

# Communication Barriers and Adjustment Strategies of Foreign Students: A Case Study Analysis in A Private University

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## **Abstract**

The increasing demand for education has led to a rise in foreign students seeking global experiences. However, they often face communication barriers in their home universities, including Telkom University. A pre-research interview at Telkom University exposed a gap between foreign and local students, with little interaction concerning campus organization and events. This study aimed to identify these communication barriers and examine their adjustment strategies. The researcher used a qualitative method and case study methodology to analyze the issues faced by six foreign students. The findings revealed five distinct communication barriers: assumptions of similarities, language differences, non-verbal misinterpretations, preconceptions and stereotypes, and high anxiety. Factors contributing to these barriers include cultural differences, media, personal beliefs/values, personal experiences, and historical background. The students implemented a convergence strategy to address these barriers. The study highlights the need for better communication between foreign and local students at Telkom University.

Keywords- Foreign students, Communication gap, Communication barriers, Adjustment strategies.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The increasing demand for education has led to a surge in individuals seeking foreign exposure to compete globally (Shahzad et al., 2020). Foreign students face various communication barriers, including language, culture, gender, and religion (Ouedraogo & Bulut, 2022). Language is the most significant hurdle encountered by foreign students, while cultural differences also contribute to these barriers. Gender disparities and religion can also serve as catalysts for communication barriers.

Previous research on cross-cultural communication has identified strategies to mitigate communication difficulties, such as adopting a receptive attitude towards divergences, promoting awareness and self-equality, maintaining cultural identity, and avoiding coercive and aggressive communication (Anwar, 2018). Students can use passive, active, and interactive strategies to facilitate their adjustment to a new setting (Talan et al., 2013).

A study conducted at Telkom University in Bandung District found a gap between foreign and local students due to communication barriers. Pre-research interviews with two foreign students revealed a low level of interaction between foreign and local students, particularly in relation to campus organizations and activities. This situation arises from the presence of communication barriers that create a significant gap between the individuals involved.

The researcher deems it necessary to conduct this study, as Telkom University serves as an exemplar for other institutions in the vicinity of Bandung. This research aims to identify the communication barriers between foreign and local students and examine how they adapt to these barriers. This research has the potential to facilitate engagement and collaboration between foreign and local students, enhance their relationships, and reduce existing gaps.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Intercultural Communication

In the present period, individuals have the ability to engage with one another without any limitations. This flexibility of connection facilitates communication between individuals from other cultures and with varying customs. This form of communication is widely known as Intercultural Communication. The book "Understanding Intercultural Communication" by Stella Ting-Toomey and Leeva C. Chung defines Intercultural Communication as a symbolic interchange process in which individuals from diverse cultural communities engage in negotiating shared meaning (Aida Niendorf, 2015, 507-514). Furthermore, the book "Intercultural Communication in Contexts" similarly describes Intercultural Communication as the exchange of information between individuals who possess distinct cultural identities (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). The scope of Intercultural Communication encompasses not only variations in race, religion, and language, but also disparities in socio-economic conditions, mindsets, and conduct.

#### B. Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication

Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication is a concept that pertains to the various obstacles encountered in the field of intercultural communication, as theorized by Laray M. Barna. Laray Barna is a professor specializing in intercultural communication, with a particular focus on the educational sector. The writer of this research chose to utilize this concept since it is one of the earliest and enduring theories on communication barriers. It examines the factors that impede good intercultural communication (Bennet, 2013). This concept is also extensively employed in other research pertaining to communication obstacles in intercultural communication. Laray Barna identified six barriers that can impede successful communication (Barna, 1994). The six barriers are: assumption of similarities, language differences, non-verbal miscommunications, preconceptions & stereotypes, tendency to evaluate, and high anxiety.

