

International students' strategies for overcoming barriers in learning Indonesian

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ABSTRACT

The number of international students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds is growing, largely due to increased global mobility, which leads to more interactions with their local counterparts in host nations. These interactions often present cultural, linguistic, and psychological barriers, particularly when it comes to adapting to new environments and engaging with different social and cultural norms. This qualitative study examines the barriers that overseas students encounter when studying Indonesian in an academic setting in Indonesia, as well as the strategies they employ to overcome these barriers. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 11 international students from Gambia, Pakistan, Egypt, and Yemen who voluntarily participated in this case study. Thematic analysis revealed that these students encounter barriers in their Indonesian language learning journey. These barriers include linguistic barriers (such as a lack of vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammatical difficulties), cultural barriers (misunderstandings related to language politeness and social norms), and psychological barriers (including anxiety, frustration, and low self-efficacy) when learning the Indonesian language. To overcome these challenges, students employ diverse strategies, including interacting with native speakers, utilizing technology, engaging with the local community, seeking peer support, and practicing self-regulated learning, to enhance their language acquisition and cultural integration. The findings have both academic and practical implications for curriculum development and teacher training, helping to create more enriching learning experiences for international students studying Indonesian within a rich intercultural and applied linguistics framework.

Keywords: Language learning strategy; linguistic barriers; Indonesian for Speakers of Other Languages; international student

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INTRODUCTION

Learning a new language in a foreign country presents multifaceted challenges for international students, particularly as they encounter various barriers during their transition to and post-graduation from the host country (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Oduwaye et al., 2023). These challenges often include linguistic barriers, lifestyle differences, academic difficulties, and sociocultural and psychological distress (Gong et al., 2020). Specifically, linguistic differences pose significant challenges for daily interactions (Bibi & Hamida, 2024).

In light of globalization and increased cross-cultural exchanges, it becomes vital to understand the barriers international students face in learning Indonesian while living in the country, especially as UNESCO recognises Indonesian as an international language (Susanto et al., 2024). Notably, with a growing number of foreign students pursuing academic opportunities in Indonesia, this study primarily aims to investigate the strategies these students employ to overcome the barriers they encounter.

The context of this research is situated within the intercultural environment of one public

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university in Jambi city, where international students pursue their studies in Indonesia. These students hail from various countries and are enrolled in regular lectures, where the language of instruction and the majority of the lecture materials are in Indonesian. Consequently, the Indonesian language becomes a foreign language that must be mastered in order to communicate effectively and support academic success.

Existing literature on foreign language learning highlights the various strategies employed by international students and categorises the barriers they encounter into linguistic, cultural, and psychological dimensions. Studies suggest that these barriers arise from linguistic complexity (Ennin & Manariyo, 2023), cross-cultural challenges (Astley, 2024; Isnaniah & Islahuddin, 2020; Ndiangu et al., 2024), social interactions complicated by cultural misunderstandings (Handrianto et al., 2024; Yu & Wright, 2024), psychological factors (Elheneidy & Mohd, 2025; Wang et al., 2021; Yee & Hassan, 2024), and inconsistent academic support that may impede language acquisition (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023; Yee & Hassan, 2024). Linguistic barriers include difficulties in understanding and producing Indonesian, which are shaped by students' previous exposure and native language backgrounds. Suyitno et al. (2018) note that cognitive learning strategies are influenced by students' linguistic backgrounds and cognitive skills, while Aguskin and Maryani (2020) explore how teaching materials can impact students' willingness to communicate.

Moreover, multiple studies have been conducted on teaching Indonesian to Speakers of Other Languages (BIPA) with varying foci. First, there are studies that focus on the development of learning materials, their implementation, and evaluation in the learning Indonesian context, such as those by Fitria (2023a), which emphasize the alignment of BIPA textbooks with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), highlighting the importance of competency mapping in language education. The need for effective teaching materials is further supported by Hardini et al. (2021), who discuss the future of BIPA teachers and the necessity for ongoing professional development. Similarly, Salamah and Setiawati's (2023) research also supports the need to develop BIPA teaching materials, particularly in the phonetic aspect, to guide learners in correcting pronunciation errors in Indonesian. Additionally, Boeriswati et al. (2023) developed a web-based placement test for BIPA, underscoring the importance of standardized assessments for effective language learning.

Second, some other studies have focused on the use of technology to support classroom learning (Rahmatika et al., 2025). Several studies in this context focus on the role and function of technology in supporting language learning, for example,

through the development of online teaching materials (Nugraheni et al., 2021), computer-assisted language learning (Andriyanto et al., 2023; Mudiono et al., 2023; Muzdalifah & Herningias, 2021), and the development of mobile-assisted language learning applications (Seri & Sutrisno, 2021).

Third, there are also studies investigating challenges and barriers encountered by international students, which are typically associated with cultural and psychological factors. For instance, research by Marsevan et al. (2023) emphasises the challenges associated with cultural factors in domains such as pronunciation, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Similarly, Rachman and Suyitno (2019) highlight cultural issues as the main challenges faced by international students in learning Indonesian. Additionally, Fitria (2023b) conducted a detailed investigation into the challenges faced by BIPA teachers and learners regarding the selection of suitable teaching methodologies. These studies predominantly reveal the various barriers faced by international students.

