

# Strategic Competence in Authentic Intercultural Interaction: The Role of Interaction Format in an Indonesian EFL Context

Salisa Afifah Qurrota Ayun, Muhammad Handi Gunawan\*

English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Language and Literature Education,  
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia  
*salisaafifah31@upi.edu, handi\_gunawan@upi.edu*

\*corresponding author

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**Abstract:** This study investigates how Indonesian EFL students deploy communication strategies in authentic intercultural interaction and how such engagement shapes their communicative confidence. Data were collected through classroom observations during six sessions, using two interaction formats (discussion and presentation), and through semi-structured interviews with six participants. The analysis identified patterns in strategy use, strategic awareness, interaction dynamics, and affective outcomes. Findings indicate that strategic competence manifested strongly through multimodal resources, particularly gesture, which appeared more frequently in discussion settings. Discussion format also promoted greater strategic diversity and collaborative mediation. Despite effective strategy use, students demonstrated limited strategic awareness but reported increased communicative confidence following authentic interaction. These findings demonstrate that discussion-oriented, meaning-focused authentic interaction fosters multimodal strategic competence and communicative confidence in EFL learners, supporting the design of intercultural programs that prioritize student agency, peer collaboration, and exposure to diverse English varieties over form-focused instruction.

## INTRODUCTION

As English increasingly functions as a global lingua franca, the ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries has become a central goal of English Language Teaching (ELT). Intercultural communication competence (ICC) is no longer viewed as an optional skill but as a core outcome of language education, particularly in contexts where English serves as a medium for global interaction rather than native-like proficiency (Byram, 1997; Sarwari et al., 2024). Consequently, ELT classrooms are expected to prepare learners not only to produce grammatically accurate language, but also to negotiate meaning, manage misunderstandings, and sustain interaction with speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

However, for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in contexts such as Indonesia, developing intercultural communicative competence remains challenging. English use is often confined to classroom settings, where interaction tends to be predictable, teacher-led, and focused on form rather than meaning. While students may demonstrate adequate control of grammar and vocabulary, they frequently experience difficulty when engaging in authentic communication that requires spontaneous responses, adaptive language use, and sensitivity to unfamiliar accents or interactional norms (Nurmasadah et al., 2022; Meliyani et al., 2022). This gap between classroom performance and real-world communicative demands highlights a persistent issue in ELT practice.

One crucial element in bridging this gap is learners' use of communication strategies (CS). Communication strategies refer to the techniques learners employ to convey meaning when linguistic resources are insufficient, such as paraphrasing, code-switching, gesture use, and clarification requests (Tarone, 1981; Dörnyei, 1995). In intercultural interaction, strategic competence plays a vital role in maintaining communication, preventing breakdowns, and supporting learners' confidence. The study also shared that effective strategy use allows learners to remain engaged in interaction despite linguistic limitations. In contrast, ineffective or absent strategies may lead to communication failure and heightened anxiety.

Research on communication strategies has developed extensively, documenting the various strategies employed by EFL learners across contexts. Early taxonomies distinguished between avoidance-oriented strategies, in which learners avoid communication difficulties by changing or abandoning messages, and achievement-oriented strategies, where learners attempt to maintain communication through alternative expressions or interactional support (Tarone, 1981). Later studies expanded this perspective by including interactional and compensatory mechanisms such as clarification requests, paraphrasing, and appeals for assistance (Dörnyei, 1995). Parallel to this body of work, research on intercultural communication has emphasized the importance of ICC, which integrates linguistic competence, cultural knowledge, and interactive skills (Byram, 1997). Studies have identified recurring challenges in intercultural encounters, including accent variation, vocabulary limitations, pragmatic misunderstandings, and foreign-language anxiety (Mirani et al., 2025).

Despite these contributions, two critical gaps persist. First, most CS research has examined strategy use in pedagogically controlled settings, leaving authentic, real-time intercultural encounters understudied (Saharani, 2023). Second, existing frameworks continue

to privilege verbal strategies, marginalizing multimodal and collaborative dimensions of strategic competence—a limitation that English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) perspectives directly challenge by reframing communication as flexible meaning-making across diverse semiotic modes (Jenkins, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

To address these gaps, the present study investigates how Indonesian EFL students employ communication strategies during authentic intercultural interaction. The study focuses on students' participation in the Global Friends Visit program (a school-based intercultural exchange initiative). This initiative connects high school learners with English speakers from different countries. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How do communication strategies manifest during authentic intercultural interaction among Indonesian EFL students? (2) How does the interaction format influence students' strategic behavior? and (3) How do students perceive and reflect on their communication experiences during authentic intercultural interaction?

