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English across borders: Higher education students' perceptions of language policy and the global role of English

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ABSTRACT

This study examines higher education students' perceptions of language policy and the global role of English within contemporary educational contexts. Using a descriptive quantitative survey design, data were collected through a closed-ended questionnaire distributed to English education students. The study explores how English is perceived in relation to government language policy, formal education, and international communication. The findings indicate that most respondents perceive English as a policy-regulated language that holds a central position in compulsory education and international domains such as diplomacy, trade, and access to global information. Participants also recognize English's influence on local and national languages and express support for bilingual or multilingual language policies involving English. These findings reflect students' perceptions of English as a global lingua franca that offers educational and socio-economic opportunities while simultaneously raising concerns about linguistic balance and diversity. The study highlights the importance of developing inclusive language policies that integrate English alongside local languages to support global engagement without marginalizing linguistic diversity.

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary globalized world, English has assumed a prominent role as an international language across political, economic, educational, and cultural domains. Its widespread use beyond native speaking contexts has positioned English as a key medium for cross-border communication and global interaction. The global status of English, as noted by [Crystal \(2003\)](#), is not the result of linguistic superiority but rather of historical, political, and economic forces that have elevated its functional value in international contexts.

The expanding role of English has significantly influenced national language policies worldwide. Language policy shapes how languages are regulated, promoted, and maintained within a society, reflecting broader ideological, political, and economic priorities. ([Spolsky, 2004](#)) conceptualizes language policy as the interaction among language practices, beliefs, and management. In many non-English speaking contexts, English has been incorporated into formal education systems through curriculum reforms, early language instruction, and institutional investment in English education. These policy orientations reflect national aspirations to participate in global markets, enhance international cooperation, and improve access to global knowledge ([Graddol, 2006](#)). Moreover, the implementation of English within education systems is not only reflected in policy documents but also in classroom practices and instructional materials. Previous research on English textbooks has shown that teaching approaches embedded in learning materials often mirror broader language policy orientations ([Nisrina et al., 2025](#)).

The status and function of English, however, vary across sociolinguistic contexts ([Kachru 1992](#)). The model of World English distinguishes among Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles, illustrating how English operates differently across historical and institutional contexts. While this framework explains the global diffusion of English, it also highlights that language policy decisions concerning English are context-dependent and shaped by local linguistic ecologies. Studies also show that students demonstrate awareness of multiple English varieties and recognize both the benefits and challenges of learning English in diverse contexts ([Suminar, 2024](#)). As a result, English may function as an official language, a second language, or a foreign language, each carrying distinct educational and socio-political implications. Despite its instrumental value, the global spread of English has generated critical debates regarding linguistic diversity and inequality. Scholars have raised concerns that the dominance of English may marginalize local and indigenous languages, particularly in multilingual societies ([Phillipson, 1992](#); [Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000](#)). The prioritization of English in education and public life may reduce the functional space of other languages and contribute to unequal access to educational and economic

opportunities. Consequently, language policy decisions involving English often involve tensions between global communication needs and the preservation of national and local linguistic identities.

In response to these challenges, scholars in language policy and planning emphasize the importance of multilingual approaches that position English as an additional resource rather than a replacement for existing languages. (Ricento 2006) argues that language policies are inherently ideological and reflect power relations embedded in broader socio-political contexts. From this perspective, promoting English within education systems must be balanced with policies that sustain linguistic diversity and social cohesion. Such an approach aligns with the concept of additive bilingualism, where English complements rather than displaces local linguistic repertoires.

In recent decades, the role of English has further expanded through digital technology, global media, and higher education. English dominates academic publishing, online resources, and digital platforms, reinforcing its status as the primary language of global knowledge production. This digital dominance places additional pressure on educational institutions and policymakers to prioritize English proficiency, particularly in higher education contexts. As a result, university students are increasingly positioned at the intersection of language policy outcomes, global access to knowledge, and future employment opportunities.

While a substantial body of research has examined English language policy at national and institutional levels, relatively little attention has been paid to how such policies are perceived by higher education students, who are direct recipients of policy implementation. Existing studies often focus on policy documents or macro-level analyses, leaving students' perspectives underexplored. Understanding student perceptions is crucial, as these perceptions shape how language policies are experienced in practice and how English is evaluated in relation to local languages, national identity, and global participation.

