
Investigating the Academic Challenges of International Students: A Case Study at One Higher Education in Jambi

Mukhlash Abrar^{1*}, Sri Wachyunni², Hary Soedarto Harjono³

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify academic challenges experienced by 10 international students studying at one higher education in Jambi. To collect the data, focus group discussion was employed guided by a moderator from the research team. The participants of this study were 10 first-year international students. Going through thematic analysis, researchers identified six academic challenges faced by international students, including lecturers' inability to teach in English, limited support from local friends, lack of staff's proficiency in English, limited material, punctuality in academics, and lack of English proficiency. Considering the encountered challenges, suggestions for university are provided in the paper.

Keywords

Academic challenges, Case study, Higher education, International students

Article History

Received April 20th, 2025

Accepted April 21st, 2025

DOI

10.22437/ijolte.v8i1.43272

^{1,2,3} Universitas Jambi, Jambi, Indonesia
Corresponding Author: mukhlash.abrar@unja.ac.id

Introduction

The internationalization of higher education has been greatly affected by globalization which demands people to learn foreign languages and cultures as well as involve in international activities (Yamada, 2021). The higher education internationalization, by recruiting international students, has led to a growing presence of international students in universities worldwide, including at one higher education in Jambi. This opens the opportunity to gain relations in inter-cultural context, appreciate different cultures, and internationalize the university to be known worldwide.

For international students, coming and moving to another country that has different languages, cultures, and environments, can be quite challenging. According to Hechanova-Alampay et al. (2002) international students are likely to face more challenges in adjusting to the university compared to local students who are also away from home. International students might find themselves in uncomfortable situations due to the differences from their home country. Therefore, they need to adjust themselves quickly and cope with the challenges to succeed academically.

The research on international students has grown significantly in recent years although most studies are conducted in English speaking countries (See Abrar, 2019; Alsulami, 2018; Jackson, 2017; Liu, 2016; Rabia, 2017). In the context of Indonesian university, some studies have been documented. For example, a study by Wachyuni et al., (2023). They focused on exploring comprehensive issues of international students at one university in Jambi, particularly the adjustment challenges they faced and overcoming strategies. Their study results indicate that international students experienced some challenges, including language issues, academic issues, individual issues, and living style of related issues. Their findings also indicated that international students employed several strategies to cope with their challenges, such as self-management and seeking-help strategies.

A different study was conducted by Emehinola and Saripah (2020). They qualitatively investigated international students' adjustment challenges at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia. The results of the study indicated that participants had difficulty adjusting due to language barriers, cultural differences, isolation from classmates, financial and technical problems, and problems with punctuality. Wahyuningsih (2020), in a different study, identified the challenges of international students' adjustment at the University of Pelita Harapan. Her study results

showed that international students experienced some challenges in their adjustment, such as language, weather, food, education system, way of thinking, and social relation. Furthermore, Ali et al., (2020) conducted a study of international students at Universitas Airlangga. They identified that language barrier is the cause of stress among international students. Moreover, Hibatullah (2019) in her qualitative study towards international students at Islamic university in Yogyakarta revealed that the students encountered some challenges during study and living there, including language, motivation, instructional language, and culture. Although the studies above have provided valuable insights on international students' experiences in the Indonesian context, their discussion is limited to adjustment challenges. This present inquiry, on the other hand, tried to fill the gaps by exclusively investigating and identifying academic challenges of international students studying at one higher education in Jambi. Therefore, the research is expected to answer one research question “What are the academic challenges faced by international students at one higher education in Jambi?”

Methods

The aim of this study is to investigate international students' academic experiences studying at one higher education in Jambi. Primarily, this research focused on the exploration of international students' challenges in the context of academic setting. To achieve the aim of the study, the researchers employed a qualitative method. This is a method of enquiry that understands the human experiences, behaviours and interactions in-depth (Abrar, 2024; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Besides, the researchers also used a case study as the approach. A case study is defined as an approach in qualitative research which enables the researcher(s) to holistically understand, explore, and analyze a case or a bounded system (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Therefore, this design was considered appropriate in the context of the study because it facilitated the researchers to provide robust and detailed data and information related to international students' experiences.

