

The Internationalization of the Indonesian Language as a Public Diplomacy Strategy: Strengthening Indonesia's Soft Power Following UNESCO Recognition

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Abstract

The internationalization of Indonesian has gained strategic momentum since its recognition as one of UNESCO General Conference's official languages in 2023, offering international legitimacy and visibility that can serve as an instrument of Indonesia's diplomacy. This study analyzes the internationalization of Indonesian as a public diplomacy strategy and examines its potential to strengthen Indonesia's soft power following UNESCO recognition. It employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach, drawing on Joseph S. Nye's concept of soft power and public diplomacy perspectives as analytical frameworks. Data were collected through literature review of official documents, government policies, academic publications, and sources on Indonesian language internationalization and the Indonesian Language for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) program. This study argues UNESCO recognition does not automatically transform Indonesian into a source of soft power, but provides international legitimacy and visibility convertible through strategic internationalization and public diplomacy. BIPA plays a strategic role as an instrument of people-to-people diplomacy, since language learning can facilitate cultural interaction, enhance cross-cultural understanding, and foster long-term relationships with foreign publics. This study proposes a conceptual Recognition-to-Soft Power Conversion model, outlining seven stages through which recognition can be transformed into soft power: recognition, legitimacy, internationalization, public diplomacy, public engagement, cross-cultural understanding, and attraction. The study concludes that strengthening Indonesia's soft power through language depends on the country's ability to convert legitimacy into genuine attraction, through an integrated, participatory, relationship-oriented public diplomacy strategy aimed at global publics.

Keywords: BIPA, Indonesian Language Internationalization, Public Diplomacy, Soft Power, UNESCO.

1. Introduction

Developments in international relations show that a country's power is no longer determined solely by its military or economic capabilities, but also by its ability to build soft power through culture, values and policies. Nye (2008) explains that soft power is the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction and persuasion, rather than through coercion. This shift has spurred the development of public diplomacy as an approach that prioritizes foreign audiences as the primary target in building image, trust and long-term relationships. In this context, language becomes a strategic instrument because it functions not only as a means of communication but also as a medium for introducing a nation's identity, history, values and culture, thereby strengthening the country's appeal at the international level (Melissen, 2005; Cull, 2008; Gilboa, 2008).

In the Indonesian context, the Indonesian language holds a strategic position as both a national identity and an instrument of cultural diplomacy. Efforts to internationalize the Indonesian language are carried out through various policies and programs, particularly the Indonesian Language for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) program, which aims to expand the use of the Indonesian language whilst introducing



Indonesian culture to the international community. Language learning not only enhances the linguistic competence of foreign speakers but also fosters an understanding of Indonesian social and cultural life, thereby strengthening people-to-people relations (Nasrullah, 2024; Wulandari & Konety, 2024). Research by Alam et al. (2022) also indicates that the internationalization of the Indonesian language has the potential to strengthen Indonesia's position in ASEAN regional diplomacy through the development of the language as an instrument of international relations.

A significant milestone in the internationalization of the Indonesian language occurred when it was designated as one of the official languages of the UNESCO General Conference through Resolution 42 C/28 in 2023. This recognition enhances the legitimacy and international visibility of the Indonesian language and opens up opportunities for Indonesia to develop language diplomacy more systematically as part of public diplomacy (UNESCO, 2023; Language Development and Guidance Agency, 2024). However, this recognition has not automatically strengthened Indonesia's soft power. International legitimacy will only yield influence if accompanied by strategies capable of fostering interaction, engagement and sustainable relationships with the international community. Therefore, the internationalization of the Indonesian language cannot be measured solely by the increasing number of learners or the expanding use of the language, but also by its ability to shape positive perceptions, enhance cross-cultural understanding, and strengthen Indonesia's image at the global level (Melissen, 2005; Cull, 2008; Nye, 2008).

Various studies have examined the internationalization of the Indonesian language from diverse perspectives. Alam et al. (2022) examined the potential of the Indonesian language as an instrument of regional diplomacy within ASEAN. Fathun et al. (2025) described the success of Indonesian diplomacy in securing recognition of the Indonesian language as an official language of UNESCO through various instruments, including the BIPA program. Meanwhile, Nuaba and Nurfatimah (2026) demonstrate that UNESCO's recognition provides significant symbolic legitimacy, but the implementation of Indonesian language diplomacy still faces challenges in optimizing the Indonesian language as a source of soft power. Nevertheless, these studies have largely focused on the process of language internationalization, cultural diplomacy, and Indonesia's diplomatic success in securing international recognition, whilst research on the mechanisms for utilizing the legitimacy gained following UNESCO's recognition from a public diplomacy perspective remains relatively limited.

Given these circumstances, there is a research gap regarding how international legitimacy gained through UNESCO recognition can be converted into soft power through public diplomacy strategies. This gap was identified through a review of academic literature published between 2022 and 2026, using search terms such as "Indonesian language internationalization", "BIPA public diplomacy", "UNESCO Indonesian language recognition" and "soft power language diplomacy", across databases including Scopus, Google Scholar, and Sinta-indexed journals, focusing on studies addressing Indonesia's language policy in relation to international relations and public diplomacy. Unlike previous studies, this research offers a perspective that integrates the concepts of soft power, public diplomacy and the internationalization of language within a single analytical framework. This study views the Indonesian language not merely as a linguistic instrument or a tool of cultural diplomacy, but also as an instrument of public diplomacy capable of building relationships with the international community, increasing foreign public engagement, and strengthening Indonesia's image and influence at the global level.