This study contributes to ELT scholarship in three ways. Theoretically, it expands traditional CS frameworks by demonstrating that strategic competence in authentic ELF interaction is multimodal and collaborative, rather than verbal and individual. Moreover, it highlights the interaction format as an important factor shaping learners' strategies, demonstrating that context influences strategic behavior. Empirically, it provides evidence from authentic intercultural interaction, highlighting how interaction formats shape strategy deployment. Pedagogically, the study positions authentic ELF interaction not merely as a place to apply learned strategies, but as a space where strategic competence develops through collaborative meaning-making.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Intercultural Communication in EFL Contexts**

Intercultural communication has gained increasing prominence in ELT as English functions primarily as a global lingua franca rather than as the exclusive property of native speakers (Byram, 1997; Jenkins, 2009). Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model provides a foundational framework, emphasizing that effective intercultural communication requires not only linguistic knowledge but also cultural attitudes, interpretive skills, and critical awareness, competencies that extend well beyond grammatical proficiency.

In EFL contexts, however, the development of ICC is shaped by conditions distinct from those of ESL (English as a Second Language) environments. In settings such as Indonesia, English is learned primarily for international communication rather than for daily interaction within an English-speaking society (Yurtsever & Özel, 2021). Learners' exposure to English is largely classroom-bound, with limited opportunities to interact with speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As a result, students may demonstrate strong grammatical knowledge yet struggle when required to engage in spontaneous, unscripted intercultural interaction (Alzamil, 2024). Research in Asian EFL contexts highlights recurring challenges, including unfamiliar accents, non-verbal mismatches, and foreign language anxiety (Mirani et al., 2025), with students often possessing theoretical intercultural knowledge yet struggling to apply it in spontaneous real-world interaction (Meliyani et al., 2022; Nurmasadah et al., 2022).

Current research on ELF calls into question the assumptions underlying traditional native-speaker-oriented approaches to ICC. Jenkins' (2009) foundational work shows that most global English communication occurs among non-native speakers rather than between native and non-native speakers, requiring mutual accommodation and phonological flexibility. Selvi et al. (2024) expand this perspective through the Global Englishes framework, which emphasizes the pedagogical inclusion of diverse varieties. and recognizes that receptive competence across global English variations is an essential communicative competency for global interaction (Suzuki & Crowther, 2024). However, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curricula continue to prioritize British or American standard English, creating a gap between classroom preparation and real-world communication demands (Al-Awaid & Awdh Hussain, 2025).

While these studies establish IC's importance, existing research tends to emphasize learners' attitudes, awareness, or self-reported perceptions rather than documenting how learners actually communicate during authentic intercultural encounters. Moreover, linguistic and cultural challenges are often examined separately, despite the reality that intercultural interaction requires learners to manage both simultaneously. These issues point to the need for closer examination of how EFL learners operationalize IC through concrete communicative behavior in real-time interaction.

## **Multimodal Strategic Competence in Intercultural Communication**

Communication strategies (CS) play a central role in enabling learners to sustain interaction when linguistic or cultural gaps threaten mutual understanding. Defined as techniques learners deploy—consciously or unconsciously—to convey meaning despite limited resources, communication strategies function as problem-solving mechanisms in interaction (Tarone, 1981; Dörnyei, 1995). Tarone's (1981) taxonomy distinguishes avoidance and achievement strategies, including linguistic compensation, non-verbal strategies such as gesture, and interactional strategies such as clarification requests, with later work extending this to cooperative and collaborative repair mechanisms (Jia & Stapa, 2024).

Subsequent research has established strategic competence as a core component of communicative competence alongside grammatical and sociolinguistic knowledge (Canale, 1983). Studies in EFL contexts demonstrate that learners actively employ a range of strategies to manage communication challenges, with evidence linking strategic competence to overall communicative effectiveness (Widyaningrum et al., 2020; Rahman & Isroyana, 2021). These findings underscore that communication strategies are not merely compensatory tools for low-proficiency learners, but also integral resources that support communication across proficiency levels.

Nevertheless, several conceptual tensions remain. Strategy use has been predominantly examined in controlled settings, leaving authentic real-time intercultural encounters understudied (Farnia et al., 2020). Communication strategy research has also tended to conceptualize strategy use as an individual cognitive process, underplaying peer mediation and collaborative repair (Jia & Stapa, 2024). Additionally, while engagement activities can develop strategic competence implicitly (Huang, 2022), this assumption remains largely untested in authentic interactional contexts.

Beyond verbal taxonomies, multimodal communication theory offers a complementary framework for understanding strategic competence in face-to-face interaction. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) conceptualize meaning-making as the integration of multiple semiotic modes, including gesture, gaze, and spatial positioning — operating simultaneously rather than as supplements to verbal language. In authentic intercultural encounters, this multimodal dimension is particularly salient, as learners draw on embodied resources when linguistic repertoires are insufficient. Mejía-Laguna (2023) demonstrates that in EFL classroom interaction, gesture and gaze play a prominent rather than marginal role in meaning construction, functioning alongside speech to achieve communicative alignment. Similarly,

Rahmanu and Molnár (2024) confirm the predominance of nonverbal modes, such as gesture and kinesics, in higher education English-learning contexts. Positioning strategic competence within this multimodal framework provides a more complete account of how EFL learners manage intercultural communication, particularly in discussion-based settings where embodied meaning-making naturally co-occurs with verbal strategies.

