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"I was born and raised in Indonesia. Should I own English?" Exploring Indonesian students' preferences and ownership of English

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ABSTRACT

The mushrooming of English varieties across the globe has been one of the consequences of the status of English as an international language, making it a pluricentric language. Despite the global attention towards English, little is known about how Indonesian learners relate personal preference to language ownership. Drawing on Kachru's (1992) three concentric circles and Widdowson's (1994) language ownership, this study explores a total of thirty-four final-year Indonesian university students' preferences and sense of ownership towards English. Through a qualitative case study research design, in which a questionnaire and interviews were employed to collect data, the study pointed to American English to be the most preferred, and by far the most popular, English variety among the students, followed by British and Australian English. While the students' preference was tightly connected to the kind of English they were mostly exposed to as they were learning the language, the findings confirm that the inner circle varieties still hold more currency in comparison to other varieties. Yet, despite the more than decade-long of knowing, learning and engaging with the language, most of the students felt ambivalent in regard to their sense of ownership toward English. They indicated that language ownership transcends the ability to speak the language; rather, it is intricately intertwined with one's sense of identity. This study calls for a more concerted effort to familiarize students with the different varieties of English in the classroom, hence making them more aware of the ideological dimension—such as native-speakerism—attached to the language.

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1. Introduction

The use of English as an international language is a fundamental feature of global communication. Today, millions around the world rely on English as a means of interaction across cultural and national boundaries. It has evolved into a flexible communicative tool, spoken in various linguistic and cultural contexts. The status of English as a global language, however, cannot be separated from its historical roots in British colonialism and the rise of the United States as a global economic power (Crystal, 2003). These forces have positioned English as the dominant language in over seventy-five territories, whether as a first, second, or institutional language (Jenkins, 2003).

Beyond its historical trajectory, scholars such as Jenkins (2006) have highlighted the functional value of English in modern society, calling it a 'golden key' to access opportunities in business, politics, education, and technology. Accordingly, English is closely linked with global mobility, employability, and social advancement. Bolton (2012) notes that a major paradigm shift occurred in the 1980s with scholars such as Braj Kachru and Larry Smith emphasizing the plurality of Englishes, hence terms such as 'World Englishes', 'New Englishes, and 'English as a lingua franca' (ELF) emerged. These terms all reflect the decentralized nature of English in global communication (McArthur, 2004; Erling, 2005).

The term 'English as a lingua franca', however, is often used to refer to the use of English as a medium of communication between speakers of different native languages (Seidlhofer, 2005). To better understand the global diffusion of English, Kachru's (1992) Three Circles Model—comprising the inner, outer, and expanding circles—helps visualize the varying degrees of institutionalization and functional use of English across nations. Within this model, Indonesia is categorized in the Expanding Circle, where English is used primarily as a foreign language with limited communicative functions in daily life.

In the Indonesian context, English is taught from elementary through tertiary levels, mostly as a formal subject (Suherdi, 2012). Lauder (2008) explains that national policy has long positioned English as a development tool rather than a socially embedded language. Nevertheless, the current sociolinguistic landscape reveals a more complex picture. Many Indonesians—especially younger generations—are increasingly exposed to English through media, digital content, and global pop culture. Despite its limited official function (Simatupang, 1999), English is gaining relevance in informal and online communication spaces.

This increasing exposure contributes to a growing sense of ownership among learners—an affective dimension of language learning where users, regardless of nativeness, can claim legitimate use and agency over it, adapting it to their local contexts (Widdowson, 1994). Thus, the diverse varieties of English create a space where preference and ownership intersect. While research on perceptions of English varieties has been conducted globally (e.g., Eriksson, 2019; Monfared, 2018; Rudra et al., 2016), studies linking preference to language ownership—particularly among Indonesian learners—remain limited.

Recent studies (e.g., Kiczkowiak, 2022; Morganna, et al. 2020; Nabilla & Wahyudi, 2021; Sung, 2019; Tsui & Tollefson, 2021) have explored how non-native English users assert linguistic agency and negotiate the legitimacy of their own English use. These works show a shift in how language ownership is perceived—not as a privilege of native speakers, but as a shared resource in a global community. However, few studies in the Indonesian context have explored the connection between individuals' preferences for English varieties and their sense of ownership of the language. Drawing on Kachru's (1992) concentric circles and Widdowson's (1994) theory of language ownership, the research thus aims to examine how learners in Indonesia position themselves in relation to the English language. By exploring student preferences and ownership, this research can contribute to a better understanding of English language education in Indonesia, highlighting the need to make English instruction more relevant and empowering.

