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Unveiling the Workers' Communication Experiences in Japanese Companies: A Phenomenological Study on Indonesian Workers

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ABSTRACT

This study describes Indonesian workers' language adaptation and acculturation in the industrial workplace in Japanese culture, which aims to describe how workers interpret their experiences interacting with Japanese people in the workplace. The method used is a phenomenological study with in-depth interviews focusing on aspects of verbal and non-verbal communication, acculturation experiences in the work and communication system in the company. The participants consider and assess their ability to communicate verbally and non-verbally, namely 12 workers with experience working for more than two years at Japanese institutions and companies. From the analysis, the workers undergo the stages of culture shock, recovery, and adaptation. In the early days of work, they experience cultural shock and cannot adjust to a high rhythm and work ethic. They adapt to various aspects of performance, such as receiving assignments and instructions, communicating, and negotiating. The Japanese culture with detailed orientations is challenging for all participants even though they have been working for a long time. Some participants admitted that the *Horenso* system in most Japanese companies was considered a tradition that led to a solid system as a working group. Several aspects play a vital role in the language adaptation of Indonesian workers to Japanese communication. Along with the increasing number of foreign workers in Japan, this study is a case example of how the perspective of foreign workers when undergoing the adaptation process in the Japanese cultural environment in order to minimize the occurrence of intercultural conflict.

Keywords: Indonesian Workers; Intercultural Adaptation; Japanese Business; Japanese Communication

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1. Introduction

Acculturation and cross-cultural adaptation are cultural and psychological changes due to contact between two or more cultural groups and their members. The movement of Indonesians to Japan as workers and permanent residents is an example of acculturation. The phenomenon of Indonesians moving to Japan has increased this decade. According to the Japanese government data, in 2021, the number of Indonesians currently in Japan is 59,280 people^[1]. In the last decade, the number of Indonesians working in Japan has increased in the industrial and medical sectors. This condition is caused by the tendency to reduce the number of productive ages in Japan. Through the Tokutei Gino (Special Skill Worker) and Gino Jisshusei (Technical Intern Trainee) programs, the government has opened the entrance for foreign workers of productive age. One of whom is from Indonesia.

Indonesian workers who work and live in Japan are not free from various problems and obstacles. Research on the problems of Indonesian workers^[2] reveals various communication obstacles faced by Indonesian workers, including verbal communication barriers, language misunderstandings, ways of working, and other habits that are felt to be different. The obstacles that arise are related to the way of working and communication culture in the workplace in Japan. In line with a study by Okushima^[3], most Indonesian labourers in the study encounter problems regarding language skills and understanding of Japanese culture. This condition creates various psychological conflicts at the beginning of their work.

In relation to the cross-cultural adaptation of expatriates, Čuhlová^[4] examined the adaptation process of Czech expatriates working outside their country. The research results lead to a deeper understanding of the process and help improve the selection process of suitable labour candidates for foreign assignments and intercultural training to achieve a higher level of adjustment. Then, Mandari & Broer's^[5] research examined the adaptation of Japanese expatriates working in Indonesia using ethnographic methods. This research found that the adaptation process is vital because it can create comfort in interacting with fellow employees and reduce miscommunication at work. The adaptation process includes Indonesian language competency, adapting to work culture, use of media, direct interaction with Indonesian people, interaction with Japanese people in Indonesia, and real

assistance for expatriates. There are three stages that people who live and work outside their country of origin go through: the preparation, active, and final stages. The results of this research also state that the critical point in the adaptation process is the skill in using the local language both orally and in writing, as well as the mental attitude of being willing to accept change. Then, Duronto^[6] investigated the adaptation events of Latin American students studying at Tsukuba University in Japan, which showed that it was essential to understand the consequences of cultural relocation from both psychological and sociocultural perspectives. The sociocultural adaptation perspective shows a student's high level of difficulty in interacting in the Tsukuba environment. Students' failure to develop cultural empathy is an obstacle to understanding the Japanese worldview. Previous research on Indonesian workers in Japan investigated laborers who in reality did not have a background understanding of Japanese culture as Okushima showed the results of his research on Indonesian workers. In contrast, this study describes the experiences of professional workers who had a better understanding of Japan before they came to Japan because they had studied Japanese language and culture at university. Also, this study takes the aspect of workers' interpretation of verbal and non-verbal interaction experiences.