### **Authentic Learning Approaches in EFL Contexts**

Authentic learning approaches provide pedagogical contexts in which communication strategies and intercultural competence can be observed in practice. Authentic learning situates learners in tasks that resemble real-world communicative situations, requiring them to accomplish genuine goals with real interlocutors (Herrington et al., 2013). From a sociocultural perspective, learning is understood as emerging through participation in meaningful social activity rather than through decontextualized practice (Vygotsky, 1978; Kim, 2025). In ELT, authentic learning exposes learners to the unpredictability and psychological demands of real communication, conditions which traditional classroom activities often fail to replicate.

For EFL learners, authentic learning is particularly valuable due to limited opportunities for natural exposure outside the classroom. Studies in Indonesian contexts demonstrate that interaction with real interlocutors enhances speaking development, communicative confidence, and willingness to communicate more effectively than controlled classroom practice (Zahara et al., 2025; Syarifudin & Rahmat, 2021). Programs that bring international visitors into EFL classrooms create opportunities for learners to engage in real-time intercultural dialogue, confronting accent variation, cultural differences, and spontaneous interactional demands.

However, authentic intercultural programs also introduce challenges that require strategic management. Accent variation, unfamiliar cultural norms, and interactional unpredictability can create communication breakdowns even as they generate valuable learning experiences (Pratama, 2022). Moreover, program design features, particularly interaction format, vary widely, ranging from discussion-based dialogue to presentation-oriented sessions. These structural differences are likely to shape learners' opportunities for strategic engagement, collaboration, and affective involvement, yet empirical comparisons remain scarce. In addition, while authentic learning theory suggests that competence develops through experience rather than explicit instruction, limited evidence documents how strategic

competence and affective change emerge during authentic intercultural interaction. This gap is especially salient in Indonesian EFL contexts, where scalable, partnership-based programs increasingly involve interaction with proficient non-native English speakers who use English as a lingua franca.

Responding to these converging issues, the present study examines how Indonesian EFL students deploy communication strategies and experience affective change during authentic intercultural interaction within the initiative. By combining classroom observations with interviews, the study documents strategic behavior as it unfolds in real time and explores learners' awareness and psychological responses retrospectively. The study clarifies how context shapes strategic competence and affective development by focusing on contrasting interaction formats and diverse English-speaking backgrounds. Hence, it positions authentic intercultural programs as critical sites where linguistic, strategic, intercultural, and psychological dimensions of ELT intersect.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine how EFL students deploy communication strategies during authentic intercultural interaction. A case study approach was appropriate as the research aimed to investigate a contemporary phenomenon situated within its real-life educational context, where boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly separable (Yin, 2009). The case under investigation was the implementation of the intercultural visit program at one Indonesian EFL school, treated as a bounded system defined by time, setting, participants, and interactional activities. The unit of analysis was the individual student, examined within the bounded context of intercultural interaction sessions. While the classroom and program served as the case context, analytical attention focused on individual communicative behavior, strategic choices, and affective responses, enabling within-case comparison across interaction formats and proficiency levels. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) systematic coding, (3) theme generation, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition and naming, and (6) reporting. This iterative and reflexive process enabled the identification of seven interrelated themes capturing both strategic and affective dimensions of student interaction.

## **Participants and Research Context**

The study was conducted at a private bilingual high school in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia. The school offers two instructional streams: National Plus classes, where English is the medium of instruction, and regular classes, where Bahasa Indonesia is the primary medium, and English is taught as a subject. To align with an EFL context characterized by limited English exposure outside the classroom, this study focused exclusively on students from regular classes.

The school participates in the monthly intercultural visit program, which facilitates classroom-based intercultural interaction between Indonesian students and proficient English speakers from different countries. Two sessions in a row were selected as focal cases due to their contrasting interaction formats, allowing the study to examine how different interaction structures shaped students' communication strategy use. The first session involved Ms. C from Canada (October 2025) and used a discussion-based format that emphasized open dialogue and mutual exchange. The second session involved Mr. M from the Maldives (November 2025) and followed a presentation-based format: the visitor delivered a structured presentation, followed by a question-and-answer segment. These formats were determined collaboratively by the program organizers and visiting speakers based on their preferred interaction styles and presentation materials.

To obtain in-depth qualitative insights, six students were selected via purposive sampling for interviews. The selection of six participants aligns with qualitative case study conventions emphasizing depth over breadth (Yin, 2009). This sample size is consistent with comparable published studies in EFL strategic competence research (e.g., Rahman & Isroyana, 2021; Jia & Stapa, 2024). Selection criteria included active participation during the sessions, variation in grade level, and observable differences in communicative behavior (e.g., use of gestures, peer mediation, or pronunciation focus). Table 1 presents an overview of the interview participants.

