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INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND LINGUISTIC ADAPTATION AMONG INDONESIAN STUDENTS IN CAIRO: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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Abstract: While a growing body of research has acknowledged the importance of Intercultural Sensitivity for international students, studies focusing on linguistic adaptation in this context remain limited. This study explores the experiences of Indonesian students in Cairo in adapting their linguistic practices through the adjustment of various linguistic resources in a multilingual context. By using a narrative inquiry approach, the data were collected through written open-ended questions and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The conceptual framework of the Intercultural Sensitivity dimensions by Chen and Starosta (2000) and the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) framework developed by Giles (1973, 1991) are employed to examine students' linguistic adjustment in intercultural encounters. The results showed that students' level of intercultural sensitivity vary and are affected by their educational background and experience in Arabic and English language acquisition. Students who

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demonstrated more intercultural sensitivity tended to be more open to local culture, more confident when interacting with local communities, and more flexible in adjusting their linguistic practices. This flexibility is reflected in their language choices, communication strategies, and the forms of linguistic adaptation used in intercultural communication.

Keywords: *Intercultural Sensitivity, linguistic adaptation, Indonesian students, Communication Accommodation Theory, international student, intercultural adaptation*

INTRODUCTION

Increasing global mobility has expanded opportunities for students to pursue higher education abroad. Studying in a foreign country provides various academic, social, and personal benefits while simultaneously exposing students to new linguistic and cultural environments (Netz, 2021; Salihoğlu, 2025). In this context, students are often required to adapt their communication practices in order to navigate everyday interactions across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Indonesian students studying in Cairo frequently face culture shock, including struggles in adjusting to the resident's language and culture (Awad et al., 2024; Wahyuni & Rachmat, 2025). They encounter different Arabic varieties such as *Fusha* (formal Arabic) and *Amiyah* (colloquial Arabic) (Husnah & Zaini, 2022; Fahira et al., 2025). Within this situation, English may play an important role functioning as a lingua franca in interactions with other international students. However, it may also create different linguistic challenges in which both parties may encounter linguistic barriers in communication (Kaur, 2011; Kirst et al., 2023). Consequently, linguistic adaptation strategies are a key aspect that contribute to their learning experiences and social interactions.

One main aspect in the adaptation process of Indonesian students in Cairo is Intercultural Sensitivity (IS). This aspect shapes an individual's ability to communicate successfully in cross-cultural interactions, including recognizing, understanding, and responding to cultural differences (Boudouaia et al., 2022). In this study, IS is

understood not merely as an attitude or theoretical awareness of other cultures, but as a communicative ability that is visible in everyday interactions. This sensitivity is reflected in how individuals choose languages, interpret meanings in discourse, and adjust their communication strategies according to the cultural context they encounter. Thus, IS is positioned as a capacity that develops and is actualized through concrete communicative experiences (Sierra-Huedo & Aguarales, 2025).

IS has been conceptualized through several theoretical frameworks. One of the widely cited models is Bennett's (1986) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). This model describes the shift in individual orientation from an ethnocentric perspective to an ethnorelativist, considering an individual's ability in recognizing cultural values, norms, and practices as relative and contextual rather than universal standards. Individuals with an ethnorelativist orientation do not immediately judge other cultures' communication practices as wrong or inappropriate, instead they try to adapt their communication strategies to the cultural context in which the interaction takes place (Bennett & Hammer, 2017). This model has made important contributions to understanding how individuals interpret and respond to cultural differences. However, this paper does not use DMIS as the primary analytical framework. Instead, IS is understood as a dynamic and contextual capacity, that manifested through communication practices and linguistic adaptations in everyday cross-cultural interactions.

The dynamic and contextual nature of IS shapes how individuals interpret cultural differences and respond to them in everyday communication practices. A more open orientation toward cultural differences can enhance individuals' readiness to navigate the challenges of cross-cultural adaptation and minimize the potential for misunderstanding (Li & Longpradit, 2022). In multilingual environments, these challenges frequently emerge in language use and everyday communication practices. In Cairo, Indonesian students navigate a multilingual environment that involves the use of *Fusha* in academic settings, *Amiyah* in social interactions, and English when

communicating with other international students or foreigners. This multilingual context requires them to make continuous linguistic adjustments. Similar challenges have been documented among international students across various educational contexts, including Spain, Egypt, Macao, and Turkey (Ali et al., 2023; Alkar & Atasoy, 2024; Chen & Hu, 2023; Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2022). Therefore, the students with well-developed linguistic competence tend to find it easier to engage in communication, express themselves, and build self-confidence in intercultural interactions (Ebrahimi, 2023; Ssemudu, 2024).

Several studies have examined IS and the factors influencing its development. Research on English Foreign Language (EFL) teachers suggests that the development of IS among them is shaped by individual intercultural engagement through international experiences (Fitriyah et al., 2024). While in the context of international students, previous studies indicate that the development of IS is influenced by the frequency of interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds (Alkar & Atasoy, 2024; Nguyen, 2023; Salihoğlu, 2025). Students who engage more actively with local communities tend to demonstrate higher IS than those who primarily interact within co-ethnic networks. In addition, participation in intercultural academic and social activities, such as language courses or cultural orientation programs, has been shown to further support the development of intercultural awareness among international students (Deveci et al., 2022; Van Melle & Ferreira, 2023).

