



A Phenomenological Exploration of Intercultural Communication Experiences among International Students in Indonesia Using Colaizzi's Method: Identity Negotiation and Nonverbal Challenges

Falimu

Universitas Muhammadiyah Luwuk, Indonesia

falimuimu77@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural communication has become a vital field of inquiry within communication studies, particularly in the context of increasing global student mobility. Despite growing interest, there remains a limited understanding of how international students subjectively experience and adapt to unfamiliar communication cultures in host countries like Indonesia. Existing studies tend to emphasize observable behaviors and adjustment stages, leaving the meaning-making process of cultural adaptation largely unexplored. This study adopts a descriptive phenomenological approach to examine how international students in Indonesia perceive and navigate intercultural communication. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nine international students from diverse cultural backgrounds, including Asia, Africa, and Europe, and were analyzed using Colaizzi's method. The findings reveal four essential themes: initial cultural dissonance, challenges in interpreting nonverbal cues, language as both a barrier and a bridge, and the gradual emergence of adaptation and belonging. These themes illustrate how students engage in continuous interpretation, emotional negotiation, and identity construction as they adapt to Indonesian communicative norms. The study offers new insights into the lived reality of intercultural adaptation, highlighting the subjective and dynamic nature of this experience. These findings contribute to a more humanistic understanding of intercultural communication and inform practical strategies for supporting international students in globalized educational settings.



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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, international student mobility has become a significant phenomenon, not only in the context of higher education but also in shaping intercultural interactions across societies. Universities in host countries like Indonesia now serve as spaces where individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds engage in meaningful communication, bringing distinct linguistic practices, values, and social norms into daily encounters. These cross-cultural exchanges offer unique opportunities for learning and adaptation but also present challenges that are deeply embedded in subjective experience.

Intercultural communication, as a field within communication studies, has extensively examined how individuals navigate differences in meaning, expectations, and behaviors across cultures. Nonetheless, prevailing research largely emphasizes theoretical models, cultural dimensions, and communication competence frameworks, with limited attention to the personal, lived realities of intercultural encounters. For international students living abroad, these experiences are not merely transactional but shape identity, belonging, and emotional well-being.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring the subjective experiences of international students in Indonesia as they negotiate intercultural communication challenges and adapt to new cultural environments. The central research questions guiding this inquiry are: (1) How do international students perceive and experience intercultural communication in Indonesia? (2) What

challenges do they face, particularly in relation to identity and nonverbal communication? (3) How do they navigate and adapt to these intercultural encounters?

The phenomenon of cultural adaptation—particularly in the early stages of immersion into a foreign communication environment—is rarely linear or uniform. It is characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and gradual meaning-making processes as individuals attempt to understand and participate in new social systems. These processes are often invisible in large-scale surveys or behavioral studies, but they are profoundly present in the lived experiences of those who must continuously interpret and respond to unfamiliar cultural cues.

Given these complexities, there is a compelling need to explore how international students subjectively make sense of their intercultural communication experiences within the Indonesian context. A phenomenological approach offers a pathway to uncover the essence of these experiences—how meaning is constructed through everyday encounters, how students interpret cultural symbols, and how they adjust to a new communicative reality. This study, therefore, seeks to deepen understanding of these phenomena by giving voice to the participants' experiences and capturing the nuanced, contextualized, and evolving nature of intercultural adaptation.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals undergoing intercultural adaptation has emerged as a critical area within communication studies, particularly in response to the growing complexities of globalization and transnational education. In the context of international students, numerous studies have addressed themes such as cultural shock, adaptation strategies, and identity negotiation. However, many of these investigations rely heavily on quantitative methodologies or structured frameworks that may fail to capture the depth and nuance of students' subjective realities.

Quantitative approaches, while valuable in identifying patterns and general trends, often lack the capacity to access the internal, emotional, and interpretive dimensions of human experience. Standardized surveys and predetermined response categories can restrict the voice of participants, reducing rich intercultural encounters to measurable variables. Even qualitative studies that adopt structured thematic coding or comparative case studies may overlook the existential aspects of meaning-making and the fluid, evolving nature of adaptation in daily life.

These methodological constraints have led to a partial understanding of how international students truly engage with, make sense of, and internalize their intercultural communication experiences. There remains a lack of detailed insight into how meaning is constructed moment-by-moment through interaction with local individuals, cultural norms, and language practices in the host environment. As a result, earlier research often misses the essence of the phenomenon as it is lived by the individuals experiencing it.