Consequently, this research is important as it makes a conceptual contribution to the development of studies on public diplomacy and soft power, particularly regarding the process of converting international legitimacy into a country's appeal through the internationalization of language. In practical terms, the research findings are expected to serve as input for the government and stakeholders in formulating a strategy for the internationalization of the Indonesian language that

is more closely integrated with diplomatic, educational and cultural policies, so that the momentum generated by UNESCO's recognition can be utilized optimally to strengthen Indonesia's position in international relations. Specifically, the findings inform concrete steps such as strengthening the BIPA program as a vehicle for people-to-people diplomacy, expanding the use of digital platforms to broaden the reach of language learning, and fostering inter-institutional synergy, for instance through closer coordination between the Language Development and Guidance Agency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, alongside the development of success indicators that capture public engagement and long-term relationship-building, not merely learner numbers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Soft Power

The concept of soft power, as introduced by Nye, emphasizes that a state can influence other actors through cultural appeal, political values and foreign policies that are perceived as credible, rather than through coercion or economic incentives (Ikenberry & Nye, 2004). In this study, the Indonesian language is viewed as a cultural resource with the potential to become a form of soft power if it is able to foster positive perceptions and appeal amongst the international community through language education, public diplomacy and cross-cultural interaction, including following the attainment of international legitimacy through UNESCO recognition.

2.2. The Concept of Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy is a state's effort to build relationships with foreign publics through communication, exchange and dialogue to support national interests. According to Cull (2008), public diplomacy encompasses activities such as listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange and broadcasting, whilst Melissen (2005) emphasizes a more collaborative and relationship-oriented approach. Nye (2008) adds that public diplomacy serves as a vital instrument in building soft power through the credibility and consistency of messages; consequently, in this study, the internationalization of the Indonesian language is positioned as one of the mechanisms of Indonesia's public diplomacy.

2.3. Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy utilizes cultural elements, such as the arts, education and language, to build relationships and enhance a country's image in the eyes of the international community. Language holds a strategic position as it serves as a medium for understanding a nation's values, history and identity; consequently, language diplomacy forms part of both cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy. In the Indonesian context, the Indonesian Language for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) program serves as a concrete implementation of cultural diplomacy, which not only teaches the language but also introduces Indonesian culture and social life to foreign audiences.

2.4. Language Diplomacy

Language diplomacy involves the use of language as an instrument to strengthen international relations, promote national identity, and foster cross-cultural communication through a long-term process. In Indonesia, language diplomacy is realized through BIPA, educational cooperation, academic exchanges and international forums, including efforts to secure recognition of the Indonesian language at UNESCO through the approaches of shuttle diplomacy and total diplomacy (Fathun et al., 2025). Therefore, this study views language diplomacy as part of cultural diplomacy, focusing on language as a medium for interaction and the formation of international relations.

Taken together, these four concepts form a nested rather than parallel relationship. Nye's notion of soft power supplies the outcome that language diplomacy is ultimately oriented towards, attraction rather than coercion, whilst Cull's and Melissen's accounts of public diplomacy supply the mechanism by which that outcome is pursued: Cull's emphasis on listening, advocacy and exchange identifies the specific activities involved, and Melissen's relationship-oriented framing clarifies that these activities must be reciprocal rather than one-directional to be effective. Cultural diplomacy and language diplomacy, in turn, represent the substantive content through which this public-diplomacy mechanism is enacted in the Indonesian case. This layered relationship, soft power as goal, public diplomacy as mechanism, language and cultural diplomacy as content, underpins the Recognition-to-Soft Power Conversion model developed later in this study.

2.5. The Internationalization of the Indonesian Language

The internationalization of the Indonesian language is the process of expanding the use, learning, recognition and functions of the Indonesian language at a global level through education, the teaching of Indonesian as a foreign language (BIPA), international cooperation and cultural diplomacy. This process is not only concerned with increasing the number of speakers, but also encompasses the legitimization, institutionalization and visibility of the language in the international arena (Alam et al., 2022). However, internationalization does not automatically generate soft power, as its effectiveness depends on the language's ability to foster cultural interaction and generate interest in Indonesia.

2.6. Analytical Framework: Recognition-to-Soft Power Conversion

This study proposes an analytical framework known as 'Recognition-to-Soft Power Conversion', which describes the process by which international recognition of the Indonesian language can be converted into a source of soft power through public diplomacy. This framework is based on the assumption that international recognition does not automatically generate soft power. There is a conversion mechanism comprising several stages, illustrated in Figure 1.

