

Indonesian students' encounter on multilingualism and multiculturalism during students' exchange programme: developing cross-cultural understanding from local into global

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explores the dynamic interplay of languages and cultures experienced by participants in the students exchange program “Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka” organized by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. The research investigates how the exchange program facilitates the development of cross-cultural competencies among Indonesian students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The study invited 16 students as the respondents who come from diversified linguistic and cultural background nationwide. Utilizing narrative interviews and observational techniques, the study delves into the students' experiences of cultural adaptation, language acquisition, and the challenges and benefits of cultural diversity in shaping their global perspectives. Results indicate that participation in the program not only enhances students' appreciation for cultural diversity but also significantly improves their communication skills and broadens their global outlook. This paper underscores the critical role of such programs in fostering multicultural understanding and preparing students to navigate a complex globalized world.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Multilingualism, Cross-cultural understanding, Cross-cultural competencies, Students' exchange programs, Cultural adaptation

Introduction

In the context of globalisation, the importance of multiculturalism and multilingualism is being more acknowledged as crucial elements for the progress of society. These occurrences promote cultural diversity and language pluralism, which are essential for encouraging global interconnectedness and comprehension. By assuming various identities and engaging in hybrid cultural manifestations, individuals actively navigate and contribute to a globally interconnected society. The interaction between different cultures and languages promotes global collaboration and understanding, enabling societies to adjust and prosper in a globalised setting (Spotti & Blommaert, 2017).

Indonesia, nestled in the heart of Southeast Asia, stands as one of the world's most diverse regions, boasting a rich tapestry of languages and cultures. With over 300 ethnic groups, according to the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics 2010 census, and a staggering 704 regional languages, as reported by the Ethnologue website. Indonesia's diversity is a cherished national characteristic.

In Indonesia, ethnicity and culture are not merely descriptors; they are the very essence of individual identity. Cultural traditions and languages, revered and preserved by their bearers, contribute significantly to Indonesia's vibrant mosaic of diversity. The mother tongue, in particular, stands as a badge of honor for those belonging to specific ethnicities.

Multilingualism is another hallmark of Indonesia's cultural landscape. Many Indonesians fluently speak at least two languages: their mother tongue and Bahasa Indonesia, the national language. While

multilingualism has historically been prevalent, its contemporary manifestation holds distinct significance.

While multilingualism has always been present, contemporary multilingualism distinguishes itself from the past by its impact on society as a whole (Aronin, 2015). Multilingualism affects society but it is at the same time a reflection of a society (Zarobe & Zarobe, 2015). Multilingualism holds some impacts as a reflection of the students' identity being the distinctive quality of people from different backgrounds. It mirrors the cultural diversity and complexity of a society. Furthermore, multilingualism in the context of student experiences not only reflects cultural diversity but also fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of different perspectives. As students navigate the complexities of language and communication within diverse environments, they develop invaluable cross-cultural competencies. These competencies enable them to bridge cultural divides, negotiate intercultural interactions, and navigate the globalized world with sensitivity and empathy. Therefore, multilingualism emerges not only as a reflection of societal diversity but also as a catalyst for fostering inclusive societies and promoting mutual understanding. In the context of student exchange programmes, where individuals from varying linguistic and cultural backgrounds converge, multilingualism becomes a cornerstone for building meaningful connections and fostering intercultural dialogue. By embracing and celebrating multilingualism, students not only affirm their own identities but also contribute to the enrichment of global cultural heritage.

Student exchange programmes serve a crucial role in enriching global diversity by facilitating the complex interaction between languages and cultures. This study centres on the "Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka" programme, implemented by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia, which serves as a prime example of the advantages of such endeavours. The programme promotes a dynamic blend of language and cultural variety by selecting participants from different locations and backgrounds. This allows students to fully engage with varied cultural environments.

In these diverse environments, challenges such as communication obstacles frequently occur. However, they also offer chances for substantial learning and adaptability. Effective collaboration and programme implementation need successfully navigating these hurdles, as stated by (Siregar et al., 2020) Developing cross-cultural abilities is crucial in a diverse and linguistically varied country like Indonesia. These abilities not only make interactions easier but also enhance students' understanding of cultural subtleties.

Participating in exchange programmes enables students to develop the capacity to adjust to and fully accept the wide-ranging cultural diversity that defines both Indonesia and the global world. These programmes play a crucial role in developing a deep comprehension of the diverse cultural and linguistic environments around the world, equipping students to become more skilled and compassionate global citizens.

