



## **Demystifying the Narrative of a Former International Student in TESOL: Reflecting on a Post-Interview Study**

**Sinta Mutiara Dewi**

*Universitas Islam Negeri Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember*

**Sandi Ferdiansyah**

*Universitas Islam Negeri Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember  
PERISAI Centre for Social Science Research*

### **Introduction**

Studying abroad is everyone's dream. It is also my dream. However, from the literature review I read, many international students have experienced difficulties in adapting to a new environment and culture (Lin & Scherz, 2014; Pinto, 2021). Therefore, for my undergraduate research project, I was interested in investigating the lived-experience of a former international student to see what actually happened when he studied overseas. At the university where I was studying, I knew a few faculty members who held either a Master's or Ph.D. degree from an overseas university. With the help of my project supervisor, I finally met a potential participant for my research. To protect the identity of the participant of this research, a pseudonym was assigned. He earned his Master's in TESOL from a university in the United States in 2015. I employed narrative inquiry to better understand his lived story as an international student. With his consent, I interviewed him about his experience of studying abroad and the challenges and opportunities in the context of intercultural communication.

This research project was mainly inspired by the intercultural communication course that I took during my studies. Intercultural communication was a compulsory course taken by every student in the English Education Department where I studied. My standpoint has been heavily influenced by Byram's (2000) intercultural theory that foreign language learning needs to embrace knowledge, attitude, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. While a myriad of previous studies have discussed how international students adapted intercultural aspects in the host countries (Bui, 2021; de la Serna, 2022; Sy & Cruz, 2019), my project focused on how an international student developed intercultural adaptation when studying abroad through a retrospective narrative inquiry lens. Specifically, I intended to learn from the participant who was a former international student on how he adapted to intercultural aspects of his academic and non-academic life. This article is part of my research project reflecting on the narrative data that I garnered from interviews with the participant. I focused on how he went through the honeymoon, culture shock, recovery, and adjustment phases while studying in the United States.



## Literature Review

### Intercultural Communication: The U-Curved Shape Model

Intercultural communication plays an important role in sustaining international relations. In a similar vein, Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, and Roy (2017) postulate that the success of international relations, negotiation, and agreements is influenced by the ability to develop intercultural communication skills. Intercultural communication skills also play an important role in bridging communication in places such as office, schools, universities or the virtual environment such as social media which “are typically highly multicultural and multilingual” (Baker, 2021, p.1). In the present study, I argue that international students get exposed to such multicultural and multilingual settings when they study abroad and they need to build the ability to develop intercultural communication skills.

International students experience an acculturation process both on campus and outside. The experiences may include cultural shock which impedes their social and daily life so that they have to struggle to adjust to such an intercultural challenge as interacting with new colleagues, supervisors, roommates, or neighbors. Experiencing a new culture which is different from the international students’ own culture helps them engage in the acculturation process to learn and adapt with new cultures that offer various levels of intervention in new learning contexts (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). In the acculturation process, there are four phases which are called the U-curved shape model that international students go through, namely honeymoon, culture shock, recovery, and adjustment (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2017). Anchored in this model, the present study examines how the participant moved along the process in adjusting to intercultural encounters.

## Method

Narrative inquiry has been widely employed by researchers to examine a person's life story. Thomas (2012) defines narrative inquiry as the study of a story, interpretation or discourse from one's individual life. Additionally, collaboration between a researcher and the participant is very important to build or co-create stories and build interpersonal relations with the participant while interviewing (Caine et al., 2016). Anchored in this methodological underpinning, I conducted two-hour in-depth interviews with Mr. Adi about his experience when studying abroad. For this reason, I examined his experience through a retrospective lens. Barkhuizen, Benson, and Chick (2014) postulate that retrospective narrative inquiry focuses on recollecting one’s experiences that occurred in the past. For example, Espada-Campos (2018) reported a retrospective narrative inquiry study to examine the experiences of participants from third culture kids (TCKs) in repatriation and collegiate engagement. From this empirical evidence, the present study investigates the participant’s past experience of intercultural adaptation when pursuing higher education overseas.

In this narrative inquiry, my supervisor and I framed personal stories of a participant in adapting between cultures in social, cultural and educational contexts while studying abroad. Caine et al. (2017) explain that narratives in a social context can have an effect on the social lives of participants and readers. In a cultural context, according to O'Neill (2013), narrative can explore the cultural experiences of participants so that it can provide an understanding of how acculturation occurs. Meanwhile, in the context of education, we can learn what people went through when interacting with them at school, in class, or in other places while abroad by telling stories and reliving the stories of their experiences (Huber et al, 2013). With this in mind, the narrative sheds light on better understanding of social, cultural, and educational contexts from an authentic and insightful voice of the participants.

