

**INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE
Its Importance To Adaptation Strategy Towards People With Different
Cultural Background**

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Abstract

This paper presents experiences of a Japanese native speaker who worked as a volunteer teacher in Indonesia. Using data collected through in-depth interview and observation, this study explores, from the Japanese native speaker's perspective and social interaction between her and Indonesian teachers as well as students. The context of the research is very limited. It examines only one volunteer assigned to teach Japanese language at a senior high school in Bandung for nine months. The result of study shows that the Japanese native speaker experienced culture shock. She had been through the U-curve with these phases: Honeymoon, Crisis, Recovery, and Adjustment. To cope with the culture shock she tried her best to adapt to Indonesian culture.

Keywords: Culture shock, intercultural communication, adaptation strategy

A. INTRODUCTION

Working abroad is a valuable experience. Many new things are encountered and studied. The key to success of living in other country is having an ability to adapt to its environment and people with different cultural background. Huntington (in Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2014:31) stated that the most important thing in the culture includes language, religion, traditions, and customs. Lack of ability to adapt to different host culture can cause culture shock, stress, and homesickness which can lead to the desire of a person to immediately return to his/her hometown.

An example of the lack of ability to adapt to people with different cultural background, experienced by a Japanese native speaker who lived temporarily in Indonesia. She worked as a Japanese volunteer teacher in Bandung district, West Java.

The following research questions are:

- 1) How did the Japanese volunteer teacher experience different culture in her workplace and society?
- 2) How did the Japanese volunteer teacher cope with different cultures?

This research could be utilized as references and insights about the importance of intercultural communication competence in social interaction and human relations at a workplace.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories and concepts used in this study are intercultural communication, intercultural communication competence, barriers in intercultural communication, and adaptation to cultural differences.

1. Intercultural communication

Intercultural communication refers to communication between individuals or groups of different culture or subculture (Asuncion-Lande in Infante, 1993:427). Intercultural communication is communication that occurs when members of a particular culture give a message to members of other culture (Samovar et al., 2014:13). Intercultural communication which involves interaction between people's perception of culture and symbol systems are quite different in a communication.

A key aspect of intercultural communication is interpersonal communication between communicators and a key of an effective intercultural communication is knowledge.

For immigrants or expatriates, it is important to know and understand the cultural differences and potential problems that may arise and make earnest efforts to overcome these problems. In addition, people need to understand that all the problems and obstacles faced will depend on how they react to them.

2. Intercultural Communication Competence

Intercultural communication competence is considered very broadly as an impression that behavior is appropriate and effective in a given context. Normally, competence is considered an ability or a set of skilled behaviors. However, any given behavior or ability may be judged competent in one context, and incompetent in another. Consequently, competence can not inhere in the behavior or ability itself. It must instead be viewed as a social evaluation of behavior. This social evaluation is composed of the two primary criteria of appropriateness and effectiveness (Spitzberg, 2000: 379-380).

Appropriateness means that the valued rules, norms, and expectations of the relationship are not violated significantly. Effectiveness is the accomplishment of valued goals or rewards relative to costs and alternatives. With these dual standards, therefore communication will be competent in an intercultural context when it accomplishes the objectives of an actor in a manner that is appropriate to the context and relationship (Spitzberg, 2000: 379-380).

People who are competent in communicating means they can communicate effectively. Messages are interpreted the same by both the sender and the recipient. Thus, intercultural communication competence sees the success and feasibility of communication and interaction between people from different cultures. (Mulyana, 2005; Deardorff, D. K., 2006).

3. Barriers in Intercultural Communication

Hall (in Infante, 1993: 432) contributed the idea of intercultural communication. He distinguished between low-context and high context of cultures in terms of communication patterns. In high-context cultures such as Japanese and Korean cultures, most of the information or message is conveyed through the physical context or implicit based on the rules, roles, and values. In low-context cultures like American cultures, most of the information contain in verbal and explicit messages. Although there is a message in both of low and high cultural, Hall believes that one context tends to dominate the other.

