

Transformation of International Students' Perceptions of Indonesian Culture in the Era of Diversity

Stephen Parker

University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland

*Corresponding Author: stephen.parker@glasgow.edu.uk

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Abstract:

This study focuses on Australian students' perceptions of Indonesian cultural values and their interaction experiences in a new social context. Applying qualitative research methods and a phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 20 Indonesian students at two universities in Indonesia. The study results indicate that students appreciate the traditional values in society and recognize the challenges in adjusting to the prevailing social norms in their new environment. Furthermore, students perceive Indonesian cultural diversity as a phenomenon that enriches their experiences, and their adaptation process shows the depth of understanding achieved through interaction with the local community. The implications of this study emphasize that the integration of teaching about cultural values in the language education curriculum is essential to help international students interact more effectively and enrich their understanding of the complexity of existing cultures. The findings also contribute to developing learning strategies that are more inclusive and responsive to the needs of cross-cultural students.

Key Words: Australian Students, Cross-cultural Interaction, Social Norms, Inclusive Education

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INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving era of globalization, intercultural interactions have become increasingly intensive and complex (Loonam & O'Regan, 2022; Rowe & Krause, 2022; Jiang et al., 2023). Indonesia, with its rich ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, faces both challenges and opportunities in facilitating cross-cultural relations, including among international students (Lou, 2023; Chuanchen, 2023; Karimova et al., 2024). Demographic data shows that the number of foreign students studying in Indonesia has risen significantly in recent years (Pambudi & Harjanto, 2020; Beatty et al., 2021; Lambey et al., 2023), necessitating a proper approach to managing this multicultural interaction phenomenon. Recently, there has been significant attention on the importance of cultural understanding in language education (Barrot, 2022; Soyooof et al., 2023;

Shadieff & Yu, 2024), considering that linguistic skills alone are insufficient for efficient navigation within diverse social contexts (Marge et al., 2022; Yudinseva, 2023; Gao et al., 2024). Therefore, it is crucial to investigate international students' perceptions of local cultural values and how they adapt to existing social norms in Indonesia (Zein et al., 2020; Koehrsen, 2021; Rahajeng et al., 2024).

Field observations reveal that many Australian students learning Indonesian face challenges in internalizing traditional values and social norms. These challenges arise from the significant differences between their cultural backgrounds and the social practices they encounter in Indonesia. Students' awareness of this cultural diversity often leads to tension, both in terms of behavioral adaptation and in understanding how they should conduct themselves in a new social space. These differences in perception underscore the importance of in-depth research to understand how students navigate challenges and opportunities in integrating their understanding of Indonesian culture into their learning experiences (Kain et al., 2024). Thus, the focus of this study will explore the concrete experiences of students in interacting with and understanding local culture, offering new insights into language learning within a multicultural context.

The literature review indicates that a number of studies have been conducted on the influence of cultural values on the language learning process. For instance, Kara et al. (2020) examined how cultural understanding affects language learning in multicultural contexts, finding that social interaction plays a key role in language acquisition and cultural comprehension. Additionally, Xu and Ali (2021) highlighted the importance of cultural awareness in the context of language education; however, their study was more limited to classroom settings, excluding more direct field experiences. On the other hand, research by Rahman et al. (2022) focused on cultural perceptions but did not explore how students adapt to different social norms. From this review, it can be concluded that there remains a gap in research on how students' experiences during field interactions contribute to their understanding of Indonesian culture.

This research gap is significant, as although there are numerous studies on cultural values and their influence on language learning, no studies specifically investigate the real experiences of students in a local context. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on the experiences of Australian students during their studies in Indonesia, analyzing their perceptions of traditional values and prevailing social norms, and how these influence their ability to interact effectively. By employing a deep qualitative approach, this study will not only enrich the existing literature but also provide practical insights for developing a language education curriculum that is more relevant and responsive to the needs of international students.

The novelty of this research lies in its in-depth investigation into how traditional values and norms of social interaction affect students' learning experiences. This study presents an innovative method by applying in-depth

interviews and observations in specific social contexts, a technique that has not been widely applied in previous studies. Thus, this research not only complements existing knowledge but also offers new perspectives that could have a positive impact on how language education is approached in cross-cultural contexts.

