



# Uncovering Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges Understanding Polite and Impolite Small Talk in BIPA Immersion Programs in Indonesia

Vania Maherani\*, Yulianeta Yulianeta

*Indonesian Language Learning for Foreign Speakers Study Program,  
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia*  
\*Corresponding author. Email: [vmahareni@upi.edu](mailto:vmahareni@upi.edu)

## ABSTRACT

Living in Indonesia as part of an immersion program, *Bahasa Indonesia untuk Pembelajar Asing* (BIPA/Education of Bahasa Indonesia for Foreigners) learners are inevitably involved in communicating with local communities, including getting to know new individuals. Small talk is a tool to start conversations and build relationships during these meetings. However, BIPA students often experience culture shock when small talk questions or expressions that do not match their cultural background arise. This research aims to describe (1) polite small talk expressions, (2) impolite or strange small talk expressions, and (3) responses elicited by inappropriate small talk expressions. A qualitative approach was used for this research, and data was collected through questionnaires completed by fifteen BIPA students participating in an immersion program in Indonesia. The findings in this research are integrated with Hall's intercultural communication theory (1976). The findings reveal that (1) BIPA students perceive polite small talk expressions as greetings and questions that are commonly used to start a conversation, (2) small talk expressions that are considered impolite or unusual by BIPA students often involve questions related to privacy that cause discomfort and (3) BIPA learners' responses to impolite small talk vary between aggressive actions and acquiescence, depending on their respective cultural backgrounds.

**Keywords:** *Culture shock, immersion, response, small talk.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesian Language Learning for Foreign Speakers or BIPA, has been held at home and abroad. This happens because the popularity of the Indonesian language is increasing. Many institutions abroad collaborate with the government and universities in Indonesia to send BIPA teaching staff abroad. Apart from this method, another way to improve students' Indonesian language skills is the Immersion method. This method requires students to come directly to the target language country to study the language and culture of the target country so that learning is more effective and maximizes the increase in the abilities of foreign students, especially high-level students who lack material resources in their home countries (Wirawan, 2018). With this method, students' language input comes not only from the classroom but also from the social environment, such as the campus environment, living environment, etc.

The use of Indonesian in everyday life is important for BIPA students. In addition to improving Indonesian language skills, BIPA students need to know and understand the accent of each interlocutor to minimize misunderstandings when communicating. As is well known, Indonesia has hundreds of regional languages which will influence the people's accents when using Indonesian. Using Indonesian in everyday life also makes it easier for students to communicate because only a few Indonesians can understand and use foreign languages. The lack of ability of Indonesian people to understand foreign languages can be a trigger for culture shock for foreign students. Moreover, some still cannot differentiate between polite and impolite ways when communicating with foreign students.

When coming to Indonesia, it is common for foreign students to feel a culture shock, such as when communicating. Culture shock cannot be avoided because of differences in cultural backgrounds, such as norms adopted, language, speaking style, customs, habits, and so on (Febiyana & Turistiati, 2019). Culture shock is most commonly felt at the start of a student's life in Indonesia. Students who come to Indonesia for the first time will be surprised by some of the questions Indonesians ask. For example, in some countries, religion and age are privacy matters that no one should know, let alone foreigners. However, some still ask about this in Indonesia, even to people they have just met. Apart from questions about religion and age, physical matters are also some of the things most often mentioned, such as skin color and body shape. This is a very sensitive matter because, both in Indonesia and abroad, people of the black race still receive discriminatory treatment.

In general, questions regarding privacy are the main cause of culture shock experienced by foreign students who come to Indonesia. Apart from religious, age, and physical issues, areas of privacy such as where you live are also things that are 'kept secret', like Americans. Americans need to find a way to share their addresses with people they just met easily. This was done because they thought telling them their home address was like opening the way for other crimes. Even though it was just small talk, where to live was quite annoying for them. However, these questions also cannot be blamed because, naturally, when making small talk, both speakers must have pragmatic sensitivity in understanding the socio-cultural relationship between them (Asmara, 2015).

Small talk in communication cannot be removed because it has become part of a country's culture and, therefore, has an important function that can determine and maintain social relations. Indonesia, which is still steeped in Eastern culture, still uses small talk as a form of politeness, both to people we have just met and people we have known for a long time. In the daily communication of Indonesian people, small talk is used in several situations, such as (1) greeting, (2) borrowing, (3) inviting, (4) inviting, (5) offering, and (6) ordering (Nuryani, 2013). However, if the two speakers have just met or become acquainted, pleasantries are only used to start or close a conversation.

