



Does Long Term Residence Mitigate Intercultural Communication Challenges? Insights from Migrant Workers in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the extent to which long-term residence influences intercultural communication challenges among Indonesian migrant workers in Taiwan. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 11 participants who have resided in Taiwan for more than 10 years, focusing on their experiences in both workplace and social contexts. The findings indicate that prolonged residence does not necessarily reduce intercultural communication difficulties; instead, these challenges evolve over time. Persistent barriers remain in areas such as religious practices, language proficiency, food-related customs, and nonverbal communication, whereas relationships with employers tend to improve due to increased trust and familiarity. Participants also demonstrate various adaptive strategies, including seeking clarification and negotiating meaning, engaging in cultural learning, and participating in local cultural activities, reflecting their active role in managing cultural differences. Overall, intercultural communication competence is better conceptualized as a dynamic and continuous process shaped by interaction, lived experience, and structural factors, rather than length of stay alone.

Keywords: Intercultural communication; Indonesian migrant workers; cultural adaptation; Taiwan



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1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of globalization, transportation, and digital communication has significantly increased international labour mobility, enabling individuals to live and work abroad for extended periods (Genovca, 2020). In this context, migrant workers have become a vital component of global economies, particularly in regions such as Taiwan, where foreign workers play a crucial role in sectors like manufacturing, caregiving, and domestic work (Liang, 2021). As individuals relocate across cultural boundaries, they certainly encounter intercultural communication challenges, which may affect their social integration, workplace performance, and overall well-being (Jackson, 2022).

Intercultural communication refers to the process of exchanging information between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, often involving differences in language, values, norms, and communication styles (Deardorff & Hunter, 2006). Recent studies emphasize that intercultural communication competence is not an innate ability but a dynamic process developed through interaction and experience (Hanley & Chankseliani, 2025; Dalib at al., 2023). Migrant workers, especially those residing abroad for extended

periods, are continuously exposed to new cultural environments, which require them to adapt their communication strategies in order to function effectively in both professional and social contexts (Yeh, 2020).

Previous research has shown that individuals who stay abroad longer tend to develop higher levels of intercultural competence, including greater adaptability, empathy, and cultural awareness (Hanleh et al., 2026). Similarly, recent findings suggest that long-term international experience contributes to the gradual development of communication skills, as individuals learn to navigate cultural differences through repeated interactions and practical engagement (Krishnan & Jin 2020). However, the process of adaptation is neither immediate nor consistent, as it depends on various factors such as the frequency of interaction with local communities, workplace dynamics, and individual motivation to adapt.

In the context of migrant workers, intercultural communication challenges often include language barriers, misunderstandings of cultural norms, and difficulties in expressing ideas appropriately in a different sociocultural setting (Walker, 2021). Studies focusing on migrant populations highlight that effective intercultural communication requires not only linguistic competence but also the ability to interpret and respond appropriately to culturally specific cues (Driscoll et al., 2020). While some migrants gradually overcome these challenges over time, others may continue to experience difficulties despite prolonged residence, suggesting that duration of stay alone may not fully determine communication competence.

Although previous studies have explored intercultural competence among international students and short-term migrants, there remains a significant gap in understanding how long-term residence shapes intercultural communication challenges, particularly among migrant workers in Taiwan. With the growing presence of Southeast Asian workers in Taiwan, especially those from Indonesia, it becomes important to examine whether extended residence helps reduce communication barriers or whether such challenges persist despite prolonged exposure to the host society. Therefore, this study aims to investigate whether long-term residence mitigates intercultural communication challenges among migrant workers in Taiwan. By focusing on the lived experiences of workers who have spent extended periods abroad, this study seeks to provide deeper insights into the processes of adaptation, the development of intercultural competence, and the factors that facilitate or hinder effective communication within a multicultural environment.

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) has been widely conceptualized as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations (Bennett, 2009). Communicators are capable of behaving appropriately across a range of communication contexts, explaining competence through personality oriented perspectives (Lustig & Koester (2010). However, contemporary perspectives argue that intercultural communication competence (ICC) is not a fixed set of traits but a dynamic and evolving process shaped through ongoing interaction, reflection, and adaptation (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2012). This aligns with process-oriented models, which conceptualize intercultural competence as something that develops gradually over time through experiential learning rather than being acquired instantaneously.

