



Navigating Intercultural Communication: Challenges Faced by International Students

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ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural communication among international students presents specific strategies and challenges, particularly within the educational domain. The success of communication largely depends on the ability of international students to adapt and develop effective coping mechanisms in the host country. This study aims to investigate the strategies and coping mechanisms employed by international students during their learning experiences in Indonesia. A descriptive qualitative method was applied, involving two international student participants. The findings reveal several challenges in cross-cultural communication, mainly cultural differences that influence both verbal and non-verbal interactions. Data analysis was conducted through triangulation by comparing participants' experiences with previous studies and relevant theories. This research provides an in-depth analysis of the challenges and coping strategies of international students, highlighting aspects that have not been extensively discussed in previous studies. The results are expected to serve as a valuable reference for future international students in navigating cross-cultural differences within Indonesian educational contexts.

Keywords:

*Coping Strategies;
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INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication has been an increasingly important phenomenon in society. The phenomenon of intercultural communication happens frequently in the educational domain with the increasing number of individuals going abroad for educational purposes (Nadeem et al., 2020). Alongside with the rising occurrences of intercultural communication, the intercultural communication competence had been widely claimed as one of the crucial skills needed in the educational sectors. In the process of gaining intercultural communication competence, real life experience is needed, which causes challenges in intercultural communication to be inevitable.

Previously, studies related to intercultural communication by international students in Indonesia have been conducted by Mulyana and Zubair (2015) that reveals the tactics used by Chinese students in intercultural communication. Yet, this study has not yet discussed the challenges and barriers of intercultural communication, which is crucially needed to be known for future international students to gain insights regarding possible obstacles they might face. This becomes challenging for international students as there is still very limited research discussing the obstacles of being international students from their own perspective (King and Bailey, 2021). Due to those reasons, this study investigated the challenges and coping strategies of intercultural communication based on the international students' perspectives.

Despite the frequent study of intercultural communication in the educational domain, there are still limited results of intercultural communication challenges and coping strategies, especially for international students from countries with different contexts of culture. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the challenges of intercultural communication for international students in the educational domain while also analyzing their way of coping with the cultural differences. The objective of this study is answering the following research questions: (1) What are the challenges faced by international students in intercultural communication? (2) How do the international students cope with the challenges faced during intercultural communication? By answering the research questions, challenges and coping strategies is elaborated thoroughly for future students and researchers references.

Intercultural communication is the verbal and nonverbal interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds. Culture can be understood as a system of shared values, beliefs, norms, and practices that influence the behavior and perception of individuals and groups. Intercultural communication involves understanding cultural differences and similarities and developing intercultural competence, which is the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations. Intercultural communication is not simply a language proficiency or a translation of words. It is also not a process of assimilation or integration into another culture. Rather, it is a broader exchange of ideas, beliefs, values, and views that requires respect, openness, curiosity, and empathy. Intercultural communication is a dynamic and complex phenomenon that can be influenced by various factors, such as context, power, identity, and emotions.

The Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) Model, developed by Young Yun Kim and William B. Gudykunst in 1983, is a widely recognized framework in the field of intercultural communication. This model offers valuable insights into how individuals can effectively communicate across cultural boundaries. Here's a more detailed explanation of the ICC Model:

Components of the ICC Model: Motivation: The ICC Model begins by highlighting the importance of motivation. It suggests that individuals should have a strong desire and

willingness to engage in intercultural communication. Motivation is a fundamental aspect of the model because it drives individuals to initiate and sustain intercultural interactions. Knowledge: Acquiring knowledge about other cultures is a critical component of intercultural competence. This knowledge includes understanding the cultural norms, values, beliefs, practices, and communication styles of different cultures. It also involves learning about the historical and social context of those cultures. Knowledge is the foundation upon which effective intercultural communication is built. Skills: Developing appropriate communication skills is another essential aspect of the ICC Model. Effective intercultural communicators need to acquire skills that enable them to adapt their communication styles to the cultural preferences and expectations of their interlocutors. These skills may include verbal and non-verbal communication, active listening, empathy, and the ability to interpret cultural cues accurately.

The ICC Model also emphasizes that intercultural communication competence is not a static trait but is developed and refined through actual interactions with individuals from different cultures. Here's how these interactions fit into the model: Motivation drives individuals to engage in intercultural interactions. When people are motivated to communicate across cultures, they are more likely to seek out opportunities to interact with individuals from different backgrounds. Knowledge informs individuals about the cultural context of their interlocutors. It helps them understand the cultural factors that may influence communication, such as language, customs, and values. Skills enable individuals to adapt their communication styles effectively to accommodate cultural differences and create a shared understanding with their interlocutors.

