

## International Students Adaptation Process in Malaysian Public Universities: A Social Communication Challenge

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### ABSTRACT

Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) is a national education provider in Malaysia that is specifically designed to manage international students. It offers various services, such as assistance with living costs, transportation rates, and necessary documentation for international students pursuing studies in Malaysia. This initiative aligns with the Ministry of Higher Education's objective of becoming an international education hub while providing exemplary hosting services. Malaysia's diverse environment creates a perception of harmony and ease of adaptation among international students. This research explores the adaptation process of postgraduate international students enrolled in Malaysian public universities, focusing on twelve students from four universities: UPM, UKM, UM, and USM. Qualitative data will be gathered through semi-structured interviews, and analysis will be conducted using the colour-coding technique with ATLAS.ti software. The findings indicate that some international students still face language challenges and context misunderstandings during interactions with locals, particularly those visiting Malaysia for the first time. In contrast, international students from other countries do not encounter significant language barriers. Addressing the communication barriers faced by international students during their stay in Malaysia is crucial, and the Ministry of Higher Education can utilise the results of this study to shape guidelines and policies that cater to the needs of international students as a host country.

**Keywords:** *International students, intercultural adaptation model, adaptation process, global education hub, sojourners.*

### INTRODUCTION

According to world ranking institutions studied by Study International (2022) and Times Higher Education (2023), Macau University of Science and Technology stands out as the most sought-after university, with 88.3% of its population being international students in year 2022, and recently, 91.6% in year 2024. Quacquarellu Symonds (QS Top Universities, n.d.) also have ranked Macau SAR #464 in QS World University Rankings 2025. This high percentage underscores the university's global appeal and competitive edge in attracting international talent.

The United Kingdom, home to some of the most renowned universities globally, welcomed 22.0% of all international students during the academic year 2020–21 (HESA, 2022). This highlights the UK's significant role in the international education landscape. Meanwhile, in Malaysia, 10,000 of the 170,000 international students were from various countries, reflecting the country's status as a preferred destination for international education in Southeast Asia. Malaysia ranks 136th globally for the number of international

students (Times Higher Education, 2022), showcasing its growing prominence as an educational hub.

#### *Impact of COVID-19 on International Education*

Despite the global challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, established public universities in Malaysia have made concerted efforts to attract international students. The efforts include enhancing their services and increasing the availability of seats for both undergraduate and graduate students. To date, five Malaysian universities have secured places in the Top 200 QS World University Ranking (2025): Universiti Malaya (60), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (138), Universiti Sains Malaysia (146), Universiti Putra Malaysia (148) and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (181).

The Malaysian government has been proactive in encouraging international students to study in the country, aligning with the Higher Education Ministry's Internationalization Strategy announced in 2007 (EMGS, 2022). This strategy is continually updated to accommodate the evolving needs of international students, aiming to establish Malaysia as a global Higher Education Hub (Chin, 2019).

#### *Challenges Faced by International Students in Malaysia*

One of the most significant challenges for international students in Malaysia is language proficiency. Students are required to pass language competency tests such as Malaysian University Entry Test (MUET), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), or International English Language Testing System (IELTS) prior to their arrival (Singh & Jack, 2022). Language barriers can profoundly affect students' psychological well-being and academic performance (Ladum & Burkholder, 2019).

International students, particularly those from regions with vastly different cultures, often face substantial cultural adaptation challenges. While students from Southeast Asia, with cultural similarities to Malaysia, might find adaptation relatively more accessible, the diverse cultural backgrounds necessitate targeted support. Aside from language and cultural barriers, international students also face challenges related to adjusting to a new educational system, financial constraints, and social integration (Abdullah et al., 2022; Chaiyasat, 2020; Lashari et al., 2018).

#### *Language and Communication in the Context of Adaptation*

Language proficiency is crucial for academic success and social integration. Previous studies have highlighted that language barriers can lead to significant psychological stress among international students (Ladum & Burkholder, 2019). Furthermore, understanding the semantics and syntax of a new language poses substantial difficulties. For example, semantics involves grasping the context-dependent meaning of sentences (Zakaria et al., 2020), while syntax concerns the arrangement and order of words in a sentence (Ketphan, 2022). A study in Sabah revealed that international students face challenges in learning Malay, mainly due to limited interaction with locals and the prevalence of the informal Sabahan language, which hinders their adaptation process (Rathakrishnan et al., 2021).

#### *Strategies for Enhancing Adaptation and Communication*

Learning the local language and engaging with the community can significantly enhance international students' adaptation process. Knowledge of the local language helps build social connections, interact with university staff, and settle into the new environment (Hassan &

Nurfarahiyah, 2020). Maintaining connections with home networks via social media can help mitigate culture shock and facilitate smoother adaptation. This approach allows students to stay connected with their home culture while integrating into the host culture.

In summary, international students face numerous challenges, including language barriers, cultural differences, and other adaptation difficulties. Effective strategies, such as language proficiency, engagement with local culture, and use of technology, can aid in overcoming these challenges. This research specifically examines communication and language issues among postgraduate international students in Malaysia. By identifying key challenges and proposing effective strategies, the study aims to facilitate a smoother adaptation process for these students.

