



## Analysis of Intercultural Communication in Implementation of Independent Student Exchange Program

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**ABSTRACT:** Since 2021 the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology has launched the Independent Student Exchange program as part of the Merdeka Campus Program. The Independent Student Exchange Program began to open online registration in June 2021, and has now entered the program implementation stage. One of the main goals of the Independent Student Exchange Program is to explore and get to know the cultural diversity of the archipelago and make friends with fellow students from different cultural backgrounds. This study aims to analyze aspects of intercultural communication that occur in the implementation of the Independent Student Exchange Program, such as how cultural interactions among students, how each student displays their cultural identity, and how to adapt to fellow students. This research uses a qualitative approach, an exploratory paradigm, in a case study perspective. The data collection process was carried out under natural conditions in the form of observation, in-depth interviews and documentation studies. This study concludes that although there are many differences in cultural backgrounds, students try to adapt to their peers who have different cultural backgrounds. The main obstacle in intercultural communication is the language barrier, because even though both speak Indonesian, the influence of local languages is still very strong, so sometimes the same vocabulary has different meanings and meanings. The results of the study also found several cases related to stereotypes against certain ethnic groups, the existence of ethnocentrism among program participants and various difficulties in adapting to fellow program participants.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Communication; Student Exchange; Independent Campus; Independent Study.



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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Unitary State of The Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) consists of thousands of ethnic groups and languages. As a pluralistic nation, interactions between different cultures are unavoidable. Intercultural interactions color life in Indonesia, including in the field of education, especially intercultural interactions among students from all over the archipelago. Cultural diversity can be a motivating factor to get to know and understand the diversity of the population in Indonesia. On the other hand, cultural diversity can also be an obstacle or challenge in communicating and collaborating in the implementation of the National Student Exchange Program ([Siregar et al., 2020](#)).

The Independent Student Exchange Program has been open to students throughout Indonesia since last June 2021. Prospective students can register through the official website of the Independent Student Exchange Program through the Merdeka Campus website of the Ministry of Education and Culture. The requirements for students to be able to take part in the Independent Student Exchange Program include (1) being registered as a non-vocational undergraduate or undergraduate State University student, who is active in odd semesters or semesters 3, 5, and 7; (2) have a minimum GPA of 2.75 or have experience of non-academic achievements as evidenced by valid documents; (3) have the ability and opportunity to develop reasoning, insight, as well as integrity, creativity and innovation; (4) have never been subject to academic and non-academic sanctions at the sending university; (5) willing to comply with all written provisions in the Standard Operational Manual for the Independent Student Exchange Program; and (6) obtain a recommendation from the original higher education institution and parent/guardian permission ([Baharuddin, 2021](#)).

During the implementation of the program, each student will get a colleague or friend who comes from a different cultural background from himself, so that ethnic Javanese students will get acquainted and socialize with students from different ethnicities from outside Java. So it is hoped that students will gain new insights, many experiences and lessons related to the diversity of Indonesian culture and tolerance between individuals. From these meetings and introductions, participants will learn to appreciate differences, and celebrate diversity while attending lectures. This program aims to encourage the growth of the spirit of love for the homeland through friendship between the younger generation in various regions of the archipelago. After participating in this program, it is hoped that the participants can become students with integrity, understand diversity and wisely manage the wealth of resources to build a sovereign, just and prosperous nation. Technically, through this program, students will be sent to a campus outside their domicile island to follow the learning process with three schemes to choose from ([Fuadi & Aswita, 2021](#)).

First, a total of 20 credits can be taken entirely at the recipient university and carried out offline. Second, a total of 20 credits can be taken in a combination, i.e. half the courses at the receiving college offline and the rest at the sending college online. , and the rest are online partner universities and/or online sending universities. In addition, students will also participate in Nusantara Module activities which are equivalent to 2 (two) credits and are guided by lecturers. The four main activities in the Nusantara Module include Diversity activities, which consist of 14

activities, Inspiration 3 (three) activities, Reflection 7 (seven) activities, and Social Contribution 1 (one) activity ([Puspitasari & Nugroho, 2021](#)).

Through the Independent Student Exchange Program, in addition to students studying as usual, they also get various other enrichment activities that can be valuable provisions for their future. In addition to attending lectures and getting a maximum of 20 credits at partner universities, participants will also receive enrichment programs prepared by lecturers who are fully dedicated to building soft skills, building competence and building the spirit of togetherness of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* but in a global scope ([Nofia, 2020](#)).

In the Independent Student Exchange Program, students can choose courses offered by partner universities or sending universities, and choose a recipient university by accessing information on the determination of the recipient college. After that, participants go to the location of the receiving university to take offline or online learning, and take part in Nusantara Module activities according to the schedule with the supervisor and mentor from the receiving university ([Susilawati, 2021](#)).

