



Speaking Across Cultures: Language Variation and Communication Patterns among Migrant Students in Higher Education

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

17 June 2026

Received in revised form

20 June 2026

Accepted 30 July 2026

Available online 31 July 2026

Keywords:

language variation,
multilingual
communication, migrant
students, social
adaptation, higher
education.

Kata Kunci:

ragam bahasa, komunikasi
multikultural, mahasiswa
rantau, adaptasi sosial,
keberagaman bahasa.

ABSTRACT

Linguistic and cultural diversity among university students creates complex communication dynamics, particularly for internal migrant students who must adapt to new social and linguistic environments. This study aimed to examine language variation among migrant students, identify the factors influencing language choice, and explore the relationship between language use and social adaptation at Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa Timur. A descriptive quantitative approach was employed involving 20 first-year students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using an online questionnaire and analyzed through descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and percentages. The findings revealed that Indonesian was the predominant language used in both academic and social interactions, including communication with classmates (80%), students from different regions (75%), and lecturers (100%). Although regional languages remained important as markers of cultural identity, their use on campus was relatively limited due to the need for more inclusive communication. Shared regional background emerged as the primary factor influencing language choice (52.6%), while differences in language and regional vocabulary represented the most significant communication barriers. Furthermore, appropriate language use was found to strengthen social relationships and facilitate students' social adaptation within a multicultural university environment. These findings highlight the importance of fostering intercultural communication practices to support inclusive and effective communication in higher education.

ABSTRAK

Keberagaman latar belakang budaya dan bahasa mahasiswa di perguruan tinggi menciptakan dinamika komunikasi yang menarik, khususnya bagi mahasiswa rantau yang harus beradaptasi dengan lingkungan sosial dan linguistik yang baru. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis ragam bahasa yang digunakan mahasiswa rantau, mengidentifikasi faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi pemilihan bahasa, serta mengkaji hubungan penggunaan ragam bahasa dengan proses adaptasi sosial di Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa Timur. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif deskriptif dengan melibatkan 20 mahasiswa angkatan 2024 sebagai responden yang dipilih secara purposif. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner daring dan dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif berupa distribusi frekuensi dan persentase. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa bahasa Indonesia menjadi bahasa utama dalam komunikasi akademik maupun sosial, baik ketika berinteraksi dengan teman sejurusan (80%), mahasiswa dari daerah lain (75%), maupun dosen (100%). Meskipun bahasa daerah tetap digunakan sebagai simbol identitas budaya, penggunaannya dalam lingkungan kampus relatif terbatas karena adanya kebutuhan untuk menciptakan komunikasi yang lebih inklusif. Faktor kesamaan daerah asal menjadi penentu utama dalam pemilihan ragam bahasa (52,6%), sedangkan perbedaan bahasa dan kosakata daerah merupakan hambatan komunikasi yang paling dominan. Temuan penelitian juga menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan bahasa yang sesuai dengan konteks berkontribusi terhadap peningkatan hubungan sosial dan mendukung proses adaptasi mahasiswa rantau di lingkungan perguruan tinggi yang multikultural. Penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya pengembangan komunikasi lintas budaya guna menciptakan lingkungan akademik yang lebih inklusif.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental component of human interaction, serving not only as a medium for exchanging information but also as a means of constructing identity, negotiating social relationships, and facilitating participation in multicultural communities. In higher education, linguistic diversity has become increasingly prominent due to the growing mobility of students across regions and countries. Universities now function as multilingual and multicultural spaces where students with different linguistic backgrounds interact daily, requiring them to adapt their communication practices to achieve effective academic and social integration. Previous studies have demonstrated that language choice is influenced by sociocultural contexts, communicative purposes, interlocutor relationships, and identity construction within diverse educational settings (Cenoz & Gorter, 2023; García & Wei, 2021; Holmes & Wilson, 2022). These findings suggest that language variation is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also a reflection of social adaptation and intercultural competence.

