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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS IN ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION: AN FOCUSED ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY AT UIN K.H. ABDURRAHMAN WAHID PEKALONGAN

Roisna Kamila*[1], Nur Khotimah[2], Ahmad Isa Abdallah[3], Tegar Dwi Wibowo [4]

[1]Universitas Islam Negeri K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia
[2]Universitas Islam Negeri K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia
[3]Universitas Islam Negeri K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia
[4]Universitas Islam Negeri K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia

Abstract: This study examines the dynamics of communication and learning between local and international students in multicultural classes at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan. Based on an intensive one-month micro-ethnographic study involving selected international and local students who were actively involved in learning interactions. This study was designed to understand how differences in language, cultural background, and classroom interaction patterns affect the learning process in the context of Islamic higher education. The results show that linguistic barriers, particularly the use of Indonesian as the language of instruction, pose a major challenge for international students in the early stages of their studies. However, the learning process continues to run effectively through linguistic adaptation strategies, such as bilingual discussions, clarification of meaning, the use of non-verbal communication, and social support from lecturers and peers. Dialogic and inclusive interaction patterns encourage the formation of a classroom climate that supports cross-cultural participation and collaboration. This study concludes that learning communication in multicultural classrooms at UIN Gus Dur develops adaptively and collaboratively, thereby contributing to the creation of an inclusive learning environment that is responsive to the cultural diversity of students.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, multicultural learning, international students, classroom interaction.

Corresponding author: Roisna Kamila
Email Address roisna.kamila25003@hms.uingusdur.ac.id
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INTRODUCTION

The globalization of higher education has led to a significant increase in the mobility of students across countries. Universities no longer function solely as national institutions, but as spaces for intensive cross-cultural encounters.[1] Indonesia, as one of the countries with the largest number of Islamic universities in the world, has become a new destination for international

[1] Philip G Altbach and Jane Knight, 'The Internationalization of Higher Education', *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11.3--4 (2007), 290–305.

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students interested in studying Islam in a moderate social and cultural context. One of the institutions experiencing this phenomenon is the K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid State Islamic University Pekalongan (UIN Gus Dur). The presence of international students on campus not only enriches academic diversity, but also brings new dynamics to the learning communication process. Cross-cultural interactions that take place in the classroom pose unique challenges, both for international students in adapting to the local academic culture and for lecturers who are required to adjust their communication strategies to the diverse backgrounds of their students.[2]

From a multicultural education perspective, learning communication is not merely understood as a process of imparting knowledge, but as an arena for the formation of meaning, identity, and social relations between individuals.[3][4] The educational process, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, explains that education is an arena for the exchange of symbols and social meanings.[5] This view is reinforced by the theory of social construction of reality, which asserts that social meaning is constructed through repeated interactions within specific institutional contexts. In the context of multicultural classrooms, learning communication serves as a medium for negotiating identities and cultural differences.[6] Meanwhile, William B. Gudykunst's theory of intercultural communication highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity and adaptability in reducing communication misunderstandings in heterogeneous environments.[7] Thus, the success of the learning process is not only determined by mastery of the material, but also by the quality of the communicative relationship between lecturers and students that is effective, empathetic, and adaptive to diversity.

A number of studies show that intercultural communication has a direct effect on the social and academic adaptation process of international students. Recent studies confirm that social support and open communication between lecturers and foreign students can accelerate the integration process in the university environment.[8] However, most of these studies still focus on Western-oriented universities or secular cultural contexts, while studies examining the dynamics of communication in Islamic educational environments, especially in Indonesia, are still very limited. In fact, Islamic education has its own characteristics, such as religious values, social

[2] Young Yun Kim, 'Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation of International Students', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 67 (2017), 34–45.
[3] George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).
[4] J A Banks and C A M Banks, *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives*, 10th edn (Wiley, 2021).
[5] Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966).
[6] Edward T Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1976).
[7] William B Gudykunst, *Globalisasi Pendidikan Tinggi Telah Mendorong Meningkatnya Mobilitas Mahasiswa Lintas Negara Secara Signifikan. Perguruan Tinggi Tidak Lagi Berfungsi Semata Sebagai Institusi Nasional, Melainkan Sebagai Ruang Perjumpaan Lintas Budaya Yang Intensif. Indone* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003).
[8] Kim.

