

Communication Challenges of AEC English Teachers in Australia

(A case study of the culture shock experienced by AEC teachers in Australia)

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ABSTRACT

AEC teachers are those who have taught English in a school called Armidale English College. They also have been exposed enough with English language and its culture. AEC has a program of sending its teachers to Australia with a mission to improve their English skills and to gain cultural studies for three months. These English teachers were expected to have a high ability to communicate well in English, they were also expected to be prepared in cultural differences, in fact, what they experienced was far from the expectations for most people. They actually experienced culture shock in Australia. The purpose of this study is to acknowledge the communication challenges and how they experienced the culture shock in Australia. This study was conducted through qualitative research using case study approach. Data collection techniques consisted of in-depth interviews and documentation studies. The results of the research on the communication challenges by AEC teachers mostly came from themselves and the language which consisted of 1) the accent 2) slang words, 3) vocabularies, and 4) conversation topics. The culture shock they experienced consisted of 1) different mindset 2) openness 3) use of profanity words and 4) life habits. The results also emphasized that overcoming cultural shock does not only focus on having language skills, but also having cultural competence and intelligence.

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1. INTRODUCTION

AEC teachers are English teachers that were assumed to have no difficulties when they go abroad to Australia and would not endure culture shock. But in fact, it was the other way around. They did endure culture shock. Culture shock was still relevant for these teachers. This is not only because of the different language they use but it was also more about the different culture they experienced. Alfred G. Smith (1966) says that "the way people communicate is the way they live. It is their culture. Who talks with whom? How? And about what? These are questions of communication and culture".¹ This statement underlines that culture and communication are inseparable.

When these teachers came to Australia for a three month periode they were challenged to have competence on their intercultural communication. The culture adjustment that was before taken for granted became their first challenge before even realizing how competent they were in intercultural communication. As most researchers see that cross-cultural adjustment is conceptualized as the degree of psychological comfort with various aspects of a host country. Research initially examined language, nonverbal behavior, and concepts such as culture shock, stereotyping, and prejudice, but has now expanded into broader topics such as identity, migration, health communication, intercultural relationships, tourism, and intercultural uses of new media [1].

The difficulties in being in a new culture happen around us for example experienced by Japanese workers who experience culture shock when they were transferred to work in Indonesia. Japanese

workers who are used to being disciplined and are used to have a high work ethic had difficulty working in Indonesia. They were shocked on how Indonesian workers were often late coming and were not enthusiast in working. Culture shock was also seen in research of Malaysian students facing various social and environmental challenges and also the challenge of adapting as a Muslim when they were in Australia.

The explanation above develops an awareness on barriers of intercultural communication which is interesting. Resultantly, the research question focused on the communication challenges that these teachers endure and how they experienced the culture shock in Australia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Culture Shock

Culture shock is a feeling when someone encounters problems in adjusting in a foreign place. There are many potential sources of confusion and frustration the sojourner² attempts to adjust to an alien social system [2]. One can be the result of a different accent even the language is familiar. One can related to different meanings in symbols or even different concepts in mind that develops different perspectives. It is more than simply being unfamiliar with social norms or experiencing new foods and it tends to impact travellers even after they've become familiar with and comfortable in new cultures [3]. It is not surprising that this phase of adjustment is sometimes termed "culture shock" to designate the psychological impact of the distortion or absence of familiar cues [2].

Research about culture shock have been conducted for years, there are several models in describing the process of

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http://www.yorku.ca/wsywong/course/ysdn3104_04/jandt4echp2.pdf

² A sojourner is a person who resides temporarily in a place.

adjustment in the literature, depicting it as a learning curve. Two that have been used various times and still relevant to this day are the U-curve and W-curve models of adjustment. Both models consist of a varying number of stages, typically three or four with some cases specific timeframes attributed to the different stages. This research will focus on the U-curve model, as the research concentrates more on the 'culture shock' stage.

Lysgaard (1955) stated, "Adjustment as a process over time seems to follow a U shaped curve: adjustment is felt to be easy and successful to begin with then follows a crisis in which one feels less well-adjusted somewhat lonely and unhappy. Finally one begins to feel better adjusted again becoming more integrated into the foreign community"[4]. As what has been stated above, the U-curve model can explain the process on how a so journal adjust and adapt in a new environment. At first, they will feel excited and enthusiast on something new, assuming that their old life was old and boring, then after some time, they will feel less excited and maybe depress because they realize that this new environment forces them to involve themselves in a different way of life, different values and norms. The lack of friends from the same originated place adds more on an unhappy feeling, following them to feel lonely. Though after a while when they eventually can adapt the life style, they slowly adjust and master the new environment and feel happy again.