Kim^[7] states that important factors in the adaptation process are personal communication skills, social communication, and support from the environment in which one lives. In line with this statement, Indonesian workers are required to have insight and communication skills in the Japanese cultural environment. Previous research does not reveal the conditions of workers' adjustment seen from the workers' perspective and interpretation of their communication experiences. This study is important because the number of Indonesians working in Japan is increasing rapidly, but there are very few studies that explore aspects of the real experiences of workers as they adjust to a work environment that has a large gap with their home culture. In fact, Indonesian workers have different views and values from Japanese even though they both come from eastern cultures, so the phenomenon of interaction is unique and cannot be generalized. So, this research tries to investigate the experiences of Indonesian expatriates and the extent to which they survive the work culture environment in Japan. Also, what aspects have been successfully adapted and what aspects have not been

able to be adapted so far? The aim is to describe the adaptation and acculturation experiences of Indonesian workers who have lived and worked in Japan for at least two years. The question focuses on: (1) To what extent are the Indonesian workers accustomed to this way of communicating after a long period, (2) To what extent do the Indonesian workers mentally adapt to a different culture in relation to interactions at work, (3) How do the Indonesian workers interpret differences and what is acceptable and unacceptable about Japanese communication?

2. Materials and Methods

This research aimed to investigate Indonesian expatriates in Japanese companies by investigating the level of communication adaptation in the workplace. Therefore, phenomenology qualitative research was used to reveal the experience of living in Japan. Creswell^[8] states that the qualitative research paradigm originates from cultural anthropology and American sociology. Qualitative research aims to understand a particular situation, event, role, group, or social interaction^[9]. This research used qualitative steps by conducting an investigation in which the researcher slowly made sense of a social phenomenon by differentiating, comparing, duplicating, cataloguing and classifying research objects^[10]. Then, this research involved researchers to delve into the researcher's setting^[11]. The researchers entered the participant's world through ongoing interaction, seeking the participant's meaning and perspective. This research aimed to describe the phenomenon of cross-cultural adaptation experiences of Indonesian expatriates working in Japan.

Moustakas^[12] provides categories of organizing methods in phenomenological research as follows: (1) preparation methods, (2) methods of collecting data and obtaining descriptions of phenomena, and (3) methods of analyzing and interpreting data. Following the stages, the author collected data from participants' experiences and analysed and interpreted them. The researchers delved into experiences and revealed how the cross-cultural communication and adaptation process was experienced and felt by Indonesian people while working and living in Japanese society. The search for cross-cultural communication experiences and employee adaptation was carried out over a fairly long period using continuous data collection steps. This research used a subjective

approach by revealing adaptation conditions and exploring participants' experiences. Phenomenological research methods were used. The fundamental aim of the phenomenological approach was to describe the nature of certain phenomena^[13]. The search and investigation of the problems in this research were based on real experiences and interpretations of adaptation to Japanese culture.

The informants of this study were selected with the following considerations: 1) the period of stay in Japan is two years or more; 2) informants have a background experience of learning Japanese language and culture and they are college graduates; 3) informants are willing to contribute to this research interview. Interviews were conducted face-to-face with repeated retrieval frequencies to ensure that the data collected were saturated or valid. The author conducted intensive interviews to collect data, especially direct interviews with participants. To adjust the interview time, the author made an appointment in advance and made a schedule after obtaining permission from all participants. Because all participants were administrative staff, interviews were conducted mainly on Saturdays, Sundays and national holidays. But once or twice, adjusting the time to meet in person was difficult. In this condition, the author decided to use the telephone and conduct online interviews with participants (for participants who live in Okayama and Shizuoka). Interviews were held within three months, and face-to-face interviews were conducted in company conference rooms, parks, cafes, and venues. Interviews were recorded with a tape recorder and transcribed with the participant's consent. The target was Indonesian staff who lived in various places in Japan and worked in various institutions and companies. In a preliminary survey, the author interviewed Indonesian staff working at an agricultural company in Ibaraki Prefecture (currently moving to Tokyo), a product shipping company in Nagoya (currently moving to Yokohama), an advertising company around Tokyo, and a halal food production company in Yokohama (now another company).

