



Exploration of cultural experiences and adaptation among international students in Korea

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ABSTRACT

Currently, students are given the freedom to study and hone their respective abilities. To achieve this, there is one way that is quite popular, namely, overseas study programs. However, the process of studying abroad is something that requires thorough preparation, especially regarding how to adapt to successful study. The purpose of this research is to find out how international students adapt to Korean culture and how students understand Korean culture and apply it as an effort to complete their studies in Korea. This research used qualitative methods and was conducted with five Korean language study program students who received a collaborative scholarship program between state universities in Indonesia and Korean universities in the cities of Seoul and Asan as research subjects. International students' understanding of Korean culture is measured by indicators of understanding according to Bloom's taxonomy in the revised form, and the students' adaptation process is measured by Kim Young Yun's theory regarding the adaptation process. Data collection was carried out using semi-structured interview techniques. The research results show that international students can understand Korean culture and can use this experience as an effort to complete their studies in Korea, and international students can adapt well during the study process in Korea.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Culture has an important role in education. This important role is shown by the existence of culture that is part of Education (Widyastuti, 2021). These two things are mutually continuous and affect each other. That is, education can change if the culture changes, and this is the case the other way around. The relationship between these two things is education which is one of the efforts to inherit culture. With education, culture can continue to be passed on to the next generation. In the educational process, the role of culture also has the goal of honing the potential, abilities and personality of students (Widyastuti, 2021).

The cultural insight that has been received by students certainly continues to develop into cultural knowledge and eventually become a cultural experience. This means that when it comes to the phase of education that is already high enough, usually a person has received quite a lot of cultural experience, because of the learning process that has been passed before. Therefore, a person who lacks in learning will have limited knowledge and cultural experience, and conversely, someone who lacks in cultural experience will have difficulty in learning. To obtain good and qualified learning skills and cultural experience, there are many efforts that can be made, one of which is by studying abroad.

Studying abroad not only provides students with access to different educational systems but also immerses them in diverse cultural contexts that enrich their perspectives. Through interaction with peers, lecturers, and communities in the host country, students are encouraged to compare, reflect, and integrate new values into their existing worldview. This process does not simply increase academic competence but also fosters intercultural awareness, adaptability, and resilience. Consequently, the integration of education and culture through international study becomes an effective means to prepare students for global citizenship, where they are expected to contribute meaningfully across cultural boundaries.

Cultural Acquisition

When studying abroad, students will gain a lot of knowledge and experience, and one of the experiences they will get is multicultural experience. Multicultural experience is the experience of a person being in an unfamiliar environment so that they are quite used to and able to interact and have a new perspective on something (Leung et al., 2008). In the context of this research, multicultural experience has the meaning of experience about culture that students gain when studying abroad. With this, students' abilities can be formed due to cultural diversity (Pratiwi et al., 2018). However, for the sake of the formation of experience and other abilities, it takes students' understanding to interpret the things received.

Comprehension is a ability that includes the individual's thoughts and ways of analyzing (Tahmidaten & Krismanto, 2020). In the cognitive realm of Bloom, the form of revision according to (Anderson et al., 2001) Understanding is divided into 7 (seven) processes, namely interpreting, exemplifying, classifying, summarizing, deducing, comparing and explaining. First, interpreting means that one can grasp the meaning of an idea and express it again according to what is understood. Second, exemplifying means, a person can give an example of an idea. Third, classifying means, a person can gather information into a certain category. Fourth, summarizing means, a person can express an idea in a shorter form, without reducing the content of the idea. Fifth, concluding means, a person can relate the entire content of an idea. Sixth, comparing means, one can find similarities and differences between one object and another. Seventh, explaining means, a person can put forward an idea according to the existing facts.

To be able to understand the culture of a country, the study participants must first be able to adapt to that culture. Adaptation is said to be an absolute necessity for students to adapt to an environment that has a new culture (Masamah, 2015). Furthermore, adaptation can be interpreted as the stages of individual adjustment to the new situation faced and not tied to the individual's personal preferences. Adaptation according to (Kim, 2001) divided into two stages, adaptation according to is divided into two stages, namely *Cultural Adaptation* and *cross-cultural adaptation*. Deep *cultural adaptation*, there is an enculturation stage, or the stage of giving and receiving information by the natives to immigrants. Then on *cross-cultural adaptation* There are three stages, which are called acculturation when immigrants begin to be able to interact with the local culture, then deculturation, which is when the previous culture affects the acculturation process, and finally assimilation, where the immigrant is more able to communicate and socialize according to the culture in which the environment is located.