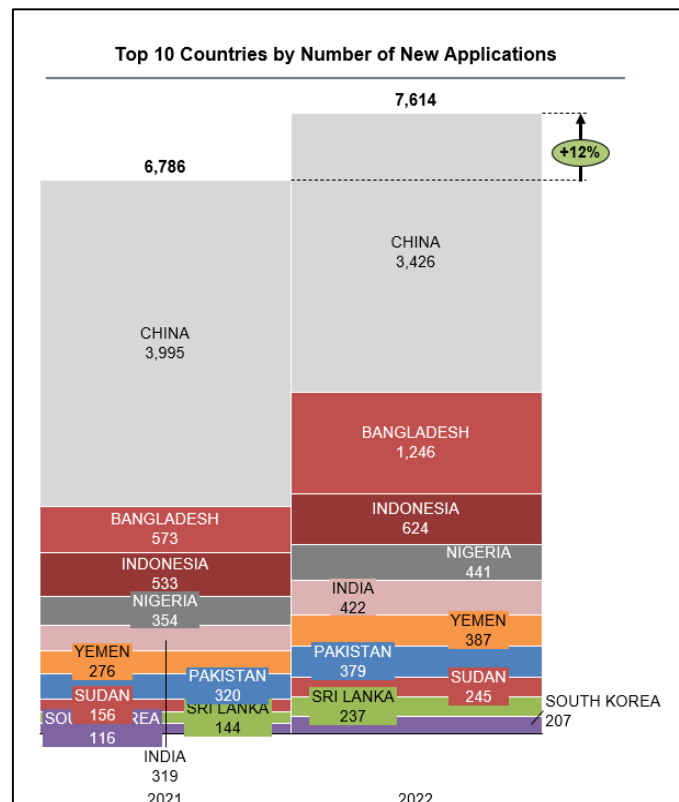


Figure 1: Application number between the years 2021 and 2022 (EMGS, 2022)

By addressing the issues mentioned above, this research chooses to focus on the communication and language issues among postgraduate international students in Malaysia. As shown in the statistics above, most international students who applied to study in Malaysia came from countries such as China, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, which have strong empowerment of their native language through their culture and government (Ramamurthy et al., 2022). International students from Southeast Asian countries with backgrounds and cultures almost similar to Malaysia's were expected to have no problems adapting. In contrast, international students from Europe, MENA, and countries with vast differences in customs and culture were considered the main concern in helping them adapt. Hence, by focusing on communication and language elements, this research was expected to provide some enlightenment to the host country on the issues the institution should prioritise for the international students' trouble-free adaptation process.

International students are expected to prepare the language competency skills prior to arriving in Malaysia. They have to pass either MUET, TOEFL, or IELTS before coming to Malaysia, as a requirement by the Ministry of Education (Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia, 2019). Aside from language, students are also exposed to other forms of challenges, such as adjusting to a new residing place, educational and academic system, and financial and social communication (Abdullah et al., 2022; Chaiyasat, 2020; Lashari et al., 2018). In many cases, language has been identified as one of the most significant concerns that can eventually affect international students' psychological health while they adapt (Ladum & Burkholder, 2019).

Although language barriers and cultural distance are frequently discussed as communication hurdles in the literature, it is unclear how they affect the communication process (God & Zhang, 2019). Prior research indicated that while Australian and Chinese students accept linguistic and cultural differences, they struggle with understanding and quality interaction (God & Zhang, 2019). Two of the most common problems in a language are understanding the semantics of the language, which is defined as understanding the context of the sentence according to the situation (Zakaria et al., 2020), and syntax of the language, which is the arrangements and order of the sentence in the language (Ketphan, 2022). A study conducted in Sabah discovered that it is challenging to acquire the Malay language since they rarely interact with the locals, particularly in the informal language of Sabahan, contributing to the slower adaptation process (Rathakrishnan et al., 2021).

By studying the native language, international students can engage with locals and get to know the local culture better (Hassan & Nurfarahiyah, 2020). In addition, knowledge of the local language is anticipated to help international students build social contacts, communicate with university employees such as lecturers and other administration staff, and settle into new environments. When they first arrive in Malaysia, it is expected that international students will encounter difficulties with food transition, language barriers, and balancing time between study and family (Aizawa et al., 2020; God & Zhang, 2019). However, culture shock can be avoided if these students participate in their home networks, emphasising the importance of social media in keeping individuals connected at home and, simultaneously, bringing quality time of interaction with the close circle as one of the solutions.

#### *Intercultural Adaptation Model*

This study chose the elements of social communication in the Intercultural Adaptation Model by Young Yun Kim (2017), and the elements serve as the framework for constructing interview questions during data collection. This article focused on the elements of social communication.

