Adjusting to Indonesia's Culture: The Case of Expatriates in the Education Industry

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Abstract

Globalization has resulted in an increased number of foreign workers in Indonesia. Nevertheless, not all foreign workers can easily adapt to the culture, business, and social situation of the host country. According to cross-cultural literature, the cultural adjustment has been considered as the prerequisite for the success of the expatriates overseas. This study aims to investigate factors that affect the success of the international assignment. Using a qualitative case study approach, this study interviewed five expatriates working in the education industry in Central Java based on the U-curve cultural adjustment theory. The result of this study demonstrates that the inability of an expatriate to adjust with the host country was due to the lack of preparation toward the culture of the host country, resistance with the new culture, conflict-avoiding behavior, and the lack of two-way communication between the expatriate and the local staffs.

Keywords: Cross-cultural adjustment, cross-cultural management, expatriate, international assignment, U-curve.

Introduction

For some people, an international assignment could be an exciting experience that encourages new worldviews, increases cultural curiosity, and supports the willingness

to explore a new culture. However, it might also invite a slight sense of anxiety caused by culture shock, causing an individual to spend more time to adjust to the new work and social culture (Oberg, 1960). According to Singh & Rani (2019), culture shock is a common phenomenon during the adjustment process of an international assignment. An individual who experiences culture shock would take months to adjust to the new environment and culture. Culture shock does not merely relate to different social norms or experiencing new foods since it tends to have an impact on immigrants even after they are getting used to and feels comfortable in the new cultures (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985).

There are many ways to deal with culture shock during the cultural adjustment process. Lysgaard (1955) states that an expatriate usually has to go through 4 levels of cultural adjustment: honeymoon period, cultural shock, gradual adjustment, and feeling at home. The honeymoon period occurs when an individual fascinated by the new culture of the new society. This fascination, however, would soon turn into anxiety as the individual realized that he/she has to deal with the new culture on a day-to-day basis – causing a cultural shock. After a certain period of time, the individual would gradually adjust to the new culture and learning how to behave appropriately. An individual would feel at home after they are effectively functioning in the new culture. These four levels can be described in the form of a U-curve, and be known as the "Lysgaard U-curve model" (Lysgaard, 1955).

Based on the review of previous research on cross-cultural adjustment topics, several gaps could be identified. Firstly, there is a lack of attention to the cultural adjustment process in the education sector despite the growing number of expatriates due to the rise of the global education export industry. The focus of cultural adjustment research in the last decade were on the trade and services sector, and was rarely conducted in non-Western context (e.g: Selmer, 2005; Sambasivan, Sadoughi, and Esmaeilzadeh, 2003; Okpara and Kabongo, 2011; Puck, Kittler and Wright, 2008; Shmueli Gabel, Dolan, and Luc Cerdin, 2005; Shay and Tracey, 2009; Halim, Bakar, and Mohamad, 2014; AlMazrouei and Pech, 2014; Singh and Singh, 2017; Vijayabanu, Therasa, Akshaysundaram, Mariabonaparte, and Saividhya, 2017; Huff, Song, and Gresch, 2014).

Therefore, the present study decided to investigate the cultural adjustment process in the education industry in Indonesia.

The second research gap, according to Müller-Bloch and Kranz (2015), could be considered as a methodological conflict gap. In the methodological conflict gap, a certain phenomenon was observed dominantly using a single methodology and avoiding the others. Thus, a variety of research methods is necessary to generate new insights or to avoid distorted findings. The topic of cross-cultural adjustment were dominantly observed by quantitative approaches (e.g.: Forman and Zachar, 2001; Selmer, 2005; Sambasivan et al, 2003; Okpara and Kabongo, 2011; Halim et al, 2014; AlMazrouei and J. Pech, 2014; Waxin, 2004; Van Vianen et al, 2004; Pooja and Cunningham, 2016; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Iqbal, 2017; Singh and Singh, 2017; Vijayabanu et al., 2017; Hou et al., 2018). There is a need to investigate the culture adjustment process using other approaches, such as qualitative approach (e.g., Shmueli Gabel, Dolan, & Luc Cerdin, 2005; Puck, Kittler, & Wright, 2008; Shay & Tracey, 2009; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015). The present study utilized a qualitative approach due to the consideration that the approach enables researchers to interact directly with the participants, observing their body language and the expression while answering the questions. Also, cultural adjustment is a process that can only be felt by the actor. The qualitative approach could provide a piece of in-depth and comprehensive information regarding the process, which could not be provided by the quantitative approach.