This is reinforced by the statement that every individual who encounters a culture or is in a new environment must go through a process of adaptation with the aim of benefiting from his or her new environment (Utami, 2015). The process according to (Kim, 2001) It is divided into three parts, namely *stress*, *adaptation*, and *Growth*. *Stress* occurs when a person begins to enter a new environment. Then *Adaptation* which takes place with acculturation and deculturation. Next is *Growth* which is characterized by the occurrence of a process *Stress-Adaptation* that is not fixed.

Barriers and Resilience of International Students

According to research conducted by Bret Allen Taylor (2004), it was found that the learning environment has an influence on learning achievement. In learning languages and cultures abroad, the surrounding environment can be a forum and support for the learning process. Factors that affect learning processes and outcomes are divided into two things, namely internal and external factors (Scott, 2017). The social environment is one of the external factors, and motivation is one of the internal factors that affect the learning process and outcomes. However, motivation has a non-fixed nature and can change according to a person's circumstances. This is supported by Dimiyati & Mudjiono's statement (Elvira et al., 2022) which states that one of the factors that affect motivation is the environmental condition of students, and to build a balance between motivation and environmental conditions, it is necessary to have the ability to adjust themselves or a qualified survival mechanism

The ability to survive in question is resilience. Resilience is the ability of students to survive difficulties and challenges in the teaching-learning process (Edwards et al., 2016). Resilience is mentioned as an effort that can inform how students or students are able to overcome the difficulties and obstacles experienced to survive for the goals and academic demands of each individual (Hendriani, 2017).

In addition to being a factor that affects the learning process and outcomes, motivation is also related to students' adaptability and resilience. If students only have motivation but do not have resistance to pressure, then that motivation can be lost (Mir'atannisa et al., 2019). Therefore, students who have good academic resilience will have high enthusiasm in learning and achieve satisfactory grades (Pramudhita et al., 2023). On the contrary, students who do not have good academic resilience are vulnerable to pressure and are more at risk of feeling stressed (Mir'atannisa et al., 2019). Therefore, it can be concluded that resilience is closely related to students' learning motivation and adaptability.

Looking at research related to student learning motivation abroad conducted by (Sadrina & Nasir, 2017); (Le Huu Nghia, 2019); (Andrian et al., 2020) and (Casas Trujillo et al., 2020) It

was found that one of the motivations to study abroad is to experience new experiences in learning as well as in culture. UNESCO noted that in 2021 there were 53,604 students in Indonesia who wanted to continue their studies abroad (Division, 2023). The high interest in international education makes the government must continue to innovate to meet these needs and demands. These demands and needs are strengthened in the Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System Chapter IV Part IV of article 11 paragraph 1 concerning the Rights and Obligations of the Government and Local Governments which reads "The Government and Regional Governments are obliged to provide services and facilities, as well as ensure the implementation of quality education for every citizen without discrimination" (Law of the Republic of Indonesia, 2003).

In line with this, the government develops programs that can accommodate those interested in studying abroad, by holding study abroad programs, including IISMA, LPDP, Advanced Indonesia Scholarship, and many other programs offered by the government to meet existing demands and needs. In addition to the above programs, opportunities to study abroad can also be found through cooperation between universities. Several universities in Indonesia have carried out this cooperation program to meet the demands and needs of students to continue their education.

The process of studying abroad is closely related to the adaptability of everyone. With adaptability, individuals can adapt to the surrounding conditions. However, in adapting abroad, students certainly face difficulties that make the adaptation process feel difficult. Research on cultural shocks and difficulties that students often feel has been researched by (Scott, 2014); (Anom & Mayagita, 2021); (Hasyim & Nur, 2022); (Zhou, 2023); and (Alasmari, 2023). The results of the above research contain similarities, namely that students feel difficulties in adapting due to cultural clashes caused by cultural differences and language barriers. The participants of the IISMA program also felt the same difficulties and obstacles. In research (Budiarti et al., 2022); and (Prasetyaningrum et al., 2023) In it, it discusses the difficulties and obstacles faced by students participating in the IISMA program. In both studies, there are the same obstacles as non-IISMA study abroad participants, namely cultural and language differences.

