

Is English Considered Prestigious? Exploring Language Ideology Among University Students

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Abstrak – Dalam banyak konteks pendidikan tinggi, bahasa Inggris memegang posisi bergengsi, terutama di negara-negara di mana bahasa ini berfungsi sebagai bahasa asing. Di kalangan mahasiswa, bahasa Inggris sering dikaitkan dengan kecerdasan, kompetensi akademik, identitas modern, dan akses ke peluang global. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana mahasiswa memandang bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa yang bergengsi dan bagaimana ideologi prestise ini membentuk identitas linguistik dan kepercayaan diri mereka dalam konteks akademik dan sosial. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Lima mahasiswa semester lima dipilih melalui pengambilan sampel bertujuan. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik berdasarkan kerangka kerja Braun dan Clarke. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa bahasa Inggris berfungsi sebagai modal simbolik dalam lingkungan universitas, memengaruhi bagaimana mahasiswa mengevaluasi diri mereka sendiri dan orang lain. Prestise bahasa Inggris memotivasi mahasiswa dengan memberikan akses ke peluang akademik dan profesional, seperti beasiswa, magang, dan program internasional. Namun, temuan juga menunjukkan bahwa prestise bahasa Inggris dapat menimbulkan tekanan dan kecemasan, terutama bagi mahasiswa yang menganggap kemampuan bahasa Inggris mereka tidak memadai. Lebih lanjut, prestise bahasa Inggris secara signifikan membentuk identitas linguistik mahasiswa, menghasilkan kepercayaan diri dan rasa tidak aman. Untuk mengatasi ketegangan ini, siswa secara aktif menegosiasikan penggunaan bahasa mereka melalui strategi adaptif seperti pencampuran kode untuk mempertahankan inklusivitas dan kepercayaan diri. Studi ini menyoroti peran ganda prestise bahasa Inggris sebagai faktor yang memberdayakan sekaligus membatasi, menekankan pentingnya praktik pedagogis inklusif yang menyeimbangkan motivasi dengan dukungan emosional dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris.

Kata Kunci: Bahasa Inggris; Prestise; Mahasiswa Universitas

Abstract - In many higher education contexts, English holds a prestigious position, particularly in countries where it functions as a foreign language. Among university students, English is often associated with intelligence, academic competence, modern identity, and access to global opportunities. This study aims to explore how university students perceive English as a prestigious language and how this prestige ideology shapes their linguistic identity and confidence in academic and social contexts. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study design. Five fifth-semester university students were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's framework. The findings reveal that English functions as symbolic capital in university settings, influencing how students evaluate themselves and others. English prestige motivates students by providing access to academic and professional opportunities, such as scholarships, internships, and international programs. However, the findings also indicate that English prestige can generate pressure and anxiety, particularly for students who perceive their English proficiency as insufficient. Furthermore, English prestige significantly shapes students' linguistic identity, producing both confidence and insecurity. To manage this tension, students actively negotiate their language use through adaptive strategies such as code-mixing to maintain inclusivity and self-confidence. This study highlights the dual role of English prestige as both empowering and constraining, emphasizing the importance of inclusive pedagogical practices that balance motivation with emotional support in English language learning.

Key words: English Language; Prestige; University Students

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INTRODUCTION

English holds a unique and prestigious position in many educational and social environments, particularly in countries where it functions as a foreign language (Phillipson, 1992). Among university students, English is frequently associated with intelligence, global mobility, and modern identity (Lauder, 2008; Lamb, 2013). As a



result, English proficiency is often perceived not merely as a linguistic skill, but also as a marker of social status and academic competence. This phenomenon can be understood through Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic capital, which explains how certain languages, especially English, gain prestige and are linked to perceptions of being educated, capable, and socially advantaged. In university settings, such ideologies position English as a valuable resource that shapes how students evaluate themselves and others (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Previous studies have demonstrated that language attitudes and ideologies play a significant role in shaping learners' confidence, identity, and participation in communication (Garrett, 2010; Dörnyei, 2005). Norton (2000) argues that learners invest in a language because they expect symbolic or social returns, such as recognition, respect, or upward mobility. In this sense, students' beliefs about the prestige of English influence how they position themselves socially, how they assess their own linguistic competence, and how they perceive their peers' English ability (Ryan, 2009). These beliefs may lead to emotional responses ranging from pride and confidence to insecurity and anxiety, depending on how individuals perceive their position within the social hierarchy of English use (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).