This research also interviewed new employees, including these subjects. 11 participants had experience studying Japanese at university, and we assumed they would have no difficulty communicating in the language. Most of the participants are Indonesians with high Japanese language skills and mainly work in administration and office fields. In addition, one of the participants was a person who stud-

ied Japanese at a Japanese language school after coming to Japan. In previous research conducted by the author^[2], from the perspective of cross-cultural communication, Indonesian office workers clarified what problems they experienced in their work life at the beginning of their arrival in Japan, and whether they experienced culture shock and difficulties in communication behavior. Meanwhile in the current study, participants worked in the workplace for more than 2 to 10 years and examined how they adapted to communication from a cross-cultural adaptation perspective.

As shown in **Table 1** below, the participants of this survey were 11 people who had studied Japanese at university and one person who studied at a Japanese language school. The eleven participants had intermediate Japanese levels when they arrived in Japan and had no difficulty communicating in everyday life. As the participant's stay in Japan became longer, his Japanese language skills increased. One of the participants improved his Japanese significantly after he studied at a Japanese language school. **Table 1** shows four

people who have lived in Japan for two to three years, five people for five to six years, and three people for eight to 10 years. They mainly work in fields related to the placement of temporary workers in each region, but some people work in maintenance, education, and nursing. However, in reality, most of the work was related to the Japanese and Indonesian sides or acted as a bridge between the two. In terms of age, eight men and four women were in their late 20s to 30s.

Regarding the length of stay in Japan, participants I.6 and I.11 did not work at the same company for ten years but quit their original company and moved to another region. In addition, I.1 lived in Japan for study purposes when they first came to Japan. Since graduating, he has worked as a staff member in the university's international affairs department for three years while teaching Japanese to technical intern trainees. Similarly, participant I.12 also studied at a Japanese language school and worked at a company for three years after graduating because he fulfilled the requirements to come to Japan and continue to work after joining the company.

Table 1. Participant identity.

Code No	Gender	Age	Residence Area	Field of Work	Length of Stay (Years)
I1	Male	30	Sendai	International Relations, Education	8
I2	Male	27	Yokohama	HR placement	6
I3	Female	32	Yokohama	Logistics Expedition	6
I4	Female	27	Yokohama	Electronic Production	2
I5	Male	26	Tokyo	HR Placement	2
I6	Male	35	Shizuoka	HR Placement	10
I7	Female	25	Okayama	Export Import	2
I8	Female	29	Tokyo	HR Placement	5
I9	Male	29	Tokyo	HR Placement	6
I10	Male	28	Tokyo	Nursing	3
I11	Male	33	Tokyo	HR Placement	10
I12	Male	30	Osaka	HR Placement	6

3. Results

Regarding the use of Japanese in communication, most participants said that the Japanese language they used at work differed from the language they studied in college. Most participants initially felt confused. Some of the technical terms used in the workplace were words they had never learned before. For example, they had never learned terms related to spare parts, machines, equipment, human resources, and nursing homes. Those words were difficult to understand. Some people have learned the words and expressions used in the business world at university but do not use them anymore.

Thus, they do not use those words at work. For example, most participants use the polite forms “-MASU” and “-DESU” in conversations. However, in formal situations, the honorifics spoken by Japanese people often appear, so participants are frequently worried about how they respond. In addition, participants often made mistakes in using the honorifics “-TE KURERU”, “-TE ITADAKU”, and “-SASHIAGERU”. Japanese honorifics are difficult for native Indonesian speakers because there are no honorifics in Indonesian.

