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Intercultural communication barriers in South Korea: the case of Indonesian international students

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify the barriers to intercultural communication that Indonesian international students encounter in South Korea and to propose a solution. A qualitative descriptive methodology, utilizing in-depth interviews for data gathering, was employed. The study involved interviews with 27 IISMA recipients to gain insights into their experiences with intercultural communication. The results showed that participants struggled to communicate effectively with people from other cultures while studying in South Korea. These problems included anxiety, the assumption that people were more alike than different, ethnocentrism, assumptions, biases, language difficulties, and difficulties with nonverbal communication. This study identified methods to overcome intercultural communication obstacles, enabling international students to develop self-awareness and deepen their cultural understanding, thereby fostering positive relationships with peers, learning the Korean language, utilizing translation applications, being kind and leaving a positive impression on the South Korean local community.



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1. Introduction

Since education equips people with the skills and knowledge necessary to operate efficiently and generate innovative ideas, it is essential for promoting economic growth. Most people concur that studying overseas is an accomplishment that goes beyond ordinary coursework. Additionally, Indonesian students are increasingly participating in study abroad programs. These classes offer students outstanding opportunities to enhance their command of the English language and gain a deeper understanding of the target culture and languages. It makes it easier for them to grasp certain situations and talk to people from different countries. The Indonesia International Student Mobility Award

(IISMA) currently offers Indonesian students a novel option to study abroad, aimed at improving their intercultural communication through program activities.

This program enables students to study abroad, acquire new knowledge, and experience a different culture. Awardees are exposed to a variety of cultural views, attitudes, and traditions, which can help them see things in a new light and challenge their existing ideas. The expertise offered by IISMA may help beneficiaries develop intercultural communication skills, enhance awareness of diverse perspectives, and foster empathy and respect for various cultures within the current framework of globalization and internationalization. The study found that, in Indonesia, the majority of employable skills that employers need are obtained during the IISMA program rather than an undergraduate degree. These attributes include problem-solving, emotional intelligence, communication, active listening, teamwork, dependability, a growth mindset, inclusivity, flexibility, responsibility, and a dedication to lifelong learning (Dewanto & Pritasari, 2023). By examining how well participants integrate with different cultures, their attitudes toward others, their behavior, academic engagement, and empathy, the IISMA 2022 program demonstrates that it has a significant impact on their capacity for cultural activities. The program's structure provides them with the opportunity to engage with the local population and gain knowledge of diverse cultures. The recipients demonstrate significant advancement in five metrics of cross-cultural sensitivity (Aziez et al., 2024). Numerous hurdles emerged for the IISMA recipients in their participation in the student exchange program. It encompasses issues related to the academic system, interactions with instructors and peers, cultural and social influences from the local community, availability of Asian halal food, proficiency in foreign languages, culture shock, and the stigma faced by international students in host countries (Prasetyaningrum et al., 2023).

Culture is increasingly international, and this trend is accelerating rapidly due to the rapid growth of digital technology, the extensive exchange of cultural influences, and the growing movement of worldwide migration (Szulc, 2023). Over time, culture can shift, particularly when individuals or groups relocate to an area with distinct cultural norms and values. Their culture's beliefs and values shape each person's aspirations in life. People from various cultures engage directly through the process of intercultural communication, which can result in cultural misunderstandings. It can make communication between local communities and expatriates more difficult, which could impede their capacity to share their cultures and result in miscommunications and disputes. The difficulties that arise when individuals from different nations and cultures interact with one another are referred to as intercultural communication. Cultural variation leads to inevitable misconceptions and obstacles that cannot be avoided. Individuals from diverse cultures frequently exhibit reluctance to engage in communication. Instead, they exhibit reluctance, resulting in substantial communication gaps between them. The talent of intercultural communication plays a crucial part in the cultural transformation of learners (Mavianti et al., 2020). Students appreciate engaging with peers from diverse cultures due to several factors: 1) they find it effortless to communicate with culturally diverse students, 2) they enjoy the company of individuals from various backgrounds, 3) they exhibit open-mindedness towards different cultural perspectives, 4) they hold respect for the behaviors of students from other cultures, 5) they seek to acquire extensive knowledge during interactions with culturally diverse peers, 6) they do not perceive their own culture as superior, 7) they frequently provide affirmative feedback to students from different cultures during exchanges, and 8) they derive pleasure from the diversity present in their classroom interactions (Weda et al., 2022).

