**Intercultural Communication Barriers Faced by Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) Awardees in South Korea**

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this research was to find out the intercultural communication barriers faced by the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) awardees in South Korea. Furthermore, this research also sought to find out the strategy for dealing with the barriers. The method of the research was the qualitative descriptive method with in-depth interviews as the information-gathering technique. The research used Barna’s (1997) theory of intercultural communication barriers. The participants of the study, comprising 27 awardees of IISMA, were interviewed to elicit their experience with intercultural communication. The findings revealed that the participants faced a kind of barriers in intercultural communication namely anxiety, assuming the similarity instead of differences, ethnocentrism, stereotype, prejudice, language, and non-verbal communication. This research provided insight into strategies to overcome the intercultural communication barriers such as developing self-awareness and deep cultural knowledge, establishing a good relationship with other participants, understanding and learning the Korean language, using the translator application, showing friendly behavior, and leaving a good impression for the local people in South Korea. Finally, the writer hopes that this research would be useful, especially for students in English Department who want to study abroad in South Korea.

***Keywords***: *barriers, iisma, intercultural communication*

**INTRODUCTION**

Globalization continues to bring forward numerous developments, advancements, and challenges. The distance between countries has become smaller throughout time, bringing distinct cultures closer than ever before and improving interaction between individuals within it. This age of rapid globalization also creates more interest in learning another language to improve communication skills with people from different countries (Jackson, 2014). As cultures differ from one another, the communication practices and behaviors of people will necessarily differ as a result of their different thoughts about the world. Regarding this matter, this prompts a need for students to develop the ability to communicate across cultures known as intercultural communication.

Intercultural communication usually happens when someone communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds, for example when traveling abroad, on holidays, and in business. However, in the academic field, most universities and social entities have implemented various international programs, including student exchanges. The growth of intercultural communication in the realm of education is indisputable due to the increasing numbers of opportunities for students to continue their studies abroad (Murtiningsih, 2016). It will provide them with more exposure to other languages and cultures while making them aware of the importance of an intercultural adaptation process.

Intercultural communication generally refers to interpersonal communication between individuals or groups who are affiliated with different cultural groups and/or have been socialized in different cultural environments (Jackson, 2014). According to Keles (2013), intercultural communication refers to any interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol are different enough to alter their communication. Furthermore, Holliday (2018) considers interculturality to be a reflexive awareness of self and other in a crossing of boundaries.There are many types of barriers which can obstruct the communication or interaction, one of them is intercultural communication barriers. Barna (1997) has developed an approach to examine barriers to intercultural communication on a general level such as anxiety, assuming similarity instead of difference, ethnocentrism, stereotypes, prejudice, language barriers, and non-verbal communication.

In Indonesia, the Indonesian Government also created a policy to improve the quality of learning and college graduates namely Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM)*.* MBKM is one of the education policies initiated and organized by Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. Through this policy, there is a wide opportunity for students to enrich and improve their insights and competencies following their passions and ideals. One of the best programs is the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA). IISMA is the Government of the Republic of Indonesia’s scholarship scheme to fund Indonesian students for mobility programs at top universities overseas and has collaborated with all the vocational schools in Indonesia including the Sriwijaya State Polytechnic. In this program, the vocational students can spend one semester at the overseas partner university to study, experience the host country’s culture and undertake practical assignments to enhance their intercultural communication skills.

Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) has several objectives such as improving students’ knowledge, soft skills, and cross-cultural understanding, providing opportunities for students to carry out self-development activities outside their campuses at universities abroad, developing friendships and networks of participating students with other international and local students, lecturers, as well as the public in general in the country where the student is located implementing programs. Moreover, the objective of this program is also to prepare qualified and open-minded College graduates who are ready to face the challenges of Industrial Revolution 4.0 and build up a good relationship between the Indonesian government and the government countries of domicile of the destination College (Tim IISMA, 2021).

Furthermore, the IISMA program has collaborated with higher education institutions in 29 countries and one of them is South Korea which offers various areas of study such as Engineering, Hospitality, and the Tourism Industry. During the programs, the awardees did some activities such as study, industrial visits, work training, and participating in cultural events in the host country that required them to enhance the communication skills. By interacting with other people from different cultures, students are expected to gain competencies and qualifications necessary for their future careers during their stay, and positively influence in terms of intercultural competence and personal development.

Despite this, numerous aspects can influence student's experiences during studying abroad especially in South Korea. While some students may have a positive experience and successfully adjust to the new culture, other students find it difficult to communicate thoughts and adapt due to different cultural values, unfamiliar surroundings and many other factors that prevent them from communicating with members of other cultures. Then, the intercultural communication barriers might be happened as South Korea has different cultures and language from Indonesia.

