OUT-OF-TOWN STUDENTS' BARRIERS TO AUTHENTIC COMMUNICATION FOR ACADEMIC CULTURAL ADAPTATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

This study explores the challenges faced by out-of-town students in adapting to academic culture, with a specific focus on barriers to authentic communication in the digital age. Out-of-town students, particularly those studying in large cities, often encounter difficulties in bridging cultural and communication gaps. These challenges can negatively affect their academic performance, social integration, and overall well-being. Through a qualitative approach, the research investigates the key barriers that hinder authentic communication among out-of-town students in academic settings. It examines the role of digital communication tools in mitigating or exacerbating these barriers and assesses how these students navigate their academic environment. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with students, faculty, and administrators at a prominent health institution. Findings highlight issues such as language barriers, unfamiliarity with local communication norms, digital literacy gaps, and a lack of cultural competence, all of which contribute to students' struggles with academic adaptation. This study also discusses the implications of these barriers for academic success and suggests practical strategies for enhancing cultural competence and communication skills among out-of-town students. The research emphasizes the importance of targeted interventions, such as training in digital communication and intercultural adaptation, to support these students in their academic journey.

Keywords: students barrier, authentic communication, academik cultural, adaptation

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi tantangan yang dihadapi oleh mahasiswa dari luar kota dalam beradaptasi dengan budaya akademik, dengan fokus khusus pada hambatan dalam komunikasi autentik di era digital. Mahasiswa dari luar kota, terutama yang belajar di kota besar, sering kali menghadapi kesulitan dalam menjembatani kesenjangan budaya dan komunikasi. Tantangan ini dapat berdampak negatif pada kinerja akademik, integrasi sosial, dan kesejahteraan secara keseluruhan. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif, penelitian ini menginvestigasi hambatan-hambatan utama yang menghalangi komunikasi autentik di antara mahasiswa luar kota dalam konteks akademik. Penelitian ini juga memeriksa peran alat komunikasi digital dalam mengurangi atau memperburuk hambatan-hambatan tersebut serta menilai bagaimana mahasiswa ini menavigasi lingkungan akademik mereka. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dan diskusi kelompok fokus dengan mahasiswa, dosen, dan administrator di sebuah institusi kesehatan terkemuka. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan masalah seperti hambatan bahasa, ketidakpahaman terhadap norma komunikasi lokal, kesenjangan literasi digital, dan kurangnya kompetensi budaya, yang semuanya berkontribusi pada kesulitan mahasiswa dalam beradaptasi secara akademik. Penelitian ini juga membahas implikasi hambatan-hambatan ini terhadap keberhasilan akademik dan menyarankan strategi praktis untuk meningkatkan kompetensi budaya dan keterampilan komunikasi di kalangan mahasiswa luar kota. Penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya intervensi yang ditargetkan, seperti pelatihan dalam komunikasi digital dan adaptasi lintas budaya, untuk mendukung mahasiswa ini dalam perjalanan akademik mereka.

Kata kunci: tantangan mahasiswa, komunikasi otentik, budaya akademik, adaptasi

INTRODUCTION

Academic adaptation is a multifaceted process that transcends the mere acquisition of subject-specific knowledge, requiring students to navigate complex socio-cultural environments. For out-of-town students—those who relocate from their home regions to pursue higher education in unfamiliar urban or metropolitan contexts—this transition is especially challenging. The adaptation process not only involves reconciling academic expectations with personal learning styles but also necessitates the integration of new social norms and communication practices that may differ significantly from those students have encountered in their home communities. These students are often exposed to academic cultures that demand a high degree of intercultural communication competence, and their ability to adapt to these environments can be crucial to their success in higher education (Drozdova & Taulean, 2022; Fitriana & Mulyono, 2019).

