

How the Experience of Living Overseas Sharpened Indonesian Student's Intercultural Communication Competence Through Student Exchange Program at the University of Pécs

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the intercultural communication competence of Indonesian students participating in the Exchange Student Program at the University of Pécs. It examines how they navigate the substantial cultural differences between Hungary and Indonesia, employing Byram's (1997) five elements of intercultural communication competence—attitude, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness/political education—and intergroup contact theory to explore potential prejudice. The findings reveal that despite facing significant cultural challenges, the students demonstrate and substantially enhance their intercultural communication competence. Utilizing a phenomenological approach, the intellectual perspectives of each student in navigating cultural differences enrich the study, contributing to a deeper understanding of their intercultural experiences and offering insights into broader cultural adaptation in educational exchange programs. All Indonesian students in this study exhibit their intercultural communication competence.

Keywords: *Indonesian Students, Student Exchange Program, Cultural Differences and Challenges, Intercultural Communication Competence*

ABSTRAKSI

Penelitian ini mengkaji kompetensi komunikasi antarbudaya mahasiswa Indonesia yang mengikuti Program Pertukaran Pelajar di Universitas Pécs. Penelitian ini meneliti bagaimana mereka menghadapi perbedaan budaya yang signifikan antara Hongaria dan Indonesia, menggunakan lima elemen kompetensi komunikasi antarbudaya Byram (1997)—*attitude, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness/political education*—dan teori kontak antarkelompok untuk meneliti potensi prasangka. Temuan mengungkapkan bahwa meskipun menghadapi tantangan budaya yang besar, para mahasiswa menunjukkan dan secara signifikan meningkatkan kompetensi komunikasi antarbudaya mereka. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi, perspektif intelektual setiap mahasiswa dalam menavigasi perbedaan budaya memperkaya penelitian ini, memberikan kontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih dalam tentang pengalaman antarbudaya mereka dan menawarkan wawasan tentang adaptasi budaya yang lebih luas dalam program pertukaran pendidikan. Seluruh mahasiswa Indonesia dalam penelitian ini menunjukkan kompetensi komunikasi antarbudaya mereka.

Kata Kunci: *Mahasiswa Indonesia, Program Pertukaran Pelajar, Perbedaan dan Tantangan Budaya, Kompetensi Komunikasi Antarbudaya.*

INTRODUCTION

Background

The youth represent the future and optimism of nations, contributing significantly to the labor force. In Indonesia, youth constitute 23.18% of the population, amounting to 64.16 million people in 2023 (BPS, Dataindonesia.id). This demographic advantage suggests a productive generation capable of driving the nation forward with their fresh perspectives and adaptability.

Indonesia fosters international partnerships in various sectors, including education, through initiatives like the International Student Exchange Program. This program allows students from universities in different countries to study abroad, enhancing their academic and cultural experiences (Atalar, 2020).

The Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) and the Indonesian Study Abroad Program facilitate such exchanges. IISMA, funded by the Ministry of Education, offers scholarships for Indonesian students to study abroad for one semester. Since its inception, participation has significantly increased, with 39 diploma students participating in 2023. Additionally, the Indonesian Study Abroad Program, introduced in 2023, enables self-funded undergraduate students to study at the University of Pécs, Hungary.

Students engaged in these programs experience intercultural communication, which involves navigating language and cultural differences (Baker, 2022). These interactions can lead to culture shock, as students adapt to new environments and social norms (Chaponniere & Hall, 2019). Challenges such as language barriers, cultural distance, and adapting to different food and weather conditions are common.

Despite these challenges, intercultural communication skills are essential. Research indicates that programs like ERASMUS enhance students' intercultural competence and language skills, fostering tolerance and diversity (Baranova, Kobicheva & Tokareva, 2020). However, not all students automatically develop these skills. Recent incidents involving IISMA awardees displaying arrogance and disrespect highlight the need to investigate the true impact

of these programs on students' intercultural competence.

This study aims to explore whether Indonesian students who participated in the 2023 Student Exchange Program at the University of Pécs have developed the necessary intercultural communication skills. By examining their experiences, the research assesses their ability to engage effectively in a multicultural environment, focusing on cultural sensitivity and diverse perspectives.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the study is to explore how the 2023 Student Exchange experience at the University of Pécs contributes to the development of intercultural communication competence among Indonesian students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Intercultural Communicative Competence

In 1997, Michael Byram defined Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) as the ability to interact effectively across cultures. This involves understanding the listener's perspective and cultural context, with politeness reflecting deeper cultural variations (Byram, 1997).

