



## Exploring Communication and Cultural Adaptation Practices Among Indonesian Diaspora Students at McGill University, Canada

\*<sup>15</sup>Muhammad Rifa'at Adiakarti Farid, <sup>2</sup>Latutik Mukhlisin, <sup>3</sup>Fajar Junaedi, <sup>3</sup>Eka Anisa Sari

<sup>1,2</sup>Muhammadiyah University of Madiun, East Java

<sup>3</sup>Muhammadiyah University of Yogyakarta, Special Region of Yogyakarta

<sup>4</sup>Ahmad Dahlan University, Special Region of Yogyakarta

<sup>5</sup>Universiti Muhammadiyah Malaysia

\*Corresponding author, e-mail: [mra410@ummad.ac.id](mailto:mra410@ummad.ac.id)

\*08558759753

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### ABSTRACT

This study discusses the communication and cultural adaptation of Indonesian diaspora students who are studying abroad. The background of this research is rooted in the need to understand how students adjust to their surrounding environment and how they experience cultural adaptation while pursuing education overseas, where the culture and language differ from those of their hometowns. It is undeniable that Indonesian students face various challenges when studying abroad, such as adapting to a new environment, unfamiliar habits, and different patterns of interaction with groups or individuals. These challenges are influenced by several factors, including time, climate, academic environment, food, ethics, language, location, and cultural values, all of which have distinct characteristics. Barriers to communication adaptation can be observed in the ongoing communication process. The influencing factors include the communicators' linguistic ability, the clarity of messages, the communication media used, the characteristics of the communicants, and the level of reciprocity within the communication interaction. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method, with Indonesian doctoral diaspora students at McGill University, Canada, serving as the research subjects. The results show that respondents needed time to adjust to their environment before they were eventually able to adapt well. The study



concludes that adaptation, particularly the ability to understand the local culture and language plays a crucial role in enabling students to adjust successfully.

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## INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication competence is an absolute aspect that must be possessed, communication cannot be separated from cultural factors. Culture will not live without communication and communication will not live without culture. The main problem in intercultural communication is errors in social perception caused by cultural differences that affect perception (Mulyana, 2018). Communication is culture and culture is communication as emphasized by Deddy Mulyana. The phenomenon of diaspora Indonesian students abroad at higher education institutions has inspired the author's enthusiasm to conduct research on student adjustment and the author is very interested in studying the cultural adaptation experienced by students who are carrying out education abroad.

Intercultural communication competence is an essential aspect that must be possessed, as communication cannot be separated from cultural factors. Culture cannot exist without

communication, and communication cannot exist without culture. The main problem in intercultural communication lies in errors in social perception caused by cultural differences that influence how individuals interpret messages (Mulyana, 2018). As emphasized by Deddy Mulyana, communication is culture and culture is communication.

The phenomenon of Indonesian diaspora students studying abroad in higher education institutions has inspired the author's interest in examining student adjustment, particularly the cultural adaptation experienced by students pursuing education overseas. The increasing number of students studying abroad has drawn the author's attention to explore patterns of communication adaptation, especially interpersonal communication skills as outlined by Budiyatna (2011), which include three dimensions: cultural, psychological, and sociological aspects. The communication patterns developed by these students reveal challenges and obstacles they encounter, particularly in



establishing relationships or adapting individually across nations within academic settings. This aligns with Purwasito (2015), who notes that intercultural encounters often face barriers related to language, culture, and race.

It is clear that cultural norms and communication patterns in Indonesia differ significantly from those abroad. Indonesian students face various challenges while studying overseas, such as adapting to new environments, unfamiliar habits, and interpersonal interactions within groups or with individuals. These processes are influenced by multiple factors, including time, climate, academic environment, food, ethics, language, location, and personal background shaped by family, ethnicity, religion, social and economic conditions prior to entering university life, as well as differing cultural values (Fajar, 2017)

In general, the communication patterns that are formed are different both individually and in groups, which can be observed from communication behavior, actions and communication patterns that are carried out repeatedly to see patterns of intercultural communication between foreign students, especially during the adaptation period, which is aimed at minimizing the differences between them. Through this diversity of nations, languages and cultures, there are differences in communication patterns that exist in both personal and group

communication relationships and social interactions between foreign students. Where when foreign students enter into a cultural conversation they find differences, at least they can observe and identify reactions to aspects of communication behavior, which are innate from their own culture.