The digital age further complicates this adaptation process, particularly with regard to communication. While digital tools have revolutionized the ways in which academic communities communicate, they also introduce new challenges for students who may lack familiarity with these technologies (Hayati & Sumiati, 2024; Iskandar et al., 2023; Milyane et al., 2023; Nurhayati, 2021; Sulkipani et al., 2024; Mulyono & Ansori, 2020). In particular, out-of-town students—especially those from rural or less digitally connected areas—face significant barriers in utilizing digital communication tools effectively(Nurhayati & Novianti, 2024; Nurhayati & Susanto, 2024; Setiadi et al., 2023; Susanti & Nurhayati, 2024). These barriers are not merely technological but are deeply rooted in issues of cultural adaptation and the need for authentic communication in academic contexts. Authentic communication, which encompasses transparent, honest, and contextually appropriate exchanges, plays a pivotal role in fostering academic integration and success (Holdo, 2022; Khan, 2017). However, in the context of digital communication, the absence of non-verbal cues, asynchronous interactions, and limited face-to-face engagement can impede students' ability to communicate authentically, thereby complicating their academic and social adaptation (Fadlyansyah & Nurhayati, 2020; Nurhayati, Friscilla Wulan Tersta, et al., 2024; Nurhayati, Wibowo, et al., 2024; Venter, 2019).

Cultural adaptation, particularly in academic environments, involves complex processes of learning new social norms, behaviors, and expectations while simultaneously negotiating one's identity and cultural background. This phenomenon, often referred to as "culture shock," is a well-documented aspect of the international student experience (Lobner, 2019). For out-of-town students, however, the challenges of academic adaptation are often intensified by local cultural differences, language barriers, and unfamiliar communication styles. Students from non-metropolitan areas may struggle to align their communication strategies with those expected in urban academic settings, leading to difficulties in establishing relationships with peers, faculty, and staff. The lack of understanding or misinterpretation of local communication codes can lead to a sense of alienation, reduced academic engagement, and a diminished sense of belonging within the academic community(Lobner, 2019; Venter, 2019). These challenges are further exacerbated in the digital realm, where communication takes place primarily through written texts, emails, and online learning platforms, which lack the immediate feedback and emotional cues present in face-to-face interactions. This situation not only

impacts students' academic performance but can also result in emotional and psychological distress as they struggle to integrate into both academic and social spheres (Nurhayati, Wibowo, et al., 2024).

While the challenges of academic adaptation for out-of-town students have been acknowledged in existing literature, particularly in the context of international students (Chen & Starosta, 2005), there is a dearth of research focusing specifically on domestic out-of-town students and their unique communication barriers. In particular, few studies have examined how these students, situated within the broader context of digital transformation in higher education, navigate the intersection of cultural adaptation and digital communication (Arifin, et.al., 2021). This research aims to fill this gap by exploring the specific barriers to authentic communication faced by out-of-town students in academic environments, with a focus on how digital tools may either facilitate or exacerbate these challenges. Additionally, the lack of support in developing digital literacy and intercultural communication skills can compound these difficulties, further hindering students' ability to thrive in their new academic and social environments (Nurhayati, 2024; Nurhayati, Fitri, et al., 2024; Nurhayati & Novianti, 2024). In light of these challenges, this study seeks to investigate the barriers to authentic communication faced by out-of-town students in academic settings, particularly in relation to digital communication tools. It will explore how these students navigate their academic and social environments and how institutions can better support their adaptation processes.

METHODS

This research employed a qualitative case study approach to examine the barriers faced by out-of-town students in achieving authentic communication for academic cultural adaptation in the digital age. An interpretive paradigm was adopted to explore participants' lived experiences (Iswahyudi et al., 2023; Nurhayati, Kurnianta, et al., 2024). The study was conducted at Immanuel Health Institute in Bandung, which hosts a diverse student body. Participants included 10 out-of-town students with at least one semester of enrollment, and 5 faculty members involved in their academic and cultural adaptation. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant experiences. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with students and faculty, direct observations of student interactions, and document analysis of institutional materials. Interviews provided in-depth insights into communication barriers, while observations and document analysis offered contextual understanding of the adaptation process. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes from the data. The analysis involved familiarizing with the data, coding, theme development, and validating findings through triangulation of interviews, observations, and documents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study indicate that out-of-town students at Immanuel Health Institute in Bandung face significant barriers to authentic communication for academic cultural adaptation. These barriers are primarily influenced by language differences, cultural misunderstandings, and communication apprehension, compounded by the challenges posed by digital communication platforms in the educational context.

