Challenges of Language Learning in a Multicultural Context:
International Students Learning BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing)
in University Level

Aldian Idris Febrianto, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Joko Priyana, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

This study examined the challenges international university students faced learning Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing (BIPA) or in English Indonesian for Foreign Speakers. The researcher examined the challenges these students faced from diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. This research used a mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative survey data and qualitative interviews to understand these problems. The research sample was 30 international students studying at Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta. Purposive sampling was employed for the questionnaire, which was based on the Likert scale, and random sampling was used for the interviews. The data analysis techniques utilized include thematic analysis to extract meaningful patterns from the collected data. A significant issue identified was the language barrier. The grammar and vocabulary of Bahasa Indonesia differed from the students' native languages, causing them to struggle. Pronunciation and intonation further hindered communication. Additionally, understanding cultural nuances required cultural sensitivity. The students' diverse educational backgrounds affected their preparedness and familiarity with Indonesian university teaching, slowing their learning and comprehension. The findings of the study revealed that teachers need to adapt their methods in multicultural classrooms. Institutions also should provide language labs and cultural orientation programs to help international students overcome these challenges. Additionally, researchers recommend improving teacher training to meet the needs of diverse students. The research informs these proposed solutions by highlighting specific difficulties faced by students, such as linguistic and cultural misunderstandings.

Keywords: BIPA Challenges, Linguistic Barriers, Multicultural

iafor

Introduction

The significance of acquiring competence in Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing (BIPA) has greatly increased in recent years as a result of the rising worldwide demand for Indonesian language skills. As Indonesia enhances its economic, political, and cultural connections with nations globally, the ability to speak Bahasa Indonesia has become a key asset for both overseas students and professionals (Novera, 2004; Fachri & Saragih, 2020). Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, a prominent educational institution in Indonesia, has created specialized programs to meet the needs of individuals who are not a native speakers of Indonesian. These programs seek to provide students with the essential language skills required especially necessary to learn in Indonesia educationally and in culture successfully.

The BIPA program at Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta is specifically tailored to cater to the distinct requirements of foreign students, who originate from a wide range of language, cultural, and educational backgrounds. These disparities might have a substantial impact on their learning experiences and results, presenting distinct obstacles that must be comprehended and resolved to guarantee efficient language acquisition. Prior studies have shown that overseas students often encounter several challenges, such as language hurdles, cultural adaptation, and divergent educational expectations. These impediments may impede their academic advancement and overall welfare (Li et al., 2010; Sawir, 2005).

Gaining a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties encountered by these students is essential for devising efficient pedagogical approaches and support systems. Although language limitations are a notable factor, cultural adaptations also have a crucial impact. Students often have difficulties in assimilating to the social and cultural conventions of a foreign nation, which might impede their capacity to actively participate in the educational process. Moreover, the educational systems and teaching techniques in their respective home countries may exhibit substantial differences compared to those in Indonesia, resulting in additional challenges when it comes to adjusting to new academic standards and approaches (Nurhayati, 2018; Sawir, 2005).

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to get a thorough knowledge of these problems. This research seeks to provide a comprehensive perspective on the challenges encountered by foreign students in the BIPA program by integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews. Quantitative data provides a comprehensive understanding of general difficulties, but qualitative interviews explore individual experiences and viewpoints in more detail, offering valuable contextual insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

The linguistic difficulties faced by overseas students studying Bahasa Indonesia are often the most immediate and conspicuous hurdles. These issues include obstacles in articulation, syntax, and lexicon assimilation, which may hinder effective communication and understanding. For example, students from diverse linguistic backgrounds may find Bahasa Indonesia's phonetic system strange, which might result in pronunciation problems that may impact their confidence and desire to engage in speaking activities. Furthermore, the distinctive grammatical framework of Bahasa Indonesia, in contrast to several other languages, might provide supplementary difficulties for individuals acquiring the language (Novera, 2004; Putri & Wahyuni, 2019).

Cultural adaptations are another crucial aspect of concern. International students are required to manage both the academic setting and the wider social and cultural context of Indonesia.

The process of adjustment may be intricate and multidimensional, including the comprehension and adaptation to new social norms, beliefs, and behaviours. The cultural aspect of language acquisition is crucial since it shapes pupils' perception and interaction with their unfamiliar surroundings. Instances of cultural misconceptions or a lack of cultural awareness may result in individuals experiencing emotions of isolation and frustration, which can in turn make the learning process more complex (Sawir, 2005; Setiyawan, 2021).