To address this limitation, phenomenology offers a powerful alternative. By prioritizing participants' perspectives and focusing on the description of lived experience, the phenomenological approach allows for a more holistic and authentic understanding of intercultural adaptation. This methodology is particularly relevant for exploring how international students in Indonesia navigate unfamiliar cultural codes, negotiate identity, and build communicative bridges in their everyday lives.

Existing research on intercultural communication among international students in host countries like Indonesia has largely relied on practical models of cultural adjustment, such as the U-Curve and W-Curve theories, as well as frameworks of intercultural competence and acculturation. While these approaches offer valuable insights into the stages of cultural adaptation and skills required for effective communication, they tend to treat adaptation as a linear, structured process. Such models often emphasize observable behaviors and outcomes, overlooking the internal and affective dimensions of students' lived experiences.

Moreover, conventional approaches—particularly those grounded in quantitative or prescriptive paradigms—are limited in their ability to capture the ambiguity, emotional nuance, and evolving meaning-making processes that characterize intercultural encounters. These methods typically fail to explore how students feel, interpret, and navigate unfamiliar communicative norms in specific cultural contexts. As a result, the depth of experience and the situated nature of meaning in intercultural communication remain underexplored.

To address this methodological and conceptual gap, a phenomenological approach is needed—one that privileges the subjective voice of the individual and seeks to understand how meaning emerges from lived experience. Unlike frameworks that categorize behavior into stages or competencies, phenomenology allows for a more holistic and nuanced exploration of how international students come to understand, negotiate, and embody intercultural communication in the Indonesian context. This study adopts such an approach to reveal the essential structure of their experiences, offering fresh insights into the human dimensions of cultural adaptation that are often overlooked in mainstream research.

Several previous studies have examined the experiences of international students in intercultural contexts. These include research on culture shock, identity negotiation, and communication adaptation using theoretical models such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions or Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory. While useful, such studies often lack depth in describing how students actually live through the process of adapting to unfamiliar communication environments. A few qualitative studies have attempted to fill this gap, but many still rely on thematic coding without grounding in phenomenological philosophy. As a result, the personal meaning and essence of intercultural experience remain underexplored.

This study adopts a descriptive phenomenological approach to understand how international students in Indonesia experience and make sense of communication across cultures. The method was chosen to uncover the essential structures of meaning from the participants' own perspectives. Unlike theoretical or behavioral models, this approach focuses on subjective lived experience and emphasizes openness to participants' voices. The phenomenological framework provides a lens to explore experiences without imposing external interpretations. This study addresses the gap by highlighting how meaning is constructed through real, everyday intercultural encounters.

The structure of this article is organized as follows. The introduction presents the background, research gap, and rationale for using phenomenology. The methodology section explains the research design, participant selection, and data collection process using in-depth interviews. The data analysis follows Colaizzi's method, enabling the extraction of essential themes from the transcribed narratives. The results section presents the main themes identified from participant experiences. Finally, the discussion interprets the findings in light of existing literature, followed by a conclusion outlining the study's implications and contributions.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of international students in adapting to the intercultural communication context in Indonesia. The phenomenological approach was selected due to its emphasis on capturing and interpreting the subjective meanings of human experience, particularly those related to cultural understanding and adaptation. Rooted in the philosophical tradition of Edmund Husserl, descriptive phenomenology focuses on uncovering the essence of phenomena as experienced by individuals, free from the influence of preconceptions or theoretical assumptions. This approach allowed for a rich, in-depth exploration of the meaning embedded in participants' intercultural communication encounters, aligning with the study's aim to understand how meaning is constructed within a new sociocultural environment.

The choice of Colaizzi's method specifically was guided by its structured, rigorous seven-step process that facilitates comprehensive extraction of significant statements and formulation of exhaustive descriptions, ensuring the validity and depth of the phenomenological analysis. Compared to other phenomenological approaches such as van Manen's more interpretive method or Giorgi's focus on psychological meaning, Colaizzi's method offers clear procedural guidance well-suited for empirical studies aiming to capture detailed experiential essences with confirmatory participant validation.

Participants

Participants in this study were international students currently enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs at universities in Indonesia. They were selected through purposive sampling

based on specific inclusion criteria: (1) non-Indonesian nationality, (2) a minimum of six months of residence in Indonesia, and (3) experience interacting regularly with local Indonesian students or communities. Exclusion criteria included limited Indonesian language proficiency that would hinder meaningful participation in interviews.

