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**THE INFLUENCE OF INTERACTION FACTORS IN CROSS-  
CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT AMONG INTERNATIONAL  
STUDENTS IN A PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION LEARNING  
INSTITUTION**

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**Abstract:**

Adjustment process is needed in a new living environment in a new host culture and is a prerequisite for any international student when studying abroad. In addition, successful adaptation to the new host culture by international students can be achieved by getting good emotional and physical support, coupled with deep understanding from family members. This study aims to understand the interaction adjustment process among international students in a private higher learning institution. We had identified and collected relevant data from two faculties in Kolej Universiti Islam Perlis. A total of 5 respondents were selected and interviewed, and the selection process was made through a snowball sampling technique. Two main themes, local accent and communication in the English Language, were developed for this study. This study provides a discussion of the main findings from the research and where applicable, links the works of literature to the research outcomes. The study outcomes can also be used as a guideline in the adjustment process for international students. Universities can also make references to this study in helping international students adapt to a new host's culture, especially in terms of interaction adjustment, by providing appropriate pieces of training and guidelines.

**Keywords:**

Cross-cultural Adjustment, Interaction Adjustment, Qualitative Analysis.

## Introduction

International students who are proficient in the local language are not only considered to be able to be self-confident, but are also considered to be able to achieve appropriate qualifications in the future (Obiora and Moyo, 2016). The ability to communicate smoothly is important when working in new countries with varied cultures, much so when the languages spoken are different, coupled when using varied slangs and pronunciations. Sometimes, they do encounter difficulties in trying to understand the language tones of their classmates and the accents of the professors, as well as in understanding the local jests and senses of humor. The English accents of some professors coming from different countries are difficult to understand, making it difficult for the students to comprehend their speeches (Fang, 2017). Apart from that, a previous study has shown that international students also face problems in mastering the local accent and dialect of the neighborhood that may disrupt their adjustment process (Campos, Pinto, and Hippler, 2021). Riding through the process of cultural adjustment is not easy; it takes time to change one's way of life, adjusting to the new workplace, getting new friends or adapting to new environment (Richardson & Wong, 2018). In its contextual form, communication is the use of messages to generate meanings, both within and across a myriad of cultures, contexts, channels and media. Through the effective practice of communications, students are able to improve cultural, social, personal and professional experiences, whether between individuals or organisation.

Every country has different cultural standards. In addition to being familiar with the language and currency, foreigners must adapt to the local culture too. At home, people are not aware of the daily work they do. The things that some foreigners do and may not be familiar with are those which are known as "unwritten rules". Some international students stated that they must use various styles of communication when they join in some local social activities outside of their campuses. For example, people in Russia and in certain countries have fundamentally different behaviors when they receive gifts or presents. In a Western culture, it is customary that people must open presents immediately in order to show some form of gratitude and pleasure. Western manners have thus created some form of inconveniences to international students exhibiting Eastern cultures, where the latter are unaccustomed to opening presents in front of others. Due to diversity in interaction methods, some people will encounter some embarrassment in social communication (Tatiana and Andrey, 2016). It must be stated that the term learning difficulties is a common word that includes many types of difficulties that may have relationships with education, learning culture, and language ability, academic practices particular to the university circumstance, and learning from strange practices (Alsahafi and Shin).

The impact of cultural adjustment on expatriates can be seen by the extent in which they can adapt to a new environment, able to learn new things, manage to apply their knowledge in the workplace, and capability to balance both physical and psychological demands, as illustrated in the CCA's U-Curve Theory. In congruent with findings by Sambasivan, Sadoughi and Esmailzadeh (2017), on expatriates working in Malaysia's MNCs, that cultural empathy, personality traits, cultural intelligence and spousal support, are few factors helping in enhancing cultural adjustment among them. The rationale of this study is to understand communication factors in cross-cultural adjustment among international students in a selected private higher education learning institution. The end results of this study will be useful for academic institutions, course designers, educational planners, international teachers, international student staff, and university counselling services for international students in

dealing with international students successfully. The participants of this research were made up of 5 international students studying at Kolej Universiti Islam Perlis.

