Challenges encountered by newly arrived Thai students when learning Indonesian as a foreign language

Fendy Yogha Pratama[1,2], Andayani[2], Retno Winarni[2], Muhammad Rohmadi[2]
[1]Department of Primary School Teacher Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
[2]Department of Indonesian Language Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to determine the challenges faced by Thai international students when they first came to Indonesia to study Indonesian as a foreign language. There were nine Thai students studying in six different cities in Indonesia were recruited as participants. The thematic analysis revealed two major themes: academic challenges and technological issues. Both made it difficult for Thai students to master the Indonesian language effectively. The condition potentially hinders their academic success when studying in Indonesia. However, the researchers found that despite the language barrier, Thai students still tried to speak Indonesian with Indonesian students and residents. It indicates that Thai students in this study were highly determined, friendly, and open to new cultures. Furthermore, the researchers advise teachers and program organizers to pay attention to these challenges to maximize the learning output.

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Corresponding Author:

Fendy Yogha Pratama
Department of Primary School Teacher Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education,
Universitas Ahmad Dahlan
Kapas St., Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Email: fendy.pratama@pgsd.uad.ac.id; fendy.yogha@student.uns.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education has an incredibly significant impact on the number of students studying abroad. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) data referenced by Kuroda *et al*. [1] showed that Asian students leaving the continent to study tripled from 771,496 in 1999 to 2,328,887 in 2015. On the other hand, the number of non-Asian international students studying in Asia increased from 323,487 to 928,977. This increase indicates that students and educational institutions in Asia are the primary actors in the internationalization of higher education.

Specifically, as one of the big countries in Asia, Thailand also takes a part in this phenomenon. UNESCO reported that 24,458 Thai students studied abroad in 2007. Of these, the United States was the most popular destination for Thai students (37.09%), followed by Australia (19.95%), the United Kingdom (18.55%), Japan (7.04%), Malaysia (3.47%), and other countries (13.90%) [2].

In this case, every international student, especially Thai students, has criteria to determine the country and university of their study destination. Srikantanyoo and Gnoth [3] stated that Thai students consider six aspects in choosing a country and university to study. The six aspects cover academic and supporting facilities, academic staff performance, environmental conditions, the academic reputation of the destination country, and university entry requirements. All these aspects are also used to prepare their study well because studying abroad requires more effort from every prospective student.

As one of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries with a good education system, international students from Thailand choose Indonesia as their study destination. UNESCO presented the data showing that 75 Thai students were enrolled in public and private universities in Indonesia in 2010. This number indicates an increase from 2008, which only amounted to 23 students. This number also places Thailand in third place under Malaysia and Timor Leste as the country of origin for international students in Indonesia that year [2].

Even though they have prepared themselves optimally by considering the various aspects, international students still experience various obstacles when they arrive in their destination country [4], [5]. One of the obstacles experienced is the lack of language skills. Language barriers could reduce the academic success of international students in the destination country [6]. Language skills are also an obstacle for international students from Asia whose first language is not English [7]. Such language barriers eventually make international students have low self-confidence [8] and find it difficult to have a good relationship with local students or residents [9], [10].

A study by Lee et al. [11] revealed that international students carried the ideology of their home country when studying abroad. International students from South Korea who participated in the study admitted that Confucian ideology made them reluctant to communicate or give opinions in classes. It happens because, in Confucian ideology, knowledge must be accepted wholeheartedly without further questioning. This view ultimately made the academic ability of international students tend to be low, especially in their early years of study. International students also face challenges related to finances [12], visas [13], and health insurance when studying abroad [14]. These issues arise especially for international students who study without funding.

Although research on the challenges of international students is overwhelming, studies on Thai students studying in Indonesia are relatively limited [15]. Previous relevant studies only focused on the experiences of Thai students when learning Indonesian online [16], [17]. For this reason, this study aims to find out the challenges faced by international students from Thailand when they first came to Indonesia to learn Indonesian as a foreign language. Holistic knowledge of this topic is expected to help teachers and program managers know what challenges and obstacles may arise so that they can develop more effective learning. Specifically, it ought to answer the following questions: i) what are the obstacles experienced by Thai students when learning Indonesian?; and ii) why do these various obstacles arise?

