



Navigating Linguistic Diversity: Indonesian Language Variation and Communication Adaptation among First-Year University Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the variation in Indonesian language use and the communication adaptation of first-year students within the multicultural environment of Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" East Java. The diverse geographical backgrounds of students contribute to variations in language, regional dialects, and local vocabulary that influence daily interactions on campus. This study employed a descriptive quantitative approach using an online survey administered through Google Forms. A total of 15 first-year students from different regions of Indonesia participated as respondents. The collected data were analyzed descriptively to identify language variation, communication barriers, and students' adaptation strategies. The findings indicate that Indonesian serves as the primary medium of communication and effectively facilitates students' adaptation to campus life. Nevertheless, regional dialects and local languages remain frequently used in informal interactions, creating communication challenges, particularly in understanding local vocabulary, humor, and region-specific expressions. To overcome these challenges, students commonly use standard Indonesian, seek clarification from peers, and gradually learn local dialects. These findings suggest that linguistic diversity represents both a challenge and an opportunity for fostering inclusive communication in multicultural higher education. Therefore, strengthening the use of Indonesian as the national lingua franca while preserving regional languages as cultural heritage is essential for promoting effective

intercultural communication.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis variasi penggunaan Bahasa Indonesia serta proses adaptasi komunikasi mahasiswa baru di lingkungan multikultural Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa Timur. Keberagaman latar belakang geografis mahasiswa menyebabkan munculnya variasi bahasa, dialek, dan kosakata daerah yang memengaruhi interaksi sehari-hari di lingkungan kampus. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif deskriptif dengan metode survei melalui kuesioner daring (Google Forms). Sebanyak 15 mahasiswa baru dari berbagai daerah di Indonesia berpartisipasi sebagai responden penelitian. Data dianalisis secara deskriptif untuk mengidentifikasi bentuk variasi bahasa, kendala komunikasi, dan strategi adaptasi yang digunakan mahasiswa. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Bahasa Indonesia menjadi media komunikasi utama yang efektif dalam mendukung proses adaptasi di lingkungan kampus. Meskipun demikian, penggunaan dialek dan bahasa daerah masih sering muncul dalam komunikasi informal sehingga menimbulkan kendala, terutama dalam memahami kosakata lokal, humor, dan percakapan yang menggunakan bahasa daerah. Untuk mengatasi hambatan tersebut, mahasiswa menerapkan berbagai strategi, seperti menggunakan Bahasa Indonesia, meminta klarifikasi kepada teman, serta mempelajari dialek yang digunakan di lingkungan kampus. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa keberagaman linguistik merupakan tantangan sekaligus potensi dalam membangun komunikasi yang inklusif di perguruan tinggi multikultural. Oleh karena itu, diperlukan upaya untuk memperkuat penggunaan Bahasa Indonesia sebagai bahasa pemersatu tanpa mengabaikan pelestarian bahasa daerah sebagai bagian dari identitas budaya.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental medium through which individuals communicate, negotiate meaning, and construct social relationships within diverse communities. Beyond its communicative function, language also represents cultural identity, social affiliation, and collective values that shape interpersonal interactions. In multilingual societies such as Indonesia, language use is characterized by considerable variation resulting from differences in geographical origin, ethnicity, educational background, and communicative context. As the national language, Indonesian (*Bahasa Indonesia*) serves not only as a symbol of national unity but also as the principal medium of instruction and communication across educational institutions. Nevertheless, the coexistence of hundreds of regional languages and dialects creates dynamic linguistic interactions, particularly in multicultural environments where speakers from diverse backgrounds engage in daily communication (Islamiyah et al., 2024; Budiman et al., 2024).

Within higher education, linguistic diversity becomes increasingly visible as universities attract students from various provinces with distinct dialects and sociolinguistic characteristics. These differences influence communication patterns, language choice, code-switching practices, and students' adaptation to new academic and social environments. Previous studies have demonstrated that language variation reflects not only linguistic diversity but also social identity, cultural affiliation, and communicative competence (Hanifah et al., 2023; Ardhana et al., 2021). Students frequently alternate between standard Indonesian, regional languages, and colloquial expressions depending on their interlocutors and communicative situations. Such linguistic practices enrich intercultural interaction while simultaneously presenting challenges related to mutual understanding, especially during the transition to university life.

