

When English language matters: Internationalizing PhD research by Indonesian political scientists

Jürgen Rüländ

University of Freiburg, Germany
juergen.rueland@politik.uni-freiburg.de

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ABSTRACT

The essay traces frequent language problems and un(der)developed academic writing skills of Indonesian PhD students in the field of political science and international relations. The author thereby draws on personal experiences as a thesis supervisor. Apart from problematic scope conditions in the Indonesian university system, he identifies a lack of training in academic writing at the undergraduate and graduate levels of education and a missing research and publication culture in social sciences. The remainder of the essay reflects about how the problem of deficient language and academic writing skills can be remedied. It argues that both Indonesian universities and also host universities abroad must develop measures to overcome the identified problems.

Keywords: *English language; Ph.D. research; Indonesia; Political scientists*

1. Introduction

Thousands of bright and determined Indonesian students seek tertiary education abroad. North America and the United Kingdom are particularly popular study destinations, closely followed by Australia, the Netherlands, Germany and the Scandinavian countries. Students pursuing religious studies seek tertiary education in the Middle East. More recently, Asian universities—in Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and to a lesser extent, Malaysia and India—have attracted Indonesian PhD students. With the exception of Middle Eastern universities, in almost all other cases, a precondition for successful enrollment in a doctoral program at a foreign university is

good proficiency in English. A TOEFL test score of at least 80 or an IELTS result higher than 6.5 is usually required for admission to overseas PhD programs.

The Indonesian government supports this educational mobility. It is, together with a number of other measures, part of a national strategy to internationalize research and university education. The Indonesian government thereby responds to often criticized quality deficiencies in the Indonesian tertiary education system (Rakhmani & Siregar, 2016; Achwan, 2017; Prasetyamartai et al, 2018). According to the annual British Times Higher Education survey, few Indonesian universities qualify among the world's 2,000 best. The two highest-ranked Indonesian universities, the University of Indonesia and Universitas Airlangga, are positioned in the 1001–1200 bracket.* Indonesia thus trails other Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Brunei Darussalam. Apart from stringent reforms in the career patterns of Indonesian academics, such as a 2017 regulation obliging full professors to regularly publish in double-blind, peer-reviewed, SCOPUS-listed international journals,† the government has also expanded its scholarship programs. Between 2013 and 2021, the Ministry of Finance provided 13,388 scholarships for graduate and PhD studies under *the Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan (LPDP)* scheme,‡ which reduces the pressure on young Indonesian researchers to find PhD scholarships abroad.

Germany has been one of the traditional destinations for Indonesian PhD students, especially in engineering disciplines and natural sciences. Apart from the quality of the PhD programs, German universities attract foreign students because they do not charge tuition fees. Moreover, a number of German organizations—in particular the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)—provide scholarships for Indonesian PhD students. Currently, 5,393 (2021) Indonesians study in Germany (DAAD, 2021), many of whom pursue PhDs.

Previously, foreign PhD students were required to write their theses in the German language. Indonesian students thus had to acquire sufficient skills in German, usually supported by intensive training at one of Germany's Goethe Institutes, before starting their PhD. However, German universities have also undergone a massive process of internationalization in the last two decades. The provincialism of German social sciences, deplored by many critics, triggered reforms in the course of which numerous English-language study programs at Master's and PhD levels were initiated. This lowered the entrance barriers for Indonesians intent on pursuing doctoral studies in Germany because their knowledge of English is usually better than that of German. Yet improving starting conditions for Indonesian students has only partly helped to overcome serious language problems in thesis writing. Apart from the need to adjust to a different academic culture, insufficient English language proficiency has often been diagnosed as a major

* Times Higher Education, "World University Rankings 2023." Available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2023/world-ranking> (accessed 25 October 2022).

† Later softened to publications in international journals. Personal communication, 30 March 2023.