4. Ethnocentrism

Liliweri (2013: 138) defines ethnocentrism as "an understanding" where the followers of a culture or a tribal group always feel superior to others outside their group. Ethnocentrism can evoke an attitude of "we" and "they", more specifically, may form subcultures that come from a great culture. Nationalism is a form of ethnocentrism, for example, Americans feel more superior to those of Chinese or Indonesian. Ethnocentrism often entails the belief that one's own race or ethnic group is the most important or that some or all aspects of its culture are superior to those of other groups (Boundless. 2016).

5. Stereotype

Stereotype is to generalize people based on little information and form assumptions about them based on their membership in a group. In other words, stereotyping is the process of putting people and objects into established categories or judgments about people or objects based on the categories that are considered suitable, rather than based on their individual characteristics. Mulyana (2014: 237).

6. Prejudice

According to Mulyana (2014: 243) prejudice is a mistake perception of different people. Prejudice is an unfair attitude towards a person or a group. Prejudice also means decisions and judgments based on past experience. Richard

W. Brislin (in Mulyana 2014: 243) defines that unfair prejudice as an attitude that deviates or is intolerant of a group of people. As stereotypes, prejudice can be positive or negative. However, prejudice is generally a negative bias.

7. Culture Shock

Culture shock or a cultural shock by Brambell (2012: 3) is a state of disorientation which can be experienced by a person who enters unfamiliar environments, away from the comfort zone. Culture shock is a common condition of the people who move to a new country or region. Culture shock can be experienced by anyone who after a long stay in one place moves to other place which has different cultures. To cope with the culture shock, people need to attempt to adjust or adapt to new environments and people with different cultures.

C. The U-Curve Framework

U-curve theory was initiated by Lysgaard. The U-curve framework has been widely used to describe the cross-cultural adjustment process of expatriate employees or sojourners within a host culture. The U curve relates the time path of an expatriate' adjustment to a host country's culture. It involves a honeymoon stage, followed by culture shock and a process of improvement or adjustment to the host culture, culminating in a mastery stage, characterised by 'small incremental.increases' in the expatriates ability to function effectively. The degree of adjustment is measured not by conformity to the host country culture but in terms of variables such as comfort or satisfaction with the new environment, attitudes, degree of contact with host nationals, or difficulties with aspects of the new environment (Black & Mendenhall, 1990). The different stages suggest that there is a transition in understanding and living when shifting from a home to a host country culture. Initially, difficulties of adjustment may be overridden by a cultural infatuation caused by the newness of the environment. Culture shock sets in when coping with the new environment on a daily basis becomes necessary. The adjustment stage is marked by an increasing degree of satisfaction with being able to cope with the cultural norms of the host country. Increasing satisfaction may

have nothing to do with following host country behaviours but rather, having a better knowledge of how to function effectively within the host country.

D. INTERCULTURAL ADAPTATION STRATEGIES

Intercultural adaptation strategies are needed to overcome problems or obstacles in intercultural communication relations. These adaptation strategies can be done: 1) Empathy. Empathy is an important factor in general communication competence including intercultural communication competent. According to Ting-Toomey (in Samovar, 2014: 466) through empathy we can imagine ourselves in the position of different cultures and experience what was experienced by other person. 2) Develop communication flexibility.

According to Gudykunst and Kim (in Samovar, 2014: 472-473) to gather information and adapt our behavior to others, then we need to have a flexible behavior. We should be able to choose the appropriate strategy to gather the information we need about the other person in order to communicate effectively with them. This requires different behavior in collecting information. 3) Make a personal relationship with the host. It is important to make a direct contact with the host. Although the insights and knowledge can be gained through intercultural studies, the everyday additional practical wisdom is still needed from people of different cultures. Making friends is a good example for developing relationships in the host culture. 4) Study the culture of the host and our own. It is also important to understand others' religion, values and beliefs, behavior of verbal and non-verbal, social ethics, political system, etc. 5) Participate in cultural activities. The best way to learn a new culture is to play an active role in the culture. On several occasions it would need to participate and interact with family members, neighbors or the environment in which one lives.

