

Intercultural Adaptive Communication Competence: Case Study on Afghan Refugee in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The arrival of refugees to Indonesia for temporary refuge is a phenomenon that has occurred for a long time and has not been resolved until now. Families from Middle Eastern countries, especially Afghanistan, who were affected by the war chose to make Indonesia their second country for safety. After they settled in Indonesia, they were required to adjust or enter the adaptation phase. In terms of culture and language, Indonesia is clearly different from their home country and this is a challenge for refugees. This study uses a qualitative ethnographic method approach, where data is taken from interviews with selected refugees who live together in the South Tangerang area. Interviews were analyzed based on the concept of five competencies in cross-cultural communication initiated by Michael Byram. The results of the study stated that refugees match with competencies during their adaptation in communication after relocation to Indonesia.

Keywords: refugees in Indonesia, communication challenges, intercultural communicative competences, intercultural communication

INTRODUCTION

The war between Israel and Palestine is still heating up and many local residents have been affected and have lost their safe homes. People who have lost their homes and have been forced to flee due to war are called refugees (UNHCR US, n.d.). According to data presented by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a UN organization that oversees refugees, there were 25.7 million refugees registered as refugees due to war in 2017 (UNHCR, n.d.). In Indonesia itself, there are around 12,295 refugees based on an article uploaded by (UNHCR Indonesia, n.d.). Their average country of origin is Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Syria (UNHCR US, n.d.). The number of Afghan refugees living in Indonesia is 48% of the registered population since December 2023 (UNHCR Indonesia, n.d.).

As living beings, we have the nature to carry out activities that require others to fulfill our life needs. One of these activities is communication, how one individual initiates interaction with another individual for a particular interest. In communicating, skills are needed to adapt to the person we are talking to because of differences in character and cultural background that influence the way a person interacts. The ability to adapt and engage in an interaction supports effectiveness and competent communication (Chen, 1992, 1). Through this research, the phenomenon of refugees' adaptation in facing challenges in Indonesia can be studied through the concept of intercultural communication competences or cross-cultural communication competence formed by Michael Byram. He is a lecturer from the United States who poured concepts about

cross-cultural communication in a book published by him entitled "Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence". The book was released in 1997 and is still used by several studies on the phenomenon of an individual's adjustment to a culture in the adaptation process. The concept discusses how individuals with refugee status face a new culture and must adapt in communication. This phenomenon is interesting to explore further because in Indonesia itself there is still little research that discusses the refugee community being able to adapt.

There are five competencies assessed in communicative competence according to Byram. Attitude in this competency discusses the attitude of acceptance and openness to differences in new cultural values. Knowledge discusses the values applied in a culture and customs carried out by its adherents. Skills of interpreting and relating focus on a person's ability to interpret a culture and relate a new culture to the culture they adhere to. This skill aims to form an integration of two different cultures from the results of the adaptation process. Then the skill of discovering and interacting focuses on the ability to learn and practice a new culture with local people. Attitude and knowledge are needed to develop this skill. Finally, critical culture awareness is a competency that explains a person's ability to evaluate the perspective, customs, and values of a new culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is recorded that 2.9 million Afghans chose to relocate to another country for the safety of their families (Loft, 2021, 2). Researchers from Sydney studied the difficulties of refugees when moving to Indonesia as a transit country. The results of the study stated that they experienced obstacles in terms of language differences, social norms, culture, and religious aspects, but their relationship with the local community was very good (Ali et al., 2016, 34). Refugees who settled in England with a strong educational background have the privilege of taking the most advanced English courses. From this course program, they can get certification to work as English teachers, but unfortunately, it is quite difficult to reach the qualification stage in England (Morrice et al., 2021, 13).

Research from Belgium states that the potential for more efficient adaptation of new communication and culture is by interacting daily with the local community (Mahieu & Caudenberg, 2020, 12). The phenomenon of the arrival of Rohingya people in Aceh also attracted the attention of researchers from the United States who stated that the Acehese people accepted refugees with open arms because they were based on a sense of solidarity and empathy for those who had lost their homes. This is also supported by strong reasons from Muslim teachings and Acehese culture which adheres to the belief in helping each other towards people who need help (Robbins, 2020, 5-7).

