

Impact of the Indonesian language course (BIPA) on international student cultural adaptation in Indonesian universities

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ABSTRACT

The Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing (BIPA) course plays an essential role in the cultural adaptation at Indonesian universities. However, the precise impact on student cultural integration and academic success has received little attention. This study investigates the impact of BIPA on cultural adaptation of international students, focusing on diverse cultural backgrounds. A mixed methods approach was used, with 123 international students questioned using a Google form survey, and 12 conducting in-depth phone calls to gather the required data. The results show that BIPA significantly improves language proficiency and cultural understanding. Language barriers emerge as the primary challenges to adaptation, emphasising the importance of language acquisition. Tailored support mechanisms within Indonesian universities are deemed essential to meet the diverse needs of international students. The recommendations include optimising BIPA programs and creating supportive environments for students.

Keywords: IPA, cultural adaptation, higher education, Indonesian universities

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INTRODUCTION

In the recent years, the internationalization of higher education has resulted in increased attention to international students (Kudo et al., 2020; Stenalt & Lassesen, 2022). In addition, (Marcuta et al., n.d.) claimed that there is an increase in student mobility on a global scale, with a nearly 70% increase recorded between 2010 and 2022. Steadily increasing, with more than six million students enrolled in foreign universities in 2019 (UNESCO, 2022) and predicted eight million by 2025 (OECD, 2016). Furthermore, international students who leave their country and immigrate from other parts of the culture experience significant changes in many aspects of their lives (J. Wang, 2009). One of the most significant challenges facing international students is cultural adaptation. When one moves to another country, it takes time to adjust to the new culture, customs, and social norms.

Living abroad in a foreign country frequently involves acclimatisation to unfamiliar cultural and religious influences in daily life and adjustment to a new language, new social norms, varied foods and eating habits, and weather and climate changes (Cruwys et al., 2021). International students who travel to another country for higher education frequently experience culture shock (Presbitero, 2016). In addition, they must learn new cultural norms and deal with language barriers. Furthermore, international students frequently deal with prejudice, discrimination, financial hardship, homelessness, social isolation, loneliness, and loss of interpersonal relationships (Ambrósio et al., 2017; Firang, 2020; Gautam et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2015). Consequently, these challenges harm their academic performance and life experience. They might not be able to accomplish their current objectives if they cannot successfully navigate the challenges and integrate into the host nation's culture.

One of the main challenges facing international students is the process of cultural adaptation process. It takes acclimatisation to the new country's culture, customs, and social norms of the new country when moving there (Alshammari et al., 2023). As (Terziev, 2019) stated, accepting the current norms of a society one is generally unfamiliar with is a necessary step in the adaptation process, which affects one's growth and prosperity. Therefore, international students must overcome linguistic and

cultural barriers and acclimate to their new surroundings to achieve their goals. A "successful transition," or effective cross-cultural adjustment, can help international students feel satisfied with their academic achievement. This can ultimately result in positive word of mouth in promoting the educational institutions to others (Shafaei & Razak, 2016). Furthermore, when international students first arrive in the host country (Hommadova, 2017), they must quickly adapt to the practices, language, traditions and assumptions of the host society (Fedotova, 2022a; Terrazas-Carrillo et al., 2014).

Indonesia, known for its cultural diversity and extensive network of educational institutions, has become a major destination for international students seeking higher education. (Baas, 2019). The growing influx of international students is an important indicator for the Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education of the Republic of Indonesia when evaluating universities' readiness for global competition. (Hapsari & Hamamah, 2019). Among these institutions, the Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing (BIPA) programme stands out as a valuable resource for international students adjusting to Indonesia's rich and diverse cultural landscape. (Raihani, 2018). The BIPA programme, which was first established in the 1990s for international students, received additional structure in 1999 with the formation of a dedicated team to manage Indonesian language education for foreign speakers. (Khoirunnisa & Sauri, 2023). Since 2000, the Language Centre of the Ministry of National Education in the Republic of Indonesia has actively organised Indonesian language teaching programmes for foreign speakers. (Khoirunnisa & Sauri, 2023). Furthermore, most Indonesian universities provide BIPA courses to foreign students before their academic programmes start, which helps with language learning and cultural adjustment. (Kumar & Benyo, 2021).

