Religion-wise Culture Shock in Language Studying:

Status quo and countermeasure

Wang Qun
Xi'an International Studies University
Xi'an, China
semiya123@hotmail.com

Syihabuddin Syihabuddin, Yeti Mulyati, Vismaia S. Damaianti
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia
Bandung, Indonesia
syihabuddin@upi.edu

Abstract—**This study reports religion-wise culture shock encountered by international students during overseas language learning, and specifically focuses on the Chinese Indonesian-language student cohort. The data were collected through two comparative sessions of in-depth interviews and were analyzed by using qualitative approach. A total of seven Chinese students responded to the research that particularly stressed their religion-wise culture shock symptoms in the first month of study and their behavioral progress after four months of cultural adaptation. The findings put forward that students of this study had all experienced culture shock in view of religious issues, which led to inconvenience living in Indonesia. Nevertheless, many of the students showed remission of culture shock by improving intercultural communicative competence. The researcher then proposed that teachers should prepare students intercultural communicative competence beforehand by using OSEE tool in foreign language teaching while adhering to certain religion education rules in a Chinese higher education context.**

Keywords—religion-wise culture shock; foreign language studying; intercultural communication; OSEE

I. INTRODUCTION

It is a generally held assumption in numerous studies of second language acquisition that the main purpose of learning a second language is to develop communicative competence. Communicative competence is considered as a prerequisite for the successful development of a professional [1], a demonstrated area (or areas) of successful communication activity on the basis of acquired tools and strategies of verbal communication supported by linguistic and language skills [2]. More specifically, communicative competence is influenced or constituted by the ability for language use and communication as a form of social interaction. It was argued in recent research that, even if contextualized and linguistically adjusted, communication might not be sufficient unless it was accompanied by multidimensional cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity and cultural adroitness supposed to lead to a relationship of acceptance where self and other are trying to negotiate a cultural platform satisfactory to all parties involved [3,4].

A. Intercultural Communicative Competence

Such ideas of communicative competence engendered the notion of intercultural communicative competence, which is generally defined as the knowledge, motivation and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures [4,5]. To illustrate the distinction, Spitzberg demonstrated that, "Effectiveness is the successful accomplishment of valued goals, objectives, or rewards relative to costs. Appropriateness means that the valued rules, norms, and expectancies of the relationship are not violated significantly [6]." Kim explained that intercultural communicative competence is required in a range of areas including language and host-culture norms [7]. While Holopainen and Björkman stressed the importance of willingness to engage in host cultures [8].

As to second language learners, in order to succeed internationally, one need to acquire intercultural communicative competence to typically adapt a new foreign culture. This requires not only sufficient linguistic and language skills and knowledge about the host culture, but also a willingness to understand host-culture members [9].

B. Culture Shock

Many studies show that, when moving to a foreign cultural environment, nearly all of the international students have encountered an array of acculturative stressors in communication competence and psychological well-being, including the language barrier [10], educational environment [11], sociocultural situations [12], discrimination [13], loneliness, and practical or lifestyle stressors [14]. "No matter for what length of time, (the international students) are responding not just to one event, but to a series of events and experiences" [15] which are so different from their own and some of which are quite "shocking" to them that the term "culture shock" is used to refer to these mentioned events and experiences [16].

The word "culture" was first defined by British scholar E. B. Tylor as "a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society [17]". Crozet and Liddicoat conceptualized culture as a series way of acting, believing, valuing and thinking which are shared by members of a community (social group) and which are transmitted to the next generation [18]. Culture may be thought of as a causal agent that affects the evolutionary process by uniquely human means. Religion, on the other hand, is considered a process of

revelation and contains the concept of the "faithful" who receive the message of revelation. Culture permits the "self-conscious evaluation of human possibilities" and therefore presents a device for increasing human control over species change [19]. Religious issue is one the most subtle and tricky cultural component. Wrench, Corrigan, McCroskey, and Punyanunt-Carter demonstrated that "religion is an essential constituent in the learning of intercultural communication [20]". Informal observations also show that significant religious difference may give rise to intercultural communication apprehension even cultural conflict [21].

One population that may shed some light on this problem is Chinese Indonesian-language students. These individuals are usually required to spend one academic year to study language in Indonesia. Nevertheless, it important to notice that they do not study language exclusively, but also attend social and cultural activities in Indonesian community. The reason why Chinese Indonesian-language students were targeted as subjects in this research was because of the vast difference of religious situations in Indonesia and China.