Communication Barriers in Academic Settings

One of the primary obstacles identified by informants was the difficulty out-of-town students experienced in understanding academic tasks, which was compounded by communication challenges, both verbal and non-verbal. According to Ibu S, a faculty member, these students often struggled with comprehending assignments due to communication gaps. Although

interpersonal communication with peers and instructors was generally smooth, deeper understanding and critical thinking skills remained underdeveloped. She explained: "Students from outside Bandung face difficulty in grasping the tasks given, primarily due to communication issues—both verbal and non-verbal. Their interpersonal communication is generally good, but their deeper comprehension and critical thinking skills are still lacking. This is particularly problematic when they interact with patients who speak Sundanese, especially the refined form of Sundanese. They often require the assistance of classmates or family to translate." This finding underscores the importance of effective communication for academic success, a point supported by Fadlyansyah and Nurhayati (2020), who emphasizes the role of communication in academic settings, particularly in cross-cultural environments. From an andragogical perspective, this finding can be linked to Knowles' (1984) principle of adult learning, particularly the notion that adult learners bring prior experiences into the learning environment, but these experiences may not always align with the institutional context or the content they are learning (Nurhayati, Haluti, et al., 2024; Nurhayati, Tersta, et al., 2024; Nurhayati, Wibowo, et al., 2024; Nurhayati & Lahagu, 2024). The gap between students' ability to communicate and their critical thinking skills suggests a need for contextualized instruction that connects academic content to real-life experiences. Knowles' principles suggest that adult learners need to see the immediate relevance of what they are learning (Cacam et al., 2023; Nurhayati, 2015; Somantri et al., 2024). In this case, more tailored language support or academic orientation could help bridge this gap, enabling students to draw on their life experiences while simultaneously developing their academic skills.

Cultural Shock and Communication Difficulties
Cultural shock, as an element of adaptation, emerged as another significant barrier. Ibu L, another informant, emphasized that cultural differences, especially language disparities, contributed heavily to communication difficulties. She stated: "The communication challenges stem from differences in language and the ability to absorb information. Out-of-town students often need explanations to be repeated multiple times—sometimes two to four times—to fully grasp the message. I also stress the importance of cultural adaptation training for students, particularly those who have just arrived in Bandung. This training should include local social and cultural orientation to help them reduce culture shock that can hinder learning." This reflects the findings of Mulyana and Rakmat (2020), who argue that culture shock—resulting from the loss of familiar social cues—can cause significant stress, affecting both social integration and academic performance. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory stresses the importance of reflection and active experimentation in learning. As students face the challenges of adjusting to a new cultural environment, it would be beneficial for educators to integrate reflection activities that allow students to process their experiences and adjust their learning strategies accordingly (Nuraeni, et.al, 2025). This could aid in bridging the gap between their prior knowledge and the new cultural norms they encounter.

Differences in Communication Styles
Pak H, another informant, acknowledged that while communication was generally functional, the challenge lay in finding a language that could be easily understood by all students. He noted that out-of-town students often had a more assertive communication style, which clashed with the local population's more indirect and subtle communication norms. He said: "Although communication is generally fine, the real challenge is finding a language or approach that is easily understood by all students. Out-of-town students, particularly, tend to have a direct communication style, which differs from the more polite and nuanced communication style of the local community. It's essential to equip students with both communication skills and cultural knowledge to bridge this gap." This finding supports the theory of intercultural

communication by Kim (2015), which emphasizes that adapting to new cultural environments requires not only understanding new communication styles but also adjusting one's own communication methods (Pitts, 2016). However, with good communication skills, this will support the development of a broader student adaptation system, thereby providing opportunities for students to understand the value of academic culture that is sustainable. This will better prepare them to contribute not only in an academic setting, but also to the surrounding community (Mulyono, Hufad & Wahyudin, 2024).