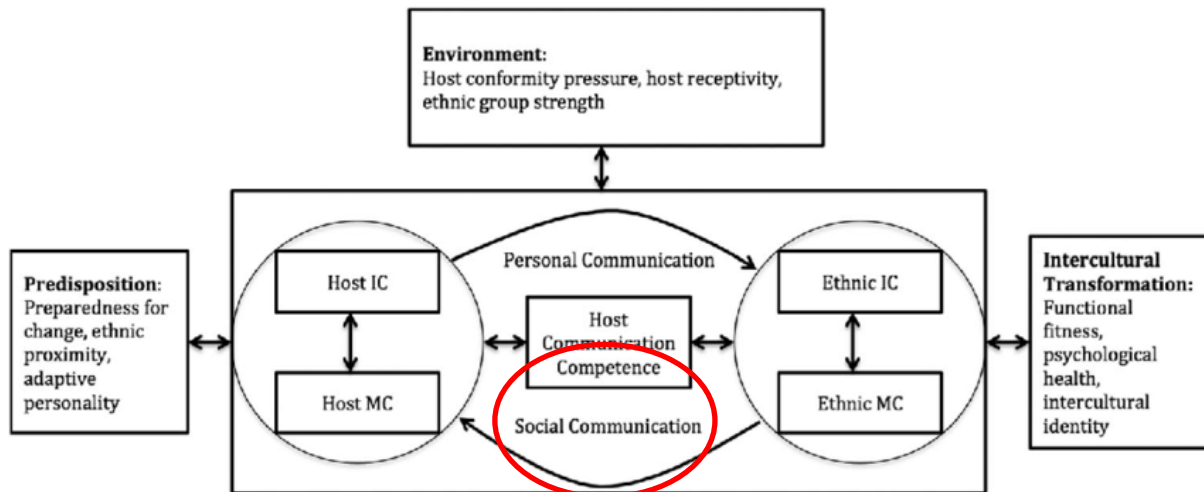


Figure 2: Intercultural Adaptation Model (Kim, 2017)

In the context of international students' adaptation, social communication challenges play a critical role in their overall intercultural adaptation process. According to the Intercultural Adaptation Model developed by Kim Young Yun, intercultural adaptation is a dynamic and ongoing process. This is where individuals strive to establish a functional and reciprocal relationship with the new cultural environment. For international students, effective social communication is pivotal in this adaptation process as it facilitates the exchange of cultural norms, values, and practices. Accordingly, it enables them to navigate the academic and social landscapes of their host country.

Kim's model emphasises the importance of communication competence, which encompasses the ability to effectively and appropriately convey and interpret messages in intercultural interactions. International students often face significant barriers in this regard, such as language proficiency, nonverbal communication differences, and varying communication styles. These challenges can lead to misunderstandings, social isolation, and decreased academic performance if not adequately addressed.

Furthermore, the model underscores the role of host environment receptivity and social support systems in mitigating these challenges. Institutions that provide robust support services, such as language training programs, intercultural communication workshops, and mentorship opportunities, can significantly enhance the social communication competence of international students. By fostering an inclusive and supportive atmosphere, these institutions can facilitate smoother intercultural adaptation, thereby promoting academic success and personal well-being among international students.

In the domain of international student adaptation, social communication challenges are pivotal, profoundly impacting their integration and academic success. The Intercultural Adaptation Model, articulated by Kim Young Yun, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding these challenges. This model posits that intercultural adaptation is an iterative and dynamic process characterised by continuous interaction and reciprocal influence between the individual and the host environment. Within this framework, social communication is not merely the exchange of linguistic information but involves a more profound, more nuanced negotiation of meanings, cultural norms, and social practices.

International students often encounter significant barriers in this communicative process, such as language proficiency issues, divergent nonverbal communication cues, and distinct interaction styles, leading to misunderstandings and social isolation. Kim's model underscores that communication competence, encompassing the cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of communication, is crucial for effective adaptation. It involves linguistic skills, cultural empathy, adaptability, and the ability to manage intercultural stress.

Furthermore, the model highlights the importance of the host environment's receptivity and the availability of social support systems. Institutions that actively foster an inclusive and supportive atmosphere through initiatives such as language support programs, intercultural training workshops, and peer mentorship schemes can mitigate the adverse effects of social communication barriers. By enhancing the communication competence of international students, these institutions can facilitate smoother intercultural adaptation, thereby promoting academic performance and psychosocial well-being. Consequently, the successful navigation of social communication challenges, as elucidated by Kim's Intercultural Adaptation Model, is fundamental to the holistic integration of international students into their new academic and social milieu.

#### METHODOLOGY

The research method used in this study is qualitative, with a semi-structured interview approach conducted online. The method is in line with Movement Control Order (MCO) during the data collection period, where there were limitations to meeting physically. The data were collected from interviews using new norms platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, and WebEx. The guidelines for conducting this online interview were practised in reference to the guidelines of the *e-Interviews* (Salmons, 2021). The interviews were recorded in mp4 format and subsequently converted to audio mp3 format. The audio was then translated into text utilising the website HappyScribe.com, which employs Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology.

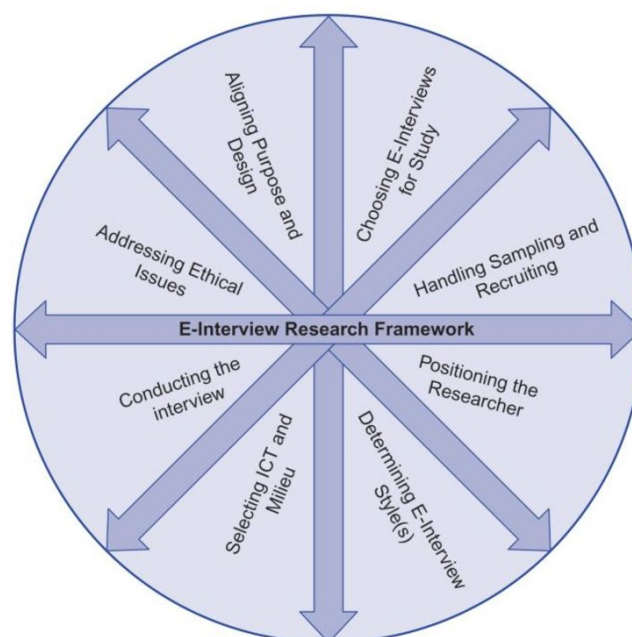


Figure 3: e-Interview research framework (Salmons, 2021)