Beyond confirming existing theories on global English, this study offers critical insight into how students negotiate the perceived benefits of English with concerns about linguistic balance and identity. Recent research on Global English highlights the need to reconsider traditional norms of English teaching and recognize diverse uses of English in global contexts (Rose, 2021). This perspective highlights not only the acceptance of English as a global resource but also the emerging awareness of its sociolinguistic implications in educational contexts.

Although the global role of English has been widely discussed, recent studies emphasize that learners' perceptions of English continue to evolve and require further empirical investigation in different contexts (Lu, 2025). Accordingly, this study

investigates higher education students' perceptions of language policy and the global role of English. Rather than offering a comparative analysis of national language policies, the study focuses on how English is perceived as a policy-regulated language, an educational priority, and a tool for international communication. By foregrounding student perspectives, this study contributes micro-level insights to discussions on global English and multilingualism. It offers implications for educators and policymakers seeking to design balanced language policies that support global engagement while preserving linguistic diversity.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive, quantitative survey design to examine higher-education students' perceptions of language policy and the global role of English. A descriptive quantitative approach is appropriate for this study because it aims to identify general tendencies and patterns in participants' perceptions rather than to test hypotheses or establish causal relationships. This design allows the study to present an overview of how English is perceived in relation to language policy, education, and international communication within higher education contexts. The study is exploratory and perceptual in nature, emphasizing respondents' views and awareness of English as a policy-regulated language and a global communicative resource. Accordingly, the findings are intended to provide contextual insights rather than statistically generalizable conclusions.

The participants of this study were undergraduate students from the English Education Department at Muhammadiyah Tangerang University. A total of 15 students participated in the study. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their academic background and exposure to English-language learning and language-related issues. As students majoring in English education, the participants were considered sufficiently familiar with the role of English in educational and policy contexts to provide informed responses. Although the sample size is limited, it is considered adequate for the exploratory nature of this study, which aims to capture perceptual tendencies rather than to make broad generalizations. The relatively small number of participants reflects the study's focus on depth of perception and contextual understanding rather than representativeness.

Data were collected using a closed-ended questionnaire administered through Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of 10 dichotomous (yes/no) items designed to elicit participants' perceptions of language policy and the functions of English across several domains. The questionnaire items addressed issues such as the existence of official language policies regulating English, the role of English in national education systems, its use in governmental and international communication, and its perceived

impact on local or national languages. Closed-ended questions enabled the collection of clear and comparable responses, allowing the study to identify general patterns in participants' perceptions. Google Forms was chosen as the data collection platform due to its accessibility, efficiency, and suitability for administering surveys to university students.

The data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive quantitative analysis. Responses to each item were summarized as frequencies and percentages to illustrate overall response tendencies. The analysis focused on describing patterns in participants' perceptions of English and its position within language policy frameworks. Although numerical data are presented, the interpretation remains descriptive rather than inferential. The results are discussed in relation to existing theoretical perspectives on global English, language policy, and multilingualism, with particular attention to how students perceive the benefits and implications of English within educational and sociolinguistic contexts.

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the descriptive quantitative survey examining higher education students' perceptions of language policy and the global role of English. The findings are summarized using frequencies and percentages to illustrate general response tendencies across the questionnaire items. Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents' answers related to the status of English in language policy, education, international communication, and its perceived sociolinguistic impact.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents' Perceptions of the Role of English in Language Policy, Education, and Global Communication

No	Questionnaire	Yes (%)	No (%)
1.	Does your country have an official language policy that regulates the use of English?	93.3	6.7
2.	Is English recognized as an important language in your national education system?	66.7	33.3
3.	Is English taught as a compulsory subject in schools in your country?	93.3	6.7
4.	Is English used for official or semi-official communication in government or public institutions?	60.0	40.0
5.	Is English commonly used for international communication such as diplomacy, trade, or tourism?	93.3	6.7
6.	Does the use of English help people access global	86.7	13.3

No	Questionnaire	Yes (%)	No (%)
	information and knowledge?		
7.	Does the increasing role of English influence the status of local or national languages?	80.0	20.0
8.	Is English considered important for employment and career opportunities?	86.7	13.3
9.	Does the government support bilingual or multilingual language policies involving English?	73.3	26.7
10.	Should English continue to play a significant role in future language policy?	80.0	20.0

The table presents the distribution of respondents' perceptions of the role of English across several key aspects, including language policy, education, governmental use, international communication, access to information, socio-economic value, and sociolinguistic impact. In terms of language policy, the findings show that a large majority of respondents (93.3%) reported that their country has an official language policy regulating the use of English. Additionally, 73.3% indicated that governments support bilingual or multilingual language policies involving English. Furthermore, 80.0% of respondents agreed that English should continue to play a significant role in future language policy, indicating a generally positive stance toward its inclusion in policy frameworks.