However, gaps remain in understanding international students' strategies in coping with various barriers to learning Indonesian. While prior studies have focused on developing learning materials, providing technological support, and exploring psychological and cultural adaptation, comprehensive studies detailing the multidimensional barriers and coping strategies within the framework of BIPA have yet to be adequately explored. Therefore, this current study aims to address these gaps by addressing two main research questions (RQs): (1) What are the barriers that international students encounter when learning Indonesian as a foreign language? (2) What strategies do international students employ to cope with the above-mentioned barriers in the context of learning Indonesian as a foreign language?

METHOD

Research Design

This qualitative research design examines the barriers faced by international students in learning the Indonesian language at a public university in Jambi city, Indonesia. The case study method was applied because it is appropriate for gaining an in-depth understanding of international students' learning experiences in a cultural and linguistic context that differs from their native language. This study enables a nuanced examination of individual experiences, offering insights into the complex interplay of linguistic, cultural, and psychological factors that influence language learning (Subandiyah, 2023; Tiawati et al., 2024).

Additionally, the qualitative research design facilitates the collection of rich, descriptive data through interviews and a focus group discussion

(FGD), which are essential for capturing the lived experiences of international students. This selection, in line with the methodologies employed in studies examining the barriers faced by foreign language learners, as seen in the work of Marsevani et al. (2023), highlights the linguistic and cultural challenges encountered by international students in Indonesia. The qualitative approach enables the exploration of coping strategies employed by students, as evidenced in research that examines the role of social interaction and cultural engagement in enhancing language learning outcomes. Shortly, the case study method is well-suited for this research, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted barriers and strategies in the context of learning Indonesian as a foreign language.

Participants

The participants in this study were 11 international students enrolled at a public university in Indonesia, situated on the island of Sumatra. In qualitative research, sample size is determined contextually,

depending on the research paradigm used (Boddy, 2016). Therefore, selecting 11 participants in this study contextually reflects the diversity of experiences relevant to addressing the research problem. The participants were selected purposively based on their diverse nationalities and choice of study program to ensure comprehensive representation of their experiences. The diverse national backgrounds of the participants were considered to capture a range of experiences and perspectives on language learning barriers and coping strategies (Ferdiansyah et al., 2020; Irayanti et al., 2025). Additionally, participants were selected based on their status as international students actively engaged in learning Indonesian as a foreign language within the Indonesian higher education context (Ferdiansyah et al., 2020; Hastowohadi et al., 2025). Participants must have been registered as international students for at least one semester at a university in Indonesia. The following table provides an overview of the participants' demographics.

Table 1
Participants' Demographics

Code of Participant	Study Program	Country Origin	Age	Gender
P1	Agricultural Product Technology	Gambia	19	Male
P2		Pakistan	22	Female
P3		Egypt	20	Male
P4	Business and Economics	The Gambia	22	Male
P5		Pakistan	22	Male
P6	Economic Development	Yemen	22	Male
P7		The Gambia	24	Male
P8	Agriculture	Pakistan	20	Male
P9		Yemen	20	Male
P10	Forestry	Gambia	22	Male
P11	Economic development	Pakistan	21	Male

To ensure confidentiality and highlight the voluntary nature of their involvement, all participants provided their informed consent as a matter of ethics. The research was conducted in full adherence to the ethical norms established by the institution, and participants were assigned codes (P1 to P11) to safeguard their identities. To differentiate between data excerpts from interviews and FGDs, the coding 'Pn#interview' is used for interview data and 'Pn#FGD' for FGD data.

Data Collection

FGD and semi-structured interviews were employed to gather data and provide a thorough understanding of the research problems (Ferdiansyah et al., 2020; Marsevani et al., 2023). During the interviews, 11 international students shared their experiences in English and Indonesian, facilitated in a comfortable setting through both face-to-face discussions and Google Forms. The open-ended questions, adapted

from Naif and Saad (2017), Wachyunni et al. (2023), and Pratama (2024), aimed to explore the challenges, barriers, and strategies participants faced in learning Indonesian. Each interview, lasting approximately 45-60 minutes, was audio-recorded with the participant's consent for accurate transcription and analysis.

Additionally, FGD was organized to encourage participant interaction and collaboratively share experiences and coping strategies, investigating common challenges that may not emerge in one-on-one interviews (Zhang & Mi, 2010). This approach provided insights into the social dynamics of language learning and peer support. The FGDs included international students and representatives from study programs, guided by a facilitator to ensure all voices were heard. The International Office facilitated these discussions to gather students' perspectives on their challenges and coping strategies while studying in Indonesia.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study utilized an inductive approach, a key methodology in qualitative research known for its 'bottom-up' and 'theory-generating' characteristics (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method entails deriving codes, categories, and themes directly from the raw data, allowing for the emergence of patterns and insights rooted in participants' lived experiences. This makes it effective for examining the complex barriers and strategies employed by international students as they learn Indonesian. Through iterative coding, constant comparison, and thematic development, inductive analysis fosters a nuanced understanding linked closely to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Thomas, 2006).

