

Communication Accommodation Strategies of International Exchange Students in Interacting with Local Students at Trunojoyo Madura University

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Abstract

This study aims to examine communication barriers and communication accommodation strategies employed by international exchange students in their interactions with local students at Trunojoyo Madura University. Differences in cultural background, language, and social practices frequently create communication challenges that affect the adaptation process of international students in the campus environment. This research adopts a qualitative approach using a narrative research design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation involving four international exchange students who had studied at Trunojoyo Madura University for a minimum of six months. The findings reveal that the primary communication barriers include limited proficiency in the Indonesian language, differences in communication styles, and variations in social norms. To address these challenges, international students apply several communication accommodation strategies, such as linguistic convergence, seeking assistance from local students, utilizing nonverbal communication strategies, and maintaining their original cultural identity. These strategies facilitate more effective interactions and foster harmonious social relationships. The study contributes theoretically to intercultural communication studies and practically serves as a reference for higher education institutions in designing support programs for international students.

Keywords– Intercultural Communication, Communication Accommodation Strategies, International Students, Student Interaction



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1. Introduction

The internationalization of higher education has undergone a profound transformation, evolving from a niche academic exchange into a global phenomenon that reshapes institutional identities. This movement has significantly increased cross-border student mobility, positioning universities not just as centers of learning, but as hubs of global diplomacy. In Indonesia, this trend is increasingly visible as the nation positions itself as an emerging educational destination in Southeast Asia. Trunojoyo Madura University (UTM), as a prominent public institution in East Java, has actively embraced this shift, becoming a strategic destination for international exchange students from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds. This influx of global talent necessitates a deeper understanding of how academic spaces transform when traditional boundaries are crossed.

The presence of international students at UTM creates a vibrant and intensive multicultural interaction space, where the global meets the local in daily campus life. These interactions are not merely peripheral; they form the core of a "third space" where different worldviews, religious practices, and social etiquettes intersect. For local students, the presence of international peers offers a window into the world, while for international students, UTM serves as their primary gateway to Indonesian and, more specifically, Madurese society. However, this multicultural environment is also a site of complexity, as participants must navigate the delicate balance between maintaining their original cultural identities and integrating into a new, unfamiliar communal framework.

In this complex social landscape, intercultural communication plays a crucial role in determining the success of international students' adaptation processes. Effective communication is the bridge that allows students to transition from being outsiders to becoming functional members of the university community. It involves more than just linguistic fluency; it requires an understanding of high-context communication patterns where meaning is often derived from non-verbal cues and situational contexts. When students master these communicative nuances, their psychological well-being and sense of

belonging improve significantly, whereas a failure to bridge these gaps can lead to isolation and a fragmented educational experience.

Despite the potential for rich exchange, differences in language, cultural values, social norms, and communication styles often give rise to significant communication barriers. These obstacles frequently manifest as "culture bumps" or full-scale misunderstandings that can derail social cohesion. In the context of Madura, international students might find the local dialect, the vigor of social expression, or specific religious observances challenging to interpret. These barriers are not confined to social hours; they penetrate the academic sphere, affecting group work, classroom discussions, and the fundamental comprehension of course materials. When a student cannot decipher the implicit expectations of a professor or a peer, their academic performance and confidence may suffer.

Extensive academic literature indicates that international students commonly experience "culture shock"—a period of disorientation and anxiety—during the early stages of their adaptation. While previous studies have extensively documented the psychological toll of this transition and general patterns of cultural adjustment, there remains a significant academic void. Most existing research tends to favor broad psychological frameworks or general national adaptations, often overlooking the micro-level mechanics of dialogue. Specifically, studies focusing on communication accommodation strategies—how individuals adjust their speech and behavior to decrease social distance—remain limited, particularly within the unique and robust cultural context of Madura.

This research is essential to address the aforementioned gap by shifting the lens toward the specific communicative maneuvers used within the Madurese cultural environment. Madura offers a distinct social fabric characterized by strong communal values, specific linguistic hierarchies, and a unique blend of Islamic and local traditions. Understanding how an international student from Europe, Africa, or other parts of Asia navigates the "Communication Accommodation Theory" (CAT) in this specific setting is vital. It explores

whether students use "convergence" to adapt to local styles or "divergence" to maintain their distinct identity, and how these choices influence their social acceptance among the Madurese student body.

Ultimately, this research seeks to strengthen and expand the field of intercultural communication studies by emphasizing the practical accommodation strategies employed by international exchange students at UTM. By focusing on daily interactions with local students, the study provides a granular view of how "global citizens" are actually made on the ground. The findings will not only contribute to theoretical discourses on communication but also provide practical insights for Trunojoyo Madura University to improve its international support services. By aligning the research focus with the empirical reality of the Madurese context, this study ensures that the discourse on internationalization remains grounded in the lived experiences of the students themselves.

2. Method

This study utilizes a qualitative approach grounded in a narrative research design, a methodology chosen for its unique capacity to capture the rich, subjective tapestries of human experience. By prioritizing narrative inquiry, the research moves beyond surface-level observations to explore the deeply personal stories and lived realities of international exchange students. This approach is particularly well-suited for investigating communication accommodation, as these processes are inherently dynamic, non-linear, and evolve significantly over time. Through the lens of storytelling, the study can uncover how students perceive their own linguistic shifts, the emotional weight of their social adjustments, and the chronological development of their communicative competence within a foreign cultural environment.

