

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ADAPTABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF CROSS-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to explain the experience of cross-cultural environment adaptation in international students and what makes international students able to overcome the crisis. The phenomenon of adaptation in a cross-cultural environment is an interesting phenomenon to study because cultural barriers are some of the things that most often cause international students to fail to complete their studies abroad. Many people who are in a new environment face culture shock, which is believed to be a normal condition. However, the level of disturbance experienced by the individual can differ from one person to another. This study uses two concepts, namely u-shaped curve and cross-cultural adaptation theories. The u-shaped curve concept has four stages of adaptation process namely honeymoon phase, crisis, recovery, and adjustment. Moreover, the cross-cultural adaptation concept believes that individuals' capacity for communicating in accordance with new cultural norms and values depends on their ability to change or adapt. It is made up of three crucial elements namely acculturation, deculturation, and assimilation. Each informant is able to be identified with a different process of cross-cultural adaptation. There are three findings in this study. First, u-shaped curve theory may not prove for a number of adaptation processes in general. Second, international students undergo different processes of cross-cultural adaptation in cross-cultural environments. Third, what makes international students overcome the crisis include several strategies.

Key Words: cross-cultural environment, adaptation, international students, u-shaped curve, cross-cultural adaptation

INTRODUCTION

Around the world, universities are responding to the challenges affected by globalization in a variety of ways. One of the responses is the internationalization of universities. According to (Xing, 2023), the

definition of internationalization of higher education refers to the process of incorporating a global, intercultural, or international component into the goals, duties, and methods of delivery of post-secondary education. Moreover, the scope of internationalization of higher education

has taken up various levels of interest and areas of focus that range from traditional study programs abroad, taking courses at colleges, or universities in other countries via the internet or face-to-face settings such as branch campuses or franchise. Other activities include international partnerships, academic programs, and research activities that emphasize the advancement of international student perspectives and skills, promotion of foreign language programs, and access to cross-cultural understanding.

A crucial component of the internationalization of higher education is student mobility (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). The most common type of student mobility is Physical Student Mobility (PSM). Physical Student Mobility (PSM) refers to residence in another country which may vary in duration with travel undertaken for academic, professional, or cultural reasons related to higher education.

Many nations, including Indonesia, are pursuing the internationalization of higher education. Diponegoro University is an example of Indonesia's higher education system going international. This is due to the fact that Diponegoro University opens IUP classes in various departments.

The International Undergraduate Program, or IUP, is an academic program

offered by Diponegoro University that attempts for internationalization of higher education. International and Indonesian students have a number of opportunities to take part in undergraduate programs at Diponegoro University through the International Undergraduate Program (IUP). English is the language of instruction in each and every study program that incorporates IUP. The requirement for IUP students is to participate in a double degree program or a student exchange abroad. This demands international students do physical mobility activities in order to participate in multicultural settings.

In physical mobility activities, international students in new environments experience a period of adaptation. According to (Xing, 2023), the process of adjusting to something new is called adaptation. Individual's interactions with their new social and cultural environment play a role in the interactive process of cultural adaptation. It is undeniable that the challenge of cultural adaptation is something that must be faced when someone wants to enter an environment with a new culture. When moving and living in a new environment, international students will feel uncomfortable, which will then have impacts on both their physical and emotional well-being. Because comprehending and adopting

different cultural beliefs takes time and is not something that can be done immediately, the new culture may put a lot of stress on some people. This is known as culture shock (Furnham, 2019).

According to (Razgulin et al., 2023), international students experience a variety of difficulties. The difficulties may include communication issues, accommodation issues, racial discrimination, separation reactions, dietary modifications, and stress due to finances, miscommunication, and loneliness. Based on interviews conducted by the author as a pre-researcher, one of the difficulties they face is the difficulty in forming intercultural friendships, especially interactions outside the academic environment. The phenomenon of adaptation in a cross-cultural environment is an interesting phenomenon to study because cultural barriers are some of the things that most often cause international students to fail to complete their studies abroad. Many people who are in a new environment face culture shock, which is believed to be a normal condition. However, the level of disturbance experienced by the individual can differ from one person to another. Therefore, the researcher wants to know more about the experiences experienced by international students in facing the adaptation process

when they are abroad with a focus on how they adapt and what makes them able to face the crisis in adapting in a new environment.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research is to explain the experience of cross-cultural environment adaptation in international students and what makes international students able to overcome the crisis.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWOK

There are two stages of the adaptation process, namely cultural adaptation and cross-cultural adaptation. Cultural adaptation involves encoding and decoding messages in a new environment, while enculturation facilitates communication between locals and newcomers. Cross-cultural adaptation includes acculturation (absorbing a new culture without losing core elements), deculturation (resistance to new cultural elements), and assimilation (combining cultures while losing original traits).

The model identifies five adaptation-related elements: personal communication, host social communication, ethnic social communication, environment (host acceptance, pressure for conformity, and intercultural identification).