The forms of pleasantries used when getting acquainted also vary. Based on the Quora platform answers, small talk when starting a conversation with new people is classified into three forms: ordinary forms (usual questions), probing for personal information, and teasing (Quora, 2020). The first form will not cause discomfort because it only asks basic questions, such as 'where are you going?', 'what are you doing?', 'Where are you from?', and so on. The second form causes discomfort for the interlocutor because it relates to personal information, which is personal for some people. The third form is the form most people avoid. These three forms of small talk have the same goal, namely establishing communication and eliminating awkward situations. It's just that some people still don't understand that everyone has a 'limit' that must not be crossed, even if it's just small talk. Therefore, some people usually avoid small talk for reasons of comfort and privacy.

Regarding comfort and privacy when saying and responding to pleasantries when getting acquainted, this cannot be generalized because it all depends on each person's culture, like research conducted by Furukawa (2013) entitled *A Study of Small Talk Among Males: Comparing the U.S. and Japan*. The study showed that Americans prefer small talk to Japanese as long as the small talk does not touch on personal matters. Meanwhile, Japanese people feel surprised and uncomfortable when talking with new people. They need a place and a good reason to talk to new people. However, they still want to talk; they need time and will gradually be willing to talk to new people (Furukawa, 2013).

Further explanation about comfort and topics during small talk is discussed in Takaya's research (2011) entitled *Organization of Topics in Intercultural and Intracultural Small Talk*. This research shows that personal topics make people uncomfortable and are avoided when communicating with new people, especially with people from other countries. More topics about culture are discussed to understand each other's culture. This avoids intercultural and intracultural misunderstandings (Takaya, 2011).

From the explanation above, this research and the two studies discuss the culture of small talk in everyday communication. However, this research discusses further the forms of small talk that are considered polite or impolite and responses that are considered polite and impolite. Apart from that, categorization is seen from the perspective of one country and several countries.

This research was conducted because Indonesian people still need help understanding the boundaries of what is considered polite and impolite, so they use and respond to small talk in the same way to everyone, both foreigners and Indonesians.

Hence, the purpose of this research is to describe (1) small talk expressions that are considered polite in the student's country of origin and Indonesia, (2) small talk expressions that are considered impolite or strange in the student's home country and Indonesia, (3) and responses or responses to pleasantries that are considered impolite or strange in the student's country of origin and Indonesia.

## 2. METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive type. This research describes findings related to small talk expressions that are considered normal or unusual by BIPA students and their responses. In this case, small talk expressions and responses are normal and cannot refer to the learner's perspective and intercultural communication theory. In this theory, it is explained that the cultural background of each speaker influences communication in society, including what is considered polite or impolite.

The data used in this research are pleasantries considered normal and unusual that BIPA students get when they first communicate with Indonesians. Meanwhile, the data source used was a questionnaire distributed to 15 BIPA students who had or were still living in Indonesia to study Indonesian. In this research, the researcher acts as the main instrument. Even though the main instrument is the researcher himself, the researcher needs a supporting instrument in the form of a questionnaire instrument during the research. In this research, the technique used to collect was by distributing questionnaires and literature study. Questionnaires were distributed to BIPA students from several countries who have or are currently implementing immersion programs in Indonesia. Interviews were conducted after BIPA students arrived in Indonesia.

The data collection procedures in this research are explained as follows. (1) determine the students used as data sources, (2) determine the data that will be used in the research, (3) prepare instruments based on the research focus, (4) distribute questionnaires, (5) conduct literature studies, and (6) collect data. In this research, there are several data analysis procedures, which are explained as follows. First, select the data that has been collected, namely by sorting the data according to the research focus. Second, classify data based on research focus. Third, analyze and match the data with Hall's intercultural communication theory (1976). Fourth, interpret and conclude the analysis data.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In everyday communication, small talk is used in several situations. The situation in question depends on the country. For example, in communication among Indonesian people, small talk is used in several situations, such as when (1) greeting, (2) borrowing, (3) inviting, (4) inviting, (5) offering, and (6) ordering (Nuryani, 2013). Small talk occurs in this situation when both parties already know each other. Meanwhile, if you have just met and become acquainted, small talk is only used to start a conversation. Apart from the situation, the form of pleasantries also depends on the country. For example, pleasantries in Indonesia arise when getting to know new people.

The forms of pleasantries used when getting acquainted also vary. Based on the Quora platform answers, small talk when starting a conversation with new people is classified into three forms: ordinary forms (usual questions), probing for personal information, and teasing (Quora, 2020). The first form will not cause discomfort because it only asks basic questions, such as "Where are you going?", "What are you doing?", "Where are you from?", and so on. The second form causes discomfort for the interlocutor because it is related to personal information, which is personal for some people. The third form is the form most people avoid.