Based on the background of the study, the research questions are formulated as follows: (1) What varieties of English do Indonesian university students prefer, and why? (2) How do these students perceive their ownership of the English language?

2. Method

This study adopted a qualitative case study research design, focusing on a bounded group of final-year English major at an Indonesian university, to explore their preferences of English varieties and sense of ownership toward the language. According to Parkinson and Drislane (2011), qualitative research aims to provide descriptive, narrative insights into specific contexts. Given the study's exploratory nature, qualitative research was therefore deemed suitable. Further, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) note that qualitative research adopts an interpretive, naturalistic approach, allowing researchers to examine phenomena in real-world contexts through the lens of participant meaning. Thus, a

qualitative method was considered the most appropriate for investigating students' English variety preferences and their perceived ownership of the language.

The study involved thirty-four final-year university students majoring in English, aged between 20 and 21 years, comprising seven males and twenty-seven females. Data were collected through two sources: an online questionnaire and individual interviews. All participants completed the questionnaire, and three students were selected for individual interviews based on the depth, clarity and introspection shown in their questionnaire responses.

The online questionnaire aimed to gather basic participant information and explore their English preferences. The questionnaire was administered in English and divided into two sections: close-ended and open-ended questions. The close-ended section addressed students' exposure to and preferences for English varieties, the variety they believe should be taught in academic settings, their agreement with the statement, "English is the way through which Western cultures permeate into my identity," and whether they felt a sense of ownership toward English.

The open-ended section comprised nine questions exploring the reasons behind their preferences, impressions of American and British English, important aspects of learning English, its usefulness in daily life, cultural values acquired, and changes in worldview due to learning English.

Following the questionnaire distribution, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather more in-depth, context-sensitive insights. This format allowed for open-ended questions and follow-up prompts based on participant responses. Kvale (1996) highlights that open-ended questions and opportunities for participants to reflect on the researcher's interpretations help yield meaningful and original insights. Interviewees were selected based on the thoughtfulness of their questionnaire responses. The interviews, conducted in *Bahasa Indonesia* to ensure clarity and comfort, lasted approximately 45 minutes and revolved around English language use, perceptions and attitudes towards English, perceived impacts of learning English, language ownership and cultural identity. All responses were transcribed, and relevant parts were translated into English. Pseudonyms were assigned to ensure confidentiality.

3. Findings and Discussion

This section is divided into four parts: (1) students' exposure to English varieties, (2) students' preferred English varieties, (3) students' views on what should be taught in the Indonesian academic context, and (4) students' sense of ownership towards English. These topics are elaborated as follows.

3.1. Students' exposure to English varieties

Participants' preferences of English varieties, as the data indicated, are strongly influenced by their exposure to those varieties, both in and outside the classroom. As confirmed by various studies (e.g., Chiba et al., 1995; Ellis, 2007), exposure plays a key role in shaping attitudes and legitimizing different forms of English. Results show that 94% of the 34 participants reported greater exposure to American English compared to other varieties. In regard to this, a participant named Ana commented: "When I was younger, I watched American movies a lot. That's why I think American English is easier to comprehend than British English."

Ana's view resonates with Rahim and Akan's (2008) observation that due to the rapid advancement of knowledge, information technology, trade and commerce, American English spread rapidly throughout the world. Thus, it seems understandable that American English is more widely used more than other varieties. As noted by Dirgeyasa (2015), American English has become the most common mother-tongue variety of English.

Although the exposures to British English (3%) and other varieties (3 %) do not appear to be significant in terms of number when compared to American English, some participants conveyed strong reasons why British English is also impactful, as pointed out by Dian: "Since English originates from Britain, it is important to learn the original language". Dian's perception of British English as the "original" variety echoes findings from Eriksson (2019), where similar views were noted.

Interestingly, many students believed they had little or no exposure to other English varieties, such as Australian or Singaporean English. The dominance of American and British English in media and education seems to limit students' awareness of other forms of English.

