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### English as Gateway or Barrier? Indonesian Students' Experiences in Japanese Higher Education

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#### ABSTRACT

**Background:** In Japanese higher education, the integration of English through English-Medium Instruction (EMI) poses both opportunities and challenges for international students, particularly those from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

**Aims:** This study explores the experiences of Indonesian students in using English for academic purposes in Japanese universities, focusing on their views, challenges, and adaptation strategies.

**Methods:** This study employed a qualitative case study approach, collecting data through in-depth interviews with five Indonesian postgraduate students from diverse academic backgrounds studying at various universities in Japan. Document analysis was also conducted to support the findings from the interviews.

**Results:** This study revealed that English is essential for accessing academic resources and engaging in international interactions. However, students still face challenges in pronunciation, academic writing, vocabulary, presentation norms, and expressing ideas confidently and clearly. They employ various strategies, including self-directed learning, digital tools, peer interaction, and institutional support, to adapt.

**Implications:** The study highlights the need for more inclusive EMI policies and better language support services in Japanese universities. It also emphasises that language learning in EMI contexts is socially, culturally, and emotionally complex, requiring internal motivation, social interaction, and institutional responsiveness.

**Keywords:** *Academic adaptation; English-Medium Instruction; Indonesian students; Japanese higher education*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

English has emerged as the dominant lingua franca in global academia, playing an indispensable role in the dissemination of knowledge and fostering cross-cultural communication. As the primary language of international institutions, it wields significant influence across diplomacy, education, and scientific advancement (Kurniawan, 2024; Mehmood et al., 2023). However, the widespread dominance of English in higher education has also sparked debates on language equity, cultural shifts, and the affordability of access to academic opportunities in countries where English is not the primary language, particularly in multilingual regions (Bhatt et al., 2022; Hsieh, 2020).

While English serves as a medium for international scholarly collaboration, its dominance also raises concerns regarding linguistic justice and cultural identity. Soler and Galvez argue that the widespread use of English does not necessarily ensure equal opportunities, as access to English proficiency varies based on social and economic backgrounds (Soler & Morales-Galvez, 2022). Similarly, Bhatt et al. (2022), highlighted that the privileging of English in higher education can contribute to cultural displacement and reinforce epistemic inequalities, particularly among international students from multilingual backgrounds. This tension is particularly relevant for Indonesian students studying in Japan, who must navigate an academic environment that employs English as a primary medium of instruction while still relying on Japanese for daily interactions.

English-Medium Instruction (EMI) refers to the use of English to teach academic subjects other than English itself, especially in contexts where most students are non-native speakers (Macaro et al., 2018; Richards & Pun, 2023). In Japan, EMI has grown significantly since the 1990s as part of efforts to internationalise higher education and produce globally competent graduates (Brown, 2018). The implementation of EMI in Japan aligns with government initiatives such as the Top Global University Project (TGUP), launched in 2014 (Aizawa & McKinley, 2020). Through this initiative, universities have increased the recruitment of international faculty and introduced more programs conducted entirely in English. As part of the TGUP, the number of EMI courses was projected to rise from 19,533 to 55,928 by 2023 (Aizawa et al., 2025; MEXT, 2018). However, between 2013 and 2020, the EMI ratio only increased from 7% to 17% across the 37 participating universities, indicating that Japanese remains the predominant language of instruction. (Yu, 2023). This is further reflected by the fact that most international students still study in Japanese-medium programs, indicating that EMI, while expanding global access, also raises concerns about equity and linguistic disadvantage in non-English-speaking contexts (Brown, 2018).

Proficiency in English enables international students to actively engage in academic activities, access global knowledge, and expand their professional opportunities (Syafrohy, 2024). However, despite acknowledging the advantages of English proficiency, many international students, including Indonesians, experience negative attitudes toward their own English accents, often stemming from low self-confidence and anxiety about being negatively judged by peers and instructors. This accent-related anxiety has been identified as a significant barrier to active participation and oral communication in academic settings (Coppinger & Sheridan, 2022). These concerns can lead to reluctance in participating in academic discussions, ultimately affecting academic performance (Mbato & Kharismawan, 2018).

