Enhancing speaking skills of Indonesian language at Thomas Carr College: An experience of the Indonesian teaching assistantship program in Australia

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Abstract

This study explores the effectiveness of personalized tutoring methods in enhancing speaking skills among students of Thomas Carr College, particularly in preparing for the VCE Indonesian language exam. The main goal of this research is to assess how tailored lesson plans and one-on-one tutoring contribute to improving fluency, confidence, and critical thinking in spoken Indonesian. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative method, the study employs observation, feedback, and interaction analysis to evaluate the students' performance. The findings reveal that individualized tutoring significantly boosts students' conversational abilities, making them more confident in their oral examinations. Additionally, the study highlights the value of incorporating culturally relevant materials and real-life scenarios into language instruction, which enhances students' connection to the language and its practical applications. This research emphasizes the role of teaching assistants in bridging language gaps and providing an immersive learning experience.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesian, a language spoken by over 270 million people, has gained international recognition and continues to grow in prominence worldwide. Currently, Indonesian is taught in 54 countries, with more than 300 language-teaching institutions and 172,000 active learners globally (AsiaToday.id). This widespread interest is a testament to the growing importance of Indonesian as a key language for communication, trade, and cultural exchange in Southeast Asia and beyond. The language's rise is not only reflective of Indonesia's geopolitical significance but also a result of cultural diplomacy and the expansion of educational initiatives aimed at promoting Indonesian as a global language. As a result, Indonesian has become a subject of interest for foreign language learners, attracting students from diverse backgrounds who seek to engage with Indonesia's rich cultural heritage, dynamic economy, and strategic positioning in international affairs. This trend underscores the role of language education in fostering cross-cultural understanding and building stronger ties between Indonesia and the global community. The increasing number of Indonesian learners worldwide further illustrates the growing recognition of its relevance in global communication, making it one of the most spoken languages in the world today.
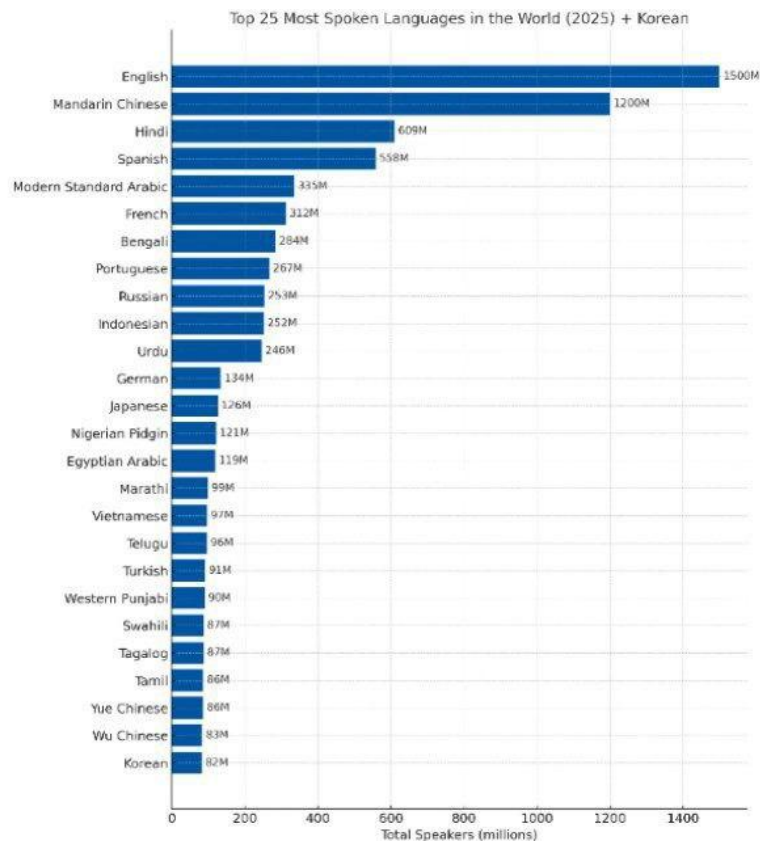
Figure 1. Indonesian is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world.