However, it turns out that not all students feel the same way. Research on international student adaptation and strategies conducted by (Costello, 2015); (Yurianti et al., 2020); (Initiative et al., 2022); and (Govinda & Hanami, 2023) explained that, despite experiencing difficulties in adapting and also experiencing cultural shocks, there are students who can be resilient. International students in the study prepared strategies and efforts to survive when experiencing cultural shocks. Efforts made include being flexible and open to learning new things.

The urgency that makes this research carried out is the need for research on how the cultural experiences of international students can affect the adaptation and understanding of international students about Korean culture and how these two contribute to the way international students complete their studies in South Korea. The purpose of this research is to answer the formulation of the problem; about how international students understand Korean culture and apply it as an effort to complete studies in Korea and how international students adapt to Korean culture. This research is expected to be able to produce a solution to the problems that occur for students who will carry out their studies abroad. It is also hoped that this research can be a reference for future research to develop the solutions that have been found.

2. METHOD

Qualitative research is used with the aim of explaining the phenomenon and research results by interpreting and elaborating data from the field in depth. Furthermore, the type of

phenomenological approach is used in this study as an attempt to explore the experiences of students while studying in South Korea. The objective of this study is to interpret and elaborate the experiences experienced by participants during the scholarship program in South Korea, both with other people and the surrounding environment.

This research was conducted with 5 (five) students of the Korean language study program who were determined to be recipients of a cooperation scholarship program between state universities in Indonesia and universities in Korea in the cities of Seoul and Asan, during February to June 2023 and had conducted a Korean language proficiency test, or TOPIK 2. This research was conducted at one of the state universities in Indonesia. The data collection technique was carried out by means of in-depth interviews or interviews.

The data collection technique was carried out by means of semi-structured interviews with interview instruments that refer to the theory of understanding Bloom's revised taxonomy and Kim Yun Young's theory of adaptation process with the aim of finding out students' understanding of Korean culture that they experience and how students use this understanding as a way to complete their studies in South Korea.

Furthermore, the data was analyzed using the Milles and Hubermann method, namely by reducing the data. Data reduction is useful for finding the data needed by separating the data from other data that is less relevant to the research topic. While sorting the data, the data obtained will be simplified and reprocessed to find more relevant, sharp, and accurate data. After that, the author will present the data results in the form of a narrative with the aim of elaborating the research results to make them easier to understand. The last step, the results of the research will be concluded by interpreting the results of the research.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Cultural Experience of International Students

Overall, international students mentioned that Korea has a diverse culture. Because of the diverse cultures, there are cultures that provide effect Culture shocks in international students from Indonesia. Culture shock usually occurs due to a lack of information or knowledge that a person has about the culture of a country (Mufidah & Fadilah, 2022). The result of a lack of knowledge, is an increase in one's expectations about the country. The cultural shock that occurred to international students in this study had the same cause, namely the lack of information about the country and culture of Korea. International students say:

"Korea is complicated. Maybe this is also because we don't have information and people to help and don't have the application that is needed right in Korea. The previous information we got was also not accurate with our situation at that time. At that time, we also didn't know how to get to the campus, and finally we were told by our friends who had arrived first, that we had to take a taxi. Because we don't know, we download the application to order a taxi, even though we can actually just go on without having to order first."

Furthermore, another international student added:

"Then we were scolded by the taxi driver. He said we had a lot of luggage so we should order 2 taxis, not 1. His tone was also not good, and I almost cried there." (FSS).

International students also admit that they lack the information they need, and no one tells them in detail about international student life in Korea. International students state:

"We don't look for information and the information we receive is also little, so we have to find out while studying" (FSS).

Another student added:

"Actually, we also ask why we have been to Korea before, but the information we received was more about preparation to go to Korea. If the information for the culture is not widely known. So what we are told is only what we do and what we must prepare" (MIJ).

