

# Culture shock among Kuantan Singingi students: A communication accommodation theory perspective

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## Abstract

Migrant students in Indonesia often face adaptation challenges due to cultural differences, one of which is communication culture shock. This study aims to understand the culture shock experienced by students from Kuantan Singingi Regency in Yogyakarta, as well as to analyze their communication strategies from the perspective of Communication Accommodation Theory. According to Howard Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory, the inability to adapt communication methods (convergence) or the tendency to overly maintain identity (divergence) can increase social distance and trigger conflict. If left unaddressed, this situation can negatively impact students' mental health, academic achievement, and social integration in their new environment. Using a qualitative method with an interpretive paradigm, data were collected through in-depth interviews with members of the Riau Students Association of Yogyakarta, Kuantan Singingi Commissariat (IPRY-KKS). The results indicate that culture shock manifests specifically through language barriers, misunderstandings due to the intonation of the Kuantan Singingi Melayu dialect which is perceived as more assertive, and disorientation towards local social norms such as the use of cardinal directions. In response, students dynamically apply two accommodation strategies. The convergence strategy, such as softening their voice and using basic Javanese vocabulary, is employed in public spaces to gain social acceptance. Conversely, the divergence strategy, which involves intentionally maintaining their native dialect, is used within the IPRY-KKS community to reinforce group identity and solidarity. The choice between these two strategies is influenced by contextual factors, interlocutors, and communication goals. This study concludes that Kuantan Singingi students are strategic communicators who actively navigate their new cultural environment, not only as an effort to survive but also to affirm their cultural identity.

## Keywords

Culture shock, Communication accommodation, Convergence, Divergence, Migrant students

## Introduction

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Indonesia, as a multicultural country, has a unique diversity of languages and cultures. This difference, coupled with unequal access to education, drives student mobility from various regions to educational centers like Yogyakarta. Yogyakarta City, known as the "student city," attracts students from all over Indonesia, including from Kuantan Singingi Regency (Kuansing), Riau. For students studying away from home, this transition process often presents significant adaptation challenges, known as culture shock. This phenomenon is defined as a state of psychological stress, anxiety, or discomfort (Turistiati & Andhita, 2021), as well as the emotional response that arises when individuals encounter a new and unfamiliar social and cultural environment (Diandra et al., 2024). Generally, students aged 18–25 are typically in the transition period from adolescence to adulthood. At this time, the changing environment of the diaspora and psychological factors make them search for their identity and learn to be more independent in their thinking and actions (Suciati, 2023). Cross-cultural communication involves interaction with a host culture that does not yet understand the culture of the newcomers. When interacting, mutual cultural misunderstanding and cultural differences can affect people who have different cultural perceptions and symbolic systems in communication (Andhita, 2021). This research focuses on the experiences of Kuansing students who are members of the Riau Yogyakarta Student Association, Kuantan Singingi Branch (IPRY-KKS).

The challenge of adaptation is evident in everyday communication. Preliminary research identified two main problems. First, the difference in intonation, where the Kuansing Malay dialect, which tends to be firm, is often misunderstood as an expression of anger in the context of the more subtle Javanese culture in Yogyakarta. Second, differences in spatial cognition caused confusion for Kuansing students, who are accustomed to landmark-based directions (e.g., turn right or left), when local people used cardinal directions. This communication problem causes interpersonal conflicts, making Kuansing students afraid to ask local people for directions and leading them to withdraw a little from interaction. This communication problem requires an analytical framework capable of explaining the adjustment of verbal and nonverbal behavior, namely Communication Accommodation Theory, pioneered by Howard Giles (Giles, 1973). The basic assumption of this theory is how similarities and differences in speech and behavior exist in all conversations, and how we perceive the utterances and behavior of others will determine how we evaluate a conversation (Suheri, 2019).

CAT explains how individuals adjust or differentiate their communication styles via Convergence and Divergence to manage social distance and achieve interactional goals. By focusing on the linguistic and nonverbal behaviors of Kuansing students, such as intonation and spatial cognition, this research is expected to provide new empirical contributions to the application of CAT in the multicultural Indonesian context.

Based on this background, this study aims to describe the manifestations of culture shock and analyze the communication Convergence and Divergence strategies used by Kuantan Singingi students in Yogyakarta.

## Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with an interpretive paradigm. The qualitative approach was chosen to deeply investigate and describe the quality of the adaptation experience (Murdiyanto, 2020). The interpretive paradigm is used to understand and give meaning to social reality from the perspective of individuals who experience it directly (Hasiara, 2012), namely the culture shock experiences of Kuantan Singingi students. The research object is the Riau Yogyakarta Student Association, Kuantan Singingi Branch (IPRY-KKS). Informants were selected purposefully against 10 informants based on the criteria of being part of the IPRY-KKS and having lived in Yogyakarta for more than two years year to deepen their experience of culture shock during their early days living in Yogyakarta and how they dealt with it. The primary data collection technique is in-depth interviews to obtain comprehensive information related to the informants' experiences (Murdiyanto, 2020).

Data analysis in this study used the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which includes three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Abdussamad, 2021). To ensure the validity of the findings, this study employed data source triangulation techniques, which involved comparing data obtained from various informants to examine the phenomenon from different perspectives (Haryono, 2020).

## Results and discussion

### Results

The communication adaptation of Kuansing students in Yogyakarta began with culture shock stemming from communication barriers. The main trigger for culture shock in this case is the difference in intonation between Kuansing Malay, which tends to be firm in speech, and the typical Yogyakarta residents, who speak softly and gently. This results in migrants from Kuantan Singingi often considering people from Yogyakarta to be gentle-natured, as stated by one of the sources:

*“Feeling awkward because of his soft speaking style, he briefly wondered if Javanese people were indeed soft, whereas in our hometown we were used to a firm speaking style”* (Informant Rollio).

