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INDONESIAN LANGUAGE DIPLOMACY AFTER UNESCO RECOGNITION: SYMBOLIC LEGITIMACY AND THE CHALLENGES OF SOFT POWER

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Abstrack

The designation of Bahasa Indonesia as the 10th official language of the UNESCO General Conference through Resolution 42 C/28 in 2023 represents an important milestone in the development of Indonesia's diplomacy. This recognition provides multilateral legitimacy for the use of Bahasa Indonesia in international forums while enhancing its visibility in diplomatic practice. This study aims to analyze the use of Bahasa Indonesia as an instrument of language diplomacy and to identify the challenges and future directions of its development following the UNESCO designation. The study employs a qualitative approach based on literature review. It adopts a language diplomacy approach within the framework of soft power to examine how language is mobilized as an instrument of influence in international relations. The findings indicate that UNESCO recognition provides procedural and symbolic legitimacy, but it does not automatically strengthen the position of Bahasa Indonesia within the global structure of language diplomacy. Its utilization remains largely dominated by representational practices that are fragmented due to the absence of an integrated national policy framework for language diplomacy. Therefore, stronger institutional reinforcement and cross-sectoral coordination are required to enable Bahasa Indonesia to be more effectively mobilized as a source of soft power in international relations.

Keywords: language diplomacy; soft power; bahasa Indonesia; UNESCO

Abstrak

Penetapan Bahasa Indonesia sebagai bahasa resmi ke-10 dalam Konferensi Umum UNESCO melalui Resolusi 42 C/28 pada tahun 2023 menjadi momentum penting dalam perkembangan diplomasi Indonesia. Pengakuan tersebut memberikan

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legitimasi multilateral bagi penggunaan Bahasa Indonesia dalam forum internasional sekaligus meningkatkan visibilitasnya dalam praktik diplomasi. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis penggunaan Bahasa Indonesia sebagai instrumen dalam praktik diplomasi bahasa sekaligus mengidentifikasi tantangan dan arah pengembangannya pasca-penetapan UNESCO. Metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif dengan studi literatur. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan diplomasi bahasa dalam kerangka soft power untuk membaca bagaimana bahasa dimobilisasi sebagai instrumen pengaruh dalam hubungan internasional. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pengakuan UNESCO memberikan legitimasi yang bersifat prosedural dan simbolik, namun belum secara otomatis memperkuat posisi Bahasa Indonesia dalam struktur diplomasi bahasa global. Pemanfaatannya masih didominasi oleh praktik representasional yang cenderung terfragmentasi akibat belum adanya kerangka kebijakan diplomasi bahasa yang terintegrasi secara nasional. Oleh karena itu, diperlukan penguatan institusional dan koordinasi lintas sektor agar Bahasa Indonesia dapat dimobilisasi secara lebih efektif sebagai sumber soft power dalam hubungan internasional.

Kata Kunci: diplomasi bahasa; kekuatan lunak; bahasa Indonesia; UNESCO

Introduction

The designation of Bahasa Indonesia as the 10th official language of the UNESCO General Conference through Resolution 42 C/28 in 2023 marks an important milestone in Indonesia's diplomatic engagement (Aulia et al., 2025). This recognition grants multilateral legitimacy for its use in international forums and increases its symbolic visibility in diplomatic practice (Arifa, 2025). It was recorded that on November 4, 2025, Bahasa Indonesia was used for the first time in the 43rd UNESCO General Conference in Samarkand, Uzbekistan (Kaban, 2025). This recognition strengthens Indonesia's cultural legitimacy and opens opportunities to expand diplomatic influence through language-based representation.

Within contemporary international relations shaped by globalization, diplomatic practice has shifted from state-centric negotiation toward broader engagement with global publics (Melissen, 2005). States increasingly rely on cultural symbols to

attract non-state actors rather than coercive power alone (Cull, 2009; Nye, 2009). This shift intensifies symbolic competition among languages, where English dominates global communication (Crystal, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2007), while countries such as China, France, Japan, and South Korea institutionalize language promotion as soft power tools (Phillipson, 2009; Sun, 2023). In this competitive multilingual order, Bahasa Indonesia's international positioning becomes increasingly relevant, as language functions as identity, communication, and cultural representation in soft power strategy (Nazokat, 2025; Nye, 2019).

