



CASE REPORT

Foreigners' Interest in Learning Indonesian

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ABSTRACT

This research examines foreigners' interest in learning *Bahasa Indonesia* (*bahasa*) or Indonesian Language, particularly in the context of the internationalization of Bahasa Indonesia as part of cultural diplomacy. Using a descriptive approach, this study highlights the factors that influence the increase in interest in learning Bahasa Indonesia, such as the simplicity of grammar, ease of phonetic spelling, and the cultural and diplomatic values contained. *Bahasa Indonesia untuk Penutur Asing* or also known as Bahasa Indonesia for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) program has become one of the important instruments in introducing Indonesian culture and language to various countries, including Japan, India, the United States, Australia and Egypt. This research also highlights the challenges in effective teaching implementation, such as the lack of teaching resources and integrated cultural materials. The results show that learning Bahasa Indonesia provides economic, social and cultural benefits for foreign students, while strengthening the position of the Bahasa Indonesia on the global stage. However, improvements in curriculum, instructor training, and wider promotion are needed to increase the success of learning Bahasa Indonesia internationally.

INTRODUCTION

The recent recognition of *Bahasa Indonesia* (*bahasa*) or Indonesian Language as an official language in the UNESCO forum marks an important milestone that not only enhances Indonesia's diplomatic status in the international arena, but also strengthens its national identity. As a unifying language in Indonesia, *Bahasa Indonesia* plays a central role in strengthening the unity of various ethnic groups, as expressed by Astawa (2022). This is in line with the 1928 Youth Pledge which emphasizes the importance of language in building communication and unity in Indonesia. In addition, *Bahasa Indonesia* is increasingly recognized as a neutral lingua franca in the international world, gaining popularity through various scholarship programs, such as Darmasiswa, which facilitates the use of Indonesian abroad (Lopez, 2019). Laws that support the promotion of the Bahasa Indonesia, such as those contained in Law No. 24 of 2009, play a crucial role in encouraging the internationalization of the Bahasa Indonesia (Sarmadan, 2020). In the field of cultural diplomacy, the *Bahasa Indonesia untuk Penutur Asing* or also known as Bahasa Indonesia for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) initiative has introduced Bahasa Indonesia and culture globally, increasing international interest in Indonesia (Sopari, 2022; Wirawan & Nakti, 2023). The historical significance of Indonesian, as the only national language amidst linguistic diversity, further strengthens its position in modern society (Sneddon, 2003). Nonetheless, this recognition still presents challenges in effective implementation and acceptance, especially in countries with established dominant languages.

Indonesian is a manifestation of culture rooted in the history of the nation's struggle, unity in cultural diversity, and equality in realizing the ideals of the nation and the unitary state of the Republic of Indonesia. There are two positions of Bahasa Indonesia, namely: (1) The position of Indonesian as a state language (official language); and (2) The position of Indonesian as a national language (national language). In the position of Indonesian as the state language, there are several functions that can be seen. One of the functions of Indonesian in its position as the state language, namely as the official language of the state. Examples of the implementation of Indonesian in state affairs can be seen in statutory documents. Another example is the delivery of official speeches of the president, vice president, and other state officials, at home and abroad, using Indonesian.

Interest in learning Bahasa Indonesia is increasing among ASEAN students, with many viewing Bahasa Indonesia as the key to improving language skills and cultural understanding in the region (Hardini et al., 2023). In addition, foreign students prefer teaching methods that involve folklore and diverse media, as these approaches are not only engaging, but also connect them to Indonesian culture (Junaidi et al., 2022). Nonetheless, challenges remain in the implementation of effective teaching, especially in relation to cultural materials that have not been fully incorporated in language teaching, which may hinder students' understanding of language in its cultural context (Tiawati et al., 2024). Hence, although the demand for learning Bahasa Indonesia continues to increase, there is a need for improvements in teaching resources and instructor quality to ensure the success of learning Bahasa Indonesia at an international level.

