



Language Barriers and Academic Interaction of Indonesian Postgraduate Students in Abroad

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Abstract

Keywords:
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This study explores how Indonesian postgraduate students in Queensland University cope with language barriers in academic contexts through the use of personal strategies and institutional support. The research employed a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews. Two postgraduate students were selected through purposive sampling based on their length of study and experiences as international students. Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes. The results show that students adopted various self-directed strategies, such as active participation in academic and social forums, practicing spoken English with peers, and engaging in extensive reading. Both participants also emphasized the importance of institutional support, including English conversation clubs, academic workshops, and Artificial Intelligence-related training programs, which significantly enhanced their academic engagement. Preparation for advanced academic tasks varied, one participant focusing on structured training and competitions, while the other emphasized content mastery and relied on institutional services to refine language skills. The study concludes that overcoming language barriers requires a combination of individual initiative and systematic institutional support, highlighting the need for integrated approaches to assist international students in academic settings.

Abstrak

Kata kunci:
interaksi akademik;
mahasiswa
internasional;
hambatan bahasa;
mahasiswa
pascasarjana

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana mahasiswa pascasarjana Indonesia di Universitas Queensland mengatasi hambatan bahasa dalam konteks akademik melalui penerapan strategi pribadi dan dukungan institusional. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif dengan metode wawancara semi-terstruktur. Dua mahasiswa pascasarjana dipilih melalui teknik sampling purposif berdasarkan lama masa studi dan pengalaman mereka sebagai mahasiswa internasional. Data dianalisis secara tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola dan tema yang berulang. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa menerapkan berbagai strategi mandiri, seperti partisipasi aktif dalam forum akademik dan sosial, berlatih bahasa Inggris lisan dengan teman sebaya, serta melakukan pembacaan ekstensif. Kedua peserta juga menekankan pentingnya

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dukungan institusional, termasuk klub percakapan bahasa Inggris, lokakarya akademik, dan program pelatihan terkait kecerdasan buatan yang secara signifikan meningkatkan keterlibatan akademik mereka. Persiapan untuk tugas-tugas akademik tingkat lanjut bervariasi, satu peserta berfokus pada pelatihan terstruktur dan kompetisi, sementara yang lain menekankan penguasaan materi dan mengandalkan layanan institusi untuk menyempurnakan keterampilan bahasa. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa mengatasi hambatan bahasa memerlukan kombinasi antara inisiatif individu dan dukungan institusional yang sistematis, menyoroti kebutuhan akan pendekatan terintegrasi untuk membantu mahasiswa internasional dalam lingkungan akademik.

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INTRODUCTION

In the globalization era, higher education is considered as a need for with growing numbers of students go abroad to pursue advanced study. The report from OECD (2022) mentioned that more than 2 million students are currently study abroad especially in the English speaking country for instance USA, United Kingdom, and Australia. Recently Australia is hosting more than 400,000 international students from various country (Australia Government Department of Education, 2023). In this context, pursuing study in the English speaking country require the ability to communicate effectively in English, which is a critical requirement for the academic success, social interaction, and also over-well being (Andrade, 2006; Arkoudis, Baik, Bexley & Doughty, 2014).

For international students, especially in the doctoral program, the linguistic demand are particularly complex. Unlike the undergraduate students which is mostly in structured classroom learning, the doctoral students are in the higher level which require to participate in the seminars, conference, presentation, and long ongoing dialogue of interaction with their supervisors and peers (Hyland, 2009 Coxhead, 2018).

Despite the international students have fulfilled English proficiency requirement such as TOEFL or IELTS, many of them continue to experience language-related challenges. Some studies have reported that some language barriers like local accent and colloquial speech often persist into international students' academic journey (Sawir, 2005; Zhang & Mi, 2010). Another students also reported that students struggle to express themselves fluently when engaging in specific social integration (Xue & Singh, 2025). These issues are compounded by the cultural differences in classroom participation, while some educational cultures may encourage a long questioning style or indirect questioning, for instance Australia classroom culture tend to value, concise, and critical contribution (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010). Consequently, these language barriers intersect with the cultural expectation, sometimes learning the international students to be remain silent, hesitant, or peripheral in academic discussions. This strengthen by the Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis which said that comprehension and participation are hindered when the students experience anxiety, self-consciousness, or insufficient comprehensible input.

In Australia, some research has examined the adjustment of international students (Wong & Hyde, 2024; Bai & Wang, 2024; Larcombe, Baik, & Finch, 2022). However, these

literature tend to focus on undergraduates or homogeneous of international students, often overlooking the unique needs of doctoral students. The students from doctoral studies has been known for higher stakes, greater independence, and the expectation of contributing in original knowledge while simultaneously have to negotiate with unfamiliar academic and cultural norms (Lee & Rice, 2007). Early year of experiences, especially in the first year of study can be considered as critical part which may directly affect to confidence, participation, and long term academic outcomes (Ward & Kennedy, 2001).