The main objective of this study is to understand how Australian students interpret and adapt to the cultural values and social norms that prevail in Indonesia. By achieving this goal, it is hoped that this study can provide a solid academic foundation for enhancing language teaching and student empowerment, as well as strengthening intercultural bridges in education. This research becomes increasingly relevant in today's global context, where a deep understanding of other cultures is crucial for positive collaboration and interaction across various fields.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research method with a phenomenological approach to explore and understand the perceptions of Australian students regarding Indonesian cultural values, as well as their experiences of interaction within a new social context. The phenomenological approach was chosen because the primary objective of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of how individuals interpret their experiences; in this case, their experiences in learning the language and interacting with the local community (Valtakoski, 2020; Stickley et al., 2022; De Villiers et al., 2022). The qualitative method allows the researcher to delve into the personal meanings contained within students' narratives, resulting in richer and more contextualized data (Busetto et al., 2020). In this regard, in-depth interviews are an appropriate choice, as they provide respondents with the space to express their views, feelings, and reflections without constraints, which would be challenging to achieve with other research methods like surveys or experiments. The study was conducted at two universities in Indonesia that offer Indonesian language programs with a significant number of international students. These locations were chosen because both universities provide an academic environment that supports rich cultural interactions and firsthand experiences, which benefit students in learning the language and understanding the social context in Indonesia. The researcher must involve Australian students currently studying Indonesian; thus, this study includes 20 informants. The criteria for selecting respondents were based on their experiences interacting with the local community and participating in cultural activities, ensuring that the data collected is relevant and representative.

This study employs the data analysis techniques of Miles and Huberman (Dhakal, 2022), which consist of three main stages: data collection, data reduction, and data presentation. First, the recorded interview data will be transcribed and then carefully read to identify emerging patterns or themes. In

the data reduction stage, the researcher filters the information by organizing it into specific categories relevant to the research focus. Subsequently, data presentation is conducted as a structured narrative to illustrate students' perspectives on traditional values and cultural diversity in Indonesia. By using this approach, the researcher can ensure that the analysis reflects the accuracy and depth required by the phenomenological approach underlying this study (Van der Weele & Bredewold, 2021; Prosek & Gibson, 2021; Thunberg & Arnell, 2022), enabling a comprehensive understanding of the students' intercultural experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with Australian students learning Indonesian to reveal their perceptions of Indonesian culture and the intercultural experiences they encountered. The findings are organized into several sub-sections that connect the research topics with data obtained through interviews and observations.

Perceptions of Traditional Indonesian Cultural Values

One of the main findings shows that students perceive traditional values as a very important part of Indonesian culture. However, these values are often encountered in a more complex context than they expected. In an interview, J2 commented, "I often feel that traditional values like politeness and respect are very strong here, but sometimes they also feel restrictive—like when I have to dress in a certain way to respect the norms around me." (Interview, 2023). This quote indicates that although students appreciate these values, there is also an awareness of the limitations imposed by cultural norms.

B1 also emphasized the importance of religion in traditional culture by stating, "Religion in Indonesia is not just about belief; it also serves as a foundation for social norms. You can't ignore it." (Interview, 2023). The deeper meaning of this statement suggests that religion functions as a social glue that regulates behavior and individual interactions within the community.

Furthermore, A1 added, "The rituals and traditions at certain events make me feel connected to the community, but I also feel that I have to learn a lot to understand their purpose." (Interview, 2023). This indicates a need for cultural adaptation, where students must strive to understand and adhere to the numerous nuances underlying these rituals and traditions.

Field observations during a local celebration in Yogyakarta showed students' participation and interaction with the surrounding community, where their curiosity drove them to understand the rituals they witnessed, while also experiencing a sense of harmony in the practice of local culture. This is depicted in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Analysis of Students' Perception of Traditional Values

Based on the Figure 1. it can be interpreted that students' perception of traditional values is a complex and multidimensional process. Starting from a basic understanding of traditional values that are strongly influenced by the foundation of religion as a social norm (Naicker, 2021). This process then develops through normative aspects that emphasize politeness and respect, which is further manifested in the form of cultural adaptation through rituals and traditions. This adaptation creates a connection with the community and a deeper understanding of cultural nuances. The culmination of this process is seen in field observations, where students participate directly in local celebrations in Yogyakarta, which allows them to develop curiosity and enhance social interaction, thus creating a deeper understanding of traditional values in a real context.