In summary, the findings suggest that most students' learning experiences are shaped by limited exposure, primarily to American English. This trend influences not only their preferences but also their perceptions of legitimacy among English varieties. The next section will further explore students' specific preferences and their reasons behind them.

3.2. Students' Preferred English Varieties

The questionnaire responses indicated that most students (73%) preferred American English, followed by British English (21%) and Australian English (6%). No students selected 'other varieties'. The preference for American and British English reflects broader global trends. As Bieswanger (2008) notes, most English users are non-native speakers, and American and British English dominate English education globally. Algeo (2006) also highlights that these two are the most commonly studied varieties. In Indonesia, American and British English are standard references in English education (Gunawan & Aminah, 2002), which explains their prominence.

1) American English: popular, easy, and familiar

Students cited three main reasons for preferring American English: it is popular, easier to learn, and more familiar. A significant portion (44%) noted its popularity, especially in Indonesia, due to exposure in school and media:

> **"**American English feels more familiar because it's used in most Indonesian school materials. It's simpler in vocabulary, pronunciation, and spelling." (Ana)
>
> "I was taught American English in elementary school, so I'm more comfortable using it." (Dian)

These views align with Dalton-Puffer et al. (1997), who emphasized the role of EFL instruction in shaping student familiarity with English. Media exposure also plays a big role:

> **"**American English is everywhere—in movies, games, and TV. I'm not exposed to British English as much." (Angga)
>
> "I've watched American movies since I was a kid, so it's influenced my usage." (Ryan)

Crystal (2003) links this preference to American cultural influence through global media. About 38% said American English feels easier to learn. Dirgeyasa (2015) supports this view, noting that Americanisms have expanded globally and simplified English vocabulary.

Another 18% found American English more familiar in sound, as commented by Dani: "American English sounds lighter and easier to follow…"

In their study, Rahim and Akan (2008) also note distinct differences in sound between American and British English, while Han (2019) also highlights differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax between English varieties.

In summary, students' preference for American English is influenced by its popularity, ease, and familiarity. These findings are consistent with Mei's (2011), which found that American English is widely seen as clear, global, and accessible. The dominant use of American English in Indonesian education further reinforces this familiarity.

3.2.2 British English: Elegant but Difficult

British English is seen as elegant but challenging. While it is less preferred overall, some students perceive it as classy or refined, as shown in the excerpts below:

> **"**It's the fanciest variety. Each region has unique accents and dialects." (Ana)
> **"**It feels 'authentic'—English originated in the UK, and British English is tied to the monarchy, making it feel exclusive." (Dian)

Alftberg (2009) describes British English as prestigious due to its historical and cultural associations. A number of students also associate British English with politeness and sophistication.

One interviewee preferred British English due to its cultural richness, while Luthfianda, another student, viewed it as essential for her studies: "As an English major, I feel obliged to master British English. It's the authentic variety and sounds unique."

Similarly, Mei (2011) notes that British English is viewed as original, elegant, and representative of the language's birthplace. Eagly and Chaiken (1993) emphasize that attitudes are shaped by beliefs, thoughts, and intentions, as reflected in Luthfianda's statement. British media, especially films like *Harry Potter*, also influence these perceptions: "When I think of British English, I think of *Harry Potter*. It sounds fancy and elegant, though the pronunciation was hard to follow at first." Other students associate British English with educated speakers: "It sounds expensive and is usually used by educated people."

Crystal (2003) pointed out that English—particularly British English—has long been associated with educated, professional users. However, a quarter of the students find British English difficult, especially due to its fast pace and unfamiliar pronunciation. One student mentioned struggling to understand British films for this reason, highlighting the role of limited exposure.

3.2.3 Australian English: Unique and Memorable

As English spreads globally, it has evolved through the influence of regional dialects brought by English speakers migrating worldwide. This has given rise to new varieties such as Australian English, in addition to the more dominant British and American forms. Based on the questionnaire, 6% of the students expressed a preference for Australian English. Their reasons relate to its uniqueness and personal connections:

> "I met an English tutor from Australia who taught me slang words that were really unique. The pronunciation is also quite different from both American and British English. It sparked my curiosity." (Ana)
>
> "Australian English was the first variety I encountered. When I was two, my mom studied in Melbourne, and I lived there with her. It just feels nostalgic, even though I use American English more now." (Dian)

The first participant highlighted Australian English's distinctive slang and pronunciation as reasons for her interest. The second participant associated it with early childhood memories, valuing it for its emotional significance rather than linguistic features. While most students focused on structural or phonological aspects, this participant's preference was driven by personal experience.