Challenges and coping strategies in intercultural communication in today's era of globalization, intercultural communication is becoming increasingly important as more and more people interact with people from different cultures. International students such as China must be able to communicate effectively with local students who come from different cultures. An expert on intercultural communication, Stella Ting-Toomey, explains that intercultural communication involves "the process of verbal and nonverbal interaction between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds" (Jing, H, 2019).

Ting-Toomey also identified several important aspects of intercultural communication, such as (1) language differences, (2) differences in values and (3) cultural norms, (4) differences in understanding of time and space, (5) differences in levels of formality in communicating. To address these challenges, Ting Toomey recommends developing "intercultural competence" through approaches such as training and education. Some of the functions of intercultural communication in the era of globalization include opening international language opportunities. With technological advances and globalization, many campuses are starting to enter global education. Intercultural communication becomes important in facilitating interaction between students from different countries (Chen, 2017),

Intercultural communication can help increase intercultural understanding between individuals and groups from different cultures. This can help prevent misunderstandings, stereotypes, and discrimination. Intercultural communication can help individuals and groups enrich their cultural experience through interaction with people from different cultures (Jackson J, 2018). Intercultural communication can help increase global awareness and understanding of global issues such as international trade, the environment, and human rights. Improving international relations, Intercultural communication can help improve relations between countries and assist in achieving political, economic, and social goals (Jing & Wang, 2019).

In the strategy of intercultural communication, according to Hammer (2020), the existence of intercultural training can increase the effectiveness of intercultural communication in the educational environment. Intercultural training can help students to understand cultural differences and learn the skills necessary to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds. The training can also help staff to recognise stereotypes and prejudices they may have against people from different cultures, as well as help them develop self-awareness of their own values and beliefs. By improving intercultural understanding and skills, Foreign students can build better relationships with different cultural backgrounds and provide more effective communication.

Intercultural training can help foreign students understand cultural differences and how to communicate effectively with students from different cultures. This training can include information about cultural differences, simulation exercises, and discussions about appropriate communication strategies. With intercultural training, foreign students can also improve the effectiveness of their communication with customers from different cultures.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research method. This method is chosen due to the suitability of this research method to answer the research questions. Data being used in this study is elicited through semi structured interviews with two international students from China studying at one of the public universities in Indonesia. Interviews are determined as the method of data elicitation due to its effectiveness in obtaining views and opinions from the participants (Creswell, 2009). Both students are studying in Indonesia for their bachelor and master degrees, majoring in English for the bachelor degree and Linguistics for the master degree. After the data collection, the interview is transcribed and coded into two main topics: (1) verbal communication and (2) non-verbal communication. To achieve trustworthy data, theory triangulation is conducted. The theory triangulation is done by comparing previous research findings and theories to analyze the data (Carter, 2014).

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Intercultural Verbal Communication

In the process of intercultural communication, verbal communication plays an important role. Despite the language differences of the international students with the other individuals they are interacting with in the campus, both students admitted that they did not face any difficulties communicating in Indonesia. This is shown by the following excerpt:

"I read that Bahasa Indonesia is one of the easiest languages to learn. We only need like 360 hours to be fluent"

Even so, the student suggested that the cultural differences in term of politeness levels make Bahasa Indonesia to be more challenging to learn for Chinese students. Based on the following interview transcript, the student pointed out the politeness differences between Bahasa Indonesia and Chinese.

"Because in Indonesian you have like What do we call this? The polite language and the peer language and the other one. You have like this, right? There is it. Same as Chinese. We don't have that. Yeah. So if It's you, it's you. There's no kamu anda something like that."

Based on the transcript, the student admitted that both English and Chinese have no level of politeness, unlike Bahasa Indonesia, where there are variety of words with same meanings to differentiate level of politeness. In the interview, the student used "kamu" and "anda" as the example of words in Bahasa Indonesia with politeness levels. These words can be translated into "you", yet the word "kamu" is commonly used for peers, meanwhile the word "anda" is commonly used for formal settings, talking with someone older or respected. Rohbiah (2017) identified many forms of pronoun in Bahasa Indonesia that is affected by formality, gender, dimension, and terms of quantity. This language variety matters when there are differences in strata or classes between both interlocutor. According to the transcription above, the student claim that this factor in Bahasa Indonesia brings more challenge during language acquisition, as it differs from Chinese.

