Understanding Culture Shock and Its Relationship to Intercultural Communicative Competence

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Abstract
Culture shock has gained attention and been observed from multi-disciplinary perspectives in international education, such as from anthropology, psychology, cultural psychology, intercultural communication studies, linguistics, and many others. By synthesising the ABC’s theory and intercultural communicative competence with their savoirs, the present study offers a perspective to analyse three international students’ culture shock experiences. As an explorative case study, the data were collected through in-depth interviews to extract the sojourners’ narratives, which were then transcribed in the form of text or quotations. It was found that the affective, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions were identified and emerged in each respondent. In the affective, overwhelming emotions, language limitation, and feelings of isolation were felt in various intensities. From the data, the respondents claimed to have lacked intrapersonal skills to prepare themselves for the culture of the host country along with the socio-cultural aspects. In addition, they found social support by individuals or officials essential for reducing negative feelings. In the behavioural dimension, these respondents started to adapt to the situation though they still found it challenging to confirm and clarify any unfamiliar encounters. Finally, in the cognitive dimension, the respondents mingled and integrated into the locals, both in their academic and social lives. It is suggested that elements of intercultural communicative competence, namely intercultural attitude,

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knowledge of the host culture, skills of relating and discovery, and critical cultural awareness may have the potential to manage culture shock effectively. It should be incorporated into international higher education and EFL pedagogy.

Keywords: Affect, behavioural, cognitive, culture shock, intercultural communicative competence, narrative study.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this contemporary world, a classroom of second or foreign language education seems to have been shaped by multilingual and multicultural settings. It is admittedly true that language education has changed dramatically not only the nature of language learners, the teaching contents, and the learning contexts but also the forms of language learning themselves (Kramsch & Hua, 2016). In other words, when these changes have implicated the nature of language education, language learning with culture has inextricably stimulated some debates on a plethora of issues and complexities.

There is no doubt that international education has increasingly soared massively to the extent that the interaction of international students from varied cultural backgrounds has flourished in Western and top-world universities, such as American, British, Australian, and European universities (Huang & Chang, 2011). Therefore, intercultural competence seems to have attracted the attention of experts in transdisciplinary disciplines, such as linguistics, social psychology, anthropology, and other relevant social sciences.

The present paper aimed to establish an interconnection between intercultural phenomena and intercultural communicative competence in which a sojourner may have experienced and honed his/her intercultural attitude as an integral part of his/her improved second/foreign language development and skills as an intercultural citizen (Byram, 1997, 2012). Language development and skills pertain to the ways an international student successfully interacts with another person in English regardless of their cultural backgrounds, and both interactants understand literally the meaning of utterance as well as the illocutionary acts of exchanging ideas. Also, a sojourner is aware of using his or her own lens or perspectives or values towards an intercultural encounter in the host country. These phenomena require beyond pragmatic competence or the so-called intercultural communicative competence (Byram et al., 2002).

In this regard, a learner as an individual and his or her experience are central to this issue. Liddicoat (2020) stated that both are mutually interacting as the former focuses on the processes of enhancing knowledge and understanding others’ sociocultural aspects in the form of attitudinal development, whereas the latter focuses on how such knowledge is interpreted well and generates appropriate meaning-making, which can be operationalised when required in real interaction. They complement one another, especially when a new belief in conjunction with experience is recognised to be beneficial or successful, thus restructuring the block of mindset and leading to improvement of attitude. This is how human beings learn from the perspective of the Vygotskian sociocultural learning (1978).
One of the experiences is culture shock. It can be defined as an infinite loop where an international student faces an unfamiliar intercultural situation. If not managed well, this intercultural phenomenon can lead to strain, loss, rejection, confusion, anxiety, and impotence (Ward et al., 2020). Culture shock is also called intercultural contact where a sojourner needs to deal with stress and coping strategies to deal with, culture learning through observation, and social identification as well as adjustment in cultural identity (Zhou et al., 2008).