Moreover, (T. Wang, 2021; Zhang & Hu, 2021) also said that language is essential to culture because it is a storehouse of priceless cultural heritage and knowledge, in addition to being a means of communication. The challenge of cross-cultural adaptation has been central to research in a variety of contexts. (Demes & Geeraert, 2014; Kim, 2015). Additionally, the most recent reviews (Jing et al., 2020) list second language acquisition and cross-cultural adaptation as among the most studied topics in international student research (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). However, to date, there have been no studies specifically examining how Indonesian language courses, such as BIPA, influence foreign students' cultural adaptation in Indonesian universities. This gap is especially significant because the research findings could provide valuable information to Indonesian universities, allowing them to improve their teaching methods and support systems for international students. Addressing these recommendations and identifying existing gaps in current practices will allow institutions to better meet the needs of their diverse student populations.

Providing theoretical information on the reasons people learn Indonesian, the influence of language on culture, and the function of BIPA in helping foreign students in assimilating into Indonesian society sets this article apart from previous research (Zuhroh et al., 2022). Furthermore, it aims to offer insight into how BIPA courses help international students in Indonesia navigate cultural adaptation stages, improve communication skills, foster cultural learning, address cultural stressors, and increase social support (Y. Wang et al., 2018).

We focus on several research questions. 1) How does the BIPA course help international students' cultural adaptation in Indonesia, as evidenced by their language proficiency, understanding of customs, and adjustment to local communities? 2) How can international students establish meaningful connections with Indonesian culture through the BIPA course, with language learning as a key component, and how does this affect their overall cultural integration? 3) To what extent does the BIPA course address the specific needs of international students to navigate and adapt to Indonesian cultural differences, and what factors impact its effectiveness in fulfilling these needs?

The significance of this study stems from its potential to fill a gap in understanding how Indonesian language courses, specifically BIPA, contribute to the cultural adaptation of international students in Indonesian universities. This study is important because it addresses a critical aspect of international student experiences: cultural integration, which has a direct impact on academic success and general well-being. Theoretically, this study is based on several key frameworks. According to (Berry, 1997), people adapt to a new culture through a process of interaction and exchange, with language playing an important role in facilitating this transition. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories, such as (Krashen, 1985) input hypothesis, emphasize how language proficiency affects students' ability to integrate socially and academically in a new setting.

Furthermore, Social Identity Theory (The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour • 277 READING 16, n.d.) examines how interactions within social groups shape individuals' sense of belonging and self-concept, as well as their adaptation to cultural norms through language. By combining these theories, this study will provide a more nuanced perspective on the intersection of language learning and cultural adaptation, as well as valuable insights into how educational institutions can better support international students. Furthermore, it will help to develop more effective pedagogical approaches, ultimately increasing the global competitiveness of Indonesian universities.

This study, which investigates the intersection of language learning and cultural adaptation, has important implications for both academic institutions and international students. Understanding how BIPA courses affect students' ability to adapt culturally can help develop targeted support systems that improve the international student experience. Furthermore, the findings may provide practical recommendations for curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and student services, ensuring that international students are better prepared to navigate cultural challenges. By emphasising the importance of language courses in facilitating cultural integration, the study can help Indonesian universities in becoming more inclusive and globally competitive, attracting a diverse range of international students. As a result, academic outcomes would improve while also contributing to the development of a more harmonious and collaborative international community on campus.

METHOD

This research methodology used in this article is a mixed method approach that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methods (Strijker et al., 2020). As (Bigler et al., 2019) states, when approaching a research problem from an integrative perspective, the use of mixed methods becomes nearly inevitable. By combining qualitative insights for in-depth exploration of experiences and perceptions with quantitative data for broader patterns, the BIPA course provides a comprehensive understanding of international students' cultural adaptation.

For the quantitative aspect of the investigation, a google forms survey questionnaire was used. This survey was distributed to approximately 150 participants, generating responses from 123 international students enrolled in Indonesian institutions. The questionnaire covered aspects including language learning, skill levels, cultural adjustment, and perceived value of the BIPA course. A descriptive analysis of the survey data was performed with an emphasis on investigating how the BIPA course helps international students adjust to different cultures.

Qualitative method in this survey with semi-structured phone interviews with twelve international students. Making calls to participants helps ensure that they are reached within the allotted time and that the data are collected as cheaply as possible (Farooq, n.d.). These interviews aimed to deepen the student experience of cultural adaptation, coping mechanisms for cultural shock, and language usage strategies during their time in Indonesia. Using targeted sampling criteria, participants were chosen to ensure that respondents had a variety of experiences and backgrounds. Coding techniques were used for the analysis of the qualitative data collected from these interviews. Three themes surfaced when the codes were combined into related categories.