The Independent Student Exchange Program is a continuation of the *Permata Sakti* program, which is a student exchange program between universities throughout Indonesia under the authority of the Directorate of Learning and Student Affairs, Directorate General of Higher Education, Kemendikbudristek. *Permata Sakti* is an extension of the Nusantara Student Exchange Program, the Credit Transfer System with Information Technology, which has been taking place since 2019 with a total of 200 students from all over the archipelago. Carrying the same goal, in 2020 the program was upgraded to reach a coverage of 20,000 students and was named the Independent Student Exchange Program. Through the Independent Student Exchange Program, every student has the opportunity to study cross-departmental courses, so that they can explore their potential more broadly. Each participant will gain valuable experience when getting to know students from different cultural and geographical backgrounds. Even though participants are familiar with online culture, online interactions with students from different backgrounds will provide many benefits and new experiences ([Sudaryanto et al., 2020](#)).

In accordance with the slogan of the *Merdeka Campus* program, which is to free opportunity, free to learn, the slogan of the Independent Student Exchange Program is *Temporary Exchange, Meaning Forever*. The two slogans have the meaning that many benefits can be obtained by the participants by joining this program. From an academic perspective, participants are expected to gain a lot of new insights and knowledge, especially as students across majors. In addition, participants can develop soft skills to adapt in new and diverse areas. Participants can also hone their interpersonal skills to socialize with students with different cultural backgrounds. Participants can also learn to understand the values of tolerance and mutual respect for each other, through cultural introduction activities where participants can introduce their culture and learn the culture of students from different cultures. All of these activities are expected to increase the pride of participants in the cultural diversity of the Indonesian nation ([Kristanto, 2016](#)).

Communication and culture are two inseparable entities, culture is communication, and communication is culture. This type of intercultural relationship must be based on the existence of different communication, where victory and partial supremacy and culture will find that everyone must be more tolerant. One can learn a culture through communication, and communication is also a reflection of one's culture. Culture and communication are two inseparable things because culture does not only determine who speaks for whom, about what, and how the results of the communication. Culture also helps a person to determine how to present messages, meanings, conditions, and circumstances through various messages that may not be interpreted ([Ou & Gu, 2020](#)).

Intercultural communication occurs when the parties involved in these communication activities bring with them different cultural background experiences that reflect the values held by the group in the form of experience, knowledge, and values. Intercultural communication which occurs under a cultural condition that differs in language, norms, customs, and habits. Intercultural communication is the sending and receiving of messages in the context of cultural differences that produce different effects. Meanwhile, intercultural communication is an event that refers to where the people involved in it either directly or indirectly have different cultural backgrounds. ([Nadeem et al., 2020](#)).

Identity is complex and abstract. So it is not easy to define what identity is. Social researchers have various understandings and descriptions of what identity is. Identity means defining a person as an individual who is different and separate from other individuals, related to behavior, attitudes and beliefs held. Identity can also be said as the way a person understands himself. However, literally, identity is a characteristic, sign or identity possessed by a person, group or organization that distinguishes it from another person, group or organization. Identity can also be the overall characteristics or special conditions that a person has from biological, psychological, and sociological factors that underlie individual behavior and become a differentiator with other individuals. So it can be said that identity is something that is in ourselves that makes a difference with others, so that each individual will be different from one another. ([King & Bailey, 2021](#)).

When cultural adaptation is carried out, the process of cultural acculturation is simultaneously carried out. Cultural acculturation is finding interpersonal relationships, the effects of cultural contact, and the process of adjusting one's self to a new culture ([Imai et al., 2016](#)). Cultural identification, intercultural friendship, and involvement in a culture are factors that have contributed to adaptation. The process of cultural adaptation includes: (1) deculturation and acculturation, (2) pressure-adaptation-growth dynamics, (3) intercultural transformation. Adaptation is more than just adjustment to language, cultural and interpersonal differences, there are a number of conflicting factors that affect intercultural relations. Misconceptions about cultural expectations are the background to a number of conflicts. By identifying cultural conflicts, you will be able to increase your awareness and ability to communicate ([Chan et al., 2018](#)).

Basically, language is a number of symbols or signs that are agreed to be used by a group of people to produce meaning. The relationship between the chosen symbol and the agreed meaning is sometimes arbitrary. Language really is at the core of human interaction. Language is

an important aspect of intercultural communication ([Munková et al., 2013](#)). Through language a person learns the values and behavior of his culture. Language also plays an important role in communication in general, namely directly expressing or exchanging thoughts or views about other people. Culture is also characterized by a number of variations of other languages, some of which are accent, dialect, argot, and slang. Human culture with all its complexities will not develop and cannot be thought of without the help of language ([Lomotey & Csajbok-Twerefou, 2021](#)). The concept of a symbiotic relationship between culture and language is that as long as languages have different ways of symbolizing an objective experience, language users tend to select and differentiate experiences differently according to the categories that exist in their respective languages ([Hassan, 2014](#)).

