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Culture Shock among Thai Students at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi: A Qualitative Case Study of Linguistic, Academic, and Sociocultural Adjustment

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates culture shock experienced by Thai students at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, an Islamic university in Indonesia where local and international students interact daily in academic and social settings. Although many Thai students anticipate a supportive religious environment and perceive cultural proximity through shared Malay Islamic elements, they still encounter differences in language use, communication styles, classroom norms, and everyday campus routines that can undermine confidence and participation. Using a qualitative case study approach, culture shock is conceptualized as a dynamic adjustment process shaped by the interaction between personal expectations and host environment demands. The study documents four salient domains of culture shock: linguistic challenges related to informal Indonesian and local accents, academic culture emphasizing active participation and presentations, peer interaction norms involving humor and greeting practices, and practical lifestyle adjustments in daily living. The analysis also identifies coping pathways that support adaptation, including strengthening communication with local peers, engaging in campus activities, improving Bahasa Indonesia gradually, and relying on support within the Thai student community. The findings offer implications for student services and teaching practices in Islamic higher education, highlighting the need for culturally responsive orientation, targeted language scaffolding for classroom interaction, structured peer mentoring, and inclusive learning environments that reduce anxiety while fostering intercultural competence.

KEYWORDS

Culture shock, Thai students, international students, intercultural adjustment, academic culture, sociocultural adaptation, Indonesia, Islamic university

1. Introduction

Internationalization has increasingly transformed universities into multicultural contact zones where students must negotiate difference in language, academic expectations, social norms, and everyday routines. For international students, the transition to a host campus often involves more than learning content. It requires learning how to speak and be heard in classrooms, how to interpret social cues, and how to participate in institutional practices that may feel unfamiliar. Culture shock, in this sense, is not a single moment of surprise but a process that unfolds over time as students compare prior expectations with new demands and gradually develop coping strategies. Evidence from international student research consistently shows that acculturative stress is associated with poorer mental health outcomes, including depressive symptoms, which can also influence academic engagement and persistence (Çimşir & Ünlü Kaynakçı, 2024). At the same time, social support plays

an important protective role, helping students interpret unfamiliar situations and reduce adjustment strain (Kristiana et al., 2022).

Indonesia has become an increasingly important destination for international students within Southeast Asia, including students from Southern Thailand who pursue higher education in Islamic institutions. In many Islamic university settings, cultural proximity is often assumed because of shared religious identity and overlapping Malay Islamic cultural references. However, perceived similarity does not automatically translate into smooth adjustment. Even when students share religious practices, they may still experience difficulty in daily interaction, classroom participation, and language use, particularly when informal Indonesian, local accents, and campus specific communication norms shape who participates confidently and who withdraws. Studies on culture shock in Indonesian university contexts have documented that international students may struggle with everyday communication, academic routines, and social integration, especially in the early stages of study (Ahmed & Shahzeb, 2024).

This article focuses on Thai students studying at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, a state Islamic university in Jambi, Indonesia, where local and international students interact routinely in academic and social spaces. The case is important because it illustrates a pattern of partial cultural proximity. Thai students may anticipate easier adjustment due to religious similarity and perceived cultural closeness, yet they still confront meaningful differences that disrupt confidence, participation, and belonging. In the campus setting, language is often the most immediate challenge. Difficulties with informal expressions, local accents, and rapid conversational styles can limit classroom interaction and reduce students' willingness to ask questions or present ideas. This aligns with broader findings that culture shock and sociocultural adaptation influence perceived language proficiency and participation among international students (Tekel et al., 2025).

