

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION EXPERIENCES AT A STATE UNIVERSITY IN JAMBI

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Abstract

Intercultural communication refers to the exchange of information between individuals from two different cultures. The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the intercultural experiences of international students during their studies at a state university in Jambi. The study employed a qualitative method. Four international students from Myanmar, Egypt, and Pakistan were involved in this study. The data were gathered from audio-recorded interviews conducted via Zoom meetings, using an interview protocol, and were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. The findings revealed that international students faced various challenges, including ethnocentrism, language barriers and communication difficulties, stereotyping and generalization, and cultural shock. Understanding these experiences is crucial for enhancing the academic and social experiences of international students in a multicultural university environment.

Keywords: *Challenges, Experiences, Intercultural Communication, International students.*

INTRODUCTION

Globalization continues to bring numerous developments, advancements, and challenges. Over time, the distance between countries has decreased, bringing distinct cultures closer together than ever before and enhancing interaction between individuals within them (Luthfia, 2014). International relations refer to the interactions between governments or individuals from other countries in specific areas that benefit both parties. Each country cannot be separated from its international connections, as each has its own supremacy and multiple complementary and mutually beneficial international links. International relations are crucial for promoting mutual understanding among nations, strengthening relationships of friendship and brotherhood between them, addressing the shared needs of each cooperating nation, fostering a sense of fairness and well-being, and contributing to the maintenance of global peace and order.

Indonesia, as part of the global community, also involves in global relations, encompassing politics, religion, trade, economics, and education. In the field of international education, Indonesia has played an active role, exchanging students, offering scholarships, and welcoming foreign students to study in Indonesia, thereby providing opportunities for those who wish to pursue their studies in the country. A state university in Jambi is one of the universities that has decided to provide opportunities for foreign students who desire to study at this university.

However, despite these positive developments, foreign students usually face a set of obstacles, especially in terms of intercultural communication during their academic journey. One of those challenges is related to international communication, specifically language barriers. The problems arise when students lack language competency in the sphere of intercultural communication. Foreign students may also be unaware of and unprepared to deal with the communication gap. Intercultural communication occurs when people from different cultural backgrounds interact, so it is essential that we share our knowledge of other cultures to prevent miscommunication when interacting with others. For example, every culture has a distinct style or communication norm, so when we intend to convey something positive, it may come across negatively in another culture. According to Barna (1991), the source of cross-cultural miscommunication and nonverbal communication is when people of different cultures communicate or act in a way that may be right but is judged negatively if done differently. Additionally, different languages can cause miscommunication because the same word may have multiple meanings.

Lestari (2021) argues that language is the most difficult barrier for international students, particularly in terms of speaking, understanding, writing. In addition, according to Zakiya et al. (2022), many international students experience language anxiety that hinders their ability to communicate effectively in academic and intercultural settings, especially during their initial period of adjustment. It is challenging for them to employ universal acculturation procedures to overcome intercultural communication difficulties. International students who have studied English as a second language in their home countries in aspects of accents, vocabulary, grammar, idiomatic usage, fluent conversation, and listening may also struggle in intercultural communication situations with others from diverse cultural backgrounds.

For international students, the mother language and cultural norms continue to be important; it is extremely difficult to successfully adapt to both a new culture and a new academic environment because international students need adaptation where they need to find a perfect home, developing new connections, and communicating in a foreign language, all while attempting to be successful academically and personally, which may be particularly challenging due to cultural variations and the need to develop foreign-language skills (Wilczewski & Alon, 2022). These characteristics may make it difficult to communicate one's thoughts in classes with lecturers, new people, and in different cultures and societies.

International students encounter several experiences when they start living in a new setting, including communication, travel, lifestyle, system, and food. A study by Wachyunni et al. (2023) found that lack of preparation, especially in intercultural communication, is a critical issue affecting international students in Jambi. These challenges highlight a pressing need to better understand the lived experiences of these students in order to improve institutional support and internationalization efforts.

While previous studies have examined the general difficulties faced by international students in Indonesia, few have specifically focused on the intercultural communication experiences of international students studying in provincial universities such as in a state university in Jambi. Therefore, this study aimed at exploring the intercultural communication experiences faced by international students in a state university in Jambi. By investigating their lived experiences, this study seeks to answer the following question: What intercultural communication barriers are experienced by international students studying at a state university in Jambi?"