By the information above, the writer is interested in researching about the intercultural communication barriers in South Korea with the title “Intercultural Communication Barriers Faced by Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) Awardees in South Korea”.

**METHOD**

In this research, the writer used the qualitative method, because this research was related to something that involves the problem or quality. Creswell (2013) states that qualitative research is the process of understanding inquiry on a tradition of district inquiry methodology that explores social or human problems. As a result, this research aimed to know the intercultural communication barriers faced by the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) awardees in South Korea and how they overcame with those barriers by describing the barriers and strategies that they did.

The subjects of this research were the awardees of Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) for Vocational path in South Korea in 2022. The total number of the awardees was 34 students who were grouped in 4 host universities such as Ulsan College (4), Kangwon National University (9), Daegu Catholic University (7), and Woosong University (14). This research took all awardees as the subjects to investigate.

Qualitative data is a type of data that relies on the participants to offer in-depth responses to the questions. It includes all modes of social research that rely primarily on non-numerical data in the form of words, such as content, conversation, discourse, and narrative analysis (Tenny et al., 2022). In this research, the writer applied the observation and interview technique.

Denny & Weckesser (2022) state that observation is the act of observing social phenomena in a real-life context, recording what people are doing, rather than what they are supposed to be doing. In this research, the writer did the observation during the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) program in South Korea from September 1st, 2022 until January 4th, 2023. The writer observed the environment and the cultures of Korean people when communicated with other people from different cultures and countries.

In getting the data, the writer used semi-structured interviews because it is included in the in-depth interview category which is free compared to structured interviews. Furthermore, this type of interview aimed to find the problem more openly and ask the participants about their opinion.

Moreover, the in-depth interview was carried out through online meetings using the applications Zoom or Google Meet. In conducting the interview, the writer covered a range of research relevant themes and ready-made questions were used to get participants’ views, opinions, and personal experiences in South Korea. The ready-made question was based on Barna's (1997) theory related to intercultural communication barriers and has been used in research conducted by Keles (2013) to examine the intercultural communication barriers faced by exchange students of Erasmus Program in Turkey. For the details of the list of interview questions, it was attached in the appendices section especially in appendix 8.

The data analysis in the qualitative method is a systematic process to determine sections and interrelation between other sections and the whole of the data collected to produce a classification of typology (Afrizal, 2014). According to (Mashuri et al., 2022), there were three stages to analyze the result of the Interview, as follows:

1. The first step was data preparation. In this stage, the writer transcribed all the interview recordings and put them into a word or table that was easy to work with. During this stage, the writer carefully read through each transcript to fully immersed in the data and the participants’ stories. The transcripts were annotated by labeling relevant words, phrases, sentences, or sections with highlight.
2. The second step was analysis the data by categorizing and reorganizing the data and seeking the patterns related to research questions. In this stage, the writer segmented the data to establish the bulk of the data cohesively. It helped the writer to determine which types of intercultural barriers are most often faced by interviewers.

The final step was to summarize the result. After tabulating the data, the writer analyzed each segment and take a deep dive into how the interviewers solved each barrier that they faced in South Korea. Finally, the writer interpreted and summarized all the data that in lights of relevant studies, theories, and concepts to answer the key questions in this research.

**FINDINGS**

In the findings, the writer explains what the writer found in doing the observation and the interview with Indonesian Intercultural Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) for Vocational path in South Korea.

## *Observation*

After doing the observation, the writer found that there are some of the Indonesian student who got struggle while communicating with Korean people. It can be happened because of the cultural and language differences between Korean and Indonesia. Furthermore, the writer also found that there are some stereotypes and prejudice from Korean people toward the Indonesian. However, the writer also found that there are some of Korean people who were friendly, kind, and always helped the foreigners in South Korea.

## *Interview*

After analyzing the data which were collected through interviews with the awardees of the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA), the writer found the problem encountered by the awardees in South Korea. However, out of the 34 awardees, only 27 were willing to conduct interviews and gave their answers. The remaining seven did not respond or refusing to become the subject of research. Based on the interview, the writer got the data as follows:

### **Kinds of Intercultural Communication Barriers Faced by the awardees**

1. Anxiety

Anxiety is the feeling of a lack of familiarity with customs, social norms, and behavioral patterns in new culture.

In this aspect, the writer found out about the anxiety felt by the participants before leaving for Korea. Out of the 27 participants, 23 participants answered that they had experienced anxiety or worry before leaving for Korea. Then, the other 4 participants said that they were more excited and considered this opportunity to be a challenge for them to explore new places.

