



Cross-Cultural Communication to Support the Education of Indonesian Migrant Children: An Ethnographic Study at the AMI Tutoring Center in Penang, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Increasing numbers of undocumented Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia face limited access to formal schooling and must navigate multilingual, multicultural environments that shape their learning experiences. While previous studies focus on legal and administrative barriers, the role of cross-cultural communication in non-formal education remains understudied. This research examines how communication practices support inclusive education at the AMI Penang Guidance Center. The study aims to explore how migrant children manage linguistic and cultural differences in daily learning and how educators adapt their communication to meet diverse needs. Using an ethnographic approach, data were collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with six children (ages 9–11) and educators at the center. Analysis followed thematic coding and was interpreted using Hurn and Tomalin's cross-cultural communication and STAR (Stop, Think, Assess, Respond) frameworks. Findings show that children frequently experience confusion, hesitation, and identity negotiation when switching between Indonesian, Malay, and their mother tongues. Educators interpret these behaviors through cultural rather than purely linguistic lenses and respond with bilingual scaffolding, culturally familiar materials, emotional support, and flexible teaching strategies. These practices enhance students' confidence, communication skills, and sense of belonging. The study contributes theoretically by positioning cross-cultural communication as a core dimension of inclusive education in transnational settings. Practically, it offers insights for designing culturally responsive non-formal education for undocumented migrant children.

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1. Introduction

Globalization and increased cross-border labour mobility have led to the growth of migrant communities in many parts of the world, including in Southeast Asia such as Malaysia (Wulan et al., 2021). In this context, children of migrant workers are a vulnerable group, especially in terms of access to proper and inclusive education. Apart from dealing with administrative limitations, migrant children also experience complex socio-cultural challenges, including language use and cross-cultural interactions. This situation demands an educational approach that not only pays attention to academic aspects, but also to the communication and cultural dimensions of their lives.



Today's society is a global society, where human interactions and social relations occur both locally within a country and between countries (Zakaria et al., 2024).

From an inclusivist perspective, a migrant is defined as an individual who is either in the process of moving or has already relocated across an international boundary or within the same nation, away from their usual residence (IOM, 2021). This definition applies irrespective of whether the migration is voluntary or forced, the reasons behind it, the legal standing of the individual, or the duration of their stay in the new location (Mixed et al., 2024). As a result of globalization, demographic shifts, conflicts, income inequality and climate change have also prompted many Indonesians to find work abroad, one of destination country is Malaysia (Widyawati, 2018). Indonesian migrant workers (IMWs) have become part of various discussions related to economic development, both on a national and global scale.

However, in Indonesia itself, the issue of migrant workers has not received optimal attention. In the 2020-2024 National Medium Term Development Plan, the protection of migrant workers is one of the main priorities. However, in reality, many migrant workers who work abroad still face various obstacles and challenges. One example is migrant workers who work in Malaysia, where they are supposed to depart through official government channels. However, many choose illegal channels by using tourist visas to enter the destination country, which ultimately makes them unauthorized migrant workers (Effendi & Rahmi, 2024). This problem is the reason why children of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia are currently undocumented, so they experience obstacles and difficulties in obtaining facilities and access while in Malaysia (Notoprayitno & Jalil, 2020).

This problem is the reason why children of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia are currently undocumented, so they experience obstacles and difficulties in obtaining facilities and access while in Malaysia (Allerton, 2018). At the policy level, there is a prohibition for children of foreign workers to attend Sekolah Kebangsaan Malaysia (Novia, 2023). There are tens of thousands of children of migrant workers in the state of Malaysia under the age of 18. This age range is the age for primary education. It is not easy for them to get education facilities in other countries because almost all of these children are illegal (Muslihudin et al., 2023).

Inclusive education means that all children can learn, contribute, and participate in the education system with equal learning opportunities (Mansur, 2019). Most studies focus on legal and administrative barriers, while the communication and cultural challenges of migrant children remain understudied. However, little attention has been paid to non-formal education initiatives, such as Indonesian learning centers in Malaysia, that have developed innovative communication-based pedagogies for undocumented students (Niehlah et al., 2023).