The increasing mobility of students across Indonesia has further intensified multilingual interactions on university campuses. First-year students commonly encounter unfamiliar dialects, local vocabularies, and speech styles that differ substantially from those used in their home regions. Consequently, effective communication often requires linguistic accommodation, adaptation, and negotiation to avoid misunderstandings and facilitate social integration. Studies on intercultural communication emphasize that successful adaptation is influenced not only by language proficiency but also by individuals' willingness to understand different linguistic and cultural norms (Ward et al., 2020). Therefore, investigating language variation in higher education contributes to understanding how linguistic diversity influences communication effectiveness and students' social adjustment within multicultural academic settings.

Although previous studies have extensively examined language variation in Indonesian society and digital communication (Ardhana et al., 2021; Hanifah et al., 2023), relatively limited attention has been devoted to exploring how linguistic diversity affects communication adaptation among first-year university students in multicultural campuses. Existing research generally focuses on describing forms of language variation or regional dialects without sufficiently examining how students respond to communication barriers and

develop adaptive strategies in academic environments. Consequently, empirical evidence concerning the relationship between language variation, communication challenges, and linguistic adaptation among new university students remains limited.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates language variation and communication adaptation among first-year students at Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" East Java, a university characterized by a diverse student population originating from different regions of Indonesia. Unlike previous studies that primarily describe linguistic differences, this research integrates the analysis of language variation with students' communication experiences and adaptation strategies in a multicultural campus environment. The findings are expected to contribute to sociolinguistic research by providing empirical evidence regarding the role of Indonesian as a unifying language while highlighting the continuing significance of regional dialects in intercultural communication. Furthermore, the study offers practical implications for developing inclusive communication practices within Indonesian higher education.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the patterns of Indonesian language variation among first-year university students, identify communication challenges arising from linguistic diversity, and examine the strategies employed by students to adapt to multilingual interactions in the multicultural campus environment of Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" East Java.

2. METHOD

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to investigate patterns of language variation and communication adaptation among first-year university students at Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" East Java. A descriptive quantitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to systematically describe participants' language use, communication experiences, and adaptation strategies without manipulating the research setting.

The participants consisted of **15 first-year undergraduate students** enrolled in different study programs at Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" East Java. The respondents represented diverse geographical and linguistic backgrounds, including Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, Jakarta, Palangkaraya, Ternate, and other regions of Indonesia. This diversity provided an appropriate context for examining language variation within a multicultural university environment. Participants were selected using **convenience sampling**, as the questionnaire was distributed to students who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

Data were collected through an **online questionnaire administered via Google Forms** over a two-week period. The questionnaire comprised both closed-ended and open-ended questions designed to capture respondents' perceptions and experiences regarding language use in the campus environment. The instrument focused on four main aspects: (1) the role of Indonesian in facilitating communication and adaptation, (2) the influence of regional dialects on daily interactions, (3) students' strategies for adapting to linguistic diversity, and (4) communication challenges encountered when interacting with peers from different linguistic backgrounds. Prior to distribution, the questionnaire items were reviewed to ensure clarity and relevance to the research objectives.

The collected data were analyzed using **descriptive statistical techniques**. Responses to closed-ended questions were summarized using frequencies and percentages to identify

general patterns of language use and communication experiences. Meanwhile, responses to open-ended questions were analyzed through descriptive categorization to identify recurring themes related to language variation, communication barriers, and adaptation strategies. The integration of quantitative summaries and qualitative descriptions enabled a comprehensive understanding of students' linguistic experiences in a multicultural academic setting.