#### C. Communication Accommodation Theory

The Communication Accommodation Theory is a communication theory that falls within the realm of intercultural communication. Howard Giles, a communications professor from the University of California, is credited with developing this hypothesis. Broadly speaking, this theory examines how individuals endeavor to adapt to their conversation partner's communication patterns, behavior, and cognitive processes during an engagement (Suheri, 2019). This theory distinguishes between two forms of accommodation: convergence and divergence (Gallois & Giles, 2015). The convergence method is employed by individuals to reduce social disparities by adjusting their language, nonverbal cues, and paralinguistic elements to match those of their conversation partners. On the other hand, in contrast to the convergence strategy, the divergence strategy highlights these distinctions. This strategy is employed when an individual seeks to elucidate the social demarcations between themselves and others. Convergence and divergence strategies can manifest in various forms (Dragojevic et al., 2015). It depends on the social value (upward/downward), degree (full/partial), symmetry (symmetrical/asymmetrical), modality (unimodal/multimodal), and duration (short-term/long-term).

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### A. Research Method

The research methodology employed in this study is qualitative. According to Cresswell (2008), qualitative research is an investigation aimed at exploring and comprehending a central phenomenon (Raco, 2018). In order to comprehend the core phenomenon, conducting thorough interviews with participants is necessary to ensure the collection of dependable data. Subsequently, the collected data will undergo analysis and be correlated with a theoretical framework or compared to prior research. Finally, conclusions will be derived to address the issues that arise. The qualitative technique is considered a recent addition to the scientific profession, as it originated in the 1960s. Hence, this approach is occasionally denoted as an alternative methodology, as it might serve as a substitute for long-standing quantitative methodologies employed by researchers. According to John Creswell (1996), there are five distinct methodologies employed in qualitative research (Raco, 2018). The five methodologies include Descriptive study, Phenomenology, Ethnography, Grounded Theory, and Case Study. Each approach has its own distinct purpose and specification. The researcher will select the strategy that is most suitable for their research topic and subject.

## B. Research Approach

This study employs a Case Study approach. Yin in Creswell (2013) defines a case study as an investigation of actual occurrences in a modern context (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, Creswell provides a definition of a case study as a qualitative research method in which the researcher thoroughly examines one or more instances using several sources of data, and presents the findings in the form of detailed case descriptions or case themes (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, a case study is a qualitative research method that involves examining a real-life situation by analyzing one or more specific cases and identifying recurring themes.

The researcher chose to employ a case study approach in this study because it focuses on a specific problem that arises inside a particular case in the campus environment. Furthermore, the case takes place in close proximity to the researcher, allowing for a firsthand experience and direct observation of the unfolding event. Subsequently, in order to comprehend the case thoroughly, the researcher deems it necessary to conduct in-depth interviews with the subject regarding their experiences. Due to these factors, the researcher deemed the case study approach appropriate for this study.

## C. Unit of Analysis

Unit of analysis is a certain unit that is considered the main object of the research. In other words, the unit of analysis is the main entity that will be analyzed in a study and is expected to conclude from. The unit of analysis in this study is:

*Table 1. Unit of Analysis*

<b>Unit of Analysis</b>	<b>Sub Analysis</b>
Communication Barriers (Based on “Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication” by Laray M. Barna)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Assumption of Similarities</li><li>2. Language Differences</li><li>3. Nonverbal Misinterpretations</li><li>4. Preconceptions and Stereotypes</li><li>5. Tendency to Evaluate</li><li>6. High Anxiety</li></ol>
Communication Accommodation Strategies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Adjustment Strategy</li><li>2. Adjustment Form</li></ol>

## D. Data Collecting

Data collection is a crucial component of the research process, playing a vital role in its overall effectiveness. Acquiring trustworthy and dependable data requires the use of suitable data sources and methodologies. Qualitative research employs multiple data collection methods. The methods employed include documentation, interviews, surveys, focus group discussions, observations, participatory arrangements, and qualitative audio-visual material (Dewi, 2022). The data collection methods employed in this study include observation, interviews, and documentation.

## E. Informant Data and Criteria

The data will be collected from six informants. The informants comprised foreign students from four distinct faculties at Telkom University. The faculties comprise the Faculty of Economics and Business, the Faculty of Computing, the Faculty of Communication and Business, and the Faculty of Creative Industries.