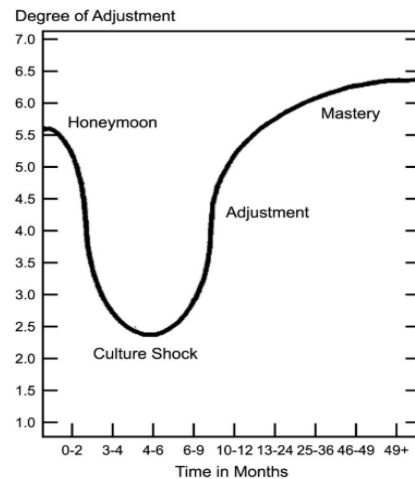


Figure 1: The U-curve of cross-cultural adjustment [4]

The U-curve model explains that there are four stages which are; the 'honeymoon stage', "Culture shock", 'Adjustment' and "Master". AEC English teachers encounters these for stages in their three months periode of time in Australia. though this research focuses on the second stage which is "The culture Shock" stage. The honeymoon stage occurs during the first week after arrival at the host country. Individuals are fascinated by the new and different culture. When the newcomers start to cope with real conditions on daily basis, the second stage begins - culture stock stage. The stage is characterized by frustration and hostility towards the host nation and its people. The third stage is the adjustment stage in which the individual gradually adapts to the new norms and values of the host country and can act more appropriately than they were before. Finally, in the mastery stage, the individual is able to effectively function in the new culture [2]. U-Curve Theory of Adjustment Early research on expatriate adjustment focused mostly on cross-cultural adjustment issues; scholars relied on the U-Curve Theory (UCT) of adjustment. This U-Curve theory is relevant with this research as to find out how these English teachers endure culture shock.

2.1 Theory of Intercultural Communication

The way people communicate is the way they live. It is their culture. This is why culture and communication are inseparable. From that statement, it is necessary to use the theory of intercultural communication in this research. Intercultural communication describes any interaction between two or more members of different cultural groups.

The word communication means sharing or distributing between persons. It involves verbal words and nonverbal words transmitted and processed to produce meaning within a specific situation. It is a common thing when words are not understood, voice tone, facial expressions, gestures, movements, postures, spatial positioning and appearance, as well as other signs, signals and symbols in the context. It may produce shared meanings but in time people interpret differently. When communication happens across culture (beliefs, values, behaviour of a specific community), messages are easily more misinterpreted than within the same culture. [5]. Intercultural communication is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process whereby people from different cultures negotiate, at varying levels of awareness, shared meanings.

What distinguishes intercultural communication from other types of communication is that we are interacting with people from different cultures—people perceived as “different from us” (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1989). AEC teachers endure culture shock when they went to Australia, this was mostly not only because of the different language they share. Indonesian and English but more because of their views of life. The study of communication is the study

of culture, reflecting the views, values and behaviour of a specific community [5].

3. METHODS

Because consumer culture is so complex, mixed-method research approaches are seen to be crucial. This strategy integrates qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide a thorough grasp of the intricate variables influencing Indonesian consumers' purchasing decisions. Techniques for stratified and random sampling will be

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

AEC is an English school located in Bandung that facilitates its teachers to go to Australia to enhance not only their English skills but also their intercultural competence. The mission is to perform a culture study. The teachers live in an Australian family home for a three months period, they are usually treated as a family member in the Australian home and involve themselves in various family activity. The other mission is for them to get involve in the community itself, joining activity groups in the community. Robby was fortunate to be able to join activities in the New England University, and had assisted the Indonesian lecturer in some events. While siska had chances to join a knitting group in the society. Kris was also working as a dinner while pratiwi basically did more babysitting time in the home family and in the neighbourhood. All four experienced interaction around the community. All four AEC teachers have also been interviewed for this research. The purpose of this study is to acknowledge their communication challenges and how they experienced the culture shock in Australia.

All four admitted that they were very excited to go to Australia, they were well prepared. When they eventually landed in the country they were fascinated on the well

managed way of life. From how people commute from one place to another, traffic seemed to be in order not as what they usually experienced in their home country. The garbage system is also well managed. Everything seemed to be in order. The initial time in a new culture is exciting for the teachers, it is pointed out in the U-curve model as a high point on the chart. However, as time progresses, the four teachers stated that they began to feel the stress of adjusting and can begin to feel low, depressed, and even physically ill. Siska in one occasion revealed that she cried because she felt alone and misses her friends and home back in Indonesia.

