# Cross-Cultural Adaptation in Exchange Programs: Sociocultural Challenges for Students and How to Deal with Them

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**ABSTRACT**

The study addresses the gap in understanding high school exchange students' communication challenges in cross-cultural settings, focusing specifically on Indonesian students in the United States. Unlike existing literature that emphasizes higher education students, this research uniquely explores sociocultural adaptation at the high school level, particularly communication barriers that are often overlooked. Using purposive sampling, six high school students who completed a one-year exchange program in the U.S. were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews enabled a thematic analysis grounded in Braun and Clarke's framework, providing a nuanced view of the students' adaptation process. Findings reveal that participants encountered significant culture shock, stemming from differences in punctuality, etiquette, direct communication, and cultural norms such as part-time work, religious observances, and addressing teachers informally. Linguistic barriers, especially around vocabulary and pronunciation, were intensified by psychological factors like anxiety and self-doubt. Furthermore, non-verbal cues such as eye contact and personal space highlighted distinct communication expectations between Indonesian and American cultures. To navigate these challenges, students adopted coping strategies including assimilation of local customs, proactive communication, and community support. This study's insights have broader implications for enhancing exchange programs by incorporating targeted support systems that address the communication and adaptation needs of younger students, potentially improving intercultural competence and easing the transition for future exchange participant.

## 1. Introduction

With the world becoming more globalized, student exchange programs play an important role that can introduce students to different academic practices, traditions, and languages (Moeliodihardjo, 2023). Beyond academia, these programs also provide real-life scenarios for students to learn how to maneuver and acclimate in foreign cultural landscapes. Failing to meet the needs of its own students, exchange opportunities are plentiful than ever for Indonesian students with multiple scholarship and support programs available (2019) leading to a generation wide eyed at the association of studying abroad. These students develop a distinct combination of competencies ability to speak foreign languages, increased cultural consciousness, etc. (Magdalena et al., 2019) as they immerse themselves in new cultures.

Students get a lot of benefits from the exchange; it cultivates their cross-cultural communication skills, growing self-confidence, and learning to be more patient with different cultures. According to Suryanto et al. Exchange programs provide a multitude of opportunities for social and professional development such as speaking English with native speakers, creating international networks, and enhancing job opportunities Gutierrez et al. (2022) states that student exchange programs influence the way students think which leads them to be more flexible and tolerant as they are introduced with different lifestyles and develop a higher level of understanding about other cultures. These changes prepare exchange students to become more capable and round-world citizens for any future professions or post-graduate studies.

That said, adjusting to a new cultural setting can be significant hardships often experienced in the form of culture shock. Not only that, but relocating from country to country often brings the experience of awkwardness, anxiety and irritation with odd social standards, lifestyles and values (Sevinç & Backus 2019). Culture shock is one of the fundamental problems faced by students in a very intimate way due

to their encounter with different cultural forces (Hasyim & Nur, 2022). These challenges seem to be ubiquitous, as past studies emphasise the experience of Indonesian students studying abroad in various destination countries such as the Netherlands (Mukminin, 2019), Australia (Belford, 2017), the United States (Hasyim & Nur, 2022), the United Kingdom (Aisha & Mulyana, 2020) and Korea (Mulyana & Eko, 2017).

Even with the culture shock out of the way, exchange students endure language barriers they cannot communicate properly leading to feeling lonely and frustrated. This is quite difficult for Indonesian students, since they have trouble speaking confidently (in alien language) (Mulyana & Eko, 2017). Language barriers impact not only verbal exchanges, but also the students' capacity to interpret cultural nuances behind non-verbal cues creating misunderstandings in daily contacts. Linguistic and social adjustment struggles can result in being lonely, most likely during the first months overseas (Mukminin, 2019). This highlights the intricacies of adapting to another culture, where students not only have to learn how to articulate their thoughts verbally but also outside verbal communication in the new cultural environment.