The literature presents a variety of approaches, theoretical perspectives, and individual-level factors that may influence intercultural communication competence (ICC), either directly or indirectly (Arasaratnam, 2007, 2016). It is therefore important to highlight the most commonly used approaches in examining ICC. The first is the culture-specific approach, which incorporates context-bound and potentially biased variables, limiting its applicability across different cultural settings (Arasaratnam, 2007). In contrast, the general culture approach identifies a set of variables that can influence ICC across diverse cultural groups, offering a more universally applicable framework.

It is important to note that many existing definitions of intercultural communication competence have largely been developed. These definitions generally emphasize an individual's ability to engage in interactions that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural settings, highlighting the role of knowledge, motivation, and skills in achieving competence (Deardorff, 2015). The foundation of this perspective can be traced to the origins of Western communication theory. Woelfel (1987) argues that much of Western communication thinking is rooted in Aristotelian philosophy, which assumes that individuals can select from a range of behavioral options in any given situation, with their choices shaped by personal beliefs and attitudes.

1.1. Long-Term Residence and Intercultural Adaptation.

A growing body of research suggests that the duration of residence abroad plays a significant role in shaping intercultural competence (Genkova & Kruse, 2020). Individuals who live abroad for extended periods are more likely to develop deeper cultural understanding and more flexible communication strategies and long-

term exposure allows individuals to move beyond surface-level cultural awareness toward more nuanced interpretations of social behavior and communication practices (Hanley & Chankseliani, 2025).

However, scholars caution against assuming a linear relationship between length of stay and intercultural competence. While time provides opportunities for learning, it does not guarantee successful adaptation (Kim, 2021). Instead, the quality and intensity of intercultural interactions are critical factors influencing competence development (Jackson, 2022). For example, individuals who actively engage with members of the host culture tend to develop stronger communication skills compared to those who remain within cocultural or migrant communities.

Moreover, recent global studies indicate that intercultural competence continues to evolve even after prolonged periods abroad, suggesting that adaptation is an ongoing and iterative process rather than a final outcome (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019). This highlights the importance of examining not only the duration of residence but also the lived experiences that shape communication practices over time.

1.2. Intercultural Communication Challenges among Migrant Workers

Migrant workers frequently encounter a range of intercultural communication challenges that stem from differences in language, cultural expectations, and social norms. Language barriers remain one of the most prominent obstacles, often leading to misunderstandings, limited participation, and reduced confidence in communication (Yeh, 2020). However, communication challenges extend beyond language proficiency to include pragmatic and sociocultural aspects, such as indirect communication styles, politeness strategies, and hierarchical relationships in the workplace.

In many host countries, workplace communication is shaped by implicit cultural rules regarding authority, directness, and emotional expression. Migrant workers who come from high-context cultures may experience difficulty adapting to more direct or task-oriented communication styles, leading to misinterpretations or perceptions of incompetence (Hall, 2020). Conversely, attempts to adopt unfamiliar communication styles may result in anxiety or identity tension, particularly when individuals feel pressured to conform to dominant cultural norms.

Workplace hierarchies, power imbalances, and limited access to social networks can restrict opportunities for meaningful intercultural interaction, thereby slowing the development of communication competence (Huang & Zhang, 2025; Liang, 2021). These constraints suggest that intercultural communication challenges are not solely individual issues but are also shaped by broader social and institutional contexts.

Emotional and psychological factors also play a crucial role in shaping intercultural communication experiences. Feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and fear of making mistakes can reduce individuals' willingness to engage in communication with members of the host culture (Gudykunst, 2020). This phenomenon, often referred to as intercultural communication anxiety, may lead migrant workers to avoid interaction or rely primarily on co-national networks, thereby limiting opportunities for language practice and cultural learning. Over time, such patterns can reinforce communication barriers rather than reduce them.

