

# Thriving in Indonesian Academia: French Students' Intercultural Communication Competence in Studying Abroad

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**Abstract:** To gain international recognition, many universities in Indonesia offer international student exchange programs, one of which is the credit transfer program. Participants in that program have differences in communicative competence. That holds for Indonesian students studying abroad and vice versa. This study analyzes the intercultural communication skills of international students and aims to acquire comprehensive information on intercultural competencies based on the students' intercultural sensitivity, awareness and adroitness. A descriptive qualitative study was conducted among international students at one university in Indonesia, involving six French students from the student exchange program who studied for one semester. The data was obtained via focused group discussion and interviews. Chen and Starosta's intercultural competence model was used as an analytical tool. The findings indicate that the students have proper intercultural communication competence, which helps them in implementing their communication strategies, adjusting to and thriving in a new cultural and academic environment.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural communication, French students, intercultural communication competence, international students.

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## 1. Introduction

Internationalization has been regarded as the main agenda for higher education institutions across the world in meeting the challenges and needs of globalization. Globalization has significantly influenced higher education in recent decades, and internationalization has become an essential part of universities' strategic plans (Codina *et al.*, 2013). Student mobility can serve as an answer to the challenges posed by globalization. It is one of the most visible and vital elements of university internationalization (Weibl 2014).

Mobility has taken a prominent role due to new circumstances and a demand for 21<sup>st</sup> Century life to prepare human resources suitable for the era. Mobility is considered not only as a challenge, but also as a potential resource, since it allows opportunities to strengthen the higher education system and give universities a better chance to compete internationally (Codina *et al.* 2013). International mobility provides students an opportunity to compete with each other and expand their knowledge globally.

Students involved in the mobility program should be prepared to face new cultures. Intercultural communication is considered as essential to development, internationalization and global education for sustainable development (Evani C.A. *et al.* 2016). Penbek, Yurdakul and Guldem Cerit (2009) state that mobility students are required to have decent cultural awareness, communicative competence, good personal attitudes such as empathy and flexibility, self-awareness and understanding of the values, norms and beliefs of others. In

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other words, to thrive in a new academic and cultural environment, students should be competent in their intercultural communication.

Previous studies have shown that obstacles remain regarding international students' intercultural communication competence. Yun (2013) found problems in intercultural communication among Chinese students studying in France. During their adaptation stage, the Chinese students experienced numerous problems, mainly because of their low linguistic competence, insufficient cultural knowledge and lack of decentering capacity. Another study (Ahmad & Weerakkody 2011) found that international students face challenges such as culture-specific knowledge prior to their arrival in the new country. Emotional factors such as fear and insecurity are part of the cross-cultural challenge.

Ngwira and Mapoma (2015) found that international students from Asian countries staying in China do not have good intercultural communication skills. The authors suggest that these students need to be encouraged to be open to active modes of interaction and willing to engage in conversation. They must come out of their circles and immerse themselves in the other students and host community. They must be flexible and more willing to interact with others outside their communities to enjoy the benefit of being in a multicultural university.

Other studies have revealed that international students who are immersed in the host country achieve good intercultural-communication skills when they have a reasonable proficiency in the language of the country (Kovalainen & Keisala 2012; Günçavdı & Polat 2016; Suwatno & Sukmayadi 2016; Aksoy, Uzunoğlu & Akyar 2017). This paper analyzes international students' intercultural communication competence: mainly that of French students studying in southeast Asian countries.

Samovar and Porter (1998) describe how, due to cultural differences, misunderstandings and disagreements often occur when communicating with people of different cultures. To reduce the risk of cross-cultural misunderstanding, people who travel abroad need to have an appropriate intercultural communication competence. The main advantage of intercultural communication is to avoid conflicts caused by cultural misunderstandings. Intercultural communication is not only a necessity, but also the primary requirement for living successfully in a pluralistic environment (Ya-Wen Teng 2009).