These three forms of small talk have the same goal, namely establishing communication and eliminating awkward situations. It's just that some people still don't understand that everyone has a 'limit' that must not be crossed, even if it's just small talk. Therefore, some people usually avoid small talk for reasons of comfort and privacy.

Based on the theory of intercultural communication related to the cultural context created by Hall (1976), understanding polite and impolite small talk is also influenced by cultural differences, especially high context and low context. Additionally, what pleasantries are considered polite or impolite can vary depending on the culture involved (Hall, 1976). However, several characteristics can be seen to determine whether small talk is polite in a cultural context.

In a high-cultural context, small talk is considered polite if done subtly and indirectly, using expressions of respect, appropriate body language, and understanding the facial expressions of the interlocutor. Meanwhile, small talk is considered polite in low-cultural contexts if the intention is expressed directly and explicitly, using clear and firm words and respecting personal boundaries.

Impolite small talk in a high-cultural context involves violating social norms, not respecting cultural traditions and hierarchies, criticizing directly, and conveying confrontational messages. Meanwhile, in low-cultural contexts, using harsh words and invading individual privacy or ignoring social boundaries is considered impolite small talk.

### ***3.1. Pretentious Expressions that are Considered Polite in The Student's Home Country and Indonesia***

Polite small talk is not just small talk but has become part of a country's culture, so it cannot be eliminated easily. Small talk in communication has an important function: determining and maintaining social relationships (Mattar & Wachsmuth, 2012). Generally, small talk is found at the beginning of a conversation because it is usually used in communication between people who do not know each other well or do not know each other at all (Mattar & Wachsmuth, 2012). During small talk, people can talk about anything if it does not offend the other party involved. However, the boundaries of politeness or impoliteness in small talk depend on each individual's perspective and cultural background, like the simple questions below.

For students from several countries, such as Rwanda, India, and China, small talk questions considered polite in their home countries are about news, family, name, reasons for coming to the student's home country, and requests for help. Some examples of questions, such as "How are you?"; "How is your family?"; "Excuse me, may I know your name?"; "Why did you come here?"; and "Excuse me, could you...?". Small-talk expressions that are considered polite are expressions of thanks, greetings, excuse me, requests for help, and wishes for a nice day, such as "Thank you", "*Assalamualaikum*", "Excuse me"; "Excuse me, could you ..."; "Have a nice day!".

Meanwhile, small talk questions that are considered polite in Indonesia according to students are questions about the purpose of living in Indonesia, location of residence, activities in Indonesia, names, and greetings such as "Work or study here?"; "Where do you live?"; "What are you doing here?"; "Hello, *Mbak/Mas*?"; "What is your name?". The pleasantries that are considered polite in Indonesia, according to BIPA students, are expressions of thanks, excuse me, and greetings such as "Thank you very much"; "Excuse me, *Mbak/Mas*"; and "*Assalamualaikum*".

Based on the explanation above, small talk questions considered polite in the student's home country and Indonesia, are general questions that do not touch on personal matters but general matters, such as news, names, activities carried out, and expressions. Thank you, and greetings. These questions are a form of polite small talk because this form of question is a greeting that is acceptable in different cultures (Marsih, 2010). In many languages, a question is used as a greeting but not as an actual question that requires an answer.

### ***3.2. Pretentious Expressions that are Considered Impolite in The Student's Home Country and Indonesia***

Small talk becomes a challenge in a new place when initiating and responding. Therefore, someone needs a high level of small talk skills (Holmes, 2005). As is well known, every place has a way of making small talk different from other places. Therefore, someone needs the ability and sensitivity in small talk to help in the process of adaptation or adjustment to a new place (Holmes, 2005). Apart from these two reasons, having a high level of ability and sensitivity in small talk is necessary to avoid misunderstandings and culture shock, which will have negative impacts (Fanari, Liu, & Foerster, 2021).

Culture shock is most commonly felt at the start of a student's life in Indonesia. Students who come to Indonesia for the first time will be surprised by some of the questions Indonesians ask. For example, in some countries, religion and age are privacy matters that no one should know, let alone foreigners. However, some still ask about this in Indonesia, even to people they have just met. Apart from questions about religion and age, physical matters are also some of the things most often mentioned, such as skin color and body shape. This is a very sensitive matter because, both in Indonesia and abroad, people of colored races still receive discriminatory treatment.

