



LANGUAGE BARRIERS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN INDONESIA: FORMS AND CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

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Abstract. Language barriers play a crucial role in shaping international students' academic success and social adjustment. However, limited research has examined how these barriers are experienced in the Indonesian context. This study examines the forms and contributing factors of language barriers experienced by 11 Thai international students in Indonesia as part of their academic adjustment. Combination of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used in the data collection procedure. The findings reveal that the students encountered difficulties in listening comprehension, speaking anxiety, grammar mastery, and reading academic texts. Contributing factors included fear of peer judgment, limited vocabulary, accent variation, and lack of familiarity with the topics. The study concludes that language barriers are not limited to linguistic aspects but also involve psychological and social dimensions. It highlights the urgency for Indonesian higher institutions to implement tailored language support, inclusive pedagogy, and academic services to foster international students' effective adjustment.

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INTRODUCTION

The number of international students worldwide has grown significantly over the decades, increasing from approximately 250,000 in 1965 to 2.5 million by 2005. This expansion has been marked by several waves of increased mobility, particularly between 1975-1985, 1989-1994, and 1999-2004 (Adams & De Wit, 2011). Traditionally, the primary destinations for international students have been the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Australia. However, in recent years, there has been growing competition from emerging education countries such as China, Singapore, and Malaysia. These countries are actively positioning themselves as attractive alternatives for higher education. This shift is driven by factors such as government policies promoting internationalization, improved education infrastructure, and the affordability of studying in these new destinations.

In 2015, approximately 607.956 international students studied in the Asia-Pacific region, with 447.124 originating from countries within the region itself (Kuroda et al., 2018). Meanwhile, in 2010, international students in Indonesia came from 89 different countries, predominantly Malaysia, Timor Leste, China, South Korea, and Japan (UNESCO, 2013). This illustrates Indonesia's growing appeal as a destination for international students seeking better educational opportunities. Among international students in Indonesia are those from Thailand. According to UNESCO data, approximately 75 Thai students studied in Indonesia in 2010 (UNESCO, 2013). This number is relatively small compared to the overall population of Thai international students globally which is estimated to range between 20.000 and 25.000 (Lertjanyakit, 2019), or more precisely, 28.339 Thai students studying abroad in 2016 (Kuroda et al., 2018).

International students encounter numerous challenges requiring significant attention (Wong & Hyde, 2024). One essential challenge in the adaptation process of international students is language barriers. Limited proficiency in the host country's language can hinder students' ability to follow lectures, actively participate in discussions, and clearly articulate their ideas in writing

(Daller et al., 2021). In classroom settings characterized by rapid discussions and complex academic terminology, students with language barriers may struggle and often taking on passive roles within groups (Seithers et al., 2022).

Beyond academic tasks, language difficulties can significantly affect social interactions, especially with local students (Cao et al., 2016; Wang & Hannes, 2014). Forming friendships and establishing support networks become more challenging when students hesitate to communicate due to fear of making linguistic errors (Peng, 2023). Such isolation can further hinder their overall adjustment process as peer support is critical for both academic success and emotional well-being. The interplay between language barriers and academic adjustment is further complicated by discipline-specific demands. For instance, students from Technology, Science, and Engineering major faced significantly fewer difficulties compared to Agriculture students (Srikrai et al., 2016). This discrepancy underscores the need for tailored language support programs that address disciplinary vocabularies and communication styles (Gholaminejad, 2021).

Although these issues have been widely explored in other countries, little is known about how they manifest in Indonesia. A literature search across three databases (PubMed, CINAHL, and SINTA) revealed no studies that specifically address this topic, particularly Thai students as research participant (Pratama et al., 2024; Widiasih et al., 2020). Most existing studies focus on Thai students' online learning experiences (Ferdiansyah et al., 2020; Susanto et al., 2020) or on broader aspects of international student mobility (Kuroda et al., 2018; Lertjanyakit, 2019). To address this gap, the present study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the various forms and causes of language barriers experienced by Thai students studying in Indonesia. Based on this, the objectives of this study are (1) to describe the forms of language barriers encountered by Thai students during their academic journey in Indonesia, and (2) to describe the various causes of these language barriers.