Individuals bring two types of knowledge to intercultural interactions: knowledge about their own culture and knowledge about social and individual interaction processes. This knowledge comes from socialization, identities (national, regional, ethnic, socioeconomic), and historical symbols. Effective intercultural communication also requires attitudes like curiosity, openness, and willingness to suspend judgment about one's cultural norms (Byram, 1997).

Byram identified five essential elements for ICC:

1. **Attitudes:** Curiosity, openness, and readiness to explore and challenge cultural norms and engage in diverse interactions.
2. **Knowledge:** Understanding social groups, practices, historical and current connections, and methods of communication in one's own and others' cultures.
3. **Interpreting and Relating Skills:** Ability to interpret another culture, explain it, and relate it to one's own, recognizing

ethnocentric viewpoints and facilitating resolution.

4. Discovery and Interaction Skills: Acquiring new cultural knowledge and effectively engaging in real-time communication, recognizing significant references, and mediating interactions.
5. Critical Cultural Awareness: Critically evaluating cultural perspectives and practices, interpreting values, and facilitating intercultural exchange.

Through the Student Exchange Program at the University of Pécs, Indonesian students enhance practical skills and gain deeper cultural understanding. Byram's ICC framework provides a lens to examine these experiences, highlighting the positive impact of intercultural interactions on students' communication abilities and cultural competence.

Intergroup Contact Theory

Gordon W. Allport's Intergroup Contact Theory (1954) posits that interaction between different groups can reduce prejudice and improve understanding if certain conditions are met: equal status, common goals, cooperative interactions, and institutional support. Personal contact is one of the most effective methods for reducing prejudice.

Living overseas provides individuals with firsthand interactions with diverse cultural backgrounds, aiding in the development of communication competence and reducing prejudice. Students engage with peers and locals in various contexts, working together on academic and social objectives, which fosters cooperation. Universities often offer cultural programs that further reinforce positive intercultural relationships.

This practical application of Allport's Contact Theory shows that studying abroad enhances intercultural communication competence and reduces prejudice. Constant exposure to diverse perspectives is crucial for effective intercultural communication.

The Student Exchange Program

The Student Exchange Program at the University of Pécs offers Indonesian students the opportunity to study abroad through two main initiatives: the Indonesian International Student

Mobility Awards (IISMA) and the Indonesian Study Abroad Program. The IISMA program is scholarship-funded, with students selected through document reviews and interviews, while the Indonesian Study Abroad Program is self-funded, requiring students to cover tuition fees after receiving an acceptance letter.

Both programs provide numerous benefits, including exposure to diverse classes, cultural immersion, and the development of intercultural communication skills. Participants gain independence, self-reliance, and adaptability, with access to university facilities and events. This enriching experience broadens students' academic and personal horizons, preparing them for future endeavors.

The Influence of Living Overseas Experiences

Living overseas allows Indonesian students to immerse themselves in a foreign culture, enhancing their intercultural competence. During their 4-5 month stay in Hungary, students actively engage with the local culture and community, interpreting cultural differences firsthand. This immersion involves conversations, interactions with locals, and navigating cultural norms, providing valuable insights into diverse ways of thinking and communicating.

Continuous exposure to cultural diversity helps students appreciate and respect differences, while developing skills to adapt and communicate across cultural boundaries. This experience enriches their competence, preparing them for a globalized world. Upon returning to Indonesia, they bring back academic knowledge and a heightened awareness of cultural diversity, equipping them to navigate a multicultural environment effectively.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative research method based on phenomenology. The phenomenological approach aims to describe the meaning of lived experiences for several individuals regarding a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). The goal of the phenomenology study is to describe the meaning of each subject's experiences.

RESULT

Cultural Differences That Bring Challenges and Cause Conflicts for Indonesian Students

The responses from the informants reveal various challenges encountered in daily life in Hungary. Language barriers and experiences of racism, particularly for those wearing hijabs and with Asian facial features, are frequently mentioned. Difficulties with the self-service system in supermarkets, differences in seasons, and currency also pose obstacles. The culture of not greeting, individualism, and apathy are noted, while unpleasant odors in certain city locations and difficulties in personal communication with long-established classmates add to the challenges. Furthermore, differences in norms and values between Indonesian and Hungarian cultures create hurdles in cross-cultural interactions. Hungarians tend to be reserved about their personal lives, the culture of hugging friends is prominent, and addressing older individuals without titles such as "sir" or "miss" is surprising. The prevalence of alcohol consumption, lower levels of religiosity or atheism, and cohabitation are more common in Hungary than in Indonesia. Open clothing, public displays of affection, public urination, and a more open acceptance of LGBT phenomena are also noted as differing and challenging norms. These observations illustrate the diverse cultural challenges faced by Indonesian students in Hungary.