Intercultural communication can provide us the ability to communicate across cultures. Understanding is increasingly important as the world gets smaller. This does not mean that the world is becoming homogeneous. What it does mean is that people interact more and more with those who are culturally diverse. Being able to deal with this cultural difference properly and peacefully is becoming a survival requirement to live and grow in a global world as a global citizen.

For the present study, we analyze the intercultural communication skills of French students who enrolled in an international students' mobility program in Indonesia. It is interesting to study how students from a different cultural dimension like France can thrive in a new environment like Indonesia. Our case analysis is shaped by Chen and Starosta's (2005) model of intercultural communication competence.

We investigate the strategies engaged in by the French students as a reflection of their intercultural communication competence. We expect this study to benefit the fields of intercultural communication and education.

## **2. Intercultural communication and competence**

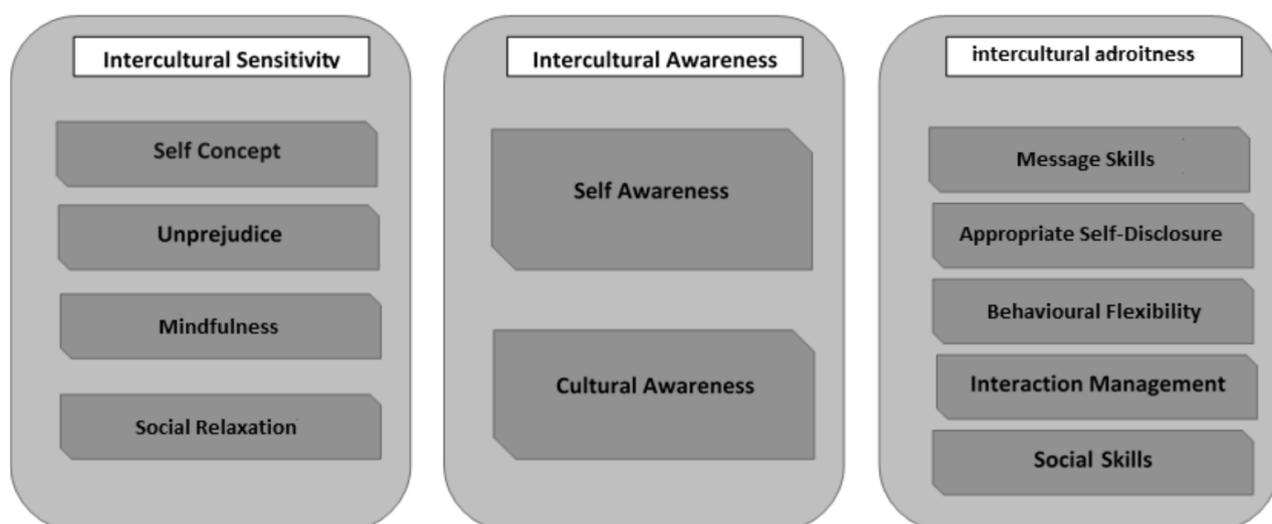
The current study is shaped by three main concepts: intercultural communication, intercultural competence and intercultural communication competence. As defined by Devito (2013), intercultural communication occurs whenever a message is produced by a member of one culture and relayed to a member of another culture. Due to cultural differences in the nature of

these interactions, misunderstandings and anxieties often prevail. In reducing this risk, it is important to understand the dynamics of intercultural communication. The main benefit of intercultural communication is to improve understanding of culturally mediated communication. Having a good knowledge of intercultural communication is not merely a life skill but a requirement of surviving and thriving in a pluralistic environment.

The second concept is intercultural competence. Competence indicates an adequacy of knowledge and skills that enables someone to react appropriately to a wide variety of situations. Intercultural competence can be defined as one's awareness about the targeted knowledge, skills and behaviors that are effective and appropriate in multicultural settings (Hofstede 2011).

As Chen and Starosta (2005) write, the underlying assumption of intercultural competence is active awareness on the part of a person who is culturally complex, influenced by culture in thought and action. This competence presents as an ability to look at culture and behavior with an open perspective.

