



Phenomenological Inquiry into EFL Tertiary Students' Experiences of Academic Culture in the *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka* (PMM) Program

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ABSTRACT

The *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka* (PMM) program, part of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) initiative, offers EFL students the opportunity to engage in diverse academic and cultural environments across Indonesia. This research aims to explore the academic cultural experiences of three EFL students who participated in the PMM program, focusing on their cross-cultural adaptation and personal development. The research subjects were students who had participated in the PMM program and were enrolled in the English Language Education program at two different universities in Southeast Sulawesi. Based on Kim's (2015) theory of cross-cultural adaptation, this study utilized a descriptive qualitative design with a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically using an interactive model of data reduction, display, and inference. The findings of this study reveal a dynamic process of stress, adaptation, and personal growth, as university students navigate cultural, linguistic, and academic differences. Key challenges included language barriers, culture shock, and unfamiliar academic norms, which resulted in initial stress. However, the students actively adopted strategies such as social observation, intercultural communication, and flexibility in response. This research highlights the important role of social support from peers, lecturers and the community in promoting adaptation and building confidence. In addition to overcoming external challenges, the students developed deeper intercultural competence, empathy, self-reflection, and professional readiness as future educators. This growth highlights the interplay between cross-cultural adaptation and identity formation, which offers new insights into the role of PMM programs in shaping holistic and inclusive educational practices in Indonesia.

Introduction

The field of education in Indonesia is currently expanding quickly, particularly since the education minister introduced the *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) program in 2021. This initiative attempts to raise the standard of higher education in Indonesia by

giving students the tools they need to plan their own learning paths (Wahyudi et al., 2024). According to Marisa (2021), self-directed learning is one of the most relevant subjects in the Society 5.0 period since technology is being integrated to help solve problems and meet people's social needs. This problem must be addressed by redesigning the study program curriculum to align with the MBKM policy, which involves adjustments in planning, learning processes, assessment methods, and evaluation of learning outcomes (Baharuddin, 2021). The MBKM program provides a wide selection of courses and extracurricular activities that suit the interests and talents of each student in an effort to improve the standard of education in Indonesia. As one of the ongoing programs, this initiative has already started (Anwar, 2022). In the MBKM curriculum, each student can study independently from outside the study program and even the university. Additionally, students can enroll in up to 20 credits of host university courses, including two required credits of Nusantara Modules (Merdeka, 2021). The MBKM program educates students about the importance of independence and self-reliance in learning, especially in a university environment (Christy, 2023).

One of MBKM's many programs is the *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka* (PMM). Indonesia's education system has undergone major changes in recent years, According to Anggara (2023), the MBKM policy is one of the most major programs implemented to promote this goal. Efforts to improve the quality of higher education have been revived through a number of initiatives. Enhancing academic freedom, encouraging creativity and innovation, and improving the standard of higher education in Indonesia are the goals to be achieved. Through the PMM program, it can open access for students to recognize the values of ethnic diversity, religion, belief, culture, and language (Batau et al., 2022). Darmawan and Aliyyah (2024) state that students need to acquire knowledge relevant to their new environment, including language, cultural practices, and social structures.

The *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka* (PMM) at MBKM gives students the opportunity to get to know the diverse values and culture of the destination university (Ilham, 2023). However, when students join this program and move to a university that has a different academic system, language, and cultural norms, they will face many challenges (Yassin et al., 2020). Some of these relate to social adaptation, differences in learning styles, and difficulties in understanding academic and doctoral communication styles. In this context, Young Yun Kim's (2001; 2015) Cross-Cultural Adaptation theory is relevant to understand the dynamics mentioned above. The theory explains that the process of adjusting to a new environment causes stress to the individual, who then adjusts through learning, and eventually experiences personal growth and integration. This process is described by the stress-adaptation-growth model. Adaptation is not only external, but also involves internal cognitive and affective transformations. Within this framework, PMM students' experiences in dealing with different academic cultures can be seen as a complex cross-cultural adaptation process.

