OVERCOMING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES: A STUDY OF MALAYSIAN AND INDONESIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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Abstract

This research aims to identify cultural challenges faced by Malaysian and Indonesian international students during their studies abroad and the strategies they employed to overcome such challenges. The respondents of this qualitative research consisted of two groups; eight Indonesian students from Universitas Airlangga Surabaya who participated in a mobility program at Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan, Malaysia and seven Malaysian students studying at Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia. The oral data were collected through semi-structured interviews before they were analysed by categorizing the types of challenges faced by the respondents and the strategies employed to overcome such challenges according to specific themes. The findings revealed that both groups of students faced challenges related to language use, food, and academic life, time management and a few other cultural aspects. Something uniquely experienced by Malaysian students in Indonesia was that, unlike the situation in Malaysia, their instructors displayed impersonalized relationship with others including their students and colleagues of different position grades. On strategies to overcome cultural challenges, students in both groups tried to learn and blend with the culture of their hosting countries. This was done by asking for information and learning from the host internationals as well as building relationships with them. Malaysian students particularly reported that they learned to speak Indonesian language for group-acceptance while Indonesian students reported that despite speaking their local language, their Malaysian counterparts showed high level of acceptance that made them comfortable amongst their group members.

Keywords: cultural adjustments strategies, cultural challenges, cultural values, international students, mobility programme.

INTRODUCTION

Studying overseas can be challenging to many students as they are often put in many precarious situations (Sherry et al., 2010). Yet, this provides them with a few exciting advantages (Sisavath, 2021). When they relocate, international students must acclimate to new surroundings, much like other sojourners. As they navigate the various obstacles, they would make unique adjustments. This is something expected because they come from different cultural background. Relocating to a new nation or community would require international students to go through at the very least, three phases of transitions: a fresh environment, a new educational system and a new academic level (Jindal-snape & Ingram, 2013; Sarmiento et al., 2019). Additionally, staying in a host country and university, international students have specific needs aside from experiencing disruption, substance abuse, and identity crisis (Lau et al, 2019; Rivas et al, 2019). They may feel unfulfilled and even display signs of acculturative stress, such as depression and anxiety as well as changes in appetite, gastrointestinal symptoms, or sleep issues. To avoid these negative consequences, personnel at the host universities must promote structures and tactics that will assist international students socially, economically, academically, and psychologically (Arthur, 2017).

The cultural challenge among international students has attracted much research. Lin (2006) for instance, examined signs of culture shock and availability of social support in an investigation of a Chinese students on a US campus. From the research, it was found that most Chinese students had a feeling of excitement towards the move to the host university. Most of them were excited about coming to study in Midwest. However, at times, uncertainty, anxiety, and stress haunted their excitement. More recent study by Alasmari (2023) revealed that international students at Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU), Saudi Arabia, demonstrated strong psychological well-being, cultural integration, and academic achievement while facing language obstacles, psychological effects, and occasionally severe culture shock. While studying in foreign countries can be a transformative experience, it also presents numerous cultural hurdles that may affect the academic, social, and emotional well-being of these students. Acknowledging this, there is a pressing need to explore the strategies international students employ to navigate and overcome these challenges effectively. Addressing these issues is crucial for enhancing the overall experience and success of international students and promoting cross-cultural exchange and understanding in the global academic

community. The growing trend of Malaysian and Indonesian students pursuing international education opportunities has led to an increased need to understand the unique cultural challenges they encounter during their studies abroad Malaysia and Indonesia are two countries in Southeast Asia recognized for their unique traits and appealing cultures (Kamal and Ayuningtyas, 2024). As reported by the current CEO of Education Malaysia Global Service (EMGS), Novie Tajuddin who held the position in April 2023, the number of Indonesian students in Malaysia is ranked second with 11,000 people based on data released in 2022. In Indonesia, as for the 2022/2023 academic year, it was about 315 international students including Malaysian students were accepted to study at Universiti Sumatera Utara alone in the Faculties of Medicine, Science, Dentistry, Pharmacy, Agriculture, Engineering Science and Social and Political Sciences (Annual Report of USU, 2023).