Stereotypes are complex forms of grouping that mentally regulate one's experiences and direct one's attitude towards certain people. It is a way of organizing the images that a person has into a definite and simple category that is used to represent a group of people. According to Stereotypes are cognitive structures that contain the recipient's knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about human social groups. Stereotypes tend to generalize the characteristics of a group of people. Stereotypes can be positive or negative. Stereotypes that refer to a group of people as lazy, rude, mean or stupid are negative stereotypes. Of course, there are positive stereotypes, such as hardworking, well-behaved, and smart ([Matera & Catania, 2021](#)).

Conflict is one of the essences of human life and development which has various characteristics. Humans have gender differences, social and economic strata, legal systems, nations, ethnicities, religions, beliefs, sects, politics, as well as culture and life goals ([Han et al., 2018](#)). In the history of mankind, these differences have always led to conflict. Conflict is a process that is expressed between two or more interdependent parties regarding the object of the conflict, using patterns of behavior and conflict interactions that produce conflict outcomes. Conflict has an influence that can be positive and negative. Conflict management is a process of parties involved in conflict or third parties developing conflict strategies and implementing them to control conflicts in order to produce the desired resolution ([Ferine et al., 2021](#)).

From the explanation above, it is considered important to research various cases of intercultural communication that occurred in the implementation of the Independent Student Exchange Program from October to December 2021 with university research locations being the location of program implementation on various campuses in West Java Province. The research location was chosen because in that location all recipient universities have completed the first phase of the Independent Student Exchange Program. In this study, the researcher limits the research to only discussing aspects of intercultural communication that occur in the implementation of the Independent Student Exchange Program, based on cases found by researchers during the research.

## **METHOD**

This research uses a qualitative approach, an exploratory paradigm, in a case study perspective. Qualitative research, flexible and open with an emphasis on inductive analysis. This type of research uses descriptive research because this research is a way to examine the status of a group, a person, an object, a set of conditions, a system of thought, or a class of events in the present

([Hamilton & Finley, 2019](#)). This study examines aspects of intercultural communication that occur among students participating in the Independent Student Exchange Program coordinated by the Directorate of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology. In accordance with the research method and approach used, the data collection process carried out in a natural setting refers to participant observation, in-depth interviews and documentation ([Hamilton & Finley, 2020](#)).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

From the results of the research, it is known that the participants of the Independent Student Exchange Program face several obstacles and challenges in the process of intercultural communication. The first obstacle or challenge is in the process of adapting to the local culture. In the adaptation process, the program participants simultaneously carry out the acculturation process. The acculturation carried out involves three important things, namely language, imbalance, and ethnocentricity. Participants face challenges against language barriers, customs, and cultural variations in verbal and non-verbal communication styles in order to achieve understanding. Language is one of the factors that influence their adaptation process. It is proven that at the beginning of adapting to his new environment ([Bohman & Borglin, 2014](#)).

Imbalance, which is associated as a relative preference for maintaining one's original culture and identity, and a relative preference for relating to members of a new culture. Participants tend to adapt by integration, indicated by the statement that most of the informants tend to want to maintain their original culture, but at the same time try to integrate with the new culture. ([Ivanoff et al., 2017](#)).

Ethnocentrism is an assessment of other cultures on the basis of the values and standards of one's own culture. Ethnocentrism also appears in the adaptation process carried out by program participants in establishing relationships with local students. It was shown by questions from several informants that there was suspicion from local students during the adaptation process. Participants tend to experience culture shock in the early stages of their arrival at their destination. This is indicated by the statements from some of the research informants that they were surprised and confused about some of the new things they encountered in their environment. The culture shock they face indicates that the participants are already interacting with in a new culture ([Liu & Zhang, 2020](#)).

In the adaptation process carried out by participants, language has an important role in communication, namely to know more about a person, about culture, and about the social environment, and to be involved in communication with local students ([Mikhaleva & Régnier, 2014](#)). Language is not just an ability that is used to make small talk, but language plays an important role in knowing the mindset of other people in depth. Language is a challenge for the participants, especially at the beginning of their arrival. Language is also important in the intercultural communication they do with local students. The use of certain vocabulary in inappropriate conditions can be an obstacle in understanding the message conveyed. In addition, jokes related to language are also different in each culture, so sometimes what is considered funny in the participant's culture may be considered rude in the local culture ([Baydak et al., 2015](#)). On the other hand, something that is taken seriously in

a participant's culture may be a joke in another culture. Accents in the pronunciation of sentences are variations when people use the same language. Accents may be the result of geographic or historical differences. Understanding one's accent has an important role in building meaning in intercultural communication. This is marked by the frequent use of different pronunciation methods that can lead to misunderstandings between program participants and local students ([Jatmiko, 2017](#)).

