Cross Cultural Understanding and English Language Skills Development of Indonesian Students Studying Abroad (A Narrative Inquiry Research of Undergraduate Students in University of Padua, Italy)

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Abstract

Studying abroad in general is beneficial academically, socially, and linguistically for students. This qualitative study is using narrative inquiry to uncover personal experiences of three Indonesian undergraduate students as they sail to study abroad through IISMA to the University of Padua, Italy in 2021. The experiences and meaning the students develop are discussed through interviews and personal notes. The data is categorized based on the research questions about what and how the experiences of study abroad influence cross-cultural understanding and English skills development. Before departing, aiming to study abroad and the preparation is the most critical. Meanwhile, during the program, cultural and academic obstacles is inevitable. Upon returning to Indonesia, students developed a stronger sense of self-confidence to pursue another degree and career advancement. This study concludes that individual narratives is an important tool to empower learning process for students studying abroad.

INTRODUCTION

The implication of cross-cultural understanding based on Samovar et al. (2018) are three important cultural competencies an individual should acquire: being motivated, having a fund of knowledge to draw on, and possessing certain communication skills to connect with others. These are the prerequisite to the benefits a highly functional multicultural society can operate. Sociolinguists use the term *communicative competence* to indicate speakers' ability in using the language based on the norms and appropriateness in a given context (Savignon, 2017). Quite similar to communicative competence, cross-cultural understanding is seeking the ability to make any decision by recognizing cultural differences and reacting in accordance with the given situation (Ratnasari, 2018). These two competencies are an indication of success for students especially the ones allowed to study abroad. Students' perceptions of the impact of studying abroad for an exchange program may vary among individuals, yet it usually helps them in achieving personal goals, cultural immersion, and expansion of network (Harrell et al., 2017). Other exclusive benefits that students get among many things are meeting new people from different cultural contexts and the 21st-century learning environment (Silalahi & Sitorus, 2021). For students, especially those who study English Language and Education or Literature, the aim of learning English as a target language is not just using the language, but effectively using it as a communicative tool in different context. Their aim mostly goes to mastery for excellence to compete in the future workplace.

A longitudinal study by McManus et al. (2021) claim that students who study abroad through exchange program show significant oral fluency improvement although the case for accuracy and grammar competence needs more research. English as the main language for communication has become widespread and varies among its speakers. Riyanti (2019) discusses how students' motivation can be achieved by an external force, yet internal motivation is always the ideal call for continuous improvement. The opportunity in studying the English language for mastery is now wide open. For students studying abroad, the chance to immerse in a different culture through direct contact is an invaluable experience. Cubillos and Ilvento (2018) believe that intercultural exchanges through studying abroad ignite the need to speak in the target language, improve attitudes and self-management, motivate learning behavior, and an avenue to exchange culture. As culture is a broad topic, it cannot be simplified, but it imparts the core values and identities, whether consciously or unconsciously to an individual. The awareness of cultural differences stems from empathy, openness, and emotional intelligence (Kilduff & Cormican, 2022). Therefore, achieving intercultural cooperation becomes a conscious act and a skill to be learned.

For undergraduate students who study in Indonesia, the doors towards the global world are available through multiple international competitions, online activities, and the top impact, the study abroad program. The program specifically targeting undergraduate students of Indonesia is not as rampant as for graduate students. Some of them are Erasmus+, Global Undergraduate Exchange Program (UGRAD), Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA), and other inter-institution partnerships. All of these programs mainly focus on delivering the opportunity to more students, yet it remains unclear how significant the impact can be. A lot of the research on these issues explained students from the USA, Europe, and Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, and China. Meanwhile, Indonesian students' cases are analyzed numerically which excludes

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an in-depth understanding of the students' experience in terms of cultural and linguistic factors.

This research aimed to analyze students' experiences as exchange program awardees to study in Italy specifically on their cross-cultural understanding and perception of English language skills development. Two questions asked in the research are:

1. What are the experiences of students studying abroad in regard to cross cultural understanding and English skills improvement?
2. How do the experiences influence students' understanding of culturaerences and their communicative competence?

