

## Foreigners' Understanding of Culture in Indonesia: A Qualitative Interview Study

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### Abstract

This study examines the perspective of foreign citizens toward Indonesia through qualitative interviews conducted with lecturers, students, and tourist. It analyzes aspect of cultural interaction, hospitality, and interfaith perceptions. The findings reveal a dynamic blend of appreciation, cultural exchange and occasional misperceptions, all of which contribute to a richly nuanced image of Indonesia within the Global community. The study also emphasizes the importance of personal interactions in shaping foreigners' perceptions of Indonesia identity. Fieldwork was carried out directly by lecturers and students through case studies involving English-language interviews with International Visitors in Medan. A mixed-method approach with a descriptive framework was used. The results show that foreign cultural representation at Maimun Palace in Medan reflects various aspects of personal tourism, particularly visitors' interest in exploring local culture at the historical site.

### INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is the world's largest archipelagic nation and a multicultural society with diverse traditions and religions, attracting international attention. While many publications explore Indonesia from an Indonesian perspective, relatively few studies focus on how foreigners view the country based on personal experiences. This study aims to address that gap by qualitatively examining how non-Indonesians experience and interpret Indonesian culture and society.

In this study, *culture* refers to the collective set of values, beliefs, practices, norms, and social behaviors shared by members of a particular group or society. Culture shapes how individuals interpret experiences, make decisions, and interact with others within specific social or organizational contexts. English is the most widely used foreign language in the world. Therefore, it is crucial for educators to provide students with learning materials that foster a strong understanding of the language, enabling them to develop global communication skills. As an international language, English requires at least a basic level of comprehension for effective use in international contexts (Prayudha, 2022). Language and culture are two inseparable elements of human life. Cultural components—including knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, and customs—play a vital role in

language learning (Akbar, 2019). Williams (1976) asserts that "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (p. 76). He identifies three broad meanings of culture: (1) a general process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development; (2) a particular way of life of a people, period, or group; and (3) the works and practices of intellectual and artistic activity.

Previous research on foreigners' perceptions of Indonesia has often relied on media narratives or tourism statistics. For instance, studies by Picard (2008) and Hitchcock (2000) examine how Bali has been romanticized through Western perspectives. However, far less attention has been given to direct personal experiences obtained through in-depth interviews. This study uses cross-cultural communication theory and the intercultural sensitivity framework to explore how foreigners perceive Indonesia.

The research applies a qualitative content analysis to examine representations of cultural content, using the cultural categorization model developed by Cortazzi and Jin (1999) and the cultural dimensions proposed by Moran (2001). According to Ismail (2017), culturally based learning materials have become increasingly relevant in recent years and have contributed to the development of new insights in the field of language teaching and learning. In every language, words are used to replace people, greet people, and refer to others. These are needed in communication. Similarly, Indonesian has these words. On this occasion, we will discuss the function of words, such as pronouns, greeting words, reference words, and how to write them. Salutations, or Address Forms, those "words speakers use to designate the person. They are talking to while they are talking to them" (Fasold, 2000 in Hasal et al., 2020). Language is embedded in culture, and understanding cultural references enhances language comprehension and communication. (Senowarsito, 2019). Cultural awareness fosters respect and promotes inclusivity in diverse ELT classrooms. (Krulatz, Steen-Olsen, & Torgersen, 2018). It helps avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations arising from cultural differences. (Buck, 2018).

## **METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative content analysis approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with foreign visitors in Medan, especially at cultural heritage sites such as the Maimun Palace. Interview data were analyzed based on the cultural representation framework of Cortazzi & Jin and the cultural dimensions framework by Moran. This method allows researchers to categorize how cultural components are perceived and interpreted by foreign tourists. Some keywords also that used for searching are culture awareness, foreign, teaching, English, EFL

## **FINDINGS**

The findings validate that foreigners' understanding of Indonesia is shaped by both personal experiences and stereotypical perceptions. Favorable impressions are most commonly rooted in interpersonal contacts, while challenges emanate from systemic or cultural differences. The research also demonstrates the way learning about cultures is a bidirectional process, with many participants participating in active reflection regarding their own cultural presumptions. In relation to religious views, the government must have a policy to reorganize the way the education system works and encourage religious teachers to become more familiar with religious lessons that are considered to be lacking time to explain.

