

Language Attitudes of Undergraduate Students towards English as a Social Identity

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ABSTRACT

English plays an important role not only as a means of communication but also as a symbol of social identity among university students. Although previous studies have reported generally positive attitudes toward English, limited attention has been given to how English functions as a social identity among English Education undergraduate students. This study aims to describe English Education undergraduate students' language attitudes toward English as a social identity. A quantitative descriptive survey design was employed involving 25 sixth-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a four-point Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed through descriptive statistics. The findings reveal an overall very positive language attitude ($M = 3.35$), with the cognitive aspect obtaining the highest mean score, followed by the affective aspect, while the behavioral aspect remained positive but comparatively lower. The study concludes that English functions as an important symbolic resource in shaping English Education students' academic and social identities, although its use in everyday communication remains relatively limited.

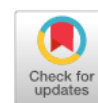
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INTRODUCTION

English has become an essential global language that influences communication, education, and professional development. English has also become an important medium for intercultural communication and international collaboration, enabling individuals to participate in academic, professional, and multicultural communities across the world Rose et al., (2020). As English continues to function as a global lingua franca, it enables communication among speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds while supporting participation in international education and professional mobility Galloway and Numajiri, (2020). Beyond its communicative function, English also represents social identity, allowing individuals to express educational background, social status, and global orientation. Among university students, particularly those studying English, the language is frequently associated with academic competence, self-confidence, and opportunities for international communication. Consequently, students' attitudes toward English are closely related not only to language learning but also to the construction of their social identity.

Previous studies have consistently reported positive attitudes toward English among university students. Kusuma and Adnyani, (2016) found that English Education students demonstrated strong instrumental and integrative motivation, indicating that English functions as both a practical communication tool and a means of connecting with the wider international community. Likewise, Maming et al., (2023) reported that students preferred interactive English learning activities because such approaches improved language competence while strengthening their self-image as globally competitive individuals. Tambunan et al., (2024) further revealed that although students recognized English as an

important global language, they also emphasized the importance of maintaining their local language and cultural identity. Defika, (2024) similarly argued that English functions not only as a communication medium but also as a symbol of prestige and modern lifestyle among university students.

Language attitudes have long been recognized as an important concept in sociolinguistics because they influence how individuals perceive, evaluate, and use a language. Lambert (1967) argues that language attitudes reflect speakers' evaluations of a language and its users, shaping their motivation and language behavior. Likewise, Gardner (1985) emphasizes that positive attitudes toward a language are closely associated with successful language learning, particularly through integrative and instrumental motivation. Baker (1992) further explains that language attitudes consist of cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions that influence individuals' beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies toward a language. Similarly, Garrett, (2010) argues that these three dimensions interact in shaping language evaluation and language use across different social contexts.

The relationship between language attitudes and identity can also be explained through Social Identity Theory proposed by Tajfel & Turner (1979), which suggests that individuals construct their self-concept through membership in particular social groups. In this perspective, language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a marker of group membership, cultural affiliation, and social identity. Norton (2013) further argues that language learning is closely connected to identity construction because learners continuously negotiate who they are through language use across different social contexts. Consequently, English serves not only as an academic subject but also as a symbolic resource through which English Education students construct, express, and negotiate their academic, professional, and social identities within both local and global communities.

Despite numerous studies investigating language attitudes, previous research has primarily focused on students' motivation, language learning, language proficiency, and comparisons between English and local languages. Relatively little attention has been given to examining English specifically as a social identity among undergraduate students by simultaneously considering cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. This indicates a research gap that requires further investigation, particularly within the context of Indonesian higher education. Therefore, this study aims to describe undergraduate students' language attitudes toward English as a social identity. Specifically, the study investigates students' cognitive beliefs, affective responses, and behavioral tendencies regarding English among sixth-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University. The findings are expected to contribute to a better understanding of how English functions as both a language of communication and a symbol of social identity in higher education.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design using a survey method to describe undergraduate students' language attitudes toward English as a social identity. The survey design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to collect quantitative data and describe respondents' attitudes based on cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Quantitative descriptive research is appropriate for describing characteristics, attitudes, and perceptions of a particular population through numerical data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Survey research is also widely used to examine attitudes and opinions because it allows researchers to obtain standardized responses from a group of participants (Cohen et al., 2018). The study focused on identifying patterns of students' perceptions through descriptive statistical analysis.