2. Assuming Similarity instead of Differences

The result of the interview session about assuming the similarity between South Korea and Indonesia shows that there were 6 participants out of the total who have the assumption that the culture in Indonesia and Korea is the same especially about the manner to the older people. Then, as many as 21 participants considered that Korean culture is different from Indonesia. They said that the majority of Koreans are individualists, not open to foreigners, and very disciplined with time. Then, they also thought that most of the Korean people cannot speak English so it will be difficult to approach them. And this has also been experienced by them directly while in Korea.

3. Ethnocentrism

In this aspect, the writer asked whether the participants had ever heard a statement in which Koreans considered themselves better than Indonesia.

The result showed that 24 participants answered that they often heard statements from social media stating that Korea is more powerful than Indonesia. Based on the answers from the them, they said that they only heard the news on social media. However, they never heard of this directly while in Korea. In other side, as many as 3 participants said that they had never seen or heard a statement regarding the attitude of Korean ethnocentrism.

4. Stereotypes

In this aspect, the writer asked whether the participants had ever heard of a stereotype of Koreans towards Indonesia. Based on result of the interview, only 11 participants said that they had heard of stereotypes of Koreans towards Indonesia especially about the Muslim girl who is using the headscarves and does not discipline with the time. However, the other 16 participants had never heard of bad stereotypes from Koreans.

5. Prejudice

In this aspect, the writer asked whether the participants have ever had prejudice from Koreans or not. Furthermore, the result showed that there were 11 participants who stated that they had felt disliked or prejudice by the local residents because of the differences culture and appearance. However, other 17 participants said that they had never experienced prejudice or bad treatment while they were there.

6. Language Barriers

In this aspect, the writer asked whether the participants had experienced language barriers while in South Korea. The result showed that all participants answered that language was their biggest obstacle because of the differences in language, accent, pronunciation, and some sentences that are not clear when heard, making it difficult for the participants to understand sentences spoken by Koreans.

7. Non-Verbal Communication Barriers

In this aspect, the writer asked whether the participants had experienced non-verbal communication barriers while in South Korea.

According to the answer of the participants, there were 19 participants stated that they often had difficulty understanding and adapting to the non-verbal communication culture of the Korean people. Nevertheless, the other 8 participants said that they had never experienced any obstacles when communicating non-verbally with Koreans. They also thought that body gestures actually help them to say what they want to convey to Koreans.

### Strategies to Overcome the Intercultural Communication Barriers

The following table is the result of the interview about the strategies that they did to overcome the intercultural communication barriers:

Table 1. *Strategies To Overcome with the Intercultural Communication Barriers*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Barriers | Strategies |
| 1. Anxiety | In overcoming the anxiety, the participants took several ways, such as conducting research to find more information regarding the culture and regulations that existed there. Then, some of them also tried to act normal and confident by preparing various things including supplies of clothing, food, and translator applications needed while they were there. Not only that, they also tried to establish relationships with other participants who came from different universities to reduce their anxiety that they would feel lonely and live far from their families. |
| 2. Assuming Similarity instead of Differences | To overcome the barriers of assuming the similarity, the awardees took various ways such as trying to adapt to their surroundings, learning Korean language, changing their mindset and seeing this challenge as an opportunity for them to learn to approach Koreans. Then, for the 21 participants who considered there were differences between the two countries. Instead, they behave normally and prepared themselves to adapt in a new environment and culture. |
| 3. Ethnocentrism | Since the majority of participants only heard ethnocentrism from social media and news articles, to overcome this obstacle, they tried to find more information first. This can prevent misunderstandings or misperceptions from Indonesians towards Koreans. |
| 4. Stereotype and Prejudice | To overcome these barriers, the majority of the participants tried to think positively while doing a number of things that they thought could overcome the negative views of Koreans towards Indonesia. They also carried out various promotions to introduce the Indonesian state to the local people there more broadly. Then, they also tried to be disciplined with time so as not to leave a bad impression on the local people there. Not only that, they also explained to the local people who have prejudice against the hooded person that the person is not as bad and weird as they thought. |
| 5. Language Barrier | To solve this barrier, the participants carried out several strategies such as taking Korean language classes with local people where they could learn the basics of Korean which they could use in their daily lives. Then, they also overcome these obstacles by asking them to repeat what they say and try to focus more on listening to what they say. Finally, all participants also used translator applications such as Papago and Google translate to make it easier for them to communicate with Koreans. |
| 7. Non-verbal Communication barriers | Given these barriers, the participants implemented several strategies such as making observations related to the culture of non-verbal communication that existed there and getting used to adapting to that culture. Then, they also tried to guess and explain these body gestures using Korean. And, they also take advantage of translator apps to solve this problem. |

**DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

Based on the data tabulation above, the writer analyzed each barrier faced by IISMA awardees while in South Korea. In this particular section, the writer explained the outcomes of data findings mentioned earlier in more detail. The phenomenon of intercultural communication is a growing interest in the realm of global communication science and students pursuing degrees across the borders of nation-states. Nevertheless, the practice of intercultural communication does not always go effectively. It also happened to the awardees of IISMA who did their student exchange program in South Korea.