Based on the research gaps mentioned, this study aims to explore how the cultural adjustment process of expatriates working in the education industry based on the U-curve hypothesis. The case of cultural adjustment of an expatriate working in Indonesia could provide unique findings due to the fact that the cultural values of each country are different. The present study is expected to enrich the literature and contribute to the development of the cross-cultural adaptation study by presenting the case of an expatriate working in the education industry in Indonesia.

Method

Respondents

The participants are expatriates working in the education industry in Indonesia with the following criteria: have undergone international assignments for 12 months or more and have experienced the impact of cross-culture, aged between 30 and 50 years, and having citizenship backgrounds that do not belong to the Far Eastern category.

Purposive sampling was implemented, and this study managed to obtain five expatriates. The country of origin of the expatriates is: one person from Norway, one person from the Netherlands, two persons from England, and one person having French and Belgium (double) nationalities. All expatriates are working as teaching staff in language education institutes in Central Java.

Design

This study used a qualitative phenomenology approach. Four main questions from Liao (2010) were asked to each expatriate regarding their cultural adjustment process: (1) How did they decide to come to Indonesia?, (2) Their experiences dealing with culture shock since coming to Indonesia, (3) The time required for them to settle down or adapt to the Indonesian life and (4) Their acceptance to the Indonesian culture. During the interview process, which lasted for 40 to 60 minutes, the probing technique was utilized to obtain more comprehensive information from the participants.

Results

The Case of Phillippe Leandre

Philippe Leandre is 63 years old, born in Brussels, Belgium, and resided in France. Therefore, Philippe has two nationalities: Belgium and France. Philippe has worked in

Indonesia for nine years. He also admitted that he once stayed in Congo and South Africa with his parents. Also, he has ten years of working experience in the United States. During the interview, Philippe told the interviewers about places that he has visited in the past.

Before working in Semarang, Philippe worked in Sumatra and Sulawesi for a quite short time. Afterward, he resided between Solo and Semarang for the past eight years. Philippe is unmarried.

When he was asked to describe his experience coming to Indonesia, Philippe explained that he never viewed Indonesia as a third world country, which is poor and has high number of criminality. He also mentioned that the all information that he has obtained prior to his arrival to Indonesia never mention anything bad about the country. In fact, Philippe said that Indonesians were described as one of the friendliest societies in the world. This information helped Philippe to have a good impression when coming to Indonesia.

After arriving in Indonesia, Philippe stated that he considers all the information he obtained earlier is correct. However, he did state that life in Indonesia is completely different from life in Europe. Following is Philippe statement:

> "*When you were coming from Paris to Stuttgart or Berlin or London, everything pretty much same, but when you come to Indonesia, everything is different, I will make it simple, there is no more common (Indonesian) things with Europe. Everything is completely different. But when it's come to Indonesia. It's like imagine you're from Planet Venus, then move to Planet Jupiter.*"

Despite Philippe's completely different experience, he considers Indonesians as the friendliest people in the world. He recalls the stories from all the country he has been visited and said that he had not met any friendlier people rather than Indonesia. Following is Philippe impression about the Indonesian habit that he cherished most:

"Especially, when they didn't know you, the least they know you, friendlier they to you, they try to know about you, this is the opposite thing than Europe, In Europe if you don't speak English they didn't want to speak to you but here, everyone is not speaking English, but they try hard to be nice with you and to practice their English, actually I don't need to worry about language."