English proficiency plays a crucial role in student achievement in international academic environments within English-Medium Instruction (EMI). Additional factors, such as language learning anxiety, self-regulation, and language barriers, can hinder students' ability to participate in discussions, understand course materials, and fully engage in academic life (Yuksel et al., 2023). Moreover, ideological views on language use in academic spaces can shape students' academic identities and sense of belonging,

often reinforcing the divide between native and non-native English speakers (Piller & Bodis, 2024; Shirahata, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires more than improving language skills alone, institutional support systems that foster inclusive and supportive learning environments are equally essential (Dauber & Spencer-Oatey, 2023).

To better understand how students experience and respond to these challenges, this study draws upon two theoretical lenses: Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Sociocultural Theory (SCT), developed by Vygotsky, views language learning as a process that is socially mediated, in which learners construct understanding through interaction with their social environment, peers, and more knowledgeable others (Alkhudiry, 2022; Rahmatirad, 2020; Vygotsky, 1978). In the context of EFL, collaboration, the use of cultural tools such as language and technology, and perceptions of the social environment significantly influence academic identity and language competence (Leontjev & deBoer, 2022). Meanwhile, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan, explains that compelling learning motivation emerges when the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT distinguishes types of motivation from amotivation to intrinsic motivation, with a focus on quality rather than quantity of motivation (Alamer, 2021). In the EFL context, both theories complement each other in understanding how social interaction and internal drive shape learning strategies and academic engagement among Indonesian students in Japan. This study seeks to understand how Indonesian students experience the use of English across academic life in Japanese universities.

### 1.1 Research Gap and Novelty

Several studies have explored Indonesian students' experiences with English in academic contexts. Language barriers, socialisation difficulties, and cultural differences pose significant challenges for Indonesian students in Japan (Haryanti, 2024). These issues necessitate intercultural adjustments, such as emotional regulation and flexibility (Govinda & Hanami, 2023). Tauchid et al (2022) revealed differences in English language ideologies between Indonesian and Japanese students, indicating Indonesian students' greater adaptability to global English varieties. Other studies reported that Indonesian students studying abroad faced challenges such as academic writing, unfamiliar accents, and classroom participation (Lugman, 2022; Zulferdi, 2021). Meanwhile, research within Indonesia pointed to positive attitudes toward English, but also highlighted limitations in pedagogical support and reliance on self-directed learning and social interaction strategies (Hibatullah, 2019; Santoso et al., 2024). On the institutional side, Aizawa and McKinley Jim (2020) highlighted policy and institutional challenges in the implementation of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) in Japanese universities, such as the lack of a language proficiency standard and inconsistent support for lecturers and students, indicating a gap between policy and practice in the field. Although various studies have addressed Indonesian students' challenges in EMI settings, few have specifically examined how Indonesian students navigate English and Japanese in bilingual academic settings, especially in daily academic activities within Japanese universities.

This research contributes new insights by specifically examining Indonesian students' experiences of using English in a bilingual academic environment in Japan, where the dominance of the local language shapes their linguistic adaptation strategies and learning experiences. A theoretical approach combining Sociocultural Theory and Self-Determination Theory provides a unique analytical framework, emphasising the role of social interaction, institutional support, and intrinsic motivation in shaping the learning experience. The findings of this study enrich the literature on EMI in non-Anglophone

contexts, particularly in understanding the dynamics of English language use under the dominance of local languages, as well as contributing to a more inclusive and contextualised practice of higher education internationalisation.

## 1.2 Research Question

The research question of this study is: How do Indonesian students experience the role of English in their academic life in Japanese higher education? By exploring their views, challenges, and adaptation strategies, this study aims to provide insights into how English shapes their academic engagement, as well as how institutions support their reflections on language.