Language in diplomatic studies is not only a communication tool but also a cultural symbol and instrument of perception-building (Sofyan, 2014). Kurbalija and Slavik (2001) emphasize that language shapes international perception through rhetoric and metaphor, enabling emotional connection and cultural understanding. Historically, French once functioned as the dominant diplomatic language, reflecting geopolitical power (Melissen, 2005). Today, countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea actively deploy language diplomacy through Confucius Institutes, Cool Japan, and Sejong Institutes (Gu & Deng, 2024; Ding & Wu, 2023), demonstrating how language strengthens cultural networks and international influence.

In Indonesia, language diplomacy has developed but remains limited in scale. Bahasa Indonesia plays a historical role in national unity and identity formation (Alisjahbana, 1957; Reid, 2010). The main instrument, BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing), supports language internationalization through teaching materials, online platforms, and university integration abroad (Kemendiktisaintek, 2024), reaching regions such as ASEAN, Europe, Africa, and the Americas (Alam et al., 2022). However, its implementation remains decentralized through

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embassies, schools abroad, and academic collaboration, without a fully integrated national policy framework.

The UNESCO recognition should therefore be seen not only as an achievement but as a strategic momentum to strengthen Indonesia's soft power through language. Without consistent and coordinated policy implementation, such recognition risks remaining symbolic rather than transformative. Soft power and diplomatic strategy must operate in synergy as an integrated diplomatic ecosystem (Nuaba, 2024).

This study examines how Bahasa Indonesia is used in language diplomacy practices and identifies its challenges and future directions following UNESCO recognition. It is relevant both academically and practically, as Indonesia has actively used soft power diplomacy but has not yet optimized language diplomacy as a strategic instrument. The study contributes to the literature on language diplomacy and offers a framework for strengthening Indonesia's soft power through linguistic instruments.

Analytical Framework

Soft Power

The concept of soft power was introduced by Joseph S. Nye Jr. (2004, 2009) to explain a state's ability to influence the preferences of other actors through attraction rather than coercion or material incentives. The primary sources of soft power include culture, political values, and foreign policies that are perceived as legitimate and credible. In the development of his theory, Nye (2011, 2019) emphasizes that soft power is not merely a symbolic asset, but a relational capacity that becomes effective only when converted through sustained strategies, institutions, and policies. Thus, soft power does not operate automatically, but requires deliberate state orchestration to shape the long-term preferences of international publics.

In this study, soft power is employed as an analytical framework to assess the extent to which the recognition of Bahasa Indonesia by UNESCO can function as a genuinely productive source of attraction. This recognition is understood as symbolic capital with the potential to become soft power; however, its effectiveness is tested through the state's ability to integrate it into foreign policy and public diplomacy. This approach aligns with the perspectives of Cull (2009) and Melissen (2005), who argue that soft power generates influence only when linked to policy design, institutional structures, and consistent implementation capacity, rather than relying solely on symbolic exposure.

The relevance of soft power theory in this study lies in its ability to explain the gap between international legitimacy and actual influence. By applying this framework, the analysis seeks to determine whether Indonesia's language diplomacy following UNESCO's recognition has progressed from the stage of recognition to that of preference shaping. This theory enables a critical evaluation of the tendency of Indonesia's language diplomacy, which remains largely reactive and representational, and explains why, without institutionalization and national orchestration, UNESCO recognition risks remaining merely symbolic legitimacy without significant strategic leverage.

Language Diplomacy

Language diplomacy is a branch of cultural diplomacy that positions language as a medium of identity, communication, and the construction of international perceptions (Kurbalija & Slavik, 2001; Sofyan, 2014). In the literature on language politics, language is understood as non-neutral, operating within hierarchical global power structures and reflecting the distribution of economic, political, and knowledge resources (Phillipson, 2009). Language becomes an instrument of diplomacy when it is linked to access to education, knowledge

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production, and transnational networks, thereby acquiring instrumental value beyond its symbolic function.

The framework of language diplomacy in this study is used to analyze how Bahasa Indonesia is positioned and operationalized following its designation by UNESCO. Language diplomacy is not measured by the frequency of language use in international forums, but rather by its capacity as a *gateway language* that creates tangible opportunities for foreign actors, such as access to higher education, research collaboration, and professional mobility. This approach aligns with the argument that the success of language diplomacy depends on its integration within a broader policy ecosystem, as demonstrated by institutions such as the Confucius Institutes, the Japan Foundation, and the British Council (Melissen, 2005; Nye, 2019).