Currently, there are many studies discussing academic education within the framework of the *Pertukaran Mahasiswa merdeka* (PMM). First, Abrar et al. (2024) examined the educational challenges and benefits faced by PMM students from three cohorts in the English Language Education program at Jambi University. Although their qualitative study highlights the impact of curriculum alignment and differences in educational systems on academic performance, the study overlooks the deeper process of personal development among students. Second, Mulyanto et al. (2024) used a case study approach to explore how students adapt to a new academic environment, identifying two main types of adaptation: recovery adaptation and peer-based adaptation. However, this study does not address how these adaptation processes relate to personal growth, a core component of cross-cultural

adjustment as outlined in Kim's theory. Similarly, Wardani et al. (2025) employed a phenomenological approach to investigate the experiences of three PMM participants, revealing challenges related to daily life changes, social integration, and language differences. While this research successfully captures sources of stress during the adaptation process, it fails to explore students' psychological and cognitive transformations. Overall, these studies highlight adaptation challenges but have not explored how such experiences lead to internal growth and identity development—a gap that is the focus of this study.

The third study has made a significant contribution in helping us understand the adaptation process of masters during the PMM program. Therefore, this study will focus on the three aspects developed by Young Yun Kim: First, the stress aspect, which is the emergence of feelings of pressure, confusion, anxiety, and discomfort as a result of differences in language, social norms, values, and how people interact with their new environment; second the adaptation aspect, where people actively begin to learn, adjust, and strategize to interact with their new environment, which is personal growth, both in cognitive, affective, and social aspects; this is an important indicator of successful adaptation and stress.

Thus, this study addresses a significant gap by focusing on how the cross-cultural experiences of PMM students not only present adaptation challenges but also foster personal growth and transformation within the context of academic culture. This focus expands the application of Young Yun Kim's theory in Indonesian higher education studies, offering new insights into the lived academic experiences of student exchange participants. The purpose of this study is to explore the academic cultural experiences of three EFL tertiary students participating in the PMM program, particularly their process of cross-cultural adaptation and personal development. To achieve this, the research is guided by the following questions: What academic culture-related challenges and transformative experiences are encountered by EFL students during their participation in the PMM program?"

Research Methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to explore the academic and cultural experiences of students participating in the PMM program. Phenomenological research explains how multiple people's life experiences of a concept or phenomenon have the same meaning (Creswell, 2007). The research subjects were students who had participated in the PMM program and were enrolled in the English Language Education program at two different universities in Southeast Sulawesi. The criteria for selecting participants include: (1) active participation in the PMM program for at least one academic semester, (2) enrollment in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program, and (3) willingness and ability to articulate their experiences during in-depth interviews. This sampling technique selects individuals most likely to provide in-depth and relevant information (Campbell et al., 2020). Based on the criteria, three participants were relevant and qualified in terms of academic and cultural experience.

Table 1 Demographics of Research Participants

Code	Gender	Age	Instansi
P1	Female	21	Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari
P2	Female	22	Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari
P3	Female	21	Universitas Halu Oleo

The main instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide. The interview protocol was adopted directly from the theoretical framework developed by Kim

(2001, 2015), specifically the Stress-Adaptation-Growth model of cross-cultural adaptation. The adaptation of the questions ensured relevance to the local context of the *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka (PMM)* program and the specific experiences of EFL students at the institution. The interview guide was structured around three main categories: stress, adaptation, and personal growth. Before conducting the interviews the instrument was validated by one expert in the field of academic culture. One expert assessed the questions for clarity and relevance. Based on the feedback there were revisions to improve the appropriateness of the questions and ensure alignment with the research objectives. The validation process ensured that the instrument was appropriate to the academic cultural experience. Interviews were used in this study; two participants conducted face-to-face interviews, due to being out of town and unable to attend the research site, and one participant participated via Zoom. Each interview session was last for 20 - 30 minutes.

This research analyzed the data using the method introduced by Miles and Huberman (2014), namely interactive data analysis. This method consists of the first three elements of data reduction, which is a reduction in data that is simpler and easier to analyze, second, data display, presentation of data in a visual form that is easy to understand, and finally data verification.