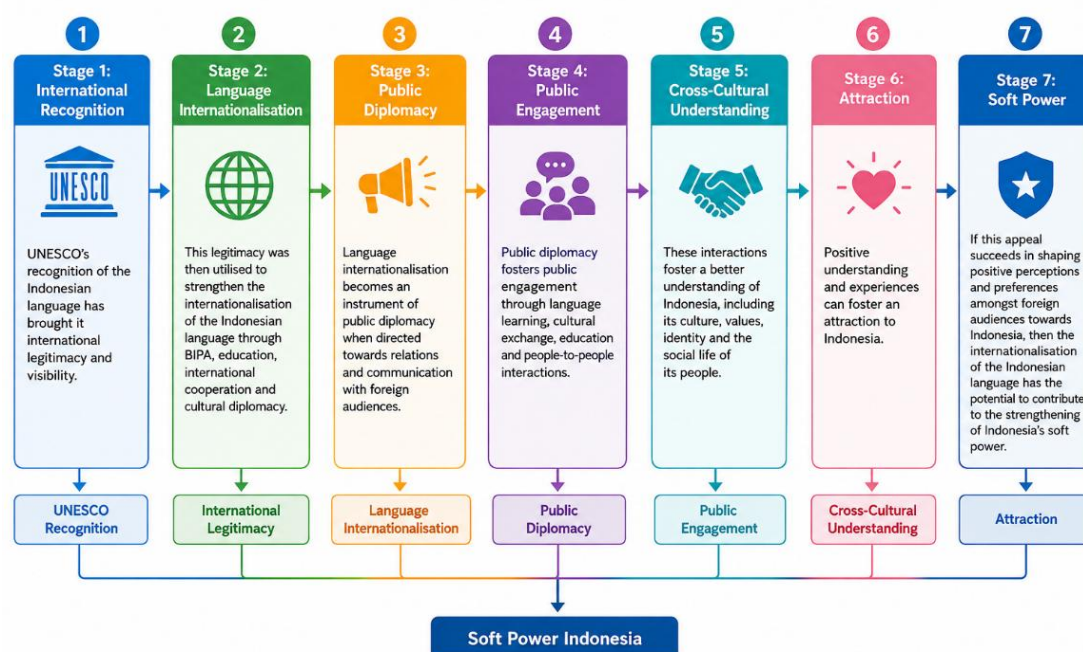


Figure 1. The Internationalization of the Indonesian Language as a Pathway to Indonesia's Soft Power

Source: Author's compilation

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach using descriptive-analytical methods to understand the internationalization of the Indonesian language as a public diplomacy strategy to strengthen Indonesia's soft power following UNESCO's recognition in 2023. This approach was chosen because it focuses on the interpretation of diplomatic policies, processes and practices, rather than on statistical measurements (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). UNESCO recognition is viewed as international legitimacy with the potential to enhance Indonesia's appeal; however, its effectiveness depends on public diplomacy strategies capable of converting this recognition into soft power (Nye, 2008; Nuaba & Nurfatimah, 2026).

3.1. Research Focus

This study focuses on the internationalization of the Indonesian language as a public diplomacy strategy to strengthen Indonesia's soft power following UNESCO's recognition. The analysis centers on UNESCO's recognition as a source of international legitimacy, the strategies for internationalizing the Indonesian language, its utilization as an instrument of public diplomacy, and the opportunities and challenges involved in converting it into a source of soft power. This focus builds upon previous research on the internationalization of the Indonesian language within ASEAN and Indonesia's diplomacy at UNESCO, with particular attention paid to the post-recognition phase (Alam et al., 2022; Fathun et al., 2025).

3.2. Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis for this study is the strategy for the internationalization of the Indonesian language as an instrument of Indonesia's public diplomacy following UNESCO recognition. The analysis covers internationalization policies, the BIPA program, cultural and linguistic diplomacy, the role of state institutions, UNESCO recognition, public diplomacy strategies, the engagement of foreign publics, and its contribution to soft power. The selection of the unit of analysis is based on the concept that language, as a cultural resource, can only function as soft power if it is capable of generating appeal and influencing the preferences of others (Ikenberry & Nye, 2004; Nye, 2008).

3.3. Data Sources

This study utilizes secondary data obtained through literature review and document analysis. Primary sources consist of official documents, including UNESCO documents and resolutions regarding the recognition of the Indonesian language, Indonesian government policies, documents from the Language Development and Guidance Agency, BIPA programs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as documents on cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy. These documents were used to identify the policies, strategies and significance of the international recognition of the Indonesian language; in qualitative research, they constitute an important source for understanding phenomena within their institutional and historical contexts (Bowen, 2009). Secondary sources include books, journal articles, conference proceedings, theses, dissertations, research reports, and academic publications discussing soft power, public diplomacy, and the internationalization of the Indonesian language. The primary literature refers to the concepts of soft power (Nye, 2008), public diplomacy (Cull, 2008) and new public diplomacy (Melissen), and is supported by empirical research on the internationalization of the Indonesian language and UNESCO recognition (Alam et al., 2022; Fathun et al., 2025; Nuaba & Nurfatimah, 2026).

3.4. Data Collection Methods

Data collection was carried out through documentary research and a literature review. Both methods were used to obtain information on policies, programs and developments relating to the internationalization of the Indonesian language, whilst also strengthening the theoretical foundation for analyzing the relationship between public diplomacy and Indonesia's soft power. The documentary study involved collecting and analyzing official documents, such as UNESCO resolutions, policies on the internationalization of the Indonesian language, BIPA programs, cultural and public diplomacy documents, government reports, and international cooperation documents. Document analysis was used to understand the context, policies and implementation of strategies for the internationalization of the Indonesian language both before and after UNESCO's recognition (Bowen, 2009).

The literature review was carried out by examining various sources on soft power, public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, language diplomacy, language internationalization, and BIPA. This study was also used to identify a research gap, namely by linking research on the internationalization of the Indonesian language in ASEAN, Indonesia's diplomacy at UNESCO, and the challenges of soft power following UNESCO recognition to an analysis of the mechanisms for converting international recognition through public diplomacy (Alam et al., 2022; Fathun et al., 2025; Nuaba & Nurfatimah, 2026).

3.5. Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis to identify, categorizes and interpret themes relating to the internationalization of the Indonesian language and public diplomacy. The analysis was conducted systematically on documents and literature to identify patterns of relationship between UNESCO recognition, internationalization strategies, and the strengthening of Indonesia's soft power (Bowen, 2009).

3.6. Data Reduction

During the data reduction stage, the researcher selected and grouped relevant information into key themes, such as UNESCO recognition, international legitimacy, the internationalization of the Indonesian language, BIPA, language diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, public engagement, cross-cultural understanding, attraction, and soft power. This stage aims to focus the analysis on data capable of explaining the relationship between the internationalization of the Indonesian language and the strengthening of Indonesia's soft power.

3.7. Operationalization of the Concept

To facilitate the analysis process, the main concepts of the research are operationalized in the Table 1.