2.   RESEARCH METHOD

A case study design was applied in this study. The researchers made several criteria to find participants who fit the research objectives [18]. Four criteria were developed in selecting prospective participants in this study: i) The participants were students who had just come to Indonesia for the first time to study; ii) The participants were in Indonesia while learning Indonesian as a foreign language; iii) The participants understood simple Indonesian or at least communicated using English well; iv) All participants represented two genders with the same number or not much different.

The researchers collected prospective informants using snowball sampling [19]. This technique was conducted by utilizing the first participant network to find other potential participants to be interviewed. Initially, the first researcher contacted the first informant who served as chairman of the Thai student association studying in Purwokerto City, Central Java, Indonesia. The researcher asked for information about other Thai students according to predetermined criteria. Based on this information, five Thai students were appointed as potential informants. The first researcher then contacted the five Thai students through a short message application to ensure their willingness to become participants. Eventually, five Thai students (four males and one female) agreed to participate in the study.

The researchers decided to look for other potential participants because the five recruited participants had an unequal number of genders. The first researcher then asked one of the five participants for information about other potential participants. Based on the information obtained, the researcher contacted six Thai students via text messages. Two students refused to participate because they felt that their Indonesian and English were not good enough, so four Thai students (one male and three female) agreed. The final total of all participants from the two recruitment processes was nine people (five men and four women). They came from six cities/four provinces in Indonesia and studied at various levels ranging from bachelor's, master's, to doctoral degrees.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants for 60-90 minutes using Indonesian. Each participant was free to choose to participate in online or offline interviews. All female and one male participant chose online interviews, while four male participants chose offline interviews. Before the interview started, the researchers provided information about the identity of the researchers and the purpose of the interview. The researchers also asked permission to record the interview and notified the participants that the recording was confidential and was only used for research purposes.

Apart from the interviews, the researchers also asked Thai students to draft essays. This essay was used to help researchers confirm statements made by participants that they felt unclear during the interview and help researchers explore other information that the interviewee might feel too personal to say during the interview. The researchers freed the participants to write in Indonesian or Thai. Two of the nine essays collected were written in Thai. The researchers then asked Thai students currently studying for doctoral studies in Indonesia to carry out back-to-back translations to ensure the suitability of the translation results of the essays.

The researchers conducted a thematic analysis [20] to identify emerging themes from the interview transcripts and essays written by Thai students. Each researcher carefully read each interview transcript and essay to become familiar with the data. The researchers then compiled various categories and grouped them into independent themes. All researchers then gathered again to discuss the themes previously compiled independently. The researchers discussed, reviewed, and elaborated on each category and theme that emerged from each researcher until the researchers reached a consensus. The first researcher then compiled the findings and wrote them down as a whole.

Then, the researchers did member-checking to increase the data validity [21]. One of the researchers sent each participant a transcript of the interview results via email. Each participant was asked for opinions to ensure that the interview transcripts submitted represented their experiences and viewpoints.

3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis process raised two broad themes, namely academic challenges and technological issues. Each theme has three subthemes. Each of these themes and subthemes is presented in Table 1. The academic challenge encountered by Thai students was poor language skills. It is understandable because all of them have never studied Indonesian before. Language limitations make it difficult for international students to communicate when communicating both with local native students and with fellow international students [22], [23]. The findings of this study also showed that Thai students had difficulty communicating, both with Indonesian students and with fellow international students.

In addition, the Indonesian language taught in the class was Indonesian in the formal variety. It made it difficult for Thai students to communicate with Indonesian students from other regions because of differences in speech (such as intonation, tempo, and accent). This difference is one of the causes of miscommunication when speaking in a foreign language [24], [25]. Still, even though they learned formal Indonesian in the classroom, Thai students found it difficult to understand formal and specific academic vocabulary because this kind of vocabulary is not commonly used in everyday conversation. Therova [26] suggested providing adequate knowledge of this type of vocabulary so that international students in the countries of study destination can write the assignment and communicate with lecturers more easily.