Language is the medium for the transmission of the culture these students experienced, therefore it is necessary to have an account of their complex journey as an awardee through narrative inquiry. As narrative inquiry is rarely used in developing the experience of students, the researcher believed it is an important approach to learn the experiences of the research subject by weaving their stories into the narrative analysis. This approach would give a meaningful contribution to the study of intercultural exchanges and English language development. Most importantly, this research would give insight into the worldview the students had developed through the study abroad program.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Defining Cross Cultural Understanding in Study Abroad

Culture and language are interwoven in a sense that the three competences to learn from: attitudes, knowledges, and skills, will provide importance for students' future. Thus, in teaching and learning process, it is encouraged for educators to provide students with the intercultural dimension through any form possible. Transformation of cultural prejudice happen when students are exposed and derived new meaning from the cultural encounter. They are able to construct and understand other cultures as they work together with other students (Chen & Yang, 2016). In the globalized and rapid mobilized world, the education institution should aim to provide systematic intercultural learning. Cross-cultural understanding, intercultural communication, and/or cross-cultural competence are similar in nature and can be used interchangeably. Lantz-Deaton & Golubeva, (2020) theorized the term competence to imply capability, aptitude, know-how, or proficiency. Meanwhile cross-cultural deals with comparing and contrasting differences and similarities between cultures. Having the competence in cross-cultural interaction will support individuals to observe, listen, and analyze their own experiences. They will be able to develop flexibility, adaptability, and the ability to emphatize with others.

Indonesia, as one of the most diverse culture in the world face infinite challenge of intercultural competence, therefore, the national curriculum has mandated multicultural education for all students. Baihaqi (2021) explains that multicultural teaching in Indonesia has been directed as advocacy for higher tolerance. Therefore, the paradigm of unity in diversity is not a new thing in Indonesia. However, internationally, there is a stark difference. Indonesian people are motivated to learn the culture of the west, yet they have not been equipped with the necessary skills to communicate appropriately due to inaccurate sources of information (Dewi & Arifuddin, 2021). To break free from

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judgment due to conflicting norms, there has to be awareness of the differences between their own culture and the perception of the new culture they learn.

Adherence to cultural practices determines the way people are generally accepted in a particular community. This is even more crucial for people who migrated to a new place. They are generally accepted but are still expected to do the bare minimum. Lee et al. (2021) define cultural competence by explaining the three parts to achieving it. First, having a sensitive cultural attitude based on the desired culture and adhering to the perception of certain behaviors and subjects. Second, having cultural knowledge. Finally, implementing cultural skills as tools to communicate across cultures. The definition of culture is still obscure and may differ philosophically. Byram & Wagner (2018) explain that language educators play an important role in shaping students' identities as their acquired languages interplay in different communication and cultural context. This suggests that knowledge and understanding towards other people of other culture start from the knowledge and understanding of oneself and the culture one have grown up in. The importance of cultural competence is defining cultural expectations and easing communication. To be a successful negotiator, an individual has to manage relational and cultural identities.

English as Foreign Language and Skills Improvement

English is used as an official language in countries like European Union, Asian countries like India, Malaysia, Singapore, and ultimately the United States and the United Kingdom. This condition affects Indonesia's decision to adopt English in its curriculum as well as indirectly becoming a communicative competence of its people. Stern (1983) proposes that there are differences between English as Foreign Language (EFL) due to its variety of purposes and requires more formal instruction for lack of environmental support. Meanwhile, English as Second Language (ESL) is frequently one of the official languages and is often learned since it is used widely within the community. Lie (2017) found that there is a gap in the initiated teaching process and the aim result of the speaker in the national curriculum. Specifically, undergraduate students picked up English as a Foreign Language and learned it extensively to study and enrich possible career development.