**Table 1.** Interview participant profiles

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Class</b> | <b>Notable Characteristic</b> |
|--------------------|--------------|-------------------------------|
| P1                 | XI           | Preferred casual format       |
| P2                 | X            | High cultural awareness       |
| P3                 | XII          | Lived in England for 4 years  |
| P4                 | XII          | Peer mediator role            |
| P5                 | XI           | High gesture awareness        |
| P6                 | X            | Pronunciation-focused         |

## **Data Collection Procedure**

Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews to capture both observable communicative behavior and participants' reflective accounts. Classroom observations were conducted across six sessions across three grade levels (Class X, XI, and XII), involving approximately 14–15 students in Class X, 14–17 in Class XI, and 11–13 in Class XII. Each session lasted 70-80 minutes.

Observations focused on students' use of communication strategies during interaction with Global Friends and peers. Next, a structured observation checklist, informed by established communication strategy taxonomies (Tarone, 1981; Dörnyei, 1995), was used to document instances of strategy use, including verbal, non-verbal, and interactional strategies. These checklists were supplemented by detailed field notes capturing contextual factors, interaction flow, peer collaboration, and affective cues such as hesitation, laughter, or visible anxiety.

Observations focused on how students managed communication difficulties, maintained interaction, and negotiated meaning during intercultural communication with Global Friends and peers. A structured observation checklist, informed by communication strategy taxonomies (Tarone, 1981; Dörnyei, 1995), was used to document verbal strategies (e.g., paraphrasing, clarification requests), non-verbal strategies (e.g., gestures, facial expressions), and interactional strategies (e.g., peer assistance and confirmation checks). As the researchers observed classroom interaction during the program, reflective field notes were used to reduce subjective interpretation during data analysis. Moreover, field notes were also used to record contextual details such as interaction flow, seating arrangements, peer collaboration, hesitation, laughter, and visible signs of anxiety or confidence.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six selected students following the observed sessions. Each interview lasted between 15 and 25 minutes, was audio-recorded with the participant's consent, and was transcribed verbatim. Interviews explored students' experiences during intercultural interaction, perceived communication challenges, strategies employed, awareness of strategy use, preferences regarding interaction format, and affective responses, such as confidence, anxiety, and enjoyment. To allow participants to express themselves fully, interviews were conducted using a flexible combination of Indonesian and English.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. The process began with familiarization, involving repeated reading of observation notes and interview transcripts while generating initial analytical memos. Coding was conducted primarily inductively, allowing patterns to emerge from the data, while several initial categories were informed by communication strategy frameworks (Tarone, 1981; Dörnyei, 1995). Approximately 150 initial codes were generated across observations, interviews, and field notes. Similar codes were then grouped into broader themes related to the use of multimodal strategies, collaborative interaction, affective responses, and interactional differences across formats. These codes were then examined for patterns and grouped into preliminary themes during the theme generation phase. Theme review involved comparing emerging themes against the entire dataset to ensure internal coherence and clear distinction between themes. Furthermore, themes were defined and named to capture their conceptual scope and relevance to the research questions.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, member checking and peer debriefing were employed. Preliminary interpretations were shared with several participants to confirm whether the findings reflected their experiences accurately and to clarify ambiguous points from the interviews (Bang, 2024). In addition, ongoing peer debriefing with the research supervisor was conducted throughout the analysis process to review coding decisions, challenge interpretations, and refine emerging themes. Data triangulation across classroom observations, interviews, and field notes was also used to support the consistency of the findings.

## **Researchers Positionality**

The researchers occupied an outsider position within the classroom context under study, although both were familiar with the broader school environment and student population as Indonesian EFL educators. This familiarity facilitated access and rapport while still requiring ongoing reflexivity to minimize interpretive assumptions. To reduce potential confirmation bias, analytic memos were maintained throughout the study to document emerging interpretations and alternative readings of the data. Decisions to include or exclude codes were reviewed iteratively, and data triangulation across observations, interviews, and

field notes was used to challenge rather than confirm preliminary interpretations. This positionality is acknowledged as both a resource and a limitation of the study.

## FINDINGS

The thematic analysis uncovered four interconnected dimensions of how learners manage communication across intercultural contexts. As summarized in Table 2, findings reveal that strategic competence is not a fixed set of techniques but a dynamic, context-sensitive process shaped by modality, interaction format, proficiency, and affective experience.

