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Beyond Borders: Indonesian as an Emergent Lingua Franca in a Multicultural International Student Dormitory

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Abstract: The internationalization of higher education has increased student mobility, yet language barriers continue to expose international students to loneliness and social isolation, and most evidence on this problem comes from English-speaking host countries. This study examines how Indonesian, acquired largely outside the classroom, emerged as a shared language among international students living with local students in a university dormitory in Medan, Indonesia, and how this process related to their sense of belonging. Using a qualitative reflective case study design, the research involved sixty-two international students from Thailand, Cambodia, Yemen, Sudan, Nigeria, and the United Kingdom and ten local students, from whom fifteen key informants, fourteen international and one local, were purposively drawn. The author, who acted as both an instructor of Indonesian for Foreign Speakers and a daily-life companion, collected data over one academic year through conversational interviews guided by an interview protocol, participant observation recorded with a field-note protocol, and a reflective journal. Data were examined through reflexive thematic analysis that combined deductive codes from intergroup contact, contact zone, third space, and abrogation–appropriation theories with inductive codes emerging from the narratives. The findings reveal four stages: communicative silence driven by practical necessity, Indonesian as linguistically neutral ground, everyday routines as the main learning site, and Indonesian as a marker of shared identity that preserved national identities. The study concludes that a language foreign to all residents can become a co-owned space of belonging, suggesting that language programs and student-affairs units should intentionally design informal, task-based intercultural contact.

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INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education has made student mobility a routine feature of university life, including in Indonesia, where universities increasingly host students from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Behind this growth lies a persistent and under-addressed problem: loneliness and social isolation among international students, often rooted less in geographic distance than in the absence of a shared language. In an early study of 200 international students in Australia, Sawir et al. (2008) found that nearly two-thirds experienced loneliness or isolation, particularly in their first months, and distinguished personal, social, and cultural loneliness, the last arising from the loss of a familiar language and cultural environment. A later systematic review of nineteen Australian studies reported that loneliness and isolation affected roughly three in five participants, alongside elevated anxiety, depression, and psychological distress (Maharaj et al., 2024). In the United Kingdom, language-related communication breakdowns were identified as a central driver of loneliness during students' first months after arrival (Wawera & McCamley, 2020). Reviews spanning the full study cycle and two decades of research show that these difficulties are persistent rather than incidental (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Oduwaye et al., 2023), and a bibliometric review identified language and communication as a distinct and growing strand of research on international students' adaptation (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). Language matters largely through relationships: among more than 1,500 international students in New Zealand, connectedness with host nationals mediated the effect of language proficiency on psychological symptoms (Bethel et al.,

2020). A more recent synthesis of eighty-six studies likewise placed language and communication challenges, social belonging, and housing conditions among the core factors shaping international students' mental well-being (Koirala et al., 2026). Taken together, these studies suggest that linguistic diversity, when it is not accompanied by a genuinely shared communicative resource, can deepen rather than dissolve social fragmentation.

Residential space is one of the settings in which this problem is either reproduced or eased. In a field experiment with randomly assigned first-year roommates in the United States, Shook and Fazio (2008) found that interracial roommate pairs reported lower initial satisfaction but showed improved implicit attitudes and reduced intergroup anxiety over time. In two Singaporean universities, See and Wade (2022) likewise found that housing arrangements integrating international and local students produced better intergroup contact and more positive intergroup attitudes than arrangements that clustered or separated them. A re-evaluation of the contact literature confirmed that contact generally reduces prejudice, while cautioning that rigorous evidence remains thinner for some forms of prejudice and settings (Paluck et al., 2019). Language itself can obstruct contact: local residents in Quebec expressed low perceived threat from international students on most dimensions except linguistic threat, which was associated with less frequent and lower-quality contact (Tekin & Trofimovich, 2024), and international students in Hong Kong were found to navigate paradoxes of intercultural communication that shaped their acculturation outcomes (Yu & Wright, 2024). Sim and Stahl (2025) found that multicultural living-learning communities facilitated informal language learning, roommate mediation, and adjustment support, although outcomes depended on the degree of genuine intercultural respect among residents. From a theoretical angle, Zhou and Pilcher (2019) showed that Bhabha's (1994) notion of a hybrid third space has moved beyond postcolonial literary studies into applied language and intercultural communication research, particularly in contexts where identities and linguistic repertoires are renegotiated through contact. Translanguaging scholarship similarly treats a multilingual speaker's repertoire as one integrated resource rather than as separate, bounded codes (Li, 2018), which directs attention to how learners actually use language beyond the prescriptions of the classroom.

Research on international students in Indonesia, although still limited, points to similar pressures. An ethnographic study of thirty postgraduate international students at Universitas Airlangga showed how students adjusted their communication patterns to the Indonesian cultural context (Bibi & Hamida, 2024), and a narrative inquiry documented how intercultural education shaped international students' ethical and social experiences in Indonesia (Irayanti et al., 2025). Studies of learners of Indonesian report linguistic, cultural, and psychological barriers, including anxiety and low self-efficacy, alongside coping strategies such as interacting with native speakers, engaging with the local community, and seeking peer support (Harjono & Wachyunni, 2026). Thai students, in particular, have been reported to face difficulties on arrival (Pratama, 2024), including at UMSU itself, where earlier work by the author documented both the difficulties and the motivation of Thai BIPA learners (Srikandi, 2022). Notably, peer and community interaction appears in these studies as a coping strategy, but it has seldom been examined as the primary site where a shared language is formed.

