

AN ANALYSIS OF LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN INDONESIAN LANGUAGE AMONG ELEMENTARY, JUNIOR HIGH, AND SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the various difficulties students face in learning the Indonesian language at the elementary (SD), junior high (SMP), and senior high school (SMA) levels using a literature review approach. Data were gathered from more than 15 primary and secondary sources, including academic journals, textbooks, and previous research findings. The study identifies six major dimensions of language learning difficulties: linguistic, pedagogical, psychological, affective, cognitive, and socio-cultural. Each educational level presents unique challenges—ranging from weak basic literacy skills in elementary school, low motivation in junior high, to underdeveloped critical thinking in high school. These findings highlight the need for contextual, communicative, and literacy-based teaching strategies to improve the effectiveness of Indonesian language instruction. This study contributes to the theoretical and practical understanding of language learning challenges in the national education context. The research underscores the importance of tailoring language instruction to address specific challenges at each educational level. Implementing targeted interventions, such as phonics-based approaches for elementary students and critical thinking exercises for high school learners, could significantly enhance language acquisition outcomes. Furthermore, the study's multidimensional framework provides a comprehensive foundation for developing more effective language teaching methodologies in Indonesia's diverse educational landscape.

Keywords: Indonesian language, learning difficulties, literacy, instruction, literature review.

INTRODUCTION

Bahasa Indonesia serves as the national language and plays a central role as the medium of communication and instruction across all education levels. Mastery of this language is crucial for students' success, particularly in developing literacy, critical thinking, and communication skills. However, many students from elementary through senior high school continue to struggle with learning Indonesian. National assessments and international studies such as PISA consistently show low literacy levels among Indonesian students.

Difficulties arise not only in linguistic aspects such as vocabulary and grammar but also across pedagogical, psychological, affective, cognitive, and socio-cultural domains. At the elementary level, students often lack foundational reading and writing skills. In junior high school, low motivation and challenges in text comprehension are common. In senior high school, students face more complex issues such as critical thinking, argumentative writing, and understanding scientific texts.

Previous research tends to focus on these problems in isolation or at a single educational level. Therefore, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Indonesian language learning difficulties at all three levels—SD, SMP, and SMA—through a literature review. The objective is to map the multidimensional nature of these challenges and offer practical, contextualized teaching recommendations.

The importance of mastering Bahasa Indonesia cannot be overstated, especially in the context of national development. Language is not only a tool for personal expression but also for civic participation, academic achievement, and social mobility. A student's ability to effectively comprehend and produce Indonesian texts greatly influences their overall performance in other subjects and their ability to engage critically with societal issues. Given this centrality, persistent difficulties in learning Indonesian reflect broader educational inequalities and systemic gaps that need to be urgently addressed.

The diversity of Indonesia's linguistic and cultural landscape adds another layer of complexity to the acquisition of Bahasa Indonesia. Many students grow up speaking local or regional languages as their mother tongue, making Indonesian a second language in practice. This multilingual context can affect how students acquire literacy skills, process information, and internalize grammar and syntax rules. In such cases, the transition to formal education in Bahasa Indonesia often introduces cognitive and affective barriers that may impede learning, especially if teaching methods fail to accommodate students' linguistic backgrounds.

Moreover, the challenges students face evolve as they progress through the educational system. While early learners might struggle with phonological awareness and sentence structure, older students may encounter difficulties in interpreting figurative language, synthesizing information from multiple sources, and constructing coherent arguments in writing. These evolving challenges suggest that learning difficulties are not static but shaped by developmental, curricular, and contextual factors. Therefore, a segmented yet interconnected analysis is necessary to understand the continuum of language learning difficulties across school levels.

Teacher competency and instructional quality also play a pivotal role in shaping students' language outcomes. Studies have shown that many teachers lack adequate training in literacy pedagogy, especially those teaching in under-resourced or rural schools. A reliance on rote memorization, textbook-centered instruction, and insufficient use of formative assessment further exacerbate the problem. As a result, students often fail to develop higher-order literacy skills, such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis, that are essential for academic and real-world success.