Indonesia represents one of the world's most linguistically diverse countries, with more than 700 regional languages coexisting alongside Indonesian as the national language. This multilingual reality creates a unique communicative environment in higher education institutions, particularly for students who migrate from different provinces to pursue their studies. While Indonesian functions as the primary lingua franca in academic settings, regional languages continue to symbolize cultural identity and social belonging. Consequently, students frequently engage in language switching and language mixing depending on communicative contexts, interlocutors, and social objectives (Sneddon, 2021; Lauder, 2020). Such linguistic practices may facilitate social bonding among students from similar cultural backgrounds while simultaneously creating communication barriers for those from different linguistic communities.

Recent research has increasingly examined language variation and multilingual communication in university contexts. Studies have reported that language diversity contributes positively to intercultural interaction, identity negotiation, and academic collaboration, although it may also generate challenges related to mutual understanding, social inclusion, and communication effectiveness (Dovchin, 2022; Zhang & Tsung, 2024; Nurhayati et al., 2023). Similarly, investigations in Indonesian universities have shown that students predominantly use Indonesian for formal communication while employing regional languages in informal interactions to maintain ethnic identity (Ambarwati et al., 2024; Ernawati et al., 2023). However, these studies primarily describe patterns of language use without comprehensively examining how language choice is associated with students' social adaptation, intercultural interaction, and communication experiences in increasingly multicultural campuses.

Despite the growing body of literature on language variation in higher education, several research gaps remain. First, previous studies have largely focused on describing language use or linguistic politeness without exploring the interrelationship between language

choice, social adaptation, and intercultural communication among internal migrant students. Second, empirical evidence concerning first-year students is still limited, even though the transition into university represents a critical period during which students negotiate new linguistic identities and establish social networks. Third, studies conducted in Indonesian higher education rarely investigate the sociolinguistic factors influencing language selection alongside perceived communication barriers and their implications for students' campus integration. Addressing these gaps is essential for understanding how multilingual communication supports inclusive learning environments and strengthens students' academic and social engagement.

This study contributes to the existing literature by examining language variation through the combined perspectives of sociolinguistics and social adaptation within a multicultural university context. Unlike previous studies that primarily describe language preferences, the present research simultaneously investigates language choice, factors influencing linguistic variation, communication barriers, and their relationship with students' adaptation to campus life. Focusing on first-year internal migrant students at Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa Timur provides new empirical evidence regarding multilingual communication practices in Indonesian higher education and offers insights for developing more inclusive language policies and intercultural learning environments.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What language varieties are predominantly used by first-year internal migrant students in academic and social communication at Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa Timur?
2. What sociolinguistic factors influence students' language choice in multicultural campus interactions?
3. How does language variation relate to the social adaptation and communication experiences of internal migrant students in higher education?

2. METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to investigate language variation in the communication practices of internal migrant students at Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa Timur. A descriptive approach was selected because the study sought to systematically describe patterns of language use, identify factors influencing language choice, and examine students' communication experiences within a multicultural campus environment without manipulating any variables. This design is appropriate for exploring naturally occurring linguistic phenomena and describing their distribution across a target population (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa Timur, Indonesia, during the 2024/2025 academic year. The participants consisted of 20 first-year internal migrant students enrolled in various study programs, including Business Administration, Public Administration, Tourism, and Development Economics. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with the following inclusion criteria:

1. They were first-year undergraduate students (Class of 2024).
2. They originated from provinces or regions outside East Java.
3. They had experienced communication and social interaction within the university environment for at least one semester.

These criteria ensured that all participants had sufficient experience adapting to the multilingual and multicultural campus environment.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire developed based on previous studies on sociolinguistics, multilingual communication, and language choice in higher education. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section gathered participants' demographic information, including region of origin, study program, and linguistic background. The second section comprised 14 close-ended items measuring:

- language use in academic and informal communication;
- frequency of regional language use;
- factors influencing language choice;
- communication barriers;
- social adaptation;
- perceived effects of language variation on social relationships.