The social context in which students are located may also produce different patterns of IS development. Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2022) traced the international students in Andalusia tended to remain at the minimization stage in Bennett's (1986) model because their interactions often occur within their own communities abroad. Whereas this does not apply to international students studying in Macao, Chen and Hu (2023) indicate that they are active in cross-cultural interactions, resulting in higher IS. Although these studies have identified various factors influencing the development of IS across contexts, IS is often understood as a stage or developmental level

of individual competence manifested in attitudinal and behavioral aspects, while paying limited attention to communication strategies and linguistic aspects in everyday intercultural encounters.

Furthermore, emotional factors serve an important role in cross-cultural adaptation. Zheng (2025) and He et al. (2023) point out that international students often experience emotional fluctuations in the early stages of living in a new country, ranging from initial confidence to culture shock before gradually adjusting to the new environment. These findings are confirmed by Ali et al. (2023, 2024) revealing that international students in Egypt face acculturative stress related to language barriers and social adjustment, including students from Arabic-speaking backgrounds. These findings highlight that emotional barriers are not solely determined by their limited linguistic background, but also by an individual's ability to a new social and cultural environment. Despite these contributions, limited research has examined how IS is reflected in students' linguistic adaptation during everyday intercultural encounters in multilingual environments.

International students studying in Arab countries navigate unique linguistic and cultural challenges, including the complexities of Arabic diglossia which means that the differences between standard Arabic and the everyday dialects used in social interactions (Bergstrand Othman, 2025). The multilingual environment is also characterized by the practice of bilingualism, particularly between Arabic and English (Alsahafi, 2024). This condition requires international students to flexibly adjust their language use in various social and academic situations. Related to this context, Indonesian students studying in Cairo as non-Arab international students encounter a linguistically and culturally distinct from their home background. They should navigate the use of Arabic in both Academic and social settings, and using English as a lingua franca in the interactions with international community. This multilingual complexity offers a relevant context for understanding in the linguistic challenges student appears and the communication strategies they extend in their daily intercultural adaptation.

Although prior research has inspected international students' adaptation and the development of IS has focused on essentially on measuring levels of IS rather than explaining how intercultural awareness is revealed in students' daily communication practices. Specifically, limited scholar has explored how international students navigate multilingual interactions and engage linguistic strategies to arrange communication challenges in academic and social encounters. This gap is particularly evident in the context of Indonesian students in Cairo seeing that they should navigate the use of Arabic (*Fusha* and *Amiyah*) and English in across different interactional situations.

This study addresses two main research questions (1) What linguistic challenges and responses do Indonesian students encounter in intercultural communication in Cairo. (2) How do Indonesian students navigate the linguistic challenges in intercultural communication in Cairo. To explore these questions, this study applies two complementary theoretical frameworks. The first is IS proposed by Chen and Starosta (2000) to help understand how students perceive cultural differences and how they respond to intercultural encounters in their interactions. This framework includes five dimensions such as interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. The second is Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) by Giles (1973,1991), which analyses how Indonesian students adapt their linguistic practices, such as language choice, speech style, and communication strategies when navigating intercultural communication in multilingual contexts.

Specifically, this study examines how Indonesian students in Cairo navigate linguistic challenges and employ communication strategies in everyday intercultural encounters. By linking IS with linguistic adaptation, the study contributes to a more understanding of how intercultural awareness is reflected into communicative practices in multilingual contexts. Practically, it offers for educational institutions in developing linguistic and sociocultural support systems to facilitate international students' intercultural adaptation.

METHOD

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with narrative biographical inquiry to help researchers understand participants' experiences through the stories they construct about their lives (Clandinin, 2006). By using narrative inquiry, this research not only tries to explore and understand the linguistic challenges faces by the students but also how they make a meaning of these experiences and learn lessons from the intercultural interactions they experience particularly within the multilingual context of Cairo (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). Therefore, this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of how linguistic challenges emerge in everyday intercultural encounters and how students narrate their responses and strategies to these experiences.

Narrative biographical inquiry highlights three interrelated dimensions, namely temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). In this study, temporality relates to how participants narrate their experiences over time, from their pre-arrival linguistic backgrounds in Cairo, including previous language learning experiences, continuing with initial intercultural interactions, and the process of adjusting to the academic and social environments. Sociality refers to the emotional aspects, interpersonal relationships, and cultural expectation experiences in various situations. Meanwhile, place refers to the multilingual and sociocultural context in Cairo, where interactions take place involving the use of *Fusha*, *Amiyah*, and English in various communication situations.