An overview of the research population is that the higher education landscape in Indonesia is clearly concentrated in Java, which has 18 universities. This highlights Java's status as the dominant educational centre, with major cities such as Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Surabaya housing many of the country's top institutions. In contrast, non-Java regions, such as Sumatra, Bali, and other islands, have seven universities. This distribution emphasises Java's importance in Indonesia's higher education system while also reflecting the gradual expansion of universities in other provinces, resulting in a more diverse and accessible academic environment throughout the country.

The study included a diverse group of 123 foreign students attending Indonesian universities, with 69 men and 54 women. Most of the participants were from Asia, demonstrating the importance of Asian students in Indonesian higher education institutions. The study also included notable representation from Africa and West Asia, highlighting Indonesia's growing diversity of international students. This demographic mix sheds light on the diverse experiences and challenges that students from various regions face, contributing to a better understanding of cross-cultural adaptation in Indonesian universities. More individuals from Oceania, North America, and Europe added even more diversity to the sample, as Table 1 illustrates.

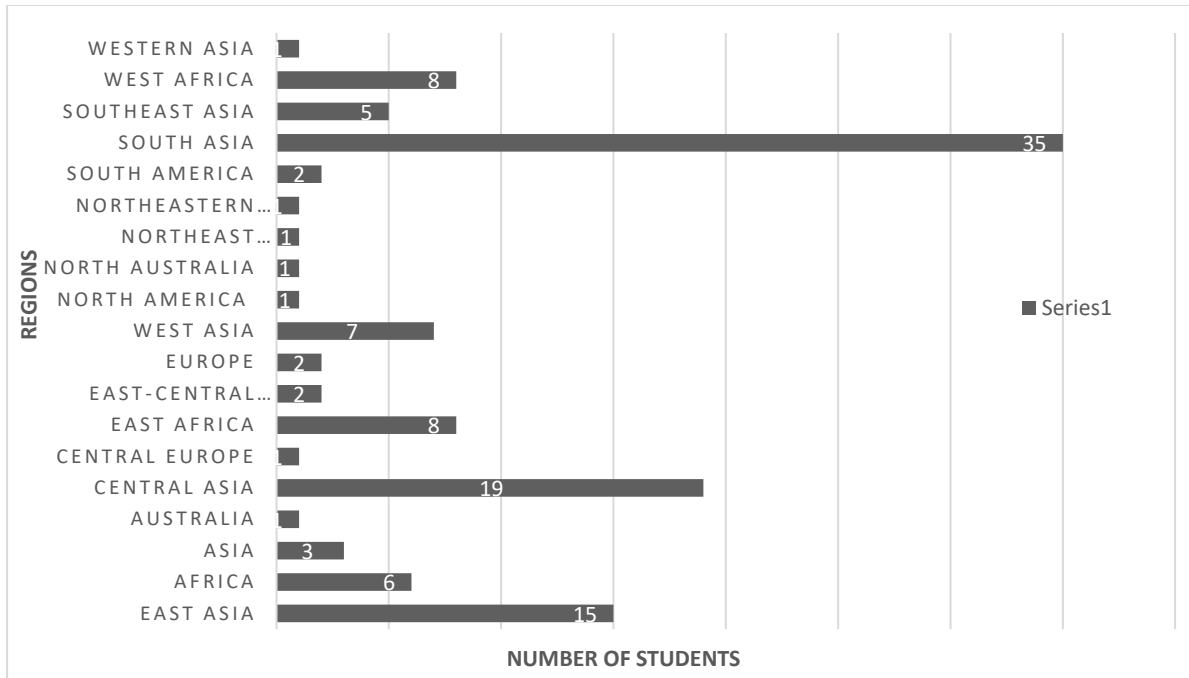


Figure 1. International students who are students at Indonesian universities participated

The data analysis results yielded significant new insights into how the experiences of international students with cultural adaptation were impacted by the BIPA course. The main conclusions on how well the BIPA course is thought to have improved students' interactions with locals are shown in Table 1. Remarkably, 82.8% of the participants recognised the course's important support in promoting cultural adaptation. Through these interactions, the students gained a deeper understanding of local cultural norms and traditions, in addition to helping them navigate daily life in Indonesia. As (Memon et al., 2020) stated, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do', emphasises the importance of cultural adaptation in new environments. However, 13.1 % of respondents remained neutral on the subject, with only 4.1% disagreeing that the BIPA course significantly enhanced their interactions with locals.