The e-Interview framework created by Janet Salmons (2021) was used to guide the online interview procedure. Salmons' framework provides a complete approach in conducting qualitative research using electronic methods, emphasising the significance of careful planning and ethical issues. The framework distinguishes between several types of e-Interviews, such as asynchronous (e.g., email) and synchronous (e.g., video conferencing). It recommends selecting the best format based on research objectives and participant preferences. It also addresses important issues such as building rapport with participants, guaranteeing data security, and maintaining research process integrity. Using Salmons' e-Interview framework, the study ensured an organised and systematic approach to data collecting, allowing for rich, in-depth insights while responding to the limitations and potential of digital communication platforms.

Nonetheless, the transcripts were double-checked by the researchers to correct some minor errors. The elements in the Intercultural Adaptation Theory (Kim, 2017) were used as the basis for generating the interview questions. All 20 questions constructed as a guide to the semi-structured interview were evaluated and authorised for use as the data collection instrument by experts in the field of social sciences. To be able to select the participants, the snowballing method was used.

The first participant was obtained through the university's head office. They were emailed to ask for cooperation in providing the international students with information related to the research. After the first student was interviewed, they were asked to suggest the following students related to the research for the researcher to interview. Qualitative research scholars have established that data saturation in a study population typically occurs with around six to seven participants (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). Additionally, recent research by Guest et al. (2020) has suggested that a sample size of twelve participants can lead to the highest level of data saturation, complementing previous findings.

In this study, data saturation was rigorously monitored, and it became evident that thematic saturation was reached after the inclusion of the tenth participant. No new themes, concepts, or insights emerged from subsequent data collection and analysis. Therefore, despite initial planning for a larger sample size, it was determined that the data had reached a point of theoretical saturation by the tenth participant. Consequently, a total of twelve international students were selected to participate in this study, ensuring both the depth and breadth of data collection while acknowledging the achievement of data saturation within the specified population. Twelve international students were selected using the purposive sampling and snowball method based on criteria such as below:

1. Lived in Malaysia as a postgraduate student for more than a year.
2. A postgraduate student studying at either UPM, UKM, UM, or USM.

Emails were sent to the International Office of the specific universities and international student body associations to help obtain three respondents from each university to be interviewed. The chosen international students were addressed as S1 until S12 to ensure their anonymity. The summary of respondents after data collection is as follows:

Table 1: Respondents demographic

	Gender	University	Age	Course	Country
S1	Male	UPM	30 years above	PhD Electrical Engineering	Nigeria
S2	Male	UPM	30 years above	PhD Mechanical Engineering	Syria
S3	Male	UPM	30 years above	PhD Aerospace Engineering	Tanzania
S4	Male	UKM	27-29	PhD Health Communication	Indonesia
S5	Female	UKM	23	MSc Political Science	Indonesia
S6	Female	UKM	24-26	MSc Educational Psychology	Indonesia
S7	Female	USM	27-29	MSc Medical Physics	Jordan
S8	Female	USM	27-29	MSc Radiation Physics	Jordan
S9	Male	USM	27-29	MsC. Computer Science	Iran
S10	Male	UM	24-26	MSc. Chemistry	Indonesia
S11	Male	UM	24-26	MSc. of Computer Science	Bangladesh
S12	Male	UM	27-29	PhD Economy	Jordan

This study focuses on social communication among international students, and the data analysis for this research was performed using twelve international students who met the criteria above. The selection of participants for the interview session was conducted using both purposive sampling and snowballing methods.

## FINDINGS

### Data Analysis

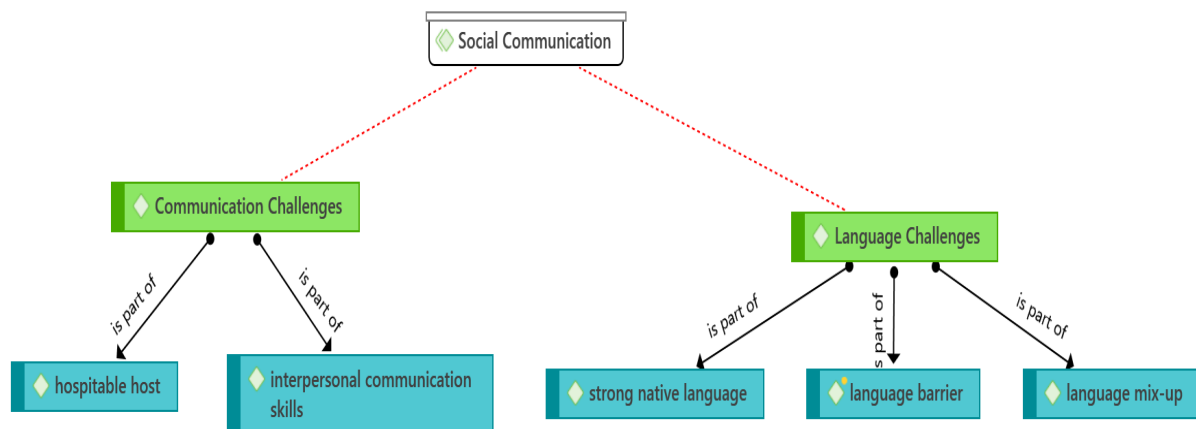


Figure 3: Medium of communication as an adaptation factor

Figure 2 displays the network results produced by ATLAS.ti after the analysis of twelve interview transcriptions by the researcher. First, the medium of communication is categorised as the main factor. Then, from the analysis, the themes produced are in terms of Communication Challenges and Language Challenges. From the Communication Challenges emerged codes such as hospitable host and 'interpersonal communication skills.' From the Language Challenges emerged codes such as 'strong native language,' 'language mix-up,' and language barrier.'

