

Perceptions of English Use and Cultural Identity in Non-Native Contexts

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ABSTRACT

English plays an increasingly important role in shaping communication practices and identity negotiation in non-native contexts. This study aims to explore how English is used in daily life and how it relates to cultural identity among non-urban Indonesian university students. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with four English education students (N1–N4) from different universities in Samarinda, East Kalimantan. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis involving coding, categorization, and theme development. The findings show that English is regularly used in academic, social, and digital contexts, extending beyond formal classroom settings. Students generally expressed positive emotional attitudes toward English, describing it as enjoyable and useful, while also acknowledging challenges related to confidence and vocabulary. Importantly, English use was not perceived as threatening Indonesian cultural identity. Instead, participants demonstrated active negotiation between global communication and local cultural affiliation, viewing English as an additional communicative and identity resource rather than a replacement for local culture. This study contributes to English as a Lingua Franca and identity research by highlighting global–local identity balance in a non-urban Indonesian context, an area that remains underexplored in previous studies.

Keywords: Lingua Franca; Cultural Identity; Indonesian EFL Learners.

INTRODUCTION

English has become a global lingua franca, used by many people whose native language is not English. This global spread raises important questions about the relationship between English use and local identity. Recent studies show that non-native speakers often embrace their own accents in English as an authentic marker of their cultural background (Ikhwanudin et al., 2025). Such perspectives challenge traditional standards that favored native-like pronunciation, suggesting instead that diverse English varieties enrich global communication. Therefore, examining how

learners' express identity through their English use offers valuable insight into the dynamic interplay between global communication and local cultural expression.

Indonesia, classified as an Expanding Circle country with a long colonial history has a complex linguistic landscape. In Indonesian education, Western "standard" English is often privileged, and tests and materials tend to reinforce native-speaker norms. Studies report that both students and teachers frequently prefer inner-circle (British or American) accents, which can render local English varieties less prestigious (Wardana & Sahiruddin, 2025; Yawan & Marhamah, 2024). At the same time, English remains a crucial tool for education and global communication in Indonesia, creating a tension between traditional Western norms and a growing sense of English as part of Indonesian life. In response to this tension, learners often maintain a strong cultural orientation: for example, X. Zhang & Lütge (2023) found that Chinese students in the UK prioritized their home culture even when communicating in English, and similar findings in Southeast Asia suggest that cultural background and language ideology jointly shape attitudes toward English.

In academic settings, English often signals educational prestige and modernity. For example, Maharani et al. (2023) report that in West Kalimantan both *Bahasa Indonesia* and English are viewed as symbols of academic legitimacy and modern values compared to local dialects. Similarly, Suroso et al. (2025) found that Indonesian graduate students frequently use English in their academic studies. These findings suggest that English plays an important role in formal learning environments in Indonesia.

Outside the classroom, students often use English to project a modern or global identity. In social media and casual conversation, English may be used playfully to demonstrate cosmopolitan belonging while still affirming one's Indonesian cultural roots. Accent choices and code-switching serve as additional identity strategies in Indonesia's multilingual settings (Ikhwanudin et al., 2025). The online environment is especially influential: learners actively co-construct their identities through English on digital platforms. For example, Demir et al. (2025) note that English use in social media and blogs allows learners to express different facets of their identity, and Sugiarto & Arif (2024) report that Indonesian Instagram and Twitter users adapt their English usage to cultural contexts. These patterns highlight that engagement with English in social and digital domains provides students with tools to connect globally without abandoning their local cultural identity.

Overall, existing literature confirms that English use is closely intertwined with identity across academic, social, and digital domains. However, much of this research is grounded in urban, metropolitan, or internationally oriented contexts. There is limited empirical evidence on how English use and cultural identity are negotiated in non-urban Indonesian regions, where linguistic diversity, local culture, and access to English differ substantially. This gap highlights the need for context-sensitive research focusing on students in underrepresented regions such as East Kalimantan. This study addresses this gap by focusing on university students

in Samarinda, East Kalimantan, a linguistically and culturally diverse province where English has limited presence. It investigates how students perceive and use English in academic, social, and digital contexts, and how these practices relate to their sense of Indonesian cultural identity. The study focuses on English Education majors at universities in Samarinda and is guided by two questions: 1) how students perceive the use of English in their academic, social, and digital lives, and 2) how these perceptions relate to their cultural identity as Indonesians.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and Cultural Identity

Recent studies suggest that viewing English as a global lingua franca (ELF) can support non-native speakers' cultural identities. Sabharwal (2025) shows that in Delhi, English functions as a shared means of communication that reshapes cultural identity in a globalized setting, while Santoso et al. (2023) argue that ELF-oriented teaching allows learners to express their own cultural backgrounds rather than conforming to native-speaker norms. These studies indicate that English can empower learners to maintain local identity. However, most ELF research is conducted in urban or classroom-based contexts and tends to emphasize positive outcomes, with limited attention to potential drawbacks such as language attrition or unequal pressures on learners. As a result, the broader sociocultural implications of ELF remain insufficiently examined.