Thus, the theory of language diplomacy is relevant in explaining why formal recognition by UNESCO alone is insufficient to elevate the global position of Bahasa Indonesia. This framework enables an analysis of the structural limitations of Indonesia's language diplomacy, particularly the absence of a national roadmap, limited cross-sectoral integration, and constrained implementation capacity. From this perspective, language diplomacy is positioned not merely as an activity of cultural promotion, but as a strategic instrument of soft power that requires institutionalization, standardization, and long-term orientation in order to generate sustainable influence in international relations.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research method. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), qualitative research is descriptive and interpretive in nature. This approach is selected because it enables the development of a descriptive-analytical framework to examine the role of Bahasa Indonesia in diplomatic contexts.

In this study, qualitative analysis is not limited to description, but is structured to identify conceptual relationships between policy, language use, and diplomatic outcomes.

The analytical framework of this study is constructed by identifying key variables. The independent variables include the institutionalization of Bahasa Indonesia such as constitutional recognition, Law No. 24 of 2009, UNESCO recognition, and the BIPA program, as well as its cultural dissemination through education, media, and digital platforms. These factors are analyzed as structural and discursive drivers of language internationalization. The dependent variable is the strengthening of Indonesia's soft power, which is reflected in international visibility, cultural attractiveness, and the global reception of Bahasa Indonesia as a diplomatic instrument. The analysis examines how the independent variables contribute to shaping this outcome through processes of policy implementation and transnational language diffusion.

Furthermore, Creswell emphasizes that qualitative research seeks to understand meanings constructed by social actors. In line with this perspective, this study interprets Bahasa Indonesia as both a linguistic system and a symbolic instrument of diplomacy. Data are collected from academic literature, policy documents, and relevant scholarly sources related to language diplomacy and soft power. The data are analyzed using descriptive-analytical techniques by mapping relationships between variables and identifying patterns of interaction between language policy, cultural dissemination, and diplomatic outcomes. This allows the study to generate tentative conclusions regarding the role of Bahasa Indonesia in international soft power construction.

Discussion

The Potential of Bahasa Indonesia as Soft Power

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Bahasa Indonesia is a language that is highly upheld in its use within the Republic of Indonesia. In its status, Bahasa Indonesia holds two positions: as the state language and as the national language. Based on the Youth Pledge 1928, particularly the third pledge stating, *"Kami putra dan putri Indonesia menjunjung bahasa persatuan, Bahasa Indonesia,"* its position as a national language is firmly established. Furthermore, the 1945 Constitution of Indonesia, Chapter XV, Article 36, reinforces that the state language is Bahasa Indonesia. Thus, Bahasa Indonesia is legally recognized as the official language used in various activities across Indonesia.

In terms of its development, Bahasa Indonesia has become standardized with established structures and rules of usage in both spoken and written forms. With approximately 267 million users nationally and more than 200 million speakers across ASEAN, Bahasa Indonesia represents one of the largest speech communities in Southeast Asia, surpassing several regional languages whose speaker bases remain more nationally concentrated (Alam et al., 2022; Aulia et al., 2025). This demographic scale strengthens Indonesia's effort to internationalize its language through the Bahasa Indonesia for Foreign Speakers (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing – BIPA) program, which functions not only as a language-learning initiative but also as a cultural diplomacy instrument that reinforces Indonesia's soft power in regional and global contexts (Fathun et al., 2025).

From a historical perspective, Bahasa Indonesia developed through linguistic interaction with various languages, including local and colonial languages, reflecting historical contact and exchange. For example, "piung" is derived from Portuguese "peon," "marinyo" from "marinho," "beranda" from "veranda," and "meja" from "mesa." From Dutch, Bahasa Indonesia also adopted words such as "roti" from "brood," "dasi" from "dasje," "necis" from "netjes," "pulpen"

from “vulpen,” and “saku” from “zak” (Alif Danya Munsyi, 2003). These borrowings reflect historical linguistic hybridity that contributes to its communicative adaptability.