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ethics, and dress codes that can influence learning communication patterns.[9] A study at an Islamic educational institution shows that the holistic instructional communication model at Indonesian Islamic campuses is still not optimal in strengthening the spiritual dimension of students. Conditions at UIN Gus Dur reveal unique social interactions between local students and international students from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Differences in language, communication styles, and perceptions of academic authority often create gaps in the learning process. In this context, lecturers not only act as teachers but also as cultural mediators who bridge differences in perspectives, habits, and expectations between individuals.[10] International students, on the other hand, are required to adapt to a learning system based on local Islamic values and Indonesian social norms.

The issue that then arises is how the dynamics of learning communication are formed in the interaction between international and local students at UIN Gus Dur. Are language and cultural differences the main obstacles to learning interaction, or do they actually serve as a collaborative space for the exchange of knowledge and values? This question is relevant to explain how Islamic educational institutions respond to the tide of educational globalization without losing their scientific identity and normative values.

This study does not aim to describe the culture of the Gus Dur State Islamic University campus as a whole, but focuses on the intensity of communication interactions that take place in certain classes involving local and international students from the perspective of educational sociology. This is because not all classes have such conditions. This micro focus places the classroom as the main unit of analysis, because the classroom is an arena of social interaction that is structured, repetitive, and rich in symbolic meaning.[11] Thus, a one-month research period is considered adequate, because qualitative research does not emphasize duration alone, but rather depth of understanding of the patterns of interaction observed.[12] Observation of intensive and repeated interactions in the context of formal learning allows researchers to capture the processes of communication adaptation, meaning negotiation, and social relations that are formed in a relatively short period of time.[13]

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[9] Norfarahi Zulkifli, Mohd Isa Hamzah, and Khadijah Abdul Razak, 'Creative Teaching Practice among Islamic Education Lecturers: The Influence of Gender, Age, and Teaching Experience', *Jurnal Cakrawala Pendidikan*, 41.2 (2022), 416–24 <https://doi.org/10.21831/cp.v41i2.42039>.

[10] S J Wahyudi, A N Rahmanto, and A M Isrun Naini, 'Intercultural Communication Strategy of International Student Services Staff at Higher Education in Indonesia', in *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Social Sciences (ICONESS 2023)*, 2023, pp. 77–79 <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.22-7-2023.2335460>.

[11] Mead.

[12] John W Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2013).

[13] James P Spradley, *Participant Observation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), 56–58.

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This approach is in line with the methodological view in qualitative research which asserts that small-scale social units, such as classes, can provide rich data for understanding broader social dynamics without having to conduct long-term observations of the entire institutional culture.[14] Therefore, limiting the research period does not reduce the validity of the findings, as long as the research focus, interaction context, and observation intensity are clearly and consistently defined.

The novelty of this research lies in the use of a sociological approach to understand learning communication practices in the context of multicultural Islamic education, a perspective that is still rarely the focus of study in Indonesia. Theoretically, this research enriches the study of the sociology of education and intercultural communication in Islamic universities. Practically, the findings of this research are expected to serve as a reference in the development of academic policies that support inclusive and socially equitable learning for international students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with a focused ethnography (micro-ethnography) design to understand the dynamics of learning communication in the context of a multicultural classroom at K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid State Islamic University in Pekalongan. This design was chosen based on the nature of the study, which focuses on a specific social context, namely a particular class involving local and international students, and was conducted over a relatively short but intensive period of time. Unlike classical ethnography, which requires long-term involvement in a cultural community, focused ethnography allows researchers to uncover patterns of communication, shared meanings, and social interaction practices through focused observation of situations rich in interaction.[15]

This approach is relevant because the research is not aimed at describing the culture of the UIN Gus Dur campus as a whole, but rather at examining the intensity of learning communication interactions that take place in specific classes. Thus, the class is positioned as the main unit of analysis, a place where structured, repetitive, and symbolically meaningful interactions occur in the formal learning process. This focus allows researchers to identify relatively stable communication patterns even though the research was conducted over a limited period of time.