Within the pedagogy of Indonesian for Foreign Speakers (*Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing*, hereafter BIPA), research has concentrated on formal instructional settings. Amala and Asteria (2025), in a mixed-methods study of 235 international BIPA learners, found a persistent gap between learners' expectations of communicative, interactive instruction and the practices they experienced. Cenoz and Gorter (2022) argued that pedagogical translanguaging, the planned use of learners' full linguistic repertoire, supports more meaningful acquisition than rigid monolingual instruction, particularly for beginners. Reviews of BIPA methods identify persistent challenges in adapting instruction to learners' needs (Fitria, 2023), and studies of cultural literacy in BIPA emphasize that cross-cultural understanding is inseparable from language proficiency (Tiawati et al., 2024). Nurramdhani et al. (2024) noted that material and technological innovation in BIPA remains largely exploratory and pays limited attention to learners outside the classroom, even though research on language learning beyond the classroom has shown that out-of-class settings are a major, and often underestimated, source of learning (Lai & Zheng, 2018; Reinders & Benson, 2017). Burner (2023) observed that many language teachers remain skeptical of flexible, learner-driven language use even where evidence supports it, while Cinkara and Derinalp (2025)

identified Indonesia as a growing contributor to reflective-practice research in Asia but found studies of informal and residential contexts to be rare.

Three gaps emerge from this body of work. First, research on international-student loneliness and multicultural residence has been conducted largely in Anglophone contexts (Koirala et al., 2026; Maharaj et al., 2024; Sim & Stahl, 2025), and the few studies of non-Anglophone host settings focus on individual adaptation strategies (Gong et al., 2021; Harjono & Wachyunni, 2026), leaving unexamined how a non-English language may function as an emergent lingua franca among the students themselves. Second, BIPA research focuses on classroom instruction (Amala & Asteria, 2025; Nurramdhani et al., 2024), with little attention to how Indonesian is acquired, or fails to be acquired, in unstructured residential settings without a formal language policy. Third, residential contact studies measure changes in attitudes and prejudice (See & Wade, 2022; Shook & Fazio, 2008) but pay little explicit attention to the element that allows contact to occur at all, namely a language that residents share. Relatedly, intergroup contact, contact zone, third space, and postcolonial appropriation frameworks (Allport, 1954; Ashcroft et al., 1989; Bhabha, 1994; Pratt, 1991) are individually well established but have rarely been combined to explain a single case in which a non-hegemonic national language becomes the working language of a multinational and multireligious student community.

These gaps are becoming more pressing as the international profile of Indonesian grows. Indonesian was adopted as an official language of the UNESCO General Conference in November 2023 (Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, 2023), and the BIPA program has been reported to reach more than 170,000 learners across 54 countries (Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, 2024). These developments are part of a deliberate policy to promote Indonesian as an international language (Susanto et al., 2024). The choice of Indonesian as a shared language also has a historical precedent: in the 1928 Youth Pledge (*Sumpah Pemuda*), young nationalists adopted Malay, long a regional lingua franca, as the language of unity, a choice that helped transcend ethnic fragmentation because it did not privilege the first language of any single dominant group (Foulcher, 2000). The same unifying function remains visible today in multi-ethnic communities, where involvement across ethnic lines is linked to awareness of and positive attitudes toward Indonesian as a marker of shared identity (Martono et al., 2022). As Indonesian universities receive more international students, understanding how Indonesian works outside the classroom, not only as a subject of instruction but also as a medium of daily life, becomes important for both language pedagogy and student well-being.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining Indonesian as it is lived rather than as it is taught: an informally acquired shared language among sixty-two international students from six countries who shared a dormitory with local Indonesian students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara (UMSU), Medan, without any formal language policy. The case is read through four complementary lenses. Intergroup contact theory holds that contact reduces prejudice when four conditions are met, namely equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and institutional support (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), yet it tends to treat language as incidental rather than as a precondition of meaningful contact. Contact zone theory describes social spaces where cultures "meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (Pratt, 1991, p. 34), producing transculturation, that is, the selective adoption and adaptation of cultural and linguistic elements by all parties. Third space theory conceptualizes meaning and identity as produced in an in-between space where no single norm dominates (Bhabha, 1994; Zhou & Pilcher, 2019). Abrogation and appropriation describe how speakers reject a single authoritative standard and reshape a language so that it can carry their own experience (Ashcroft et al., 1989). Together, these lenses explain, respectively, the structural conditions, the interactional texture, the identity outcome, and the linguistic mechanism of language emergence.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how Indonesian, functioning outside formal instruction, emerged as a shared communicative and identity-forming resource among linguistically diverse international students, and to examine how this emergence related to their experiences of isolation and belonging. Three research questions guide the study: (1) How did Indonesian emerge and function as an informally acquired shared language among international students with no common first language in a multicultural dormitory? (2) How do intergroup contact, contact zone, third space, and abrogation–appropriation theories illuminate the social and linguistic processes observed? (3) How do students'

accounts indicate that this shared language shaped their experiences of isolation and belonging? The study is expected to contribute evidence from a non-Anglophone setting to research on international student well-being, extend BIPA scholarship beyond the classroom, and offer practical guidance for BIPA instructors and student affairs units in Indonesian universities.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative reflective case study situated within the reflective practice tradition in language teaching (Farrell, 2022; Schön, 1983). A single bounded case, the UMSU international student dormitory, was selected because the study sought an in-depth understanding of a naturally occurring process rather than statistical generalization (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflective practice was appropriate because the author was embedded in the setting as both a BIPA instructor and a daily-life companion to the residents, so that reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action could be recorded systematically as data rather than remaining informal impressions. The research procedure is summarized in Figure 1.