In the data reduction stage, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed to identify meaningful statements. The statements were grouped based on the three main dimensions in Kim's (2001, 2015) theory, namely: stress, adaptation and growth. In the data presentation stage, the results of the analysis were organized thematically in the form of a narrative describing the student experience based on the three dimensions. Findings from each theme were accompanied by direct quotes from participants to show the authenticity of their experiences and strengthen the interpretation. This presentation also compares experiences between participants to find common patterns as well as individual variations. In the final stage, conclusion drawing and verification were conducted to formulate the meaning of the findings in depth. Validation was conducted through member checking, which involves asking one or more participants to review the findings to ensure that the researcher's interpretation is in line with their authentic experience (Candela, 2019).

Findings

As described in the methodology, interviews were conducted with three participants to gain deeper insights into their academic and cultural experiences while participating in the *PMM* program. The findings are presented based on the three main dimensions of Kim's (2001, 2015) Stress-Adaptation-Growth model, which provides a clear framework for understanding the participants' journey through initial challenges, the adjustment process, and self-development.

Stress Demention

Initial Challenges in Adapting to a New Environment

All three participants revealed that the initial period of participating in the *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka (PMM)* was a stressful and uncomfortable phase. The main challenges they faced were closely related to differences in language, local culture, academic systems, weather, and unfamiliar cuisine.

P1 said that every time he entered the classroom for the first time, the lecturer used Javanese, which he did not understand well, and there were differences in regional

languages. As a participant from outside Java, he had difficulty understanding the Javanese language often used by lecturers.

"Most lecturers there use Javanese when they enter the classroom. So we, as foreign students, are confused and unable to understand (P1)."

P2, who is from Kendari, feels the same way. He feels stressed because of the differences in the academic system and discipline, where students are required to be more independent in understanding the material before entering class.

"At my main campus, we usually study directly in class. However, there, before entering the classroom, we are required to understand the material and already know what will be studied, and there is also a strict rule that we must be on time when entering the classroom (P2)."

Meanwhile, P3 faced pressure in the form of social and religious norms that were unfamiliar to him. At his new campus, he had to follow the tradition of reciting five verses before class began, something that was new and not customary at his original campus. In addition, he also experienced discomfort in adjusting to local norms of politeness, such as the obligation to shake hands and ask for special permission from lecturers.

"At my home campus, we usually just pray before class. But there, before the lesson starts, we recite five verses from the Quran and then pray. I learned how respectful the people there are to their lecturers. They salim and apologize before entering the classroom if they are late, while that is not something we usually do at my home campus." (P3)

The three participants also felt awkward because they did not have any close friends during the first few weeks. Limited social interaction made them feel like outsiders who had not yet been fully accepted into the new community.

"At first, we and they were both awkward. We felt, will we be accepted or not?" (P1)

"The thing that made me most uncomfortable at the beginning of the exchange was not having any friends because I didn't know anyone yet." (P3)

Adaptation

Self-Adjustment Strategies and the Role of Social Support

In facing initial pressures, participants demonstrated various active adaptation strategies, both cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally. They did not simply passively accept the situation, but consciously made adjustments through observation, cross-cultural communication, and openness to the social environment.

P1 relied on social observation strategies in the first week to learn how local residents spoke, behaved, and interacted, both with friends and lecturers. He also began to adjust his communication style, such as slowing down his speech tempo and choosing more neutral words so as not to be misunderstood as rude or rushed.

"I observed for a week first. I watched the lecturers, my friends, and how they interacted, then I started to speak slowly, because they think we are angry when we speak quickly." (P1)

P2 chose a direct approach of asking local friends to clarify things he did not understand, including language, conversation context, and the cultural meaning of certain customs.

"If I don't understand the meaning, I ask my Javanese friends: what did the lecturer just say? They will explain what the lecturer said (P2).

Meanwhile, P3 developed openness through active introductions and sharing personal experiences. He realized the importance of building social relationships with local students and felt that the friendly attitude of lecturers and classmates was very helpful in creating emotional comfort.

"What I did was to get acquainted with friends or share things with each other, lecturers helped introduce us to local students, and other students were also very open." (P3)

All three participants emphasized that lecturers and the surrounding community, such as the canteen lady or market vendors, also played an important role in facilitating the adaptation process. Although the initial interactions felt awkward, they gradually felt accepted as part of the community.

