

Cross-Cultural Learning: Indonesian Students' Educational Engagement in Southern Thailand

Djusmalinar

Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus, Thailand

E-mail:

ABSTRACT

The placement of Indonesian students for Kuliah Kerja Nyata (KKN—Community Service Program) in Southern Thailand has been ongoing for quite some time. Before and after the COVID-19 outbreak, the number of students sent each year has continued to increase. This can be seen from their regular attendance at the Consulate of the Republic of Indonesia (KRI) in Songkhla, especially during Indonesian Independence Day celebrations. This ongoing collaboration cannot be separated from the role of the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia (KJRI) in Songkhla, which has built partnerships with various institutions in Southern Thailand, particularly Indonesian alumni, local schools, and related officials. This research employs a qualitative method, drawing on various sources about sending KKN students abroad, especially to Thailand. A sociopragmatic approach is used to examine the responses of participating students. Data from different sources and sociopragmatic analyses are then clearly described for readers' understanding. The findings show that the students have actively promoted the Indonesian language in Southern Thailand. This occurred largely because they taught Indonesian and English at local schools during the KKN program. In addition, they made efforts to understand the local dialect spoken by the Pattani community.

Keywords: *Students, Indonesia, KKN, Sociopragmatics.*

ARTICLE HISTORY

Published

September 19th 2025



ARTICLE LICENCE

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1. Introduction

The *Kuliah Kerja Nyata* (KKN), or Community Service Program, is a hallmark of higher education in Indonesia, serving as a structured bridge between academic learning and real-world application. Rooted in the mandate of the Republic of Indonesia Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, Article 20 Paragraph 2, KKN embodies the threefold mission of universities: education, research, and community service. Beyond fulfilling a curricular requirement, the program nurtures a sense of social

responsibility and fellowship among students, encouraging them to contribute meaningfully to society both domestically and abroad.

KKN operates as a dynamic platform where theoretical knowledge meets practical engagement. It is designed to link and align university education with the actual needs of communities, creating opportunities for students to translate classroom lessons into tangible action. As Gunawan (2000) notes, KKN serves as an experiential learning arena where participants can test and refine the theories, methods, and skills they have acquired throughout their academic journey. This real-life immersion enhances not only intellectual growth but also empathy and adaptability.

The program's objectives underscore its transformative potential. Perdana et al., (2013) identify three core goals: enabling students to apply academic theory in fieldwork, improving the quality of life in host communities, and forging sustainable partnerships between higher education institutions and society. These goals highlight KKN as a dual-benefit initiative—students gain professional and personal development while communities receive educational and social support tailored to their needs.

Over time, KKN has evolved beyond local boundaries to embrace international contexts. This expansion reflects Indonesia's growing commitment to global citizenship and cross-cultural understanding. Universities have increasingly recognized that exposure to international environments enriches students' perspectives and strengthens their ability to engage with diverse cultures. Consequently, overseas KKN placements have become a strategic avenue for fostering intercultural competence and global awareness among participants.

Southern Thailand has emerged as a prominent destination for international KKN programs. The region's rich cultural tapestry, predominantly Muslim population, and proximity to Malaysia make it an ideal setting for Indonesian students to share their knowledge while learning from local traditions (Zakaria et al., 2024; Rahman & Weda, 2018). Collaborative initiatives in this area not only strengthen ties between Indonesia and Thailand but also encourage mutual respect and understanding across national and religious lines.

Several Indonesian universities have taken significant steps to institutionalize international KKN placements in Southern Thailand. Institutions such as Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatra Utara, Universitas Islam Surabaya, Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, and Universitas Islam Tulungagung have consistently sent students to participate in community service projects there. Their programs underscore the value of cross-border engagement as an integral component of contemporary higher education.

The presence of Indonesian students in Southern Thailand has had a measurable impact on both the local communities and the participants themselves. Through teaching, cultural exchange, and collaborative projects, students not only disseminate knowledge of the Indonesian language and culture but also gain deeper

insights into the linguistic and social dynamics of the Pattani Malay community. This reciprocal exchange fosters cultural diplomacy and strengthens the bonds of friendship between the two nations.

In sum, KKN represents far more than a university requirement; it is a transformative educational experience that prepares students to become compassionate, globally minded citizens. Its integration of academic learning, community service, and intercultural dialogue equips participants with the skills and perspectives needed to address complex social challenges. The growing success of international placements—particularly in Southern Thailand—demonstrates the program’s enduring relevance and its potential to shape future leaders who are both professionally competent and socially conscious.