The informants of this research were taken with the following criteria:

1. Active Telkom University students with foreign nationality.
2. Live in Bandung for at least six months.
3. Not fluent in Bahasa Indonesia
4. Have experience of interacting with local students.

Table 2. Informant Data

No.	Name	Age	Gender	Major	Batch Year	Country
1.	Ahmad Rafiq Shahab	20	Male	Communication Science	2021	Qatar
2.	Ebrahim Abdul Hamid Nakhwa	19	Male	Informatics	2022	India
3.	Rabab Fawaz Saleh Al Ali	19	Female	Informatics	2022	Yemen
4.	Paulina Pereira De Carvalho	19	Female	Business Administration	2022	Timor Leste
5.	Haddy Joof	19	Female	Communication Science	2022	Gambia
6.	Abir Al Ifaz	21	Male	Visual Communication Design	2022	Bangladesh

#### F. Data Analysis

Data analysis is the systematic examination and manipulation of acquired data by researchers to facilitate comprehension and dissemination among others. Miles and Huberman (1992:20) propose three distinct stages of data analysis: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion and evaluation (Rijali, 2019). The three steps operate simultaneously and interactively, rather than sequentially. The reason for this is that in qualitative research, the process of conceptualization, categorization, and description relies on the events and observations made during the field research. Data reduction is the systematic procedure by which researchers organize and categorize data that has been collected during fieldwork (Rijali, 2019). Data presentation occurs subsequent to data reduction. The ultimate stage of data analysis involves drawing conclusions and assessing the findings.

#### G. Data Validity

The researcher employed triangulation and member verification as methods to ensure the validity of the data in this study. Triangulation is a method employed to verify the accuracy of qualitative data by integrating diverse data from multiple sources (Sugiyono, 2015). The type of triangulation technique used in this study is the triangulation of data collection technique. Triangulation of data collection was employed to gather data from multiple sources, including observation, interviews, and documentation. The purpose of this is to enable the researcher to verify the data collected from many data gathering procedures by crosschecking. Consequently, one can acquire accurate data. Member checking is a method used to ensure the authenticity of data. It involves cross-referencing the data collected by the researcher with the informant's input (Sugiyono, 2017). The purpose of this method is to verify if the data collected and analyzed by the researcher aligns with the information provided by the informant. If the data is corroborated by the informant, it indicates that the data is legitimate. Member checking typically occurs subsequent to the acquisition of data findings or conclusions. It can be accomplished either individually or by means of group discussion forums. The last phase of this methodology involves the informant affixing their signature to the paper as evidence that member checking has been conducted.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### A. Results

##### • Communication Barriers

The communication barriers experienced by foreign students at Telkom University are diverse. The study's researcher identified five obstacles that hindered the informants' engagement with local students. The following are the barriers:

##### 1. Assumption of Similarities

Assumption of similarities refers to the act of presuming that other individuals share common traits or characteristics with oneself. Whether it be shared backgrounds, nationality, religion, culture, or other factors. While it may have positive implications, this assumption can also lead to culture shock, misunderstandings, and miscommunication if the assumptions diverge from reality. The researcher inquired about their assumption of similarities to the informants in order to investigate the presence of communication barriers in their interactions with local students. Through the conducted interviews, the

researcher identified three distinct sorts of assumptions: background similarities, cultural similarities, and religious similarities.

2. Language Differences

The presence of language differences is a prominent barrier experienced by individuals upon their arrival to unfamiliar locations. The researcher inquired with the six informants regarding their encounters with communication barriers arising from differences in language. The study revealed that the informants encountered linguistic barriers, including issues with language usage, both official and informal, vocabulary, slang, and different meaning.

3. Non-verbal Misinterpretations

Non-verbal misunderstanding is a common communication barrier that arises when foreign and local students interact. The visibility of this barrier is less pronounced compared to the language barrier. It causes the communicator or communicant to be unaware of non-verbal misinterpretations. The researcher inquired about potential instances of non-verbal misinterpretations encountered by the six informants. The results revealed that the participants encountered non-verbal miscommunications in two specific ways: through body language and the pace of speech.