C. Religious Situations in Indonesia and China

The Indonesian Constitution declared in Chapter XI that "the state shall be based upon the belief in the one and only God" and "the state guarantees all persons the freedom of worship, each according to his/her own religion or belief". The two statements establish the founding principle that the state is religious, from which follows the conclusion that the state has legitimate role in regulating religious practice and religious affairs. In addition to that, Ministry of Religion has published the data that in 2011 that Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim-majority country with 87.18% of Indonesians declared Muslim on the 2010 census, over 25,000 *pondok pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), and Indonesian Mosque Council has released the figure that there are over 800,000 mosques in Indonesia.

In sharp contrast with Indonesia, according to data collected by WIN-Gallup International in 2012, 86% of Chinese population is atheists, which is quite common in a socialist and communist country. Atheists usually are defined as the individuals who do not have a specific faith, religious behaviors, or an emotional connection with a religious figure. Notwithstanding, there is still a considerable interest in religion among young Chinese atheists, which means they still have their own special views, emotions, and behavioral patterns toward religion, which can be said to constitute their religiosity [22,23]. Even though Chinese atheists do not see themselves as religious, many endorse some positive effects of religion and some believe in the existence of a supreme being [24].

D. The Study

Religious and spiritual beliefs are prominent in all cultures [25] and have become an important influence on life for international students [26]. In the light of the immense difference between religious background in China and Indonesia, it can be deducted that religious issues strike as a great impact on Chinese learners' intercultural communication. To ascertain the religion-wise culture shock symptoms of the

subjects, the research sought to investigate the following question:

RQ1: *Whether Chinese Indonesian-language students were suffering from religion-wise culture shock when studying in Indonesia?*

In the meantime, the detailed culture shock symptoms also need to be examined. Thus, the following question:

RQ2: *How did Chinese Indonesian-language students perceive and cope with religion-wise culture shock when studying in Indonesia?*

In addition to that, the researcher went on to explore the countermeasure against religion-wise culture shock before entering a new cultural environment, and put forward some suggestions for religion education reform in China. This prompted the third question:

RQ3: *What is the appropriate teaching model that can prepare students from religion-wise culture shock by encouraging improvement on knowledge, motivation and skills?*

II. METHOD

To address the research questions, a qualitative approach, more specifically qualitative case study, was used for seeking the religion-wise culture shock issues in specific intercultural contexts. Qualitative approaches provide detailed descriptions of socially constructed realities, which make them appropriate for studying complex processes that play out in specific settings [27,28]. In this research, data were collected through in-depth interviews, during which the researcher explored the participants' emic perspectives on religion-wise culture shock on intercultural communication and their coping mechanism. Seven Chinese Indonesian-language students took part in the research as participants when they were studying in an Indonesian university.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Religion-wise Culture Shock

The first interview question was used to ascertain whether participants had encountered culture shock when studying in Indonesia. Participants positively responded to five listed culture shock symptoms [29], which proved the hypothesis that participants were all suffering from culture shock. They found things in the new environment shocking, wanted to stay away from anxious foreign cultural environment as far as possible, and regarded their Chinese classmates' group as a care-free shelter.

People from different cultures who employ value systems may have some things in common but are likely to differ greatly, particularly in religious and spiritual beliefs [20]. To explore what major stressors that contributed to culture shock, the researcher asked participants to give examples of theirs culture shock symptoms. The collected data showed that every one of the participants mentioned and underscored the religious

issues. This may be exemplified by excerpts from seven participants from seven aspects of religious issues: customs and routine, rituals, outfits, food and drinks, and communication.

1) Customs and routine: In general, there has been a fatwa which forbids free mixing between men and women, especially when alone. One male participant reported, *"When living in a boarding house in Indonesia, you need to pay attention to the 'no girls' rule, which is 'no boys' rule for girls. However, I reckon that we are all adults here and we can be responsible for what we do."* Other male participants reported more culture shock issues on differences of daily. They were accustomed to hanging out till late night in pubs or coffee shops, but found out that their bedtime routines did not suit with Indonesian friends'. One participant said, *"I was once hanging out with some Indonesian Muslim friends. It turns out they could not stay up till 00:00 a.m. because they need to get up at 03:00 a.m. for prayers. They also had curfew schedules in their individual boarding houses."* Likewise, some participants reported that Friday was their least favorite day in a week because it was the day for *"shalat Jum'ah"* (a congregational prayer that Muslims hold every Friday), and errands were often postponed on Friday. One participant said, "The cafes and restaurants stopped serving food because the cooks went for praying." Another two participants added, *"Almost all the government windows were closed after 12:00 a.m.. Shouldn't public affairs come first?"*

