

AN OVERVIEW OF ACCULTURATION STRATEGIES APPLIED BY THE INDONESIAN STUDENTS LIVING IN TAIWAN

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of acculturation strategies applied by the Indonesian students living in Taiwan. The sample was drawn from twenty-six Indonesian students living from northern part to southern part of Taiwan. Data were collected with multiple methods: open question survey, follow-up interviews, emails, and their Facebook (FB) communication. Among the four acculturation strategies proposed by Berry (2005): *assimilation*, *integration*, *marginalization*, and *separation*, the results from participants' responses indicated that *integration* is applied better than other strategies. *Separation* is the second favored mode used by most Indonesian students to acculturate, while *assimilation* and *marginalization* are the least preferred by the Indonesian students. After acculturation efforts they made, it holds them clearer perception of their cultural identity.

Keywords: Acculturation, *assimilation*, *marginalization*, and cultural identity

INTRODUCTION

Many students aspire to study abroad, particularly those who live in Asia Pacific region, including Indonesia. The number of students studying abroad continues to grow every year. They assume that the education in other countries has better quality than the education in their own countries.

One of the aspects of higher education is the highly qualified professors. Those professors usually pursued their degree in other professional and better educational institutions, so that they can guarantee what they offer is nothing but quality. In addition, better facilities also support academic needs, such as library with complete documents (books, journals, online reference, etc) as well as school facilities such as school clinic, gym, sports fields, etc.

Study abroad students encounter several substantial differences during their stay in the host country. It is because every country has its own background and characteristics, which are different from one to another. Two of them are the basic issues in social and cultural aspects as well as academic fields. To meet the demand of a successful study abroad, it is crucial for students to gain language and cultural knowledge of the host country. It is not only important for students' educational purposes, but for their social life as well. As Spenader (2011) pointed out, some researchers previously suggested that the process of this language learning may be influenced by acculturative outcomes, both directly or indirectly. intercultural encounters (Brown & Hewstone, 2005 as cited in Lo, 2010, p. 85).

Berry (2005) explained further that *assimilation* happens when there is no will to maintain individuals' origin culture, but participate

Yet, relatively very little research has been done on the acculturation process of international students in Taiwan. Therefore, this study investigated the acculturation strategies used by the Indonesian students living in Taiwan during their studies.

Acculturation is the process of individuals adapts to the dominant culture and change culturally and psychologically as a result of making contact with the new culture (Chae & Foley, 2010; Mahmud & Schölmerich, 2011). The concept of acculturation attitudes refers to the various ways that acculturating individuals prefer to live with the two cultures with which they are in contact: to maintain or reject their heritage culture, while also participating and acquiring the values, attitudes and behaviors of the dominant culture (Berry, Kim, Power, Young, & Bujaki, 1989; Tonsing, 2010).

Acculturation strategies are variations in how people seek to engage the process of acculturation (Berry, 2005). As can be seen in Figure 1, Berry in 2005 proposed the four acculturation strategies: *assimilation*, *integration*, *marginalization*, and *separation*. Those strategies involve two aspects: (a) a relative preference for maintaining one's heritage culture and identity, and (b) a relative preference for having contact with and participating in the larger society along with other ethnocultural groups (Berry, 2005, p. 704). Acculturation involves two main tasks: (a) developing an awareness of one's own cultural/familial expectations and mainstream values, and (b) establishing a personalized strategy during in the larger society in the new environment. It happens when individuals give up their heritage culture and acquire more from the dominant society. *Integration* occurs when there is both a desire to maintain one's heritage culture, also to participate in

the larger society at the same time. *Integration* happens when cultural integrity is still maintained together with the seeking attempts in the larger community. *Marginalization* can be recognized when there is both little desire to maintain one's heritage culture or to have relations with the larger society, while *separation* can be defined when individuals keep their desire to maintain heritage culture only, and not to participate in the larger society (Berry & Sabatier, 2011).