Thematic analysis was conducted on qualitative data collected from interviews and FGD to identify constraints and effective strategies for overcoming these barriers, focusing on recurrent themes related to international students' challenges and coping mechanisms (Indah et al., 2023). Following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis involved familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming them, and drawing conclusions. Attention was given to data saturation to ensure a comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences, and member checking was employed to enhance data trustworthiness by allowing participants to confirm the accuracy of their information. Additionally, peer debriefing sessions facilitated discussions on emerging themes, and an audit trail was maintained throughout the data analysis process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings derived from the thematic analysis. The findings are organized around prominent themes that emerged from the data, reflecting the barriers international students face in learning Indonesian and the strategies they employed to cope with these barriers. These findings are then discussed in relation to existing literature, previous studies, and the study's objectives.

Findings

RQ1: What are the barriers that international students encounter when learning Indonesian?

The interviews and FGD data reveal several key themes that encapsulate the barriers faced by learners in navigating a new linguistic and cultural environment. By weaving together the participants' experiences, we can identify common themes and the complexities inherent in learning the Indonesian language.

Linguistic Barriers

The participants encountered various barriers in their study in a new environment in Indonesia, including language, cultural, and psychological challenges. Specifically, these barriers include a lack of vocabulary and pronunciation, as well as difficulties in understanding Indonesian sentence construction, meaning, and context. The following is a brief explanation of these main themes that emerged from the interviews and FGD data.

Lack of Vocabulary and Pronunciation

Lack of vocabulary emerged as a significant challenge for participants. For instance, in response to the interview question, "What difficulties do they face in learning Indonesian?" most participants said that understanding vocabulary and pronunciation were the main challenges. As P4 stated, "Not knowing the meaning of Indonesian words is my biggest problem, which makes it difficult for me to communicate and understand people speaking Indonesian." Throughout the interviews, students conveyed how difficulties with Indonesian vocabulary hindered their ability to communicate complex ideas effectively. Participant P7 remarked, "Vocabulary words are my lack in *bahasa* still", reflecting feelings of inadequacy regarding their lexical knowledge. Participant P2 noted that while many Indonesian words are similar to English and Urdu, others are challenging to pronounce.

The FGD's data indicate that vocabulary limitations and pronunciation difficulties serve as fundamental barriers to effective communication in both formal and informal academic contexts. As P9 stated in the interview, "The language barrier truly affected my interactions with locals, lecturers, and local students". "I found myself relying on basic vocabulary, which made it tough to have deep discussions and connect on a deeper level". Additionally, difficulties in vocabulary mastery are closely related to pronunciation challenges, particularly with complex affixed words, such as "*kebersihan*", "*penyadapan*", and "*penggunaan*".

Several participants identified pronunciation as a significant hurdle in their language learning. For example, a participant from Gambia stated, "Pronunciation, in terms of getting the intonation and vowel sounds just right, has been a real struggle." (P9#FGD). This acknowledgment highlights the significance of mastering pronunciation for effective communication in Indonesian, where subtle sound differences can alter meanings entirely. Such challenges are compounded by the fact that students may come from various linguistic backgrounds, which affects their ability to produce and distinguish sounds that may not exist in their native languages.

Difficulties in Understanding Sentence Construction, Meaning, and Context

FGD's data demonstrated that participants' perspectives on grammar varied, with some viewing it as a barrier and others finding it manageable. Participant P10 articulated a common discomfort by stating, "It's about the grammar and vocabulary," indicating that challenges with grammar often stem from issues with vocabulary usage. In contrast, P11 viewed Indonesian grammar as less demanding, remarking, "I think Bahasa Indonesia is the easiest language as a grammar because there is not much grammar." This perspective suggests that some learners find relief in aspects of the language that differ from more complex grammatical frameworks. Additionally, P11's reference to Urdu highlights the influence of their native language on their confidence; they noted that transitioning from Urdu to English involved more grammatical complexities than moving to Indonesian.

The experiences of international students highlight nuanced challenges in learning Indonesian, particularly in areas such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Pronunciation issues often hinder students' confidence in communication, while vocabulary challenges indicate a collective struggle to master the language's extensive lexicon. Diverse perceptions of grammar exist, with some appreciating its relative simplicity compared to other languages. These insights highlight the need for targeted instructional strategies to address specific barriers. Educators should implement practice-focused approaches for pronunciation, vocabulary development activities, and clear grammatical structures to support learners as they navigate the complexities of acquiring Indonesian as a foreign language. Understanding these challenges can foster a more conducive learning environment, ultimately enhancing their language acquisition journey.

Cultural Barriers

Cultural barriers are experienced by some participants when engaging in social interaction and communication with local students in Indonesia. The following interview data illustrates the prevalence of misunderstandings in communication due to a lack of comprehension of the cultural aspects of Indonesian in natural communication.

... I misunderstood using informal language with a senior colleague. In Indonesian, there are different levels of politeness and formality in language. I mistakenly used a casual form of address when I should have used a more formal one. This led to a moment of awkwardness, and I quickly learned the significance of using appropriate language based on the context and the person's status in Indonesian culture. (P5#interview)

Data from the FGD also revealed cultural barriers experienced by participants, notably the confusion around social language use. For instance, Participant P2 stated, "The manners here are very confusing. I don't even know when it is appropriate to use the word '*kamu*' to address a lecturer or an older person." A significant theme that emerged was the complexity of language politeness in Indonesian culture. Participants underscored the importance of understanding the hierarchical nature of language; using informal language with senior colleagues can lead to awkwardness. This aligns with literature emphasizing the role of socio-cultural factors in language learning, indicating the need for comprehensive cultural orientation programs (Chung, 2024). Such programs equip students to navigate language and cultural challenges, enhancing their language acquisition and social integration (Sinaga, 2024; Yuliantari & Huda, 2023).