It didn't stop there, when they interacted more with the Australian family and the people around them, they began to feel discharged. Not because the family was being bad to them but because the differences they had. When members of different cultural groups come into contact, they often discover their expectations diverge considerably [1].

The Intercultural Communication Challenges

Intercultural communication is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process whereby people from different cultures negotiate, at varying levels of awareness, shared meanings. So basically, challenges appear when the communication takes place and emerges when people exchange symbols toward another, though it was quite different as what Kris had experience. Kris suggested that the challenges already took place before he even had an interaction with the Australian. Kris admitted that the communication challenges came mostly from himself, not that he didn't understand the language, but because he was discouraging and very nervous to speak up. It had to do something related on the way

Indonesian people were grown up. "It was not a custom for us to speak up and give out our opinion". This made Kris worried to speak up. He was also concerned of his grammar, he was afraid that if he had used the wrong grammar, people would misinterpret and considered him as being impolite.

This is clearly a lack of competence in communication, as what Sage (2017) suggested that from the seven suggestions in communication competence is to have strategies for opening and entering conversations, making suggestions, objections and excuses (phatics) also that we learn ways to initiate conversations, interrupt others, change direction of discussions and terminate an exchange of views [5]. That was stated by Kris in the beginning part of his experience in interacting. It came to be a shock for him. But eventually he could manage this well as time went by.

Results of the interviews also emerged communication challenges that were more related to the verbal communication which is the language used in interacting with one another. There are four categories which consist of:

1. The Accent

Pratiwi mentioned that she had poor listening when it came to Australians talking to each other or even to her. She admitted it was hard to understand Australians as they have a unique accent. This accent is not custom in Hollywood movies, that was why Pratiwi had a difficult time in understanding. She also realized that her English accent was also difficult to be understood. So, on some occasion, whether it was Pratiwi or an Australian, they both had difficult times in understanding each other. She tended to avoid long conversation since she was afraid people wouldn't understand her. "I always ask people to repeat things when they talk,

but sometimes they don't want to repeat it so they say nevermind and the conversation stopped".

There are problems when speaking the common language of others, you are with, but using a different accent, stress and intonation pattern than them, called 'mothertongue interference'. This can give wrong signals and impressions. Differences between Asian-English and English-English may lead to difficulties [5]. One's intellectual ability is often judged on the basis of how well one speaks English. Foreign accents and accents related to variation in style and pronunciation of native English speech can be subject to negative evaluation and discrimination [6]. This might be the cause of insecurity among the four teachers in communicating in English. It is common in Indonesia that people who can speak English are assumed to be intellect, but it also comes with the right accent, which should be the what they call as the "British accent".

Roach (2004) in his research focused on the definition of what we call as "The British accent", he categorized it into four aspects: (a) the number of native speakers of this accent who originate in Ireland, Scotland and Wales is very small and probably diminishing. (b) the great majority of native speakers of this accent are of middle-class or upper-class origin, educated at private schools and (if of appropriate age) university. (c) the majority of speakers of this accent live in, or originate from, the south-east of England. (d) The accent is most familiar as that used by most 'official' BBC speakers of English origin [7].

Robby without doubts stated that Australian accent was the hardest thing he could understand. "To be honest, I can't really catch up the words from the people who speak with Australian accent".

2. Slang Words

Robby had difficulties in understanding slang words. Slang words is an oral communication, using them can make the language spoken more natural. The four teachers surely had difficulties in understanding these words as they had never learnt about them. But they were forced to acknowledge these words as they were commonly used in daily conversation. Robby after a while got used to them after knowing how to use them. This was as what Kris had done, shadowing his Australian friends. Though both admitted that they didn't want to overuse it. They were worried if in a way it would sound strange and also unusual and at one point, they didn't know when it was appropriate to use slang expressions.

One should be very careful when using a dialector slang expression in another language [8]. In the case of English, a limited use may be all right but an overuse of either is considered by many to sound uneducated. Slang expression emerges when a young generation takes on a set of values starkly opposed to the values of its elders and begins to use a positive slang expression that is semantically linked to its new value orientation. It differs from most slang in that it typically endures for one or more generations, is used pervasively, and is applied to a wide array of referents as a general term of approval [9]. From Moore's statement before, slang words are created by young people at the age of their teen life.