The experiences of overseas students are significantly influenced by educational expectations and practices. The teaching methodologies and dynamics inside Indonesian institutions may vary in comparison to those in the students' countries of origin. For instance, the focus on repetitive learning and memorisation in some educational systems differs from the interactive and engaging teaching approaches often used in Indonesian classrooms. Students who are used to alternative learning and evaluation methods may find this adjustment difficult, since they will need to adjust to new academic standards and expectations (Li et al., 2010).

Moreover, the support systems provided to foreign students play a vital role in supporting their adaptation and educational progress. Universities must ensure that they provide sufficient resources and support services to assist students in overcoming language, cultural, and educational obstacles. Support methods such as language tutoring, cultural orientation programs, and academic advising may significantly contribute to students' academic success. Gaining insight into the efficacy of these support services and pinpointing areas that may be enhanced are crucial for improving the entire student experience (Sawir, 2005; Utami, 2022).

Research Questions

What are the primary challenges faced by foreign students in the BIPA program at Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, and how can tailored pedagogical approaches and support systems be developed to enhance their language acquisition and cultural adaptation?

Research Objectives

This study aims to address the gap in current literature by thoroughly examining the challenges faced by foreign students in the BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia untuk Penutur Asing) program at Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research, this study seeks to analyze the multifaceted obstacles foreign students encounter, such as language barriers, cultural adaptation issues, and academic integration. By incorporating up-to-date insights from recent research on language acquisition and intercultural learning, this study will also consider the broader socio-cultural dynamics influencing students' learning experiences. According to the latest studies by Jones & Smith (2022), effective language instruction for non-native speakers requires not only pedagogical adjustments but also the establishment of strong support systems for cultural acclimatization. This research will offer valuable recommendations to enhance both academic performance and the overall well-being of international students. The outcomes of this study will contribute to the development of improved instructional strategies, more effective language support frameworks, and comprehensive welfare systems for non-native speakers, thereby fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. Ultimately, the findings will help shape educational policies that better cater to the diverse needs of international students in Indonesia.

Literature Review

In this section, the authors conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the literature pertaining to intercultural learning.

Multicultural Learning

emerged as a crucial approach to address the diverse needs of students from varying racial, socioeconomic, gender, linguistic, cultural, and ideological backgrounds within the educational sphere (Banks, 2019). It seeks to create an inclusive environment that respects and values the contributions of different cultures to enrich the learning experience for all students. According to Gay (2018), multiculturalism serves as a valuable resource that enhances students' knowledge and understanding of other cultures, thereby promoting empathy and global awareness. These educational programs offer opportunities for learners from all cultural backgrounds to interact and cultivate positive attitudes towards cultural diversity (Nieto & Bode, 2018). They aim to equip students with the necessary skills to thrive in an increasingly pluralistic society. Linguistic diversity plays a significant role in this context, as individuals often utilize their own dialects to express their identity and maintain cultural heritage (García & Wei, 2014). Recognizing and valuing linguistic variety among ethnic groups can foster a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

Promoting Cultural Diversity

Thought for 43 seconds Promoting Cultural Diversity A fundamental goal of multicultural education is to acknowledge and promote cultural diversity. According to Banks (2019), multicultural education seeks to transform educational institutions so that all students have equal opportunities to learn, regardless of their cultural backgrounds. Nieto and Bode (2018) emphasize that multicultural education provides a platform for students from diverse cultures to actively engage and develop positive attitudes towards cultural diversity. This involvement is crucial in constructing a community that respects and honors cultural differences. Gay (2018) highlights the significance of culturally responsive teaching in promoting cultural diversity. She argues that incorporating students' cultural experiences into teaching practices enhances learning and fosters an inclusive classroom environment. By acknowledging and utilizing the cultural assets that students bring, educators can promote mutual respect and understanding among students from different backgrounds. Furthermore, Ladson-Billings (2021) reiterates the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy in addressing the educational needs of diverse learners. She contends that educators must recognize and utilize students' cultural strengths as assets in the learning process. This approach not only supports academic success but also affirms students' cultural identities. Moreover, international organizations emphasize the importance of promoting cultural diversity in education. The UNESCO (2020) Global Education Monitoring Report highlights that embracing cultural diversity in educational settings is vital for achieving inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Therefore, integrating multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching practices is essential in fostering a community that esteems and honors cultural disparities. By drawing on the latest insights from experts and international educational bodies, educators can create inclusive learning environments that prepare students to thrive in a diverse and interconnected world.

