

THE CULTURAL ADAPTATION PROCESS OF INDONESIAN STUDENTS STUDYING IN GERMANY

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Abstract

Globalization through technological advancements facilitates Indonesian students to continue their studies abroad, such as in Germany. Technology provides easier access to information on scholarships and various benefits can be obtained from studying abroad, including self-development, improving language skills, and global networking opportunities. However, we cannot deny cultural differences between countries where language barriers, societal characteristics, and unfamiliar norms, can pose significant challenges to intercultural communication and adaptation. This research examines the adaptation process of Indonesian students studying in Germany and how they navigate these challenges. The method used is descriptive qualitative and in-depth interviews aim to attain detailed data. The theoretical frameworks applied in this study are the Communication Accommodation Theory, which explores how individuals adjust their communication styles, and the U-Curve Theory, which outlines the four phases of cultural adaptation. The results reveal that the students experience the honeymoon, crisis, adjustment, and adaptation phases, and employ similar strategies, such as respecting the new culture and actively adjusting to it.

Keywords: culture shock, intercultural communication, cultural adaptation process.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization is the process of expanding cultural influence throughout the world. It also encourages interdependence between countries through education (Setyawati, Septiani, Ningrum, & Hidayah, 2021). Indonesia is positioned 22nd in the world as the country with the most students studying abroad (Dinata, 2022). Roughly 53,604 of them studying abroad (Adisty, 2022) with 8000 of them opting for Germany (Goethe-Institut, 2023). The reasons that attract Indonesians to migrate abroad to continue their studies, especially in Germany are the free tuition fees (Sun Education, 2022), scholarships (Ahmad, 2018), and good quality of education (U.S. News, 2024). As we can see, the decision to study abroad is a positive decision to develop one's character in a current borderless world. The desire to seek new experiences, experience new cultures, build relationships with people from different countries, and much more makes Germany a sweet spot for Indonesian students to hone their intercultural sensitivity.

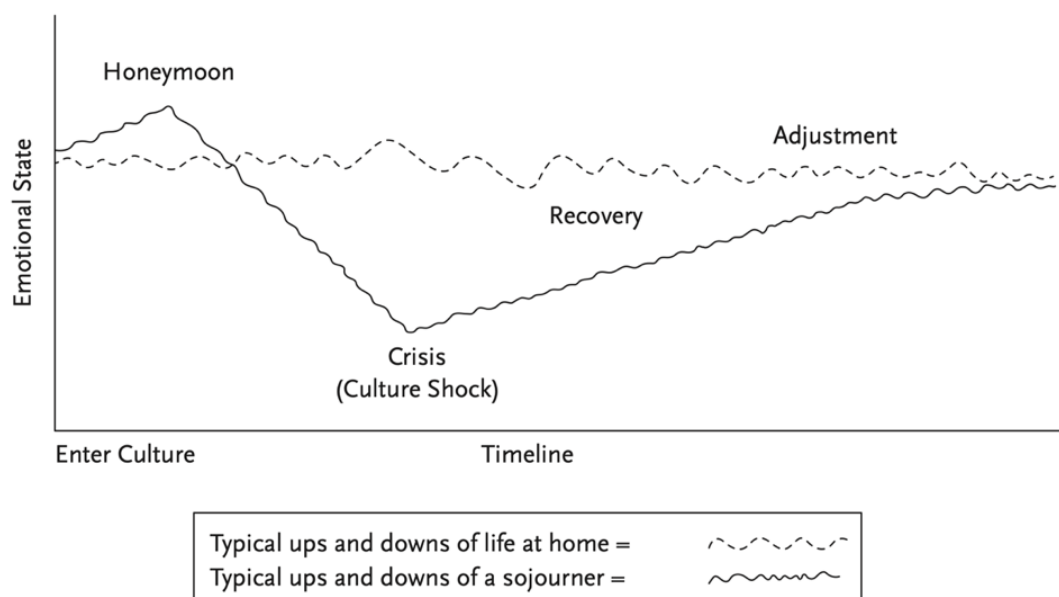
Germany is a country with a population of more than 80 million people (Expatrio, 2024). It is a country with an individualistic culture and people tend to avoid small talk and giving someone personal space is seen as a sign of respect rather than rudeness (AFS USA, 2024). This means that German people consist of people who take responsibility for their well-being and do not merely depend on the government, family, or friends to help them (World Population View, 2024). This way, the existence of cultural differences such as differences in language, behavior, and social norms can form barriers between cultures which could hinder effective communication and result in culture shock. Additionally, German language skills are expected

because otherwise, it can make it difficult for international students to socialize with society (Jasmine, 2023). DW (2018) reported several Indonesian students admitted that they received in some sense a form of discrimination and racism. One Indonesian student who was wearing a hijab was shunned by an old lady who was sitting next to her inside the tram and then the old lady grumbled to herself. Other times they experienced a similar incident when they were at the cashier in a supermarket.