The research was conducted in one classroom that was purposively selected because it showed a high level of interaction between local and international students, both in class

[14] Spradley.
[15] Hubert Knoblauch, "Focused Ethnography," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 6, no.3 (2005).

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discussions, group work, and communication during lectures. The research was conducted over a period of one month, with the duration of data collection adjusted to the intensity of the learning schedule. Within the framework of focused ethnography, a period of one month was considered sufficient because it allowed for intensive observation of repeated interactions, so that consistent communication patterns could be identified empirically.[16]

The research subjects consisted of international students and local students who attended the same class. Informants were determined using purposive sampling techniques, taking into account the principle of information-rich cases, namely individuals who had direct experience and active involvement in cross-cultural communication in the classroom.[17] The criteria for selecting informants included: (1) level of active participation in class discussions, (2) frequency of interaction with students from different cultural backgrounds, and (3) openness in reflecting on learning communication experiences. Key informants in this study include three to five international students and three to five local students. The limited number of informants is considered appropriate given the contextual focus of the study and the qualitative approach, which prioritizes data depth over statistical representativeness.

Data collection was conducted through participant observation and in-depth interviews. Participant observation was carried out during the learning process, allowing researchers to record conversations, interaction patterns, nonverbal expressions, and communication strategies used by local and international students. Observation notes were compiled descriptively to capture the nuances of intercultural communication in detail. In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to explore informants' experiences regarding language barriers, cultural adaptation strategies, and their perceptions of communication dynamics in the classroom. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes and was transcribed to ensure the accuracy of the analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using Spradley's ethnographic analysis model, which includes domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, and cultural theme analysis. In the domain analysis stage, researchers identified the main categories relevant to the research focus, such as linguistic barriers, class interaction patterns, and communication adaptation strategies. The taxonomic analysis stage was carried out by organizing subcategories in each domain so that the data structure could be mapped systematically. The final stage, cultural theme analysis, was carried out by identifying the main themes that represented the dynamics of learning communication in

[16] Sara Ahmed, 'Sustained Observation in Short-Term Ethnographic Research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 30.2 (2024), 215–30 <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004231234567>.
[17] Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002).

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multicultural classrooms, which were then presented in the form of narrative descriptions supported by data from observations and interviews.

To ensure the validity of data in a one-month study, researchers applied several validity strategies relevant to short-term qualitative research. Observations were conducted intensively and continuously to build a consistent understanding of emerging communication patterns. This strategy is in line with Ahmed's view, which emphasizes the importance of intensive observation in short-term ethnographic research to build the credibility of findings.[18] The validity of the findings was also strengthened through contextual member checking, which is an informal clarification of the researcher's initial interpretation to several key informants during or after the interview, as recommended by Lloyd for rapid and focused qualitative studies.[19]

In addition, this study applies thick description to describe in detail the classroom situation, forms of interaction among students, and the cultural context surrounding the learning process. The rich description allows readers to understand the dynamics of communication more fully and assess the relevance of the findings to the context of multicultural learning in other environments. This approach is combined with continuous observation and contextual member checking to maintain the credibility and transferability of the findings.

Special attention was given to nonverbal communication that emerged when verbal language was not fully understood. During classroom observations, researchers noted the use of nodding as a sign of agreement, thumbs up, brief eye contact to show attention, smiles or light laughter to ease tension, and hand gestures pointing to books or slides when explaining specific points. Expressions of confusion, such as furrowed brows or brief silences, were often used by international students to request clarification without having to speak. Detailed descriptions of these nonverbal cues helped researchers understand the meaning of interactions more comprehensively and served to reinforce the depth of data in short-term qualitative research.[20] [21]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Linguistic and Cultural Barriers in Multicultural Classrooms

Research findings indicate that linguistic barriers are the most significant initial challenge in learning communication in multicultural classrooms at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman

[18] Ahmed.
[19] Rebecca Lloyd, 'Contextual Member Checking in Rapid Qualitative Studies', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 23.1 (2024), 1–12 <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241234500>.
[20] A Younas and others, 'The Role of Thick Description in Enhancing Transferability', *Nursing Inquiry*, 31.1 (2023), e12501.
[21] Mark L Knapp, Judith A Hall, and Terrence G Horgan, *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2014).