4. Preconceptions & Stereotypes

Preconceptions and stereotypes are prevalent phenomena encountered by individuals when they arrive in a new location and interact with a new group of individuals. Overgeneralizing can be beneficial as it helps identify the necessary steps to initiate intercultural communication. However, if it is done excessively, it might cause offense and result in cessation or retreat. The researcher inquired about the preconceptions and stereotypes that the six informants may hold regarding local Indonesian students. The researcher identified four distinct themes pertaining to this subject. Those themes are: Indonesians do not like to speak with foreigner, Indonesians are like to speak with foreigners, historical issues, and religious issues.

5. High Anxiety

High anxiety or tension refers to the psychological strain that occurs when an individual is confronted with a state of uncertainty (Barna, 1994). This barrier is the fundamental basis for the other five barriers collectively. Therefore, it is one of the most prevalent barriers to effective communication. The researcher inquired about the high anxiousness that the six informants may have had throughout their encounter with local students. The researcher discovered that the majority of the informants encountered significant levels of anxiety during their initial arrival in Indonesia.

- Factors of The Barriers

Upon identifying the communication barriers reported by the informants, the researcher endeavored to investigate the underlying reasons contributing to their occurrence. The researcher identified five elements that contributed to the occurrence of communication obstacles in their encounters. The five factors encompass cultural differences, the media, personal beliefs, personal experience, and historical background.

- Adjustment Strategies

The researcher of this study additionally investigated the adjustment strategies selected by the informants in response to their communication barriers. The researcher identified one distinct types of adjustment techniques based on the responses provided by the informants. It arises when the informants take action in response to their barriers. This adjustment is referred to as convergence strategy in relation to Howard Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory (Gallois & Giles, 2015). This strategy is employed when an individual seeks to reduce social disparities by adjusting their language, nonverbal cues, and other communication elements to align with those of their conversation partners. In this case, the informants' attempts to adapt the communication patterns of their interlocutors can be considered a convergence strategy. In this type of adjustment strategy, the informants did several actions to adjust to their interlocutor's communication pattern. The researcher divided these actions into four. Those actions are: accepting reality, being open-minded, out of comfort zone, and learning the culture/customs.

- Adjustment Forms

There are numerous forms of communication adjustment. It is contingent upon various factors such as social value, degree, symmetry, modality, and duration (Dragojevic et al., 2015). The researcher sought to determine the form of adjustment employed by the informant, taking into account factors such as changes in the variety

of speech (e.g., accent), the occurrence of code-switching, the directionality of the adjustment, and the duration of adjustment.

1. Change in The Variety of Speech

Speech variation, particularly accent, is a significant aspect of communication when interacting with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. The interview results show a divide in responses, with some individuals changing their accents in response to circumstances, while others maintain their accents, believing they are already intelligible to local students.

2. Code-switch

Code-switching, the act of incorporating another language's vocabulary into one's speech, is another aspect of communication. The majority of participants engage in code-switching to mitigate language barriers, while one individual acknowledges the fear of judgment from others.

3. Directions of The Adjustments

The researcher also examined whether adjustments were one-way or two-way, with most participants stating that their conversation partners also adapt to their communication styles. Only one participant reported one-way adjustments, indicating that the people they were conversing with had not changed their way of speaking.

4. Durations of The Adjustments

The duration of adjustments was also examined, with some making changes simultaneously, while others did not.

## B. Discussions

- Communication Gap Between Foreign and Local Students

As previously mentioned in the preceding chapters, there exists a gap between foreign and local students at Telkom University. Subsequently, the situation evolved into a scenario where only a limited number of foreign students actively engaged in internal campus activities, such as joining organizations, committees, or events. The factors contributing to the gap are primarily language differences and high anxiety, which serve as communication barriers. Upon revisiting the outcomes of the researcher's comprehensive interviews, it becomes evident that language differences and high anxiety were identified as additional barriers to effective communication. The in-depth interview results revealed that language differences were the primary communication barrier encountered by all participants. Concurrently, high anxiety serves as the fundamental obstacle that underpins the remaining barriers (Barna, 1994). High anxiety can be seen as the initial cause of the other communication barriers experienced by the informants.