Chen and Starosta designed a model of intercultural communication competence, which consists of three aspects: *intercultural sensitivity* (affective aspect), *intercultural awareness* (cognitive aspect) and *intercultural adroitness* (behavioral aspect). See Figure 1, based on Chen and Starosta (1996). Intercultural communication competence is a fundamental concept relating to a person's cognitive, affective and behavioral engagement in a cross-cultural communication process.



**Figure 1:** Model of intercultural communication competence.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Research design

The study analyzes the intercultural competence of French students trying to survive and thrive in the Indonesian academic world: a multicultural experience. We use a qualitative approach based on case study. Case studies make a thorough investigation of a single individual, group or event to explore causes and underlying principles (Yin 2006). We used this method to understand the reasons, opinions and motivations of French students during the course of their studies. Such an approach is essential whenever the subject has never been addressed in a certain context before or when existing theories do not apply to the sample being studied (Creswell, 2013). The case-study method can be applied to discover a new perspective or build on existing theory: in this case, that of intercultural competence.

### **3.2 Setting and participants**

The study was conducted at a public university in Indonesia: Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI). Six French students studied there during the second semester 2018/2019, and all volunteered to participate in the study. All were from the university's international student exchange program. One student was studying at the postgraduate level, the others were at the undergraduate level. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their identities.

### **3.3 Data collection**

We interviewed the six students both in a group and individually. We began with a focus-group discussion (31 January 2018) lasting 60-90 minutes. Then we conducted 45-minute individual follow-up interviews to confirm the findings from the group meeting. All interviews were recorded. Some parts were conversational and unstructured, particularly when we requested that the students describe their experiences living and studying in Indonesia. Other parts, where we discussed the context and presented cases of cross-cultural experiences, were semi-structured.

The interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy. We assigned each participant a code number and identified transcripts by number only. Next, the transcripts were analyzed and categorized. Additional interviews, known as member checks (Creswell 2003), were used to reconfirm the responses.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

The sequence data was categorized and organized into patterns or categories. According to Patton (cited in Moleong 2006), the categorization of data must distinguish that interpretation that gives most significant meaning to the analysis; one must explain the pattern description and look for a relationship between the dimensions.

The data was categorized and interpreted using a data-analysis technique proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994): a qualitative approach interactively and continuously conducted over time until the data is considered saturated or, as in this case, one stops gathering data. We stopped when the information given by the French students yielded no new discoveries.

We reduced the data by classifying some things as fundamental and focusing on those we considered importantly related. Finally, the data was condensed into a narrative description.

## **4. Findings and discussion**

The presentation in this section is organized according to the three primary components of Chen and Storosta's (1996, 2005) model: intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness and intercultural adroitness.

### **4.1 Intercultural sensitivity**

Intercultural sensitivity relates to a person's ability to send and receive positive emotional responses when interacting with others in a multicultural context, to gain recognition or respect from those individuals. The cross-cultural component of sensitivity in this study comprises four dimensions: positive concept ("self-concept"; see Figure 1), prejudice ("unprejudice"), mindfulness and social relaxation. See Table 1.

**Table 1:** French students' intercultural sensitivity.

Component	Description
positive concept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indonesia is considered a beautiful nation with a friendly people and a total difference in culture.</li> <li>• Being adaptive and open to any changes in the situation is key to thriving in Indonesia academia.</li> <li>• Students acknowledged the differences between Indonesia's collectivist tradition and France's individualist tradition.</li> <li>• Difference in culture is not considered a source of problems.</li> </ul>
prejudice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students' pre-arrival impressions toward Indonesia were of a center for natural disasters, tropical weather and Muslim extremists.</li> <li>• Students' impressions of Indonesia took on a more positive vibe after studying there.</li> </ul>
mindfulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students learned about Indonesia language and culture back in their home country.</li> <li>• Indonesian cultural manners, religious values and bureaucracy provide the most striking intercultural experiences.</li> <li>• Students were surprised by differences but could accept them.</li> </ul>
social relaxation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active listening avoids misunderstandings.</li> <li>• Don't directly engage with the source of anxiety. (Stay quiet when facing a particularly anxious moment then ask a close Indonesian friend for explanation.)</li> <li>• Ask questions as needed.</li> <li>• Be tolerant and go with the flow (avoid trouble).</li> </ul>