The urgency of the present paper is that culture shock is often perceived as both an intercultural experience and intercultural communicative competence, which are exclusively independent implicating the relationship between them. Moreover, such a synthesis has gradually differed and been understudied. In fact, these topics need comprehensive investigation as they are related to abstract psychological phenomena, such as acceptance, adaptability, and empathy in addition to concrete cultural products and practices (Schauer, 2021), in which the conceptualisation of intercultural competence can be internalised and embedded into one’s repertoire through experiencing and encountering sociocultural practices (Dervin, 2020). Moreover, intercultural communicative competence is advocated to equip learners to be more intercultural in EFL pedagogy in addition to being adept at using English in a multicultural and multilingual context. All of these are based on context, emotion, interlocutor, moods, power relations, and other sociocultural aspects. Therefore, the present study synthesises all of the works of culture shock as part of intercultural communicative competence. Thus, the research question of the present article is:

1. How do international students face culture shock and resolve it?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Culture Shock Studies

There have been multiple studies about culture shock from varied disciplines; mostly dominated by anthropologist researchers. In these early studies, the culture shock was always connected to the conceptualisation of the nature of culture. One example is the study of Oberg (1954) who stated that culture shock is anxiety emerging as a result of being distant from familiar signs and symbols. Peacock (2001) stated that culture consists of shared practice codes that a newcomer must learn and adapt to as a new member of a cultural group. Unfortunately, their studies did not address which cultural behaviours and feelings had to be considered by an individual in a new culture. As if the intercultural phenomenon could be alleviated when one survived to remain in a cultural group’s environment.

Throughout the years, the influence of psychology has been indicated by the studies of Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) who found that culture shock has some characteristics, and there are variables indicating the intensity of culture shock, such as cross-cultural differences, size of co-national group, family status, and previous cross-cultural experiences. Their study revealed that the interaction with the hosts would resolve any problems in students’ culture shock. This perspective seems to shed light on how to cope with culture shock, and the criteria mentioned in the study are intertwined with an individual’s status, such as socio-economic status, which could be unreliable in some conditions for an immature international student.
Over the years, culture shock has been analysed from transdisciplinary perspectives. From the perspective of social psychology, it was viewed as a social skill difficulty relating to cognition, emotion, behaviour, and psychology (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). In 2006, an intercultural communication study by Lin (2006) emphasised that social support from others is highly crucial to cope with culture shock. The study stressed not only individual effort but also collective and organisational efforts that have to be encouraged to ameliorate the situation. This stance was proposed because the previous studies appeared to have not provided solutions collectively merely exclusively on an individual level to deal with the intercultural encounter.

Ward et al. (2020), over the years, developed an understanding that culture shock is an intercultural contact experience in which acculturation must be managed wisely through sociocultural and psychological adaptation. Still adopting the ABC’s theory, affect, behavioural, and cognitive are thoroughly analysed. Most of the studies about culture shock have been presented in this sequence. Yet, the analyses of data remained sufficiently unanswerable about how to explore, compare, contrast, and build the links between statements and cultural categories.

Culture shock was initially analysed via the lens of intercultural competence by Guilherme (2000), who argued that culture shock can be mitigated by adjusted and contextualised communicative ability that is grounded by intercultural awareness and other multidimensional cultural knowledge and skills. A recent study by Lobytsyna et al. (2020) put forward the pivotal role of intercultural understanding as generated by intercultural communicative competence, that is, the ability “to engage with diverse cultures and capable of living and working together in an interconnected world that cultivates mutual respect” (p. 5). This recent stance is adopted in the present study as it covers more sociocultural aspects and encapsulates multidisciplinary views about culture shock.

2.2 Frameworks of Analysis

Upon the selection of the perspective of culture shock, the present study would like to discuss a framework for analysing culture shock. Since an intercultural phenomenon has been regarded as part of intercultural competence, the assessment or analysis of culture shock is suggested to adopt how the level of intercultural competence can be enacted and portrayed by an individual. Some methods were elaborated in the following sub-section. The best framework would then be selected based on scientific consideration and a strongly supported argument.

First, Chen and Starosta (1998) proposed that an individual must possess six affective elements to be interculturally sensitive, namely self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement, and suspending judgment in order to resolve culture shock and become more intercultural. Their study used a 24-item questionnaire of self-cultural awareness comprising five categories of interculturality level, namely interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. It is unfortunate that there is a critique of the model, claiming it to be overly subjective. The outcome may not represent a genuine level of one’s intercultural sensitivity as it results in overconfidence and the negative effects of culture shock.

Second, Hammer et al. (2003) also promoted Intercultural Development Inventory to measure intercultural sensitivity with a 60-item questionnaire on six
orientations: denial, defence, minimisation, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. It is claimed that, at the state of adaptation, one will be relatively ready for culture shock. It is because this individual has more empathy towards other cultures as the change is not only cognitive but also affective and behavioural through actual experiences. This tool inevitably receives scant critiques on the observers’ perceptions towards some cultural categories harmonised with the orientations. To achieve commonalities, an interview guide was prepared, yet some individuals have complexities in their lifespan creating unique cultural categories.