In the Indonesian context, Indonesia is recognized as one of the major source countries of international students in Australia (Marginson, 2014). This growing mobility reflects increasing participation of Indonesian students in global higher education, particularly at the postgraduate level. Despite this upward trend, Indonesian students remain underrepresented in the body of research on international doctoral education. Existing studies have predominantly focused on students from East Asian countries, particularly China, due to their large population and significant presence in Australian universities. In contrast, students from Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, have received comparatively limited scholarly attention. This imbalance in the literature suggests a critical gap, as it risks overlooking the diverse experiences of students from different regional, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

Such a gap is particularly important because Indonesian students bring distinctive characteristics shaped by their sociocultural, linguistic, and educational contexts. For instance, differences in academic conventions, communication styles, and language proficiency may influence how Indonesian students engage in academic discourse, negotiate meaning, and position themselves within scholarly communities. These unique attributes suggest that their experiences of academic adaptation—especially in relation to language barriers—may differ significantly from those of students from more frequently studied contexts. Therefore, a more focused investigation into Indonesian students' experiences is necessary to provide a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of international doctoral education.

Hence, the present study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by examining the lived experiences of Indonesian doctoral students during their first year at University of Queensland. The first year is a critical transitional period in which students are required to rapidly adjust to new academic expectations, communication norms, and linguistic demands. More specifically, this study investigates the language barriers encountered by these students in academic interactions, including discussions with supervisors, participation in seminars, and engagement in scholarly discourse. It also explores how these barriers influence their confidence, agency, and ability to actively participate in the academic community.

By addressing these issues, this study makes both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it advances understanding of how linguistic and cultural barriers intersect in shaping international students' academic identities, particularly within the context of doctoral education. It highlights the dynamic process through which students negotiate meaning, construct knowledge, and position themselves within a new academic culture. Practically, the findings of this study provide valuable insights for higher education institutions in designing more responsive and inclusive support systems. These may include targeted language support programs, culturally sensitive academic mentoring, and structured opportunities for

meaningful academic interaction. Ultimately, such efforts can enhance international students' academic integration and overall success in global higher education environments.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a case study design to explore the language barriers faced by Indonesian postgraduate students in their academic interactions in Queensland. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences, perceptions, and interpretations within their natural context. Specifically, the case study design enabled the researcher to examine a bounded system namely, a small group of Indonesian doctoral students within a particular sociocultural and academic environment. According to John W. Creswell (2013), case studies are particularly useful for gaining rich, contextualized insights into individuals' lived experiences, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

The participants of this study were three Indonesian doctoral students who were selected through purposive sampling. This sampling technique was employed to ensure that participants met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. In particular, all participants had less than one year of study experience in Queensland. This criterion was deliberately established to capture experiences during the early stage of academic and sociocultural adjustment, a period in which language barriers are often most pronounced and impactful. By focusing on this initial phase, the study aimed to identify immediate challenges and coping mechanisms before participants become more linguistically and culturally acclimated. The Participant recruitment was conducted through personal networks and Indonesian student communities. They were contacted via email and social media platforms and were provided with information regarding the purpose of the study, participation requirements, and ethical considerations. Three participants agreed to participate voluntarily and provided informed consent prior to data collection. The number of participants was considered appropriate for an exploratory qualitative case study because the aim was to obtain rich and detailed accounts of individual experiences rather than to achieve statistical generalization. To maintain ethical standards and protect participants' identities, all names used in this study are pseudonyms.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted online. The semi-structured interview guide consisted of ten open-ended questions. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent before being transcribed verbatim for analysis. This method was chosen to provide both structure and flexibility, allowing the researcher to guide the conversation while also giving participants the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences in depth. Semi-structured interviews are particularly effective in qualitative research as they enable the exploration of emerging themes while ensuring that key topics are systematically addressed. The interview guide was developed in alignment with the research questions, ensuring content validity and relevance. The questions focused on several key areas: (1) participants' experiences of language difficulties in academic settings, (2) challenges encountered during academic interactions such as discussions and presentations, (3) difficulties related to understanding different accents and

specialized academic terminology, (4) the influence of language barriers on participants' willingness and confidence to ask or answer questions, and (5) the overall impact of these barriers on their academic participation and engagement.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis as proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006), which involves a systematic six-phase process. These phases include familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This analytical approach was selected due to its flexibility and its suitability for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets. Through this process, the researcher was able to construct themes that reflect the participants' shared and divergent experiences regarding language barriers.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. Member checking was conducted by sharing interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations with participants to verify the accuracy and credibility of the data. Additionally, reflexive notes were maintained throughout the research process to document the researcher's perspectives, assumptions, and potential biases, thereby enhancing transparency and confirmability. These strategies align with the criteria of trustworthiness proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), including credibility, dependability, and confirmability.