Participants background

The participants consisted of four Indonesian students studying in Cairo. They were selected using purposive sampling because this study focuses on individuals who had direct experience in navigating linguistic challenges and intercultural interactions in a multilingual environment. Although the number of participants was limited, narrative biographical inquiry focuses the depth and richness of individual experiences, and allowing the researches to analyze each

participant's story. The recruited through the researcher's academic network among Indonesian students in Cairo. Participants who met the inclusion criteria and were willing to share their experiences voluntarily agreed to participate in this study.

They were registered in Islamic higher education in Cairo where Arabic is the primary language of instruction, particularly in religious and academic studies. In their daily lives, students with residents, international students, and co-ethnic peers. This environment exposes them to multiple linguistic resources, including Fusha in academic contexts, Amiyah in everyday interactions, English in communication with international students. This background facilitated them early exposure to using multilingual practices before continuing their studies in Cairo. For instance, linguistic backgrounds are important for this study because they may shape how students use language, navigate linguistic choices, and respond to intercultural communication challenges in a new sociolinguistic. They were referred to using the following pseudonyms: A1, A2 (male, class of 2022), B1 (female, class of 2024), and B2 (female, class of 2022) to keep their information private.

The first participant, A1, came from an Islamic high school (*Madrasah Aliyah*) between 2018 to 2021 and spent one year studying basic Arabic language at boarding school (*Pesantren*) before beginning his studies in Cairo in 2022. His previous exposure to Arabic provided initial familiarity with *Fusha*, upon arriving in Cairo, he gradually learned *Amiyah* language in daily interactions with residents and occasionally used English when communicating with international students or in practical situations such as asking for directions. The second participant, A2, graduated from *Pesantren* between 2018 and 2021 and also attended an Arabic course for several months. In 2022, he moved to Cairo to continue his higher education. Prior to his arrival in Cairo, he had been exposed to Arabic and English through his previous educational experiences. During his studies, he encountered the use of *Fusha* in formal situations, *Amiyah* with residents, English in communication with non-Arab student or tourist.

The third participant, B1 had *Madrasah Aliyah* in 2019 to 2022. She began her studies in Cairo in 2023 at one of the universities there. Before arriving in Cairo, she had studied *Fusha* through her *Madrasah Aliyah*. During his interactions in Cairo, she continued to use *Fusha* Arabic in daily communication. She also reported using English in certain situations and communicating comfortably with Malaysian students due to the similarities between Indonesian and Malay. The last is participant B2 had *Pesantren* where Arabic and English were emphasized between 2018 and 2021. She began her studies in Cairo in 2022. During her previous education, she was regularly exposed to the use of Arabic and English in academic settings.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were obtained through written open-ended questions distributed participants online. The questions were designed to allow them to freely share their experiences of their linguistic background before studying in Cairo, their early experiences interacting with local residents and international students, the linguistic challenges they encountered in everyday communication, and the ways they responded to these challenges.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted online to accommodate participants' academic schedules and geographical distance. Participants were given flexibility in responding, either in written or via WhatsApp voice notes. All of data were subsequently transcribed by the researcher prior to analysis. Before participating, all students were informed about the purpose of the study and were assured that their responses would remain confidential. Participation was voluntary and they were free to withdraw from the study at any stage.

Data Analysis

The collected narratives were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). The analysis process began with familiarization with the data through repeated reading of participants'

narratives to gain an overall understanding of their experiences. Next, the researcher generated initial codes by identifying data segments related to linguistic challenges, and participants' strategies and responses to communication difficulties. These codes were then examined to identify broader patterns and themes across the participants' narratives. The identified themes were then analyzed using the Intercultural Sensitivity dimensions by Chen and Starosta (2000), and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) (Giles, 1973,1991).

FINDINGS

Participants' narratives show that Arabic serves as the primary medium of daily communication for Indonesian students in Cairo. *Fusha* is primarily used in formal settings, while *Amiyah* is commonly used in daily interactions with residents. On the other hand, English appears more selectively, especially in interactions with non-Arab international students or in certain situations that required a *lingua franca*. Across participants' narratives, variations in language use reflect differences in interaction engagement, confidence, and communication strategies in intercultural encounters.

Linguistic Challenges

Informed by participants' narratives, the linguistic challenges Indonesian students encounter in intercultural communication in Cairo and how they respond to these challenges in everyday interactions.

Navigating the Fusha and Amiyah Diglossic Context

Across participants' narratives predominantly described linguistic challenges entails navigating the diglossic context between *Fusha* and *Amiyah*. Participants' experience indicates that the transition between two varieties is not experienced uniformly. The intensity of the challenges and how they responded to this dialect variation were shaped by educational background, previous language practice experience, and social preferences in interactions.

Participants A2 and B2, who have *Pesantren* educational background shows active engagement in navigating this linguistic diversity from their early settlement in Cairo. In their narratives, both participants addressed the coexistence of *Fusha* and *Amiyah* as a part of everyday interactions. As A2 reported, "...by talking, I try to practice what we have learned." B2 supported, "every opportunity that I have, I always use to interact because I can practice continuously." These shows a willingness to engage in interactions and experiment with different variations of language in conversations. Rather than avoiding the variation, they use these interactions as opportunities to practice and expand their communicative competence.