Both groups supposedly involved to synchronize the necessities of both groups in the process of mutual acculturation. In consequence, Berry explained that the dominant group plays important role in influencing the way in mutual acculturation would occur (Berry, 2009). In Figure 1, strategies of the dominant community are also depicted. Melting pot is defined when *assimilation* is sought by the dominant group. Segregation appears when *separation* is forced by the dominant group. Exclusion occurs when *marginalization* imposed by the dominant group. Lastly, *integration*, "when diversity is an accepted feature of the society as a whole, including all the various ethnocultural groups, is called multiculturalism" (Berry, 2005, p.

rooted in the process of acculturation, which usually includes psychosocial difficulties (e.g., loss of social support, rejection by the host culture) when adapting to a new culture" (Berry, 2005; Smart & Smart, 1995 as cited in Wu & Mak, 2012, p. 71).

According to Smith and Khawaja (2011), there are five most possible acculturative stressors encountered by international students. Language barrier can impact both academic life and social life of the students. Students may encounter difficulties on assignment writing, understanding lectures, oral and written examinations, and questions and answers activities in class, while it can impede their efforts to make friends and interact with local people.

There are also educational stressors because they may not always find the expected quality and efficiency of services provided by educational institutions. Moreover, they may not be able to adjust to the teaching style of the host university (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Sociocultural stressors and discrimination are also perceived by international students. It is hard for the students, particularly Asian, African, Indian, Latin, America, and Middle Eastern to make friends with local

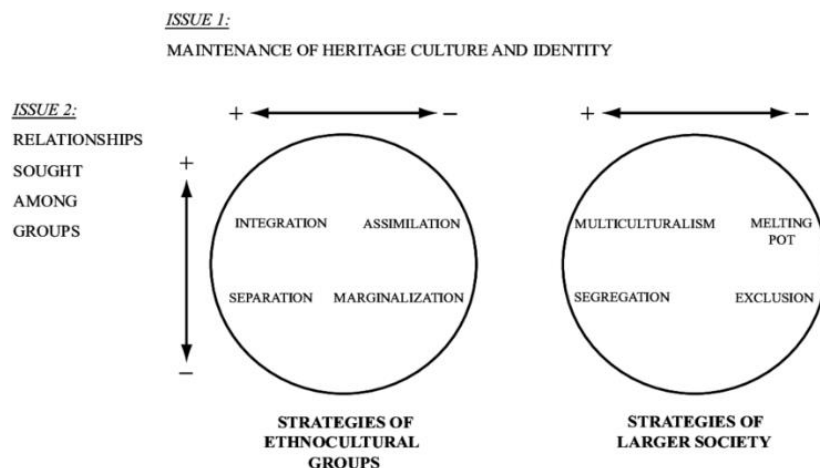


Figure 1. Acculturation Strategies in Ethnocultural Groups and in the Larger Society (Berry, 2005, p. 705)

706).

Although the process of acculturation is based on individuals' personal choices, but some studies have indicated that more assimilated individuals report both positively and negatively outcomes. Positively, they have lower levels of stress, show better psychological adjustment, gain higher satisfaction with life, and demonstrate higher levels of self-esteem. On the other hand, high levels of *assimilation* were easily related to psychological distress and depression, acculturative conflicts and stress, substance abuse, and prevalence of eating disorder (Chae & Foley, 2010).

As a result of being in a new environment, international students may encounter changes, which may become stressors. Acculturative stress is "one kind of stress in response to life events that are

students in a university in the United States as they also become the victims of discrimination.