Indonesia International Study Abroad Mobility (IISMA) as Kampus Merdeka Program

Study abroad, in this case, is a pursuit of academic credits to be recognized by home university in which the study period is short term. Bhatt et al. (2022) provided the analysis on study abroad linked to high impact academic achievement due to three reasons: study abroad programs are designed to award high-achieving students academically, the students who chose to study abroad are well-informed, and the students take study abroad program early on show awareness of cultural differences. Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) is the Government of the Republic of Indonesia scholarship scheme to fund Indonesian students for mobility program at top universities overseas. This mobility program is aimed at facilitating undergraduate students to partake in courses and activities outside of their own major. Students may choose courses based on their interest and passion to achieve the competencies which increases their career opportunities domestically or globally. The flagship program started in 2021 where 2572 applicants from 98 universities across Indonesia took part. There were 955 awardees

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selected to spend one semester in either one of 73 host universities worldwide. As the 2021 alumni returned home, they formed IISMA-AC (alumni club) to build network among the alumni and provide necessary information for incoming awardees.

The selection process started with administrative requirements such as: a recommendation letter from the vice rector, an English proficiency test, an academic transcript (to prove GPA >3), some declarative forms, as well as answering the essay. The next one was an interview session to discuss the essay and motivation to study abroad by the participants. In 2022, there was an additional test on civic knowledge. After about three months of application, the names of the awardees were announced and they had to prepare for departure through ranges of pre-departure preparation, which includes: Letter of Acceptance (LoA) process, visa application, information session with LPDP, challenges announcement, and pre-departure training with Indonesia's embassy of targeted country's university. During the mobility, students of the same host university were challenged to share Indonesia's culture and submit the challenge afterward. For individual challenges, each awardee had to report their personal learning of each meeting with a short summary to SPADA Dikti. Aside from activities required by IISMA program, the awardees were given the flexibility to participate in any events held by the host university or to explore activities in the local communities.

The Learning Theory and Design in Study Abroad

In the design of study abroad, there are two pertinent theories termed transformative learning and theory experiential learning theory. The two theories are in similar framework with the aim of study abroad, which are hands-on experience of language, culture, perception, and preparation for the future career. Transformative learning theory facilitates four processes of learning. One, is to elaborate an existing point of view which seeks further evidence to support initial bias regarding a group and expand the range or intensity of our point of view. Two, is to establish new point of view. The tendency to focus on the flaws and prejudice of other group is bigger when there is little to no interaction. Three, is to transform our point of view. To experience the other culture wholly, being critical of the common bias may change the point of view directed to them as empathetic sense emerge. Lastly, transformation of mind to be critical and aware of biases on other groups may happen when it sits comfortably with the frame of reference.

Not only is identity formed in relation to determining structures but also in relation to other individuals. As we explore the meaning of culture embodied in cultural competence, the perspective necessarily moves from the individual level to a larger view of society as a whole and the aspirations of a democratic society to include and value different voices and cultures. This democratic view, in turn, needs to in fuse the development of cultural competence within the culture, climate, and organizational structures of institutions of higher education (Chun & Evans, 2016). Thus, all teaching and learning is a matter of sharing and negotiating the constructed knowledge. Each individual learner has a distinctive point of view, based on the acquired knowledge and values. This means that similar courses, teaching or activity may result in different learning for student, as they have subjective analysis on the learning.

In essence, experiential learning theory defines learning as the transformation of experience into valuable knowledge. Kolb & Kolb, (2012) shows the importance of new experience as it provides the seed to developing new concepts from scratch. Various factors play roles in influencing individual learners' learning process: social surrounding,

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educational background, or basic cognitive ability. The implication then would be a different learning style even though similar material is delivered. Study abroad fits with the context of experiential learning as culture is constructed through individual experience. Not only do the students reflect on themselves, they also draw the learning process in contrast of what they already believe to the new exposure of contemporary culture. The application of experiential learning increases the potential benefits of transformative learning especially in study abroad program. Both of the theories is in appropriate use to assess the effectiveness of study abroad objectives.

Tarchi & Surian, (2022) narrate the literature, communicative, and experiences of American students studying in Italy showing the development after cultural exposure. The finding portrayed similar results where students are positively impacted in their personal development after the exchange (Sobkowiak, 2019). Essentially, studying abroad is beneficial for students in enhancing cross-cultural understanding, language development, and self-development (Zhong et al., 2020).