Table 1. BIPA course impact

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage
Valid	Strongly disagree	2	1.6	1.6
	Strongly Agree	40	32.5	32.8
	Disagree	3	2.4	2.5
	Neutral	16	13.0	13.1
	Agree	61	49.6	50.0
	Total	122	99.2	100.0
Missing	System	1	.8	
	Total	123	100.0	

As stated above, this research methodology used is a mixed method, and for the quantitative approach data analysis included tabulation in Excel and SPSS(Rahman, 2021). According to (Upton, 2014), the process of gathering, organising, analysing, and presenting numerical data for use in solving industrial, social or scientific issues is known as statistics. The interviews were transcribed, recorded and subjected to a thematic analysis investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, to maintain the integrity of the study, the researcher employed multiple strategies for qualitative data, including debriefing, memorisation and note-taking using the NVivo software (Udah et al., 2019). Immersion in interview transcripts allowed systematic coding of relevant responses, resulting in coherent thematic categorisation that reflected various aspects of social adaptation. Through this analysis process, the researcher was able to methodically give the significance of the interview data (Udah et al., 2019).

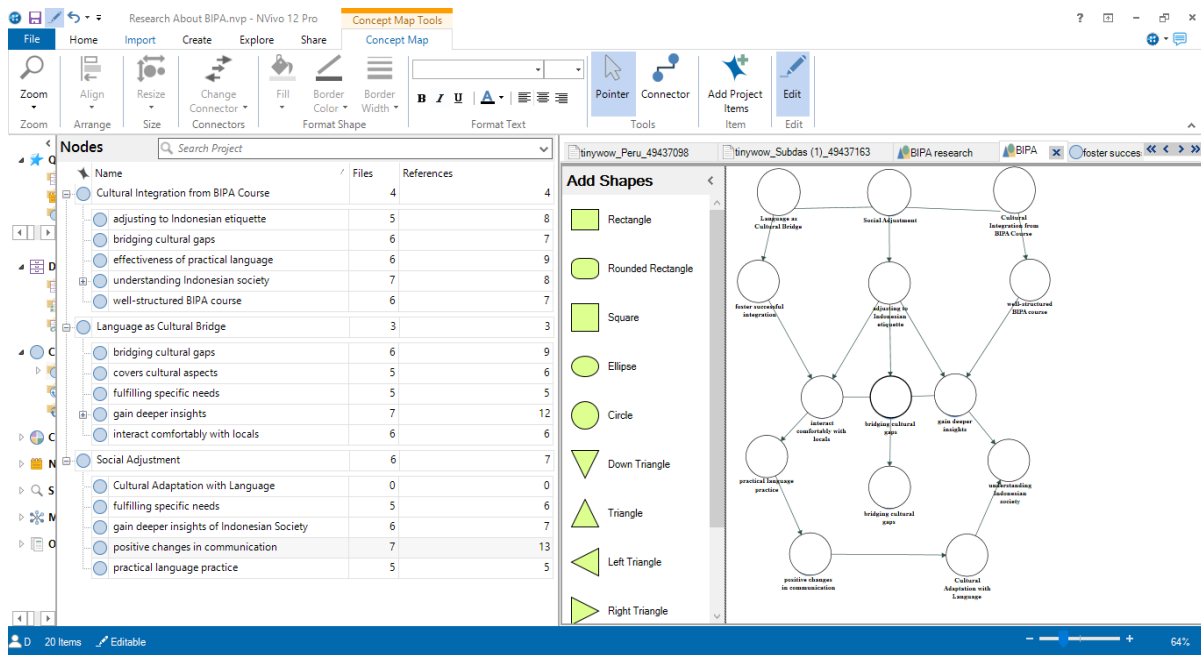


Figure 2. Thematic mapping from the NVivo

The study followed strict ethical guidelines to protect participant confidentiality and validate identified themes (Fereday et al., 2006). This comprehensive approach ensured that the analysis results were consistent with the identified themes while maintaining academic integrity and coherence throughout the process. Semi-structured interviews, which are especially useful when knowledge of the topic is limited, enable a thorough examination of participants' perceptions (Adams, 2010). Interviews were carefully planned to minimise disruption and ensure an uninterrupted information flow. Additionally, protocols were established with interviewers who were briefed on the questions and procedures. The main points were recorded along with audio recordings, improving the precision and reliability of the data.

