

International Experiences of Students in the ITHLA Abroad Batch 7 Program: Academic and Cultural Perspectives

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Abstract

Study abroad programs provide opportunities for students to develop their academic abilities, language skills, and cross-cultural competence. In the context of Arabic language learning, international experience enables authentic language use alongside the process of cultural adaptation. However, such experiences are still rarely examined in depth from both academic and cultural perspectives. Therefore, this study aims to explore the international experiences of students in the ITHLA Abroad Batch 7 program from both academic and cultural perspectives. This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method. The research subjects are students participating in the ITHLA Abroad program, with data collection techniques through interviews, observations, and documentation. Data analysis is carried out using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results of the study show that from an academic perspective, there is a shift in learning Arabic from being theoretical to more practical and contextual through direct interaction with native speakers, thereby improving students' communicative abilities and self-confidence. From a cultural perspective, students undergo a process of adapting to cultural differences that initially causes difficulties but can gradually be overcome through social interactions in the new environment. This study also found that academic and cultural experiences are integrated in supporting language learning success and the development of students' global competence. Thus, the ITHLA Abroad program becomes an experience-based learning tool that is effective in holistically developing linguistic and intercultural competence.



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A. Introduction

In the era of globalization, higher education institutions play a crucial role in preparing highly qualified human resources who are capable of competing in the global arena (Nurhaliza, 2025). Within the higher education environment, students are expected to equip themselves with global competencies, including both academic excellence and the ability to adapt to multicultural settings (Toriyono et al., 2022). As a developing country, Indonesia cannot avoid the effects of globalization, as it is a process that increasingly connects societies within a global framework (Widianti, 2022). One of the defining characteristics of globalization is the diminishing of boundaries between nations, creating both challenges and opportunities for countries around the world (Gaffar, 2025). Therefore, the key to succeeding in the era of globalization lies in the development of high-quality human resources (Setyawati et al., 2021).

International mobility provides students with valuable opportunities to gain diverse learning experiences, enhance their professional skills, and develop intercultural competencies that are increasingly essential in the global era (Gowinda et al., 2023). International experiences not only contribute to students' academic development but also play a significant role in fostering intercultural communication skills and broadening their global perspectives (Rohmah, 2026). Through interactions with different communities and educational systems, students can cultivate open-mindedness, tolerance, and the ability to adapt to cultural diversity (Riyanto, 2024).

For students enrolled in Arabic Language Studies programs in Indonesia, language proficiency can no longer be effectively developed solely within the confines of the classroom (Himmawati, 2022). Intercultural competence refers to students' ability to communicate effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Vidyarini, 2017). As one of the official languages of the United Nations, Arabic possesses linguistic complexities that require direct engagement within an authentic language environment (Byram, 2020). engagement within an authentic language environment. Byram (2020) emphasizes that Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) can be fully developed only when learners actively participate in the sociocultural context of the target language. Furthermore, study abroad experiences have been shown to significantly enhance students' confidence in communicating in a foreign language (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2012).

Although numerous studies on study abroad programs have demonstrated their positive impact on language proficiency, intercultural competence, and students' personal development, most previous research has primarily focused on general and quantitative outcomes, such as improvements in language test scores, participant satisfaction, and intercultural communication skills (Hasanah et al., 2025). These studies have paid relatively little attention to students' subjective experiences throughout the processes of learning and adapting to a new environment (Naomi & Rini, 2026). Furthermore, much of the existing research has been conducted in Western contexts with participants from different educational and cultural backgrounds, limiting the extent to which the findings reflect the experiences of Indonesian students, particularly those studying Arabic (Bani, 2023). Previous studies have also tended to examine academic and cultural dimensions separately, despite the fact that both aspects interact closely in shaping students' study abroad experiences. Consequently, a significant research

gap remains regarding how international experiences influence students' perspectives on language learning methodologies and how they navigate cultural adaptation processes in real-life settings. Addressing this gap constitutes the primary rationale for the present study.