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach, which was considered appropriate for gaining in-depth insights into students' lived experiences, challenges, and strategies related to learning and using English in a non-English-speaking country. Qualitative research is a naturalistic inquiry method that explores human behaviour, attitudes, and experiences through non-numerical data (Nassaji, 2020). In this study, a case study approach was adopted as it allows for an in-depth investigation of students' experiences within their real-life academic context (Yin, 2018).

### 2.2 Research Subjects

This study involved five Indonesian postgraduate students who are currently studying at various universities in Japan. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in academic disciplines and lengths of stay in Japan. Their diverse linguistic backgrounds and academic experiences contributed valuable insights into the role of English in their academic lives. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from each participant. To protect their privacy, pseudonyms were used, and all identifying information was kept confidential. This study received ethical clearance from the Academic and Student Affairs Division of the Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, UIN Datokarama Palu. Further details of the participants are summarised in Table 1, with identifying information anonymised to protect their privacy.

**Table 1** Profiles of the Students as Interviewees

Participants	Gender	Universities	Degree Level	Field of Studies	Length of Studies
AN	Male	Ibaraki University	Master Degree	Agronomy and Horticultural Science	8 months
GG	Female	Ibaraki University	Master Degree	Food and Life Science	2 years 9 months
KS	Male	Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology	Doctoral Degree	Symbiotic Science of Environment and Natural Resources	5 years 8 months
LF	Female	University of Tsukuba	Doctoral Degree	Disability Science	3 years 7 months
RA	Male	Tokyo University	Doctoral	Biological	3 years

2.3 Research Procedures

The data collection employed in-depth interviews as the primary data and document analysis as the secondary data. The development of the semi-structured interview instrument to explore students' experience on the role of English in their academic life while studying in Japan involved several stages. The process began with constructing an interview guide derived from the core themes of the research. The questions were designed to address the main issues the researcher intended to explore. To ensure comprehensive coverage of the topics, probing questions were also prepared; however, these were not included explicitly in the interview guide. The first validation phase involved expert review by two academic supervisors and the head of the English language study program to ensure that the questions were appropriate, clear, and aligned with the research objectives. To further ensure the quality of the instrument, the interview guide was piloted with two Indonesian students who had at least one year of overseas study experience. The results of the pilot test were analysed to evaluate whether the questions effectively captured the intended data. Based on feedback from both pilot participants and observers, the guide was revised by modifying or adding questions considered necessary for eliciting more meaningful responses. After revision, the finalised interview guide underwent revalidation to confirm its relevance and readiness for use in interviews with the main participants—Indonesian students currently studying in Japan.

The secondary data in this study consisted of publicly available information obtained from the official websites of Japanese universities attended by the participants. This included details about academic support services—such as writing centres and international student handbooks—as well as policy documents and publications from initiatives like the Top Global University Project (TGUP). These documents were selected to provide institutional context and were used to cross-check and validate the interview findings.

2.4 Research Instruments

A semi-structured interview was used to offer flexibility, enabling researchers to adapt questions and follow up on participants' responses to gain deeper insights (Ruslin et al., 2022). The primary issues looked into in the semi-structured interview were formulated as follows:

Table 2 Themes and Interview Guidelines

Themes	Interview Questions
The view of Indonesian students about the role of English in academic life	<div>1. What do you think about the role of English in academic life?</div> <div>2. Do you feel that English proficiency is important for academic success in Japan? Why or why not?</div> <div>3. In which circumstances do you feel English is most necessary in your studies?</div> <div>4. Do you think studying in English has affected your academic performance? If so, can you explain how?</div>



Indonesian students experience challenges using English in the academic environment

1. What are the main challenges you face when using English in your academic activities?
2. Do you face any challenges in understanding lecturers provided in English?
3. Do you face any academic challenges when dealing with English written text during academic studies?
4. Do you feel comfortable sharing your ideas in English during class discussions, presentations, or assignments? Why or why not?
5. Do you experience any communication difficulties with professors or classmates due to language barriers?