The themes that the researcher kept at the end of this analysis process were those that surfaced from the interview data and were then used in the following stage to produce the analysis results (Alasmari, 2023). The themes found by the researcher that illustrate social adaptation are as follows.

Theme 1: Social Adjustment: Cultural adaptation to language, fulfilling specific needs, gaining deeper insight into Indonesian society, positive changes in communication, practical language practice.

Theme 2: Language as Cultural Bridge: bridge cultural gaps, covering cultural aspects, fulfil specific needs, gain deeper insights.

Theme 3: Cultural Integration from the BIPA course: adjusting to Indonesian etiquette, bridging cultural gaps, the effectiveness of practical language, and understanding Indonesian society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The conclusions shed light on the difficulties foreign students face in integrating into Indonesian society, from eating habits to social norms. Participants described initial cultural shock experiences, such as misconceptions about homogeneity and unfamiliar dining practices. On the contrary, they also observed positive surprises, such as the unexpected politeness of the locals. In parallel, the importance of language in cultural adaptation emerges strongly.

Social Adjustment

International students who encounter cultural differences during their studies abroad often struggle with issues such as food, social norms, and interpersonal relationships. Let us say that a participant (P1) arrived in Indonesia with preconceived notions about its homogeneity, only to discover a diverse cultural landscape. Another (P2) said: *“When I saw people sitting on the floor and eating with their hands without shoes, and having my country, which is not allowed. People in restaurants always must sit in a chair, at the table, before bed and school, but here it was so free. For me, it was new. I*

didn't know how to react to that. It was like, wow. Now I get used to it". Furthermore, differences in fast food perceptions also emerged, and P3 finding the presence of white rice alongside traditional fast food offerings surprising. On the contrary, P4 was intrigued by the unexpected politeness and frequent smiles of Indonesians and said that

"People here are very polite. I don't mean that it is a bad thing, but I didn't expect that before, sometimes. They are so polite to even if you go to the market or something, they use very, you know, respect for work, like, very difficult, like, on every occasion they use that".

Language as Cultural Bridge

Language and culture are inseparable (International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies, n.d.). They are interconnected. Numerous studies have shown that language can help people learn about a culture. Similarly, when these questions were posed to students, nearly 99% agreed that there is a significant relationship between language and culture.

The BIPA course made me learn more about Indonesian culture.
123 responses

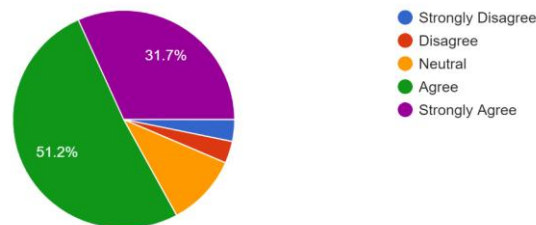


Figure 3. Responses to Learning Culture Through Language

Figure 3 shows that the majority of the respondents, approximately 82.7%, believe that there is a significant correlation between language and culture, indicating a widespread belief among the surveyed population. This finding is likely generalisable and is supported by the insights gained from the participant interviews. P6 emphasised the importance of language proficiency in understanding the culture and people. Similarly, P7 highlighted the inherent link between language and culture, emphasising how language reflects cultural norms and values. Both participants agreed that language proficiency is necessary to navigate and understand the complexities of culture.

'So, the language reflects that your culture reflects your social system. The way these people think, their social diet, the boundaries of respect, they pray for each other. So, it is reflecting the own culture. Honestly speaking. Yeah, I also totally agree with this statement that by language one can understand culture [P7]'.

Participants 8 (P8) and 9 (P9) emphasised the importance of language in understanding local customs and societal norms, as well as its role in promoting cultural understanding. P9 emphasised the challenges posed by language barriers, claiming that linguistic proficiency allows an effective navigation of cultural complexities. Similarly, P10 cautioned against misinterpretation due to limited language skills, focussing on language as a tool to understand cultural nuances. P11 echoed this sentiment, highlighting the importance of language in promoting social integration and connecting with local communities. Collectively, these perspectives highlight language as a critical bridge for international students to adapt to new cultures, promoting cross-cultural interaction, and cultivate appreciation for cultural diversity.