In this case, participant I.10 had difficulty communicating in a nursing home since the elderly's speech still uses dialectal language. Meanwhile, in formal written language sit-

uations, it often takes a lot of time to reply to emails because the language of written emails already has standard provisions. In this situation, I.10 had the impression that Japanese people “did not say clearly”, “Tatemaie (camouflage)”, and “ambiguous statements” referring to the statements made by Japanese superiors and peers. Especially in responding to orders, participants misunderstood instructions, such as

the sentence “Isn’t it better like this?” Those who had lived for a long time could understand its meaning. However, for Indonesians who had just started working, the speech was considered just “advice” rather than “orders” even though this sentence is actually a command in the Japanese communication culture. The barriers to language use can be seen in **Table 2** below.

Table 2. Barriers to language use.

Language Varieties	Japanese Language Varieties Adapted by Research Informants
Polite language Ambiguities	Form polite sentences: “-Te Kudasaru”, “-Te Itadaku”, “-Te Sashiageru” Phrases: “Korede ii desukedo” (This one is good though), “Daijoubu” (It doesn’t matter), “Koreno houga ii janai desu?” (Wouldn’t it be better like this?), “Sokoni oitahouga ii janai desuka” (Wouldn’t it be nice to put it there?), “Kangaete okimasu” (I will think about it first).
Formal language in official letters	“Itsumo osewani natteorimasu” (Thank you for your help so far), “- kano A desu”, “Senjitsu – arigatougozaimashita, - no ken de-” (I am – thank you for that day, regarding –), “Gorenraku itadakereba saiwai desu” (I will be very happy if you contact us later), “Gorenraku yoroshiku moushi agemasu” (Please help contact us again)
Special terms	Sparepart, tool names, business terms

Regarding communication values in the company, the participant shared his experience. Participant I.6 stated “As my stay progressed, I became more aware of language use, communication and work methods. In other words, I gradually learned to follow the example of those around me regarding business ethics.” As a result of coming into contact with Japanese people in everyday life, one tends to change his perspective and way of thinking. From this data, communication between Indonesian workers and their Japanese partners does not always run smoothly. Differences in communication habits with partners cause this problem. For example, many patients in Indonesia make appointments at the last minute instead of planning a visit well in advance. However, for Japanese people, making an appointment must be agreed upon by both parties well in advance, even a month or two beforehand. In such cases, participants think these “Japanese customs” are ideal.

As I.12 said, “I think that the values of HORENSO (Hokoku-renraku-soudan: reporting, contacting, consulting) should also be shared by Indonesians”. Japan, which has a strong collective culture and distinctive values, forces Indonesian expatriates to try hard to follow this communication. HORENSO is a system of communication in the workplace that is a habit of Japanese people. It is also a value in Japanese communication that is adopted in various aspects of life. HORENSO is, however, a reflection of a collective

culture. The existence of this collective culture is in line with Beamer & Varner’s^[14] statement which explains that individual attitudes in the workplace in Japan are unacceptable. On the other hand, collective values are a fundamental element in running a business. Participants often encounter this condition in their companies. On the other hand, the participant was already accustomed to Japanese communication patterns such as how to treat time and the use of honorific language. It influenced the participant to follow communication in the Japanese business world. The psychological changes in the participants can be seen in **Table 3** below.

However, even now there are still several things that make Japanese participants still “less than acceptable” in communicating with Japanese people even though they have lived in Japan for a long time. This is the opinion of a participant who has lived for 10 years. The main impression is that there is “no flexibility” in technical actions and there is a tendency for “one problem to be solved in a predetermined way”. As I.6 states “When problems arise, there should be alternative options to solve them, but my boss doesn’t understand why I don’t follow the system that has been decided. I think it would be effective if there was a little flexibility as a solution”. Another participant said, “Indonesians think that it’s okay to chat and relax after all the work is done, but my colleagues and seniors don’t want to waste their time, so I think it would be stressful to do something else even

though they've already finished everything. Do they really have to be that busy, huh?" Looking at this example, the work habits are very different. There seems to be a big gap in terms of working, thinking and problem-solving. Moreover, there is no similar slogan for working in Indonesia, such as

HORENSO. Even if there is a similar pattern, the level of consistency is different. In interpreting such communication actions, the participant has a view from his own cultural perspective, which also influences the assessment of Japanese culture.

Table 3. Changes in way of thinking and psychological changes.