Despite the prevalence of undocumented Indonesian children in Malaysia, their educational experiences remain inadequately addressed. Most attention has been directed toward administrative, legal, and human rights barriers, overshadowing a critical dimension: how multilingual and multicultural environments shape communication, participation, and learning processes. For children navigating multiethnic spaces, cross-cultural communication is not merely a skill but a prerequisite for academic engagement and social belonging (Suarno et al., 2021).

If the context of communication is culture, then communication actors who come from different cultural spheres require a cultural adaptation process (Guessabi, 2021). Cross-cultural communication, the process of sharing information among different social and cultural groups, is usually applied to the interactions of people practicing different cultures (Adipat, 2023). Cross-cultural communication is an important component in supporting the education of migrant children. For children growing up in multiethnic and multilingual environments, the ability to

understand and adapt to cultural and linguistic differences is an essential skill. Cross-cultural communication not only helps them understand the subject matter, but also strengthens their ability to interact socially in new living and learning environments (Xia, 2024).

Within the framework of inclusive education, cross-cultural communication also plays a role as a bridge that connects children's cultural background with the education system in their country of residence. Education also plays an important role in the formation of the next generation of the Indonesian nation and serves to advance the nation and society (Annisa & Nizar, 2022). Guidance center is a form of non-formal education in Indonesia that aims to provide access to learning for Indonesian children who cannot attend formal education due to lack of legal documents (Niehlah et al., 2023).

Based on an interview with the center's manager, AMI (Anak Malaysia Indonesia) Penang Guidance center was established in response to the educational needs of children of Indonesian migrant workers who were born and raised in Malaysia, particularly in the Pulau Pinang and Kedah regions. This institution aims to provide access to basic education for children who do not have the opportunity to receive formal education due to administrative limitations and immigration status. Apart from providing academic learning, the center also equips students with various skills and social values that support their holistic development (Aririguzoh, 2022; Huang, 2021).

Institutionally, Guidance center AMI Penang has obtained official recognition through Perakuan Pendaftaran Perniagaan Briged Bakti Malaysia Negeri Pulau Pinang Services (BBMPP Services) from the regional authority of Pulau Pinang, Malaysia, and has the active support of Masjid Jamek Cherok Tokun Bawah, Bukit Mertajam, as a local community partner that plays a role in supporting the sustainability of non-formal education activities in the neighborhood.

This study therefore aims to examine how cross-cultural communication supports inclusive education among the children of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. Specifically, it investigates the barriers faced by undocumented migrant children in accessing learning opportunities, the ways in which cultural and linguistic adaptation influence educational engagement, and the role of guidance centers and non-formal institutions in mediating educational inclusion. By integrating communication and educational perspectives, this research seeks to address a critical gap in the literature. By using a qualitative approach of ethnographic method, this research is expected to contribute to the development of non-formal education practices that are more inclusive, adaptive and contextualized in facing the challenges of global mobility. Ethnography is essential for this study because it enables an in-depth understanding of real, lived, everyday communication experiences of undocumented migrant children, which are inherently cultural, relational, and deeply contextual (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

Theoretically, this study contributes to expanding the discourse on inclusive education by foregrounding cross-cultural communication as a core dimension of inclusivity in transnational contexts. Practically, it provides insights for policymakers, educators, and community organizations in designing culturally responsive educational programs for undocumented migrant children. The collaborative initiatives led by the Indonesian government and the Indonesian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur centered on the principle of "education for all" offer an illustrative model of how non-formal education can serve as a bridge toward equality of opportunity (Novia, 2023). Ultimately, this study underscores that inclusive education must extend beyond access to encompass communication, culture, and identity in shaping the learning experiences of migrant children.

2. Theoretical Framework

According to Hurn & Tomalin (2013) emphasize that cross-cultural communication is a multifaceted discipline influenced by anthropology, linguistics, psychology, and philosophy. It explores how individuals from different cultural backgrounds construct meaning and exchange information through both verbal and non-verbal forms. Central to their theory is the idea that communication is not merely the transmission of information but a process of negotiation shaped by cultural norms, perceptions, and expectations. This framework is particularly relevant in understanding the educational dynamics between Indonesian migrant children and their learning environment in Malaysia, where cultural and linguistic differences significantly shape classroom interactions and learning outcomes.

