

EXPLORING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN BALANCING ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND LOCAL IDENTITY

Url Jurnal: <https://jurnal.uia.ac.id/Lingua/article/view/5372>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.34005/lingua.v2i12.5372>

Naskah Dikirim: 17-12-2025

Naskah Direview: 20-12-2025

Naskah Diterbitkan: 24-12-2025

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Abstract: *English has become one of the global language that students' needs for both academic and future careers. In developing English proficiency, students also need to maintain their local languages, values, and cultural identity. This could be challenging, as students need to engage in global communication while still maintaining their cultural identity. However, limited research has focused on the cultural and local identity, particularly among students who leave their hometowns to pursue their education. This study examines the difficulties students face in learning English while maintaining their local identity. Using a qualitative method, the participants of this study were undergraduate students from the fifth and seventh semesters of the English Education Department at an Islamic Public University in Jakarta. The data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The study revealed that students faced difficulties, including pronunciation difficulties, a lack of a supportive environment, and social pressure. To deal with these challenges, students use strategies like switching languages depending on the situation and using digital media as learning support. Future researchers can include more diverse participants from different areas. In addition, educational institutions and educators can also help students balance English learning and local Identity by using culturally sensitive methods.*

Keywords: *English proficiency, local identity, Students' difficulties, EFL, Culture, language, Identity in language learning*

Abstrak: Bahasa Inggris telah menjadi salah satu bahasa global yang dibutuhkan mahasiswa untuk keperluan akademik dan karier di masa depan. Dalam mengembangkan kemampuan berbahasa Inggris, mahasiswa juga perlu mempertahankan bahasa lokal, nilai-nilai, dan identitas budaya mereka. Hal ini dapat menjadi tantangan karena mahasiswa harus terlibat dalam komunikasi global sekaligus tetap menjaga identitas



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budaya mereka. Namun, penelitian yang membahas aspek budaya dan identitas lokal masih terbatas, terutama pada mahasiswa yang meninggalkan daerah asalnya untuk melanjutkan pendidikan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kesulitan yang dihadapi mahasiswa dalam mempelajari bahasa Inggris sambil tetap mempertahankan identitas lokal mereka. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan partisipasi mahasiswa program studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris semester lima dan tujuh di sebuah universitas Islam negeri di Jakarta. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terbuka dan wawancara semi-terstruktur. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa menghadapi beberapa kesulitan, antara lain masalah pengucapan, kurangnya lingkungan yang mendukung, dan tekanan sosial. Untuk mengatasi tantangan tersebut, mahasiswa menggunakan berbagai strategi, seperti mengganti bahasa sesuai dengan situasi dan memanfaatkan media digital sebagai sarana pendukung pembelajaran. Penelitian selanjutnya disarankan untuk melibatkan partisipasi yang lebih beragam dari berbagai daerah. Selain itu, institusi pendidikan dan pendidik dapat membantu mahasiswa menyeimbangkan pembelajaran bahasa Inggris dan identitas lokal dengan menerapkan pendekatan pembelajaran yang sensitif terhadap budaya.

Kata kunci: kemahiran berbahasa Inggris, identitas lokal, kesulitan mahasiswa, EFL, budaya, bahasa, identitas dalam pembelajaran bahasa

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, English isn't used in daily life, so it's taught as a foreign language mostly in schools. This makes it different from English as a Second Language (ESL), which is learned in places where people use English every day (Ristiani, 2021). Most Indonesians speak Bahasa Indonesia and their local languages, but English is still important because it's the main language for global communication. Students are considered proficient when they can use English well in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. According to Chan, Lee, Tang, and Chen (2024), local cultural identity means a person's sense of belonging to a certain cultural or ethnic group. It develops through being part of that culture and involves learning and accepting its traditional social and cultural values. Indonesia has many local languages, and the spread of English has changed how people see language and identity. The study looks at how globalization influences the use of English in Indonesia and how it affects the way Indonesians see their identity today, (Syafrony, 2024)

It is troubling that the influence of learning English on students' identities is frequently overlooked as communication and English skills advance. There are advantages and disadvantages to teaching English as a second language in a multicultural and multilingual environment. On one side, English is seen as the language of progress and globalisation. Local languages and cultural traditions play a vital role in shaping individuals' values and beliefs. By examining how students manage these different influences, we can gain deeper insight into the relationship between language proficiency and identity, as well as how this connection affects their motivation, self-perception, and academic performance.