3.3. Students' views on what should be taught in the Indonesian academic contexts

English proficiency is essential in both academic and professional domains (Shen & Chiu, 2019). In Indonesia, where English is a compulsory subject (Llurda, 2009), students are increasingly exposed to various English varieties, shaping their preferences for what should be taught in schools.

The majority of the respondents believe multiple dominant varieties—especially those of the Inner Circle varieties—should be taught to help students understand global usage and cultural context. As one student pointed out: "Teaching different varieties helps students grasp not just the language but also its sociolinguistic background. It prepares them for real-world communication." This aligns with Eriksson's (2019) findings on Swedish students who favored British and American English in education.

Some students, however, advocated for including Asian Englishes, such as Singaporean, Malaysian, and Indian English, arguing these reflect the linguistic realities of the region. As Dian said: "We should also learn Asian Englishes. Singapore and Malaysia, for instance, have their own varieties. It helps us avoid thinking only American pronunciation is 'correct'." One participant emphasized prioritizing Asian Englishes in Indonesia to better reflect regional communication needs. This perspective echoes Kirkpatrick's (2007), who maintains that ASEAN students need exposure to regional Englishes to navigate intercultural exchanges effectively.

Yet, 15% of the participants believed that no single variety should dominate. All varieties are valid as long as they're understandable and practical. As commented by Angga: "There's no 'best' variety. All should be taught if they serve communication purposes."

This reflects Widdowson's (1994) idea that language serves both communicative and cultural purposes. While British and American English are widely used, no variety should be seen as inherently superior.

3.4. Students' sense of ownership towards English

As previously mentioned, participants noted that American English has the most significant impact on their language exposure compared to other varieties. However, despite this exposure, most participants did not believe they truly 'own' the English language in their daily lives. In the questionnaire, participants were asked whether they felt a sense of ownership over English, with three response options: yes, no, and not sure. The results are shown below:

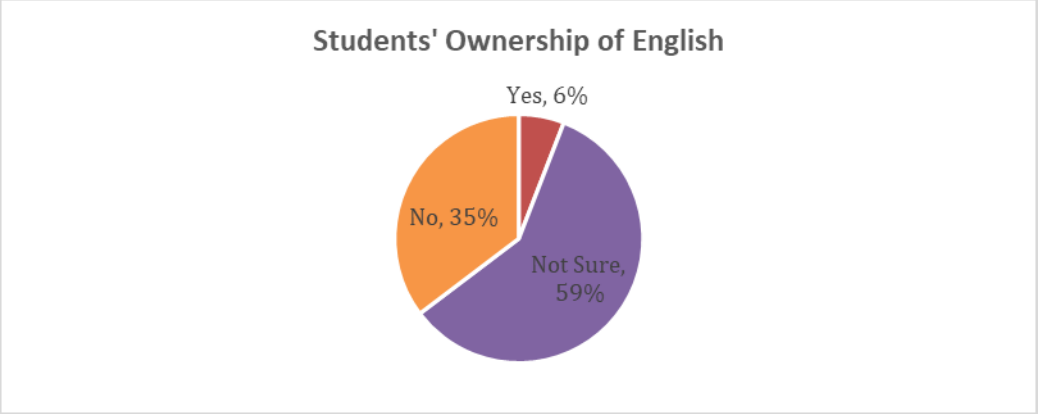

Fig. 1. Students' ownership of English

As Figure 1 shows, the majority of students (59%) responded "not sure" when asked about their ownership of English. This was followed by 35% who said "no." Only 6% of the 34 participants answered "yes," indicating they felt a sense of ownership. To further explore the reasons behind these responses, interviews were conducted with three participants.

The first participant, Shana, expressed that she does not see English as part of her identity. As an Indonesian, she views English primarily as a practical communication tool: "I don't 'own' English because I don't consider English as part of my identity. I do not feel like I own English because I was born and raised in Indonesia. English is used only as a communication tool."