According to Hurn & Tomalin (2013), successful cross-cultural communication depends on awareness of both explicit and implicit aspects of culture. Explicit culture includes observable behaviors such as language, dress, and etiquette, while implicit culture refers to underlying values, beliefs, and attitudes that guide human interaction. These invisible dimensions often create barriers when individuals from different cultures communicate without shared assumptions or contextual understanding. In the context of migrant education, teachers and learners bring distinct implicit cultures into the classroom teachers may operate based on Malaysian educational norms, while children of Indonesian migrants may interpret authority, respect, and participation differently due to their cultural upbringing. Recognizing and addressing these hidden cultural codes can therefore enhance inclusivity and reduce misunderstandings.

Hurn and Tomalin also introduce several communication style dimensions that highlight cultural variations in interaction, direct versus indirect communication, formal versus informal approaches, and emotional versus neutral expression. For instance, Malaysian communication tends to lean toward indirectness and formality, valuing politeness and the avoidance of confrontation. Indonesian communication, while similarly high-context, often incorporates a more collectivist tone and implicit hierarchy in interaction. When these two communication systems meet in an educational context, misinterpretations can easily arise what one culture perceives as respectful silence may be interpreted by another as passivity or lack of engagement. Educators who understand these contrasting patterns can better facilitate learning by adapting their messages to bridge the communicative gap.

A central component of Hurn and Tomalin's theory is the concept of *barriers to effective communication*. They identify ethnocentrism, stereotyping, ignorance, and fear of embarrassment as common obstacles that distort understanding. For migrant children, these barriers can manifest in subtle ways such as reluctance to speak in class, limited participation in group activities, or internalized anxiety about language errors. Teachers' awareness of these psychological and cultural barriers is therefore essential for creating supportive and non-threatening learning environments. The authors advocate empathy, active listening, and feedback loops as strategies to overcome such barriers, underscoring that effective cross-cultural communication involves releasing the *right response*, not just sending the *right message*.

Another key insight from Hurn and Tomalin is the role of perception in shaping communication. They argue that "perception is reality," meaning individuals interpret messages through their own cultural filters rather than objective truth. For migrant children navigating between Indonesian and Malaysian contexts, perception affects how they understand authority, discipline, and peer relationships. Misperceptions can lead to withdrawal or behavioral challenges if cultural norms clash. Therefore, developing intercultural sensitivity defined as the ability to recognize and respect

different cultural perceptions is crucial in non-formal education programs such as the AMI Penang Guidance Center.

Finally, Hurn and Tomalin's *STAR approach* (Stop, Think, Assess, and Respond) offers a practical model for managing cross-cultural encounters in Fig. 1. This approach encourages reflection before reaction, helping communicators to slow down, observe, and adjust behavior to avoid misinterpretation. In the context of migrant children's education, teachers can apply this model to identify cultural cues, listen empathetically, and create adaptive teaching strategies that honor both Indonesian and Malaysian cultural perspectives. In summary, Hurn and Tomalin's theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how communication styles, cultural perceptions, and barriers intersect in multicultural educational settings. Applying these principles helps explain why cross-cultural communication is not merely a supplementary skill but a foundational element in promoting inclusive education and cultural adaptation among children of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia.

