
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION ADAPTATION BETWEEN SUNDANESE AND BUGINESE LECTURERS IN PALU CITY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the adaptation processes and inhibiting factors in the intercultural communication between Sundanese and Buginese ethnic lecturers at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Tadulako University. A qualitative method was employed, utilizing interviews and field observations for data collection. Informants were selected through purposive sampling, involving four participants. The findings reveal two distinct phases in the adaptation process of Sundanese lecturers engaging with their Buginese counterparts: the arrival phase and the integration phase. The arrival phase marks the initial presence of Sundanese lecturers in the faculty, during which they begin to observe, learn, and interact with Buginese colleagues. The integration phase is characterized by more active adaptation, including linguistic, culinary, and behavioral assimilation into the Buginese cultural environment. The primary communication barrier encountered during these phases is the difference in speech intonation patterns Sundanese tend to communicate in a softer tone, whereas Buginese speakers often use a more neutral or high-pitched tone, which may create tension or misunderstandings during the adaptation process.

Keywords: Cultural adaptation, Intercultural communication, Multiculturalism

INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication has become an increasingly relevant issue in multiethnic academic settings, particularly in public universities that serve as “melting pots” for Indonesia’s diverse ethnic groups. In such contexts, interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds require communicative adaptability to foster harmonious and effective relationships. Success in academic communication is not solely determined by mastery of subject matter, but also by one’s sensitivity to differences in culture, language, and social values brought by each individual. Amid this diversity, navigating cultural differences becomes essential, especially in the pursuit of productive professional collaboration.

The Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at Tadulako University, located in Palu, exemplifies this ethnic plurality. The composition of lecturers and students reflects the cultural diversity of both Eastern Indonesia—represented by the demographically dominant Buginese ethnic group—and Western Indonesia, including the Sundanese. Interactions between Buginese and Sundanese lecturers present a compelling dynamic for study, as their differing cultural backgrounds influence not only social aspects but also patterns of communication in academic and professional activities. These differences span speech styles, nonverbal expressions, and the social norms applied in daily interactions.

Preliminary observations through short interviews with three lecturers—one of Sundanese ethnicity and two of Buginese ethnicity—at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences revealed notable differences in communication patterns. The two Buginese lecturers reported using their regional dialects in informal settings, while the Sundanese lecturer did not. However, in formal

forums, all three reported consistently using standard Indonesian, indicating an awareness of professional communication norms. Each of the lecturers also expressed efforts to adjust their communication style when interacting with individuals from different ethnic backgrounds and described feeling comfortable in a multiethnic work environment. This study aims to analyze the forms of intercultural communication adaptation as well as the inhibiting factors that emerge in interactions between Sundanese and Buginese lecturers within the academic setting of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Tadulako University.

Several previous studies are relevant to this topic. One such study by Wiradharma, (2020) titled *“New Environment: Cultural Adaptation by Newly Appointed Civil Servant Lecturers,”* explored general organizational cultural adaptation among new lecturers. In contrast, the present research focuses specifically on the intercultural communication dynamics between ethnic groups, particularly among lecturers who have long been part of a stable academic environment. This study thus goes beyond the transitional phase of cultural adaptation to examine how intercultural communication is practiced and sustained over time. Furthermore, it considers inhibiting factors—such as cultural stereotypes, value differences, and language barriers—that may arise in daily interactions.

Another relevant study by (Faisal et al., 2024) titled *“Intercultural Communication in the Adaptation Process of Balinese Students at IPB University in Bogor,”* aimed to identify communication barriers and adaptation processes among Balinese students studying in Bogor. Their findings highlighted barriers such as differences in culture, language, food preferences, access to places of worship, and variations in social values and norms. Nonetheless, the Balinese students demonstrated the ability to adapt across cultural differences by employing various communication strategies. That study also emphasized several phases of intercultural communication challenges, including the cultural euphoria phase, culture shock, and cultural adjustment—all of which are conceptually relevant to the present research.