As stated in (Ratri et al. 2025), according to Parker and Nilan (2023, as cited in Ratri et al., 2025), people are increasingly worried about the loss of cultural identity among Indonesian youth. Recent studies point out three

main concerns related to this issue. First, about 78% of teenagers now prefer international content on social media (Pratiwi & Rahman, 2022, as cited in Ratri et al., 2025). Second, many young people are starting to lose touch with their cultural roots because their local languages are being used less (Suryadi, 2023, as cited in Ratri et al., 2025). Third, fewer youths are joining traditional cultural activities, which makes it harder to keep those traditions alive across generations, which weakens the transmission of knowledge between generations (Sutarto & Widodo, 2024, as cited in Ratri et al., 2025).

Nowadays, culture and identity have a real effect on people's lives and often shape the way they communicate, including when it comes to learning a new language. Several studies have highlighted the relationship between English learning and students' cultural identity. Previous researchers, such as (Nanda 2021). Found that language and culture cannot be separated because the way people speak reflects their cultural values and shapes their identity. Meanwhile, (Sugianti 2024) found that students' L1 and L2 identities often exist in a state of tension, sometimes conflicting with each other but also working together to reshape the students' sense of self.

Furthermore, (Syafrony 2024) found that people often switch between languages based on the context. For example, students may use regional languages at home, Bahasa Indonesia in formal settings, and English in school. These studies demonstrate the intimate connection between language and identity, demonstrating that learning and speaking different kinds of languages has an impact on cultural values as well as how people see themselves and interact in various social contexts. This condition leads to a question: "What are the difficulties faced by students in balancing English proficiency and local identity?" and "What are the strategies that students use in balancing between local identity and English proficiency?" Therefore, the study aims to identify what kinds of issues EFL students encounter when it comes to speaking English.

Although there has been limited research examining students' cultural identity and English proficiency, most of these studies are still limited to examining students' personal experiences in balancing between cultural identity and English proficiency. Therefore, there is a critical need to investigate the challenges students face in mastering English and how they maintain their local identity, as well as to identify the Challenges faced by English learners in their attempt to maintain their cultural identity. It is important to fill this gap as it illustrates the challenges learners encounter in cultural identity preservation and argues for the necessity of using culturally responsive strategies in teaching the English language. T

The purpose of this study is to investigate the difficulties that students face when trying to learn English while maintaining their local identity and culture. English is important for education and careers in the future as the world grows closer to one another. But at times, learning English can cause the students to feel disconnected by their native tongue and culture. This

study will discover how students respond to this circumstance and find a balance between learning English while maintaining a connection to their cultural identity.

1.1 English Proficiency and Its Importance

Students who have English language proficiency are seen as an important factor for achieving academic success (Devi 2023). These days, in a time when English is widely used, particularly in Indonesia, Mastery of English is no longer optional but a necessary skill to support students' learning and also communication (Andayani 2022);(Ilyosovna 2020).

According to (Utami and Wahyudin 2022), English holds an important part in education in Indonesia, as it is one of the most widely used foreign languages. This is a fact: English is a necessary language for students. At this time, technological developments require mastery of English in order to face the challenges of the times, so that learning aims to develop communication skills, both spoken and written (Andika and Mardiana 2023). As (Hidayat 2024) states that in Indonesia, English language skills are increasingly important in the professional world due to the variety of different cultures and the fast growing-economy. (Mauliska and Angelo 2024) Also, argue that proficiency in English not only improves students' critical thinking and cognitive abilities, but also opens up greater opportunities and possible careers. meaning that, English language proficiency is not only important in education but also a skill that is sure to be used in various work environments.