This study tries to focus on aspects of communication and cultural adaptation issues, especially students who are carrying out studies abroad need adaptation not only in interacting with individuals but must be good at placing themselves in the social system including unraveling problems together in organizations, having mutual dependence. conduct joint In general, the communication patterns that emerge differ both individually and in groups, as reflected in communication behaviors, actions, and repetitive communication practices. These patterns allow researchers to observe intercultural communication among international students, particularly during the adaptation period, which aims to minimize differences between them. Due to the diversity of nationalities, languages, and cultures, variations in communication patterns are evident in both personal and group relationships, as well as in the social interactions of foreign students. When these students engage in intercultural conversations, they inevitably encounter differences; at the very least, they are able to observe and identify reactions related to



communication behaviors that stem from their own cultural backgrounds.

This study focuses on issues of communication and cultural adaptation, particularly on the adjustments required by students studying abroad. Such adaptation is needed not only in individual interactions but also in integrating themselves into the social system. This includes collaboratively addressing problems within organizations and maintaining mutual interdependence, such as participating in group discussions through university units, community groups, or other organizations. This aligns with Integrative Theory, proposed by Richard Farance, Peter Monge, and Hamish Russell, which posits that communication is central to organizational structure. An organization is defined as a system consisting of at least two or more individuals who depend on one another in terms of inputs, processes, and outputs. These individuals communicate and work together to produce outcomes by utilizing energy, information, and other resources from the environment (Winata, 2023).

Communication adaptation is closely linked to cultural aspects. Eastern cultures, particularly Indonesian culture, place strong emphasis on ethics, manners, social norms, and values of togetherness or mutual cooperation. In contrast, Western cultures exhibit very different characteristics, such as openness to public displays of affection,

drinking habits, and more individualistic lifestyles. These differences contributed to the informants' experiences of culture shock. The term *culture shock* was first introduced by Oberg (1960) to describe deep and negative reactions such as depression, frustration, and disorientation experienced by individuals living in a new cultural environment. Adaptation to a new environment often involves feelings of confusion, uncertainty about appropriate behavior, and difficulty understanding what is considered acceptable or unacceptable in the host culture (Dayaksini, 2004).

Consistent with this perspective, Ward (2001) notes that the processes individuals face—shaped by diverse experiences, cultural backgrounds, and adaptation strategies—significantly influence their adjustment within society. A new environment requires individuals to be observant of factors that affect their reactions, including life changes, personality traits, and available social support. Other influencing factors include cultural differences, cultural awareness, and the degree to which individuals recognize and understand the host culture.

Y.Y. Kim (2017) further explains that immigrants, diaspora students, refugees, temporary sojourners, and domestic migrants leave the familiar surroundings of their home culture and resettle in new cultural environments for varying lengths of time. Although each individual's circumstances differ, all



newcomers must establish and maintain a relatively stable working relationship with the host environment. The adaptation process unfolds within the stress–adaptation–growth dynamic, which reflects the natural human tendency to seek internal equilibrium when facing challenging external conditions.

Ren Zhong Peng (2019) also emphasizes that his research results demonstrate the reliability and validity of a revised scale for measuring international students' cross-cultural adaptation. His findings indicate four primary pathways—host communication competence, host social communication, basic intercultural transformation, and advanced intercultural transformation—that are essential for the development of cross-cultural adaptation. The significant and positive interrelationships among these pathways provide a strong theoretical foundation for examining international students' adaptation in non-Western contexts, supported by compelling empirical evidence.