The significant number of Indonesian students in Malaysia and Malaysian students in Indonesia has motivated research to be conducted on cultural challenges and adjustment strategies employed by these students during their stay at the host countries. Kamal and Ayuningtyas (2024) for instance, reported that Indonesian students at Universiti Sains Malaysia had to navigate differences in academic disciplines, overcome language barriers, and adjust to the local cuisine. The informants claimed that the students followed academic disciplines well. They were also able to adjust themselves to the local food which they found them much sweeter and richer such as chicken curry. The cultural adjustment was experienced by the students in many ways. According to one of the informants, he adjusted to Malaysian culture and university campus by enjoying the local cuisine while other informants who viewed his adjustments from a social perspective by adapting themselves to the campus life of local students. Like other universities, Universiti Sains Malaysia is populated by local students from all around Malaysia, not just those from the State of Penang. Hence, its international students were exposed to the cultures of other states in Malaysia.

Based on what is reported above, it is clear that culture is not just close to all, but also an interesting aspect of research that remains relevant to everyone since the findings could lead to many implications theoretically and practically. For the purpose of this study, no distinction is made between "international students" and "foreign students". Both terms are used to refer to foreign students in host universities who do not speak the local language. The terms will be used interchangeably, whichever is appropriate in the writing context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The movement of students across national borders has grown significantly in recent decades, drawing increased scholarly attention to the cultural, linguistic, and social adjustments experienced by international learners. Studies on student mobility consistently highlight that encountering unfamiliar cultural norms, communication styles, and academic expectations is an inevitable part of studying abroad. For students from geographically and culturally proximate countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, these challenges may influence their social integration and academic performance.

Cultural Challenges

Cultural challenges relate to the difficulties encountered by foreign people in any host country. The distinct cultural backgrounds pose problems for them in addressing the issues at hand. Astadipura's study (2021) on obstacles encountered by Indonesians working in Germany revealed that the obstacles included language barrier and cultural differences which include time management and orientation as well as individualism which were the most notable cultural distinctions among the students. An example of cultural background influence highlighted in the study was the attitude of individuals from Indonesian who tended to exhibit shyness and discomfort in verbal expression. They also exhibited different working styles and job expectations from the locals while showing lack of trust. Particularly on international students, Smith and Khawaja (2011) who presented a review on acculturation experiences among them reported that acculturative stressors included a language barrier, educational difficulties, loneliness, discrimination, and practical problems associated with a changing environment.

Further analysis on past studies strengthens the earlier findings on cultural challenges faced by international students in host countries. On the aspect of language barrier which is arguably the most common issue for most international students, Takahashi (1989) reported that, contrary to a common American assumption that everybody readily understands English, acquiring foreign language proficiency, especially in adult years, requires a relatively long period of strenuous study, strong linguistic ability, and an extensive knowledge of the adopted culture. Sharing the same notion, Mori (2000) explained that in the academic domain, language barriers can impact language learning activities such as asking questions in class. Additionally, Sherry et al (2010) who researched interlanguage interactions involving vulnerable international students with Americans, reported that, despite being provided a relaxed learning environment which would enable the former to acquire English language skills, these students still experienced language barriers, including knowledge of slang.

Aside from language barriers, another aspect of cultural differences is behavioral norms related to the concept of time as reported by Baklashova and Kazakov (2016). In their study, the foreign students who had an appointment with an Asian teacher expressed their inconvenience at having to wait for half an hour to meet the teacher; a situation not considered the norm in their culture but is common among Asians. Stressful educational environment, according to Smith and Khawaja (2011), is another source of stress in the classroom although it is not specific to international students, but rather something that all university students go through. Nonetheless, academic stress is probably higher for international students because of the additional demands of second language anxiety and adjusting to a new learning environment.