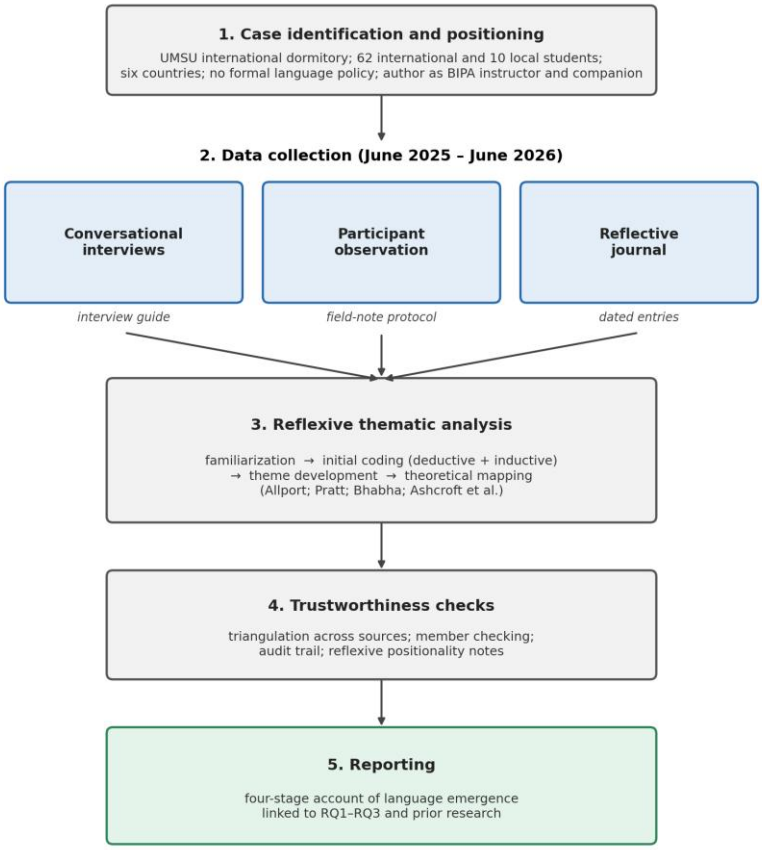


Figure 1. Research procedure

Research Setting and Participants

The dormitory housed sixty-two international students, namely thirty-eight from Thailand, thirteen from Cambodia, seven from Yemen, two from Sudan, one from Nigeria, and one from the United Kingdom, enrolled in seven study programs (Electrical Engineering, Islamic Religious Education, English Language Education, Agriculture, Economics, Accounting, and Primary School Teacher Education), together with ten local Indonesian students. Most international residents had lived in the dormitory since the beginning of their studies and remained there for the full length of their degree, approximately three years, so the dormitory functioned as a long-term living space rather than temporary accommodation. Residents' first

languages included Arabic, Khmer, Thai, Hausa, and English. Most residents began their residence with very limited Indonesian, not all residents understood English, and the university applied no formal language policy in the dormitory; the dominance of Indonesian therefore arose from daily communicative need rather than from institutional regulation. International students attended BIPA classes at levels ranging from beginner to advanced, but most of their daily interaction took place in the dormitory. Data were collected over one academic year, from June 2025 to June 2026.

From the resident population, fifteen key informants were selected purposively: fourteen international students and one local Indonesian student. The selection criteria were (a) representation of each of the six nationalities and of the local residents, (b) residence in the dormitory throughout the data collection period, and (c) willingness to share their experiences in informal conversations. Because Thai students formed most residents, informants were drawn from every nationality rather than in strict proportion, so that the perspectives of smaller groups were not overshadowed. Table 1 presents the profile of residents and key informants, identified only by codes to protect confidentiality.

Table 1. Profile of residents and key informants

Nationality	Residents (n)	Key informants (n)	First language(s)	Code
Thailand	38	6	Thai	TH-01 to TH-06
Cambodia	13	3	Khmer	KH-01 to KH-03
Yemen	7	2	Arabic	YE-01 to YE-02
Sudan	2	1	Arabic	SD-01
Nigeria	1	1	Hausa / English	NG-01
United Kingdom	1	1	English	UK-01
Indonesia (local)	10	1	Indonesian / regional languages	ID-01
Total	72	15		

Researcher Positionality

The author's dual role as instructor and companion provided prolonged access to everyday interaction but also created a potential power asymmetry. To reduce this, participation in conversations for research purposes was voluntary and had no bearing on course assessment, students were informed that they could decline or withdraw at any time, and the author recorded her own assumptions and emotional responses in the reflective journal so that they could be examined during analysis rather than silently shaping it.

Data Collection and Instruments

Table 2. Data sources and instruments

Source	Instrument	Frequency / volume	Purpose
Conversational interviews	Interview protocol (Appendix A)	15 sessions (one per key informant)	Students' own accounts of language use, learning, and belonging
Participant observation	Field-note protocol (Appendix B)	3 observation sessions (FN-01 to FN-03)	Unplanned language events in cooking, chores, and celebrations
Reflective journal	Dated reflective journal	Kept continuously, June 2025 to June 2026	Researcher reflection and audit trail

Three data sources were triangulated, as shown in Table 2. Each key informant participated in one conversational interview, which was informal but guided by an interview protocol containing prompts on first experiences of communication, language choice, learning episodes, and feelings of isolation or belonging (Appendix A). Participant observation was conducted in three sessions and recorded with a field-note protocol capturing the date, setting, participants, language(s) used, the communicative event, and an initial interpretation (Appendix B). The reflective journal was kept continuously throughout the data collection period and documented reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action after notable events (Farrell, 2022; Schön, 1983). Because the conversations took place informally during daily life, most

accounts are reported as close paraphrases recorded in field notes; verbatim wording, where available, is marked with quotation marks. Each account is coded by data source: INT-01 to INT-15 for the fifteen interviews, FN-01 to FN-03 for the field notes of the three observation sessions, and RJ for the reflective journal. Where the nationality of the informant is relevant to the account, the informant code from Table 1 is added after a slash; for example, INT-07/UK-01 denotes the seventh interview, held with the British informant.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) through six phases: familiarization with transcripts and field notes, initial coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. Coding combined a deductive framework derived from the four theoretical lenses (Table 3) with inductive codes that emerged from recurring narrative patterns, such as mutual correction and shared jokes about pronunciation. Coding was carried out manually: transcripts and field notes were read line by line, relevant segments were highlighted and labeled with initial codes in the margins, and the codes were then compiled in a coding matrix that linked each code to its source record, deductive category, and candidate theme. An excerpt of this coding scheme is presented in Table 4. Themes were then organized chronologically into four stages of language emergence because informants consistently described their experiences as progressing over time.