A second domain concerns academic culture. Many Thai students enter a learning environment where classroom norms emphasise active participation, group discussion, and frequent presentations. When students are more familiar with teacher centred instruction or more reserved participation styles, these expectations can produce anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and hesitation to speak. Research on acculturative stress indicates that academic demands and communication pressures are among the contextual factors shaping international students' adjustment and stress levels (Ali et al., 2024). A third domain concerns peer interaction norms. Differences in humour, greeting practices, and everyday social etiquette can lead to awkwardness or misinterpretation, and this matters because peer relationships function as a major source of emotional support, academic guidance, and informal cultural learning. A fourth domain concerns practical lifestyle routines, including food, schedules, and daily living arrangements, which may appear minor but can accumulate into fatigue and influence wellbeing and study focus.

Although culture shock is commonly discussed as a challenge, international students also develop strategies that support adaptation. Qualitative evidence from Thai students in Indonesia highlights coping through language learning, social engagement with local peers, and reliance on co national networks that provide emotional and informational support (Armayati et al., 2025). These strategies matter because they shift culture shock from disruption to learning, and they offer a practical basis for institutions to design more responsive support systems. Yet, research that documents culture shock in Islamic university contexts remains limited, especially in settings where institutions may underestimate adjustment needs due to assumed cultural similarity.

Therefore, this study investigates culture shock among Thai students at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi by identifying the most salient domains of adjustment, describing how culture shock affects confidence and participation, and explaining coping pathways that enable adaptation. The study contributes to cultural studies of higher education by treating culture shock as an interactional process shaped by linguistic practices, academic culture, and everyday meaning making on campus. It also contributes practical implications for student support and teaching, including culturally responsive orientation, language scaffolding for informal classroom interaction, peer mentoring structures, and inclusive classroom practices that reduce anxiety while strengthening intercultural competence.

1.1 Research Questions

This study addresses four research questions. The first asks how Thai students experience culture shock during their early adjustment at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi. The second asks which domains of campus life are most strongly associated with culture shock, focusing on language, academic culture, peer interaction norms, and daily routines. The third asks what impacts culture shock produces on confidence, participation, and sense of belonging. The fourth asks what coping

strategies Thai students use and what forms of campus support are perceived as most helpful.

2. Method

This study used a qualitative methodology with a case study approach to investigate culture shock among Thai students studying at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi. Qualitative research is appropriate when a study aims to generate an in depth understanding of meanings, experiences, and social processes in their natural context rather than to test relationships through numerical indicators (Lim, 2025). The case study approach was selected because culture shock in this context is a bounded phenomenon located in a particular institutional setting and shaped by specific academic and sociocultural routines, making it necessary to examine the phenomenon holistically and contextually (Greenhalgh, 2025; Yin, 2018).

The research site was UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, a state Islamic university in Jambi, Indonesia, where Thai students interact daily with local students in classrooms and campus life. Access to the site was obtained through coordination with relevant academic units and student networks. The researcher introduced the study aims, procedures, confidentiality safeguards, and voluntary nature of participation, and then proceeded only after informed consent was granted.

Participants were Thai students currently enrolled at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi who had experienced academic and social engagement on campus long enough to reflect on adjustment experiences. Participants were selected using purposive sampling so that those included could provide information rich accounts aligned with the study focus and research questions (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). Where feasible, the study also included one or two key informants such as academic advisors, lecturers, or student mentors who had direct experience supporting Thai students, so the analysis could capture both student perspectives and institutional observations while maintaining the student experience as the analytic centre.

Data collection relied on multiple sources to strengthen depth and credibility, consistent with case study guidance that encourages the use of more than one form of evidence when examining a complex phenomenon in context (Greenhalgh, 2025; Yin, 2018). The main instruments were semi structured interviews, a small focus group discussion, non-participant observation, and documentation. Interviews were used to elicit individual narratives of culture shock and coping, the focus group discussion was used to explore shared meanings and collective comparison of experiences, observation was used to document interactional routines that participants might not fully articulate, and documentation was used to contextualize adjustment processes through naturally occurring institutional and participant generated materials (Chand, 2025).