‡ See LPDP, Laporan Kinerja 2021, p. 32.

impediment for the (timely) completion of theses. Based on the personal experiences of the author, who has supervised Indonesian Master's and PhD students in the fields of political science and international relations for more than 30 years, this essay identifies problems that Indonesian students encounter in English-language academic writing, before reflecting on what can be done at Indonesian universities and the German host institutions to improve the language proficiency and writing skills of Indonesian doctoral students.

2. Un(der)developed writing skills and their causes

The language problems that many—though certainly not all—Indonesian PhD students face in their studies abroad have systemic as well as individual, personal roots. At the most general level, systemic factors are predominantly shaped by the power distribution in the existing (albeit changing) global order. Like many other countries in the Global South, Indonesia struggles with a Western value hegemony that has also deeply penetrated higher education. It is primarily Anglo-Saxon universities that are the standard-setters for what is considered academic excellence. More recently, decoloniality studies and reformist strands in several disciplines—such as the calls for a truly “global” approach in the field of international relations (Acharya, 2014)—have sought to chart alternative paths to education and quality research that take into account local cultures, knowledge, modes of articulation and historical experiences. Yet, unperturbed, the government bureaucracies in charge of (tertiary) education are striving hard to conform to the defining standards of Western educational ideals and to catch up with Western universities in terms of research output and the reputation of their study programs. This Western—or better, Anglo-Saxon—hegemony in the field of higher education is epitomized in the dominant status of English as the *lingua franca* in the field of research. Willy-nilly Indonesian students studying abroad thus have to comply with the language requirements and the criteria of what is considered quality research.

Another very general systemic factor is related to the primary and secondary levels of education. They are still more insulated from the neoliberal influences of the Western hegemonic model than tertiary education. Primary and secondary education are thus still closer to age-honored local indigenous culture and values. In this local life world, contesting the knowledge of teachers and individualistic notions of educational attainment deviates from the dominant strands of social collectivism. Unsurprisingly, Indonesia does not fare well in the rankings of the Western-dominated Organization of Economic Cooperation's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Indonesia ranks close to the bottom among 79 countries in a number of key qualifications, including literacy (Azzahra & Zahra 2023: 3). These problems have a continuing influence on tertiary education and must be analyzed in much greater depth, but cannot be further pursued in this brief essay.

A less abstract problem for the issue of the lacking academic writing skills of many Indonesian doctoral students is that the country's university system has so far failed to

develop a vibrant “research and publishing culture” (Rakhmani & Siregar, 2016; Achwan 2017; Prasetiamartati et al, 2018). It is only quite recently that the scholarly community and Indonesian authorities have responded to the fact that cutting-edge research must be published in English that without good English proficiency university graduates struggle in an increasingly globalized professional world, and that Indonesian universities will have great difficulty in advancing to a state of internationally recognized excellence. It is thus a problem that, despite reforms and undeniable improvements, the use of English and, in particular, the development of students’ English academic writing skills continues to play a subordinate role in their training.[§] While in political science and international relations classes nowadays a large percentage of the course literature is in English, the medium of instruction is still *Bahasa Indonesia*, the national language.^{**} There are very few courses that are entirely offered in English. If they are, they are part of a department’s international program, which, so far, few social science faculties offer, or they are courses for a department’s foreign students.

In many political science courses, and to a somewhat lesser extent international relations, written (mid-term and final) exams count considerably more, up to 70 percent, toward the students’ grade than term papers. Term papers are part of the courses as well, but do not count for more than 20-25 percent for the student’s grade.^{††} Usually, they do not exceed 5 to 10 pages and are more of an essay type than a scholarly paper based on an analytical framework and methodological rigor. Some observers attribute the latter problem, among others, to the fact that many Indonesian lecturers have not exceeded a Master’s degree as their highest educational attainment and that the Master’s courses they attended abroad often prepare them for applied sciences, but do not teach them scholarly rigor and the capacity to develop systematic research designs.^{‡‡} By comparison, German political science courses, especially those held in the form of seminars, require students to write a truly scholarly 10-20 pages term paper, which counts for up to 100 percent of their course performance. The exceptions are introductory lectures into sub-disciplines such as comparative politics, international relations, political theory, and the history of political ideas or statistics, which usually end with a written exam. As a corollary, when German students have finished their undergraduate studies, they have learnt to design and develop a scholarly paper focusing on a self-defined topic related to the pertinent course theme, often even written in English.