Previous studies have thoroughly reported issues pertaining to international students facing culture shock, language barriers, and social alienation in different academic environments. As an example, Ernofalina (2017) conducted a study finding that Indonesian undergraduate students experienced culture shock whereas Hasyim &Nur (2022) examined the challenge of Indonesian master's students in the United States. Mulyana & Eko (2017) found that one culture shock issue being faced by immigrants in Korea is related to their social adaptation difficulties, and Aisha & Mulyana (2020) explored postgraduate students intercultural communication experiences during their study at the United Kingdom. Although there is a considerable amount of research in this area, very little has directly examined challenges with communication for high school students in exchange programs.

The contribution of this study to the concept and existing literature is specific; it addresses only high school exchange students, particularly from Indonesia that follow programs in Western countries, especially the US. This is important because the majority of existing research has explored experiences of older, university students rather than younger high school-aged students who may have less socio-cultural resources and resilience (Chadha, 2024). Barriers High School Exchange Student Experiences While Adapting to New Culture Research has suggested that younger students face more challenges regarding language proficiency and culture such as maturity, compared to older students who are likely to be more mature and adaptable (Shadiev, 2023; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2013).

Focusing on this younger age group, this research fills a gap by highlighting the differences in cultural adaptation and communication barriers present for high school students. In addition, using technology in education can improve students' intercultural communication skills Speech-enabled corrective feedback technology, for example, has proven to be an effective method for enhancing pronunciation and grammar and enabling participants to communicate more effectively (Shadiev, 2023). This tech support is especially important for high school students who may not feel comfortable speaking in a foreign language. Moreover, since their inception virtual exchanges have been acknowledged as an effective vehicle for the enhancement of intercultural competence by enabling students interaction with distant peers and therefore a more profound comprehension of distinct perspectives (Colomar, 2024). These interactions play a big part in breaking down language barriers as well as establishing core social skills needed to successfully adapt to a new culture.

And even more importantly, the key role of educators leading these exchanges. By including intercultural communication skills in their teaching, teachers can provide great benefits to exchange students attending their classes by creating an open environment of conversation and the sharing of cultures (Dumitraşcu-Băldău & Dumitraşcu, 2019). This highlights the necessity to develop specific pedagogical practices since high school exchange students face some unique barriers when it comes to communication competence (Braslauskas, 2021).

This study makes a contribution to the intercultural education literature particularly on novice sojourners by addressing research gaps through the lens of what younger exchange students experience and learn about their identity adjustment. The nature of such hurdles and the coping mechanisms employed by Indonesian high school exchange students in the United States deviate from the national context, with this study applying a semi-structured interview to eight respondents.

The paper notes these distinguishing difficulties and therefore provides practical implications for any educational policy maker or program designer wanting to improve the exchange experience with a focus on younger participants by providing relevant support systems. Thus, the present study highlights that providing high school exchange students with intercultural communication skills and a sense of adaptability can enhance positive results in relation to their self-reports on successful exchanges; therefore, giving educators and policymakers evidence-based perspectives on improving practices in preparing students for fruitful intercultural experiences and thus generating more sustainable cross-cultural outcomes.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Cross Cultural Understanding

Cross-cultural understanding plays an important role in adapting to various cultural norms and reducing potential misunderstandings due to differences in culture (Rahmawati, 2023; Rohmah, 2021). Such differences are by identifying the cultural practice (Sunardi, 2019), an accurate response towards other people in a cross-cultural context (Ratnasari, 2018). According to Hartiningsih (2016), cross-culture understanding will reconfigure human attitudes and worldviews by providing knowledge about how people in the host society do their daily activities. Yet, the lack of cross-cultural understanding tends to spark conflicts and lead toward escalating culture shock which further implies that intercultural sensitivity needs to grow (Rahmawati, 2023).