Responses were measured using multiple-choice categories and frequency scales (e.g., always, often, sometimes, rarely, never). Before distribution, the questionnaire was reviewed by two lecturers with expertise in linguistics and educational research to ensure content validity and clarity of the items.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed electronically via Google Forms through WhatsApp groups of first-year students. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the research and the confidentiality of their responses before completing the survey. Only fully completed questionnaires were included in the analysis, while incomplete responses were excluded to ensure data quality.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques with the assistance of Microsoft Excel. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to describe students' language preferences, communication patterns, factors influencing language choice, and adaptation experiences. The results were subsequently presented in tables and bar charts to facilitate interpretation. The findings were interpreted using sociolinguistic perspectives, particularly theories of language variation, multilingual communication, and social adaptation, to explain how linguistic diversity shapes communication practices among internal migrant students in higher education.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to fundamental research ethics principles. Participation was entirely voluntary, informed consent was obtained before data collection, and respondents' identities remained anonymous throughout the study. The collected data were used exclusively for

academic purposes, and participants were assured that their responses would be treated confidentially and reported only in aggregated form.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A total of **20 first-year internal migrant students** from various study programs at Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa Timur participated in this study. The descriptive analysis presents the distribution of language use, communication preferences, factors influencing language choice, communication barriers, and students' social adaptation within a multicultural campus environment. The results are organized according to the research questions and are presented using frequencies and percentages derived from the questionnaire responses.

Language Use in Academic and Social Communication

The findings indicate that Indonesian is the dominant language used in both academic and interpersonal communication among first-year internal migrant students. When communicating with classmates from the same study program, 80% of respondents reported using Indonesian, while 20% used a combination of Indonesian and regional languages or English. None of the respondents relied exclusively on their regional language during these interactions.

Similarly, communication with students from different regions was predominantly conducted in Indonesian. As shown in Table 1, 75% of respondents used Indonesian, 20% employed mixed language practices involving Indonesian and English or regional languages, and only 5% reported using Indonesian combined with regional languages. No respondents communicated solely in their regional language when interacting with peers from different cultural backgrounds. These findings demonstrate that Indonesian functions as the primary lingua franca facilitating communication in multicultural university settings.

Table 1. Language Use in Campus Communication

Communication Context	Category	n	%
Communication with classmates	Indonesian	16	80.0
	Mixed language	4	20.0
	Regional language	0	0.0
Communication with students from other regions	Indonesian	15	75.0
	Mixed language	5	25.0
	Regional language	0	0.0
Communication with lecturers	Indonesian	20	100.0
	Other languages	0	0.0
Formal situations	Indonesian	18	90.0
	Mixed language	2	10.0
	Regional language	0	0.0

In formal academic settings, language use was even more homogeneous. Ninety percent of respondents reported using Indonesian in formal situations, while only 10% occasionally employed mixed language. Furthermore, all respondents (100%) indicated that

Indonesian was the exclusive language used when communicating with lecturers, highlighting its role as the institutional language of higher education.

Regional Language Use and Communication Barriers

Although Indonesian dominated daily communication, regional languages remained important markers of cultural identity. Approximately 65% of respondents stated that they rarely used their regional language when communicating with friends from different regions, whereas 25% reported frequent use and 5% indicated that they always used it. Respondents also acknowledged the importance of maintaining their regional language when interacting with peers from the same geographical background, with 80% considering it occasionally necessary and 20% viewing it as highly necessary.

Regarding communication challenges, 63.2% of respondents sometimes experienced difficulties communicating with peers who did not understand their regional language. Meanwhile, 21.1% had never encountered such difficulties, and 15.8% frequently experienced communication barriers. These findings suggest that linguistic diversity occasionally hinders effective interpersonal communication despite the widespread use of Indonesian.

Further analysis revealed that the primary source of communication difficulties was language differences (50%), followed by regional vocabulary differences (40%), and intonation differences (10%), indicating that linguistic diversity primarily affects lexical comprehension rather than pronunciation.