Like their German counterparts, Indonesian political science and international relations students conclude their Bachelor’s or Master’s studies with a thesis (*skripsi*). But unlike German students, Indonesian students have rarely written sophisticated pieces of scholarly work before this. Unlike in Germany, where in the last two decades universities reformed their once outdated German-language-centered examination

[§] Personal communication, 12 April 2023.

^{**} Personal communication, 29 March and 30 March 2023.

^{††} Personal communication, 29 March 2023.

^{‡‡} Personal communication, 31 March 2023.

regulations and now explicitly permit the writing of theses in English, an option many German students keenly adopt, the overwhelming majority of Indonesian students write their *skripsi* in *Bahasa Indonesia*. They thereby often enter their *skripsi* project without comprehensive training in developing a systematic research design. Writing a study that is guided by an analytical framework; that is methodologically informed, sound and rigorous; that closely links theory and empirical analysis; and in which theoretical categories order the empirical material, has—as mentioned above—not been sufficiently trained before. These problems multiply if a complex study such as a doctoral dissertation must be written in a foreign language—for example, in English. Unlike the majority of their German counterparts, many Indonesian PhD students have only a vague understanding of the criteria that must be met for a quality thesis.

Another systemic problem concerns teaching personnel. Not only do scholarly writing skills, especially in a foreign language, need sufficient training, bright students also tend to imitate the working and writing styles of their professors. And here the problem starts. Most Indonesian lecturers (*dosen*) and professors are not very productive (academic) writers. According to statistics published by the University of Indonesia, the productivity record of social sciences and humanities is at the lower end of the university's faculties (Achwan, 2017, p.469). In the fields of political science and international relations, only think tank scholars publish frequently and regularly in the English language, usually in area studies journals. However, many of these contributions are policy-oriented and hence have little theoretical grounding. By contrast, the number of Indonesian university scholars publishing regularly in impact factor-strong international disciplinary journals is still low. If they publish, it is usually in *Bahasa Indonesia*, in journals that are not well known outside the country, or in the form of opinion pieces in the country's rich mediascape. While it is undeniable that under the impact of the 2017 reforms, consciousness of English-language publications has been growing, especially among younger scholars, the texts they publish in homegrown journals are often of questionable scholarly quality, not guided by (senior) academic mentors, poorly edited, and in some cases even full of spelling and grammatical errors. The realization that quality research also requires profound linguistic quality checks is only gradually dawning. Many Indonesian scholars publish in SCOPUS-listed journals only when they seek promotion.^{§§} This explains why, according to a survey conducted a few years ago, only 8 percent of scholars at major Indonesian universities published in SCOPUS-listed journals (Rakhmani & Siregar, 2016).

This state of affairs has something to do with wrong incentives. Indonesian academics still advance their careers in the university system through seniority and by adopting executive or “structural” positions (Achwan, 2017). In these roles they spend much more time settling administrative matters than advancing their research. Their publications thus rarely stand for best practices in research and academic writing; few of

^{§§} Personal conversation with Indonesian scholars, 24 October 2022.

them serve as role models for their students. Research-minded Indonesian academics are thus, as one colleague caustically stated, in constant “survival mode” concerning serious academic publishing.^{***} This creates path dependencies which are difficult to overcome. Unsurprisingly, thus, the desk rejection rate of Indonesian submissions to international journals is high, because they lack theoretical grounding and methodological rigor and/or because they are submitted in poor English.