Furthermore, Indonesian has been designated as one of UNESCO's official languages . Indonesian was designated an official language of UNESCO on November 20, 2023 (GoodStats). Nowadays, interest in Indonesian has increased significantly. The Australian government recognizes the importance of learning foreign languages for the future of its international relations, particularly with several Asian countries, including Japan, Indonesia, India, China, and South Korea (Muslim & Brown).

Indonesian is one of the languages studied and taught in many schools in Australia. Indonesian is one of the priority languages in Asia, along with Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, and is recognized in Melbourne, Victoria. Thomas stated that Indonesian has been taught in several universities and schools in Australia for over 50 years (Kohler, 2021). This means that Indonesians have long been familiar with Australia. Australia, as Indonesia's neighbour, fully understands the importance of learning Indonesian.

The popularity of Indonesian in Australia has received a positive response. Several collaborations have been established to support research on the Indonesian language. One example is a collaboration between Yogyakarta State University and the Victorian Indonesian Language Teachers' Association (VILTA). This collaboration aims to increase interest in learning Indonesian in Australia and improve the skills of Indonesian students, particularly those at Yogyakarta State University, in teaching Indonesian for Foreign Speakers (BIPA).

This language and cultural diplomacy are an official agenda of the Government of the Republic of Indonesia to improve bilateral relations between Indonesia and Australia. This is reinforced by government support from the Education and Culture Attaché (ATDIKBUD) of the Indonesian Embassy (KBRI) in Canberra, Prof. Dr. Mukhamad Najib, who is actively promoting the Indonesian language in Australia. In addition to the Indonesian Embassy, the Indonesian Consulate General in Melbourne also conducts Indonesian language introduction

programs by visiting schools, teaching students to play the angklung, and holding other cultural activities.

Each student is assigned to be a teaching assistant at a predetermined school. Teaching assistants are responsible for supporting teachers during classroom instruction and helping students improve their language skills. Teaching assistants serve as a bridge between Indonesian culture and the study of the Indonesian language. Teaching assistants receive specialized training to prepare their classes.

Learning Indonesian for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) becomes authentic with the presence of native speakers in the classroom. In this collaborative activity with VILTA, students meet with native speakers to practice their Indonesian language skills, both through direct communication and through exposure to other language skills, such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Speaking and listening skills, in particular, require honing and practice. Thus, by listening to native speakers, students can master pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence structure. Understanding phonemes, words, and sentences greatly supports students' speaking, reading, and writing skills (Rahman, 2019).

The goal of speaking learning for grade 12 students at Thomas Carr College is to pass the speaking test in the VCE assessment conducted by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. Speaking skills are acquired both in and outside the classroom (Astriani, 2013). Learning in the school occurs when students interact with native speakers. This means that all students can interact directly and simultaneously. Meanwhile, learning outside the classroom provides students with additional hours to practice their language skills in face-to-face interactions with native speakers.

METHOD

The methodology used in this study focused on a two-month program designed to improve the speaking skills of Grade 12 students at Thomas Carr College. The primary objective was to prepare students for the VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) Indonesian language exam, with a particular emphasis on speaking proficiency. The program incorporated individualized tutoring, where teaching assistants provided one-on-one support during Indonesian language lessons. Students were given pre-prepared questions by the teacher, and the assistant's role was to pose these questions, observe the students' responses, and offer feedback. Additionally, teaching assistants helped students practice for simulated United Nations (UN) sessions, focusing on skills such as formulating problems, developing solutions, and presenting ideas. The tutoring sessions were designed to boost students' speaking confidence and fluency by offering personalized, interactive learning opportunities both inside and outside the classroom. The method also involved close observation of students' body language to adapt the tutoring approach to each student's needs. The feedback received was generally positive, highlighting the impact of the teaching assistant role in motivating students and enhancing their speaking skills, while also fostering self-confidence through intensive language practice.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
 One-on-one tutoring activities

Twelfth-grade students are approaching the period of the graduation exam. There are many exams to prepare for, including the Indonesian language exam. The Indonesian language exam tests all skills and is divided into two parts: oral and written. For the written exam, students take the exam simultaneously and record their answers on the provided answer sheet. Meanwhile, for the oral exam, students are assessed through an interview with an examiner. This oral exam assesses students' understanding of their conversation partner's

intent and purpose, and their mastery of grammar and sentence structure, in their responses to the examiner's questions.

