my English skills" (P4.21), while another highlighted a stronger motivation to continue making progress (P5.18). A third participant resonated with this sentiment, saying, "I feel more motivated to keep learning and practicing my English" (P6.21).

These remarks suggest that the students' motivation stemmed not from grades, but from the intrinsic joy of using English to connect with real individuals. The opportunity to interact with peers from diverse cultures seemed to render learning English more significant and exhilarating. This aligns with Ishida et al. (2024), who assert that educational settings that provide purpose and interaction—such as VE—can boost learners' motivation and independence.

4.1.5 Favorable Features that Support English Learning

Five participants pinpointed particular features of the platform that significantly enriched their learning experience, notably the comment section. One participant remarked, "My favorite feature is comment… I would certainly comment and we would continue our discussion there" (P1.6). Others conveyed a similar fondness for the engaging aspect of commenting (P2.6), while one participant mentioned, "I felt like I was using social media" (P5.6), implying that the platform blurred the distinctions between formal education and digital social engagement. Although the "post" feature was also valued (P3.7), the comment section was perceived as far more vibrant and interactive.

These observations emphasize the necessity of creating platforms that mimic social media environments, facilitating real-time, peer-driven exchanges. As Alsubhi et al. (2019) point out, educational platforms that reflect well-known digital tools can enhance engagement, collaboration, and enjoyment—elements that foster learning beyond the conventional classroom setting.

4.2. Students' Perceptions of the IVE Project in Enhancing Intercultural Communication Skills

4.2.1 Greater Cultural Awareness and Understanding

Participants concurred that the IVE Project significantly deepened their appreciation for diverse cultures. One remarked, "In IVE we exchanged insights regarding each other's cultures, norms, and customs from various nations" (P2.17), while another noted she had "acquired insights into the cultures of multiple countries" (P3.20). Other participants reiterated this sentiment, highlighting their broadened cultural awareness (P5.12, P6.16).

These remarks indicate that the IVE platform not only promoted language acquisition but also served as a venue for cultural exchange, allowing students to question preconceived notions and widen their perspectives. By sharing and contrasting their experiences, students collaboratively developed knowledge about cultural practices, norms, and outlooks. This aligns with the conclusions of Chanwaiwit and Mori (2024), who posited that intercultural interactions in virtual settings foster cultural awareness, acceptance, and global proficiency.

4.2.2 Empathy and Respect for Cultural Differences

Three participants highlighted that the IVE Project fostered empathy and an appreciation for cultural diversity. One participant mentioned that she became more understanding and conscious of others' viewpoints (P1.15), while another remarked, "I should have been more compassionate and recognized that each country possesses its own distinct culture" (P4.17). A third participant expressed that she learned "to value others more" (P5.13).

These insights reveal an emotional and ethical aspect of the learning experience, where students not only acquired cultural knowledge but also developed the ability to comprehend, respect, and connect with differences. These results bolster Kim's (2020) claim that intercultural learning fosters empathy and respect—crucial values in equipping students for global citizenship.

4.2.3 Platform for Promoting Local Culture

Participants regarded the IVE Project as a venue for cultural self-expression. One participant recounted her experiences with Indonesian mountain tourism and remarked that "their response had been very enthusiastic" (P1.16). Another participant talked about sharing traditional sweet foods (P5.15), while a third indicated that she posted about "traditional dances and food" (P6.7). A particularly noteworthy interaction was shared by a student who discussed academic subjects, resulting in "a discussion that received up to 60 comments" (P2.19).

These narratives illustrate that students not only gained insights into other cultures but also took pride in presenting their own, transforming the IVE Project into a means of digital diplomacy. They viewed themselves as ambassadors of Indonesian culture, actively engaging in cross-cultural dialogue with enthusiasm. This observation aligns with Verzella (2018), who highlighted that virtual exchanges can enable students to share and celebrate local traditions while immersing themselves in global diversity.

The outcomes of this study indicate that the IVE Project fulfills a dual purpose by enhancing both English language skills and intercultural communication competence. Through authentic, peer-to-peer interactions, students improved their writing, speaking abilities, vocabulary, and confidence. At the same time, they became more culturally aware, empathetic, and self-assured in articulating their identities on a global stage. Notably, students were not merely receivers of cultural knowledge; they also played an active role in fostering intercultural dialogue.

These findings imply that effectively designed Virtual Exchange projects—particularly those that mimic interactive, social media platforms—can serve as potent instruments for transformative learning. For educators, the IVE model provides compelling evidence of how digital platforms can humanize language education, cultivate global citizenship, and render English learning more pertinent in today's interconnected landscape.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Development of English Language Proficiency through Authentic Interaction

The findings demonstrate that students perceived the International Virtual Exchange (IVE) Project as instrumental in enhancing their English proficiency, particularly in writing and vocabulary development. Students' reflections on gaining confidence and adaptability in writing mirror earlier studies (e.g., Ismailov, 2021; Zhou, 2023), which underscore how authentic communication with international peers fosters meaningful engagement and language growth. The participants' experiences highlight that learning occurs most effectively when tasks are communicative and personally relevant—core tenets of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as noted by Dooly and O'Dowd (2023).

Interestingly, while writing emerged as the most developed skill, students also reported minor yet valuable improvements in speaking through limited synchronous interactions such as Zoom meetings. This finding resonates with Helm (2015) and Schenker (2012), who emphasize that even occasional synchronous communication can significantly enhance oral fluency and pragmatic competence when embedded in meaningful contexts. Moreover, vocabulary gains appeared to occur incidentally and contextually through interaction—supporting Belz's (2003) and Canals' (2024) observations that virtual exchange provides rich, input-based opportunities for natural vocabulary acquisition.