Regarding the educational aspect, most respondents (93.3%) reported that English is taught as a compulsory subject in schools. In addition, 66.7% indicated that English is recognized as an important language within the national education system, while 33.3% reported otherwise. These responses show that English is widely perceived as part of formal education, although there is some variation in how its importance is viewed.

In the domain of governmental and institutional use, 60.0% of respondents reported that English is used for official or semi-official communication in government or public institutions, whereas 40.0% indicated that it is not. This suggests that perceptions of English use in formal institutional contexts are more varied than those for other aspects. On the other hand, in international communication, an overwhelming majority of respondents (93.3%) indicated that English is commonly used in areas such as diplomacy, trade, and tourism. This reflects a strong perception of English as a key language for global interaction.

In terms of access to information and knowledge, 86.7% of respondents agreed that the use of English helps people access global information and knowledge, while 13.3% did not share this view. This indicates that English is widely perceived as an

important medium for accessing global resources.

Similarly, in the aspect of employment and economic value, 86.7% of respondents considered English important for employment and career opportunities. This suggests a strong perceived connection between English proficiency and economic prospects. Finally, concerning the sociolinguistic impact, 80.0% of respondents acknowledged that the increasing role of English influences the status of local or national languages, while 20.0% did not perceive such an impact. This indicates that most respondents are aware of the potential influence of English on existing linguistic dynamics. Overall, the responses across all aspects show consistently high levels of agreement, indicating strong tendencies in how respondents perceive the role of English in policy, education, global communication, and socio-economic contexts, with some variation in institutional use and perceived importance within the education system.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide important insight into how higher education students perceive the role of English within language policy frameworks and global communication. It is important to note that these findings reflect students' perceptions rather than direct evaluations of language policy implementation across countries. Previous studies have shown that students generally perceive English as a global language that facilitates communication, access to knowledge, and future opportunities ([Herawati & Istinganah, 2022](#)). From this perspective, the results illustrate how macro-level language policy orientations are understood and interpreted at the micro level of student experience.

The strong acknowledgment of official language policies governing English indicates that students perceive English as an institutionalized, policy-driven language rather than merely a subject of study. This perception aligns with [Spolsky's \(2004\)](#) framework, which conceptualizes language policy as the interaction among language practices, beliefs, and management. Students' responses suggest awareness that deliberate policy decisions and institutional structures shape the presence and role of English in education and society. Additionally, this finding is consistent with recent studies showing that exposure to Global Englishes perspectives can significantly influence learners' perceptions of English and increase their awareness of its diverse functions ([da Costa, 2024](#)).

The widespread recognition of English as a compulsory subject further reflects its normalization within formal education systems. This finding supports prior research identifying English as a gatekeeping language that structures access to academic success and global participation ([Graddol, 2006](#); [Kirkpatrick, 2010](#)). From the

students' perspective, English is not optional but embedded within the educational trajectory as a necessary competence. At the same time, the variation in responses regarding the importance of English within national education systems suggests that students are aware of differing levels of emphasis across contexts. This perception resonates with [Kachru's \(1992\)](#) World Englishes model, which highlights the context-dependent roles and functions of English across different sociolinguistic environments. In addition, similar findings have been reported in studies of English education students, where learners demonstrate positive attitudes toward different varieties of English while still recognizing the role of standard English in formal contexts ([Amalina, 2024](#)). The findings can also be understood in relation to classroom-level practices, where English language policies are enacted through teaching materials and pedagogical approaches. Content analyses of English textbooks have demonstrated how instructional design reflects broader educational and policy priorities ([Nisrina et al., 2025](#)). Furthermore, students' perceptions of English are closely related to their learning experiences in the classroom. Previous research has shown that interactive and collaborative learning environments can enhance student engagement and shape perceptions of English as a meaningful and functional language ([Yustisia et al., 2023](#)).

