



Enhancing Politeness and Cultural Adaptation in BIPA Education: A Community Service Initiative for Foreign Students

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ABSTRACT

This community service initiative was conducted to help foreign students in the BIPA (Indonesian for Foreign Speakers) program develop a deeper understanding of cultural discourse in their daily interactions. Using a hands-on, experiential learning approach, students were guided in mastering culturally appropriate speech acts such as making requests, offering invitations, providing advice, and pleading, all in accordance with Indonesian social norms. The results of the project indicate significant improvements in the students' ability to communicate politely and effectively, reflecting their increased awareness of Indonesian cultural etiquette. This enhanced communication competence has facilitated smoother adaptation to the social environment in Indonesia, helping students build better relationships and integrate more fully into the local community.

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1. Introduction

The BIPA (Indonesian for Foreign Speakers) program plays a crucial role in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps for international students who aim to learn Indonesian. While language acquisition often emphasizes grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure, BIPA goes beyond that by integrating lessons on the cultural nuances of communication. This holistic approach allows students to not only speak Indonesian fluently but also to understand the context in which the language is used. In essence, BIPA aims to equip learners with both linguistic proficiency and cultural competence, helping them navigate the complexities of everyday interactions in Indonesia. Yusutria and Rahmat (2019) highlight that a lack of understanding of cultural norms in communication can result in miscommunication, even when linguistic proficiency is achieved. This is particularly evident in speech acts such as requesting, giving advice, or apologizing, which

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are deeply influenced by cultural expectations. In Indonesia, politeness and indirectness are often valued, and failure to adhere to these cultural norms may lead to unintended offense or misunderstandings. For instance, an international student who directly requests something without using polite markers like "tolong" (please) may come across as rude or demanding, even if their language skills are otherwise strong.

Therefore, mastering cultural discourse is essential for the overall success of foreign students in adjusting to local society. It is not enough to merely understand the literal meanings of words and phrases; students must also grasp how these words function within the social fabric of Indonesian culture. For example, knowing when and how to use honorifics, understanding the importance of saving face in interactions, and recognizing non-verbal cues are all critical components of effective communication. The BIPA program's inclusion of these elements ensures that students are not only linguistically capable but also socially adept, allowing them to build positive relationships and integrate more seamlessly into Indonesian society. Furthermore, the ability to navigate cultural discourse fosters a deeper connection between international students and the local community. By learning the appropriate ways to interact and express themselves within the Indonesian cultural framework, students gain the tools necessary to avoid social blunders that could otherwise alienate them. This understanding helps them become more confident in their interactions, whether in academic, social, or professional settings. Ultimately, the BIPA program serves as a vital conduit for cultural exchange, promoting mutual understanding and respect between foreign students and their Indonesian peers.

As part of community service efforts, the BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing) program is designed to offer intensive guidance for foreign students, helping them not only learn the Indonesian language but also grasp the intricate cultural norms embedded within it. One of the key objectives of this initiative is to ensure that learners are capable of navigating the cultural landscape of Indonesia through appropriate and respectful communication. In a multicultural learning environment like the BIPA program, understanding cultural discourse is as vital as mastering grammar and vocabulary, as it ensures that learners are socially competent when interacting with native speakers. By incorporating cultural lessons into language education, this program ensures that students are equipped with both linguistic skills and the cultural knowledge necessary to thrive in Indonesian society. Rahmat et al. (2019) emphasize that teachers play a pivotal role in helping students bridge the gap between language learning and cultural understanding. Teachers are not only language instructors but also cultural mediators who guide learners in navigating the unwritten social rules of communication. In the context of the BIPA program, educators help foreign students understand that polite communication in Indonesia involves more than simply knowing formal phrases; it also requires sensitivity to the expectations and norms of Indonesian society. For example, when making requests or offering advice, indirectness and modesty are often expected, and learners who fail to recognize these subtleties may struggle to integrate into local social settings. By highlighting these nuances in their instruction, teachers enable students to adopt a culturally appropriate communication style that fosters better relationships and avoids misunderstandings.

