

Building Self-Efficacy in Intercultural Communication: A Narrative Study of an International Ph.D Student in The US

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Abstract: This study aims to explore how self-efficacy in intercultural communication was constructed by an Indonesian Ph.D. student in the United States through academic and social experiences. A narrative inquiry design was employed to capture lived experiences and meaning-making processes in intercultural adaptation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, self-recorded conversations, and researcher notes, with triangulation applied to ensure validity. Thematic analysis indicated that intercultural challenges, including communication barriers and cultural differences, were navigated through adaptive strategies, reflective practices, and support from academic and community networks. The findings suggest that self-efficacy is a dynamic process, strengthened through mastery experiences and social reinforcement. This study emphasizes the need for reflective learning opportunities and empathetic institutional support to enhance international students' intercultural competence.

Article History

Received: 13-07-2025

Revised: 17-08-2025

Accepted: 04-09-2025

Published: 25-10-2025

Key Words:

Self-efficacy;
Intercultural
Communication;
Narrative Inquiry.

How to Cite: Septiani, P. T., Khafidhoh, P. N., Mahaputri, R. A., & Herlina, H. (2025). Building Self-Efficacy in Intercultural Communication: A Narrative Study of an International Ph.D Student in The US. *Jurnal Paedagogy*, 12(4), 1226-1230. <https://doi.org/10.33394/jp.v12i4.16953>



<https://doi.org/10.33394/jp.v12i4.16953>

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Introduction

In the globalization era, pursuing higher education abroad has become an increasingly common path, particularly at the doctoral level. International students, however, often encounter multidimensional challenges that extend beyond academics, including sociocultural and psychological adjustments (Rayyan et al., 2023). Among these, intercultural communication functions as both a major hurdle and a transformative opportunity. The ability to navigate intercultural encounters is closely tied to the development of self-efficacy, which significantly influences academic engagement, social integration, and emotional resilience.

Self-efficacy, as defined by Bandura (1997), refers to individuals' belief in their capability to perform tasks and overcome challenges. In international education, this belief manifests in the confidence to participate in academic discourse, adapt to new learning systems, and foster intercultural relationships. Previous research emphasizes that intercultural competence requires not only linguistic ability but also cultural sensitivity, emotional regulation, and adaptive behavior (Deardorff, 2006; Kim, 2001). Furthermore, the strength of self-efficacy in intercultural contexts is influenced by coping strategies and the presence of supportive environments (Sawir et al., 2008; Kim & Kim, 2020).

Despite the growing number of Indonesian students pursuing doctoral studies abroad, limited research has specifically examined how intercultural communication experiences shape their self-efficacy. Most existing studies primarily address language barriers, academic adjustment, or general adaptation, while the psychological dimension of self-efficacy in

intercultural encounters remains underexplored. Addressing this gap is urgent, as self-efficacy strongly affects international students' academic success, social participation, and overall well-being. This study aims to explore how self-efficacy in intercultural communication was constructed by an Indonesian Ph.D. student in the United States through academic and social experiences.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a narrative inquiry design (Creswell, 2013), which was considered appropriate for exploring lived experiences and meaning-making processes in intercultural adaptation. The participant was an Indonesian doctoral student enrolled at a university in the United States, selected through purposive sampling. The participant also had more than ten years of professional experience as a lecturer in Indonesia prior to doctoral study, providing a rich perspective on academic transition and intercultural communication.

Data were collected from three sources: semi-structured interviews, self-recorded conversations, and researcher field notes. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. To ensure validity, triangulation was applied through the use of interviews, recordings, and notes. Member checking was conducted by sharing transcript summaries with the participant, while prolonged engagement and reflective journaling were used to increase credibility. Thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) was applied to code, categorize, and synthesize emerging patterns, focusing on how self-efficacy in intercultural communication developed through challenges, adaptive strategies, and support systems.

Results and Discussion

1) Intercultural Encounter Challenges (RQ1)

The participant encountered multiple intercultural challenges in both academic and social contexts. Communication barriers were among the most immediate, particularly in understanding idiomatic expressions, slang, and informal classroom discourse. Although the participant had adequate academic English proficiency, these aspects of everyday language created difficulties in real-time comprehension. Such challenges align with Kim's (2001) argument that linguistic competence must be accompanied by sociocultural awareness. Recent research also highlights that international students continue to struggle with informal communication despite strong academic English skills (Zhang & Zhou, 2020).

Cultural misunderstandings also appeared, such as clothing norms in academic contexts and potluck practices where individuals pay for their own meals. These experiences illustrate cultural contrasts between collectivist and individualist orientations, echoing Hofstede's (2001) cultural framework. Similar findings have been reported in more recent studies, which confirm that intercultural misunderstandings often stem from implicit social norms that are difficult for newcomers to interpret (Rayyan et al., 2023).