One important aspect of the process of cross-cultural adaptation is a concept called culture shock, which usually follows four stages: the honeymoon phase in which people feel euphoria and excitement towards their new land, crisis stage with a high level of stress due to the ideological cultural barrier, recovery stage in which they recover little by little and start adapting to their surroundings and finally adjustment stage when people are fully adapted from having developed a bi-cultural identity (Macgregor & Folinazzo 2017). Memory Note: Mechanisms of adjustment in and acceptance towards this process can be psychologically as well as behaviorally challenging, more so for exchange students who are compelled to balance their academic and social integration issues within a foreign environment (Liu et al., 2022). While emotional pain is often exacerbated by factors such as language barriers, academic pressure and social loneliness during the crisis/failure phase (Ferencz et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2022), bicultural networks may provide important support and solidarity to individuals experiencing distress/loss, while monocultural network might mitigate adaptation stress.

However, we still have work to do in identifying specific interventions for select student groups across the K-12 educational landscape. Macgregor and Folinazzo (2017). Maintain that collaborative leadership strategies can create inclusive environments for fostering social and academic integration, which lessens the impact of culture shock (2017). By bringing together the linguistic, academic and socio-cultural facets of cross-cultural adaptation into one phenomenon that it would further guide effective support systems for international students (Schwartz et al., 2019).

### 2.2 Exchange Students & CCU Context

Exchange programs allow students to study abroad in different cultural and academic environments, leading them to develop language competence, confidence, and international networks. Academic credits and professional internships can also be obtained through these programs to improve career opportunities (Diem et al., 2023; Suryanto et al., 2022; Marciniak & Winnicki, 2019; Za, 2022). While these advantages are clear, and research on the topic generally considers adults as participants, little has been done to investigate the communication barriers that high school students face, which is a critical factor in understanding how they adapt to foreign culture and language situations.

Language is an important variable for successful cross-cultural adaptation, but it often poses challenges for exchange students. As for failures, it is not only related to vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar barriers, but also psychological issues like anxiety and lack of confidence (Horwitz, 2010; Kelemen et al., 2024). In addition, the diverse nature of the people also affects their communication styles; for example, differences in lexical indexes, degrees of directness and body language (Sidabutar, 2020; Wahyuni, 2018; Ibrahim et al., 2022; McNeill, 1992). Yet there is little research that examines the ways in which students make sense of these multifaceted communication differences and the implications for adapting to them.

With this in mind, the present study aims to fill these gaps but is specifically concerned with linguistic and psychological obstacles that Indonesian high school exchange students face and the strategies they embody while pursuing their studies in the United States. The study adds to the cross-cultural adaptation literature by offering insights into the specific challenges confronting this earlier cohort. We provide insights for educational policymakers and program designers to better shape meaningful intercultural experiences providing support systems to aid high school exchange students.

## 3. Methodology

In this case, qualitative research design was used through in-depth exploration and investigation of social phenomena, namely acculturation and communication difficulties experienced by Indonesian high school exchange students. Because we sought to describe situated settings, build necessary complexity and description, and at times generate new theories and hypotheses (Leavy, 2022), qualitative research was selected. Similar to IPA, this approach would provide a deep analysis of participants' lived experiences with particular attention paid to the meanings that people ascribe to behaviors and interactions across diverse cultural environments.

This study was a physical and virtual study to provide accessibility and inclusivity. The majority of the participants were spoken to face to face at The Gade Coffee and Gold Makassar due to its practicality. For participants who lived outside of Makassar, interviews were carried out via the Zoom Video Meeting platform (ver. 5.14.0), allowing the researcher to engage with

participants effectively regardless of geographical distance.

Respondents were selected using purposeful sampling of those who meet the conditions of being an exchange student for a year in the U.S. while attending high school. Participants were recruited through Instagram, where we Direct Message potential participants from Bina Antarbudaya Makassar program. Through this process, six participants who provided individual consent were enrolled as a purposive sample representing cohorts from 2018/2019 through to 2021/2022. This sampling yielded a diversity of data amongst similar participants and variety in challenges of bicultural adjustment.

