

A phenomenological investigation of the impact of study abroad experiences on the development of intercultural communication skills in college students

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural communication represents a significant challenge in the adaptation process for students studying outside their home regions. This study aims to examine the impact of studying abroad on the development of students' intercultural communication skills. A qualitative approach, utilizing a case study design, was employed for this research. The study involved four students who were currently studying abroad, selected through purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather insights from each participant. The analysis revealed four key themes: personality resilience, communication skills, psychological adaptation, and cultural awareness. The findings suggest that psychological resilience plays a crucial role in facilitating effective intercultural communication. Additionally, interpersonal communication skills are essential in this process. A common psychological challenge faced by students is homesickness, which can be mitigated by maintaining regular communication with family members. Studying abroad also enhances students' awareness of Indonesia's cultural diversity, prompting them to expand their understanding of different cultures, values, environments, and norms. This study underscores the importance of strengthening guidance and counseling services in higher education to support students' adaptation to new environments.

Keywords: communication skills, cultural awareness, intercultural communication, psychological adaptation

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INTRODUCTION

Communication plays a crucial role in human life [1]. It encompasses the ability to interact with others through speech, writing, or other forms of expression, making it an essential component of daily life. The communication process involves not only sending

messages but also receiving feedback [2]. Effective communication skills are fundamental for successful interactions [3]. Each individual possesses unique characteristics and behaviors [4]. For university students, communication skills are critical both in academic and daily life. These skills are essential for students as future professionals, as they regularly engage in activities that require effective speaking abilities, such as participating in class discussions, asking questions, delivering lectures, and more [5].

This is particularly important for students studying outside their home regions, who must adapt to new communication styles and behaviors in their host environments. The rapid advancement of globalization significantly impacts all areas of life, including education. Thoughtful career planning is essential for individuals to achieve their desired success [6]. Globalization opens new opportunities for individuals to access quality education, allowing them to study at prestigious universities both domestically and internationally [7].

In such an interconnected world, communication skills are indispensable, especially for students studying outside their home regions, where they are exposed to diverse backgrounds and cultures. As individuals engage with different cultural contexts, various communication practices emerge, as culture forms the foundation of communication [8]. Studies suggest that culture is inherently embedded in communication behaviors, with communication not only reflecting but also shaping, maintaining, and transmitting culture [2].

Social relationships are defined as the ways in which individuals engage and interact with others in their social environment [9]. As social beings who cannot live in isolation, humans inherently require social interactions with those around them [10]. When individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds communicate, intercultural communication occurs [11]. Intercultural communication is the process of exchanging ideas and meanings between people from different cultures [12]. This form of communication takes place when individuals with distinct backgrounds such as different nationalities, races, or languages engage with one another [13]. The significance of intercultural communication is evident, as each region exhibits unique cultural traits, including language, ethnicity, race, religion, and socio-economic status [14]. Research has shown that communication norms and patterns vary according to cultural functions and types [15]. Intercultural communication is also vital for students' ability to understand individuals or groups from different cultures, helping to

prevent conflicts [16]. In essence, having a deep understanding of other cultures and the capacity to communicate effectively in intercultural contexts is crucial in preventing misunderstandings and fostering cooperation and harmony in a multicultural society.

Despite the importance of intercultural communication for students studying away from their home regions, challenges still arise, with many students struggling to communicate effectively across cultures. Issues of self-adjustment are particularly prevalent among first-year students [17]. Interactions in everyday life, especially in culturally diverse settings, often present unforeseen obstacles and challenges [18]. Conflicts may arise between communicants from different cultures, with interpersonal disputes frequently resulting from differences in communication skills and contrasting national behavioral patterns [19]. Research conducted on students from Aceh Province studying in Bandung reveals that they must adapt to an environment that is culturally distinct. Despite these cultural differences, they cannot avoid interacting with local residents and must engage in regular communication with those around them [20]. Further studies highlight that students studying outside their home regions often face significant difficulties, including culture shock due to cultural discrepancies and challenges in adjusting to new cultural norms [21]. Additionally, Indonesian students studying at higher education institutions in the United States report academic and social challenges that lead to culture shock, particularly during the initial semesters. The stressors they face include using English for academic purposes, interacting with academic advisors, and understanding American cultural values [22]. These findings suggest that individuals entering new environments, previously unfamiliar to them, encounter various challenges, including linguistic barriers, differences in attitudes, belief systems, and cultural practices [13]. Another study found that academic stress can negatively impact other aspects of students' lives, such as their learning motivation [23]. In response to challenges, individuals exhibit a range of reactions, from stress and depression to indifference, where some may appear unaffected while concealing underlying issues [24]. These cases illustrate that students studying outside their home regions require robust intercultural communication skills, particularly in adaptability and cultural sensitivity.