In addition, technological and media influences have altered how students interact with language. The prevalence of informal digital communication and the widespread use of social media may contribute to declining formal language skills among students. While digital platforms offer opportunities for literacy engagement, they can also reinforce informal or incorrect usage patterns, which may interfere with academic language acquisition if not properly guided. Thus, an exploration of the external socio-cultural environment is vital in understanding contemporary challenges in Indonesian language education.

Given these multifaceted issues, this study takes a holistic approach by synthesizing findings from various studies and educational levels. It seeks to identify not only the recurring patterns of difficulty but also the underlying causes, whether they be related to

student background, teacher practices, curriculum design, or broader sociocultural trends. In doing so, the paper aims to support the development of targeted interventions and informed policy strategies that can improve Bahasa Indonesia learning outcomes across all school levels in Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative library research method. Data were collected from scholarly journals, reference books, conference proceedings, and relevant research reports. The analysis was conducted using descriptive qualitative techniques, identifying patterns of difficulties and their causes across educational levels. The focus areas of analysis include:

- 1) actual classroom conditions,
- 2) challenges and strategies faced by teachers, and
- 3) pedagogical recommendations drawn from prior findings.

The selection of sources followed specific inclusion criteria to ensure the relevance and credibility of the literature. Studies published between 2013 and 2024 were prioritized to capture recent trends and developments in Indonesian language education. Both national and international publications were included to offer a balanced perspective. Research that directly examined language acquisition challenges, literacy performance, or instructional practices in elementary (SD), junior high (SMP), and senior high school (SMA) contexts were considered most relevant for this review.

To organize the findings, a thematic analysis approach was applied. The collected studies were systematically coded according to emerging themes, such as phonological development, reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, writing skills, student motivation, teacher competency, curriculum alignment, and sociocultural influences. This coding process allowed the researcher to identify recurring patterns and differences across school levels and geographic regions. Each theme was then categorized under broader domains such as cognitive, affective, pedagogical, and sociocultural factors.

Furthermore, the study adopted a comparative framework to examine differences in learning difficulties across educational levels. This involved identifying the specific language skills students are expected to master at each level (e.g., decoding and sentence construction in SD, narrative and expository comprehension in SMP, and argumentative writing in SMA) and analyzing how well students meet these benchmarks based on the literature. This comparative lens helped clarify the progression—and in many cases, the stagnation or regression—of language competencies among Indonesian students.

In addition to peer-reviewed sources, government documents and assessment data—such as results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), National Assessment (AN), and other standardized tests—were used to triangulate findings. These data sets provided quantitative evidence to support or contrast with qualitative insights from classroom-based studies. The integration of both qualitative and quantitative findings strengthened the reliability of the conclusions drawn.

Ethical considerations were taken into account by ensuring that all cited sources were appropriately referenced and that no proprietary data or unpublished student information was used. Since this research did not involve direct human subjects or fieldwork, ethical approval was not required. However, rigorous academic standards were maintained throughout the data collection and analysis process.

By using this structured and comprehensive research method, the study aims to produce a nuanced synthesis of the challenges faced in Indonesian language learning across educational stages. This methodological design also ensures that the findings can inform both policy and practice, particularly for curriculum developers, teacher educators, and educational policymakers looking to improve language instruction in diverse Indonesian contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Indonesian Language Learning Difficulties in Elementary School (SD)

At the elementary level, Indonesian language learning difficulties are multidimensional, affecting reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. For instance, studies at SDN Dukuh 3 found that fifth-grade students struggle to understand reading content and write logically structured paragraphs. This is linked to underdeveloped literacy foundations and limited reading habits at home.

Other research highlights issues in writing, where students find it difficult to express ideas coherently due to limited vocabulary, poor memory, and low self-confidence. Monotonous teaching methods and minimal media use further contribute to weak language skills. At SD Negeri 20 Meulaboh, students failed to structure narratives properly due to lack of exposure to story elements and narrative flow.