Semi-structured interviews, which allow for exploratory in-depth conversation but can support consistency across participants with their use of pre-defined questions were used to collect data. The open-ended nature of this approach allowed researchers to explore particular elements of the experience in question with participants, providing rich qualitative data. Interview questions aimed to elicit information about the nature of linguistic, psychological and cultural challenges participants faced and how they coped.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis according to Clarke and Braun (2017). We systematically identified, coded, and categorized common themes within the interview transcripts. important themes regarding culture shock, language barriers and non-verbal communication were identified and contextualized along with interpretation to frame the processes by which participants adapted. The analysis was both disciplined and transparent in its credibility as it remained anchored to the perspectives of the participants.

## 4. Result

Following this introduction is a presentation of the results based on the cross cultural experiences of Indonesian high school exchange students in America the thematic areas identified were cultural shocks, communication barriers, coping strategies and changes after the program.

Every finding is supplemented with verbatim excerpts marked with qualitative research codes, including participant IDs and interview settings and timestamps. We analyze these findings in order to offer a more novel understanding of participants' experiences.

### 4.1 Cultural Shock

In their first few months in the United States, participants experienced a number of culture shocks that illustrated just how different the two countries are on certain levels.

### Punctuality

A huge cultural shove was the too punctual US. Kedi told Fox News they were surprised how important it was to be on time as in Indonesia people often do not plan their arrival.

**Excerpt 1:** *"If there is an appointment at 7, they can even come 5 minutes before 7. They are very time-disciplined and don't want to waste time on things that aren't important."* (GF, Interview Set 2, Week 3)

**Excerpt 2:** *"They are punctual. For example, if they say 5 minutes, they are correct. That caught me off guard, and I tried to adjust."* (LN, Interview Set 1, Week 2)

Participants had to quickly adjust their habits due to culture being focused on time keeping. This change made sense but also aligned with this greater norm within the culture I had landed in that appreciated efficiency and respecting other people's time. Participating in this practice not only helped individuals hone their ability to contribute speedily, but also represented a transferrable skill applicable to future academic and workforce settings.

### Toilet Habits

Hygiene habits proved difficult for participants to reconcile for example, the use of tissue and the lack of water in the United States was unconventional compared to their experiences in Indonesia.

**Excerpt 3:** *"In Indonesia, we use water, whereas in the United States, we use tissue. Because of the high cost of water, the usage of water there is limited, therefore when I go to school, I bring a tumbler of water to use when I use the toilet because I believe that using a tissue will not be clean."* (GF, Interview Set 3, Week 4)

This transformation emphasises the additional burden of coping with everyday life in a foreign land. Seemingly trivial, but it demonstrates how cultural contrasts seep through every mundane aspect of life and participants are see the need to find ways to keep light on at the same time keeping themselves clean.

### Part-Time Jobs

One of the biggest cultural shocks was how many American high school students have part-time jobs. It shocked a lot of the participants to see their peers being so financially independent.

**Excerpt 4:** *"I'll never forget it. Almost all of the high school students there have part-time jobs, and some have up to two occupations at the same time."* (TI, Interview Set 2, Week 3)

**Excerpt 5:** *"Another culture shock is that the students there are self-sufficient; in fact, they are all earning their own money by working part-time."* (GF, Interview Set 1, Week 2)

Participants were immersed in a culture that promotes independence and being self-sufficient from an early age. It invited participants to examine their own duties and think about the benefits of financial independence.

### Interpersonal Dynamics

For example, participants observed significant discrepancies in mannerisms, such as the Americans being more straightforward and casual.

**Excerpt 6:** *"For example, we offer to eat; if we say no, we will not be served food; if we say yes, we will be served food. If we refuse in Indonesia, we will undoubtedly continue to be offered. But not in the United States."* (AM, Interview Set 3, Week 5)

**Excerpt 7:** *"They don't consider age, and they talk about calling teachers names without using the term 'Sir.'"* (AY, Interview Set 2, Week 3)

This meant participants needed to recalibrate their expectations and behaviors in these interactions. The way that Americans just say what they want forced participants to rethink approaches to politeness, and the less formal classroom allowed students to see another side of the teacher-student pairing.