Table 2. Factors Affecting Language Choice and Communication

Variable	Category	%
Main factor influencing language choice	Same region	52.6
	Similar educational background	31.6
	Same ethnicity	15.8
Main communication barrier	Different language	50.0
	Regional vocabulary	40.0
	Intonation differences	10.0

The findings further indicate that shared regional background (52.6%) was the strongest determinant of language choice, followed by similar educational background (31.6%) and shared ethnicity (15.8%). This suggests that geographical origin exerts a greater influence on students' language preferences than ethnic affiliation alone.

Language Variation and Social Adaptation

The analysis also demonstrates a close relationship between language practices and students' social adaptation. A majority of respondents (65%) believed that appropriate language use positively strengthened social relationships, whereas 30% perceived no significant effect and 5% considered language variation capable of weakening social interaction.

Interestingly, 45% of respondents reported occasionally feeling socially isolated when using their regional language on campus, while 30% experienced such feelings frequently and 25% never felt excluded. These results indicate that although regional languages reinforce cultural identity, they may simultaneously reduce communicative inclusiveness in multilingual settings.

Regarding social adaptation, 50% of respondents considered their adaptation process easy, 40% regarded it as difficult, and 10% perceived it as very easy. None of the respondents reported experiencing very difficult adaptation. These findings indicate that most internal migrant students successfully adjusted to the multicultural campus environment despite linguistic differences.

Overall, the descriptive findings reveal that Indonesian serves as the principal language for academic communication and intercultural interaction among first-year internal migrant students. At the same time, regional languages continue to function as important symbols of identity, while language choice, communication barriers, and social adaptation remain closely interconnected within the multicultural environment of higher education.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Indonesian functions as the primary language of communication among first-year internal migrant students in both academic and social contexts. The overwhelming use of Indonesian when interacting with classmates, students from different regions, and lecturers reflects its role as a national lingua franca that facilitates mutual understanding within linguistically diverse environments. This finding is consistent with sociolinguistic theory, which argues that language choice is strongly influenced by communicative context, interlocutors, and social norms rather than by speakers' native languages (Holmes & Wilson, 2022). In multilingual higher education settings, adopting a common language promotes communicative efficiency while minimizing potential misunderstandings among individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Similar findings have been reported in Indonesian universities, where Indonesian predominates in formal communication despite the continued presence of numerous regional languages (Ambarwati et al., 2024; Ernawati et al., 2023). Therefore, the present findings reinforce the importance of Indonesian as both an academic language and a unifying medium in multicultural campuses.

Although Indonesian dominated daily communication, the findings also indicate that regional languages continue to serve as important markers of cultural identity. Most respondents considered it necessary to use their regional language when communicating with peers from the same geographical background, suggesting that language remains closely associated with emotional attachment, solidarity, and shared cultural experiences. According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), language is a salient symbol through which individuals express group membership and strengthen interpersonal relationships. Recent studies similarly argue that multilingual speakers strategically alternate between languages to negotiate identity and maintain cultural belonging while participating in broader multilingual communities (García & Wei, 2021; Dovchin, 2022). Consequently, regional language use among migrant students should not be interpreted merely as a communication preference but as a meaningful sociocultural practice that preserves cultural identity within a multicultural university environment.

Another significant finding concerns the factors influencing language choice. Shared regional background emerged as the strongest determinant of language selection, exceeding educational background and ethnic similarity. This suggests that geographical proximity provides a stronger basis for linguistic accommodation than broader ethnic affiliation. The finding supports Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 2016), which explains that speakers tend to converge linguistically toward interlocutors with whom they perceive greater social similarity. By adapting their language to people from the same region, students enhance

interpersonal closeness and facilitate smoother communication. Similar observations have been reported in multilingual university contexts, where language convergence strengthens social cohesion and promotes positive interpersonal relationships among students from comparable linguistic backgrounds (Zhang & Tsung, 2024). Therefore, language choice appears to be a socially negotiated strategy rather than a fixed linguistic behavior.