Some scholars investigated the negative effect of discrimination, poor psychological well-being, depression, higher levels of homesickness can occur as a result of poor adaptation (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Moreover, Berry & Sabatier (2010) added that when adolescents perceived discrimination, they tend to conform to the larger community instead of rejecting the larger community, they are also less likely to show the psychological well-being and less able to function successfully in school and in the community. Practical or lifestyle acculturative stressors also contribute negatively to international students condition. Several studies mentioned that the most common issue among majority international

students is financial problem because of the high cost of academic tuition. It is more difficult since they cannot find any job to help themselves due to work restriction in the host country (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Individuals' acculturation orientation impacts the development of their cultural identity. Cultural identity refers to "the way in which individuals conceive of themselves in relation to cultural communities; it is a multidimensional and dynamic sense of self as a member of a particular group or groups including affective, cognitive and behavioral aspects" (Berry & Sabatier, 2010, p. 194). It is how individuals perceive their feeling of belonging in their ethnic group and the identity in the larger society in which they live now (Berry & Sabatier, 2010).

METHODS

Twenty-six Indonesian students (12 male, 14 female) studying in Taiwan were involved to participate in the study and their age ranged from 23 to 38 years old. Participants' duration of stay in Taiwan is varied from five months to four years with a background of English learning experience for more than ten years and Chinese course for at least one month. Their age ranges between 26 and 32. All of the participants are either Master's or PhD students with different field of study.

The data were gathered from open questions survey, semi-structured in-depth interviews, observations, and Facebook (FB) communication. Two parts of the questionnaire were administered. The first part was demographic information and the second part was to investigate the participant's interaction in their daily life, language usage to communicate with others, and their reflections based on their socio-cultural experiences. Further questions were also given by email correspondences based on their previous answers. Participant's FB interactions to their teachers, local students, and other friends were also utilized. FB communications of the participants with their consent were then saved in JPEG image file formats.

Semi-structured in-depth interview were recorded and saved in Windows Media Audio (WMA) and Adaptive Multi-Rate (AMR) formats before finally transcribed into Microsoft Office Word 2007 files.

Observations were done whenever the author had direct contacts, such as in an exhibition, conference, etc. The data then were recorded in a written journal.

Qualitative method is adapted in this study. All of the data were analyzed based on the acculturation strategies proposed by Berry (2005).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Acculturation Strategies Applied by the Indonesian Students Living in Taiwan

According to Berry (2005), attitudes and behaviors are the two main components of the strategies demonstrated in receiving intercultural occurrences everyday (p. 704). Attitudes affect personal preference in determining ways to acculturate, while behaviors interpret his/her actual activities. Those occurrences they faced mostly everyday were things related to culture and customs, and academic purposes.

Assimilation

Since coming to Taiwan, some of the Indonesian students' habits were changed due to the influences from the local community. Gradually, their behaviors or thoughts changed to be like what Taiwanese do. But the changes of the attitude among the participants were very few. Some of the students admitted that previously they could eat spicy foods because of the Indonesian culinary, but nowadays they preferred not to eat those kinds of foods anymore. The habit changed even after they went back to Indonesia. Furthermore, the students became more aware of the environmental issue. For example, they did not throw litter in nature or everywhere anymore. They would like to keep the trash until they found garbage can, as can be seen in the excerpts below:

"I don't eat so spicy anymore since I am in Taiwan, not spicy food is okay or good for me. If I went back to Indonesia for holiday, I also cannot eat foods containing chili or pepper. Every time I tried to, I got stomach ache, so I just simply avoid spicy foods now." (S14, Questionnaire & Facebook message)

"I become cleaner now. I don't throw the garbage anywhere since I came to Taiwan" (S22, Questionnaire)

Nonetheless, the number of students who showed *assimilation* is very limited. Although in general most students have positive feelings about Taiwanese people and culture.

Integration

The result of this study showed more than 80 percent of the participants believed that they belonged to their community. This sense of belonging made them feel so comfortable, so that they had desire to participate in the community without giving up their origin culture. They wanted to be part of the community because basically they were curious to learn new things and they wanted to make friends with others. By doing so, they learnt new knowledge and experienced Taiwan culture. Besides, they were far away from home, so that they have to make a good relationship with other people. They also wanted to motivate themselves to finish the study as soon as possible so that they could go home faster.