This focus on cultural norms is particularly significant because it shapes how language is used in different social contexts. For instance, BIPA learners are taught the importance of using honorifics and polite expressions, such as "tolong" (please) or "maaf" (excuse me), when interacting with people of different age groups or social status. According to Revita et al. (2019), the ability to communicate respectfully in accordance with cultural expectations is crucial for building rapport and gaining acceptance within a new community. In Indonesian society, where maintaining harmonious social relationships is highly valued, the use of culturally appropriate language acts as a bridge that connects learners with the local population, enabling smoother interactions both inside and outside the classroom. In addition to aiding learners in their day-to-day interactions, understanding cultural discourse also enhances their academic experience. Yusutria and Rahmat (2019) point out that in educational settings, understanding the cultural dimensions of communication allows students to engage more effectively in class discussions and group work. For foreign students in the BIPA program, this understanding extends beyond the academic sphere, as they are expected to apply their cultural knowledge in various real-life situations, from ordering food at a restaurant to participating in community events. By providing students with this comprehensive framework of language and culture, the BIPA program helps them feel more confident and capable in their new environment, leading to a more enriching and fulfilling experience in Indonesia.

Furthermore, the community service component of this program highlights the importance of collaboration between educational institutions and the local community. Through this initiative, foreign students are not only learners but also active participants in the cultural exchange process. This reciprocal relationship allows both sides to gain new perspectives, as the foreign students acquire valuable insights into Indonesian culture while contributing to the diversity of the local environment. As Sari (2018) notes, cultural exchanges like those fostered by the BIPA program play a crucial role in promoting cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect, which are essential for fostering a globalized society. Foreign students who come to Indonesia to learn Indonesian often face significant challenges in adapting to the local communication norms. These norms are deeply rooted in Indonesian culture, where politeness, indirectness, and respect for hierarchy play pivotal roles in shaping interpersonal interactions. For many international learners, understanding the nuances of communication extends beyond simply translating words from their native language into Indonesian; it involves grasping the appropriate way to engage in speech acts such as requesting, inviting, and advising within the social and cultural context of Indonesia. Without this understanding, foreign students may find it difficult to navigate daily interactions, leading to feelings of isolation or frustration as they struggle to communicate effectively with native speakers.

One of the most challenging aspects of communication for foreign students is mastering the indirect and polite forms of requests that are commonly used in Indonesian society. In many Western cultures, direct speech is often seen as clear and efficient, but in Indonesia, such directness can be perceived as rude or overly assertive. Instead, Indonesians tend to use softer, more indirect expressions when making requests. For example, rather than saying "Give me the book," one might say, "Could I possibly borrow the book for a moment?" This softer approach reflects not only politeness but also the speaker's consideration of the listener's comfort and autonomy. As Revita et al. (2019) note, the use of polite and contextually appropriate language is not just a matter of social convention; it is a reflection of the speaker's personality and their respect for social harmony. Similarly, foreign students may struggle with the etiquette involved in offering invitations or giving advice. In Indonesian culture, inviting someone to an event or a gathering is often done with an emphasis on modesty and deference. Invitations are typically phrased in ways that leave the recipient the option to decline politely without feeling pressured. For example, an Indonesian might say, "If you're not busy, we'd love for you to join us," rather than a more direct "You should come." This subtle approach helps maintain a sense of social ease and allows both parties to save face. According to Yusutria and Rahmat (2019), mastering such speech acts requires not only linguistic knowledge but also a keen awareness of the cultural values that underlie them.