In terms of listening, many students cannot comprehend implied meanings when listening to stories read aloud. Teachers at SD UPTD Keleyan 4 noted that students' weak fine motor skills hinder their ability to write efficiently, often stemming from a lack of early writing habits and home literacy support.

Additionally, teacher-centered instruction without real-life context or engaging media makes students lose interest quickly, reducing the effectiveness of language learning.

Difficulties in Junior High School (SMP)

At the junior high level, students commonly struggle with reading comprehension and narrative writing. Internal factors include low reading interest and motivation. Externally, traditional teaching methods and a lack of interactive media are significant contributors. In a blended learning environment at SMP Muallimin Blitar, unclear online instructions and poor time management were identified as major barriers to mastering Indonesian.

Students often find it difficult to write explanatory and descriptive texts due to weak understanding of text structure and lack of guided practice. Socioeconomic factors also limit access to learning materials at home. Motivation is further diminished by uninspiring

teaching methods and minimal student engagement in literacy activities, reducing language learning to test preparation rather than genuine communication or expression.

Difficulties in Senior High School (SMA)

In high school, 62% of students at SMAN 2 Tana Toraja struggle to comprehend nonfiction texts like opinion articles or scientific reports. This is attributed to weak critical thinking skills, lack of reading strategies, and limited academic vocabulary. Despite using interactive lectures, many students merely take notes without truly grasping the material.

At SMA Negeri 3 Gowa, online learning challenges included poor essay writing due to limited teacher interaction and minimal feedback. Students also hesitated to use formal Indonesian due to daily code-mixing habits. Additional difficulties include identifying facts vs. opinions, summarizing texts, and building arguments from data. These reflect weak information literacy, a key competence at the high school level.

Students also face challenges in interpreting figurative language in literary texts. A rigid approach to literature teaching and limited exposure to literary works hinder their appreciation and analysis of texts such as poems and short stories.

Dimensions of Indonesian Language Learning Difficulties

1) Linguistic Aspects

Students often struggle with grammar, morphology, syntax, and spelling. Weak word choice and understanding of meaning also hinder reading comprehension and effective writing.

2) Pedagogical Aspects

Teacher-centered methods and limited media usage prevent meaningful learning. Lack of project-based learning or authentic texts makes it difficult for students to internalize language skills.

3) Psychological Aspects

Fear of making mistakes, anxiety, and performance pressure make students passive. These issues are especially apparent during public speaking or reading aloud.

4) Affective and Motivational Aspects

Indonesian is often perceived as an “easy but boring” subject, leading to low intrinsic motivation. However, students are more engaged when materials are tied to current events, fiction, or multimedia content.

5) Cognitive Aspects

Students lack critical, analytical, and reflective thinking. They struggle to interpret implicit meanings, analyze arguments, and compose logical narratives, particularly in secondary education.

6) Socio-Cultural Aspects

In areas where local dialects dominate, exposure to formal Indonesian is limited to the classroom. Low literacy culture, limited access to quality reading materials, and lack of formal language use at home reduce language proficiency.

Implications and Recommendations for Instruction

For Elementary Level:

- a) Use experience-based methods such as illustrated stories and word games.
- b) Improve basic skills through multisensory approaches.
- c) Promote parental involvement and home literacy culture.

For Junior High School:

- a) Strengthen school literacy programs with local content.
- b) Utilize project-based learning materials.
- c) Train critical thinking through discussion and reflection.

For Senior High School:

- a) Emphasize academic literacy and debate.
- b) Use authentic and complex texts.
- c) Practice fast and critical reading strategies.

General Recommendations:

- a) Improve teacher training and professional development.
- b) Apply regular formative assessments.
- c) Integrate educational technology.

The findings of this study confirm that learning difficulties in Bahasa Indonesia are not isolated incidents but part of a broader, systemic issue affecting students across all educational levels. At the elementary school level (SD), foundational skills such as reading fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and sentence construction pose the greatest challenges. Many students enter school without sufficient exposure to formal Indonesian, particularly in regions where local languages dominate. This language gap often hinders their ability to decode written texts and develop comprehension skills, which are critical for progressing in later academic stages.