"I would like to learn more about Taiwan culture. That is why I want to be part of my environment and hopefully the people around me can accept me sincerely." (S14, Questionnaire)

"I am far away from home, so I have to make a good relationship with the others." (S12, Questionnaire)

The friendliness offered by the host community is very important. Taking and giving are mutual actions, which are very beneficial for both parties, such as learning each other's culture and tradition, for instance local foods and traditional events. Indonesian students really like night markets in Taiwan since they can find many interesting foods and would like to try them as long as it is *halal*.

"I found Taiwanese are very warm and friendly, they help me a lot with the study especially with the language." (S23, Questionnaire)

"I like some local delicacies such as niuromian, or tang yuan in winter solstice. I also experience famous lantern festival and I know the story behind it." (S01, Questionnaire).

The Indonesian students in Taiwan really adored local people's awareness to maintain public transportation, public infrastructures, etc, and those people are also very respectful and caring to the elderly. The students also felt safe because of the convenient environment. Good public facilities were also additional factors. The students were impressed by high technology used to create the transportation system. There was not much traffic jam in Taiwan, as their description is shown in the following excerpts:

"I feel happy in Taiwan. This country provides a good service of transportation, a good environmental and I feel safe in Taiwan. These situations are not provided in my country." (S19, Questionnaire)

The Indonesian students also tried to imitate local people's habit, for example eating by using chopsticks. Some of them got used to it, but some others still preferred to eat using spoon or their bare hands. The excerpts below show their opinion about it.

"I try Taiwanese stuff that is different from my country, for example I eat by using chopsticks sometimes now." (S06, Questionnaire)

Unfortunately, most of the Indonesian students found many challenges related to their religion since most of them are Muslim. They wanted to change the host community's perception of Muslim. The students found difficulties in finding places to perform prayers. Moreover, Taiwanese have not understand yet why Muslims cannot eat pork, blood, alcohol, and all of the foods that have been contaminated by those.

".... Islam is still strange in Taiwan. We can see that from the very minimum number of praying rooms. Taiwanese still feel unfamiliar with

Islam. They also look suspiciously when we pray. My lab mates often ask why I wear hijab/head scarf even in hot weather. But I think they do not perceived it as something strange, but because they never knew about it before." (S21, Interview)

Leaving a familiar environment including family, friends, and home culture to pursue academic life abroad may lead international students to a depressive reaction (Verschuur, et al., 2003). But some Indonesian students in Taiwan were luckier than some others because they had their main family staying together in the same environment and experienced the same cultural settings in the host country. It was a big support for them to endure their difficult times in the process of their learning and acculturation. Homesickness disadvantageously affects students' academic ability (Burt, 1993). As any other international students, Indonesian students in Taiwan reported frequent feeling of homesickness as well. Hendrickson et al., (2011) stated that homesickness was often found to be a major factor in causing individuals to alienate themselves from the social environment. To overcome the situation, they communicated with them via phone or utilized other online software, such as Skype, or they spent time with friends to visit new places.

"I miss my family often. I feel unhappy about that, but I still thankful for everything. I can still speak with my husband, daughter, my mom, and my dad by phone or Skype. It really helps me. They are really motivators for me." (S26, Questionnaire)

"I enjoyed staying here and feel happy because of my complete family. I live together with my husband and my two children. It helps me to feel a real home while I'm abroad." (S16, Questionnaire)

By showing positive *integration*, the students gained new cultural competence from the local people, but they also shared their home country culture.

Marginalization

In this study, no specific examples were found in the data which shown *marginalization* strategy applied by the Indonesian students.