RESEARCH METHODS

Qualitative methods were used to paint a nuanced and complex picture of participants' experiences regarding the language barriers they faced. Qualitative methods are suitable for this purpose because these methods allow for an in-depth exploration of personal experiences that quantitative methods might overlook. By using interviews and focus groups discussion, researchers can gather rich and detailed data that reveal the complexities of how participants navigate and overcome language barriers.

A total of 11 international students (7 male, 4 female) from universities in Solo, Yogyakarta, and Semarang participated in this study. The decision to select these three cities as research sites was based on practical considerations and the contextual relevance of the study. Familiarity with the available data and direct access to the responsible authorities in each city provided advantages in terms of data collection efficiency and the smooth implementation of the research. This familiarity also enabled a deeper understanding of the characteristics and dynamics involved in the research process, thereby enhancing the validity and relevance of the findings (Davison, 2021). The list of participants can be seen in Table 1.

Tabel 1. Participants List

Participants Code	Sex	Age (y.o)	Duration of stay (month)	City	Field of study
P1	M	21	12	Semarang	Management
P2	M	21	14	Yogyakarta	Management
P3	F	22	24	Yogyakarta	Indonesian lang. ed.
P4	M	28	48	Yogyakarta	Linguistic
P5	F	25	30	Surakarta	Public health
P6	F	21	14	Surakarta	Indonesian lang. ed.
P7	M	19	15	Yogyakarta	Linguistic
P8	M	20	18	Yogyakarta	IT
P9	F	29	32	Yogyakarta	IT
P10	M	24	24	Surakarta	English lang. ed.
P11	M	25	14	Surakarta	English lang. ed.



Combination of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used in the data collection procedure (Geampana & Perrotta, 2025). The data collection procedure was carried out in two stages. First, three participants were interviewed regarding the language barriers they experienced and how they overcame these challenges. Thematic analysis (Ammigan et al., 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2019) was utilized to identify and analyze emerging themes from the in-depth interviews. These emerging themes were then used as topics in three focus group discussions involving eight participants

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants identified language barriers as the primary challenge affecting their academic adjustment. Students reported low proficiency in Indonesian, particularly among first-year undergraduate students. Many struggle with listening and comprehension due to the rapid pace of speech, diverse accents, and unfamiliar pronunciation. This challenges leading to missed information during lectures. Speaking anxiety further hinders communication as students fear making grammatical errors or being misunderstood and causing reluctance to engage with lecturers or peers.

Academic challenges arise from difficulties in mastering Indonesian grammar, particularly affixes, and the overwhelming task of balancing language classes with regular coursework. Additionally, reading academic materials in Indonesian is time-consuming and requires frequent translation. This process delays comprehension and impacts academic performance. Table 2 shows the form of language barriers experienced by Thai students.

Table 2. Form of Language Barriers

Themes	Statements
Listening and comprehension difficulties	<p><i>When I first arrived in Indonesia, people spoke very quickly. I wished they could speak slower. Additionally, their accents varied significantly (P6).</i></p> <p><i>I felt insecure due to my poor listening skills. The Indonesian accent was unfamiliar to me, and each lecturer had a different accent. This made it difficult for me to understand the topics being discussed (P9).</i></p> <p><i>During lectures, I often missed important points because I couldn't process the words fast enough. By the time I understood one sentence, the lecturer had already moved on to the next topic (P5).</i></p> <p><i>Sometimes I could catch only half of what the lecturer said, and I had to guess the rest (P2).</i></p>
Speaking anxiety	<p><i>Sometimes, I want to express everything on my mind, but it is difficult to arrange vocabulary into sentences. This often results in me speaking in Malay (P4).</i></p> <p><i>I rarely spoke with lecturers because I didn't feel proficient in Indonesian. I was afraid my speech would be incorrect, and lecturers wouldn't understand me (P10).</i></p> <p><i>When interacting with local students, I hesitated to join conversations because I was worried about using the wrong words and embarrassing myself (P3).</i></p> <p><i>I prefer staying silent in class rather than risk making a mistake and feeling embarrassed (P11).</i></p>
Academic challenges related to language proficiency	<p><i>Indonesian grammar is very difficult for me. There are many affixes, each with different meanings and functions. I need to recall the meaning and function of these affixes before writing (P1).</i></p> <p><i>In my first year, I didn't understand Indonesian at all, which led to poor grades. This probably happened because I had to take Indonesian language classes simultaneously with regular classes. It was overwhelming because there was too much to learn at once (P8).</i></p> <p><i>Writing assignments takes me twice as long because I need to check the dictionary constantly (P6).</i></p>