In contemporary digital spaces, lexical similarities between Bahasa Indonesia and other languages have further strengthened its visibility. For instance, comparisons between Bahasa Indonesia and Tagalog show similarities such as “bulan” and “buwan,” while parallels with Dutch include “kantor” from “kantoor” and “stadion” and “handuk.” These examples, circulated through platforms such as VOA Indonesia (@voaindonesia) and @TheHayeWa, illustrate how digital media expands transnational linguistic awareness and supports global familiarity with Bahasa Indonesia.

In language planning theory developed by Einar Haugen (1966), a national language is formed through selection, standardization, expansion, and acceptance. Bahasa Indonesia has passed through these stages and achieved broad social integration across society. Such conditions form the basis for Bahasa Indonesia’s potential as a soft power instrument. Joseph S. Nye Jr. (2004) argues that soft power derives from cultural attractiveness and legitimacy. Language, in this sense, functions as a medium of attraction rather than coercion. Bahasa Indonesia reflects values of inclusivity, pluralism, and social stability, which can be projected as part of Indonesia’s international identity. It also enables emotional connection and cross-cultural understanding (Cull, 2008).

Bahasa Indonesia also holds strong institutional legitimacy. It is constitutionally recognized under Article 36 of the 1945 Constitution and reinforced by Law No. 24 of 2009. This law establishes Bahasa Indonesia as the language of legislation, official documents, state speeches, administrative services, and agreements involving Indonesia (Articles 26, 27, 28, 30, and 31). It is also mandated in regional and international forums held in Indonesia (Article 32), and functions as the language of science

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and academic development (Article 35). This role is further strengthened by Presidential Regulation No. 63 of 2019, which operationalizes its use across state, educational, economic, and diplomatic institutions.

The Role of Bahasa Indonesia Abroad

Language, within international relations studies, is understood as an instrument of diplomacy with the capacity to generate soft power, without negating its primary function as a means of communication. Joseph S. Nye Jr. (2004) emphasizes that soft power is rooted in the attractiveness of a country's culture, values, and policies, enabling it to influence others without coercion. In this context, a national language functions as a medium through which cultural identity and national values are communicated internationally. In line with Dinnie's (2008) concept of nation branding, language also contributes to shaping a country's international image and global reputation. Therefore, the increasing international presence of Bahasa Indonesia strengthens both Indonesia's cultural influence and its symbolic position in global diplomacy.

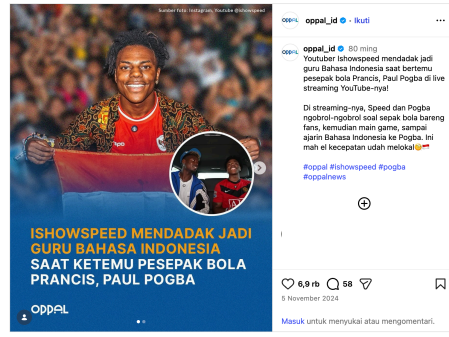
The practical manifestation of this can be seen in the Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing (BIPA) program, implemented in various countries. Beyond language acquisition, BIPA integrates Indonesian culture and social values as part of public diplomacy, including in Europe where it also opens academic and educational opportunities (Shienlia, 2025). The inclusion of Bahasa Indonesia in foreign university curricula reflects language internalization, where learners become carriers of Indonesia's positive image abroad (Fithriana and Karamina, 2025). In this sense, language functions not only as identity representation but also as a medium for transnational social networking. Furthermore, its learning by international students strengthens cultural translation and people-to-people diplomacy, which is long-term and interpersonal in nature

(Ahmed and Amen, 2024). Bahasa Indonesia demonstrates strong potential as a soft power instrument through BIPA and its global academic diffusion, reinforcing cultural values and Indonesia's international image through non-coercive engagement.

Figure 1. Bahasa Indonesia in transnational digital content



(a) no na reaction video by Brazilian audiences.



(b) IShowSpeed using Indonesian expressions in livestream content.