Religious practices also play a significant role in shaping intercultural communication experiences among migrant workers (Chen & Yang, 2022). Differences in religious beliefs, values, and daily practices such as prayer routines, dietary restrictions, and observance of religious holidays can create both practical and communicative challenges in the host society. For instance, migrant workers may find it difficult to explain or negotiate their need for prayer time or religious observance in workplaces that are unfamiliar with or less accommodating of such practices. This can lead to misunderstandings, feelings of marginalization, or reluctance to express personal needs (Huang, 2021).

Despite these challenges, some studies indicate that migrant workers develop adaptive strategies over time, such as code-switching, observation, and imitation of local communication patterns. These strategies reflect a process of learning through experience, where individuals gradually refine their communication practices to align with the expectations of the host culture (Kim, 2021).

1.3. The Role of Experience and Interaction in Developing Competence

Repeated interaction with members of the host culture provides opportunities for individuals to test, adjust, and improve their communication strategies (Jackson, 2022; Lustig et al, 2010). Through this process, individuals not only acquire cultural knowledge but also develop the ability to respond flexibly to diverse communication contexts (Nameni, 2022).

Importantly, the development of intercultural competence is influenced by individual factors such as motivation, openness, and willingness to adapt (Arasaratnam, 2016). Migrant workers who actively seek interaction and demonstrate a positive attitude toward cultural differences are more likely to achieve effective communication outcomes (Genkova & Kruse, 2020). Conversely, those who experience social isolation or rely primarily on co-national networks may have fewer opportunities to develop intercultural skills.

This suggests that intercultural competence is coconstructed through both individual agency and social environment, reinforcing the idea that long-term residence alone is insufficient without meaningful engagement and interaction. This indicates that intercultural competence develops through the interaction between individual agency and the surrounding social environment, suggesting that long-term residence alone is not sufficient without active engagement and meaningful interaction.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore whether long-term residence mitigates intercultural communication challenges among migrant workers in Taiwan. A qualitative approach is appropriate as it enables an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, particularly in understanding how intercultural communication develops over extended periods of time (Creswell, 2009). By focusing on individuals with long-term residence, this study seeks to capture not only challenges but also the processes of adaptation and competence development.

2.2. Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 11 migrant workers residing in Taiwan, including 6 females and 5 males. All participants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. Most importantly, participants were required to have lived and worked in Taiwan for a minimum of 10 years, ensuring that they had extensive exposure to intercultural communication in both workplace and social contexts.

The participants represented diverse backgrounds in terms of age, educational level, location of residence, Chinese language proficiency, marital status, prior overseas experience, and frequency of communication with their employers. This diversity was intentionally sought to ensure a wide range of perspectives and experiences regarding intercultural communication challenges and adaptation processes.

In addition, the participants were employed in different occupational sectors, including caregiving, maritime work (shipmates), and company based employment. This variation in professional fields provided a broader understanding of how workplace contexts influence intercultural communication experiences. To protect participants' identities and maintain confidentiality, all names used in this study are pseudonyms.

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi structured interviews designed to explore participants' long-term experiences in intercultural communication. The interviews generally focused on participants' early communication challenges upon arrival in Taiwan, their current communication practices after living in Taiwan for more than 10 years and the strategies for mitigating intercultural communication challenges.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 - 60 minutes and was conducted remotely via online platforms, as all participants were residing in Taiwan while the researcher was based in Indonesia. Prior to the interviews, informed consent was obtained from all participants. The interviews were audio recorded to ensure accurate data collection, and follow up questions were used to gain deeper insights into how participants' communication strategies developed throughout their long-term residence.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). This method is suitable for identifying patterns across participants' experiences, particularly in examining how intercultural communication challenges change over time. Special attention was given to identifying themes related to temporal development, such as differences between early-stage challenges and long-term adaptation. This allowed the study to directly address whether extended residence contributes to the mitigation of intercultural communication difficulties.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Intercultural Communication Challenges among Long-Term Migrant Workers

Using thematic analysis, several key themes emerged regarding intercultural communication challenges experienced by Indonesian migrant workers in Taiwan. The findings reveal that although participants had lived in Taiwan for more than 10 years, intercultural communication challenges were not entirely eliminated. Instead, these challenges evolved over time, with some becoming less significant while others persisted due to cultural and structural differences.