I first met Mr. Adi to discuss my research project in May 2021. After explaining the purpose of my study, he promised to respond to my request via WhatsApp. While waiting for his response, I was nervous about the answer he would give. His response was very important as it became the basis for my decision to

continue or stop the research project as a final requirement for graduation. A few days later, I saw a reply to a message sent to me indicating his willingness to participate in my research. The next day, I rushed to meet him in his office, the language department at my campus. I did my first interview carefully using the questions I prepared. I recorded the interview using my mobile phone. Before the interview ended, he put forward some conditions that I needed to protect his identity. I understood his request because research ethics should be maintained in my study. I promised him that I would keep his identity confidential and ensure that nobody could get access of the data. Kinsella and Phelan (2013) pinpoint that ethics is very important to ensure the safety of participants when they participate in research.

After the first interview, I went home and listened to the recorded interview to transcribe the data. After transcribing the interview data, I listened to the recording again. This iterative process helped me ensure that the transcription was accurate. With the help of my supervisor, I categorized the key findings based on the U-curved model of acculturation (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2017). I employed lexis coding to find general emerging themes. I conducted the second interview in September 2021 to elaborate on the data and do member checking. I used the same process as explained in the first interview when I analyzed the data. The key themes were presented using thematic analysis as proposed by Barkhuizen, Benson, and Chick (2014).

## Findings

### Reflecting on Post Interview Study

Mr. Adi was a new English lecturer at the university where I studied. He started teaching in 2020. When interviewing him, I found out that doing study abroad was not as smooth as I imagined. I also assumed that studying abroad would enable someone to make new friends from different cultures easily and being in a different environment would definitely be fun. However, it was not true as Mr. Adi experienced culture-shock and he missed his family in Indonesia a lot. What Mr. Adi encountered was also reported by Ganotice, Downing, Chan, and Yip (2020) who found that international students experienced psychological challenges such as frustration, stress and depression. These challenges are triggered by several factors such as different cultural, social, and educational backgrounds (Williams, 2005). Additionally, these challenges cause students who had studied abroad to experience several personal problems such as time disorientation, restlessness, and concentration problems (Poyrazli & Mitchell, 2020). Furthermore, Mr. Adi also recalled that he had difficulties in the early years of college and even some of his colleagues were unable to cope with his academic progress. He added that if someone could not resist this situation, they would decide to give up and return to their home countries. The challenges experienced by international students greatly affect their lives both in host and home countries as they returned. It was also found that Mr. Adi's experience when studying and living abroad was quite challenging. The following sections explore how he went through the acculturation process by the time he arrived abroad until he finished his studies using the U-curved shape model.

### Honeymoon Phase

After carefully listening to the experiences he recounted, I found that the participant's experience in the first year was similar to that of other international students. However, what makes him different from others is the process he went through while abroad. This is very rarely observed by people because they are used to the flow of struggles told by international students. Every story will have a different plot and I realize there are challenges for each individual. For example, during the interview, the participant experienced many struggles when he first arrived in the United States.

Mr. Adi arrived in the United States in 2014. He was very excited because it was his dream to study abroad which came true after going through a tough journey as a scholarship applicant. His first scholarship was rejected in 2012.

“I previously participated in the scholarship but I was not accepted” (First interview, April 8th, 2021)

It was only two years later that he was accepted for a scholarship from the United States and his dream came true after the struggles he had gone through. The first month in United States, he felt extremely happy. Even today, he could feel the excitement when he was abroad for the first time.

“I was very excited to be able to study in the US. It’s kind of a feeling when someone visited a new place that he always dreamt for the first time.” (Second interview, September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

He recalled that it was natural to feel happy when he lived in a different country. He discovered a new culture, social, and academic life. They made him excited to start his life as an international student. However, over time his enthusiasm slowly faded out because he missed his family in Indonesia a lot, he continued.