Table 3. Deductive analytical framework

Theoretical lens	Core concept	Deductive codes	RQ
Intergroup contact (Allport, 1954)	Equal status, common goals, cooperation, institutional support	Linguistic equality; joint tasks; absence of a dominant language	RQ1, RQ3
Contact zone (Pratt, 1991)	Transculturation through clash and negotiation	Friction; negotiated meaning; errors treated as humor	RQ1, RQ2
Third space (Bhabha, 1994; Zhou & Pilcher, 2019)	Hybrid, in-between identity production	Hybrid forms; negotiation with local students; preserved national identity	RQ2, RQ3
Abrogation and appropriation (Ashcroft et al., 1989)	Rejection of a single norm; reshaping the language	Non-standard vocabulary; in-group greetings; ownership of language	RQ1, RQ2

Table 4. Excerpt of the manual coding scheme

Initial code (inductive)	Deductive category (Table 3)	Source record	Theme
Gesture-based communication; emotional fatigue	Friction (contact zone)	INT-02	Stage 1
First-language clustering; uneven English proficiency	Absence of a dominant language (contact)	FN-01	Stage 1
Native-speaker restraint	Linguistic equality (contact)	INT-07/UK-01	Stage 1
Inferiority when using English; same starting point	Linguistic equality (contact)	INT-04; INT-09	Stage 2
Error as humor; imitation as intimacy	Errors treated as humor (contact zone)	FN-02; INT-11	Stage 2
Kitchen vocabulary; recipe exchange	Joint tasks (contact); non-standard vocabulary (appropriation)	FN-03; INT-13	Stage 3
Learning not perceived as learning	Joint tasks (contact)	INT-05; RJ	Stage 3
Repurposed address terms (bang, kak); inner language	In-group greetings; ownership (appropriation)	INT-14; FN-03	Stage 4
Preserved national identity; language as meeting space	Preserved national identity (third space)	INT-03/YE-02; INT-10/NG-01; RJ	Stage 4

Trustworthiness and Research Ethics

Trustworthiness followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was supported primarily by prolonged engagement over the twelve-month data collection period and by triangulation across interviews, participant observation, and the reflective journal. Triangulation was carried out theme by theme: each stage was compared across the three sources, and points of convergence, complementarity, or divergence were recorded (Table 5). A limited member check was also conducted after the analysis was completed, as reported in the subsection "Triangulation and Member Checking". Transferability was supported by a thick description of the setting. Dependability was maintained through dated field documentation that forms an audit trail, and confirmability was maintained through explicit acknowledgment of the author's dual role and by anchoring each theme in documented accounts rather than in researcher inference alone. All informants gave oral informed consent after the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the use of pseudonymous codes had been explained to them. Pseudonymous codes are used throughout, and the study was approved by the Indonesian Language for Foreigners Institute (Lembaga BIPA) of Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis produced four themes that informants described as successive stages in the emergence of Indonesian as their shared language. Each stage is presented with representative accounts from the data, followed by a triangulation matrix in Table 5, a synthesis in Table 6, and a theoretical discussion.

Stage 1: From Silence to Necessity

In the first weeks of cohabitation, communication among residents was largely limited to gestures, smiles, and disconnected fragments of vocabulary. English did not function as a reliable bridge because proficiency varied sharply across the six nationalities, and several residents reported speaking only their first languages with compatriots. The accounts show that the need for a neutral shared language did not arise from ideology but from the most practical questions of cohabitation: who switches off the lights, whose turn it is to cook, and where shared items are kept.

> *Account 1 [INT-02]: One student recalled that in the first days they could only point at objects and nod to make sure a roommate from another country understood, an experience described as emotionally exhausting because even asking for help required great effort.*

> *Account 2 [FN-01; INT-07/UK-01]: Students from Yemen and Sudan tended to speak Arabic among themselves, Cambodian and Thai students reported limited exposure to English, and the British student described having to hold back so as not to dominate conversations as a native speaker of English.*

The interview accounts were corroborated by the first observation session (FN-01), which recorded residents speaking their first languages within national groups during shared activities.

Stage 2: Indonesian as Neutral Ground

Informants repeatedly expressed the awareness that, because Indonesian was foreign to all international residents, no group held linguistic superiority over another. Several noted that this equality made them more willing to try speaking, since no one had to feel embarrassed in front of a native speaker of a dominant language. Mispronunciations and grammatical errors became a source of shared amusement rather than shame, reflecting an unwritten agreement that mistakes were part of communal life.

> *Account 3 [INT-04; INT-09]: Several students said that using English in the early period had, without their realizing it, placed some of them in a position of inferiority, whereas Indonesian put every resident at the same starting point: all were learning, and all mispronounced words.*

Account 4 [FN-02; INT-11]: Mispronunciations of similar-sounding everyday words and misplaced affixes became a source of warm jokes; some students admitted deliberately imitating a friend's mispronunciation as a sign of closeness.

The second observation session (FN-02) showed that the shared laughter described in the interviews also occurred in real-time interaction, which suggests that it was not only a retrospective framing by informants.

Stage 3: Everyday Life as a Classroom

When asked how they had progressed without formal instruction, informants most often pointed to routine dormitory activities, including rotating cooking duty, shared cleaning, religious and cultural celebrations, and watching sports matches together, as the real site of language learning. By their own account, vocabulary tied to concrete needs, such as kitchen terms, turn-taking phrases, and expressions of apology and gratitude, was acquired more readily and retained longer than vocabulary encountered in class.

Account 5 [FN-03; INT-13]: During the rotating cooking duty, students from different countries taught one another the Indonesian names of ingredients and cooking methods while exchanging recipes from home; by their account, kitchen vocabulary became the Indonesian vocabulary they mastered fastest, much faster than vocabulary learned in class.

Account 6 [INT-05; RJ]: Students did not experience this process as studying; it blended into the rhythm of daily life, and they recognized it as learning only when asked to look back and describe how their Indonesian had developed.

The interview claims about kitchen vocabulary (INT-13) were observed directly during cooking duty (FN-03), while the reflective journal (RJ) helps explain why informants rarely described this process as learning until they were asked to reflect on it.

Stage 4: Language as Shared Identity

In later conversations, informants described Indonesian not only as a functional tool but also as a marker of collective identity, visible in how they greeted one another, joked, and resolved minor friction. This shared identity did not erase national identity: a Yemeni student remained Yemeni and a Nigerian student remained Nigerian, while Indonesian became the common space in which these identities met and were expressed to one another.