Winata (2023), in his study on interpreting the intercultural communication approaches of Indonesian diaspora in Türkiye, explains that PPI (Indonesian Student Association) operates as an organization. An organization is defined as a system consisting of at least two or more individuals who depend on one another in terms of inputs, processes, and outputs. These individuals communicate and collaborate to produce outcomes by

utilizing energy, information, and other resources from their environment.

## METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative descriptive method, namely the source of a broad and well-grounded description, and contains an explanation of the processes that occur in the local scope (Miles and Huberman in Silalahi, 2012). This research methodology is carried out by searching, analyzing, and interpreting the data found through the results of documents, interviews by online and WhatsApp, and observations. This study focuses on intercultural communication activities carried out by the Indonesian diaspora student in Canada. The data in this study were obtained by conducting online interviews and analyzing the latest data related to intercultural communication activities. In this case, researchers want to comprehend the process of identity formation carried out by the Indonesian diaspora student in Canada, where identity leaves incompleteness, yet is always stated as “in the process of being formed” (Hall & Du Gay, 2011). The focus of this research is to reveal how the diaspora's activities of introducing Indonesian culture are carried out in Canada as a form of intercultural communication. Then the researcher also finds out the variety of Indonesian culture introduced in Canada so that the Canada people can get to know Indonesian culture and influence the identity that the Indonesian diaspora wants to highlight in front of





Canada. In-depth interviews were conducted with respondents who live currently in Canada, representatives of Indonesian students and who have all been staying for a few years in Canada.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Campus is a miniature community heterogeneity. On campus, students can find a diversity of individuals and groups in the dynamics of the campus that are relatively complex. The uniqueness of the campus is also felt by the presence of the academic community. They are different in purpose and the way to achieve that goal in every interaction between them. Especially for students, this difference can be sourced from a background influenced by family, ethnic, religion, social, and economic conditions before their presence in university life. That's why adaptation is needed (Iqbal, 2017).

Indonesian students who are continuing their studies abroad need to make adjustments to the surrounding environment. There are at least three (3) things that need to be adapted, namely adaptation to the environment, language, and culture. In order to achieve cultural adaptation or achieve adjustment to a new culture, it can be reviewed through integrative communication theory. The influencing factors include personal communication, host social communication, ethnic social communication, environment, and predisposition. Clearly, the five important factors in the adaptation

process are described in the following model: Personal Communication, or personal communication, occurs when a person feels the things that are in his environment, then gives meaning and reacts to objects and other people in his environment. At this stage, the adjustment process begins by using personal communication competencies which are reduced to three parts, namely cognitive, affective, and operational. This happens within the individual person. "I was born from a religious environment that has background values of eastern cultural values, and communication patterns have the characteristics of Islamic values". (Interview with Izzul Haq, doctoral student at McGill, 26 January 2022 at 21.00 WIB by Zoom meeting)

This is one of the reasons behind many Indonesian Muslim students abroad who choose communities that are full of Islamic values to follow, such as the Special Branch Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (PCINU) and the Special Branch Board of Muhammadiyah (PCIM). The interactions that occur between fellow community members can help the adaptation process among fellow students. It is possible that the Moslem student also took part in the PPI (Indonesian Student Association)

Izzul has completed his Master degree from the London School of Economics (LSE), so he knows about community life in London, United Kingdom (UK) and Canada. Community life in the UK and Canada has a



significant difference with society in Indonesia. British people, for example, do not hesitate to show affection in public such as hugging on the bus or in the park (public display of affection), which is different from the norm in Indonesia, which still upholds eastern culture. Public display of affection has become a common thing and does not become a taboo subject as long as it does not disturb public order. Individualist lifestyles are also often an obstacle for Indonesian students who are accustomed to living together, helping each other, and supporting one another. These cultural differences can interfere with the communication process because culture will not live without communication and communication will not live without culture. The main problem in intercultural communication is errors in social perception caused by cultural differences that affect perceptions (Mulyana, 2004).