In South Korea, language is a significant issue because the vocabulary is vast, making it challenging to understand, and there are limited opportunities to interact with locals. Additionally, different cultural backgrounds can both facilitate and hinder cross-cultural engagement. Differences in cultural backgrounds can make it hard to interact and communicate, which can lead to anxiety and doubt, making partnerships harder. Students often show little interest in interacting with international students because they struggle to speak, and international students tend to be less active in class. Moreover, a quantitative study reveals a lack of interest in interacting with international students (Lee & Bailey, 2020). A feedback loop is created by students' experiences and perceptions of Korea: positive adaptation brought about by a strong interest in the host country, which increases sentiments of satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Jung, 2023).

Previous studies have investigated intercultural communication barriers in various contexts. However, there is no study focusing on the IISMA awardees in South Korea. At a global scale, these intercultural communication barriers have been explored with diverse participants like international students, foreign managers, and staff in Malaysia (Arifin & Abuisaac, 2018; Mardhiyyah et al., 2022), university and international students in India (Ennin & Manariyo, 2023; Ghani & Rehman, 2024), international students in USA (Halpern et al., 2022), university students in China (Zhang & Zhou, 2021), international students in Philippines (Roxas & Vargas, 2021), and international students in Hungary (Tayeh, 2020). In South Korea, this topic has been explored for Indonesian migrant workers (Fahzaria et al., 2024). Meanwhile, in Indonesia, related studies on intercultural communication barriers have been conducted among international students from various countries (Safi et al., 2022; Pinariya & Sutjipto, 2021; Siregar & Hasibuan, 2020). Regarding IISMA awardees, the focus of intercultural communication was on competence, rather than barriers (Budiarti et al., 2022). In short, the research problems are formulated in the following questions:

1. What are the intercultural communication barriers faced by the IISMA awardees in South Korea?
2. What are the intercultural strategies, in general, used by the IISMA awardees in South Korea?

2. Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the intercultural communication difficulties that Indonesian international students encountered as well as the methods they used to get past these barriers. The 2022 Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) recipients in South Korea from different Indonesian polytechnics were the subject of this study. The study involved 27 grantees from four host institutions: Woosong University, Daegu Catholic University, Ulsan College, and Kangwon National University. This research included in-depth interviews with pertinent individuals for data collection. The comprehensive interview was executed via online meetings on Zoom or Google Meet, utilizing pre-formulated questions to elicit participants' perspectives and personal experiences in South Korea. Additionally, the primary data were collected through observations of the surroundings and the cultural interactions between Korean individuals and citizens from diverse cultural backgrounds. This research adhered to the data analysis methodology outlined by Mashuri et al. (2022), encompassing data preparation, categorization, reorganization, and result summarization. The initial data were obtained from the participants' answers through the

questionnaire’s items. The answers were categorized based on each aspect of intercultural communication barriers. Then the data were organized according to the details of each aspect to see the barriers. At last, the percentage was presented as the result summarization.

3. Result and discussion

Anxiety, the propensity to see people from various cultures as similar rather than different, ethnocentrism, preconceptions, bias, language problems, and issues with nonverbal communication are the seven categories of intercultural hurdles that IISMA recipients faced, according to the data analysis. The following table displays these obstacles.

