Role of Social Media in Improving Intercultural Communication Competence: A Comparative Study of European Students in Indonesia and Indonesian Students in Europe

Amia Luthfia¹*, Rosidah² and Ferane Aristrivani Sofian³

¹,³Mass Communication Program, Communication Department, Faculty of Economic and Communication, Bina Nusantara University, Jl. K.H. Syahdan No. 9, Kemanggisan, Palmerah, Jakarta 11480, Indonesia
²Management Department, BINUS Business School Undergraduate Program, Bina Nusantara University, Jl. K.H. Syahdan No. 9, Kemanggisan, Palmerah, Jakarta 11480, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate how European students living in Indonesia and Indonesian students living in Europe utilise social media to improve their intercultural communication competence. This research uses descriptive qualitative methods in which semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data in Indonesia (Jakarta) and United Kingdom (Norwich). The result shows that students’ intercultural communication competence improve due to direct communication and face-to-face interaction instead of social media whereby the latter is only helpful in improving students’ knowledge and understanding the differences of their home culture and the host culture. Interactivity and other abilities of social media become influential aspect to improve students’ knowledge of host culture. Moreover, social media develops relationships between the students and their hosts country. Facebook and Instagram are found to help students improve their adaptability and flexibility to different cultures.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, culture European and Indonesian students, social media

INTRODUCTION

A rapid development of communication technology has made communication through new media (ICT) a necessity and an important part of human life. Internet-related communications technology such as social media, mobile phone, SMS, email, online games, blogs, and Skype connects
people interpersonally across cultures, nations, time, and space. The Internet has also brought significant improvements in the sphere of intercultural communication and changed the way people conduct cultural contacts. For some, the Internet can increase intercultural contact, whereas others find it can inhibit the interaction between cultures and favour the standardisation of culture at the expense to cultural diversity (Marcoccia, 2012; Shuter, 2011). Therefore, it is necessary to study how the Internet impacts on intercultural communication practices.

Various models and measurement tools have been developed to assess the capability of a person to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds. However, none of these has discussed how the communicators utilise the new media to help them improve knowledge, attitude, and skills when interacting with people from different cultures. Meanwhile, studies on intercultural communication are still largely focused on face-to-face intercultural contact, and still only few studies have examined the implications of the Internet-based technology on intercultural communication between individuals and groups (Shuter, 2012).

The purpose of this study is to investigate how students who study abroad utilise social media to improve their intercultural communication competence and which social media applications are the most beneficial to improve their intercultural communication competence. This study is also aimed at examining whether social media plays an important role in enhancing the international students’ intercultural communication competence.

The findings of this study is expected to be useful for those who study abroad, international office of the universities, partner universities and any related parties, on using social media to improve intercultural communication effectively.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural competence is defined as “. . . a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself.” This definition covers several clusters or components that include various characteristics; three areas or domains (i.e., relationships, communication, and collaboration); four dimensions (i.e., knowledge, attitude, skills, and awareness); host language proficiency; and developmental levels (Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006).

Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) reviewed various model of intercultural competence. They classify the models into five types, which are compositional model, co-orientation model, developmental model, adaptation model, and causal path model. Each of these models has different focuses.

Spitzberg and Changnon observed that many of the terms used to describe intercultural competence in all five types of model (e.g., adaptability, sensitivity, etc) have not yet been properly operationalised or validated in an empirical research and that
many of the models may have ethnocentric biases as they were used to examine western European and North American societies and may lack cross-cultural generalisability (Barrett, 2012).

Compositional model and co-orientation model have been used in a research on a group Asians to increase generalisability and reduce the ethnocentric bias. Luthfia (2012) found there were differences in competency between two social contexts: formal and informal social context. In the study, the participants (Indonesian students) were sufficiently competent in the formal social context. Their competency was supported by the educational setting that accommodated them and was tolerant of their shortcomings compared with the informal social context (Luthfia, 2012).

Zhou and Griffiths (2011) showed most students did not possess good intercultural communication competence. They did not understand the differences between Chinese and Western culture and lacked knowledge about the customs and values of Western culture in general. According to the foreign lecturers, the students due to their lack of fluency in English spoke English using Chinese paradigms (Zhou & Griffiths, 2011). Therefore, ensuring intercultural communication competence is important for international students.