Recent studies have increasingly highlighted the role of English as a prestigious language in shaping students' attitudes, identity, and confidence in EFL contexts. Asmi, Vania, and Asdi (2022) found that English is positioned at the top of linguistic hierarchies in Indonesian educational settings, where it is closely associated with intelligence and elite status. Similarly, Wigati and Wiwoho (2021) reported that university students often perceive English proficiency as a symbol of academic competence and social superiority, which influences how they evaluate themselves and their peers. Furthermore, Adalta and Arsyad (2023) revealed that many Indonesian EFL students internalize native-speakerism ideology, associating "good English" with legitimacy and higher status. These findings suggest that prestige-related beliefs shape not only language attitudes but also students' identity construction and self-presentation in academic settings.

In the context of Indonesian higher education, English increasingly appears in academic activities, digital communication, and peer interactions (Lauder, 2008). Many students describe English proficiency as something "*keren*," "*pintar*," or "*berkelas*," reflecting broader societal ideologies that associate English with opportunity, modernity, and prestige (Sargeant, 2009). While the prestigious status of English can motivate students to improve their language skills, it may also generate pressure. Students who perceive their English ability as inadequate may experience anxiety, self-doubt, and avoidance of English use, particularly in academic settings (Teimouri et al., 2019). Consequently, the symbolic power attached to English can influence confidence levels, peer judgment, and power relations within the classroom (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005).

Despite growing interest in language attitudes and affective factors in language learning, limited scholarly attention has been given to how university students subjectively experience and negotiate the prestige of English in their everyday academic lives, particularly in relation to linguistic identity and confidence (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Lamb, 2013). Most existing studies focus on linguistic challenges or general motivation, while fewer explore English prestige as a lived social ideology that shapes students' emotions, self-perception, and social positioning (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). This indicates a research gap in understanding how English prestige is experienced and interpreted by students beyond its instrumental or instructional value.

To address this gap, the present study aims to investigate how university students perceive English as a prestigious language and how these perceptions shape their linguistic identity and confidence in academic and social contexts. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this study explores students' subjective experiences through semi-structured interviews, allowing their voices and personal interpretations to emerge naturally. By examining English prestige as a social and ideological phenomenon, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the sociolinguistic dynamics of English use in higher education and to promote more inclusive and supportive English learning environments. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do university students perceive the prestige of English in academic and social contexts?
2. How does the ideology of English prestige shape students' linguistic identity and confidence?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study design to explore university students' perceptions of English as a prestigious language and to examine how this ideology shapes their linguistic identity and confidence. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study aimed to understand students' subjective

experiences, beliefs, and interpretations regarding English prestige, which cannot be captured through numerical data (Creswell, 2014). This approach is appropriate for investigating language ideology as a socially constructed phenomenon embedded in students' everyday academic and social interactions.

Participants

The participants of this study were five fifth-semester university students selected through purposive sampling. This sampling technique was used to ensure that the participants were relevant to the research objectives, particularly students who had experiences using English in academic or social contexts. The participants varied in their levels of confidence in using English, allowing the study to capture diverse perspectives on English prestige. Participation in the study was voluntary, and ethical considerations were observed by ensuring confidentiality and assigning pseudonyms (P1, P2, etc.) to all participants.

Research Instruments

The primary research instrument was a semi-structured interview. This type of interview was chosen because it allows flexibility for the researcher to explore participants' responses in depth while still maintaining alignment with the research questions. The interview questions were developed based on key research variables related to perceptions of English prestige, linguistic identity, and confidence. To ensure clarity and coherence, the interview guide was structured around indicators derived from the research questions.

To ensure that the interview questions were systematically aligned with the research focus, the instrument was developed based on clearly defined research variables and indicators. The organization of the variables, indicators, and sample interview questions is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Variables, Indicators, and Interview Items

Research Question	Variable	Indicators	Sample Interview Questions
RQ 1: How do university students perceive the prestige of English in academic and social contexts?	Students' Perceptions of English Prestige	English as a prestigious language	Do you think English is considered a prestigious language among university students? Why?
		Sources of prestige	What makes English seem prestigious compared to other languages in academic or social contexts?
		Social evaluation of English users	How are students who speak English fluently usually perceived by others?
RQ 2: How does the ideology of English prestige shape students' linguistic identity and confidence?	English Identity, Prestige, and Confidence	Confidence in using English	How do your beliefs about English influence your confidence when using it?
		Emotional responses	Have you ever felt proud, insecure, or anxious because of your English ability? Can you explain?
		Linguistic identity	Do you think English affects how you see

			yourself as a university student? How?
		Pressure vs motivation	Do you think the prestige of English is more motivating or pressuring for students? Why?