The experiences of using English and Arabic intensively in everyday life at the *Pesantren* may shaped their interactional confidence and linguistic readiness. This accepted them to initiate conversations and participate more occupied in their daily communication. Therefore, the negotiation between *Fusha* and *Amiyah* are not a linguistic barrier, but actually became part of their communicative process with each other.

Otherwise, the gradual pattern of adaptation has occurred in A1 and B1. A1 who had background in a basic Arabic at *Madrasah Aliyah* for a year before continuing his studies in Cairo. He showed to remain in a safe zone with peers from the same ethnic. He mostly depended on *Fusha* in any contexts and initially relied on technology assistance or non-verbal strategies to support communication, A1 mentioned, "I learn from many moments of social interaction from *Fusha* to *Amiyah* and gradually learned from that." This story suggests that *Amiyah* has limited exposure, it contributed a gradual process of engagement in daily situations. Similitude, B1 highlighted a more hesitant international approach. She tended to look forward for the interlocutor to start the conversation and only adjust the language as necessary. This limits her opportunities for experience in *Amiyah* and reduces the intensity of learning through direct social interaction. Therefore, in this context of *Fusha-Amiyah* transition relates not only to linguistic differences but to the courage to take communication risks.

Generally, participants' narratives highlighted that navigating the *Fusha-Amiyah* transition requires more than formal language competence. Participants with more extensive prior language practice tended to show more interaction engagement and confidence when communicating in the diglossic environment, whereas those with limited exposure adopted more cautious and selective forms of participation. These differences represent how participants adjust their linguistic practices when navigating the diglossic environment. Some quickly adapted and actively spoke, and others were more hesitant.

The Use of English in an Arabic-Dominated Environment

Additionally, participants' narratives highlight the use of English presents a linguistic challenge for Indonesian students in Cairo. Whereas English functions as a lingua franca in interactions with international students and tourists, and its use is not dominant in communication with residents. Even though English has global value, but it does not always serve a practical function in social interactions especially in Cairo. Participants often encounter with the situation marked by conflicting feelings, where they hesitated to English but simultaneously arrange to use it for practice.

Some of them mentioned there is a tendency to default to English as an additional communicative resource. A2 explained, "*the residents actually rarely use English. I only use with European students or travelling,*" the use of English is contextual and depends on the interlocutor. "*I doubted with my English skills, but I kept trying and made progress.*" He acknowledged initial uncertainty about his English language proficiency but by his response reflects how individual experiment with different linguistic resources to sustain communication.

On the contrary, other participants explained a tendency to limit their use of English and preferred to do conversations with co-ethnic peers that have a similar linguistic and cultural background. A1 highlighted, "*I prefer interacting with students from countries related to Indonesia...*" this is preference for a safer communication zone. Indonesian was perceived comfortable than English or *Amiyah*. These

stories suggest that the decision about whether to use English or not may be shaped by linguistic proficiency, but also by interaction confidence, level of social comfort and perception of communication needs in intercultural encounters.

Based on participants' narratives, English emerged as a situational and selective communicative resource within an Arabic-dominated linguistic environment. Some participants exhibited openness in using English to expand communication beyond their immediate residential settings, while others showed a more hesitant tendency by restricting its use to familiar or less challenging situations. These differing responses illustrate varying ways of readiness to participate in intercultural communication. Therefore, the role of English in this context reflects not only linguistic considerations but also students' attentiveness to social contexts and their willingness to adapt to diverse communicative environments.

Processing Rapid Speech, and Expressive Communication

Indonesian students in Cairo encounter particular challenges in understanding resident communication, especially regarding speech rate and expressiveness. These difficulties are not only concern phonological aspects but also involve the process of understanding the social meanings contained in volume, intonation, and tempo of speech. A few participants further explained that the residents' communication style, which tends to be a rapid speech and a louder tone, initially caused misunderstandings. As noted by A2, *"Egyptians speak loudly and quickly, it sounds angry to Indonesians, but that's actually normal for them."* This highlights the contrast between Indonesian communication, which emphasizes indirectness and politeness, and Egyptian communication, which tends to be more direct and expressive. For some participants, these differences were initially perceived as signs of anger or impoliteness, before they understood that such communication was normal in the resident context.

Similar challenges were also experienced by B1, who shared that, *"Residents usually speak quickly and loudly. I cannot speak Amiyah yet...mostly used Fusha or English because Amiyah is still difficult."* This suggests that limited familiarity with *Amiyah* made it more difficult for some participants to follow daily conversations. A1 also mentioned, *"even though Amiyah accent is like that, I was very stiff at first... I tried step*

by step to blend in through mujamalah or chit chat with them, and gradually I could understand a bit." A1's experience shows an effort to stay involved in daily interactions despite comfortable in intercultural communication.

At the same time, B2 explained how repeated exposure helped change her understanding of the residents' communication style. As she stated, *"I do not take things personally anymore because I understand that their way of speaking is just like that."* This shows how B2 became more aware of culture differences and more attentive during interactions. Over time, she understood that the residents' expressive way of speaking was part of their normal communication style, rather than a sign of negative emotions.