Methodology

Research Purpose

This study investigates the participation of students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in a student exchange programme, aiming to understand how individuals adapt and communicate across such differences. It aims to analyze how the programme develops students' comprehension, perception, and experience of new languages and cultures, as well as their ability to understand and appreciate different cultures. Furthermore, the study seeks to explore how students' insights and knowledge in understanding different cultures and languages can contribute to the development of a comprehensive global view of existing cultures and languages.

Research Design

This phenomenological study investigates the experiences of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds across 18 universities in Indonesia. The primary objective is to examine the phenomenon of cultural shock and self-adjustment among these students within the context of their respective university environments. The study employs narrative interviews as the primary data collection method, allowing respondents to recount their experiences and perspectives in depth. By focusing on students' varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the research aims to gain insights into their cross-cultural understanding and appreciation during exchange programmes, both locally and globally.

Research setting and participants

This research was conducted among participants of the Inbound Independent Student Exchange programme at Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa University in Banten. Representing diverse regions, the students enrolled in this programme exhibit a natural inclination towards multilingualism, with the majority proficient in at least two languages: their mother tongue and Indonesian. Additionally, a subset of students demonstrates proficiency in English, further enriching the linguistic landscape of the study cohort. This linguistic diversity serves as a fertile ground for exploring the intricacies of cultural adaptation and language acquisition during their university exchange experience.

Observations were conducted on a cohort of 122 students actively engaged in the student exchange programme. To comprehensively explore the cultural and linguistic variations experienced by these exchange students, their backgrounds were meticulously examined. Hailing from diverse regions, the participants represent 21 different provinces and originate from 47 distinct universities spanning Indonesia. From each province, 16 students were purposefully selected for in-depth interviews, offering insights into their individual backgrounds, perceptions of cross-cultural understanding, and the programme's impact on their cultural appreciation. This methodological approach ensures a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of cultural adaptation and intercultural exchange within the context of the student exchange programme.

Data collection and analysis

Primary data collection involved both observational techniques and narrative interviews with participants of the programme. Observations focused on capturing the natural interactions among students, yielding insightful findings regarding their adaptation and communication across diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Additionally, narrative interviews were conducted, resulting in approximately 280 minutes of audio recordings. These interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure that the students could express their experiences within the context of their exchange programme. Employing a semi-structured approach, the interviews aimed to elicit distinct and nuanced perspectives on the students' encounters with new cultures and languages. This methodological strategy facilitated the collection of rich qualitative data, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the participants' experiences and insights.

The recorded interviews were transcribed to facilitate analysis. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was then employed to delve into the nuanced experiences and perceptions expressed by the participants. IPA is a qualitative research approach that focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences within specific contexts. IPA is particularly useful for investigating complex, ambiguous, and emotionally charged topics (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Through a systematic and iterative process, the transcripts were closely examined to identify recurring themes, patterns, and underlying meanings. This involved immersing ourselves in the data, engaging in detailed line-by-line analysis, and interpreting the participants' accounts from their own subjective perspectives. Since IPA is participant-oriented, participants can express their stories authentically without distortion (Alase, 2017). By adopting an IPA framework, we aimed to uncover the rich

complexities of the participants' cross-cultural encounters and the development of cultural appreciation throughout their exchange programme.

Additionally, peer debriefing involved seeking feedback from colleagues experienced in qualitative research to critically evaluate our interpretations and conclusions. These processes helped to mitigate potential researcher bias and strengthen the credibility of our findings. By adhering to rigorous methodological standards, we aimed to produce robust and trustworthy insights into the experiences of participants in the student exchange programme.

Results and Discussion

The ongoing *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka* (PMM) programme, now in its fourth batch at Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa University (Untirta), spans from February to the end of June 2024. This round of the programme has attracted 122 overseas students from diverse universities across Indonesia. Participating students face numerous challenges as they immerse themselves in new cultures, interact with unfamiliar people, grapple with different languages, and navigate unfamiliar environments. Adaptation becomes paramount as they strive to acclimate to these new circumstances.