2.1 Interview and focus group discussion

Semi structured interviews were chosen because they provide a clear framework for exploring key topics while allowing participants to explain experiences in their own words and provide concrete examples of misunderstandings, anxiety, adaptation, and support seeking. This format is recommended for qualitative research when the goal is to capture both consistency across participants and depth of meaning in individual narratives (Adeoye Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Interviews explored culture shock across four domains that were central to this case, namely language and local accents in everyday communication, academic norms such as class participation and presentations, peer interaction and social etiquette, and lifestyle routines such as food and daily schedules. Interviews also explored coping strategies, perceived sources of support, and suggestions for institutional improvement.

In addition to individual interviews, a small focus group discussion was conducted with Thai students when practical and safe to do so. The focus group was used to examine shared interpretations of campus norms, compare adjustment trajectories, and identify common coping practices. The focus group format was included because it can reveal collective meaning making and agreement or disagreement that may not surface in one to one interviews, particularly in topics shaped by peer culture and shared experiences (Greenspan et al., 2021).

2.2 Observation and documentation

Non participant observation was conducted in selected campus settings such as classrooms, student gatherings, or support activities to document interaction patterns, participation expectations, and everyday sociocultural practices related to adjustment. Observation was used to capture contextual factors that influence culture shock, such as turn taking in class discussion, the pace of informal speech, and the practical routines of campus life, which participants may describe differently

depending on confidence or language proficiency (Chand, 2025). Observation data were recorded as structured field notes focusing on setting, interactional features, and analytic reflections.

Documentation was collected to support and contextualize the interview and observation data. Documentation included non-sensitive institutional materials such as orientation information, relevant student activity records, and participant shared materials such as photographs of campus activities when consent was given. Document analysis is useful in qualitative case studies because documents function as traces of institutional practices and everyday realities that can corroborate or nuance participant accounts (Morgan, 2022).

Trustworthiness was addressed through triangulation across interviews, focus group discussion, observation, and documentation, and through systematic documentation of analytic decisions. Member checking was conducted when feasible by sharing brief summaries of key interpretations with participants to confirm whether the interpretation accurately represented their intended meanings, while recognizing that member checking should be used thoughtfully to avoid unintended pressure on participants and to protect confidentiality (Lloyd, 2024).

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis because it provides a rigorous yet flexible approach to identifying patterned meanings across qualitative datasets and is widely used in educational and intercultural research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytic process began with familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes and the writing of analytic memos. The researcher then generated initial codes capturing recurring experiences such as language anxiety, participation pressure, social awkwardness, and coping through peer support. Next, codes were clustered into candidate themes that represented broader patterns across participants. Themes were reviewed against the dataset for coherence and distinctiveness, refined through clear definitions and naming, and then developed into an analytic narrative that explains how culture shock emerged and how students adapted. Throughout the analysis, the study followed recommendations for methodological coherence in thematic analysis so that the claims made in the findings remain consistent with the analytic approach and the type of thematic analysis conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

3. Discussion

This study shows that culture shock among Thai students at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi is best understood as a multi-domain adjustment process rather than a single initial reaction. In the Indonesian higher-education context, culture shock commonly involves changes in food, social norms, behaviour, language, and religion, and these pressures may trigger stress and anxiety during the early period of study abroad (Ahmed & Shahzeb, 2024). Similarly, evidence from foreign speakers in Indonesia indicates that culture shock often concentrates around interaction styles, food practices, discipline and cleanliness norms, transportation routines, and language use, suggesting that everyday micro-practices can become major sources of strain (Muzaki et al., 2025). In this study, the most salient issues reported by Thai students align with these patterns, but they also highlight a specific institutional nuance: cultural proximity through shared Islamic identity does not eliminate communication and academic adjustment demands, especially when informal language and local campus norms shape participation.