This study aims to compare intercultural communication competence of European students who live in Asia (Indonesia), and Indonesian students who live in Europe (United Kingdom).

Currently, there is no study that examines the role and implications of the new media on intercultural communication competence. This is another aspect that distinguishes this study with previous ones on the link between new media and intercultural communication. However, some studies proved social media and the Internet have implications and influence on the adaptation process of individuals or group in a new culture (Chen & Choi, 2011; Croucher, 2011; Sandel, 2014; Sawyer, 2011).

Croucher (2011) explained the influence of social networking on cultural adaptation through two propositions: (1) during the process of cultural adaptation, the use of social networking sites affect the immigrant interaction with the dominant (host) culture; and (2) during the process of cultural adaptation, the use of social networking sites affects the immigrants’ interaction with people from the same culture (Croucher, 2011).

Sawyer (2011) showed social media connects students with host and home countries. With social media, the students strengthen their relationship with the people in the host country. Also, it provides an outlet for students to stay in touch with their family and friends in their home country especially when they are facing some challenges in host culture. The use of social media can build a sense of belonging and a feeling of being part of a community in the host country (Sawyer, 2011). Sawyer further showed that online communication
enhances students’ experience, boosting their socio-cultural skills, informational needs, relational bonds, and psychological well-being. The students also prefer different platforms when communicating with friends versus family and intimates (Sandel, 2014). Students who communicate directly through Skype with family and friends in their home country are no longer worried about the latter and which means their studies are not affected (Singh & Cui, 2011).

Chen and Choi (2011) who looked at how Chinese migrants in Singapore adapt to the local culture shows they tend to communicate via the Internet often with their families and friends in China than with the local people. It also proves that the immigrants who communicate more frequently with locals via the Internet are more adaptive than those who communicate more frequently via the Internet with people from their country of origin (Chen & Choi, 2011).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research adopts descriptive qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews. The participants are selected based on requirements that they are registered as active students at their respective universities, have at least two social media accounts, and access them on a daily basis.

The subjects of the research were selected international students from Western Europe countries studying at Bina Nusantara University, Jakarta, Indonesia; and Indonesian students studying at a university in Norwich, United Kingdom.

The European students who enrolled in the student exchange programme in Indonesia were two female students (J and L) from Switzerland and Germany, respectively; and two male students (R and G) from France. The Indonesian students in the UK were A from Jakarta, and D from Jogjakarta.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim in their respective native languages. Data was analysed qualitatively marking the keywords and key ideas. After that, the researchers arranged and provided coding based on the keywords, key ideas and important concepts. The next step was sorting and categorising data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Social Media Utilisation by European Students in Indonesia

Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Skype, WhatsApp, Line, and Instagram are the most popular social media accounts used by the four European students. Additionally, they used email and SMS to communicate with each other. J and L noted the differences in social media usage by Indonesian students, especially the frequency and the purpose of posting. From the Indonesian students’ postings of food, clothes, and activities, these European students learned about Indonesian culture and interesting places to visit there. J and L, the female European students, used Line and Instagram to communicate with their Indonesian friends.

For two-way communication with Indonesian students, J and L frequently used Line. By reading the conversation in Line group, they learned how to communicate
appropriately with Indonesian lecturers and campus staff. In addition, they also received inputs from their Indonesian friends who often reminded them how to dress and behave in accordance with the local culture. Unlike J and L, the male European students R and G used Facebook, SMS, and email to communicate with Indonesian students. Facebook and email were more frequently used by them to discuss lectures and group assignments. The two male students used Facebook Messenger only for making appointments and on important issues, while Instagram was used to learn about Indonesian customs, rituals, places and food.

The main function of social media for those European students was to plan a meeting to do assignments, search for information about college and campus activities/boarding and to engage in social activities. They did not like to discuss assignments and lectures on social media; they preferred to meet in person (face-to-face) when there are important things to be discussed. The European students thought it was better to meet in person to avoid any misunderstandings and it was found to be more effective to have face-to-face communication. Instant messaging like Line or WhatsApp was used only to decide when and where a group of friends wanted to hang out, do tasks together, or to remind each section of an assignment to be completed. Socialisation function was merely for appointments about the time and place they would meet for a walk, get-togethers or having meals together.