Another framework was the Portfolio Assessment by Jacobson et al. (1999) relying on the individuals’ reflections on their personal documents or work to measure intercultural competence evolution. This assessment was recognised to be the most selective compared to the others because it stems from a philosophical stance that learning may not be quantifiable. It also offers a very developing and interrelating response and criteria of cultural categories based on the reflections the respondents made. It is evident that Rahimi (2019) found insufficient validity in the tool and suggested the use of narratives as another alternative for assessing competence.

2.3 Narrative Study for Culture Shock

Narratives are claimed to be able to capture the complexities of one’s positioning. Harbon (2014) argued that narratives do not only describe teachers but also all individuals who want to be acknowledged. Their experiences and histories become central to their intercultural profile development. Each person must have a unique and different story, which shapes how they view the world. Narratives must be collected properly through in-depth or semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Exploring, probing, analysing, and validating are predominant in the process.

One of the recent studies conducted by Qun et al. (2018) on Chinese-Indonesian students discovered that the respondents encountered psychological and social problems that made them feel inconvenient living in Indonesia. Then, intercultural communication was found to be the key to resolving their problems.

The studies above concluded that the selection of narratives as the method to analyse culture shock is recommendable. The presentation of data was also suggested to adopt Ward et al.’s (2020) ABC theory as it has conflated all aspects influencing the condition and the status of an international student.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Approach

The study adopted a qualitative approach with the design of an explorative case study. With the constructivist understanding of reality, the study wished to build realities of culture shock based on an individual’s understanding of them (Creswell, 2014). In other words, the study would use the participants’ understandings of feelings, sensations, emotions, and other factors related to culture shock, which were then narrated as part of their personal experiences.
The study was implemented in the westernmost province of Indonesia, namely Aceh, due to its distinctive characteristics, such as having a strictly religious community, thus offering a different living experience to international students compared to other cities in Indonesia. Universitas Syiah Kuala was selected as the research locus as it hosts a higher number of international students compared to other local universities. It also provides international scholarships that attract many foreign students.

3.2 Sampling

The study used purposive sampling. It involved three international students from African countries staying in Aceh Province, Indonesia, for several months. They originally come from Gambia, Sierra Leone, and the Republic of Mali. Due to ethical reasons, their names were made anonymous.

These African students were chosen to see whether or not the culture shock they experienced was partly due to narrativization about Africans in Aceh, and as Kooria (2020) said, stereotypes about Africans still need to be given a critical focus because there are still many racial discriminations to Africans due to the stereotypes. The respondents had taken at least two semesters of lectures. Their initials were BD, a male student from Gambia studying at the Economic Development department; MW, a male student from Sierra Leone studying at the Biology Education department; and TD, a female student from the Republic of Mali studying at the Department of Mining Engineering.

3.3 Data Collection

The instrument of this narrative study was an in-depth interview, which was recorded using a voice recorder. There were two sessions for each participant; each session took a maximum of one hour to avoid fatigue. The questions were open focusing on affective, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions. The interviews were audio-recorded, which were transcribed for analysis. The interview was conducted in English because the participants were comfortable expressing their opinions in English.

The interview followed a set of general guidelines. One of which is that it started from the most general inquiry to the most reflective one. However, some flexibility was allowed within the guideline to obtain a clear overview of the respondents’ perceptions or accounts of a particular topic. The topics of the interview questions were college experiences (educational system, classroom environment), racial discrimination, perception of campus diversity, and cultural adjustment.

3.4 Data Analysis

The present study employed qualitative data analysis. It involved iterative analyses where data condensation, data display, data drawing, verification, and conclusion were carried out in a loop cyclic design (Miles et al., 2014). For verification, checking representativeness with the three dimensions mentioned earlier was performed. Then, the themes (affective, behavioural, and cognitive aspects) were compared across respondents.
4. **RESULTS**

This section elaborates on the findings following the ABCs theory presentation, namely affective, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions, to reveal the respondents’ culture shock experiences.