A total of nine participants were involved, consisting of five males and four females, aged between 20 and 29 years old, representing countries from Asia, Africa, and Europe. The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, whereby recruitment ceased once no new significant themes or insights emerged during the final interviews, ensuring sufficient depth and breadth to capture the phenomenon comprehensively. This demographic diversity enriched the data by encompassing a range of cultural perspectives and adaptation experiences.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews designed to elicit rich descriptions of the participants' communication experiences. A flexible interview guide was used to ensure consistency while allowing participants to freely express their thoughts and reflections. The interviews were conducted in English and Bahasa Indonesia, depending on the participant's language preference, and took place in quiet and private settings such as university consultation rooms or online platforms (Zoom or Google Meet) to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were also taken to capture nonverbal cues and contextual details relevant to the participants' narratives.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's method of descriptive phenomenological analysis, which involved a systematic process of extracting and organizing meaningful themes. Transcripts were read multiple times to gain familiarity with the content. Significant statements were then identified and coded into meaning units. These units were clustered into themes that reflected the core aspects of the participants' experiences. Themes were reviewed and synthesized to formulate exhaustive descriptions of the phenomenon, followed by the extraction of the essential structure of the intercultural communication experience. Qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) was used to assist in managing, organizing, and retrieving data throughout the analytical process. Validation of findings was conducted through member checking, allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the interpretations drawn from their narratives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics review board. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by assigning pseudonyms and securely storing data. This study adhered to international ethical standards for research involving human subjects, including those outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

RESULTS

The findings of this study are presented in the form of thematic narratives that reflect the lived experiences of international students navigating intercultural communication in Indonesia. Through an in-depth phenomenological analysis of interview data, four central themes emerged: (1) Cultural Dissonance and First Encounters, (2) Navigating Nonverbal Nuances, (3) Language as a Bridge and Barrier, and (4) Emerging Adaptation and Belonging.

Cultural Dissonance and First Encounters

Participants consistently reported experiencing a sense of cultural dissonance during their initial interactions with Indonesians. This dissonance stemmed from unfamiliar communication styles, different cultural expectations, and perceived social distance. Most participants described the early

phase of their stay as marked by confusion and uncertainty in understanding local norms of politeness and hierarchy.

“I remember in the first weeks, people would smile and nod, but I was unsure if that meant agreement or just being polite. I was afraid to say something wrong because I didn’t understand the unspoken rules,” (Participant 3, Female, Germany).

“In my country, we are very direct. But here, people avoid saying ‘no’ directly, and that was confusing. I didn’t know if they really agreed or just wanted to be nice,” (Participant 7, Male, Nigeria).

This phase of cultural dissonance often left participants feeling isolated or hesitant to initiate conversations, especially in formal or academic contexts.

Navigating Nonverbal Nuances

Many participants expressed that nonverbal communication was as challenging, if not more so, than verbal communication. Gestures, eye contact, silence, and physical proximity were interpreted differently than in their home cultures. Participants shared stories of misinterpretation and moments of awkwardness resulting from unfamiliar nonverbal cues.

“In Indonesia, people smile a lot—even when they are nervous or uncomfortable. At first, I thought they were always happy or agreeing with me, but later I realized the smile can mean many things,” (Participant 1, Female, Japan).

“Back home, eye contact is a sign of respect. Here, I noticed some people avoid eye contact, and I wondered if they were angry or shy,” (Participant 6, Male, Sudan).

These experiences highlight the deeply contextual nature of nonverbal communication, which required participants to engage in a continuous learning process through observation and trial-and-error.

Language as a Bridge and Barrier

Bahasa Indonesia played a dual role in the communication experience of international students. While learning the local language enabled greater social integration and comfort, the initial language barrier often created feelings of exclusion and frustration.

“At the beginning, I could only say ‘terima kasih’ and ‘selamat pagi.’ I couldn’t join conversations at lunch because they spoke fast, and I felt invisible,” (Participant 4, Female, France).

“I started picking up words from my Indonesian friends. When I tried speaking, they laughed—not to mock me—but to encourage me. That made me want to learn more,” (Participant 9, Male, Thailand).

Participants gradually perceived language learning not only as a necessity for daily communication but also as a meaningful act of cultural engagement and respect.

Emerging Adaptation and Belonging

Over time, most participants reported a growing sense of adaptation and intercultural competence. This adaptation was marked by their ability to navigate social situations with greater ease, appreciate Indonesian communication subtleties, and develop meaningful relationships with local peers.