METHOD(S)

This study employed a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the intercultural communication experiences of international students. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research is suitable for exploring complex social phenomena in natural settings through the perspectives of participants. The participants in this research were only four international students since there were limited number of international students on campus. They were from various countries, including Myanmar, Egypt, and Pakistan. The participants joined our research voluntarily by signing an informed consent form. The researchers served as the primary instrument for data collection, while an interview protocol was used as a secondary instrument to ensure consistency and focus during the interview process. The data were collected through interviews conducted via Zoom.

Furthermore, the open-ended questions proposed by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences without restriction, either through an online method or by phone. Each interview lasted approximately 25 minutes and was conducted in English. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for the data analysis stage. In this study, thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to analyze the transcribed data. The process consisted of six steps: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the final report. This method allowed the researchers to identify patterns and recurring themes related to intercultural communication experiences. To ensure trustworthiness, strategies such as member checking and pilot testing were applied. The study also applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to enhance research validity and reliability.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section describes the intercultural communication experiences of international students in the English Education program at a state university in Jambi. Through thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, four key themes were identified: experiences of challenges, including ethnocentrism, language barriers and communication challenges, stereotyping and generalization, and culture shock. These themes are discussed below based on Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model and Samovar et al. (2017) intercultural communication challenges.

1. Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism refers to the belief that one's culture is superior to others (Samovar et al., 2017). In this study, participants expressed different perspectives regarding cultural superiority and equality. Some individuals embraced cultural equality and openness, while others displayed a strong sense of cultural superiority. Two of the participants, Rick and Carol, demonstrated intercultural openness and equality. In the interview, Carol explicitly rejected any notion of superiority, as can be found in the following excerpt.

"Not really, because we're all the same. So, I didn't think about this like, I'm superior or they're inferior or something. So no, I don't think so."
(Carol)

Her egalitarian view shows an absence of cultural hierarchy, reflecting Byram's (1997) emphasis on intercultural attitudes rooted in tolerance and curiosity. Similarly, Rick highlighted his effort to engage with the local culture, as seen in the interview data below:

"Since the beginning, I came to Indonesia because I wanted to know about Indonesian culture, I wanted to know how the Indonesian community is, so I have already prepared myself to immerse myself with the community or the locals. So, I never think that my culture is better. Even if sometimes I feel like some aspects of the culture make me uncomfortable, instead of thinking my culture is better, I just accept it."
(Rick)

His willingness to embrace cultural differences, even when uncomfortable, aligns with Byram's ICC theory of openness and readiness to experience unfamiliar practices. In contrast, Maggie and Negan expressed strong ethnocentric perceptions. Maggie criticized Indonesian time management and institutional communication, as can be found in the following excerpt:

"Well, actually, there are some cultures in Indonesia that are a bit backward. For example, in Myanmar, when we are about to host an event or plan a hangout, we announce that it will start at, say, 9 AM. In Myanmar, we do it exactly at 9 AM. And we do it on time. In Indonesia, even though they say 9 AM, it becomes 10:30 or even 11 AM. So, it's a bit of an inconvenience as well." (Maggie)

In Myanmar, we consider international students who do not understand our national language and provide English translations. In Indonesia, even university contracts are typically only available in Bahasa Indonesia, without an English version. That is another backward aspect of Indonesian culture." (Maggie)

Negan's statements were more direct:

"It's like your culture is better than ours. Like any person, he will think that his culture is way better than the others, because you have been living in your country for a long time. Like if you go to Egypt, you will feel the same." (Negan)

"Okay. So, do you think your culture is superior?" (Interviewer)

"I guess mine is better." (Negan)

These responses illustrate how cultural superiority can hinder empathy and reduce the ability to appreciate different norms. As Samovar et al. (2017) stated, ethnocentrism often hinders effective intercultural communication and perpetuates misunderstandings.

2. Language and Communication Challenges

Language proficiency, including differences in English fluency and the use of slang or idiomatic expressions, significantly shaped the participants' academic and social interactions. In this study, participants faced different communication challenges when interacting with local students.

a. English Proficiency Differences

Rick and Carol both made intentional efforts to engage with local students despite English proficiency differences. Carol encouraged local students to try communicating, even when they felt insecure. This evidence can be found in the following excerpt.

