

Language and culture guide

Indonesian

Language experts agree that language learning is most effective when language and culture are linked. *The Polyglots* apps aim to spark children's interest in language and culture through play. This guide provides some general information about Indonesia and Indonesian culture and language that may be of interest to you and may extend children's learning.

About Indonesia

Indonesia is made up of more than 18,000 islands and is one of Australia's closest neighbours. About 288 million people live there (in comparison, about 28 million people live in Australia). There are about 11.8 million people living in the capital city, Jakarta – more than one-third the population of Australia occupying a city no more than 8 kilometres wide.

Early childhood education in Indonesia

Improving access to early childhood education has been a priority of the Indonesian government in recent years. In 2023, 36.3 per cent of children in Indonesia participated in early childhood education.¹

Language

Indonesia is home to hundreds of diverse peoples. Together, they speak almost 750 languages and dialects. In 1945, Indonesia declared independence, and Bahasa Indonesia became the official language. Bahasa Indonesia is taught in Indonesian schools and is used by the Indonesian media and government. This is the language spoken in *The Polyglots* apps.

For correct pronunciation, listen carefully to the words as they are spoken in the app or in the sound library in the app toolkit on the ELLA website.

Culture

Indonesia is culturally diverse. Across the Indonesian archipelago there are about 300 ethnic groups, each with their own unique cultural practices. A large majority of people are Muslim and there are also many people who are Christian, Buddhist, Hindu and Animist.

Politeness and customs

- The left hand is considered unclean. It is rude to use your left hand to pass someone food, drink or a gift.
- You can point by using your right thumb and folding the other fingers against your palm. It is rude to point with your index finger.
- The polite way to beckon someone is with your right hand. Move your hand in a downward motion.
- Take off your shoes when going into someone's house.
- It is rude to show the soles of your feet or shoes. When sitting, you can point your feet down or put them flat on the floor.
- A person's head is considered sacred in Indonesia, so it is rude to touch someone on the head.

Culture in *The Polyglots* apps

As children play with the apps, they can discover fun and intriguing Indonesian cultural references such as an orangutan, a cicak lizard, rambutan fruit and an Indonesian mask. You can learn more about the cultural references in the app toolkit.



¹ 'Indonesia lags in early childhood education', *The Jakarta Post*, 3 July 2024, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2024/07/03/indonesia-lags-in-early-childhood-education.html>

Interesting topics

Animals	The animals of Indonesia include: • elephants • green sea turtles • Komodo dragons • orangutans • rhinoceroses • slow lorises (small primates with big eyes and a toxic bite) • tarsiers (small primates with even bigger eyes and an appearance that some people may find creepy; they catch insect prey by jumping on them) • tigers.
Arts	• An angklung is a traditional bamboo instrument. • Batik and ikat are traditional techniques used to create textiles with beautiful patterns. • A gamelan is a traditional musical ensemble played with Indonesian instruments. • Wayang golek are wooden puppets. • Wayang kulit are shadow puppets.
Food	The national dish of Indonesia is called nasi tumpeng. It is served on a plate with a big cone of rice in the centre. Surrounding the rice are lots of side dishes, which can include satays, vegetables, pickles, seafood and more. Other Indonesian foods include: • gado gado (salad with peanut sauce) • nasi goreng (fried rice) • satay (meat skewers with peanut sauce) • kue lapis legit (layer cake, made by grilling each layer of the cake).
Games	Traditional games include: • congklak (a board game played with shells, stones or seeds) • semut, orang, gajah (a game played with the right hand, similar to rock, paper scissors).



Interesting topics

Places	• Bali is a popular tourist destination, known for its temples, beaches, arts and crafts. • In Banjarmasin in Kalimantan, there is a floating market where people buy and sell from their boats. • Jakarta is the capital city of Indonesia. It has big shopping centres and theme parks such as Dunia Fantasi Theme Park (also known as Dufan Ancol). • The island of Komodo is home to the Komodo dragon, the world's biggest lizard. There is a beach on Komodo called Pink Beach because of its pink-coloured sand. • Lake Toba in Sumatra is the biggest volcanic lake in the world with an island in the middle that is almost as big as Singapore. Lake Toba was formed after a super volcano erupted about 75,000 years ago. • The Maluku (Spice) islands were once the only source in the world of the spices mace and nutmeg.
Seasons	Indonesia has a tropical climate, with a wet season and a dry season. The dry season is generally around June to September. The rest of the year is wetter.
Traditional houses	Across Indonesia, different areas have different traditional houses: • long houses in Kalimantan • Minangkabau people's houses with 'spired' roofs in West Sumatra • Batak people's boat-shaped houses in North Sumatra • compound houses in Bali • Tongkonan houses in Sulawesi.
Traditions	This is just a small selection of Indonesia's many rich traditions. • In South Sulawesi, the Toraja people have elaborate funerals that can go for many days. • In Sumba, a ritual game celebrates the rice-planting season. In it, people throw spears at opponents while riding horses. • On the island of Nias, stone jumping is a manhood ritual where boys jump over a stone wall.

Note: This document contains content that has been gathered through independent research and consultation with subject matter experts. The figures and information included in this document should be reviewed for accuracy over time.



Education
Services
Australia



Australian Government
Department of Education

ELLA is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and is managed by Education Services Australia.

© 2026 Commonwealth of Australia, unless otherwise indicated. This material, other than all logos and the Polyglots characters, may be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC 4.0 licence (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), unless otherwise indicated.