Culture, religion, and economy are three fundamental aspects of society that are deeply interconnected and cannot be separated. Religion often plays a central role in shaping cultural practices, values, and traditions within a community. These cultural and religious expressions—such as architecture, festivals, clothing, and rituals—become important elements that define the identity of a place. At the same time, these elements attract visitors and contribute to the economy, especially through tourism. For example, historical religious sites like the Raya Mosque and Maimun Palace in

Medan are not only places of worship and cultural pride, but also key tourist destinations that generate income for local communities. Local vendors, artisans, and tour guides benefit economically from the presence of tourists who come to experience the unique blend of religion and culture. In this way, cultural identity and religious heritage become valuable economic assets, showing that these three domains are intertwined in a mutually reinforcing relationship.

**Table 1. Nationalities and Purposes of Foreign Visitors at Istana Maimun**

No.	Country of Origin	Number of Visitors	Purpose of Visit	Notes
1	Malaysia	20	Tourism	Familiarity with Malay heritage
2	Germany	3	Historical exploration	Interested in colonial history
3	Australia	3	Educational / academic	Visiting with student exchange program
4	France	3	General tourism	Noticed local architecture uniqueness
5	United States	15	Cultural curiosity	Compared local culture with Western norms
6	Thailand	20	Religious & cultural visit	Related cultural practices and customs
7	Japan	8	Photography	Attracted by building aesthetics
8	Netherlands	7	Historical & colonial legacy	Researching Dutch-Indonesian history

**Total respondents: 79 people**

The majority of respondents demonstrated a keen interest in the historical significance of Istana Maimun, appreciating not only its role in the cultural heritage of Indonesia but also its unique Malay architectural style, which they found both intricate and emblematic of the region’s rich history. This interest was often deepened through their direct interactions with local residents, which served to reinforce their positive impressions of Indonesian society. Many respondents highlighted the warmth and hospitality they encountered, describing it as genuine and welcoming, while also noting the country’s strong atmosphere of religious tolerance, where diverse beliefs coexist peacefully. Through these personal experiences, several respondents admitted that their initial misconceptions or stereotypes about Indonesia were challenged and eventually corrected, leading to a more nuanced and authentic understanding of the culture. A key factor that facilitated this meaningful cultural exchange was the use of English as the primary language of communication, which helped bridge potential language barriers and allowed for clearer, more open conversations. This use of a common language significantly enhanced mutual understanding and made it easier for foreigners to engage deeply with local traditions, values, and social practices.

**DISCUSSION**

This research was conducted through direct observation interviewing a person from abroad, namely England, at the Istana Maimun in Medan, Indonesia. When she saw the cultural story in the Istana Maimun, she stated that this was interesting and rare because of the Mariam Puntung cultural story in the Istana Maimun.

When interviewed many also stated that there are differences in food from their country of origin. Because of the differences in taste and food served. As stated by Finkelstein (1999) in Brown, Edwards & Hartwell (2010) Food cannot be separated from culture because food becomes an individual's habit. When individuals move to a new culture, a problem called food shock will occur. In today's era, we can also use social media to introduce our national culture. Our national culture

should not be left behind and then lost in the rapid flow of globalization. Therefore, we must instill in ourselves to love and preserve our culture (Wicaksana, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

This qualitative interview study reveals that foreigners' understanding of Indonesian culture is shaped by their direct interactions with local communities, participation in cultural events, and exposure to traditional customs, languages, and values. Many participants expressed admiration for Indonesia's cultural diversity, hospitality, and communal spirit, though some also noted challenges related to cultural misunderstandings and language barriers. These insights highlight the importance of intercultural communication and cultural sensitivity in fostering positive relationships between foreigners and local communities.

For future research, it is recommended to expand the participant pool to include a wider range of nationalities and lengths of stay to explore how time and origin influence cultural adaptation. Additionally, incorporating comparative studies between urban and rural experiences could provide a deeper understanding of regional cultural variations. Practical initiatives, such as intercultural workshops or immersive cultural programs, may also be developed to support foreigners in navigating Indonesian culture more effectively.

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