E. METHOD

This study used a qualitative research method. According to Sugiyono (2008:1) the method of qualitative research is used to examine the natural conditions. Bogdan and Biklen cited by Sugiyono (2008:9) also explains that a descriptive qualitative

research uses data collected in the form of words or images, not emphasizes on the figures.

Informant in this study is a Japanese native speaker who worked as a volunteer teacher at a senior high school in Bandung district, namely X (31 years old) in the school year 2015-2016. X lived with Indonesians in a rent house during her stay in Bandung. She took approximately 30 minutes to reach her workplace by public transportation.

The in-depth interview was carried out face to face twice. Each meeting lasted for approximately 3 hours. In additions, communications via e-mail and SMS as well as by phone were done. Communication used three languages: Japanese, English, and Indonesian languages.

F. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Language Barriers

In the first 2 weeks staying in Bandung, X experienced a severe pain. According to the doctor who examined X, she was hit by an unknown virus type. X was confused with her doctor's explanation. She felt her face and mouth itchy and her whole body was mottled red like a mosquito bite. According to X, the doctor seemed difficult to explain what happened to X due to his English problem. X was frustrated by her language barrier between them. She was given some antibiotic tablets and cream to combat itchy.

"In conditions of pain and no one understands my language, I really want to go back to Japan and be with my family" said X.

X communicated in Japanese with Japanese language teacher at her workplace. However, Japanese language ability of the teacher and students was limited and needs to be improved. As a result, X often felt tired of repeating her conversation. X rarely communicated her students in Japanese language except when she taught Japanese language.

According to X, most Indonesian people both pupils and teachers at school do not seem to try hard to learn Japanese while English language skills of them were

quite poor. Pupils and teachers appeared inconfident using Japanese and English meanwhile X struggled to learn Indonesian language.

Food

According to X in Indonesia all types of food are available including Japanese food that she could find in restaurants. X likes fried noodles which she tasted different that *udon* or *soba* noodles. However, X ate fried noodles occasionally because it was too greasy. X found Sundanese and Indonesian people in general really like this kind of fried foods (fried foods and chips or crackers). It seemed for her that Indonesian people like eating. Although they have had a great meal, they still eat a lot of snacks like hotcakes, chips, or fried food.

Contrast to Japanese culture, Indonesian people like to treat others some food. They pay some food for others. Japanese people culturely do *betsu-betsu* or go dutch if they eat in a restaurant. In this case, they pay their own food and not pay other's food. In other words, they pay each meals.

Public Transportation Driver

In the pre-departure training, X was informed that Indonesian people are friendly. X found that the information was not always true and she felt dissappointed. It happened many times that she was treated unfair by public transportation drivers including taxis' drivers. Almost every time she went by public transportation she had to pay more than it should be. For example, she gave a public transportation (*angkot*) driver Rp 5.000 while the fees was only Rp 3.500. She did not receive any changes of Rp 1.500. The worse thing for her was she never got any changes from taxi drivers if the changes are less than Rp 10.000.

Cleanliness and Garbage

Dry and wet garbage in most parts in Bandung were dumped in one place or not separated. X sometimes saw rubbish a long the way of traditional markets or even near pedesterian. She once educated her students how to sort different kinds of garbage and throw in separete rubbish bins at school. Hoeverver, she felt

disappointed to find that the separated garbage was disposed in the same place in a landfill.

“Jam Karet”

In English “jam karet” could be literally translated "rubber time". The term was defined as “time that is imprecise, late from the appointed time” such as meeting. X was surprised with the delay of 15-30 minutes or even more when she had an appointment with her Indonesian collega or friends. People whom she made appointment were late without prior notification and made her wait for a long time. Instead of apologizing, those people gave her reason by blaming somebody else. Her students sometimes came late to her class. Those who were late sometimes came to her class without showing guilty. It made her more dissapointed.