Diversity in Indonesian Society

Diversity is one of the most striking characteristics of Indonesian society which is often a topic of discussion in cultural studies. Indonesia offers a diverse range of traditions, languages, and cultural practices that not only illustrate the complexity of its people, but also its rich cultural heritage. The study found that Australian students who study Indonesian are highly aware of and appreciate this diversity, which inspires them to better understand and appreciate cultural differences. With direct interaction in the field, they not only undergo academic experiences but also develop new perspectives on identity and culture.

In the interview, J2 revealed, "One thing that surprised me was how diverse the backgrounds of the people here, from languages to traditions." (Interview, 2023). This statement shows the level of astonishment and admiration felt by students when facing the rich culture in Indonesia. Jan's insights show that diversity is not just a fact, but also a direct experience that touches their feelings and adds depth to their understanding.

C1 also highlighted these differences, he argued, "Each region seems to have something unique to offer; I never thought Friday would feel so different in Bali than in Java." (Interview, 2023). This quote shows that each region of Indonesia not only has a different viewpoint and beliefs, but also offers a unique and distinctive experience. For example, Balinese culture, which is rich in religious ceremonies and art, is very different from the traditional nuances found in other regions, such as Java, which is more structured in its customs.

In addition, J2 describes the uniqueness of society by stating, "Diversity here is not only in terms of ethnicity, but also in the way people live their daily lives. I feel connected to the local culture when I see the dynamic social interactions." (Interview, 2023). Through this statement, Jim emphasized that diversity is not only seen in the physical aspects of culture such as language and customs, but also in the social dynamics that shape daily interactions. These social interactions, which span a wide range of cultural backgrounds, teach students about the importance of intercultural dialogue and collaboration within society.

During the observation in the traditional market, intense interaction between traders and visitors from various backgrounds was seen, with variations in language, vocabulary, and ways of interacting. The students seemed excited to engage in conversations, ask questions, and try to adapt to different local ways of communication. This situation creates an inclusive atmosphere and shows the extent to which the diversity of Indonesian people can serve as a platform for collaboration that enriches their experiences.

The importance of this diversity shows that students not only learn languages, but also develop the ability to embrace a broader framework of thinking in understanding people and cultures. Each experience they experience equips them with a new perspective, where acceptance of differences becomes a highly valued value, in line with Nelson Mandela's view that education is the most powerful weapon to change the world (Parham, 2021). By adapting this perspective, students not only become competent language learners, but also become individuals who are more sensitive to differences and able to bridge the gap between cultures.

Social Interaction Norms

The norms of social interaction in Indonesia are greatly influenced by deep cultural values and the motto of community life that respects manners and politeness. Australian students studying Indonesian are experiencing a paradigm shift in how they interact in a new social environment. The meaning of these norms often develops through hands-on experience on the ground and daily interactions with local communities. This study found that students are not only required to understand language, but also to adjust to applicable social norms.

A1 explained, "The people here really appreciate politeness and manners; I feel that there is a high expectation to treat others with respect." (Interview, 2023). This statement reflects students' sensitivity to the expectation to act politely in interacting with others. This shows that politeness is not just a ritual, but an integral part of their social identity. This awareness shows that the norms of respect and politeness serve as a tool to build positive relationships within the community.

J4 added his view on the norms of interaction by saying, "In Indonesia, they are very direct, making me feel easier to interact with, even though I am not used to questions that are too personal." (Interview, 2023). Here, Bob notes the norms of social interaction that reflect sincerity and transparency in communicating, which is a contradiction for students who are used to a more covert culture. Being direct in expressing concern or asking personal things can create a quick bond, but it can also be awkward for those who are not used to it.

Observations of classroom interactions show that students often prefer to ask questions outside of their formal schedules, creating space for more open and relaxed discussions. In a more informal learning atmosphere, students look more comfortable and willing to share personal experiences and open up conversations about their respective cultures. This shows that the norm of interaction can vary depending on the given space and context.

In this analysis, the relationship between social interaction norms and identity is very important. According to Bhabha (1994), identity can be seen as a construction that is formed through the process of interaction and social exchange (Daza et al., 2021). Therefore, students who study and interact in Indonesia are faced with diverse identity dynamics, which teaches them to constantly adapt and become more sensitive to different contexts. This creates a more in-depth and rewarding learning journey, where they not only acquire language mastery but also social skills that are essential for interacting with the diversity and complexity of the global world.