The adaptation process primarily occurs through social interactions between individuals, as well as between individuals and groups [25]. Research has shown that students from migrant ethnic backgrounds undergo a natural adaptation process, which may initially be challenging when they enter a new cultural environment. At first, they may

experience feelings of dissatisfaction, impatience, discomfort, anxiety, and difficulty communicating, as everything feels unfamiliar [26]. It is noted that, as social beings, humans are expected to engage in social interactions throughout their lives, not only as a part of their obligation to live within groups but as a fundamental aspect of human existence. Involvement in social relationships is essential for every individual [25].

Further studies indicate that cultural adaptation occurs more effectively when immigrants possess cultural sensitivity. This sensitivity can be developed by actively adopting the mindset of the host culture. Cultural sensitivity is a vital asset in fostering tolerance and mutual understanding between migrants and the local community [27]. It refers to an individual's attitude of respect toward the cultures of other regions. This respect is particularly evident in social interactions with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, where one prioritizes the value of respect and avoids actions that could offend cultural differences [28]. For students, developing cross-cultural awareness, cultivating communication skills sensitive to differences, and enhancing their ability to respond effectively in intercultural situations are critical for fostering harmonious and empowered relationships with their new academic and social environments [29].

Building on the previous discussion, the aim of this study is to examine the impact of studying abroad on students' intercultural communication skills, with particular emphasis on their adaptability and cultural sensitivity. While some prior studies have explored this topic, research focused on Indonesian students studying abroad remains limited. This study holds significant value in enhancing our understanding of how studying abroad influences students' ability to adapt and their sensitivity to diverse cultures. Furthermore, it offers practical insights for students currently engaged in study abroad programs, enabling them to apply the findings to address challenges they may encounter in intercultural communication. Additionally, this research contributes to raising public awareness about the importance of intercultural communication and its role in shaping social relationships.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study approach. The research focuses on several students from Sungai Penuh City, Jambi Province, who are currently studying outside their region. Participants were purposively selected based on ease of access. The

informants included students pursuing both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Eligible participants were contacted through the WhatsApp application. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for each participant, and their individual affiliations were not disclosed. Participants representing various semesters and academic disciplines are shown in table 1 below.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Subject	Gender	Age	University	Major	Semester
RM	Female	20	Universitas Riau	Mathematics Education	6
YN	Female	20	ITL Trisakti	Transportation System	6
SM	Female	21	Universitas Riau	Psychology	8
AW	Male	23	UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung	Science of the Qur'an and Tafsir	2

This study employed semi-structured and in-depth interviews to collect data Table 1. Participant Demographics. During the interviews, participants were asked to share their experiences regarding intercultural communication while studying abroad. All interviews were conducted online via telephone and WhatsApp from March to April 2024. Each semi-structured interview lasted between 20 to 25 minutes. The researcher recorded the interviews, transcribed them verbatim, and systematically analyzed and categorized the data.