The U-Curve theory by Lysgaard explains the adaptation process in four phases: Honeymoon (anticipation and happiness), Crisis (challenges and discontent), Recovery (understanding the new culture), and Adjustment (mastering the new culture).

RESEARCH METHOD

Phenomenological approaches for qualitative research will be used in this research. The phenomenology that will be applied is IPA. IPA is a qualitative research methodology focused on examining how people interpret their most significant life experiences on their own terms. The population in this study will be IUP students at Undip who had lived abroad to study abroad. The number of respondents is five people. Undip students were chosen because of their proximity to the scope of research.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The Preparations of International Students to Study Abroad

The informants in the study conducted research on their study destinations through various media channels before making their choices based on their interest in the host country or university. Preparations before departure were categorized into three aspects:

communication and social interactions, everyday life, and academic life.

In the communication and social interactions aspect, informants focused on understanding the characteristics of the host community and learning the proficiency of the host community's English. They mentally prepared themselves for cultural differences and language challenges.

In the everyday life aspect, preparations included budget management, knowledge about travel routes and infrastructure, understanding local customs, learning the political views of the host country, preparing important documents, and making life plans. Informants aimed to manage their finances, navigate transportation effectively, bridge cultural gaps, and familiarize themselves with the political climate.

In the academic life aspect, preparations involved finding explanations about the courses taken, understanding college life in the host university, and arranging educational needs like books and electronic devices.

Despite thorough preparations, some informants still felt anxious, while others experienced a mix of excitement and nervousness. The study contributes valuable insights into the preparation

process for international students and highlights the diverse emotions experienced before departing to a foreign country.

Honeymoon Phase: The Excitement over Meeting New People, Encountering New Culture, and Being Involved in a New Academic Setting

The honeymoon phase for international students begins with excitement and positive expectations upon arrival in the host country. The informants had diverse expectations related to communication and social interactions, everyday life, and academic life.

In the communication and social interactions aspect, one informant expected positive interactions with the host community using her language skills, while another had concerns about potential negative relationships due to cultural disparities.

In the everyday life aspect, expectations included a desire to eat authentic cuisine, execute life plans such as working part-time jobs and arranging trips, adopting local customs, and altering appearance to fit in. Academic life expectations involved maximizing student success by understanding the host university's curriculum and resources. The

informants experienced intriguing discoveries in communication and social interactions, everyday life, and academic life. They observed the host community's character, diversity, and English language proficiency. Everyday life experiences included advancements in infrastructure, the host country's culture, appearances of the host community, changing seasons, the nation's security, political views, prices of necessities, and technological advancements. In academic life, they learned about learning methods, the evaluation system, how the host community dresses, and campus facilities. The study provides insights into the varied expectations and discoveries of international students during their honeymoon phase, emphasizing the importance of understanding cultural nuances and preparing for academic differences in the host country.

Crisis Phase: The Desperation over Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Relationships, Unfamiliar Daily Operations, and New Educational System

The crisis phase in the experiences of international students occurs when they start feeling unsettled, encountering various challenges, culture shock, and unpleasant experiences. This phase, characterized by feelings of disappointment, dissatisfaction,

and desperation, arises from differences between the native and host cultures, potentially leading to culture shock. The crisis phase induces an aggressive attitude, hostility, and difficulties adapting, accompanied by homesickness, boredom, changing moods, sensitivity, and feelings of isolation.

The challenges in this study are categorized into communication and social interactions, everyday life, and academic life.

1. Communication and Social Interactions

Personal Challenges: These include preserving mental wellness, learning a new language, adjusting personality, not prioritizing important things adequately, and avoiding judgment or stereotypes, and personal responses to departure.

Social Challenges: The challenges involve receiving negative treatment from the host community, experiencing racism, dealing with taboo conversations, and forming social interactions or failing to form social bonds.

2. Everyday Life

Challenges in Individual Circumstances: Issues include fears of a third Covid-19 wave, concerns about

money management, adjusting to changing seasons, learning public transportation systems, sorting garbage, fixing internet problems, and facing difficulties with local cuisine.

Social Challenges: Difficulty in blending in with new cultures, adapting to cultural differences, and recognizing and naming local foods are highlighted.

3. Academic Life

Personal Challenges: Informants express difficulty in achieving good scores in the new educational systems, adapting to host university assessment methods, and dealing with the absence of attendance in assessment criteria.

Social Challenges: Unpleasant learning experiences are described, including classmates' anxiety around foreign students, passivity, and lack of English language proficiency despite English being the medium of instruction. The challenges highlight the impact on students' learning experiences and potential negative judgments and stereotyping based on language proficiency.

Overall, the crisis phase presents a complex set of challenges in various aspects of international students' lives, encompassing personal, social, and academic dimensions. The difficulties

range from individual psychological preparedness to societal reactions and cultural adaptation, emphasizing the need for support systems and effective intercultural communication strategies.