The promotion of Indonesian plays a very important role in strengthening national identity and supporting internationalization. As a unifying language, Indonesian has a central role in connecting Indonesia's diverse ethnic groups, while fostering a spirit of nationalism (Siregar et al., 2024). The existence of Indonesian as an official language, guaranteed in the 1945 Constitution, emphasizes its position as a symbol of national identity (Astawa, 2022). Educational initiatives that have evolved over time focus on strengthening Bahasa Indonesia learning by adjusting the curriculum to meet the demands of modern times (Astawa, 2022). However, despite this, there is a big challenge as many Indonesians are more interested in using foreign languages than their own, which may threaten the continuity of Bahasa Indonesia promotion (Zahra & Ambarwati, 2022).

On the social and cultural side, the use of fluent Indonesian contributes to community empowerment and creates social harmony. It allows for wider participation in community activities, which strengthens Indonesia's overall social fabric (Hilmi et al., 2023). In addition, the promotion of the Bahasa Indonesia also plays a role in resisting the dominance of foreign cultures, preserving traditions, and strengthening Indonesia's cultural identity (Siregar et al., 2024). Despite institutional efforts, real challenges remain, as some Indonesians still lack pride in their language, tending to favor foreign languages, which could hinder this promotional goal.

The originality of this research lies in its focus on foreign interest in learning Indonesian, especially after Indonesian was recognized as an official language in the UNESCO forum. It comprehensively examines the factors that drive international interest, such as grammatical simplicity, strategic role in diplomatic and economic relations, and the contribution of programs such as Bahasa Indonesia for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) in promoting Bahasa Indonesia and culture globally. The novelty of this research can be seen from its analysis of public interest in various countries, such as Japan, India, the United States, Australia, and Egypt, by presenting the latest data as well as the challenges and opportunities faced in efforts to internationalize the Bahasa Indonesia. This research also provides new insights into the importance of integration between language and culture curricula in the strategy of promoting Bahasa Indonesia in the international arena.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research method uses a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to describe the phenomenon of

foreign community interest in learning Indonesian. The research subjects consisted of foreigners who participated in Bahasa Indonesia for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) programs or other informal courses, as well as teachers and support staff of the programs. The research was conducted in educational institutions that provide BIPA programs, such as universities, cultural centers, and Indonesian Embassies in several countries, including Japan, India, the United States, Australia, and Egypt.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with foreign students, teachers, and program managers to obtain information related to motivation, learning methods, and challenges faced. In addition, participatory observations were conducted in BIPA classes to understand teaching methods and interactions between students and teachers, as well as documentation in the form of syllabi, learning modules, and relevant activity reports. The research instruments used included an interview guide, observation list, and documentation data recording format.

The data obtained was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, starting with data reduction to select important information, followed by grouping data based on main themes, such as learning motivation, teaching methods, and challenges. Conclusions were drawn based on patterns and themes found during the analysis process. Data validity and reliability were maintained through source triangulation, by comparing data from various sources, and technique triangulation, by utilizing several data collection techniques to ensure consistency of results. This method is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of foreigners' interest in learning Indonesian.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The growing interest of foreigners in learning *Bahasa Indonesia* or Indonesian Language can be explained through several important factors, including the simplicity of the language, cultural understanding, and the role of language in diplomatic and economic relations. Indonesian has a relatively simple grammar and easy-to-understand phonetic spellings, making it more accessible to learners from different linguistic backgrounds (Sudikan, 2022). The simple structure of the language allows for rapid acquisition, which is attractive to foreign learners who want to learn the language efficiently (Lopez, 2019). In addition, learning Indonesian provides a deep insight into Indonesia's cultural diversity, including traditional arts, customs and ceremonies that enrich the understanding of the country (Audrey et al., 2023).

The Bahasa Indonesia for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) program plays an important role in introducing Indonesian culture through cultural diplomacy, which helps increase mutual understanding between Indonesia and other countries (Audrey et al., 2023). In addition, Indonesian also plays an important role in fostering diplomatic relations and strengthening social and economic ties, especially through scholarship and cultural exchange programs. The increasing number of countries teaching Indonesian shows how important the language is in the context of international relations. Nonetheless, the challenges of developing effective teaching methods and updating curricula remain important issues that need to be addressed for interest in learning Indonesian to continue to grow. Below are examples of countries interested in learning Indonesian.