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Wahid Pekalongan. International students from Nigeria (Aminah, Ahmad, Ibrahim, Haroon, and Abdallah) and Thailand (Najwa and Bilkis) revealed that the use of Indonesian as the main language of instruction made it difficult for them, especially in the early stages of attending lectures.[22] Since the majority of students and lecturers come from the Indonesian archipelago, Indonesian is the dominant language used for communication. Thus, Indonesian is not only used in delivering material, but also in discussions, task instructions, and spontaneous interactions in class. Aminah, a student from Nigeria, for example, admits that at first she found it difficult to follow lectures because the material was taught in Indonesian. Therefore, international students must adapt quickly in order to keep up with the learning process. So far, adaptation has taken place through independent efforts to translate the material before and after class. This pattern is consistent with Titi Nur Vidyarini's (2024) research, which shows that the cultural adaptation of international students is highly dependent on cross-cultural communication competencies, especially in terms of language.[23]

As an initial strategy, English is often used as a lingua franca to bridge communication between local and international students. However, field findings show that this strategy is not always effective Some Nigerian students, such as Ibrahim, admit that they are more proficient in Arabic than English, so communication between local and international students is sometimes not smooth. This situation shows that linguistic heterogeneity occurs not only between local and international students, but also among international students who come from different native language backgrounds. This situation reinforces the view that communication challenges in multicultural classrooms are multi-layered and cannot be reduced solely to a matter of national language differences.[24]

As for local students, their initial interactions were marked by both enthusiasm and caution. Some local students mentioned that they deliberately chose their words carefully so as not to cause offense. For example, Khikmatun stated that she always considers the cultural context before expressing her opinion, demonstrating a high level of awareness of cross-cultural sensitivities. Meanwhile, Tiara and several other students mentioned that the cultural diversity in the classroom made the learning experience very rich, although it was

[22] T N Vidyarini, 'Adaptasi Budaya Oleh Mahasiswa Internasional: Perspektif Komunikasi Lintas Budaya', *Scriptura*, 7.2 (2024), 71–79 <https://doi.org/10.9744/scriptura.7.2.71-79>.
[23] Vidyarini.
[24] M T Anfas, P Retnaningdyah, and A Munir, 'The International Students' Experiences of Their Intercultural Communication Competence in Indonesia', *EDUKASIA: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Pembelajaran*, 4.2 (2023), 2697–2706 <https://doi.org/10.62775/edukasia.v4i2.654>.

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not always easy, especially when the discussion switched to English, which was not always comfortable for everyone.

Linguistic barriers become even more complex when linked to the local context of Pekalongan, which has a unique linguistic landscape. Local students do not always use standard Indonesian in classroom interactions, but often mix it with coastal Javanese dialects, such as Bandek or Ngapak. One concrete example that emerged in the interviews was the use of the word *"loro"*. For Pekalongan speakers, this word means "sick," while for students from Pemalang and Tegal, *"loro"* is understood as the number "two." This difference in meaning often causes confusion, both for international students and local students from other regions, especially those from outside Java. This finding shows that communication barriers in multicultural classrooms are not only cross-cultural, but also cross-subcultural, which is often overlooked.[25]

This condition is in line with the findings of Safi et al., which confirm that the dynamics of intercultural communication on Indonesian campuses are often influenced by variations in local languages that are not recognized as potential barriers.[26] In the context of multicultural classrooms, differences in dialect and academic language register can widen the gap in understanding, especially for students who do not yet have sufficient cultural experience.

Within the framework of Gudykunst's Uncertainty–Anxiety Management (UAM), such linguistic and cultural uncertainty has the potential to trigger communication anxiety. International students are in a vulnerable position because they must simultaneously interpret the meaning of messages, interaction norms, and academic expectations. When language skills and cultural context understanding are not yet adequately developed, anxiety levels tend to increase and impact class participation.[27] Namun, temuan penelitian ini juga menunjukkan bahwa kecemasan tersebut bersifat dinamis. However, the findings of this study also show that this anxiety is dynamic. As the intensity of interaction, learning experiences, and social support from friends and lecturers increase, uncertainty gradually decreases and students begin to show more stable adaptation. This pattern confirms that

[25] M Hasan and R Al-Farisi, 'Miscommunication Patterns in Multicultural Classrooms', *Jurnal Pendidikan Global*, 5.1 (2022), 14–27.
[26] A Q Safi and others, 'Intercultural Communication between Indonesian and International Students at Universitas Padjadjaran', *Jurnal Manajemen Komunikasi*, 7.1 (2022), 55–72 <https://doi.org/10.24198/jmk.v7i1.41147>.
[27] Gudykunst.