However, poor language skills did not necessarily make Thai students close themselves off. They still tried to interact using Indonesian outside the classrooms. Thai students also tended to easily get along with other Indonesian students or residents, such as food vendors, security guards, and online motorcycle taxi drivers. This fact contradicts several studies that found that international students found it difficult to get along with students or residents [27], [28].

Thai students who continued to try to talk to Indonesian students and residents despite their language limitations indicated that they had high self-determination. Students with high determination when learning a foreign language have many strategies to improve their language skills [29]. In this case, the researchers think Thai students' willingness to keep trying to interact was their strategy to improve their fluency in Indonesian. These facts reveal that Thai students are friendly and open to new cultures. Thai society also highly values cultural values and is always polite, humble, and relatively relaxed to maintain harmonious interpersonal interactions [30]. Therefore, the researchers think Thai students tried to avoid conflict despite misunderstandings when interacting with Indonesian students and residents.

Moreover, many Thai students used the words 'tense', 'fear of being wrong', and 'hesitating' to describe their experiences speaking Indonesian. Research by Horwitz [31] explained that this feeling arises from the fear of being considered incompetent by the social environment, and language errors when communicating are a sign of someone's incompetence. Negative thoughts like this are the biggest factors that trigger anxiety [32], [33]. Fear of negative evaluations of the surrounding environment also relates to stress and the desire to always be perfect [34]. In this study, the researchers think that Thai students wanted to ask correct and perfect Indonesian questions. However, when students felt they did not have good language skills, they finally gave up their intention to speak [35]. This behavior can potentially impact students' personal and academic aspects [36].