2. Literature Review

2.1 KKN and the service-learning tradition

KKN (Kuliah Kerja Nyata) is situated within the broader service-learning tradition, which integrates academic instruction with community engagement to generate reciprocal benefits for students and host communities. Indonesian higher education policy, as stated in Law No. 20/2003, embeds this mission by requiring universities to provide education, research, and community service. International literature on service-learning underscores outcomes such as civic engagement and applied skill development (Gunawan, 2000; Perdana, Holilulloh, & Nurmalisa, 2013), while recent analyses (e.g., Ambele, 2022) highlight how multilingual settings demand flexible, culturally responsive approaches.

2.2 Internationalization of community service

Cross-border service-learning introduces unique intercultural dynamics. International KKN placements in Southern Thailand function as a form of soft diplomacy while immersing students in authentic cross-cultural learning. Contemporary research emphasizes the need for intercultural communicative competence to manage these dynamics (Wimontham et al., 2023; Yaumi et al., 2023; Youngsun et al., 2024), aligning with findings that students must negotiate linguistic and cultural differences to succeed in such contexts.

2.3 Objectives and outcomes of KKN programs

Earlier studies describe three main objectives: applying classroom theory in the field, improving community welfare, and strengthening partnerships between universities and host communities (Perdana et al., 2013). These goals remain relevant today and are echoed in updated service-learning literature that stresses ethical collaboration and mutual benefit (Higgins & Siritaratn, 2022). International KKN projects therefore continue to serve as both educational practice and institutional outreach.

2.4 Pedagogical practices in cross-cultural teaching

KKN participants often act as language teachers, making pedagogy central to their success. Current Thai EFL research shows the effectiveness of interactive, context-sensitive methods and translanguaging to bridge linguistic gaps (Ambele, 2022). Such approaches resonate with student reports of using icebreakers, scaffolding, and visual aids to sustain motivation and comprehension in multilingual classrooms.

2.5 Sociopragmatic frameworks and pragmatic competence

A sociopragmatic lens explains how meaning is co-constructed through culturally bound norms of politeness, speech acts, and turn-taking. Awareness of these norms helps avoid pragmatic failure in multilingual classrooms. Recent Thai studies on intercultural competence development (Pattaraworathum, 2022) reinforce the importance of training students to manage these social nuances, complementing classic frameworks by Leech and other pragmatics scholars.

2.6 Dialectal variation and Pattani Malay implications

Dialectal variation adds another layer of complexity. Research on Pattani Malay phonology (Chapakiya, 2023) and studies of Malay–Indonesian lexical overlap (Sama-ae & Agustina, 2023) show that significant phonological and lexical differences can impede mutual intelligibility. Additional evidence of phonological interference when Pattani speakers use Indonesian (Kuwing, 2023) underscores the need for KKN participants to learn local expressions and adjust their speech to ensure effective communication.

2.7 Intercultural adaptation, identity, and student learning

International service-learning literature frequently describes a process of anticipation, culture shock, adaptation, and integration. Qualitative accounts highlight emotional resilience and identity negotiation as students shift from “expert” to “collaborator.” Pattaraworathum’s (2022) findings on intercultural awareness development among Thai university students parallel KKN participants’ reflections on building rapport and cultural understanding in Southern Thailand.

2.8 Methodological notes from qualitative KKN research

Qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and participant journals remain essential for capturing these nuanced experiences. Triangulation of interviews with artifacts like lesson plans and photos strengthens validity, as recommended in current intercultural education research (Wimontham et al., 2023). Ethical considerations—consent, anonymity, and respectful portrayal of host communities—are especially critical in politically sensitive regions like Southern Thailand.

3. Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of Indonesian students participating in the Kuliah Kerja Nyata (KKN) program in Southern Thailand. A qualitative approach is well suited to uncovering in-depth insights into social interactions, cultural adaptation, and personal reflections that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods. The research focuses on understanding how students apply academic knowledge in an international community-service context and how they navigate linguistic and cultural differences during their placements.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews and written personal accounts from KKN participants who served in various schools and community institutions across Southern Thailand. Semi-structured interviews allowed for open-ended dialogue, enabling participants to share detailed narratives while giving the researcher flexibility to probe for clarification or elaboration. Personal reflections, including diaries and informal reports, provided supplementary perspectives that enriched the findings and ensured triangulation. All data were analyzed thematically, identifying recurring patterns related to teaching practices, intercultural communication, and the sociopragmatic strategies employed by students in their daily interactions.

