

## LANGUAGE BARRIER AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES FACED BY THAI STUDENTS ON LEARNING EXPERIENCES AT STAIN JEMBER

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### Abstract

*Permasalahan tentang kendala bahasa menjadi penting dalam pergaulan dan perbedaan budaya diantara mahasiswa asing. Dengan permasalahan bahasa dan budaya, mereka harus berjuang untuk mendapatkan ilmu yang ingin mereka raih dengan upaya yang lebih sulit. Penelitian ini fokus pada fenomena adanya mahasiswa Thailand yang sedang menuntut ilmu dalam prodi PAI jurusan Tarbiyah STAIN Jember. Dengan pendekatan qualitative, penelitian ini berusaha mengidentifikasi permasalahan yang dialami oleh mahasiswa tersebut dalam pengalaman belajarnya di STAIN Jember dan upaya solusi yang mereka lakukan.*

**Key Words:** *Language Barriers, Cultural Differences*

### INTRODUCTION

One's language shows one's nation and one's language shows one's culture. Mastering a language is not an easy thing, since we have to acquire both the language and the culture. Many students are interested to learn foreign language. However, the unsatisfactory result appears due to the culture that bonds with the language.

Increased globalization is forcing a growing number of students to interact across linguistic boundaries. Since language affects almost all aspects of everyday life, there needs more of a focus on communication



barriers by researchers and practitioners engaged in international business and management<sup>1</sup>, including in education environment.

Applying this notion to the Thai students at STAIN Jember context, this study aims to get the picture of how the language barriers and cultural differences happened among the Thai students who learn Islamic studies at STAIN Jember. As we know that for most of the Muslim on South part of Thailand, Indonesia is like the second home. Many of them are studying and even running a business in Indonesia.<sup>2</sup> Starting in 2013, STAIN Jember has made an MoU with Thailand government, especially with the Princess of Naradhiwas University. The result of the MoU is the students' exchange, in which the chosen Tarbiyah students can follow Field Experience Practice (PPL) II in Thailand, while the selected students of Princess of Naradhiwas University can study in Tarbiyah Faculty PAI Department of STAIN Jember.

The issue of language barriers is particularly critical during intercultural education encounters, where the students and the teachers are from different cultures. Such intercultural education encounters may be influenced not only by cultural differences but also by language barriers. The fact that almost all of Indonesian students and lecturers cannot speak Thai and Malay may greatly affect Thai students. They may find it difficult to communicate or even get necessary information regarding their study in Indonesia. Moreover, most of Thai students are very low on the ability of English.

Language is more than just a communication tool, but also linked to an individual's identity<sup>3</sup>, therefore these barriers may influence different aspects of the education experience. Intercultural students can also be perceived as low literate students in terms of their Indonesian skills. They struggle not only with reading and writing but also with listening and

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<sup>1</sup> Henderson, J.K. 2005. 'Language Diversity in International Management Teams', *International Studies of Management and Organization* 35(1): 66–82.

<sup>2</sup> Anggadha, Arry and Kawilarang, Renne R.A (VIVAnews). 2010. *Muslim Thailand: Indonesia adalah Rumah Kedua*. Kamis, 22 Juli 2010. VIVA.co.id

<sup>3</sup> Lauring, J. 2008. Rethinking social identity theory in international encounters: language use as a negotiated object for identity making. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 8, 343.



speaking of Indonesian. Problems encountered by low literate students can cause misunderstanding on knowledge and information.

### **Differences and Similarities between Thailand and Indonesia**

There are different traditions and cultures, both similar and different traditions and culture between Thailand and Indonesia as a result of geographic factors. Here are the cultural and religious roots that explain the reasons as follows.<sup>4</sup>