While the above studies illustrate the significance of research on cultural challenges, the identification of the issues encountered by the respondents of the current study i.e. Indonesian students studying in Malaysia and vice versa, could provide insights into the cultural obstacles experienced by other students studying abroad with a distinct set of challenges, depending on the research context. Based on past studies, it could be concluded that the common types of cultural challenges faced by foreigners are related to language barriers, behavioral norms and educational environment

International Students' Adjustment

By focusing on international students' cultural adjustments, the current study involves examining a students' subjective experience navigating different elements of new environments they encounter (Black, 1988; Black & Gregersen, 1991; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). In short, the study examines how the students play their roles in a new environment i.e. adjusting themselves as members of the community in the host country and students in their academic institution (Malay et al, 2024). According to Pedersen (1995), this adjustment is divided into five stages as follows:

1. Honeymoon Stage

The honeymoon stage is characterized by attitudes such as enchantment, adventure, fun, discovery, optimism, or excitement. These emotions are nourished by curiosity, interest, confidence, and the appealing aspects of the host culture.

2. Stage of Disintegration

At this juncture, individuals may experience a state of perplexity and disorientation, when they are unable to discern the distinction between their native society and the culture of the host country. Persistent experiences of feeling "distinct, socially disconnected, and insufficient appear to be enduring, accompanied by symptoms of depression and withdrawal." Because of this situation, individuals experience failure and subsequently attribute it to their own concerns and inadequacies.

3. Stage of Reintegration Individuals

In stage three, students may experience intense anger and exhibit a tendency to attribute their despair and difficulties to external factors, displaying limited empathy towards others. Individuals tend to exhibit a greater inclination towards criticizing the host culture and its inhabitants rather than actively seeking out resolutions to prevailing issues. In essence, it can be observed that individuals employ self-defense as a strategy to mitigate vulnerability and potential assault within the context of the larger societal framework.

4. Autonomy Stage

The initial phase entails experiencing pleasure, followed by a subsequent phase characterized by self-blame, and culminating in a final phase marked by attributing blame to the host society. Individuals are increasingly inclined to pursue an ideal of objectivity, equality, and positivity, as opposed to a notion of perfection that is unfavorable. This phenomenon has the potential to enhance the understanding of both the dominant culture and the cultures of the persons participating in the interaction. Subsequently, addressing the issue of diversity becomes significantly more straightforward.

5. Freedom Stage

At this developmental phase, individuals may have a sense of belonging, comfort, establishment, acceptance, and linguistic proficiency in both their own and adopted cultures. The reciprocal and advantageous cultural dynamics and disparities between the pre-existing and contemporary locations will have an impact on individual perspectives and emotions. The individuals in question will exhibit trust and empathy for the culture of the host community.

Although studying abroad offers many personal advantages, such as the chance to travel, pick up new languages, and widen one's social network, adjusting to a new culture may be difficult and stressful. International students must overcome language obstacles, adjust to new educational systems, form new social networks, deal with prejudice, get over homesickness, and resolve a variety of practical issues while they are there (Smith and Khawaja, 2011). One effective strategy for helping overseas students adjust to a new culture is to seek out social support (Mallinckrodt and Leong, 1992). To receive the necessary emotional support and guidance, international students could talk about their struggles with their families, close friends, peers, and academic supervisors.

Strategies in Overcoming Cultural Challenges

Studying abroad is not always easy. It is indeed common to see foreigners struggling greatly with adaptation, which can have an impact on both their academic performance and their overall perception of life in a foreign nation. In order to bridge the divide between one's linguistic proficiency and the desired communication objectives, international students could employ some communication strategies (Park et al., 2017). Guirdham and Guirdham (2017) asserted that the utilization of the following strategies varies according to the cultural backgrounds of the speakers.

1. Information-seeking

The concept of information-seeking pertains to the act of seeking clarification or feedback from native individuals in the host country to avoid misunderstandings. For example, a study conducted by Hertzum and Hyldegård (2019) demonstrated that international students' information needs and seeking behavior are shaped not only by their host university but also by cross-cultural, personal, and situational issues.

2. Anxiety and uncertainty management (AUM)

The AUM theory provides an explanatory framework for understanding the occurrence of fear and uncertainty experienced by individuals during their early interactions with unfamiliar individuals.