3.1.1. Religious Beliefs as a Persistent Challenge

One of the most prominent and enduring challenges identified in this study relates to religious beliefs. All participants were Muslim, while the majority of the Taiwanese population practices Buddhism at 21.3%, other religions at 16.2%, Christianity at 5.5%. and 13% of the population considered themselves nonreligious (Taiwan Today, 2026). This difference created ongoing challenges in practicing religious obligations, particularly daily prayers and adherence to Islamic practices.

Participants 2 reported

“I work as a caregiver, and as a Muslim, this has been an ongoing challenge for me from the beginning. In my first year, it was especially difficult to practice my religious beliefs. As you know, we are required to pray five times a day, but my employer asked me not to wear a white prayer garment (which covers a woman’s head and body) because her grandchild was afraid of it, thinking it looked like a ghost. In addition, I didn’t have a private room, which made it even harder for me to pray. However, over time, my employer has become more understanding. I now use a different-colored garment, and I’ve also become better at managing my time so that I can fulfill my religious practices without interfering with my work”.

Participant 1 also added

“From the very beginning, I’ve always had difficulties because I work in a factory. It is especially challenging to perform Friday prayers since there is no mosque near the factory. It is also quite hard to ask my boss for permission to pray, even if it is just with friends in our room. It is possible for all of us who are Muslim to leave at the same time because the factory would be empty, so we take turns instead. However, even with this arrangement, I am sometimes unable to perform Friday prayers regularly”.

Participant 5 shared that

“At home, I am still allowed to pray. I manage my time well, and my employer understands. However, it can sometimes be difficult to attend religious gatherings, such as study sessions, which are often held around Taipei Main Station or at the mosque, usually about once a month. If I want to join, I need to inform my employer in advance to get permission for a day off on Sunday, as long as it does not interfere with my work, or sometimes I bring the elderly woman I take care of, because she enjoys joining Islamic or Indonesian cultural activities”.

These findings indicate that, despite long term residence, religious practices remain a sensitive and unresolved area of intercultural communication. Unlike language or social adaptation, which may improve over time, religious differences are deeply rooted and less flexible, often requiring negotiation with employers who may have limited understanding of Islamic practices.

3.1.2. Language Barriers and Gradual Adaptation

Language differences emerged as another major challenge, particularly in relation to Mandarin Chinese proficiency. While some participants reported improvements in basic communication skills over time, limitations remained, especially in reading and writing.

Participants 10 described ongoing misunderstandings caused by pronunciation errors, limited vocabulary, and difficulty interpreting written Mandarin characters.

“I can speak Mandarin, but only for speaking and listening. At the beginning, I often made mistakes with tones, so my employer didn’t always understand me. But now, if my employer doesn’t understand, I try to explain using different vocabulary. However, when I go to places like the hospital, I still have difficulties because I can’t read Mandarin, especially for things like medication”.

Participant 8 also mentioned that

“For me, speaking Mandarin is quite fine, and I can communicate well. At the beginning, I made a lot of mistakes, but since I’ve been here for 17 years, I’ve become much more fluent. However, Mandarin is not an alphabet-based language like Indonesian, so it’s different. Because of that, I still find it difficult to read things like addresses or street names, and I often have to ask local Taiwanese people or use Google Translate”.

Participant 9 also shared

“My Mandarin is very poor, even though I’ve lived in Taiwan for a long time, because I rarely use it. I work in a company where all the employees and my boss use English, so communication is not much of a problem for me. However, when it comes to documents, I still find it difficult because I can’t read or write Mandarin. So, I usually ask for help from Taiwanese friends or use professional services”.

Interestingly, the findings suggest that long-term residence contributes to partial adaptation rather than full competence. Many participants developed functional communication skills sufficient for daily interaction but did not achieve full linguistic proficiency. This indicates that duration of stay alone does not guarantee language mastery, particularly when opportunities for meaningful interaction are limited.

3.1.3. Food Practices and Cultural Negotiation

Food and dietary practices, particularly related to halal requirements, were identified as ongoing intercultural challenges. Participants frequently encountered difficulties in ensuring that food met Islamic dietary laws, including the avoidance of pork and alcohol.