“Someone would enjoy travelling for like two or three days. But when they stayed for months or years, I believed they would no longer feel excited. They would start thinking of their family.” (Second interview, September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

## **Culture-Shock Phase**

From the interview, Mr. Adi expressed that he experienced culture shocks such as missing his family and facing different educational systems and culture. After going through the joy of arriving in the United States, one month later Mr. Adi began to feel sad because he missed his hometown and his family. His feeling of sadness spread when he knew that he lived far away leaving his wife and children in his home country. “I left my wife and daughter in Indonesia when I studied in the US.” (First interview, April 8th, 2021). This was a pressure for him coupled with the education system differences between Indonesia and the United States. They were quite a problem at the beginning of his studies as a foreigner there. As a student from Indonesia who had just entered college, he felt shock because there were so many differences from the training he got when he arrived in the United States. This is due to the different education systems.

“In the US, students were encouraged more to discuss topics of assigned textbooks by the lecturers. The students were very active in the discussion and respected other opinions. It’s different from ones I experienced in my campus in Indonesia. My friends and I ended discussion with never ending debate.” (First interview, April 8th, 2021)

He also sometimes had difficulty to understand what the lecturer explained in the class in his first months. He thought that the lecturer spoke very fast. Whereas before he went abroad, he had prepared to follow the class to the best of his ability. However, when coming to the class, high TOEFL scores and confidence in his English skills were not enough to deal with native speakers of English there. So, to overcome his difficulties in cultural differences, he got used to it slowly.

“I thought the lecturers spoke very fast in class. Most of the time, I could not follow their explanation. Actually, my TOEFL score was not bad. To overcome it, I wrote here and there to connect the ideas of what my lecturer explained.” (First interview, April 8th, 2021)

The other cultural shock that Mr. Adi found was different habits and food. For example, he was surprised when he went to a supermarket. He found out that the locals would be very happy when he let them enter the supermarket first even though they did not know each other. He added that the locals cared and respected other people very much. It made him think that the individual life that he sometimes met during his few months living there did not necessarily erase his sense of caring for others. He was also surprised by the breakfast menu at his campus canteen such as green rice or very delicious Mexican bananas.

“It was a bit difficult for me to adapt to the food. When I first arrived in Ohio, I could not cook during the university orientation programs so I went to canteen instead and was surprised with the menu and found no rice there.” (First interview, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

## **Recovery Phase**

To adjust with these challenges, he chose to gather with fellow people from his country. It helped him reduce the problem of adapting to social and academic life in the host country. Socializing with people from Indonesia helped him face many difficulties in his new home. In addition, Mr. Adi travelled to different places. He rode his bicycle to enjoy the new environment. He believed that these enabled him to overcome difficulties in adapting to a country with a different culture. He also said that staying out helped him to avoid psychological illnesses such as stress and depression.

“When I moved to Arizona, I met friends from Indonesia occasionally. I spent time by cycling in campus streets.” (Second interview, September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

Another way he overcame his difficulties was to travel within the city. He did this during his semester break. He preferred to go around the United States because it would be more difficult when he left his family again if his semester vacation is used to go home. There he visited places that previously could only be seen on television.

"So the summer break is my last chance before I go back to Indonesia and not necessarily I can go back there, because while I was there I made the best use of my time so I could know what I had seen on television." (First interview, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

Familiarizing himself with the native speakers of English was the most effective way to reduce difficulties and increase his insight. To familiarize himself, he not only got closer when he was on campus, but he also did hangouts with his friends from the United States. In addition, to be able to reach a wider range of relationships, he mingled not only with fellow students there, but also with lecturers and campus employees. He believed that it helped him gradually get used to the new environment.

“But I also had hangouts a few times but not with students, mostly with lecturers or campus employees. We often spend time with them only because they may not be the same age, sometimes we are invited to go for a walk together.” (First interview, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

## **Adjustment Phase**

To survive, Mr. Adi always reminded himself that the opportunity he got to study abroad was a very valuable thing. He said that studying abroad was a gift from God and he was very grateful for it. This helped him graduate faster in a year and a half.

“When I felt stress with my academic journey in the US, I began to reflect that studying overseas was a lifetime achievement for me.” (Second interview, September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

In addition, regulating feelings was very important and influential in maintaining his intention to stay in a different environment and avoid overthinking while studying in the United States. That is because overthinking will cause stress and make people uncomfortable living in a foreign place.

"Fortunately, it really depends on us, if we are relaxed people and don't think too much about it"  
(Second interview, September 11th, 2021)

In order to survive in different environments, different cultures, and different educational systems, gratitude and managing feelings are important. It is because what he went through from the beginning of college to graduation would pose many challenges. When he couldn't stand being abroad, he convinced himself to keep fighting. His belief helped him keep fighting until he graduated from the university where he studied. So, the sense of hopelessness that he felt can turn into enthusiasm to continue his struggle as an international student.

