

STRATEGIES FOR MULTICULTURAL COMMUNICATION: A STUDY OF INDONESIAN POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the multicultural communication strategies employed by Indonesian postgraduate students during their study abroad experience at a university in Melbourne, Australia. Multicultural communication, as the main focus of this research, refers to communication between participants from different lingua-cultural backgrounds or nations, where their different conceptualizations and perspectives may lead to potential miscommunication. To achieve the research objective successfully, a qualitative method, specifically a semi-structured interview, was adopted to collect the data. 4 Indonesian postgraduate students who studied abroad in Melbourne, Australia were interviewed and asked about their cross-cultural misunderstanding experience during their sojourn period in Australia. They were also asked how they negotiated meaning and overcame language barriers when they communicated with local Australians or other international students. The collected data were analyzed and discussed in reference to strategies for multicultural communication theoretical framework. The findings of this study demonstrate that the respondents implemented a range of strategies to achieve successful intercultural communication, and the observation of others was deemed as one of the most effective methods. The outcomes of this research could provide a useful reference for students who plan to study abroad, especially in Melbourne, Australia, on the various strategies they can use to have effective communication across cultures.

Keywords: Multicultural communication, intercultural communication, English, miscommunication across cultures, Indonesian postgraduate students

I. INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of globalization and technological advancement, coupled with the rapid spread of English, people's mobility has become higher than ever. This may enable people from different lingua-cultural backgrounds to interact with each other. This is particularly true for students who study abroad, including Indonesian students who study in Australia. Through studying abroad, it is possible for Indonesian students to communicate with Australians, Chinese, Colombians, Saudi Arabians, and other international students. As a matter of fact, people from different backgrounds may bring their own attributes, such as culture, lexical varieties, accents, perspectives, conceptualizations, and interpretations. Therefore, when people from different countries interact with

each other, it is highly common to have misunderstandings as they may bring their own attributes when they are talking to each other (Yuwita, 2020). The communicants may speak English, but their conceptualization may differ. This is what we call multicultural communication.

Multilingual and multicultural communication is defined as communication involving two people or more from different lingua-cultural backgrounds (Canagarajah, 2009). Multicultural and multilingual communication would at least involve people who bring their own cultural and social values, pragmatic norms, and roles as their standardized patterns of behaviour. Canagarajah (2009) points out six key points on how multilingual negotiate English. First, multilingual commonly highlights the ability to negotiate meaning, and prioritise intelligibility rather than

being a 'native'-like. In essence, they do not imitate 'native' speakers' accents to achieve successful cross-cultural communication. They do not necessarily adopt commonalities in language forms. For instance, when a Turkish person interacts with a Spanish person, they do not require American or British English to achieve successful cross-cultural communication (e.g. Baker, 2009; Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014). This strategy is clearly beyond linguistic skills as it involves the ability to effectively negotiate meaning and requires open-mindedness towards others' system of English instead of focusing too much on grammar (Canagarajah, 2009; Jenkins, 2006).

Second, multilingual co-construct intersubjective norms for communication. Communication across cultures would automatically enable the speakers to construct the norms and conventions to accommodate English diversities. This strategy would help them enhance their flexibility when they interact with people from many countries (Canagarajah, 2009). For instance, when an Indonesian communicates with a Chinese person, then moves on to talk to a Saudi Arabian, then moves on to talk to a Colombian, they would subsequently adapt themselves to their interlocutors to achieve effective communication (e.g. Jain & Krieger, 2010).

Third, multilinguals communicate through hybrid codes, which means that L1 items and localized English varieties would facilitate the conversation (e.g. Virkkula & Nikula, 2010).

Cross-cultural communication may not be rigid, and it may contain the mixture of codes and diversities, including the L1 items and localized varieties of English which might be unfamiliar to others. In other words, cross-cultural communication commonly does not have standardized grammatical form. However, this phenomenon is viewed as a positive thing since it would accommodate the fluid conversation (Canagarajah, 2009). In this case, language diversity would serve as the resource for one another.

Fourth, multilinguals are consensus-oriented and supportive. Multilingual speakers are generally more co-operative and accommodating during cross-cultural communication. This strategy requires the speakers to work with each other to achieve intelligibility and negotiate meaning. For instance, the speakers may include repeating the information, changing the speaking style, or showing curiosity towards others to accommodate the interlocutors (Jain & Krieger, 2010; Nardon, Steers, & Sanchez-Runde, 2011). Canagarajah (2009) also added the 'let it pass' strategy from Firth (1996), which means moving along instead of attempting to correct or judge the interlocutors.