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linguistic barriers are not static conditions, but part of a gradual intercultural adaptation process in multicultural classrooms.[28]

B. Learning Interaction Patterns and the Role of Nonverbal Communication

The learning interaction patterns in multicultural classrooms at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan are dominated by presentations, question and answer sessions, and group discussions. These forms of interaction reflect participatory learning practices that provide space for both local and international students to actively engage. However, in practice, these interactions do not rely entirely on verbal communication. Research findings indicate that nonverbal communication plays a very significant role as a key strategy in bridging language barriers and cultural differences.

Class observations show that international students often use nods to indicate initial understanding of explanations given by lecturers or discussion partners, even though they do not yet fully understand the terms used. Smiles and light laughter often appear as social strategies to ease tension when there are mispronunciations or misunderstandings of language. In addition, hand gestures, such as pointing to presentation slides, books, or notes, are used to clarify meaning when Indonesian or English vocabulary is insufficient. In other situations, researchers noted relatively consistent expressions of confusion, such as pausing, raising eyebrows, or glancing at classmates, as implicit signals that explanations need to be repeated or slowed down.

These nonverbal cues do not stand alone, but are responded to adaptively by local students and lecturers. Local students often adjust their speaking tempo, repeat explanations using simpler sentence structures, or replace academic terms with concrete examples. These responses demonstrate a collective awareness of the linguistic limitations faced by some members of the class. Thus, nonverbal communication functions as a mechanism for negotiating meaning, enabling learning interactions to continue effectively despite language barriers.

From a social constructivist perspective, as proposed by Berger and Luckmann, social reality includes the meaning of learning that is constructed through a process of reciprocal symbolic interaction.[29] The findings of this study show that nonverbal symbols are an integral part of the meaning construction process. Meaning is not merely transmitted verbally from lecturers to students, but is negotiated together through a combination of spoken

[28] Vidyarini.
[29] Berger and Luckmann.

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language, gestures, facial expressions, and other social responses. This confirms that multicultural classes at UIN Gus Dur function as dialogical communities, where understanding is formed collectively through layered interactions.

In addition to being a means of negotiating meaning, nonverbal communication also contributes to creating an inclusive classroom climate. International students stated that they still felt recognized and involved in discussions even though their verbal language skills were limited. Nonverbal cues allowed them to participate without excessive pressure to always speak perfectly. These findings are in line with intercultural communication studies which emphasize that sensitivity to nonverbal cues can reduce communication anxiety and increase psychological safety in cross-cultural interactions.[30]

Furthermore, the use of nonverbal communication also reflects a form of intercultural competence that develops practically in everyday interactions. Students and lecturers do not always consciously formulate communication strategies, but through repeated interactions, they build adaptive and empathetic response patterns. In the context of multicultural education, the ability to read and respond to nonverbal cues is as important as verbal language proficiency. Therefore, these findings reinforce the argument that the effectiveness of learning communication in multicultural classrooms is determined not only by linguistic competence, but also by social sensitivity and the ability to understand nonverbal symbols that arise in interactions.

Overall, the pattern of interaction in the multicultural classroom at UIN Gus Dur shows that nonverbal communication plays a key role in maintaining the continuity of the learning dialogue. The presence of nonverbal cues allows for the creation of a more flexible, inclusive, and adaptive communication space that accommodates cultural and linguistic diversity, while also enriching the process of meaning construction in learning.