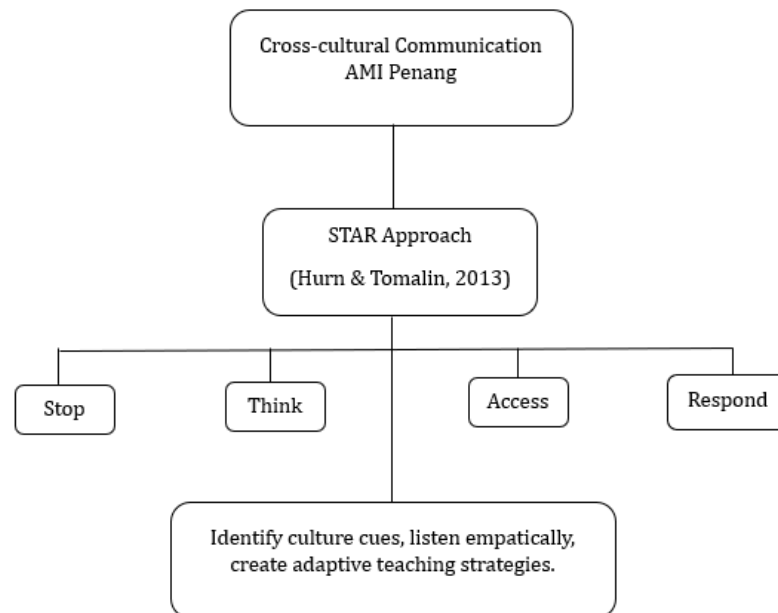


Fig. 1 Methodology Framework

2. Method

Research design

This study employs a qualitative research approach with an ethnographic design. Ethnography is used to understand how individuals construct meaning within their natural social and cultural environments through prolonged engagement, observation, and interaction (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Focuses on observing and understanding cross-cultural communication practices in the daily lives of migrant children. In this research, ethnography enables an in-depth exploration of cross-cultural communication practices in the daily lives of Indonesian migrant children in Penang, Malaysia. By examining educational practices from the perspective of cross-cultural communication, this research is expected to contribute to a more contextualized discourse of inclusive education that is responsive to the needs of migrant children. The ethnographic approach provides a foundation for understanding the social realities faced by children in transnational

communities, as well as highlighting the important role of non-formal education institutions such as guidance centers in building bridges between the culture of origin and the new environment in which they grow and learn.

Participants

Primary data review was obtained through in-depth interviews with informants, Mrs. Ami Kusmiati as a teacher and administrator at AMI Penang Guidance Studio. To complement the children's perspective, the researcher also conducted in-depth interviews with the administrators and assistants at AMI Penang Guidance Studio. This study used a qualitative approach using ethnographic methods, with data collection techniques through semi-structured interviews involved 6 out of 10 children aged 9-11 years old. Specifically, there were 3 girls in grade 3, 1 girl in grade 4, and 2 girls in grade 5. The reason for choosing all girls as participants was that most of the students at the tutoring center were girls. In addition, the boys there tended to be reluctant to be interviewed.

Data Collection

Data collection combined participant observation and semi-structured interviews, in line with ethnographic practice. Observations were conducted directly at AMI Penang Guidance Studio, where migrant children learn and socialize. In addition to participatory observation, data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews tailored to the children's age and language ability. The location of this research is in AMI Tutoring Center Penang, Malaysia. The children lived in environments dominated by Malay, Javanese, Chinese, Indian, and Indonesian cultural groups. Their everyday language use included combinations of Bahasa Indonesia, Malay, Javanese, and local varieties, with varying exposure to other languages. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both child participants and adult informants to supplement observational data and provide deeper insight into individual experiences. The six Indonesian migrant children (ages 9–11) participated in age-appropriate interviews focused on their everyday language practices and cross-cultural encounters. The interviews allowed children to articulate how they understand and manage cross-cultural communication in their daily lives. In-depth interviews were also conducted with Mrs. Ami Kusmiati (teacher and administrator) and other assistants at the center. The adult perspectives helped contextualize children's communicative behaviors within broader educational, cultural, and institutional frameworks.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted by categorizing the findings into main themes related to cross-cultural communication practices, language identity, and the role of non-formal education in shaping migrant children's communication competence. Data analysis employed a thematic analysis approach. The process included, all interview recordings were transcribed. Observation field notes and interview transcripts were compiled and organized for detailed reading. The researcher identified and coded meaningful units of data related to language use, communication difficulties, cultural perceptions, and emotional responses to multilingual environments (e.g., confusion, embarrassment, enjoyment, pride). Codes were grouped into broader themes, including: cross-cultural communication practices in daily interactions, language identity and preference, perceived barriers in communication (e.g., fear of making mistakes, accent issues, confusion between languages). The role of AMI Penang Guidance Studio as a non-formal educational space that mediates between Indonesian and Malaysian cultural contexts.

The themes were interpreted using [Hurn & Tomalin \(2013\)](#) cross-cultural communication framework, which emphasizes: The distinction between explicit culture (language, behavior, etiquette) and implicit culture (values, beliefs, attitudes). Cultural variations in communication styles (direct/indirect, formal/informal, emotional/neutral). Barriers such as ethnocentrism, stereotyping, ignorance, and fear of embarrassment. The importance of perception and intercultural sensitivity in cross-cultural encounters. The STAR model (Stop, Think, Assess, Respond) proposed by Hurn and Tomalin was used as an analytical lens to understand how educators can monitor and adjust their communication strategies in response to children's cultural and linguistic needs.

