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## The Challenges and Strategies in English Communication of UNNES 7<sup>th</sup> Semester Students during International Community Service Program (ICSP) Participation

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on revealing the challenges in English communication of UNNES 7<sup>th</sup> semester students during the International Community Service Program, as well bridging unexpected cultural gaps in communication, analyzed beyond the classroom-based context to extends existing discussion on communication competence. This paper adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, with 7 participants involved. Data collection was initially conducted with an open-ended questionnaire, followed by participants being invited back for a semi-structured interview. The findings revealed the main communication challenges faced by participants, such as limited knowledge of English vocabulary, and the challenge of understanding the English accent of Malaysians. However, several strategies in overcoming communication challenges were implemented, including the use of fillers, appeal for help strategy, applying code-switching, and the use of body gesture strategy. This paper presents opinions and experiences of the participants involved, highlighting the challenges of English communication in international scope and the strategies applied. In addition, this paper suggests the necessity of exposure to English learning in real-life contexts, such as involved in international standard programs to enhance long-term communication skills.

**Keywords:** English communication challenges; communication strategy; international community service

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### 1. Introduction

The importance of mastering English is clearly evident in the fact that countries around the world currently recognize English as a tool of international communication. Truly, a global language is one that plays a significant role as well as significant influence in many countries around the world. This definition is most appropriate for English, which according to a linguist, has a special status in more than 70 countries worldwide (Crystal, 2003). This is also in line with a study conducted by Santhosh (2025), English language is now considered an important competency for someone to have a role at the global level, with English, exchanging opinions,



negotiating, and communicating across cultures will be more effective. Furthermore, in Indonesia, the importance of English is introduced from kindergarten through university. Related to that matter, we grow up knowing that English is one of the most influential and dominant languages globally. Nowadays, English, as the language of international communication, also connects all activities in global developments. International transaction and business negotiation, all involve English as a tool of communication (Tan, 2024). To address this, Indonesia must be prepared for the fact that English is an important aspect in keeping up with global developments and plays a role on the international stage. However, of the four English language skills, speaking or communication is often considered to be the most challenging to apply in the real word situation. Yet, when it comes to mastering English, communication is the most important and influential in everyday life.

Due to the frequent difficulties in mastering English, developing English language skills is not sufficient through formal academic learning at school. The English language learning style in Indonesia still tends toward teacher-centered learning. Most schools focus more on English grammar, and student's English proficiency is measured by written exam scores. Thus, students become more passive in communicating in English (Hakim & Putra, 2021). Students should receive communication practice in real life context to overcome the lack of input and exposure to the target language in formal education settings (Rahayu, 2020). Furthermore, students are urged to be exposed in an international program where they have the opportunity to be in a social setting and directly practice their communication skills. This is related to a paper conducted by Al-Soufi (2021), communication skills are one of the outcomes obtained by students who participate in international programs. Cornelia et al. (2023) explored the English's speaking skill development of the participants in global volunteer program. Overall, the results show an increase in the participant's English language skills, the participants will regularly interact with others while on a program abroad. The more frequently a person engages in conversations in the target language, that is English, the better and more developed their communication will be.



At present, there are many international program opportunities available for students. Including University in Indonesia often offer international-standards programs for their students. Through these programs, students are able to gain hands-on experience interacting with the community, as well as gaining new perspectives on the global world (Ariyanti, 2020). In line with the matter, Universitas Negeri Semarang introduced an international program, known as GIAT International. GIAT International is a community service program organized by Pusat Pengembangan “Kuliah Kerja Nyata” LPPM UNNES. This program consists of selected students who have passed a selection process, who will then be sent to serve the community abroad. In 2025, GIAT International program, in collaboration with Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), sent 20 students to serve, share knowledge and culture, also build strong global relationships in Hulu Selangor, Malaysia. For this paper purposes, the program will be referred as the International Community Service Program (ICSP). Through ICSP, participants will be able to directly get the opportunity to practice communicating in English in Malaysia, which is known for its community habit of using English as the second language after Malay in daily conversation (Lee, 2021). One of the requirements for participating in ICSP is that the participants must have at least basic English skills. The reason behind this requirement is simple: English will be used when the participants interact with vendors, online taxi drivers, or even when they get lost in the city. This is one of the things the ICSP participants look forward to, the opportunity to experience communicating in English with citizens of other countries, while simultaneously assessing their proficiency.