### Religious Practices

Even though, western socialization here brings a lot of convenience and comforts, etc. Muallaf or revert especially male will find it tough to carry out their religious matters such as praying time especially since they were living in a wholly non-Muslim country.

**Excerpt 8:** *"Prayer time, I skipped class because during the break I could not get Friday prayer sermons at the mosque, so I skipped classes and used a bicycle, about 8 km which could take up to 30 minutes if I was speeding."* (MF, Interview Set 2, Week 4)

**Excerpt 9:** *"For matters of prayer, I also have no problem, and there is also a mosque at my place, so during Eid at that time I went to the mosque and ate at the house of my Pakistani friend."* (AM, Interview Set 1, Week 6)

Finding a way to manage cultural and religious practices with living in the U.S. required problem-solving skills and an openness to talking about it all. The study participants were thankful for the cooperation and goodwill extended by their American counterparts which served to soften up the obstacles faced by them in holding on to their religious identity.

## 4.2 Communication Barriers

Language and communication posed significant challenges for participants, particularly in their early months.

### Linguistic Barriers

They struggled with accents and slang, unfamiliar words that made up their daily routines.

**Excerpt 10:** *"There are lots of accents and the way they speak too fast and the amount of slang they use. My English too, the first 3 months there was not very fluent."* (GF, Interview Set 2, Week 4)

**Excerpt 11:** *"When I first came, my Indonesian accent was very thick, so sometimes my friends didn't understand what I was saying. I repeated it several times before they understood."* (AY, Interview Set 1, Week 2)

Language barriers showed how important it was to adapt to the language. As they repeated their practice and continued support from their peers allowing them to become confident when engaging socially, over time it improved;

### Psychological Barriers

Nervousness in cultural presentations and public speaking were also described by participants.

**Excerpt 12:** *"The psychological barrier comes when it comes to cultural presentations. I feel a lack of self-confidence. It must have affected the language barrier, nervousness, and stuttering so the words were scattered."* (LN, Interview Set 2, Week 3)

Those psychological walls were, hand-in-hand, difficulties with speaking an entirely different sort of language. In overcoming such barriers participants relied upon the support and encouragement of American peers which played a role in instilling greater self-belief.

### Non-Verbal Communication

The type of non-verbal communication in the U.S. is also not what participants were used to seeing back home in Indonesia.

**Excerpt 13:** *"They prefer to show things by hugging than shaking hands."* (GF, Interview Set 3, Week 5)

**Excerpt 14:** *"When talking you have to make eye contact, because if you look away it would be impolite."* (AM, Interview Set 1, Week 3)

The development of understanding these unspoken messages benefited the acclimatization to American social norms. Participants also learned about American interpersonal dynamics in the lessons highlighting physical gestures and eye contact.

### Coping Mechanisms

Solutions were found using a variety of research protocols, and flexibility and communication were key differentiators in the overall success of an individual study.

**Excerpt 15:** *"The point is communication and honesty. If they're talking too fast, then I'd say to them, 'Could you go slower?' And they will also understand."* (GF, Interview Set 3, Week 5)

**Excerpt 16:** *"At least 5 months I can smoothly say what I'm going to say. The point is you can adapt."* (TI, Interview Set 1, Week 4)

These strategies show how participants persevere with cultural and language differences in order to engage. Even more important than all that was their willingness to ask for help and communicate openly with their families, however.

### 4.3 Post-Program Transformations

The transformation within each participant was remarkable with many reporting increased independence, maturity and cultural sensitivity.

**Excerpt:** *"I feel more confident and capable of making big decisions. I also apply assertive communication skills that I learned in America."* (MF, Interview Set 2, Week 6)

**Excerpt:** *"I am more independent and know how to respect others and learn to be punctual."* (GF, Interview Set 1, Week 6)

This program is truly transformative and that conclusion shines through in these reflections. Participants had improved intercultural competence and understanding of cultural diversity, preparing them for tomorrow's challenges in a globalised setting.