From the interview with Philippe, it can be concluded that he never experienced any cultural shock in Indonesia. In fact, Philippe stated his willingness to stay and reside in Indonesia. He believed that more than half of his adaptation process to the Indonesian culture was already taken care of, and in the future, he would like to familiarize himself with the technical aspect such as using a computer or program in Bahasa Indonesia, learning how to drive on the road.

The Case of William Carter

William was born 50 years ago in York, England. Before moving to Semarang, William resided in Kuala Lumpur for more than five years. Afterward, a year ago, he moved with his wife to work in an overseas education agency as a certified IELTS examiner and English teacher in Semarang.

William describes himself as a person with low expectation, especially when having to visit new places. According to him, Indonesia is not well known internationally. Nevertheless, he did not search for any information about Indonesia before his arrival. This was because of some bad experiences in the past. William has been to several countries, and at first, he did search about what kind of place the country is. When he arrived, however, the reality is different from what he has expected.

After his arrival in Indonesia, Williams seems to be able to manage with the local culture. He stated that he did not miss England, but also stated that he does not want

to reside in Indonesia for good either. Following is the statement from William regarding his decision to leave England:

> "*I don't miss my home country. But sometimes I call my family in England. I do. But moreover, I don't miss anything like food or the things I used to do in England. Because I want to leave. I mean if you really miss your country so why do you leave. I didn't leave because I need a job. Some people do that. I understand that. In my case, no, I leave my country because I want to. So I don't miss anything.*"

In adjusting to the culture of Indonesia, William stated that he was always eager to learn the local languages. For him, if someone decided to live in another country for more than a year, then the person should learn to speak as the local. During his stay in Semarang, William stated that many people that he met were unable to communicate in English. Despite this condition, he said that he feels proud when he could address local people using Bahasa Indonesia.

Regardless of his experience and eagerness to learn Indonesia culture, William stated that he never has any intention to reside in Semarang for more than two years. William stated as follows:

> "*I not sure about that, maybe because I am never done it; I do not think I completely settle down. I am not the kind of person to settle down in one place.so I'm not interested in one place for a long time; make a long commitment, so that's probably why.*"

The Case of Catherine Morison

Catherine, 55-year-old, has two kids. She is from Bedfordshire, a small district about one hour trip from London by car. In Semarang, Catherine is accompanying her

husband, who works in a manufacturing company. Since she would like to have more activities, Catherine decided to work at an English language institute.

Interestingly, Catherine told the interviewers that she was raised in Sumatra and completed her bachelor study in Singapore. According to her, adjusting to Indonesian culture is very hard. She stated as follows:

> "*I can probably say like this; I was in Indonesia at very young ages. When the first time I came to Indonesia, we were in Banjarmasin. It is challenging at the beginning. Moreover, it is a very different time in Indonesian history, so I can really say that I understand your culture and understand your history.*"

Despite the difficulties she has experienced, Catherine stated that she has been on the 'feeling at home' stage. Catherine continuously stated that she has live in Indonesia for a long period of time, which resulted in her ability to think 'out of the box.' Catherine said that nowadays, she would be shocked if she found out that she cannot relax with local people.

Catherine has a certain method to overcome cultural shock whenever she visited new places. She mentioned about the expatriate communities that she encountered online in every major city in Java Island. As a member of an expatriate community herself, following is Catherine's statement regarding how a community could help expatriates to adapt with new culture and environment:

> "*If typical expat like me are going to Semarang, they always looking for fellow expat in social media. In Semarang, they always are a Semarang Multinational Group on Facebook, and they usually meet for like once a week or once in two weeks. Also every month, they have a morning coffee to welcome new people. So there is some chance to meet new people*".

The ability to adapt to a new culture seems to make Catherine have a sense of 'feeling at home' while staying in Indonesia. However, Catherine said that she would never be able to reside in Indonesia. She stated her intention that once her children finished education in Singapore and her husband complete his assignment in Indonesia, she will return to England. For Catherine, Indonesia will never be the same with England, especially the food and the culture.

The Case of Michael van Linge

Michael is a Dutch national. He was born in Haarlem, a half an hour drive from Amsterdam. Four years ago, Michael established a private language course in East Semarang. The course's target market is students, university students, and the general public who are interested in studying English and Dutch. Until 2014, Michael acts as one of the tutors in the course. Michael has worked in a foreign institution in Jakarta since 2015, although he continuously visits Semarang to supervise the language course business that he has established.