English Use in Academic, Social, and Digital Domains

Previous studies indicate that English use across academic, social, and digital domains plays an important role in shaping learners' identities, although most findings are drawn from specific and often privileged contexts. In academic settings, English has been shown to support the construction of scholarly and professional identities, particularly through academic writing and research engagement (Chen et al., 2023; L. Zhang & Wang, 2024). However, these studies largely focus on postgraduate or research-oriented learners, leaving unanswered questions about how English functions for students with more limited academic exposure. In social contexts, English use is frequently associated with modernity, global orientation, and peer-group identity (Davydova, 2025; Peng, 2023), yet such interpretations may not fully apply to settings where local languages dominate everyday interaction and English carries less social prestige. Digital environments further intensify English exposure, especially among younger learners, as online platforms normalize bilingual practices and integrate English into daily self-expression (Davydova, 2025). While this suggests that digital engagement can strengthen English-related identity, existing research often assumes stable access to technology and overlooks potential inequalities or the marginalization of local languages. Overall, although prior studies highlight the identity-forming potential of English across multiple domains, they provide limited critical insight into how

these dynamics operate in non-urban contexts, where access, attitudes, and sociolinguistic conditions may differ substantially.

Kachru's Three Circles model

Kachru's Three Circles model provides a foundational framework for understanding the global distribution of English by categorizing its use into the Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles (Kirk, 2022). The model helps explain how historical, political, and educational factors shape English norms and speaker identities, particularly positioning Expanding Circle users, such as Indonesian learners, as users of English for instrumental purposes rather than as norm creators. Despite its continued relevance, scholars have increasingly criticized the model for oversimplifying contemporary English practices, as globalization, migration, and digital communication have blurred the boundaries between the three circles (Kirk, 2022). For example, distinctions between native and non-native speakers are less stable in today's multilingual societies, yet the model is still reflected in language ideologies and educational policies, including the preference for "native" English norms and teachers in some contexts (Deng et al., 2023). This persistence suggests that while Kachru's model may no longer fully capture the complexity of English use, it remains influential in shaping attitudes toward English ownership and legitimacy. However, most discussions of the model focus on national or urban-level language policies, leaving its relevance and impact on learners' identity negotiation in non-urban contexts largely unexplored.

Local Culture and Attitudes toward English

Studies show that home and local cultures significantly shape learners' attitudes toward English and can strengthen motivation and identity when integrated into EFL learning. In Indonesia, Giyatmi et al. (2022) demonstrate that using local cultural content increases student engagement and cultural pride, while X. Zhang & Lütge (2023) find that learners view home culture as central to effective ELF communication even without deep cultural knowledge. However, tensions remain, as Burgos et al. (2024) report that learners may value English for its global benefits while worrying about cultural loss. A key limitation of these studies is their focus on classroom-based or international contexts, offering limited insight into how home culture shapes everyday English use in non-urban communities. Consequently, although existing research highlights the importance of local culture, it leaves important questions about identity negotiation in less urbanized settings unanswered.

METHOD

Design and Samples

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore non-native English users' perceptions of English use and cultural identity in a non-urban context.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria; 1) they were undergraduate students enrolled in an English-related program in Samarinda, East Kalimantan, 2) they were non-native speakers of English with Indonesian cultural backgrounds, and 3) they actively used English in academic, social, or digital domains. Four participants were involved, a sample size considered appropriate for qualitative inquiry focused on depth rather than generalization. The limited number of participants enabled in-depth exploration of individual experiences and facilitated detailed thematic analysis, while the shared educational and sociocultural background of the participants supported analytical consistency and saturation within the scope of this exploratory study.