4.1 **Affective Dimension**

Affective (or affect) is identified when anxiety appears and coping strategies are managed and enacted (Furham, 2012). In this phase, all respondents had positive and negative or overwhelming emotions, such as feeling happy, sad, confused, and anxious simultaneously. Each respondent experienced different culture shock symptoms. Yet, most of them developed feelings, just indifferent intensities. The following is an interview with one of the respondents, BD:

(1) “When I was here, I was nervous and happy at the same time. It’s my first time abroad for a long period of time. Although I also interacted with other international students, especially Gambian students, I still had never known them before. When I first came here, I didn’t even know what to do except to study. So yeah... I’m just a foreigner”. (BD–Gambia)

BD felt distressed when he first came to Aceh, Indonesia. He had never been abroad previously and settled for a long period. However, this was his own decision to continue his education overseas. Prior to living here, he never knew what Indonesia was like, especially Aceh Province, because he never thought of continuing his education here.

Unlike the first respondent, MW, the second respondent from Sierra Leone, had previously been to several countries and experienced different cultures. Hence, MW did not feel overwhelmed on his first day on campus. Even before coming to Aceh, he had lived in Jakarta for three months, which explained his low level of anxiety.

(2) “I have travelled to the U.S. and Europe before I came here. I went to Malaysia. Then, before college began, I stayed in Jakarta for three months, and then in September, I went to Banda Aceh for my college. It was not so much difference at the time”. (MW–Sierra Leone)

Meanwhile, TD as the third respondent revealed that she was happy to live and continue her education in Aceh even though she occasionally longed for her family.

(3) “From the start, I was really excited about what it would be like to study abroad. But yeah...going to another country, especially different continents, and countries that I didn’t think of before. Of course, I also miss my family and friends, but the environmental atmosphere is not too different from my hometown. So, yes, I enjoyed it even though yes...there are still things that make me stressed, too”. (TD–Republic of Mali)

More interestingly, it was found that, at the beginning of the first semester, the three respondents chose to hang out or share stories with their fellow Africans and international students from other countries because they felt that they shared something in common. Doing so made them feel comfortable as they shared similar perspectives. In the interview, BD said that:

(4) “Yup...I have a group chat with my friends who are from Africa too, so sometimes I hang out with them so I don’t get too stressed alone”. (BD–Gambia)
TD also shared the same opinion:

(5) “...I was looking for friends who were fellow foreign students and fellow international students.” (TD–Republic of Mali)

Secondly, culture shock can be more intense when the culture of a newcomer is far different from the culture of the host, mainly in terms of language difference. Based on the interviews, one of the major causes of the respondents’ culture shock was the language barrier. It affected their life, especially campus life. All respondents agreed that this factor hindered them from interacting, as revealed in the excerpts below:

(6) “I think the main problem is about language. Due to the language barrier, my relationship with local friends is not very good.” (BD–Gambia)

(7) “Ya, I had a difficult time in the first year I studied here. You know language barrier, hahaha (laughing), because I don’t speak the Indonesian language”. (MW–Sierra Leone)

(8) “At that time, I could not speak Bahasa, and sorry maybe this is a little bit sensitive, but local students at that time thought I was a student from Papua. So, at that time they kept talking in Indonesia which I didn’t understand what they said and I answered them in English and they were shocked.” (TD–Republic of Mali)

Thirdly, drawing upon the interview results, all of the international students in this research developed a feeling of isolation, which is one of the common symptoms of culture shock, especially in daily activities. This feeling is characterised by a low interest in engaging with a new environment as well as an inability to carry out activities optimally in a new environment, as revealed in the following excerpts:

(9) “If there’s something we want to ask, we don’t know who to ask. When I spoke to them, they always say ‘I don’t know’ or with a gesture of shaking their head and waving their hand”. (BD–Gambia)

TD also had the same experience. At first, TD felt that local students discriminated against her because she came from the black race. However, she later found out that local students actually avoided her because they were reluctant to speak English, and not because of her skin colour as she assumed.

(10) “I often misunderstand what the local students mean. Like what I said earlier, they just smiled awkwardly and then they seemed to want to run away. After a while and I had made friends with the locals I asked, ‘Why are they being like that? Is it because I’m black? Then my local friend immediately denied and said, ‘No. It’s not like that, we’re not racist like you think, if you want to know from our point of view, we’re actually like that because we avoid speaking English’”. (TD–Republic of Mali)

More surprisingly, MW was avoided by his local friends, which seemed to be caused by the age difference. After his local friends knew he was much older, they seemed reluctant to interact with MW, as stated in the extract below:

(11) “But unfortunately, my relationship with my classmates was like ‘we are only classmates’, nothing more outside of campus. Maybe it is because of the age gap? I think”. (MW–Sierra Leone)
However, the feeling of isolation and age difference were no longer problems for the respondents. The three respondents could interact and engage with local friends later on. Based on the interview results, intrapersonal influences within individuals, such as communication skills, cross-cultural experiences and settings, social skills, and individual character traits (tolerance or independence from family members who play an important role in their lives as a support and supervision system), had a significant influence on the intensity of culture shock they experienced.