International students also face broader challenges in cultural adaptation, as they grapple with new social norms and expectations that can lead to feelings of isolation and anxiety. Yu and Wright (2024) found that cultural barriers create a paradox, as they obstruct students' desire to interact with diverse peers due to limited engagement with local students. These cultural and language differences contribute to a psychological gap, making it difficult for international students to integrate into a multicultural environment. As a result, students may gravitate toward familiar national or cultural groups, hindering overall integration into Indonesian culture. Socio-cultural challenges, combined with feelings of being an outsider, may heighten psychological issues. The analysis of cultural barriers revealed prominent themes related to variability in misunderstandings, contextual factors that affect comprehension, and learning through experience.

Variability in Cultural Misunderstanding Experiences

A significant portion of the participants reported positive experiences with language interactions, with participants P1, P2, P3, P4, and P8 stating in FGD that they had not encountered any cultural misunderstandings. P1 articulated this sentiment succinctly, stating, "No," while P2 echoed a similar feeling with, "Nothing yet." This absence of reported misunderstandings suggests that for some students, initial exposure to the Indonesian language and culture may be manageable or less fraught with tension. The experiences of these participants highlight a segment of the international student population that may not have engaged deeply enough with the language or cultural nuances to encounter significant misunderstandings.

Conversely, several participants did share close encounters with miscommunication. For instance,

interview data revealed that P5 provided a detailed account of his struggle when he attempted to buy shoes upon his arrival in Indonesia. He recounted, "I spent one hour, but because of the language, I couldn't buy the shoes because he didn't understand what I was telling him, and I didn't understand what he was saying." These findings underscore the immediate practical challenges that language barriers can create, leading to frustration and potential feelings of inadequacy.

Contextual Factors

The theme of contextual factors revealed how various elements influenced understanding during interactions. In the interview, P7 expressed feelings of cultural disrespect in situations where seniors expected compliance with unfamiliar norms, stating, "They asked us to sit on the floor... they don't need to reciprocate respect back to us." This highlights the clash between cultural norms and personal perspectives, particularly for international students unfamiliar with Indonesian etiquette. In this case, a lack of understanding of cultural context becomes a barrier for participants in social interactions with students.

While participants identified significant barriers, they also reflected on their growth from these challenges. For instance, P10 mentioned mispronunciations that resulted in unintended meanings: "Yes, multiple times I often mispronounced the words, leading to the meaning of something else or an insult." P11 recounted a distressing incident involving miscommunication that resulted in financial loss, emphasizing the importance of effective negotiation skills. These experiences highlight how mistakes can transform into pivotal learning moments.

Furthermore, the distinction between formal and non-formal varieties of Indonesian is another barrier for foreign speakers, particularly in terms of politeness and formality in the language. Moreover, understanding contextual factors is vital for effective communication and cultural interaction. Participants' experiences demonstrate that language learning extends beyond vocabulary and grammar to include an understanding of social context.

I'm a bit puzzled by the use of "ndak," "tidak," and "gak" in formal classroom settings. I'm also confused about the use of the greetings "kakak" and "bapak," which my friend says shouldn't be used carelessly in all situations. When you're dealing with formal situations, you should use "tidak," "tidak," or "gak." This is what I'm still confuses. (P1#interview).

To sum up, the findings revealed that while many international students shared positive experiences, a significant number faced barriers due to cultural misunderstandings. Individual

backgrounds and engagement levels significantly influenced their interactions, underscoring the importance of cultural sensitivity, adaptive strategies, and emotional support in enhancing the educational experience of international students in a multicultural environment.

Psychological Barriers

The data reveal several psychological barriers that international students encounter as they navigate the complexities of learning Indonesian as a foreign language. The experiences of the participants highlight various psychological factors that impede their confidence, motivation, and overall engagement with the Indonesian language while studying in Indonesia as foreign students.

Anxiety, Fear of Judgment, and Frustration

One of the most prominent psychological barriers identified in the interviews is anxiety related to speaking and communicating in the target language. For instance, Participant P6 expressed that language barriers not only affect academic performance but also diminish their spirit for learning, stating, "I got disappointing results due to my limited mastery of Indonesian. This makes me afraid to talk to local friends or ask lecturers who only speak Indonesian." This fear of negative evaluation can paralyze learners, restricting their willingness to engage in conversations and contribute in a learning environment.

Similarly, Participant P7 courageously shared that they often worry about how their attempts to speak Indonesian might be perceived, saying in FGD, "I always didn't mind if people will laugh at what I will say in Bahasa Indonesia." This statement, while reflecting a courageous attitude, also indicates a conscious awareness of potential ridicule that can arise from making mistakes in a new language. In this vein, research has shown that such anxiety can inhibit participation and engagement, leading to further isolation from the learning community.

Participants also articulated feelings of frustration stemming from their language learning experiences, noting that,

I experienced significant difficulty in comprehending the lectures delivered in Indonesian. I was therefore frustrated at being unable to gain any comprehension whatsoever. The lecturer was unable to comprehend questions posed in English, and the majority of local students were similarly incapable of communicating in English. (P3#interview)

The participant's frustration stems from a lack of comprehension of Indonesian, which is a common barrier for international students learning in a foreign language. The finding highlights that

language barriers limit students' acquisition of knowledge and skills, which are crucial for their academic success and overall learning experience. This frustration can erode motivation and lead to disillusionment with the learning process, as learners feel that their efforts do not yield the desired results. When students face persistent challenges without adequate support, it can diminish their intrinsic motivation to learn.