Research on the cultural adaptation process has been conducted previously such as “Cultural Adaptation Process of Indonesian Students in Pursuing Education in Queensland, Australia” (Mahendra, 2021); “Intercultural Communication Adaptation Process for Indonesian Students from Ternate Abroad (Descriptive Study of Intercultural Communication Adaptation Process for Students from Ternate Abroad in Facing Culture Shock” (Arifin, 2022); “Understanding Cultural Adaptation in Indonesian Students Studying Abroad” (Mumpuni, 2021); “Adaptation of Voluntary Collectivist Culture During International Voluntary Service (IVS) in Germany” (Nurlina, 2021); and “Self-Adaptation and Culture Shock of Indonesian Postgraduate Students in European and American Countries (An Intercultural Communication Study)” (Wardah, 2021). Although previous research has examined cultural adaptation among international students, research specifically examining the cultural adaptation of Indonesian students in Germany is relatively limited even as their numbers continue to increase.

Therefore, This study focuses on analyzing the cultural adaptation process of Indonesian students in Germany. To understand their cultural adaptation process, the concept used in this study is the Intercultural Communication model coined by William B. Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim used to indicate communication occurs between people from different cultures or communication with foreigners (Gudykunst and Kim 1992, p. 32-37, in Mulyana, 2019, p. 168). In addition, to analyze the cultural adaptation process, two theories used in this study: (1) the Communication Accommodation introduced in 1973 by Howard Giles and assumes when two people come from different cultures and communicate with each other, there will be differences in accent, language, behavior, and speed of speech thus every individual has an adaptation strategy when interacting with other people through: convergence, divergence, and excessive accommodation (West & Turner, 2010, p. 472); and (2) the U-Curve theory looks at the cultural adaptation process when someone enters a new culture (Kim, in Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2017, p. 393) and when facing a new culture, they must endure four phases before being able to return to the same level such as:

1. Honeymoon Phase: this phase is characterized by feelings of joy, surprise, and surprise. It happens because someone sees new things that are unique and exotic. So they feel pleasure when they enter a new culture.
2. Crisis (Culture Shock): this phase is a phase of culture shock that occurs when there are real differences in the values, attitudes, and behavior of a new culture that disrupt one's perceptual reality. At this stage, people feel anxious, frustrated, isolated, and depressed, which can lead to personal disintegration when confusion about one's identity in a new culture increases. A person can also have hatred for everything that is considered foreign.
3. Recovery Phase: this phase is characterized by one's willingness to open himself up by accepting a new culture, adapting himself, and a willing to understand the new culture, and a person can accept other people from the new culture both verbally and nonverbally.
4. Adjustment Phase: the final phase is the interdependence stage where one will appreciate the new culture actualize himself and find new ways to explore human diversity. In this phase, a person will feel comfortable in the new culture and be able to live in the old culture and the new culture which is then accompanied by feelings of joy.



Source: (Hall, Covarrubias, & Kirschbaum, 2002, p. 289)

METHOD

This research is a qualitative descriptive research that aims to explain a phenomenon using words. This research was carried out through purposive data sampling on the basis that the selection of informants was based on the researcher's considerations. The collection technique using triangulation of data analysis is inductive, and the research results emphasize meaning rather than generalization. The results of this research describe the results of in-depth interviews to gain the depth of the data (Mamik, 2015, h. 109) through the structured method Vanderstoep & Johnson (2009, h. 225) and documentation through studies (Prasanti, 2018) with Indonesian students studying in Germany as research subjects so that researchers know the adaptation process faced by Indonesian students in Germany (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018, p. 8).

This research involved three informants who were students who came from Indonesia and were studying in Germany. The selection of informants was carried out on the basis that the students were studying in Germany and had lived in Germany for more than 66 days in accordance with the European Journal of Social Psychology criteria regarding the average time needed to form new habits (Sani, 2021).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Intercultural Communication

Based on the findings, Indonesian students who are studying in Germany experience cultural differences from their country of origin, namely Indonesia, to the country they currently live in. One of the fundamental distinctions is between individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

In an individualist society, Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy (2017, p. 88) assumed that a person is sovereign over himself, competition, independence, self-determination, pursuing personal goals, and living independently. The three students in this research found that German people when speaking were straight to the point, helpful when asked, independent, enjoyed their solitude, behaved professionally towards friends, and respected and were efficient with their time. The way the 1st student responds to the individualist attitude of German people is to adapt herself to individualist behavior even though she does not abandon the (collectivistic) nature she has with her.

When Indonesian students study in Germany, they will make perceptions when facing a new culture which is influenced by the student's sense of sight and condition (Mulyana, 2019,

p. 179). The 1st and 2nd students perceive Germans as people who don't like to spend time on things they feel are useless, are smart in managing their time, and answer questions only sparingly.