Indonesian students have to cope with another handicap: Unlike their German peers, their exposure to foreign universities prior to their doctoral studies is much lower. Under the European Union’s Erasmus program, tens of thousands of German undergraduate and graduate students have multiple opportunities and choices to study one or two semesters abroad. English is a frequent—though not the only—medium of instruction in these exchange programs. This increases their exposure to international writing standards, sharpens their awareness of the internationalization of research and also heightens their desire to train these skills at their home universities. By contrast, exchange programs at Indonesian universities, while now more forcefully promoted under the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) scheme, are quantitatively still comparatively modest, primarily benefit students from the country’s most prestigious universities and often rely on the personal initiative and the engagement of individual professors and their colleagues abroad.^{†††}

Systemic problems are exacerbated by problems that lie at students’ personal or individual levels. The English proficiency of students greatly varies according to social background. English language skills are greater in disciplines which have an intrinsically international outlook such as international relations and that often disproportionately attract students from families with a wealthy urban upper- and middle class social background and a high level of educational achievement. Also, students in the country’s leading universities, such as the University of Indonesia and Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, tend to have better English competence than students from universities in the so-called outer islands. While most Indonesian doctoral students are nevertheless able to communicate well in everyday foreign-language conversations, the picture changes markedly when it comes to writing academic texts. Problems that students often encounter include a limited vocabulary and a lack of knowledge of idioms. In practice, these problems translate into clumsy and repetitive texts, including difficulties in systematically developing arguments or clearly visible storylines. The adequate description of social phenomena and the much needed nuancing of findings that is part and parcel of quality research suffers under these circumstances.

Poor texts, usually in the form of chapter drafts, become a burden for the supervisor and slow down students’ work on their theses. For the supervisor, this means that before s/he can start examining the chapter’s substantive issues—factual checks, verifying the links between theory and empirical analysis or assessing the work’s methodological

^{***} Personal communication, 30 March 2023.

^{†††} See IISMA’s website at: <https://iisma.kemdikbud.go.id/>, (accessed 31 March 2023).

adequacy—s/he must edit the submitted text to improve its readability. In more problematic cases, the message of phrases remains nebulous and requires returning the text to the student for amendments. This can become a quite time consuming, tedious and stressful process for both sides.

Aware of their handicaps in writing foreign-language academic texts, many students produce their texts in a two-step process. The first draft is in *Bahasa Indonesia*, which then—in a second step—is translated into English. This, together with the limitations in their vocabulary, adds further to the clumsy nature of these texts. Moreover, students do not learn to think in the foreign language; the text is thus translated rather mechanistically. This explains, for example, why they often prefer to write texts in passive voice—standing for good writing style in *Bahasa Indonesia*—but ignoring that flowing English text requires an active voice. Some students engage proofreaders to identify errors and polish the writing. Unfortunately, but understandably in view of the high costs, these are not native speakers, but often friends or colleagues who have only a slightly better grasp of the foreign language and whose edits rarely help to improve a text's quality.

Time pressure due to the finite duration of scholarships and severe problems of producing a readable academic English text may also constrain students' cognitive dispositions for language-related learning. Even after years of working on their dissertations, some of them continue to commit the same grammatical errors: concerning syntax, the use of articles, singular and plural, as well as the tenses. The readability of texts improves only gradually. The most serious problem resulting from these language issues is that students face great difficulties in revising their draft chapters. Even with a good design at the outset, any research entails a certain degree of trial and error and hence requires revisions. But when the use of the language is insecure and clumsy, revisions become a major effort which stresses students and is highly time consuming.

3. Strategies to improve the academic writing skills of Indonesian doctoral students

Indonesian universities and host universities abroad should jointly try to improve the English-language academic writing skills of Indonesian PhD students. This section outlines a few proposals to facilitate this process.