The collected data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model [30], which involves an iterative process of continuous data collection, processing, and interpretation. This model aids in organizing, summarizing, and extracting meaning from qualitative data collected in case studies. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation techniques were employed. In this study, multiple data sources, methods, and theories were used to confirm the findings and ensure the validity of the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to analyze the impact of studying abroad on students' intercultural communication skills, with a specific focus on their adaptability and sensitivity. Four key themes related to intercultural communication were identified: Personality Strength,

Communication Skills, Psychological Adaptation, and Cultural Awareness [31]. Below is a description of the participants' information:

Participant: RM

RM is a student from Sungai Penuh, Jambi Province, who studied outside her home region at Riau University, majoring in Mathematics Education. During her time at Riau University, RM noted several cultural differences compared to her hometown, such as differences in language and accent. Initially, she faced challenges in communication; however, over time, she adapted. RM attributed her successful adaptation to her open and sociable nature, which made it easier for her to connect with new people and adjust to cultural differences. She emphasized her commitment to presenting her authentic self and not conforming to others' expectations in social settings. RM was also able to communicate with other students from Sungai Penuh at Riau University, as she was actively involved in the Sungai Penuh Student Association. Despite her adaptability, RM did face some challenges while studying outside her region.

Participant: YN

YN, a student from Sungai Penuh, was selected to pursue her studies outside her region. She continued her education at ITL Trisakti University in Jakarta, where she received a scholarship. YN is generally quiet by nature and is not overly outspoken. The cultural differences between Sungai Penuh and Jakarta were significant, encompassing aspects such as culture, cuisine, language, and more. These differences made YN particularly sensitive to cultural variations and led her to develop a high level of cultural awareness. Despite these challenges, she acknowledged facing numerous difficulties while studying outside her region, which added to her learning experience.

Participant: SM

SM, originally from Sungai Penuh, pursued her education outside her home region at Riau University, majoring in Psychology. She is naturally reserved when interacting with new people, often expressing herself through thoughtfully articulated words. Initially, SM found adapting to life outside her region challenging; however, with time, she came to appreciate the experience. During her stay, SM primarily communicated in Indonesian to

avoid language misunderstandings. While studying outside her region, SM encountered various cultural differences, particularly with accents, which initially caused her discomfort. She was also unfamiliar with the local dress code, as many students wore short clothing or skirts, which contrasted with her modest Muslim attire. These experiences, though initially difficult, helped SM broaden her understanding of cultural diversity. She also faced additional challenges, which contributed to her personal growth and intercultural understanding.

Participant: AW

AW, a student from Sungai Penuh, is currently pursuing his Master's degree outside his home region at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati in Bandung. He is fortunate to have received a scholarship for his studies. During his time studying away from home, AW noticed significant cultural differences between his hometown and his new environment. As an active participant in student organizations, AW found it easier to adapt, although challenges still persisted. His time in Bandung taught him valuable lessons, such as the importance of respecting others and using polite language, especially since the majority of the population in Bandung is Sudanese. Initially, AW struggled to communicate with Sudanese individuals, but over time, he became accustomed to the local accent. Additionally, AW faced several psychological challenges while studying outside his region, which contributed to his personal and academic growth.

Emerging Themes:

The researchers identified four key themes related to intercultural communication: Personality Strength, Communication Skills, Psychological Adaptation, and Cultural Awareness [31].

Personality Strength

An individual's personality, encompassing values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, significantly influences how they communicate with individuals from different cultural backgrounds [32]. The analysis reveals that personality strength plays a crucial role in presenting one's identity in diverse environments.

As RM, one of the participants, reflects: “I believe the strength of personality is essential for presenting our identity even in unfamiliar environments. With a strong personality, a person can be recognized for who they are, even without explicitly stating it.”

This quote highlights the significance of personality strength in expressing one’s identity. Even when placed in a new environment, individuals with strong personalities can naturally project their true selves without needing to verbalize it.

Personality strength is also vital for effective communication, as it helps individuals adapt to different cultural contexts while maintaining their authenticity. As YN explains:

“I adjust to cultural differences and diverse learning situations.”

According to YN, her personality strength allows her to stay true to herself while adapting to the dynamic and varied environments she encounters. This flexibility enables her to adjust without losing her personal identity, demonstrating the value of personality strength in intercultural communication.