Ethical Consideration

Informed consent was obtained from the teacher, as well as assent from child participants. Interviews with children were conducted in safe, familiar environments, using language they understood and at a pace appropriate to their age. The researcher remained attentive to signs of discomfort and allowed children to decline or stop participation at any time. The study respected the vulnerable status of migrant families and avoided questions that could cause distress or expose them to risk.

3. Result and Discussion

The educational environment at AMI Penang serving Indonesian migrant children within a multicultural and multilingual context offers a rich empirical case to examine how cross-cultural communication competence can underpin inclusive, adaptive teaching practices. Applying the STAR model from [Hurn & Tomalin \(2013\)](#) Stop, Think, Assess, Respond provides a theoretically grounded lens to interpret how educators negotiate cultural complexity, language diversity, and psychosocial vulnerabilities.

STOP

The STOP phase of the STAR approach emphasizes the importance of pausing in moments of cultural uncertainty to prevent reactive or inappropriate responses ([Hurn & Tomalin, 2013](#)). These emotional reactions reveal that linguistic misunderstanding is deeply intertwined with cultural insecurity, confirming [Hurn & Tomalin \(2013\)](#) view that educators in intercultural contexts must pause before responding in order to avoid exacerbating fear or miscommunication.

Recognizing Ambiguity

At AMI Penang, ambiguity frequently arises due to the multilingual and multicultural backgrounds of the migrant learners, who come from Indonesian, Bangladeshi, Burmese, and Rohingya communities. This diversity produces constant shifts in meaning, language interpretation, and classroom expectations. Interview data show this clearly: students such as Putri Nur Aini (9), Putri Ariana (9), and Cut Meera (9) describe feeling “*bingung*” (confused) when encountering unfamiliar languages or switching between Indonesian and Malay. Rina Suparto (11) and Nur Aisya (11) struggle with accents and pronunciation, while Meme Lia (10) reports confusion when hearing languages she had “never heard before.” These forms of ambiguity affirm [Biasutti et al. \(2019\)](#) argument that misunderstandings in multilingual classrooms often stem from cultural, not merely linguistic, gaps. Recognizing this ambiguity is essential for teachers to avoid assumptions and premature judgments.

Tension

Tension emerges when linguistic and cultural ambiguity interacts with the children's socio-emotional vulnerabilities. Many AMI Penang students experience unstable housing, undocumented status, and stressful migration histories that shape their behavior and communication patterns (Allerton, 2025). Such conditions often manifest as emotional insecurity, hesitation, or withdrawal when they face unfamiliar languages or classroom norms. Ticheloven et al. (2021) note that these stressors can produce behavioral challenges that differ from conventional school settings, making it critical for educators to "stop" and monitor emotional cues before responding. If teachers fail to acknowledge the tension underlying students' reactions confusion, fear, irritability they risk misinterpreting behavior as resistance rather than as a stress response. Thus, recognizing tension becomes a prerequisite for culturally responsive engagement.

Cultural Triggers

The STOP phase also requires identifying cultural triggers moments where differences in values, customs, or communication norms may lead to misunderstanding (Adipat, 2023). At AMI Penang, cultural triggers include unfamiliar linguistic expressions, culturally different classroom expectations, and variations in eye contact, tone, or politeness markers across communities. Students' emotional responses to unfamiliar languages reveal deeper cultural triggers: the fear of "saying something wrong," uncertainty about identity when switching languages, and insecurity caused by exposure to norms different from those at home. These experiences confirm Hurn & Tomalin (2013) assertion that educators must pause before responding, especially in intercultural settings, to avoid unintentionally escalating miscommunication or cultural discomfort. By identifying these triggers early, teachers create space for empathy, clarity, and culturally sensitive instruction.

THINK

The THINK phase requires educators to analyze the cultural variables that shape communication. Hurn & Tomalin (2013) describe the THINK stage as a cognitive process that involves interpreting values, beliefs, cultural scripts, and communication styles before determining an appropriate response.