To address these challenges, ITHLA (*Ittihadu Tholabah al-Lughah al-Arabiyah bi Indonesia*), a national organization of Arabic language students in Indonesia, initiated the ITHLA Abroad program. This program serves as a bridge for students to gain direct international learning experiences in countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore. As explained in the concept of Experiential Learning, knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984). Through ITHLA Abroad, students are provided with opportunities to transform the grammatical knowledge acquired in the classroom into practical understanding through direct interaction with Arabic speakers and authentic communicative contexts (Kinging, 2009).

However, international experiences do not always proceed smoothly. Students often encounter challenges related to academic adaptation and cultural disorientation, commonly referred to as culture shock. Saputra (2025) notes that cross-cultural adaptation involves complex psychological and sociocultural adjustment processes. Similarly, Schumann (1968) According Acculturation Model, the degree of social and psychological proximity between language learners and members of the host community significantly influences the effectiveness of second-language acquisition (Pulungan, 2025). Consequently, students are often required to negotiate and reshape their identities within unfamiliar cultural settings in order to adapt successfully and achieve their academic objectives (Norton, M., & Norton, 2000).

The uniqueness of this study lies in the context of the program under investigation, namely ITHLA Abroad Batch 7, which differs from conventional international mobility programs typically organized by universities. Rather than focusing solely on formal academic exchange, the program emphasizes direct engagement in cross-national Arabic language learning and teaching through a network of Arabic language students across Southeast Asia. Participants are not merely language learners; they also serve as academic and cultural representatives who actively engage in educational, social, and linguistic activities with students from diverse national backgrounds. This setting creates a more dynamic and multifaceted learning environment than traditional classroom-based instruction, as students continuously negotiate meaning, exchange cultural perspectives, and apply their language skills in authentic intercultural interactions.

The novelty of this study lies not merely in examining the impact of a study abroad program on the improvement of Arabic language proficiency, as has been widely addressed in previous research. Rather, it seeks to explore how cross-national experiences of learning and teaching Arabic shape students' perspectives on language learning methodologies, intercultural communication practices, and the negotiation of academic and cultural identities within an international environment. By focusing on a student organization-based international mobility program, this study offers a fresh perspective on the international experiences of Arabic language students. Such a context remains relatively underexplored in the literature on academic mobility and Arabic language education, thereby contributing new insights into the interplay between language learning, intercultural engagement, and identity formation.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this article aims to examine the international experiences of students participating in the ITHLA Abroad program from two main perspectives: academic and cultural. Specifically, it seeks to explore how international exposure shapes students' approaches to Arabic language learning and how they navigate cultural adaptation in a new environment. Through this investigation, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the learning dynamics and cross-cultural adaptation processes experienced by students during their participation in the program.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive research design. The approach was chosen to explore and describe students' international experiences in the ITHLA Abroad program, particularly from academic and cultural perspectives. The participants consisted of five students who took part in the ITHLA Abroad program and were selected through random sampling. They represented several higher education institutions, including KH. Ruhiat Cipasung Islamic University, STIBA Makassar Institute of Islamic and Arabic Studies, and UIN Palangka Raya. The program was conducted in Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore from August 31 to September 17, 2025. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. The interviews were conducted on November 2, 2025. The interview protocol was designed to explore participants' academic experiences, cultural adaptation processes, and perceptions of the impact of the program on their language learning and intercultural development.