METHOD
The study employed a narrative inquiry through qualitative design employing content analysis approach. The design fits the study for it allows the researchers recognize the students' cross-cultural understanding expressed through their learning reflection.

Participants
This research explored the stories of three Indonesian students participating in the Indonesia International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) at the University of Padua. The participants are two female students and one male student. The three of them are Indonesian undergraduate students majoring in English Education from different public universities in Indonesia. They are in their third and fourth year of study and went to the mobility program for one semester long from September 2021 to February 2022. They had taken a cross-cultural or intercultural course in their respective major, which had exposed them to the notion of cultural competencies.

Data Collection
The method of data collection are mainly interview and documents. The tools are unstructured interview, video recording, written text, diary, and personal photographs or pictures. The data are mainly acquired from the participants. The supporting data are collected by the researcher through open sources with direct citations.

Data Analysis
The approach to data analysis is through thematic analysis. The data analysis was done in a form of an interpretive explanation. This means that the researcher is sharing the stories of the research participants by explaining the process the research participants had experienced during their study and how it shaped their understanding today. The process is similar to decoding the documents to conclude a meaningful cultural context. The researcher then reduced the data by classifying some things as fundamental and focusing on the most important points. This process is called restorying.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

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Through the process of data collection by interview and document submission from the participants, the findings are made into narrative in chronological order and thematic analysis. Five themes emerge alongside various sub-themes encompassing the experiences of the participants. The table below provides a quick look into the narrative discussion highlighted for each theme.

Table 1.
Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes based on the Analysis from Qualitative Interview

Themes	Sub-themes
1. The childhood dream realized	a. process of applying to the program
	b. motivation to study abroad
2. The decision to leave	a. proficiency test
	b. taking linear programs
	c. English skills
3. Expecting the best, but not preparing for the worst	a. different expectations
	b. cultural adaptation plans
	c. Italian language skills
	d. facing reality
	e. favorite things
	f. obstacles
4. Experiencing two different academic atmosphere	a. different academic culture
	b. accepting the difference
5. Living in reality and pursuing the next big thing	a. developing new narrative
	b. language skills improved
	c. cultural adaptation
	d. academic exposure
	e. friendship
	f. future career
	g. cross-cultural understanding
6. Notes from the participants	a. start learning the target language
	b. importance of cross-cultural understanding
	c. importance of learning English

Theme 1: The Childhood Dream Realized
Studying abroad is oftentimes on the top bucket list, especially for young emerging scholars. The benefits of studying abroad include learning a new way of living, meeting new people, and exploring various opportunities, which will enrich perspectives. Students have different reasons that made them pursue this dream even after years of dreaming of it. In this research, the participants came from a humble background: middle-class, non-English speaking households, from a small town, never study abroad, and went to public school (with one exception of B studying in an international primary school). They started learning English when they were young. Aside from joining English courses, these students equipped themselves through the internet and entertainment such as movies, music, and literature to expand their English skills. The decision to study abroad is not an abrupt choice as A was motivated by his parents and the education his parents have shaped him to pursue now.

The preparation to study abroad takes time, way before the application is drafted. The administrative selection is excruciatingly painful and might make it seems impossible. This is the case for IISMA in 2021 as it was a pilot program in Kampus Merdeka initiated by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Indonesia. At that time, they have no idea of the program and did not even plan extensively. The childhood dream come to them in a form of WhatsApp text from their lecturers, giving them no chance to let it go but to achieve it. The dream which was buried somewhere in their mind is ignited by the possibility of ticking the bucket list as an undergraduate student. On the other hand, B explained how unlikely she might receive the scholarship, but tried anyway. In her dismay, she was able to prepare everything in a short period of time.