Japanese People's Interest in Learning Indonesian

Japanese interest in learning Indonesian continues to surge, not only in metropolitan cities such as Tokyo, Osaka, and Fukuoka, but also in small towns such as Takamatsu, the capital of Kagawa Prefecture located about 700 kilometers from Tokyo on Japan's southern Shikoku Island. This phenomenon shows how Indonesian is increasingly attracting the attention of various circles in Japan, both in big cities and in remote areas. Amzul Rifin, Atdikbud of the Indonesian Embassy in Tokyo (2024), said: *"Mastering the Bahasa Indonesia not only opens the door to understanding Indonesian culture, but also opens up various business and cooperation opportunities in the future"*.

High enthusiasm was evident from the number of registrants that exceeded the class capacity. Participants

came from all ages, from the younger generation to the elderly, all of whom showed great interest in learning Indonesian. This reflects the awareness of the importance of Indonesian as a strategic communication tool in the era of globalization. The Bahasa Indonesia course consists of one beginner-level class that runs for nine meetings, two hours each. The Indonesian government hopes that this initiative will not only introduce Indonesian to more Japanese people, but strengthen bilateral relations between Indonesia and Japan. With the growing number of Indonesian speakers across Japan, we are optimistic that Indonesian will be increasingly recognized and used globally (Amzul Rifin, 2024).

This increased interest is not without reason. Indonesian opens access to the dynamic Southeast Asian market, strengthens economic and cultural cooperation, and enables wider exchange of science and technology. In addition, learning Indonesian is a strategic step for those interested in tourism, education, and diplomacy between the two countries. With this course, it is hoped that Indonesia-Japan relations will strengthen, creating a stronger network in various fields. Not only in big cities, but also in small towns like Takamatsu. This effort shows Indonesia's commitment to spreading language and culture through various channels, ensuring that Indonesian is not only a regional language, but is recognized internationally.

Indian People's Interest in Learning Indonesian

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology in collaboration with the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia (KJRI) Mumbai, India organized the Bahasa Indonesia for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) Class. Head of the Language Development and Guidance Agency of the Ministry of Education, Research and Technology, E. Aminudin Aziz expressed his appreciation for the establishment of this BIPA cooperation program because of the high enthusiasm seen from the number of participants in the hundreds, especially for the business community in India. Usually, BIPA is taught not for the business community, but for tourism purposes. Indonesian is actually an easy and simple language to learn as it does not have the complexity of other foreign languages. Historically, Indonesia has been heavily influenced by Hindu communities, culture and traditions. Therefore, when people learn Indonesian, they will find some vocabulary that comes from Hindi.

Agus Saptono, Consul General of the Indonesian Consulate General in Mumbai, said that he received requests from a number of business groups there to learn Indonesian. Many Indian business people from many sectors, including the tourism sector, are interested in learning BIPA. To respond to this request, the Consul General of the Indonesian Consulate General in Mumbai has coordinated with the Indonesian Embassy in New Delhi to initiate cooperation with the Language Development and Guidance Agency, which is known to have a number of competent and experienced BIPA teachers in organizing BIPA classes.

Education and Culture Attaché of the Indonesian Embassy in New Delhi, Yahya et al. (2024) said many Indians have asked for Bahasa Indonesia learning in leading universities in India. They are very enthusiastic to learn Indonesian. Many Bahasa Indonesia lessons are conducted through courses. Indians are happy with Indonesians because they have similarities in terms of culture and food.

In the economic field, India is ranked 5th in the world beating China. The potential for the use of Indonesian is very open. India's trade value has increased significantly. Many business people want to learn Bahasa Indonesia. Many Indonesian-Indian students exchange to learn Indonesian. An Indian archaeologist is interested in Prambanan Temple and wants to study it by learning Indonesian. In the tourist field, the most tourists from India come to Bali so they learn more or less Indonesian. The Indian community wants to open a student exchange study program.