### Literature Review

In the experience of cross-cultural adjustment, people will experience significant changes in aspects of perspective, physical and psychological issues. This process is called a cross-cultural adjustment. Krishnan and Kirubamoorthy (2017) stated that the cross-cultural adjustment process is one of the ways to interact with people. This interaction usually proceeds by language environment, with the interaction factors being language and communication style. The process of communication is a common problem that most international students put effort into. New comers usually faced some problems in interaction such as the language barriers, difficulty in understanding the local accent, and being too shy to communicate. These problems may lead to difficulties in the interaction process in a new environment (Gulraihan, 2017). Each culture has its own rules for appropriate behaviors that influence verbal and non-verbal communications, whether a person looks another person in the eye or the closeness of people to each other when they speak. All these behaviors and others are rules of etiquette and depend on the culture itself.

According to Abdullah and Alghail (2016), the interaction and social aspects are still at a low-level rate between African international and local students. Another selected communication barrier identified was misunderstanding due to their communication styles. Different communication style is one of the major elements that impact the interaction process (Suhailah et al., 2016). As a result, it causes a high degree of neuroticism, trauma, misunderstanding, and depression (Gulraihan, 2017). However, it is similar to the language, cultures, foods, and religions in Singapore and Indonesia, where the students who came to Malaysia mentioned that they did not encounter any problems in the adjustment process. They were easily able to adapt and adjust themselves to the Malaysian culture. As for the international students who had similar cultural backgrounds to Malaysians, they were more easier to adapt and adjust to the new cultural environment in Malaysia (Pillai, 2017).

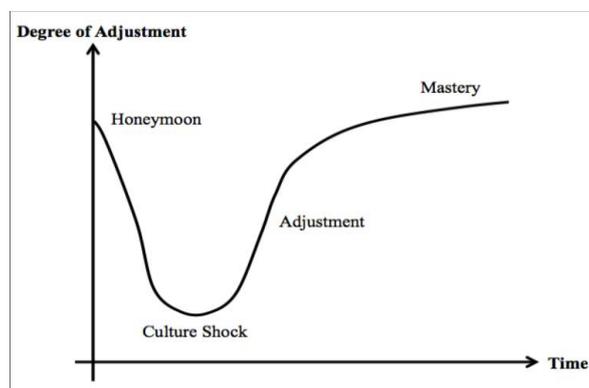
Interaction adjustment makes reference to interacting with host nationals on a daily basis, involving communicating with and socializing with the host nationals (Mesidor and Sly, 2016; Selmer and Luring, 2014). Specifically, it refers to the comfort associated with interaction with the home country's nationals inside and outside of work (Hussain and Shen, 2019; Geary, 2016; Black, 1988). Interaction adjustment also plays an important role in the adjustment process of expatriates since local languages are used daily in communications either with local people or with co-workers. Insufficient competency in the local language in communications will cause serious consequences to expatriates, directly putting direct pressure on the expatriate's adjustment process and basis for informal exclusion (Li and Zizzi, 2018; Selmer & Luring, 2015). If the local language in the host country is easy to learn, it helps to accelerate the adjustment process. Expatriates need to learn the local host's language because not all local people or clients of the organizations and outsiders they interact and deal with can speak and understand English. Zimmermann, Holman, and Sparrow (2003) mentioned four (4) main modes of direct interactions in adjustment, these being by assimilation, separation, marginalization, and vacillating, as well as through indirect communication, such as using facial contacts and expressions. In some cultures, the local cultures are very concerned with facial interactions and expressions, which translate into pride and shame, affecting one's reputation (Vasilopoulos, 2016; Zimmermann, Holman, and Sparrow, 2003). The ability to

speak and communicate in host's language will help students in speedier adjustment process. This is important because good interactions will ease the communication flows. Although English is known as international lingua-franca, not all societies in the world can speak fluently in English. Typically, all expatriates sent overseas are made up of highly talented, selectively chosen and high skilled employees.