Separation

Despite the fact that *integration* is applied better than other acculturation strategies among Indonesian students in Taiwan, some of them indicated *separation* as well. They seldom had contact with the people around. Desire to finish the study soon and a part from their family were the motivations for the students not to be a part of the environment. They refused to learn the local language, let alone to practice it with the society member around them. They perceived the people around them were not as friendly as they thought,

and it made them alienated themselves from the society, as shown in the excerpts below:

"I do not want to learn the local language and culture. I have very limited times, but much have to be done and think of." (S03, Questionnaire)

"Nothing that makes me feel I am home in Taiwan, so that I do not enjoy my staying here." (S10, Questionnaire)

They admitted that the most difficult thing in school that made them feel excluded was the language matter. More than forty percent of the students did not attend English-taught classes because the school only provided Chinese-taught course. They could not speak and read in Chinese and it gave them problems to understand the lectures, since many of them had only Mandarin courses offered by the school. They found this obstacle impacted their academic performance, so that they preferred to remain silent and did not involved much when there was any discussion or in-class interaction with less English-spoken.

"Classes taught in Chinese, especially seminar, are very difficult. I couldn't get any additional knowledge except from particular classes and from efforts I did by myself. Furthermore, language barrier made me not to take part in group discussion in which my Taiwanese friends could get information and shared their knowledge." (S10, Questionnaire)

"Sometimes teachers explain a subject in Chinese and they do not want to translate it into English. They said that I don't need to know. They sometimes explain a program (e.g., SPSS) in Chinese only and it is very difficult to understand." (S17, Questionnaire)

Separation attitude caused the students to get the least experiences in learning new language and culture. They lost the chances to gain cultural competence through language and interaction, while staying in the best settings to get those competences.

Cultural Identity

Cultural identity refers to the ways in which individuals conceive of themselves in relation to cultural communities; it is a multidimensional and dynamic sense of self as a member of a particular groups or groups including affective, cognitive and behavioral aspects" (Berry, 2010, p. 194). The cultural identity of the students was reinforced together with their attempts to obtain language and cultural inputs in the new ethnic group. Being part of the new environment, the students acquired both positive and negative response regarding to their home culture identity. Some students in Taiwan affirmed that professors and classmates really respect their Muslim way of life and even curious about Indonesian culture as explained in the excerpts below:

"My professor never marginalized the problem of my culture and religion. This is because

our discussions are related to my study only. He often reminds me about my praying time when I am busy to do my assignment." (S19, Questionnaire)

Some others argued that they are not respected because for them it was hard to explain how Muslims live. Moreover, there are numerous migrant workers in Taiwan. The students considered Taiwanese disrespect them by looking down to those people and generalizing all Indonesian people.

"Some of local students still assume that Indonesian people are low-level worker since many Indonesian workers here." (S09, Questionnaire)

However, most of the students do not intend to give up their own identity. They are already proud to be someone with their own culture. Differences in behavior, customs, and culture are the reason why they are reluctant to change, but they respected and valued good attitude such as politeness, healthy life, discipline, etc.

"I prefer to be myself because I am who I am. I copy any traditional manner that appropriate with my identity to appreciate them, but not to change myself." (S06, Questionnaire)

"I'm proud to be Indonesian, but there are some good characters of Taiwanese that I envy, e.g., the habit of doing sports and eating healthy foods." (S20, Questionnaire).

CONCLUSIONS

In the process of the acculturation, the students apply different strategies to deal with the challenges and easiness in the host country. The result of this study implicate that *integration* is applied better than other strategies. This findings is in agreement with previous studies conducted by other researchers. The students maintain both origin cultures in their ethnic groups and also participate and maintain contact with the new host community at the same time. They keep good relationship with their fellow Indonesian students to overcome daily challenges, such as language problem, differences between home culture and local culture, homesickness, academic and financial issue, etc. *Separation* is the second favored mode used by most Indonesian students to acculturate, while *assimilation* and *marginalization* are the least preferred by the Indonesian students.

After the acculturation efforts they made, it holds them clearer perception of their cultural identity. All of the Indonesian students in Taiwan were impressed with the positive values they have learnt from the local culture, but they refused to be more like them because all of them were already proud of their home culture identity as an Indonesian. They only copied appropriate attitudes and values and tried to fit them together with their origin culture. They also believed that the host community really gave respect to whom they are and where they came from.

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