**Table 2.** Thematic organization

| Themes   | Sub-Themes                                      | Analytical Focus  |
|--|---|---|
| Multimodal Strategic Competence in Authentic Intercultural Interaction | Gesture Dominance                               | Types and modes of communication strategies used in authentic interaction |
|  | Collaborative Meaning-Making                    | Social construction of strategies through peer assistance and mediation   |
| Situational Variation in Strategic Deployment                          | Interaction Format as Affordance and Constraint | Influence of interaction format and participant roles on strategy use     |
|  | Proficiency-Based Variation                     | Differences in strategic roles based on proficiency levels                |
| Implicit Strategic Competence: The Awareness Paradox                   | -   | Learners' awareness of their own strategy use                             |
| Navigating Intercultural Terrain: Challenges and Communicative Shifts  | Linguistic/Phonological Barriers                | Linguistic and phonological challenges in intercultural communication     |
|  | Affective Shift                                 | Changes in confidence and communicative orientation                       |

### Multimodal Strategic Competence in Authentic Intercultural Interaction (Theme 1)

#### *Gesture Dominance in Authentic Intercultural Communication*

**Table 3.** Illustrative observation tallies of communication strategy used across interaction formats

| Strategy Type                | Observation 1<br>(Discussion Style) | Observation 2<br>(Presentation Style) |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Gestures/Body Language       | 18                                  | 5                                     |
| Paraphrasing                 | 7                                   | 3                                     |
| Code-mixing/switching        | 8                                   | 4                                     |
| Clarification Requests       | 7                                   | 11                                    |
| Confirmation Checks          | 4                                   | 10                                    |
| <b>Total Strategies Used</b> | <b>44</b>                           | <b>33</b>                             |

Note: The counts represent researchers' observation tallies intended to illustrate interactional tendencies rather than statistical measurements.

Students deployed communication strategies across multiple modalities, with gesture emerging as the dominant non-verbal strategy. Observational data revealed 18 gesture instances in the discussion-format session, compared to only 5 in the presentation format, resulting in a 13-tally reduction (Table 3). Gesture types included illustrative (pointing, demonstrating), mimetic (imitating actions), spatial (indicating direction/size), and emphatic (reinforcing verbal meaning). For instance, when asked about Indonesian dishes, P1 described *tahu bulat* (round tofu) while making a round gesture with her hands (Field Notes 2, 2025), exemplifying how gesture bridged vocabulary gaps.

Linguistic compensation strategies included paraphrasing, code-switching, and grammatical simplification. When P3 forgot the word “sheep,” she described it as “The fluffy white animal that eats grass” (P3, 2025). However, code-switching served dual functions: filling lexical gaps and managing topic transitions, as when P2 said “What should we discuss next?” during a conversational pause (Field Notes 1, 2025).

### ***Collaborative Meaning-Making as Social Strategic Competence***

Communication strategies were not merely individual cognitive processes but socially co-constructed. The findings showed that peer assistance occurred frequently, particularly for vocabulary clarification. When P5 asked, “What is *batubara* in English?” her classmates then immediately responded “coal” (Field Notes 2, 2025). High-proficiency students naturally assumed mediator roles. P4 explicitly noted, “Actually, I clarified more. Like, I helped my friends that cannot speak English fluently; they asked me to ask the Global Friend (foreign English speaker)” (P4, 2025). This collaborative dimension extended to collective repair sequences, as when P2 said, “bone marrow soup” for *sop iga*, and her classmate corrected it to “It’s ribs soup” (Field Notes 2, 2025).

## **Situational Variation in Strategic Deployment (Theme 2)**

### ***Interaction Format as Affordance and Constraint***

Format profoundly influenced both strategy type and frequency. The discussion format, characterized by informal circular seating and direct student-GF dialogue, afforded greater strategic diversity (44 total instances) than the presentation format, in which the GF lectured from the front (33 instances). This reduction in amount reflected decreased spontaneous interaction. Significantly, all six interview participants expressed a strong preference for the

discussion format. P1's statement evidences it, "I prefer the first one (discussion format), it was more friendly. While the second meeting (presentation format) was stiffer" (P1, 2025).

The presentation format shifted strategic patterns toward reactive meaning negotiation (clarification requests increased by 3 tallies, while confirmation checks increased by 6 tallies) as students struggled with one-directional information flow and pronunciation challenges. As P3 explained, the presentation format inhibited participation, "I felt I should talk less... mostly just waited for him to ask something... it was more listening and responding" (P3, 2025).

### ***Proficiency-Based Variation in Strategic Function***

Beyond format effects, learner proficiency influenced how strategies were used. Lower-proficiency students primarily deployed strategies as survival mechanisms to prevent breakdowns and maintain basic comprehensibility. In contrast, higher-proficiency students used strategies to enhance, clarify, and mediate. P4 articulated this distinction clearly, explaining that he rarely needed strategies for his own expression but used them to support peers by paraphrasing, translating, or clarifying meaning, as stated, "Actually, I clarified more. Like, I helped my friends that cannot speak English fluently; they asked me to ask the GF" (P4, 2025).

Observational data supported this proficiency-based divergence. Lower-proficiency students (notably P1 and P5) relied heavily on gesture and single-word responses to maintain basic comprehensibility, while higher-proficiency students (P2, P4) deployed strategies for elaboration and peer support. For example, during the presentation session, P5 primarily used gestures and confirmation checks when she failed to parse Mr. M's accent, functioning as reactive strategies under breakdown pressure. This pattern resonates with Widyaningrum et al. (2020), who found that proficiency influences both the type and function of strategies deployed, with higher-proficiency learners exhibiting greater strategic flexibility.