**Social Media Utilisation for Indonesian Students in the UK**

Indonesian students who studied in the UK used Facebook to communicate with native English speakers and UK students. They considered Facebook as a complete social media because of its various features, such as create a group class, upload photos, create events, make comments, chat via Facebook Messenger, and play games. The feature most commonly used was Facebook Messenger because it is more interactive than the others.

Although many Indonesian students use other types of social media, Facebook was their most preferred mode communication. Unlike Indonesian students, the British students did not really use different types of social media. They mostly used SMS (Short Message Services) or telephone to contact each other. Interestingly, British students only shared their WhatsApp number or their Facebook account if they wanted to or felt comfortable to deal with a person for further friendship. With acquaintances, they preferred to communicate directly via phone. The British students were neither active using Facebook Messenger to communicate nor left a comment on status or photos uploaded by their friends on Facebook.

Facebook was mostly used by the British students for campus affairs such as sharing information about the task in the group or arranging meeting and gathering. In addition, social media facilitated the uploading of lecture materials, as well
as strengthened their relationship and mutual friendship. To be well-informed about news and developments in UK, Indonesian students resorted to face-to-face conversation in the classroom or at the campus, and not through the social media. Most of their conversations on Facebook were about college and campus life.

Social Media Role for Intercultural Communication Competence

The categories discussed below are derived from elements of intercultural communication competence model proposed by Deardorff (2006).

Attitude

Before the international students in Indonesia joined the exchange programme, they had equipped themselves with knowledge and developed an attitude of being non-judgmental and to be open to other cultures. Thus, during their stay in Indonesia, they minimised any potential problems and accepted their cultural differences.

“Social media did not help much gaining our confidence communicating with Indonesian students... our confidence and tolerance gained through direct face-to-face communication with local students”.

For Indonesian students in the UK, social media was useful in helping them improve their self-esteem when they meet the locals because they had familiarised themselves with popular topics before the meeting takes place. This made them confident in participating in the conversation.

By reading the commentary, conversations, and photos uploaded by their British friends, their intercultural awareness increased as they learned the cultural differences between Indonesians and the British. Additionally, they became open-minded in accepting the differences.

Knowledge and Comprehension

The European students in Indonesia obtained most of their information and insights into Indonesian culture from Instagram and Facebook. They learned about the daily lives of Indonesians from the pictures and conversations on Instagram and Facebook. They could see this lifestyle from the photos uploaded by their Indonesian friends about interesting places, food, clothes, and events (such as religious customs and rituals) that are considered important in Indonesia, including tips to adapt to local culture during their stay in Indonesia.

Indonesian students in the UK in the meantime found social media could help them improve their knowledge. They learned a lot from status uploads, comments, and conversations between the British in social media. According to A:

“Social media provides various types of information. I can see someone’s status update, or their posts, quotes or pictures. From there we can see how the British mingle, how the Chinese mingle
and compare it to how Indonesian make the connection. It may not be an obvious difference, but soon we can see the difference.”

Skills
The European students in Indonesia said their knowledge and language skill were not obtained through communication in social media but via face-to-face meetings since they used English as a primary language to communicate in the social media. Facebook and Instagram were helpful to improve their ability to observe, interpret, analyse, and evaluate their relationships with Indonesian friends and culture. For example, through project-group on Facebook, they learned that their Indonesian friends were not happy to be rushed to complete the group assignment.

For Indonesian students in the UK, by observing the British conversation in social media, they could understand the popular topics and they could learn how to respond to the conversation. This observation helped them to be more flexible when joining a conversation in a face-to-face meeting. The difficulty they faced was to understand British jokes in the social media as it was very specific and highly contextual. Sometimes British students used terms that were very particular which could only be understood by the natives.

Internal and External Outcome
Both groups of students said there is a difference in communication style between Indonesians and Europeans. Indonesian students in the UK were aware that British people did not using social media to discuss serious or intimate topics, but they sometimes shared jokes. Therefore, the Indonesians can adapt to different communication styles and behaviours to adjust to a new cultural environment. They also show flexibility in which they can select and use appropriate communication style and behaviour. This is reflected in a statement by D:

“I customize the type of social media used in Norwich with the people here. They only use WhatsApp and Facebook, whereas I use Line, Instagram, Twitter too but I didn’t use it here. I also understand that they’ve never talked about anything in-depth through social media, only superficial things. If there is a serious or intimate matter that should be discussed, they choose to meet in person.”