Table 1 – Intercultural Communication Barriers

No.	Intercultural communication barriers indicators	Response		Details
		Yes	No	
1	Anxiety	23	4	Worried about being discriminated against, appearance, food issues, worship/praying, learning style, communication in different languages, and anxiety about the distinct culture and environment.
2	Assuming similarity instead of differences	6	21	Some of the participants thought that there are some similarities between Korea and Indonesia, such as manner, social activity, and character. They found that most Korean people were individualistic and complex to approach. In addition, 21 participants assumed that Korean people and culture would be distinct from Indonesian culture, including their social activity, fashion, language, and environment.
3	Ethnocentrism	24	3	The majority of participants were aware of the assertion that Koreans regarded themselves as superior to Indonesians on social media. Their advanced technology, financial resources, personnel, fashion, and education are evident. Nevertheless, they did not receive this information immediately while in South Korea.
4	Stereotypes	11	16	Eleven participants reported awareness of erroneous preconceptions held by Koreans against Indonesians, particularly concerning Muslim girls who wear headscarves and are perceived as lacking punctuality.
5	Prejudice	10	17	In this barrier, some participants reported feeling dislike or prejudice from residents due to cultural and appearance differences.
6	Language	27	0	All interviewees concurred that language constituted their primary difficulty, attributed to variations in language, accent, pronunciation, and specific ambiguous sentences, which impeded comprehension.
7	Non-verbal communication	19	8	Nineteen participants reported frequently encountering challenges in comprehending and adjusting to the nonverbal communication norms of Korean culture, which encompass body language, bowing, and meeting etiquette.

The participants experienced anxiousness before they departed from Korea. Of the 27 participants, 23 reported having experienced anxiety or apprehension before they departed from Korea. Ayu et al. (2021) assert that Indonesian students face anxiety while dealing with international students and residents, stemming from apprehensions regarding cultural differences and tensions arising from their lack of understanding of the host nation's customs and beliefs. The participants' anxiety prior to departure stemmed from the numerous disparities between Korea and Indonesia, encompassing culture, educational settings, cuisine, language, ethnic diversity, and the more individualistic nature of the populace compared to Indonesia.

Second, six of the people thought that the civilizations of Indonesia and Korea were the same because they perceived them as similar rather than different. A sense of familiarity may cause some newcomers to act in ways that are appropriate in their own culture but may be viewed as inappropriate in other social settings. Two participants experienced cultural shock due to the disparity between their expectations and the actual circumstances they faced. Subsequently, regarding inquiries about ethnocentrism, 24 participants reported that they frequently encountered assertions on social media claiming that Korea has greater authority than Indonesia. It fosters an unfavorable view of the metaverse civilization and may lead to a general intolerance of foreign norms and customs. Nevertheless, the 24 participants reported that they primarily encountered the message via social media. They were never told this directly while they were in Korea.

Furthermore, only 11 participants reported being aware of the stereotypes Koreans held about Indonesia in response to the fourth question about stereotypes. A stereotype is a predetermined collection of beliefs about a specific group, encompassing both favorable and unfavorable perceptions, that are typically derived from the behavior of members of that group. According to one individual, they have heard Koreans claim that headscarves prevent people from achieving their objectives, which is comparable to what Iranians believe. Some people think that Indonesia is a developing nation, that all Indonesians are Muslims, and that they are constantly late for everything. Negative preconceptions can have a significant impact on communication between countries, leading to misunderstandings, biases, and a reluctance to engage with people from other cultures (Kriti, 2022). Despite this, they often encountered positive clichés about Koreans, such as the notion that all Korean students are very creative and hardworking. It may have made the participants feel more confident.