Cultural Integration from the BIPA Course

The BIPA programme (Indonesian Language and Culture for Foreign Speakers) provides a comprehensive platform for foreign students to improve their verbal language skills while also learning

about Indonesian culture and customs. Our survey asked the respondents for feedback on difficulty level, cultural inclusivity, overall comprehensibility, and impact on cultural adaptation.

Participants' feedback on the BIPA programme was overwhelmingly positive. P1 praised the structured approach to language learning, citing components such as listening, reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary as useful. P1 also emphasised how effective the program's comprehensive textbook was in facilitating language acquisition. Similarly, P12 praised their university's language centre for its high-quality preparation and delivery of materials, emphasising the importance of well-designed language programmes in assisting foreign students with language acquisition and cultural adaptation.

I will suggest to every upcoming international student to must join the BIPA to adapt to the culture of Indonesia.
123 responses

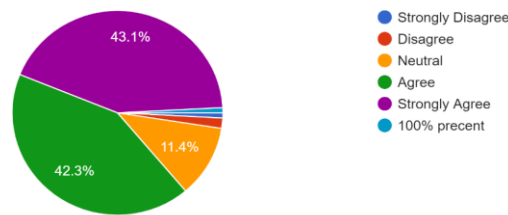


Figure 4. Responses showing the importance of language learning for incoming students for cultural adaptation

Almost 85.4% of the participants in this study hold a similar viewpoint. Furthermore, 11.4% chose to remain neutral, declining to vote despite not disagreeing with this point of view. We can conclude that the BIPA course is very important for international students coming to Indonesia for higher education. It not only facilitates interaction, but also helps to become familiar with local culture, norms, and traditions, as well as instructing international students on what to do and what not to do. *‘Through the language, one can say that in the initial language, it is a perfect connection with the nation of people. And it was only possible due to BIPA [P5]’*. Moreover, an international just summarised this in one statement he said:

Language, I think language is the main aspect of adapting any culture, it is like a bridge to everything, because, like many people, one can interact and become familiar with them [P4]’.

These testimonials highlight the critical role of BIPA programmes in helping foreign students' language learning efforts and improving their understanding of Indonesian culture and traditions. Such programmes are critical in facilitating cultural adaptation and improving the overall academic experience.

Discussion

This study reveals that cultural shock is a widespread experience among international students in Indonesia, characterised by challenges related to differences in food, language, climate, societal norms and cultural practices (Temitayo Emehinola, 2020). These findings are consistent with previous research that has highlighted the difficulties that international students face when adjusting to a new sociocultural environment (Almutairi, 2020; Rivas et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2019; Fedotova, 2022b). Such challenges are frequently caused by unfamiliar value systems, communication patterns, and social interactions, resulting in psychological stress and anxiety (Alasmari, 2023; Fedotova, 2022b; Lau et al., 2019; Nasirudeen et al., 2014). The study emphasises the need for tailored support mechanisms to help these students transition more smoothly into their host society.

The manifestations of cultural shock often result in feelings of frustration, confusion, and isolation as students encounter unfamiliar social settings. This phenomenon is exacerbated by internal conflicts in which students' traditional beliefs and values clash with the dominant norms of the host culture. Such clashes can cause identity crises and emotional turmoil, highlighting the intricate relationship between

individual identity and sociocultural adaptation. To address these challenges, international students must take proactive steps, such as participating in open-ended conversations, seeking counseling services, and collaborating with cultural organisations. These strategies are critical to fostering meaningful connections, developing resilience, and establishing a sense of belonging in the host culture.

Language emerges as an important factor in the adaptation process, serving not only as a means of communication, but also as a window into understanding the host culture. Proficiency in the host country's language allows international students to learn about local traditions, societal norms, and behavioural patterns, facilitating deeper intercultural understanding (Kim, 2017; Mesidor & Sly, 2016). The findings of this study are consistent with the existing literature, which emphasises the dual role of language in fostering effective communication and promoting cross-cultural competence (Ali et al., n.d.; Hommadova, 2017; T. Wang, 2021). In particular, language acquisition entails more than just linguistic competence; it also includes an understanding of the cultural nuances inherent in the language itself.