Communication Aspects	The Details of the Communication Aspects
Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instead of being direct, it is better to use euphemistic expressions (circling around) proportionally. • Japanese language skills are increasing rapidly • Can use honorific expressions correctly • Can understand special terms • Can, to some degree, understand ambiguous Japanese expressions
Communication style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indonesian workers are used to writing emails, so they can accept it even if they have to write an email with a long narrative (opening-content-closing) • Company decisions and policies are conveyed to lower levels, so that participants follow that method • When ambiguous expressions (Tatemaie) appear, to a certain degree the participant understands where the Japanese partners are talking
Procedure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The idea arises that HORENSO = professional • Carry out work precisely and quickly (following the Japanese work rhythm) • Acquire skills in problem solving • Awareness arises of treating time correctly (on time)

Indonesian participants who lived for a long time had no problems interacting with the people around them. Language barriers disappear as they live longer. They learn to understand other people's feelings when they say words. As a result, as stated in I.12 "Compared to when I first arrived in Japan, I no longer feel uncomfortable relating to the people around me, and if anything, I can communicate fluently. When I had a problem at work, I gradually gained the ability to try and solve it myself. Work is not without stress, and when problems pile up, I use my own power to control my thoughts." He said that he was given the opportunity to relieve stress at work, and he was treated relatively with respect by his superiors and colleagues. In line with this, Ng, Wang, and Chan^[15] showed that social support from local friends was proven to significantly moderate the impact of integration and marginalization strategies on sociocultural and psychological adaptation.

In this study, all participants were Muslims. There were

many cases where companies tried to understand their religious rituals. For example, as expressed by I.3 "I was given the opportunity to pray and leeway when fasting." Many companies provide a place in the company and give about 10 minutes to pray. The environmental aspects facilitate cross-cultural adaptation in the workplace for Indonesian workers. Looking at similar research, Peltokorpi^[16] examines the determinants of cross-cultural adjustment of expatriates regarding non-work (interaction and general life adjustment) and work (work adjustment and job satisfaction) aspects in Japan. The study shows that expatriates' language proficiency, type, and personality traits such as emotional stability and cultural empathy positively influence the adjustment. If looking at the participants in this research, the following experiences support successful adaptation. The elements that support successful adaptation of participants can be seen in **Table 4** below.

Table 4. Elements that support successful adaptation of participants.

Supporting Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Self-effort: showing opinions to superiors, negotiating, learning from those around you, adapting to communication and ways of working, avoiding work mistakes, and correcting wrong actions ● Support from superiors and colleagues: guidance in work ● Environment in the company: aspects that support the adaptation process, as Muslims can carry out worship, fasting, holidays, and the company provides time for religious rituals.

From the description above, the participants received support from internal and external sources in adapting to Japanese culture. It would not be an exaggeration to say that new understanding and perspectives had been born through various experiences to see how far they could adapt psychologically. As according to Lysgaard's adaptation curve theory, humans generally go through the following stages when entering a new environment as stages of mental fitness. The U Curve and W Curve (Lysgaard, 1955 in^[17]) are models for understanding the cross-cultural adaptation process. Participants also experienced the Honeymoon-shock-recovery-stable stages in their work and living environments. The degree of adaptability to different cultures changes from the honeymoon stage to the shock stage to the recovery stage to the stable stage. The honeymoon period is the initial stage of adaptation to a different culture. It is a period when a person moves to a new area and is impressed by the beauty of the environment and the kindness of the people. For example, when the participant first went to Japan, he was impressed by the beautiful scenery and safe roads, and he felt that they were beautiful and wanted to live there for a long time. However, after living there for some time, the participant began to feel uncomfortable because the behavior and way of thinking of the people around him at work differed from those in his home culture. The period of culture shock is generally a symptom that occurs in people who live for a long time. Looking at the participant's experience, for example, Indonesian interactions are very different from Japanese habits, so it sometimes causes shock.