However, despite all the learning and interaction processes taking place, significant gaps still remain. Unbeknownst to the students participating in the program, they still encountered communication challenges when directly engaging in real world interactions with people from different linguistic backgrounds. Communication challenges may occur when a conversation goes in a direction that is beyond a person’s expectation, and they cannot apply the communication strategy (Cheng et al., 2021). This is a common thing that could happen, Indonesian students often face challenges in communicating while studying abroad due to the



adjustment process (Hakim & Putra, 2021). One of the challenges faced by international students is to find the right words when communicating (Barton et al., 2022). A study also revealed that communication challenges can be caused by several factors, including encountering unfamiliar words, finding diverse accents, differences in idioms, speech rate etc (Cheng et al., 2021). While Malaysian society doesn't entirely use English, challenges remain. This is a stark contrast to what we typically encounter when practicing speaking in formal English classes.

In relation to the phenomena explained above, this study aims to identify the challenges faced by the ICSP participants in communicating in English. Moreover, if there are challenges, there are certainly communication strategies used. Communication strategy is a way for someone to overcome challenges that occur in oral communication, also to ensure that the speaker and listener are on the same page regarding the topic being discussed (Ahmad Kashmiri, 2020). Communication strategies need to be known by someone to be able to overcome limitations in communicating (Apriliani et al., 2022). A Study conducted by Apriliani et al. (2022) also discovered that strategies such as mumbling, code switching, code asking for help or clarification were frequently used as communication strategies. Moreover, communication strategy is an important factor in students'communicative competence to become better at use (Fatiyah et al., 2020). Most previous research has focused on exploring communicative competence in a formal classroom context, particularly on teaching and learning strategies, as well as assessment results, rather than real-life experiences (Wahyuni, 2024), specifically international community service programs experiences. In this matter, how students respond to communication challenges and develop communication strategy competencies in an international community service program environment has received less attention. Additionally, in contrast to research examining classroom-based English communication competencies, research focusing on international community service programs remains relatively rare in the state of the art of this area. Existing studies on ICSP-like programs tend to highlight intercultural awareness, empathy, and general aspect of language



development, without sufficiently focusing on detailed communication challenges that arise unexpectedly during international program interactions (Makhmut et al., 2024). In accordance with the topic, the following research questions are formulated:

- (1) What are the challenges do International Community Service participants face when communicating in English during the program in Malaysia?
- (2) What are strategies do International Community Service participants use when encountering challenges in communicating in English during the program in Malaysia?

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Research Design

The author settled on a qualitative descriptive approach for this paper. The objective of research with a qualitative approach is to find out how individuals recognize and interpret the content and meaning of their experience (Dira & Kuswandono, 2024). According to Sandelowski (2000), qualitative descriptives will assist researchers to obtain data that portrays a phenomenon or someone's experience. Many previous researchers used qualitative descriptive to be able to study and explore someone's experience related to an event or phenomenon (Kim, Sefcik & Bradway, 2017). This approach was chosen with the hope of presenting findings with a comprehensive and accurate descriptive presentation according to the data collected, so that it can easily make sense to the reader.

The specific aims of this research were to examine the challenges and strategies in communicating in English for 7th semester students of Universitas Negeri Semarang who participated in ICSP. Of the total 20 participants, 7 participants from the program were selected to be the subjects of this research to provide sufficient in depth-data. The subjects were chosen based on their active participation during the program, as they were the seven highest-ranked candidates as officially announced by the ICSP organizers after passing the interview stage, which was then they were entrusted with handling several main projects during the 25 days ICSP period in Malaysia. All of them has also willing to give their consent to participate in the research. Nevertheless, this study recognizes the selection of this small sample subjects may



have biased data reporting or inaccurate self-assessments as a trade-off, also possibly does not represent the diversity experiences of overall ICSP participants, as well as participants in other ICSP-like programs. Data collection was carried out after participants finished the program and have arrived back in Semarang, Indonesia, through questionnaire sent via WhatsApp and conducted both offline or online interview, depending on participants' availability. The period of data collection is no more than one month after the end of ICSP.