Both groups of participants used social media for communicating with local students, completing campus tasks, and understanding local customs. Through the social media, they could assess and study the cultural differences, as well as learn the different communication styles. It can be summed up that Indonesian are more expressive and much ‘chattier’ compared with the Europeans. They are more direct and are not fond of communicating via social media; they very rarely discuss anything in depth in the social media.
The two groups of students gained intercultural communication competence through face-to-face communication while social media only helped them improve their knowledge and understanding of their local cultures and others. Both sides showed spirit of tolerance, accepting differences, and open-mindedness from direct meetings and togetherness that do not exist in the social media.

Both groups of students stated that social media was beneficial for them as it enabled them to feel as part of the society in their host countries. This is consistent with the findings of Sawyer (2011) on the role of social media to being part of a community in the host country. However, Croucher (2011) argued that social media does not play a prominent role in developing relationship, but this study show the opposite result. This study has shown that social media plays a significant role in increasing the ability of the two groups of students in building relationship with people in their host country.

This study is in line with others that found social media can enhance individual experience, provide information and assist socio-cultural skills (Sandel, 2014). However, this study shows different results on the role of social media in the relational bonds. For the European students in Indonesia, social media could help them to build relational bonds with people in the host country. As for Indonesian students in the UK, they were not able to build relational bonds through social media because of limitation whereby social media was only used (by their British friends) to make appointment or to ask about important issues. Thus, the Indonesian students in the UK build relational bonds only through direct interaction.

The participants are active students and are curious about the new culture. They are individuals who are open-minded and have a high motivation to adapt to a new culture. Motivation is the most important dimension in communication competence (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). The first step in the process of achieving intercultural competence is to have motivation and appropriate intercultural attitude followed by knowledge and understanding, and skills. The students’ attitude towards cultural difference is positive; hence it can lead to knowledge and comprehension (Deardorff, 2006).

The results of this study indicate that Indonesian students in the UK felt more comfortable and confident in communicating with native speakers through face-to-face communication than through social media. According to Etae, Krish and Hussin (2016), this happens because the communicators are more concerned with engaging in an efficient communication with the native speakers. Indonesian students were unsure if they were able to communicate with native speakers, who have their own conversational style i.e., to be direct, simple and flexible. It can be inferred that the participants were conscious of their selection of politeness strategy or appropriateness with the people from a different cultural milieu (Etae et al., 2016).
Internal and external outcomes are the embodiment of intercultural communication competence. If the students in both countries had the ability to adapt and empathise, be flexible, and have an ethnorelativism view on other cultures, then all of these capabilities are expected to be seen as an external outcome. External and internal outcomes will be achieved in a synergistic way. The results showed that all participants were produced internal outcome although external outcome was not specifically shown in this research.

Croucher (2011) stated social media affected the immigrants’ interaction with their host culture and it simultaneously influenced the ways they interact with people the same cultural background. This study indicated otherwise, whereby communication style and behaviour of the host culture affected the use of social media by international students. When they communicate with people with similar cultural background or with their families in their home countries, they will make adjustment on the social media they use. They use Skype or WhatsApp to communicate with their families, whereas Line or FB is used to communicate with their friends in the host culture.

CONCLUSION

Social media is found to be beneficial for both the European students in Indonesia and Indonesian students in the United Kingdom to improve their knowledge and understanding about cultural differences. However, their intercultural communication competence did not benefit from their interaction in social media, but from face-to-face communication and direct interaction.

Social media is capable of improving intercultural communication competence of both groups of students. Among various types of social media, Facebook is considered the most useful for its complete features. It enables students as users to communicate and learn about cultural differences in a comprehensive way. Social media plays an important role in developing relationships with people in the host country.

Facebook and Instagram are helpful for international students to improve their adaptability and flexibility in the new cultural environment. This is because both types of social media have features that are capable of displaying the local culture in a more vivid and concrete way through photographs. It is clear from this study the social media used in host countries are similar.

REFERENCES