Account 7 [INT-14; FN-03]: Several students began using Indonesian address terms heard around the campus, such as bang *(older brother) and* kak *(older sibling), as affectionate forms for fellow residents regardless of nationality, describing these habits as an "inner language" whose full meaning only fellow residents understood.*

Account 8 [INT-03/YE-02; INT-10/NG-01; RJ]: A Yemeni student continued to identify as Yemeni and a Nigerian student as Nigerian, while both described Indonesian as the shared space in which their identities could meet on equal terms.

The cross-national use of bang and kak was both reported in the interviews (INT-14) and recorded in observation (FN-03), and the reflective journal (RJ) documented how national identities remained visible alongside this shared register, so the claim of an in-group register rests on reported as well as observed use.

Triangulation and Member Checking

To make the credibility procedures visible, Table 5 shows how the three data sources contributed to each stage. Every stage was supported by at least two of the three sources. Stages 1 to 3 were largely convergent across sources, whereas Stage 4 drew on complementary evidence: interviews explained what the shared address terms meant to residents, and observation confirmed that the terms were actually used across nationalities.

Table 5. Triangulation of data sources by stage

Stage	Interviews (INT)	Participant observation (FN)	Reflective journal (RJ)	Triangulation outcome
1. Silence to necessity	INT-02: gesture-based communication felt exhausting; INT-07/UK-01: holding back English to avoid dominating	FN-01: Arabic used within the Yemeni and Sudanese group; limited English among Thai and Cambodian residents	—	Convergent: no existing language served the whole group
2. Neutral ground	INT-04, INT-09: English placed some residents in an inferior position; INT-11: imitating a friend's error as closeness	FN-02: errors in similar-sounding words and affixes met with shared laughter rather than correction	—	Convergent on equal status; observation shows the humor in real-time interaction
3. Everyday classroom	INT-13: kitchen vocabulary learned fastest; INT-05: learning not perceived as learning	FN-03: ingredient and cooking terms taught across nationalities during cooking duty	Learning recognized only in retrospect	Convergent; RJ explains why learning was under-reported in interviews
4. Shared identity	INT-14: bang and kak as an "inner language"; INT-03/YE-02, INT-10/NG-01: national identity kept	FN-03: bang and kak used across nationalities	Indonesian as a meeting space for national identities	Complementary: interviews give meaning, observation confirms use

A limited member check was conducted after the analysis had been completed. At the end of September 2026, a summary of the four stages and their interpretations was sent via WhatsApp to one key informant who had graduated by then and was therefore no longer in a course relationship with the author. The informant confirmed that the four stages and their sequence reflected their experience of dormitory life and proposed no corrections or additions. Because this check involved only one informant and yielded confirmation rather than refinement, it is treated as supporting evidence; the interpretations rest primarily on the convergence of sources shown in Table 5, and the limited scope of member checking is acknowledged in the Limitations section.

Table 6. Summary of findings and theoretical interpretation

Stage	Key finding	Main evidence	Theoretical interpretation	RQ
1. Silence to necessity	Gesture-based communication; English fails as a bridge; need for a neutral language arises from daily tasks	Accounts 1–2	Early contact zone (Pratt, 1991)	RQ1, RQ3
2. Neutral ground	Linguistic equal status; errors become shared jokes rather than shame	Accounts 3–4	Equal status (Allport, 1954); transculturation (Pratt, 1991)	RQ1, RQ2
3. Everyday classroom	Vocabulary grows from lived activity rather than syllabus	Accounts 5–6	Common goals and cooperation (Allport, 1954); appropriation (Ashcroft et al., 1989)	RQ1, RQ2
4. Shared identity	Distinctive greetings and habits mark group identity; national identities preserved	Accounts 7–8	Third space (Bhabha, 1994); appropriation (Ashcroft et al., 1989)	RQ2, RQ3

Figure 2 integrates these stages with the four theoretical lenses and the problem that motivated the study. The following sections discuss each relationship in turn.

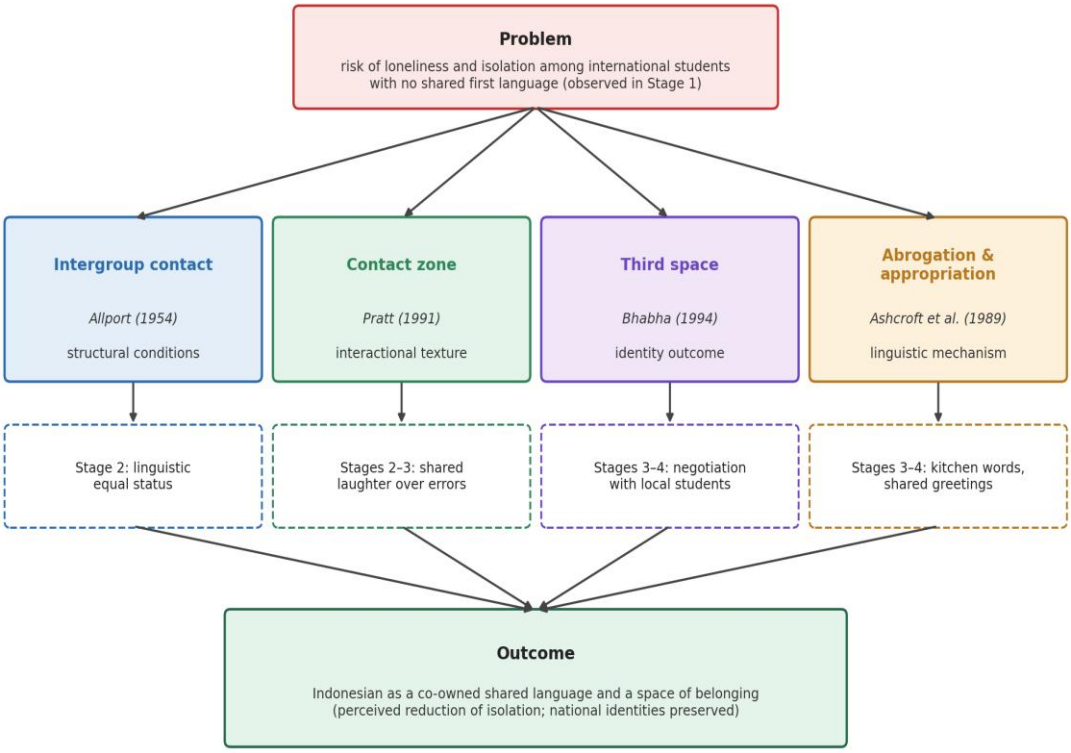


Figure 2. Conceptual model linking the problem, theoretical lenses, findings, and outcome