After entering a period of shock, when a person learns the habits of the people around him, the participants undergo the recovery period where they can accept themselves. An example was shown by the participants. As new Indonesian workers who lived in Japan for a long period of time, they were initially shocked by how Japanese people work. But as time went by, they began to think that they could also do it, and recovered from the shock. In addition, as they

stay longer, they become accustomed to the new culture. It is called a stable period when they gradually adapt to the environment.

If we look at the participants' experiences in this research, the recovery phase is clearly visible in those who stayed for six to eight years. From the results of the analysis, Indonesian people who work in a Japanese cultural environment can adapt in some aspects but not in others. In this way, Indonesian culture still influences Indonesian workers' way of thinking. There is still a subjective view of the outside world based on one's cultural values, and people will likely return to their old habits even when working. However, the longer they stay in Japan, the more their views and thoughts will change.

In their research, Miyagi & Yasuda^[18] showed that foreign medical personnel working in hospitals in the Okinawa region discovered the adaptation process from the unique aspects of using Japanese, negotiation patterns with customers, and relationships in the workplace. If looking at the results of the analysis of the experiences of Indonesian participants, similar conditions can be seen in these aspects. As Mandari & Boer^[5] show, important factors in the adaptation process are language fluency, work culture adjustments, media use, daily interactions with Indonesians, interactions between Japanese people in Indonesia, and real assistance for expatriates.

There are three stages that expatriates must go through, namely the preparation stage, the active stage and the final stage. Language skills and the willingness to accept change are important points in the adaptation process. This is the same thing experienced by the participants of this research. These factors are naturally experienced while living and working in the Japanese cultural environment. Similar to student adaptation in research by Zheng Shaofeng & Ishii Keiko^[19], results showed that distant emotional support-seeking negatively predicted psychological adaptation in the host country. Nevertheless, distant emotional support-seeking alleviated feelings of loneliness in Chinese

international students as close emotional support-seeking did. Also, the results showed that international students with higher home-culture orientation sought more distant support, whereas those with higher host-culture orientation sought more close support. Further, Chinese cultural orientation increases distant emotional support-seeking, which decreases psychological adaptation and loneliness.

4. Conclusions

Indonesian workers in Japan are relatively able to adapt to the Japanese work environment, which is very different from that in Indonesia. All participants could adapt to some aspects even though they could not accept other aspects, such as detail orientation and the high work ethic of Japanese people. By focusing on foreigners, especially Indonesians, who seek employment in Japanese companies, this research will help us understand the actual communication situation and reflect on them as members of society alongside Japanese people. As Alston & Takei^[20] emphasize, traditional Japanese values and communication patterns and their characteristics continue today in the business world. As the world moves towards globalization, people from different cultures live and work together. On the other hand, the characteristics of Indonesians who have solidarity values, flexibility in thinking, friendliness, and permissiveness, tend to be a big gap when interacting with people from other cultures. Therefore, the issue of foreign workers in Japan needs to be studied in more depth considering that Japan is currently heading towards a multicultural society.

It is necessary to conduct further research on: 1) how Indonesians relate to Japan and what strategies are carried out in the adaptive communication stage; 2) how Indonesian workers respond to symbols they encounter in different cultural environments, especially in Japan; 3) in a group of Indonesian workers in Japan, what factors support successful adaptation in the workplace and how the adaptation process occurs in terms of psychological, time and environmental aspects.

In the future, this article will be meaningful for the Japanese, who recruit workers, and for the Indonesian workers to support each other. More than that, with Japan becoming a country that includes many foreign workers, the results of this research provide new information and help realise a multicultural society. In the future, the two countries will likely

expand economic cooperation in employment so that Japanese companies can consider aspects of language adaptation and cross-cultural understanding when employing Indonesians.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, S.W.; methodology, S.W., D.K., and J.J.; validation, S.W., J.J., and N.A.; formal analysis, S.W., D.K., and N.A.; investigation, S.W. and D.K.; resources, S.W. and J.J.; data curation, S.W. and N.A.; writing original draft preparation, S.W., D.K., J.J.; writing review and editing, S.W. and J.J.; supervision, S.W., D.K., and N.A.; project administration, D.K., J.J., N.A.; funding acquisition, J.J. and N.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this article. Further enquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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