Most respondents do not have any problems communicating with the locals since most Malaysians are able to converse in English and at least under the comprehension level. Most Malaysians were exposed to the importance of reading and comprehending English from the early age of five (Salleh et. al, 2020). These language lessons were compulsory until the age of seventeen years old, and if they further their study, it is also a compulsory subject



in the public university. Since 2003, some of the compulsory to-pass subjects, such as Mathematics and Science, were specially conducted and curated textbooks were in English (Md Ruzli & Adnan, 2022) as part of the Pembelajaran dan Pengajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris (PPSMI). This means the Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English is a Malaysian government initiative aimed at promoting English language proficiency among students in primary and secondary schools. Based on the analysis, only a few respondents had communication and language issues during their early stay in Malaysia. The other respondents were able to encounter their adaptation phase of language barriers by learning the Malay language and speaking with the locals frequently.

### Communication Challenges

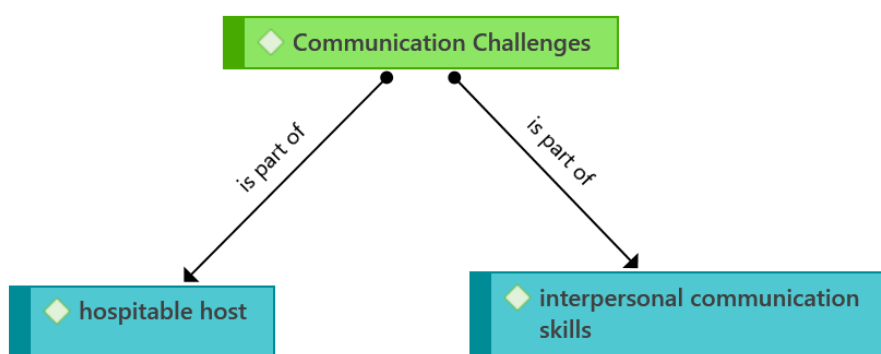


Figure 4: Communication challenges

The figure above illustrates the international students' Communication Challenges during their stay in Malaysia and how they perceive the challenges in order to create solutions. Under the theme of Communication Challenges, there are codes of 'hospitable host' and 'interpersonal communication skills'.

#### a) Hospitable Local Host

S4, in his conversation, mentioned that he was delighted and comfortable that his local friends tried to speak in Indonesian, although it was just the basic informal language they learned from the mass media. He became a proud Indonesian when he acknowledged that entertainment, culture, and language from his country are also appreciated by other countries. It is also in his knowledge that the locals are trying to make him comfortable when they try to speak in his native language. These feelings raise a sense of comfort and belonging to him. Comfortability is one of the crucial aspects when one is trying to adapt to a new environment (Mandari & Boer, 2021). The interaction will be smoother and might be converted into regular conversations. Having peers to converse with also assists in terms of mental health during the adjustment period of the adaptation process (Razgulin et al., 2023).

Although it is funny to see and weird to hear, I appreciate that when they try to speak in my language. Apparently, Malaysians watch so many Indonesia dramas (S4).

Having peers or closest friends who are able to put themselves in the international students' shoes makes them feel that they can overcome the challenges during their adaptation process. This is because the obstacles to making friends and starting conversations were replaced with a sense of comfortability by knowing that the peers, too, know what the original culture and backgrounds of the Indonesian international students work and look like.

Seeing the fact that Malaysia is still relatively new to being an efficient host country compared to the United Kingdom and Australia, conversational English skills for the locals with lower background classes is one of the challenges for international students (Singh, 2021). Dealing with older locals who do not speak fluent language, S8 from Jordan mentioned that regardless of this incapacity,

...I rarely have problems when buying things or food outside because if they do not know English, they will use their hand sign to assist me... (S8).

This suggests that the locals do not discriminate against her presence as a foreign and international student. This is very different from S1 from Nigeria. Upon telling his story, he refuses to mention the race or gender of the doer as below,

My father and I had one difficult moment when a taxi driver came out with a machete after I asked him about the fare that seemed to be overcharged. So, I tried to question why you overcharged from one point to another point, so he got angry. Why are you asking; you don't want to pay or something? He brought out a big knife or 'parang,' but it was a minor incident. But things happened. The rest of the time, I had a wonderful time (S1).

This situation indicates that the unfriendly locals' portrayal of Malaysians as non-hospitable hosts creates a sense of discomfort for the international student and his father. The communication was severed by the taxi driver's violent act plus emotions instead of discussing the matter in a civilised manner. However, this was a secluded matter and is not generalized to the community as a whole.

#### *b) Interpersonal Communication Skills*

Communication skills are important to increase an individual's communication competence, which is a vital aspect to acquire as a postgraduate student. Students who attend a multicultural university campus with peers of many nationalities may develop certain intercultural communication skills to help them communicate successfully in their personal and professional lives (Sarwari, 2019).