3.1. Measures at Indonesian universities

Merely curing the symptoms is not enough and will not decisively solve the problem. Strategies to improve the English-language academic writing skills of young Indonesian scholars are part and parcel of a comprehensive process and must first address the scope conditions. Such measures would have to begin with tackling the deficiencies of the educational system at the primary and secondary levels. At the university level, “top-down” government reforms to internationalize research and publishing (Achwan, 2017, p.468) are underway and commendable, but do not go far enough. The much-needed change in academic career patterns is only slowly materializing. Incentives for

young scholars to publish internationally must markedly increase, enabling them to boost their reputation in the academic world through their achievements in research and publishing, rather than by rising through the ranks of the academe primarily on account of successfully performing executive functions. Making publications in SCOPUS-listed international journals compulsory for professorial positions is an important and helpful step forward that in the long run—with some softening interim measures mitigating the reforms' impact for the old generation of scholars—should be stringently implemented. A research and publication culture must emerge in universities so that achievements in research and publishing internationally become an intrinsic motivation for scholars, supported by financial rewards and accelerated career advancement. Some universities have already started to pay bonuses to scholars with a track record in publishing internationally, a practice that should be intensified but should be based on more rigorous criteria.

Also conducive for building up research excellence is the establishment of a national research foundation, as many countries have successfully done before: The German Research Foundation (DFG), the Australian Research Council (ARC), the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), the Polish National Science Center, or the Austrian Wissenschaftsfonds (FWF), to name a few, are cases in point. They provide competitive, multi-year grants for innovative and original research proposals and stimulate scholars to publish internationally.^{†††} In 2016, Indonesia created the Indonesian Science Fund (DIPI). This is certainly a step in the right direction. Yet grant disbursements seem to be lopsided, mainly benefiting medicine, life sciences and other natural sciences.^{§§§} With around US\$800,000 in 2018, the research funding is still very modest.^{****}

One thing that facilitates the preparation of students for international research and successfully concluding PhD studies abroad is the organization of student mobility at the undergraduate and graduate levels. In principle, the ASEAN University Network (AUN) provides a good organizational framework for the intensification of student and staff exchange in Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, while it has existed since 1995, it has mainly concentrated on the ASEAN-wide accreditation of study programs. Expanding the network via a vibrant student and staff mobility program embedded in cooperative arrangements with host universities would facilitate Indonesian students' early familiarization with international research and writing standards (Lücking, Meiser, & Rohrer, 2023).^{††††} A liberal system for converting the credits acquired abroad in the local university's transcript would further facilitate student mobility.^{††††} However, it should, at

^{†††} For the problems associated with Indonesian research funding, see Prasetiamartati et al (2018: 19-20).

^{§§§} Personal communication, 12 April 2023.

^{****} See DIPI, "Empowering the Culture of Research Excellence in Indonesia. Annual Report 2018." Available at: <https://dipi.id/download/ENG%20-%20DIPI%202018.pdf>, (accessed 31 March 2023).

^{††††} For a path-breaking example, see the tandem model initiated by the anthropology department of the University of Freiburg, Germany (Lücking, Meiser & Rohrer 2023).

^{††††} Personal communication, 12 April 2023.

this point, be noted that at a moderate level, mobility programs have already been launched. One is the above-mentioned Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) scheme, another the student exchange organized by the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) university network.^{§§§§} While establishing student and staff mobility programs requires sizeable investment, this should not be an insurmountable obstacle. Southeast Asia has enjoyed remarkable economic growth in recent decades and most countries in the region have reached middle or upper-middle income status. Investment in scholarly mobility programs will contribute to strengthening ASEAN member countries' R&D capacities and will constitute a step in their quest to evade the middle-income trap.

In political science and international relations, it is crucial to expand the number of English-language study programs at undergraduate and Master's levels. The international programs offered so far primarily by medical faculties, natural sciences and economics may facilitate this process, although high fees make access to the programs socially highly selective. It is certainly also commendable when emphatic lecturers bring their undergraduate classes to guest lectures by visiting overseas scholars, but unfortunately such activities mostly fizzle out ineffectively. Especially in provincial universities, students lack English proficiency and the necessary disciplinary training to benefit from these lectures. By contrast, full-fledged English-language study programs would increase the incentives for universities to hire foreign teaching staff, a strategy successfully applied to varying extents by other ASEAN countries, foremost Singapore, but also Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. A first step in this direction is the Ministry of Education and Culture's "world class professors" program, intended to bring highly reputed scholars as visiting professors to Indonesian universities for three-month stints.^{*****} Also, the German Senior Expert Service (SES) sends experienced scholars to Indonesian universities to help internationalize their teaching and research programs and to familiarize potential doctoral students with the disciplinary requirements and the expected writing skills. Yet, to be sustainable, these usually month-long missions need a coordinated follow-up, which normally does not happen.