American Interest in Learning Indonesian

According to data from the Language Development and Guidance Agency, domestically there are currently no less than 45 institutions that have taught Bahasa Indonesia for Foreign Speakers (BIPA), both in universities and in course institutions. Meanwhile, abroad, BIPA teaching has been carried out by around

thirty-six countries in the world with no less than one hundred and thirty institutions, consisting of universities, foreign cultural centers, the Indonesian Embassy, and course institutions.

The United States is one of the countries that also studies Bahasa Indonesia. Bahasa Indonesia teaching in America is carried out in several universities, institutions, the Indonesian Consulate General, and also the Indonesian Embassy. Some universities that teach Indonesian include Yale University and Ohio University.

Yale University is a private university located in New Haven, Connecticut. It is one of the best universities in America. According to Saddhono et al. (2024), Bahasa Indonesia teaching at Yale University began in 1940. Teaching began with Malay (mainly for military purposes along with other Southeast Asian languages). Bahasa Indonesia teaching is also assisted by teachers from the FLTA (Fulbright Teaching Assistant) program from Indonesia, SAME BIPA, and the program to send BIPA teachers abroad, PPSDK, and the Ministry of Education and Culture.

All students are required to take a foreign language class and students are free to make their choice. Indonesian is chosen by many students. One factor is because the lecturer's teaching method is interesting and fun. Another factor is because of things related to Indonesia (students bleed Indonesia).

In addition to learning Bahasa Indonesia, students also learn Indonesian culture. The cultural activity is called Southeast Asia Spring Festival. This activity is a performance that comes from Indonesian cultural groups including *gamelan* and Balinese dance performances from the Indonesian Consulate General in New York, students from language classes and the community. The festival began with a dinner of Southeast Asian dishes and continued with cultural performances.

Ohio University is one of the oldest universities in the United States, founded in 1804. Ohio University is located in Athens, Ohio. The city is approximately 1004 km from the capital of the state of Ohio, Columbus. The Bahasa Indonesia program here competes with other language programs as one of the required courses to graduate from the Center for International Studies study program. Students are required to take eight credits of foreign language courses. This is similar to the regulations required by Yale University.

At Ohio University, learning levels are divided into several levels, namely elementary 1, elementary 2, intermediate, advanced, and superior. Foreign language learning in the United States must refer to ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages). Therefore, the five main objectives of foreign language learning emphasized by ACTFL are Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. The number of Bahasa Indonesia learners at Ohio University is quite small compared to Yale University. The reason they major in Indonesian is because they have a specific goal as researchers.

The challenge of teaching Bahasa Indonesia in the United States is 'competition' with other foreign languages, especially Spanish and French. The number of native Spanish and French speakers in the United States is far greater than Indonesian speakers. The small number of Indonesian speakers in the United States, makes the context of language use less optimal, giving the impression that the relevance and function of learning Indonesian is limited as new knowledge.

Education and Culture Attaché of the Indonesian Embassy in Washington DC, Diah Ayu Maharani (2024) said that the interest of the American people is increasing. Special programs have been offered since Indonesian became a UNESCO international language. In the Fall Semester 2024 of the Indonesian Embassy in Washington DC, there were 24 classes with 630 people registering for free Bahasa Indonesia classes. The 24 online classes consisted of: 9 beginner classes; 4 intermediate classes, 1 advanced class, and 10 classes for early childhood, children, and youth. There are 14 teachers: 7 assigned by the Language Agency, 1 assigned by ITB, and 6 assigned by the Indonesian Embassy. Of these 14 teachers, some are unpaid. If you look at the graph, from 2021 to 2024 there is a significant increase in the interest of the Washington DC community to learn Indonesian.

Australians' Interest in Learning Indonesian

The Australian Government supports the learning of Bahasa Indonesia and culture for students and teachers in Australian schools. In 2024 this support was strengthened by relaunching the Bahasa Indonesia Learning Ambassador pilot program. Through the Indonesian Language Learning Ambassador (ILLA) program, Australia Awards scholarship recipients from Indonesia studying in the kangaroo country can participate in teaching Bahasa Indonesia and culture. This program will be enjoyed by students and teachers at primary to secondary school levels.