Participants

The participants of this research were all the third batch of international students in one higher education in Jambi. The participants came from several countries in the. To be more specific, the participants were three Pakistani, three Zambian, two Yemeni, one Thai and one Egyptian who enrolled at the university in the year 2023. They studied in several

departments, three participants in English Education, two participants in Islamic Economics, two participants in Management, one participant in Agricultural Technology, one participant in Chemistry, and one participant in Animal Science. The information of the participants can be seen in the following table.

Table 1 Research Participants

No	Name Code	Country	Study Program
1	TR	North Africa	English Education
2	SB	South Asia	English Education
3	FC	Southeast Asian	English Education
4	AB	West Asia	Economic Development
5	SH	West Africa	Forestry
6	AR	West Asia	Accountant
7	SK	West Africa	Accountant
8	AS	West Africa	Agricultural Technology
9	UR	South Asia	Animal Science
10	SN	South Asia	Chemistry

Data Collection and Analysis

To collect the data, the researchers used focus group discussion (FGD). FGD is a method of gathering information from participants by asking questions related to the phenomenon of interest with a selected group of people on a particular pre-determined topic (Abrar, 2024; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Basnet, 2018). One of the main reasons for employing FGD in this inquiry was to gain deeper knowledge and understanding regarding the participants' experiences and to give more opportunities for the participants to fully express themselves. Before the FGD, the researchers contacted the participants, international students batch three, to ask about their eagerness to participate in the research. In conducting FGD, the moderator of FGD, one of the researchers, guided the process by asking the questions following-up questions based on the participants' answers when needed. The moderator led the FGD face-to-face in a designated room. The moderator used English as a medium of instruction in conducting FDG with the duration of approximately 45 minutes. During the FGD, the researcher recorded all conversations among the moderator and participants by using a voice recorder.

After collecting the data, the next step was data analysis. In this sense, the researchers used thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) to analyze the data. Braun and Clark (2006) detail six stages in this data analysis, including familiarizing with the data, generating initial coding,

searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. In practice, the researchers started the analysis by listening to the audio recording, transcribed the data, and read the transcription several times. After that, the researchers generated the initial code by highlighting important points with different colours in the transcription. The next step was searching for the themes by reviewing the data, combining similar data, and separating the different ones. After collecting similar data, then the researchers decided on the tentative names for themes and sub-themes. After that, the researchers reviewed the themes by looking at the data one by one and ensuring the data matched the themes. The next process of the analysis was defining and naming the themes. In this step, the researchers reconsidered the appropriate name of the themes by reviewing the whole data. Lastly, the researchers produced the report. The summary of the thematic analysis can be seen in the following figure.

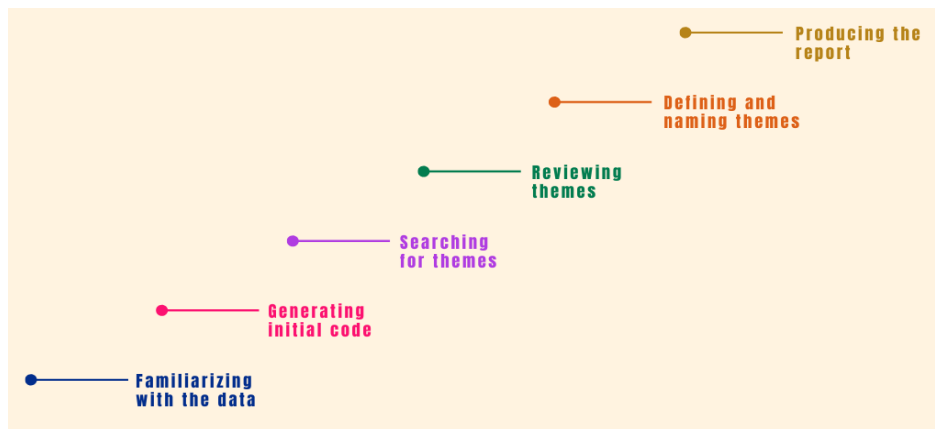


Figure 1 Stages of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark. 2006)