The new environment around students ultimately requires individuals to be able to adapt not only to the cultural aspect, but the adaptation process to the communication aspect also has a strategic role in the ongoing adaptation process. The process of adaptation to aspects of intercultural communication has a strategic role as part of the process of interaction, exchange of meaning, ways of communicating, and etiquette or ethics. In social interaction, especially in the information exchange process that takes place, there are several things that affect the communication message

conveyed, including cultural background, habits, and differences in communication behavior both verbal and non-verbal such as intonation, articulation, diction or word choice, language style, and facial expressions (Solihat, 2018). “When I came to London, I stuttered in understanding what the people around me were saying, British people use a thick British accent while so far I'm used to an American accent. It took me about 2 months to adapt well.” (Interview with Izzul Haq, doctoral student at McGill, 26 January 2022 at 21.00 WIB by Zoom meeting)

Picture 1: Interview by zoom meeting



Source: Author's documentation (2022)

In line with what was conveyed by Ward as quoted by Prasetyo (2015), the process of communication interaction faced by individuals, because they have various experiences, cultures, and ways of adapting, will affect them when establishing interactions, especially in the communication aspect. The communication aspect in this case stutters in understanding the words of the people around, as the British use a thick



British accent, while so far the informants are accustomed to the American accent. Preconceived experience and culture influence the pattern or method of communication (Prasetyo, 2015). This communication model implies that the source element (who) is a means of stimulating questions about message control (e.g., messages conveyed by friends or neighbors), while the message element (says what) is material for content analysis. Communication channels (in which channel) are examined in media analysis. The recipient element (to whom) is often associated with audience analysis, while the influence element (with what effect) is clearly related to the community as the target of socialization (Farid, 2021).

Cultural differences between students and the community around where they live often lead to conflicts. Intercultural communication competence will emerge when each party in contact or interaction can minimize cultural misunderstandings, namely efforts to reduce ethnocentric behavior, prejudice, and stereotypes (Prasetyo, 2015). Therefore, there needs to be adaptation and intercultural communication. The process of adaptation and intercultural communication is a process used by foreign students to adjust to the socio-cultural environment of the surrounding community (Putri, 2018).

Communities in the Western world, both in England and Canada, are

closely related to individualism. This individualism is more concerned with personal interests above the interests of groups. People in the Western world prefer to carry out their own activities rather than in groups and tend to interact socially and establish communication with their inner circle in a limited scope. On the other hand, people in the Eastern world are accustomed to collectivism or prioritizing group interests; everything is done together in mutual cooperation with full kinship. This socio-cultural adaptation made Izzul Haq, a doctoral student at McGill, feel lonely and isolated when he first came to the country, which had an impact on the communication interaction process that was developed both with neighbors and friends.

Migrant students, by bringing patterns and cultural identities from where they come, like foreign tourists, have to face cultural differences, patterns of interaction, and adjustment to indigenous culture. The adjustment process is called acculturation, where the variable in communication in acculturation is interpersonal communication; the better the aspects of personal communication, the better the communication is effective. This happened to Izzul Haq, a doctoral student at McGill who was actively involved in being part of the PPI (Indonesian Student Association) London, active in recitations organized by the Islamic community in England, and active on campus internally as a





recitation coordinator. Aspects of personal communication that can be accepted by Indonesian students in the new environment are able to build interpersonal and intrapersonal communication and make Indonesian students have good teamwork as an effort to adapt to the new communication climate so that communication effectiveness can be maximized. In summary, the systems perspective recognizes the dynamic interaction processes between personal communication, social communication, and the communication environment (Mulyana, 2006). This happened to the Indonesian students who made them able to adapt to the surrounding environment

Interpersonal communication is communication that is carried out between people face to face, which allows each participant to capture the reactions of others directly, both verbally and nonverbally (Mulyana, 2004). This aspect of interpersonal and group communication is a picture of communication within oneself; in humans there are communication components such as sources, messages, receiving, and reciprocal channels. The communication component can affect the interaction of the sender of the message through the selection of appropriate words and expressions in conveying the content of the communication, as well as the selection of the right media or communication channel so that the recipient of the message can understand the content of

the message and provide appropriate communication feedback as well. This happened to Izzul Haq, a doctoral student at McGill, who was actively involved and built the right communication component process when he was part of the PPI (Indonesian Student Association) London and various other associations and organizations. Those who are members of the Indonesian Student Association (PPI) are quite significant in building intercultural communication so that they can function as bridging agents in peddling and promoting Indonesian culture (Winata, 2023).