While some slang expression can last for a good length of time some slang expressions have a short life. Therefore, there is the danger that one may learn out-dated expression that would sound strange in a modern conversation or an older person using a young person's expression could bring smiles to the face of a native speaker [8]. This made it harder for the teachers when they

were basically learning slang words from former teachers who had gone to Australia and taught them some slang expression. It turned out what they have learnt were slang expressions that were not used anymore.

3. Vocabularies

Kris thought what he had got from being an English teacher in Indonesia would prepare him with vocabulary richness and phrases, but it turned out, that he had not got enough. One time he told a story about a rooster, though what he said was not rooster, he used the word 'cock' to identify a male bird. Immediately the person who he was talking to get confused and laughed. The word 'cock', as he ended up knowing was used not to identify a rooster, but a 'penis' in Australia. Kris stated that from then on, he was more aware of different meanings in vocabularies and it made him a bit more reluctant in speaking. Kris then did a lot of shadowing so he was accustomed to what Australians said when they were having a conversation.

Robby also had hard times in describing things, he admitted to have lack of vocabularies. It was alright when they talk about daily conversation, but it got difficult when it was focus on topics related to farming tools. So, in the meantime, Robby admitted to use more of his body language to describe things.

4. Conversation Topics

All teachers admitted that of course that understand Australian English even though of the obstacles they faced during conversation which were stated before, but it was the topic itself which was another thing that made them confused to involve themselves in a conversation. "...I don't really understand what they are talking about" Robby stated. Pratiwi also said that in some conversation she preferred to not involve

herself because of the topic. They stated that most was because the topics were related on Australian culture, politics, state regulation, Australian shows, films and news which they didn't really follow much.

In some cases, they would ask about it, then the Australians would likely share information, then explain. Though again, topics could change in an instant and suddenly would talk about other things not didn't relate with the teachers. It definitely confused them. Robby had some problems because every time they finished talking about something, they would always ask him for his opinions, sometimes he could give his thoughts about it, but on several occasion he couldn't, and again it ws because he couldn't relate to the conversation topic.

According to one of the six culture dimensions of Geert Hofstede, one of it is individualism versus collectivism, Individualism "can be defined as a preference for a loosely-knit social framework" in which people rely solely on themselves and immediate family. Collectivism presents a tight knit relationship with family and relies heavily on family members [10]. This can help to understand the difference in the set of minds from the teachers that went to Australia with their new friends in Australia. Being independent in Indonesia is not really a must as they often do everything with someone else accompanied by someone else especially with their family. "We like to hang out together as a family", Robby stated. Kris on the other side has a tight bond with his family in Indonesia, so being far from them gave him a shock.

As in Australia, they were immediately forced to let go this 'collectivism' sense and plunged in to a more 'individualism' sense. Siska admitted she felt alone when after her honeymoon stage in Australia. This loneliness that she endured

made her cry at nights. Differences in individualistic Western cultures and collective Eastern ones are below:

<i>Individualistic culture</i>	<i>Collective culture</i>
Self is unique, separate, independent, self-sufficient & makes their own decisions	People belong to extended families/ groups, making decisions together with a 'we' perspective
Individuals take care of the self and immediate family	People expect to take care of the extended family & support them in all aspects of life
Group memberships & friends based on shared interests & activities	Belong to few permanent groups which have a strong influence on all aspects of life
Reward for individual achievement/ initiative-individual credit & blame assigned	Reward for contribution and cooperation to group goals. Credit & shared blame
Value for autonomy, individual security, equality, youth & change	Value for tradition, duty, order, age, group security, status, hierarchy

Figure 2. Differences in Individualistic Western cultures and Collective Eastern [5]

The culture shock they experienced relates on the differences in individualistic western cultures and collective eastern which influence their mind set. Even though there had been some research that stated that the separation between individualistic and collective culture were not relevant in this era, but as it came up to be in this research it still does.

1. Different Mindset

When they had conversations which related to topics about their parents. There had a lot of differences. The teachers see themselves as those who had responsibilities to take care of their parents when one day they get old and would then later on taken care by their children, on the other side Australians stay in a 'home', or in other words a home for the elderly.

One of the teachers said that one of her friends got married, but it was odd because not everyone was invited. The people that were invited were close friends. While in Indonesia, they have a tradition way in a

wedding where it seems that everyone is invited.