The interviews were conducted to explore students' academic experiences during their participation in learning activities as well as the cultural adaptation processes they underwent in the host countries. Data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by (Miles, 1992) which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

C. Findings and Discussion

Students' Academic Perspectives in the ITHLA Abroad Batch 7 Program

Based on the interview findings, students who participated in the ITHLA Abroad Batch 7 program experienced a shift in their understanding of Arabic language learning. Learning, which had previously focused on mastering grammatical rules, memorizing vocabulary, and completing academic tasks in the classroom, evolved into a more practical and contextualized process. This transformation occurred not only because students were exposed to a broader Arabic-speaking environment but also because they were confronted with real communicative needs that required them to interact with speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Most participants reported that learning abroad placed greater emphasis on the direct use of Arabic in everyday communication. One participant noted that the learning experience involved "more practice than theory, allowing Arabic to be used directly in interaction" (RF). A similar view was expressed by another participant, who stated that the experience made them "more confident in speaking because they became accustomed to discussing and interacting with others" (NB).

In the Indonesian context, this shift can be attributed to the fact that Arabic language instruction at universities is still largely conducted in an environment dominated by the use of Indonesian. As a result, opportunities to use Arabic

spontaneously in everyday life remain relatively limited. Through participation in the ITHLA Abroad program, students entered a new environment in which Arabic functioned as a medium of communication across various activities, including academic discussions, social interactions, presentations, and cultural exchanges. This situation encouraged students to reduce their reliance on translating into Indonesian and to process Arabic more directly. In other words, the transformation in their learning approach was influenced not only by differences in instructional methods but also by changes in the language environment they experienced.

These findings are consistent with Vygotsky (1978), concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which highlights the importance of social interaction in the learning process. However, in the case of Indonesian students of Arabic, the process exhibits more specific characteristics. Interaction occurred not only with more proficient speakers but also with fellow learners from different countries who possessed varying levels of language proficiency and diverse cultural backgrounds. This condition created opportunities for meaning negotiation, enabling students to adjust their vocabulary choices, communication styles, and message-delivery strategies in order to achieve mutual understanding. Consequently, the learning process involved not merely the acquisition of linguistic knowledge but also the development of intercultural communicative competence.

Furthermore, the increase in students' willingness to communicate did not emerge instantly as a result of being immersed in an Arabic-speaking environment. The interview findings indicate that this confidence developed gradually through repeated experiences of successfully expressing ideas, receiving positive feedback, and overcoming communication difficulties. Such experiences progressively strengthened students' beliefs in their ability to use Arabic effectively in real-life situations. In this regard, Bandura (1997). concept of self-efficacy not only explains the growth of learners' confidence but also illustrates how international experiences contribute to the formation of their identities as active users of the Arabic language.

In conclusion, the ITHLA Abroad Batch 7 program not only enhanced students' communicative competence but also transformed their orientation toward Arabic language learning. Arabic was no longer perceived merely as an academic subject centered on the mastery of linguistic theories; rather, it became a medium for communication, academic collaboration, and intercultural interaction. This shift in perspective represents a significant contribution of the program to the development of Indonesian students of Arabic, equipping them with the linguistic and intercultural competencies required in an increasingly globalized world.

Cultural Perspectives and Students' Adaptation Processes

From a cultural perspective, the findings indicate that students encountered various challenges in adapting to a new environment. Cultural differences, language barriers, and patterns of social interaction emerged as the primary factors influencing this process. Several participants reported experiencing difficulties during the initial stage of their stay, particularly in understanding local customs and communication styles. One participant stated that they "initially found it difficult due to cultural differences, but gradually became accustomed to them over time" (NB). Another participant explained that the adaptation process involved "observing local customs and attempting to interact directly with the community" (RF).

These findings suggest that cultural adaptation is a gradual process involving both psychological and social adjustment. Intensive engagement with the surrounding environment appears to be a key factor in facilitating successful adaptation, as it enables students to better understand local norms, build social relationships, and navigate cultural differences more effectively.

These findings are consistent with the cross-cultural adaptation theory proposed by Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, (2001) which argues that adaptation involves both psychological and sociocultural adjustment processes. However, the results of this study suggest that, for Indonesian students of Arabic, adaptation serves a broader purpose than merely adjusting to a new environment. It also functions as a means of re-evaluating and reconstructing their prior understandings of culture. Through direct interaction and lived experiences, students came to realize that Arab culture is not a homogeneous entity but rather encompasses diverse social practices, customs, and communication styles. This realization broadened their perspectives on the relationship between language and culture, leading them to view language not only as a linguistic system but also as a reflection of culturally embedded meanings and social practices.