Growth

Personal Transformation and Cross-Cultural Competence

After going through the adjustment process, participants experienced significant development in personal, social, and professional areas. They felt more prepared to deal with differences, more confident in communicating, and had a broader understanding of cultural diversity in Indonesia.

P1 stated that he now has better communication skills and is more sensitive to language and cultural differences. He realizes the importance of Indonesian as a lingua franca that can bridge communication gaps between regions.

"What has improved is my communication and adaptation skills. I had to learn to step out of my comfort zone, and now I understand how important the Indonesian language is as a unifying force between different cultures." (P1)

P2 said that he became more disciplined, open, and reflective. He not only learned about other cultures, but also gained the confidence to introduce his own regional culture. This made him more prepared to become an educator who is able to understand the cultural backgrounds of his future students.

"I have become more disciplined with my time and studies, I have become more confident in sharing my regional culture, and I have also learned about their culture." (P2)

P3 experienced a transformation in his perspective on differences, from initially feeling alienated to appreciating and celebrating diversity. He acknowledged that this experience helped him understand the importance of tolerance and non-judgmental attitudes when encountering other cultures.

"I can see firsthand the cultural differences that exist in our country. I now understand how important tolerance is, and I no longer judge things easily. I learn first, understand the cultural background first." (P3)

As prospective teachers, the three of them consider their PMM experience to be an important asset in character education, multicultural learning, and strengthening national values. They hope to pass on the spirit of diversity to the younger generation in schools.

"When I become a teacher, I will emphasize the importance of Indonesian language to prevent miscommunication." (P1)

"This is useful for me as a prospective teacher so that my students will also be more open-minded." (P3)

At the end of the interview, all participants stated that they greatly appreciated the PMM experience and did not regret participating. Although there were minor issues such as fund management or the desire to be more active in building relationships from the start, they agreed that the program had a strong transformative impact.

"If I could do it again, I would do it all over again. But what I would improve is money management." (P1)

"I want to mingle more with all the students, build more relationships, and introduce our culture." (P3)

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to explore the academic cultural experiences of three EFL students participating in the PMM program, with a particular focus on their cross-cultural adaptation and personal development. Based on Kim's (2015) theory of cross-cultural adaptation, this study aims to understand how students undergo a dynamic and continuous process of stress, adjustment, and growth as they navigate cultural differences and integrate into a new academic environment.

EFL students in this study found that the early stages of participating in the *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka* (PMM) were a stressful and uncomfortable phase. One of the main challenges they faced was the differences in language, culture, and academic systems, which caused acculturative stress, as revealed by Ardila (2023) and Rahmanda & Satwika (2023). The results show that new students who move away from home often experience loneliness, difficulty understanding the local language, and adapting to a new social environment. In this context, EFL students find it difficult to adjust to the communication style, traditions, and academic norms at their destination campus. Despite experiencing initial stress, they gradually develop adaptation strategies such as social observation and

active communication to reduce pressure and build better social relationships. These findings are consistent with previous research by Wardani et al. (2025), which showed that lifestyle and academic gaps cause students to experience mental and physical stress. Such shocks are an important part of the development process, not an obstacle. This study also supports the intercultural competence model (Deardorff, 2006), which includes openness, knowledge of cultural frameworks, and communication skills. The participants' journeys reflect these elements as they negotiate meaning and build intercultural relationships. These results are consistent with the findings of a study (Mulyanto et al. 2024), which observed that adaptation techniques among PMM participants included affective elements (building relationships) and cognitive elements (understanding the new system). They did not merely passively accept the situation but consciously made adjustments through observation, cross-cultural communication, and openness to the social environment. These findings align with the research by Syafi'i & Sadewo (2023), which emphasizes that social support from faculty members, peers, and the surrounding environment plays a crucial role in supporting the academic adaptation of new students. P1 relied on social observation strategies during the first week to learn how residents speak, behave, and interact, both with peers and faculty members. He also began adjusting his communication style, such as slowing down his speaking pace and choosing more neutral words to avoid being misunderstood as rude or rushed. P2 chose a direct approach by asking local friends to clarify things he did not understand, including language, conversation context, and the cultural meaning of certain customs. He also developed flexibility toward food differences by adjusting his preferences and, if necessary, cooking for himself. He recognized the importance of building social relationships with local students and felt that the friendly attitude of lecturers and classmates greatly helped create emotional comfort. This finding is supported by research by Sari & Zaini (2024), which shows that social support not only facilitates academic adjustment but also enhances students' resilience and ability to cope with cultural differences. The three participants emphasized that faculty members and the surrounding community, such as the cafeteria staff or market vendors, also play a crucial role in facilitating the adaptation process. Although initial interactions felt awkward, they gradually felt accepted as part of a larger community.