International students said that the diversity of cultures in Korea includes coffee drinking culture, alcohol culture, culture respecting parents, learning culture, dating culture, punctual culture and public transportation culture. Among these cultures, Korea and Indonesia have differences and similarities. The similarity mentioned by international students is in how Korean and Indonesian people respect parents. This is evidenced using a call of respect to older people. It aims to honor those who already have more knowledge and experience in life.

Then, the differences explained by international students, among them are the culture of punctuality. In Korea, there is a culture called *ppali-ppali*, or fast culture. Thanks to this culture, almost everything in Korea goes on time. It is different from the time culture in Indonesia. In Indonesia, *ngaret* culture is a frequent occurrence. This culture of *ngaret* occurs because Indonesian people often do things slowly. Then, other differences are individualism and racism. According to the statement of international students, the individualistic attitude of the Korean people is because they do not want to be bothered with other people's affairs. In contrast to Indonesian people who have a friendly attitude, this difference is certainly the most felt by international students. This can be seen from the excerpts of interviews with international students below:

"The culture of respect for parents is very similar to that in Indonesia. The difference is the culture of the time. If it's in Korea, you have the right time estimate. So, suppose there is an announcement about a late train, it is told how many minutes late. For example, 2 minutes late, yes in 2 minutes it will have arrived" (FSS).

Other international students explained the cultural differences between Korea and Indonesia as follows:

"In Indonesia, the culture of mutual cooperation is strong, different from the same there. "We know that Koreans are individualistic, but we don't think that they are very individualistic."

In addition to individualistic attitudes, not a few Korean people still have racist attitudes. International students said that the possibility of racism occurred was due to the advancement of the Korean state and caused its people to have a sense of superiority over other nations, especially in Southeast Asia. This is supported by research conducted by (Mulyana & Eko, 2017) about *cross-cultural adaptation* Indonesian students in Busan, South Korea. In the study, it was explained that some Indonesian students were treated badly by the racist Korean society and considered that Indonesia was an underdeveloped country and far behind in the context of wealth and technology. One of the international students explained about the racism experience he experienced while studying in Korea. The presentation of the experience is as follows:

"I've always felt the racism of Korean society. At that time, I was going to a minimarket, the one who guarded the minimarket was a married couple who were quite old. Because the mother who was proud saw me wearing a veil, so she showed me which foods did not have pork, and which ones were. Now after it was finished, I paid, and the one who took care of this was his father. He said, 'you must eat all the food, no matter if there is pork or not'. At that time, I was just diem and my mother who was the one who told my father not to talk like that" (FSS)

In research (Mulyaman & Ismail, 2021) regarding ethnocentrism and xenophobia in South Korea it is explained that Korea has a long history with foreigners, and this is probably the reason why Korean society finds it difficult to open up to new cultures or foreigners. This thing done by the Korean people has a high probability of giving rise to negative impressions, not only from international students, but this can also come from other foreign tourists.

However, despite the negative experiences, international students also still have positive experiences while in Korea. International students said that there are still many Korean people who are caring and tolerant of others. The international students further explained that they had received assistance from the Korean community. The positive experience they felt next was about the learning culture in Korea. Students in Korea, can be called competitive. This is supported by an explanation from international students who say that the place of study is always full of students who are studying, even more so during the exam period. This culture is said to be one of the cultures that is very difficult for international students from Indonesia to understand. It is stated that the possible cause is due to the similarity between the subject matter and the exam questions. In contrast to Indonesia, the subject matter is different from the exam questions. This is done with the aim that students can think more critically. Therefore, it can be concluded that students in Korea learn by memorization because of the same subject matter and exam questions.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the experiences of international students in Korea are shaped by both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, issues such as ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and differences in academic culture create significant obstacles. On the other hand, the presence of supportive individuals, well-structured learning environments, and accessible public facilities demonstrate that positive experiences also play an important role in students' adaptation. Thus, it can be concluded that the process of cultural adjustment is not solely about overcoming barriers, but also about recognizing and learning from the positive aspects of the host culture that can enrich students' academic and social lives.