- Communication Barriers Between Foreign and local Students

1. Communication Barriers Because of Assumption of Similarities

One informant expressed the belief that she generalizes all individuals as being identical due to our shared humanity. This attitude, referred to as the "People are people" mindset, is characterized by a particular way of thinking (Barna, 1994). It occurs when individuals make assumptions about their similarities based solely on the fact that they are all human. This mindset arises due to individuals' efforts to mitigate the unease associated with handling differences. Additionally, the other informants likewise hold the belief on cultural and religious similarities. According to their statement, they presumed that local students possess identical practices and beliefs based on information provided by the media. These assumptions are regarded as a manifestation of ethnocentrism (Jones & Draper, 2007). It is because the informants are assuming that the worldview of their own culture is central to all reality.

2. Communication Barriers Because of Language Differences

Using the same language does not necessarily eliminate communication barriers for them. The boundaries persisted in the manifestations of vocabulary, informal language, slang, accent, and different meanings. One informant encountered mockery when she utilized formal Indonesian vocabulary in a casual setting. On the other hand, a different informant perceived the phrase "F\*ck you" as a casual expression in Indonesia, yet in his own country, it has significant weight and can instigate a physical altercation. Such misunderstandings sometimes arise due to individuals' tendency to adhere to a single interpretation of a word. Where in reality, one word might be understood

differently depending on the circumstances. The lack of knowledge will inadvertently result in misunderstandings (Barna, 1994).

3. Communication Barriers Because of Non-verbal Misinterpretations

The informants of this research also experienced misinterpretations of non-verbal cues. An informant from Qatar inadvertently made rude hand gestures towards local students. His knowledge is limited to the fact that the hand gesture he performed is considered a talisman of good fortune. The informants encountered another non-verbal obstacle when the locals spoke rapidly, causing the informants to struggle to comprehend or misinterpret the statements. Misinterpretations in non-verbal communication are frequently observed due to the greater contextual depth inherent in non-verbal communication compared to verbal communication (Sabre & Mohandas, 2023). In addition, Bloom & Reenen assert in their book "Non-Verbal Communications" that non-verbal communication not only enhances comprehension but can also result in misinterpretations (Bloom & Reenen, 2023).

4. Communication Barriers Because of Preconceptions & Stereotypes

The informants' preconceptions and stereotypes regarding local students are evident in their assumption that Indonesian students have an aversion to engaging in conversations with foreigners. The reason is that the majority of local students lack proficiency in English, leading him to anticipate social isolation from them. In addition, one of the informants from Timor Leste holds the belief that Indonesians will not engage in conversation with her due to their shared historical context. Finally, one informant holds the assumption that all Indonesian students are religious and adhere to Islamic principles. The aforementioned stereotype was previously addressed in the section on assumptions of similarities, as it pertains to the informant who personally encountered this preconception. Through media exposure, he was aware that Indonesia has the largest Muslim population among all countries. This knowledge led him to build a preconception and disregard the truth that Indonesia is not a Muslim country. Not all Indonesian individuals adhere fully to Islamic principles. His tendency to make broad generalizations is substantiated by Barna's assertion that preconceived notions and stereotypes persist because individuals prefer to selectively see information that aligns with their existing beliefs (Barna, 1994).

5. Communication Barriers Because of High Anxiety

Foreign students often encounter high levels of anxiety as their barrier. This barrier is distinctive as it frequently serves as the foundation for other barriers (Barna, 1994). When an individual experiences assumption of similarities, preconceptions, or stereotypes as a coping mechanism to alleviate the discomfort. The awareness of similarities and familiarity with the unfamiliar surroundings can induce a sense of tranquility in their psyche.