### **Implicit Strategic Competence: The Awareness Paradox (Theme 3)**

Despite extensive use of strategy, students demonstrated limited awareness of their strategic behavior, particularly regarding nonverbal strategies. Gesture use was consistently underreported in interviews, even when observation data documented frequent use.

"Mostly, it comes naturally. I mean, it's not something I deliberately do. I don't really think about it much" (P4, 2025).

P1 similarly could not recall specific gestures despite observation notes documenting six distinct gesture instances during her explanation of *tahu bulat*, as stated, “I don’t remember gesturing that much... Maybe I did? But I wasn’t thinking about it. I was just trying to make Mr. M understand what I meant” (P1, 2025).

Students described their strategic actions as spontaneous rather than deliberate. However, interestingly, students could articulate their awareness of the verbal strategies they consciously deployed. P6 clearly recalled asking for clarification, “Yes, I remember asking ‘Can you repeat that?’ several times with Mr. M because his accent was hard. That was deliberate, like I knew I needed to ask” (P6, 2025).

This contrast suggests a hierarchy of awareness: verbal and interactional strategies were more readily recalled, whereas embodied strategies, such as gesture, were less accessible to retrospective reflection. Rather than being consciously selected, these strategies appeared to emerge naturally under communicative pressure, suggesting that gesture may function more closely to embodied, procedural practice than to deliberate planning.

#### **Navigating Intercultural Terrain: Challenges and Communication Shifts (Theme 4)**

##### ***Linguistic and Cultural Challenges in Diverse English Encounters***

Students encountered multi-layered challenges during interaction with Global Friends, with accent differences emerging as the primary linguistic barrier. Analysis revealed a marked increase in clarification requests when communicating with the Maldivian Global Friend (11 instances) compared to the Canadian Global Friend (3 instances), reflecting phonological processing difficulties. As P1 and P4 articulated:

“The Canadian accent is easier for me because it sounds more like what we hear in class or in movies. While Maldives accent was really different, some words I knew but couldn’t recognize how he said them” (P1, 2025).

“I certainly do [have comprehension issues]. Mostly because of their accent. Mr. M came from Maldives, and his accent is a little kind of Indian, some words might be hard” (P4, 2025).

Beyond linguistic barriers, students demonstrated sophisticated intercultural awareness that aligns with Byram’s (1997) ICC dimensions, particularly *savoir-être* (attitudes of respect and openness) and *savoir-s’engager* (critical cultural awareness involving evaluation of one’s own and others’ cultural practices). A critical incident occurred when the Canadian Global

Friend mentioned Pride Month (which takes place in June and celebrates LGBTQ+ rights). Despite expressed curiosity, students engaged in cultural-level code-switching — self-monitoring their communicative behavior based on perceived cultural norms and social sensitivities of both cultures in contact. P2 explained, “I really wanted to ask Ms. C more about that, but my fellow Indonesian friend must have been not comfortable with it... because discussions around sexual orientation remain socially sensitive in our context.” (P2, 2025).

This navigational awareness extended to non-verbal communication, with P5 noting cultural differences in expressiveness, “In Indonesia, we talk while smiling, making friendly, cheerful gestures... The London GF’s face was really straight... I thought he wasn’t enjoying it, turns out that’s the culture there” (P5, 2025). P5 responded to this perceived cultural difference by consciously mirroring the Global Friend’s more reserved non-verbal style, “I tried to match his energy, not be too expressive so he wouldn’t feel uncomfortable with our Indonesian style” (P5, 2025).

This adaptive cultural mirroring demonstrates students’ sophisticated intercultural awareness and their willingness to adjust their communication behaviors in line with perceived cultural expectations. This dual orientation reflects ICC competence operating in real-time intercultural interaction, not as abstract cultural knowledge but as embodied navigational practice during authentic encounters involving cultural difference.

### ***Affective Shifts: From Anxiety to Confidence***

Participation in authentic intercultural interaction generated profound affective shifts. Initial barriers included shyness, fear of making mistakes, and anxiety about appropriateness. P3 stated this hesitation, “Sometimes, I feel like I was too shy to speak... afraid of interrupting or bothering them... especially with Mr. M because he kept talking” (P3, 2025).

However, all six participants reported increased confidence post-program. Most significantly, authentic interaction catalyzed a cognitive shift that altered the communicative orientation. P5’s reflection captured this shift, “I became more confident. In my opinion, international friends don’t really care about grammar, don’t care about speaking difficulties. But, if they understand, the conversation will keep going” (P5, 2025).

This realization, that fluency and comprehensibility matter more than grammatical accuracy, later fundamentally reoriented students from accuracy-focused anxiety to fluency-prioritized agency. As P5 concluded: “I became more fluent... not using ‘uh-eh’ anymore” (P5, 2025), evidencing reduced hesitation phenomena.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Multimodal Strategic Competence Beyond Verbal-Centered Frameworks**

One of the most significant findings is the dominance of gesture as a strategic resource during authentic interaction. Although gesture has long been acknowledged within communication strategy taxonomies (Tarone, 1981; Dörnyei, 1995), it has typically been treated as supplementary to verbal strategies. The present findings challenge this hierarchy by showing that gesture served as a primary resource for meaning-making, particularly in discussion-based interaction.