The students described various strategies to deal with cross-cultural situations by using their intercultural sensitivity. Cultural sensitivity is a set of skills allowing international students to learn about people whose cultural background is not similar to theirs. Someone with a positive self-concept is more readily accepted and trusted by culturally diverse parties than someone who has a poor self-concept (Kourova & Modianos 2013).

The interview results indicate that each student had a positive concept of Indonesia before they arrived and grew more supportive by the time they returned to their home country. They knew they would find vast cultural differences between France and Indonesia. They tended to accept the differences and considered them an exciting lesson. Although they had prejudices about Indonesia due to the media, eventually they understood that what they had heard on the media was not wholly accurate or not accurate at all.

Prior to my arrival in Indonesia, I was afraid because of much news about the natural disasters in Indonesia. However, now I realize that disasters happened only in particular places and this city is not one of them (SFA, interviewed 29 January 2018).

I have seen news about Indonesia, most of the news about the disasters, and I also heard about numerous demonstrations. I was quite anxious, but I ask my seniors who visited the country in the previous year, and they said that the news is not fully true. There are many things to see here in Indonesia, more than the bad news published by the media (LF, interviewed 29 January 2018).

The French students' intercultural sensitivity can be considered culturally qualified. They learned the Indonesian language and culture before they came. They had Indonesian friends and had set their minds open to new things, regardless of whether they should be engaging or disturbing.

Studying abroad is exciting and rewarding in many ways. Nevertheless, it takes a great deal of preparation and patience. Preparation includes learning how to communicate in the language of the host country (Ponce & Fierro 2017). The decision of the students to learn the local culture and language is part of their mindful act towards diversity. Mindfulness is a state of mind in which a person is open to new information, continually creating new categories and open to new perspectives so as to adjust well in a new environment (Chen & Starosta 1996, Yi 2018).

In the focus-group discussion, the students stated that, in order to cope with a wide variety of cultural differences, they used active listening and tried to be receptive, trying to understand before responding or reaching conclusions.

Using the cross-cultural sensitivity scale developed by Bennet (1986, 1993, 2017), we use these findings to conclude that the students had successfully passed beyond the denial phase and were between the minimization and acceptance phases. The minimization phase is when one has realized that one must focus more on cultural similarities than differences. The acceptance phase is when one realizes that every country has its own demography, culture(s) and values. Given the level of the students' cultural sensitivity, they were able to adapt faster and minimize anxieties interacting with others from different cultural backgrounds.

In studying abroad, a decent level of cultural sensitivity level is essential because it allows one to function effectively function in another cultures (Gonzales & Dame 2017). Intercultural sensitivity and a positive mindset allow one to value other cultures. By having a suitable sensitivity, students can reduce cultural barriers between themselves and their Indonesian counterparts.

#### 4.2 Intercultural awareness

Byram (1997) states that intercultural awareness is the ability to empathize with and decenter in another culture. More specifically, in communication, it is the ability to take on the perspective of communicators from another culture or nationality in light of their cultural background.

In the present study, we considered the two main elements of intercultural awareness: awareness of one's own culture ("self-awareness"; see Figure 1) and awareness of other cultures ("cultural awareness"). Awareness of one's own culture is related to the capacity to identify one's cultural background and avoid ethnocentrism: i.e., judging another culture solely by the standards of one's own culture. Awareness of other cultures is the ability to identify and respect diversity while communicating in a multicultural environment.