Overall, based on the participants' narratives gives that understanding rapid and expressive communication styles requires more than just language ability. It also requires the ability to interpret communication practices that are shaped by culture. Over time, some of participants gradually recognize that these communication patterns were normal characteristics of the residents, rather than signs of negative emotions. As a result, they continued engaging in interactions and adjusted their communication expectations accordingly. In contrast, more cautious students tended to reduce their interactions when they experienced difficulty understanding fast speech. In response to these challenges, some participants asked interlocutors to repeat their speech or temporarily switched to *Fusha* to clarify meaning. These findings suggest that challenges in understanding the speed and style of communication may involve not only linguistic ability but also to students' readiness to interpret and adapt to cultural embedded communication practices. Students who were able to interpret these communication styles as part of resident cultural practices tended to remain engaged in interaction and gradually adjusted their communication expectations. In contrast, those who continued to interpret these styles through communication norms from their home culture sometimes reduced their participation in interactions.

Pragmatic Norms and Residents' Communication Style

Across participants' narratives, another linguistic challenge emerges at the pragmatic level, particularly in understanding how conversations are structured and how messages are delivered in everyday communication. Several participants described that local residents often begin conversations with extended greetings and

religious expressions before moving to the main topic. As A1 explained, *"Egyptians open a conversation with salam, remind each other to send blessings to the Prophet, say a prayer, then move to the topic."* A1 described that interactional pattern initially felt unfamiliar. A2 also supported, *"In Indonesia, usually we start conversations with a brief greeting followed directly."* The longer sequence of greetings and religious expressions used by residents required them to adjust not only the language but also the pragmatic order of interaction. The narrative they convey shows that participation in daily communication in Cairo involves a gradual process of learning the conversational patterns commonly used in the resident context.

Participants' narratives also added the differences in the level of directness in communication. B2 explained, *"Egyptians tend to be expressive and straight to the point."* While B1 supported, *"compared to the way people here communicate, as Indonesian we tend to be more indirect and careful with our words, so the direct and expressive style felt quite different at first."* Indonesian students who come from a communication culture values indirectness and careful wording, this style initially feels abrupt.

One challenge for participants was understanding whether direct expressions reflected negative intentions or were simply part of the resident communication style. The participants responded to these differences in different ways. A2 explained that he adapted by following the residents' way of interacting, as he said, *"usually, I just follow their way of interacting because I comfort and enjoy blending with them and following their communication style."* This reflects a readiness to engage to the residents' communication practices.

Likewise, B2 shared that she gradually became more comfortable with the direct communication style used by the residents. She stated, *"Indonesians tend to just go along with things because we do not want to make others uncomfortable but since I have become used to the culture here, I find it easier not to say no or refuse something."* Her experience shows a growing understanding that directness is a natural part of resident communication. Meanwhile, B1 reported more limited interaction with residents. As she explained, *"most of the time I talk with people from the same ethnic group, so I do not interact with residents very*

often unless there is a specific need." This limited contact may affect opportunities to become familiar with resident communication styles.

Across the narratives, students' responses illustrate different ways of navigating pragmatic differences in intercultural encounters. Some of them gradually reinterpret resident communication styles as a part of cultural norms rather than personal attitudes. This adjustment suggests that aspects of interaction attentiveness and respect for cultural differences, as students become more aware of how communication operates within the resident culture context. Others, tend to limit their interaction when these differences feel unfamiliar. These findings suggest that linguistic challenges in intercultural encounters require not only vocabulary or grammar but also the ability to interpret speech patterns, prosodic features, and pragmatic norms are embedded in everyday communication.

Table 1.
Language Challenges and Intercultural Sensitivity Responses

<i>Category</i>	<i>A2</i>	<i>B2</i>	<i>A1</i>	<i>B1</i>
<i>Language Use</i>	Fusha, Amiyah, English	Fusha, Amiyah, English	Fusha dominant, Gradual Amiyah, Occasional English	Fusha dominant, Limited Amiyah, Occasional English
<i>Response to Linguistic Challenges</i>	Adapts to interlocutors, uses gestures	Flexible, Open to learning	Uses dictionary, gradual interaction	Uses gestures, minimal interaction
<i>Cross-cultural Interaction Attitudes</i>	Enjoys	Sees challenges as learning	Initially cautious, gradual interacts more	Prefer familiar groups

Generally, participants' narratives indicates that linguistic challenges in intercultural encounters are experiences differently by Indonesian students. They encounter various challenges, such as the diglossic use of *Fusha* and *Amiyah*, the selective role of English in an Arabic-dominated environment, the processing of rapid and

expressive speech, and the interpretation of resident pragmatic norms. Participants responded to these challenges in different ways, from active engagement in daily interactions to more hesitant or selective participations. These differences presented how students gradually adjust their linguistic practices as they navigate communication in both academic and social contexts.