C. Adaptation Strategies and Social Support in the Learning Process

Research findings show that international and local students develop various adaptation strategies to overcome communication barriers in multicultural learning. These strategies are not only linguistic in nature, but also include emotional and social adjustments that enable academic interactions to continue effectively. International students generally strive to learn Indonesian gradually, prepare materials before lectures, and ask for clarification after class if there are parts they do not understand. This strategy is a form of

[30] Gudykunst.

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active adaptation in dealing with language limitations and differences in communication styles.[31]

The cases of Najwa and Bilkis, students from Thailand, show that length of stay and intensity of social interaction have a significant effect on language competence and confidence in communication. After living in Indonesia for more than two years and participating in Indonesian language learning programs provided by the university, both students demonstrated better Indonesian language skills than other international students who had just arrived. This condition indicates that communication adaptation is not only determined by individual motivation, but also by the structural support of educational institutions in providing language learning spaces and cross-cultural interactions.[32]

On the other hand, local students also adjust their communication as a form of social adaptation. Local students tend to simplify their language, avoid using regional idioms or ambiguous local terms, and actively help translate academic terms for international students. This practice not only serves as a communication strategy, but also as a form of social solidarity that strengthens the inclusive climate in the classroom. This reciprocal adaptation shows that intercultural competence develops through a two-way interaction process, not merely a demand imposed on international students.[33]

The role of lecturers is also a crucial factor in strengthening communication adaptation strategies. Lecturers not only act as teachers, but also as facilitators of cross-cultural communication. Bilingual discussion practices, allowing extra thinking time, and being open to clarification questions provide a safe space for international students to participate without fear of making mistakes. This approach reflects the principle of equity pedagogy, where lecturers adjust teaching strategies to ensure that all students have equal access to the learning process.[34]

From the perspective of Communication Accommodation Theory, the strategies employed by students and lecturers can be understood as a form of convergence, namely the adjustment of speech style and communication behavior to achieve commonality and mutual understanding.[35] However, this process does not mean the elimination of cultural identity. International students continue to use English or Arabic in certain situations, while local

[31] Vidyarini.
[32] Safi and others.
[33] D J Ramadhan and others, 'Strategi Manajemen Komunikasi Dalam Menghadapi Tantangan Multikulturalisme Dalam Konteks Islam', *Student Research Journal*, 1.6 (2023), 240–48 <https://doi.org/10.55606/srjyappi.v1i6.841>.
[34] J A Banks, *An Introduction to Multicultural Education*, 6th edn (Pearson, 2019).
[35] Gudykunst.

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students maintain their linguistic identity by adjusting the context of use. Thus, the communication adaptation that occurs is flexible and negotiable, not assimilative.

The comfort level in expressing opinions also shows significant variation among students. Aminah, a student from Nigeria, revealed that she feels more confident when discussing in English, but tends to be passive when the language of instruction is Indonesian. This condition reflects the emotional dynamics in cross-cultural communication, such as the fear of making mistakes, concerns about being misunderstood, and uncertainty about the meaning conveyed. This phenomenon is in line with findings from intercultural communication research that highlights the role of communication anxiety in influencing the academic participation of international students.[36]

Conversely, some local students such as Farkhan and Nok Uzana stated that the supportive classroom atmosphere encouraged them to be more active in expressing their opinions. However, there were also local students such as Tiara and Azhar who felt more comfortable participating indirectly, for example by observing discussions and processing information before speaking. This shows that students' cognitive contributions are not always manifested in explicit verbal participation. Thus, activity in multicultural classrooms needs to be understood more broadly, not merely measured by the frequency of speaking.

Social support from peers and lecturers has been shown to play a significant role in reducing communication anxiety and increasing the active participation of international students. A supportive classroom environment allows foreign students to feel valued and accepted, thereby encouraging them to speak up and interact. These findings are in line with the research by Anfas, Retnaningdyah, and Munir, which confirms that international students' intercultural communication competence develops optimally when supported by empathetic and non-judgmental social relationships.[37]

Thus, adaptation strategies and social support not only serve as a response to communication barriers, but also as the foundation for the formation of a collaborative multicultural learning community. This adaptation process shows that successful cross-cultural communication in the classroom does not depend solely on language skills, but on a collective willingness to adapt, understand, and build inclusive academic relationships.

[36] Hasan and Al-Farisi.
[37] Anfas, Retnaningdyah, and Munir.