Early Riser

Indonesian people especialy Moslems get up early in the morning. Moslems need to pray *subuh*. In the first weeks at her rent house X was disturbed by the sound of *adzan* from the mosque and the noise of her house mates who need to do *wudhu* and pray. As time went by X utilized *adzan* an “alarm” to wake up in the morning. X was impressed with *adzan* that she never heard before.

Work Ethic and Discipline

Teachers are too permissive and "spoiled". For example some teachers sometimes do not come to work because of uncommon reasons or not occur in Japan. A teacher does not work because he/she feels tired, needs to take his/her son to the doctor, his/her housekeeper (maid) goes home, and so on. Teachers are also generally less firmly against students with less or no discipline.

It's okay" and "where are you going?"

Indonesian people often say "it's okay" to respond or react to things that might bother them. In fact “it’s okay” could be “okay” or “not ok”.

Such questions like "where are you going?" sometimes is said by X’ Indonesian friends, teachers, or students. It seemed that they did not really want to know but

in fact it sometimes bothered her. X felt confused how to answer those questions. She did not want to make people feel ignored by not answering their questions. In other side she felt it was not necessary to let people know where she was going to.

Weather and Pollution

The weather in Bandung is very hot even in rainy season.

"Although we are in Japan experiencing summer but in Jakarta and Bandung different from Japan. In Bandung and Jakarta, it was hot and dusty (polluted)," said X.

Pre-departure training is necessary for people who will live or stay in other country for quite a long time. X got general idea about living in Indonesia from her departure training, media, and her friends who used to live in Indonesia. In the first weeks of her arrival Indonesia she attended an introductory session from fellow volunteers in Jakarta. At the session she got an overview of Indonesia and the school where she was placed. She was excited to see and come to various shopping malls around Jakarta. She looked forward to starting her new journey as a Japanese language teacher in Bandung. X imagined that everything would be exciting. As a matter of fact, it only lasted for the first week. X experienced what is called Samovar, et al. (2014: 477) as the excitement phase. She was elated, euphoria and enthusiasm with people, environments, and cultures she encountered.

In the second week in Bandung, X experienced the second phase or disappointment phase. The second phase was marked by several experiences such as sickness due to unknown type of virus. X was frustrated because of the constraints of communication she faced. In that condition X was ethnocentric. She always compared Japanese culture to Indonesian culture. Japanese cultures such as shown in services in hospitals, clinics, supermarkets, transprotations, and schools are much better. In additions, Japanese culture also pay much respect to such services from doctors and nurses, transport services, respect for time, work discipline, spirit of learning and work, etc. The more she compared what Japanese people used to behave to Indonesian customs, the more she was frustrated.

In the third month X went through the third phase or the so-called recovery phase. X gradually made some adjustments or adaptations to host culture (Indonesian culture). There were internal and external factors of adaptation strategies. Internal factors are factors such as character, attitude, and motivation to do the job. External factors, such as lack of support from family, friends and fellow Indonesian people and Japanese people, work environment, etc. The character of a person can influence how she made adaptations. A person who is open minded, flexible and tolerant will be more easily adjusted to the environment (Levine and Adelman, 1993: 39). Attitude is one of the influential factors in adaptation. In this case, for example X perceived that cultural differences have been a challenge to face, learn, and become new insights. Motivation also becomes one of factors that influence a person in adaptation. A motivated person gains new experience working abroad (Indonesia), learns new culture, and does her best to be more adaptable.

External factors are among the factors that affect a person's adaptation to the new environment. According to Sulaiman (1995: 32), an open working atmosphere will make easier for someone adjust to new environment compared to the close atmosphere or environment. In an open working environment, a person will not feel embarrassed or awkward to express her/his feelings. X is not accustomed to be open to people who are not close to her. Her colleague (local Japanese teacher) is the one who is close to her. By then, X could be open in some occasions. X tried her best to directly express her discomfort or problems encountered to team teaching carefully. For example, X told her colleague why she did not want to eat fried food. X carefully explained the danger of cholesterol for the body and the importance of health care.