Fifth, multilinguals exploit ecology for meaning-making. In essence, people from different lingua-cultural backgrounds generally bring their own gestures, multimodal resources, physical environment, and social contexts for communication. In this case, those components

would be beneficial as the resources of the richness of the language to effectively communicate across culture (Canagarajah, 2009; Nardon et al., 2011; Virkkula & Nikula, 2010).

Lastly, language use and language learning are interconnected. For multilinguals, as they use English for interaction purposes, they also learn something new during communication (e.g. they observe the systems and the conventions of their interlocutors, they learn how to interpret what others say, and they monitor their own speech style to successfully negotiate communication) (Henderson, Barker, & Mak, 2016). Cross-cultural communication enables people to rapidly learn from the diversities. It may help people reconstruct the schema and prepare the future communication to accommodate the effective communication (Canagarajah, 2009).

In summary, the six multilingual and multicultural strategies proposed by Canagarajah (2009) explicitly highlight those proficient English speakers are those who are not only aware of others' cultural diversities but also their own identities and cultural practices (Sharifian, 2009). Furthermore, broad-mindedness, tolerance, and the ability to negotiate meaning also serve as significant strategies for successful cross-cultural communication. These strategies imply that the speakers in multicultural and multilingual communication apparently need the ability beyond 'mastering grammar' to achieve effective cross-cultural communication.

Previous studies have investigated international students' strategies to overcome cross-cultural communication during their study abroad experience. Fang and Baker (2018) discovered in their study that the participants employed certain strategies to achieve successful multicultural communication, such as communicating equally and understanding empathetically. Other strategies utilized by international students to enhance their cultural literacy and intercultural capability during the overseas study were through immersive experiences, such as attending local events (Tran & Bui, 2023) and outbound mobility (Byker and Putman, 2018). Rybo-LoPresti and Rhein (2021) found in their study that the American participants utilized Google Voice or made certain gestures to overcome miscommunication in Thailand.

Although many studies explored strategies for overcoming miscommunication across cultures, very few examined Indonesian students' cross-cultural experience, specifically those who study in Melbourne, Australia. With more Indonesian students studying in Australia each year, investigating Indonesian students' strategies for multicultural communication is deemed to be crucial. Thus, to fill the gap in the literature, this study primarily aims to enrich the field of Applied Linguistics by addressing this research question: What are the strategies for multicultural communication employed by Indonesian Postgraduate students during their study abroad experience in Australia? The answer to this

research question is expected to be a reference for students who plan to study abroad in Australia. In a particular, this study will unravel the efficient strategies to avoid misunderstanding across cultures in Australia.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

The present study conducted a qualitative approach, specifically a semi-structured interview, to gather detailed and authentic data in a natural setting. Given that interviews are interactive, researchers may seek further clarification or additional data from participants when their initial responses are ambiguous, confusing, or irrelevant (Mackey & Gass, 2016; Talmy, 2011), which can enhance the authenticity and reliability of the data. This methodology was deemed to be appropriate for investigating how Indonesian students navigate strategies for multicultural communication, as the research aims to achieve an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon. The data obtained from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Canagarajah's (2009) Strategies for Multicultural Communication theoretical framework, and were categorized based on key terms. The participants in this study were four Indonesian postgraduate students studying at a university in Melbourne, Australia, comprising 2 males and 2 females. The participants were subdivided into two classifications: First-year Students (FYS) and Second-Year Students (SYS) to compare and contrast the strategies utilized by them to achieve

successful multicultural communication. Table 1 represents the participants of the current study.

TABLE I
THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE CURRENT STUDY

Pseudonym	Duration in Australia	Academic year/ Major
Chandra (M)	6 months	First-year student/ Master of Digital Learning
Ghea (F)	6 months	First-year student/ Master of Applied Linguistics
Hasbi (M)	18 months	Second-year student/ Master of Environment and Sustainability
Elen (F)	18 months	Second-year student/ Master of Communication

III. DISCUSSION AND FINDING

Based on the key terms that emerged, there are 3 subsets of strategies for multicultural communication employed by Indonesian postgraduate students who study abroad in Australia. Such strategies are entangled with be tolerant and supportive, observing others' varieties and self-monitoring, and elaborating on L1 conventions.