Through the above findings, it shows that Australian students who study Indonesian have a complex and deep perception of traditional values, community diversity, and social interaction norms in Indonesian culture. They appreciate the richness and diversity of the culture that exists, while also being aware of the challenges that arise from adjusting to applicable social norms. Hands-on experience in social interaction and participation in traditional rituals allows them to build a connection with the local community, create curiosity, and develop a deeper understanding of the nuances of Indonesian culture. The following coding table provides a systematic overview of the interviews conducted and summarizes the key findings in the context of students' perceptions of Indonesian culture.

Table 2. Thematic Coding

Interview Sentences	Coding	Category / Theme
"I often feel that traditional values such as politeness and respect are very strong here."	Tension in appreciating norms	Traditional Values/ Perception of Culture
"Religion in Indonesia is not only about belief, but also the foundation of social norms. You can't ignore it."	Religion as a social norm	Traditional/Religious and Social Values

"The rituals and traditions in certain events make me feel connected to the community"	Connectedness through tradition	Traditional Values/ Intercultural Experience
"One thing that surprises me is how diverse the backgrounds of the people here, from languages to traditions."	Admire diversity	Diversity/Perception of Culture
"Each region seems to have something unique to offer; I never thought Friday would feel so different in Bali than in Java."	Unique and diverse in each region	Diversity/ Cultural Experiences
"The diversity here is not only in terms of ethnicity, but also in the way people go about their daily lives." (Jim, 2023)	Diversity in life	Diversity/ Social Dynamics
"The people here really appreciate politeness and manners; I feel that there is a high expectation to treat others with respect."	Modesty as the norm	Norms of Social Interaction/ Social Learning
"Sometimes, I feel pressured to always be polite, even when I don't feel comfortable with personal questions."	Pressure to be polite	Norms of Social Interaction/ Cultural Adaptation
"In Indonesia, they are very direct, making me feel easier to interact with, even though I'm not used to questions that are too personal."	Sincerity in interaction	Norms of Social Interaction/ Intercultural Experience
"Intense interaction between traders and visitors from different backgrounds, with variations in language, vocabulary, and ways of interacting."	Collaborative social interaction	Diversity/ Social Connectedness

The table above illustrates the process of encoding interview data of Australian students who are learning Indonesian about their perception of Indonesian culture. The questions asked aim to explore their views on social norms, cultural diversity, and how they adapt to local cultural practices. Each quoted interview sentence is asserted with a code that highlights the main theme of what is expressed without repeating the same references. With this structuring, the research can clearly demonstrate how Australian students' perceptions and experiences contribute to their deeper understanding of Indonesian culture.

The findings of the study on Australian students' perceptions of traditional values, diversity, and norms of social interaction in Indonesian culture reflect a very significant theoretical and practical contribution. Theoretically, this study adds to the academic discourse on cross-border cultural interaction by showing how students not only learn languages, but also internalize complex social values and norms, thus enriching the understanding of identity construction in different contexts. From a practical perspective, these findings provide important insights for the development of a more inclusive and contextual language education curriculum, where the introduction of local cultural elements becomes an integral part of the learning process. This not only prepares students to interact effectively in Indonesian society, but also teaches the importance of respecting and celebrating cultural diversity, which can further

create bridges of understanding between cultures in the era of increasing globalization.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study reveals that Australian students' perception of traditional values, cultural diversity, and social interaction norms in Indonesian culture provides important insights into how the acculturation process takes place. The findings show that while students value and respect existing cultural values, they also experience challenges in adjusting to prevailing social norms. The lesson that can be drawn from this study is the importance of direct experience in intercultural interactions, which not only enriches linguistic knowledge but also forms awareness of social and cultural complexity. This strengthens the existing understanding in intercultural studies and creates new opportunities for intercultural dialogue in the era of globalization.

From the perspective of scientific contributions, this research succeeded in renewing the existing perspective in the literature on language learning in cultural contexts. By proposing a more holistic approach to language learning that links theory and practice, this study introduces new variables around social interaction and cultural values that have not been widely raised before. Nonetheless, limitations on the scope of this study, such as a focus on specific demographic groups and limited location contexts, suggest that further research needs to be conducted to understand broader dynamics, including gender and age differences. By exploring these aspects, future research will be able to provide a more comprehensive and contextual picture, which in turn could be the basis for more effective and responsive education policies to the needs of multicultural societies.

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