Table 1. Themes and subthemes

Main themes	Subthemes	Participants' responses
Academic challenges	Language ability	Student 2: "*Reading activity was very difficult for me because I had to read slowly. I interpreted the vocabulary one by one and then combined them into sentences. It took time for me to understand the material more slowly. I also did not ask many friends because I did not think my language skills were good. Therefore, I was mostly silent.*" Student 9: "*The first-class activity to do was a practice of listening to the news or dialogs. The vocabulary used by the speaker sometimes sounded strange. I rarely heard that word. It was very academic. What we usually hear is like everyday conversation. Thus, if new vocabulary was spoken in the dialog, it would automatically become difficult for me to understand.*" Student 6: "*My Indonesian was still poor. In everyday language, it was possible, but formal language was exceedingly difficult. If it was a formal language, the vocabulary was very technical and specific to a particular field. My writing was also not good because I rarely wrote using formal vocabulary. I thought all Thai students here were like that too.*" Student 3: "*Talking to Indonesian friends outside of class was difficult. My friend is now from a different island. Some of them are from Kalimantan, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Papua. Their accents are completely different. There is a fast or very loud intonation. Some could not be heard clearly because their way of speaking was different. As fellow international students, we felt we were not good at Indonesian and English. Thus, we tried to speak things as simply as possible, but miscommunication could still occur.*"
	Program issues	Student 3: "*At that time, I was taught by 13 teachers. Apart from the teachers, some master's students were also doing internships. Every day, the teachers changed, and the way of teaching was different. On one day, the class could be very exciting and interesting for me, but on another day, it could be very boring. I also could not get close personally to the teachers and sometimes forgot their names.*" Student 4: "*Different teachers came every day, but the books were the same. Thus, on one day, for example, studying chapter one, page one to page three, another teacher on the next day would continue to page four of the same book, but the way they explained the material was different. Therefore, it was not very clear to me. The program also did not have a dedicated teacher who taught reading or writing. I felt my reading and writing skills were not developing, making me lazy to go to class.*"
	Anxiousness	Student 1: "*When giving a presentation, I felt tense. I worried about whether the idea I was presenting was good. I also lacked pronunciation, so I was afraid that the words I said were not properly pronounced. After the presentation, my friends and teachers would also ask questions, and I might be unable to answer their questions.*" Student 4: "*I felt many doubts if I had to speak Indonesian. Perhaps it was because I feared my language would unconsciously mix with Malay. If instructed to speak directly, I could forget all the vocabulary I had learned. All is lost.*" Student 8: "*If there was something I did not understand, I preferred to be silent. I felt that there were friends who thought, 'Why do you not understand something like this?'*" Student 9: "*I was afraid of being wrong. I was also afraid they would think, 'why are you asking something very easy like this? You asked too much.' Regarding the language problem, I was better because my mother is Indonesian, but I still had doubts when composing words to speak.*"
Technological Issues	Unfamiliarity with technology	Student 6: "*The pandemic arose when I entered the last month of learning Indonesian. All classes turned online, and the learning activity used the Zoom application. I had never used Zoom before. Therefore, I could only enable the camera and turn on the mic like that. It was difficult because I had never studied online. Hence, I also did not know how to utilize it.*" Student 1: "*I did not know how to use Zoom because it was the first time I saw it. The same applied to other applications, such as Google Classroom. The thing that worried me the most was the internet connection. I was afraid that the internet connection would suddenly crash or accidentally turned off so I could not hear the teacher when he was talking. I was also afraid that the internet would turn off during the presentation because it would embarrass me in front of other friends.*" Student 5: "*Sometimes, internet connection becomes a problem when studying online. Apart from that, all online learning conditions were good, but if there is a chance, I think in-person learning is better.*"
	Distraction and decreased motivation	Student 8: "*I felt less focused when studying online. Sometimes, I often check my phone only to check the time. I was so sleepy because you sometimes did not need to take a shower. Just wash your face, and you can go online. Maybe, I was just lazy at the time. I did not commit to focusing when learning online.*" Student 6: "*My motivation when learning Indonesian face-to-face was higher and made me more enthusiastic. I could prepare clothes and pretty make-up if classes were held face-to-face. When classes were online, I did not need to be pretty; I only sat in the room and could not meet friends. I felt bored in the room and only sitting in front of the laptop.*" Student 3: "*I felt like I did not want to study if I encountered obstacles in an online class or found difficult material for me to understand. Then, if I did not have an idea to make a presentation, I did not feel like thinking hard. I found it easier to feel tired and lazy.*"
	Lack of interaction and difficulty working in groups	Student 5: "*My Indonesian learning was done entirely online, so I never met other classmates in person. It made our relationship not too close. I only saw faces and never met face to face. I was too shy only to ask how things were or ask about assignments. Thus, I asked the teacher more.*" Student 8: "*When I was in a group, I felt a burden inside of me. I wanted to help but did not understand much of the material presented. Thus, when I was in a group, I was mostly silent and only watched. The other friends also seemed the same. I felt uncomfortable working in a group because we did not know each other. Working in groups online also required time management and commitment, which not all group members sometimes had.*"

Furthermore, an unexpected finding by the researchers was that Thai students felt that the program was not managed properly. It could be seen from the experience of one student whom 13 teachers taught. This number is very large, and not all of them were professional teachers because some of these teachers were master students who were practicing teaching. Such a program management could make it difficult for the students to learn with a consistent method because each teacher has a different way of teaching. Various statements made by Thai students also indicated that they were unsatisfied with how the program was run. In fact, student satisfaction is closely related to academic achievement [37] and the quality of the learning program [38], so it has the potential to affect their language skills. However, the researchers could not conclude the effectiveness of the program in which the Thai students participated. Thus, further research involving program organizers and teachers needs to be carried out to obtain a more comprehensive overview.

All Thai students who were the participants also had experience learning Indonesian online. Online learning provides an opportunity to use various platforms and applications to facilitate learning. However, these various technologies are sometimes unknown to foreign language learners, so they find it difficult to operate them. Thai students said they had difficulty using the Zoom application, especially in the early days of online learning. This difficulty arose because they were not familiar with the application. Zhou et al. [39] stated that students' unfamiliarity with a learning technology could raise doubts that the technology will be effective and fun to use.