Michael admits that before coming to Indonesia, he worked at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign affairs, which office located near the Indonesian Embassy in the Netherlands. He made acquaintances with people there, making him understand the protocols and information about various places in Indonesia. Additionally, Michael's education background is on psychology and management major. His final work while in the university was about the behavioral change in the organization and its relationship to culture. Thus, Michael considered himself as a competent individual in relation to the Indonesian culture. He stated that he is confident enough to visit and resided in new places with a different culture.

During his stay in Indonesia, there was much interaction between Michael and the local individuals. Michael told the interviewers about his Indonesian co-workers, who, according to him, were very involved, friendly, and proud. Nevertheless, Michael said that some Indonesian bad habits also exist; for example, they were never come on time, always said "*besok*" when asked to accomplish simple tasks. Michael did

impressed with the "always say yes" behavior of his co-workers and considered this as the most positive thing of the Indonesians.

Of all the experiences that he has experienced, Michael stated that he does not have any reason to stay in Indonesia. This was also due to his difficulties in understanding the Indonesians whose communication style tends to be high context. Following is the statement from Michael:

> "*I think Indonesian people is hard to express their feeling and what are they thinking. Also, peoples are rarely to discuss their problems. But as a people that I work with, I try to communicate with them. Everything's need times, right? But this also made me think that I have no reason to stay. The Netherlands is my country, soon as my work permit expires and there is no extension, I will go back to my home country. My place is not here. I only do this because my workplace puts me here."*

The Case of Erik Herlovsen

Erik is from Norway and told the interviewers that teaching is his second job. He is a programmer in a notable social media company in Singapore. His work does not require him to come to the office every day, although the company does give him a daily work target. Erik married a woman from Semarang, and for the past two years, he travels and stays in Semarang for two weeks in a month. In total, Erik stated that at least he had spent 16 months in Semarang. During his stay in Semarang, Erik teaches English. This job was from his wife's acquaintances, who need an English teacher to teach her children.

Erik recalled the pre-departure period before arriving in Indonesia. According to him, an individual has to prepare themselves with information and advice about life, the culture, and the local area situation before visiting a new place. Erik also said that an individual has to be realistic – to not have a high expectation – since the actual

condition may vary. Despite the preparation, the following is the statement from Erik regarding his cultural shock when arriving at Semarang:

> *"Shocking... The way of life, like people, is very conservative, no many bar or club, and always using your right hand. If you are using the left hand, it is an offense. Culturally unacceptable."*

Despite the cultural shock, Erik is gradually adjusting himself with the local culture. For example, Erik found out that catching on one's eyes is an important gesture during a conversation. Also, he learned to nod his head whenever he passed another individual. Simple words such as "*permisi Bu"* can also be used to get the interlocutor engaged and listening to what the speaker is going to say.

Erik stated that he experienced the 'feeling at home' feeling in Semarang. The city gave Erik a deep impression since he met his wife in Semarang. Erik stated that the decision to build a family in Semarang is the hardest decision he ever made. However, he further stated that the decision was taken with a full conscience, and he has considered all the good aspects and bad aspects of it.

Discussion

There were several kinds of cultural shock experienced by the participants. In most situations, they were stressed out due to their inability to communicate properly with the local communities, inability to adapt to the style and behavior of local people, climate, and food.