Students' background in participating in the programme

The students participating in the programme come from diverse backgrounds, with a common motivation being their interest and curiosity toward other cultures. Many students are driven by a desire to gain new experiences and insights, while others are specifically interested in studying and experiencing the academic activities of the host university. Additionally, some students seek to enhance their self-value through participation in the programme. Some view it as a free opportunity for them to explore, which makes them interested. As said by one of the interviewee:

The first is an experiment, experience and seeing previous PMM friends which seems exciting, because I like exploring and there is a living assistance fee to reduce our expenses, we get departure and return tickets. It can motivate us. If there is something like this that is free, it will be really motivating. (Participant 1)

Culture shock felt by students in new areas

Culture shock is a phenomenon that occurs when individuals are exposed to a new and unfamiliar cultural environment; it involves a range of emotional and psychological responses, such as anxiety, confusion, and disorientation, arising from the loss of familiar cultural cues and norms (Oberg, 1960). When culturally disparate groups come into contact with each other, they tend to have an impact on each other's social structures, institutional arrangements, political processes, and value systems (Ward et al., 2001). Indonesia's cultural diversity is remarkably vast, often leading to moments of surprise for individuals encountering unfamiliar cultural practices for the first time. This multicultural landscape can be both fascinating and challenging for those from different cultural backgrounds.

Students in study abroad programmes often experience culture shock (Young et al., 2014). In the case of the *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka* programme, culture shock is not felt by all of the students but is felt by some. Especially when individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds have to meet with each other, the different backgrounds could mean different ways of speaking, different norms and different perspectives. Different cultures have different rules and patterns for social interactions, which can include negotiations, agreements, and everyday communications (Hall, 1959). As one of the student's experience with different language culture of certain people and group:

My language culture tends to be fast and quite firm, until here, hearing and observing the culture or language style of the people here, it's a bit sincere and a bit slow, so it took me quite a while to learn and it took a while to adapt to the language style of the people here. (Participant 2)

Many students report that encountering diverse culinary preferences also impacts them significantly. They often find themselves needing to adapt to new habits due to the broad range of differences they experience. Meanwhile, those who do not experience cultural shock tend to share common traits: a familiarity with interacting with people from various backgrounds, a history of travel, or sufficient prior research about the new environment.

Challenges students face in the programme

Although the Indonesian language serves as a common medium of communication, challenges often arise from variations in accent and intonation among students. Some students tend to speak quickly, which can complicate comprehension, while others use a lower intonation that might be harder to hear. This contrast becomes particularly noticeable for those accustomed to hearing high intonation, leading to difficulties in auditory perception and understanding. The diversity in speech patterns underscores the need for adaptive listening skills.

Attitudinal differences in language use also present challenges. Students who typically speak with high intonation and volume find they need to adjust their approach when interacting with peers from diverse backgrounds to avoid causing offence or hurt. Self-adjustment is also a difficult challenge for some students at first because of the differences in the programme. The variation is apparent not only within the host university environment but also among colleagues who bring diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and mindsets. This necessitates a thoughtful approach to communication and interaction to foster an inclusive and respectful atmosphere.

Meeting students who come from various ethnic groups, different islands, different characters and different accents, in my opinion, is like a challenge in itself to unite and feel what life is like for them there, which can broaden our insight into the culture. (Participant 3)

Student adjustment to differences and diversity

Students report that their adjustment in the host university and their current place are different and varied. Some are required to change their habit so they can adapt to their current experiences that are different from their past experiences. Some adjust themselves by using more formal accents so other students can understand them. Some say they need to leave their habit that is not fitting with the new places, like lowering their accent and reducing their volume of speech. Some students learn and get to know other peers of different regions, so they can understand more about their languages, cultures, and perspectives. Enhancing relationships and fostering communication with individuals from diverse backgrounds are crucial steps in facilitating adaptation for students.

In a new environment, meeting new people certainly requires adjustment. In a new environment, we have to pay attention to whether what we do will offend other people or not. ... our adjustments are of course, linguistically important, because we have to understand one or two words and their meanings, so that we can be more careful in speaking. (Participant 4)

As emphasized by (Yasya et al., 2022), effective communication serves as a fundamental tool in this process. Establishing meaningful connections with others from varied cultural backgrounds acts as a bridge for understanding different cultures and cultivating cross-cultural relationships. The juxtaposition of experiences further underscores the significance of cross-cultural relationships in mitigating obstacles, as noted by (Masztalerz, 2021).

How the programme affects students

Overall, students have reported that the program enhances their curiosity and cross-cultural understanding. It aids in fostering an appreciation for and tolerance of the diverse cultures within Indonesia, aligning with the objectives of the *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka* program to introduce Indonesian culture and promote understanding of ethnic, religious, racial, and intergroup diversity.

This programme can increase understanding and insight into different cultures and languages. And we can see how existing differences can be reconciled. It also creates curiosity within you. And learn to adapt. This programme can increase relationships and friendships, so we must be ready to face existing differences. (Participant 5)

The program sparks students' curiosity, encouraging further learning. Additionally, some students find that the program enhances their adaptability.