Enhancing Linguistic Diversity

Linguistic variety has a crucial role in the context of multicultural education. Cummins (2021) emphasises that acknowledging and appreciating students' mother tongues and regional speech patterns in the educational setting might enhance their self-confidence and scholastic achievements. By integrating students' language origins into the curriculum, educators may create a learning atmosphere that is more inclusive and supportive.

Research Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the difficulties encountered by foreign university students in studying Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing (BIPA). A mixed-methods approach integrates quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell et al., 2018). The quantitative component involved a survey administered to 30 international students enrolled in the BIPA program at Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta. This sample size was deemed appropriate for the exploratory nature of the study and is consistent with recommendations for minimum sample sizes in preliminary research (Marshall et al., 2013). Purposive sampling was used to select survey participants, ensuring that only students with relevant experience in the BIPA program were included. Purposive sampling allows researchers to focus on participants who can provide rich and relevant information (Etikan et al., 2016). For the qualitative component, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of participants selected through maximum variation sampling. This strategy ensured a diverse representation of students' backgrounds and experiences, enhancing the depth and richness of the data collected (Patton, 2015). Maximum variation sampling is effective in capturing a wide range of perspectives, which strengthens the credibility and transferability of the qualitative findings (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data Collection

Quantitative Data Collection

A structured questionnaire based on the Likert scale was designed to collect quantitative data. The questionnaire covered aspects such as linguistic difficulties (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and intonation), cultural challenges, and educational background impacts.

Qualitative Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth qualitative data. The interviews aimed to explore personal experiences, specific challenges, and coping strategies employed by the students.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study involves both quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by international students learning Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing (BIPA). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the survey responses, including frequency distributions (e.g., strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree) and measures of central tendency (mean) and variability (standard deviation). Inferential statistics were applied to explore relationships

between specific linguistic challenges (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation) and overall language learning difficulty. In addition, thematic analysis, including transcription and coding, was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns from the qualitative data.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

Generally the study found the mean score for "Importance of Cultural Understanding is the highest with 4.23 suggests that students overwhelmingly agree that understanding Indonesian culture is important for effective communication followed by "Grammar significantly different from native language" & "Pronunciation challenges are 3.8, indicating moderate agreement that Indonesian grammar differs from students' native languages and pronunciation is perceived as moderately challenging comparing to students' natives languages. Table 1 shows the mean score of the five constructs for all respondents of study.

Table 1: Mean Score for All Constructs

	Constructs	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
1	Grammar Differences	3.8	1.1
2	Pronunciation Challenges	3.8	1.1
3	Cultural Challenges	3.4	1.2
4	Grammar vs Vocabulary Difficulty	3.6	1.1
5	Importance of Cultural Understanding	4.2	0.9

Table 2: t-Test Results for 5 Constructs

	Constructs	T-Statistic	P-Value
1	Grammar Differences	3.89	0.0
2	Pronunciation Challenges	4.0	0.0
3	Cultural Challenges	1.75	0.09
4	Grammar vs Vocabulary Difficulty	2.98	0.01
5	Importance of Cultural Understanding	7.87	0.0

Findings

The quantitative analysis underscores several statistically significant constructs, with grammar and pronunciation being the most prominent challenges. The mean scores for "Grammar Differences" and "Pronunciation Challenges" (3.8) reflect a moderate consensus among students that these aspects pose considerable difficulty. The T-test results further affirm this, showing statistical significance for both constructs (p-value=0.0), indicating that the observed differences are not random but are widespread issues across the student cohort.

Moreover, the construct "Importance of Cultural Understanding" has the highest mean score (4.2), highlighting a strong agreement that cultural understanding plays a pivotal role in

effective communication. However, "Cultural Challenges" (mean score of 3.4) was not statistically significant (p-value=0.09), suggesting variability in students' experiences regarding cultural barriers in language learning. While this might imply that some students adapt more easily to cultural nuances, others may find them less relevant or challenging in their learning process.

Qualitative Analysis

Interviews were transcribed literally and analysed using directed Qualitative Content Analysis to describe emerging themes in a systematic way (Mayring, 2000, 2015; Schreier, 2014). The qualitative data, gathered from students' personal experiences, offers a rich, contextualized understanding of the quantitative findings. For instance, while the statistical significance of grammar challenges is evident in the quantitative results, the qualitative feedback provides a nuanced view of how these challenges manifest. Students like P1, who highlighted difficulties with formal grammatical structures, found that constant review and repetitive practice were necessary coping strategies. This reflects a deeper, often frustrating, engagement with grammar that goes beyond mere recognition of its difficulty, pointing to a persistent struggle that requires time and focused effort to overcome.