Cultural Exchanges and Intercultural Interactions among Indonesian Student

The responses reveal a general attitude of openness and appreciation for cultural differences between Indonesia and Hungary. Most students respected the freedom of behavior in Hungary, even if they did not fully adopt its cultural values. Some chose to fully adopt the new culture, showing flexibility. They emphasized understanding local customs, such as food, language, and values, and stressed the importance of not discriminating and respecting others' choices.

The informants demonstrated a deep understanding of Hungarian culture and the cultures of their international friends, showing knowledge about Hungary's government, political situation, social norms, and history.

They recognized how cultural assimilation and Soviet influence shaped Hungary.

Indonesian cultural values significantly influenced their interactions, creating a positive impression among peers and locals. Values like politeness, friendliness, and cooperation were integral, with students emphasizing greetings, politeness, and maintaining good relationships.

The university facilitated cultural exchange through activities and events, including international classes, Hungarian language classes, and student organization events. Facilities like international dorm wings and city events supported cultural diversity.

The informants faced small conflicts, especially with roommates, resolved through communication, compromise, gestures, and humor. Some experienced racism, addressing it by speaking politely or ignoring it. Conflicts related to laundry queues were resolved by seeking win-win solutions, and personal conflicts were handled through open discussion and gentle language.

For intercultural contact, students used verbal communication, face-to-face meetings, and social media platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, Telegram, and Microsoft Teams. They were generally aware of Hungary's political situation, noting similarities with Indonesian politics, such as corruption and nepotism, and observing propaganda and government intervention in schools.

Significant Changes Brought Forth by Encountering Cultural Differences

The responses indicate significant changes experienced by students after interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. They became more independent, resourceful, open-minded, and internationally aware. Additionally, they developed legal and soft skills, became more responsible and tolerant, understood privacy and boundaries, and recognized differences in high-context and low-context cultures. They also became more cooperative, confident in initiating conversations, accepting of differences, and less judgmental. Cross-cultural interactions made them more opportunistic, appreciative of differences, and altered their views on religiosity and equality. The students gained a deeper understanding of

cultural diversity, reduced prejudice and racial conflict, and contributed to creating an inclusive and peaceful environment. They also became more familiar with the history and political conditions of the host country.

CONCLUSION

Cultural differences present challenges and potential conflicts for Indonesian students in Pécs, but these experiences also enhance their intercultural communication competence. This study divides these competencies into five key elements:

1. Openness, Tolerance, and Curiosity: Indonesian students exhibit open-mindedness, tolerance, and curiosity towards diverse viewpoints, religious values, lifestyles, sexual orientations, and individual characteristics. Their respect for diverse cultures helps mitigate racial prejudice and conflict.
2. Enriched Knowledge and Perspectives: Students gain extensive knowledge about Hungarian laws, politics, history, languages, social norms, foods, and traditions, broadening their perspectives.
3. Cultural Interpretation and Relating to Their Own Culture: Students demonstrate adeptness at interpreting other cultures, linking these observations to their own experiences, and fostering a deeper appreciation for diversity.
4. Interaction and Discovery: Students actively engage in academic and non-academic activities, including class discussions and cultural events organized by ESN and NGOs, maintaining friendships through social media.
5. Awareness of Hungarian Politics: Despite their short stay, students develop a deep awareness of Hungary's political landscape, including policies, government systems, and political issues.

These competencies prepare Indonesian students to thrive in a globalized society.

SUGGESTIONS

Suggestions for further research are to conduct comparative studies involving students from other countries or researchers can then study Indonesian students from different host

universities. Apart from that, future research can also examine further how intercultural communication competence develops over a longer period of time through longitudinal study methods. By tracking these changes over time, researchers can understand the long-term impact of student exchange programs on intercultural communication skills, which can provide deeper insight into students' cultural adaptation and personality changes after returning to their home country.

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