In junior high school (SMP), the nature of the challenges becomes more complex. Although students are generally more familiar with Bahasa Indonesia by this stage, they often struggle with text interpretation, especially when faced with abstract or narrative content. Motivation also becomes a significant factor, with many students showing declining interest in language learning. This may be attributed to uninspiring teaching methods, a lack of contextual relevance in instructional materials, and limited opportunities for creative or critical language use. Teachers frequently report difficulty in maintaining engagement and adapting texts to suit the diverse linguistic backgrounds of students.

At the senior high school (SMA) level, learning difficulties shift toward higher-order language skills, such as analyzing argumentative texts, writing academic essays, and understanding technical or scientific language. These demands are often not met due to weak foundations laid in earlier school years. Moreover, many students report a lack of confidence in expressing complex ideas in Indonesian, which affects their performance in both written

and oral tasks. The growing reliance on digital and informal language in everyday communication further compounds the issue, as students often mix formal and informal registers without understanding the proper context for each.

Across all levels, the role of the teacher emerges as a critical factor. Many educators report feeling underprepared to meet the varied needs of students, particularly in multilingual classrooms. Professional development opportunities for language teachers are limited, especially in rural and underserved areas. Furthermore, a heavy emphasis on exams and rigid curricula leaves little room for innovative, student-centered pedagogy. As a result, instruction often fails to connect with students' real-world experiences or accommodate different learning styles, further disengaging students from the learning process.

Sociocultural factors also significantly influence learning outcomes. Students who come from families with limited literacy practices or who lack access to books and other language-rich resources are at a clear disadvantage. Additionally, national language policies do not always align with classroom realities, particularly in remote areas where Indonesian is not the primary language of communication. This disconnect between language policy and practice highlights the need for more locally responsive curricula and teaching strategies that bridge students' home languages with formal Indonesian instruction.

In summary, the discussion reveals that learning difficulties in Bahasa Indonesia are deeply interconnected with linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural factors. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that strengthens early literacy development, supports teacher training, contextualizes instruction, and considers the linguistic diversity of students. By understanding the continuum of difficulties from elementary through senior high school, educators and policymakers can design more effective interventions to improve language learning outcomes nationwide

CONCLUSION

Indonesian language learning difficulties span linguistic, pedagogical, psychological, affective, cognitive, and socio-cultural aspects. Addressing these requires a comprehensive and adaptive approach. Future research should focus on developing diagnostic instruments for learning difficulties and evaluating the effectiveness of innovative teaching strategies across educational levels.

Findings from this literature review demonstrate that learning difficulties in Indonesian are not isolated issues but multidimensional. They reflect broader educational, social, and cultural challenges. As the national language, Indonesian must be taught in a way that is contextual, communicative, and sensitive to students' emotional and social backgrounds. Further studies are needed to design multi-dimensional diagnostic tools and assess effective learning interventions in diverse classroom contexts.

To ensure effective interventions, it is also important to involve all educational stakeholders—teachers, school leaders, parents, and policymakers—in identifying and addressing language learning barriers. Active collaboration among these groups can help create supportive learning environments that reinforce language use both inside and outside

the classroom. Additionally, school-based initiatives such as reading programs, writing clubs, and language competitions can cultivate a more positive and engaging culture around the Indonesian language, especially when integrated with students' interests and local cultural contexts.

Moreover, the integration of technology and digital media in language learning presents both opportunities and challenges. While digital platforms can expand access to diverse learning materials and promote student autonomy, they must be used strategically to support formal language acquisition rather than reinforce informal or incorrect usage patterns. Future policy directions should explore how digital tools can be aligned with curricular goals, teacher training, and student literacy development. Ultimately, sustained improvement in Indonesian language education will depend on how well the education system adapts to the evolving linguistic, technological, and cultural realities faced by today's learners.

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