Table 1. Operationalization of the Research Concepts

Concepts	Operational Definitions	Analysis Indicators	Theoretical Sources
Language Internationalization	Expanding the use and learning of the Indonesian language at an international level	BIPA, education, cooperation	Alam et al. (2022)
Language Diplomacy	The use of language as a diplomatic tool	Language promotion, language learning	Fathun et al. (2025)
Public Diplomacy	Efforts to build communication and relations with foreign audiences	Communication, dialogue, relationships	Cull (2008); Nye (2008)
Soft Power	The ability to achieve results through appeal	Attraction, positive perceptions	Ikenberry and Nye (2004); Nye (2008)
International Legitimacy	Recognition and acceptance in the international arena	UNESCO recognition	Nuaba and Nurfatimah (2026)

Concepts	Operational Definitions	Analysis Indicators	Theoretical Sources
Public Engagement	Engagement with foreign audiences	Participation and interaction	Cull (2008)
Cross-Cultural Understanding	Cross-cultural understanding	Cultural understanding and identity	Melissen (2005)
Attraction	Attractiveness of Indonesia	Interest and positive perceptions	Ikenberry and Nye (2004); Nye (2008)

Source: Author's compilation

3.8. Data Validity and Reliability

The validity and reliability of the data in this study were reinforced through source triangulation by comparing information derived from official UNESCO documents, Indonesian government documents, publications by the Language Development and Guidance Agency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, academic articles, academic books, and sources from other credible institutions. This process was carried out to ensure the consistency and credibility of the data, particularly regarding the recognition of the Indonesian language by UNESCO and the analysis of public diplomacy and soft power, so that the research findings are not solely based on the government's narrative but are also supported by academic perspectives and those of international organizations.

3.9. Research Limitations

This research is limited to an examination of the period following the recognition of the Indonesian language as one of the official languages of the UNESCO General Conference in 2023, which served as a significant milestone in the internationalization of the Indonesian language (Nuaba & Nurfatimah, 2026). The research utilizes secondary data only, without directly measuring foreign public perception; consequently, soft power is understood as the potential to enhance appeal. Furthermore, the study focuses on the Indonesian language as an instrument of public diplomacy without addressing all aspects of Indonesian cultural diplomacy, ensuring the discussion remains centered on the relationship between the internationalization of the Indonesian language, public diplomacy, and the strengthening of Indonesia's soft power.

3.10. Research Analysis Framework



Figure 2. Research analysis framework

Source: Author's compilation

Figure 2 presents this analytical development of the research based on Nye's argument that soft power stems from the ability to generate appeal, and that public diplomacy can serve as an instrument for building soft power through communication and engagement with foreign audiences (Nye, 2008). In the context of this study, UNESCO recognition is positioned as a contextual variable, the internationalization of the Indonesian language as a diplomatic resource, public diplomacy as a conversion mechanism, and soft power as a potential outcome. Consequently, this study does not assume that UNESCO recognition automatically generates soft power. Rather, the study analyses whether there is a conversion process linking international legitimacy → public diplomacy → public engagement → appeal → soft power.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Research Results

4.1.1. The Recognition of the Indonesian Language by UNESCO as a Source of International Legitimacy

The recognition of Indonesian as an official language of the UNESCO General Conference in 2023 marks a significant development in Indonesia's language diplomacy. This decision was adopted through Resolution 42 C/28, making Indonesian the 10th official language of the UNESCO General Conference. Under UNESCO's regulations, Indonesian is now listed as one of the official languages of the General Conference alongside Arabic, Mandarin, English, French, Hindi, Italian, Kiswahili, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. This recognition provides an institutional platform for Indonesian within UNESCO's multilateral forums and enhances its visibility in the realm of international diplomacy (UNESCO, 2023).

From the perspective of international relations, this recognition can be understood as a form of international legitimization for the Indonesian language. This legitimization has both symbolic and procedural dimensions. Symbolically, the Indonesian language has gained broader recognition as a representation of Indonesia's national identity, whilst procedurally, it has attained official status within one of the leading international organizations active in the fields of education, science and culture. Research by Nuaba and Nurfatimah (2026) indicates that UNESCO's recognition provides both symbolic and procedural legitimacy for the Indonesian language, although this recognition does not automatically make the Indonesian language an effective source of soft power.

Within the framework of this study, UNESCO's recognition is not positioned as the final outcome of Indonesian language diplomacy, but rather as initial capital that can be converted into diplomatic resources. This means that international recognition only holds strategic value if Indonesia is able to utilize it to expand the use of the Indonesian language, enhance language learning, build relationships with foreign audiences, and foster a positive perception of Indonesia.

Thus, there is a significant distinction between recognition and soft power. International recognition provides legitimacy and visibility, but soft power requires a further process involving the creation of attraction that can influence the preferences of other actors. From Nye's (2004) perspective, the possession of cultural resources does not automatically generate soft power. These resources must be capable of creating an appeal so that others are voluntarily drawn to, accept, or follow the values and preferences on offer. Based on these findings, UNESCO's recognition can be regarded as the starting point in the process of Recognition-to-Soft Power Conversion:

UNESCO Recognition → International Legitimacy → International Visibility → Strategic Utilization

These stages indicate that Indonesia's main challenge following its recognition by UNESCO is no longer simply a matter of securing that recognition, but rather how to transform that legitimacy into a diplomatic strategy that generates international engagement and public appeal.

4.1.2. The Internationalization of the Indonesian Language Following UNESCO's Recognition

The internationalization of the Indonesian language is by no means a new agenda that emerged only after UNESCO's recognition. Prior to this recognition, Indonesia had already undertaken various efforts to expand the use and learning of the Indonesian language through the BIPA program, educational cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and language-related activities abroad. Research by Alam et al. (2022) indicates that the internationalization of the Indonesian language has been part of Indonesia's diplomatic efforts, particularly within the context of ASEAN. The Indonesian language has the potential to be developed as an international language and can contribute to enhancing Indonesia's image if supported by a diplomatic strategy involving the government, educational institutions, and the wider public.