As with all findings of this nature, they help illustrate the delicate balance between transition and transaction of culture. And they showed great psychological resilience and coping skills, which allowed them to transcend cultural shocks and communication barriers; leading first to major changes in themselves. These insights underscore a need for customised support systems to better leverage the opportunities offered by exchange programmes in order to create value gains for future participants.

## 5. Discussion

This study explores the cross-cultural experiences of Indonesian high school exchange students in United States, including their struggles and coping mechanisms to survive in a new culture and language. Results for the study expose significant information on their adaptation processes and emphasize the changeable nature of cultural exchange systems. Results reflect existing literature on the outcomes of exchange students, but fill major gaps in our understanding of program experiences for youth.

### 5.1 Cross-Cultural Understanding: Insights from Indonesian Exchange Students

Fulbright exchange programs stand, in my opinion, for building international relationships and the personal growth that we experience through living and learning the languages of new countries. As Marciniak and Winnicki (2019) have stated, exchange programs are a way to build connections between countries while giving students a lifetime experience. So, this is

consistent with the Zerman (2014) allegation that argues these programs create bonds and promote better understanding between countries. These abilities are crucial in our globalized world today, where professional success increasingly depends on retooling cross-cultural competence.

Furthermore, Dormal et al. (2019) remind us that such exchanges can have unintended negative side effects, including more alcohol consumption at the host university among other students, which reveals significant social complications during these programs. Such complexity is important because it even in international contexts, entering new markets or setting up joint classes with local partners tend to be murkier affairs than simple add-on marketing. But the good in exchange programs does not stop with friendships. A study by Diem (2023) found that participation in international exchanges fundamentally increases independent living skills, a global perspective, and critical thinking and language skill development. These findings echo (Collins et al., 2022) who argue that Global Learning Experience (GLE) programs contribute to intercultural competence and subsequently expand the ability of students to understand themselves and their relationship with dissimilar ideas. This type of personal growth is essential to the health of our increasingly connected world, which is leading us to identity fluidity where most jobs will require the ability to navigate between cultural contexts.

Apart from that, you will not be able to overlook the role of educational institutions in these rituals. Choudaha & Chang (2020) suggests that universities that function as a regional educational cluster can then capitalize on the educational tourism potential to serve local development and global student attraction. This view is supported by the Schutel, et al. (2018) study which discusses development of identity formation in higher education, confirming that these international programs enhance the transformative nature of transformative experience through academic contacts. That interaction between the growth of individual students with building global communities in exchange serves both, are truly two sides to one coin, and creates an invaluable experience for everyone involved.

Cultural shocks were a recurring theme, where participants faced major changes in everyday life and in relating to others. Being on time was the most difficult of the four elements because in Indonesia they don't have the same strict adherence to scheduling as there is in America. As one participant pointed out, "If it is an appointment for 7, they can even come just five minutes before." This adaptation demanded participants to acquire time management strategies that will help them during their academic and professional endeavors (Lai et al., 2023).

Participants experienced day-to-day differences such as using tissue instead of water in toilets. While

these changes might seem simplistic, they stood out how far cultural practices ran into daily life. The participants exercised elasticity in terms of practical solutions (for example had their own bags with personal water bottles) handling such phenomena where they tried to find the ratio between adapting to a new culture but the personal comfort index remained dominant (Ernofalina, 2017).

The interplay of social and interpersonal dynamics is one major reason for culture shock, especially when changing cultures that have completely different communication manners. They challenge Indonesians, who come from cultures that emphasize formality in the workplace, with a preference for direct communication and informal interaction. As an example, the American practice of addressing teachers or instructors by first names as opposed to last names with a formal title exemplifies just one difference we need to prepare for in our culturally appropriate adaptation. This observation reinforces Sidabutar (2020), who explained communication styles are different thereby each culture must be having some strategies to narrow the gap effectively.