This programme increases our own independence and reliability and this programme increases understanding and curiosity about the diversity of languages and cultures in Indonesia. (Participant 6)

Active engagement in interpersonal and mass communication activities, following host culture norms, is central to this adaptation process, as noted by (Kim, 2017). Students often develop code-mixing speech, blending Indonesian with words from various other languages, a practice fostered by exposure to multiple regional languages. Because multilingualism promotes the use of cross-linguistic communication methods such as code switching and code mixing (Okal, 2014). Furthermore, students express that the program broadens their perspectives, fostering an appreciation for and tolerance of other cultures. It also strengthens their sense of community through shared experiences, a factor correlated with improved wellbeing, feelings of safety, participation in community affairs, and civic responsibility (Francis et al., 2012; Mahmoudi Farahani, 2016). Ultimately, the program contributes to students' happiness, which is closely linked to improved wellbeing and mental health as their sense of community grows. Several students also note personal growth through their participation in the program. According to research by (Hao et al., 2016), exposure to diverse cultures can stimulate creativity, innovation, and cognitive flexibility in individuals.

How the programme improve their global perspective on cross-cultural understanding

Building on the insights from (Fu et al., 2016), it is evident that encountering various cultures not only fosters openness but also promotes cognitive flexibility and adaptability. When individuals are regularly exposed to foreign practices, they develop a more nuanced understanding of the world, which enhances their ability to navigate complex multicultural environments. This exposure can lead to greater empathy and a reduction in cultural biases, ultimately contributing to more harmonious interpersonal relationships across cultural boundaries. Moreover, such experiences can equip individuals with the skills necessary for effective communication and collaboration in our increasingly globalized society.

According to (Harush et al., 2016), the interaction of multiple cultural identities within individuals is pivotal in determining how they respond to culturally diverse settings. This dynamic is crucial in today's global society, where individuals often find themselves part of multicultural teams or communities. The ability to navigate and reconcile these cultural identities not only influences personal interactions but also impacts professional effectiveness in diverse workplaces. As individuals become more adept at integrating aspects of their various cultural backgrounds, they contribute to a richer, more inclusive environment. This skillset is increasingly recognized as essential for leadership in multicultural settings, promoting a broader understanding of global perspectives and enhancing problem-solving and innovation.

Feel the impact of differences in the programme which opens up our horizons about colleagues from other areas. By participating in this programme we inevitably become more open and accept the strengths and weaknesses of each ethnicity. It opens up understanding and insight into the culture, history, language, customs and acculturation of existing communities. (Participant 7)

Students reported that their exposure to various cultures during the program significantly heightened their curiosity.

The impact of the existence of different cultures and their understanding, we will have a curiosity to know and learn about existing cultures. (Participant 8)

This increased interest motivated them to participate more actively in program activities, which led to a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and practices. The program not only expanded their cultural horizons but also enhanced their appreciation for global diversity. Exposure to multiple cultures fostered a sense of tolerance and a broader appreciation for cultural differences. Furthermore, the program allowed students to explore and become familiar with existing cultures, thereby cultivating a global perspective and enhancing cross-cultural understanding. This experience opened their minds to new perspectives and deepened their respect for cultural diversity.

Conclusion

This study has illustrated the profound impact of student exchange programs on enhancing multilingual and multicultural competencies among participants. The *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka* program at Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa University provided a rich backdrop for exploring the nuanced interplay of languages and cultures and their implications on student adaptation and cross-cultural understanding.

Key findings highlight that such programs not only foster greater appreciation and tolerance for cultural diversity but also enhance participants' communication skills and global perspectives. Through immersion in diverse linguistic and cultural environments, students developed a heightened curiosity about different cultures and a greater empathy toward others, which are crucial skills in our globalized world.

Moreover, the challenges faced by students, such as culture shock and language barriers, underscore the need for well-structured support systems within exchange programs to aid in smoother transitions and deeper cultural immersion. The insights gained from these challenges provide valuable lessons on the dynamics of cultural adaptation and the importance of fostering resilient and inclusive educational environments.

Future research could explore the longitudinal impacts of such exchange programs to assess how these cross-cultural competencies evolve post-program and influence participants' professional and personal lives. Additionally, studies focusing on the role of technology in facilitating or hindering cultural immersion in such programs could provide further depth to our understanding of modern exchange experiences.

In conclusion, the *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka* program not only enriches students' academic and social lives but also plays a pivotal role in preparing them to be competent global citizens, capable of navigating and contributing to a multicultural world.

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