3. Face management

The term 'face' in this context pertains to the self-perception that individuals present to the public. The objective of face management is to attain favorable social recognition and acceptance within a given society. Consequently, individuals exert greater effort to prevent the experience of social embarrassment or loss of reputation, sometimes referred to as 'losing face.' Goffman (1967) defined face as the positive social worth that can be shared with others. Since it directs people's communication behaviour to lessen the impact of potentially face-threatening activities, the face is communicative (Goffman, 1967; Brown & Levinson, 1987).

4. Showing politeness

In the realm of politeness theory, Guirdham and Guirdham (2017) establish a correlation between the speaker's face, the potential risks to face, and the various modes of communication employed by speakers. The primary purpose of politeness is to mitigate potential damage to the recipient's social image.

5. Rapport management

The term 'rapport' denotes a communication approach that is distinguished by the display of warmth, enthusiasm, and attention throughout the engagement. Establishing a favorable rapport fosters a sense of concordance within the interpersonal exchange.

6. Showing difference

The concept of difference can be defined as a communication strategy that involves the combination of acceptance and respect for someone's wishes. While communication strategies can help to bridge the gap between individual's linguistic knowledge and communication goals, the strategy employed by the students might not reflect their preferred strategy. Maleki (2007) and Saeidi and Farshchi (2015) for example, examined the communication challenges caused by accented English along with communication strategies employed by international students in the Australian context. The result showed that the students' preferred strategies to overcome such difficulties conflicted with what they regarded as the most effective strategies.

7. Achieving clarity, avoiding hurting others, and minimizing imposition

A fundamental objective of communication is to achieve clarity while avoiding any potential injury or threat to an individual's self-image or reputation.

8. Building trust, reciprocating, and behaving altruistically

Henderson et al. (2016) states that a communication strategy commonly employed by overseas doctors and academicians in Australia involves the establishment of trust and alliance with individuals from the host country. The participants held the belief that this method aids them in effectively navigating challenging circumstances. The technique was implemented through the demonstration of friendliness, increased social interaction with individuals from the host country, and the provision of reassurance and explanation to the host country citizens of the normalcy of their cultural behavior.

9. Deceiving

Despite its negative connotation, deception is a communication strategy that might occur for a reason. The cultural background of individuals has an impact on their responses to acts of dishonesty. For example, individuals belonging to a collectivist cultural background exhibit a tendency to engage in deception for the purpose of benefiting both themselves and others.

10. Influencing

The act of persuading others is a fundamental aspect of one's behavior. There exist multiple strategies for persuading someone, including the utilization of power to manipulate outcomes, as well as the ability to influence others through discourse, emotions, or attitudes. From a study by Ma and Chuang (2011) who explored the interpersonal persuasion strategies preferred in the Chinese culture, they reported the Chinese's corresponding sense-making processes represent a cultural reality that is different than its U.S. counterpart.

Based on the research background given above, the current study aimed to answer two questions:
1. What types of cultural challenges faced by Malaysian and Indonesian international students during their studies abroad?
2. What strategies were employed by Malaysian and Indonesian international students in overcoming cultural challenges during their studies abroad?
By responding to the above questions, it is hopeful that the findings of this study would provide insights for future students on what to expect should they pursue their studies abroad, particularly in Malaysia and Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative e research approach to achieve the research objectives of identifying the cultural challenges faced by Malaysian and Indonesian students studying abroad and examining how they overcame such challenges. The data were collected by interviewing a group of Indonesian students studying in Malaysia and Malaysian students studying in Indonesia. The latter were students from Universitas Airlangga Surabaya who participated in an International Student Mobility Programme at Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan located in the east coast of Malaysia. The interview questions were constructed to allow the researchers to obtain useful input on the types of cultural challenges faced by the respondents and their strategies in overcoming such

challenges. These challenges were then categorized based on themes adapted from Guirdham & Guirdham's perspective of intercultural communication (2017). Subsequently, the data were further analysed to examine the strategies employed by both groups of students to overcome the challenges.

Respondents

The respondents of this study consist of two groups; eight Indonesian students participating in the International Student Mobility Program at Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan and seven Malaysian students studying at Universitas Sumatera Utara (USU), Indonesia. The purpose of having these two groups of international students was to explore any challenges and their respective strategies to overcome them that were uniquely experienced by either Malaysian or Indonesian students.