The language barrier is also a big barrier to effective cultural adjustment and communication, as indicated by some informants who felt confused because they could not express the opinions or feelings they wanted to convey. In the process of interaction, language problems are also a separate obstacle for program participants ([Giovannoni & Xiong, 2019](#)). In an ideal situation, the use of communicative language can increase understanding, facilitate shared meaning, and allow communication to occur at the same stage. However, language limitations made it difficult for participants to convey their intentions and desires. Non-verbal communication is an effort made to overcome language problems that occur. This was conveyed by informants who pointed at something with their fingers, body language, or used pictures to explain their intentions and desires. Communication barriers experienced by program participants indicate that language is part of one's identity, while mindset is a group boundary, and therefore, often becomes a separate obstacle in the process of intercultural communication ([Kil et al., 2019](#)). Stereotyped views are also experienced by program participants when interacting with local residents around campus. For example, students from the provinces of East Nusa Tenggara and Papua tend to experience stereotypes that give rise to the impression of racism. Racism is a continuation of stereotypes and prejudice, so that if stereotypes are allowed, racism can emerge. The things experienced by some participants regarding the stereotypical view in interacting with residents around campus are evidence of the cultural stereotypes that people use when talking about other cultural groups. Every society has stereotypes about certain ethnic groups or ethnic groups ([Sierra, 2019](#)).

To the various obstacles and challenges experienced by informants in the process of intercultural communication, they give different responses and actions according to their cultural background, understanding, and experience in dealing with a person or group of people from different cultures ([Szkudlarek et al., 2020](#)). The first step taken by the participants was to adapt to speech rate, pause, smile, eye gaze, other verbal and nonverbal behaviors, with the aim of overcoming the differences in values and behavioral patterns that differ from their area of origin. The differences in values include the value of decency and the value of independence ([Dolphen, 2014](#)). As well as overcoming differences in behavior patterns such as in establishing hierarchical relationships. For example, program participants from Aceh and West Sumatra tried to follow the norms and customs prevailing in Sundanese customs. This effort shows that although there are differences in behavior patterns, these differences are not a significant problem for program participants, so that in the end they can understand these differences and adapt to the behavior patterns of people in West Java ([Ferine et al., 2021](#)).

The second way that participants do to overcome the obstacles that occur in the process of intercultural communication is to open themselves completely by interacting more with the other person and trying to make themselves as comfortable as possible through the interactions that

occur. A person can be said to have adapted when the person concerned has been able to reduce or manage anxiety and uncertainty so that the person has arrived at the phase of being able to accept different values, behavior patterns, and different languages. The second method is carried out by participants who come from allied ethnic groups, such as students from the Javanese, Madurese, Balinese, and Lombok ethnic groups.

The third way is by making direct contact based on third party information. This strategy was carried out by informants when faced with language differences, as was done by program participants from the Makassar and Manado ethnic groups. In practice, before communicating with students or local residents, participants seek complete information on certain matters, so that when they convey this to local residents, they already have enough references. If they find a term that they do not understand, they actively ask the meaning of the term to their fellow participants who have understood the meaning of the term. Armed with this information, they can improve their interactions with local residents with a new understanding.

The fourth method is the opposite of the third method where the informant is passive towards the adaptation process with students or local residents. Passive here means that the informants do not actively ask their friends or local residents about information about a particular culture, but they only observe local cultural patterns and then conclude for themselves the actions they will take to overcome the communication barriers they face. While the last method is the method most used by participants. This method is quite effective in overcoming the barriers to intercultural communication experienced by the participants, which is done by engaging in active conversations with both students and local residents. Participants actively greet, open conversations, introduce themselves and ask questions directly to the interlocutor who is a student or local resident. In this way, the participants managed to reduce uncertainty and anxiety by observing or asking third parties, but also putting into practice the information or knowledge gained about the local culture. Such as how to sit, walk and greet, so they can immediately feel familiar with students or local residents and can get any information they need more easily.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although there are many differences in cultural backgrounds, students try to adapt to students and local residents who have different cultural backgrounds. The main obstacle in intercultural communication is the language barrier, because even though both speak Indonesian, the influence of local languages is still very strong, so sometimes the same vocabulary has different meanings and meanings. The results of the study also found several cases related to stereotypes against certain ethnic groups, the existence of ethnocentrism among program participants and various difficulties in adapting to fellow program participants.

Each program participant has their own way of overcoming the obstacles and challenges they face in the adaptation process and in communicating with students and local residents. In general, there are five different ways that program participants take, namely by following local cultural patterns and social customs, by carefully observing local culture, actively asking fellow participants, being passive towards cultural differences and finally interactively trying to establish communication. intensely by following the local culture to get the information they need.



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