The language barriers outlined in Table 2 reveal not only surface-level communication



difficulties but also deeper issues that influence students' academic engagement and social participation. These challenges are interconnected. Listening and comprehension problems often intensify speaking anxiety. This anxiety then limits opportunities for practice and improvement. In a similar way, academic struggles related to grammar mastery and reading comprehension create a cycle of low confidence and reduced participation in classroom activities. The impact of these barriers extends beyond academic performance as they also affect students' willingness to interact with peers, participate in discussions, and seek clarification from lecturers.

The recurring nature of these challenges points toward underlying causes that go beyond individual effort. Based on participants' accounts, the barriers are driven primarily by three interrelated factors: fear of peer judgment, lack of familiarity with the topics of discussion, and limited overall proficiency in Indonesian. These contributing factors are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Contributing Factors

Themes	Statements
Peer Judgment	<p><i>Personally, I feel afraid to speak because I'm worried about making mistakes. I'm afraid people will think, "Ah, seperti ini saja tanya" (Oh, you're asking about something so simple). Even though I understand a bit of Indonesian because my mother is Indonesian, I still struggle with forming proper sentences. The fear of making mistakes makes me hesitant to speak (P7).</i></p> <p><i>In group work situations, I often feel a sense of burden. I want to understand the material, but I don't fully grasp it. This makes me feel like a burden to the group. When it comes to choosing group members, I tend to feel uncomfortable because I don't contribute much to my friends (P4).</i></p> <p><i>I often feel hesitant with my classmates. I'm worried that if I ask too many questions, they will get annoyed. It's not that I'm afraid of the teacher, but I'm afraid that my friends might get upset (P5).</i></p> <p><i>Sometimes, I stay silent even when I know the answer because I don't want to stand out or draw attention (P1).</i></p>
Unfamiliar with the topics	<p><i>The difficulties increase when studying literature. The language often uses metaphors or words with figurative meanings that can't be understood directly. For a foreigner like me, it's very confusing because the meanings don't match everyday conversation. That's why it's hard for foreigners to immediately understand the meaning. (P8).</i></p> <p><i>My ability to speak really depends on the topic being discussed. If the topic is something I know, I can keep talking, even to strangers or people I don't know well. But if the topic is something I don't understand, I'll just respond with "ya, tidak" (yes, no). So, it really depends on what is being discussed in class (P4).</i></p> <p><i>Sometimes, if the topic is heavy, like politics, I get bored because I don't like it. It's too complex. But if the topic is light and I can understand it, I try to participate and make some comments, even just a little (P1).</i></p> <p><i>Some topics require prior knowledge, and I feel lost if I have never encountered the subject before (P3).</i></p>
Semantic differences and limited vocabulary	<p><i>I find it difficult to speak because one word in a sentence here can have different meanings depending on the context. For example, the word "mati" (dead) is considered impolite in Indonesia. People here usually say "wafat" or "meninggal" (passed away). But in Thailand, "mati" is actually the most polite term. So, to avoid making mistakes, I'd rather stay silent (P2).</i></p> <p><i>Sometimes, I forget certain vocabulary because I don't hear the words very often. I want to express what's on my mind, but I struggle to construct sentences in Indonesian. In the end, I often speak in Malay instead (P3).</i></p> <p><i>Reading academic papers in Indonesian takes me much longer than my classmates. I have to translate many words before I fully understand the meaning (P11).</i></p> <p><i>I often struggle to find the right word in Indonesian when writing assignments, so I end up using simpler words (P7).</i></p>

The findings show that the language challenges faced by Thai students are more complex



than just communication difficulties. Their inability to comprehend varying accents and the fast pace of speech creates a heavy cognitive load. This cognitive load affects their ability to understand lecture content. The reliance on peer support and confusion about Indonesian social and cultural norms further aggravates these issues. This indicates that language barriers are not only about vocabulary acquisition but also involve psychological and social factors that shape their academic experiences.