In general, questions regarding privacy are the main cause of culture shock experienced by foreign students who come to Indonesia. Apart from religious, age, and physical issues, areas of privacy such as where you live are also things that are 'kept secret', like Americans. Americans need to find a way to share their addresses with people they just met easily. This was done because they thought telling them their home address was like opening the way for other crimes. Even though it was just small talk, where to live was quite annoying for them. Other questions are considered impolite as small talk in the culture of several countries, such as India, China, Rwanda, and Thailand. These questions relate to personal matters and are quite sensitive.

Small talk questions considered impolite for some BIPA students in their home country include reasons for coming to the BIPA student's country, food, age, marital status, address, romantic relationships, and policies and regulations that apply in the student's country, taboo and controversial subjects such as sex, LGBTQ, narcotics, and salaries. Question forms, such as "Why did you come to this country?"; "Is this your first time in this country?"; "How is the food in this country?"; "How old are you?"; and "Are you married?". Apart from these questions, there are also forms

of small talk considered impolite for BIPA students in their home countries, such as making fun of their mothers and fathers, saying harsh words or discussing sexuality, and using rude or dirty words.

Meanwhile, according to BIPA students, several small talk questions are considered impolite for those in Indonesia, such as questions about age, offers of wanting to be a partner or not, whether or not they have ever had casual sex, as well as asking about taboo and controversial matters such as sex, LGBTQ, and narcotics. The forms of questions, such as “How old are you?”; “Do you want to be my wife?”; “Have you ever had casual sex or not?” Meanwhile, forms of small talk expressions that are considered impolite in Indonesia for BIPA students are talking about rude things, saying dirty things, not using greetings such as *Mas* ‘Brother’, *Mbak* ‘Sister’, *Pak* ‘Mister’, or *Bu* ‘Miss’, disclosing financial conditions, saying things directly, and calling someone by name directly.

Based on the explanation above, there are similarities between a small talk that is considered impolite in the student’s home country and Indonesia, namely small talk about age, offers of wanting to be a partner or not, romantic relationships, taboo or controversial matters such as sex, LGBTQ, and narcotics. Apart from that, small talk considered impolite is saying dirty words, not using the right greetings, and making small talk about financial conditions or salary. These pleasantries are considered impolite because they are unacceptable for communicating and discussing personal information (Alexe & Savu, 2016).

### ***3.3. Responses to Pleasantries that are Considered Impolite or Strange in The Student’s Home Country and Indonesia***

The BIPA students’ response to pleasantries that are considered impolite in the student’s home country is not to respond, not reply; answer, then say that the person should have been more polite or said sorry before asking; silent; telling partners that they will be scolded or beaten if they are unlucky; it’s your fault; still answer questions, but protect privacy; ignore by smiling or not answering; up to me (at that point); and don’t do anything, don’t move from that place.

BIPA students’ response to small talk, which is considered impolite in Indonesia, is not to reply to answer but to say “I do not know”; sad and not wanting to make friends anymore; Don’t know; ignore with a smile and not answer; Be quiet; not negotiating; and laugh.

BIPA students’ responses or responses to small talk expressions that are considered impolite, both in the student’s home country and in Indonesia, are silence, not responding or not replying, answering they don’t know, ignoring with a smile, and laughing.

In Indonesia, information such as your name, nationality, and address is not considered personal because it is only part of a person’s identity. According to (Katemba, 2016), someone can avoid it or joke if someone doesn’t want to answer (the pleasantries). The person can also reverse (return) your question because, in fact, most Indonesians never press other people (foreigners) for answers.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The pleasantries in communication encountered and experienced by BIPA students who carry out the immersion program when meeting new or unknown people consist of questions and expressions. Some polite expressions and questions are considered impolite when conversing with Indonesians for the first time. Responses or responses to questions and pleasantries considered impolite vary according to the cultural background of BIPA students.

## **AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS**

Vania Maherani: Conceptualization of the research, research design, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript drafting.

Y Yulianeta: Contribution to research design, data analysis, and critical manuscript revision.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We would like to express our gratitude to all parties who have supported this research. Special thanks to the BIPA students who participated in this study and patiently answered our inquiries.