### Theoretical Framework

Culture shock in cross-cultural adjustment happens when foreigners are unable to adapt themselves in various countries with different cultures and values. Collie et al. (2015) stated that cross-cultural adjustment can assist people to lessen their personal mental pressures. When people are facing the culture shock in a different environment, cross-cultural adjustment can help people to lessen conflicts and pressures, whether they are in the working environment or working outside of the home country. In the culture stress stage, the individuals gradually destabilize over time, as most of the stress elements as a result of culture shock is solved, although some may continue to feel stressed but on a much smaller scale. Expatriates will start to develop some form of self-conflicts and confusions in their local domains; in other words, despite feeling being at home, they are neither comfortable in their home culture nor in their new culture.

Cross-cultural adjustment also can help people in obtaining feelings of comfort and relaxation in the psychological aspect (Stilianos et al, 2017). In terms of experiencing cross-cultural adjustment, people will experience the changes in aspects of perspective, physical, and psychological, significantly. This process is widely known as a cross-cultural adjustment. Krishnan and Kirubamoorthy (2017) stated that the cross-cultural adjustment process is one of the ways in interacting with people. In addition, proficiency in host country's language can effect students' local interactions or in establishing cordial relationship with local nationals. Language as a medium of communication helps in meeting and getting acquainted with new friends, conveying messages, giving instructions, getting directions and multitude of other attributes and where two diverse countries are involved, smoothens in both social and cultural adjustment. There are four stages in cross-cultural adjustment which are Honeymoon, Cultural Shock, Adjustment, and Mastery.



**Figure 1: Cross-cultural Adjustment Theory**

Source: Black, J. S., & Mendenhall, M. (1990), Cross-cultural training effectiveness: A review and a theoretical framework for future research. *Academy of Management Review*, 15(1): 113-136.

According to Chen et al. (2018), culture covers arts and humanities, movement, cuisine, music, dance, building, history, and family. The means of expression of culture are totally different in different countries. The snowballing method not only takes very little time but also provides researchers with an opportunity to communicate better with the samples because they are acquaintances of the first sample and the first sample is related to the researchers. Therefore, the research sample grows like a snowball (Ahmadzadehasl, 2016).

### Research Methodology

Qualitative research is a type of social science research. It collects and processes non-numerical data and tries to interpret the meanings from these data, thereby helping a researcher to understand social life by studying the target group or place. Qualitative researchers aim to study the meanings, interpretations, symbols, processes, and relationships in social life. This type of research method produces descriptive data, and researchers must then use rigorous and systematic transcription, coding, and trend and topic analysis methods to interpret these descriptive data. Qualitative research explores meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, and metaphors. Symbols and descriptions of things (Berg, 2016) are the most inspiring voices for international students at public universities in Malaysia. Additionally, Hu and Yong (2015) assert that “[a] qualitative study goes some way towards de-trivializing expatriate experience by digging up and interpreting tales told by expatriates, thus helps to find other factors lying behind the rich texture of adventure stories in exotic locations.”

According to Hammerberg, Kirkman and Lacey (2016), qualitative studies are suitable to explore and study the beliefs, attitudes and context of participant’s normative behavior. Qualitative method is a non-numerical research exercise in the form of exploring certain issues, understanding situations in the current phenomenon and answering these questions by making sense of unstructured data that has been assembled, collected and subsequently analysed. Its uniqueness in areas where it focuses on art, data analysis, coding and interpretation of data collected. The research approaches are employed across a spectrum of either academic disciplines, focusing particularly on the aspect of human elements in social and natural sciences, or in academic contexts, concentrating on areas of application such as qualitative market researches, businesses, services and journalism. This type of research method also is used within a number of research areas like education, social sciences and similar. Researchers used CAQDAS software is Atlas.ti software for coding and analysing data that has been collected. Software such as Atlas.ti, helps global researchers to validate, manage and generate relevant data for analysis and interpretations viz-z-viz on coding.