Communication Accommodation

Communication Accommodation Theory assumes that when individuals from different cultures communicate, there will be differences in accent, language, behavior, and speed of speech so they will try to adjust or accommodate their way of speaking (West & Turner, 2010, p. 467). The three informants found it difficult to communicate with German people on campus because they spoke quickly so it took time to understand and get used to their words.

The strategy used by the three informants is convergence. Convergence is a strategy used by individuals from different cultures when communicating. This is done by adapting to communication behavior and depending on the perceptions, words, and behavior of other people (West & Turner, 2010, p. 472). The adaptations made by them include speech using German when communicating and communication behavior by asking if someone does not understand and daring to open a dialogue with them when in class and on campus.

The U Curve Theory

The U Curve Theory suggests an adaptation process when someone enters a new culture and someone who faces a new culture must go through phase four before being able to return to the same level (Kim, in Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2017, p. 393). The respond of each student according to the four phases explained as follows:

1. Honeymoon Phase: this phase is characterized by feelings of joy, surprise, and surprise (Hall, Covarrubias, & Kirschbaum, 2002, p. 289). The three students have gone through all phases of the U Curve Theory. The 1st student felt happy when first started studying in Germany because she saw new things when she was active in campus activities. The 2nd student felt happy when he started studying in Germany because he saw something new, namely that the courses that required attendance only had a weight of 5% for the grades while for the rest there was no attendance required from class. Lastly, the 3rd felt happy when studying in Germany by seeing new things, namely the good academic system, and facilities provided by the campus.
2. Crisis (Culture Shock): this phase is a phase of culture shock that occurs when there are real differences in the values, attitudes, and behavior of a new culture that disrupt one's perceptual reality (Hall, Covarrubias, & Kirschbaum, 2002, p. 289). The 1st student was faced with differences in behavior where the learning conditions in the classroom were heavily emphasized in the interaction between the lecturer and student, so it is very dynamic and active compared to Indonesia in which the majority still rely on one-way communication and students are mostly passive. It is clear that there are differences that disturb her perceptual reality. Afterward, the 2nd student faced real differences in the attitude that German students are more competitive than Indonesian students and real differences in grades where the academic system in Germany provides regulations that the university will expel students who fail the exam up to three times. Then the 3rd student faces real differences in values related to education in Germany where academic activities in Germany are not like in Indonesia because there are no graduation or graduation ceremonies and academic events revolve heavily around studying with professors.

3. Recovery Phase: this phase is characterized by one's willingness to open himself up by accepting a new culture, adapting himself, and a willing to understand the new culture, and a person can accept other people from the new culture both verbally and nonverbally (Hall, Covarrubias, & Kirschbaum, 2002, p. 289). The 1st student was finally willing to adapt to the dynamic and active learning process in the classroom. Meanwhile, the 2nd student later adapts himself to understand the new culture by prioritizing learning activities. Finally, the 3rd student makes adjustments by realizing that the difference in values from the academic side is just a cultural difference.
4. Adjustment Phase: the final phase is the interdependence stage where one will appreciate the new culture actualize himself and find new ways to explore human diversity (Hall, Covarrubias, & Kirschbaum, 2002, p. 289). The 1st student now feels happy and comfortable when attending class by actively participating in class to get good grades. Then the 2nd student can appreciate the rules of the academic system in Germany, then manage the time by actualizing himself and exploring human diversity by taking part in various activities outside of academics, such as being active in sports and organizations. Lastly, the 3rd student feels happy and appreciates the new culture for the different values of academic culture which he used as learning material.

The latter allows us to understand that Indonesian students studying in Germany foremost experience a significant cultural adaptation process influenced mainly by collectivist and individualist cultures. They encounter challenges such as communication barriers, cultural differences, and adjustments to Germany's academic environment. Derived by the U-Curve Theory, these students navigate through the honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment phases, gradually adapting to their new surroundings. From the Communication Accommodation, they employ strategies of convergence which actively adapt their communication styles and behaviors to fit the local culture. Though they initially face culture shock, they eventually embrace the differences and develop skills to appreciate and thrive in the new environment. This process highlights the importance of openness, flexibility, and support systems to help international students overcome barriers and successfully integrate into a new culture.

CONCLUSION

When studying in Germany, Indonesian students are faced with the reality of cultural differences. Some of them are the nature of society, which is individualistic, and classroom learning in Germany emphasizes highly on interaction and discussion between lecturers and students. The three students, who had gone abroad before studying in Germany, still have to adjust to German culture. In terms of the nature of society, those who bring Eastern culture must be accustomed to the nature of German people which speaks directly to the point, helps when asked, respects time, acts professionally with friends, and is punctual. Then they have to actively participate in discussions in class and adapt to German to be able to communicate with German society.

Academically, further research can be developed using the W Curve Theory which looks at the adaptation process of Indonesian students when they return to their home country after studying abroad due to students who have adjusted to a new culture must make readjustments to their original culture. Practically, future researchers who are interested in studying similar research topics can better study the adaptation strategies carried out by students who are studying abroad when living in a new culture.

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