Using purposive sampling method, the respondents were chosen based on three main pre-determined criteria which include studying at their first-degree level, having experience living at their host universities for at least eight weeks and having the opportunity to mix around with classmates from the host universities. Being under a mobility program, the first group of students read Information Management and spent eight weeks at the host university i.e Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan. As for Malaysian students studying at USU, Indonesia, these medical students had spent about 3-4 years in the country after completing a foundation program at various universities in Malaysia.

Prior to data collection process, approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of UiTM. Following this, the participants were approached personally by the researchers to explain their research participation as well as obtaining their consent to participate in the study.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

In this study, the primary data source was the in-depth online interviews with the respondents. The interview questions were developed to provide directions for data collection based on Carspecken's critical qualitative research approach (Hardcastle et al., 2006, p. 153). The interview sessions were conducted in the locallanguages i.e Bahasa Indonesia for Indonesian respondents and Bahasa Melayu for Malaysian respondents.

In particular, Carspecken's critical qualitative research approach proposes the following five stages of data collection in qualitative study:

1. Building a primary etic record (What is going on?)
2. Researcher interpretation, etic perspective
3. Dialogical (emic) data generation, collaborative stage
4. Describes systems relations to broader context
5. Explains relational systems

Referring to the first and second stages, qualitative data collection starts with establishing understanding 'what is going on' based on a primary etic record elicited from the respondents. Etic record which refers to data or descriptions gathered from an external and objective perspective in the study would provide researchers with some research background related to demographic data of the respondents. Moving on to the third stage, researchers then start to ask questions that would provide them with emic data, which gives them input from an insider's view. Here, the respondents start giving their opinions or sharing their perspectives based on the interview questions. In the fourth stage, the researchers make interpretations and descriptions based on the input given before moving on to the fifth stage explanation is given in a larger perspective in order to achieve the research objectives.

In following these stages, the online interview sessions started by gathering the respondents' basic background information mainly to ensure that they were homogenous in terms of origins and academic background. These includes asking them questions about their country of origin, home university, level of studies and study programme as well as their length of stay at the host universities. While this served as an ice breaking session, the next phase of interview was to gain input regarding any exposure in dealing with cultural issues that the respondents might have received at the host universities. This phase of interview helped to establish rapport with the respondents before the researchers were ready to ask further questions related to cultural challenges faced by the respondents and their strategies in overcoming such challenges.

In order to facilitate the interview process, the online interviews were conducted in groups in which the students could freely take turns to answer the questions posed by the researchers. That was to ensure that they would answer genuinely without being forced to respond so as to prevent them making up the answers. The online interviews were conducted twice, once with the group of Indonesian students in Malaysia while another session was with Malaysian students. Each session lasted about 2 hours. The interview sessions were video recorded to help the researchers with their data analysis later on.

The following are the interview questions asked by the respondents:

Interview Questions Asked	Information that needs to be collected as input to develop the themes
Cultural Challenges Faced by Malaysian and Indonesian International Students	
1. How long have you participated in the International Student Mobility Program?	Period spent in the host university

2. Does the university expose you on strategies in overcoming cultural difference?	Cross-cultural training
3. Do you face difficulties in handling cultural challenges at your university?	Types of Difficulties in Handling Cultural Differences
4. What are the types of challenges that you face during your study abroad?	Types of Cultural Differences
5. How do you tackle cultural challenges during your stay abroad?	Strategies in Overcoming Cultural challenges

Data Analysis

After all participants have been interviewed, the data were analyzed using a two-step process. According to Arsenault (2020), the first step is the coding analysis, followed by data categorization. Following Polit and Beck (2008), the categories were grouped together and contrasted with one another, making them mutually exclusive. Additionally, the researchers then debated the categories as a group in order to guarantee inter-researcher trustworthiness. After consensus was obtained, four final categories were created (Polit and Beck, 2008).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data analysis, it was found that both groups of students experienced some cultural challenges that required them to employ strategies in order to meet their communicative goals. Based on the results after respondents' input were consolidated in specific themes, the types of challenges experienced by both groups include language barrier, time management, food, and academic life.