In terms of advising, foreign students may encounter difficulty in understanding how to offer suggestions without appearing too direct or critical. In Indonesian society, advice is often given in a manner that is gentle and non-confrontational. Instead of saying, "You should do this," it is more common to frame advice as a suggestion or possibility, such as "Maybe it would be better if you did this." This form of indirectness is used to show respect for the other person's decision-making authority and to avoid offending them. As Nurlina and Fathonah (2014) explain, cross-cultural communication between foreign students and the local population requires sensitivity to these cultural expectations, as misunderstandings can easily arise when these norms are not followed. The adaptation process for foreign students is therefore not just about learning the language; it is about learning how to communicate in ways that are socially and culturally acceptable within the context of Indonesia. Programs like BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing) play a crucial role in helping students bridge this gap by providing them with the tools to understand and navigate the complexities of Indonesian communication norms. Without this guidance, students may find themselves at odds with the local community, despite their proficiency in the language. By teaching students how to use polite, indirect, and culturally appropriate forms of speech, the BIPA program ensures that learners are better equipped to build positive relationships and integrate more smoothly into Indonesian society.

Ultimately, the ability to communicate effectively in a foreign cultural context is key to a successful study abroad experience. As Sari (2018) points out, foreign students who are able to master the cultural nuances of communication are more likely to be accepted and respected within their host community, leading to more fulfilling and rewarding interactions. Therefore, for international students learning Indonesian, mastering the subtleties of speech acts such as requesting, inviting, and advising is not only a linguistic achievement but also a crucial step toward cultural integration.

2. Method

This community service project adopted a qualitative descriptive method with a hands-on learning approach. The choice of this methodology was driven by the need to capture the authentic experiences and progress of foreign students as they learned to adapt to Indonesian cultural norms in their speech acts. According to Maryelliwati et al. (2018), qualitative descriptive methods are effective in capturing real-world data as it naturally occurs in the field. This approach is particularly suitable for educational settings like BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing), where the focus is not only on language learning but also on cultural adaptation. By using a hands-on learning model, the program encouraged foreign students to engage directly in communication scenarios, allowing them to practice and internalize Indonesian cultural discourse through guided exercises.

Throughout the community service program, data collection relied heavily on direct observation and transcription of conversations. These tools allowed the facilitators to track students' progress in real-time, identifying areas where they struggled or excelled in applying polite and culturally appropriate speech acts. Observation sessions were structured around everyday communication scenarios that required the use of specific speech acts, such as making requests, giving advice, or offering invitations—key areas where cultural misunderstandings often occur for foreign students. Each conversation was recorded for further analysis, ensuring that the data captured a complete and accurate picture of the students' communicative behavior. This method of recording real interactions provided a rich source of qualitative data that could be analyzed to identify improvements in the students' understanding and use of Indonesian cultural norms.

The analysis of the data focused on identifying patterns of change in the students' ability to use polite and culturally appropriate language. The recorded conversations were transcribed, coded, and then analyzed to detect common themes, such as the use of indirect speech, polite requests, and appropriate forms of address. These themes provided valuable insights into how well the students were adapting to the subtleties of Indonesian communication. The qualitative findings were then compiled into a report that highlighted both successes and areas for improvement. The results showed that the students were increasingly able to engage in culturally sensitive communication as the program progressed. For instance, students who initially struggled with making polite requests began to use terms like "tolong" and "silakan" more confidently as the sessions continued. These improvements in language use demonstrated the effectiveness of the hands-on learning approach in helping students internalize cultural norms alongside linguistic skills.

The findings from this community service project serve as a valuable resource **for** evaluating the effectiveness of the BIPA program. By using the qualitative descriptive method, the project was able to provide detailed insights into how foreign students learn and adapt to Indonesian communication norms. This information can be used to refine future iterations of the BIPA program, ensuring that it continues to meet the needs of its diverse student population. As Setiawan and Rois (2017) argue, qualitative descriptive research is particularly useful in educational contexts because it allows for a nuanced understanding of complex phenomena, such as cultural adaptation, that might be missed in quantitative studies. The success of this community service project suggests that hands-on learning, supported by direct observation and qualitative analysis, is a highly effective approach to teaching foreign students both the language and cultural norms of Indonesia.