Instrument and Procedure

The primary instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview protocol designed to explore participants' perceptions of English use and its relationship to cultural identity. The interview questions were adapted from previous studies referenced in the literature review to ensure conceptual relevance and consistency. To enhance the reliability of the interview protocol, the questions were reviewed and refined prior to data collection to ensure clarity, neutrality, and alignment with the research objectives. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility for probing while maintaining a consistent framework across all interviews, thereby supporting comparability of responses.

To minimize researcher bias, several measures were implemented during data collection and analysis. First, the interviewer used open-ended and non-leading questions to avoid influencing participants' responses. Second, all interviews were conducted in a language preferred by the participants to ensure comfort and authentic expression. Third, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve accuracy and reduce selective interpretation. During analysis, recurring themes were identified across participants rather than emphasizing individual accounts, which helped limit subjective bias. These procedures enhanced the trustworthiness of the data and ensured that the findings reflected participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's assumptions.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. All transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure familiarity, after which inductive coding was applied by labeling meaningful segments related to English use and cultural identity. Coding decisions were guided by the research questions and applied consistently across all transcripts. Similar codes were grouped into broader categories and refined into themes through constant comparison. Theme validation involved reviewing whether each theme was supported by data from multiple participants and aligned with the study's objectives, with overlapping themes merged and weak themes excluded. To enhance transparency, for example, statements describing English as "useful for university tasks" and "important for academic success" were initially

coded as academic usefulness and later developed into the theme English as an Academic Resource. This systematic and iterative process ensured that the themes were data-driven and analytically credible.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study involved four Indonesian university students (codes N1–N4) majoring in English education at different Samarinda universities in East Kalimantan. All participants were Indonesian and multilingual (for example, N1 also spoke conversational Arabic and basic Korean, N3 learned Spanish independently, and N4 had basic Japanese). Each had extensive exposure to English through formal education and media. A condensed overview of their background, language use contexts, and perceptions of English on their cultural identity is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. List of Participants

Participant	University (Semester)	Other Languages	English Use Contexts	Perceived Identity Impact
N1	UMKT (7th sem)	Arabic, Korean	Class chats, media (songs/films), self-practice	Feels somewhat distant from Bugis heritage; proud of English skills
N2	UNMUL (5th sem)	–	Chatting with international friends; campus presentations; social media	Feels connected globally via English; still values Indonesian culture
N3	UWGM (7th sem)	Spanish	Teaching/learning in class; online gaming; watching media	Sees English as a “new culture” that can eclipse Dayak at times; finds English enriching
N4	UINSI (9th sem)	Japanese (basics)	Code-switching with peers; self-talk while walking; watching anime	Enjoys English as fun; believes it does not threaten Indonesian

				identity and spurs interest in local culture
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Based on participants' profiles and reported practices (Table 1 and Table 2), all students used English regularly across academic, social, and digital domains. English was not limited to classroom activities but was integrated into informal communication, online interaction, and media consumption. This pattern reflects the role of English as a lingua franca used for practical communication rather than native-like performance, as described in ELF-oriented studies (Sabharwal, 2025; Santoso et al., 2023). In line with Kachru's Expanding Circle context, English functioned primarily as an instrumental resource for global interaction rather than as a replacement for local languages (Kirk, 2022). These findings indicate that English use among non-urban Indonesian students extends beyond formal education into everyday communicative practices.

Table 2. Main Theme, Sub-Themes, Codes, and Participant Responses

Theme	Sub-Theme	Code	Sub-Code	Respond (Original Indonesian quote)
English Use and Cultural Identity	English in Daily Life	Chatting with foreign friends	Online messaging	<i>"Untuk bahasa Inggris hari-hari saya gunakan buat berhubung... teman... dari luar negeri. Jadi otomatis pakai bahasa Inggris full..."</i>
		Self-Practice	Speaking to oneself	<i>"Bukan terbaru banget... deep talk with myself... just practice aja, nambah-nambahin practice aja"</i>
	Emotional Attitudes	Enjoyment	Fun and expressiveness	<i>"Menyenangkan, kayak lebih wah gitu lebih ekspresif"</i>
		Challenge	Lack of confidence/vocabulary	<i>"Komplikated... lack of vocabulary..."</i>