According to Devito (1997), interpersonal communication is also defined as a communication process that occurs between two people who have a clearly visible relationship between them, for example a conversation between a father and a child. In this definition, every new communication is seen and explained as materials that are integrated in the act of interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication has its own dynamics. This means that there are results from every interpersonal communication activity. The dynamics obtained can be desirable or undesirable and have various forms (Barus et al., 2020). The importance of interpersonal communication lies in the fact that the communication process can take place in a dialogical manner. Dialogue is a form of interpersonal communication that shows the occurrence of the



communication process. If students who continue their studies abroad automatically meet new individuals, environments, and cultures, the communication process carried out will not be optimally integrated; this process requires interactions that are built in a dialogical manner so that the interpersonal communication process can run optimally.

Interpersonal communication has the power to change attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and behavior of the recipient of the message, so that the form of interpersonal communication is often used to convey persuasive communication. Persuasive communication is a psychological communication technique, for example in the form of invitations or persuasion, because every actor in communication will carry out four actions, namely forming, conveying, receiving, and processing messages addressed to the communicant or message recipient, which is defined as creating ideas or ideas with certain aims and objectives. This happened to Izzul Haq, a doctoral student at McGill who was actively involved in being part of various groups, both religious and social. The community that Izzul Haq participated in must have aims and objectives, including carrying out the vision of da'wah, which incidentally aligns with the fact that Izzul Haq is one of the sons of a kyai or religious figure from Jombang, East Java. A figure who was born and raised in an Islamic boarding school

environment full of religious values and then continued his undergraduate studies with a socio-political scientific background closely related to the world of movement has its own challenges to become a forum for voicing ideas.

In the process of interpersonal communication, there is a flow of communication that occurs circularly or rotating, meaning that each individual has the same opportunity to become a communicator and communicant. Individual senders and recipients of messages in interpersonal communication effects or feedback can occur instantaneously. In the aspect of the stages or communication process, it can be analyzed that each communication actor, both the sender and the recipient of the message, must have a different background of experience in educational aspects, culture and belief values, so that the alignment of communication messages can bring up different points of view in the event of disturbances in communication. process and reception of communication, so that the communication that is built will not be effective. Western culture, which is full of individualism, exhibits intimacy in public which is very different from the culture of eastern society. When Indonesian students are faced with conditions like this, different perspectives will emerge in interpreting behavior in the context of western culture. This is in line with what is emphasized by Dance (1986) that



communication is the process of conveying ideas or frameworks of human psychological behavior, expectations and messages conveyed through certain symbols, containing the meanings carried out by the sender of the message to the recipient of the message.

Foreign students have difficulty interpreting intonation due to differences in dialect or behavior when communicating both verbally and nonverbally. There are differences in tone of voice, speed of speech, and facial expressions that are observed when foreign students greet, get acquainted, discuss, or when foreign students make presentations in class. However, problems in these communication patterns can be overcome as they communicate or interact more often.

This cultural shock can affect the process or stages of communication patterns; communication skills are one of the supporting factors. The sender and receiver of the message can articulate communication symbols to reach an understanding of meaning. The model of the information delivery process can be observed from the typical behavior that is repeatedly carried out both in the learning environment and in interaction with the environment and new groups encountered. Language is one aspect of facilitating communication. However, different languages from different backgrounds become an obstacle for some people to communicate with people from other countries with a language different from their mother

tongue. According to Owen in Purba & Silaban (2021), "Language is a socially accepted code or conventional system for conveying concepts through the use of desired symbols and combinations of symbols regulated by provisions." (Purba & Silaban, 2021). Language is a communication tool to adapt to a new environment; in this case, Izzul Haq, a doctoral student at McGill, when entering the early stages of adaptation to a new friendship environment, still finds it difficult to articulate meaning because of barriers to intonation, articulation of meaning, or messages in English when the other person conveys the message at a fast tempo. The uniqueness of the campus is also felt by the presence of the academic community who are different in purpose and the way to achieve that goal in every interaction between them (Fajar, 2017)