Participant 3 shared

“We all are the shipmate, we have our lunch box every day that provided by our boss. The boss knows that Muslim cannot eat pork but I am not sure that it was 100% halal, but only God knows. Indeed, we still eat it because we cannot cook here”

This situation described where they had limited control over their food and relied on trust rather than certainty regarding halal compliance.

Participant 4 added

“I work as a caregiver for an elderly woman. My employer knows that I am Muslim and that I do not eat pork or food cooked with lard, so I cook my own meals at home and she does not mind. However, I am still unsure because the same pots and plates are also used to cook non-halal food. I feel hesitant to buy my own utensils because I’m afraid it might offend her. Sometimes I buy food from Indonesian halal restaurants, but I can’t do that every day”.

Participant 7:

When it comes to food, I’ve not had difficulties since my university days. There was a halal canteen on campus, but the menu was quite limited and repetitive. Now that I work in a company and live on my own, I cook for myself and buy my own utensils, so it’s generally safe. However, sometimes I want to try traditional Taiwanese dishes, which can be difficult because many of them contain pork or are cooked with lard. Even when there are halal options with certification, they are usually more expensive.

These findings highlight that food practices are not only a matter of personal preference but also a form of cultural and religious identity. As such, they require continuous negotiation and may remain challenging even after long-term residence.

3.1.4. Nonverbal Communication and Cultural Misinterpretation

Nonverbal communication was also identified as a significant challenge, particularly in understanding culturally specific symbols, gestures, and social norms. Participants reported limited knowledge of nonverbal cues, such as the symbolic meaning of certain actions, colors, or numbers in Taiwanese culture.

Participant 2 said

“I only know a little about nonverbal communication in Taiwan. For example, we should not stick chopsticks upright into a bowl of rice in our lunch box, because it symbolizes wishing someone death. However, I am not familiar with other aspects such as gestures, silence, or eye contact, but over time, I’ve been learning little by little”.

Although some participants had attended pre-departure training or cultural seminars, they noted that such knowledge was often theoretical and insufficient for real-life situations. Misunderstandings still occurred, such as wearing inappropriate clothing for certain occasions or failing to recognize culturally sensitive behaviors.

Participant 5 added that

“Before coming to Taiwan, I had to attend a seminar about Taiwanese culture because I would be living in my employer’s house. I learned basic cultural meanings, such as red symbolizing good luck and noodles representing long life, among others. However, I only understood these in theory. In practice, I sometimes did not fully understand the cultural norms. For example, in my very first year, I wore a black dress to my employer’s birthday, not knowing that it could be considered inappropriate or taboo in Taiwanese culture. Fortunately, my employer was not angry and instead explained the cultural meaning to me. At that time, I had very limited understanding, but now I have gradually improved, and I even remind myself of these cultural norms.”

Participant 9 also said

“At the beginning of my work experience, I was quite confused, even though I had already completed a two-year master’s degree. I had to learn their work culture. I heard that leaving exactly on time is sometimes seen as not being loyal to the company. In the beginning, I always went home on time, but over time I started adapting to their work habits.

Another difference is that in Indonesia, people may often chat or spend time together with coworkers. However, in my office, this rarely happens although it might just be my workplace. I have also heard from friends that, in general, coworkers here are considered only work colleagues, not friends for socializing outside of work.”

This suggests that nonverbal communication competence develops more slowly and requires contextual experience. Even after extended residence, gaps in understanding may persist due to the implicit and culturally embedded nature of nonverbal cues.

3.1.5. Interpersonal Relationships

In contrast to the challenges discussed above, participants generally reported fewer difficulties in maintaining relationships with employers and expressing their needs. Many participants described positive relationships with their employers, characterized by mutual understanding, emotional support, and open communication.

Participant 10 said

“Showing some respect is very important, I always do it every day. Like in the morning I said “Nihao” or “Zao an” to my boss, because he is my boss, I worked with and let say he paid me, so why not to express our ethnic to show the respect, it was not difficult”

Other participant described their relationships with employers as familial, highlighting emotional closeness and mutual care.