Shana's comment highlights the link between ownership of English and the concept of nativeness. Although the concept of 'nativeness' is widely debated, Davies (1991, as cited in McKay, 2002) suggests that one's native language can change as their group identity shifts. This introduces the possibility of becoming a 'native speaker' of another language. Thus, identity and nativeness are deeply interconnected.

The second participant, Luthfianda, also felt unsure about her ownership of English. She cited two main reasons: first, she doesn't use English consistently in her daily life; and second, she perceives her English proficiency as inferior to that of native speakers. Nonetheless, she acknowledges that speaking English allows her to feel connected to a global English-speaking community. In her own words:

> "I am not sure because English is not my native language. It is not the language in which I live. So, I feel like I don't own English. Also, I do not use English twenty-four hours in my daily life. My English skills are also not the same as those of native speakers. … My English is not as good as my Indonesian language, which I master and use every day with the people around me … because English [is] not my first language. However, on the other hand, I can also say I

'own' English because by being able to speak English, I feel like I belong to its community..." (Luthfianda)

In contrast, Acha, expressed a clear sense of belonging to the English language. She shared that English plays a significant role in her life, especially in helping her express complex ideas more effectively:

> "So, English, for me personally, is already attached [to who I am as an individual], and I use it from the beginning of my foreign language learning. English helps me to explain difficult concepts better… I like to code-switch to English if something is difficult to explain in *Bahasa Indonesia*…" (Acha)

To explore the relationship between language and cultural identity, participants were also asked to respond to the following statement: "English is the way through which Western cultures permeate into my identity." Responses were again categorized as yes, no, or not sure. The results are shown below:

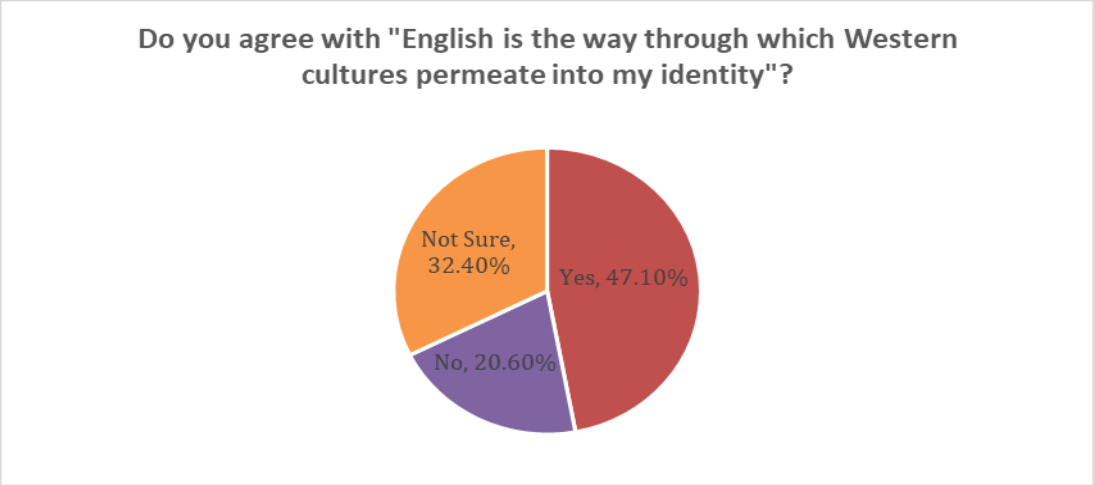

Fig. 2. English and cultural identity

Based on the responses, almost half of participants agreed that Western culture has influenced their identity through English. One participant noted that the most noticeable cultural shift was the adoption of Western communication habits, particularly a greater appreciation for time and directness—traits that are often seen to contrast with Indonesian conversational norms. As Shana said:

> "The most noticeable value is maybe that when you learn English, you also learn to appreciate time and be straight to the point. Maybe because Indonesians are usually laid back and usually beat around the bush in doing things, it is fascinating that it is reflected and can be noticed in the language." (Shana)

Meanwhile, 32.40% were unsure about whether Western culture influenced their identities. Unfortunately, none of the participants provided specific reasons for their uncertainty. Another 20.60% disagreed with the statement. These respondents felt that learning English did not necessarily equate to cultural exposure. One participant stated that his interest lies more in the language itself than in the culture: "So far, I'm personally not that interested in learning about the culture since I am more interested in the language itself."