Perceptual differences amongst us make communication challenging enough for those from the same cultural background. When people come from differing cultures, possibility of misunderstanding is greater [5]. This assumed that this different mindset can create more misinterpretation between the teachers and the people around them.

2. Openness

Sojourners abroad typically experienced initial elation and optimism followed by frustration and alienation in interacting with host country nationals [2]. Kris was not prepared in expressing himself, but he saw that his friends express his or her feelings easily. There was a big openness in his environment. They expressively talked about their love life, career and education. Kris was not ready to see an unmarried couple sleep in the same bedroom or express their love in front of him. He was shock at first but he had to maintain calm.

Homosexuality was also something shocking for Pratiwi. Most Indonesian perceived it to be taboo, she was not used to see partners with the same sex showing affection in front of public. She appreciated when Brook gave her some insight about it before she saw it by herself so she was quite ready for it. And Robby had also the same experience. One of the family members where he stayed in stated that she was a "he", while actually physically she is a girl. She said that She wanted Robby to call her "Felix" while her birth name was actually "Fellicia" and acknowledge her as a "him". This was quite confusing for Robby. At first this kind of "openness" seemed shocking but they day by day they got used to it.

3. Profanity Words

Kris was amazed how people well behaved and well spoken suddenly let out profanity words when he or she was angry. Especially when they were driving, and someone broke some rules. They used to swear words, which made Kris nervous and shocked. Pratiwi stated that even she was customized by these cursed words, she admitted to always had a bit of a fright whenever she heard it "I think I can never get used to it".

4. Life Habits

Kris admitted stated that Indonesians were not at all grown up being independent, they were grown up to be more dependent to people. Indonesians usually have someone to help out things, and they usually do something because they were told to or they do something because everyone else was doing it and maybe they do it because someone would be helping them.

Kris was forced to be independent and at the same time confident. That was quite hard, and it took a while. Kris that admitted himself as a person who couldn't say something straight to the point, had problems in that. His Australian friends forced him to say something straight to the point. As when you don't like something, you should just say it. Kris had a rough time in that because he was also worried not to be impolite. He saw that when they gathered around with friends, they always clean up together. It was already a custom.

On birthday parties, if they go out, it was not a custom that the birthday person treats the friends, everyone just pays by themselves. Kris said that, it was completely different in Indonesia where the birthday person is expected to treat everyone coming to the party. Kris was shocked when he had to pay his own bills when he was invited to a

birthday party, as he didn't have that much money. Fortunately, another Australian paid for him.

In a different case, Pratiwi was stunned when gardeners came to and from into their house where Pratiwi lived freely to get their drinks. She was also stunned when they could also be left when everyone in the family had to go somewhere. "The house wasn't even locked when the family had to go somewhere, one time I went to lock the door as I was scared, but then eventually they advised me not to do it anymore"

The results also emphasized that overcoming cultural shock does not only focus on having language skills, but also having cultural competence and intelligence

The degree of culture-shock experienced by a sojourner abroad is affected by his/her flexibility of role behavior and cross-cultural sensitivity [2]. Cultural differences (above example) show there is no single model of competence. What is acceptable behaviour in one culture might be inept or offensive in another [5]. Profanity words for example is highly offensive for the teachers and as seen above, the teachers stated that they could never get used to it.

The ability to communicate with people of other cultures by minimizing the potential for conflict and misunderstanding is one of the key components of gaining what is referred to as "cultural self-awareness." Culturally self-aware people learn to recognize the effects that culture has on their perceptions and values [11]. The culture shock endured by these teachers set in when coping with the new environment on a daily basis. Individual begins to recognize some degree of unpreparedness for dealing effectively with the environment.

5. CONCLUSION

The results of the research concludes that even though the four teacher that were sent to Australia had prepared themselves well before they went to Australia. They still experienced culture shock which then challenged them in their communication competence. There are four communication challenges that they endured besides challenges that came out from within themselves: 1) the accent 2) slang words, 3) vocabularies, and 4) conversation topics. Those four categories had become barriers to perform effective communication at the time of their interaction with Australians.

The culture shock as one of the stages in the U-curve model in adjusting in a new

environment seemed to have a big influence in their competence in communication. How they experienced culture shock are categorized into four aspects: 1) different mindset 2) openness 3) use of profanity words and 4) life habits. This emphasized that overcoming cultural shock does not only focus on having language skills, but also having cultural competence and intelligence.

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