Shared Language as the Precondition for Intergroup Contact

Read through intergroup contact theory, the dormitory case suggests that language is not merely one element accompanying Allport's (1954) four conditions but the precondition that allows them to operate. The equal status described in Stage 2, where no party felt linguistically superior, was possible because Indonesian was jointly learned and jointly owned. Without it, equal status and cooperation would have remained formal features of co-residence rather than lived features of interaction. This reading extends meta-analytic evidence that contact reduces prejudice (Paluck et al., 2019; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) by specifying a linguistic mechanism through which contact becomes meaningful. It also offers a counterpoint to findings that language can act as a perceived threat that suppresses contact (Tekin & Trofimovich, 2024): where the shared language belongs to no group among the international residents, it is less likely to be experienced as a threat and more likely to become common ground. The presence of a British resident adds an important nuance: although English was the first language of at least one resident, the community did not converge on English, because uneven proficiency would have reproduced a hierarchy. The British student's account of consciously holding back in English (Account 2) shows that the choice of Indonesian also meant relinquishing the one linguistic advantage present in the group, which strengthens the equal-status interpretation. This also refines the residential contact findings of Shook and Fazio (2008) and See and Wade (2022): integrated living improves intergroup relations, but the present case suggests that a shared, non-dominant language is one mechanism through which such improvement takes place.

Friction and Error as Transculturation

From the perspective of contact zone theory (Pratt, 1991), cooking together, sharing chores, and correcting one another's language without embarrassment, as reported in Stages 2 and 3, are concrete instances of transculturation, a process of mutual selection and adaptation born of friction rather than initial sameness. The shared laughter over mispronunciation, and even the deliberate imitation of a friend's errors as a sign of closeness (Account 4), was not evidence of communicative failure but a sign that the contact zone was working: a space of both friction and learning. This finding reframes error, which formal BIPA instruction often treats as something to be corrected, as a social resource that lowers anxiety

and sustains participation. The prominence of cooking and chores as learning sites in Stage 3 is consistent with research showing that learning beyond the classroom is shaped by the settings and purposes of learners' everyday lives (Reinders & Benson, 2017), and with evidence from immersive programs such as English camps, where students perceived informal, sustained interaction as strengthening their communicative competence (Al Fauzi et al., 2026).

Dormitory Indonesian as a Co-Owned Third Space

Through third space theory (Bhabha, 1994) and the concept of abrogation and appropriation (Ashcroft et al., 1989), the Indonesian that emerged in the dormitory is best understood not as a replica of classroom-standard Indonesian but as a variety appropriated by its speakers, reshaped through kitchen vocabulary, address terms such as *bang* and *kak* repurposed across nationalities, and habits arising from communal life (Accounts 5 and 7). The presence of local Indonesian students adds a further layer: Indonesian in this space was neither detached from its native speakers nor fully possessed by them, but was continuously negotiated between both groups. The dormitory thus functioned as a third space in a literal sense, an in-between setting where different national identities, including Indonesian identity itself, met and reshaped meaning. This observation is consistent with translanguaging accounts in which speakers draw on their whole repertoire to make meaning (Li, 2018), and it mirrors, on an international scale, the role of Indonesian as a shared identity marker in multi-ethnic Indonesian communities (Martono et al., 2022).

From Isolation Risk to Belonging

Returning to the problem that motivated the study, the findings indicate that a language can shift from a potential source of isolation to a bridge of belonging. Stage 1 confirms that the risk of isolation was real, with awkward early weeks, fragmented communication, and an urgent need for a common language, echoing the anxiety and low self-efficacy reported by other learners of Indonesian (Harjono & Wachyunni, 2026). Stages 2 to 4, however, show that this risk did not culminate in estrangement but became an opportunity to build a collective identity. The presence of local students is important here: because host national connectedness mediates the link between language and psychological adjustment (Bethel et al., 2020), the dormitory offered not only a shared language but also daily access to host nationals through that language. In terms of the cultural loneliness described by Sawir et al. (2008), the loss of a familiar linguistic environment was partly compensated not by recovering the first language but by co-creating a new shared one. Because loneliness was not measured with a validated instrument, this conclusion rests on informants' perceptions rather than on measured change; nevertheless, the accounts provide micro-level evidence that isolation is not an inevitable consequence of diversity itself but is closely tied to the absence of a shared space and a shared language through which diversity can be lived.

Interpreting the Mechanisms of Emergence

Beyond confirming that a shared language emerged, the accounts allow a closer interpretation of why Indonesian, rather than English or the numerically dominant Thai, became the working language of the dormitory. Three conditions appear to have operated together. The first is relational neutrality. Indonesian was foreign to every international resident, but it was the everyday language of the ten local students. Its neutrality was therefore not absolute but relational: it was neutral among the international residents and, at the same time, connected them to the host community. This double character matters. English offered access to some residents while placing others at a disadvantage (Accounts 2 and 3), whereas Indonesian offered both a level starting point and a route into the surrounding social world, which helps explain why it was adopted rather than merely tolerated. The second condition is balance at the level of interaction rather than at the level of the population. Thai students formed more than half of the residents, and their language could, in principle, have become the in-group code of the dormitory. The accounts indicate instead that first languages remained languages of compatriot talk, while shared tasks such as the rotating cooking duty brought students of different nationalities together and required a code that every participant could use (Account 5). Numerical dominance did not translate into linguistic dominance because the activities that structured daily life were multinational. The third condition is the absence of a formal language rule. Because no institutional policy prescribed Indonesian, its use was

experienced as a collective choice rather than an obligation, and this sense of choice appears to underpin the ownership described in Stage 4.