Participant 7 also added

“My boss never pretended his self as a boss to keep a good relationship with us, he was very kind boss. But even so, we are as the shipmate workers need always to show our respect and our ethnic. Like made a bow when face the boss, or said “Nihao” only like that, it also proved that as Indonesian we are very friendly”

These findings suggest that interpersonal communication challenges may decrease over time as trust and familiarity develop. Long-term residence appears to facilitate relationship-building, which in turn supports more effective communication.

3.2. Strategies for Mitigating Intercultural Communication Challenges

The analysis also identified several strategies used by participants to mitigate intercultural communication challenges. These strategies reflect active efforts to adapt and navigate cultural differences over time.

3.2.1. Clarification and Negotiation

Participants frequently used clarification as a strategy to overcome misunderstandings. This included explaining religious practices, correcting misinterpretations, and using tools such as translation applications or gestures to facilitate communication.

Participant 2 shared

“I didn’t really know how to lessen the difficulty in practicing my religious beliefs, so I tried to explain everything more clearly to my boss, such as that I pray five times a day and wear a headscarf (hijab). At first, my boss thought I was doing something related to mysticism, but after I explained it day by day, my boss finally understood. I continued praying even though I didn’t have my own room. So now I just continue my prayers, but I make sure my work is finished first, so my boss does not call me during prayer time.”

Participant 5 added

“During the Ramadhan, as a Muslim I have to do fasting. My boss asked me to just break my fasting because he worried that I would be fainted if I did not drink and eat during work. I tried to explained him that I only prohibited drink and eating from sunrise to sunset. After that I can eat and drink like usual. Then, he understood”

Participant 2 also mentioned

“Once, I rejected my boss’s offer not because I did not like it, but because I could not accept it due to my religious beliefs. My boss gave me food that contained pork. I resolved the situation by explaining that I am Muslim, and Muslims cannot eat pork or pork-based products, and cannot drink alcohol such as beer. The next day, she bought me vegetarian food instead.”

3.2.2. Learning the Host Culture

Participants actively sought to learn about Taiwanese culture through observation, interaction, and asking questions. This included learning about nonverbal communication, workplace norms, and cultural values.

Participant 8 shared

“I really don’t understand about the nonverbal communication in Taiwan. Because it was very different with Indonesian, especially as Javanese like me. So, I kept learning to ask everything about this, that, to my boss, my other Indonesian friends and even ask my agency”

Participant 5 added

“I always helped them prepare Chinese New Year food and even contributed to the celebration. Through this, I learned more about their culture, especially how certain foods symbolize aspects of life. For example, noodles represent long life, red symbolizes good luck, and items such as angpao and oranges also carry cultural meanings. I also learned their gestures, such as when saying ‘gong xi fa cai,’ Taiwanese people clench both hands and slightly bow”

3.2.3. Participation in Cultural Practices

Engagement in local cultural activities, such as festivals and celebrations, was also identified as an important strategy. Participation allowed migrant workers to develop cultural understanding, improve language skills, and build stronger relationships with members of the host culture.

Participant 1 said

“I joined the dragon boat festival to learned more about Taiwanese culture, I leaned about the history of an effort of one Taiwanese Hero”

Participant 11 also shared

“Taiwan is rich in culture. At my workplace, my boss often invited me to celebrate together, such as the Moon Festival and Chinese New Year. There were many other celebrations as well. There, I learned a lot”.

This study reveal that intercultural communication challenges (ICC) among Indonesian migrant workers in Taiwan persist even after long-term residence. Rather than disappearing, these challenges tend to transform and become more context dependent over time. This supports the view that intercultural competence is not

automatically achieved through duration of stay, but is instead shaped by continuous interaction, adaptation, and structural conditions in the host environment (Diatta, 2020; Jackson, 2022).

One of the most significant findings is that religious identity remains a persistent and sensitive area of intercultural negotiation. Despite long-term exposure to Taiwanese society, participants continued to face difficulties in practicing Islamic obligations such as daily prayers, dietary restrictions, and religious expression in the workplace. This reflects how religious practices are deeply embedded in identity and are often less flexible compared to other aspects of cultural adaptation (Choudhury, 2024). Similar findings have been reported in recent studies, which emphasize that religious accommodation in migrant workplaces often depends on individual employer understanding rather than institutional support systems (Kim & Lee, 2022). This indicates that intercultural communication alone is insufficient without structural cultural inclusivity.