2) Rituals: What catches the researcher's eye was that all participants reported the "disturbance" from "azaan", the calling out for prayers from a loudspeaker in a mosque. One participant illustrated her anxiety when hearing the "azaan" for the first time, *"It was a loud and endless sound. I guess it wasn't Indonesian language, but some kind of mantra. I was aroused from my sleep at 04:00 a.m.. Can you believe it? I might sound a bit selfish, but I would appreciate if they turning down the volume of the loudspeaker."* Another participant echoed, *"You could hear 'azaan' coming from every corner within your earshot on the eve of Corban Festival. I was frightened because I thought it was a religious demonstration. After I found out that it would last for a whole night, I just grinned and bore it. I never knew this 'azaan' chanting and have never heard of it before when learning Indonesian language in China."*

3) Outfits: Aside to the inconvenience in daily life, all three female participants expressed their confusion about female Muslim's outfits. One participant argued that, *"I understand the Muslim dressing code, yet there are numerous female Muslims who don't wear a 'hijab' or a veil. That means that those who scrupulously abide by the religious code have an alternative, a prettier alternative. I would've chose fashion over everything. I felt pity for them."* Another participant was shocked by the "special sportswear for Muslims", *"I saw Muslim girls in swimsuits covering head to ankle. I thought it was diving suit, but, no, it was a Muslim swimwear. I wanted to ask them how they feel in contrast to people wearing bikinis, but I was afraid to offend them."*

4) Food and drinks: For the participants of this research, it was exciting to try new food the first time, but it was not easy to adapt to the same type of food every day. Most participants complained the imbalance between carbon hydrates and vegetables and how Indonesian people enjoyed deep-frying food materials. Religion-wise, particularly, all seven participants expressed their yearning towards pork and beer since there was seldom access to purchasing them. In addition to their own experience, participants complemented some views on Indonesian people's food habits. One participant said, *"Some of my friends fasted on Friday. They didn't eat nor drink till 18:00 p.m.. I admired their persistence and strong beliefs. On the other hand, I doubted whether if the fasting could do harm to their metabolism system."*

5) Communication: The collected data showed that the religion-wise culture impact was bidirectional, which means the local Indonesian Muslims were also confused by Chinese participants' religious situation. Nevertheless, their confusion had brought more troubles to the participants. One participant reported, *"I was often asked about my religion. At first, I explained that China is a socialist and communist country and I have no religion, but this answer only made Indonesian people more confused and astonished. I guess religion does mean a lot to them. Sadly, I can't get it because I'm an atheist."*

To sum up the data collected from the first session of in-depth interviews, all participants have encountered religion-wise from culture shock. Even though they were excited to study in Indonesia, at times, confusion, uncertainty, anxiety, stress and fright haunted their excitement.

B. Aftermath: Adaptation or Apprehension

Some prominent themes emerged from the data collected from the second session of in-depth interviews that addressed five of seven participants' behaviors in acquiring and using intercultural communicative competence in solving culture shock problems. Four participants reported that he had learned to use some religious terms in Islam, e.g. "assalamualaikum", "bismillah", "insya Allah", and "alhamdulillah". One participant commented, *"At first, I thought only Muslims could speak those religious words. I discreetly avoid using them in a conversation. However, I accidently said the word 'alhamdulillah' when I got my lost wallet back. My (Indonesian) classmates were surprised and complimented me on my 'knowledge on Islam'– to be honest, it was the only word I knew. I felt I was bridging the distance between Indonesian majority and myself by learning their culture."* Another participant added, *"I want to tell my friends back in China that it is okay to use some religious words with religious people. It has no particular meanings in most daily communication contexts, but it helps you to build a better relationship in a new culture."*

Apart from verbal behaviors, participants also achieved improvement on nonverbal behaviors in their intercultural communication. For instance, one participant demonstrated that she started to greet teachers with Islamic gesture "salim" (similar to hand-kissing, with exception it is only tip of nose or

forehead that touch the hand, not the lips). She complemented, "*At the beginning, I could never accept this 'salim' gesture because it looked weird and disrespectful to me. However, I found out that it was just a way of expressing esteem and decency to someone superior in Islam. Also, to be honest, I thought it was fun to 'do it as the Romans do'. As a result, I myself started doing this gesture with my Indonesian professors. They looked happy when receiving it. It might only be a gesture for us atheists, but it showed acculturation of two different cultural communities.*"

In sharp contrast, simultaneously, the other two participants responded negatively after one academic semester studying in Indonesia. The collected interview data showed that they were reluctant to blend in Indonesian community. Moreover, they both showed low self-esteem and incompetence in intercultural communication. They used "I didn't understand religiosity in China, I didn't understand it in Indonesia, and I don't want to understand it" as an excuse. In essence, the mentioned two participants had high levels of intercultural communication apprehension.