Academic demands were another significant challenge, including fast reading requirements, unfamiliar writing conventions, and the pressure to meet higher critical standards. These obstacles are consistent with Sawir et al. (2008) and are reinforced by Nugraheni et al. (2024), who emphasize that doctoral students from non-Western systems often face steep transitions when adapting to Western academic expectations.

2) Adaptation Strategies (RQ2)

To address these challenges, the participant employed several adaptive strategies. Reflective practices were central, involving ongoing self-reflection and reinterpretation of intercultural experiences. Instead of perceiving misunderstandings as failures, they were reframed as opportunities for growth. This reflective stance resonates with Deardorff's (2006) framework of intercultural competence and is further supported by Nguyen (2022), who emphasizes the role of reflective learning in strengthening intercultural communication competence.

Social support was also crucial. Participation in the Indonesian student association, peer mentoring, and guidance from academic advisors helped the participant navigate both academic and cultural challenges. Such social persuasion reinforced confidence, consistent with Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, and aligns with Rayyan et al. (2023), who found that peer and institutional support strongly contribute to doctoral students' adaptation abroad.

Engagement in intercultural contexts, such as multicultural events and collaborative group projects, further enhanced the participant's confidence and cultural sensitivity. This supports Kim and Kim (2020), who argue that intercultural competence develops most effectively through active participation in diverse communities.

3) Influence on Self-Efficacy (RQ3)

Through continuous adaptation, the participant experienced significant growth in self-efficacy. Confidence in academic writing and oral discussions improved, particularly through mastery experiences such as supporting peers and publishing research. Cultural flexibility and tolerance also developed, as the participant learned to approach cultural differences without excessive anxiety. These findings align with Bandura's (1997) theoretical model, where mastery experiences and social persuasion are central to self-efficacy development.

Recent scholarship supports these conclusions, showing that self-efficacy in intercultural contexts is strengthened by reflective practices and external reinforcement (Zhang & Zhou, 2020; Nugraheni et al., 2024). The participant's experiences highlight that self-efficacy is not static but a dynamic process shaped by personal reflection, social support, and mastery experiences in both academic and social environments.

To illustrate the findings more clearly, a concept map was developed to show the relationship between intercultural challenges, adaptation strategies, and the development of self-efficacy (Figure 1).

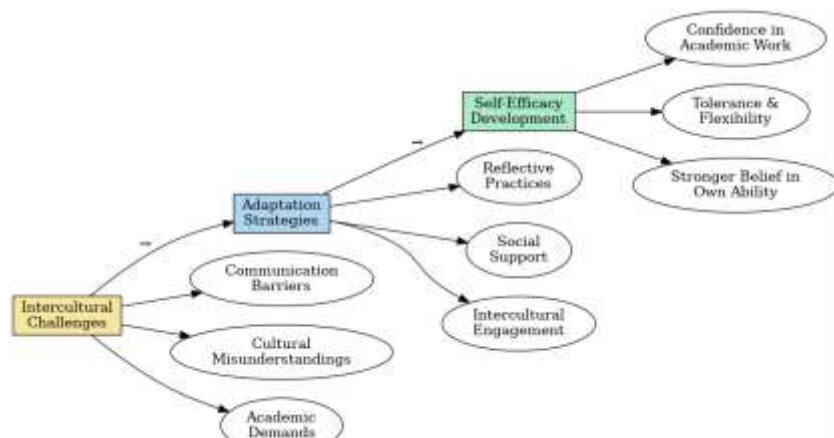


Figure 1. Concept map of the research findings

Conclusion

This study explored how self-efficacy in intercultural communication was constructed by an Indonesian Ph.D. student in the United States. The findings show that self-efficacy developed through navigating intercultural challenges, applying adaptive strategies, and receiving support from academic and social networks. These experiences indicate that self-efficacy is not static, but a dynamic process shaped by reflection, mastery experiences, and social reinforcement.

Practically, the study highlights the importance of reflective learning opportunities, peer and institutional support, and inclusive intercultural engagement in fostering international students' self-efficacy and communication competence.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be proposed for prospective doctoral students pursuing international education. First, it is important to strengthen intercultural communication skills early by engaging in language practice beyond academic English, including idioms, slang, and informal interactions, to prepare for everyday communication. Second, students are encouraged to develop reflective learning habits, such as keeping journals or recording reflections, so that intercultural encounters can be interpreted as opportunities for growth rather than obstacles. Third, seeking supportive networks through student associations, peer groups, and mentors can provide both academic and emotional assistance. Fourth, participation in intercultural activities, including multicultural events, community gatherings, and collaborative projects, can foster confidence and build cultural sensitivity. Finally, balancing academic responsibilities with personal well-being through effective time management and self-care strategies is essential for maintaining resilience throughout doctoral studies.

These recommendations emphasize that doctoral success is not only determined by academic performance but also by the ability to adapt, reflect, and engage in supportive communities.

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