Intercultural communication refers to interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, encompassing language, values, social norms, and communication styles. In a multiethnic academic environment such as state universities in Indonesia, intercultural communication becomes a crucial aspect determining the success of professional collaboration (Gudykunst & Kim, 2017) Universities that serve as melting pots of various ethnicities demand communication sensitivity and adaptive capabilities from academic members to foster harmony in both academic and social interactions. Previous studies show that successful intercultural communication in universities is heavily influenced by cultural sensitivity, openness, and empathy toward differences (S. , Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). A lack of understanding of other cultures often leads to misunderstandings, stereotypes, and even latent conflicts between individuals from different ethnic backgrounds.

The theory of intercultural communication adaptation developed by (Young Yun, n.d.) (2001) serves as the main foundation for understanding the adjustment process of individuals entering different cultural environments. Kim views adaptation as a dynamic process consisting of three main stages: stress, adaptation, and growth. In the initial phase, individuals experience stress due to the tension from cultural differences. Through adaptation—both verbal and nonverbal—individuals develop more appropriate communication patterns in the new context. Ultimately, they experience growth, forming a new, more adaptive and flexible communication identity. According to Kim's view (in (S. W. , Littlejohn & Foss, 2016)), the adaptation process includes:

1. **Stress**, when individuals enter a new environment and experience tension due to culture shock, selective attention, or avoidance;
2. **Adaptation**, as a process of learning through acculturation and deculturation that leads to internal growth;
3. **Growth**, which is a process of personal development shaped by the fluctuation between stress and adaptation.

Cultural adaptation is a natural and unavoidable process, particularly when an individual must learn and adjust to a new culture and environment. Every individual requires adaptation, as each environment has its own unique characteristics.

Bugis culture is known for its expressive, assertive, and direct communication style. The Bugis also uphold strong social norms emphasizing dignity and honor (*siri' na pacce*), which is reflected in their communicative behaviors (Abdullah, 2020). In contrast, Sundanese people typically adopt a gentle, polite, and conflict-avoidant communication style ((Mulyana, 2018)). These differences often result in varying perceptions and interpretations in interactions between individuals from the two ethnic groups. In professional interactions, these communication style differences may present specific challenges—for example, in delivering opinions, offering criticism, or interpreting nonverbal cues. However, with awareness and appreciation of diversity, both parties can develop more inclusive and effective communication forms.

Previous studies have identified several main barriers to intercultural communication, including ethnic stereotypes, prejudice, differing social values, and language limitations (Samovar et al., 2016). In academic settings, these barriers may delay the adaptation process and affect team effectiveness. Stereotypes, for instance, may lead individuals to feel unaccepted or distrusted, while value differences can create divergent perspectives on professional matters. In the context of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at Tadulako University, these challenges are evident in communication dynamics between lecturers from two culturally distinct ethnic groups. At the same time, there is a strong need for equal communication to minimize potential miscommunication resulting from differing ethnic-based communication styles.

METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in a subjective paradigm, employing active observation and qualitative analysis, where the process of gathering information serves as the main pillar toward achieving research objectivity (Sugiyono, 2015). The interactive nature of the research facilitates the description of complete and contextual facts. It also enables in-depth data analysis supported by interviews that focus on intercultural communication adaptation and the inhibiting factors within that process. Using a purposive sampling technique, four (4) informants were selected and actively studied. Interviews were conducted on campus due to the informants' busy academic schedules. One advantage for the researcher was the close, respectful relationship established with the informants, fostering mutual understanding. The researcher managed to meet with each informant up to three times, with sufficient duration to observe their communication behaviors. All the necessary data were adequately collected and could be analyzed interactively, as a familial-like relationship had already been formed between the researcher and the informants. The goals and purposes of the research were mutually understood, resulting in open and comprehensive information sharing with no significant obstacles.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Forms of Communication Adaptation between Sundanese and Buginese Ethnic Groups

Cultural differences serve as the main challenge in the adaptation process between the Sundanese and Buginese ethnic groups. In the context of intercultural communication, strangers are described as individuals who come from different backgrounds—particularly in terms of culture—and who interact or make contact for the first time with local people who act as the “hosts” within a certain region or group (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992). According to Gudykunst, during intercultural encounters, at least one party is considered a stranger and may experience uncertainty and anxiety (intrapersonal), due to their limited knowledge of the new environment. This leads to hesitation and confusion in determining how to behave appropriately.