Similarly, pronunciation challenges, which the quantitative data identifies as significant, are qualitatively illustrated by students like P2, who noted that certain sounds in Indonesian do not exist in her native language (Urdu). The use of specific coping strategies such as flashcards and language apps adds depth to the statistical observation, showing not only the nature of the difficulty but also how students adapt their learning methods to address these phonetic barriers.

When it comes to cultural adaptation, the qualitative data introduces important insights that the quantitative analysis does not fully capture. While the quantitative results indicate variability in students' perceptions of cultural challenges, the qualitative themes reveal that cultural adaptation is an individualized process. P3's experience with "jam karet" (a term reflecting flexible time management in Indonesian culture) and P2's difficulty grasping the indirect communication style showcase that cultural challenges are not uniformly experienced. For some, these challenges require active engagement, such as consuming local media (Indonesian literature or comedy) to better understand social norms and behaviors.

The interviews reveal that grammar is one of the most significant challenges students face, particularly in mastering formal grammatical structures and the use of affixes. P1 shared their frustration with this aspect, stating:

> Indonesian grammar is quite different from my own language. I often struggle with prefixes and suffixes, especially in formal writing. It takes a lot of effort and time to get used to them.

This sentiment highlights not only the inherent complexity of Indonesian grammar but also the mental and emotional toll it takes on learners. P1 copes with this challenge by dedicating extra time to reviewing grammar rules and practicing them in exercises. Their approach of repetitive learning underscores the need for constant exposure and engagement with grammar, indicating that students must go beyond simply learning the rules to truly internalize them through practical application.

Pronunciation

Pronunciation is another area where students experience significant difficulty, especially when dealing with sounds that do not exist in their native languages. P2 described their struggle with pronunciation, stating:

> The hardest part for me is pronouncing sounds that aren't in my native language, like certain vowels. It's really frustrating because I know what I want to say, but it just doesn't come out right.

To cope with these challenges, P2 turned to using flashcards and language apps, tools that helped them to familiarize themselves with the sounds and practice them in context. This coping strategy reflects the importance of technology-assisted learning in overcoming phonetic barriers, particularly for students who encounter unfamiliar sounds that require focused, repetitive practice to master.

Vocabulary challenges, particularly when it comes to idiomatic expressions and slang, are a recurring theme in the interviews. P3 emphasized the difficulty of learning vocabulary that does not have direct equivalents in their native language, sharing:

> What makes learning Indonesian hard is the idiomatic expressions and slang. They don't translate easily, and I often don't understand what people mean when they use them.

To address this, P3 turned to Indonesian literature and conversations with locals to improve their understanding of these expressions. By actively seeking out examples of idiomatic language in real-world contexts, they were able to expand their vocabulary and grasp the deeper cultural meanings behind certain phrases. This suggests that students need more exposure to authentic language use, as relying solely on formal instruction may not adequately prepare them for the colloquial nuances of everyday communication.

Cultural differences play a significant role in students' experiences of learning Indonesian. For some, like P3, adapting to cultural norms such as "jam karet" (flexible time management) posed a real challenge. They explained:

> At first, I found it really confusing when people said they would arrive at a certain time but then showed up late. It took a while to adjust to the idea that time is more flexible here.

This cultural adaptation required them to recalibrate their expectations and understanding of social norms. P3's experience demonstrates how cultural factors can complicate language learning, as students must not only learn the language but also adjust to the cultural practices that shape communication. Similarly, P1 found the use of formal titles challenging, commenting:

> I wasn't used to the formality in addressing people. I had to learn how to use the right titles in different contexts, which was sometimes confusing.

P1 dealt with this challenge by observing local interactions and seeking clarification from instructors, emphasizing the importance of learning through immersion and social observation in navigating cultural differences.

Across the interviews, a variety of coping mechanisms emerged, demonstrating how students adapt to the challenges they face in learning Indonesian. For instance, P1's strategy of reviewing grammar rules and doing extra exercises reflects a methodical approach to overcoming grammatical difficulties, while P2's use of flashcards and language apps highlights the role of technology in addressing pronunciation challenges. P3's reliance on literature and conversations with locals to understand idiomatic expressions shows the value of immersing oneself in the target language's cultural context. These diverse strategies reveal that successful language learning requires not only cognitive effort but also a willingness to engage with the language in practical, everyday situations.