To minimize subjectivity and to ensure trustworthiness of the data, member checking was employed. It is a process of ensuring the data by asking the participants of the research to check the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2012). In doing this, the researchers asked each participant to check the transcription of his/her interview before analyzing the data. Additionally, the researchers complied with research ethics by providing informed consent forms to sign before beginning the process of interview and changing the name of the participants with name code.

Findings and Discussion

Going through thematic analysis, the researchers identified five themes from the data obtained. The themes are mainly related to languages, materials, and support. The following figure summarizes the themes of the findings.

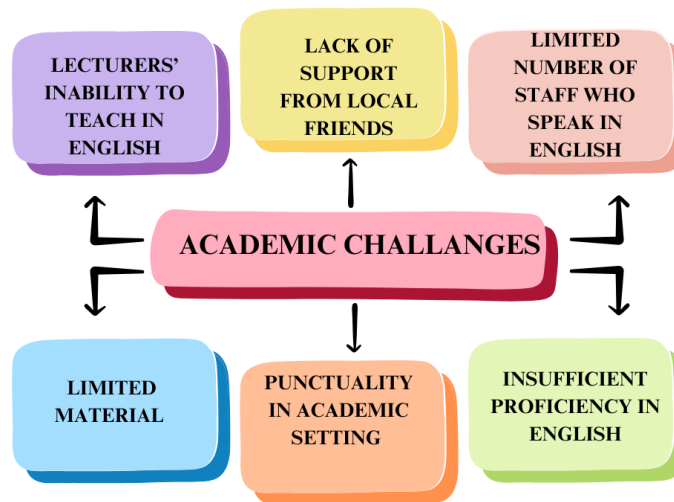


Figure 1 Themes of International Students' Academic Challenges

Lecturers' inability to teach in English

Among the five themes, the theme of lecturers' inability to teach in English is the most mentioned by the participants. Of 10 participants, seven of them acknowledged that studying in class was challenging, especially with the lecturers who have limited English. For instance, AB, explained that some of his lecturers used English only for the greeting because they could not really speak English. He stated,

“I really do not understand some of my lecturers' explanations. They could not really speak English. The use of English is limited to the greeting at the beginning of the class”.

Like, TR explained that some of his lecturers who teach general courses could not speak English and it made him confused with the lesson. He specifically mentioned,

“Frankly speaking, I do not have any difficulty studying in English courses. However, I find it hard to understand the material of general courses. Most lecturers who teach general courses could not speak English”.

With a different case, AR described that their lecturers are mostly the same every semester. Other lecturers are unable to explain in English. He shared,

“The lecturers who teach us are always the same. If new lecturer(s) come, I personally find it challenging to study effectively because most of them cannot teach in English”.

The above transcriptions clearly indicated that English communication in the classroom is pivotal for international students to understand the explanation from the lecturers. For intercultural context, the use of English is important as an attempt to help people achieve better intercultural understanding (Grigoryeva & Zakirova 2022). Lecturers' limited competency in communication and teaching English can be the burden for international students to comprehend the materials and to study effectively. Therefore, the lecturers are required to upgrade their English competency to create a more convenient learning situation. A quite similar with the result of the study, Hibatullah (2019), in her study, reported that international students could not keep up with the lesson due to the lecturers' tendency to using Bahasa Indonesia as a medium of instruction in teaching. Another study from Hapsari and Hamamah (2019) also revealed that lecturers' lack of English proficiency made international students struggling in their academic activities, such as lecturing.