Furthermore, participant P10 reflected the impact of these barriers in the FGD, stating, "It has really affected me a lot as a student who is socially active; it has reduced my spirit of interaction with local students." This reduction in motivation illustrates how psychological barriers can have a cascading effect on learners' social interactions and willingness to engage with local peers, ultimately limiting their ability to adapt and integrate into their new environment.

Participant P6 encapsulated the overwhelming feeling many students experience when encountering a new language by saying, "Everything is new; that means everything should be a challenge for me." This difficulty relates directly to pronouncing words correctly in Indonesian, as each unfamiliar sound or intonation requires effort to learn and replicate accurately. Furthermore, P5 highlighted the extent of the challenges when he shared in FGD, "I can't pronounce most of the words, and some of them are very hard to pronounce." These expressions of frustration illustrate not only the difficulties of learning Indonesian phonetics but also the emotional impact such challenges can have on students' confidence and willingness to engage in spoken dialogue.

Perceived limitations and self-efficacy

The interviews and FGD data also reveal issues related to self-efficacy, where participants feel hindered by their perceived limitations. P11 stated, "If we don't have skills in Bahasa Indonesia, we can't communicate with our lecturer and we can't experience our main point." This statement underscores the connection between self-perception and language competence. When students perceive themselves as lacking the necessary skills, their confidence in engaging with academic environments diminishes. Research indicates that self-efficacy beliefs play a crucial role in shaping the motivation and performance of language learners.

Furthermore, a positive self-concept is essential for successful language acquisition; thus, perceived limitations can serve as significant psychological barriers. In this case, P9 shared a similar concern in the interview, saying, "While I worked hard to learn *bahasa Indonesia*, there were times when I couldn't fully convey complex thoughts or ideas." This struggle to articulate

thoughts can lead to feelings of inadequacy and impact students' overall self-esteem.

To summarise, psychological barriers are a crucial aspect of the language learning experience for international students. Anxiety, frustration, and perceived limitations are recurring themes that hinder communication, motivation, and engagement with the Indonesian language. Addressing these psychological challenges through supportive learning environments, peer collaboration, and targeted interventions can enhance students' confidence and motivation, ultimately promoting a more effective language acquisition process.

RQ2: What strategies do international students employ to cope with the barriers in the context of learning Indonesian?

Varied strategies to cope with the barriers

The primary finding from the interview data is that participants employ a range of strategies to overcome the barriers they face. These consist of taking the initiative to practice pronouncing words correctly, exploring the meaning of new terms, speaking with native speakers and local students, reading Indonesian news, sharing messages in Indonesian on social media, and listening to news or native speakers. It is evident from the interview data that participants employ a range of learning strategies when learning the Indonesian language. For example, participants from Yemen stated that "... I used a combination of methods. I tried to speak with native speakers to practice conversation... These approaches helped me gradually become more proficient in the language" (P9#interview). Additionally, participants from Gambia stated, "I try to speak Indonesian through speaking with my classmates, friends, and I used Google Translate for translating from English to *bahasa Indonesia* or vice-versa" (P4#FGD). These findings suggest that participants employ a variety of strategies rather than relying solely on one, such as seeking out opportunities to practice the language, utilizing internet resources, and engaging in peer-to-peer learning.

Having interactive communication with local students

The FGD data confirmed that one alternative solution to overcome obstacles in improving Indonesian language skills is to utilise communication partners who are native Indonesian speakers. Interacting directly with local students who are native speakers of Indonesian can provide a valuable experience and have a significant impact on language skills. Participants P9 and P11, for instance, shared their interesting experience with these strategies.

Indeed, I had the chance to interact with local students using *bahasa Indonesia*, and these

experiences had a significant impact on my language skills. Engaging in conversations with native speakers improved my ability to speak and understand the language. It wasn't just about learning the formal aspects of the language but also picking up colloquial expressions and cultural insights that I can only gain through real interactions. These experiences were pivotal in advancing my overall proficiency in Bahasa Indonesia. (P9#FGD)

I think practice is the main tool for learning any kind of language. Just we need to negotiate with local friends and classmates then we can learn. (P11#interview)

The data revealed prominent themes relevant to the strategies employed by international students to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers. The participant's realization of the importance of using appropriate language forms suggests a proactive approach to learning.

Utilizing Technology

The interview data revealed that a prominent strategy identified among students was the use of technology, particularly translation tools, to enable communication and understanding. In this regard, technology is a key element of the learning strategies used by non-native speakers of Indonesian. The participants' experiences suggest that the monolingual Indonesian dictionary (Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia), YouTube videos, social media, and Google Translate are frequently utilised as learning tools. As stated by a participant from Gambia, "I will use an electronic dictionary (KBBI) to look up the meaning of any unfamiliar words and work on improving my reading skills until I can pronounce them fluently in order to solve this problem" (P1#interview). This is supported by another participant from Egypt, "I am learning Indonesian from YouTube and social media because physically, we don't have classes directly from lecturer" (P3#interview).