Source: YouTube and Instagram (2025)

The globalization of communication has shifted language from a local communication tool to a medium of global visibility (Crystal, 2003). Digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and X enable rapid cross-border circulation of language, supported by diaspora communities and digital creators. For example, the Indonesian girl group no na incorporated Indonesian expressions into their song "Rollable," while a Brazilian reaction video (Feature Friday Clips) reported audiences "learning Bahasa Indonesia" with over 164,000 views. Similarly, IShowSpeed used Indonesian expressions such as *"sabar," "santai,"* and *"awas"* in livestreams after his visit to Indonesia, including interactions with Paul Pogba. These cases illustrate how digital entertainment functions as informal

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transnational language diffusion, increasing global familiarity with Bahasa Indonesia (Androutsopoulos, 2015; Susanto, 2023). This phenomenon intersects with digital diplomacy and soft power, as language becomes a vehicle for cultural dissemination in online spaces (Nye, 2004). In sum, globalization and social media have expanded the reach of Bahasa Indonesia, strengthening its role as an emerging instrument of soft power in global cultural dynamics.

The Practice of Indonesian Language Diplomacy Post-UNESCO Recognition

The recognition of Bahasa Indonesia as an official language of the UNESCO General Conference places the national language within a framework of multilateral legitimacy that is largely procedural **and** symbolic in nature, whose effects remain largely confined to formal visibility without necessarily altering the underlying hierarchy of global diplomatic languages. In diplomatic studies, such legitimacy is understood as creating structural space for symbolic participation in international forums rather than directly increasing influence or altering linguistic hierarchies in global order (Melissen, 2005; Nye, 2009). While this recognition expands formal visibility, its diplomatic value depends on the state's ability to integrate it into sustained policy strategies. Without mechanisms of conversion, institutional recognition remains at the level of representation and does not alter global linguistic power structures (Xhemaili, 2022).

The post-recognition use of Bahasa Indonesia shows increased symbolic visibility in diplomatic spaces, although this visibility has not yet translated into its institutionalization within formal diplomatic communication regimes, which

remain governed by entrenched linguistic hierarchies and path-dependent practices. This is reflected in its use in official speeches, UNESCO documentation, and cultural diplomacy activities through Indonesian Cultural Centers (Rumah Budaya Indonesia) in countries such as France, the Netherlands, Japan, and the United States (Kaban, 2025; Sanam, 2025). It is also used in Indonesian Language Day events, literary festivals, and cultural forums abroad (ANTARA, 2025; Arifa, 2025; Kemendikdasmen, 2024). The BIPA program further demonstrates sustained international engagement through language teaching in multiple countries, with strong reach, academic acceptance, and institutional collaboration (Alam et al., 2022). However, these practices remain concentrated in the representational domain, indicating that UNESCO recognition functions more as symbolic capital accumulation than as structural transformation in global linguistic power relations.

Such representational practices have limited capacity to generate long-term diplomatic influence. Symbolic exposure alone is insufficient without institutional support and policy continuity (Cull, 2009; Melissen, 2005). Soft power becomes effective only when symbolic resources are systematically integrated into foreign policy structures (Nye, 2011). In this context, BIPA remains primarily an educational program rather than a fully strategic diplomatic instrument, with limitations in global certification and branding. Compared to Confucius Institutes or Sejong Institutes, which are state-backed cultural infrastructures (Ding & Wu, 2023), BIPA remains fragmented and programmatic.

Globally, language diplomacy is shaped by dominant languages such as English, French, and Mandarin, whose

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strength derives not only from formal recognition but from integration into political, economic, and knowledge systems (Phillipson, 2009). Without institutional support, language diplomacy risks becoming ceremonial rather than strategic (Nye, 2019; Saaida, 2023). The absence of a clear roadmap reinforces that UNESCO recognition has not yet been transformed into a policy instrument, but remains symbolic capital.

Structurally, Indonesia's language diplomacy suffers from weak national orchestration. Multiple actors—including ministries, universities, and diaspora networks—operate without binding coordination, resulting in fragmented implementation and inconsistent messaging (Melissen, 2005). In contrast, successful cases such as China's Confucius Institutes, the British Council, and Japan Foundation demonstrate that effective language diplomacy depends on centralized institutional mandates and long-term strategic integration (Li et al., 2025; Nurhusna & Sakinah, 2024; Nazokat, 2025; Zhou, 2022).

Therefore, to maximize UNESCO recognition, Indonesia must strengthen institutional leadership through policy consolidation, standardization, and integration into national public diplomacy. Without orchestration and a coherent strategy, UNESCO recognition will remain symbolic rather than transformative for Bahasa Indonesia's global position.

Challenges and Directions for Strengthening Language Diplomacy

Language diplomacy operates within a global hierarchy of power where English, Mandarin, and French dominate due to their linkage with knowledge production, global markets, and international institutions (Phillipson, 2009; Nazokat, 2025).