1. Being Tolerant and Supportive

Both FYS and SYS agreed that being tolerant and supportive were highly crucial to achieve

effective multicultural communication. In this case, FYS and SYS were aware that cross-cultural communication might comprise cultural differences and practices. Thus, being able to 'accept' these differences was necessary to avoid miscommunication. The following excerpts reveal the participants' broad-mindedness towards the differences in communication across culture:

Data 1:

"The point is, we should be open-minded and tolerant with English diversities. If it's possible, don't get shocked easily, especially if you study abroad, of course, there will be a lot of differences. If you discover something which isn't suitable for us just because it isn't our norm, then just let it be. We need to be ready to face cultural differences, and we have to be smart in filtering new culture."

(Chandra/M/FYS/41:03)

Chandra discussed his approach of embracing and accepting differences in English usage as a crucial factor in achieving successful cross-cultural communication. He explained that his experience of meeting people from different nationalities while studying abroad has exposed him to these differences. Based on his social interactions, Chandra has developed specific strategies for effective international communication. Therefore, being supportive plays a significant role in cross-cultural communication. This finding is consistent with Firth's (1996) 'let it pass' strategy, which suggests

that instead of correcting or judging interlocutors, speakers should move forward with the conversation, allowing for better understanding in subsequent exchanges. Multilingual commonly highlights the ability to negotiate meaning, and prioritize intelligibility rather than being a 'native'-like. In essence, they do not imitate 'native' speakers' accents to achieve successful cross-cultural communication. They do not necessarily adopt commonalities in language forms (Canagarajah, 2009).

Data 2:

"I tend to repeat my sentences if I talk to people from different nations and if they don't understand (what I mean)."

(Ghea/F/SYS/32:31)

Ghea acknowledged that success in achieving her objectives required her to adopt a pragmatic approach. She shared her specific strategy of restating her statements to facilitate mutual comprehension with interlocutors. This demonstrates Ghea's willingness to collaboratively negotiate meaning during cross-cultural communication, given the potential for linguistic disparities.

This excerpt endorsed Henderson, Barker, and Mak (2016) who stated that multilinguals not only use English for communication purposes, but they also gain knowledge from the communication process itself, including the observation of their interlocutors' linguistic systems and conventions, the interpretation of others' speech, and the monitoring of their own speech style to

successfully negotiate communication. Canagarajah (2009) suggests that cross-cultural communication enables people to quickly learn from diverse cultural backgrounds and reconstruct their schemas to accommodate effective communication in future interactions.

2. Observing Others' Varieties and Self-Monitoring

Besides being tolerant and supportive, the outcomes from the interviews suggest that both FYS and SYS believed that monitoring others' varieties and self-monitoring were also crucial for communication across culture. The participants were aware of the diversity, and they realized that learning others' culture as well as their own culture would be beneficial for future communication. The participants monitored the systems and conventions of their interlocutors, and adjusted their own speech style to successfully negotiate communication (Canagarajah, 2009). In other words, they enthusiastically showed their curiosity to learn what was appropriate and what was not appropriate for cross-cultural communication since they were aware of the diversity.

Data 3:

"(We) need to pay extra attention when we talk to someone from other nationalities. If we don't understand (what the interlocutors say), we can ask for clarification. If the interlocutors don't understand (what I say), maybe (I will) slow down my speech rate, use an analogy, or use gestures."

(Hasbi/M/SYS/18:02)

This excerpt indicates that Hasbi monitored what the interlocutors said in order to gain a full understanding of the meaning. It is noted that Hasbi said 'pay extra attention' because he was aware that communication across culture might require the abilities beyond the linguistic skills (e.g. developing awareness of individual culture or negotiating meaning). Besides monitoring others, he also mentioned that he would adjust his speech style to enable the interlocutors to capture what he meant. This result also validates Canagarajah (2009) who stated that in multicultural communication, the speakers observe the systems and conventions of their interlocutors, and monitor their own speech style to negotiate communication successfully.

Data 4:

"I try to find an appropriate topic. After I interact with a lot of people here (in Australia), I try to avoid topics like age, relationship status, religion, and origin unless they (the interlocutors) start it."