The interview data were also supported by the participants' dialogues in the FGD. Participant P4, for example, briefly noted, "I usually used Google Translate and asked my fellow mate who can try both languages." Other participants echoed this statement, emphasizing the utility of Google Translate. P5 stated, "Just using Google translator and sometimes I ask my friends about that," while P8 noted, "If I ever get stuck somewhere, I use Google Translate." This reliance on digital translation services underscores the crucial role technology plays in bridging language gaps, providing immediate access to vocabulary and phrases necessary for daily interactions.

Additionally, participant P10 elaborated on a more strategic use of technology by explaining, "I make sure I type out my needs for the day on Google Translate and keep a screenshot so I don't get stuck with what I want to buy." This proactive approach to preparing for interactions highlights a level of planning that international students often employ to enhance their communication effectiveness.

Engaging With the Local Community

Engagement with local speakers emerged as another significant theme of strategy for overcoming language barriers. In the interview, P9 emphasised this by stating, "To manage language barriers daily, I engage with locals, use language apps, and rely on translation tools." Active participation in local interactions reflects a willingness to practice speaking Indonesian and immerse oneself in the language, thereby fostering a deeper understanding over time.

In the FGD, P7 also articulated the importance of engaging with local speakers, sharing, "I always didn't mind if people will laugh at what I will say in Bahasa Indonesia." This fearless attitude toward potential mistakes exemplifies the participants' commitment to learning through practice. Such interactions not only enhance language skills but also facilitate cultural exchange, enriching the overall experience of living in Indonesia. Additionally, P3's response encapsulates this proactive involvement succinctly: "Speaking the language a lot." This enthusiasm for regular communication is a cornerstone of effective language acquisition and indicates how vital interaction is, as practice becomes a pivotal part of overcoming barriers.

Seeking Assistance from Peers

Peer support emerged as an essential resource for navigating language barriers. Interview data revealed that participants frequently mentioned consulting friends or classmates who are more proficient in either Indonesian or English. For example, P6 remarked, "I use translator and ask my local friends," highlighting the role of local connections in language learning. Similarly, participant P4's approach of incorporating peers into the language-learning process reflects this dependence on social interactions for educational advancement.

Moreover, FGD's data also articulated a belief in the power of practice through social engagement:

I think practice is the main tool for learning any kind of language. We need to negotiate with local friends and classmates, and then we can learn. (P11#FGD).

Even though I have made extensive use of digital technology applications, especially for translating and providing examples of correct pronunciation of words in Indonesian, I still need the help of friends who can speak both English and Indonesian to reassure me. (P2#FGD).

The data demonstrated that participants using their social environment as a language learning group to overcome their problems, not only for seeking help in learning Indonesian, but also for adapting to the new culture and resolving psychological issues, such as loneliness in an unfamiliar cultural environment. This suggests that seeking help from other students is an effective strategy for international students to cope with various barriers.

Performing Self-Regulated Learning

The participants' experiences reflected a shared persistence and self-regulated learning among international students. P2 expressed in an interview, stating, "I try to read and pronounce the words in Bahasa Indonesia even when it is difficult," highlighting the resilience needed to navigate a new language. This willingness to face challenges exemplifies a growth mindset, which is essential for language learning. Similarly, P1, stating, "Just trying to learn the Indonesian alphabet and way of pronunciation,"—emphasises foundational steps for building confidence in pronunciation, crucial for effective communication.

Insights from the FGD reveal diverse strategies international students employ to overcome language barriers, such as using translation tools, engaging with local speakers, relying on peer support, and maintaining a persistent learning attitude. These approaches illustrate students' self-regulated learning and socio-affective strategies in addressing linguistic challenges. As these strategies evolve through interactions with the Indonesian language and culture, creating a supportive social and academic environment becomes crucial for enhancing language acquisition. Participants also utilised socio-affective strategies to foster cultural understanding and acceptance, recognizing similarities between Indonesian culture and their own, which helps strengthen social connections. The following data demonstrate that participants perform self-regulated learning: "I learned Indonesian on my own by taking a BIPA course at another university in Java, since it wasn't offered here in Jambi. Apps like Google Translate and Duolingo also helped me a lot" (P3#FGD).

Additionally, technological assistance is vital; interacting with native speakers allows students to practice pronunciation and essential skills. For example, mobile learning content effectively supports vocabulary acquisition and can be tailored

for speaking and writing tasks. In summary, this study highlights the linguistic, cultural, and psychological barriers international students face in learning Indonesian, reinforcing the need to address these challenges in language education.

Discussion

This section will discuss the dominant themes that emerged from the interview and FGD data to address: (1) What are the barriers that international students encounter when learning Indonesian as a foreign language? (2) What strategies do international students employ to cope with the barriers in the context of learning Indonesian as a foreign language?

The findings of the thematic analysis reveal that international students encounter a variety of linguistic, cultural, and psychological barriers in their pursuit of learning Indonesian. This finding corroborates the findings of previous similar studies, such as those by Marsevani et al. (2023); Subandiyah (2023); Srikandi (2022), and Tiawati et al. (2024), which suggest that linguistic and cultural barriers are dominant themes in the context of learning Indonesian as a foreign language. Within this context, previous studies have identified common issues including pronunciation challenges, limited vocabulary that impedes comprehension, and cultural differences. These studies also highlight feelings of anxiety and frustration as prevalent challenges experienced by learners.