Success in communication involving two different cultures or cross-cultural issues requires an adaptation process that focuses on the relationship of intercultural integration (McAllum, 2020, 2). The results of interviews conducted with female refugees from Afghanistan who were resettled in Australia stated that they found it difficult to communicate verbally to express their opinions. The study revealed that from a psycho-emotional perspective, they faced challenges in attitude, commitment, dedication, age, self-confidence, behavior, and low motivation to learn English (Sharifian et al., 2021, 10). In cross-cultural communication, there are five competencies that can be tested according to Michael Byram (1997), a British professor who researches culture in communication. Quoted from research (Schukking & Kircher, 2022), the five competencies include: attitude, knowledge, skill of interpreting and relating, skill of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness.

METHODS

Based on the issues of the research to be discussed, a qualitative approach and ethnographic method are the right steps. This method is the result of the formation of several well-known anthropological heads, such as Mead, Malinowski, Boas, Radcliffe-Brown, Park, and Dewey (Creswell & Poth, 2018, 144). The ethnographic method focuses on analyzing interactions between groups that have the same cultural background and how they respond to a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018, 143). The ultimate goal of research conducted using the ethnographic method is to find a new understanding for researchers and readers for further research (Creswell, 2009, 130).

The research data was collected through interviews with two informants from Afghanistan, namely refugees living in the South Tangerang area. The criteria for informants to be interviewed were refugees aged 20 years and over and had lived in Indonesia for more than one year. According to research conducted by the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), it takes an average of 36 weeks or around 9 months to learn Indonesian (Kenny, n.d.). The interview technique supports the ethnographic design that describes the phenomenon of adaptation in communication that occurs in the refugee community.

Table 1: Participant details

	Gender	Age Range	Duration of stay in Indonesia
A	Female	20-25	10 years
B	Male	35-40	14 years

Table 2: List of questions

	Competence	Questions
C1	Attitude	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How was your first impression about Indonesia as a country after you relocated here? 2. How was your first impression on Indonesian locals after you relocated here? 3. What are the difficulties that you faced during the adaptation process after you moved here?
C2	Knowledge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is there any Indonesian culture that attracted you to learn? Maybe our local language or any other culture? 2. What did you know about Indonesia before you moved here? 3. How did you learn the Indonesian language? And for how long were you learning?
C3	Skill of interpreting and relating	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In your opinion, is there Indonesian culture that reminds you of Afghanistan culture? 2. Is there any Afghanistan culture that you still can adopt or apply here in Indonesia?

C4	Skill of discovery and interacting	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have you experienced any difficulties when communicating with the locals? 2. Have you found any interesting facts about Indonesian culture? 3. After learning Indonesian culture, do you find it easier to interact daily with the locals?
C5	Critical cultural awareness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you find it hard to adapt to Indonesian culture? 2. Based on your perspectives, are Afghanistan aware of Indonesia' multiculturalism concept? And what do you think about the concept? 3. Which Indonesian culture or language do you find hard to adapt to?

RESULTS

According to the results of the discussion with informant A, she felt that Indonesia was quite welcoming to his presence and was assisted by UNHCR in the placement process in the new location. Local residents also supported the adaptation process and were friendly in communication even though they were hampered in language. Informant A showed an open attitude in learning the Indonesian language and culture from how he often asked his community friends about the language. Although the adaptation process was not easy because of the circumstances that forced them to move countries, informant A slowly accepted the situation and the fact that A and his family had to live in Indonesia for safety.

Informant A has an interest in exploring the art of Indonesian cuisine such as Padang food which also uses spices in its cooking. Her knowledge about Indonesia was obtained from social media platforms that share about the island of Bali which is visited by many tourists. She is also interested in learning about Balinese culture because many foreign tourists feel at home there and it is known for its very strong culture. Informant A has the skills to interpret and relate between Afghan and Indonesian culture which both have a strong Muslim religious background. "We can still celebrate Eid here in Indonesia, knowing the people are festive to celebrate it each year."