## REFERENCES

- Alexe, M., & Savu, E. (2016). Small talk as a sign of cultural differences. *Proceedings of University of Ruse*, (pp. 44–47). Retrieved from <https://conf.uni-ruse.bg/bg/docs/cp16/6.3/6.3-9.pdf>
- Asmara, R. (2015). Basa-Basi dalam percakapan kolokial berbahasa Jawa sebagai penanda karakter santun berbahasa [Small talk in Javanese colloquial conversation as politeness marker]. *Transformatika*, 11(2), 80–95. Retrieved from <https://jurnal.untidar.ac.id/index.php/transformatika/article/view/215>
- Fanari, A., Liu, R. W., & Foerster, T. (2021). Homesick or sick-of-home? examining the effects of self-disclosure on students' reverse culture shock after studying abroad: A mixed-method study. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 50(3), 273–303. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17475759.2020.1866643>
- Febiyana, A., & Turistiati, A. T. (2019). Komunikasi antar budaya dalam masyarakat multikultur: Studi kasus pada karyawan warga negara Jepang dan Indonesia di PT. Tokyu Land Indonesia [Intercultural communication in a multicultural society: Case study of Japanese and Indonesian citizen employees at PT. Tokyu Land Indonesia]. *Jurnal Lugas*, 3(1), 33–44. Retrieved from <http://ojs.stiami.ac.id>
- Furukawa, C. (2013). *A study of small talk among males: Comparing the US and Japan* (Doctoral dissertation, Portland State University). Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/openview/9573391a6d84aa24efcc4439d6f42b05/1?pq-origsite=gsc-holar&cbl=18750>
- Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday.
- Holmes, J. (2005). When small talk is a big deal: Sociolinguistic challenges in the workplace. *Second Language Needs Analysis*, 344–371. Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rebeca-Jasso-Aguilar/publication/222347193\\_Sources\\_Methods\\_and\\_Triangulation\\_in\\_Needs\\_Analysis\\_A\\_Critical\\_Perspective\\_in\\_a\\_Case\\_Study\\_of\\_Waikiki\\_Hotel\\_Maids/links/59ebc7234585151983cb768a/Sources-Methods-and-Triangulation-in-Needs-Analysis-A-Critical-Perspective-in-a-Case-Study-of-Waikiki-Hotel-Maids.pdf?\\_sg%5B0%5D=started\\_experiment\\_milestone&origin=journalDetail#page=352](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rebeca-Jasso-Aguilar/publication/222347193_Sources_Methods_and_Triangulation_in_Needs_Analysis_A_Critical_Perspective_in_a_Case_Study_of_Waikiki_Hotel_Maids/links/59ebc7234585151983cb768a/Sources-Methods-and-Triangulation-in-Needs-Analysis-A-Critical-Perspective-in-a-Case-Study-of-Waikiki-Hotel-Maids.pdf?_sg%5B0%5D=started_experiment_milestone&origin=journalDetail#page=352)
- Katamba, C. V. (2016). Small talk among the Indonesians in three different countries: America, Indonesia, Philippines. *Acuity: Journal of English Language Pedagogy, Literature and Culture*, 1(2), 66–85. Retrieved from <https://jurnal.unai.edu/index.php/acuity/article/view/606>
- Marsih, L. (2010). Linguistic politeness in different cultures. *PARAFRASE: Jurnal Kajian Kebahasaan & Kesastraan*, 10(1). Retrieved from <https://jurnal.untag-sby.ac.id/index.php/parafrase/article/view/151>
- Mattar, N., & Wachsmuth, I. (2012). Small talk is more than chit-chat: Exploiting structures of casual conversations for a virtual agent. In *Annual Conference on Artificial Intelligence*, (pp. 119–130) Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg.
- Nuryani, L. (2013). *Fungsi basa-basi dalam tindak bahasa di kalangan masyarakat Jawa: Kajian pragmatik* [The function of small talk in language acts among Javanese society: Pragmatic study] (Thesis, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta). Retrieved from <http://eprints.ums.ac.id/id/eprint/25140>
- Quora. (2020). *Apa Pertanyaan “Basa Basi” yang Cocok untuk Berkenalan dengan Orang Baru?* [What are the appropriate "small talk" questions when meeting new people?]. Retrieved from <https://id.quora.com/Apa-pertanyaan-basa-basi-yang-cocok-untuk-berkenalan-dengan-orang-baru>
- Takaya, K. (2011). Organization of topics in intercultural and intracultural small talk. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 7(4), 17. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/openview/65cd91027a439cd3288343e8abf2ea80/1.pdf?pq->

origsite=gscho  
lar&cbl=40276

Wirawan, A. K. (2018). Pembelajaran Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing (BIPA) dengan metode immersion terintegrasi budaya Indonesia [Learning Indonesian for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) using the integrated immersion method of Indonesian culture]. *Kongres Bahasa Indonesia*, 1–10. Retrieved from <https://repositori.kemdikbud.go.id/9972/>

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