Respondents

The respondents were 25 sixth-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University during the 2025/2026 academic year. The participants were selected using purposive sampling because they had sufficient experience using English in both formal academic activities and informal social interactions. Their exposure to English enabled them to provide relevant information regarding their language attitudes toward English as a social identity.

Instruments

The primary instrument of this study was a structured questionnaire consisting of 15 statements representing three dimensions of language attitudes: cognitive, affective, and behavioral, as proposed by Baker (1992) and further elaborated by Garrett (2010). All questionnaire items employed a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree), which is commonly used to measure attitudes by asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements (Likert, 1932). The questionnaire was validated by English education experts to ensure its content validity. Documentation in the form of photographs of academic activities was also collected as supporting data.

Procedures

The data collection began by administering the questionnaire to the selected respondents. Participants completed the questionnaire individually within approximately 30 minutes. After all questionnaires had been collected, the responses were coded and tabulated according to the Likert scale. The researcher then organized the data for statistical analysis to determine the overall pattern of students' language attitudes toward English as a social identity.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Mean scores, frequencies, percentages, and standard deviations were calculated to determine the level of students' language attitudes across the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. The results were interpreted using the predetermined classification criteria to identify whether students' attitudes were categorized as very positive, positive, negative, or very negative.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overall Language Attitudes toward English as a Social Identity

Table 1. Overall Language Attitudes toward English as a Social Identity

Aspect	Mean Score	Interpretation
Cognitive	3.49	Very Positive
Affective	3.38	Very Positive
Behavioral	3.18	Positive
Overall Mean	3.35	Very Positive

The overall mean score of undergraduate students' language attitudes toward English as a social identity was 3.35, indicating a very positive attitude. The cognitive aspect obtained the highest mean score (3.49), followed by the affective aspect (3.38), while the behavioral aspect obtained the lowest mean score (3.18), although it remained within the positive category. The distribution of respondents' attitudes showed that 16 students (64%) demonstrated very positive attitudes, 8 students (32%) demonstrated positive attitudes, and 1 student (4%) demonstrated a very negative attitude. Overall, these findings indicate that most respondents viewed English positively as part of their academic and social identity.

Cognitive Aspect of Language Attitudes

Table 2. Cognitive Aspect

Statement	Mean	Positive Response
English provides wider academic and social opportunities	3.36	96%
English helps students understand different cultures	3.52	96%
English is important for international relationships	3.68	96%
English is associated with educated and successful individuals	3.44	92%
English shapes identity as an undergraduate student	3.44	92%

The cognitive aspect obtained the highest mean score (3.49), indicating that respondents strongly believed in the importance of English for academic, social, and international purposes. The highest-rated statement was "English is important for international relationships" ($M = 3.68$), followed by "English helps students understand different cultures" ($M = 3.52$). The statements related to English as a symbol of educated and successful individuals and as part of undergraduate identity each obtained a mean score of 3.44.

Affective Aspect of Language Attitudes

Table 3. Affective Aspect

Statement	Mean	Positive Response
Interested in continuing to learn English	3.60	96%
Proud when using English in academic activities	3.64	96%
Comfortable using English with peers	3.28	92%
More confident when speaking English	3.20	84%
English is part of social self-expression	3.20	88%

The affective aspect obtained a mean score of 3.38, indicating a very positive attitude. The highest mean score was found in students' pride when using English in academic activities ($M = 3.64$), followed by their interest in continuing to learn English ($M = 3.60$). The statements regarding confidence and self-expression each obtained a mean score of 3.20, although they remained within the positive category.