Cultural Challenges

1. Language Barrier

Language barrier is the most commonly cited challenge faced by Indonesian students from Universitas Airlangga Surabaya during the studies at UiTM Cawangan Kelantan. The challenges occurred the moment they arrived in Kelantan for the first time. Even though Indonesians and Malaysians can usually understand each other when communicating in their own languages, the use of some local terms that also appeared in the Malay language might have a different meaning. For instance, the term 'senang' means 'happy' among Indonesians but 'easy' among Malaysians. Similarly, the term 'mesra' in Indonesia means 'romantis' but 'friendly' among Malaysians. When asked to give a measurement of the differences between the two languages, one of the Malaysian respondents stated an 80% difference.

Similar with their Indonesian counterparts, Malaysian students also encountered difficulties in understanding Indonesian terms. For instance, when the Indonesian students uttered the term 'butuh' which is common among Indonesians, their Malaysian students were clueless of its meaning. Only after clarifications were sought from the former that the latter could equate the term with 'desire' or 'wish'. In some cases, Malaysian students in Indonesia reported that they needed to translate Indonesian phrases into English and sometimes to further translate into the Malay language to help their understanding. Differences in language terms can pose a major problem among Malaysian medical students. For instance, the term 'asam lemak' in Indonesia is called 'asid lemak' in the Malay term, which could cause confusions among the students since ther term 'asam' in Malaysia is associated with food.

2. Food

In terms of food, both countries share many common dishes, probably because they are rooted from the same archipelago. In fact, some Indonesian menus are popular in Malaysia such as Nasi Ayam Penyet and Ayam Gepuk. Nevertheless, according to Indonesian students, foods served in Malaysia were 'heavier' since it is common to see gulai, rendang, chicken curry, squid, and meat served at every meal. While they could try to adjust their diet, it was not easy to do so. Additionally, Indonesian students also reported that it was hard to find cooked vegetables, except for raw cucumber served with rice. Additonally, the food portion served is considered too big for Indonesian students that they could not finish it in one go.

Malaysian students, on the other hand, thought that Indonesian dishes tended to be spicy and loaded with many ingredients. One student who does not like spicy food reported that she had to be selective of the food she consumed. Should she choose the wrong food, she would have a stomachache ache and that was bothersome for her.

3. Academic Life

Malaysia and Indonesia adopt a different academic system. In Indonesia, the students completing Senior High School at the age of seventeen will continue their studies at undergraduate level, at an average age of eighteen years old. In contrast, students completing Senior High School in Malaysia need to complete pre-university studies between one to three years, depending on the programmes they enroll before they can pursue their studies at the degree level, which will take another two to four years. While this can lead to maturity issues, students from both countries are expected to adjust themselves wisely so that no one would feel inferior when working together.

As for Malaysian students, the biggest issue related to academic life as highlighted by a number of them, is the gap that occurs between juniors and seniors, making the two groups adhere to the social distance that occurs between them. Surprisingly, this not only occurs among students but also between students and lecturers, as well as amongst lecturers themselves. Senior students for instance, would expect their juniors to be less dominant. Similarly,

lecturers in higher grades are not expected to socialize with junior lecturers, most likely as a gesture of respect although not everyone adheres to this expectation.

4. Time Management and Other Cultural Aspects

Aside from language barriers, the respondents also reported experiencing some inconvenience caused by differences related to time management. Indonesian students reported that their Malaysian counterparts displayed a quick working habit and high level of punctuality which was not easy for them to follow, especially during their early stay in Malaysia. Additonally, they also needed to make adjustments related to prayer times. For example, in Malaysia, they had to be an hour earlier than Indonesian time for Subuh prayer.

Unlike their Indonesian counterparts, none of Malaysian students highlighted difficulties caused by time difference. Instead, the were more concerned about cultural perceptions held by Indonesians towards them. For instance, being a popular health treatment hub, Malaysia is expected to train its own medical doctors. Hence, coming to Indonesia to be trained for this reason is something questioned and frowned upon by some Indonesian academics, causing Malaysian students to be unpleasant when asked such questions.