International students often face difficulties in writing in academic language, understanding lectures, and communicating with their lecturers and peers. This situation is caused by differences in language and culture, requiring students to continuously adapt. Such challenges negatively impact students' understanding of academic content and interactions within the academic community (Singh & Jack, 2022).

Accent differences among local and international students further complicated Thai students' comprehension of Indonesian. Consequently, students faced barriers to classroom participation, social relationship-building, and equitable access to academic opportunities compared to local students (Park et al., 2022). Over time, these challenges also reduced students' confidence in initiating conversations and decreased their willingness to engage in collaborative academic tasks. This reduction in interaction limited opportunities for language improvement and hindered their cultural integration.

The findings also revealed that Thai students encountered multiple language barriers that significantly hindered their academic adjustment in Indonesia. These challenges align with broader research on the linguistic struggles of international students in non-Anglophone contexts (Linh & Hang, 2024). Such barriers not only slowed their academic progress but also limited opportunities for social integration, reduced confidence in participating in discussions, and created additional stress in managing coursework.

A predominant issue reported by participants was the inability to process spoken Indonesian at natural speed particularly during lectures. One student noted, *"When I first arrived in Indonesia, people spoke very quickly. I wished they could speak slower. Additionally, their accents varied significantly"*. This sentiment reflects a common struggle among L2 learners, where rapid speech rates and regional accent variations disrupt comprehension (Chiu & Chen, 2023; McDonald et al., 2018). The cognitive load of decoding unfamiliar accents in real-time often led to missed content, as another participant explained, *"The Indonesian accent was unfamiliar to me and each lecturer had a different accent. This made it difficult for me to understand the topics being discussed."*

Such challenges align with research emphasizing the impact of speech rate and phonological adaptability on L2 listening comprehension (Masrai, 2020; Medina et al., 2020). Learners in classroom environments exhibited significant declines in comprehension accuracy when exposed to rapid speech, especially when combined with unfamiliar accents (Saito et al., 2019). For Thai students, the absence of prior exposure to Indonesian accents likely intensified these difficulties and making it harder to understand spoken input (Kang et al., 2010). Moreover, the lack of visual or contextual cues in virtual lectures may have further worsen these issues as multimodal input plays a crucial role in aiding comprehension (Fiorella & Mayer, 2016).

The presence of various accents in standard Indonesian used by lecturers, classmates, or the surrounding community can intensify the difficulties Thai students face in understanding conversations. This directly affects their academic performance, particularly during class discussions or presentations. This challenge highlights the need for more focused strategies to help international students navigate the linguistic variations they encounter.

Speaking anxiety also emerged as a critical barrier and reducing students' willingness to engage in academic and social interactions. Participants frequently described a disconnect between their cognitive ideas and linguistic output, *"Sometimes, I want to express everything on my mind, but it is difficult to arrange vocabulary into sentences. This often results in me speaking in Malay."* Code-switching to Malay highlights the cognitive overload associated with real-time sentence formulation in Indonesian.

This phenomenon mirrors the concept of *language anxiety* in SLA, where learners' fear of



linguistic inaccuracies inhibits verbal participation (Horwitz, 2010). Participants' reluctance to interact with lecturers and peers reflects a broader pattern of communication avoidance observed among international students (Özdemir & Seçkin, 2025). Such avoidance not only limits language practice opportunities but also impedes social integration which is a key predictor of academic success (Briscoe et al., 2021).

The role of affective factors is particularly significant. Language anxiety peaks in situations perceived as evaluative, such as speaking with authority figures or peers. For Thai students whose cultural norms emphasize respect for hierarchy, the pressure to communicate flawlessly with lecturers may have intensified this anxiety (Kainzbauer & Hunt, 2016). The lack of corrective feedback in peer interactions caused by peers' reluctance to critique led to continued linguistic inaccuracies. Participants often relied on non-native senior students for guidance.