Adaptation is a bridge that needs to be crossed so that individuals or groups of people can communicate without encountering obstacles with other parties from different cultures. Adaptation in the study of intercultural communication is generally associated with changes in society or part of society (Utami, 2015). Individuals who adapt quickly tend to have sensitivity to their environment, so they can immediately be ready to change and change behavior. An Indonesian student studying a doctoral degree abroad, familiarly called Izzul, is able to compromise with a new culture, including actively caring for and joining organizations and communities in the



academic and religious realms so as to find a new environment that is a place to adapt in terms of speech and behavioral aspects. This sensitivity to the surrounding environment is one of the supporting indicators of communication adaptation.

The process of adaptation and introduction to friendship is passed by foreign students with a new environment, both in the academic environment and the environment in terms of other interactions. It can be said that they have gone through several stages of adjustment to social conditions. In line with what was conveyed by West and Lynn (2008), their social relationship develops from not knowing to becoming a friendship relationship. First, the communication relationship between one person and another begins at a superficial stage and moves on a continuum to a more intimate stage (Purba & Silaban, 2021). The Indonesian student who is currently studying abroad often goes out with friends from other countries, both in the academic environment and when interacting, taking the time to better understand local culture and culture. In addition to intercultural competencies, the role of creativity in effective intercultural interaction is no less important. Only a creative person will be able to look creatively at the problems that arise in intercultural interaction and find appropriate solutions to them (Braslauskas, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

Adaptation is a key factor in understanding the local culture and language. This is necessary as a means of building good communication. In this case, students who are continuing their further studies abroad, especially in Canada, find that the climate of communication and culture is influenced by various supporting factors, including the ability of communicators to adapt to language as a means of communication or interaction, to be able to compromise with a new environment both in the academic and community environments or organization, and to be able to study culture, religion, and environmental characteristics by getting closer to the new environment in order to understand the symbols and behavior of individuals in the environment so that there is no cultural shock.

Barriers to communication adaptation can be seen from the ongoing communication process; the influencing factors include the ability of communicators in this case to communicate through language, messages, media, communicants, and reciprocity of the communication process. The communication process that does not run optimally will have an impact on culture shock. Other aspects that influence the intonation, articulation, and language pronunciation factors can also affect the communication process. This research provides an illustration of the communication adaptation process for



students who continue their studies abroad, showing that they should study and try to interact actively with local students and the organizational environment so that environmental sensitivity is formed as one of the supporting factors for successful adaptation.

Communication is difficult to establish because intercultural communication continues to carry out communication practices between people who have different cultural backgrounds. Communication is also difficult to establish because participants do not or are reluctant to have an understanding of a particular culture, and the existence of cultural understanding gaps can lead to misunderstandings. Intercultural communication competence is an absolute aspect that must be possessed; communication cannot be separated from cultural factors. Culture will not live without communication and communication will not live without culture.

We hope in the future there will be researchers who continue to hope for this intercultural communication network, so this paper can continue with other research which prioritizes the concept of openness by not forgetting the advantages of each other's culture. That cultural communication relations between the two countries can run well and can be a reference for future related research

## **CREDIT AUTHORSHIP**

### **CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT**

Muhammad Rifa'at Adiakarti Farid designed the research, drafted the methodology and discussion, Latutik Muchlisin interpreted the concept into literature studies and theory studies. Fajar Junaedi summed up the discussions into conclusions and reviewed the full text for the Profetik: Jurnal Komunikasi. Eka Anisa Sari did the data collecting concept and also designed a methodology.

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## **DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST**

The authors certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial, personal, or other relationships with other people or organizations related to the material discussed in the manuscript.

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