S5 mentioned,

I like to hear stories from random people the most. For example, I am strolling on the street, and I meet a woman from my country who has been around here for a long time. Maybe he's a fellow Indonesian, but he works as a driver or a housekeeper. I will try to have conversations with them. I also often chat with the parents of my friends. So, whenever they invite me to their house, I am interested in having talks about Malaysian matters. They say that Malaysia has people like this, people like this, and that. I think it is because I happen to like

the stories of the past or historical stories. Because of them, I can learn new things, and it is another way to improve my skill to communicate (S5).

S10 mentioned that, by trying to speak in English whenever he cannot find the words in either Malay or Indonesian, he improves his English-speaking skills. Practising language can increase confidence during interaction and prevent language ego from taking over the adaptation process (Eğinli & Özşenler, 2020). Hence, he also thinks it is a great chance for him to survive in a new environment during his adaptation process. S10 stated,

It is good to have a multicultural environment and use English to improve fluency (S10).

Hence, this suggests that it is important for an individual to always try to improve themselves instead of being stagnant and stuck within their old self. Culture shock itself is a learning process. Kim (2017) mentioned that if someone does not face culture shock and if the stress in the adaptation process does not happen, growth will not occur.

S7 from Jordan, for example, has no difficulty communicating throughout her stay in Malaysia. The university's demand to make the Malay language compulsory for postgraduate overseas students improved their experience in Malaysia. She mentioned that,

Since almost all Malaysians speak in English, especially in Penang, I think communication is not much of a problem to me. Besides, I also know some of the necessary daily words and alphabets in Malay because it is a required course for me to graduate (S1).

S11 also stated that after a few months of studying in Malaysia, the language is no longer an issue for him because he rarely sees Malaysians who do not know at least the basics of conversing in English. S4 believes that because he has lived in Malaysia since his adolescent years, language has never been difficult for him. After 13 years of residency in Malaysia, he can already communicate in Malay with most individuals he meets. Despite the fact that he began with informal language, he believes that these terms will be valuable to him.

I think especially during my degree time, that is when I catch up with the locals in Malay. All those slogans, good words, bad words, everything. Especially when you have guys who just finished their high school, you know they are so young, and when they teach you Malay, they start with negative words (S4).

The statement above implies that informal education can also contribute to the progress of communication skills. Often heard and used words in social interaction were usually unintentional to be registered and embedded in a person's memory rather than words that were only read and not practised (Golinkoff et al., 2019).

## 1. Language Challenges

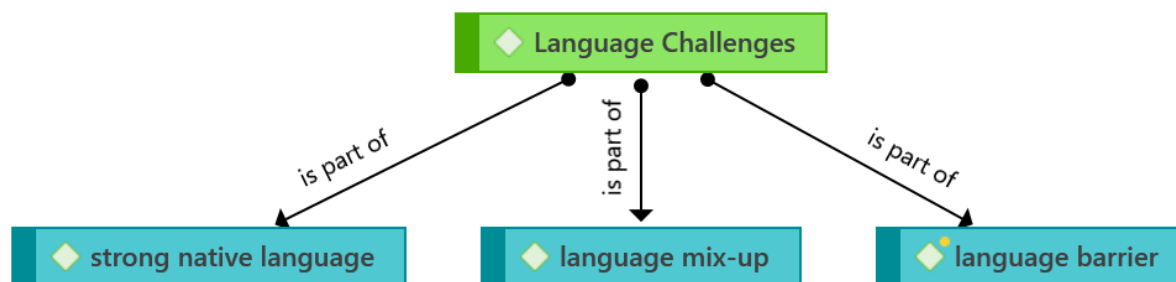


Figure 5: Language challenges

Having language challenges is a critical issue and can lead to unnecessarily prolonged culture shock without positive growth whenever this issue is forgotten and not addressed properly (Jackson, 2020). Most respondents mentioned that they had language challenges upon their arrival and during their period of adjustment and adaptation. Figure 5 illustrates the breakdowns of the challenges to sub-themes of 'strong native language,' 'language mix-up,' and 'language barrier.'

### a) Strong Native Language

Malaysia is known as a multi-diverse country with three main ethnicities, Malay, Indian, Chinese, and many smaller ethnicities, all of which have their own rights to practice and speak each of their mother tongue languages. The official language used in formal meetings and the government sector is the Malay language, which all Malaysians are required to learn and pass the examination as the system for the English language mentioned above. However, it is different for the people in Indonesia, where their national language policy puts their official language, Bahasa Indonesia, as something that should be embedded in the citizens' identity.

In Indonesia, the Indians do not really exist. Nothing at all. So, we are Chinese, but Chinese are like Chinese-Bandung. He speaks Sundanese, and for Chinese in Jakarta, for example, he speaks Javanese, but here, the Chinese speak Chinese. But in Indonesia, Chinese too, but they can't speak Chinese (S6).

Growing up in surroundings that use the native language influenced by the Dutch alphabet and language system, the Indonesians also find it hard to change the system when Malaysia's education system varies from the influence of the British language (Setiawan, 2020). In order to support the national language policy, Indonesians apply the Indonesian language even to the smallest things in their personal identities. This includes their name, race, ethnicity, shop signage, and academic writings, and has been embedded into each Indonesian as their core identity (Crosling et al., 2024). This is very different from Malaysia, which emphasises the use of the English language as a lingua franca and the second language of every Malaysian to catch up with the developing world. Hence, it is quite challenging for most Indonesians who come to study abroad as they rarely get the chance to practice in their homeland.