Besides intonation, differences in spatial cognition, such as cardinal directions, also pose communication difficulties, forcing students to make behavioral adjustments. The long-term challenge that is still felt is the difficulty in mastering the Javanese language. IPRY-KKS students contextually used two main strategies from CAT. The two manifestations of culture shock mentioned above demonstrate that assertive intonation, which is prone to triggering social misunderstandings and spatial disorientation, hindering daily mobility, collectively creates conditions of substantial communication uncertainty for

Kuansing students. The psychological and social pressure resulting from these basic adaptation difficulties directly motivates informants to activate strategic self-adjustment mechanisms. According to the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) framework, this mechanism takes the form of a conscious choice between Convergence and Divergence. Students in Kuantan Singingi must balance the need to achieve social approval on one hand and maintain their Malay cultural identity on the other.

In response to this, convergence became the dominant accommodation strategy used by Kuansing students in their interactions with the out-group (local community). Kuansing students often adapt to local communities, such as softening their intonation, facial expressions, and body language to avoid misunderstandings. Convergence is a strategy where individuals adapt to each other's communicative behavior. People will adapt to the speaker's rate of speech, pauses, smiles, eye contact, and other verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Krisna et al., 2020). This adjustment is made to reduce uncertainty and seek social approval (Turner, 2008). Intonation adjustment to 'soften the voice or intonation' to align with communication norms in Yogyakarta. "Yes, if I keep using my regional intonation, I'm afraid it will cause misunderstandings" (Informant Nur Fadni). In this case, Kuansing students applied a convergence strategy by learning the cardinal directions to facilitate communication with local people. Efforts to use basic local vocabulary and greetings are also often used, such as "monggo" and "matur nuwun," to facilitate daily communication.

Divergence is not meant to build similarity among communicators. This process is one way for individuals from different cultural communities to maintain their social identity. Divergence is used by Kuantan Singingi migrant students to emphasize cultural identity (Amelia et al., 2023), specifically occurring within the context of the in-group (fellow Kuansing students at IPRY-KKS). When gathering with fellow Kuansingi students, they fully utilize the Kuansing dialect to emphasize social identity and foster in-group solidarity "If I'm with friends from Kuansing, that's for sure, because that's where I can use my hometown dialect freely." (Informant Rahmat)

IPRY-KKS serves as a Safe Space that mediates stress caused by culture shock and allows students to reconnect with their original identities. This result indicates that Kuansing students adopt Contextual Communication Accommodation. Convergence is employed as a strategy for social and functional survival in a new environment, driven by the motive for social acceptance, while Divergence is used as a mechanism for maintaining identity and cultural solidarity. This balance demonstrates that the context of interaction and the social goals pursued significantly influence communication accommodation (Hamiji, 2024).

### Discussion

The findings in this study indicate the presence of communication barriers stemming from differences in communication styles. Unlike dialectal barriers, which are linguistic

in nature, the confusion of Kuansing students regarding the use of cardinal directions (North, South, West, East) by the people of Yogyakarta reflects a difference in ways of thinking. Yogyakarta residents point directions using a compass, while Kuansing students are accustomed to pointing directions with their body position, which can change depending on the direction giver's position (e.g., left, right, or turn at the tugu intersection).

From the perspective of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), this phenomenon places Kuansing students in a position of uncertainty. When local residents gave directions using the terms 'ngetan' (east) or 'ngulon' (west), Kuansing students not only failed to understand the words spoken but also failed to determine their position. The analysis of the interview data reveals an imbalance in the accommodation strategies used here. Kuantan Singingi students often observe it difficult to achieve full convergence (adopting the mindset of the cardinal directions) instantly because it requires a long adaptation period. As a form of adaptation, they tend to negotiate meaning by asking their interlocutors (local residents) to explain their communication methods. For example, they might ask, "Excuse me, ma'am, which way is east?" Left or right? (informant Zaim Fadhil).

At that moment, the Kuansing students were actually asking the local residents to converge toward their way of thinking (using 'left/right'). This study indicates that in severe culture shock (disorientation), individuals tend to suspend efforts to adapt their language to the new environment and focus more on message clarity in order to survive or achieve their goals. However, such an approach also makes them stand out as outsiders (out-group) who are not yet accustomed to local norms.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that Kuantan Singingi students in Yogyakarta are not merely passive individuals experiencing anxiety due to culture shock, but rather active communicators in adapting to their new social environment. Through the lens of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), this study found that communication adaptation occurs through two dynamically interacting mechanisms.

Convergence strategy. This strategy is evident in the way they soften their vocal intonation and try to adjust to the compass-based direction system. This approach is done not merely out of preference but as a survival strategy to minimize negative stereotypes and social friction. The finding regarding directional confusion due to differences in thinking styles (self-based vs. cardinal-based) is one of the significant contributions of this research, as it demonstrates that culture shock can disrupt basic navigational abilities. Second, within the in-group realm (IPRY-KKS), students consciously engage in Maintenance Divergence. The use of a strong native dialect in community spaces is not a form of self-isolation but rather a way to restore psychological well-being and reaffirm their ethnic identity, which is often suppressed in public spaces.

This research confirms that the success of migrant students' adaptation is not measured by how quickly they can fully integrate into the new social environment, but rather by their ability to maintain a balance between adjusting to be accepted by others (external) and still preserving their self-identity to maintain internal stability.

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