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the research before completing the questionnaire, and their identities were kept anonymous to ensure confidentiality. The collected data were used exclusively for academic research purposes and reported in aggregate form to protect participants' privacy.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Characteristics

A total of **15 first-year students** from Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" East Java participated in this study. The respondents represented various study programs, including Business Administration, Agribusiness, Agrotechnology, Industrial Engineering, Law, Management, and Development Economics. Their geographical backgrounds were highly diverse, covering several regions of Indonesia, such as West Java, Central Java, Jakarta, South Kalimantan, North Kalimantan, Palangkaraya, Palembang, North Sumatra, Ternate, and Tangerang. This demographic diversity provided an appropriate representation of a multicultural university environment where students interact using different linguistic backgrounds.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Characteristics	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Number of participants	First-year students	15	100
Educational level	Undergraduate	15	100
Geographical origin	Multiple provinces in Indonesia	15	100
Data collection method	Online questionnaire (Google Forms)	15	100

Indonesian Language as the Primary Means of Communication

The survey results indicate that all respondents (100%) acknowledged that Indonesian plays an essential role in facilitating communication and helping them adapt to the multicultural campus environment. Indonesian was consistently perceived as the common language that enables students from different regional and linguistic backgrounds to interact effectively.

Although Indonesian served as the dominant language in formal communication, respondents reported that they frequently and sometimes unconsciously incorporated regional dialects and local vocabulary into everyday conversations. Examples included lexical items from Javanese, Sundanese, Dayak, Betawi, Palembang, Batak, and eastern Indonesian dialects. These findings demonstrate that students maintain elements of their linguistic identity while simultaneously adopting Indonesian as the principal language for academic communication.

Influence of Regional Dialects on Communication

The findings reveal that regional dialects continue to influence students' daily communication despite the widespread use of Indonesian. Several respondents explained that

certain expressions commonly used in their hometowns possess meanings that differ from those understood by students from other regions. Such lexical differences occasionally caused confusion and required additional clarification during conversations.

Furthermore, students from outside East Java reported experiencing greater difficulty when interacting with peers who frequently used Javanese during informal conversations. Although these interactions rarely disrupted formal academic communication, they sometimes limited students' participation in casual discussions, jokes, and social interactions because they were unfamiliar with local expressions.

Communication Adaptation Strategies

The respondents demonstrated various strategies to overcome communication barriers resulting from linguistic diversity. The most frequently reported adaptation strategies included:

1. Using standard Indonesian during conversations with peers from different linguistic backgrounds.
2. Asking friends to explain unfamiliar regional vocabulary or dialectal expressions.
3. Learning frequently used local words and expressions through daily interaction.
4. Observing peers' communication patterns before actively participating in conversations.

These strategies indicate that students actively negotiated linguistic differences in order to establish effective interpersonal communication within the campus community.

Communication Challenges

Despite successful adaptation, several communication challenges remained evident. The most common difficulties reported by respondents included misunderstanding regional vocabulary, failing to understand jokes delivered in local dialects, and experiencing confusion when conversations shifted entirely into regional languages, particularly Javanese. Some students also admitted that they unintentionally used expressions from their own regional dialects, requiring them to restate their messages using standard Indonesian to avoid misunderstanding.

Overall, the findings suggest that linguistic diversity simultaneously presents opportunities for intercultural learning and challenges for effective communication. Indonesian functions as the principal lingua franca that facilitates interaction among students from diverse backgrounds, whereas regional dialects continue to represent important markers of cultural identity within informal communication contexts

Discussion

The present study demonstrates that Indonesian serves as the primary medium of communication among first-year students at Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" East Java despite their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The findings indicate that all respondents perceived Indonesian as an effective lingua franca that facilitated communication and accelerated their adaptation to the multicultural campus environment. This result supports the sociolinguistic perspective that a national language functions not only as a communication tool but also as a unifying symbol capable of reducing linguistic barriers in multilingual societies. In Indonesia, where more than 700 regional languages coexist,

Indonesian provides a shared linguistic platform that enables individuals from different ethnic communities to interact efficiently in educational settings (Islamiyah et al., 2024).

Although Indonesian dominates academic communication, the findings reveal that regional dialects continue to play an important role in students' everyday interactions. Respondents frequently reported the unconscious use of vocabulary and expressions originating from their local languages, including Javanese, Sundanese, Dayak, Batak, and several eastern Indonesian dialects. This phenomenon reflects the concept of language variation proposed in sociolinguistics, whereby linguistic choices are strongly influenced by speakers' social identity, cultural background, and communicative context. Rather than replacing regional languages, Indonesian and local dialects coexist through complementary functions, with Indonesian being predominantly used in formal communication and regional dialects remaining prominent in informal interpersonal interactions. Similar observations have been reported by Hanifah et al. (2023), who found that language variation among Indonesian speakers reflects social identity and contextual language choice rather than linguistic inconsistency.