The participants for this research were strategically selected from the international exchange student body at Trunojoyo Madura University, specifically focusing on four individuals who have resided in Indonesia for a minimum of six months. This duration ensures that the informants have moved past the initial honeymoon phase of travel and have encountered genuine communicative

challenges and adaptation milestones. The study employs a purposive sampling technique, utilizing strict criteria to ensure the quality and relevance of the data: participants must be active students, engage in frequent direct interactions with local Madurese peers, and demonstrate a voluntary commitment to sharing their experiences. The primary focus remains on the specific communication accommodation strategies—such as convergence, divergence, or over-accommodation—that these students employ to bridge the gap between their native backgrounds and the local social landscape.

To ensure a holistic understanding of the research phenomenon, data collection was conducted through a multi-method approach involving in-depth interviews, participant observation, and rigorous documentation. The in-depth interviews served as the primary tool for extracting nuanced narratives regarding communication barriers and strategy implementation, while participant observation allowed for the real-time witnessing of social and academic interactions in their natural settings. To process this wealth of information, the study followed a systematic data analysis model comprising data reduction, data display, and the drawing of verified conclusions. To safeguard the academic integrity of the study, data credibility was maintained through source and method triangulation. This cross-verification of information from different perspectives and tools ensures that the findings are both robust and trustworthy, providing a reliable reflection of the intercultural dynamics at play.

3. Result and Discussion

The research results reveal that international exchange students at Trunojoyo Madura University (UTM) encounter a series of formidable communication barriers that define their initial experience in Indonesia. Among these, language barriers emerged as the most dominant and persistent challenge, particularly during the critical early months of their academic residency. This linguistic divide is characterized by a significant lack of specialized vocabulary and a fundamental struggle to decode the nuances of the Indonesian language as it is spoken in an academic setting. These deficiencies do not merely limit casual conversation; they

create a structural wall that prevents students from fully immersing themselves in the university's intellectual life.

Beyond the formal Indonesian language, students faced the unexpected complexity of local dialects, most notably the Madurese influence on daily speech. The prevalence of local slang, unique intonations, and the mixing of Madurese terms into Indonesian conversations often left international students feeling excluded from spontaneous social interactions. This difficulty in understanding the local "street" language or the informal banter in student lounges significantly hinders their ability to build immediate rapport with their local peers. Consequently, the first stage of their journey is often marked by a cautious silence as they attempt to map the linguistic landscape of the campus.

In addition to overt linguistic obstacles, the study found that fundamental differences in communication styles profoundly influence the quality of interactions. Many international students arrive from "low-context" cultures—where communication is expected to be direct, explicit, and literal. When these students interact with local Madurese and Indonesian students, who largely operate within a "high-context" framework, a cognitive gap emerges. In the local context, meaning is often embedded in what is not said, relying heavily on situational cues and social hierarchy. For the international student, the inability to "read between the lines" can lead to confusion and a sense of being perpetually misinformed.

The potential for miscommunication is further intensified by differing social norms regarding transparency and confrontation. International students often found it challenging to navigate the local etiquette of expressing opinions or declining invitations. While a foreign student might value a direct "no" to avoid ambiguity, local students may use polite euphemisms or non-committal gestures to maintain social harmony and avoid "losing face." These subtle cultural disagreements regarding social obligations and peer-to-peer feedback can create underlying tensions that, if not managed, may result in social withdrawal or the formation of isolated cultural cliques.

To navigate these hurdles, international students actively employ various communication accommodation strategies, with linguistic convergence being the most prominent. Despite their limited initial proficiency, students demonstrated a strong commitment to learning and using Indonesian in their daily routines. This effort toward convergence serves a dual purpose: it acts as a functional tool for survival and as a symbolic gesture of respect toward the host culture. By attempting to use local greetings and adopting the rhythmic patterns of local speech, international students signal their willingness to integrate, which in turn encourages local students to be more patient and supportive in their responses.

The study highlights that international students frequently rely on local students as informal communication mediators, particularly within the high-stakes environment of the classroom. These "cultural bridges" are essential during group projects and complex lectures where technical jargon can be overwhelming. Local mediators help translate not just the words, but the cultural expectations of the professors. This reliance on peer-to-peer mediation fosters a unique form of collaborative learning, though it also places a significant social responsibility on the local students to act as constant guides for their international counterparts.

When verbal language proves insufficient, international students pivot toward nonverbal strategies to bridge the gap. The strategic use of hand gestures, exaggerated facial expressions, and modified voice intonations becomes a vital secondary language for clarifying messages and expressing emotions. However, adaptation does not mean total assimilation. Students also employ "maintenance" strategies to preserve their original cultural identities. This is most evident when they congregate within international student circles, using their native languages as a psychological "safe haven" to recharge and maintain their sense of self amidst the pressure of adapting to a foreign environment.

These findings affirm that communication accommodation strategies are the invisible threads that weave together the social fabric of a multicultural campus. The ability of international students to balance convergence with identity maintenance is vital for building harmonious social relationships at UTM. Effective interaction does more than just facilitate the individual adaptation of the

foreign student; it enriches the local student body by exposing them to diverse perspectives and communication styles. This mutual exchange transforms the university into a true global laboratory, where intercultural friction eventually gives way to a more sophisticated, empathetic, and inclusive academic community.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that international exchange students at Trunojoyo Madura University face communication barriers related to language limitations, differences in communication styles, and variations in social norms. To address these challenges, students employ communication accommodation strategies, including linguistic convergence, support from local students, nonverbal communication strategies, and maintenance of their original cultural identity.

Theoretically, this study enriches intercultural communication literature by highlighting communication accommodation strategies within the context of student exchange programs. Practically, the findings may serve as a reference for higher education institutions in developing mentoring programs and strengthening multicultural interactions on campus.

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