Unlike the findings of previous studies, this present study not only analyzed issues related to linguistic, cultural, and psychological barriers but also highlighted various strategies used by international students to overcome these multidimensional barriers. Common strategies included direct interaction with local students, utilizing technology, and self-regulating learning. The following discussion will address the themes of linguistic, cultural, and psychological barriers, as well as strategies to overcome difficulties in learning Indonesian.

Linguistic Barriers

This study examines the challenges encountered by international students in learning Indonesian and their approaches to overcoming them. The findings reveal that limited vocabulary is a significant barrier to understanding and communicating effectively in Indonesian, aligning with Nation (2022), who argues that vocabulary size is crucial for language learning. A strong vocabulary directly enhances comprehension and expression, which are essential for successful communication and learning experiences.

Current research indicates that vocabulary size is closely tied to language comprehension and production abilities. Miralpeix and Muñoz (2018) identify a strong vocabulary base as a predictor of

language performance in academic settings, pointing out the difficulties faced by students with limited lexical resources. Additionally, Rafique et al. (2023) found that insufficient vocabulary knowledge negatively affects students' performance across various language skills, underscoring the pivotal role of vocabulary acquisition in overall language proficiency. An inadequate vocabulary diminishes communication effectiveness and constrains learning experiences.

The acquisition and retention of vocabulary also depend on factors such as task involvement load, which influences depth of processing and contextual learning (Khodaparast & Keshmirshekan, 2021). Consequently, an extensive vocabulary is crucial for understanding grammatical structures and enhancing reading and listening skills, laying the groundwork for further language development (Lin, 2016). Regular engagement in reading, speaking, and language activities is crucial for expanding vocabulary and enhancing overall language proficiency (Hamid et al., 2019; Wang, 2022). Previous studies have confirmed that vocabulary is essential for effective communication in second and foreign languages (Alqahtani, 2015; Moghadam et al., 2012; Wen & Naim, 2023). A robust vocabulary facilitates comprehension of linguistic meaning and enables individuals to articulate their thoughts and emotions effectively, serving as a cornerstone for both interpersonal dialogue and academic discussions (Salazar & Salazar, 2024).

In a similar vein, Mehrabian and Salehi (2019) found that an extensive vocabulary enables individuals to express complex ideas accurately, which is vital for improving overall language proficiency. Effective communication in a foreign language requires a broad vocabulary that is continually being enriched by speaking, reading, and other language exercises. Utilizing technology and language apps can enhance vocabulary acquisition in meaningful contexts (Wang, 2022), while collaborating with peers in conversational practice reinforces vocabulary knowledge and integrates it into everyday use. Continuous vocabulary enhancement is crucial for successful communication in a second language, although learning vocabulary is a complex and gradual process (Agca & Ozdemir, 2013).

In accordance with Moghadam et al. (2012) and Wen and Naim (2023), vocabulary knowledge is crucial for effective communication, and the findings of this study support these assertions. In addition to being a prerequisite for language abilities such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing, a large vocabulary provides access to all forms of spoken and written communication. Research indicates that a robust vocabulary facilitates comprehensive understanding and production of language, allowing for more nuanced communication (Antonia & Limone, 2020).

Conversely, limited vocabulary can lead to challenges in comprehension and expression, significantly hindering participation in language activities. Overcoming this barrier requires dedicated efforts to master vocabulary through diverse strategies, including reading, speaking, and leveraging language learning applications (Purpura et al., 2017). Therefore, a varied approach to vocabulary enhancement is essential for language learners aiming for fluency and communicative competence (Wang & Treffers-Daller, 2017). Apart from these barriers, the findings indicate that foreign students face challenges in distinguishing between local, standardised, and non-standard varieties of the Indonesian language. It is essential for these students to pay attention to the variations in the language and the roles of both Indonesian and local languages while learning.

Cultural Barriers

The findings reveal that mastering Indonesian involves not only exploring linguistic techniques and strategies but also engaging with cross-cultural communication and cognitive processes. This aligns with literature emphasizing the role of socio-cultural factors in language learning, indicating the need for comprehensive cultural orientation programs (Chung, 2024). In other words, learners must navigate the interplay between language, culture, and social dynamics (Zhou, 2023). For this reason, such programs equip students to navigate language and cultural challenges, enhancing their language acquisition and social integration (Sinaga, 2024; Yuliantari & Huda, 2023).

However, the effectiveness of language learning strategies varies significantly among individuals, influenced by their cultural backgrounds, past language learning experiences, and available resources (Bernard & Kermarrec, 2022). This assertion aligns with recent research indicating that the interplay of individual differences and contextual factors significantly shapes language learning outcomes (Dörnyei, 2019).

Moreover, this study highlights that international students exhibit persistence, adaptability, and self-regulated learning strategies when acquiring Indonesian. Self-regulated learners are better able to set specific goals, monitor their progress, and adjust their strategies as they learn (Bernard & Kermarrec, 2022; Dörnyei, 2019). By utilizing formal university courses as a foundation, these students actively seek diverse resources to support their language learning journey. Self-speaking practice, a form of self-regulated strategy, is a prevalent method for language acquisition that facilitates effective communication (Lysak, 2022). Engaging in such practice improves fluency and boosts confidence in language use, which is vital for effective communication. Furthermore, multimodal approaches that incorporate visual, auditory, and

digital modes enhance language learning by providing varied input that caters to different learning styles (Antonia & Limone, 2020). This combination of self-directed practice and multimodal resources empowers learners to take charge of their learning, ultimately leading to more effective language acquisition.