Another Thai student also explained his concern about internet access used when studying online. The student was afraid that the internet he used was suddenly cut off or the laptop utilized had severe technical problems. Even though these technical obstacles had never happened, unfounded fears like this would make a student have negative thoughts that these obstacles may occur one day [40]. It made them feel anxious when studying online.

In addition, some students said they were very easily distracted by other things instead of focusing on learning when the learning was done online. One Thai student often checked his smartphone to check social media or only to check the time. Adler and Benbunan-Fich [41] called this activity a negative self-interruption. This activity is a temporary cessation of focus done intentionally due to physical/mental fatigue, frustration, and distraction. Gupta and Irwin [42] also argued that distractions in online learning, such as those of Thai students, are caused by low motivation. This low motivation is characterized by the emergence of feelings of boredom, frustration, and confusion [11]. In a long term, low motivation can ultimately affect a student's foreign language skills [43], [44].

The researchers argue that low motivation was not the only factor causing distraction. The presence of gadgets near students when learning online could also create distractions. Online learning can reduce teacher supervision so students can easily do other things unrelated to learning, such as operating their gadgets. A study by Thornton [45] found that the presence of a smartphone could reduce a person's focus and ability to perform tasks that require greater attention and cognitive abilities, such as studying, working in an office, and driving. Therefore, they suggested removing the gadget when carrying out various activities that require high concentration.

Thai students also experienced low interaction with other international students in online classes. Many students experienced it when participating in online learning [46], [47]. In addition, students felt they did not know each other very well. This feeling raised doubts in Thai students to ask about the material or only ask how they were. Wut and Xu [48] asserted that lack of interaction is closely related to learning effectiveness. It also has the potential to make group work in online classes ineffective.

Furthermore, Indonesian language classes generally consist of students from different time zones. This time zone difference makes it difficult for group members to coordinate a time to discuss tasks [49]. Therefore, teachers must be able to pay attention to sufficient time and duration when assigning tasks in classes containing students from various countries.

4.   CONCLUSION

This study is one of the few studies that uncovers Thai international students' challenges when they first came to Indonesia to learn Indonesian as a foreign language. Academic challenges and technological issues are the two main themes that emerged from the data analysis. Despite many challenges, Thai students still tried to speak Indonesian when communicating with Indonesian students and residents. It denotes that Thai students had high self-determination and were open to cultural differences. However, this study only recorded the point of view of Thai students with all their subjectivity. The researchers did not test the Indonesian language skills of the Thai students, so various statements by Thai students who thought their language skills were lacking might be biased and were perceptions of themselves. In addition, the researchers realized that the number of respondents in this study was relatively limited as a consequence of the sample collection method. Therefore, further researchers need to use a different sampling method to enable more respondents to emerge and involve teachers and program managers so that their point of view is properly accommodated.

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BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS

Fendy Yogha Pratama 🆔 [8] [SC] ↻ is a doctoral student at Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia. He is also a Lecturer in Primary School Teacher Program at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta. His research focuses on Indonesian as a Foreign Language; reading difficulties; language and literacies; and teaching methods. He can be contacted at email: fendy.pratama@pgsd.uad.ac.id.

Andayani [iD] [g] [SC] [C] is a professor and Head of the Doctoral Programs of Indonesian Language Education at Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia. Her research interest includes Indonesian as a foreign language; teaching methods; teaching materials; and learning evaluation. She can be contacted at email: andayani@staff.uns.ac.id.

Retno Winarni [iD] [g] [SC] [C] is a professor of Indonesian Language Education at the Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia. Her field of specialization, research areas, publication, and presentation cover a wide range of Indonesian language teaching-related aspects. Among these are Indonesian as a foreign language; early childhood education; Indonesian folklore; Indonesian literature; character education; teaching methods. She can be contacted at email: retnowinarni@staff.uns.ac.id.

Muhammad Rohmadi [iD] [g] [SC] [C] received a Doctoral degree from Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia. His current research interest includes Indonesian as a foreign language; pragmatics, sociolinguistics, psychopragmatic; character education, and Indonesian literature. He can be contacted at email: mamad_r76@staff.uns.ac.id.