(Elen/F/SYS/41:18)

Elen specifically described her opinion to respect others by avoiding what she perceived as inappropriate topics for certain people. She indicated that she learned to evade these inappropriate topics after she interacted with people from other nationalities. In other words, her social network has led her to choose this strategy to achieve successful cross-cultural communication. Given the chance to watch and learn, Elen benefited from this opportunity to

deliberately anticipate future miscommunication across cultures. In this case, Elen's response supports Canagarajah (2009) who stated that cross-cultural communication enables people to rapidly learn from diversities and makes it a reflection process. This strategy will allow people to explore their curiosity about other cultures and analytically examine them (Nardon et al., 2011; Sharifian, 2009). Further, Elen's response aligns with Henderson et al. (2016) who wrote that as multilinguals use English for interactional purposes, they also learn something new during the communication, (e.g. they observe the systems and conventions of their interlocutors, and they monitor their own speech style to successfully negotiate communication).

3. Elaborating on L1 Conventions

Another strategy implemented by FYS and SYS was elaborating on their L1 conventions as they were aware that they might carry out their L1 cultural frames to L2 during cross-cultural interaction. The participants also realized that the pragmatic conventions (e.g. speech act) might also be different from their interlocutors who came from different lingua-cultural backgrounds. Canagarajah (2009) indicated that cross-cultural communication may contain items from the first language of both speakers and interlocutors. Thus, cross-cultural communication does not have rigid or standardised grammatical form as it comprises the mixture of many different items (Canagarajah, 2009).

Data 5:

"I tend to explain and clarify. I have this experience, so I have an Australian friend who visited me, and I was eating when he came. Then, as an Indonesian, we tend to offer people the food when we eat. But it's only a small talk. Then my friend asked "So, you're not honest when you offer me food?", Then I explained that it is Indonesian culture. It doesn't mean that we want to give you our food, (we) just try to be polite."

(Chandra/M/FYS/34:15)

The excerpt above suggests that Chandra incorporated his Indonesian cultural frame into L2, which is offering food. He reported that offering food in Indonesian culture does not necessarily mean that he wanted to give the food. It is merely an Indonesian politeness marker as saying 'How are you?'. However, his friend critically questioned him by assuming he was dishonest when he offered the food. Then, Chandra specifically explained to him that it was only an Indonesian pragmatic feature and Indonesian commonly used it for respecting guests. In this case, Chandra brought his L1 speech act, specifically the act to do a small talk. The speech act is associated with the epistemological viewpoints and the speakers' preconceptions and values within their sociocultural settings. The speakers may carry out their L1 conventions to the English they adopt. Likewise, this excerpt is related to cultural schemas proposed by Sharifian (2009). Cultural schemas are defined as generalised collection of

knowledge elicited from the past experience guiding one's behaviour in a familiar situation (Sharifian, 2009). In this case, Chandra carried out his cultural schema during the conversation. He was aware that this cultural practice might be different from his interlocutors' cultural schema. For that reason, he attempted to explain this specific cultural practice. This excerpt is in line with Sharifian (2009) who suggested that a proficient multilingual must have the ability to negotiate the intercultural meaning (e.g. to be able to elaborate on their own cultural conceptualisations that might be unfamiliar to others) (Sharifian, 2009). In other words, proficient multilinguals are those who not only respect the diversity of English but also understand their own cultural conceptualisations.

IV. CONCLUSION

This article has unravelled strategies for multicultural communication employed by Indonesian postgraduate students during their study abroad experience in Australia. The crucial aspects related to their selected approaches were their recognition of diversity and their social connections, rather than their academic level. Neither FYS nor SYS exhibited clear-cut techniques to achieve effective multicultural communication. They recognized that tolerance towards differences was crucial to successful cross-cultural communication, as they acknowledged that such communication would include differences or norms different from their

L1. Furthermore, FYS and SYS found it useful to monitor others' variations and adopt a self-monitoring strategy to enhance their ability to negotiate meaning and avoid miscommunication in the future. Lastly, explaining their L1 cultural practices was also helpful in preventing conflicts during cross-cultural communication. In reality, FYS and SYS may bring their L1 cultural practices to L2 and elaborate on them to their interlocutors. Overall, this present study concludes that the experiences of FYS and SYS demonstrate that successful cross-cultural communication requires not only English language proficiency but also cultural competence and interpersonal skills. By valuing diversity and utilizing various strategies for negotiating meaning, individuals can build stronger relationships across cultures and expand their horizons in a globalized world.

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