Linguistic Adaptation Strategies in Navigate Challenges

This section examines how Indonesian students navigate linguistic challenges in intercultural communication in Cairo through various adaptation strategies. Participants' narratives presented two main strategies, namely convergence, and maintenance, which are employed to sustain communication in both academic and social contexts. These strategies are expressed through adjustment in language choice, speech style, and communication practices during interacting with interlocutors from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Convergence

Participants encountering linguistic difficulties, such as differences in communication, unfamiliar vocabulary, or limited proficiency in certain language varieties. Participants navigated these challenges by aligning their linguistic practices with those of their interlocutors. Convergence emerged not only through language choice in switching between *Fusha*, *Amiyah*, and English, but also through adjustment in prosodic features including volume, speech tempo, and expressiveness in communication style. These adaptations were often asymmetrical, which is Indonesian students tending to adjust more than their interlocutors.

In the academic interactions, participants encounter challenges in informal communication by adapting to the use of *Amiyah*. A2 explained that, "*Amiyah was the language we use most often in daily life,*" this shows its importance in helping them participate more naturally in daily conversations. A1 also described a gradual adaptation process,

saying, *"As time goes, I will understand their language..."* Similarly, B1 highlighted, *"At first, I did not understand, so I asked again and sometimes I changed to use Fusha."* When misunderstandings occurred, participants often switched back to *Fusha* or English as a way to manage communication difficulties.

Based on the data, the use of English appears to be selective and context-dependent. English function as a lingua franca to facilitate communication with international students or tourists who were not fluent in Arabic. However, English is not always the primary language in interaction. This is supported by the B2 statement, *"If I forget the Arabic word, I just switch to English so the conversation still continues."* Instead, English plays a more role as a reserve language that is used when there are communication barriers in Arabic. In this context, English functioned less as a primary language of convergence and more as a communicative support that helped maintain conversational continuity.

Additionally, the extent of linguistic adjustment described marked variation. A2 and B2 made multimodal by changing both language and prosodic aspects. As A2 explained, *"I used to speak in a soft tone but here I often have to raise our voices to keep up with them."* The changes in prosodic aspects emerge a more intensive level of convergence because they entail a transformation of communication styles. On the other hand, A1 and B1 rather shows a more limited of adjustment. A1 combined language choices with visual aids when vocabulary was limited and adapted to the cultural practices of verbose (*mujamalah*), *"...with google translate and pointed the items I mean, because the local really enjoy with mujamalah, so, I had to adjust my expressions and reactions. When to be assertive and when to join in the joke."* In contrast, B1 tended to make adjustment at the language choices only without changing her expressive style or speaking pace. Across participants' narratives, the process of linguistic adjustment varied and depending not only on their language proficiency but also by their willingness to engage with resident communication practices.

Maintenance

In this component, maintenance can be seen in how participants' effort to continue using certain language practices that they considered suitable for specific situations and interactions. Participants navigated linguistic and social challenges by maintaining certain communication patterns that were perceived as more comfortable or identity-affirming. For instance, in the choice of Indonesian becomes a symbol identity, solidarity, and sense of comfort. A1 noticed that, *"I prefer to interact with students from the same ethnic as Indonesia or Malaysia, Brunei, and Thailand Pattani."* B1, confirmed the same thing, *"...the interactions that I found easier are not in English but in Indonesian,"* these preferences emerged that maintenance does not reflect a rejection of the cross-cultural environment, but rather a choice tailored to the situation. In cross-cultural, they still adapt their language when necessary. However, in closer social interaction, Indonesian is maintained as a communication comfort zone.

Furthermore, participants navigated communicative uncertainty by maintaining English as a safety net with foreigners, international students who are not fluent in Arabic, and during forgetting a phrase in Arabic. The use of Arabic either *Amiyah* or *Fusha* was chosen based on individual preferences and abilities. In this case, English as a fallback option that ensured communication could continue. Across participants' narratives emerged that A1 and B1 tended to limit their interaction to co-ethnic groups. This pattern can be understood as selective engagement, where cross-cultural adaptation is still carried out when needed, but deeper social relations are built in domains that are considered identity-stable.

In contrast, A2 and B2 showed a tendency to engage in broader social interactions in their lives. As A2 explained, *"I often use Amiyah and switch languages when talking to locals."* Similarly, B2 stated, *"I interact a lot with Egyptians and adjust my language depending on the situation."* Their experiences show that they not only actively used *Amiyah*, but also adapted flexibly by switching languages and adjusting their communication styles based on the context. This pattern emerged that they interact more frequently with residents and

therefore apply *Amiyah* and code-switching regularly in daily interaction.

Overall, across participants' narratives emerge that Indonesian students navigate linguistic challenges in intercultural communication in Cairo through a dynamic combination of convergence and maintenance strategies. They flexibly adjusting their language use, communication style, and interactional practices, while simultaneously maintaining certain linguistic preferences, despite limitations. Others maintain specific linguistic preferences, enabling them to maintain communication across various academic and social contexts. These patterns mentioned how participants use multiple linguistic strategically to manage communication challenges in a multilingual environment.