Beyond academic and professional contexts, English proficiency also contributes to global competitiveness and social mobility. Is it often perceived as an indicator of educational quality, as well as for communication and social status improvement (Jon et al. 2021). Proficiency in English is considered an advantage that can open up more opportunities and is often associated with higher status because it is seen as a sign of a good education. To achieve this proficiency developing language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, is very important, especially for students, because these skills are the basis for both effective and confident communication (Hidayah, Hasyim, and Azizah 2023). students' will be more confident when they have good English language skills, as these skills enable them to express their ideas and interact with others.

1.2 Local Identity

Local identity refers to an individual's sense of belonging to a particular cultural or social group (Mohyeddin 2024). It refers to how individuals understand who they are in relation to their cultural background and social environment. Indonesia is known as a multicultural country with rich cultural diversity, with many different ethnic groups, traditions, and languages. (Widiatmaka 2022) stated that one of the characteristics of the Indonesian people is the existence of different local wisdom, which has

become a national identity and must be maintained and preserved by all communities in various regions. The existence of different local wisdoms represents the characteristics of their identity. Local identity represents the history, values, and way of life of the local community, while at the same time strengthening solidarity and pride in their culture (Indrawati and Sari 2024).

Cultural Identity is quite complicated as it includes traditions, customs, values, and beliefs that influence how people see who they are and their place in the society (Fahma, Safitri, and Sujarwo 2024). Maintaining local identity is very important because it is part of a country's national identity. However, with the rapid development of science and technology, local identity is at risk of fading and being replaced by foreign cultures that easily influence society (Hamisa et al. 2023). Since culture itself has an influence on shaping individual identities and influencing people's behaviour. As a consequence, local identity encounters difficulties in maintaining its relevance in the era of globalization and rapid technological development.

Language, Culture, and identity are closely connected. In Indonesia, in several schools and universities, learning a foreign language usually involves understanding the related culture and traditions (Santoso, Silalahi, and Sohnata 2023). This relationship becomes even more related especially for students who live away from their hometowns, as they encounter not only a new language but also cultural differences that can influence how they communicate and develop their identity. The experience of living away from their hometown encourages students to face the relationship between the local culture they bring with them and the new culture they encounter, including in the use of foreign languages in academics and society. Therefore, learning a language is not only about language skills but also identity.

For Indonesian students, it becomes especially relevant when exploring their difficulties in balancing English proficiency with maintaining their local identity. Previous related studies have investigated the relationship between English proficiency and cultural or local identity in many situations. (Mahdi and Nahi 2024) Examined how learning English can affect the cultural identity of Iraqi students at the University of Basrah. They found that some students started adopting Western habits, like celebrating Christmas or changing the way they view or see certain cultural values. Similarly, (Ghufron, Taufiq, and Firdaus 2024) studied students in Islamic schools and how learning English affects students' Islamic identity. Most students feel that learning English has a neutral effect on their Islamic identity. Some students felt it could strengthen their identity, while others saw it as something that might cause conflict. Meanwhile, a study by (Kustati et al. 2023) found that cultural differences make English learning more difficult. The authors argue that language and culture cannot be separated, so learning English often means facing Western values that sometimes conflict with Islamic traditions.

(Nursanti and Andriyanti 2021) studied language identities at how Indonesian university students shape their language identity and how English teaching can help with that process. They found that students use different languages depending on the situation, such as using slang online, English for learning purposes, Indonesian for communication, and regional languages to represent their culture. (Nufus 2022) found that many students felt insecure about their accent and the way they spoke, which shows how challenging it is to keep their cultural pride while trying to improve their English skills.