Another important pattern emerging from the findings is the perceived distinction between English's international and domestic functions. The global use of English is closely linked to cultural exchange and intercultural communication, highlighting the role of language in shaping global understanding ([Hossain, 2024](#)). While English is strongly associated with international communication, such as diplomacy, trade, and tourism, it is perceived as less dominant in governmental and public institutional contexts. This distinction suggests that students view English primarily as a language of global interaction rather than internal administration. Such a perception reflects broader tensions in language policy, where governments attempt to balance global engagement with the maintenance of national identity and linguistic sovereignty ([Spolsky, 2004](#)). Students' responses indicate an awareness of this dual function of language, in which English operates alongside, rather than replaces, national languages.

The findings also highlight students' perception of English as a key medium for accessing global knowledge and information. This aligns with the established view of English as the dominant language of academic publishing, digital communication, and higher education ([Graddol, 2006](#); [Seidlhofer, 2011](#)). From a sociolinguistic perspective, this reinforces English's role as a global lingua franca, facilitating participation in transnational knowledge networks. For students, this translates into a practical understanding that English proficiency is closely tied to academic success and

intellectual engagement.

In addition to its academic function, English is strongly associated with economic opportunity. The high percentage of respondents who link English proficiency to employment prospects reflects the perception of English as linguistic capital. This finding supports [Phillipson's \(1992\)](#) argument regarding the symbolic and material power of English within global economic structures. Students' responses suggest that English is perceived not only as a communicative tool but also as a strategic resource that enhances individual competitiveness in the global labor market.

Importantly, the findings also reveal a critical dimension in students' perceptions. A substantial proportion of respondents acknowledged that the increasing role of English influences the status of local and national languages. This awareness reflects concerns raised in language policy scholarship regarding linguistic inequality, language shift, and the marginalization of minority languages ([Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000](#)). In the Indonesian context, the spread of Global English has also been shown to influence learners' linguistic identity and perceptions of language use ([Ubaidillah et al., 2023](#)). Rather than demonstrating uncritical acceptance, students appear to adopt a more nuanced perspective, recognizing both the advantages of English and its potential sociolinguistic consequences.

This balanced perspective is further reflected in the strong support for bilingual or multilingual language policies. Students' preferences align with the concept of additive bilingualism, in which English is treated as an additional resource rather than a replacement for existing linguistic repertoires ([Ricento, 2006](#)). Such findings indicate that students favor integrative language policy approaches that allow English and local languages to coexist. This orientation reflects contemporary shifts in language policy discourse toward more inclusive and sustainable multilingual frameworks. At the classroom level, language policy is often operationalized through instructional materials. Studies on English textbooks have demonstrated how pedagogical approaches reflect broader policy orientations and educational priorities.

Overall, while the findings largely reinforce established theoretical perspectives on global English and language policy, this study contributes context-specific insights by foregrounding higher-education students' perceptions. By examining how students interpret the institutional, educational, economic, and sociolinguistic dimensions of English, the study highlights the micro-level realities of language policy. These perceptions demonstrate how global language trends are internalized and negotiated by individuals directly affected by policy decisions. In doing so, the study underscores the importance of incorporating stakeholder perspectives into language policy development, particularly in educational contexts where the impacts of such policies are most immediately experienced.

CONCLUSION

This study explored higher education students' perceptions of language policy and the global role of English. The findings indicate that English is widely perceived as a policy-regulated language that plays a central role in formal education, international communication, access to global information, and employment opportunities, reinforcing its status as a global lingua franca. At the same time, the results reveal students' awareness of the sociolinguistic implications of English expansion. While English is valued for its instrumental benefits, many respondents recognize its potential influence on local and national languages and therefore support bilingual or multilingual language policies that integrate English alongside other languages. This reflects a preference for balanced language policy approaches that accommodate global engagement while preserving linguistic diversity.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to language policy and global English scholarship by foregrounding student perceptions as a micro-level lens for understanding language policy outcomes. In practice, the findings suggest that policymakers and educators should adopt inclusive, context-sensitive language policies that promote English without marginalizing local languages. This study is limited by its small sample size and reliance on self-reported data. Future research may involve larger samples and mixed-methods approaches to examine further how language policy and global English are experienced across diverse educational contexts.

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