In this exam, students are expected to answer the examiner's questions fluently, critically, comprehensively, and in accordance with the rules of the Indonesian language. The teaching assistant's role in this case is to tutor students in preparing for their oral exams. They also assist students in preparing for the final exam. Speaking sessions with the author take place both during Indonesian language lessons and after class.

In assisting grade 12 students in preparing for the Indonesian language oral speaking exam, the author acted as an assessor, providing input and suggestions. During the speaking practice session, the author provided questions prepared by the teacher. The teacher prepared the questions; during implementation, the teaching assistant served as the executor. The teaching assistant posed questions to the students, observed their speech patterns, language use, and sentence structure, and provided feedback. The author also developed teacher-provided questions. This development was implemented to ensure that students not only became accustomed to memorizing the question templates but also truly understood the meaning of the assessor's questions. Improvisation in questioning was also carried out to provide students with an overview of the various types of questions that might arise.

The assessment team asks open-ended, opinion-related, and interest-related questions on the exam, which require students to think critically about issues in Indonesia. One example is asking students to select a problem or event occurring in Indonesia and present it to the assessor, articulating their aspirations and opinions on the issue. Based on this, the students' attitudes and abilities in conveying ideas and opinions are required and assessed by the assessment team.

Indonesian student's language learning and literacy development are significantly influenced by their home and religious communities, as well as digital tools. Family support plays a crucial role in balancing exposure to heritage and host languages, thereby preserving cultural identity while facilitating integration into new environments (Angrill Schuster, 2020). Religious communities provide culturally aligned literacy activities that respect Islamic values, enhancing faith-based learning opportunities. Additionally, digital tools offer flexible and interactive resources that enrich literacy experiences through creative expression and language acquisition (Angrill Schuster, 2020).

In the context of Indonesian language education in Australia, there has been a historical disconnect between the stated aim of fostering intercultural understanding and the actual language learning experience provided to students. Traditionally, language teaching has focused primarily on language acquisition, with cultural understanding often treated as a separate component. However, recent pedagogical approaches have begun to integrate language learning with intercultural understanding, emphasizing the importance of this integration for developing a better understanding of the culture and religion of Indonesia (Kidwell, 2021).

The role of digital repositories in supporting the teaching and learning of Indonesian literature is also noteworthy. These repositories provide access to a wide array of literary materials, including digitized texts and multimedia content, which can enhance educational outcomes by making literature more engaging and accessible. However, the integration of these digital resources into the curriculum remains limited, highlighting the need for targeted training programs and infrastructure development to foster greater adoption of digital tools in literary education (Chan, et al, 2015).

Moreover, the integration of local cultural elements into language instruction, such as using Indonesian folklore in Arabic language teaching, can enhance students' language learning experience and promote a deeper understanding of Indonesian culture. This

approach not only improves language proficiency but also fosters cultural awareness and appreciation (Palennari, et al, 2023).

The method used in this activity is a one-on-one tutorial. This means each student practices individually with the author. This activity lasts approximately 15–30 minutes for each student. The author asks questions from a preprepared list.

The challenge in this one-on-one tutorial is the unique characteristics of each student. Each student has different abilities, understandings, and levels. The author's role in treating students must naturally adapt to each individual's character. While conducting this activity, the author also observes students' body language to determine whether they feel comfortable with the system being implemented.

The effectiveness of one-on-one tutorials lies in their ability to cater to the unique characteristics of each student. This personalized approach allows tutors to adapt their teaching methods to align with the individual abilities, understandings, and comfort levels of their students (Ross & Andreas, 2024; Mitchell, et all, 2012; Chen, et al, 2011). By recognizing that each learner has distinct needs, tutors can create a more engaging and supportive learning environment. This adaptability is crucial, as it not only enhances the learning experience but also fosters a sense of belonging and motivation among students.