Although previous studies have examined English language proficiency and local identity in various situations, but few studies have focused on investigating the difficulties students face in balancing both, English language proficiency and local identity, especially students who are staying far from their hometowns. Most existing studies have examined either high school students, Islamic school, or specific language programs in particular regions. Meaning that little is known about how being away from their local community influences students' ability to maintain their cultural identity while improving English proficiency. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the difficulties faced by students who live away from their hometowns in balancing their English Proficiency and their local identity.

METHODS

2.1 Method and Design of the Research

According to Jeong (2025), a qualitative approach was used for this study qualitative methods focused on achieving a comprehensive understanding of a person's lived experience, taking into account all the details of the case. This study investigated students' difficulties and strategies in balancing English proficiency and local identity. To achieve this purpose, a qualitative descriptive approach was employed to explore students' experiences and perceptions in depth based on their real experiences and own words.

2.2 Participants

The participants of this study were eight students from the English Language Education Department at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta. They consisted of four students from the fifth semester and four from the seventh semester. The participants came from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, which helped the researcher understand how they used English and their local languages in different contexts. Their diverse experiences provided valuable insight into how students balance English learning with maintaining their cultural identity.

2.3 Research Instruments

The main instruments used in this study were open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaires were designed to collect students' written responses about their experiences, challenges, and strategies in learning English while keeping their local identity. Afterward, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore their answers further. These interviews allowed students to share examples, opinions, and personal reflections in greater depth, giving the researcher a clearer understanding of their real experiences.

2.4 Technique of Data Collection

For our study, we aimed to integrate open ended questionnaires and brief interviews to gain an overall view of the phenomenon. To study students' attitudes, feelings, and learning difficulties, participants were also given questionnaires (Syafryadin et al., 2024). They then spoke with several students and conducted in-depth one-on-one interviews. These interviews allowed researchers to dig deeper, probe and clarify issues, and gain clear insights into questionnaire responses. Interviews also provided researchers with insights into students' lived experiences and helped document students' perspectives and attitudes in a complex manner.

2.5 Technique of Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher carefully read all questionnaire and interview responses to find repeated ideas and common patterns. Similar answers were grouped and coded to form main themes. From this process, two key themes were found: students' difficulties in balancing English proficiency and local identity, and the strategies they used to manage these challenges. This analysis helped organize the data clearly and understand the main experiences shared by the students.

RESULTS

In this section, the results are presented based on the open-ended questionnaires and the interviews with the selected students. This section presents the findings from the open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The analysis focused on identifying students' main difficulties in balancing English proficiency and local identity, as well as the strategies they used to manage these challenges. The results are organized into two main themes: Students' Difficulties and Strategies in Managing Difficulties.

3.1 Students difficulty in balancing between English proficiency and local identity

The major finding from Question 1, “*As a student whose local identity and living far from your hometown, what difficulties do you face when you try to be proficient in English?*” shows that most students struggle with pronunciation and a lack of a supportive environment to practice English. For example, A.Y.R said, “*I find it hard to be good at English... it’s also difficult to find people to practice with since not everyone uses English,*” while M added, “*There are some letters or consonants that are hard to pronounce.*” A few students find that some students, like F.H, feel their cultural background has little effect on their English: “*We have to use an English accent when using it, it doesn’t match with our cultural background.*”

In Question 3, we ask about how the students balance their English proficiency and local identity. Most students balance both aspects by using English in academic settings and local language in daily life. A.R.S explained, “*I speak English in class... but switch to my local language with friends and family.*” A few students mentioned that they used English to talk about or share aspects of their local culture. , as F.H noted, “*With English I could embrace and even introduce my culture.*”

A.Y.R. also shared in her interview that it is difficult to maintain the use of their local language because the campus environment mostly uses Indonesian and English. They also mentioned feeling confused when switching between contexts, such as using English in academic settings and Javanese at home.. This situation shows the challenges students face in balancing their local identity with the need to develop English proficiency. Another student, F.H, explained during the interview that he maintains this balance by using each language depending on where he is. He shared that he speaks his local language and talks about cultural topics when interacting with people from his region, but when he’s with his friends from the English education program, he switches to English.