Additionally, Malaysian students also reported that some Indonesians classmates tended to speak loudly, causing them feelingg uncomfortable. Later, they discovered that it was a norm for Bataknese people to speak in loud voice. While the above are some challenges faced by international students in Malaysia and Indonesia, it would be interesting to examine further on how such challenges were overcome by the students. In order to achieve this objective, the students' feedback was categorized according to themes adapted from Guirdham and Guirdham (2017) to identify their strategies in overcoming cultural challenges faced by them.

Strategies in Overcoming Cultural Challenges

This section highlights the strategies employed by the respondents in dealing with cultural challenges in order to achieve their communication goals. As highlighted by Maleki (2007) and Saeidi and Farshchi (2015), students' preferred strategies in overcoming cultural challenges may not always be reflected in their actual behaviour. This, however, should not prevent researchers from analysing the strategies used based on the input provided by the respondents. From the analysed data, three main strategies were identified: information seeking, honesty and building relationsgip with the host nationals.

1.Information Seeking

To achieve their communicative goals, students from both groups would seek help from their local classmates. According to the respondents, some good friends from the host university were always ready to help to explain the meaning of the local terms or sentences politely. This supports Guirdham and Guirdham's (2017) AUM theory that acknowledges the occurrence of fear and uncertainty experienced by individuals in unfamiliar situations. With the help of the host nationals, international students would feel less anxious being in a foreign land.

Besides this, the students also help themselves by making their own effort such as learning the local language through various sources such as television and social media platforms. One Indonesian student for instance said that watching Upin and Ipin TV series helped them improve their Malay language.

2. Honesty

According to one Indonesian student, it is important to be honest and admit our weaknesses in learning other language(s) since the locals would usually understand problems faced by non-native speakers. From Guirdham and Guirdham's (2017) perspective, this can be regarded as 'showing difference' that involves the combination of acceptance and respect for someone's wishes. In this case, the locals were expected to show respect for their foreign friends who come from different cultural backgrounds.

3. Building Relationship with the Host Nationals

Most of the respondents in this study agreed that it is very important for foreigners to build a good relationship with the host nationals because this would help the former in many aspects. Both Malaysian and Indonesian students perceived their host nationals were friendly and helpful, which made them comfortable to ask about anything they needed to know. This strategy is termed 'rapport management' by Guirdham and Guirdham's (2017), manifested through warmth, enthusiasm, and attention throughout interactions between the two nationals. As for Malaysian students, building good rapport with their friends si important for group-acceptance.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the cultural differences experienced by Malaysian and Indonesian international students in their academic and social environments abroad. It highlights the cultural challenges and overcoming strategies between Malaysia and Indonesia as foundational elements that ease cultural adjustment for international students from both nations. Despite these commonalities, subtle differences in language usage, social norms, and academic expectations pose challenges that require some communication strategies to be employed to ensure the communicative goals of both parties are met.

The research concludes that there are many similarities in the challenges faced by Indonesian and Malaysian students rooted from language barrier and differences in food, academic life, time management and other cultural aspects between the two nations. These challenges, however, could be easily tackled when understanding, honesty and respect exist in a warmth relationship, resulting in good rapport between the two nationals which serves as a prerequisite for successful communication strategies.

RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite successful communication strategies employed by the respondents of this study, it is important to note that students' preferred strategies in overcoming cultural challenges might not be reflected in their actual behaviour (Maleki, 2007; Saeidi & Farshchi, 2015). Acknowledging this, future studies are recommended to make comparisons between students' preferred communication strategies with the ones they actually displayed. The findings of this recommended research will shed light on the students' awareness in employing communication strategies as a means to make them competent communicators in a foreign land.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

 The first author was responsible for conceptualizing the research and its methodology, helping in data collection and analysis, as well as preparing the draft article for this journal. The second author was in charge of data collection and data analysis together with the first author, as well as preparing resources before the data collection. The third author was responsible for identifying respondents, helping out with data collection, and validating the results. The fourth author was involved in the validation of results and the review of the article.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used AI-assisted technologies in order to assist with summarising literature, refining language, clarifying theoretical concepts, and organising key findings. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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