Observing students' body language during tutorials provides valuable insights into their comfort and engagement levels (Protolo, 2019; Salvato, 2025). Non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and posture (Dimitriadou & Lanitis, 2025), can indicate whether a student is struggling or feeling confident in their understanding of the material. By being attuned to these signals, tutors can adjust their instructional strategies in real-time, ensuring that students feel supported and encouraged. This responsiveness is essential for building trust and rapport, which are foundational elements in effective teaching and learning relationships.

Moreover, the discussion of motivational and cognitive factors highlights the importance of understanding what drives each student. Different students may have varying levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which can significantly impact their learning outcomes. By incorporating strategies that address these motivational aspects, tutors can enhance student engagement and promote a more active learning process. This tailored approach not only helps in meeting academic goals but also contributes to the overall development of students as confident learners.

Finally, the role of reflective practice cannot be overstated in the context of one-on-one tutoring (Parsons &Vaughn, 2013). Tutors who engage in regular reflection on their teaching practices are better equipped to identify areas for improvement and adapt their methods accordingly. This continuous cycle of assessment and adjustment ensures that the instructional approach remains relevant and effective in meeting the evolving needs of students. By fostering a culture of reflection, tutors can enhance their professional development and ultimately improve the learning experiences they provide (Parsons, 2012).

Some students are confident during practice, whereas others lack confidence. This presents a challenge for the author. For students taking exams, feeling nervous and insecure is normal. These feelings of nervousness and insecurity must be effectively managed to have a positive impact. This is where the guidance of a teaching assistant is crucial, as it helps and motivates students toward optimal results. Fostering self-confidence in students enables them to give their best. Self-confidence is built on sufficient skills. These skills are developed through intensive practice. This is where the role of a teaching assistant is needed. Training students to become accustomed to speaking Indonesian so that their language is flexible and fluent.

Directing Students in the UN session

In addition to taking final exams, 12th-grade students are also expected to attend a session held by the United Nations (UN). The purpose of participating in this activity is to build students' confidence in speaking Indonesian and to familiarize them with its use.

Figure 2. 12th-grade students participating in a United Nations session

The author assisted students in conducting the UN session. This was the first UN session at the school, and it was an enjoyable experience. Before the session, the students and the author prepared by gathering information on the session's theme, rehearsing the session, and practicing presenting the discussion results in the forum. In this session, speaking skills were a key focus. The author and students practiced reading the discussion results. Furthermore, the author's accompanying lecturer also participated in guiding the students during the UN session.

The challenge of the UN session is that it's a new activity, so students don't yet have a clear picture. Students also need support from teachers and coaches to build confidence. During the practice session, the author assisted the students by providing input and technical guidance.

CONCLUSION

Service Learning possesses great potential as a humanizing educational tool, but only if it dares to transcend the charitable model that often actually dehumanizes. By grounding its practice in the principles of critical consciousness (conscientization), SL can transform into a powerful educational praxis. A framework centered on assumption deconstruction, authentic dialogue, and collaborative problem investigation can guide SL to achieve its true purpose: empowering students and communities equally to become active agents in social transformation.

This transformation requires fundamental shifts in how we conceptualize the relationship between educational institutions and communities, moving from service provision to mutual learning and empowerment. When implemented with critical consciousness, Service Learning becomes more than just a service program—it becomes a truly liberating educational experience that contributes to sustainable social change.

The proposed framework offers practical guidance for educators and institutions seeking to implement more equitable and transformative forms of Service Learning. However, successful implementation requires sustained commitment to critical reflection, authentic community partnership, and ongoing dialogue that challenges existing power structures within educational and social contexts.

Future research should focus on empirical studies of critical consciousness-based SL programs, examining their effectiveness in promoting both student development and community empowerment. Additionally, an investigation into specific strategies for supporting educators in facilitating critical dialogue and implementing problem-posing methodologies would contribute valuable insights to the field.

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