DISCUSSION

The result shows that Indonesian student in Cairo encounter several linguistic challenges during engaging in intercultural communication. These challenges emerge not only from differences in language varieties but also sociolinguistic practices embedded in daily interactions. All participants should adjust to the diglossic relationships between *Fusha* and *Amiyah*, understanding the role of English in an Arabic-dominated environment, expressive speech patterns and interpret rapid, also gain awareness of resident pragmatic norms. One of the primary challenges highlights adapting to the diglossic relationship between *Fusha* and *Amiyah*. Even if participants had studied Arabic prior to studying in Cairo, their exposure was focused on the formal used in academic settings. As a result, adjusting to the *Amiyah* used in daily communication required additional learning through direct interaction with residents. Moreover, language proficiency acquired through classroom learning do not always prepare students for the complexities of daily communication. As also mentioned by Ramjan et al. (2024) the discrepancy between formal language learning and everyday communication practices often creates challenges in interactions.

Participants responded to this challenge in different ways. Some students actively initiated interaction and treated the diglossic environment as an opportunity for language practice, while others adopted more hesitant communication strategies and relied more heavily on the formal variety of Arabic. These differences may be interpreted through the dimensions of interaction engagement and interaction confidence within the framework of IS (Chen & Starosta, 2000). Students who were more willing to initiate interaction tended to treat the diglossic environment as an opportunity for language practice, gradually emerging familiarity with *Amiyah* through repeated exposure. In contrast, those who preferred interacting within co-ethnic peers adopted more hesitant communication strategies and relied more heavily on the formal variety of Arabic. These differences reveal that IS may influence how individuals approach linguistic uncertainty and communication risk in intercultural encounters (Chen & Starosta, 2000; He et al., 2023; Puspitasari, 2023).

The role of English inside an environment where Arabic dominates daily interactions also become a challenge. As the results, English function as a lingua franca for international students or tourists, but its role actually remains limited in communication with residents. In an Arab context, English is primarily used for specific purposes such a tourism, academic communication, business rather than daily social interaction (Abdullah & Mohammad, 2023). Accordingly, English operates as a situational communicative resource rather than as the dominant language of interaction (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). Across the participants' responses to this challenge is varied, some students actively use English as an additional communicative resource, while others preferred interacting within culturally familiar networks or relied on *Fusha* language in daily communications.

The next challenges related to the communication style and the speech patterns. Several participants initially interpreted the louder and faster speech of residents. Over time, some students began to recognize that these expressive communication styles represent common features of everyday interaction in the resident context rather

than signs of negative interpersonal attitudes. This gradual shift in interpretation may reflect the development of interaction attentiveness, one of the dimensions of IS (Chen & Starosta, 2000).

Pragmatic differences also found as an important component of the linguistic adaptation. Across participants' narratives, everyday conversations especially with residents often begin with the sequences of greetings and religious expressions before moving to the main topic. In many Arabic speaking contexts, greeting expressions carry sociocultural and religious meanings, which frequently invoking references to peace and reflecting culturally embedded norms of speech etiquette (Dulayeva et al., 2023; Mamedova et al., 2021; Mustafa & Ali, 2024). These expressions function not only as a routine greeting but also as forms of phatic communication that shaped establish rapport, signal, respect, and maintain harmonious social relations (Al-Awaid & Mohammed, 2024). Thus, the student that unfamiliar with these interactional patterns, may successfully participation in conversation required not only linguistic comprehension but also in the build pragmatic awareness of how conversations are structured in the resident context.

Further results indicate that Indonesian students navigate these linguistic challenges in Cairo through a combination of convergence and maintenance strategies. These strategies are realized through the flexible use of multiple communicative resources, including adjustment in speech style, language choices, and interaction strategies during communicating with interlocutors from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Across participants' narratives students described switching between *Fusha*, *Amiyah*, English depending on the interactional context, while also adjusting prosodic features such as tempo, volume, and expressive style. These patterns points out that linguistic adaptation in a multilingual environment requires not only selecting appropriate languages but also modifying communicative behavior to maintain mutual understanding. This adjustment can be understood through the framework of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which explains how people adapt their

communication styles in response to others during social interaction (Giles, 1973, 1991).

Participants' narratives describe that convergence often involves adjustments beyond language choice. Several students highlighted modifying their volume, speech tempo, and expressive communication style to align with the interactional patterns commonly observed among residents. Some participants reported speaking more loudly or adopting a faster conversational tempo when interacting with residents, as an attempt to match the rhythm of everyday communication. These adjustments reveals that linguistic accommodation is not limited to lexical or grammatical choices, but also extends to prosodic and interactional features of communication.

These patterns show that convergence happens through various communicative modes. In daily interaction, successful communication depends not only on verbal language but also nonverbal cues such as tone of voice, facial expression, and conversational pacing (Ahmed & Saleem, 2025). By adjusting these aspects, participants try to reduce interactional distance and make communication with residents run more smoothly. In the framework of CAT, these adjustments can be seen as convergence strategies that aim to increasing communicative alignment between speaker (Giles, 2016). The findings indicate that linguistic adaptation among Indonesian students in Cairo is not only about changing language, but also requires broader adjustments in communication style.