International Students' Adaptation Strategies

The first stage of adaptation felt by international students immediately after arriving in Korea is *cultural adaptation*, where students unknowingly receive information about Korea from the local community. This sudden and massive information caused confusion among international students. International students said that the cause of the confusion they felt was the absence of a companion to help them after arriving in Korea. This has also resulted in international students being forced to find ways to carry out a series of activities independently, which requires them to communicate directly with the local community. Unfortunately, the information they had at the time was not very supportive and instead caused them to experience a culture shock on their first day in Korea.

In the process of searching for information, international students again experienced a cultural shock. An example of the cultural shock they experienced was the individualism attitude of the Korean people. This is inversely proportional to the culture they have as Indonesian people, which are known to have high hospitality. Korean society tends to be less concerned about others and more concerned about themselves. However, this does not apply to people who are already close to them. International students reveal that Korean society will be very kind and caring to those closest to them. But apart from that, this attitude of individualism also has a positive impact felt by international students. It is stated that with this attitude, the situation in Korea can be said to be quite safe. One of the international students said that it was safe enough to be outside their residence even at night. Then, another added that many Koreans are not worried about leaving their luggage in public places. Below is an excerpt of an interview with one of the international students:

"In Indonesia, going home late at night can be quite worrying because of the possibility of encountering crimes such as robbery. However, in Korea, returning home at night feels relatively safe, as people generally mind their own business and do not interfere with what others are doing" (NNA).

Furthermore, the second stage of adaptation felt by international students is *cross-cultural adaptation*. At this stage, students have received quite a lot of information about the country and culture of Korea. International students have also interacted with the local community or other international students. In this *cross-cultural adaptation* stage, students experience acculturation, where the acculturation process occurs. Before the acculturation process occurs, the efforts made by international students are, among others, by being open, trying to accept, interacting with cultural owners and understanding Korean culture, they also try to apply Korean culture that is still in line with their original culture. An example of the acculturation process carried out by international students is by uniting Korean and Indonesian eating cultures, as well as worship cultures in Korea and Indonesia. Korean people usually eat fast food chicken without rice, but it is different from the culture of Indonesian people who often consume fast food chicken with rice. Therefore, students prepare rice from the dormitory where they live to be eaten with fast food. This is evidenced by the following statements from international students:

"In Korea, fried chicken is usually eaten without rice, which felt unusual for me. So, I brought rice from the dormitory and ate it together with the chicken. In this way, I tried to combine my Indonesian eating habits with the Korean style. " (NNA).

Another example, Indonesian society is a country where most adherents of the Islamic religion, therefore, it is easy to find mosques in every place. However, in Korea, it is quite difficult to find a mosque because most of the people are not adherents of the Islamic religion. The acculturation found was that one of the international students was required to use public transportation first to find the mosque. The next example of acculturation is the openness of international students' attitudes to the culture of consuming alcohol in Korea. This is certainly very contradictory to the religion and culture of international students, but they try to understand and instead of alcohol, they consume soft drinks.

Then, the stages of deculturation also occur in international students when adapting. At this stage, there is an embedded culture that replaces the previous culture. This is supported by an explanation of the ability of international students on how to separate waste by type according to what people in Korea do. The next thing that is most remembered and applied by international students is the attitude of the individualism of the Korean people. It is stated that they imitate this attitude of individualism with the aim of adjusting to Korean society and avoiding things that are felt necessary. However, in the process, international students retain and use their native attitudes and culture when needed.

Over time, the assimilation process is inevitable. This is shown with international students explaining that they are becoming more familiar with Korean culture. At this stage, international students say that they have applied the Korean culture they have received. Among them, the self-service culture of the Korean people. This *self-service* culture is carried out by ordering food through menu outlets and cleaning food utensils after eating independently. One of the international students also said that Korea is an orderly and disciplined country. This is also implemented by following the regulations applied in each place.

In addition, the process of assimilation is not limited to visible practices such as food culture or public order but also extends to values and behaviors that shape everyday interactions. For example, students gradually learn the importance of punctuality, efficiency, and respect for shared spaces, which are strongly emphasized in Korean society. These forms of adaptation indicate that assimilation involves both behavioural adjustments and internalization of cultural values, allowing students to function more effectively in their host environment.