Following UNESCO's recognition, the internationalization of the Indonesian language has gained new momentum. The Language Agency, through its 2024 Policy Statement, views the recognition of the Indonesian language as an official language of the UNESCO General Conference as an opportunity to strengthen the use of Indonesian in international forums whilst increasing the number of Indonesian language learners abroad. The document states that by 2024 there were more than 180,000 Indonesian language learners in 54 countries through the BIPA program. At the same time, the Language Agency emphasizes the need to improve the quality of teaching and the development of learning materials so that the Indonesian language can function more effectively as a global language.

These findings indicate that the internationalization of the Indonesian language has two dimensions. Firstly, the linguistic expansion dimension, which involves increasing the number of learners, teaching institutions and the use of the Indonesian language abroad. Secondly, the strategic-diplomatic dimension, which involves utilizing the language as an instrument to build relations between Indonesia and the international community.

In this context, the BIPA program serves as one of the primary instruments. Research by Nurhuda et al. (2023) indicates that the strategy for the internationalization of the Indonesian language through BIPA can be developed by expanding BIPA institutions in countries that have diplomatic relations with Indonesia, integrating Indonesian cultural and musical content into the curriculum, and strengthening Indonesian language proficiency among non-native speakers. Thus, the internationalization of the Indonesian language in the post-UNESCO era can be understood as a process oriented not only towards language expansion but also towards strategic cultural engagement. The Indonesian language serves as a gateway to introduce Indonesian culture, society, values and identity to foreign audiences.

4.1.3. Indonesian as a Tool for Public Diplomacy

Conceptually, public diplomacy positions foreign publics as a vital part of international relations. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which focuses more on intergovernmental relations, public diplomacy is directed towards the processes of communication, interaction and relationship-building with the public in other countries.

In this study, the Indonesian language is understood as an instrument of public diplomacy because language learning creates a space for direct interaction between Indonesia and foreign audiences. Through learning the Indonesian language, foreign audiences not only acquire linguistic skills but also have the potential to become familiar with the culture, history, social life and values that have developed in Indonesia. This relationship is depicted in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Indonesian Language as an Instrument of Public Diplomacy

Source: Developed by the author

In this context, language diplomacy has characteristics that differ from conventional diplomatic communication. Language not only conveys messages about Indonesia, but also enables foreign audiences to experience and interact directly with elements of Indonesian culture. The BIPA program serves as a concrete example of this process. Research by Ahmed and Aman (2024), shows that learning the Indonesian language can be linked to the process of cultural adaptation among international students in Indonesian higher education settings. These findings demonstrate that language possesses a social dimension that facilitates interaction between foreign learners and Indonesian society. Consequently, the Indonesian language can serve as a medium for people-to-people relations. Such relations are crucial in public diplomacy, as a country's appeal is often shaped not only through government communications but also through the direct experiences of foreign nationals when interacting with the country's people, culture and social life.

This suggests that the internationalization of the Indonesian language has the potential to shift language diplomacy from a promotional approach towards a more relational one. Language promotion asks how Indonesia introduces the Indonesian language, whereas public diplomacy asks the broader question of how the learning of the Indonesian language can build relationships between the Indonesian people and foreign audiences. This shift in focus is important because soft power cannot be built solely through the one-way dissemination of information. Sustainable appeal requires credibility, interaction and authentic relationships.

4.1.4. BIPA as an Instrument of People-to-People Diplomacy

The Indonesian Language Program for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) occupies a strategic position in the internationalization of the Indonesian language. BIPA is not merely a language learning program, but can be understood as a space for social and cultural interaction between Indonesia and the international community. In the context of public diplomacy, BIPA has three main functions. Firstly, the linguistic function. BIPA provides foreign nationals with access to systematic Indonesian language learning. The more foreign nationals who possess Indonesian language skills, the greater the opportunity for the formation of an international community with close ties to Indonesia.

Secondly, the cultural function. Language learning can be integrated with an introduction to Indonesian culture. Internationalization strategies through BIPA may include material on Indonesian art, music, cuisine, traditions, history and social life. Nurhuda et al. (2023) specifically recommend the

integration of Indonesian cultural and musical material into BIPA learning as part of a language internationalization strategy.

Thirdly, the public diplomacy function. BIPA can serve as a means of forging long-term relationships between foreign learners and Indonesia. Learners who have had a positive experience of learning Indonesian can build relationships with the Indonesian people, consume Indonesian cultural products, travel to Indonesia, or contribute to academic and professional networks related to Indonesia. Thus, BIPA can be positioned within the framework:

BIPA → Language Learning → Cultural Exposure → Social Interaction → Relationship Building
→ Attraction

From a public diplomacy perspective, such mechanisms are more strategic than mere promotional campaigns. This is because relationships formed through direct experience tend to foster a more authentic perception. However, the development of BIPA also faces challenges. The National Language Agency emphasizes the importance of improving the quality of teaching, developing standardized materials, and strengthening the Indonesian language learning ecosystem to ensure the internationalization of the language proceeds sustainably. Therefore, the challenge of internationalizing the Indonesian language is not merely a matter of the number of learners, but also the quality of the learning experience and the ability of BIPA programs to foster broader connections between foreign learners and Indonesia.

4.1.5. From Recognition to Attraction: Public Engagement and the Soft Power Gap

One of the key findings of this study is that UNESCO recognition functions as an enabler of soft power rather than a guarantee of it. Recognition enhances the visibility of the Indonesian language, but visibility does not automatically translate into engagement, understanding, or appeal, each of these must be actively cultivated through public diplomacy. This relationship is formulated in Figure 4.