Communication Skills

Communication skills are crucial for students studying outside their home region, as they often encounter various challenges during their studies. The analysis reveals that students employ various strategies to overcome the challenges of intercultural communication while studying abroad. These strategies include:

“I cope by learning the characteristics of the regional language where I study. Sometimes, differences in accent and the habitual use of certain words or phrases can change the meaning of a word, so I always pay attention to these nuances.” (RM)

“I learn the local language here and make an effort to understand it.” (YN)

“When I face obstacles in the learning process, I ask the lecturer or a friend for help and try to understand the situation better.” (SM)

“The main challenge is being able to quickly adapt to the new environment.” (AW)

The findings demonstrate that the participants addressed intercultural communication challenges through various methods, including learning the local language, understanding regional accents, and becoming familiar with the cultural context. Some participants emphasized the importance of asking lecturers or peers for assistance to overcome

misunderstandings. Additionally, the participants noted the need for rapid adaptation to the new environment in order to effectively navigate cultural differences.

Psychological Adaptation

Psychological adaptation is essential for students to navigate the psychological challenges they face in a new environment. Students who study outside their home region often encounter psychological difficulties but also develop strategies to overcome these challenges. Examples of psychological challenges and coping mechanisms experienced by students include:

“I feel homesick, and to cope with it, I stay in touch with my family and friends back home, while also seeking support from new friends in my current location to help ease the homesickness.” (YN)

The analysis indicates that homesickness is one of the primary psychological challenges faced by students studying outside their home region. Students cope with this challenge in two main ways: maintaining communication with family and friends at home to stay connected to their roots, and seeking support from new friends in the host environment. The combination of these strategies helps alleviate homesickness and eases the process of adjusting to a new place.

In addition to homesickness, students also experience stress as they adapt to new environments with different cultures. The findings reveal various coping strategies for managing stress during this adaptation process, including:

“I build social relationships with classmates and people around me.” (YN)

“I cope by always trying to blend in with the local culture. I am the type of person who is brave enough to participate or engage directly, which makes it easier to integrate.” (RM)

The analysis shows that one effective way students cope with stress during their cultural adaptation is by building social relationships with people in their new environment and actively engaging with the local community.

Cultural Awareness

Studying outside their home region allows students to gain greater cultural awareness, as reported by several participants. These experiences help students recognize

the diversity of cultures, acknowledge differences in opinions, values, expectations, and lifestyles, and appreciate the cultural richness present in different regions of Indonesia:

“Studying abroad made me realize the diversity of cultures, especially the differences between my hometown and the place where I study. I had to adapt to these differences, from food to language and other aspects.” (RM)

“Facing intercultural challenges and conflicts opened my awareness to differing opinions, values, and expectations.” (YN)

“I came to understand that Indonesia’s vast landscape includes so many cultural differences, yet these differences do not prevent us from uniting as one nation, Indonesia.” (AW)

It is noteworthy that study abroad experiences help students appreciate the cultural diversity within Indonesia. This awareness plays a crucial role in fostering cross-cultural understanding and contributing to the cohesion of the nation. Therefore, studying abroad not only provides academic knowledge but also enhances cultural awareness, which is essential in a multicultural society like Indonesia.

For students studying abroad, adapting to and being sensitive to the local culture is essential for effective communication. Furthermore, students need strong personalities to navigate this adaptation process. The research findings indicate that students studying outside their region exhibit diverse personality strengths. One participant shared that the strength of their personality allows them to present their identity even in unfamiliar environments. This suggests that these students are able to interact with individuals from different cultures while maintaining their own cultural identity. Previous studies support this idea, emphasizing that communicative attitudes are reflected in self-concept, tolerance, and openness [33]. This aligns with the current findings, which demonstrate that students can engage in cross-cultural interactions without losing their cultural roots [34]. Moreover, research indicates that students do not have to relinquish their home culture to feel comfortable with a new one [35]. The results of this study further suggest that cultural intelligence positively influences intercultural communication competence, as well as the relationship between personality traits, cultural intelligence, and intercultural communication competence [36].

A person's personality, which encompasses values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, significantly influences how individuals communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds [32]. Effective communication across cultures also demands a comprehensive understanding of cultural differences and an awareness of varying communication norms. Research indicates that intercultural communication is a key element of an individual's personality [37]. Furthermore, intercultural competence is defined as a set of individual traits that facilitate adaptation to new environments, promote learning, and support behavioral adjustments in intercultural interactions [38].