This difference in terms of politeness also exists in online communication, especially when texting lecturers. This happened due to the fact that Chinese students are used to greet their teachers differently than Indonesian students. She claimed that in Chinese they express greetings the same way as they greet their peers, such as using "Hello". Meanwhile, in Indonesia, there are a lot of dimensions in greetings, especially in texting. Usually, in China, the only thing that is considered impolite when texting is related to timing, students that text their lecturer late at night are seen as improper. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, students need to greet the lecturer, introduce themselves, apologize for disturbing their time, clearly express their intention, and express gratitude toward the lecturer for their attention, all aspect included during texting. Due to this differences, the student claimed that she needed to learn more about polite language and how to use more polite words when texting.

"When we text with our lecturers? I need to learn more. Language more polite or Use words more polite."

This phenomenon happens due to the fact that offline communication and online communication can be very different from each other (Meng et al, 2022). As an example, when texting, we need to introduce ourselves, meanwhile in offline communication, lecturers can directly identify their students based on appearance. During texting, politeness are crucial as it is used as the indicator of social gap between students and lecturers (Nurdiyani and Sasongko, 2022). There are a lot more aspects that influence the language use when texting lecturers through Whatsapp, such as information, opening attitudes, and moral norms (Febianto et al., 2019). Another differences of online and offline communication is the use of emoji during texting. The use of emoji in online communication provide multimodality which decrease the gap between online and offline communication, despite having the possibility to be interpreted in various ways, especially for non-native speaker (Murniati, 2023). Considering the high-context culture of Indonesia, it is crucial to be aware of these communication differences.

Other than the level of politeness, Bahasa Indonesia and Chinese are also different in terms of context. In the following excerpt, the student elaborated her first culture shock when having intercultural communication with Indonesian.

"Yeah, sometimes especially when someone I go, we are new. We are new, but maybe we are first meeting and the first meeting or something. But they directly ask age. Oh yes, kind of culture shock. Because in China it's impolite to ask. Oh, someone's age, especially the Gers. It's kind of like a Western culture."

There are also some statements that have different implications in Indonesian culture, which the international students fail to understand.

"How do I say this? So we just met her and me. And my friends, She was like, oh, you're from China. And she was like, inviting us, Come to my house, I live here and we can have a chat. I was like, when?. Okay. She passed and she was like I don't know how it remember like she saw this life a little bit, right? Go to there. Yes. Yes, I remember like We're doing Yeah, like almost every So I was like, okay, when?"

In this case, the interlocutor (Indonesian) was saying "Come to my house. I live here, we can have a chat", with the intention of invitation for politeness purpose to the student that she just met, without any intention of really asking her to come to her house. The student comprehended the statement with literal meaning, which she perceive as a real invitation. Since the student perceive the statement as an invitation, she replied with "When?". This differences in understanding implicature suggest the difference between both individuals in term of cultural background. The invitee (Indonesian) was stating the invitation for politeness purpose since she is used with Indonesian culture where invitation might be used as a small talk to indicate that the student are welcomed. Meanwhile, the student (Chinese), which is used to perceive things literally, since she live in low-context culture where they

prioritize less ambiguous statement, did not catch the implicature and only understand literal meanings.

Another case of failure in understanding implicature happened due to the contextual differences between the international student culture and the interlocutor culture. In this case, the one who misunderstood is the interlocutor.

"It's okay, means, in yours, in your Okay. I don't know perspective. Like, never mind. It's okay. But in Chinese? It's okay. I don't know. It's like a How to explain this. It's a little bit. Like this. If I say it's fine, it's okay. That's like, don't worry, don't worry. You don't need to do it. If like For example, if I drop your phone. And what do we call this? There's a screen, cracked? And if you say, it's OK, it's OK. It doesn't mean, in China, my perspective. It doesn't mean I don't need to look at this. I meant this thing. When I told her it's OK. And she was like. Which means I don't need to You understand? And I feel like so weird because like she borrowed my money and she said that I would pay you like next month. I was like, oh, it's okay. It's okay. Please take your time, right? I don't know, her understanding? She's like, oh, I don't need to pay. Yeah, just like that. And when I ask her of all that like another month. She was like, oh, you said it's okay, something like that. When I asked her about this. Like, oh, it's time to. Pay me. Yeah. Even though you say it's okay. Oh my goodness, what did I say? I just said it's okay, right? So it doesn't mean you don't need to. I just remember that."