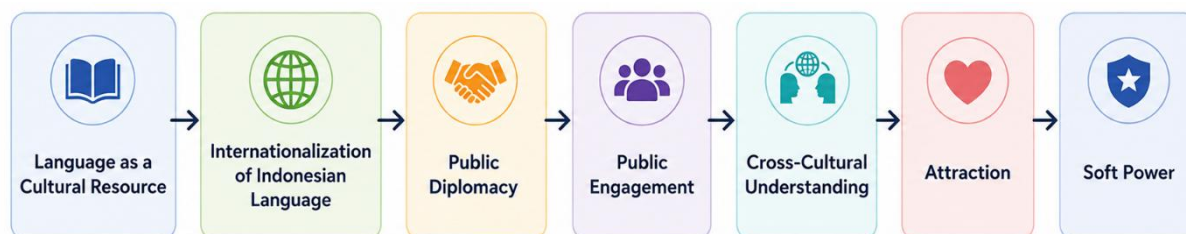


Figure 4. The Internationalization of the Indonesian Language as a Pathway to Soft Power

Source: Developed by the author

This pathway demonstrates that the Indonesian language is not automatically a form of soft power. It is a cultural resource with the potential to become a source of soft power, and that potential is only realized if each stage in the pathway is completed. This distinction is theoretically significant: UNESCO recognition provides symbolic capital, but strengthening soft power requires a conversion strategy that carries that capital through internationalization, public diplomacy, public engagement, and cross-cultural understanding before it can generate attraction.

The first requirement along this pathway is public engagement. For recognition to contribute to soft power, Indonesia needs strategies that allow foreign audiences to actively engage with the Indonesian language, whether through the BIPA Program, student exchanges, university partnerships, Indonesian cultural centers, cultural festivals, digital content in Indonesian, social media, translation programs, Indonesian language competitions, or international educational cooperation. This requires

a shift from “language promotion”, understood as merely introducing the Indonesian language, to “language engagement”, understood as creating experiences, interactions, and relationships through the language. As Ikenberry and Nye (2004) argue, appeal arises when others are voluntarily drawn to the values or culture on offer; the success of language diplomacy is therefore measured not by how much Indonesia promotes the language, but by how far foreign communities are drawn to learn, use, and interact through it.

The second requirement is cross-cultural understanding. Language learning is not only the acquisition of linguistic structure but also an encounter with how a community understands the world. For the Indonesian language, this offers foreign communities a gateway to Indonesia’s cultural diversity, from traditions and cuisine to arts, social values and community life, spanning Sabang to Merauke. This process operates gradually: exposure to the language builds understanding of Indonesian culture, which in turn narrows cultural distance, increases familiarity, and shapes positive perception, the psychological groundwork from which attraction eventually emerges. From a public diplomacy perspective, this matters because positive perceptions of a country are formed less through direct promotion than through the experience of interaction and learning.

Together, these two requirements explain why appeal cannot be forced or assumed. Indonesia cannot automatically convert the Indonesian language into soft power simply because it has been recognized by UNESCO; appeal must grow through foreign audiences’ experiences and Indonesia’s credibility. Recognition provides legitimacy, but experience provides appeal, and that experience unfolds incrementally rather than all at once.

This distinction constitutes what this study terms the soft power gap: the disparity between recognition of a language and its effective conversion into soft power outcomes. The gap arises because several stages must be completed in sequence, international recognition, legitimacy, internationalization, public diplomacy, public engagement, cross-cultural understanding, and appeal, and a breakdown at any one stage means recognition may not translate into influence. This is consistent with Nuaba and Nurfatimah (2026), who show that UNESCO recognition has not automatically strengthened the Indonesian language’s position in global language diplomacy: its use remains largely representational and is not yet supported by an integrated language diplomacy policy framework.

4.1.6. The Potential for the Internationalization of the Indonesian Language as a Public Diplomacy Strategy

Following UNESCO’s recognition, Indonesia has a strategic opportunity to strengthen the internationalization of the Indonesian language through various channels of diplomacy and international cooperation. The Indonesian language’s official status at UNESCO enhances its visibility in multilateral settings and strengthens its institutional position within the UNESCO General Conference. This situation can be utilized to expand the use of the Indonesian language in various educational, cultural and international cooperation forums, thereby raising its profile at a global level.

On the other hand, strengthening the Indonesian Language for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) program presents a highly promising opportunity. The number of Indonesian language learners abroad, which has reached over 180,000 people across 54 countries by 2024, indicates a strong social foundation for the language’s internationalization process. This potential can be optimized as an instrument of public diplomacy through the expansion of teaching networks, improvements in the quality of learning, and the strengthening of cooperation with various educational institutions abroad.

The internationalization of the Indonesian language can also be promoted through the integration of the language with cultural diplomacy. The Indonesian language can be promoted alongside the arts, music, cuisine, tourism, film and the creative economy, thereby becoming part of

the overall ecosystem of Indonesia's cultural appeal. Furthermore, the use of digital diplomacy through online learning, social media, video platforms and language learning applications enables the dissemination of the Indonesian language to reach a global audience that lacks direct access to BIPA centers. More broadly, these various efforts also strengthen Indonesia's position as a middle power that relies on non-coercive instruments to enhance its international influence through education, culture and people-to-people relations.

4.1.7. The Challenges of the Internationalization of the Indonesian Language as a Form of Soft Power

Despite offering significant opportunities, the internationalization of the Indonesian language as an instrument of soft power still faces various challenges that need to be overcome so that international recognition can have the greatest possible impact. The first challenge lies in the gap between recognition and appeal. Official recognition by UNESCO has indeed enhanced the legitimacy of the Indonesian language at a global level, but this has not automatically encouraged the international community to learn or use the Indonesian language. In other words, formal recognition must be followed by strategies capable of fostering interest in, the benefits of, and the relevance of the Indonesian language to the global community. Findings by Nuaba and Nurfatimah (2026) also indicate that UNESCO's recognition has not directly strengthened the position of the Indonesian language as a source of soft power; consequently, more comprehensive follow-up efforts are required.

