Intercultural Communication Challenges in the Implementation of *Kouryuukai* Program

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Abstract

Globalization has intensified cross-cultural encounters, including through informal cultural exchange programs known in the Japanese context as *kouryukai* (交流会) – gatherings between native Japanese speakers and foreign students aimed at introducing cultural practices, building interpersonal relationships, and enhancing language proficiency. Despite its informal nature, *kouryukai* harbors considerable communicative complexity, as differences in linguistic backgrounds, communication styles, and social expectations frequently generate diverse communication barriers among participants.

Drawing on Howard Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which distinguishes between convergence, the adaptive alignment of one's communicative style toward an interlocutor, and divergence, the deliberate maintenance of communicative differences to assert group identity; this study investigates the forms of communication barriers experienced by Indonesian university students in *kouryukai* and the strategies they employ in response. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were gathered through triangulated methods of interview, observation, and documentation from students who had attended a minimum of two sessions. The findings reveal recurrent patterns of communicative barriers alongside the accommodation strategies participants deployed to navigate them.

Keywords: *communication barriers, cultural exchange, communication accommodation theory*

1. Introduction

Globalization has facilitated cross-cultural encounters among nations, including through cultural exchange programs, referred to in Japanese as *kouryuukai* (交流会). These programs are designed to bring together individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds – specifically, native Japanese speakers and international learners—in informal settings, with the objectives of fostering interpersonal relationships, introducing cultural values, and enhancing language proficiency.

In alignment with these objectives, the Japanese Literature Study Program at Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar routinely organizes *kouryuukai* activities. These events represent a form of collaboration with partner universities in Japan and are typically held biannually in March and August. Through *kouryuukai*, students not only refine their language skills but also develop intercultural competencies that are increasingly vital in the contemporary era of globalization. The activities encompassed within the *kouryuukai* program at Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar include group discussions, cultural presentations, quizzes, interactive games, and question-and-answer sessions involving students from both

countries.

In practice, however, *kouryuukai* activities do not always proceed seamlessly. Divergent linguistic backgrounds, differing norms of politeness, varied communication styles, and contrasting social expectations among participants frequently give rise to a range of communication barriers. These barriers manifest not only in linguistic aspects but also extend to cultural, social, and psychological dimensions. The Japanese cultural tendency toward indirect communication, for instance, often renders it difficult for Indonesian students to discern the implicit meanings conveyed by their interlocutors. Furthermore, social factors such as the influence of hierarchy and status in conversation further complicate the communicative dynamics within *kouryuukai*. Such misalignments have the potential to engender misunderstandings, discomfort, and even withdrawal from interaction—conditions that fundamentally contradict the overarching objectives of the exchange program itself.

To examine these dynamics in depth, this study employs the framework of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), developed by Howard Giles in 1973. The theory posits that individuals can adapt their speech patterns, gestures, and attitudes to create a sense of similarity or difference with their conversational partners. In the context of kouryukai, CAT offers a precise analytical lens, as these activities inherently constitute arenas in which communication strategies are tested in real-world settings. Giles argues that when group membership becomes more salient in an interaction, the communication strategies individuals choose are significantly influenced by intergroup dynamics. In the context of kouryukai, the identities of "international students" and "Japanese students" represent one of the most prominent group distinctions, directly shaping how Indonesian students select their communication strategies.

Central to CAT is the range of strategies individuals employ in the process of accommodation. These strategies may be elaborated as follows:

a. Convergence; a strategy in which an individual adapts their communicative behavior to become more similar to that of their interlocutor. Convergence encompasses linguistic convergence (adjustments in vocabulary, grammar, and speech tempo), paralinguistic convergence (adjustments in tone, volume, and intonation), and nonverbal convergence (adjustments in gestures, facial expressions, and physical distance).

b. Divergence; a strategy in which an individual maintains and accentuates differences in communication style from their interlocutor.

c. Over-accommodation; inappropriate or excessive convergence that may inadvertently lead the interlocutor to perceive the speaker as condescending, thereby exacerbating communication barriers. For instance, speaking excessively slowly or using overly simplified language may be perceived as patronizing and may reinforce rather than reduce perceived differences.

d. Under-accommodation; referring to a failure to make adequate adjustments despite clear signals from the interlocutor that such adjustments are necessary. An example would be a native speaker who continues to speak at a rapid tempo or uses local dialects without considering the interlocutor's linguistic competence.

e. Maintenance and Non-accommodation; Maintenance refers to a condition in which a speaker retains their original communication style neutrally without making any effort to adjust. Non-accommodation, conversely, denotes an absence of adjustment efforts, which often culminates in communication breakdown and the avoidance of interaction.