## 2.2 Research Instruments

First of all, data collection was implemented using a questionnaire, consist of 12 open-ended questions that cover details of participants' communication challenges, along with how they deal with unexpected challenges that may occur. Unlike close-ended questions, open-ended questions allow participants to freely elaborate their personal experience, opinions, ideas in their own unique ways (Baburajan et al., 2022). After participants have completed the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, they will be invited back for a 20-30 minutes semi-structured interview, consisted of fewer than 15 guiding questions, adapted from participants' responses to the previous questionnaire in order to explore the 5W + 1H, which is then transcribed in real time by the researcher for later analysis. More in-depth explanations and participant's perspectives that were not predicted by the researcher might be available during the semi-structured interview. The use of more than one data collection method was applied by researcher to obtain a more valid point of view and get more detailed as well as in-depth elaboration. Furthermore, ethical considerations were communicated throughout the study, all participants were informed of the study objectives, and gave their consent before data collection. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were also used. The researcher ensured that data was stored securely and could be accessible only to the researcher for study purposes.

## 2.3 Data Analysis Technique

The data collected through open-ended questionnaires and semi structure interviews, which were transcribed, were carefully read and then analyzed using thematic analysis introduced by Braun & Clarke (2006). In this paper, the researchers applied thematic analysis



to analyze the groupings, then identify themes or data patterns related to the formulated research questions. Therefore, respondents played a crucial role in providing comprehensive explanations of behaviors, steps, ideas, and point of view.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

This section specifically reports the results of the study based on two main research questions: (1) What are the challenges do International Community Service participants face when communicating in English during the program in Malaysia? (2) What are strategies do International Community Service participants use when encountering challenges in communicating in English during the program in Malaysia?

#### 3.1 Findings

##### 3.1.1 The Challenges Faced by the International Community Service Participants in English Communication during the Program

###### a) Limited Knowledge of Vocabulary

The challenge of limited vocabulary is one frequently encountered by non-native English speakers. This is also a case for ICSP participants during their activity in Malaysia. Despite possessing basic English skills as a prerequisite for participation in this international program, the reality remains different. Participants reported feeling unfamiliar with vocabulary beyond their typically used in classroom instruction.

P4 mentioned:

*“I always feel like I need more time to think about the right vocabulary to convey to my conversation partner, especially vocabulary that I don’t usually use during class.”*

P3 shared:

*“I usually get nervous, so the vocabulary that I initially knew suddenly disappears, I forget.”*

P4 and P3 indicated that they felt pressured when they tried to respond to their conversation partner. In the interview, P4 said that his vocabulary knowledge was not extensive, he felt less



familiar with vocabulary outside the vocabulary learned in class, so he needed more time to respond. P3 also experienced something similar, she felt uncomfortable if her conversation partner had to wait too long because she could not respond spontaneously, this ended up making her nervous and stutter. The respondents' statement suggest that proficiency in English vocabulary has a meaningful influence on someone's ability to communicate (Wardana, 2023). However, previous research has also found similar communication challenges as those experienced by the ICSP participants. The challenge of limited knowledge of English vocabulary appears to be a reason for someone being nervous, and is also one of the challenges that is repeatedly encountered (Özdemir & Seçkin, 2025). Additionally, the challenges experienced by P4 are relevant to those found by Hibatullah (2019), One of the participants stated that in finding the right vocabulary to convey, a high level of vocabulary mastery may always require.

The difference in the level of vocabulary challenges when communicating in English in the real world was also felt by P1.

P1 mentioned:

*“During class we usually only focus on theories like grammar and exercises, and I feel like those theories often don’t come into play when we’re actually talking.”*

P1 shared:

*“Theory proficiency is not enough to communicate in the real-world, I need real practice to be familiar with the vocabulary used in real conversation.”*

P1's interview suggests that the theory she learned during English class was too complex. The main challenge she encountered was understanding the new vocabulary spoken by her conversation partner, as well as finding the right words to respond. From this experience, P1 realized that she still lacked practice communicating in English and that her vocabulary was limited. P1's responses were still in line with the answers of other participants who had similar



experiences. This also illustrate that mastering vocabulary positively impacts on students' communication competence (Khan, 2024).

## b) Difficulty in Understanding Malaysian English Accent

Malaysia is indeed known for its ethnic diversity. However, some participants also felt unfamiliar with the English accent of local Malaysians. They found the accent of the locals, either Malay, Indian or Chinese ethnicity were different and sounded foreign to their ears.