Based on the findings, several forms of communication adaptation between Sundanese and Buginese individuals were identified:

1. **Verbal integration:** One form of adaptation practiced by Sundanese lecturers is the use of the Bugis language, such as the greeting “*aga kareba*”. The use of “*aga kareba*” in certain contexts also helps strengthen emotional bonds between the two ethnic groups. Similarly, Buginese individuals greet Sundanese lecturers on campus with phrases like “*kumaha*,” “*hatur nuhun*,” and “*hareudang*.”
2. **Non-verbal integration:** This is reflected in mutual recognition. For example, when Sundanese individuals participate in campus activities, they feel like part of the Buginese group, and vice versa. Buginese individuals consider Sundanese lecturers in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences as part of their own ethnic group. This was affirmed by a Sundanese informant who stated: “*Regarding non-verbal blending, the Bugis are quite different from the Sundanese, especially in terms of food. For instance, during communal meals at the faculty, in Sundanese culture, we usually take only one piece of fish, but Bugis culture requires taking the whole fish—leaving leftovers is not acceptable. So, I have to adapt because I’m surrounded by Bugis people.*”

According to Young Yun Kim ((S. W. , Littlejohn & Foss, 2016)), the adaptation process involves three stages:

1. **Stress:** This occurs when an individual enters a new environment and experiences pressure from culture shock, selective attention, or avoidance.
2. **Adaptation:** This involves learning through acculturation and deculturation, leading to internal growth in the individual's adaptation process.
3. **Growth:** This refers to personal development through the ups and downs of the stress and adaptation phases.

Cultural adaptation is a natural and unavoidable process, especially when individuals strive to understand the new culture and environment around them. Every person must adapt because each environment has unique characteristics. Cultural adaptation is a long-term process of adjusting and eventually becoming comfortable in a new setting. It takes place when individuals enter unfamiliar cultures and begin interacting with their elements.

2. Barriers to Adaptation between Sundanese and Buginese Ethnic Groups

Intercultural communication refers to the communication process between individuals or groups with different cultural backgrounds. It involves the exchange of information, thoughts, and feelings between all parties involved. This type of communication goes beyond spoken or written language and includes body language and other non-verbal elements that support clear message

comprehension. Intercultural interactions occur both among individuals and between groups, as they send and receive messages across cultural boundaries.

Culture not only influences communicative behavior but is also an integral part of the communication process that shapes, maintains, develops, and transmits cultural values (Liliweri, 2004). Based on interviews with informants, one major obstacle in the adaptation process between Sundanese and Buginese individuals is related to language adaptation—specifically intonation differences in intercultural interactions. Sundanese people tend to use a softer tone in communication, whereas Buginese people may speak in a flatter or sometimes louder tone, especially during the adaptation and blending phase.

Communication barriers in intercultural communication resemble an iceberg. Some barriers are visible “above the waterline,” while others are hidden “below the waterline.” The “below the waterline” barriers are deeply rooted in personal behaviors or attitudes, making them difficult to observe. These hidden barriers include perceptions, norms, stereotypes, business philosophies, rules, networks, values, and group affiliations (Rahmat, 2009)

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the cultural adaptation process between Sundanese and Buginese ethnic groups occurs in two phases for Sundanese lecturers:

1. The arrival phase, which is the initial period of being at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, during which the Sundanese individuals begin learning and interacting with Buginese lecturers.
2. The integration phase, where Sundanese lecturers begin adapting to and blending in with Buginese colleagues—this includes adapting language use, food habits, and behavioral patterns.

The main obstacle faced by Sundanese individuals during both the arrival and integration phases is the difference in intonation during intercultural communication. Sundanese are generally more soft-spoken, while Buginese tend to have a flatter or occasionally louder tone. This difference becomes particularly noticeable during the adaptation process.

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