3. Result and Discussion

In this community service program, foreign students demonstrated significant progress in both understanding and applying Indonesian cultural norms in their speech acts. One of the most notable improvements was seen in their use of directive speech acts, particularly in making requests and pleas. Before receiving any formal guidance, many of these students struggled with polite requests, often employing direct or blunt language that may have appeared rude or inconsiderate in an Indonesian context. This was especially challenging for students from cultures where directness is valued over politeness. However, after intensive instruction and practice, they began to incorporate culturally appropriate phrases such as "tolong" (please) and "terima kasih" (thank you) with greater confidence and accuracy. This shift in communication style reflects their growing competence in not just the language, but in Indonesian cultural discourse.

The program's hands-on learning approach played a crucial role in helping students internalize these norms. According to observations made during the program, students gradually became more adept at framing requests in ways that were not only polite but also culturally aligned with Indonesian etiquette. One

student from Taiwan, for instance, exhibited marked improvement by transitioning from a blunt request like "Give me that book" to the much more polite "Please lend me this book." This change illustrates the student's understanding of the subtleties involved in making requests in Indonesian culture, where direct commands are often softened to maintain harmony and respect within the conversation. These findings are in line with Cahyaningrum et al. (2018), who underscore the role of **sociocultural factors** in shaping communication behaviors and highlight that the ability to navigate these factors is crucial for effective communication.

Further, improvements were not limited to requests. Students also showed substantial progress in other speech acts, such as offering advice and extending invitations. In Indonesian culture, advice is often offered in a manner that avoids confrontation or offense, typically through indirect language. Initially, many students were unaware of this cultural expectation and would give advice in ways that might be perceived as too forceful or presumptive. However, as the program progressed, students began to modify their approach. For example, instead of bluntly saying, "You should wear better clothes," they learned to phrase their advice more subtly, saying, "Shouldn't you wear more appropriate clothes?" This indirect style of giving advice is common in Indonesian culture, where maintaining the interlocutor's dignity and avoiding embarrassment is essential. This shift in communication style aligns with the observations of Nurlina and Fathonah (2014), who emphasize that cross-cultural understanding is key to ensuring smoother communication between foreign students and the local community.

Another key area of progress was in the way students extended invitations. Invitations in Indonesian culture are typically issued in a non-imposing way, allowing the recipient to gracefully decline without feeling pressured. Initially, foreign students tended to issue direct invitations, which could come across as too assertive. However, after receiving guidance, they began to adopt the more culturally sensitive approach of framing invitations in a way that gave the listener an easy way out if they couldn't attend. For instance, they would say, "If you're free, maybe you could join us," rather than "You should come." This demonstrates the students' growing awareness of Indonesian norms of politeness and their ability to adjust their communication style accordingly.

In conclusion, the improvements observed in the foreign students' use of Indonesian cultural discourse reflect the effectiveness of the community service program. The progress made in directive speech acts such as requests, advice, and invitations indicates that students not only learned the language but also adapted to the cultural subtleties that govern its use. This development highlights the importance of incorporating cultural discourse into language learning programs, as students who understand and apply cultural norms are more likely to engage in effective and meaningful communication with their host communities. As Revita et al. (2019) point out, the use of polite, culturally appropriate language fosters positive relationships and smoother interactions, which are critical to the successful integration of foreign students into Indonesian society.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results of this community service, it can be concluded that direct guidance in understanding cultural discourse is highly effective in improving foreign students' ability to communicate politely according to Indonesian cultural norms. Students who participated in this program were able to apply speech acts such as requesting, inviting, and advising more politely and appropriately. In addition, this community service shows that understanding cultural discourse is not only important for learning the language but also for adapting to the social environment in the host country. By mastering speech acts that align with local culture, foreign students can more easily integrate into Indonesian society and establish good social relationships. This finding is consistent with Sari (2018), who emphasizes the importance of politeness in communication for foreign students learning Indonesian. This community service can serve as a useful model for other BIPA programs in providing guidance to foreign students, particularly in understanding cultural discourse. Therefore, further development of BIPA programs in this area can offer long-term benefits for foreign students in their adaptation process in Indonesia.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors state that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publication of this paper.

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