Furthermore, the internationalization of the Indonesian language also faces the challenge of policy fragmentation. This process involves numerous stakeholders, ranging from the Language Development and Guidance Agency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, diplomatic missions, educational institutions, universities, to civil society. Without integrated coordination amongst these various actors, language diplomacy risks being fragmented and less effective. Therefore, cross-sectoral synergy is a crucial prerequisite for ensuring that internationalization strategies can be implemented in a targeted and sustainable manner.

The next challenge relates to the quality and standardization of Indonesian language learning for foreign speakers (BIPA). The success of internationalization depends not only on expanding the number of learning programs, but also on maintaining consistent quality. This includes the provision of relevant teaching materials, competent teaching staff, and learning methods suited to the needs of foreign learners. The National Language Agency also emphasizes the importance of developing standardized teaching materials and improving the quality of teaching as part of efforts to strengthen the position of the Indonesian language at the international level.

Furthermore, the Indonesian language must thrive amidst competition with global languages that have a wider scope of use, particularly English. This situation calls for an internationalization strategy that does not merely involve direct competition, but rather leverages Indonesia's comparative advantages, such as its cultural richness, creative economy, tourism sector, education, and Indonesia's strategic role in the region. Through this approach, the Indonesian language can offer distinct added value compared to other global languages.

Finally, an equally important challenge is the issue of credibility. From a soft power perspective, the appeal of a language is greatly influenced by the image and reputation of its country of origin. If the promotion of the Indonesian language is not accompanied by positive experiences of Indonesia, the effectiveness of language diplomacy will be diminished. Therefore, the internationalization of the Indonesian language must go hand in hand with improvements in the quality of education, cultural openness, public services, and the strengthening of Indonesia's reputation in the eyes of the international community. Such an integrated approach will strengthen the position of the Indonesian

language not only as a means of communication, but also as an instrument of cultural diplomacy and sustainable global influence.

4.1.8. Model Recognition-to-Soft Power Conversion

Based on the results of the analysis, this study develops the Recognition-to-Soft Power Conversion model as a framework to explain how UNESCO recognition can contribute to strengthening Indonesia's soft power. The model consists of seven stages. In the first stage, Recognition, the Indonesian language gains recognition as an official language of the UNESCO General Conference. In the second stage, Legitimacy, this recognition generates international legitimacy and visibility. In the third stage, Internationalization, this legitimacy is leveraged to expand the use and learning of the Indonesian language. In the fourth stage, Public Diplomacy, this language internationalization is used as an instrument to build communication and relationships with foreign publics. In the fifth stage, Public Engagement, foreign publics not only receive information about Indonesia but also become involved in cultural learning and interaction. In the sixth stage, Attraction, this positive interaction creates appeal and a positive perception of Indonesia. In the seventh and final stage, Soft Power, this accumulated appeal translates into a broader strategic asset that strengthens Indonesia's influence and standing internationally. This attraction has the potential to be converted into non-coercive influence, or soft power. The model is illustrated in Figure 6.

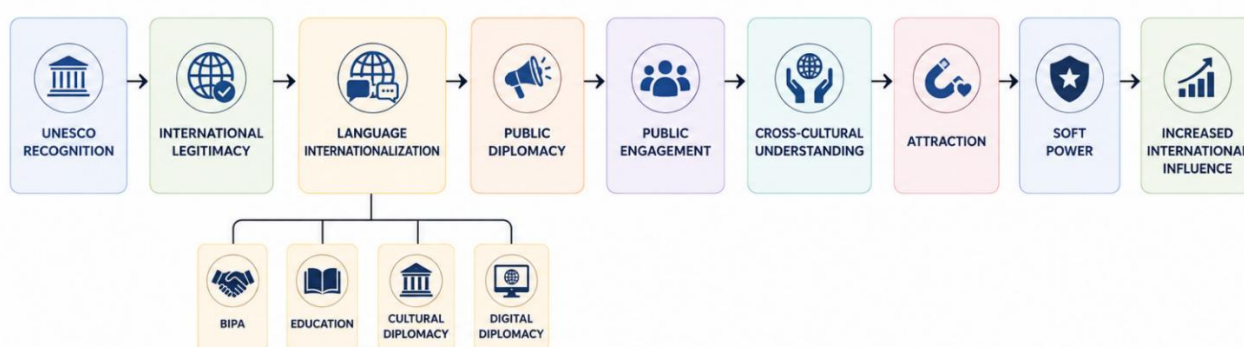


Figure 6. Recognition-to-Soft Power Conversion Model

Source: Developed by the author

This model shows that UNESCO Recognition is not itself a soft power outcome, but rather an enabling condition. Public diplomacy, meanwhile, functions as the conversion mechanism that links legitimacy to attraction. This finding constitutes the study's main conceptual contribution, as it demonstrates that the relationship between language internationalization and soft power is indirect rather than direct. In other words, Recognition does not equal Soft Power; rather, Soft Power emerges only as a potential outcome of Recognition combined with Strategic Internationalization, Public Diplomacy, Engagement, and Attraction working together.

4.1.9. Key Findings of the Research

Based on the analysis carried out, this study has produced several key findings. Firstly, UNESCO recognition provides legitimacy, but does not automatically confer soft power. The recognition of Indonesian as an official language of the UNESCO General Conference strengthens the legitimacy and international visibility of the Indonesian language. However, this recognition must be accompanied by a systematic strategy for its utilization. Secondly, the internationalization of the Indonesian language needs to be positioned as a public diplomacy strategy. The Indonesian language should not only be promoted as a language, but also utilized as a medium for building relationships with foreign audiences.

Thirdly, BIPA (Indonesian as a Foreign Language) is a strategic instrument of people-to-people diplomacy. The BIPA program has the potential to foster long-term relationships between the Indonesian people and foreign audiences through language learning and cultural interaction.