Convergence serves as a survival strategy for maintaining communication when linguistic challenges emerge. Participants elaborated on their switching between *Fusha*, *Amiyah*, and English to maintain conversational flow, particularly when encountering vocabulary gaps or misunderstandings. In such situations, language switching was not necessarily used to imitate the interlocutor, but rather to avoid communication breakdown. This emerges that convergence has a pragmatic strategy for maintaining interaction rather than as a social alignment mechanism. Language can be means of social engagement as well as a strategy for coping with communication difficulties (Kurniawan, 2024; Shofiya & Basuni, 2023;

Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). In this study, Indonesian students reveal this flexibility by selecting whichever linguistic resource is most effective for sustaining communication at a given moment. By the framework of CAT, such adjustments represent convergence strategies that facilitate interactional continuity and mutual understanding (Giles et al., 1991).

This study also found that participants tended to accommodate their interlocutors, element of language maintenance were still evident in their narratives. This aligns with Giles et al. (2010) view that convergence is commonly used to build intimacy and reduce intercultural distance in social interactions. However, despite this tendency toward convergence, participants continued to maintain their use of their native language, which suggests that accommodation does not necessarily eliminate the expression of social identity. Therefore, language maintenance is shaped by family and community needs that provide a sense of identity and emotional closeness (Alafifi, 2025).

Indonesian students in Cairo also continues using Indonesian or Malay within their communities as a face-saving strategy and to maintain group identity, while still adapting, using *Fusha* in academic, *Amiyah* with residents and English serves as a safety net when they have difficulty finding Arabic vocabulary. This pattern confirms that language maintenance functions as an identity negotiation strategy to gain social acceptance without losing ties to their native culture.

Additionally, this study shows that communication accommodation between Indonesian students and residents in was unequal. Indonesian students are more adaptable, while residents tend to use high-speed Arabic and rarely switch to *Fusha* or English. This situation places greater pressure on international students to adapt to maintain smooth conversations (Redmer, 2021; Yang, 2024). In the context of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), international students need to adapt to the language patterns and communication styles of the interlocutors, who do not always demonstrate the same level of linguistic awareness. This may be interpreted as a form of under-accommodation, as described by Giles et al. (1991).

Based on the overall analysis, the integration of IS and CAT helps explaining the linguistic and cultural adaptation process of Indonesian students in Cairo. The five dimensions of IS describe the intercultural awareness aspects and readiness, while CAT shows how this awareness is manifested in communication behavior. In this study, these adaptations are situational and iterative process. Indonesian students in Cairo navigate their identity and communication through combining of IS and linguistic behavior adjustment. The ability to choose intonation patterns, appropriate language, and communication strategies related to the development of intercultural communicative competence in multilingual environments. The adaptation entails not only language but also an understanding of cross-cultural social expectations (Isaac et al., 2022; Hu, 2023). Thus, the successful adaptation of Indonesian students in Cairo emerged from the synergy between IS and adaptive communication strategies, opening up opportunities between affective factors and linguistic strategies in multilingual and multicultural interactions.

In light of these findings, the results indicate that Indonesian students studying in Cairo navigate various linguistic challenges in intercultural communication, such as dealing with diglossic language varieties, interpreting expressive speech patterns, and understanding resident pragmatic norms. These challenges are managed not only through active engagement in daily interactions but also through intentional and reflective communication strategies. In this study, IS plays a significant role in shaping how students notice and respond to communicative differences in intercultural settings. Students with active of IS tend to be more attentive to residents' communication practices and more open to experimenting with language use as well as adapting their communicative styles. Therefore, IS contributes to the development of awareness regarding communicative differences. while accommodation strategies show how this awareness is translated into actual linguistic adjustments. These processes reflect linguistic adaptation in intercultural communication, where students strategically use different linguistic resources to sustain interaction in multilingual environments.

CONCLUSION

Indonesian student in Cairo in this study navigate various linguistic challenges and adapt their communication practices in intercultural encounters. Linguistic adaptation requires ongoing negotiation of different language resources, including Arabic (*Fusha* and *Amiyah*) and English, which are used depending on the context of interaction in both academic and social settings. This adaptation emerges as a dynamic and situational process shaped by interactional needs, prior linguistic experiences, and social relationships. The findings of this study highlight the complementary roles of IS and communication accommodation in shaping intercultural communications. IS provides explain how participants recognize and interpret communicative differences, while accommodation strategies illustrate how this awareness is translated into concrete linguistic adjustments when interaction. These perspectives contribute to a deeper understanding of how participants in this study manage communication in multilingual environments. Therefore, educational institutions should strengthen linguistic and sociocultural support and provide opportunities for interaction with residents to enhance students' communicative flexibility in multilingual environments.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors employed Grammarly and ChatGPT to support improvements in language clarity, grammar, and readability. All material produced by these tools was thoroughly reviewed, checked, and revised by the authors. The authors assume full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the final manuscript.

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