Communication style is just one of the numerous cultural differences impacting how we relate to each other and becoming involved in varied situations. People with high cultural intelligence have a higher level of the necessary communication skills required to bridge cultures, which in educational contexts will help cultivate inclusivity that can mitigate misunderstandings (Alifuddin & Widodo, 2022). In addition, professional fields like health care and education stress the importance of cultural competence. For example, in healthcare, cultural differences and communication challenges are known barriers to collaboration that impact patient outcomes (Harrison et al., 2019; Chouinard et al., 2021). Therefore, investing in recognition and adaptation to different communication styles is essential to increasing engagement, and ensuring that we interact with each other across cultural lines respectfully and effectively.

PRL: Within that context, some participants faced distinct challenges with religious practices, especially Muslim participants. Many Muslim students found their prayer times, and dietary restrictions incompatible with life in a non-Muslim environment. However, the American students who worked with participants were described as very understanding and accommodating in spite of these challenges. As one participant stated: "I had no concerns relating to prayer; there was a mosque nearby and I felt able to express my needs" It confirms the significance of cultivating a culturally Inclusive atmosphere in this exchange program (Belhadi & Ayad, 2017).

## 5.2 Communication Barriers: Linguistic and Psychological Challenges

Participants cited language barriers as one of their most significant challenges, especially in the first months they were in the United States. Problems with vocabulary, accents, and slang revealed the disparity between English lessons in Indonesia and how people actually spoke in the US. There are tons of accents and how fast they talk with their slang as GF would say. This finding is consistent with Murti and Baso Jabu (2022) who argue that linguistic barriers are intensified in cross-cultural settings, especially among non-native speakers.

Especially during the first few months of being in the USA, many of the participants expressed feeling hindered by language barriers with challenges due to mismatched English drawn from formal classes taken in Indonesia compared to how it was used on an everyday basis in America where issues such as specific vocabulary challenged non-native speakers of English within this cross-cultural context (Muijsenbergh et al. 2013). Slang is informal linguistic expression that is often context-specific; thus, it becomes another complication for communication as it may not be a part of the traditional lessons found in textbooks (Saputra et al., 2023; Kurniati & Rusfandi, 2021).

Not only that, psychological barriers worsened the situation of linguistic challenges as participants reported anxiety, lack of confidence, and fear of judgment in public presentations and social interactions. A measure of the extent to which psychological barriers remain One participant said: "The psychological barrier comes when it concerns cultural presentations. And nervously, stuttering, "I am not confident." These obstacles correspond with the inter relationship between psychology and language use. Despite these barriers, supportive American peers were key in instilling confidence in participants, emphasizing the need for a supportive social context that fosters participants efforts to address these experiences.

In addition to these difficulties with language, psychological barriers were further experienced by participants in the form of anxiety and low self-confidence, as well as fear of judgment in a public setting [13] or while socializing. These results also concur with studies regarding the relationship between cross-cultural and language barriers communication anxiety and sense of inferiority (Morita, 2004; Hara & Iqbal, 2015). Instead, participants valued these interactions with American peers as they helped strengthen their confidence, showing that social support can mediate the psychological difficulties faced by this group of students (MacFarlane et al., 2012; Choi et al., 2022).

In addition to verbal communication challenges, participants noted differences in body language and eye contact. Participants said hugging was used by Americans almost too much, while the importance of

eye contact was also a little unsettling. Another said, the way you are used to talking as you Americans when we talk you must have eye contact because the moment that you look away it would be impolite. Such adaptations emphasize the dynamic relationship between verbal and non-verbal communicative aspects (Ibrahim et al., 2022) during intercultural communication. Another challenge lay with non-verbal communication – as participants dealt with varying uses of physical gestures and norms regarding eye contact. This likewise exemplifies the balancing act that an individual needs to play between word and non-word through the domain of cross-cultural exchange (Sun et al., 2021). The differences in non-verbal cues can be vast, therefore adaptability to cultural behaviours is imperative for efficacious communication as it builds rapport and relationships between individuals emphasising the importance of inclusion in communication (Choi et al., 2022; MacFarlane et al., 2012).

## 5.3 Coping Mechanisms: Strategies for Adaptation

Resilience and adaptability Participants smashed through the challenges thrown their way. The adaptation strategies needed to embrace American practice and methods with a culturally driven yet mirroring approach. For instance, they changed their behavior to accommodate the punctuality and blunt communication style in the US. This aligns with Lai et al. which echoes how (2023) puts it, adaptation plays a key role in culture shock management.