P6 mentioned:

*"The local people's accent and pronunciation sound so fast and slurred, often hard to get it, because I'm not used to it."*

P3 shared:

*"The local people from Chinese ethnicity often speak too fast, and like to add "lah" at the end of their sentence, which confuses me."*

P5 added:

*"It's the intonation and pronunciation of the Indian street vendors was too fast and energetic. I'll just switch to Indonesian or Malay if I don't understand."*

This participants' point of view is very interesting, where they implicitly express their surprise with the local people's English accent. Moreover, this program is their first experience of being exposed to the English language spoken by the Malaysian community. This is aligned with a study conducted by Musa et al. (2023), It was found that understanding the English accent of the Malaysian community may be challenging for foreigners.

### 3.2.1 The Strategies Used by the International Community Service Participants in English Communication during the Program

#### a) The use of Fillers

Based on the interview results, participants responded positively to the unexpected challenges of communicating in English by applying communication strategies. The use of communication strategies plays an essential role in the adaption process and the level of



participants' confidence in expressing insight and arguments. Related to this, many of them agreed that the use of fillers was applied either consciously or unconsciously. The interview revealed that participants were aware of their limited English communication skills, and therefore, using fillers contributed well during the conversation.

P4 mentioned:

*"I often automatically say "hmm" then "you know", especially when I'm looking for the right vocabulary to express something."*

P2 shared:

*"Yeah, right the pauses words, somehow it really helps to give my brain space and time to think."*

Some of the participants were just learned that the words they often automatically say are called "fillers", they admitted more familiar with the term "pauses words". However, the use of fillers is quite popular during data collection. Previous research has also found out that fillers potentially support in giving someone time to think when facing communication challenges during a certain conversation. Fillers become one of the most frequently used strategies in creating time to maintain the flow of conversation (Rangga et al., 2025). In fact, the use of fillers plays an efficient role in helping speakers to express ideas and thoughts confidently (Gandeza, 2023).

## b) Appeal for Help Strategy

Support from friends and colleagues positively influences in overcoming communication challenges. Some of the participants reported that they relied on each other by implementing "appeal for help" strategy. Seen in the interview, they stated felt more confident communicating in English with locals and fellow tourists when they were accompanied by friends, or at the very least they were not alone.



P3 mentioned:

*“Usually, I give my friend a code to help translate or respond to the person I’m talking to.”*

P6 shared:

*“Most often I ask my friend to explain what the other person is saying, while I also try to learn some new vocabs.”*

The English language skills of ICSP participants are generally the same among each other. Based on the interview results, it can be seen that by carrying out an appeal for help as a communication strategy meaningfully effects on the conversation. With this strategy, they are able to assist each other in facing communication challenges, as well as acquire new vocabulary by practicing directly in the real world. Previous study also discovered something similar. The asking for help strategy emerged as one of the real actions that is known to be effective in maintaining communication flow and overcoming vocabulary challenges (Ducker, 2021).

### c) Code-Switching Strategy

Referring to the interview results, code-switching appears to be a fairly prominent strategy. This reinforces the findings of Masna (2020) who mentioned that code-switching is indicated as a strategy that functions to explain the intent and purpose in communication, as well as to avoid misunderstanding. In this regard, some participants had their say on this matter.

P5 mentioned:

*“Luckily, I still meet a lot of people who understand Bahasa Indonesia so I can just switch from English to Bahasa.”*

P4 shared:

*“As I said, my vocabulary knowledge is limited, so switching to Bahasa Indonesia is one of the strategies I automatically apply.”*

P4 added:



*“But of course this is in the context of talking with local Malaysians. I can’t use this strategy when talking to fellow tourists from other countries.”*

The phenomena experienced by P5 and P4 are considered similar, it is explicitly stated that most participants remain firm in taking advantage of this opportunity to practice communicating in English, while also feeling safe because Bahasa Indonesia is still understood by some local people. Meanwhile, P4 added that the code-switching strategy still has a weakness, specifically that he cannot employ it when a fellow tourist from another country invites him into a conversation. Relevant to this report, adapting code switching as a whole, may connect to a person’s sense of security and reduces anxiety in expressing ideas in communication, as well as increasing interaction and participation among community and colleagues (Andi Suwarni, 2025).

#### **d) Body Gesture Strategy**

In terms of overcoming challenges in communication, the use of body gesture is expressed as a fairly popular strategy among participants involved in this study. Participants expressed their lack of understanding that when they use their bodies to say something, it is known as a body gesture strategy. Based on the interview, they simply use their bodies spontaneously to support communication.