Lack of Support from Local Friends

This theme is the second most mentioned by the international students as their academic challenges. Friend's support refers to an interpersonal process which enables individual, e.g., a student, to get help both information and actions to solve their academic and emotional challenges (Friedlander et al., 2007; Linden-Andersen et al., 2008; Shanti et al., 2021). Therefore, the existence of friend's support is needed for international students. Five participants of this inquiry shared that their classmates are not really supported. This influences their academic exposure as well as motivation to study. For instance, AS told his story during

FGD that his friends stop helping him because of his intensity of asking for help. He commented,

“Most lecturers teach in Bahasa Indonesian in the classroom, and I do not understand the language. I often ask my friend who is sitting next to me about the lecturers’ explanation. At first, he helps me, and he does not want to help me anymore”.

With a similar vein, SH mentioned that some of his classmates are reluctant to answer his questions regarding the lesson. He Shared,

“I sometimes do not understand the lesson because the lecturers dominantly teach in Bahasa Indonesia. I then ask some of my friends in the classroom. They do not really want to answer my questions. If they answer them, their answers are short”.

Meanwhile, AB said that he experienced an unexpected and adverse situation because of the lack of his classmates’ support. He expressed,

“I did not take my mid-test a few days ago because no one told me about it. In fact, all my classmates knew about the schedule of the mid-test, and they came to class. I was the one who did not know the schedule and did not take the mid-test...huff”.

The elaboration of data suggested the importance of friend/peer support for the international students. Its absence causes difficulty for international students in their academic exposure, including understanding the lesson and motivation. Several earlier studies have consistently reported that friend’s support is closely related to academic performance, achievement, and personal development (Buote et al., 2007; Clifton et al., 2004; Ryan, 2001). It is crystal clear that support from friends for learners plays a critical role in promoting academic success, personal development, and well-being.

Limited Number of Staff who Speak English

Another prevalent theme from the data is the limited number of staff who can communicate in English. Related to this, three participants admitted that they find it

challenging to get in touch with the staff due to their lack of English proficiency. To illustrate, SK told his story in FGD that he is reluctant to communicate with the staff in his study program. He said,

“I rarely talk to the staff. They could not really respond to me in English. I know some of them can speak English, but many of them could not”.

Likewise, UR shared that she occasionally asks her friends to accompany her talking with the staff to avoid misunderstanding. She mentioned,

“To do administrative matters, I often ask my friend(s) to accompany me to meet the staff. I just want to avoid misunderstanding because they seem difficult to talk in English”.

The above transcriptions again indicated the importance of English for university staff as a means of communication in an intercultural context. Lack of their English proficiency could cause difficulty for international students in adjusting to academic life. This finding confirms the result of some previous studies (Ali et al., 2020; Hapsari & Hamamah 2019). Their study found out that language is the barrier for them to communicate with staff and adjust their academic life. This emerged because many staff at the university are unable to speak English

Limited Material

The data from the transcription showed that limited material is another issue for international students. Three participants raised this in FDG. One of them, SN, contended that his lecturer(s) did not provide English materials for the class, and this confused him when learning the course. He specifically said,

“I really struggle to understand the materials. The lecturer only provides the references, such as books and journals, in Bahasa Indonesia”.

With a different case, AB, mentioned that the lecturer only gives lesson plan for the semester, not the materials. He commented,

“I take statistics course this semester. You know, the lecturer only gave RPS [lesson plan] before the class. After I read the RPS, I could not find any English references on the list. How can I learn? I did not have a book as a guidance for the course and all references are in Bahasa”.

Meanwhile, one of the participants, SB, tried to be more active whenever she did not get the reference for her study. She mentioned,

“I sometimes find it difficult to study because the lecturer did not provide enough materials. However, I tried to use learning platforms to understand the lesson”.

From the above extracts of transcription, it can be concluded that providing enough and appropriate materials is essential to help international students understand the lesson. Several studies have consistently reported that instructional materials, including textbooks, hands out and other resources to facilitate teaching and enhance learning experience, serve as essential tools in teaching and learning process (Abdulrahman, et al., 2020; Bacia, 2024; Bušljeta, 2013). However, international students can find their needed materials by employing technology and available learning platforms.