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The strategies Indonesian students use to adapt and their reflection on language support

1. How do you manage or balance the use of both English and Japanese in your academic activities?
2. How do you overcome the challenges of using English in your studies in Japan?
3. What strategies do you use to improve your academic English skills?
4. Does your university provide language support to help students improve their English language skills? If yes, what kind of support is provided?
5. Have you participated in any language support programs? If so, how effective were they in helping you improve your academic English?
6. In your opinion, what additional support would you like to receive from your university to improve your academic experience in English?
7. Do you think your experience in an EMI environment (if applicable) is beneficial for your future academic and professional career? Why or why not?

The interview was conducted online via Zoom and WhatsApp video calls, depending on the interviewee's availability and convenience. Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Interviews were video recorded with participants. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian and transcribed for analysis. After all, the communication that took place during the research process was entirely based on the participants' consent. In addition to interviews, document review was used because it was directly related to the themes that emerged from the interviews and was publicly accessible, with references to the selected participants. These documents were collected after analysing the interview transcripts and then reviewed through a thematic review to support and complement the findings. Their role was to serve as a triangulation tool to strengthen the validity of the data from the participants' experiences.

**Table 3** Documents and Reference Codes

Name of Documents	Reference Codes
Top Global University Project	D1
Academic Writing Support Desk	D2
International Students Affairs	D3
International Students' Handbook	D4

## 2.5 Data Analysis

The data collected were transcribed and analysed using the Miles and Huberman method, which emphasises that qualitative data analysis should be conducted interactively and continuously until data saturation is achieved ([Miles and Huberman, 1994](#)). This approach involves three key components: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the first stage, data from interviews and document reviews were transcribed and simplified by focusing on key information relevant to the themes. This included identifying recurring themes and removing irrelevant or redundant content. The second stage involved organising the reduced data into structured formats—such as tables or narrative summaries—to facilitate the visualisation of patterns. In the final stage, the researcher concluded by linking the identified themes to the research objectives. These themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the students' academic experiences, challenges, and the strategies they employed. To strengthen the credibility of the findings, triangulation was applied with document analysis and expert validation of the interview guide, involving supervisors and the head of the English language study program.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Findings

This study aims to explore the experiences of Indonesian students regarding the role of English in their academic life while studying in Japan. The findings are organised based on the three main themes. Each theme presents the students' views, challenges, and strategies related to the use of English in academic settings.

#### The Views of Indonesian Students on the Role of English in Academic Life

Based on the interview results, the findings show that Indonesian students in Japan perceive English as a crucial component of their academic life, both as a means of global communication and as a tool for accessing academic literature. English is the key to accessing global academic knowledge sources, given that most textbooks, scientific journals, and relevant academic references are published in English. As one interviewee stated,

We know that English is an international language. It is also recognised academically that academics use English as an international language to convey information. Therefore, most scientific writings and research are written in English. In order to increase our knowledge, academic understanding, and abilities, we are encouraged to understand English (AN).

Mastering English literature is considered essential for students to understand course material in depth and complete academic assignments effectively. This awareness encourages them to continually improve their reading skills and expand their academic vocabulary, as these skills have a direct impact on their academic performance. The use of English extends beyond academic activities, such as writing papers or reading scientific journals, to everyday activities. As expressed by one informant, "*Most of the*

*activities are writing, making daily reports, answering questions, and using English... reading papers, references also mostly use English."*(LF).

In addition to being considered a means to access international academic knowledge, students also indicated that English serves as an effective means of communication in a multicultural educational environment. The ability to speak English enables them to engage in cross-cultural interactions in formal contexts, such as group work and discussions among international students. English is considered a global language that bridges communication between students from different countries, thus providing a sense of security and increasing confidence when interacting. As one participant expressed, "English as an international language that can bridge... It's safer to communicate with students from other countries" (KS).