4.2 Behaviour

In this phase, the international students became more open and willing to accept the differences after assessing the ways to reduce the gaps and which aspects made them comfortable. Stress due to differences and the feeling of isolation began to disappear as their adaptability started to show results, as shown in the following excerpts,

(12) “The point is that I just follow the local people’s habits here. What are the habits of local students? How is your lecturer teaching us in front of the class? And, if there is something that makes us uncomfortable, just ignore it because if you think about it too much, you will be stressed out”. (MW–Sierra Leone)

BD also revealed that he preferred reducing activities outside the class schedule to reduce stress in dealing with the culture shock,

(13) “So, what I did every day to reduce this feeling is I just attended classes. After class, I went straight back to my room (dorm).” (BD–Gambia)

In contrast, TD joined her fellow international students to overcome her sense of culture shock, as stated in the following excerpt.

(14) “So, my way to deal with it is to gather with fellow foreign students including African, Thai and other countries”. (TD–Republic of Mali)

It is evident from the excerpts above that the international students changed their behaviours to adapt to the locals’ cultures. They had also observed the ideal ways of adaptation and quit overthinking any thoughts that might stress them.

4.3 Cognitive

In this final phase, all international students were aware that a new culture was either better or worse. In the interviews, all respondents admitted that they had passed a period of culture shock.

(15) “Just want to let you know, I’m also the type of person who wants to learn new things and you know…extrovert? I’m a person who likes to mingle with other people, so I think it’s not as difficult as I imagined. Maybe someone else…I mean other foreign students will join fellow foreign students, but I’m still trying to mingle with the local students even though it’s awkward and has language barriers, but I still want to be friends with local students”. (MW–Sierra Leone)
BD also revealed that he eventually had many local friends because he began to learn the local students’ attitudes, learn Indonesian, and spend more time with other international students, as stated in the following excerpt:

(16) “If I have something that I want to ask my classmate I prefer to ask via chat. Because yeah, as you know, if I asked directly, they would ignore me. So yes, I asked them through chat. But now I have a lot of local friends...hahaha (laughing)...you know, sometimes we hang out together like going to a coffee shop or playing football. I think I have started to adapt to the atmosphere here”. (BD–Gambia)

TD also showed her adaptability through the following statement:

(17) “At first, there were only two people. After a while, my friends became so many because I joined the students’ association in my department. After I joined the students’ association, the situation immediately changed to 180 degrees and I have a lot of friends. At first, they were shy with me, but when I tried to be nice to them, now they are close. They taught me Indonesian, I taught them English and French, so now I can speak Indonesian, even though I am not fluent.” (TD–Republic of Mali)

When these respondents were asked about the ways they coped with culture shock in academic life, they answered that they just needed to adapt to the existing academic rules and system. They also learned new things that did not exist in their previous academic life. In other words, for the respondents, the behavioural phase is a phase where they begin to accept the situation, start learning about new things, and find ways to reduce the culture shock. In the cognitive phase, the data showed that respondents began to immerse themselves in their new environment, both in their academic and social lives.

5. DISCUSSION

The data showed that affective, behavioural, and cognitive aspects were saliently expressed in the respondents’ extracts. This is in line with Ward et al. (2020) that sociocultural and psychological adaptation appear to be effective in dealing with culture shock. In the affective phase, the international students went through difficult times and showed symptoms of culture shock, such as overwhelming emotions, language limitation, and feelings of isolation. The study also found that intrapersonal factors, including communication skills, cross-cultural experience, and social skills were among the determining factors that prepare the sojourners (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). Furthermore, the researchers found that individuals lacking intrapersonal skills tended to be entrapped more easily into culture shock because they did not have any necessary strategies to cope with all the differences and discomfort.