Based on the excerpt, the statement "It's okay" caused misunderstanding due to differences in implication. The student stated that the statement "It's okay" means "Don't worry, take your time" which in the context of the conversation, means that the student is fine with the condition where the interlocutor have not yet paid the money she borrowed. Meanwhile, in the case that the student experienced, the interlocutor perceive "It's okay" as "You don't need to do it", which means that the interlocutor did not have to pay the money.

To solve this cultural difference between Bahasa Indonesia and Chinese, the student stated that she mainly uses English when communicating. Unlike Indonesia with high-context culture, English and Chinese share the same low-context culture (Jackson, 2014). This makes it easier for the student to communicate with peers and lecturers at the campus.

Regardless of being in an English major where other students and lecturers are able to communicate in English, the student stated that sometimes she faced difficulties when having group discussions for group projects. The student elaborated the challenge in the following excerpt.

"Yeah, once, when I was in the undergraduate class. There's a one member of our group. And I think the He's not like a admit to that, but he never asked me, understand or not, but he directly told the lecturer. "I will remember this she never, other than never discuss with us, never say something." But actually when we do the discussion they will use Bahasa...oh, yes, Jawa. So, I cannot understand. So what should I say?"

The excerpt suggested that other than the international student intercultural communication competence, the interlocutor situation is also relevant to the success of intercultural communication. At last, the student cope with this challenge by

communicating her struggle to the lecturer, which was responded well by the lecturer, as shown by the following excerpt

"I explained to the lecturer because of those lectures some of them are studying overseas so they can understand this kind of situation."

This obstacle faced by the student demonstrated the need for mutual understanding in intercultural communication. Intercultural communication requires mutual understanding in the professional domain (Sabirjanovna, 2022). In this case, the lecturer shows understanding toward the international student concern, meanwhile the group mates lack understanding toward the international student language barriers and refuse to facilitate the group discussion using the language comprehensible by the international student.

Another verbal communication challenge faced by the international student at the campus is related to phonological differences. The student stated that some consonants in Bahasa Indonesia are hard to pronounce correctly.

"No, it's not hard, but some. How do you say that...some alphabet? We cannot pronounce it correctly. Especially the [t] and [d][p] and [b], it sound same to me, but I don't know how Indonesian student or Indonesian people how to difference them. It's totally different, because our pronunciation is like very clear like English letters."

According to the student's statement, some examples of the consonants are challenging to pronounce due to its pronunciation differences in the Chinese sounds. These examples include the sounds of some consonants, such as [t], [d], [p], and [b]. The phonological differences between Bahasa Indonesia and Mandarin varies due to difference in ways to articulate and articulator (Wikarti et al., 2019). The examples of the consonants differences comparison in both languages can be seen in the table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Consonant Differences between Mandarin and Indonesian.

| Consonants | Mandarin | | | Indonesian | | |
|------------|----------------------|----------------|--------------|----------------------|-----------------|---------|
| | Ways of articulating | Articulator | Example | Ways of articulating | Articulator | Example |
| [d] | Unaspirated | Apiko Alveolar | 弟 (di) | Voiced | Lamino Alveolar | [D]adu |
| [t] | Aspirated | Apiko Alveolar | 台灣 (taiwan) | Voiceless | Lamino Alveolar | [T]iga |
| [p] | Aspirated | Bilabial | 披 (pī) | Voiceless | Bilabial | [P]adi |
| [b] | Unaspirated | Bilabial | 北京 (Beijing) | Voiced | Bilabial | [B]aca |

However, the student claimed that the communication challenges related to phonological differences have not yet caused miscommunication. As demonstrated by the following statement, the student suggested that the interlocutor shows understanding when the student makes a phonological mistake.

"Oh, and then, misunderstanding and but actually, he's understand, but he's shocked. Because if I pronounce that letter wrongly, the meaning is not very well. So he's like, laughing, and he taught me if you said, pronounce it like this. The meaning is like not good."

When discussing their experience in general, the student admitted their lack of accuracy in using Bahasa Indonesia, which shows their awareness in their ability of doing intercultural communication.

"Yeah, maybe sometimes my Bahasa Indonesia is not very accurate so they don't understand. It's not like they misunderstood to another one but they don't really know what I'm saying."