The study further revealed that differences in language and regional vocabulary constitute the principal communication barriers experienced by internal migrant students. Although Indonesian minimizes many communication problems, lexical differences and unfamiliar regional expressions occasionally hinder effective interaction. These findings align with previous studies demonstrating that multilingual environments often generate communication challenges because participants possess unequal linguistic repertoires and varying levels of familiarity with regional expressions (Cenoz & Gorter, 2023; Holmes & Wilson, 2022). Interestingly, intonation differences contributed relatively little to communication difficulties, indicating that semantic understanding rather than pronunciation represents the primary obstacle. This finding emphasizes the importance of developing intercultural communicative competence, enabling students to negotiate meaning and communicate effectively despite linguistic diversity.

An equally important finding is the relationship between language variation and social adaptation. Most respondents believed that appropriate language use strengthened social relationships, while approximately half reported adapting relatively easily to the multicultural campus environment. These findings suggest that language functions not only as a communication tool but also as a mechanism for facilitating social integration and reducing feelings of isolation. Nevertheless, a considerable proportion of students occasionally felt excluded when using their regional language on campus. This phenomenon illustrates the dual nature of language: it reinforces in-group identity while simultaneously creating symbolic boundaries between speakers and non-speakers. Such findings correspond with recent multilingualism research indicating that language simultaneously promotes inclusion within cultural groups and exclusion across linguistic communities (Dovchin, 2022; Zhang & Tsung, 2024). Consequently, universities should encourage inclusive communication practices that recognize linguistic diversity while ensuring that all students can participate equally in academic and social interactions.

Compared with previous studies conducted in Indonesian universities (Ambarwati et al., 2024; Ernawati et al., 2023), this research extends existing knowledge by examining language variation alongside students' social adaptation and communication experiences, rather than merely describing patterns of language use. Previous investigations primarily focused on identifying language preferences or politeness strategies in campus communication. In contrast, the present study demonstrates that language choice is closely associated with students' adaptation to multicultural environments and their ability to establish social relationships. This integrated perspective contributes to sociolinguistic research by illustrating how linguistic practices influence both communication effectiveness and psychosocial adjustment among internal migrant students.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study involved only 20 respondents from a single university, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other higher education contexts. Second, the exclusive reliance on questionnaire data restricted deeper exploration of students' lived communication

experiences. Future research should employ larger and more diverse samples, incorporate qualitative methods such as interviews or focus group discussions, and examine language variation across different universities and cultural regions. A mixed-methods approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how multilingual communication shapes identity, academic engagement, and social adaptation within increasingly diverse higher education environments.

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated language variation among first-year internal migrant students at Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa Timur and examined the factors influencing language choice and its relationship with students' social adaptation in a multicultural campus environment. The findings reveal that Indonesian serves as the dominant language in both academic and social communication, functioning as a common linguistic medium that facilitates effective interaction among students from diverse regional backgrounds. Although regional languages continue to represent important markers of cultural identity, their use is primarily restricted to interactions with peers sharing similar linguistic and geographical backgrounds.

The study further demonstrates that shared regional background is the primary factor influencing language choice, while differences in language and regional vocabulary constitute the most significant communication barriers. Despite these challenges, most participants reported positive social adaptation, indicating that appropriate language use contributes to stronger interpersonal relationships and smoother integration into the university community. These findings suggest that multilingual communication practices play a vital role in fostering inclusive social interaction within higher education institutions characterized by linguistic diversity.

The present study contributes to the sociolinguistic literature by extending the discussion beyond language preference to include the interrelationship between language variation, communication barriers, and social adaptation among internal migrant students. This integrated perspective provides empirical evidence that language choice is not merely a communicative decision but also a social strategy that supports identity negotiation and campus integration in multicultural educational settings.

Nevertheless, this study is limited by its relatively small sample size and focus on a single university, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples across multiple higher education institutions and employ mixed-methods approaches to obtain a deeper understanding of multilingual communication, intercultural competence, and students' adaptation processes. Such studies would provide stronger empirical evidence for developing inclusive language policies and communication strategies that support increasingly diverse university communities.

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