Theme 2: The Decision To Leave

At the time, the information about the program is not yet widely known. During the opening of the application, all of the students received information from the lecturers, which signal their knowledge of the program. They have to challenge themselves in a short period. Due to the time limit, preparing for proficiency tests such as TOEFL or IELTS is not the main priority. In around three days, the participants took the Duolingo test and their results are above average at 120-125 of the total score. For them, it was just enough and they were a bit frightened of the competitiveness of the program. One account from B said, she took the spontaneous decision after receiving the news:

> *"Uhmm, honestly I heard it from one of my lecturers. She asked me like if you are interested, to go abroad, then hit me up. So, I did one of the most spontaneous thing in my life, and I chat her." B55*

The unique situation facing these participants come from the fact that they are English Education and/or Literature students choosing the University of Padua over 60 other educational institution worldwide. Their biggest reason is the linearity of the courses offered by the University of Padua with their current major. It was important to ensure that they receive permission from their campus and get the 20 credits recognition as promised. At that time, the *Kampus Merdeka* program had just kick-started, which prompted minimal response. Even for the higher-ups, the process of understanding the system is not similar one to another. C was poised enough and decided to take the courses which would help her secure permission from her lecturers and campus by doing research through the internet.

As seen during the interviews, all of the participants' lecturers play important role in guiding the participants to choose the program, university, and courses as they made up their minds. The decision to study in Padua also comes with the consequences of delaying the study at home. For A, he prepared the possibility of doing an online class 6 hours difference from Italy while doing offline classes in Padua. Fortunately, his lecturers informed him that it was not necessary, eliminating his worry and making him more confident to study well in Padua. The role of the lecturers is significant as the support system, academic advisor, and guiding the process of adapting to different cultural contexts.

Theme 3 : Expecting The Best, But Not Preparing For The Worst

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In terms of language skills, English is more than enough to help the students participate in class, build relationships with peers, and interact in an academic setting. However, the prevalence of Italian in the everyday setting has become a major challenge for all of the students as they encounter daily struggles. The main characteristic of their language experience is happening outside the academic corridor. There they encounter people in grocery stores, bus stops, train stations, and even police. The inability to produce meaningful phrases in Italian made them resort to online translation features. Although they are faced with language barriers, engagement with locals is possible through the day to day interaction. It was made possible because they were observing and taking the next interaction with practices they have seen beforehand. The Italian they met were appreciative of such gestures and welcome them when such events occur. Especially the older generations, they are not keen enough to speak with strangers such as international students.

Theme 4 : Experiencing Two Different Academic Atmosphere
The participants are all studying English Education and Literature. A has defended his thesis and now preparing for studying master degree. B is currently doing her thesis at home while working as an event organizer. C is in 7th semester and doing KKN one hour away from the capital city. Some of the adjustment to be made is: one, transition to learning in hybrid form in which the pandemic has brought changes to learning method. Despite that, the Italian education institution go hybrid, giving the students of University of Padua options to study from home or coming to campus. These IISMA folks definitely chose the latter. The requirements include having been vaccinated twice and in good health. The learning process is a very active one. They have been induced to think about complex matters and be outspoken about world issues. Students think holistically and share their thoughts verbally or in a written form. As an incoming students, they have to quickly adjust to prepare themselves beforehand by reading materials at least in the previous night. They come to campus ready to listen to lectures and even challenge their professor.

The learning with a lot of layered analysis has shown these students why the University of Padua received its praise in the world as one of the oldest and well-established academic institution. The openness to new ideas and critical thinking sharpened the ability of these attending students. Specifically for A, he was able to grasp the academic life in a different light. As someone who used to feel like the smartest in the room, he talked and shared his thought as Indonesian student. When he was in Italy, however, he became a better listener as he needs to understand the new dynamic he is in. During the exam season, the library is filled with every student there is. In Padua, the libraries are available in each campus and some historical buildings located around the town. There, any type of student with their personal style preference study by themselves. They answered the questions effectively and pursue the highest score as possible. In Italy, the grading system place a lot of stress on final examination performance, those who score above 20 from 30 are a good enough number, yet for students in Italy, achieving at least 25 should be the standard. Class participation and attendance is off no importance. They study thoroughly, which motivates Indonesian students, particularly IISMA participants to study well and got the best score possible. However, engagement with lectures and group project is a positive learning experience after two semesters of online learning.