Finally, for Question 4, What do you think, is it difficult to balance your academic need to use English fluently with your intention to maintain and stay connected to your local culture? Why or why not?“ The result shows most students find it difficult to balance English fluency and local identity due to social pressure and constant practice needs. M said, “*People will laugh at you if you use English with your regional dialect.*” A few students said they tried to keep balance by staying confident and appreciative of their culture.As A wrote, “*I try to balance it by feeling grateful and caring about culture.*”

3.2 Strategies in Managing Difficulties

The major finding from Question 5 “*What are strategies to help you improve your English skills without giving up your local language and culture?*” shows strategies used by some students such as, watching English-language films or listening to English songs while still enjoying local music. For example, M said, “*I always watch English YouTube channels, but sometimes the authors are Indonesians themselves*”. While, A.R.S said

“Some strategies I use are practicing English through movies, songs, and conversations, while still using my local language with friends”.

The findings are also confirmed by interview results, as A.R.S stated, *“On campus, I mainly use English during classes, but at my boarding house, I use Javanese when communicating with my friends.”*

In Question 6 *“Why do you think using these strategies to balance your English skills and local identity is important for your personal or academic life?”*. In Question 6, one student said that using these strategies helped improve English skills for academic purposes while staying connected to local culture. ”.

Meanwhile, A.H. mentioned that *“Because of this feeling of gratitude and concern, I want to preserve culture so that Indonesian culture can be known and remembered by the whole world”*.

In addition to these findings, another student, F.H, also shared in the interview a simple strategy to keep their cultural identity while learning English. F.H said, *“To maintain my identity and culture while learning English, I typically employ the strategy of creating my own English-speaking environment. This strategy allows me to become accustomed to using English in various situations, as if I had a friend who always speaks English. I find this strategy very effective because it helps me maintain my English fluency without abandoning my own culture and identity. Even in everyday conversations, including messaging on WhatsApp, I try not to use Indonesian at all. This way, I can continue to improve my English while maintaining my cultural values”*.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results above, the researcher identified several difficulties students encounter in balancing their English proficiency with their local identity. These difficulties include problems with pronunciation and the lack of a supportive environment in which to practice English. The findings also reveal that students’ English proficiency is minimally influenced by their background.

Pronunciation was found to be the most common difficulty students faced. Some students reported that certain letters or consonant sounds were difficult for them to pronounce. In line with this, a previous study by (Nufus 2022) found that pronunciation really affects students’ English skills, because many learners struggle to say certain English sounds. Similarly, (Shalehah and Rahmawati 2025) mentioned that pronunciation is also a common problem for students learning English as a foreign language. Pronunciation has become a common issue for many students, and this often makes it harder for them to improve their English proficiency.

Students often face trouble keeping their English skills strong while still holding onto their local identity. To deal with this, many of them switch languages based on where they are. As (Syafrony 2024) said, people often change their language depending on the situation, for example, students use English at school, Bahasa Indonesia in formal places, and their local

language at home. This switching helps them fit in and communicate better, but it also causes some inner conflict. When they speak English, they may feel pressure to sound fluent or like native speakers. When they use their local language, they feel more comfortable and true to themselves.

Students had different opinions about their regional accents. Some felt their accent held them back, while others saw it as an important part of their culture and identity. This shows the close link between how they speak and how they see themselves. Which student may create a struggle between being authentic and being understood. Some students are proud of their accent because it shows their culture, while others feel it makes their English sound weak. So, switching languages becomes both a way to communicate easily and a way to balance their identity with their English ability. It is also mentioned in (Laita et al. 2025) the study argues that Indonesian EFL students find it hard to keep both good English fluency and their local identity because of social judgment, lack of support, and the heavy effort needed for constant practice.