Despite causing various kinds of challenges due to cultural differences, verbal communication is also part of the communication strategies used by international students to cope with the challenges they face. As stated in the following excerpts, the student stated that she and her friend communicate in Mandarin in the middle of the conversation where miscommunication happens.

"My friend like remind me like Well, like, because we speak Chinese, so she doesn't Right, so my, she was just. So you know, it's not looking like Well, I, We have team and I was like, Yeah, At that time. Just arrive, like everyone invite you."

Another important thing that the international students did to deal with the intercultural communication is being aware of what they are lacking in. It is essential to understand that differences in culture and social norms are inevitable considering the character of global society (Nam et al., 2023). This aspect has already been shown by the student during the interview.

Intercultural Non-verbal Communication

While verbal communication is mainly done in intercultural communication, nonverbal communication has become a prevalent method in communication between individuals. According to the interview excerpt, the non verbal intercultural communication challenges include the aspect in kinesics (body language) and physical appearances.

The nonverbal intercultural communication challenges faced by the students related to body language are shaking hands, hand-kissing, and bowing. It is shown in the interview transcript that the nonverbal culture of politeness has not yet been experienced by the students prior to studying in Indonesia.

"How do you say that the students will kiss the hands? So you're shocked. Yeah, how do they use, so usually do it in China? We only say hello to our lecturer. I say morning or Afternoon all these kind of things. We didn't do this."

Even when the students are not used to doing the hand-kissing gesture, they deal with the unfamiliar culture by adjusting with what every other student did, as elaborated in the following transcription.

"You do like this (imitating shaking hands) Hello, I never see that. I see everybody doing it. Yeah, I'm willing to do it. But, I don't understand. I don't understand what they are doing, like everyone. Even like if you're late you have to come by and give this (imitating hand-kissing) first"

The gesture experienced by the students is called "salaman" in Indonesia. This behavior is done as a form of respect, especially to teachers or someone older, such as parents, grandparents, and other respected relatives. According to Safuwan et al. (2019), this gesture is used as a form of greeting as a symbol of absorbing the knowledge of the elders or someone more educated than them. While it has become common in Indonesia, this might be surprising for foreigners.

Other gestures that are part of Indonesian, especially Javanese culture, being faced by the international student are bowing when passing through someone older. Passing through someone older is considered impolite, thus younger individuals need to bow as an effort of being more polite (Suhadi and Purwarno, 2018)

"Like if you pass through someone you have to (imitate bowing while walking). There's what we call this, bowing. He was saying that we (Indonesians) know how to be invisible, but I still can see you"

In addition to body language, the international student also faces challenges in terms of physical appearance cultural differences. Based on the excerpt, the international student expressed shock when she was told that wearing an all black outfit is impolite as they are only done when grieving someone at a funeral.

"For all international students, we perform. I get upstage using all black costume and my friend said that it is for funeral"

The obstacles faced by the students related to cultural differences exist due to the unique culture of Indonesia, especially when focusing on the area of study in Java. Javanese people are known to have uniqueness in using language, especially in greetings (Pratama, 2018). The challenges mentioned above have shown the need for adjustment as a way of dealing with differences. The students ability to adjust is demonstrated in the following statement

"We cannot understand this. We can respect you. Because we are in your country but you need to respect us also. We didn't do anything wrong."

The statement suggests the student's understanding of cultural differences. Intercultural communication experiences in the educational domain influence the development of intercultural communication competence where the linguistic diversity in communication is focused (Ou and Gu, 2020). Therefore, it can be concluded that these experiences elaborated by the participants improved their ways of coping as a form of implementation of intercultural communicative competence.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study elaborated the main challenges in intercultural communication based on international students' perspective, which falls into two categories, verbal and nonverbal communication. The verbal communication challenge includes politeness issues, context level differences, phonological differences, and the interlocutor's lack of intercultural communication competence awareness. Meanwhile, during the non verbal intercultural communication process, the students faced challenges regarding body language and physical appearance. To cope with these obstacles, the students implement various strategies, including using English as a lingua franca, communicating obstacles to lecturers, and adjusting with their environment.

The findings implied the need of Indonesian students intercultural communication competence to facilitate the rising number of international students, especially in English majors, where students are expected to be able to communicate with English. The discussion of this paper also demonstrated the need for adjustment for international students, not only in Indonesia, but also other countries around the world. Due to the limitation of this study, the researchers suggest further study related to this topic to be conducted. Considering the lack of study investigating the students' perspective, it is crucial for future researchers to address this problem.

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