The interplay of listening, speaking, and literacy challenges created a barrier for Thai students. These challenges affecting both academic and social dimensions of their adjustment. Listening difficulties hindered lecture comprehension, speaking anxiety limited participatory learning, and grammatical complexity slowed academic output. These issues grew more severe due to the psychological burden of feeling inadequate, as students interpreted their difficulties as personal shortcomings instead of recognizing them as part of broader problems.

Some Thai learners admitted that they do not have the courage to speak in class. This fear arises from the belief that they will be judged negatively by their classmates. This feeling stems from the fear of being perceived as incompetent by their social environment and asking the teacher about material they do not understand is seen as a sign of incompetence (Horwitz, 2010). Such negative thoughts are one of the biggest factors triggering anxiety (Aydin, 2008). Fear of negative evaluation from others is also associated with stress and the desire for perfection (Shafique et al., 2017). Thai learners wish to ask questions using correct language. However, they often withdraw their intention to speak when they feel lack adequate language skills.

Thai learners also expressed fear of becoming the center of attention or being perceived as *attention-seekers*. This form of anxiety is known as identity-based anxiety (Stroud & Wee, 2006). It is triggered by the fear of peer judgment. Even when learners feel capable of asking questions in proper Indonesian, they still experience anxiety due to potential negative opinions from peers. As a result, learners often choose to remain silent in class.

Learners' decisions to speak a foreign language can also be influenced by the topic being discussed in class. Students are reluctant to participate in discussions if they feel they lack sufficient knowledge of the topic (Chung, 2021). Learners who enjoy a particular topic usually have a wider range of vocabulary related to that topic (Cancino, 2023). This enables them to better understand the terminology used in discussions.

Another factor that can trigger psychological barriers is the level of language proficiency. These difficulties are not only experienced when learners first arrive in Indonesia, but also after several months of living there. For instance, participant P2 shared that they had difficulty recognizing the levels of politeness in Indonesian as Thai does not have a similar system. This lack of knowledge made them highly selective about when to speak. Meanwhile, participant P6 expressed confusion due to the various accents in Indonesian. This situation made them hesitant to initiate speech. These phenomena indicate that low language proficiency can cause learners to feel anxious and unwilling to communicate in Indonesian.

Various studies have shown that language proficiency is closely related to foreign language anxiety and willingness to communicate. Reading and writing skills are among the factors that can lead to foreign language anxiety (Thach & Khau, 2025). Other contributing factors include limited vocabulary, low language ability, and lack of grammatical knowledge. These factors can cause speaking anxiety in learners (Zhou et al., 2023).

Overall, this study highlights that language barriers for Thai students extend beyond vocabulary knowledge, encompassing cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions that collectively affect academic adjustment. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that integrates linguistic support, psychological support, and cultural orientation. By doing so, higher education institutions can foster a more inclusive environment that promotes both learning



and intercultural engagement.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study provides valuable insights into the academic adjustment experiences of Thai students studying in Indonesia, with a specific focus on language-related challenges. The findings reveal that language barriers significantly hinder students' academic and social integration. Factors such as unfamiliar accents, speech rate, speaking anxiety, limited vocabulary, and unfamiliar academic topics further intensified these challenges. Importantly, psychological elements like fear of negative peer evaluation and identity-based anxiety contributed to students' reluctance to engage in classroom discourse. These results directly address the research aim by showing that language barriers are not isolated difficulties but interconnected with cultural familiarity, academic demands, and social confidence. This adds to existing literature by providing evidence from a non-Anglophone Southeast Asian context. The study underscores the urgent need for universities to implement targeted interventions, such as enhanced Indonesian language programs, culturally responsive pedagogy, and inclusive academic policies, to ensure equitable academic participation.

While this study offers critical perspectives, its limitations include the focus on a specific nationality and context. This focus may not fully capture the diversity of international students' experiences in Indonesia. Future research should examine longitudinal trajectories of language adjustment, compare students from multiple linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and investigate the effectiveness of integrated academic–language support programs. Such work will help refine institutional strategies and contribute to the creation of more inclusive higher education environments in Indonesia and beyond.

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