Analyzing Cultural Variables

At AMI Penang, this requires teachers to reflect on children's social identities, linguistic repertoires, migration histories, and cultural conditioning. The students operate within a complex linguistic ecology Indonesian, Malay, various ethnic mother tongues, and limited English used flexibly depending on social context. Field data show that Nur Aisya (11) and Rina (11) primarily use Indonesian at home or in the sanggar but shift to Malay when interacting with local peers. Meanwhile, Meme Lia (10) and others maintain strong emotional attachments to mother tongues such as Javanese or Chinese, using them for comfort, identity affirmation, or emotional expression. These patterns demonstrate that language choice is shaped by cultural affiliation, identity orientation, and environmental expectations. This aligns with Greenfield (2009) cultural learning theory, which asserts that learning behaviors and communication formats emerge from culturally structured experiences. Likewise, Carrasco-segovia & Sancho-gil (2023) highlight that linguistic proficiency and cultural familiarity strongly shape participation in multilingual educational spaces. Thus, in the THINK phase, educators at AMI Penang intentionally analyze these cultural variables to avoid misinterpretation and to ensure responses are grounded in a nuanced understanding of each child's cultural world.

Communication Meanings

Communication meanings extend beyond words and are embedded in cultural scripts, emotional states, and identity positions. According to [Hurn & Tomalin \(2013\)](#), the THINK stage requires educators to decode these deeper meanings before responding. At AMI Penang, teachers observe that children's code-switching, pronunciation struggles, hesitation to speak, or language preferences often reflect identity tensions, uncertainty, or previous learning experiences rather than lack of motivation or cognitive ability ([Sczepurek et al., 2022](#)). The field data show widespread hesitancy among children when speaking unfamiliar languages many pause, remain silent, or revert to their mother tongue when unsure. Teachers interpret these behaviors by distinguishing when silence reflects cultural respect, when it signals fear or insecurity, and when multilingual mixing is not confusion but a legitimate expression of self ([Janiak, 2023](#)).

This interpretive process aligns with studies showing that communication in multicultural settings is layered with emotional and cultural meaning: children's linguistic behavior often reveals belonging, identity negotiation, and comfort-seeking rather than mere linguistic performance. By engaging in this interpretive work, AMI educators ensure that their understanding of communication is culturally informed. The THINK phase thus prevents misjudgment and equips teachers to read children's messages verbal and non-verbal through accurate cultural frameworks.

ASSESS

The ASSESS stage involves evaluating various pedagogical and communicative strategies that can effectively support children's needs. This evaluative process reflects what [Hurn & Tomalin \(2013\)](#) identify as the need to predict cultural outcomes and choose the most appropriate communicative path.

Evaluating Options

At AMI Penang, teachers engage in ongoing evaluation of how best to address the children's multilingual realities, cultural identities, and emotional conditions. Field data illustrate why this evaluative work is essential: Putri Nur Aini (9) prefers the use of only one language to avoid confusion, while Nur Aisya (11), Cut Meera (9), and Meme Lia (10) view multilingual learning as beneficial for communication across diverse groups. These differences require teachers to weigh various instructional options from monolingual clarity to multilingual enrichment based on the individual needs of learners. ([Duarte, 2019](#)).

Strategies

After reviewing possible options, teachers assess which strategies best align with the students' linguistic profiles and socio-emotional realities. This study found a wide set of adaptive strategies employed at AMI Penang, including, bilingual and bicultural teaching (Indonesian-Malay), use of culturally familiar media, such as comics and films, integration of local community practices, flexible curriculum design, blending Indonesian and Malaysian materials, and multilingual scaffolding through repetition, gestures, and peer support. These strategies reflect [Allard \(2019\)](#) emphasis on tailoring language support to learners' identities and readiness levels. Teachers must decide when bilingual scaffolding is needed, when simplified language is more effective, and when encouraging multilingual exploration will build confidence and communicative competence. Existing scholarship supports such pedagogical flexibility [Peungcharoenkun \(2024\)](#) highlights teacher adaptability as central to multicultural education, and [Modood \(2017\)](#) stresses inclusivity and tolerance as guiding principles in diverse contexts.

Possible Consequences

A key part of ASSESS involves anticipating the potential consequences both positive and negative of different instructional choices. Teachers consider not only linguistic outcomes but also how strategies may influence: Children's emotional readiness, identity affirmation or erosion, peer interactions and social harmony, confidence in multilingual communication, integration within the Malaysian environment.