She also discovered that Indonesians have lots of dialects based on their ethnic backgrounds. She found it difficult to understand since the locals sometimes talk too fast or are not very particular on their pronunciation. And Indonesians who live in big cities on average come from outside the region which causes diversity. But interacting with the locals did help them to slowly learn Bahasa and Indonesian cultures. "It is very unique how Indonesians believe that using the right hand to give something to someone is a polite manner." The process of learning Indonesian is not too difficult according to A because there are some vocabularies that are similar to English. And because the Indonesian base is dominated by Muslims, it is not difficult for A to adapt.

Meanwhile, the results of the interview with informant B, learning Indonesian is quite challenging because it is very different from Arabic. However, because the majority of Indonesians are Muslim, it makes it easier for B to communicate because they are educated in Arabic. Local people have a role in the adaptation process of B and his family because they are quite helpful during the relocation process to a new residence even though their status is refugees. Informant B is open to learning Indonesian because he is helped by friends from the refugee community who have lived in Indonesia longer. In addition to

Indonesian, B is also interested in learning Sundanese because there are neighbors who come from Bandung, West Java.

“I acknowledged that Indonesia is one of Southeast Asia countries and known as a country with the largest Muslim population”. B’s knowledge about Indonesia was obtained from educational content on social media that discussed facts about Indonesia. Having lived in Indonesia for 14 years, B has also studied Indonesian cultures such as traditional clothes, regional specialties, and regional languages from various events. The similarity between Afghan culture and Indonesian culture that B noticed is prioritizing family interests before personal interests. B is very related to this culture because he tries to get the best rights for his family. And because it is supported by the existence of a community, Afghan culture also has a high collectivity, just like Indonesian culture.

“At first, I hadn’t heard about multiculturalism until I moved here. It is beautiful because it unites the people despite the differences.” The concept of multiculturalism in B’s view is very suitable for Indonesia’s diverse cultural identity. From this diversity, there are indeed several things that make it difficult for B. Regional dialects that are spoken too quickly sometimes cause miscommunication. Then, with the intonation of local people who sometimes use a high tone, it raises assumptions that are not in accordance with their intentions. “Sometimes the locals talk to me in high pitch, giving me a sense that what I did is wrong and they are mad at me.”

CONCLUSION

Byram’s communicative competences (1997) can be applied to the refugee phenomenon that has persisted in Indonesia for years. This phenomenon will not stop if the war in the Middle East is not resolved because more people will flee to other countries. Indonesia, as one of the countries that accommodates the most refugees, continues to accept refugees and their families even though Indonesia did not participate in the Refugee Convention in 1951. Refugees from Afghanistan are the largest contributors in Indonesia and are spread across various regions, one of which is South Tangerang.

Indonesia is a cultural and religious country. As refugees who were relocated to Indonesia, it is very natural to experience culture shock because there are very diverse cultures in each region. And the most common obstacle is the obstacle in communicating due to the language barrier. The refugee community and local people have an important role in learning Indonesian on a daily basis. Culturally, informants can still adjust because Indonesian culture is also influenced by Middle Eastern culture. And with a population dominated by Muslims, informants do not find it difficult to carry out worship and can still celebrate Islamic holidays.

The attitudes of the informants were positively open to Indonesian culture and were able to accept the fact that they had to live in Indonesia temporarily for safety. Then the knowledge of the two informants about Indonesia grew because they had lived there for more than 10 years. Their insights were obtained from exposure to social media and from exposure to local people with various cultural backgrounds. The skill of interpreting and relating was also shown by the informants from their ability to relate Afghan culture to Indonesian culture. While the skill of discovering and interacting was also clearly embedded in how the informants made efforts to interact with local people. In addition, they also have the ability to explore more advanced Indonesian culture, to the point of wanting to explore it in depth. Informants A and B fulfill the critical culture awareness competency where they understand the concept of multiculturalism in Indonesia and instill an attitude of tolerance towards differences.

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