4. Results and Discussion

KKN, or Community Service Program, is an academic activity conducted in both public and private universities, involving faculty as supervisors and students as participants. The term KKN is deeply rooted in Indonesian academia, though its English equivalents vary between “community service” and “service learning.” Burns (1998) notes that educators and community leaders often see these terms as interchangeable. Similarly, Crabtree (2008) integrates academic instruction and community service under the broader concept of International Service Learning, which includes overseas KKN programs like those in Southern Thailand.

Each host community selects students according to its needs. For instance, Islamic State Universities (UIN) often send students from Arabic or religious studies, while other universities may choose students with English-language skills to facilitate school placements.

4.1 Selected Student Experiences

4.1.1 Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta, Faculty of Public Health

Wiratul participated in the 2023 international KKN in Songkhla with 11 other students. She and her teammate taught English and Indonesian at elementary through high schools, introduced Indonesian culture through traditional dance and cuisine, conducted health and nutrition campaigns, and offered Qur’anic recitation lessons. The program aimed to help students engage internationally, practice languages (English, Thai, and Malay), and understand local Muslim communities in southern provinces such

as Pattani, Narathiwat, and Yala. She observed warm community interactions, mutual religious respect in a predominantly Buddhist country, and disciplined students who often learned outdoors through weekly activities like sports weeks, food fairs, and English camps.



Figure 1. Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta, Faculty of Public Health

4.1.2 Institut Ahmad Dahlan Probolinggo, Faculty of Islamic Education

Initially hesitant to join the January–February 2024 KKN-PPL program, Firmansyah overcame his anxiety about cultural and linguistic differences when assigned alone to Padungmat, Narathiwat. Welcomed warmly by teachers and students, he taught Qur'an, Hadith, Arabic, Fiqh, and Malay with Roman script, using interactive methods and icebreakers to engage students despite language barriers. Participation in local events like Children's Day and National Teachers' Day deepened his appreciation of education's role in shaping youth.



Figure 2. Institut Ahmad Dahlan Probolinggo, Faculty of Islamic Education

Those images could represent a participant in the international *Kuliah Kerja Nyata* (KKN) program in Southern Thailand. The formal badge and neat attire are consistent with how KKN students described preparing for school-based or community activities, where they often taught Indonesian and English, introduced Indonesian culture, and interacted with local residents and students. The setting—an outdoor area with plants and a campus-like or institutional backdrop—also aligns with the typical environments where KKN participants carried out teaching and cultural exchange, reflecting the program’s emphasis on professionalism, intercultural engagement, and community service.

4.1.3 Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto

During his January 2024 placement in Pattani, Riyadi faced challenges with the local Pattani Malay dialect, which differed significantly from both Indonesian and Malaysian Malay. Because he spoke neither Thai nor local Malay, he taught junior and senior high students in formal Indonesian, aided by their familiarity with Rumi (standard Malay) script. Gradually, he also learned basic Thai vocabulary.



Figure 3. Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto

4.1.4 Sociopragmatic Insights

From these accounts, most students served as language instructors—primarily in Indonesian or Malay—regardless of their academic major. Their teaching emphasized spoken interaction, aligning with sociolinguistic principles that highlight speech as central to human social interaction (Demers et al., 1990). Asmah (2002) further classifies interaction into face-to-face oral communication and written exchanges. Thus, the students’ methods reflect a sociopragmatic approach, which, as Leech (1983) explains, examines not only linguistic form but also the cultural context. Difficulties with the Pattani Malay dialect illustrate the importance of understanding regional linguistic varieties in effective cross-cultural communication.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the significance of Kuliah Kerja Nyata (KKN) as a transformative international service-learning program that bridges academic knowledge with real-world community engagement. Findings show that KKN participants in Southern Thailand not only applied their disciplinary theories in practice but also developed intercultural communicative competence, sociopragmatic awareness, and adaptive teaching strategies. Their experiences confirm that successful community service requires more than technical expertise; it demands flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to navigate dialectal variation, especially in multilingual contexts such as Pattani Malay.

The literature and participant narratives collectively underscore that international KKN fosters reciprocal benefits: students gain professional and personal growth, while host communities receive meaningful educational and cultural contributions. Updated research—from Ambele's (2022) insights on translanguaging to Wimontham et al.'s (2023) intercultural competence models—reinforces the importance of interactive, context-sensitive pedagogy and sociopragmatic adaptation. By integrating these perspectives, this study affirms that international KKN not only fulfills the mandate of Indonesia's National Education System but also serves as a model for preparing globally minded graduates capable of ethical engagement and effective communication across cultures.

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