Questions designed for the interviews are expropriated from past studies, but customised and modified to meet the requirements of this study. Interview questions developed for this study is on interaction adjustment. This enables the researcher to gain a better understanding of the student’s cross-cultural adjustment. In conducting any qualitative study, usually qualitative researchers do face multiple challenges in terms of negative perceptions, internal biasness and the reliability and acceptability of data collection. Such concerns have been echoed by several scholars, including who all pointed out that, depending on the purpose, a research immersion experience inside an organization may make sense for an investigator. Benefits cited include the insider researcher’s ability to (1) use his or her knowledge of culture and norms to seek access, approval, and resources from organizations that might not be granted to an outsider; (2) gain access to academic support structures and knowledge; and (3) create an environment of trust through stakeholder participation and buy-ins that can lead to tangible learning and

change. In addition, the existing literatures on cross-cultural adjustment among students were extracted for cross-reference purposes and to provide parallel guidance, so that conclusions and outcomes of the study are not deemed biased or based merely on insider interpretations or based upon personal understandings of the researcher, but within parameters of acceptable and norm of past literatures.

### Findings

The participants of this research were made up of 5 international students studying at Kolej Universiti Islam Perlis, in varying fields of disciplines. The researchers applied the snowball sampling method as the sampling approach method for this study.

*R	Country	Gender	Age	Religion	Field of Discipline	Se m
Dee	Thailand	Male	25	Islam	Bachelor of Accountancy (Hons)	6
Nor	Thailand	Female	24	Islam	Bachelor of Accountancy (Hons)	6
Wan	Thailand	Male	25	Islam	Bachelor of Accountancy (Hons)	6
Ris	Thailand	Male	25	Islam	Bachelor of Business Administration (Hons)	6
Iz r	Myanma	Male	17	Islam	Diploma In Islamic Asset Management	4

**Table 1: Respondent's Demographics**

A total of 5 respondents had participated in our study, with 4 respondents (80%) coming from Thailand and 1 respondent (20%) from Myanmar. In terms of genders, Male and Female respondents were 4 (80%) and 1 (20%) respectively, with an age range of between 17-25 years. All the respondents were Muslims. In terms of field of disciplines, 3 of them were taking the Bachelor of Accountancy (Hons) programs and 1 each was undergoing the Bachelor of Business Administration (Hons) and the Diploma in Islamic Property Management programs. Respectively 4 of the respondents were in Semester 6 while 1 was in Semester 4, in their respective colleges.

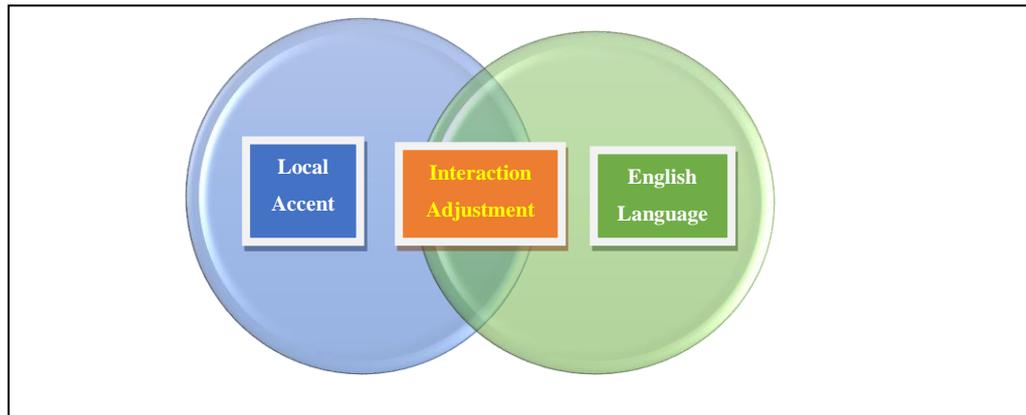
The themes developed on the interaction factors coding are stated in Table 2 below.