A second interpretive point concerns the affective dimension of learning. Learners of Indonesian commonly report anxiety and low self-efficacy (Harjono & Wachyunni, 2026), and the first weeks of cohabitation in this study were described as emotionally exhausting (Account 1). What changed in Stage 2 was not primarily the residents' proficiency but the social meaning of error. When everyone mispronounced words and laughter was shared rather than directed at an individual, error ceased to signal personal inadequacy and became evidence of membership in a common learning community (Accounts 3 and 4). In this sense, linguistic equality functioned as an affective condition as much as a structural one: it lowered the cost of speaking, and more speaking produced more opportunities for incidental learning. This interpretation connects the contact and contact zone readings offered above. Equal status, in Allport's (1954) terms, was not a pre-existing feature of the residents' relationship but something produced and maintained through repeated, low-stakes interaction in which errors were tolerated and even enjoyed.

A third point concerns the invisibility of informal learning. Informants recognized their progress as learning only when asked to reflect on it (Account 6). This suggests that much of what residents acquired remained tacit, embedded in routines rather than articulated as knowledge. From the standpoint of reflective practice (Farrell, 2022; Schön, 1983), the conversational interviews themselves acted as a prompt for reflection-on-action, turning implicit experience into explicit understanding for the students as well as for the researcher. Two consequences follow. Informal learning in residential settings is likely to be underestimated if it is assessed only through classroom tests, and structured reflection may be needed to make such learning visible, transferable, and available for further development (Reinders & Benson, 2017).

Finally, the stage model should be read with care. The four stages represent an analytic ordering of informants' retrospective accounts, which consistently described a progression over time and were corroborated by observation where possible (Table 5), rather than fixed phases through which every resident passed at the same pace. Residents who arrive after a shared variety of Indonesian has already formed would enter a community in which the work of Stages 1 and 2 has largely been done, and their experience may therefore be shorter or different in kind. The model is best understood as a description of how a shared language can come into being in a newly formed multicultural community, and of the conditions that sustain it, rather than as a universal sequence.

Positioning the Findings within Prior Research

The findings confirm and extend earlier studies. Consistent with Wawera and McCamley (2020), language was central to early social difficulty, and consistent with Sim and Stahl (2025), shared residence facilitated informal language learning and adjustment. What this study adds is evidence of how a non-hegemonic, non-English language can function as an emergent rather than institutionally imposed lingua franca among students with no common first language, a situation largely absent from the Anglophone-dominated literature synthesized by Koirala et al. (2026). Studies of international students in Indonesia have identified peer and community interaction as a coping strategy (Bibi & Hamida, 2024; Harjono & Wachyunni, 2026); the present case shows that such interaction can go further and produce a shared, co-owned variety of the language. Whereas BIPA scholarship has examined classroom methods (Amala & Asteria, 2025; Fitria, 2023; Nurramdhani et al., 2024), this case documents acquisition that occurred largely outside pedagogical structure, through cooking duties and chores rather than curriculum. It also extends the observation of Zhou and Pilcher (2019) that third space theory continues to expand into new domains by demonstrating its explanatory value in a residential setting. Finally, it responds to the scarcity of reflective research on informal contexts noted by Cinkara and Derinalp (2025).

Implications for Learning Design

For learning design, the findings suggest that the most productive sites of acquisition in the dormitory were tasks with a real purpose, a mixed-nationality group, and a concrete outcome, such as preparing a meal or completing a shared chore. BIPA instructors can deliberately reproduce these features by designing out-of-class tasks around learners' existing routines rather than around simulated classroom

scenarios. A cooking rotation, for instance, can be framed as a task cycle: a brief pre-task in class introducing ingredient names, quantities, and turn-taking expressions; the task itself in the dormitory kitchen; and a short post-task reflection in which learners report new expressions and misunderstandings. Such a cycle extends the logic of pedagogical translanguaging (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022) beyond the classroom, since learners can draw on their full repertoire during the task while consolidating Indonesian afterward.

The findings also bear on how error is handled. Because shared laughter over mistakes lowered anxiety and sustained participation (Stage 2), instructors may design activities that treat interactional errors as material for collective reflection, for example by inviting learners to bring a memorable misunderstanding from the dormitory to class and to analyze together why it occurred. This turns error from a target of correction into a resource for metalinguistic awareness and intercultural discussion, consistent with the emphasis of BIPA cultural literacy on understanding meaning in context (Tiawati et al., 2024). In addition, the difficult first weeks captured in Stage 1 point to the value of front-loaded support: pairing each newcomer with an experienced resident and a local student, and introducing survival vocabulary for household routines in the first days after arrival, may shorten the period of communicative silence, particularly for groups whose arrival difficulties have already been documented (Pratama, 2024; Srikandi, 2022). Finally, because informal learning tended to remain invisible to learners themselves (Account 6), learning design should include simple reflective tools, such as a weekly language log or a guided reflective journal, through which learners record what they have learned outside class and connect it to classroom work (Farrell, 2022; Lai & Zheng, 2018).

Implications for Curriculum Development

At the level of curriculum, the case suggests that BIPA programs in universities that house international students should recognize out-of-class residential learning as a formal component of the curriculum rather than as an incidental supplement. This could take the form of a structured co-curricular strand that runs alongside classroom instruction, with learning outcomes, activities, and assessment explicitly linked to the main course. The content of such a strand can be graded by proficiency level. At the beginner level, it may focus on the vocabulary and functions of daily cohabitation, such as household routines, requests, apologies, and expressions of gratitude, which informants reported acquiring most readily. At the intermediate level, it may move toward negotiating shared responsibilities, resolving minor conflicts, and participating in religious and cultural celebrations. At the advanced level, it may engage learners in reflecting on identity, mediating between residents from different backgrounds, and analyzing the dormitory variety of Indonesian itself, including the repurposed address terms and in-group expressions described in Stage 4.