A central finding concerns language and accent-related barriers as a gateway issue that influences both academic and social integration. Recent research on Thai international students in Indonesia reports difficulties in listening comprehension, speaking anxiety, and reading academic texts, with contributing factors such as fear of peer judgment and accent variation (Pratama et al., 2025). These patterns help explain why students in the present study described hesitation to speak in class and uncertainty in informal conversations, particularly when Indonesian is used with local accents, slang, or fast-paced turn-taking. Beyond “language proficiency,” the issue is interactional access: when students cannot easily follow informal speech, they may misread intentions and withdraw, reducing opportunities to learn social norms through contact. A complementary Indonesian-based study on learning Indonesian among international students shows that barriers are not purely linguistic; they also include cultural misunderstandings related to politeness and social norms and psychological barriers such as anxiety and frustration (Harjono & Wachyunni, 2025). Together, these findings support the interpretation that Thai students’ culture shock is partly produced by the overlap between linguistic barriers and social meaning-making, where uncertainty about “how to say things properly” becomes uncertainty about belonging.

The academic culture of participation and presentation emerged as a second strong driver of culture shock because it links communication pressure to performance evaluation. A qualitative case study in Jambi University found that speaking anxiety among an international student from Thailand was strongly shaped by fear of negative evaluation and high academic expectations, and that coping

strategies included preparation and peer support (Danisti et al., 2025). While the focus of that study is English-speaking anxiety, its mechanism is relevant here: anxiety intensifies when students believe that participation is a test of competence and face, and when they lack confidence in the linguistic resources needed to perform publicly. This aligns with quantitative evidence that foreign language anxiety is associated with classroom participation and academic adjustment, indicating that participation is not only a pedagogical requirement but also a psychological and relational demand (Nuralieva et al., 2024). In the present study, Thai students' reports of discomfort with active discussion and presentation norms can therefore be interpreted as a culturally situated participation gap, where students must learn not only course content but also the participation script of the host classroom.

Peer interaction norms form a third domain where culture shock becomes visible through small but socially consequential moments such as humour, greeting practices, and informal styles of solidarity. A study on international students' communication patterns in Indonesia, using communication accommodation theory, shows that international students often attempt to converge with Indonesian norms, yet language remains a major hurdle for daily communication (Bibi & Hamida, 2024). This helps interpret why Thai students may want to "fit in" but still experience frequent awkwardness, because accommodation requires not only intention but also linguistic and pragmatic competence. Humour is a particularly high-risk interactional resource in cross-cultural settings because it depends on shared references, timing, and implicit meaning. Evidence from a recent study on humorous discourse in intercultural contexts suggests that humour can bridge cultures, but its use is often limited by language barriers, cultural differences, and lack of confidence that humour will be understood as intended (Rysmagambetova et al., 2025). In the present case, this supports an interpretation that Thai students' confusion about jokes or casual teasing is not trivial; it is a boundary marker that can either invite inclusion or produce withdrawal, depending on whether students feel safe to ask, clarify, and try again.

Daily lifestyle routines, including food adaptation, schedules, and practical campus living, represent a fourth domain of culture shock that accumulates into fatigue and emotional strain. In Indonesia, lifestyle-related culture shock is frequently reported alongside language and interaction challenges (Ahmed & Shahzeb, 2024). For foreign speakers, food and everyday routines also appear as persistent adjustment sites that differ by origin and prior exposure (Muzaki et al., 2025). In this study, the reported lifestyle adjustments should be read as part of a broader adaptation ecology: practical discomfort can amplify academic stress, and academic stress can reduce motivation to explore and experiment with host routines, creating a feedback loop in which students stay within safe circles and delay wider integration. A recent higher-education study indicates that acculturative stress negatively affects sociocultural adaptation and that the acquisition of culturally appropriate behaviour in academic settings is an especially important component of adaptation, implying that institutions should actively support students to manage stress and learn context-appropriate practices (Malota & Mucsi, 2025).