Australian Ambassador to Indonesia Penny Williams PSM (2024) said the ILLA program is an excellent way to promote Bahasa Indonesia learning in Australian schools, by building relationships between Indonesian students and Australian students. It is this kind of personal connection that underpins the strong relationship between the people of Australia and Indonesia.

The initial ILLA pilot program will place ten Indonesian students receiving Australia Awards scholarships in six schools. The program ran from 2017-2019 and was interrupted due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The ILLA program expands in 2024 by matching scholarship recipients with Australian universities to support the learning of Bahasa Indonesia and culture. Through the ILLA program, students from Australian schools have the opportunity to learn about Indonesian culture and improve their Bahasa Indonesia skills. Conversely, Indonesian students in Australia have the opportunity to interact with Australian school students and teachers, develop their leadership skills, and build relationships with the local community. The Australian government is aggressively promoting increased Asian literacy for students in Australian schools. Australian students are introduced to the languages and cultures of Asian countries. This is in line with the Australian federal government's recommendation that four major Asian languages be studied in schools, namely Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Indonesian.

Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) in Victoria, Australia, Mark Grant (2024) said that many schools in Australia need teachers, including Bahasa Indonesia teachers. However, schools have difficulty obtaining teachers, especially Bahasa Indonesia teachers. As long as teachers from overseas, including from Indonesia, meet the qualifications required in Australia, their opportunities are very open to teach in Australian schools. Especially if they are willing to teach in schools located in remote areas.

The general requirements for Indonesian teachers from overseas to be able to obtain a teaching license in Australia include, First, having a relevant educational background, in this case a bachelor's degree in education and or better yet a master's degree in education. Secondly, sufficient English language skills to be able to teach children, as evidenced by International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores. Thirdly, someone who will teach in an Australian school must also have a Working with Children or Working with Vulnerable People letter issued by the Australian Government.

Egyptians' Interest in Learning Indonesian.

In an effort to promote the use of Indonesian internationally, the Indonesian government is implementing cultural diplomacy through the Center for Cultural Diplomacy Strategy and Development (PPSDK). One of Indonesia's diplomatic focuses is Egypt. Educational cooperation between Indonesia and Egypt is an important factor in carrying out cultural diplomacy. The spread of the Bahasa Indonesia in Egypt is carried out through the teaching of Bahasa Indonesia for Foreign Speakers (BIPA).

Education and Culture Attaché at the Indonesian Embassy in Cairo, Abdul Muta'ali, said the relationship between Indonesia and Egypt is very strong. Bahasa Indonesia and culture are already embedded in Egypt. Since 1953 Egypt has allowed Indonesian-language radio, so Egyptians are familiar with the Bahasa Indonesia. This year (2024) the Egyptian government allowed the opening of an Bahasa Indonesia and literature study program at Al-azhar. There are 50,000 students, but there are constraints such as limited

space. With so many people learning Indonesian, there are many benefits for the Egyptian state. Egypt is a destination for Indonesians visiting Egypt/Cairo and there are Egyptian tour guides who can speak Indonesian.

CONCLUSION

This research shows a growing global interest in learning *Bahasa Indonesia* (*bahasa*) or Indonesian Language due to factors like simple grammar and phonetic spelling. Indonesian's role in cultural diplomacy and UNESCO recognition also contribute to its popularity. Interest in learning Indonesian varies by country. In Japan, there is enthusiasm for business and cultural exchange. India's business community is interested due to economic ties. The United States has university programs, but faces competition from other languages. Australia has strong government support through programs like ILLA. Egypt's historical relationship with Indonesia fosters interest in learning the language.

Nonetheless, challenges occur which include the need for qualified instructors, cultural materials in teaching, and updated curricula. Promoting *Bahasa Indonesia* or Indonesian Language programs is vital in countries with competition from other languages. Bahasa Indonesia for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) program illustrates the success of cultural diplomacy through language education. Improvements in teaching resources and promotions are necessary to sustain this interest. The future of Indonesian language learning internationally depends on institutional support, innovative teaching methods, and cultural integration. These findings provide insights for policymakers, educators, and institutions promoting Indonesian language learning globally. Future research could focus on standardized teaching methods and the impact of Indonesian language proficiency on international relations and cultural exchange.

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