English is inseparable from the local context in Japan, where mastery of Japanese remains an essential factor for students' academic and social success. Students realise that in specific situations, especially when interacting with lecturers or local students as well as in daily social activities, the use of Japanese is more necessary to ensure the flow of communication and prevent misunderstandings. As revealed by one interviewee, "In my opinion, in terms of communication, Japanese is stronger... some lecturers don't speak English, so if you only speak English, it will be difficult." (KS)

This challenge is still experienced even at universities that are actively involved in internationalisation initiatives, such as the University of Tsukuba, which is one of the participating universities in the Top Global University Project (D1). Although this university offers English-based academic programs and services, Japanese remains the primary language of instruction in many departments. One student explains this:

In academic activities, we actually use English quite often, even though my department is a Japanese-language department. However, for reference, there are some courses where the references are mostly in English. There are courses where all the references are in English, even though the lectures are in Japanese. Additionally, communication with professors via email is also in English. Consultations via email are also in English. This includes writing reports; the reports assigned are actually written in English. (LF)

This situation illustrates the complexity of bilingualism faced by international students, who must constantly navigate between Japanese for academic activities and English for global communication. This suggests that, despite the implementation of internationalisation policies such as TGUP, the use of English in academic practice remains limited and context-specific. Although English opens access to global literature and cross-cultural academic interaction, academic success in Japan remains highly dependent on students' ability to master both languages. This bilingual academic environment is further reflected in institutional documents. For instance, the International Students' Handbook (D4) of the University provides essential campus and academic information in both English and Japanese, demonstrating a conscious institutional effort to support international students' linguistic adaptation in a dual-language context.

### Challenges Faced by Indonesian Students Using English in Academic Life

While these students expressed positive views on the role of English in academic life, they also revealed several challenges they faced in using the language during their studies in Japan. One of the main challenges was understanding the English pronunciation of non-native speakers, including both lecturers and international peers. Strong local accents, varying intonations, and unfamiliar articulation often hindered effective communication, particularly in lectures and class discussions. Students noted that they needed time to adapt to different accents—for example, those of Japanese



lecturers or instructors from Eastern Europe. In some cases, the phonological influence of the speaker's native language made the pronunciation difficult to recognise, leading students to rely on contextual clues to interpret meaning. As one participant stated, *"Wrong pronunciation... sometimes we get confused... if it's wrong grammar, we can still understand, but wrong pronunciation makes us not understand."* (KS). GG's argument supports these points:

The main problem here is actually pronunciation. It's still tricky because they don't have silent letters at the end. For example, a shop, a Japanese shop, going to a shop. The 'shop' part is because they don't have silent letters at the end, so 'shop' has an additional suffix that they're used to adding. When speaking Japanese, they say 'shoppo' like that. So sometimes those pronunciation things are what make me sometimes guess what they're saying. (GG)

In addition to communication barriers, another prominent challenge faced by Indonesian students in Japan is academic writing in English. Students reported that writing reports, scientific papers, and even articles for publication are the most challenging aspects of their academic work. Some students stated that although they were able to understand the content of the course material, expressing their ideas through academic writing remained a significant obstacle. This was mainly due to a lack of appropriate vocabulary and difficulty in organising arguments logically in English. One interviewee described this challenge as follows:

The hardest part for me is actually writing. Because it's a thesis. Then we also have to publish scientific papers. Everything has to be in English. But I think writing is the most challenging part. Yes, even though I know many tools can help, such as Grammarly. Many people are now using ChatGPT. But the originality still has to come from us, the ideas. This still requires skill in constructing sentences and other similar tasks. Maybe grammar can be helped or corrected by the publication. However, for me, sentence structure remains the most challenging part. (GG)