X established good relation with Indonesian people at the workplace and her neighbor in her housing complex. She practiced her Indonesian language with them and performed a variety of activities that can help her adapt to the culture of Indonesia in general and Sundanese culture.

Learning Indonesian culture

To gain new knowledge and experiences about Indonesian culture (especially Sundanese culture) X learned traditional and Sundanese and Jaipongan dance. According X although Jaipongan dance is difficult to learn, it is interesting, energetic or dynamic.

X sometimes attended invitations from local people. It was a good opportunity for her to see and learn Indonesian culture, such as traditional wedding ceremony and *aqua*. *Aqiqah*, an Islamic terminology, is defined as the animal that is slaughtered on the occasion of child birth. For the child there should be *aqiqah*, on behalf of the child make sacrifice and remove the hair. *Aqiqah* consists of giving a name to the baby, shaving its hair, and offering a sacrifice. It is recommended that the new-born baby should be given either a compound name containing one of the most beautiful names of Allah or the name of holy figures.

Avoid Stereotypes

X was aware of her mistake and no longer prejudiced about public transport drivers who she thought were unfriendly. Apparently, not all public transportations and taxi drivers are friendly. These might happen to certain drivers. She got experience once she met a friendly public transportation driver.

X did a stereotype mostly because she did too much comparison between her Japanese cultures to Indonesian culture.

Japanese people have a principle to always do their work sincerely with high morale. (The Japanese Times, 2001). They have *ganbari* (頑張り) principle. *Ganbari* derived from the Japanese word *ganbaru* (頑張る), which means doing the best (Davies and Ikeno, 2002: 87). In many cases it may be true that Indonesian people are not as persistent as Japanese people but X witnessed when she went to traditional markets in Bandung, traders seemed very diligent to bring their stuff to be sold early in the morning such as vegetables, fruits, herbs, and soon on. On social media, X also saw school children who were struggling to reach their school by crossing a wire bridge.

Learning Indonesian Intensively

X realized that an ability to speak and understand Indonesian language is one of the important factors to interact with Indonesian people. For that purpose, she intensively tried her best to speak English with her Indonesian friends and teachers. X also learned Indonesian language through reading children books with a simple Indonesian language.

X also realized that it is impossible to change the habits of other people that she thought they were uncommon. According to Lavine and Adelman (1998: 42), to familiarize themselves with the customs in a new place (going native), a newcomer can more easily adapt to its environment. For example, to maintain cleanliness in the classroom and school environment, keeping promises, being discipline and hard working, and respect for others, X preferred showing as living example rather than asked them to do so.

Limitation and Future Research

The study reported in this paper was limited to a Japanese native speaker who worked as volunteer teacher at a senior high school in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia. Findings can at best be treated as indicative. Future research could include more, if not all, Japanese volunteer teachers in Bandung. The results would be more representatives.

G. CONCLUSION

People who live or stay in other country and meet people with different cultural background potentially face problems or feel discomfort. Ethnocentrism, stereotypes, prejudice, and language barriers can cause problems and turn to cultural shock.

Japanese and Indonesian people have high-context culture. From Japanese informant's perspective, Indonesian people have higher context culture than Japanese people. In fact, most researchs found that Japanese people have higher-context culture than Indonesian people.

From this research, it shows that the informant experienced the second phase of U-curve or crisis/disappointment phase. This occurred due to several causes such as ethnocentrism, prejudice, language barriers, and overgeneralization.

To cope with culture shock, the following adjustment or adaptation strategies are undertaken: 1) Being open-minded. 2) Learned Indonesian culture in general, including Sundanese language since she lived in Bandung. 3) Learned Indonesian language intensively and practiced using Indonesian language with Indonesian teachers and students in her daily life in Bandung. 4) Managed prejudices and stereotypes. 5) Attended Indonesian culture events. 6) Established Japanese language Club and visited tourist spots around Bandung and outside Bandung. 7) Overcame homesickness by communicating with family and close friends in Japan via Skype, e-mails, phones, and social media.

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Ade Tuti Turistiati

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