1. Religious culture that spread out and get the respect of people in Southeast Asia, including Buddhism, a religion that most people in Thailand are traditionally respected, so Religious ceremonies as the Thai people offer alms to Buddhist monks, Praying, to pay respect to the Buddha. For Indonesia, mostly population believe in Muslim, so they have Islamic culture.
2. The language, while the people of Thailand speak Thai and Malay, Indonesian speak Bahasa Indonesia and their mother tongue.
3. Traditions, rituals, if any nation is the foundation of religion is Buddhism, traditional rituals are similar to the Thai Buddhist culture, such as philanthropy, the walking around temple three times with the candle in the important religious days and Buddhist lent day etc, as for other traditions are not related to religion found that if a country has a border with Thailand. The Thai culture to show respect. The respect of Thai people. These nations have a tradition of respect as well. Meanwhile, Indonesian is based on Islamic traditional rites.
4. Food of the population in Southeast Asia, mainly consists of rice, vegetables and meats that are readily available locally. Mostly food will be spicy type. The foods of Southeast Asia are very diverse. Colors are appetizing. Spicy flavor.
5. The Dress of people in Southeast Asia, if not count local and national dress the dress code is no different. The city at present. Men wear pants, women wearing pants or skirts, but in rural areas, many women still wear the Sarong.

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<sup>4</sup> Steven\_Thana. 2000. Similarities and differences between the cultures of Thailand and neighboring countries.



### Five Factors Caused Language Barriers and Cultural Differences

There has been identification of some of the common language barriers and cultural differences and misunderstandings that often show up in the workplace. Some examples of these are:<sup>5</sup>

1. **Roles and Status:** In some cultures, a social hierarchy often exists that can create “bumps” in communication in the workplace. For example, in many countries, women are subordinate to men. Working in an American business, women from these countries may feel they should defer to their male counterparts or should not speak to or even look directly in the eyes of their male supervisors, managers or co-workers. When men innocently try to interact with them in the workplace, such women can feel uncomfortable or violated in some way. In contrast, males with such cultural backgrounds may not adapt well to working equally with females or having female supervisors. Understanding the interaction between sexes and the roles assigned in various cultures is important.
2. **Personal Space:** Americans typically prefer to stand about five feet apart when conversing. However, people from different cultural backgrounds may have different “comfort zones”. For example, Germans and Japanese like more distance, and Arab and Latinos generally like to get closer. Knowing these nuances in personal space can help communications tremendously.
3. **Body Language:** Body language says a lot, but it can be interpreted differently in the world. For example, most Americans typically signal “no” in shaking their heads, but people from some countries raise their chins. Another example is with eye contact. Americans like to make eye contact, and when it does not happen it can be taken as a sign of evasiveness. In some Latin and Asian countries, however, averted eyes are a sign of respect. Similarly, people from some cultures do not feel comfortable shaking hands. An American worker or manager may view this as lack of respect or ignorance.

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<sup>5</sup> Morris, Carol. 2002. Cultural and Language Barriers in Work Place. *Charlotte Mcklenburg-Workplace Department Board*



4. **Religion:** In many cultures, religion dominates life in a way that is often difficult for Americans to understand. For example, workers from some Muslim cultures may want to pray three times a day in accordance with their values and beliefs. There may also be religious holidays on which people of certain religions are forbidden to work or need to follow certain customs. These differences need to be respected, where possible, and not ignored.
5. **Personal Appearance:** Hygiene and grooming, eating habits and attire can vary from country to country and culture to culture. For example, some people may wear attire such as a headdress as part of their custom and beliefs. To remain true to their beliefs, some workers may want to continue to wear this dress in the American workplace. Employers may view this as inappropriate or unsafe. It is particularly problematic in businesses in which workers wear uniforms. In another example, immigrants from India, Turkey or other countries may use spices in their diets that are emitted through the body. American workers can interpret this as dirty or unhygienic, which is not the case.

## 10 Strategies for Overcoming Language Barriers and Cultural Differences

Language barriers and cultural differences are a common challenge in international business settings—and a two-way process. What native speakers often do not realize is that frequently it is not the other person's accent but their *own way of speaking* that creates the greatest barriers to effective communication. Use the strategies below to ensure you're not putting up your own roadblocks to effective international communication.<sup>6</sup>

### 1. Speak slowly and clearly.

Focus on clearly enunciating and slowing down your speech. Even if you're pressured for time, don't rush through your communication. Doing so often takes more time, as miscommunication and misunderstanding can result and you'll ultimately have to invest additional time in clearing up the confusion.