Fourthly, the success of language diplomacy depends on the ability to generate attraction. The internationalization of the Indonesian language will only contribute to soft power if it is able to generate positive experiences, cross-cultural understanding and an interest in Indonesia. Fifthly, an integrated language diplomacy strategy is required. UNESCO's recognition must be followed by coordination between the government, educational institutions, diplomatic missions, the Language Agency, universities, cultural communities and non-state actors. Findings by Nuaba and Nurfatimah (2026) indicate that policy fragmentation is one of the challenges in making the Indonesian language an effective source of soft power.

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1. The Internationalization of the Indonesian Language as a Public Diplomacy Strategy

Based on the overall analysis, this study finds that the internationalization of the Indonesian language can be positioned as part of Indonesia's public diplomacy strategy; however, its effectiveness depends heavily on Indonesia's ability to transform the language from merely an object of promotion into a medium for international relations. Within this framework, the Indonesian language serves three strategic functions.

Firstly, as a representation of identity. The Indonesian language represents Indonesia's national and cultural identity. Secondly, as a medium of interaction. The language enables direct communication between the Indonesian people and foreign audiences. Thirdly, as a diplomatic resource. The language can be used to generate appeal and build relationships that support Indonesia's interests. Thus, the position of the Indonesian language can be formulated as:

Language as Identity → Language as Interaction → Language as Diplomacy → Language as a
Potential Source of Soft Power

This perspective broadens our understanding of Indonesia's public diplomacy. Public diplomacy is not only carried out through image campaigns or government communications, but also through educational and cultural activities that create direct links with foreign audiences. In this context, UNESCO's recognition in 2023 presents a window of opportunity for Indonesia. This momentum can be utilized to strengthen BIPA, expand Indonesian language learning centers, develop digital diplomacy, enhance translation services, and integrate the Indonesian language with cultural diplomacy. However, this opportunity will only yield soft power if Indonesia is able to develop a sustainable and integrated strategy. In other words, Indonesia's main challenge following UNESCO's recognition is no longer 'how to gain recognition', but 'how to utilize this recognition to build relationships and appeal'.

4.2.2. Summary of the Analysis Results

Based on the research findings, the relationship between the internationalization of the Indonesian language, public diplomacy and soft power can be summarized in the following table:

Table 2. Summary of the Analysis Results on Language Internationalization, Public Diplomacy and Soft Power

Stages	The situation in Indonesia	Diplomatic Implications
Recognition	Indonesian has been recognized as an official language of the UNESCO General Conference	Enhanced legitimacy
Legitimacy	Indonesian has gained international status	Increased visibility
Internationalization	BIPA and internationalization programs	Wider use of the language
Public Diplomacy	The language is used in education and culture	Relations with foreign audiences
Public Engagement	Foreign learners and communities are involved	The formation of social networks
Cross-Cultural Understanding	Understanding of Indonesian culture is increasing	Bridging the cultural divide
Attraction	Interest in Indonesia is growing	The creation of a positive image
Soft Power	Potential influence through its appeal	Strengthening Indonesia's position

Source: Developed by the author

Based on the table 2, it can be concluded that the internationalization of the Indonesian language has the potential to become an instrument of public diplomacy and a source of Indonesia's soft power, but this process is gradual and not automatic. Conceptually, this study finds that UNESCO recognition serves as legitimacy capital, language internationalization serves as the instrument, public diplomacy serves as the mechanism, public engagement serves as the process, attraction serves as the intermediate outcome, and soft power serves as the potential outcome. Accordingly, the main contribution of this study is to offer the perspective that the internationalization of the Indonesian language following UNESCO recognition should be understood as a process of converting international legitimacy into attraction through public diplomacy.

5. Conclusion

This research shows that the internationalization of the Indonesian language holds strategic potential as an instrument of public diplomacy to strengthen Indonesia's soft power, particularly following its recognition as one of the official languages at the UNESCO General Conference in 2023. However, this recognition is not soft power in itself, but rather a form of international legitimacy that must be converted through the processes of language internationalization, public diplomacy, public engagement and cross-cultural understanding, ultimately generating attraction towards Indonesia. Thus, the Indonesian language only becomes a source of soft power if it is able to attract foreign communities to learn, use and build relationships with Indonesia of their own volition.

Theoretically, this study proposes a 'Recognition-to-Soft Power Conversion' model, which explains that language is a cultural resource requiring public diplomacy as a mechanism for conversion into soft power. From a practical perspective, Indonesia needs to integrate language diplomacy with cultural, educational, tourism and creative economy diplomacy; strengthen the BIPA program as a vehicle for people-to-people diplomacy; utilize digital platforms to expand the reach of language learning; foster inter-institutional synergy; and develop success indicators that focus not only on learner

numbers but also on increased public engagement, positive perceptions, and long-term relationships with the international community. For instance, this synergy could take the concrete form of a joint coordination mechanism between the Language Development and Guidance Agency (Badan Bahasa) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in which Indonesian embassies and cultural attachés abroad are formally tasked with identifying BIPA placement opportunities and channeling foreign public feedback back to Badan Bahasa for curriculum and outreach adjustments.

Nevertheless, this study remains limited to conceptual analysis and has not yet empirically measured changes in foreign public perception or compared Indonesia's language diplomacy strategies with those of other countries. Therefore, further research is recommended to test this model through surveys of BIPA learners, comparative studies, and analyses of digital diplomacy. Overall, the study confirms that UNESCO's recognition serves as a starting point that opens up opportunities to strengthen Indonesia's public diplomacy, whilst the success of the internationalization of the Indonesian language depends heavily on the ability to transform international legitimacy into authentic appeal through cross-cultural interactions and relationships.

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