“I’ve learned when to speak, when to pause, and how to read people’s expressions. I feel more comfortable now, and my Indonesian friends say I act like one of them,” (Participant 5, Male, South Korea).

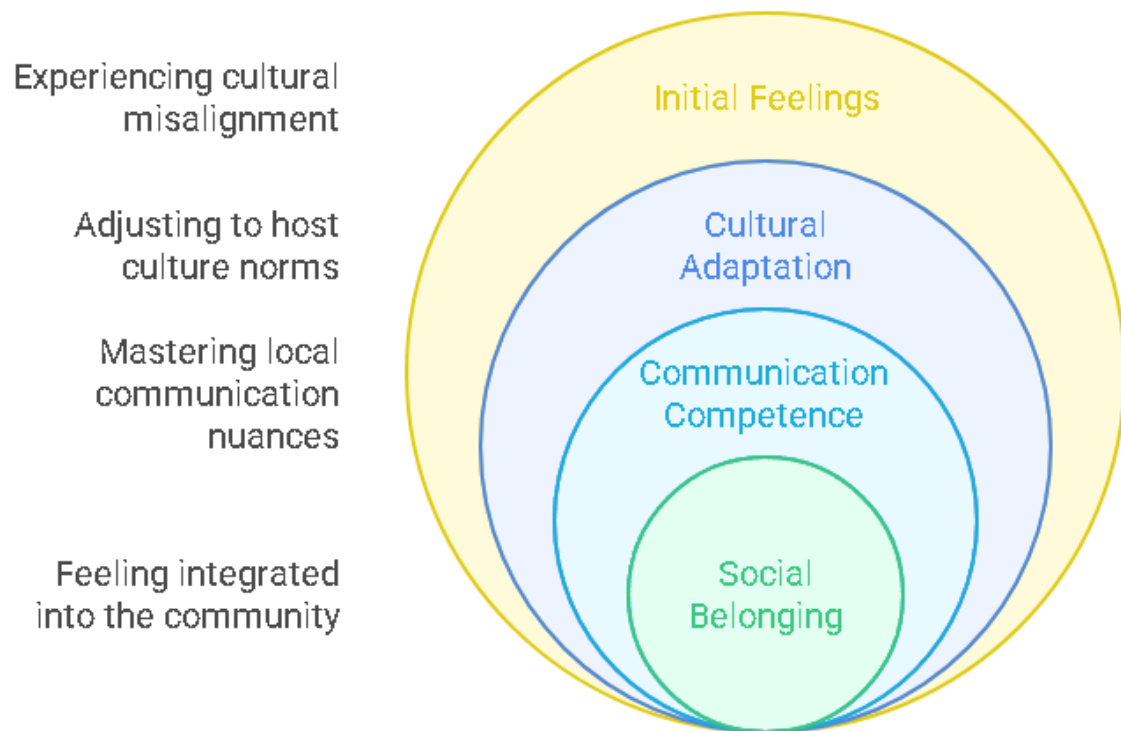
“There’s still a lot I don’t understand, but I feel part of the community now. I know how to say sorry in the right way, how to joke, and how to be respectful,” (Participant 2, Female, Netherlands).

Adaptation was often described not as a complete assimilation but as a hybrid identity that incorporated elements of both home and host cultures.

The lived experiences of international students in Indonesia reveal a transformative journey of intercultural understanding and adaptation. From initial feelings of cultural misalignment to eventual growth in communication competence and social belonging, these narratives reflect a nuanced and

dynamic process. The findings underscore the importance of contextual sensitivity, mutual respect, and emotional resilience in intercultural communication within the Indonesian sociocultural environment.

Intercultural Adaptation Journey



DISCUSSION

This study reveals that international students in Indonesia undergo a dynamic and transformative process of intercultural adaptation, marked by initial cultural dissonance, challenges in interpreting nonverbal cues, negotiation of language barriers, and gradual development of communicative competence and social belonging. These lived experiences provide nuanced insights into how individuals construct meaning in unfamiliar cultural environments, directly addressing the central research question on how international students understand and adapt to Indonesian communication culture.