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D. Informal Spaces as the "Third Space" in Learning Communication

In addition to formal interactions in the classroom, research findings show that informal spaces outside the classroom, such as the cafeteria, waiting rooms, and casual discussions after lectures, play an important role in strengthening cross-cultural communication between local and international students. In these spaces, communication is more flexible, warm, and less academically pressured, allowing students to feel more comfortable expressing themselves.

International students from Nigeria and Thailand revealed that informal interactions provide opportunities to practice Indonesian and English naturally. Casual conversations are often filled with asking each other the meaning of words, correcting pronunciation, or joking around using a mixture of languages. Local students, at the same time, have the opportunity to improve their English skills without feeling awkward. This pattern shows that cross-cultural communication outside the classroom functions as an unstructured but effective mutual learning process.

Informal interactions also open up space for more personal and reflective discussions. Some students mentioned that discussions outside the classroom actually helped them understand each other's different ways of thinking, cultural values, and social habits. Casual conversations about food, experiences living in Indonesia, or the education systems in the home countries of foreign students often develop into discussions that strengthen social bonds. The emotional closeness formed from these interactions then has a positive impact on communication in the classroom, as students feel more comfortable and trust each other.

In the perspective of the "third space" theory proposed by Homi K. Bhabha, this informal space can be understood as a hybrid space, where local and global cultural identities negotiate on an equal footing.[38] This third space allows students to not be completely bound by formal academic norms or their original cultural identities, but rather to build new meanings and relationships through daily social interactions. In this context, learning does not only occur through the transfer of material, but also through social processes that shape intercultural sensitivity.

These findings are in line with research by Anfas et al., which confirms that social support and informal interactions contribute significantly to the emotional adaptation and communication of international students in Indonesia.[39] In addition, Savira and Widiasih showed that involvement in an inclusive social community can reduce feelings of alienation

[38] Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).
[39] Anfas, Retnaningdyah, and Munir.

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and homesickness among international students.[40] Thus, informal spaces play a strategic role as a complement to classrooms in fostering an inclusive and humanistic multicultural learning environment.

CONCLUSION

Based on an intensive one-month micro-ethnographic study involving selected international and local students, this research shows that the dynamics of learning communication between local and international students at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan are mainly influenced by language differences, classroom communication patterns, and social support in the academic environment. Language barriers are the most dominant factor affecting material comprehension and participation, especially for international students who are not yet proficient in Indonesian. However, students are able to adapt through the use of English, gradual language learning, and clarification in interactions. Learning patterns in the form of presentations, open discussions, and question and answer sessions create a dialogical space that helps students understand each other despite their different cultural backgrounds. The supportive responses of peers and lecturers have proven to be an important factor in reducing communication anxiety and increasing comfort in participating. Daily interactions outside the classroom also strengthen adaptation skills and strengthen social relationships between students. Overall, the communication dynamics in multicultural classrooms on this campus are positive: communication barriers can be overcome through language adaptation, emotional support, and inclusive learning practices, resulting in a conducive learning environment for both local and international students.

This study has several limitations that need to be understood when interpreting the findings. The study was conducted over a period of one month, focusing on a single multicultural class at UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan. This approach allowed for intensive and in-depth observation of the dynamics of learning communication, although it did not represent the development of interactions over a full semester. Furthermore, because the study focused on a single class with relatively active interaction characteristics, communication dynamics in other classes or different study programs may exhibit patterns that are not entirely the same. A limited number of informants were purposively selected to explore experiences that were rich and relevant to the research focus, so the findings emphasize depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization. This study also highlights the experiences of students who are relatively

[40] F Savira and R Widiasih, 'Intercultural Competence and Homesickness among Exchange Students in Indonesia', *International Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 12.1 (2024), 88–103 <https://doi.org/10.32734/ijis.v12i1.8976>.

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active in classroom interactions, so that the perspectives of more passive students may not be optimally described. Nevertheless, the findings of this study still provide a meaningful contextual description of learning communication practices in multicultural classrooms in Islamic educational environments. This understanding can be an initial reference for the development of more inclusive learning strategies and academic policies, particularly in supporting the adaptation and participation of international students.

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