C. A Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence as Countermeasure

Chinese Indonesian-language students in this research manifested severe religion-wise culture shock in the beginning of their overseas study journey in a new cultural community and different religious system. In spite of that, many of them started to get accustomed to new environment by approaching and learning religious factors in foreign culture.

Studies on teaching culture have shown that language and culture are closely linked and are best acquired together [30-32]. Language teaching and learning no longer aims only at language proficiency, but also at guiding learners toward becoming viable contributors and participants in a linguistically and culturally diverse society [33]. When language skills and intercultural communicative competence become coalesced in a language classroom, students become optimally prepared for participation in a global world. What kind of teaching model can be applied in second language acquisition class in order to successfully move students toward better intercultural communicative competence?

As the present research focused on alleviating international students' religion-wise culture shock by improving their intercultural communicative competence, the researcher preferred Deardorffs' OSEE tool as countermeasures to the aforementioned issues [34]. The reasons and procedures are listed below.

Our understanding of one cultural environment is deeply permeated by particular religious traditions and their secular legacies [35]. Religion individually and as concatenated history has played defining roles in human life, shaping the social, political, and ideological realities of the vast majority of people who have ever lived [36]. As to Chinese foreign language students who have not acknowledged a religious community before, it is vital for students to consider their preconceived ideas and attitudes before entering into the intercultural competence process [33]. The OSEE tool was created in order to help learners analyze their attitudes toward others at the

beginning of the intercultural process [34]. The abbreviation "OSEE" stands for [37]:

- O: Observe what is happening
- S: State objectively what is happening
- E: Explore different explanations for what is happening
- E: Evaluate which explanation is the most likely one

In a second language acquisition classroom, the teacher may choose a topic of interest and present some media that related to the theme of the curriculum. In this research case, an Indonesian-language teacher locates a video clips showing a scenario of "*Idul Fitri*" Festival. The teacher begins by presenting the video with the sound off so that students are solely engaged by the images, actions, and interactions thereby providing an opportunity for students to focus completely on what they see during the observation.

This exploration activity creates space for learners to consider their preconceived ideas about people from other cultures so that negative beliefs are transformed during exercises focusing on objective observation, research, and evaluation [33]. In addition to that, the sound off playing of video clips creates an environment of curiosity and inquiry fin order to guide students toward intercultural communicative competence.

D. Touching upon Religion Education in Language Teaching in China

Another reason that the researcher chose OSEE as teaching tool is because of the strict religion education policy. China adheres to the rule of separation of religion and slate. Moreover, it is clearly forbidden to engage in activities that use religion to interfere with educational activities. Only education that aims at a basic knowledge of religion is conducted, and the treatment of religion is strictly limited. The aforementioned OSEE tool starts from observation and ends with evaluation under teacher's supervision as a coordinator. The students can interactively learn about the religious culture knowledge without referring to ideology. It is suggested that foreign language teachers in China should discreetly screen the materials before conveying to students. A recommended scope of religious culture knowledge is religious customs.

Be this as it may, although limitedly, religion is touched upon all levels of education in China. One could only hope that the relationship between education and religion can improve further one day in order to bear abundant intercultural communicative fruits.

IV. CONCLUSION

This research investigated religion-wise culture shock issues encountered by Chinese Indonesian-language students when studying abroad in Indonesia and attempted to explore their process on cultural adaptation by adopting qualitative approach. Through analysis of seven Chinese students' cultural experiential accounts in a span of four months, the pattern is shown that Chinese Indonesian-language students had suffered from religion-wise culture shock. They had shown uncertainty, anxiety, stress, and alienation when addressing to religious

issues. It is found that many of them had tried adapting and adjusting themselves to Indonesian culture by employing verbal and nonverbal behaviors in Islamic religion. But not all of the participants had achieved remission of culture shock symptoms. The two most heavily affected participants were having intercultural communicative apprehension and could not establish an open attitude.

Based on the findings, the researcher suggested that foreign language teacher in China may exploit OSEE tool through language teaching in a Chinese religion education context. By intriguing students' curiosity, the teacher coordinates the students through observing, stating, exploring and evaluating the religious customs in a foreign cultural community.

This research, as most do, was conducted with a number of limitations. First, the interviews were done in Mandarin then translated into English. Therefore, it is possible that the context meaning was not delivered intactly. Second, although highly unlikely, it remains a possibility that students who participated in the research were the only ones who had experienced culture shock in the research scope. It is suggested that further research might focus on teaching materials and media development or how to well prepare students who are going to study abroad both in culture and communication.

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