"At first, some students were shy and thought their vocabulary was not enough. But I told them to try speaking, and I would understand. If I didn't, I would ask them to repeat. Later on, they spoke to me more and felt happy." (Carol)

Rick similarly focused on building understanding by improving his language skills:

"I have never avoided any local students just because they cannot speak English well. Instead, I try to develop my Bahasa Indonesia so that I can communicate with them because communication is more important than language in real life." (Rick)

Their responses demonstrate intercultural attitudes, such as openness, tolerance, and empathy, as well as intercultural skills, specifically interpreting and relating, aligning with Byram's (1997) framework. Both prioritized connection and understanding over linguistic accuracy, helping reduce communication anxiety among local peers. Maggie, however, admitted to reducing interactions. Maggie acknowledged that English proficiency significantly affected her communication with local students:

"It's not that I look down on my friends, but when they don't understand English that much, it's really hard for me to communicate with them. So, to avoid misunderstandings, I try to limit my interaction with them unless it's necessary." (Maggie)

Her limited interaction reflects language-related social withdrawal by Samovar et al. (2017), a coping strategy commonly adopted by students who feel linguistically disadvantaged. Negan preferred to adapt. He emphasized his willingness to use translation tools or allow students to speak in Bahasa Indonesia:

"Even if they cannot speak English, I will let them speak in Bahasa. If I don't understand, we can translate. But I never reject someone." (Negan)

His willingness to let others speak in Bahasa and use translation tools shows intercultural adaptability, aligning with Byram's (1997) ICC concept of sociolinguistic awareness.

b. Use of Slang, Jargon, and Unclear Words

Rick and Carol also adapted their speech to support clearer communication. Both simplified their English to be more comprehensible to local students:

"At first, yes, I used the simplest vocabulary, so they would understand me. Even sometimes I'm using a simpler one, they still don't understand, and they ask, What is this? What are you saying? I don't understand. But, later on, I had friends whose English was good, so I didn't need to simplify anymore." (Carol)

"I stopped using a lot of slang and proverbs because I had some experiences related to this matter, and I was worried they wouldn't understand. I intentionally avoid it to make communication simple and efficient." (Rick)

Both responses demonstrate sociolinguistic awareness competence in Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Maggie took a different approach by using Jambinese local slang, Indonesian slang, and code-mixing:

"Well, yeah, because of that, I did try to use local slang or jargon with them. For example, when I asked for the change, I would say, so-so (sosok), give me some so-so (sosok), bro, like that.' I also mix Indonesian words into my vocabulary so my friends feel more comfortable with me." (Maggie)

Her strategy reflects intercultural curiosity and empathy, essential for Byram's (1997) ICC model to build stronger relationships. On the other hand, Negan faced misinterpretation during a conversation with his friends. He found that speaking Egyptian Arabic slang led to misconceptions, as locals sometimes associated it with religious recitation:

"When I speak Arabic, they think I'm praying. Maybe as a joke. So, I avoid using it unless I'm teaching them fun words like 'yalla' (let's go) or 'khalas' (enough)." (Negan)

His response reveals sociocultural awareness in Byram's (1997) ICC Model. His cautious approach suggests an awareness of how language can be misperceived and how humour plays a role in cross-cultural exchanges, as well as how Arabic language and slang are often misinterpreted as a form of prayer.

3. Stereotyping and Generalization

Stereotyping and generalization were significant, as they navigated initial misunderstandings and assumptions about local students' behavior, communication styles, and sociocultural norms. Carol and Negan described early social challenges that were rooted in misperceptions when interacting with local students.

"Some of the people assume about me, like I don't wanna talk to them, and that's why they are not talking to me. But later, when we talk, they

already feel fine and comfortable. So, I don't think any problems like that.
" (Carol)

"Some of them just keep staring at you. Maybe this is the first time they've seen me as a foreigner. But if I go and speak with them, they would be so nice." (Negan)

These statements reflect perceptual bias (Samovar et al., 2017), where limited intercultural exposure leads to assumptions that affect interaction. However, both participants reported that these biases diminished after communication occurred, indicating the transformative power of direct engagement.