Another important finding concerns the communication barriers experienced by students from outside East Java. Many respondents acknowledged difficulties in understanding conversations that incorporated local dialects, particularly Javanese expressions used during informal discussions and humor. These findings suggest that communication challenges do not necessarily originate from insufficient Indonesian proficiency but rather from limited exposure to local linguistic practices. According to intercultural communication theory, successful adaptation requires individuals to develop not only linguistic competence but also sociocultural competence, enabling them to interpret contextual meanings embedded within local expressions and communicative norms (Ward et al., 2020). Consequently, unfamiliarity with regional dialects may initially restrict students' participation in social interactions despite their ability to communicate effectively in Indonesian.

The study further demonstrates that first-year students actively develop adaptive communication strategies to overcome linguistic diversity. The most common strategies identified include consistently using standard Indonesian, requesting clarification when unfamiliar expressions arise, observing peers' communication styles, and gradually learning frequently used regional vocabulary. These strategies illustrate a process of linguistic accommodation in which speakers consciously adjust their language use to facilitate mutual understanding and maintain positive interpersonal relationships. From the perspective of Communication Accommodation Theory, such adjustments represent convergence strategies that reduce social distance and enhance communication effectiveness among individuals from different linguistic backgrounds. Therefore, language adaptation should be viewed as an active social process rather than merely an outcome of language proficiency.

The coexistence of Indonesian and regional languages identified in this study also has broader implications for multicultural higher education. The findings indicate that linguistic diversity should not be regarded solely as a communication challenge but also as an educational resource that enriches intercultural understanding and strengthens students' appreciation of Indonesia's cultural diversity. Universities therefore have an important role in fostering inclusive communication by encouraging the use of Indonesian as a common language while simultaneously respecting regional languages as valuable components of

students' cultural identity. Such an approach is consistent with recent studies emphasizing that multilingual educational environments promote intercultural competence, tolerance, and collaborative learning when linguistic diversity is managed effectively (Budiman et al., 2024; Islamiyah et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved only fifteen respondents from a single university, limiting the generalizability of the results to other higher education institutions in Indonesia. Second, the descriptive quantitative approach primarily relied on self-reported questionnaire responses, which may not fully capture actual language practices occurring in natural interactions. Future research is therefore encouraged to employ larger and more diverse samples, integrate qualitative methods such as interviews or classroom observations, and examine additional sociolinguistic variables including code-switching, digital communication practices, and intercultural competence. Such investigations would provide a more comprehensive understanding of language variation and communication adaptation within Indonesia's increasingly multicultural higher education landscape.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Indonesian plays a central role as the primary language for communication and social integration among first-year students in the multicultural environment of Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" East Java. Despite students' diverse linguistic backgrounds, Indonesian effectively facilitates academic interaction and supports their adaptation to university life. At the same time, regional dialects and local languages continue to influence informal communication, reflecting the preservation of cultural identity while occasionally creating communication barriers, particularly in understanding local expressions, humor, and dialect-specific vocabulary.

The findings further demonstrate that students actively employ adaptive communication strategies, including the consistent use of Indonesian, seeking clarification from peers, and gradually learning unfamiliar regional expressions. These strategies contribute to more effective interpersonal communication and promote successful adaptation within a linguistically diverse campus community. Consequently, linguistic diversity should be viewed not merely as a communication challenge but also as an opportunity to foster intercultural understanding and strengthen social cohesion in higher education.

This study contributes to sociolinguistic research by providing empirical evidence on the interaction between language variation and communication adaptation among first-year university students in Indonesia. The findings also offer practical implications for universities to strengthen the use of Indonesian as a common language while simultaneously promoting respect for regional languages as an integral part of Indonesia's cultural heritage. Future research is recommended to involve larger and more diverse samples, apply mixed-methods approaches, and explore additional sociolinguistic dimensions, such as code-switching, multilingual communication, and digital language practices, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of language variation in multicultural higher education.

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