This situation also happened with S12 from Türkiye. Türkiye is also known to apply their language firmly into their formal and informal daily life since some Turks believe that the public use of English threatens the Turkish language and culture. Hence, when it comes to proficiency in English, the people of Türkiye are considered among the lowest in the world (Arik, 2020). As evidence of this situation, S12 mentioned that "...my English is not that good...I am only friends with my people from Türkiye...". The communication between S12 and the locals was hindered by his inability to mingle with the locals, resulting in a lack of communication skills.

### *Language Mix-Up*

The findings suggested that a new issue among Indonesian international students arose when a language mix-up happened. This new issue may cause conflicts when intercultural communication happens during their study and when they attempt to blend in with the locals. Figure 6 below provides examples of similar words in Malay and Indonesia, which Oktira et al. (2022) discussed in their study, stating that these words are the words that usually cause confusion between these two countries.

Malaysia	Meaning	Indonesian	Meaning
<i>Kereta</i>	car	<i>Kereta</i>	motorbike
<i>Bile</i>	When	<i>Bila</i>	If
<i>Budak</i>	Child	<i>Budak</i>	Servant
<i>Percuma</i>	Free	<i>Percuma</i>	Useless
<i>Awak</i>	You	<i>Awak</i>	in some Malay culture in Indonesia, awak means "I"
<i>Kakitangan</i>	Employee/staff	<i>Kaki dan tangan</i>	Feet and hand
<i>Berbual</i>	Chatting	<i>Berbual</i>	Lie
<i>Bandar</i>	Town	<i>Bandar</i>	There are several meaning of Bandar in Indonesia, such as port and trench.

Figure 6: Example of context differences between Malay and Indonesian languages (Oktira et al., 2022)

Nevertheless, the study discovered that international students living in Southeast Asia, particularly in neighbouring countries, are concerned about becoming confused by the language used by the locals. The diagram below depicts some of the semantic discrepancies that generate misunderstanding in the daily lives of Indonesian students. Language mix-up occurs because we can observe different contexts, yet the exact words were the cause of these problems, which were identified as semantics problems. The findings reveal that the language barrier has become an issue for postgraduate international students. This is mentioned by one of the respondents below:

Actually, when I first came here (in Malaysia), it was quite hard to adapt because the language (Malay language) is like my own mother tongue (Indonesia) but mixed and scrambled (S5).

She stated that some of the local words in the Malay language mean something different from their mother tongue. Although the words have identical pronunciations and spelling, the context differs when used in casual conversations. Hence, to overcome this

barrier, she tried to get into a simple conversation with the university's janitor, who came from her country. She would ask them about their experiences and life in Malaysia as a foreigner.

S6's friend from the same country and university also mentioned the same thing, proving that the language barrier still happens in a minor group of international students. S6 statements of the language mixed up were as follows,

I think in language terms, it is quite hard for me because I am from Jakarta. I think if it is my Sumatran, Minang, or Riau friends, it will be quite easy for them to adapt to the language because they also speak Malay. But because Jakarta has its own language identity, we use either the official Indonesian language or English. There are so many similar vocabularies but with different meanings. For example, when we say car, we say '*mobil*,' but '*kereta*' for Malaysia. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, '*kereta*' means train (S6).

Actually, if that language is in Indonesia, we also have a lot of languages. But what makes it different is that in Indonesia, if we are from Bandung, my family, Ghita's family from Bandung, but we move to Jakarta, and we have Sundanese, Javanese, Pandanese, we also speak differently but use Malay (S6).

With 707 languages, according to one estimate, or 731 languages and more than 1,100 dialects spoken by more than 600 ethnic groups dispersed throughout 17,504 islands in the archipelago, Indonesia has an extremely rich linguistic diversity (Zein, 2020). Hence, S6 mentioned that she was not culturally shocked when she heard locals speak Malay but with different pronunciations or a different set of vocabulary that sounds almost the same as formal Malay. The statement by S6 below suggests that she is also familiar with the different slang and accents in Malaysia.

In Malaysia, it's like this. For example, Johor and Kedah, if in Indonesia, have different languages, if here they have a different dialect, right? (S6)

This research discovers that the language mix-up only happens to the Indonesian study within the semantics and syntax issues due to the same culture that was diverse but connected closely by geography. Malay and Indonesia share so many similar cultures that sometimes, even the outsiders can confuse these two ethnicities due to migrations between Malaya and Sumatra, Sumatra and Java, Java and Malaya, and Java and Borneo that were frequent and extensive back during their heyday of trade (Lee et al., 2020).

#### *b) Language Barrier*

According to one study, most international students prefer to speak in their native tongue, such as Arabic, Urdu, or Somali (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). From both respondents, the researcher can confirm that the language barrier still happens among the respondents who speak a language close to the Malay language as their mother tongue. However, it is different for people outside the Malay Archipelago, where the situation of language mix-up does not happen. It is either they converse only in English, or they learn Malay as their medium of communication. As an alternative, these international students must use English to communicate so that they do not feel left out or confused by the context of talks. Students'

motivation to communicate in a foreign language is proven to be influenced by their levels of fear and self-confidence (Akenina, 2022).