Theme	Sub-Theme	Code	Sub-Code	Respond (Original Indonesian quote)
				<i>lack of confidence...</i>
		Global Value	International recognition	<i>"... bahasa Inggris Internasional... nilai plus"</i>
	Cultural Identity	Identity Maintenance	Indonesian identity preserved	<i>"... tidak menutupi identitas kita sebagai orang Indonesia..."</i>
		Local Connection	Closer to local culture	<i>"... semakin pengen lebih dekat lagi dengan budaya lokal itu sih"</i>
		Cultural Tension	Foreign influence	<i>"... bahasa Inggris kan budaya baru. Jadi saya lupa dengan bahasa daerah sendiri"</i>
		Global Connection	Connected to the world	<i>"... saya merasa terhubung dengan dunia luar... memperkenalkan budaya kita ke orang luar juga"</i>

Regarding emotional attitudes, the findings show a consistent pattern of positive engagement with English alongside perceived challenges (Table 2). Students associated English use with enjoyment, expressiveness, and personal satisfaction, while also acknowledging limitations such as lack of vocabulary and confidence. This coexistence of positive affect and difficulty aligns with previous findings that emotional factors strongly influence sustained language use (Davydova, 2025; Peng, 2023). At the same time, English was consistently perceived as having global value, reinforcing its symbolic importance as an international language, as noted in studies of English use in academic and social contexts (Chen et al., 2023; L. Zhang & Wang, 2024). These findings suggest that emotional responses and perceived utility jointly shape students' engagement with English.

In terms of cultural identity, the findings indicate that English use was largely perceived as compatible with Indonesian identity rather than as a threat to it (Table 2). Most participants reported maintaining a strong sense of national and local identity while using English, and some even described increased interest in local culture. This pattern corresponds with research showing that home culture remains central in ELF communication and identity negotiation (X. Zhang & Lütge, 2023). Although moments of cultural tension were reported, particularly when English was perceived as a “new culture”, these experiences were temporary and did not result in identity displacement. Overall, the findings align with previous studies suggesting that English can function as an additional identity layer that coexists with, rather than replaces, local cultural identity (Burgos et al., 2024; Giyatmi et al., 2022).

English in Everyday Practices and Emotional Engagement

The findings suggest that English has become a routine part of students’ everyday lives, particularly through digital communication and informal self-practice. Participants reported frequent use of English when interacting with international peers online and during private activities, such as speaking to themselves. As one participant explained, “*Untuk bahasa Inggris hari-hari saya gunakan buat berhubung... teman... dari luar negeri. Jadi otomatis pakai bahasa Inggris full.*” This pattern supports previous studies showing that English use in social media and digital spaces enables learners to engage in authentic communication beyond the classroom (Davydova, 2025; Peng, 2023). From an ELF perspective, such practices reflect the use of English as a functional communicative tool rather than adherence to native-speaker norms (Sabharwal, 2025; Santoso et al., 2023), which is characteristic of Expanding Circle contexts like Indonesia (Kirk, 2022).

Emotionally, students’ engagement with English was marked by a combination of enjoyment and challenge. English was frequently described as fun and expressive, which encouraged voluntary use even outside academic requirements. One participant noted, “*Menyenangkan, kayak lebih wah gitu lebih ekspresif,*” indicating that emotional satisfaction played a key role in sustaining English use. At the same time, students acknowledged difficulties related to vocabulary limitations and confidence, as reflected in the comment, “*Komplikated... lack of vocabulary... lack of confidence...*” This coexistence of positive affect and difficulty aligns with earlier findings that emotional factors strongly influence learners’ willingness to use English, particularly in informal contexts (Davydova, 2025; Peng, 2023). Rather than acting as barriers, these challenges were perceived as a natural part of learning and did not prevent continued engagement.

Importantly, frequent English use and positive emotional engagement did not result in the erosion of cultural identity. Participants consistently emphasized that English did not replace their Indonesian identity, as illustrated by one student’s assertion that using English “*tidak menutupi identitas kita sebagai orang Indonesia.*” This supports previous research indicating that EFL learners are able to maintain strong

local identities while using English for global communication (Giyatmi et al., 2022; X. Zhang & Lütge, 2023). Although moments of tension were acknowledged, particularly when English was perceived as a “new culture”, these were temporary and did not lead to identity loss, echoing findings that identity negotiation in ELF contexts is dynamic rather than subtractive (Burgos et al., 2024). Overall, English functioned as an additional communicative and emotional resource that complemented, rather than threatened, students’ cultural affiliation.