Regarding ethical considerations, informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Participation was entirely voluntary, and confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the research process. All data were anonymized, and any identifying information was removed to ensure the privacy and protection of the participants.

FINDINGS

Comprehension Barriers

The first theme expressed that all the participants commonly reported that they have difficulties in understanding spoken English, especially in the informal or social context.

P1 expressed that:

"In everyday situations, for example when meeting with local people or Aussies, sometimes there are difficulties in understanding them because they speak very fast."

P2 highlighted challenges with non-native accent and colloquial language:

"My supervisor is Japanese... speaking English is difficult to understand."

"Australians abbreviate everything: 'breakfast' becomes 'breki,' 'Brisbane' becomes 'Brisi,' 'McDonald's' becomes 'Maccas.'"

P3 noted to the everyday conversation, especially with service staff or student from other Asian countries, can be harder than academic English:

"Everyday conversation is harder than academic language... when buying tea or coffee, I don't always understand what they are offering."

All participants reported difficulties in understanding spoken English, particularly in informal or social contexts, indicating that comprehension is highly context-dependent. While

academic discourse was generally easier to follow, everyday interactions posed greater challenges.

P1's response shows that rapid speech in natural conversations makes real-time processing difficult. This suggests that comprehension issues are not only related to vocabulary but also to speech features such as speed and connected forms. P2 highlights additional challenges related to accent variation and the use of colloquial expressions, including local abbreviations that are rarely encountered in formal learning contexts. This points to limited exposure to sociolinguistic aspects of English. Meanwhile, P3 emphasizes that everyday transactional communication can be more difficult than academic language, likely due to its unpredictability and less structured nature.

Overall, these findings suggest that structured academic speech is more accessible because it tends to be slower and more predictable, whereas informal interactions are more challenging due to rapid delivery, accent variation, and culturally specific language use. This indicates that language proficiency involves not only understanding formal English but also the ability to navigate diverse real-life communication contexts.

Expression Barriers

The second theme reported that student challenges are expressing ideas in English due to vocabulary limitations, grammar, and reduced rhetorical skills.

As P1 stated that:

"When I want to interact in an academic forum here, I have to write my questions in a notebook or at least design the context of my question and write down the necessary vocabulary I must use... If I don't do this, I might get lost when asking, and my question will not be conveyed properly."

P2 emphasized that there's no language barriers in expressing ideas

"I do not have language barriers here"

P3 emphasized the difference between expressing ideas in Indonesian and English:

"In Indonesian, I can use analogies and intonation to make my narrative more interesting. In English, my skills are not yet enough to create attractive sentences. So I just say things plainly, as best as I can."

Despite the barriers from P3, this participant actively managed communication challenges through preparation and clarification:

P3 stated:

"The important thing is to ask... they understand, they ask for clarification, and I also ask for explanation."

The second theme highlights challenges in expressing ideas in English, mainly due to limitations in vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical skills. However, the degree of difficulty varies across participants. P1's response shows a reliance on preparation strategies, such as writing down questions and key vocabulary in advance. This indicates that limited linguistic resources can affect spontaneity, requiring additional cognitive effort to organize and articulate ideas clearly. In contrast, P2 reported no significant language barriers, suggesting that individual differences in proficiency or prior exposure play an important role.

P3 emphasizes a shift in expressive capacity between Indonesian and English, particularly in the use of rhetorical devices such as analogy and intonation. This suggests that while basic communication is achievable, more nuanced and engaging expression remains challenging.

Nevertheless, P3 actively manages these limitations through interactional strategies, such as asking for clarification and engaging in dialogue.

Overall, these findings suggest that expression barriers are not absolute but can be mitigated through preparation, strategic communication, and active participation in academic interactions.

Cultural and Social Influences

The third theme exposed that the participants highlighted the influence of classroom culture, supervisory styles, and peer-group dynamics on language use.

As P2 described the academic interaction as egalitarian and respectful:

"The language is used in ways that are polite and respectful... they always treat us all as equals. Egalitarian, not hierarchical."

At the same time, the difference in cultural norms, including punctuality, affected expresses.

As P1 recalled:

"In Indonesia we sometimes are late; here everything is on time... once I was five minutes late and my supervisor called."

Participants further noted the expectation for concise and critical questioning in seminars.

As P2 explained:

"Questions are expected to be critical and impactful... not just storytelling, but straight to the point."

P3 also added that planning questions for formal settings contrasts with reflexive questioning in informal contexts:

"In seminars, we plan our questions carefully. In informal settings, we react reflexively, even if grammar is imperfect."

P2's response characterizes the academic environment as egalitarian and respectful, which may create a supportive space for participation. However, P1 highlights that differences in cultural norms – such as expectations around punctuality – can affect how students adjust their behavior and communication. This suggests that adaptation involves not only language use but also alignment with academic conventions.