Another significant obstacle faced by Indonesian students in studying English in Japan is the difficulty in understanding academic vocabulary, particularly technical and field-specific terms. Students reported that they frequently encountered unfamiliar words in academic readings—such as scientific journals, course materials, and written assignments—which made it challenging to comprehend the content. This difficulty is not limited to scientific terms that are rarely used in daily communication, but also includes high vocabulary and context-dependent expressions that differ from what students typically encounter in general English classes. These linguistic barriers often resulted in slower reading and comprehension, which in turn delayed the overall learning process. As one informant noted, *"Some vocabulary that is too academic... new terms that I don't necessarily understand right away... have to look up the meaning of the word first."* (AN).

In addition to linguistic challenges, students also faced cultural barriers, particularly in the context of academic presentations in Japan. While presentations in Indonesia tend to focus on concise bullet points, Japanese academic audiences—especially lecturers—expect more detailed and explicit explanations. This difference in expectation required students to adjust their presentation style to be more verbal and elaborative. Such adaptation increased their cognitive load, as they had to balance content clarity, sentence structure, and audience comprehension, particularly when addressing non-native English speakers. Indonesian students also reported experiencing psychological and cognitive barriers when expressing ideas orally in English. They noted that limitations in thinking quickly, organising ideas, and constructing grammatically

accurate sentences often made them reluctant to speak during class discussions or presentations. These difficulties were compounded by mental pressure, such as nervousness, fear of making mistakes, or concern about being misunderstood by the audience. *"Even I am actually not too confident to use English."* (AN). This barrier not only emerges in formal settings such as presentations, but also in group discussions or situations that require spontaneous responses. Some students explained that when their ideas were not yet fully formed, they already felt pressured to speak, which often led to disorganised or hesitant verbal expression. Limited comprehension of the material further contributed to difficulties in constructing relevant and coherent responses.

### Indonesian Students' Strategies and Reflections on Language Support

In the face of academic demands and language challenges in the Japanese university environment, Indonesian students have evolved various strategies. The findings of this study show that students' adaptation strategies include not only independent efforts in improving English language competence, but also the utilisation of support services provided by the campus to support academic success in the bilingual context. One of the strategies that students widely apply is balancing their language use according to the context of the communication they face. Students consciously make language adjustments depending on the interlocutor and the social situation. As explained by one informant, *"I speak Japanese with Japanese people. For international communication, I use English."* (KS). Additionally, students utilised independent learning strategies to enhance their English proficiency, as well as their Japanese skills. These strategies included intensive listening and reading practice, the use of digital media such as YouTube, and regular reading of international journals and textbooks to expand their academic vocabulary. GG expressed, *"Expand vocabulary, improve grammar... practice a lot... gain more experience."* (GG).

This reflects students' awareness of the importance of consistent practice in developing language skills. LF added that she made a habit of listening to podcasts and reading English-language references every day—not merely for language learning, but as an academic necessity integrated into her studies. To overcome difficulties in understanding course materials delivered in a foreign language, students also utilised various technological tools, including Google Translate, recorded lectures, and transcription software. These tools served as practical aids in navigating complex academic content, helping to reduce cognitive load during study sessions. Another participant stated, *"Use English first, then switch to Japanese if the other person doesn't understand... use Google Translate when it gets difficult."* (RA). This strategy was also adopted by LF, who considered it effective, although mentally exhausting, as it required additional time to process information. Such practices demonstrate how students utilise technology as a practical solution to overcome language barriers in academic environments.

Beyond individual strategies, students also effectively utilised institutional support to enhance their academic English skills. University-provided resources positively contributed to their self-confidence and reinforced their understanding of the importance of English proficiency in educational contexts. At the University of Tsukuba, for example, students had access to the Academic Writing Support Desk (D2), a consultation service designed to assist with English academic writing. As LF stated, *"Yes, the writing class... was very helpful because it taught us how to write with proper structure and use some academic vocabulary."* (LF).