In contrast, Maggie developed a broader generalization over time. While she initially found local students friendly, she later experienced a decline in closeness:

"Maybe we will have a great connection with them at first, but after one semester, they start to suddenly become distant, even the friends that I'm close with." (Maggie)

This stereotype reflects an emotional response to perceived withdrawal and could be influenced by differing cultural norms in relationships with friends. In some cultures, relationships may be situational and task-based, whereas in others, they require regular personal engagement (Samovar et al., 2017).

Rick, on the other hand, has a stereotype by stating that local students' poor English proficiency is caused due to systemic education issues:

"The curriculum has a very limited time to learn English. So, probably that could be one of the problems. That's why some Indonesian students have limited English, especially in communication." (Rick)

His statement demonstrates a form of assumption that aligns with the concept of stereotyping, as described by Samovar et al. (2017), where individuals generalize about members of a group based on limited experiences from English language usage or educational institutional gaps among local students.

4. Cultural Shock

Cultural shock was another major challenge. It refers to the psychological and emotional discomfort international students face when encountering unfamiliar cultural norms and expectations. In this study, participants shared how differences in communication style, academic norms, clothing rules, and gender roles contributed to moments of shock, confusion, and adjustment. Carol and Maggie encountered cultural shock due to Indonesia's direct communication style, which differed from the indirect norms in their home culture:

"There was cultural shock when I came here, especially in how people interact, like how direct they are when speaking." (Carol)

"The difference between Jambi people and Minang people is different. Minang people are a lot more soft-spoken, calm, while Jambi people are quite direct, straightforward, and a lot more active." (Maggie)

These statements align with the crisis stage of culture shock (Samovar et al., 2017), where the unfamiliarity of the host culture's communication style leads to uncertainty and discomfort (Samovar et al., 2017). They eventually adapted, and cultural shocks can fade as foreign students adjust their perspectives and realize that not all Indonesians communicate the same way, and regional cultures vary significantly. On the other hand, Rick faced role confusion in academic interactions with lecturers, which differed from what he was used to in Myanmar:

"In my country, if we don't understand an assignment, we can just ask the lecturer conveniently. But in Indonesia, we have to speak a lot, be very polite, and very humble to speak to the lecturer." (Rick)

He also encountered a culture of visibility and formality in student leadership as can be seen in the following excerpt:

"For example, if you are the Ketua UKM (Student Association Leader), your photo will be on every poster. In my country, we don't do that unless someone is very beautiful or popular." (Rick)

These statements illustrate the varying expectations for formality and hierarchy in Indonesian academia, reinforcing Samovar et al.'s (2017) notion of institutional role expectations, which can create tension and lead to misunderstandings, ultimately resulting in culture shock. Rick finds academic formality and leadership visibility very surprising, but must adapt to these norms over time.

Furthermore, Maggie also faced cultural shock with dress codes. Although Muslim herself, Maggie came from a country where religious expression was less enforced. The expectation to wear a hijab on campus exposed her to new forms of social regulation:

"For me, how do I say, in my country, we don't have a proper dress code for the university. We just show up with a hoodie or show up with trousers or maybe like slippers or something. "I was told that, oh, yeah, if you are Muslim, why don't you wear a hijab or something like that? But, I'm trying to adapt to the culture as well." (Maggie)

Her experience illustrates how value orientations (Samovar et al., 2017) and nonverbal cultural norms, such as appearance and clothing, can be powerful triggers of cultural shock. On the other side, Negan expressed surprised over students' mobility, especially among female students:

"When I asked my friends on campus, 'Where are you from?' They said, 'I'm from Java' or 'I'm from North Sumatra.' I was shocked. How can your parents send you off by yourself like this? It's so dangerous!" (Negan)

Coming from a society where women's independence is often limited for safety and cultural reasons, Negan experienced deep value dissonance regarding gender and mobility, whereas in Indonesia, many students travel to different islands for university without strict parental restrictions, leading to culture shock for him. On the other hand, Rick faced exclusion in social and academic settings due to the language barrier at a formal campus event:

"Although we try our best to communicate or understand Bahasa Indonesia, we are also still foreigners, so our Bahasa Indonesia is very limited. Sometimes we go to activities from the department, or we go to the student activities at this university. The major language of communication is in Bahasa, so sometimes we feel bored. For instance, we put in effort to attend activities or ceremonies, and then we arrive, only to hear Bahasa Indonesia everywhere. No one is trying to explain to us, or like, there is no one taking care of us. I mean, we don't want to be taken care of, but we feel like we are side people, and we are not welcome in this environment, or we are not welcome in this activity." (Rick)

This experience highlights the exclusion caused by language barriers, which can lead to cultural shock. According to Samovar et al. (2017), language barriers can limit access to social and academic life, reinforcing feelings of isolation and disconnection that can lead to withdrawal and culture shock, resulting in international students limiting their participation due to repeated negative experiences. Negan also experienced discomfort with public attention, leading to cultural shock, as he expressed in the following interview data:

"Some of them, they just keep staring at you. Some of them take a video of you. This is a significant disrespect in my country. For instance, you take a video of someone without their permission. At least come and say hi. And then you can take a video or something... With the local students, to be honest, some of them just stare at you without saying anything. I'm not speaking about my department. I mean other departments. Perhaps they are shy, as I mentioned earlier. One of the best things about Indonesia is that they are shy. But in this way, I feel like I'm not feeling comfortable, you know, around the people, because they keep staring at me, and then without doing anything. So, just at least say hi or something." (Negan)

He described the behavior as socially intrusive, reflecting cultural differences in norms of privacy and nonverbal behavior. In some cultures, prolonged staring may be interpreted as a sign of curiosity, while in others, it can be perceived as a gesture of intrusion or aggression (Samovar et al., 2017). This suggests that social discomfort resulting from cultural differences between other countries and Indonesia can affect international students' sense of belonging and overall experience in a foreign university.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that international students have encountered several intercultural communication experiences at a state university in Jambi. Each of these experiences of challenges had a significant impact on the international students' experiences, shaping their adaptation processes and influencing their overall satisfaction with their academic and social lives in Jambi. Ethnocentrism has emerged as a key factor influencing the interactions of international students with the local culture.

While some students engaged with Indonesian customs with openness and curiosity, others exhibited strong ethnocentric attitudes, which hindered their adaptation and contributed to intercultural misunderstandings. Language barriers were also significant in shaping both academic and social experiences. Some students managed these barriers by employing adaptive strategies, such as simplifying vocabulary, learning Bahasa Indonesia, or using translation tools, while others experienced difficulty in communication due to the limited language proficiency of the locals, resulting in limited interaction. Stereotyping and generalization also influenced interactions between cultures by shaping how foreign students viewed their local students and their perspectives in return. Over time, ongoing interaction helped remove stereotypes, even though early stereotypes frequently caused social isolation and other problems. Cultural shock was also identified as a major challenge, particularly in terms of different expectations regarding dress codes, gender norms, communication styles, and public behaviour. While some students felt overwhelmed by these cultural differences, others gradually adjusted and developed greater intercultural awareness. Ultimately, the results of this study underscore the importance of structured intercultural programs, language support, and cultural orientation initiatives in facilitating a smoother adaptation for future international students.

The researchers realized that this study might have some limitations as the findings cannot be generalized due to the research design employed and the focus was only experiences related to the foreign students' intercultural communication challenges. The researchers offer a suggestion to future researchers interested in the same topic. In this study, since it is all about finding intercultural communication experience only, future researchers could expand it more by putting a focus on strategies that international students use to overcome intercultural communication challenges, such as, investigating adaptive techniques where it investigates the specific adaptive techniques that international students use to navigate communication challenges, coping mechanisms which focuses on the coping strategies that students develop in response to cultural shock and communication barriers, improving support systems for the effectiveness of peer networks, mentorship programs, and institutional resources that support international students for enhancing their future intercultural communication experiences.

Practically, the findings of this study have implications for universities and international student management, including developing effective intercultural communication support through training programs, peer networks, and institutional resources for international students. Academically, the study may contribute to intercultural communication research by emphasizing students' experiential perspectives and suggesting directions for future research on adaptive and coping strategies for any challenges related to this matter.

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