Despite its large number of speakers, Bahasa Indonesia remains peripheral and has not yet achieved a comparable instrumental role in global science, economy, and technology. This limits its effectiveness as a soft power resource, since language influence is shaped not only by demographics but also by its function as an access language to education, mobility, and transnational opportunity (Pozniak et al., 2025; Sadaf et al., 2025; Melissen, 2005).

From a policy perspective, Indonesia has not yet developed a clear and integrated national roadmap for language diplomacy aligned with foreign policy priorities (Aulia et al., 2025). Language diplomacy is still largely treated as cultural promotion rather than a strategic instrument of long-term influence (Susanto et al., 2024), reflecting weak policy ownership and fragmented implementation (Melissen, 2005). As a result, its practice tends to be project-based and dependent on short-term budgeting rather than sustained strategic planning.

Without a coherent strategic vision, international recognition such as UNESCO risks remaining symbolic rather than transformative (Cull, 2009; Susanto et al., 2024). Current practices remain largely reactive, and this is reinforced by implementation constraints, particularly limited human resources, uneven teaching materials, and unstable funding structures (Zhu & Faucher, 2025). These conditions create a gap between policy aspirations and actual capacity, preventing Bahasa Indonesia from being fully developed as a credible soft power instrument (Nye, 2019).

Addressing these challenges requires a shift from symbolic promotion toward building a language ecosystem. Language should function as a gateway to education, economic participation, and cultural engagement, not merely as an identity marker (Kurbalija & Slavik, 2001). Its internationalization can be strengthened through integration into higher education, research collaboration, creative

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industries, and diaspora networks as linguistic intermediaries (Aulia et al., 2025; Susanto et al., 2024).

Finally, effective language diplomacy requires cross-sectoral integration across education, economy, tourism, and public diplomacy. The state should act as a strategic coordinator that sets direction and standards, while non-state actors expand networks and innovation capacity. This inclusive governance approach is essential to transform language diplomacy from symbolic representation into sustained international influence (Melissen, 2005; Nye, 2019).

Conclusions

This study finds that the designation of Bahasa Indonesia as the 10th official language of the UNESCO General Conference provides multilateral legitimacy that is procedural and symbolic in nature, but does not automatically elevate its position within the global language diplomacy structure. The post-recognition utilization of Bahasa Indonesia remains largely dominated by representational practices, such as its use in official speeches, forum documents, and cultural diplomacy agendas. However, these activations have not yet demonstrated a strategic conversion mechanism capable of strengthening the global influence of Bahasa Indonesia in the long term. Within the framework of soft power diplomacy, this formal legitimacy has not been systematically integrated into foreign policy strategies, and therefore has not been able to shift Bahasa Indonesia from a language of symbolic visibility into one with strategic leverage in the circulation of knowledge, education, and global networks.

This study also finds that the primary limitations of Indonesia's language diplomacy lie in weak policy orchestration and implementation capacity. The absence of an explicit,

measurable, and integrated national roadmap for language diplomacy has resulted in initiatives such as BIPA and cultural diplomacy programs operating in a fragmented manner, dependent on sectoral initiatives and event-based momentum. Compared to other countries that have successfully institutionalized language diplomacy through centralized policy infrastructures, Indonesia's approach remains grounded in project-based logic and cultural promotion, rather than functioning as a strategic instrument to shape the long-term preferences of international publics. This condition reinforces the gap between soft power aspirations and operational realities, leaving language not yet fully utilized as a credible diplomatic resource.

Based on these findings, this study recommends a repositioning of Indonesia's language diplomacy through the institutionalization of a coordinated, cross-sectoral national strategy. The government needs to formulate a comprehensive language diplomacy roadmap that explicitly links Bahasa Indonesia with foreign policy, international higher education, research collaboration, and the creative economy, supported by clear standards, measurable indicators, and sustainable resource allocation. In addition, the state should assume the role of a strategic coordinator, orchestrating both state and non-state actors—including diaspora communities and educational institutions—to build a functional language ecosystem. Through this approach, UNESCO recognition will not remain merely symbolic legitimacy, but can be mobilized into a soft power instrument that contributes meaningfully to strengthening Indonesia's position and image in contemporary international relations.

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