Curriculum developers also need to reconsider assessment. If much of the learning occurs informally and remains tacit, classroom tests alone will underestimate learners' communicative competence. Portfolio assessment, reflective journals, and observation-based evaluation of task performance would capture a broader range of what learners can do with Indonesian in real interaction. A curriculum of this kind further requires teacher preparation. Burner (2023) observed that many language teachers remain skeptical of flexible, learner-driven language use, and the present findings suggest that BIPA teacher development programs should include reflective practice (Farrell, 2022) and practical training in designing, facilitating, and assessing learning beyond the classroom (Reinders & Benson, 2017). Finally, because the dormitory variety of Indonesian differed in some respects from classroom-standard Indonesian, curricula should help learners move flexibly between registers, valuing the informal variety as a resource for belonging while ensuring that learners also develop the standard Indonesian required for academic study.

Implications for Educational Policy

At the institutional level, the findings support housing policies that integrate international and local students rather than clustering them by nationality, in line with field evidence that integrated living arrangements improve intergroup relations (See & Wade, 2022). The case adds two further considerations. First, where one national group forms a clear majority, as Thai students did here, the allocation of rooms and shared duties should ensure that daily tasks bring together residents of different nationalities, so that

the practical necessity of a shared language is preserved. Second, local students mattered not only as a source of linguistic input but also as a channel of host national connectedness, which prior research links to better psychological adjustment (Bethel et al., 2020). Institutions may therefore reserve places for local students in international dormitories and prepare them, together with resident assistants, to act as informal intercultural facilitators. Because proximity alone does not guarantee positive outcomes (Sim & Stahl, 2025), such policies should be accompanied by orientation activities that foster intercultural respect.

The case also suggests a cautious approach to language regulation. Indonesian became a co-owned language in the dormitory precisely because its use was not imposed. Institutional policy may therefore be more effective when it creates conditions for a shared language to emerge, such as mixed task groups, shared spaces, and regular communal events, than when it mandates language use through rules. Student well-being strategies could also incorporate language and belonging indicators into the routine monitoring of international students, given the consistent association between language challenges, belonging, and mental well-being documented in prior reviews (Koirala et al., 2026; Maharaj et al., 2024). At the national level, Indonesia's policy of promoting Indonesian as an international language (Susanto et al., 2024), reinforced by its adoption as an official language of the UNESCO General Conference (Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, 2023), has so far concentrated largely on formal instruction. The present case suggests that this policy could also recognize residential and community settings as legitimate sites of BIPA learning, for example by including informal learning components in program standards and by supporting universities that develop integrated residential programs for international students.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, as a single-site reflective case, it relies on one researcher's observations and informants' narrated accounts, most of which were recorded as close paraphrases in field notes rather than verbatim transcripts. Second, the author's dual role as BIPA instructor and daily-life companion may have shaped what students chose to share, despite the safeguards described under Researcher Positionality. Third, observation was limited to three recorded sessions, so the observational evidence is thinner than the interview evidence. Fourth, no validated loneliness or belonging instrument was used; reduced isolation is therefore reported as perceived rather than measured. Fifth, the resident population was uneven, with Thai students forming the majority, and only one local Indonesian student served as a key informant, which limits insight into the host-student perspective. Sixth, member checking was conducted only once, with a single informant, after the analysis had been completed; checking the interpretations with additional informants, and during the analysis, would have strengthened their credibility. In addition, informants described their experiences retrospectively, which may have smoothed the stages into a more coherent progression than residents experienced at the time, and language proficiency, like loneliness, was not measured with a standardized instrument, so growth in Indonesian is likewise reported as perceived. Finally, the case conditions, including six nationalities, the absence of a formal language policy, and extended cohabitation, may not hold in shorter or more homogeneous settings; the findings therefore offer analytic transferability rather than statistical generalizability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Taken together, these limitations mean that the implications for learning design, curriculum development, and educational policy discussed above should be treated as informed propositions to be tested in other settings rather than as established prescriptions.

Recommendations

For future research, studies should compare several dormitories with different national compositions and lengths of stay, combine interviews with validated loneliness and belonging scales, and follow students longitudinally from arrival. Mixed-methods designs that add standardized measures of Indonesian proficiency would allow perceived linguistic growth to be tested against measured change. Audio-recorded naturally occurring interaction would allow closer analysis of how the shared variety forms, including its address terms, borrowings, and translanguaging practices (Li, 2018),, and the inclusion of more local students would capture the host perspective. Research could also examine

whether similar dynamics occur with other non-hegemonic national languages functioning as emergent lingua francas.

For practice, the recommendations follow the three levels discussed above. For learning design, BIPA instructors can build structured, task-based activities into residential life, such as shared cooking duty, community service, and celebrations, and link them to classroom units through pre-task preparation and post-task reflection. For curriculum development, BIPA programs can pilot a co-curricular residential strand graded by proficiency level and assess it through portfolios and reflective journals alongside classroom tests. For educational policy, student-affairs units can house international and local students together and assign mixed-nationality roles in routine tasks during the first weeks after arrival, the period identified as most isolating in Stage 1, while university internationalization offices and national policymakers can treat informal shared-language spaces as part of their well-being strategy and recognize community-based learning within BIPA program standards.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Indonesian, a language foreign to most international residents, became a co-owned medium of daily life and a marker of shared identity in a multicultural dormitory, emerging from practical necessity, linguistic equality, everyday routines, and collective appropriation that preserved national identities. Its central contribution is to position a shared, non-dominant language as a precondition, rather than a by-product, of meaningful intergroup contact. The main implication is that BIPA programs, student-affairs units, and internationalization policies can support both language acquisition and a sense of belonging by deliberately designing informal, task-based, mixed-nationality contact rather than relying on classroom instruction alone. The most important limitation is that the findings come from a single reflective case and rest on perceived rather than measured change, so they offer analytic rather than statistical generalization.

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AI USE STATEMENT

During the preparation and revision of this manuscript, the authors used Claude (Anthropic) to assist in organizing the reviewer comments and drafting revisions in response to them. The AI tool was not used to collect, code, or analyze the data or to generate the findings. All data collection, analysis, and interpretation were carried out by the authors, who reviewed and edited all AI-assisted text and take full responsibility for the content of this manuscript.

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