In response to inquiries about bias, 10 students reported experiencing feelings of being hated or discriminated against by neighbors due to stereotypes associated with Indonesians who wear headscarves and are perceived as tardy. It aligns with Ren's (2023) assertion that prejudice arises when negative preconceptions are persistently maintained, resulting in erroneous assessments of other cultures. Participants' responses indicated that they were subjected to cynical and peculiar stares from residents due to their distinct appearance. One participant perceived that the bus driver exhibited gestures of disdain and contempt towards her and her friends upon their late arrival on the bus. Moreover, there exists a societal bias against individuals of diverse faiths, particularly manifesting in the treatment of women, so illustrating intolerance. People received looks of disgust in stores, sewing shops, on airlines, and even at ski resorts.

According to every interviewee, the most significant issue they had when speaking with Koreans was language. Linguistic disparities are a substantial barrier to cross-cultural communication

(Romadhona & Kusuma, 2022). It might also result from Koreans' disparate accents, pronunciations, and ambiguous statements. They claimed that because many Korean terms have similar sounds, it can be challenging for them to distinguish between them. They pointed out that because many Koreans talk too rapidly and ambiguously, pronouncing articulation can be complex. Nonverbal communication comes last. Nineteen respondents reported frequently struggling to comprehend and adjust to the nonverbal communication norms of Korean culture. The idea that all human social systems share a standard set of nonverbal expressions with widely accepted meanings worldwide is the source of the barrier to nonverbal misinterpretation. The experiences of the two participants demonstrated how they adapted to the nonverbal culture prevalent at the time, which included receiving a drink from an elder and bowing when greeting someone.

To surmount international communication hurdles, the majority of participants endeavored to enhance their patience and self-awareness. Furthermore, they employed diverse strategies, including researching to acquire cultural knowledge, fostering positive relationships with other participants, creating a favorable impression on the local populace, endeavoring to comprehend and learn the Korean language, and utilizing a translation application to facilitate the surmounting of these obstacles. Murtiningsih (2016) posits that Self-awareness, profound cultural understanding, cultural sensitivity, and the capacity to discern subtle differences, including communication styles, contextual pitch and intonation comprehension, and the appropriate use of communicative touch, are among the knowledge and comprehension skills that Indonesian students studying in South Korea must acquire. These techniques can help Indonesian students overcome the challenges of intercultural communication in South Korea. Obstacles have resulted in numerous issues that impede the efficacy of Intercultural Communication. Various strategies have been identified to augment the efficacy of intercultural communication, including enhancing cultural awareness, promoting constructive communication through actions, and refining cross-cultural and affirmative communication skills (Thuy, 2024).

4. Conclusion

The results show that the IISMA winners in South Korea had seven problems with intercultural communication: anxiety, thinking that people are more alike than different, ethnocentrism, preconceptions, bias, language difficulties, and issues with non-verbal communication. After looking at the answers from 27 people, it was found that 23 of them felt anxious, 6 thought that the cultures of Korea and Indonesia were similar; twenty-four individuals encountered remarks regarding ethnocentrism; eleven experienced stereotypes; ten encountered obstacles to bias; all twenty-seven had language difficulties; and nineteen struggled with nonverbal communication. The results showed that the main obstacle the IISMA beneficiaries encountered while in South Korea was linguistic problems. The participants also employed a range of techniques to overcome these obstacles, including studying South Korean culture to better comprehend cultural differences and to foster greater self-awareness. They then attempted to learn and comprehend Korean, worked on fostering positive relationships with other participants, or used a translation tool to help them overcome these issues. Ultimately, they maintained their greatness by acting with courtesy and having a profoundly positive influence on the local population in South Korea. It facilitated the promotion of Indonesian culture and

demonstrated to others that the Indonesian populace was not as unfavorable as perceived. The study's results will provide administrators, professors, and policymakers with insights into diversity, globalization, and inclusion practices within higher education curricula, explaining the elements that support or hinder the integration and academic achievement of international students. The outcomes from this study will bring fresh data to the field of foreign student research and the interplay between their experiences and intercultural communication. Administrators and faculty members may gain valuable insights from this study to better understand and address the curriculum experiences, challenges, and obstacles faced by international students in higher education, thereby fostering greater intercultural competence in their activities.

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