For example, using only one language may help reduce confusion for some students but may also risk diminishing cultural expression for others. Conversely, encouraging multilingual mixing may strengthen identity and social flexibility but could overwhelm learners who struggle with linguistic transitions. By evaluating these consequences, teachers avoid approaches that inadvertently marginalize cultural identities or intensify misunderstandings. Instead, they select pathways that protect students' self-esteem, belonging, and learning engagement, aligning directly with [Hurn & Tomalin \(2013\)](#) emphasis on thoughtful cultural prediction.

RESPOND

The RESPOND phase translates the insights from STOP, THINK, and ASSESS into concrete communicative practices that are culturally sensitive and contextually grounded ([Hurn & Tomalin, 2013](#)).

Implementing Appropriate Cross-Cultural Communication

Teachers at the AMI Penang operationalize cross-cultural communication by embedding cultural awareness into daily interactions and instructional routines. This includes culturally responsive teaching that integrates Indonesian cultural norms with Malaysian social expectations, multilingual communication guidance that supports strategic code-switching and translanguaging, and emotional reassurance for children with trauma or unstable migration histories. Teachers also facilitate peer-based cooperation, helping students navigate social differences and misunderstandings ([Ticheloven et al., 2021](#)).

Field data reveal the positive effects of these communicative practices: children increasingly express confidence in using Indonesian and Malay, demonstrate greater comfort with multilingual interaction, and begin to view multilingualism as a meaningful asset. These developments reflect findings by [Ma et al. \(2024\)](#), who argue that self-efficacy in learning is shaped by cultural values, supportive learning environments, and social connection. The communication approaches used at AMI align with this evidence by prioritizing empathy, contextual understanding, and responsive interaction.

Action

These actions result in observable progress: children gain fluency in Malay and Indonesian, develop stronger interpersonal skills, and adapt more effectively to multicultural peer environments. This aligns with [Brainee \(2024\)](#) who notes that intercultural competence enhances student motivation, cultural awareness, and relational quality. Additionally, [Amriwijaya & Sodjakusumah \(2024\)](#) show that culturally sensitive interventions reduce culture shock and accelerate adaptation outcomes mirrored in AMI students' increasing ease in navigating unfamiliar social and linguistic contexts. From a social perspective, peer acceptance and supportive friendships are essential to shared adjustment, a dynamic emphasized by ([Tomás et al., 2020](#)). Through responsive action, AMI educators create affirming spaces that help stabilize identity and promote a sense of belonging. Overall, RESPOND demonstrates that effective intercultural practice is not merely linguistic but involves active, empathetic interventions that enable children to thrive within complex multicultural environments.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the educational experiences of undocumented Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia are deeply shaped by their multilingual and multicultural environments. The core findings show that children frequently face confusion, insecurity, and hesitation when navigating Indonesian, Malay, and their mother tongues. These linguistic challenges are intertwined with cultural identity formation and emotional vulnerability. Educators at AMI Penang respond not only through language support but also through culturally sensitive interpretation of children's behaviors, using adaptive strategies such as bilingual scaffolding, culturally familiar materials, and the STAR approach to cross-cultural communication. As a result, non-formal education becomes an essential mediating space that fosters communicative confidence, cultural belonging, and social inclusion. Theoretically, this study expands the discourse on inclusive education by positioning cross-cultural communication not merely access as a core component of educational inclusion for migrant children. It also applies Hurn and Tomalin's framework and STAR model to an understudied context, illustrating how these theories operate within real-life intercultural classrooms. Practically, the findings provide evidence that non-formal schools can effectively support migrant learners through culturally responsive pedagogy, emotional support structures, and flexible curricula that reflect students' complex linguistic repertoires.

Based on these insights, the study recommends that non-formal schools serving migrant communities prioritize cross-cultural communication training for educators, implement bilingual and translanguaging-based pedagogies, and build stronger partnerships with local communities to support cultural integration. Additionally, migrant education programs should develop policies that recognize the value of non-formal learning spaces and provide resources to strengthen their long-term sustainability. This research is limited by its small sample size, focus on a single learning center, and the inclusion of only female child participants, which restricts the generalizability of findings. Its ethnographic scope also emphasizes depth over breadth. Future research should expand to multiple centers, include a wider demographic of children, and explore longitudinal changes in communication competence. Further studies could also investigate how cross-cultural communication practices intersect with digital learning, trauma-informed pedagogy, and policy-level frameworks for migrant education.

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