**Table 2:** French students' intercultural awareness.

Component	Description
awareness of one's own culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is no such thing as a superior culture.</li> <li>• Cultures are unique.</li> </ul>
awareness of other cultures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students have a "do as the Romans do" mindset.</li> <li>• Mental preparation to face uncertainty is needed before traveling abroad.</li> <li>• Interacting with others is a strategy to understand their cultural identity.</li> </ul>

Having awareness both of one's home culture and other cultures plays a decisive role in cross-cultural communication, as it did here between the French students and their Indonesian counterparts. The students prepared themselves mentally by learning about Indonesian culture and language prior to their arrival. When they arrived, they not only learned the language but also attempted to develop as a learner and as a member of a larger community. The students

tried to interact with and experience the local culture by practicing the local customs. Such interaction can develop cultural awareness and appreciation (Antony 2016).

Having proper intercultural awareness in learning abroad promotes awareness of students' cultural identity and personal development. Personal growth is a product of enabling students to align their own beliefs with ideas from the culture of the "other" that may strike them as unconventional and challenging (Kourova & Modianos, 2013). By traveling abroad, students can enhance their educational and cultural experience while broadening their awareness of this diverse world.

In the focus-group discussion, all of the students said that having traveled to numerous countries before gave them preparation for interacting with the Indonesian community and culture.

### 4.3 Intercultural adroitness

For Chen and Starosta (2004), intercultural adroitness is a behavioral competence that includes messaging skills, knowledge of appropriate self-disclosure, behavioral flexibility, interaction management and social skills. Using this definition, we interviewed the French students concerning their communication behavior in Indonesian academia; see Table 3.

**Table 3:** French students' intercultural adroitness.

Component	Description
message skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning colloquial Indonesian added to students' skill socializing with Indonesian students and friends.</li> <li>• Some students learned the Sundanese language.</li> </ul>
behavioral flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students had a "try it all while you can" mentality to experience Indonesian culture to the fullest (e.g., eating with one's hands).</li> <li>• Adapting to Indonesian academic life: e.g., wearing batik shirt on Fridays, adjusting to the high number of students in a class, dealing with tentative appointments and sudden schedule changes.</li> <li>• Adapting attitudes toward others, such as how to respect elders and extend common courtesies.</li> </ul>
self-disclosure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discreet self-presentation is the key to avoiding conflict.</li> <li>• One must understand the local dos and don'ts.</li> <li>• One must restrain oneself when facing cultural uncertainties.</li> </ul>
interaction management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weight words in Bahasa Indonesia (the official language) are used to start and end a communication.</li> <li>• Applying a bit of the Sundanese language works as a social lubricant.</li> <li>• Smiling is always key to functional interaction.</li> </ul>
social skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students learned to spend <i>nonkrong</i> time more with Indonesian friends than friends from one's home country.</li> <li>• Students persisted with using Bahasa Indonesia as well as possible.</li> <li>• Students found that being active on social media improved their language learning.</li> </ul>

Table 3 shows how the students had their individual communicative strategies in dealing with cross-cultural interaction. Based on message-management skills, the students were willing to learn colloquial Indonesian to ease communication with the locals and add value to relationships. Their willingness to learn not only the standard formal Indonesian language but also the informal language made their adaptation easier.

I realized that in Indonesia, most locals do not speak formal Indonesian, so I need to learn the informal language and a little native language [Sundanese]. It seems that the locals are very appreciative to my effort and they keep helping me in learning the informal language (LF, interviewed 29 January 2018).

The students spent their time mostly in West Java where the Sundanese language is the *lingua franca*. They were eager to engage with the local communities to learn both colloquial Indonesian and common Sundanese expressions. Learning colloquial Indonesian and the local native language became essential tools. Kim and Kim (2004) write that, by having a specialized knowledge for mastering other languages, as well as a general ability to use one's message appropriately, people can communicate more effectively in a new cultural environment.

In maintaining a smooth relationship with the Indonesian people, the students used various strategies relating to behavioral flexibility, self-disclosure, and interaction management. Being discreet and flexible was key. In the focus-group discussion, the students said that being discreet can avoid unnecessary conflict. Even if there was a conflict, the students chose to restrain themselves. They tried consciously to be flexible, behaving according to common custom in Indonesia so as to blend with the community.