Behavioral Aspect of Language Attitudes

Table 4. Behavioral Aspect

Statement	Mean	Positive Response
Use English in formal academic activities	3.48	96%
Use English in informal peer interaction	2.80	64%
Mix English and Indonesian with friends	3.56	96%
Look for opportunities to use English outside class	3.24	84%
Join English-speaking communities	2.80	64%

The behavioral aspect obtained the lowest mean score (3.18), although it was still categorized as positive. The highest score was found for code-mixing between English and Indonesian in conversations with friends ($M = 3.56$), followed by the use of English in formal academic activities ($M = 3.48$). Meanwhile, the use of English in informal peer interaction and participation in English-speaking communities both obtained the lowest mean score ($M = 2.80$).

Discussion

The findings indicate that undergraduate students demonstrated very positive language attitudes toward English as a social identity, as reflected in the overall mean score of 3.35. This finding suggests that English is perceived not only as a means of communication but also as an important component of students' academic identity, social interaction, and future

professional aspirations. Garrett's, (2010) explains that language attitudes consist of cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions that influence how individuals perceive and use a language. Similarly, Baker (1992) argues that language attitudes encompass individuals' beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies toward a language, which ultimately shape language learning and language use in different social contexts. Therefore, the respondents' positive attitudes indicate that English has become an important social and educational resource among undergraduate students.

The cognitive aspect obtained the highest mean score ($M = 3.49$), indicating that students strongly believed English provides wider academic opportunities, facilitates international communication, and contributes to identity construction. These findings are consistent with Kusuma and Adnyani (2016), who reported that English Education students possessed strong instrumental and integrative motivation toward English learning. Likewise, Rose et al., (2020) argue that English has become an international language that enables individuals to participate in global education and intercultural communication. Consequently, students' positive cognitive beliefs may reflect their awareness of the important role of English in supporting academic achievement and future career development.

The affective aspect also demonstrated a very positive attitude. Students expressed pride, interest, and positive emotional responses when using English, particularly in academic settings. These findings indicate that English contributes positively to students' confidence and academic self-image. According to Baker (1992), positive emotional evaluations toward a language encourage learners to maintain favorable attitudes and sustain their motivation to continue learning. Furthermore, Norton (2013) emphasizes that language learning is closely related to identity because learners continuously construct and negotiate their identities through language use. Therefore, the respondents' positive affective responses suggest that English has become an important part of how they perceive themselves as university students.

Although the behavioral aspect remained positive, it obtained the lowest mean score among the three dimensions. This finding indicates that students' positive beliefs and feelings toward English have not been fully reflected in their everyday language practices. Most respondents reported using English primarily during formal academic activities, whereas Indonesian remained the dominant language in informal communication. Norton (2013) argues that opportunities for authentic interaction strongly influence language use and identity development. Consequently, the limited use of English outside classroom settings may explain why students' behavioral attitudes were comparatively lower than their cognitive and affective attitudes.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that English functions not only as a communication tool but also as a symbolic resource through which undergraduate students construct their academic and social identities. The combination of positive cognitive beliefs, favorable emotional responses, and generally positive behavioral tendencies indicates that students recognize the value of English in higher education and future professional contexts. However, creating more opportunities for authentic English interaction both inside and outside the classroom may help students translate their positive attitudes into more consistent language use.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined English Education undergraduate students' language attitudes toward English as a social identity through cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. The findings showed an overall very positive attitude, indicating that students view English as an important part of their academic identity, self-expression, and social interaction. The cognitive dimension received the highest mean score, followed by the affective dimension, while the behavioral dimension scored the lowest, suggesting that students' actual use of English is less frequent than their positive beliefs and feelings. These findings support theories of language attitudes and social identity, highlighting the role of English in identity formation. Practically, universities are encouraged to provide more authentic English-speaking

environments beyond the classroom. However, the study was limited by its small sample and single-institution setting. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples across multiple universities to improve the generalizability of the findings.

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