In interviews, participants elaborated further. Shana shared that learning English had indeed influenced her identity. While she grew up with Indonesian cultural values, she noticed a shift in her attitudes—particularly regarding individualism—after being exposed to Western cultural norms: "English has given quite huge impacts on my identity as an Indonesian… I grew up in an Indonesian culture, but I simultaneously was also learning English. So, English contributed to shaping my present outlook and attitudes, such as individualism …. These things have made me the individual person I am today."

Similarly, Luthfianda viewed such influence as empowering. She argued that being exposed to different cultures through English actually enhanced her sense of national identity: "The influence is great because the English speakers come from different countries. So, with the differences in the individuals' backgrounds, I feel more proud of my identity as an Indonesian. Instead of feeling that my identity is concealed by my English skills, I feel like my [Indonesian] identity becomes increasingly prominent as we are one … international community that speaks other languages with different people…. On the other hand, there are also attitudes that change [in me] such as being more critical, sensitive or caring. But my identity as an Indonesian, my … nationalism increases because of joining the global community."

In summary, English plays different roles for different individuals. This study reveals that even among final-year English majors, there is no automatic sense of ownership over the English language—despite years of academic engagement. Participants' views were often marked by ambivalence, similar to the self-reflections in Gandana and Luthfiah's (2021) study, where one of the authors found herself caught between strong emotional ties to English and her identity as an Indonesian. As Gandana (2014) notes, such feelings of 'in-betweenness' can lead to dilemmas of self-perception and cultural identity. Many participants still perceive English as inherently belonging to native speakers from the Inner Circle countries, an idea shaped by the ideology of native speakerism—which, as Holliday (2005) argues, frames native speakers as the most authentic and ideal representatives of the English language.

To understand the deeper impacts of English, participants were also asked to identify how learning the language had affected them personally. The five most commonly mentioned effects were: gaining new perspectives, becoming more critical, changing attitudes, thinking more openly, and adopting new beliefs. The data are summarized in the diagram below:

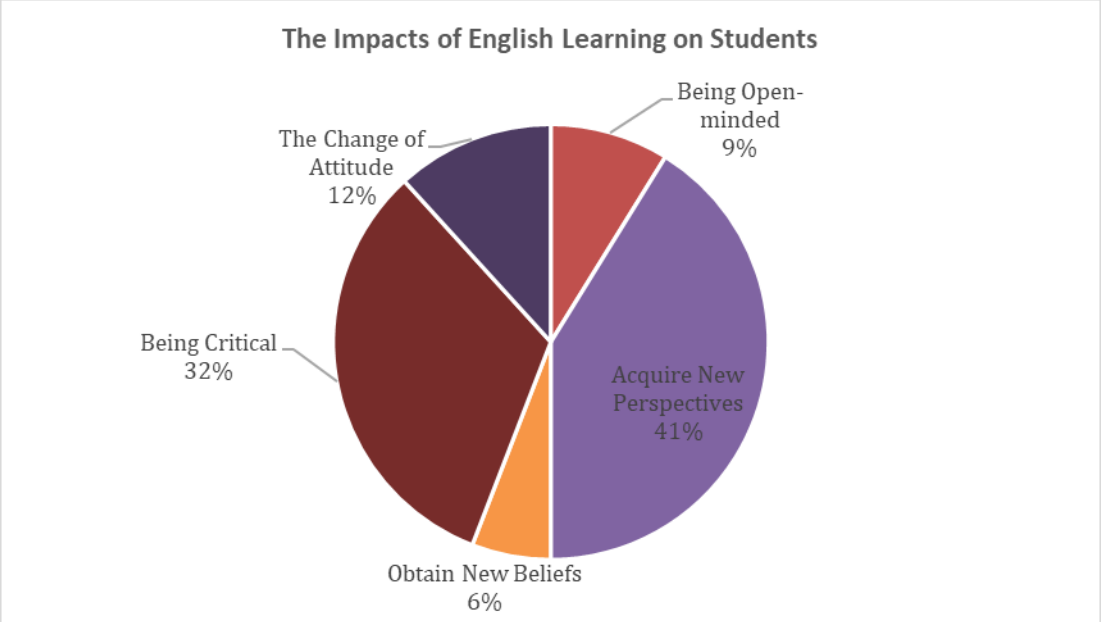

Fig. 3. Impacts of English learning

The most frequently cited impact was the acquisition of new perspectives, mentioned by 41% of participants. Many students noted that English helped broaden their understanding of various global issues. As Ana pointed out: "The biggest impact of English on my life is probably how it can help me broaden my point of view and extend my knowledge. I get many useful things that I probably would not find if I limited myself to just learning *Bahasa Indonesia*."