Despite the ability of students to adapt to some Korean cultures, international students said that they still find it difficult to adapt to certain things. This includes food, weather, and the nature and attitudes of Korean people. The difficulty arises because the indigenous culture of international students affects the way they adapt in Korea. To deal with these difficulties, resilience efforts carried out by international students are diverse, such as, trying to accept and understand Korean culture, communicating with relatives, expressing emotions by crying, communicating with Indonesian people who are also in Korea are quite effective solutions to overcome difficulties in adapting. Because it can be said that support from the social environment can awaken students' adaptability to survive in the midst of academic demands (Pramudhita et al., 2023). Supported by the statement of international students below:

"Sometimes, when we share our experiences with each other, it helps us hold back our tears. During the fasting month, we often go to a mosque where many Indonesians gather, and there we talk with fellow Indonesians about how to adapt as Muslims in Korea" (SAM).

In addition, international students have also prepared things that can make their adaptation process easier. This is food brought from Indonesia, or items that they often use while in Indonesia. Because of these things, international students say that their adaptation process becomes easier. Furthermore, international students also stated:

"I feel that adaptation is easier because I bring food from Indonesia. Like chili sauce, fried noodles and others. So, if you want to go to Indonesia, you can eat Indonesian food. I also bring things that I often use, such as flip-flops, bring a veil directly, so it's easy" (FSS).

Next, the final adaptation process is *Growth*. In accordance with the stated by (Kim, 2001), at this stage, students are considered to have been able to adapt well, although there are several times they feel it again *stress* and have to adapt to the culture they are just experiencing. But according to them, it is no longer something to worry about and think about because they already know how to adapt to the culture. The following is a statement from international students:

"Yes, but in some ways, it does take a process, and you have to try to get used to Korean cultures, and you have to be able to adapt continuously so that you get more used to it and will not be surprised anymore" (MIJ).

From all the presentations about adaptation above, it was found that international students experienced a lot of adaptation to the acculturation stage. The possibility that acculturation is very often happening because students who want adaptation to go well but are still tied to the culture and values of their country. Therefore, Indonesian values and culture are still very attached to them. In line with the findings (Mulyana & Eko, 2017); (Soemantri, 2019) and (Initiative et al., 2022) which implicitly explains that international students from Indonesia have adapted a lot to the acculturation stage. In previous research, there are many implicit meanings that international students from Indonesia can adapt by daring to open themselves up and try new things, especially with the culture in which they are studying. It was also explained that international students still adhere to the values and culture of Indonesia that are inherent in them. This shows that two cultures are united without any culture being lost.

In this regard, the process of acculturation experienced by Indonesian students in Korea reflects a dynamic negotiation between preserving their cultural identity and embracing aspects of the host culture. Such a process demonstrates that adaptation is not a linear transition but rather a reciprocal exchange, where students selectively adopt practices that support their academic and social success while maintaining values that shape their identity. This dual orientation can be seen as a strength, as it allows students to expand their intercultural competence and resilience without feeling disconnected from their cultural roots.

4. CONCLUSION

The experiences told by international students above can be proof that international students understand the culture they have experienced. This is evidenced by the presentation of many experiences. Then, the way international students adapt is also in accordance with the stages and process of adaptation according to Kim Young Yun, who at first international students felt *stress* because of some cultural shocks they experienced, then international students started the stages and the adaptation process well. This is evidenced by students who have managed to survive during the study abroad process.

From the experience described, students said that the experience helped them in the process of completing their studies in Korea. International students agree that by continuing to try to adapt, they will become more familiar with a culture. When they get used to it, international students will know what to do and what not to do. International students also added that the method can be effectively applied in other countries. Therefore, students' cultural experiences are said to be able to help adapt and help students to complete their studies. The suggestion for the next research is to conduct more focused research on how the learning environment and where students live can affect students' cultural experiences, and how these experiences can affect students' learning outcomes during the study abroad process.

Furthermore, the findings of this study are expected to provide practical implications for both sending and receiving institutions. For universities in Indonesia, this research may serve as a reference in preparing students before departure, equipping them with adequate cultural literacy and strategies for adaptation. For host universities in Korea, the results can highlight the importance of providing support systems that acknowledge the diverse cultural backgrounds of international students. By doing so, both institutions can work together to ensure that cultural experiences abroad are not only challenges to overcome but also valuable assets that contribute to students' academic success.

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