Punctuality in Academic Setting

The next theme identified from the data of FGD was punctuality in academic context. For this theme, two participants voiced that punctuality is not a concern for some lecturers. For example, UR highlighted the lateness of the lecturer. She said,

“I feel a bit disappointed with my lecturer(s). Some of them did not really come on time and even canceled the class anytime. This is a matter for me”.

Likewise, SK argued that the habit of late annoys him, and it greatly influences his motivation to learn the lesson. He stated,

“Honestly, I feel annoyed with, I mean the culture of lateness. Some lecturers often come late to the classroom. Because of this, I sometimes feel demotivated to study and start thinking of being late too”.

The data above indicates that the culture of punctuality is indeed important for some international students. The absence of this culture may affect their motivation to learn. Dörnyei (2001) argued that teacher-related components, such as behaviour, personality and culture greatly influence learners' motivation. Therefore, it is necessary for the lecturers to create a convenient academic culture for the learners' academic success. Moreover, this finding aligned with the study result of previous studies on international students in Indonesian context (Emehinola & Saripah, 2020; Wachyuni et al., 2023). They revealed that punctuality issues such as lateness and class cancellation made international students difficult to adjust themselves in academic life.

Insufficient Proficiency in English

The last theme from this study is insufficient proficiency in English. Among 10 participants, only one of them, FC, experienced this issue. This issue makes sense for him because English serves as a foreign language in his country. During FGD, he shared that he could not really keep up with the lesson due to his limited proficiency in English. He commented,

“I can't...speak English well in the classroom. I sometimes do not know what to say because my English is limited. My vocabulary is limited, and my pronunciation is not that good”.

The extract above suggested that language proficiency is important for international students to effectively learn the lesson in English. This challenge is a challenge for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners studying in an English instructional classroom. This finding corroborates some previous studies on EFL students (Hibatullah, 2019; Huwari, 2019; Wahyuningsih, 2020). Their studies highlighted that linguistics factors are one of the main challenges studying English and/or studying in English.

Conclusion Limitation and Implications

This study aimed to identify academic challenges faced by international students studying at one higher education in Jambi. The findings of the study revealed that they experienced some expected and unexpected challenges in their academic life, including lecturers' limited proficiency in teaching English, minimum support from their local friends,

staff's inability to communicate in English, lack of appropriate materials, cultural differences in academic context, and lack of English proficiency.

Although this study comprehensively discussed international students' academic challenges studying in one higher education in Jambi, it is not to say that this study has no limitations. Firstly, this inquiry exclusively explored international students' experiences, and university staff was excluded. Further study can explore university staff experiences dealing with international students. Secondly, this sample of the study is relatively small, particularly with international students. Further researcher(s) can expand the research by increasing the number of participants or involving some universities in Indonesia to provide a more in-depth and comprehensive exploration of the topic.

Moreover, from the above findings, researchers would like to provide some recommendations for the university. It is expected that the university can organize some workshops for lecturers and staff to upgrade their English proficiency. Besides, the university can also maximize the role of study programs to monitor and evaluate the learning process and to facilitate buddy for international students. In addition, the university can organize some training for international students to improve their Indonesian.

References

- Abdulrahman, M. D., Faruk, N., Oloyede, A. A., Surajudeen-Bakinde, N. T., Olawoyin, L. A., Mejabi, O. V., ... & Azeez, A. L. (2020). Multimedia tools in the teaching and learning processes: A systematic review. *Heliyon*, 6(11), e05312.
- Abrar, M. (2024). *Teknik pengumpulan data penelitian kualitatif: Suatu pengantar*. UNJA Publisher.
- Abrar, M. (2019). Re-telling: A narrative inquiry of Indonesian graduate students' speaking experiences in a United Kingdom University. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 8(3), 588-596.
- Ali, S., Yoenanto, N. H., & Nurdibyanandaru, D. (2020). Language barrier is the cause of stress among international students of Universitas Airlangga. *PRASASTI: Journal of Linguistics*, 5(2), 242-256.
- Alsulami, N. D. (2018). The challenges of studying in Australia for Saudis male international students. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, 8(2), 17-28.