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<sup>6</sup> Berardo, Kate. 2007. 10 Strategies for Overcoming Language Barriers. Where Growing Minds Go Global © Culturocity.com



2. Ask for clarification.

If you are not 100% sure you've understood what others say, politely ask for clarification. Avoid assuming you've understood what's been said.

3. Frequently check for understanding.

Check both that you've understood what's been said and that others have fully understood you. Practice reflective listening to check your own understanding (e.g. 'So what I hear you saying is...') And use open-ended questions to check other people's understanding. Ask, 'what's your understanding of this process?' instead of 'is that clear?'

4. Avoid idioms.

Business language is often contextual, and therefore culture specific. For example, in the US, baseball terms are used extensively: 'Straight off the Bat,' 'Ballpark figures,' 'Out in left field,' 'Touch base,' 'Strike a deal'. As a good general rule, if the phrase requires knowledge of other information—be it a game or metaphor—recognize that this may make your communication more difficult to be understood.

5. Be careful of jargon.

Watch the use of TLAs (Three Letter Abbreviations) and other organizational language that may not be understood by others. If you use them, provide in parentheses a description of what these are so others can learn to use the same language you do.

6. Define the basics of business.

In international business contexts terms such as: 'success', 'doneness', 'meetings', 'punctuality', etc. may mean different things to different people. Spend time early in your communication defining what these mean to you and others. Invest in building a shared vocabulary.

7. Be specific.

Spell out your expectations and deadlines clearly. Instead of, 'Please get back to me shortly,' say 'Please email the completed report by 5 pm Eastern Standard time on Wednesday, February 21.'

8. Choose your medium of communication effectively.

Carefully choose your form of communication (phone or video conference, email, instant message, etc.). Be mindful not to 'overuse' email. While useful, there are times when the medium is likely to be ineffective.



When a message is complex and complicated or there is tension or conflict that needs to be resolved, switch to another medium.

9. Provide information via multiple channels.

Follow phone calls with emails that summarize what's been said. When possible, provide presentations, agendas, etc. in advance so those working in their non-native language can get familiar with materials.

10. Be patient.

Cross-cultural communication takes more time. If not at all times, certainly initially you cannot expect your communication to occur with the same speed and ease as when you are communicating with someone from your own culture.

Through qualitative research, this study identifies issues that concern with language barriers and cultural differences faced by Thai students in intercultural education encounters and the solutions to create a better education experience for both sides.

## METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative research with a case study type which all of the data are in the form of explanation. The goal is a holistic picture and depth of understanding, rather than a numeric analysis of data.<sup>7</sup> The subject of this research is the Thai students who study at STAIN Jember. They all are on the third semester of PAI department Tarbiyah faculty which consists of 5 male and 5 female students.

Direct and semi-structured interviews were conducted as the main source of data. An interview guide consisted of 5 questions probing the interviewees regarding their problems which are usually faced as the influence of language barriers and cultural differences, namely: rules and status, private distance, body language, religion, and individual appearance. Moreover, questionnaire and observation as supporting instrument was also used to know their culture and habit in Thailand which was then analyzed by using triangulation.

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<sup>7</sup> Ary, Donald; Jacobs, Lucy Cheser; and Razavieh, Asghar.2002. *Introduction to Research in Education (Sixth Edition)*. Belmont: Wadsworth Group.



## DISCUSSION

### Language Barriers

From the data of the instruments, it was known that firstly, the Thai students experienced language barrier. They got difficulty in understanding the lecturers' words and they could not speak Indonesian. It made them difficult to learn the lesson in class. They were hoping to learn more about Islam in Indonesia, especially the religious college in Jember. However, language is a big obstacle for them.

Everything needs time. After a while, with the help of their friends in Indonesia, the Thai students could understand Indonesian and they could learn the lesson in class better. Language is a practice not a theory. The more we use it, the better result we get.