These new perspectives often prompted critical reflection on cultural norms. It follows that a critical mindset was the second most common impact, reported by 32% of students. Learning English helped participants become more analytical and selective when interpreting information:

> "I am now more careful and selective, not only in digesting information I found online or offline, but also in knowing about the credibility of a product. These two things can be done by looking carefully at the linguistic aspects used in the article and the product. I am now smarter in knowing what is good and bad, true and false, and worthy or not." (Angga)

> "Yes. English helps me realize how big the world is and how there are parts of the world that are different from mine. It makes me more aware of cultural varieties and the perspective of people who are culturally different from me." (Ryan)

When using the English language, a critical awareness tends to emerge. This heightened awareness leads to greater attentiveness to vocabulary and grammar, particularly among those who do not speak English as their first language. The following statement illustrates the importance of speaking English correctly and being mindful of language use: "In some ways. because of learning English, I put more attention to vocabulary and grammar when I write and speak something."

Following this rise in critical awareness, 12% of participants also reported a change in attitude toward language use. This shift is evident in their preference for a more straightforward communication style. The participants' expressions often reflect a direct, honest way of speaking, particularly when giving opinions or offering suggestions. Many attributed this to their exposure to English-language entertainment, which influenced how they view and approach communication. One participant elaborated on how this has shaped her outlook:

> "… I am really straightforward when I am saying things. Being straightforward here means that if someone asks for my advice, I will give them a number of possibilities: the bitter one, the logical one, and the sugarcoated one…. It doesn't mean I give them rude comments or anything. I think I may have adopted this from … what I watch—some sitcoms and TV series, all of which are in English. I think it [watching them] expands my worldview. This also makes me realize that people can have different perspectives towards an issue. So, I have to understand that differences exist, and the world is not as narrow as the laptop screen I am seeing now."

In addition to fostering straightforwardness, learning English was reported to promote a more open-minded attitude in 9% of participants. Meanwhile, 6% mentioned adopting new beliefs as a result of their English learning experience. For these participants, English has served as a gateway to better understanding social issues and ethical behavior.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that Indonesian students' perceptions of English varieties are not simply shaped by preference, but deeply embedded in historical exposure, linguistic ideology and cultural identity. While American English remains the most familiar due to media exposure, students also recognize the value of other varieties—including British, Australian, and Asian Englishes—for academic and intercultural purposes. Yet, there is strong indication that the students' perceptions remain strongly shaped by the ideology of native speakerism, which frames native speakers as the most authentic and ideal representatives of the English language. Further, although many participants recognized the significant influence English has had on their lives—ranging from increased critical awareness and straightforward communication to open-mindedness and new beliefs—only a small percentage expressed a clear sense of ownership over the language. Most remained uncertain about whether they could claim ownership of English. While some regarded English as a lingua franca that connected them to Western culture, others felt detached from the cultural aspects, focusing instead on learning the language itself. This study thus highlights the different roles that English plays for different individuals. Despite the global status that English has gained, it is interesting to note that many participants still perceive English as inherently belonging to native speakers from the Inner Circle countries. This suggests that fluency in English does not automatically translate into a sense of entitlement or ownership, especially when learners position themselves outside the Inner Circle norm. This study highlights the critical role that teachers have to play, by embracing, among others, a more pluralistic approach to English language teaching, acknowledging the legitimacy of the different varieties of the language. Indonesian teachers, in fact, are well-positioned to teach English in multicultural contexts, and, by engaging both teachers and students in discussions on English's global role, it is hoped that we can shift toward a more inclusive ELT paradigm. Given English's

global reach, the question should no longer revolve around which variety is 'correct'. Instead, the focus must shift toward empowering learners to navigate English's diverse forms with confidence, critical awareness, and cultural sensitivity—preparing them for authentic global communication.

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