- Bacia, M. K. (2024). Role of instructional materials in students' academic performance. *Research invention journal of current research in humanities and social sciences*, 3(2), 24-27.
- Basnet, H. B. (2018). Focus group discussion: a tool for qualitative inquiry. *Researcher: A Research Journal of Culture and Society*, 3(3), 81-88.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Buote, V. M., Pancer, S. M., Pratt, M. W., Adams, G., Birnie-Lefcovitch, S., Polivy, J., & Wintre, M. G. (2007). The importance of friends. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 22(6), 665-689.
- Bušljeta, R. (2013). Effective use of teaching and learning resources. *Czech-polish historical and pedagogical journal*, 5(2), 55-69.
- Clifton, R. A., Perry, R. P., Stubbs, C. A., & Roberts, L. W. (2004). Faculty environments, psychosocial dispositions, and the academic achievement of college students. *Research in Higher Education*, 45(8), 801-828.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Teaching and researching motivation*. Longman.
- Emehinola, T. T., & Saripah, I. (2020). International students adjustment challenges in Indonesia. *Journal of Innovation in Psychology, Education and Didactics*, 24(1), 35-50.
- Friedlander, L. J., Reid, G. J., Shupak, N., & Cribbie, R. (2007). Social support, self-esteem, and stress as predictors of adjustment to university among first-year undergraduates. *Journal of college student development*, 48(3), 259-274.
- Grigoryeva, L. L., & Zakirova, R. R. (2022). The role of English in intercultural communication: Past, modernity and future global perspectives. *TLC Journal*, 6(2), 45-55.
- Hapsari, Y., & Hamamah, H. (2019). International students in Indonesia: A study on academic and socio-cultural adjustment. In *Proceedings of the International Conference on Education and Learning (ICEL)*. <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai> (pp. 23-33).
- Hechanova-Alampay, R., Beehr, T. A., Christiansen, N. D., & Van Horn, R. K. (2002). Adjustment and strain among domestic and international student sojourners: A longitudinal study. *School Psychology International*, 23(4), 458-474.

- Hibatullah, O. F. (2019). The challenges of international EFL students to learn English in a non-English speaking country. *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching & Learning*, 4(2), 88-105.
- Huwari, I. F. (2019). Problems faced by Jordanian undergraduate students in speaking English. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, 8(9), 203-217.
- Jackson, D. (2017). Exploring the challenges experienced by international students during work-integrated learning in Australia. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 37(3), 344-359.
- Linden-Andersen, S., Markiewicz, D., & Doyle, A. B. (2009). Perceived similarity among adolescent friends: The role of reciprocity, friendship quality, and gender. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 29(5), 617-637.
- Liu, J. (2016). Internationalization of higher education: Experiences of intercultural adaptation of international students in Canada. *Antistasis*, 6(2). 1-11.
- Rabia, A., & Hazza, M. (2017). Undergraduate Arab international students' adjustment to US universities. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 6(1), 131-139.
- Ryan, A. M. (2001). The peer group as a context for the development of young adolescent motivation and achievement. *Child Development*, 72(4), 1135-1150.
- Shanti, T. I., Janssens, J. M. A. M., & Setiadi, B. (2021). Friends' support, motivation to learn, emotional adjustment, and academic performance among Indonesian first-year students. *Jurnal Psikologi*, 48(2), 183-198.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.
- Wachyuni, S., Abrar, M., Istifada, I., Harjono, H. S., & Hendra, R. (2023). Challenges faced by international students: A case study of Jambi's institute of higher learning. *Dinamika Ilmu*, 23(1), 37-52.
- Wahyuningsih, M. B. (2020). Challenges of foreign students' cultural adjustment to Indonesian culture and impacts on their academic achievements. *KnE Social Sciences*, 158-170.
- Yamada, A. (2021). Globalisation in higher education: Bridging global and local education. In *Third International Handbook of Globalisation, Education and Policy Research* (pp. 269-284). Springer.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.