The findings of this study offer a deeper understanding of how international students make sense of their intercultural experiences in Indonesia—not as passive recipients of cultural norms, but as active agents engaged in meaning-making through trial, reflection, and adaptation. The emergent themes demonstrate that adaptation is not solely a behavioral shift but a process of internal negotiation with local values, communication styles, and identity. The essence of their experiences lies in the participants’ ability to navigate ambiguity, interpret cultural signals, and reconfigure their communicative practices, which answers the research question by uncovering how students experience and internalize intercultural adaptation beyond surface-level interactions.

The findings both support and extend previous literature in intercultural communication. For instance, the theme of initial cultural dissonance aligns with Kim’s (2001) cross-cultural adaptation theory, which suggests that disorientation is a common starting point for adaptation. However, this study extends Kim’s model by illustrating how such disorientation is not just psychological but deeply communicative and socially situated. The struggle to interpret smiles, eye contact, and indirectness echoes findings by Gudykunst (2003) on high-context communication, particularly in Asian societies, but this study uniquely shows how these cues are experienced and reinterpreted at the personal level by newcomers.

Furthermore, the role of language as both bridge and barrier resonates with earlier works on language and identity (e.g., Norton, 2013), yet the participants' accounts provide richer texture by showing how humor, encouragement, and error become part of the adaptation process. Unlike survey-based studies that measure adaptation through satisfaction scores or communication frequency, this research highlights the emotional labor and interpretive effort required to engage across cultures.

These findings also respond to critiques in intercultural communication research that call for more attention to lived, contextualized narratives (Jackson, 2012). By using a phenomenological lens, this study contributes to a growing body of literature that emphasizes the need to prioritize human experience and meaning construction over rigid theoretical categorization.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both academic and practical domains. At a sociocultural level, the results underscore the importance of recognizing the emotional and interpretive labor involved in intercultural adaptation, suggesting that host institutions and educators should design support programs that go beyond language training and orientation sessions. The nuanced understanding of nonverbal cues, indirect communication styles, and cultural ambiguity revealed in this study calls for more culturally sensitive approaches to mentorship and peer engagement. From a communication theory perspective, the study emphasizes that intercultural adaptation is not merely about achieving competence but about co-constructing meaning through interaction. The narratives of international students reveal an ongoing process of negotiating identity, belonging, and understanding within a new cultural environment—an insight that may inform intercultural pedagogy, counseling, and internationalization policy in higher education.

Limitations of the Study

While the phenomenological approach enabled a rich exploration of participants' experiences, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The study's focus on a small group of international students limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Furthermore, the participants were primarily from academic institutions in urban Indonesia, which may not reflect the experiences of students in rural or less globalized regions. Language choices in the interviews—conducted in English or Bahasa Indonesia—may have influenced the depth of expression for some participants. Lastly, the analysis is grounded in a specific cultural and temporal context, which may shift as intercultural dynamics evolve over time. These limitations do not undermine the study's contributions but instead highlight areas where further inquiry is needed.

Future Research Directions

Building upon the insights of this study, future research may benefit from expanding the participant base to include students from a wider range of disciplines, nationalities, and institutional types. Longitudinal studies could also explore how intercultural communication experiences transform over the duration of a student's stay, capturing shifts in identity and adaptation strategies. Additionally, comparative phenomenological studies involving both international and local students may reveal how mutual perceptions shape intercultural meaning-making. Investigating how digital communication platforms mediate adaptation processes could also offer valuable perspectives, particularly in post-pandemic educational contexts. These avenues of inquiry can contribute to a more holistic and dynamic understanding of intercultural communication in higher education and beyond.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how international students in Indonesia experience and adapt to intercultural communication within a new sociocultural environment. Using a descriptive phenomenological approach, the research uncovered four key themes: initial cultural dissonance, challenges in interpreting nonverbal cues, the dual role of language, and the process of developing a sense of belonging. These findings reveal that intercultural adaptation is not merely behavioral but involves deep meaning-making and identity negotiation.

Uniquely, this study advances intercultural communication theory by highlighting the dynamic, affective processes underpinning identity construction in cross-cultural contexts, an area often underexplored in existing literature. Practically, the insights offer evidence-based guidance for educational institutions to design targeted support programs that address not only language and behavioral adjustment but also emotional and identity-related challenges faced by international students. From a policy perspective, the findings advocate for inclusive policies that recognize and accommodate the complex, lived realities of culturally diverse student populations, promoting more effective intercultural integration within host universities. By prioritizing lived experience, the study offers valuable insights for educators, institutions, and communication scholars seeking to support culturally diverse student populations. Future research may expand on these insights by including broader populations or exploring how digital and hybrid environments influence intercultural understanding.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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