The ability to communicate openly about language barriers and work through issues together. Participants highlighted getting clarity and being transparent that they are struggling. GF said, "Well if they're too fast then I'd be like 'Can you go slower? and they would understand." The proclivity for an active response underlines the participants' ability to manage cultural differences, consistent with Mardiningrum and Larasati (2021) claim that help-seeking needs to be promoted as a vital skill to gain from language barriers.

International exchange students rely heavily on support networks from host families, peers and teachers who can help mitigate their emotions and academic adjustments to cultures (Diem, 2023). Language support and cultural orientation tailored to individual needs promote acclimatization, and mentorship cultivates self-confidence and lasting connections.

Self-confidence and integration are moreover enhanced through inclusive teaching practices (which may involve teachers who treat local students in a friendly manner, and participate on an equal basis with international students in a range of social–academic activities) and positive contact experiences with members of the host culture highlighting the need for support environments during exchange programs (Ferencz et al., 2020).

## 5.4 Study's Implications and Contribution

We believe that this study fills a key gap in the existing literature regarding high school exchange students, which has been largely omitted in cross-cultural adaptation research. The majority of the other studies focus on university-aged people (who will typically be older and more experienced at dealing with cultural conflict). This study illustrates how the experiences of younger participants can add to an understanding in the mix on age and maturity in cross-cultural adaptation.

This study presents novel claims on the interconnected linguistic, psychological, and cultural dimensions of adaptation. The integration of these dimensions reveals that closing the gap on cross-cultural adaptation and transition necessitates a holistic methods in comprehending the complexities participants face. The results highlight the importance of personalized support systems in exchange programs. Based on the above factors, educational policymakers and program coordinators should ensure that pre-departure training targets cultural differences, language issues, and coping mechanisms. Training should focus on the comprehensive aspect of intercultural communication, including both verbal and non-verbal.

The programs should promote an inclusive space that honors the identity of those participating in terms of their culture and religion. Which consists of cultural prayer times, food limitations, and much more. Currently in Alzahuista, facilitating resources and support networks can help participants' overall experience and adjustment. Although this study sheds great light, it also opens numerous opportunities for future research. It could also conduct longitudinal studies into the development of personal and professional skills among program participants with studying abroad experience. However, a comparison between high school and university exchange students may expose how the different age and maturity levels are affecting their methods of adapting. Also, the use and role of digital aids like virtual reality or language-learning applications in intercultural competence could provide some interesting novel solutions. It would be valuable to include participants of different backgrounds in order to gain a wider perspective on the difficulties and advantages of exchange programs for cultural awareness further on a global scale.

## 6. Conclusions

This research uncovers the types of cross-cultural challenges faced by Indonesian high school exchange students in the United States, such as culture shock, language barriers, and communication. The article highlights that participants described the need to adapt to American timeliness, unusual toilet habits, work practices in part-time jobs and head-on communication style as well as informal interaction as a whole; religious and cultural diversity created challenges.

There were also cultural barriers, both linguistic and psychological, which needed to be overcome (thorough explanation) related to verbal & non-verbal communication norms of extensive use of touch & eye contact. Participants also engaged in moves to combat such issues, including cultural acclimatization, acceptance, and open dialogue. This study is innovative in that it examines an international student population, high school exchange students, not previously studied (or at least not specifically) who are distinct from older international students regarding cross-cultural experiences. These results have significant implications for exchange programs, underscoring the importance of pre-departure training, encouragement systems, and inclusive environments to equip students with greater acumen in preparation for cross-border cultural exposure. Longitudinal studies could be conducted with regards to effects on personal and professional growth, age group comparisons together with the assessment of digital tools mediating in exchange programs efficacy results and individual intercultural competencies development. These studies would further deepen our understanding of cross-cultural adjustment and lead to better development of exchange programs around the world.

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