In face-to-face interaction, students used gestures to explain cultural concepts, describe food, show size or direction, and clarify meaning when vocabulary was limited. These gestures were not simply additional support; they worked together with spoken language to make meaning clearer. This finding supports the idea that communication in real interaction is naturally multimodal, involving verbal and non-verbal resources simultaneously (Rahmanu & Molnár, 2024).

This multimodal strategic behavior is fundamental to ELF communication, in which mutual intelligibility relies on the flexible use of available semiotic resources rather than on shared linguistic norms (Jenkins, 2009). In this context, gestures function not as compensation for linguistic limitations, but as important resources for co-constructing meaning across diverse linguistic repertoires. When students increased their use of gestures and visual cues while interacting with the Maldivian Global Friend, they demonstrated the adaptive multimodal accommodation central to successful ELF communication. This finding extends ELF theory by highlighting the multimodal dimension of accommodation, which has often been discussed mainly in verbal and phonological terms.

Pedagogically, these findings challenge EFL practices that focus mainly on verbal strategy instruction. If strategic competence in authentic ELF interaction is fundamentally multimodal, then teaching verbal strategies separately from non-verbal communication may not prepare learners for real-world interaction. Instead, pedagogy should provide authentic face-to-face communication contexts where verbal and non-verbal strategies develop naturally through interaction.

### **Strategic Competence as Socially Distributed Practice**

The peer assistance, collaborative repair, and support from higher-proficiency students found in this study challenge the traditional view of communication strategies as individual problem-solving techniques (Dörnyei, 1995). Instead, the findings show that strategic competence in authentic intercultural classroom interaction is socially distributed and developed through collaboration. For example, when P5 asked, “What is batubara in English?” classmates immediately provided the word “coal,” showing that successful communication depended on peer support rather than individual effort alone. It supports sociocultural perspectives that view learning as socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978; Kim, 2025).

While previous research has shown that peer interaction supports language development (Sato, 2021), the present study extends this by highlighting spontaneous collaboration in mixed-proficiency authentic interaction. Higher-proficiency students not only used strategies for their own communication but also helped others participate in interaction.

These findings refine CS theory by suggesting that strategic competence involves collaborative meaning-making rather than only individual compensatory strategies. Cooperation is therefore not simply one type of strategy, but a central feature of authentic classroom interaction.

Pedagogically, this challenges ability-grouping practices in EFL classrooms. Mixed-proficiency interaction can support strategic competence development by allowing higher-proficiency students to model communication strategies while lower-proficiency students participate through peer support and scaffolding.

### **The Awareness Paradox: Effective Strategy Use Without Clear Recognition**

Another key finding concerns the gap between students’ behavioral strategic competence and their conscious awareness of that competence. Although students effectively deployed paraphrasing, clarification requests, code-switching, and gestures across both interaction formats, most were unable to articulate these strategies during retrospective interviews. Several participants described their communication as spontaneous or natural rather than planned, and gesture use, despite being the most frequently observed strategy, was consistently underreported.

This dissociation carries theoretical implications beyond simply confirming that strategies can be unconscious (Dörnyei, 1995). It suggests that in authentic high-stakes interaction, strategic competence may operate as procedural knowledge that becomes

automatized through communicative experience, to the point where conscious monitoring is less accessible under real-time communicative pressure. It reframes the awareness paradox not as a deficit but as a developmental indicator, because students who communicate successfully without deliberately selecting strategies may have internalized strategic flexibility more deeply than those who deploy strategies consciously but hesitantly. Moreover, this interpretation extends Huang's (2022) finding that student-centered engagement implicitly raises language awareness by suggesting that authentic intercultural pressure may accelerate this proceduralization in ways classroom simulation cannot replicate.

Furthermore, this finding diverges from studies that treat strategic awareness as a prerequisite for competent strategy use (Tarone, 1981) and instead aligns with sociocultural accounts in which competence emerges through participation in meaningful activity before becoming available for explicit reflection (Vygotsky, 1978; Kim, 2025). Pedagogically, this suggests that teachers should not delay authentic interaction until students can explicitly name their strategies. Instead, structured post-interaction reflection, such as reviewing field note excerpts or short video clips and asking students to identify how they maintained communication, can help bridge the awareness gap retrospectively without disrupting the natural strategic behavior elicited by authentic pressure.