Given the cultural differences encountered, students are required to develop strong communication skills to navigate the challenges of intercultural communication during their studies abroad. Participants in this study reported that overcoming these challenges involves learning about and understanding the local culture, as familiarity with it facilitates smoother communication. Engaging with the local language and traditions is essential to connect more effectively with the local community [39]. This finding aligns with previous research, which emphasizes that cultural knowledge is a critical factor in ensuring effective communication [40]. Additionally, studies suggest that students who study abroad can quickly adapt to the local culture by immersing themselves in their social environment, seeking new relationships, and participating in campus organizations or student activities [41].

Developing intercultural communication skills—such as understanding cultural concepts, recognizing differing values and norms, and acknowledging intercultural communication practices in various settings—is crucial for effective intercultural communication [42]. While specialized intercultural communication skills are vital, general communication skills also play a significant role in intercultural contexts [43].

In addition to communication skills, psychological adaptation is essential for students to overcome the psychological challenges they face in a new environment. Students studying abroad often encounter various psychological challenges, and many are aware of the strategies required to address them. One participant shared that homesickness was a significant psychological challenge encountered while studying outside their home region. To cope, they maintained regular communication with family and friends back home and sought support from peers in their new environment, which helped alleviate feelings of

homesickness. The findings of this study indicate that homesickness is common among students, as they often feel a deep longing for family and loved ones who are far from them [44]. Feelings of homesickness and loneliness are typical experiences when separated from one's country and family [22].

Another participant described how stress and psychological pressure during the adaptation process were managed by building social relationships with classmates and others around them. This aligns with previous research, which suggests that joining or forming study groups or learning communities can play a crucial role in easing the adjustment process in an academic environment [45]. Additionally, studies have shown that social support from peers significantly contributes to students' adaptability during their studies abroad [41].

Studying abroad helps students become more aware of the rich cultural diversity within Indonesia. The participants in this study reported that their experiences studying outside their home regions led them to recognize the cultural, linguistic, value-based, and culinary diversity across Indonesia. This finding aligns with prior research, which suggests that migrant students often face challenges related to differences in their new environment, such as variations in language, culture, norms, and social practices [46]. These findings are further supported by studies highlighting that exposure to diverse cultures broadens an individual's knowledge, particularly in terms of language use, behavior, and an understanding of cultures different from their own [47]. Despite Indonesia's vast cultural diversity, the nation continues to uphold tolerance and unity, reinforcing the national motto "Unity in Diversity" [48]. Research has demonstrated that studying abroad significantly enhances students' cultural awareness and sensitivity [49]. International learning experiences can foster the development of intercultural communication skills and global citizenship [50].

While this study provides valuable insights into the impact of studying abroad on intercultural communication skills, it does have some limitations. Firstly, the informants in this study were located across various cities in Indonesia, which made in-person meetings challenging. Consequently, interviews were conducted via WhatsApp, using voice notes and telephone calls. This limitation occasionally hindered the researchers' ability to fully

understand the information shared by the informants, as the absence of non-verbal cues (such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language) restricted the depth of communication. This also reduced opportunities for collecting additional data. Secondly, the informants' busy academic schedules made it difficult to coordinate suitable interview times, leading to delays and, in some cases, cancellations of interviews.

CONCLUSION

The experience of studying abroad has a profound impact on students' cultural awareness and intercultural communication skills. Students who study outside their home regions must undergo a process of adaptation and develop sensitivity to local cultures, which significantly facilitates communication with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. The psychological resilience exhibited by the informants in this study is one of the key resources that can be leveraged to enhance communication, both in their local and academic environments. In addition, communication skills play a critical role in overcoming the challenges of intercultural interactions that frequently arise due to cultural differences. Alongside communication skills, psychological adaptation is essential for students to cope with the emotional challenges they encounter while studying abroad. One common psychological challenge faced by students is homesickness, which can be mitigated through maintaining communication with family and fostering social connections in the new environment. Moreover, studying abroad increases students' awareness of the cultural diversity within Indonesia, broadening their understanding of cultural values, practices, and norms across the country.

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