Respondents	Quotes
Dee	When I first come to Malaysia, I struggle a lot. When I want to communicate with local because, I communicate through my friends like Sufwan and Najwa. But now, I understand what people talk to me but people can't understand me.
Nor	When I come to Malaysia, I have difficulties to understand in English and standard Malay. When I was in class, I be friends with Malaysian. What I do is I love to read and I read a lot. I was scold by the teacher but I don't understanding what she said. I just look at them. My academic also improve because of my language. When I was in Diploma I learn a lot about English and Malay until my friends can't recognize that I'm not Malaysian.
Wan	The language is the first thing we need to adapt when going abroad. Although I can speak in Kelantanese slang, when I go to Selangor, I need to speak in Malay standard language. My secondary school, I start to speak

	Malay is during my form 3 because I mix with Malay friends. I develop English language during my diploma level because I need to present in English. For me, if we want to learn language we need to be in pressure. We need to stay with local.
Ris	My first time in Malaysia, I have no knowledge at all. Luckily, I have friends that able to speak in Kelantanese. So they help me. In school, they separate us the Thailand's students and mix with local. At that time, I start to build my communication. But when I in perlis, I have difficulties in understanding the local ascent.
Iz	I have big difficulty here especially in Perlis. Inside university it is ok because everyone can speak English but when I go outside like when I want to eat or buy something, I need to use translator a lot. Also, I need my Malaysia or Indonesia friends that can speak Malay. I just use google translate here although my friend suggest me to use other apps, I don't feel comfortable. Google translate is more easier to use. I learn to speak Malay from my Malaysian friend. In Perlis, the people talk too fast and I cannot understand. It is because of their ascent.

**Table 2: Respondent's Quotes**

The respondents stated that they faced a major problem in terms of not understanding the Malay language (local language). An interesting outcome of this study was that the four respondents from Thailand stated that despite being able to speak and communicate in Malay, the different accents used by the locals gave them difficulties in understanding and communicating. This situation occurred as although these Thais could speak Malay, their accents were similar and suitable for those locals coming from the Eastern Malaysian community than the accents of the locals residing in the Northern Malaysian areas. As a result, they needed to learn and speak the Malay accent of the Northern Malaysian community as well. The sole respondent from Myanmar stated that he had a problem with communication because he could not speak Malay (the local language) at all. The situation is even more complicated when some of the locals in the college community cannot speak English to communicate. In order to cope with this problem, the Myanmar respondent needed to use translators to communicate with the local community. In conclusion, respondents need to adjust themselves in terms of different Malay dialects and in communicating in English, which is not their mother tongue language. A model of the results for this qualitative study developed is as follows:



**Figure 2: A Model of Interaction Adjustment among International Students in a Private Higher Institution**

### **Discussion and Recommendation**

This section provides a discussion of the main findings from the research and where applicable, links the literature to the research outcomes. Sandekian et al. (2015) emphasized that language difficulties are considered to be important for international students. The finding of our research is that the biggest challenge facing these respondents is the language barrier when they first came to Malaysia. A similar finding was made by Mesidor and Sly (2015), stating that almost all international students were unable to use the official language of Malaysia – Bahasa Malaysia. This makes it more difficult for them to communicate with people outside the campus. For example, when communicating with a mechanic in the event of a car breakdown, not only that they are not able to understand Bahasa Malaysia, but when they try to communicate in English, both sides could not understand each other owing to the different accents and language of the communicators.

International students may encounter some challenges and super imposing new things in the new culture in the new environment, especially in a different language, which is very different from the life and growth environment of their mother culture. The adaptation or adjustment strategies used by institutions need to suit when international students are treated as individuals or when they are treated as a country, language, religion, or other types of groups (Farkas, 2015). An important factor in helping new international students succeed in the new environment is to let them understand how they need to be exposed to the new education system in the host country. Higher education institution providers in Malaysia can encourage international students to begin their undergraduate majors from the first semester, to receive guidance from a small group of tutors, and to stay with the same group of students throughout the entire study period, thus helping them adapt to the new environment. The universities can help international students by forming effective means and useful ways to help them. In his study, Poyrazli (2017) has proposed plans to help students encounter discrimination, homesickness, and the transition to university life.

### **Limitation**

This study focused only on five international student respondents in Kolej Universiti Islam Malaysia Perlis, a private higher institution of learning. Therefore, future research should target

a higher number of international student respondents from other Malaysian private universities, as well as those from the public universities too, to further understand their experience. Many international students at Malaysian public universities have academic and socio-cultural difficulties that require immediate attention.

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