Participants also noted expectations for concise and critical contributions in seminars. As reflected in P2's response, academic interaction prioritizes direct and analytical questioning rather than extended explanation. P3 further distinguishes between formal and informal contexts, showing that students tend to carefully plan their language use in structured settings, while relying on more spontaneous communication in informal interactions. These theme 3 findings indicate that cultural and social norms shape how students manage both comprehension and expression, ultimately influencing their level of participation and engagement in academic contexts.

The findings expose that Indonesian postgraduate students face interrelated challenges in comprehension, expression, and social cultural context. In the context of academic in generally manageable, while in the context of informal interaction, slang, and accents can create language comprehension barriers. The expression barriers are mitigated thorough preparation and clarification strategies. The cultural norms and peer group influence participation and language

practice. These findings highlight the need for orientation to local varieties, discipline through specific vocabulary, and support for structured opportunities for practice and discussion.

DISCUSSION

One of the most immediate barriers stated by the participants concerned to the comprehension. It is particularly in listening to unfamiliar language accent, colloquial speech, and also rapid delivery of spoken. While in the context of formal academic interaction like speech in lectures, seminar, or consultation with supervisor was described as more manageable. The everyday interactions often triggered misunderstanding in communication. This finding is in line with a research reported that international students often challenges with accent and speed in communication (Kaur, 2007). The recent study from Australia also confirm that the regional and colloquial language are considered difficult for international students to follow especially in the informal interaction (Trenkic & Wamington, 2019).

Theoretically, From the perspective of Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982), language acquisition is facilitated when learners receive input that is comprehensible but slightly beyond their current level of competence. In this study, participants reported difficulties understanding colloquial expressions and unfamiliar accents, suggesting that the linguistic input encountered in daily interactions may have exceeded their level of comprehensibility. As a result, opportunities for meaningful interaction and language development may have been reduced during the early stages of adjustment. In the finding case, when the participants exposure to varieties of English that are less understandable, they may experience limited confidence and engagement. This this directly suggest that the educational institution must not only support the academic English listening, but also provide some kind of an orientation to local speech patten with the expectation this support could reduce frustration and also can accelerate social integration.

The second theme relates to the expressive ability and the limitation in vocabulary, the participants noted the need to prepare vocabulary before speaking, and there is also expressed concern about grammatical accuracy. That finding aligns with Coxhead (2018) which reported that postgraduate students often struggle with discipline-specific academic vocabulary. Additionally, Morita (2004) exposed that limited expressive resources led to silence in seminar. Without such scaffolding and practice, there is a possibility that international students, including postdoctoral may remain passive in academic community practice. Beyond lexical limitations, the participants appeared to associate speaking with the need to produce grammatically accurate responses. This perception may have increased self-monitoring and communication anxiety, causing them to spend more time planning utterances rather than actively contributing to discussions. Consequently, language barriers were not solely linguistic in nature but also affected participants' confidence and willingness to engage in academic discourse.

The third major findings was the tendency of students to hesitate in participating on seminars or other group discussions. These often linked to the uncertainty about their language skills or lack of clarity in understanding the discussion. In the findings the P2 managed to engage actively and the others described moments of silence. This findings is consistent with the research from Nastiti (2023) which reports that the cultural norms, fear of negative

evaluation and limited linguistic sources can discourage active contribution. The findings suggest that participation is influenced not only by linguistic competence but also by perceived communicative legitimacy. Even when students possessed relevant knowledge, uncertainty regarding language accuracy often discouraged them from contributing. This indicates that language barriers may indirectly affect academic engagement by reducing students' confidence to position themselves as legitimate members of the academic community.

Collectively, those three themes suggest important implications for higher education institutions that host international doctoral students. The support should extend beyond formal academic English into some training such as local accent, colloquial speech, and interactive listening. Discipline-specific academic vocabulary development should be embedded into the training, so this also can be supported by pedagogical practices, for instance small group discussion, scaffolded questioning, and other supportive programs.

CONCLUSION

This study's objective is to explore the language barriers experienced by Indonesian postdoctoral students in their first year at University of Queensland. Drawing on in-depth interviews with three participants, this research exposed that linguistic challenges extend beyond vocabulary and grammar, including the difficulties in understanding local accent, expressing ideas in academic discussion, and managing the pressure of doctor level of communication. These challenges are not merely technical but also social-emotional, which affect how they perceived themselves as legitimate participants in the academic community. Even though some language barriers are revealed, however the academic interaction still manageable.

This study contributes to insight in designing targeted support for doctoral students. At the same time, this study limitation includes with only three participants, the findings cannot be generalized to all Indonesian students, not to international students broadly. Future research could expand this result by including a larger and more diverse sample of participants, or other perspective from supervisors.

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