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In terms of language, none of the participants experienced any major challenges. At most, it is on adapting the learning culture that differ from what they studied at home. One of the examples is the Philosophy of Science major that A took, which in his words are subject targeted to master degree students in Indonesia, meanwhile it is a freshmen course for Padua students. Italy is known as one of the countries that pursue work life balance at its best.

Theme 5 : Living In Reality and Pursuing The Next Big Thing
It might start with high expectation, slowly fading into fear, yet repeated exposure to frightening and novel experiences might make it no longer scary. Some of the highlighted benefits shared by the participants are: building new friendships, learn to see things in different perspectives, gaining survival skills, and improved language skills. When the students took the adventure of a lifetime, the impact also influence them forever. The foreseeable future is in the form of career options and pursuing higher tertiary education. A explained that:

> *"Uhmmm I aspire to be a lecturer or educator in general and I've been preparing for my next study, my postgraduate study, even though I haven't get my bachelor degree yet, but I've planned and I've prepared and sorting out universities then narrowing it down several universities for me to choose from." A39*

The magnificent opportunity that these students experience is to triumph over hardship: time zone, weather difference, language and cultural difference have helped them in shaping their global mindset. They rose from the challenges befallen to them. Academically, the students are able to develop new thought processes that accompanied their journey throughout their studies. They are more outspoken, embracing differences, and able to work in group of different cultural backgrounds. Particularly in English skills, their speaking skill have stark improvement due to exposure of listening to different types of accent and context, and the daily usage as well as academic English. The purpose of studying abroad, despite in a English as Second Language country gives them new way of seeing things.

> *"Yeah, after joining the program, I feel that I have become a more open-minded person and I don't judge things from one side only and I think it's normal for people to experience culture shock when living in a new place. And because obviously there are cultural and language differences." C147*

Theme 6: Notes from the participants
> *"If you want to study foreign language, you need to speak it every day if you want to be fluent on it. I encourage people to at least live in foreign country once. It would change your life, it would affect your future and your way of thinking. So I encourage young students from every degrees, doesn't' matter, to live at least once in foreign country. It would make your life different after that, I can guarantee that." A46*

To prepare oneself for a study abroad opportunity should start by learning the target language, especially English, and immerse in cultural know how concurrently. The opportunity is wide open and accessible as the higher education is aiming at

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internationalizing its education. For the linguistic benefits, the students have the motives to learn and improve English abilities.

In any case, study abroad was not only seen as an instrumental opportunity to improve language skills, but also as a way to learn about other cultures. In the overall experience, it is normal to experience culture shock. We have been conditioned to live in certain way and to just change it entirely will cause confusion and dissonance. Cross-cultural understanding as the subject they learned in both academic institution become their prior knowledge that can be retrieved during their daily interaction. The willingness to try new things and to observe will be advantageous for everyone, even more so for students to succeed in the unprecedented time to enter workforce.

CONCLUSION

The students' experiences show the influence of contextual English language to their language development. Furthermore, the necessity to have an effective communication can be done through understanding people of other cultures as an EFL speaker. The essential part of cross-cultural understanding as a competence come at the extend of being able to live with the people of other culture. They have different expectations ranging from high, medium, to none. All of which differ from one person to another. Not only do they experience the new culture, they also get to reflect it to the identity they have formed at home.

The learning of English language was aimed at using it effectively, thus learning it directly in social settings show significant difference to their English skills development in comparison to text-book based learning. It is shown through their proficiency test result, their willingness to participate in academic context, and their ability to discern the context of the cultural difference. All of these are essential as a parameter of success for the students and the overall evaluation of the program. For these three participants and other English education students, the immersive experience of study abroad is an avenue to improve English skills, cross-cultural understanding, and a learning ground to expand knowledge and network. In the future, they are equipped with the 21st century skills whether they decide to be an educator or not.

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