The interview guide functioned as a flexible framework rather than a rigid questionnaire. As the interviews were semi-structured, follow-up questions were asked when participants' responses revealed experiences or perspectives that required further clarification or elaboration.

Data Collection

Data were collected through individual interviews conducted either online or offline, depending on participants' availability. Each interview lasted approximately 20–40 minutes. The interviews were conducted in a combination of English and Indonesian to ensure that participants could express their ideas comfortably and accurately. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis process involved several stages: familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts, generating initial codes, identifying emerging themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final interpretation. Thematic analysis was selected because it allows flexibility in identifying patterns related to language ideology, perceived prestige, identity construction, and confidence. To enhance trustworthiness, the analysis was grounded in participants' actual statements, and interpretations were made carefully to reflect their perspectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study based on thematic analysis of the interview data. Three major themes emerged from the participants' responses: (1) *English as symbolic capital in university contexts*, (2) *prestige, motivation, and access to opportunities*, and (3) *English prestige and linguistic identity construction*.

The first and second themes address Research Question 1, which examines students' perceptions of English as a prestigious language in academic and social contexts. The third theme responds to Research Question 2, focusing on how the ideology of English prestige shapes students' linguistic identity and confidence.

1. English as Symbolic Capital in University Contexts

The findings indicate that English is widely perceived as a prestigious language among university students, carrying strong symbolic value in academic and social settings. Across participants, English was frequently associated with intelligence, modernity, and academic competence. Students who were proficient in English were often viewed as more capable and respected within their academic environment.

Several participants emphasized that English is respected because of its global status and its role in accessing international communication and knowledge. One participant explained, "*English functions as a global language. It allows us to access international sources and communicate with people from different countries*" (P1).

English was also perceived as a marker of academic competence. A participant stated that students who are fluent in English are often viewed positively in academic contexts, noting that "*students who are proficient in English tend to be seen as smart and capable academically*" (P3).

In addition, English was seen as a marker of intelligence and educational achievement. One participant remarked, "*Students who speak English fluently are usually perceived as smart and having good academic abilities*" (P5). These perceptions demonstrate that English functions as a form of symbolic capital. Within university settings, students' beliefs about the prestige of English influence how they position themselves in relation to their peers,

affecting their confidence, participation, and sense of legitimacy as competent academic actors.

2. Prestige, Motivation, and Access to Opportunities

Another prominent theme concerns how the prestige of English motivates students and is closely linked to access to academic and professional opportunities. Many participants reported that English proficiency opens pathways to internships, employment, and international programs. This perception motivated students to improve their English skills and actively use the language in academic and social interactions.

Several participants described English as an important requirement for future opportunities. One student explained, *"English opens many opportunities, such as job prospects or internship programs where English proficiency is often prioritized"* (P1). Similarly, another participant noted that English enables students to participate in international academic activities, including student exchange programs, scholarships, and conferences abroad (P3). For these students, the prestige attached to English served as a motivating force that encouraged continuous learning and self-development.

However, the findings also reveal that English prestige can create pressure, particularly for students who perceive their proficiency as insufficient. One participant expressed that *"the prestige of English creates pressure because there is a demand to master it, while not all students have the same level of ability"* (P5), that the high status of English can make some students feel pressured or left behind, especially when English is treated as a standard of intelligence or competence. Another participant acknowledged this tension and described using code-mixing to reduce discomfort among peers, stating that *"I often combine English and Indonesian or repeat what I say in Indonesian so that others do not feel pressured"* (P4).

3. English Prestige and Linguistic Identity Construction

The third theme highlights how the ideology of English prestige shapes students' linguistic identity and confidence. Participants described experiencing a complex range of emotions when using English, including confidence, pride, anxiety, and insecurity. For some students, English proficiency contributed positively to their self-image and confidence, particularly when interacting with peers who also use English.

This positioning is evident in the participants' narratives. Several students reported that English proficiency influenced their sense of confidence and legitimacy in academic interactions. One participant stated, *"When I can speak English well, I feel more confident and brave to speak in class because people think I am capable"* (P1). In contrast, another participant expressed hesitation, noting that *"Sometimes I prefer to stay silent because I am afraid my English is not good enough and others will judge me"* (P3). These accounts illustrate how beliefs about English prestige directly shape students' participation and self-evaluation in university settings.