Social pressure is another difficulty students face when trying to balance their academic need to use English fluently. This pressure often appears in the form of self-doubt and fear of being judged by others. Similarly, a study by (Startzell, Calumpang, and Bacang 2025) noted that self-doubt and fear of judgment are among the difficulties students encounter in the classroom when learning English. These feelings could make it difficult for students to participate in class and may hinder their English learning. (Siahaan and Sitorus 2025) In their studies, explained that a lack of confidence in using English contributes to slower language development. Students often worry about making mistakes because they fear being laughed at or judged. this social pressure also making some students feel less confident because people around them have negative opinions or even make fun of them for speaking English.

Students' employ various strategies to develop their English proficiency while maintaining their local identity. For example, watching English language films or listening to English songs while still enjoying local music. Aligns with Maulya (2025) study in which English learning through local practices and active global media participation was indicated.

Language switching is also a common strategy used by students'; They often use English during the lessons, but Javanese, Sundanese, and other local dialects at their homes. using more than one language helps learners develop English skills while keeping their cultural identity. Study by (Nursanti and Andriyanti 2021) with college learners in Indonesia, who pointed out that it is common to use English and Indonesian, as well as a local language in a given context to preserve one's cultural identity while also practicing the academic requirements.

Another strategy is integrating hobbies, or leisure activities, into English learning. Students often find it easy to learn English through the utilization of various leisure activities such as watching movies, listening to songs, or tuning into certain Youtube channels. These practices makes

students motivated and engaged, mitigating the possible disengagement of culture. (Nurlita and Taufiq 2025) stated that how the use of enjoyable media increased learning of the English language, as it decreased the anxiety learners felt, and also increased their confidence.

This study also shows how students shape their own language learning and cultural practices. One student explained that when they built their own personal English-speaking environment, they became comfortable using English in different situation, almost like talking to an English-speaking friend. This self-built space gave this learner the possibility to practice English more regularly, even in daily WhatsApp chats, while still keeping their cultural identity. meaning that improving English skills and maintaining cultural identity do not have to be in conflict. Instead, both can grow together when student are inentional about their learning, and this was also supported (Sugianti 2024) who found that Indonesian EFL learners can develop both their first and second language identities at the same time. Similar study by (Liando, Tatipang, and Lengkoan 2022) stated that using more than one language in EFL classrooms helps learners maintain their cultural identity while increasing confidence and language ability. Students gain the confidence that comes from multicultural acceptance and the positive affirmation of their cultural identity (Nurlita and Taufiq 2025).

This, in turn, lets them use English more freely and comfortably, when they're not fluent. (Abdusyukur 2022) found that Indonesian EFL learners who embrace their cultural identity feel more confident and practice English more actively. English is the language of communication that learners have in order to engage their home culture, local language and English, which leads to the promotion of their cultural identity, because the integration of them leads to the acquisition of English language effectively.

CONCLUSION

This study found that students face several difficulties in keeping a balance between learning English and maintaining their local identity. These difficulties include pronunciation problems, a lack of supportive environment, and social pressure when speaking English. Many students deal with this by switching languages, using English for study and their local language in daily life. This shows that learning English does not mean losing one's culture; instead, English can be used to share and promote local culture more widely.

The results also show that learning English is not only about language skills but also about understanding one's culture, self, and sense of belonging. Teachers and schools have an important role in helping students balance both sides. They can do this by using culturally sensitive teaching methods that connect English learning with students' local backgrounds. Encouraging translanguaging, respecting students' culture, and building their confidence can help them improve their English while staying true to their identity. with that, English learning and cultural identity

can grow together with the right support and awareness in the classroom. However, this study is limited by its participants, as it involved only fifth and seventh semester students from a single Islamic public university. Although the participants came from different regions, future studies may include a larger, more diverse sample from multiple institutions and regions.

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