The University of Tsukuba Library officially provides this service and is available to international students seeking to improve their writing structure and academic diction (University of Tsukuba, n.d.). In addition, students attended English-language courses that were part of the mandatory curriculum, aimed at developing essential academic communication skills such as delivering presentations and writing reports. In more

informal settings, students also participated in activities such as international gatherings (D3), which enabled them to build connections with peers from around the world. These events created inclusive social spaces where students could practice speaking English without the pressure of formal academic evaluation, enriching their experience of using the language in more natural ways.

In addition to utilising available institutional support, students also expressed critical reflections on the limitations of existing services and conveyed their expectations for additional forms of support. Some students emphasised the importance of improving English-language academic and administrative services, especially for universities that have opened international programs. The continued dominance of Japanese in campus service systems, such as online course registration, is considered a barrier for international students and needs to be improved immediately to make them more accessible to international students. Support in the form of an academic writing centre, as already implemented by the University of Tsukuba, was also frequently mentioned as a primary need. Additionally, training programs and predictive tests for TOEFL, IELTS, or TOEIC were considered necessary as part of a strategy to develop English language competencies. These reflections indicate that students have a high awareness of the role of institutions in supporting their English language skills.

This study found that learning in an English-based academic environment was considered beneficial for supporting students' academic and professional goals. Furthermore, students perceived that their experience would positively impact their future careers by enhancing their international communication skills and opening broader professional opportunities. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these experiences was still constrained by the dominance of the Japanese language in various aspects of campus life. These findings expand upon previous studies by emphasising that international students' adaptation strategies in non-English-speaking countries like Japan involve more than just language improvement. They also require the ability to navigate bilingual academic systems and engage with the broader sociocultural context in which learning takes place.

### 3.2 Discussion

English serves as a crucial gateway for international students to access academic knowledge and to engage in cross-cultural communication in EMI contexts, as highlighted by (Govinda & Hanami, 2023; Kurniawan, 2023). For Indonesian students in Japanese universities, academic success arises from a dynamic interplay between internal factors, such as personal motivation and learning strategies, and external factors, including institutional support and the sociocultural environment.

Within the framework of Sociocultural Theory (SCT), the process of navigating these dynamics is viewed as socially mediated. As experienced by predominantly overseas students, including Indonesians, in EMI environments where Japanese remains the dominant language, language barriers and implicit academic norms must be overcome. (Govinda & Hanami, 2023) and Haryanti (2024) observed that success in studying abroad requires not only academic competencies but also students' ability to align with culturally embedded academic practices. This intercultural adjustment involves adapting to Japan's more detailed presentation style, which contrasts with Indonesia's concise bullet-point approach. This adjustment process is mediated by social interaction with lecturers and peers, who help them learn academic norms and language through the Zone of Proximal Development (Alkhudiry, 2022; Vygotsky, 1978). Supporting this adjustment, students utilise various mediation tools—such as Google Translate, YouTube, and lecture recordings. These tools play a central role in bridging the gap in understanding of the academic contexts and their increasing demands. Moreover, these tools serve as essential instruments of mediation for both the academic and social lives

of students ([Lantolf & Thorne, 2007](#); [Leontjev & deBoer, 2022](#)), aligning with ([Godwin-Jones, 2024](#)) call for a technology-integrated and socially grounded pedagogy.

Complementing this sociocultural perspective, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides insights into the psychological dimensions of students' motivation. SDT has consistently demonstrated how students pursue autonomy, competence, and relatedness through self-directed strategies such as journal reading, writing exercises, and listening to podcasts, along with reviewing previous lectures via YouTube. Learners' motivation is enhanced when they feel competent in their abilities and connected to others within their learning environment ([Alamer, 2021](#); [Dincer, 2017](#); [Ryan & Deci, 2017](#)). However, gaps in institutional support—such as the limited English language requirements in course registration systems—undermine this motivation. ([Aizawa & McKinley, 2020](#)) In particular, note that internationalisation of academic programs in Japan often lacks substantive institutional support, resulting in inconsistencies between policy and practice.