Finally, it is crucial to markedly increase undergraduate and graduate students' familiarity with the cutting-edge literature in their discipline. Offering reading courses led by an experienced and accomplished lecturer, focusing on the discipline's standard literature and increasing the orientation of students in their study field, is an option to facilitate this. Requiring, or at least encouraging, students to write term papers and their BA or MA theses (*skripsi*) in English complements these measures.

Compared to 30 years ago, when this author had his first encounters with Indonesian universities, the country's leading institutions of higher learning are no longer massively

^{§§§§} Interviews with scholars and university administrators, 27 May 2022, 6 June 2022, 9 June 2022, 1 November 2022.

^{*****} "2021 World Class Professor Program Offer." Available at: <https://lppm.itb.ac.id/en/2021-world-class-professor-program-offer/>, (accessed 27 March 2023).

resource strapped. Their budgets have markedly increased and they can now invest substantial amounts of money to upgrade the education they offer. While there is a tendency to prioritize investments in the universities' physical infrastructure, it is advisable to step up investment in student and staff skills development. One such step could be for departments to employ an English native speaker with the task of polishing texts that department members intend to submit to international publication outlets and to train them in English academic writing. The author has witnessed how years ago South Korean universities successfully employed such a strategy.

3.2. Support provided by host universities

Indonesian doctoral students coming to Germany with German scholarships first undergo three months' intensive training in the German language. This certainly helps students in their everyday lives in the host country, but certainly does not develop their English academic writing skills. While it is not advisable to train them in two languages at virtually the same time—both German and English—as sometimes recommended by the scholarship selection committees, it would be helpful to provide funding for a native-speaking language teacher who trains foreign PhD students—not only those from Indonesia—during their first year abroad in English academic writing. This should be done on the basis of the texts they produce and should include regular personal consultation opportunities in which students meet their English teachers on a one-to-one basis. Scholarship providers, be it German ones or the Indonesian government, should also earmark an amount in the order of at least 3,000 euros for final proofreading of the dissertation text by a native speaker prior to submission. Students financing their PhD studies privately should be advised to retain sufficient savings for proofreading services during and at the end of the thesis-writing process. Finally, promising students should be encouraged to present papers related to their PhD research at international conferences. Weaker ones should at least be enabled to attend and audit such events in order to learn by observation about the production of academic knowledge and papers.

4. Conclusion

Readers with a decoloniality perspective might not agree with my reflections. Yet they face the uphill task of developing an academic culture that on the one hand authentically reflects non-Western life worlds and on the other finds acceptance beyond the confines of their country. They should rest assured that I do not mean to say that Indonesian political science and international relations PhD students in Germany notoriously underperform when writing their PhD theses. Many of them identify highly relevant themes, the findings of which—based on careful fieldwork—not only support their country's developmental agenda but also provide novel insights in the respective field of studies. A few of these PhD students submit excellent and well-written theses, which get published by renowned publishers and mark the beginning of outstanding scholarly careers. Yet, unfortunately, this is rather the exception than the rule. Many

students struggle with the foreign environment, a different scientific culture and with writing their theses in a foreign language.

This essay, guided very much by the personal and hence subjective experiences of the author, has identified some common problems and their roots. More importantly, it has sought to develop some strategies helping to overcome the weaknesses of Indonesian PhD students in academic writing. If it does, it would boost the internationalization of Indonesian research in the fields of political science, international relations and beyond.

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