The informants encountered significant anxiety upon their initial arrival in Indonesia. They refrained from engaging with local students due to their lack of knowledge on how to initiate contact. Several informants even reported experiencing tears and bodily tremors during their initial contact. The source of their anxiety was determined to be culture shock and historical contexts, specifically for the informant from Timor Leste. The culture shock may cause individuals to be perpetually vigilant in order to avoid making any errors. An additional study conducted by Evi et al. (2022) explores linguistic anxiety among international students. The researchers identified fear of making mistakes, self-identity, and cultural differences as significant contributors to anxiety (Evi et al., 2022)

• Intercultural Communication Adjustments of Foreign Students

The informants predominantly selected the convergence method as the most prevalent adjustment strategy in this research. They undertook various acts, such as accepting reality, being open minded, coming out of comfort zone, and learning the local culture/customs. The majority of the informants acquire knowledge about the local culture through language acquisition. It was done because language differences provide a significant obstacle for them, as already mentioned. In addition, acquiring proficiency in the language is crucial for successfully adapting to a different culture (Kang et al., 2019).

Communication Accommodation Theory categorizes adjustment forms based on social value, degree, symmetry, modality, and duration (Dragojevic et al., 2015). Three convergence forms were employed in this investigation. The informants' adjustment is a downward convergence, based on social value. Downward convergence is a method in which an individual transitions from using a "prestigious" way of speaking to a

"less prestigious" way of speaking in order to become more similar to others. For instance, when an individual intentionally transitions from using a standardized language to a regional dialect. The informants' shift from a typical English accent to an Indonesian accent is evident. Occasionally, it was performed without conscious awareness in order to facilitate communication and enhance comprehensibility (Fang, 2017).

Based on the symmetry, the adjustment made by the informants is symmetrical convergence. Symmetrical convergence can also be known as two-way adjustment. It means that both informants and their interlocutors are converging towards each other. Even though there was one informant who stated that his friends did not make adjustments, from the statement he gave, it can be seen that it was because he asked his friends not to make adjustments anymore. Because of this, the researcher concluded that previously, his friends had also made adjustments to his speaking style.

Based on the degree, the adjustment made by the informant of this research is a partial convergence. Partial convergence is a form of adjustment where someone only changes one or several aspects, not the whole, of their communication style (Dragojevic et al., 2015). It can be seen from how the informants only change their accents and some vocabulary in their sentences, without changing to a completely different language. And then, based on the modality, the adjustment made by the informants is multimodal. Multimodal convergence occurs when someone adjusts to several variables and dimensions of communication (Dragojevic et al., 2015). It can be seen from how the informants were adjusting to several dimensions of communication (accent, body language, context, etc.) of their interlocutors.

Finally, the adjustments made by the informants are categorized into short-term and long-term convergence, based on their duration. Long-term convergence occurred concurrently and over an extended duration, whereas short-term convergence occurred solely in some instances.

## V. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

### A. Conclusion

The study reveals that communication barriers between foreign and local students include assumptions of similarities, language differences, non-verbal misinterpretations, preconceptions & stereotypes, and high anxiety. Language differences and high anxiety are the most significant challenges for foreign students. Factors contributing to communication barriers include cultural differences, media, personal beliefs, experiences, and historical background. The study suggests one adjustment strategy, namely convergence strategy. This strategy can be categorized into downward convergence, partial convergence, symmetrical convergence, multimodal convergence, short-term convergence, and long-term convergence.

### B. Suggestions

In order to advance future research, it is desirable to conduct additional studies focusing on the communication barriers encountered by foreign students, with a greater emphasis on specific instances. The researcher advises foreign students studying at Telkom University to overcome anxiety, dismiss assumptions, stereotypes, and any other factors that may hinder their willingness to engage with local students. In addition, endeavour to assimilate into the surroundings by acquiring knowledge of the language, culture, and conduct of local students. Consequently, the researcher proposes that Telkom University should enhance the availability of venues that facilitate foreign students in engaging with local students in a more congenial manner.

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