Through intense cross-cultural interaction with *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka* (PMM), participants demonstrated significant development in various aspects of their lives, both personally, socially, and professionally. These experiences not only broadened their horizons but also improved their intercultural communication skills, empathy, and deeper understanding of cultural diversity in Indonesia. This aligns with research by Ndoen (2023), which confirms that living in a multicultural environment can foster tolerant attitudes, improve cross-cultural communication skills, and encourage openness to differences. Similar findings were also reported by Rachma & Sari (2023), who showed that cross-cultural interactions foster multicultural awareness and better adaptability. P1 revealed that he is now more sensitive to language and cultural differences and recognizes the importance of Indonesian as a unifying language that can bridge cross-cultural communication. This helped them step out of their comfort zone and develop more adaptive communication skills. P2 emphasized improvements in discipline, openness, and reflectiveness. They felt more confident in introducing their own culture and understanding new cultures. This transformation prepares him to become a teacher who can appreciate his students' cultural backgrounds. P3 experienced a shift in perspective from initially feeling alienated by differences to being able to appreciate and celebrate diversity. He realized the importance of tolerance and a non-judgmental attitude when facing other cultures.

The three participants also agreed that social interactions with local students, lecturers, and the surrounding community played an important role in supporting their transformation. This social support, which included friendliness, guidance, and openness from the surrounding environment, helped them overcome initial challenges and build self-confidence. As future teachers, the three of them believe that this experience is an important asset in the development of character education, multicultural learning, and the strengthening of national values in the future. They hope to bring this spirit of diversity into the classroom and instill an understanding of the importance of tolerance in the younger generation. This is a valuable lesson for me as a future educator. So that my students can also become more open-minded. P3.

Overall, this study confirms that PMM experiences not only provide EFL students with opportunities to hone their cross-cultural communication and empathy skills, but also shape a more open, tolerant, and adaptive professional identity. This transformation reflects the dynamics of stress, adaptation, and growth outlined in Kim's theory (2015) and supports the intercultural competence model (Deardorff, 2006). Thus, the process of cross-cultural adaptation in PMM is not merely an academic experience but a transformative process that enriches students' character, cultural understanding, and professional readiness.

Conclusion

This study explores the academic cultural experiences of three EFL students in the *Pertukaran Mahasiswa Merdeka* (PMM), focusing on the dynamics of cross-cultural adaptation and their personal development. The results of this study reveal that the initial phase of participation in PMM was stressful due to differences in language, culture, and academic systems, which triggered acculturative stress. However, the students actively developed cognitive, affective, and behavioral adaptation strategies, such as social observation, active communication, self-reflection, and flexibility in dealing with cultural differences. The social support received from faculty members, peers, and the surrounding community proved crucial in helping the students overcome challenges and build self-confidence. Participants not only overcame language and cultural barriers but also experienced profound personal growth, such as increased empathy, cross-cultural communication skills, awareness of diversity, sharper self-reflection, and readiness to become inclusive educators. They emphasized the importance of this experience as professional preparation for educating students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Their adaptation journey reflects the dynamics of stress, adjustment, and continuous growth outlined in Kim's theory (2015), and supports Deardorff's intercultural competence model (2006). Overall, this study affirms that PMM is not merely an academic experience but a profound transformative process. This cross-cultural experience shapes students' professional identities to be more open, tolerant, and adaptive while strengthening their foundation as future teachers capable of instilling values of diversity and tolerance in future generations.

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