Recovery Phase: The Complete Understanding of Relationship Development, Life Management, and Academic Performance

The recovery phase for international students occurs as they gain a better understanding of the new culture, focusing on language acquisition, habit adaptation, and self-sufficiency. In this phase, crisis solutions and culture learning are emphasized. Three categories—everyday life, academic life, and communication and social interactions—are used to address crisis situations.

1. Communication and Social Interactions

Acquiring Language: International students actively learn the new language by interacting with the host community.

Intrapersonal Communication Practice: Engaging in self-communication to enhance cognitive abilities and problem-solving skills.

Having an Open Mind: Developing an open-minded mindset toward cultural

differences and accepting diverse perspectives.

Social Relationship Building: Establishing connections with friends, both from the same country and internationally, to overcome loneliness and boredom.

2. Everyday Aspects

Personal Efforts: Frequent Use of Sunscreen and Moisturizer: Protecting the skin from harsh weather conditions; Getting Used to Walking Culture: Adapting to walking and using public transportation; Acquiring Waste Sorting Techniques: Learning waste sorting practices; Maintaining Health and Hygiene: Taking precautions against Covid-19; Financial Management: Planning and managing expenses; and Making Meals: Preparing meals to address food preferences.

Social Efforts: Assimilating into Local Culture: Observing and adopting host community customs; Using Various Communication Channels: Learning cultural values, laws, and language through conversations; and Adopting Host Community Habits: Altering appearance and habits to resemble the local culture.

3. Academic Life

Personal Efforts: Understanding Host University's Curriculum:

Familiarizing oneself with the assessment system and study plans,

Social Efforts: Adapting to Local Norms: Going to the host institution with friends to pursue academic goals; Utilizing University Resources: Using campus facilities, including libraries, to complete homework.

The recovery phase highlights the proactive measures taken by international students to integrate into the new culture, emphasizing language acquisition, cultural adaptation, and social connections. The focus shifts from crisis management to a constructive approach in navigating academic and everyday life challenges.

Adjustment Phase: Cultural Competencies as Valuable Learning Outcomes of Study Abroad

The adjustment phase for international students occurs when they have mastered the new culture, accepted the way of life, and integrated into the new environment without anxiety. This phase is characterized by a deep understanding of the local language, values, and customs. Cultural competence acquired during the study abroad experience includes establishing good interpersonal relationships, enhanced language proficiency, comprehension and integration

of the host country's culture, good problem-solving, improved self-development, and global knowledge.

Intercultural Communication Competency

Intercultural communication competency is defined as "behavior that is appropriate and effective in a given context. It involves managing challenging features of intercultural communication, including cultural differences, inter-group posture, and the experience of stress.

The adjustment phase reflects enjoyment and functional competence in the new environment. Informants provide insights for future international students, emphasizing the importance of good preparations in language, necessity, and knowledge, as well as mastering intrapersonal communication abilities for successful adaptation. Studying abroad is seen as a transformative experience for self-improvement and global awareness.

Cross-Cultural Adaptation

The experiences of informants align with the concept of cross-cultural adaptation. Cross-cultural adaptation involves acculturation, deculturation, and assimilation. Acculturation (Informants 1, 3, 4, 5): Learning to become functional and comfortable in the new cultural setting

without eradicating essential components of the original culture. Deculturation (Informant 2): Experiencing the growth of new cultural elements to meet new needs arising from changes in situations. Deculturation involves losing elements of one's culture after coming into contact with another, and it may lead to hostility toward the new culture. The overall process of cross-cultural adaptation depends on an individual's capacity to change and adapt to new cultural norms and values.

In summary, the adjustment phase is a culmination of successful adaptation and integration into the host culture, involving the development of intercultural communication competency and various facets of cross-cultural adaptation, such as acculturation and deculturation.

CONCLUSION

First, the U-shaped curve theory may not be universally applicable to all adaptation processes, suggesting that not every adaptation conforms to this pattern.

Second, international students typically undergo cross-cultural adaptation, involving acculturation and deculturation processes. Acculturation entails understanding and implementing the new culture while still being influenced by their native culture. Deculturation involves

significant changes to align with the new culture, leading to the discovery of a new identity without feeling disconnected.

Third, strategies for overcoming the adaptation crisis are categorized into three aspects: communication and social interactions (language acquisition, interpersonal communication practice, open-mindedness, building relationships), everyday life (adapting to local customs, health and hygiene, financial management, assimilating into local life), and academic life (understanding the host university's curriculum and assessment system, adapting to local student norms).

IMPLICATION

This research serves as an additional resource for understanding how international students adapt in cross-cultural environments, particularly in the context of student mobility programs. The study challenges the applicability of the U-shaped curve theory to all adaptation processes and identifies key aspects that can facilitate international students' adaptation. It emphasizes the importance of preparation, including language skills and cultural knowledge, as well as the mastery of intrapersonal communication abilities. The findings suggest that studying abroad contributes to self-improvement and a broader understanding of the world. The

research aims to inform international students about the adaptation process and suggests that the U-shaped curve theory may not universally apply to common adaptation processes.

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