"And if when I start feeling down I feel like I want to go home, I always remember that not always not everyone gets that opportunity" (Second interview, September 11th, 2021)

## Discussion

### Awareness of the Importance of Intercultural Communication

Reflecting on the interview and the stories, I realized that building the awareness of intercultural communication is very important for international students or students who want to study abroad. Drawing from the difficulties experienced by Mr. Adi, developing intercultural communication competence has an effect on students' lives while abroad. In academic contexts, the participant I interviewed said that some of his acquaintances were forced to return to their home countries because they could not keep up with the academic life in that country. In addition, international students who were not well prepared to study abroad would experience delays which affected their education. While delays in education were natural, they could risk their study and even worse they could drop out. These academic challenges sometimes influenced their non-academic life such as despair because they could not survive the atmosphere of their academic life. Additionally, it could affect their social life or mental state. This is very influential back to their academic life and can reduce their learning performance. Therefore, the spirit to keep fighting and the encouragement that supports international students from those close to them are important. They also experienced a cultural shock because their culture was different from the country they had lived in so far. Previous studies showed that challenges related to cultural differences can increase the psychological and socio-cultural pressure of international students (Lee & Rice, 2007; Ralarala, Pineteh, & Mchiza, 2016). Thus, international students are expected to realize the importance of intercultural communication. Building an awareness of intercultural communication competence is important for four reasons: 1) awareness of problem situations and habits of switching to more conscious modes of thinking; 2) consideration of multiple interpretations of various situations; 3) awareness of factors that can have a negative impact on achievement; and 4) awareness of the benefits of the choice of doubt and how the choice of interpretation affects interactions with interlocutors from the target culture (Tran, Admiraal, & Saab, 2020). The awareness built in the context of intercultural communication can help international students in adapting to new cultures. Thus, international students can prepare themselves well to continue their studies abroad.

## Conclusion and Implications

Listening to international students' stories about their lived experiences of both academic and non-academic life has been very inspiring. The way they shaped their personal identity in intercultural settings shows how they could modify their personality from a mono-cultural individual to an intercultural communicator. In addition, reflecting on the international student's stories was enlightening in a sense that they could develop their professional identity as a scholar whatever intercultural challenges they faced during their study such as different academic life, culture shock, and stereotype. The stories told by an international student can be very impactful because they inspire the future international students on how to adjust the interplay between personal and professional identity in the contexts of intercultural communication.

While the findings of the present narrative inquiry study cannot be generalized to other contexts, it offers theoretical and practical implications in intercultural communication contexts. Theoretically speaking, the U-curved shape model proposes a methodological approach to better understand the intercultural experience of those living or studying overseas. This model assumes, in various contexts, that diasporas may experience up and down emotions when encountering different sociocultural life. From a pedagogical perspective, the present study is evidence that intercultural communication awareness can be built through real life stories told by a former international student. Underpinned by these implications, future research should involve more participants to examine their intercultural communication portrayed from a particular theoretical or conceptual lens.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and feedback. They also would like to thank the participant of this study for sharing his valuable story and experience as a former international student.

## The Authors

*Sinta Mutiara Dewi* is an undergraduate student of English education student at the Universitas Islam Negeri Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember, Indonesia. Her areas of interests include intercultural communication and narrative inquiry as a research methodology.

Department of English Education  
Universitas Islam Negeri Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember, Indonesia  
Tel: +62 85806095800  
Email: mutiaras162@gmail.com

*Sandi Ferdiansyah* (corresponding author) is a faculty member of English education student Universitas Islam Negeri Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember, Indonesia. He currently also serves as the director of Department of Research and Publication, PERIISAI Centre for Social Science Research, Banyuwangi, Indonesia. His research interests are innovation in ELT methodology, teacher professional development, and reflective practice.