Some students felt that English proficiency increased their confidence and comfort, especially when interacting with peers who also use English. One participant stated, *"When I can use English, I feel comfortable and more confident, especially with people who also speak English"* (P1). Another participant similarly noted that using English helped them feel more confident in expressing themselves (P2).

However, this confidence was often accompanied by anxiety related to grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, or fear of negative judgment. One participant shared, *"Sometimes I feel anxious because I am afraid of mispronouncing words or being judged by others"* (P3). Other participants expressed feelings of insecurity and self-comparison, particularly when English was perceived as a benchmark of intelligence or academic ability. A participant, saying, *"My belief that English is prestigious makes me feel that my ability is not good enough"* (P5) that viewing English as a prestigious language sometimes reduced their confidence, as they felt their ability was not good enough compared to others. To navigate these pressures, some students negotiated their linguistic identity through adaptive strategies such as code-mixing. One participant explained that mixing languages helped maintain inclusivity and reduce social tension in interactions (P4).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that university students view English as a language with strong symbolic value, often associated with intelligence, modernity, and social advantage. This perception is consistent with previous studies in Indonesian EFL contexts, which indicate that English functions as a marker of academic status and cultural capital among university students (Asmi, Vania, & Asdi, 2022). Similar research has shown that students frequently attach prestige to English, perceiving it as a language connected to educated identity, higher

competence, and access to global opportunities (Lamb, 2013; Norton, 2000).

Students in this study reported that English proficiency is often perceived as “*keren*,” “*pintar*,” or “*berkelas*,” reflecting broader language ideologies that create symbolic hierarchies among peers. This finding reinforces Bourdieu’s (1991) notion of symbolic capital, in which linguistic competence becomes a valued resource that shapes social evaluation and positioning. The tendency of some participants to compare their English proficiency with that of their peers is also in line with previous research suggesting that language attitudes are closely related to learners’ confidence and self-perception in academic settings (Garrett, 2010; Dörnyei, 2005).

1. English as Symbolic Capital in University Contexts

The findings indicate that English carries an enormous symbolic capital especially in university context, many students in university think that English functions as a marker of intelligence, academic competence, and modern identity. Participants consistently described English as “*keren*,” “*pintar*,” and “*berkelas*,” reflecting how English proficiency is socially valued beyond its communicative function. This perception aligns closely with Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital, which explains how certain forms of linguistic competence grant social recognition, legitimacy, and power within specific social fields. (Bourdieu, 1991).

In Indonesian higher education, English proficiency is often institutionalized through academic requirements, standardized tests, and international programs. As highlighted by participants, English is closely associated with access to scholarships, internships, student exchanges, and global academic engagement. This reinforces previous studies showing that English occupies a dominant position within linguistic hierarchies in Indonesian universities, where proficiency is equated with higher academic status and social advantage (Asmi et al., 2022; Zein et al., 2020). Consequently, students tend to evaluate themselves and others based on English ability, confirming that symbolic power attached to English actively shapes social relations in academic spaces.

Importantly, the findings reveal that students actively evaluate both themselves and their peers based on English ability. This evaluative process reflects how symbolic power operates in everyday academic interactions, confirming that English prestige is not abstract but lived and experienced by students. Such findings resonate with Kirkpatrick (2012), who highlights that English in Asian educational contexts often functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that shapes access to resources and recognition.

2. Prestige, Motivation, and Access to Opportunities

Beyond symbolic value, the findings demonstrate that English prestige significantly shapes students’ motivation, particularly in relation to future opportunities. Most participants perceived English proficiency as a gateway to academic and professional mobility, including internships, scholarships, international programs, and employment prospects. This perception reflects Norton’s (2000) concept of investment, which emphasizes that learners engage with a language because of the social, symbolic, and material returns it offers.

For participants who perceived themselves as competent English users, prestige functioned as a motivating force. These students reported increased confidence, willingness to practice, and active participation in academic and social interactions. This supports previous research suggesting that positive language attitudes and perceived value of English enhance learners’ motivation and engagement (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Lamb, 2013). English prestige, in this sense, operates as a form of aspirational capital that encourages self-improvement.