### **Interaction Format as a Pedagogical Determinant**

The study provides empirical evidence that the interaction format substantially shapes strategic behavior. Discussion-based interaction afforded greater strategic diversity, higher engagement, and stronger affective outcomes than presentation-based interaction. These differences can be explained by structural affordances. Discussion formats promoted student agency, bidirectional dialogue, peer visibility, and lower affective pressure, creating conditions conducive to spontaneous strategy use. In contrast, presentation formats constrained participation, shifted students toward passive roles, and increased reliance on reactive negotiation strategies. This interpretation extends Liu and Thurston's (2025) finding that dialogic structures enhance interactional development by demonstrating that format shapes not only the quantity of interaction but also the type of strategic competence that interaction develops.

Compared with previous authentic learning research, this finding helps explain the inconsistent outcomes reported across similar programs (Zachrich et al., 2024). Authentic

interlocutors alone are insufficient when the interaction format limits learner agency. Thus, the study refines rather than contradicts the authentic learning literature by showing that real interlocutors matter, but the interaction format determines how learners engage with the opportunity. For program designers, this provides concrete evidence that discussion-based formats should become the primary structure for intercultural visit programs. Circular or small-group seating, open-ended prompts, and explicit norms encouraging student-initiated questions are practical design features that appeared to support the strategic diversity and collaborative engagement observed in this study.

### **Navigating Linguistic Diversity in Global English Use**

Students experienced greater difficulty understanding the Maldivian Global Friend, reflected in the higher number of clarification requests during his session. This finding highlights a gap between EFL classroom preparation and the phonological reality of global English communication. Although students possessed sufficient grammar and vocabulary, they struggled with phonological comprehension due to accent variation in a non-canonical English variety.

This finding supports Selvi et al.'s (2024) argument that receptive competence across diverse English varieties is a distinct communicative skill separate from general proficiency. It also extends Suzuki and Crowther's (2024) work by showing that phonological unfamiliarity triggers compensatory strategies, such as clarification and confirmation requests, even among otherwise competent learners. Rather than withdrawing from interaction, however, students responded adaptively, demonstrating the communicative resilience emphasized by Al-Awaid and Awdh Hussain (2025). Pedagogically, these findings support integrating diverse English varieties, including South Asian, African, and Southeast Asian accents, into classroom preparation for intercultural interaction.

### **Cultural Sensitivity and Affective Shift**

A consistent pattern across participants was a shift from prioritizing grammatical accuracy toward focusing on meaning and fluency. This shift was reflected in reduced hesitation, greater willingness to initiate communication, and a broader understanding of successful interaction.

Theoretically, this finding reflects communicative competence at the affective level (Canale, 1983). Successful meaning negotiation despite imperfect grammar appeared to

reshape students' beliefs about language use and aligns with sociocultural perspectives on identity and agency in language learning (Kim, 2025). Students' careful self-monitoring during discussions about Pride Month further demonstrated the development of situated intercultural judgment. In this sense, Byram's (1997) concept of *savoir s'engager* emerged as observable interactional behavior, extending Syarifudin and Rahmat's (2021) finding that authentic intercultural interaction enhances communicative confidence among Indonesian EFL learners.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that intercultural programs become more effective when students experience genuine communicative success rather than merely exposure. Supportive interaction conditions, such as familiar topics and peer collaboration, may therefore help learners gradually shift from accuracy-oriented anxiety toward greater communicative confidence and agency.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined how communication strategies manifested during authentic intercultural interaction among Indonesian EFL students within an intercultural visit program. The findings indicate that strategic competence was expressed through both multimodal and collaborative practices, with gesture serving as a prominent resource for meaning-making during discussion-based interaction. Interaction format also played an important role in shaping strategic behavior, as discussion-based activities afforded greater strategic diversity, peer collaboration, and opportunities for authentic communication than presentation-based activities. In addition, students demonstrated limited awareness of many strategies they employed, particularly non-verbal ones, suggesting that strategic behavior often operated spontaneously rather than through deliberate planning. Despite encountering linguistic and phonological challenges, students successfully adapted to the interaction and reported greater confidence and a stronger focus on communication rather than grammatical accuracy following the experience.

## **LIMITATIONS AND STUDY FORWARD**

This study has several limitations. First, the data were collected from six students at one bilingual school in Bandung, limiting generalizability to other Indonesian EFL contexts, particularly schools with lower English exposure or different socioeconomic backgrounds. Future research should include diverse school types (e.g., rural–urban, monolingual–bilingual,

varying proficiency levels) to examine which findings are context-specific and which are broadly applicable. Second, the study was conducted within a single academic term. Longitudinal research is needed to explore whether strategic development and affective shift persist over time or require sustained authentic interaction. Third, only two Global Friends (from Canada and the Maldives) participated. Future studies should involve speakers from more varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds to better understand how different English varieties and intercultural dynamics influence strategic behavior. Fourth, this qualitative case study prioritized depth over breadth. Mixed-methods research incorporating larger samples and quantitative measures (e.g., anxiety levels, frequency of strategy use, proficiency gains) would strengthen generalizability and allow further testing of format and awareness-related findings. Future research may also compare explicit strategy instruction with authentic practice approaches, examine long-term development of strategic and intercultural competence, and investigate how classroom culture influences collaborative strategy use in authentic learning programs.

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