The first antecedents of cultural shock were due to the communication process between expatriates with their Indonesian co-workers and the local community. From the expatriates' point of view, Indonesians tend to be unfamiliar with English and rarely used it in day-to-day communication. Therefore, a good mastery of Bahasa Indonesia is considered absolute in the cultural adaptation process. In the education industry,

expatriates have to use Bahasa Indonesia to communicate with co-workers. Also, in most cases, the communication between the expatriates as a teacher and their Indonesian students were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia since the students cannot speak fluently in English. This finding closely parallels with studies on the adjustment process of international students (e.g., Wu, Garza & Guzman, 2015; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015) as well as asylum seekers (Slonim-Nevo & Regev, 2016) where language mastery plays vital role in minimizing the experience of cultural shock. Nevertheless, it must be underlined that in the case of Indonesia the mastery of the Bahasa Indonesia alone may not suffice as according to the Indonesian National Census (Statistics Indonesia, 2011), more than 75 per cent of the Indonesian population conducted their day-to-day communication using the local language of each Indonesian subcultures. Therefore, in the case of the country with high cultural variation such as Indonesia, understanding the Bahasa Indonesia and the local dialect might improve the expatriates' communication process.

The next precedent of culture shock is due to expatriates' inability to integrate with the Indonesian lifestyle. The Indonesians, especially Javanese, have a high level of collectivism compared to western countries (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Based on this difference, it can be said that the expatriate must adjust with the collectivist lifestyle: sharing their personal life with the community and colleagues. Some expatriates did not want to mingle with the surrounding community and tend to isolate themselves or preferring friendships with fellow expatriates. Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern (2015) study on Saudi women studying in the US has revealed that experiences of discrimination might cause someone to limit their interaction only with individuals from the same cultural background. Nevertheless, the decision taken by the participants of this study was made voluntarily, not based on the previous experiences of discrimination. This phenomenon could be explained by referring to the moderate score of Uncertainty Avoidance of Indonesia which promote the separation of the internal self from the external self (Hofstede et al., 2010). Whenever Indonesian are upset, it is habitual not to show their actual emotion explicitly. Thus, foreigners living in Indonesia would rarely face direct confrontation from the Indonesians; which foster

the independency of the expatriates working in Indonesia to limit their friendships only with fellow expatriates or to not to adapt with the local customs.

The climate in Indonesia is classified as a humid, wet, and hot compared to European countries which have four seasons. The expatriates were not used with such climate, and sometimes it stressed them out. Food is also a cause of culture shock, resulting in the avoidance of Indonesian food by the expatriates. According to Black (1988), the psychological comfort toward food and climate could affect the general adjustment of the expatriates toward their host country.

Despite barriers in adjusting with the Indonesian life, the family is one of the key motivations for expatriates to adapt. Many expatriates contact their families in their home countries. The family can also provide encouragement and suggestions for expatriates to always work well. This is in line with Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld (2005) research, where family support is found to be crucial in determining the academic success of the international students.

Based on the results of this study, steps are needed to increase the capabilities of an expatriate to carry out international assignments. Preventive actions are needed to avoid the undesirable things that might happen during the expatriation. For institutions and companies employing expatriates, an understanding of cross-cultural management concepts and practices is vital to assist the managers in creating an organizational climate that embrace workforce diversity. In this era of globalization, a more effective cross-cultural management practice could create a distinct characteristics that could help organization to prevail upon its competitor.

There is also a suggestion for local employees and communities, where the local employees should begin to accept all incoming foreign cultures. Multicultural communication and cultural differences tend to start a conflict. Thus, employees must be prepared to deal with such situations by improving skills in understanding other cultures. It is also necessary for local employees to be open and having cultural intelligence since it builds conflict management behaviors that are appropriate for each

situation. Training programs could also be arranged with the aim of reducing stress and improving relationships among co-workers.

Referring to the results obtained from this study, it concluded that the experience of the expatriates in the education industry is not compatible with the U-Curve hypothesis (Lysgaard, 1955). Not all expatriates experience the honeymoon period or the cultural shock, due to the other variables that are not included in this study.

Conclusion

Results from the present study have presented the cultural adjustment process experienced by expatriates working in the education industry in Central Java. It demonstrates that the barrier in the cultural adjustment process was due to the lack of study toward the culture of the host country, resistance with the new culture, conflict-avoiding behavior, and the lack of two-way communication between the expatriate and the local staffs. Furthermore, although the U-curve hypothesis proposed by Lysgaard (1955) is proven to help understand the adjustment process, it turned out that the real adjustment process does not always follow the U-curve hypothesis.

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