In addition to institutional barriers, psychological challenges also arise, particularly anxiety when speaking English in class or during presentations. This factor is not only related to language limitations but also concerns self-confidence and mental pressure. These points are in line with the findings of ([Lugman, 2022](#); [Zulferdi, 2021](#)), who reported that Indonesian students abroad often find it challenging to participate actively due to unfamiliar English accents and a lack of confidence, which ultimately limits their academic engagement.

Similarly, academic skills such as scientific writing and mastering technical vocabulary are also significant challenges. Yuksel et al ([2023](#)) emphasise the need for targeted educational training programs, such as scientific article writing, to support EMI students. One proposed solution is the establishment of an academic writing centre, similar to the one at the University of Tsukuba; however, such services are not yet widely available across the campus. This finding is supported by Dauber & Spencer, who state that internationalisation policies must be balanced with accessible and welcoming support facilities for international students ([Dauber & Spencer-Oatey, 2023](#)).

Thus, the main contribution of this study lies in its comprehensive understanding of the linguistic and academic adaptation processes of Indonesian students in a Japanese university, integrating internal motivation, social interaction, and institutional support as interrelated aspects of everyday bilingual academic practice. Unlike previous studies that separate language, cultural, and institutional barriers, this study uses the integrated framework of Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to capture the complexity of students' social and motivational experiences in the EMI context. SCT emphasises the importance of social mediation and learning aids, while SDT explains the motivational dynamics that drive self-directed learning strategies. The study also highlights the students' flexible bilingual adaptation and critical reflection on institutional support, demonstrating active engagement in adjusting academic strategies. These insights provide a deeper understanding of the unique adaptive strategies employed by Indonesian students who effectively utilise two academic languages. The findings also broaden the discussion on EMI practices in non-English-speaking countries and provide a foundation for developing more inclusive internationalisation policies.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

This study examines the experiences of Indonesian students in dealing with English-Medium Instruction (EMI) in Japanese universities. The results indicate that the dynamic interaction between internal motivation, mediated learning strategies, and institutional language support significantly influences students' academic engagement. English language proficiency is proven to be crucial for accessing global educational resources

and fostering international communication. However, the dominance of the Japanese language in local academic practices—particularly in administrative services and communication with lecturers or locals—remains a challenge.

This study contributes to the development of EMI studies by demonstrating that academic success in non-English-speaking countries cannot be attributed solely to language competence. Instead, learning success also depends on students' ability to navigate bilingual systems, manage language anxiety, and adapt to prevailing social and cultural expectations. The view of Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in this study emphasises the importance of learning tools (mediational tools) and motivational regulation in shaping students' adaptation strategies and academic resilience.

While this study provides valuable insights into the academic and linguistic adaptation of Indonesian students in Japanese universities, it has several limitations. The sample consisted of only five postgraduate students, so the results may not be representative of the broader population of Indonesian or international students. Additionally, the focus on Indonesian students limits cross-cultural generalisations, as students from diverse backgrounds may encounter different challenges in EMI environments.

Building on these findings, further research can involve more participants from different disciplines and institutions. Comparative studies between universities with varying levels of EMI implementation, or between students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, will enrich our understanding of sociolinguistic complexity in the context of EMI, especially in non-English-speaking countries.

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### Authors' Contributions

Tendri Sanna Shakti is the principal author of this article, contributing to the main data collection and analysis, as well as reporting during the research. While Ruslin and Fatima, as the first and second supervisors, respectively, along with Muhammad Ihsan, the senior lecturer in the English Language study Program, play an essential role in ensuring the validity, reliability, and adequacy of the data, analysis, and research report. Sajjad Al Hawsawi ultimately ensures that this article is eligible for publication, while also highlighting the importance of its robust data and findings.

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