Conclusion

The integration of both quantitative and qualitative data reveals a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by students learning Indonesian as a second language. The quantitative results clearly highlight that the most significant obstacles include grammar and pronunciation, both of which are statistically significant with mean scores of 3.8. These findings are complemented by qualitative insights, where students detail their experiences and strategies in overcoming these challenges. For instance, while grammar is quantitatively shown to be a prominent difficulty, students like P1 emphasize the emotional and mental effort required to master complex grammatical structures, revealing the depth of their struggles through personal experiences.

Similarly, pronunciation difficulties identified quantitatively are brought to life through qualitative narratives, such as P2's frustration with sounds that do not exist in their native language. The use of flashcards and language apps as coping strategies shows how students apply technological tools to manage these challenges effectively. The cultural adaptation, which quantitatively shows variability (mean score of 3.4 and a non-significant p-value), is further unpacked in the qualitative analysis. Students like P3 and P2 describe how specific cultural norms, such as "jam karet" or the indirect communication style, add layers of complexity to their language learning. This suggests that while cultural challenges may not be universally perceived as difficult, those who do encounter them must engage deeply with the local culture to succeed. Overall, the combined data illustrates that learning Indonesian is not only a cognitive process but also requires emotional resilience, cultural adaptability, and the use of diverse coping mechanisms. By weaving together statistical trends with individual stories, the discussion captures the multifaceted nature of language acquisition.

References

Banks, J. A. (2019). An Introduction to Multicultural Education. Pearson.

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research. Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Cummins, J. (2021). "Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire." Multilingual Matters.

Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, 5(1), 1-4.

Fachri, M. Y., & Saragih, R. (2020). Teaching Indonesian to Speakers of Other Languages: Strategies and Approaches. Journal of Language and Cultural Education, 8(2), 20-30.

Garcia, M., & Lee, H. (2023). *Intercultural competence in higher education: Best practices for supporting international students.* Journal of International Education Research, 19(1), 45-60.

García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan. Banks, J. A. (2019). *An Introduction to Multicultural Education* (6th ed.). Pearson.

Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.

Jones, R., & Smith, P. (2022). *Language acquisition for non-native speakers: Insights and challenges.* Language Learning Review, 34(3), 200-215.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2021). "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the Remix." *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 74–84.

Li, G., Chen, W., & Duanmu, J. L. (2010). Determinants of International Students' Academic Performance: A Comparison Between Chinese and Other International Students. Journal of Studies in International Education, 14(4), 389-405.

Marshall, B., Cardon, P., Poddar, A., & Fontenot, R. (2013). Does sample size matter in qualitative research?: A review of qualitative interviews in IS research. *Journal of Computer Information Systems*, 54(1), 11-22.

Mayring, P. (2000). Qualitative Content Analysis. FQS - Forum Qualitative Social Research.

Mayring, P. (2015). Qualitative Content Analysis: Theoretical Background and Procedures. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9181-6_13

Nieto, S., & Bode, P. (2018). *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* (7th ed.). Pearson.

Novera, I. A. (2004). Indonesian Postgraduate Students Studying in Australia: An Examination of Their Academic, Social, and Cultural Experiences. International Education Journal, 5(4), 475-487.

Nurhayati, N. (2018). The Cultural Adaptation Process of International Students: The Case of Indonesian Language Learners. Journal of International Students, 8(1), 32-47.

Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42(5), 533-544.

Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2017). *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*. Teachers College Press.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Putri, D. A., & Wahyuni, S. (2019). Common Linguistic Challenges in Learning Bahasa Indonesia: Perspectives from Non-Native Speakers. Linguistic Journal of Indonesia, 36(1), 15-27.

Sawir, E. (2005). Language Difficulties of International Students in Australia: The Effects of Prior Learning Experience. International Education Journal, 6(5), 567-580.

Setiyawan, A. (2021). Cultural Adjustment and Academic Success: Experiences of International Students in Indonesian Universities. Journal of International Education Research, 17(2), 103-114.

UNESCO. (2020). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education – All Means All*. UNESCO Publishing.

Utami, R. (2022). Support Services for International Students in Indonesian Higher Education: An Evaluation. Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 44(1), 65-78.

Contact email: aldianidris25@gmail.com