Psychological Barriers

It is essential to consider psychological factors in conjunction with linguistic and cultural aspects when learning a foreign language. Magyar et al. (2022) assert that motivation, effort, and self-regulated learning are examples of cognitive and non-cognitive elements that affect achievement. Self-regulated learning, according to Benson (2007), is the capacity of language learners to direct their own learning, establish objectives, and choose what, how, and when to learn. This kind of teaching supports self-direction and learner agency. The importance of self-regulation in language acquisition is also highlighted by Su et al. (2023), who focus on how it empowers students throughout their academic careers.

These factors are essential for success in foreign language learning, particularly for international students who benefit significantly from mobile technology. According to Dolzhich et al. (2021), mobile applications significantly accelerate language learning, suggesting that mobile learning has the potential to enhance education by meeting a range of learning demands and providing individualised, interactive experiences. Research shows that mobile-assisted language learning technologies improve accessibility and flexibility in language acquisition. For instance, Dolzhich et al. (2021) emphasise that mobile applications boost social interaction, motivation, and cognitive abilities, fostering a dynamic learning environment. Similarly, Lai and Zheng (2018) emphasise the importance of mobile devices for "anytime-anywhere" learning, which accommodates varied preferences. Furthermore, Wang and Gunaban (2023) argue that mobile learning enables learners to engage in educational activities beyond traditional settings, empowering them to personalise their learning journeys. This evidence highlights the importance of integrating technology-based strategies, such as mobile learning, into language education to enhance communication skills and promote learner autonomy. This strategy may help address barriers to foreign language learning in various cultural and linguistic contexts.

Strategies Overcoming the Barriers

In coping with linguistic, cultural, and psychological barriers, the study found that various strategies have emerged to mitigate their effects. Several effective strategies employed by international students include (1) interacting with local students, (2) utilizing technology, (3) engaging with the local

community, (4) seeking assistance from peers, and (5) participating in self-regulated learning. These findings align with those of Pratama (2024) and Youngsun et al. (2024), who have also found that interactions with native speakers, particularly, enhance self-determination and willingness to communicate despite language limitations. Moreover, the effective use of technology, such as online learning platforms and digital media, further supports the learning process by providing resources that can foster both linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding (Mudiono et al., 2023; Muzdalifah & Herningtias, 2021).

Additionally, engaging with the local community can help international students overcome feelings of isolation and anxiety, as these social interactions build supportive networks. These connections can cultivate a sense of belonging and identity, which are vital for psychological well-being and encourage learners to practice the language more freely and confidently (Martono et al., 2021). Moreover, studies have indicated that social strategies in language learning, such as forming relationships with native speakers, lead to enhanced language learning and improved motivation, reinforcing the idea that community involvement is indeed a potent strategy for language learning success (Indah et al., 2023).

Furthermore, seeking assistance from peers, particularly native speakers, plays a significant role in foreign language learning. Engaging with native speakers enhances vocabulary acquisition and improves pronunciation, as learners are exposed to authentic language use in context (Carhill-Poza, 2015). This peer-assisted environment encourages linguistic experimentation, boosting learners' confidence and enjoyment in using the language. In this case, students who engage more frequently with their peers report greater enjoyment in learning, which leads to increased language retention and higher performance levels (Huang, 2023; Pan & Yuan, 2023).

Lastly, the integration of self-regulated learning into language education enriches learners' experiences by fostering resilience and adaptability. Research has shown that students who employ self-regulated learning strategies are more likely to experience effective language learning outcomes. For instance, Bai and Wang (2020) highlighted that self-regulated learners engage in goal-directed activities that help them manage and control their own learning efforts, which results in improved language achievements. Students equipped with self-regulated strategies can navigate challenges, such as language barriers or a lack of immediate feedback, with greater efficacy (Wang, 2021). This adaptability is essential in the dynamic landscape of foreign language learning, where learners often encounter varying degrees of difficulty.

CONCLUSION

The following conclusions can be drawn from the research findings and discussions presented. First, foreign students face barriers related to linguistic complexity, cultural differences, and psychological issues when learning Indonesian. These barriers are interconnected rather than isolated, underscoring the complex nature of language acquisition and learning in a foreign setting. For instance, limited mastery of vocabulary can severely hinder students' comprehension of both spoken and written texts in Indonesian, ultimately leading to negative impacts on their cultural adaptation and motivation levels towards language learning journeys.

The study also revealed that international students employ a variety of strategies to overcome the barriers. Each student utilises multiple strategies to navigate and overcome the barriers encountered. These strategies included interacting directly with local students, utilizing technologies, and maintaining persistence and self-regulated learning. Furthermore, this study has both academic and practical implications for educators in curriculum development, teacher training, and facilitating more enriching experiences for international students learning Indonesian as a foreign language within the rich intercultural context and an applied linguistics framework.

Nevertheless, like all qualitative research, this study is limited in its generalizability across contexts. The findings may not be universally applicable to all international student populations or language learning environments. However, in the appropriate context, the findings of this study may prove useful in overcoming the barriers typically faced by non-native students in the foreign language learning process. Further research should be conducted in a broader range of areas and contexts to enhance the impact of various strategies employed in learning a foreign language.

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