Communication adjustment and the selection of accommodation strategies, within CAT, are influenced by various factors, including the relationship between speakers, cultural

backgrounds, and situational contexts. More specifically, Dragojevic, Gasiorek, and Giles (2016) identify three key variables: (1) interpersonal versus intergroup orientation; (2) perceptions of status and power; and (3) attribution of motives—that is, perceptions of why an individual accommodate.

Research on communication barriers in the context of cultural exchange between Indonesian and Japanese students remains relatively limited. Existing studies tend to focus predominantly on linguistic aspects, such as error analysis or vocabulary acquisition. Furthermore, few studies have explicitly employed Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as an analytical framework. To address this gap, the present study offers several novel contributions. First, this research extends beyond linguistic barriers to also examine non-linguistic barriers, thereby providing a more comprehensive picture of the communication challenges encountered. Second, the study involves Indonesian students who have directly participated in kouryukai, ensuring that the findings have direct relevance for the study program and program organizers. Additionally, the increasing prevalence of student exchange programs between Indonesia and Japan renders this research particularly timely and pertinent. Understanding the forms of communication barriers that arise in *kouryukai*, as well as the strategies participants employ to overcome them, carries practical implications for organizers of cultural exchange programs; not only within the Japanese Literature Study Program at Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar but also at other institutions seeking to design more inclusive and effective activities.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative research design with a case study approach. The research subjects comprised 12 students from the Japanese Literature Study Program at Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar, enrolled in semesters III, V, and VII, who had participated in kouryukai activities with partner universities during the 2025/2026 academic year. Data were collected using questionnaires and in-depth interviews.

The data analysis was conducted using the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which comprises three stages, as outlined below.

a. Data Reduction

Data reduction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw data obtained from the field. At this stage, the researcher categorized questionnaire data based on communication barriers, participant responses to these barriers, and changes in communication style. Following the initial coding process, similar codes were grouped into categories using the conceptual framework of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as a guiding reference.

b. Data Display

Following data reduction, the data were presented in a format that facilitated conclusion drawing. The researcher constructed a tabulation matrix using Microsoft Excel, which mapped the research subjects against the identified communication barriers. This matrix subsequently linked the barriers to the accommodation strategies employed by participants, as conceptualized within CAT.

c. Conclusion Drawing and Verification

This process was carried out in two steps. First, dominant patterns were identified, defined as those that emerged in more than 60% of the subjects. Second, the patterns were interpreted through the lens of CAT, specifically by synthesizing the prevalent patterns of barriers and accommodation strategies. These were categorized into four groups: linguistic, non-linguistic, social, and psychological barriers. The communication strategies identified encompassed convergence, divergence, and non-accommodation.