Department of English Education  
Universitas Islam Negeri Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember, Indonesia  
Department of Research and Publication  
PERIISAI Centre for Social Science Research, Banyuwangi, Indonesia  
Tel: +62 8980500821

Email: sanjazzyn@yahoo.com

## References

- Baker, W. (2021). From intercultural to transcultural communication, *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 22(3), 280-293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2021.2001477>
- Barkhuizen, G., Benson, P., & Chick, A. (2014). *Narrative inquiry in language teaching and learning research*. Routledge.
- Black, J. S., & Mendenhall, M. (1990). The U-curved adjustment hypothesis revisited: A review and theoretical framework. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 22, 225-247. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.jibs.8490301>
- Bui, T. A. (2021). Becoming an intercultural doctoral student: Negotiating cultural dichotomies. *Journal of International Students*, 11(1), 257-265. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v11i1.1272>
- Byram, M. (2000). Assessing intercultural competence in language teaching. *Sprogforum*, 18(6), 8-13.
- Caine, V., Murphy, M. S., Estefan, A., Clandinin, D. J., Steeves, P., & Huber, J. (2016). Exploring the purposes of fictionalization in narrative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(3), 215-221. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416643997>
- Caine, V., Steeves, P., Clandinin, D. J., Estefan, A., Huber, J., & Murphy, M. S. (2017). Social justice practice: A narrative inquiry perspective. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*. 13(2), 133-143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197917710235>
- de la Serna, A. X. (2022). One family, different experiences of identity formation: International graduate students and their spouses. *Journal of International Students*, 12(2), 366-383. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v12i2.2459>
- Espada-Campos, S. (2018). *Third culture kids (TKCs) go to campus: Retrospective narrative inquiry of international upbringing and collegiate engagement* [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania]. [https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations\\_sp2/113/](https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations_sp2/113/)
- Ganotice, F. A., Downing, K., Chan, B., & Yip, L. W. (2020). Motivation, goals for study abroad and adaptation of mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong. *Educational Studies*, 48(2), 149-164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2020.1746240>
- Gullahorn, J. T. & Gullahorn J. E. (1963). An extension of the U-curve hypothesis. *Journal of Social Issues*, 19(3), 33-47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1963.tb00447.x>
- Huber, J., Chaine, V., Huber, M., & Steeves, P. (2013). Narrative inquiry as pedagogy in education: The extraordinary potential of living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories of experience. *Review of Research in Education*, 37(1), 212-242. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X12458885>
- Kinsella, E. A., & Phelan, S. K. (2013). Picture this . . . Safety, dignity, and voice- Ethical research with children: Practical considerations for the reflexive researcher. *Qualitative Inquiry*. 19(2), 81-90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800412462987>
- Lee, J. J. & C. Rice. 2007. Welcome to America? International student perceptions of discrimination. *Higher Education*, 53(3), 381-409. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-005-4508-3>
- Lin, S. Y., & Scherz, S. D. (2014). Challenges facing Asian international graduate students in the US: Pedagogical considerations in higher education. *Journal of International Students*, 4(1), 16-33. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v4i1.494>
- O'Neill, F. (2013). Making sense of being between languages and cultures: a performance narrative inquiry approach. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 13(4), 386-399. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2012.758733>
- Pinto, S. (2021). "Everything is so different": African students' voices on the challenges of doing a PhD at a Portuguese university. *Journal of International Students*, 11(4), 895-913. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v11i4.2702>



- Poyrazli, S. & Mitchell, M. A. (2020). Mental health problems of U.S. students' studying abroad. *Journal of International Students*, 10(1), 17 - 27. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i1.1014>
- Ralarala, M. K., Pineteh, E. A., & Mchiza, Z. (2016). A case study on the language and socio-cultural challenges experienced by international students studying at Cape Peninsula University of Technology. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 30(4), 231-255. <https://doi.org/10.20853/30-4-572>
- Samovar, L. A., Porter, R. E., McDaniel, E. R., & Roy, C. S. (2017). *Communication between cultures* (9th ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Sy, J., & Cruz, N. (2019). Life outside your comfort zone: The power of reflection for cultural adjustment. *Journal of International Students*, 9(4), 1203-1208. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i4.1022>
- Thomas, S. (2012). Narrative Inquiry: Embracing the possibilities. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 12 (2), 206 - 221. <https://doi.org/10.1108/14439881211248356>
- Tran, T. Q., Admiraal, W., & Saab, N. (2020). Effects of critical incident tasks on students' awareness of intercultural communication (Efectos de un programa de actividades basadas en incidentes críticos en la competencia de los estudiantes sobre comunicación intercultural). *Culture and Education*, 32(4), 674 - 704. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11356405.2020.1819118>
- Williams, T. R. (2005). Exploring the impact of study abroad on students' intercultural communication skills: Adaptability and sensitivity. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 9(4), 356-371. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315305277681>

(Received December 10, 2022; Revised April 30, 2023; Accepted June 10, 2023)