However, the findings also reveal the exclusionary dimension of English prestige. For students who perceived their proficiency as insufficient, prestige became a source of pressure rather than motivation. Feelings of insecurity and anxiety emerged when English was perceived as a benchmark of intelligence or academic competence. This finding echoes Choi’s (2016) argument that social comparison in language learning contexts can intensify anxiety, particularly when dominant language norms are internalized but difficult to achieve.

Thus, English prestige produces a dual effect: it motivates students who feel capable while simultaneously creating pressure and marginalization for those who feel less proficient. This highlights that prestige ideology is not neutral but can generate unequal emotional and psychological experiences among university students.

In addition to motivation, the prestige of English in higher education also reflects unequal power dynamics. Students’ educational backgrounds, past experience, and socioeconomic resources frequently have an impact on the unequal distribution of access to English competence. Because of this, pupils who have more linguistic capital typically receive more from the prestige of English, including increased self-assurance, recognition, and access to educational possibilities. Conversely, pupils who don’t speak English well could feel excluded, doubt themselves,

or participate less. This implies that rather than only representing individual work or aptitude, the prestige of English serves as a type of symbolic power that upholds academic hierarchies. Such dynamics highlight how language ideology intersects with inequality, positioning English as both a resource and a barrier within higher education.

3. English Prestige and Linguistic Identity Construction

The findings further also show that English prestige ideology plays a central role in shaping students' linguistic identity and confidence. Students who identified themselves as competent English users tended to associate English with confidence, modernity, and academic legitimacy. Feelings of pride and comfort when using English, particularly in academic discussions and peer interactions, indicate that English proficiency contributes positively to students' self-concept. This supports Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004) argument that language ideologies influence how individuals position themselves and negotiate identity within social contexts.

The prestige of English operates through everyday academic practices and implicit evaluative norms within university settings. English proficiency is often treated as an indicator of intelligence, academic seriousness, and global orientation, even when such expectations are not explicitly stated. As a result, students constantly engage in social comparison, measuring their linguistic abilities against those of their peers. This mechanism shapes participation patterns, where students who perceive themselves as proficient feel more legitimate and confident to speak, while others withdraw due to fear of negative evaluation. In line with Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment, English prestige mediates students' engagement by determining who is recognized as a legitimate academic speaker and whose voice is marginalized.

English proficiency also functioned as a marker of academic identity. Participants reported feeling more confident during presentations, seminars, and classroom discussions when using English. This aligns with Garrett (2010), who suggests that language attitudes significantly influence learners' participation and sense of belonging. Similarly, Wigati and Wiwoho (2021) found that English proficiency in Indonesian universities is often associated with perceptions of competence and credibility.

Conversely, students who internalized English prestige but perceived themselves as less proficient experienced identity tension. Feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and fear of judgment emerged when students compared themselves to more fluent peers. This reflects how prestige ideology can produce identity conflict, where learners measure their self-worth against dominant linguistic norms. Such experiences resonate with Adalta and Arsyad's (2023) findings on native-speakerism, where "good English" is equated with legitimacy and higher status, often disadvantageing less confident speakers.

Notably, several participants adopted adaptive strategies to negotiate this tension, such as code-mixing, repeating meanings in Indonesian, or prioritizing communicative clarity over grammatical accuracy. These practices suggest that students actively resist rigid prestige norms and construct flexible linguistic identities. Rather than passively accepting English prestige, they strategically negotiate its use to maintain confidence and inclusivity. This highlights students' agency in responding to language ideology and suggests that identity construction is dynamic rather than fixed.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that English, as a prestigious language, exerts both empowering and constraining effects on university students. It is perceived not merely as a communicative tool, but as a form of symbolic capital that plays a significant role in shaping students' confidence and linguistic identity in both academic and social contexts. While it functions as symbolic capital that enhances social value, academic opportunities, and self-confidence for some, it simultaneously generates pressure, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy for others, particularly when students compare themselves to more proficient peers. The ideology of English prestige significantly shapes students' linguistic identity, influencing self-evaluation, peer perception, and communication strategies such as code-mixing or selective use of English to maintain social harmony. These findings underscore the complex social, psychological, and emotional dimensions of English learning in higher education, highlighting the necessity of inclusive teaching practices that foster confidence, reduce anxiety, and ensure equitable participation. Future research should further investigate classroom interventions, larger participant samples, and specific strategies that can balance the motivational potential of English prestige with its possible challenges, ultimately contributing to a more supportive and empowering language learning environment.

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