P7 mentioned:

*“I spontaneously use my body to express something, more specifically pointing directly at what I mean.”*

P1 shared:

*“Usually, I try to use body gesture, while hoping that the person I’m talking to can understand what I mean.”*



Based on the statements above, the researcher was very impressed by the fact that non-verbal actions such as body gestures are able to support the flow of communication. Here P7 and P1 stated that body gestures enable them to express something, particularly when they are looking for an item. P7 clearly stated that by simply pointing to the item she meant to a seller in Kuala Lumpur, her communication challenges are solved. The use of non-verbal communication such as using index finger to point something has proven promising in inter-cultural communication (Agustina, 2019).

## 3.2 Discussion

Altogether, the findings address gaps in communication phenomena during the International Community Service Program (ICSP). First, there is the challenge of expressing as well as recognizing the vocabulary in conversations during the ICSP. Several participants stated they were unfamiliar with vocabulary and terms other than vocabulary frequently used in class. Moreover, participants realized how their ears were still in the process of adapting to real conversations with people with different linguistic backgrounds. Wilczewski & Alon (2023) mentioned that the ability to produce language in response to communication challenges and differences in cultural background has an influence on the adaptation and socialization process. In contrast to this perspective, formal classroom-based research reports that communication processes are relatively stable and directed by allowing students to prepare responses and rely on well-known conversational patterns without major differences in linguistic background (Sato & Ballinger, 2012). When participants are faced with challenges in producing appropriate vocabulary in conversation, this illustrates their lack of communicative competence practice to deal with real-world terms. In addition, the findings also expressed participant's sense of surprise due to the Malaysians' English accent. It is described that the accent of Malaysian people sounds fast and some of them are very energetic in expressing their ideas. According to Vasquez Diaz and Iqbal (2024), diverse English accents have been reported to be one of the common difficulties that may occur in oral communication. This perspective implicitly suggests to the need to engage more in oral communication in real-



world settings, specifically by taking part in international programs. In line with this point, English language exposure by foreigners while being involved in an international program is perceived to be efficient in building oral communication skills (Yanti & Sada, 2023).

Communication strategy was once said to be a technique used to fill in linguistic gaps during structured speaking task (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). However, this paper identifies that communication strategies contributing well to language-related challenges in ICSP participants communication. The use of fillers, the application of appeal for help strategies, employment of code switching, and body gesture strategies are mentioned to be commonly adopted in this paper. Overall, participants felt such an impact in implementing these strategies on their communication process, more precisely in supporting the flow of conversation, sense of confidence in articulating ideas, along with avoiding misunderstanding. In bridging the gap that occurs in the communication process, these strategies have been reported to facilitate a person's involvement by boosting self-confidence to play a role in interaction (Shofiya & Basuni, 2023). Participants' personal experience in involving communication strategies, realizing what communication competence they need to improve in the future, while motivating them to be more engaged in English learning in real context involving foreign speakers, in addition to a formal classroom learning (Laiya & Pd, 2019).

On the other hand, limitations may still remain in this study. The limited involvement of participants, potentially limits the generalizability of the findings. However, participants were selected while relatively providing deep qualitative data, also may form the basis for future research with a wider range of samples and more diverse cultural backgrounds. The data sources presented are also based on self-experience that may be subjective and personal. Furthermore, the study was initiated within a specific international community service program, and its findings possibly not directly valid to contributed to other contexts.

## 4. Conclusion

As this research seeks to identify the challenges and strategies in English communication of UNNES 7th semester students during the ICSP participation, a range of discoveries were revealed. The participants of ICSP spotlight the challenges they most often



face, such as their limited of knowledge in English vocabulary, leading them to struggle in identifying the right vocabulary to apply. Furthermore, the challenge of understanding Malaysians' English accent, which they are facing for the first time in real life. Despite facing these challenges, ICSP participants positively faced these challenges by implementing communication strategies that arise internally from themselves or with others assistance. Thus, the findings of this research indicates that communication skills are able to formed and improved through experiments applying clarification and assistance-asking strategies, adapting fillers, simplifying with body gestures as a response to communication challenges, especially in international standard programs. Researcher suggests educators and educational institutions to promote more opportunities and encourage students to engage in international standard programs with the aim of enhancing the experience of learning by doing in real life contexts.

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