In the anxiety aspect, the writer found out about the anxiety felt by the participants before leaving for Korea. Out of the 27 participants, 23 participants answered that they had experienced anxiety or worry before leaving for Korea. Ayu et al., (2021) states that anxiety that arises in Indonesian students when interacting with foreign students and local residents includes concerns about the existence of different cultures and customs, as well as tension because they do not know much about the customs values of the host country. This is in obedience to what the participants felt when they felt anxious before leaving because of the many differences between Korea and Indonesia starting from culture, learning environment, the taste of the food, language, and the character of the people there which is more individualist than Indonesian. Furthermore, racial/ethnic minority college students usually will experience more fear of discrimination before studying abroad (Grinshteyn et al., 2022) and it was experienced to the 23 participants who were worried about the discrimination and racism because of being the minority in South Korea.

Second, in assuming similarity instead of the difference aspect, there were 6 people out of the total who think that the culture in Indonesia and Korea was the same. Some of them thought that the culture of being polite to older people in Korea is the same as that in Indonesia and this is in line with the fact that they have their own ordinance for speaking to their elders. However, Jandt (2016) states that some of the newcomers might hold on to the feeling of familiarity and, as a consequence, they behave in the manner that is appropriate in the home culture but might be perceived as improper within other social systems. This was experienced by two of the participants who experienced culture shock because they thought that Koreans would be as friendly as Indonesians when doing the communication between each other. But in reality, they saw that the majority of Koreans did not care and only focus on themselves. This culture shock might be happened because of assuming the similarity instead of the differences between our country and other.

Next, on questions related to ethnocentrism, there were 24 participants answered that they often heard statements from social media stating that Korea is more powerful than Indonesia. This leads to perceiving the society encountered negatively and may result in broadly understood intolerance of foreign norms and customs (Thiederman, 1991). It was evidenced by the differences in the fields of technological progress, infrastructure, national income and the quality of human resources which makes them feel even greater in comparison with Indonesia. Not only that, Koreans also have beauty standards and pay a lot of attention to their appearance which makes them sometimes commit racism to the other people. However, the 24 participants said that they only heard the statement on social media. In fact, they never heard of this directly while in Korea.

In addition, when answering the fourth question about stereotypes, only 11 participants said that they had heard of stereotypes of Koreans towards Indonesia. Thiederman (1991) defines stereotype as inflexible information about a certain group, which can include both positive and negative assumptions and it is in accordance with the answer of the participants. One of them said that they had heard the stereotype from Koreans who thought that people with headscarves could not achieve their dreams, as was the case in Iran. Then, there were those who think that all Indonesians are Muslim, always late in every activity, and classified as a developing country. The negative stereotypes can significantly impact intercultural communication such as misinterpretation, prejudice, and avoidance of intercultural interactions (Kriti, 2022). However, they also often heard good stereotypes of Korean people such as they think if all of the Indonesian students are very creative and diligent which can increase the confidence of the participants.

Then, in answering the questions about prejudice, there were 10 students who stated that they had felt disliked or prejudice by the local residents because of the stereotypes regarding Indonesians who wear headscarves and tend to be late. This is also in line with the statement from Ren (2023) who states that prejudice is formed when negative stereotypes are kept in mind for long time, which subsequently misleads people to make inaccurate evaluations regarding other culture. It was shown by the answer of participants that they had been stared at cynically and strangely by local people because they looked different from them. Then, one of the participants also felt that he had received expressions of dislike and anger from the bus driver when she and her friends came to the bus late. Not only that, Jandt (2016) states that there would be a social prejudice against people of different religion which is evident in woman and shows the intolerance. It was experienced by some of the participants who have also been ignored with expressions like dislike when in shopping areas, sewing shops, planes, and ski areas.