International students in Indonesia benefit greatly from programmes like Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing (BIPA), which help them bridge linguistic and cultural gaps. The BIPA course meets the diverse needs of international students by providing a comprehensive curriculum that integrates language instruction and cultural insights. Beyond linguistic training, the course encourages students to appreciate Indonesia's rich cultural heritage while also providing them with the tools they need to navigate daily interactions and societal expectations (Kramsch, 2014; Raihani, 2018). Furthermore, the course's emphasis on cultural adaptation strategies demonstrates an understanding of the inextricable link between language and culture, emphasising its importance as a key support mechanism for international students.

The impact of the BIPA programme goes beyond individual adaptation, helping Indonesia's global reputation as an inclusive academic destination. By promoting cross-cultural understanding, the programme not only enriches international student experiences but also strengthens Indonesia's reputation as a global education hub. Furthermore, the economic and cultural advantages of hosting international students highlight the symbiotic relationship between education and culture, in which education serves as a platform for transmitting cultural values and encouraging international collaboration (Lovanavalona & Candy, 2016).

The study also emphasises the broader implications of cultural adaptation, specifically for the long-term academic and personal development of international students. As students navigate diverse academic and social settings, their ability to integrate into the host culture has a significant impact on their academic performance and overall well-being. Understanding the relationship between cultural adaptation and factors such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status is critical to developing effective support strategies. Furthermore, cultural competency training for educators and service providers can help higher education institutions become more inclusive, creating an environment in which international students feel valued and empowered to succeed.

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight the critical role of language and cultural programmes, such as the BIPA course, in supporting the cultural adaptation of international students. By addressing the inherent challenges of cross-cultural transitions, Indonesian universities can create an environment conducive to academic success, personal growth, and global citizenship. These efforts not only benefit international students, but also help to achieve the larger goals of inclusivity and cultural exchange in the global academic community.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the journey of international students pursuing higher education abroad is packed with opportunities and challenges, the most significant of which is the need to adapt to new cultural conditions. The BIPA course serves as an essential bridge between these students and the rich tapestry of Indonesian culture, providing them not only linguistic proficiency but also with a better understanding of societal norms and traditions. This study has highlighted the importance of language in fostering cultural integration and academic success. According to our findings, language barriers are a serious limitation to international students' adjustment periods. However, the Indonesian government's proactive measures in offering Bahasa Indonesia courses demonstrate a commendable commitment to meeting the diverse needs of this student cohort. However, there is much room for improvement in the support mechanisms available to international students.

To achieve this, we support the concerted efforts of Indonesian universities' international offices to guarantee a smooth academic and cultural transition for students from other countries. Universities can significantly improve the academic success and cultural adaptation of international students by providing a clear and tailored approach to the BIPA programme, encouraging active participation and creating an inclusive and welcoming environment. Furthermore, ongoing research into students' adaptation processes to language programmes, as well as instructors' roles in facilitating cultural integration, is critical for informing the development of future support strategies. In essence, the findings of this study highlight the significant impact on promoting cross-cultural understanding and academic achievement among international students.

Future research could take a more comprehensive approach and include a more diverse sample of BIPA learners with a variety of cultural backgrounds, levels of language proficiency, and durations of stay in Indonesia in order to overcome the limitations of the current study. This would enable a more nuanced understanding of how these variables influence the language learning and cultural adaptation processes. Furthermore, researchers could investigate the efficacy of various BIPA teaching strategies and interventions tailored to the specific needs of different populations of learners. Future studies that use a more inclusive and comprehensive research framework can contribute to a better understanding of BIPA learning outcomes, ultimately leading to the development of more personalised and effective language education programmes that better meet the diverse needs of international students. Future studies that use a more inclusive and comprehensive research framework can contribute to a better understanding of BIPA learning outcomes, ultimately leading to the development of more personalized and effective language education programmes that better meet the diverse needs of international students.

Future research on cultural adaptation among international students in Indonesia could benefit from longitudinal studies that follow the adaptation journeys over time, providing information on the long-term effects on academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being. Additionally, support systems such as university programmes and community engagement initiatives must be evaluated for their effectiveness in facilitating successful adaptations. Examining how cultural adaptation interacts with variables such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status could help us better understand the diverse and nuanced experiences of international students. Furthermore, comparative studies conducted in different regions of Indonesia would help identify regional differences in adaptation experiences. Research into the role of digital technologies in adaptation is also necessary, particularly in virtual or hybrid learning environments, as digital platforms continue to play an important role in international students' experiences. Finally, investigating the impact of cultural competency training for educators and service providers would be extremely beneficial in promoting inclusivity and diversity, ultimately improving the overall international student experience in Indonesia.

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