...classes are also still online, and the orientation is also held online. So, to do that with someone who doesn't really understand the language, it really does not do me a favour (S4).

Sometimes, it's also hard for me to understand if the professor speaks too fast in the class, but so far, it's good that I am happy. Nothing is too much of an obstacle for us (S5).

In her interview, she also emphasised this difficulty when the lecturer speaks too fast, which is hard for her as an international student who has just begun to learn the language. However, for her, it is not a big deal, and her decision not to let the language barrier prevent her from learning. In this case, it is proven that the desire to learn and apply a foreign language is also a significant factor in overcoming the language barrier, which is considered a socio-psychological barrier that cannot be overcome without effective interaction (Akenina, 2022).

In Malaysian universities, the official languages of instruction are English and Bahasa Melayu, and one of the requirements for international students to be accepted in Malaysia public universities is for them to take MUET (Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia, 2019) or any similar English test such as IELTS and TOEFL. Hence, there should be fewer critical problems when conversing in English. However, S5 mentioned that during her orientations and online classes, she experienced difficulties understanding the context of the events.

So, my expectation when I come to Malaysia is to study English. That's why I study IELTS. But when I arrived, everyone spoke Malay, and I was really surprised by this incident. It is also confusing for a first-timer like me, right? And it turns out that UKM is required to speak Malay, so that's different from my expectation (S5).

Therefore, the language barrier faced by international students proved to be happening due to misinformation from the students' side and the university's side. Some of the lecturers were also unaware of the phenomenon of the new learner due to the high expectations for international students and the requirements they have to meet to enroll. S2 mentioned that upon his arrival in Malaysia, he struggled with the English accent used in Malaysia.

Basically, local people, especially in Kuala Lumpur, they can speak English and are easy to communicate with. But when I meet people with dialects, mostly in markets, I have a hard time understanding them (S2).

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study emphasise the importance of communication and language proficiency in the adaptation process of international students in Malaysia. Since English is widely spoken in Malaysia, most respondents did not suffer significant communication challenges, according to the study. This is consistent with the Malaysian educational system's

emphasis on English proficiency, which begins at a young age and continues through higher education.

Nevertheless, a few participants reported experiencing initial difficulties due to language challenges, especially when engaging with residents who spoke other dialects or had limited English competence. The students' attempts to acquire the Malay language and the willingness of the locals to help them through nonverbal communication helped to lessen this problem. The residents' friendly demeanour made a big difference in the students' feeling of security and community, which is essential for a successful transition (Mandari & Boer, 2021; Razgulin et al., 2023). There were several noteworthy outliers despite the generally good encounters. For example, S5's dismay at the frequency of Malay usage in some situations, in contrast to her expectations of English usage, highlights the necessity for colleges to communicate language use policies more clearly. The diversity in English proficiency and accents is further highlighted by S2's difficulty understanding regional English dialects, which might provide difficulties for overseas students used to varying English standards (Singh, 2021).

As a result, this study clarifies the complicated connection between international students and their host nation, highlighting the need for encouraging surroundings and useful communication techniques. Subsequent investigations ought to delve into the experiences of international students adjusting to a wider variety of Malaysian colleges and scrutinise the enduring consequences of preliminary language and communication obstacles on their scholastic and social achievements.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined only four research universities from a total of twenty-two public universities since these four research universities have a higher concentration of international students than other universities. As a result, the findings could not be generalised to international students in other locations in Malaysia. More research is needed to investigate the disparities in the adaptation process for international students attending institutions in Malaysia with various geographical and cultural elements. In this way, we can ensure that any language issues for these students are addressed effectively.

Furthermore, it is necessary to devise a strategy to address the issues that international students may have had when adjusting to their new surroundings, such as stress, loneliness, and difficulties dealing with lectures. Further research should examine the elements that contributed to student depression, stress, and anxiety during the early adjustment and adaptation period, as well as devise techniques to improve students' learning experiences. The research findings have significant consequences for university employees, including lecturers, staff, and legislators. It emphasises the need for additional studies to produce recommendations and interventions aimed at becoming a welcoming host country for international students while also accomplishing the goal of becoming an International Education Hub.

Moreover, this study sheds light on the complicated interaction between international students and host nations, emphasising the relevance of the host country's skills as the most accessible entity to international students. The findings not only improve our understanding of international students and the dynamics of language and communication challenges but also have practical implications for Malaysia's education system and future international relations. Further study into the aforementioned components, as well as university participation, will help refine and expand on these findings, paving the way for Malaysia to



generate high-quality foreign student graduates. Understanding and tackling these difficulties would allow Malaysian universities to better support their international student populations, enhancing the country's position as a top higher education destination.

In summary, the implications of this study are broad, addressing the immediate need for tailored support systems for international students, the larger policy shifts required to create an inclusive educational environment, and the long-term benefits of fostering strong international ties through education. Future research could investigate the impact of specific intervention programs on enhancing international students' adaptation experiences, resulting in more tailored recommendations for university policies and procedures.

The study also found that having good interpersonal communication skills and living in a welcoming environment is important for facilitating the process of adaptation. It has been discovered that having friends and peers who could relate to the experiences of overseas students is good for their mental health and general well-being during the adjustment period.

Overall, these results indicate that although communication and language difficulties are not the main complications for international students studying in Malaysia, university support mechanisms still need to be improved. Improved language support services, orientation programs, and transparent communication about language policies could all help new international students adjust more easily.

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