Student Perspectives: Confidence and Language Understanding
In addition to faculty perspectives, the interviews with five out-of-town students provided further insights into the barriers they face in authentic communication. The students reported generally not experiencing significant issues when communicating with instructors, but they often felt insecure about speaking up or asking questions. One student explained: "We don't usually have problems communicating with professors, but we often feel hesitant to ask questions. We're afraid of saying something wrong or sounding silly. Our communication style is also sometimes misunderstood, particularly when we speak in a higher tone, which locals interpret as anger. Additionally, understanding the refined Sundanese language, especially in patient interactions, is another challenge for us." These findings align with previous studies on communication apprehension (Darmawangsa et al., 2020), suggesting that out-of-town students may struggle with self-confidence and fear of judgment, which can impede authentic communication. Moreover, the misunderstanding of tone and language differences highlights the broader issues of cultural adaptation and communication in cross-cultural settings. Out-of-town students may lack confidence in their communication abilities, especially in unfamiliar cultural and linguistic contexts. As adult learners, these students require supportive learning environments that provide both psychological safety and the opportunity for gradual skill development. Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory on self-efficacy further supports this, suggesting that building students' confidence through structured practice, feedback, and encouragement can significantly reduce communication apprehension (Nurhayati, Friscilla Wulan Tersta, et al., 2024; Nurhayati, Haluti, et al., 2024; Rahmat et al., 2024).

Communication Apprehension and Digital Platforms
In addition to linguistic and cultural challenges, students reported a sense of communication apprehension when using digital platforms for academic purposes. Despite having no significant issues communicating with instructors face-to-face, five out-of-town students interviewed in the study admitted to feeling insecure when using digital communication tools. One student shared: "When we send emails or post questions on the LMS, we feel insecure. We're afraid of making mistakes or being misunderstood because there's no opportunity for immediate clarification. It's hard to communicate authentically through these platforms because we can't convey the nuances of our tone or body language." This aligns with findings from Dalessandro (2018), which suggest that digital communication platforms, while efficient, can contribute to students' feelings of apprehension and hinder the establishment of authentic relationships. Without the immediate feedback and face-to-face interaction, students often hesitate to engage fully, which limits their ability to participate in meaningful academic discussions (Mulyono, et.al., 2024). To address the challenges of digital communication, universities must integrate interactive technologies that simulate face-to-face communication (Azizah et al., 2024; Juita et al., 2023; Nurhayati et al., 2023; Suharyat et al., 2022). Tools such as video conferencing, discussion boards with real-time interaction, and peer feedback mechanisms can help reduce students' communication apprehension and improve engagement. Additionally, training students and faculty to utilize digital platforms effectively is crucial to

ensure that digital communication does not become an additional barrier (Kristiyanti & Nurhayati, 2024; Masri & Nurhayati, 2024; Nurhayati, Fitri, et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that out-of-town students at Immanuel Health Institute face significant barriers to authentic communication for academic cultural adaptation. These barriers are primarily caused by language differences, cultural misunderstandings, communication apprehension, and challenges with digital communication platforms. Faculty and students reported difficulties in comprehending academic tasks, adjusting to local communication styles, and dealing with culture shock. Students also expressed insecurity when engaging in digital platforms, highlighting the role of non-verbal cues and the immediacy of face-to-face interactions in facilitating authentic communication. The research implications emphasize the need for targeted interventions to support students' academic and cultural integration. Educational programs should include language support, intercultural communication training, and confidence-building initiatives to bridge communication gaps. Additionally, digital communication strategies must be enhanced to reduce students' anxiety and promote authentic engagement in online learning environments. Future research should explore the effectiveness of intercultural communication training and digital communication tools in improving academic adaptation. Longitudinal studies can investigate how these barriers evolve over time and how technology-enhanced learning environments can be optimized to facilitate cross-cultural communication. Further research could also examine the role of peer support networks in easing adaptation, particularly in terms of fostering a community of practice among students from diverse backgrounds.

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