Poor communication skills can also create many obstacles in social and academic lives. The respondents in the present study admitted that their problems mostly stemmed from a lack of traveling experience, knowledge of foreign cultures, and foreign language skills, which in this case was Indonesian they had never encountered previously in their respective countries. This is aligned with the statement of Lobytsyna et al. (2020) that experiences of living with people from different cultural backgrounds are decisive to the success of dealing with culture shock.
When the respondents felt isolated from their new environment, they tended to assume that they were not accepted by the local community, especially in the academic environment because they were ‘different’ from the locals physically, culturally, and linguistically. Many local students also avoided the international students, which was actually due to the locals’ poor ability to communicate in English, and not because of racial factors as assumed by the respondents. This initially led to a misunderstanding among international students, triggering the symptom of anxiety of failing in the adaptation process.

All respondents agreed that social support is pivotal in dealing with stress and coping with problems. The situation would be harder if they had had insufficient capability to tackle the problem, as reported by Lin (2006) in her study as well. Finding sources of social support was challenging for the respondents because there were too many differences and only a few people could understand them. This affective aspect is likely to be influenced by one’s intrapersonal skills, such as communication skills, emotional management, social skills, and individual character.

After passing through the affective phase, the international students entered the behavioural phase where they began to find ways to ameliorate the culture shock they experienced. They started to deal with the differences and changed their behaviours as coping mechanisms. Stress due to existing differences and feelings of separation slowly disappeared. However, the respondents had different adaptation techniques. One international student chose to follow the habits of the local people. He no longer focused on differences that might lead to discomfort. Overthinking was also perceived as an act that exacerbated the situation. Another international student chose to withdraw himself from social life and stay alone in his dorm room. He believed that reducing outdoor activities could help him eliminate the culture shock. The last international student, however, decided to hang out with her fellow international students to overcome culture shock, including with students from Africa, Thailand, and others. She said that by joining fellow international students, she felt more comfortable and that they were ‘in the same boat’. All of these strategies have been advocated by Guilherme (2000) as heightened intercultural awareness and improved communicative abilities would have been gained and nurtured from their interactions with international students and their own responses.

The last phase is the cognitive phase. In this phase, all international students realised that the new culture they encountered was neither better nor worse than their own. Instead, they accepted it as it was so that they could feel familiar and confident in this new setting. All international students started to make friends with the locals and learn Indonesian. One of the respondents said that he started spending more time with his local friends, such as going to a coffee shop or playing football. Another respondent who was initially hindered from social life due to the age gap started to look for other friends from different majors, and even made friends with several lecturers. The last respondent said she became very confident and had many local friends after joining the student association in her department. She even taught French and English to her friends. Concerning the problems in academic life, the international students confessed that they only needed to adjust to the curriculum and teaching methods used by the host country. At this stage, the respondents had developed an intercultural understanding (Lobytstna et al., 2020).

To encapsulate, from the lens of intercultural communicative competence, all of the above-mentioned culture shock phenomena are caused by minimum attention to
the elements of intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997). Lacking savoirs (knowledge about the culture including the sociocultural aspects not limited to the language, the norms, and the habits) may lead to anxiety. The respondents’ savoir etre (intercultural attitude) was also not developed prior to arriving in Indonesia; they were not equipped with a sort of understanding of how to relativise a cultural phenomenon from their own perspective to others’ perspectives. Their savoir apprehende (skills of relating and discovery) or intrapersonal skills did not suffice yet, thus making it difficult to clarify and confirm any unfamiliar encounters in the host country with credible individuals or officials (social support). Finally, a critical cultural awareness can heighten and streamline the acculturation process in the cognitive phase. As a result, they became aware of not repeating the same mistakes and gained lessons from their daily interactional activities. All of these indicate the urgency for intercultural communicative competence to be incorporated into higher education and EFL pedagogy.

6. CONCLUSION

The respondents in the present study went through several phases of the acculturation process, which in this study, was linked to the ABCs phases (Ward et al., 2020) in conjunction with intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997) as a synthesis. In the affective phase, the respondents felt stressed in a new environment due to poor intrapersonal skills, resulting in symptoms of culture shock, such as overwhelming emotions, language barriers, and feelings of isolation. After passing through this phase, the respondents began to enter the behavioural phase, in which they became more open to new cultures and started to accept the differences. They also began to develop some adaptation strategies to survive in this new environment. Finally, in the cognitive phase, the respondents had the ability to adjust and interact with the local people, including in the academic setting. They also no longer felt stressed.

All of these culture shock experiences could have been alleviated if the international students were equipped with a set of savoirs elements such as the knowledge of the host culture, intercultural attitude, skills of relating and skills of discovery, and critical cultural awareness. This can prepare them and improve their intrapersonal skills, allowing them to access social support, observe, and learn from their surroundings.

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