Cultural Identity Negotiation in English Use

The findings indicate that students actively negotiate their cultural identity when using English rather than experiencing identity replacement. Most participants emphasized that English functions as a communicative tool and does not override their Indonesian identity. This view is reflected in one participant’s statement that using English “*tidak menutupi identitas kita sebagai orang Indonesia.*” Such responses align with ELF-oriented perspectives, which emphasize that non-native speakers retain ownership of English while expressing their local identities through it (Sabharwal, 2025; Santoso et al., 2023). Similarly, Ikhwanudin et al. (2025) argue that Indonesian learners’ English use, including accent and style, often serves as an authentic extension of their cultural background rather than a marker of cultural loss.

At the same time, identity negotiation was not entirely without tension. One participant described English as a “new culture” that occasionally caused her to forget her regional language, stating, “... *bahasa Inggris kan budaya baru. Jadi saya lupa dengan bahasa daerah sendiri.*” This momentary tension reflects what Gandana et al. (2025) describe as cultural fluctuation, where increased engagement with English can temporarily distance learners from local linguistic practices. However, these tensions were not framed as permanent or threatening. Instead, participants perceived them as situational and reversible, suggesting that identity negotiation is fluid and context-dependent rather than linear or subtractive.

Importantly, several participants reported that engagement with English heightened their awareness of local culture and motivated them to reconnect with it. As one student noted, “... *semakin pengen lebih dekat lagi dengan budaya lokal itu sih.*” This finding supports previous studies showing that exposure to English can prompt reflective engagement with one’s own culture, particularly in ELF contexts (Giyatmi et al., 2022; X. Zhang & Lütge, 2023). Within Kachru’s Expanding Circle framework, this pattern illustrates how English functions as an additional identity layer that coexists with local and national identities rather than replacing them (Kirk, 2022). Overall, students’ experiences demonstrate that English use in non-urban Indonesian contexts involves continuous identity negotiation, balancing global communication with sustained cultural rootedness.

English Use and Global–Local Identity Balance

This study contributes to existing ELF and identity research by providing empirical evidence from a non-urban Indonesian context, an area that has been underrepresented in previous studies. While earlier research has largely focused on urban, metropolitan, or international settings where English exposure is relatively high (Sabharwal, 2025; Santoso et al., 2023), this study demonstrates that similar processes of global–local identity balancing also occur in less urbanized regions such as Samarinda, East Kalimantan. The findings extend previous work by showing that even with more limited access to English, students actively integrate English into their daily practices without perceiving it as a threat to local cultural identity.

In contrast to studies that emphasize either the empowering or the disruptive effects of English on identity, this research highlights a nuanced balance between global engagement and local rootedness. Prior studies have documented how learners use English to project modern or global identities (Davydova, 2025; Peng, 2023) or how home culture remains central in ELF communication (Giyatmi et al., 2022; X. Zhang & Lütge, 2023). This study builds on those insights by demonstrating that global and local identities are not experienced as competing forces but as complementary dimensions that are negotiated simultaneously in everyday English use.

Moreover, this study offers a contextual contribution by showing how English functions as an additional identity layer within Kachru’s Expanding Circle framework rather than as a marker of cultural shift. While Kachru’s model has often been applied at national or policy levels (Kirk, 2022), the present findings illustrate how global–local identity balance is enacted at the individual and community levels in non-urban settings. By foregrounding students’ lived experiences, this study enriches ELF scholarship with a more localized and grounded understanding of identity negotiation, underscoring the importance of examining English use beyond metropolitan centers.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how non-native English users in a non-urban Indonesian context perceive and negotiate English use in relation to their cultural identity. The findings show that English is integrated into students’ everyday academic, social, and digital practices and is generally associated with positive emotional engagement, despite acknowledged challenges such as limited vocabulary and confidence. Importantly, English use was not perceived as diminishing Indonesian identity. Instead, students actively balanced global communication needs with strong local and national cultural affiliations.

The study further demonstrates that English functions as an additional communicative and identity resource rather than a replacement for local culture.

Students negotiated moments of tension between global and local influences in flexible and context-dependent ways, indicating that identity construction is dynamic rather than fixed. These findings highlight that global–local identity balance is not limited to metropolitan settings but is also evident in non-urban contexts with more limited English exposure.

In terms of implications, the findings suggest that English education should recognize and support learners’ cultural identities rather than positioning English as culturally neutral or superior. Integrating local cultural perspectives into English learning can foster positive engagement while maintaining cultural rootedness. Future research may extend this work by involving more diverse non-urban regions or exploring longitudinal perspectives on identity negotiation over time.

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