### Cultural Differences

From the five problems of cultural differences, it can be understood that basically no cultural differences happened between Thailand and Indonesia. It could be because most of Thailand and Indonesia's culture are similar. Moreover, with Islamic and Malay tradition, we have many similarities. However, differences are slightly found, but they do not make Thailand and Indonesia different in thoughts.

In addition to helping us to understand ourselves and our own cultural frames of reference, knowledge of patterns of cultural difference can help us to understand the people who are different from us. An appreciation of patterns of cultural difference can assist us in processing what it means to be different in ways that are respectful of others, not faultfinding or damaging.

We can also learn to collaborate across cultural lines as individuals and as a society. Awareness of cultural differences does not have to divide us from each other. It does not have to paralyze us either, for fear of not saying the "right thing." In fact, becoming more aware of our cultural differences, as well as exploring our similarities, can help us communicate with each other more effectively. Recognizing where cultural differences are at work is the first step toward understanding and respecting each other.

Learning about different ways that people communicate can enrich our lives. People's different communication styles reflect deeper



philosophies and world views which are the foundation of their culture. Understanding these deeper philosophies gives us a broader picture of what the world has to offer us.

Learning about people's cultures has the potential to give us a mirror image of our own. We have the opportunity to challenge our assumptions about the "right" way of doing things, and consider a variety of approaches. We have a chance to learn new ways to solve problems that we had previously given up on, accepting the difficulties as "just the way things are."

If we are open to learning about people from other cultures, we become less lonely. Prejudice and stereotypes separate us from whole groups of people who could be friends and partners in working for change. Many of us long for real contact. Talking with people different from ourselves gives us hope and energizes us to take on the challenge of improving our communities and worlds.

As we set to work on multicultural collaboration in our community, keep in mind these additional guidelines:

Learn from generalizations about other cultures, but do not use those generalizations to stereotype, "write off," or oversimplify your ideas about another person. The best use of a generalization is to add it to our storehouse of knowledge so that you better understand and appreciate other interesting, multi-faceted human beings.

Practice, practice, practice. That's the first rule, because it's in the doing that we actually get better at cross-cultural communication.

Do not assume that there is one right way to communicate. Keep questioning your assumptions about the "right way" to communicate. For example, think about your body language; postures that indicate receptivity in one culture might indicate aggressiveness in another.

Do not assume that breakdowns in communication occur because other people are on the wrong track. Search for ways to make the communication work, rather than searching for who should receive the blame for the breakdown.

Listen actively and empathetically. Try to put yourself in the other person's shoes. Especially when another person's perceptions or ideas are



very different from your own, you might need to operate at the edge of your own comfort zone.

Respect others' choices about whether to engage in communication with you. Honor their opinions about what is going on.

Stop, suspend judgment, and try to look at the situation as an outsider.

Be prepared for a discussion of the past. Use this as an opportunity to develop an understanding from "the other's" point of view, rather than getting defensive or impatient. Acknowledge historical events that have taken place. Be open to learning more about them. Honest acknowledgment of the mistreatment and oppression that have taken place on the basis of cultural difference is vital for effective communication.<sup>8</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The problem that was experienced by the Thai students was mostly related to language. They got difficulty in understanding what the lecturers' said. Moreover, it was also effected the understanding of the lesson in class. Language barriers often go hand-in hand with cultural differences, posing additional problems and misunderstandings in the education setting. When a person speaks little language, he/she can be intimidated and frustrated trying to communicate with other native language. That is why good environment supports a lot to the learning progress of understanding the language and culture of some countries.

The Thai students' suggestion due to the problem goes for the readiness of language mastery and language course. The exchange students should be taught about the language before they follow the students-exchange.

Awareness of current power imbalances -- and an openness to hearing each other's perceptions of those imbalances -- is also necessary for understanding each other and working together. Remember that cultural norms may not apply to the behavior of any particular individual. We are all shaped by many, many factors -- our ethnic background, our family, our education, our personalities -- and are more complicated than any cultural norm could suggest. Check our interpretations if we are uncertain what is meant.

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<sup>8</sup> M.E. DuPraw & M. Axner. 2007. Working on Common Cross-cultural Communication Challenges.



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