Coping strategies identified in this study point to social support and structured engagement as central mechanisms that transform culture shock into gradual adjustment. Evidence from Indonesia shows that international students cope by maintaining communication with locals and peers and that supportive university communities facilitate gradual adaptation (Ahmed & Shahzeb, 2024). Empirically, social support is widely documented as a buffer for acculturative stress among international students, based on a meta-analytic synthesis (Kristiana et al., 2022). At the institutional level, campus friendliness research highlights that helpful factors for international student adjustment include social support, events and activities, campus resources, inclusive environments, and language learning opportunities (Huang et al., 2024). These findings mirror the coping pathways observed in the present study, especially students' reliance on local peer communication, participation in campus activities, gradual improvement of Bahasa Indonesia, and mutual support within the Thai community. At the same time, the social-support mechanism should be interpreted carefully. Some evidence suggests that generalized anxiety among international students is shaped strongly by acculturative stress and perceived stress, and that the role of social support may vary depending on how it is operationalized and the context of students' stressors (Ersoy & Akçaoğlu, 2025). This implies that UIN STS should not rely on informal "friendship happens naturally" assumptions, but instead should develop targeted, structured supports that make support accessible, culturally safe, and academically relevant.

Finally, the discussion has an important implication for student wellbeing. Acculturative stress is robustly associated with depressive symptoms among international university students, as shown by recent meta-analytic evidence (Çimşir & Ünlü Kaynakçı, 2024). In the UIN STS setting, where students may be perceived as culturally close because of shared religious identity, wellbeing risks can

be overlooked if culture shock is interpreted as a minor and temporary inconvenience. This study suggests the opposite: culture shock can be subtle yet consequential, operating through everyday communication barriers and participation pressures. Therefore, culturally responsive orientation, language scaffolding that includes informal classroom interaction and local accent exposure, peer mentoring that pairs Thai and local students, and inclusive classroom practices that normalize clarification and reduce fear of negative evaluation are not "extra services," but core institutional supports that enable equitable participation and intercultural competence development. These measures are also consistent with evidence that social support improves adaptation in campus environments where students experience culture shock (Aisy & Muslima, 2025).

4. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate culture shock experienced by Thai students at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi and to explain how they cope and adapt within an Islamic higher education environment in Indonesia. Overall, the findings confirm that culture shock in this context is not a single initial reaction but a dynamic adjustment process shaped by the interaction between students' expectations and the demands of daily academic and social life on campus.

In line with the study objectives, the results identify four interrelated domains in which culture shock is most visible. The first domain is language and local accent use, which influences students' confidence in classroom communication and everyday interaction. The second domain is academic culture, particularly classroom norms that emphasize active participation, discussion, and presentations, which can create pressure and hesitation when students feel unprepared. The third domain is peer interaction norms, including humor, greeting practices, and informal social etiquette, where small misunderstandings may affect students' sense of belonging. The fourth domain is lifestyle adjustment, including routines related to food, schedules, and daily living, which can accumulate into fatigue and indirectly shape academic engagement.

The study also highlights coping and adaptation pathways that help Thai students gradually regain control and confidence. Students tend to adapt by strengthening communication with local peers, participating in campus activities, improving Bahasa Indonesia through daily practice, and relying on mutual support within the Thai student community. These pathways indicate that adaptation is strongly supported by social connection, structured engagement, and opportunities to learn interaction norms in a low risk environment.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding culture shock in Islamic university settings where cultural proximity may be assumed because of shared religious identity. The findings show that shared religion does not automatically eliminate adjustment challenges, especially when language practices, classroom participation norms, and informal peer culture shape everyday inclusion. Practically, the study suggests that universities can support Thai students more effectively through culturally responsive orientation, targeted language scaffolding for classroom and informal interaction, peer mentoring that bridges Thai and local students, and inclusive classroom practices that reduce anxiety while maintaining academic standards.

Future research can build on this study by including multiple stakeholder perspectives such as lecturers, academic advisors, and local peers, and by comparing Thai students' experiences across different universities or regions in Indonesia. Further studies may also examine how specific institutional policies, teaching practices, and student support programs influence the trajectory of culture shock and adaptation over time, including which supports are most effective at different stages of students' study journeys.

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