The IVE platform's interactive features—particularly the comment section—proved central to students' learning. This affirms Alsubhi et al.'s (2019) assertion that social media-like digital platforms can increase learner motivation and participation by blending informal and formal learning spaces. The convergence of social and educational functions appears to create an environment conducive to authentic communication, social engagement, and peer feedback, all of which are essential for sustained language use beyond the classroom.

5.2. Growth in Confidence and Motivation

Confidence and motivation emerged as transformative psychological outcomes of the IVE experience. Students described feeling more assured in using English, both in writing and oral discussions, as the environment was perceived as safe, non-judgmental, and supportive. This aligns closely with Nguyen-Liwan-Mai (2020), who noted that authentic intercultural interactions reduce language anxiety and cultivate confidence by allowing learners to express themselves without fear of error.

Moreover, participants expressed a renewed intrinsic motivation to improve their English skills. This motivational gain seems to stem from the social relevance of language use—connecting with real people, exchanging cultural ideas, and being part of a global conversation—rather than from external rewards like grades. Similar findings have been documented by Ishida et al. (2024) and Martinsen and Thompson (2024), who found that virtual exchange enhances learners' sense of autonomy and purpose. This suggests that the IVE Project successfully created situational interest and emotional engagement, which are key drivers of sustained language learning.

5.3. Intercultural Competence and Global Mindedness

Beyond language learning, the IVE Project significantly enhanced students' intercultural awareness, empathy, and understanding. Participants consistently reported gaining insights into diverse cultural norms and values while simultaneously sharing their own local traditions. This bidirectional exchange illustrates that virtual exchange can function as both a site of intercultural learning and digital diplomacy, allowing students to become cultural ambassadors. These findings are consistent with Canals (2024) and Evans Commander et al. (2022), who found that structured online exchanges enhance learners' ability to interpret, respect, and adapt to cultural diversity.

The emergence of empathy and respect for cultural differences further supports Kim's (2020) argument that intercultural learning involves not only cognitive understanding but also affective growth. Students' reflections—such as learning to be more compassionate and open-minded—demonstrate that the IVE Project facilitated the affective dimensions of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), including tolerance and mutual respect. This is consistent with López-DcDto (2023) and Toscu and Erten (2023), who highlighted that online intercultural exchanges help learners reflect on cultural assumptions and negotiate meaning collaboratively.

5.4. Contextual Implications for Indonesian Higher Education

The outcomes of this study affirm the potential of virtual exchange as a contextually adaptive innovation for Indonesian higher education. Previous research indicates that EFL programs in Indonesia still heavily emphasize grammar and written assessments while neglecting oral communication and intercultural competence (Geria, 2022; Mustamir, 2024). The IVE Project effectively addresses this pedagogical imbalance by integrating authentic communication, intercultural exposure, and technology-mediated learning into students' everyday academic experience.

However, the findings also suggest challenges related to the limited frequency of synchronous sessions, echoing concerns raised by Ala-Kortesmaa and Muñoz (2023) about the uneven effectiveness of virtual exchange due to technological constraints and differing expectations. For IVE and similar initiatives to achieve sustainable outcomes, universities must invest in teacher training, technological infrastructure, and curriculum integration—recommendations echoed by Hackett et al. (2023) and Anggadwita (2024).

5.5. The Transformative Potential of Virtual Exchange

Synthesizing these findings, it becomes evident that the IVE Project not only enhances English proficiency but also promotes transformative learning—a process through which students reinterpret themselves as global citizens. The combination of linguistic improvement, intercultural understanding, and motivational growth suggests that well-designed virtual exchanges can humanize digital education, bridging cognitive, emotional, and ethical dimensions of learning.

Consistent with Verzella (2018) and Higgins (2024), this study reinforces that virtual exchange fosters a learning ecosystem where students simultaneously learn about the world and represent their place within it. Such outcomes are particularly valuable in post-pandemic educational contexts where international mobility remains limited, yet global collaboration is increasingly essential.

5. CONCLUSION

As anticipated in the Introduction, this study confirms that the International Virtual Exchange (IVE) Project can bridge limited out-of-class exposure in an Indonesian EFL context by enabling authentic global interaction; correspondingly, the Findings and Discussion show that students experienced measurable benefits in English learning (especially writing, vocabulary growth, confidence, and motivation) alongside meaningful intercultural development (greater cultural awareness, empathy, and pride in representing Indonesian culture). Building on these outcomes, the project has strong application potential as a curriculum-integrated model to promote digital literacy and global citizenship, particularly if supported with clearer task design and more structured synchronous speaking opportunities; further studies should extend this work through larger and more diverse samples, multi-site comparisons, and longitudinal or mixed-method designs to examine sustained proficiency gains and longer-term intercultural transformation.

Acknowledgment

The authors extend their sincere gratitude to the students who participated in this study and voluntarily responded to the invitation to engage in in-depth interviews for data collection.

Declarations

Author contribution	:	EDH initiated the idea, developed the interview instruments, collected, analyzed data and wrote the initial draft. TTHN analyzed the data and revised the manuscript. FH helped collecting the data.
Funding statement	:	There is no funding to support this research nor the publication.
Conflict of interest	:	The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Ethics declaration	:	We acknowledge that this work has been written based on ethical research that conforms with the regulations of my university and that I have obtained the permission from the relevant institute when collecting data.

We support GPELTL in maintaining high standards of personal conduct, practicing honesty in all our professional practices and endeavors.

Additional information : No additional information is available for this paper.

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