Furthermore, Schumann (1968) Acculturation Model emphasizes that social and psychological proximity to the target community plays a significant role in successful language learning. However, in the context of ITHLA Abroad Batch 7, such proximity was established not only through interactions with local communities but also through engagement with international students from diverse national and cultural backgrounds. This multicultural environment created a unique learning space in which students were required to adapt not to a single culture, but to multiple cultural perspectives simultaneously. As a result, participants developed greater intercultural sensitivity and enhanced their ability to communicate effectively across diverse cultural contexts. Therefore, adaptation was not merely a challenge to be overcome; it became an integral component of students' development of global competence, enabling them to navigate cultural diversity and engage more effectively in international settings.

Integrating Academic and Cultural Experiences

The findings indicate that academic and cultural experiences are closely interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Effective language learning occurred not only through formal academic activities but also through various social interactions beyond the classroom. Several participants reported that using Arabic within authentic cultural contexts facilitated a deeper and more rapid understanding of the language. One participant explained that "learning Arabic in its native environment accelerated comprehension because the language was immediately put into practice" (RF). Similarly, another participant noted that their language proficiency improved as they became more comfortable with the surrounding cultural environment (NB).

These accounts suggest that language development was closely linked to students' cultural adaptation experiences. As participants became more familiar with local customs, social norms, and communication practices, they gained greater confidence in using Arabic in real-life situations. Consequently, cultural immersion not only enhanced their understanding of the language but also created opportunities for meaningful communication, which further supported their linguistic development.

These findings are consistent with Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning, which emphasizes that knowledge is constructed through direct experience. However, the results of this study suggest that, for Indonesian students of Arabic, such experiences did more than simply generate new knowledge; they fundamentally transformed students' learning orientations. Specifically, participants shifted from a learning approach centered on grammatical rules and linguistic forms to one that prioritized communication and the practical use of language in authentic contexts.

Furthermore, Byram's concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) helps explain the close relationship between language and culture. Nevertheless, the findings of this study demonstrate that intercultural competence developed not merely through theoretical knowledge of the target culture, but through students' active engagement in everyday social interactions. By participating directly in multicultural environments, students learned to interpret cultural meanings, adapt their communication strategies, and negotiate cultural differences in real-life situations. These experiences enabled them to integrate linguistic competence with intercultural awareness, thereby fostering a more holistic understanding of language learning.

The relationship between academic and cultural experiences within the ITHLA Abroad Batch 7 program was reciprocal in nature. Greater cultural adaptation encouraged students to engage more actively in the use of Arabic, while improved language proficiency enabled them to build social relationships and gain a deeper understanding of their new cultural environment. This process fostered a holistic learning experience in which the development of linguistic competence and intercultural competence occurred simultaneously and reinforced one another. These findings suggest that the success of Arabic language learning in an international context cannot be explained solely by academic or linguistic factors. Rather, it should be understood as the outcome of a dynamic interaction between language-related experiences and cultural experiences encountered by students through direct participation in authentic social and intercultural settings.

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the ITHLA Abroad Batch 7 program made a significant contribution to the development of students' academic and cultural competencies. From an academic perspective, Arabic language learning shifted from a predominantly theoretical approach to a more practical and contextualized one through direct interaction with native speakers, thereby enhancing students' communicative competence and self-confidence. From a cultural perspective, students encountered various challenges of cultural adaptation, which were gradually overcome through social engagement within the new environment. The findings further highlight that successful language learning is closely linked to students' ability to adapt culturally. Consequently, academic and cultural experiences were integrated in shaping students' global competencies in a holistic manner.

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