Generally in high-context communication, people use indirect messages to convey their opinions. Low-context communication is more likely to reflect direct exchange and explicit messages (Patel, Mingsheng & Prahalad 2011). Indonesia is considered a high-context country, France low-context (Hofstede 2011). Due to the cultural differences, the way of communicating is likewise different. Indonesians use indirect ways to communicate; French people are more direct. In Indonesia, people consider others' feelings and the risk of losing face, influenced by Indonesian collectivism that focuses on group coordination and diplomatic means to express messages (Hofstede 1991, Susana 2005). To avoid cultural conflict while studying in Indonesia, the French students learned to be more flexible.

The final components of intercultural adroitness are interaction management and social skills. Interaction management refers to the ability to engage comfortably in interaction by maintaining good management of the conversation. The French students used various strategies, weighing their words in Bahasa Indonesia to start or end their conversations. Weight words are an essential tool for understanding what kinds of speech can be uttered when and where to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings (Antony 2016). The students engaged with locals frequently and learned the local language to support their daily social life. Recall that the world is becoming smaller and more and more people are traveling for business purposes or personal reasons; the learning of other languages is becoming increasingly critical (Nuridin, Syam & Harahap 2015, Vitali 2018).

We defined social skills in this study as the students' ability to manage interpersonal relationships outside their academic activities. In the focus-group discussion, all of the students shared the same experience: they developed interpersonal relations by making a lot of local friends off-campus and engaging in social media. For the students, social media served both as social lubricant and learning medium for enhancing their language learning. By having friends off-campus, the students were able to blend well and felt that they were part of the Indonesian academic community. To blend in socially, a person needs to express himself within the accepted range of social-cultural attitudes and be conversant with the local social norms, trends, history, colloquialisms, etc. (Gonzales & Dame 2017). The students behaved discreetly, were culturally flexible and actively engaged with the local community, thereby avoiding conflict and reducing their cultural anxieties.

The French students were competent regarding their intercultural adroitness, able to communicate in Bahasa Indonesia in an appropriate way. That helped them blend in with the

local community and their university counterparts. Their strategies helped them adjust and thrive within the social-cultural life of Indonesia.

In general, the findings show that having excellent cross-cultural competence is necessary for international learners. They can know the difference between their own culture and the target culture, thereby developing strategies to be more tolerant of the dynamics of other cultures (Smith & Khawaja 2011, Takeshita 2016). Such an ability can prevent cross-cultural misunderstandings, eliminate adaptation difficulties, and support social interaction with the local community. The students' intercultural competence gave them the opportunity to gain more knowledge of society and excel with their foreign-language competence. Intercultural ability regarding transnational communication shapes a person to have a more communicative, open, tolerant, and sensitive attitude toward other cultures. In a globalized, multicultural, competitive era, it seems that one of the ways to promote intercultural communication is by embedding it in the education process. This will inevitably result in better-prepared, better-trained students who are truly global citizens.

## 5. Conclusion

Competence in intercultural sensitivity, awareness and adroitness are needed for any student who would like to study abroad. Our French students had the adaptive social skills they needed to thrive in Indonesian academia. The students' initial experiences learning the Indonesian language and culture undoubtedly helped them in building their cultural understanding and confidence interacting socially and settling down in a new academic environment.

The students generally felt anxious before their arrival in Indonesia. However, they came up with strategies to cope with their anxieties, swiftly handling them by not only learning the Indonesian language and culture, but also exploring the culture of their Indonesian counterparts. The students were fully competent regarding their intercultural communication skills. All of the French students were able to communicate in an appropriate way in the local community, with the flexibility to live with cultural uncertainties. They were able to blend their new academic and social lives into one happy unity.

Our study did not test the effectiveness of the students' intercultural communication strategies quantitatively. We would recommend subsequent studies to investigate intercultural communication quantitatively. By having both qualitative and quantitative results, these studies can contribute to international student mobility and the study of intercultural communication as a whole.

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