Participants were able to communicate in daily interactions but still faced difficulties in reading, writing, and formal communication contexts such as healthcare or documentation. It means that language adaptation was found to develop gradually, but mostly at a functional level. This supports the idea that second language acquisition in migration settings is highly dependent on exposure and necessity rather than formal instruction alone (Paltridg & Prior, 2024). Moreover, limited opportunities for deep linguistic engagement may result in partial rather than full proficiency, even after many years of residence (Huang & Zhang, 2025).

To cope with intercultural challenges, participants actively used strategies such as clarification, negotiation, cultural learning, and participation in local cultural practices, reflecting agency in managing cultural differences rather than passive adaptation (Huang, 2021). Clarification and explanation were particularly important in addressing misunderstandings related to religion and workplace expectations, while participation in cultural events provided experiential cultural knowledge and strengthened social integration, aligning with research that emphasizes experiential engagement as a key pathway for developing intercultural competence (Jackson, 2022). Overall, the findings suggest that intercultural communication among long-term migrant workers is a continuous and evolving process rather than a final state of adaptation, where interpersonal relationships may improve over time, but deeper cultural elements such as religion, language literacy, and nonverbal communication remain partially unresolved, indicating that intercultural competence is shaped not only by individual effort but also by structural, institutional, and contextual factors, and therefore requires both personal adaptation and systemic cultural inclusivity (Deardorff, 2020).

Food related practices highlight the intersection between cultural adaptation and religious identity, as participants frequently relied on trust or self managed strategies to ensure halal dietary compliance, showing that food functions not only as a basic necessity but also as a symbolic marker of identity. It shows that migrant food practices involve ongoing negotiation between accessibility, affordability, and religious obligations (Hassan & Ali, 2022), the findings also indicate that even after long term settlement, uncertainty regarding food safety and halal integrity remains, particularly in shared or employer-controlled environments. Likewise, nonverbal communication emerged as another persistent challenge despite long term exposure, as participants demonstrated only partial understanding of cultural symbols and workplace norms while deeper interpretation of implicit meanings remained limited, reflecting the tacit nature of nonverbal communication that is typically acquired through lived experience rather than formal instruction. Other research also emphasizes that nonverbal competence is difficult to develop due to its highly context specific and culturally embedded nature (Chen & Starosta, 2021; Liu, 2022), and even predeparture training is often insufficient to prepare individuals for the complexity of real life intercultural interactions.

In contrast, interpersonal relationships with employers showed more positive adaptation outcomes, as participants reported increased trust, mutual understanding, and emotional closeness, suggesting that relational aspects of intercultural communication develop more effectively over time than linguistic or structural challenges (Wang, 2021). Sustained workplace interaction reduces cultural distance and improves communication effectiveness although these relationships are still shaped by hierarchical workplace structures that influence interaction patterns (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2012).

4. Conclusion

Extended residence does not automatically eliminate intercultural communication challenges among migrant workers. Instead, intercultural communication remains a dynamic and ongoing process in which difficulties are transformed rather than fully resolved over time. Persistent challenges are still evident in religious practices, language literacy, food-related habits, and nonverbal communication. Among these, religious identity is the most stable and sensitive aspect, as individuals continuously negotiate practices such as prayer, dietary restrictions, and religious expression within workplace settings.

Language competence generally develops to a functional level, enabling basic verbal communication, although limitations in reading and writing remain, indicating that language acquisition is shaped more by

exposure and interaction than by duration of stay. Similarly, food-related practices and nonverbal communication continue to present challenges due to cultural and contextual constraints. In contrast, interpersonal relationships with employers tend to improve over time through increased trust and familiarity. Overall, intercultural communication competence is best understood as an evolving process shaped by interaction, lived experience, and structural conditions, highlighting the need for supportive institutional environments to facilitate effective adaptation and integration.

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