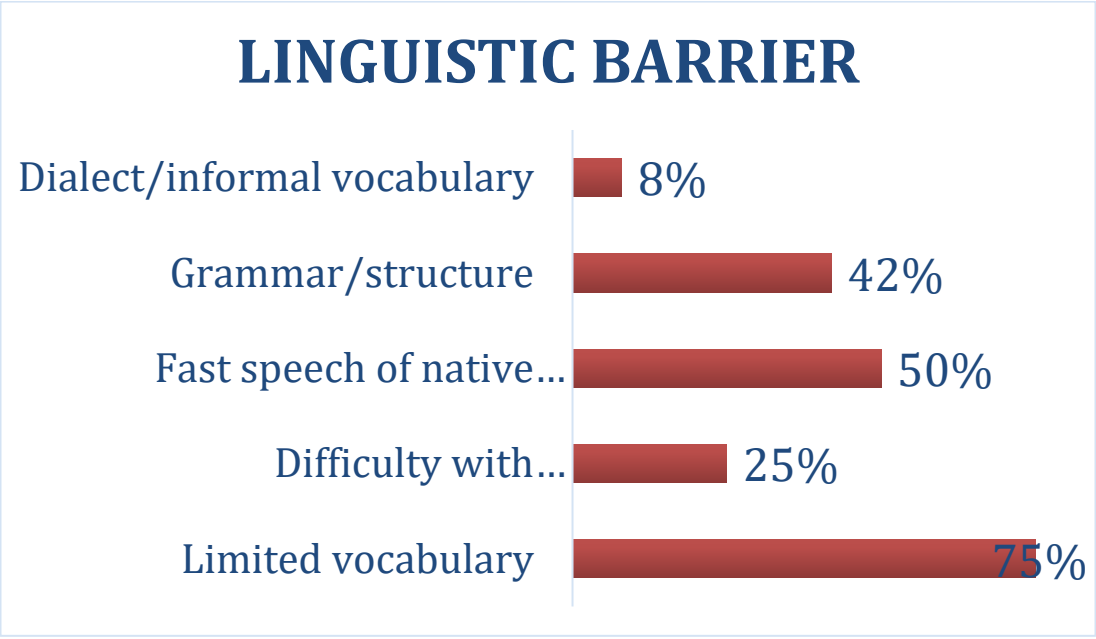
3. Result

Tabel 1. Communication barriers at Kouryuukai

Barrier categories	Key finding	CAT strategy
Linguistic barrier	Most diverse barriers, involved both formal and informal aspect of language	Linguistic convergence: adaptation of vocabulary, speech tempo and language register
Non-linguistic barrier	Cultural and non-verbal barriers, implicit and difficult to detect	Non verbal convergence: adjustment of gestures, facial expressions and social norms
Social barrier	Hierarchy is highly dominant, influences participants' entire communication style	Social convergence: use of honorific forms aligned with interlocutor's status
Psychological barrier	Internal barriers, related to self-confidence and avoidance strategies	Defensive divergence: code switching to English

4. Discussion

The most dominant barrier was linguistic, with 75% of the 12 subjects identifying limited vocabulary as their greatest challenge (see the graphic below).



Picture 1. Linguistic barrier

This finding aligns closely with CAT. According to Giles, linguistic code differences

between in-groups and out-groups create communication tension. When Indonesian students with limited vocabulary interact with native Japanese speakers, the perceived gap in linguistic competence heightens anxiety and can lead to communication breakdown. This also explains why *keigo* and the speed of native speech were frequently mentioned as major obstacles. These are not just linguistic features; they carry social and cultural weight that makes them particularly difficult for second-language learners to navigate.

The majority of subjects applied convergence strategies, specifically linguistic convergence. They adapted their vocabulary, slowed down their speech tempo and adjusted their language register to become more similar to their Japanese conversational partners. This was a conscious effort to build rapport and facilitate smoother communication.

However, evidence of divergence was also identified in the present study. Everal participants engaged in code-switching to English as a protective mechanism. This phenomenon may be interpreted as defensive divergence; a strategy employed to preserve face when participants perceived themselves as unable to express their intended meanings adequately in Japanese. Additionally, laughter and the deliberate avoidance of certain topics were also observed as face-saving strategies.

Interestingly, the findings did not reveal strong evidence of over-accommodation, under-accommodation or non-accommodation among the participants. On the contrary, participants demonstrated a general awareness of their communicative limitations and actively employed various strategies to navigate the communication challenges encountered during the *kouryuukai*.

The present study set out to examine the communication barriers experienced by Indonesian students in *kouryuukai* and the accommodative strategies they employed, as framed by Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 1973). Based on the findings, several conclusions may be drawn.

First, linguistic barriers, particularly limited vocabulary, emerged as the most prominent obstacle encountered by participants. This finding underscores the critical importance of lexical competence in intercultural communication contexts. Second, convergence strategies were predominantly adopted, while divergence served as a secondary, face-saving mechanism employed when participants perceived themselves as unable to express their intended meanings adequately in Japanese.

Third, the findings affirm the relevance of CAT as an analytical framework for understanding communication dynamics in cultural exchange programs. CAT not only illuminates the origins of communication barriers but also clarifies the strategic responses that participants mobilize to navigate these challenges.

Collectively, these findings contribute to growing body of literature on intercultural communication in educational exchange settings and offer actionable insights for the enhancement of future *kouryuukai* programs.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research contributes to the extant body of knowledge on intercultural communication within educational exchange contexts. The findings demonstrate that communication barriers are not exclusively linguistic in nature, but are rather deeply embedded within cultural, social, and psychological dimensions. This multidimensionality underscores the complexity of intercultural interactions and the necessity for a holistic approach to understanding communication challenges in such settings.

By applying Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as the analytical framework, this study provides valuable insights into the ways in which students actively shape

and adapt their communication strategies to forge meaningful connections despite the presence of formidable barriers. The findings further highlight the critical role of institutional support in optimizing the outcomes of cultural exchange programs. Universities and program organizers are therefore encouraged to provide comprehensive preparation and ongoing assistance to participants, thereby maximizing the educational and intercultural benefits of these initiatives.

It is hoped that the present research may serve as a foundation for future investigations into communication strategies in intercultural settings. Furthermore, it is anticipated that the findings will contribute to the development of more effective, inclusive, and participant-centered exchange programs in the years to come.

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