For questions about language, all participants answered that language was their biggest barrier when communicating with Koreans. One of the natural barrier in intercultural communication is the existence of language differences (Romadhona & Kusuma, 2022). Furthermore, it also can be happened because of the different accent, pronunciation, and unclear sentences spoken by Koreans. One example is that the majority of Koreans often pronounce English vocabulary using a Korean accent by adding an 'e' at the end of each word they say, such as 'hae'pe', 'milk-keh', 'ai-ce', ' kli-peh, or 'Mack-do-nal-doe', and others. Not only that, the participants also experienced difficulties when speaking Korean. They said that there are several vocabulary words in Korean that have the same pronunciation so they sometimes find it difficult to tell the difference. Then, they also added that articulation in pronunciation is also a barrier for them because many Korean people often speak too fast and not clear.

The last aspect is about non-verbal communication, there were 19 participants stated that they often had difficulty understanding and adapting to the non-verbal communication culture of the Korean people. In this aspect, the obstacle they often experience is the difficulty in understanding Korean people's body gestures when they want to say something which eventually causes misunderstandings between them. Not only that, several other awardees experienced difficulties in understanding body gestures when they were shopping at the market or when asking the price of goods. Jandt (2016) states that the nonverbal misinterpretations barrier derives from the assumption that all human social systems refer to the same set of nonverbal expressions whose meaning is universal across the globe. This was proved by the experiences of two participants when adapting to the non-verbal culture that existed there, such as bowing when greeting people, and non-verbal ethics when receiving a drink poured by an older person.

In short, based on the objectives of the research, the findings were types of intercultural communication barriers. After analyzing the related data, the writer found out that the awardees of IISMA faced the seven barriers in intercultural communication based on Barna (1997) theory namely anxiety, assuming similarity instead of the differences, ethnocentrism, **stereotype,** prejudice, language barrier, and non-verbal communication barriers. From those barriers, participants experienced the most language barriers when communicating with Koreans.

In overcoming due to the intercultural communication barriers, most of the participants were tried to be more patience and improve their self-awareness. Moreover, they also did some strategies such as doing the research to gain more cultural knowledge, establishing a good relationship with other participants, giving a good impression to the local people, trying to understand and learning the Korean language, or using the translator application to help them to solve these barriers easily. These strategies are in accordance with the Berardo (2007, as cited in Mei & Fung, 2015) theory which states that there are some strategies in dealing with the intercultural communication barriers such as showing friendly behavior, exercising in patience, frequently checking information for understanding, and using the help of the translator application that can help us to overcoming intercultural communication barriers. Furthermore, Murtiningsih (2016) also states that Indonesian students in South Korea should also develop knowledge and comprehension competence, including self-awareness, deep cultural knowledge, have cultural sensitivity, realizing subtle differences, such as ways of communication, how to understand pitch and intonation in proper context, and how to use communicative touch appropriately. These strategies can help the Indonesian students to solve and overcome the intercultural communication barriers in South Korea.

**CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

**Conclusion**

Based on the result of the findings that have been analyzed and the discussions that have been presented, the writer concluded that there were 7 intercultural communication barriers faced by the IISMA awardees in South Korea namely anxiety, assuming the similarity instead of the differences, ethnocentrism, stereotype, prejudice, language barrier, and non-verbal communication barriers. After analyzing all of the answers from 27 participants, there were 23 participants who experienced anxiety, 6 participants who assumed that Korean and Indonesian cultures were the same, 24 participants who heard statements related to ethnocentrism, 11 participants who experienced stereotype, 10 participants faced prejudice barriers, 27 participants who experienced language barriers, and 19 participants who experienced barriers in non-verbal communication. Based on the data, the writer found that language barriers became the most barriers faced by the IISMA awardees during their stay in South Korea.

Moreover, the participants did some strategies to overcome those barriers such as doing the research about the culture in South Korea in order to deep cultural knowledge about the differences culture and improve their self-awareness. Then, they also established a good relationship with other participants, tried to understand and learning the Korean language, or used the translator application to help them to solve these barriers easily. And the last, they also maintained to do the best by showing friendly behavior and leaving a good impression for the local people in South Korea. It helped them to promote the Indonesian culture and showed to the other people that Indonesian people are not bad as what they thought.

**Suggestions**

The writer wants to give the suggestions for the Indonesian people who are planning to go or staying abroad especially in South Korea. It is advisable to learn as much as possible about their host country local traditions and cultures before departure to reduce the occurrence of barriers in intercultural communication. Then, this research has also shown that language is the most frequent obstacle because South Korea is a country that has its own national language which is different from Indonesia. So, the writer also suggests for the readers to learn or understand more the rules and use of Korean language before the departure to overcome this barrier easily. In addition, the possible future research also could assess how the intercultural communication barriers might occur in other countries, while another research could investigate in more detail of each barrier in intercultural communication barriers.

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