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## **Heritage Language and Ethnic Identity: A Study on Students' Ethnic Identity and Self-Identification in Jakarta**

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# Heritage Language and Ethnic Identity: A Study on Students' Ethnic Identity and Self-Identification in Jakarta

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on looking at how Indonesian students view themselves as Indonesians and as members of certain ethnic groups concerning their ability to speak in the local/heritage languages. This article also covers their attitude towards their heritage languages in comparison to English, as a foreign language. The data for this study were collected through paper-based questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. It is found that participants with the ability to speak in their local language felt more confident in stating their ethnic identity. There was also a lead to confusion of their ethnic identities, for those few who can't speak any local language. These youths are proud Indonesians, with their Indonesian languages. However, as predicted by Rini (2014), among other languages in Indonesia, English will still be a more important foreign language. This study adds that English appears to be more important than any local language to these Indonesian students.

**Key words:** language, heritage language, identity, ethnicity, ethnic identity

**Abstrak:** Studi ini berfokus pada bagaimana mahasiswa Indonesia memandang diri mereka sendiri sebagai orang Indonesia dan sebagai anggota kelompok etnis tertentu dalam kaitannya dengan kemampuan mereka untuk berbicara dalam bahasa daerah/warisan. Artikel ini juga mencakup sikap mereka terhadap bahasa daerah mereka dibandingkan dengan bahasa Inggris, sebagai bahasa asing. Data untuk penelitian ini dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner dan wawancara semi-terstruktur. Dalam studi ini ditemukan bahwa peserta dengan kemampuan berbicara dalam bahasa lokal mereka merasa lebih percaya diri dalam menyatakan identitas etnis mereka. Ada juga yang menunjukkan kebingungan tentang identitas etnis mereka, bagi beberapa orang yang tidak dapat berbicara bahasa

*daerah. Para mahasiswa ini bangga sebagai orang Indonesia, dengan bahasa Indonesia mereka. Namun, seperti yang diprediksi oleh Rini (2014, di antara bahasa-bahasa lain di Indonesia, bahasa Inggris masih akan menjadi bahasa asing yang dianggap lebih penting. Studi ini menambahkan bahwa bahasa Inggris tampaknya lebih penting daripada bahasa daerah apa pun bagi siswa Indonesia ini.*

**Kata kunci:** bahasa, bahasa warisan, identitas, etnis, identitas etnis

## INTRODUCTION

Ethnicity was once astounding when talking about Indonesia. Indonesia boasts its thousands of islands and hundreds of different ethnicities, not less than 1340 ethnicities (Kominfo, 2017). Recently, it was published that there have been 718 local languages identified all across Indonesia, and the number is still growing. With that many languages, Indonesia is second only to Papua New Guinea with the most languages spoken across the globe (Sunendar, 2019).

It is acknowledged that 14 local languages have perished, and 341 languages need more attention, as they are slowly dying. Sunendar claimed that it is likely due to our lack of awareness and knowledge of how vulnerable our cultural heritage is.

Bearing this in mind, it is interesting to find out how important these local languages from the young generation's perspective are. The government insists on preserving the diverse languages, but what about the youths? It is reported that currently, the youth (aged 19 - 30) sits as the highest population in Indonesia (Utomo, 2019).

This paper investigates how Indonesian youth look at the local/ethnic language in correlation to their identity, either as a member of their ethnic group or as Indonesian. The research questions are formulated as follows:

1. How do the languages they speak affect their identification of themselves?
2. What are the attitudes of Indonesian students towards their heritage languages?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Identity and Language

The simplest definition of identity is 'who I am.' Yet identity is far from simple. It's a complex subject (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2013). If someone asks me who I am, what comes to mind is that they want to know my name. If the person asking knows my name, then s/he to know more than just a name. Who are you? It is not easy to answer this question because whoever is deep is never completely grasped and articulated in words. Had I been asked these questions, I just said: "I'm Nancy. A woman, a teacher, a mother, an Indonesian, or a Christian. And on what do they rely on? I never really thought about it. As people think about identity, in the Indonesian context, many times it is "the ethnic". Physical features can be most easily identified. How do they look? What's your race? What's your ethnicity? Many times, I have been told, "You don't look like a Batakese" despite my answer to my ethnicity.

Identity is a complex subject (Tatum, 2000); it is what distinguishes us from one another, and at the same time it is what brings people together. It is developmental and changes over time. (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2013) describes identities formation at different stages; micro, meso, macro and global identities. The microelement is self-definition and interaction with individuals and issues from an individual or a personal point of view. The meso stage is where the identities of our cultures and/or our families are perceived, formed and challenged. The macro relations are between and from a national point of view between people, concerns and groups. Eventually, connecting people, problems, and groups from a global perspective is the global stage. (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2013) structured the social categories to present inequalities in the societies, divided them into the dominant and the subordinate (this domination is not discussed in this paper, though). In terms of language (as the last category) they claimed English as the dominant over all other languages. This might be true in the Indonesian context (a third world; a subordinate nation).

How important is language in shaping whom we think we are? The way we think influences the way we speak, but the influence also goes the other way. Research have shown that changing the way people speak affects their way of thinking. For example, teaching people new color terms improves their ability to discriminate colors. And a new way of speaking about time teaches people a new way of thinking about it. One way of dealing with this issue is to

study bilingual people. Studies have shown that bilinguals change their way of looking at the world depending on the language they speak (Boroditsky, 2011). Thus, language plays an important role in shaping the way we think. This includes the way we think of who we truly are. Another important element is the upbringing, the social setting where we were raised. The ability to speak a certain language gives another identity to the speaker (Rini, 2014). A broad connection exists between language and identification. Language defines the ethnic group that we belong to, our status in the social stratification, and also determines the power we hold in our society. Our social identity is created by our language and also our future possibilities are determined by language. With other factors placed in mind, language then plays a major role in determining who we are and what our future possibilities are.

## **B. Ethnic Identity and Heritage Language**

Decades ago Phinney (1990) reviewed 70 studies on ethnic identity. Ethnic identity is a dynamic, multidimensional structure that refers to one's identity or self-conception as part of an ethnic group. Ethnic identity varies in terms of development and meaning over time. This indicates a continuum of growth from early identification to immediate quest for a positive ethnic identity—typically in adolescence. The desired outcome of the cycle of ethnic identity creation is a stable and trustworthy sense of ethnicity. It is believed that this established sense of self as an ethnic group representative includes positive feelings about one's own and others and is a source of positive self-assessment. Ethnic identity is very important for immigrants, but over time and generations, it changes. Retention of ethnic identity for later generations of immigrants depend both on attitudes in the ethnic group and on a broader social or historical context. It seems to be more sensitive to a bicultural culture, including national identity. However, the analysis of ethnic identity is incomplete and work is not translated into different environments. Increased collaboration is needed among researchers from various countries.

Many studies have been conducted on how close ethnic identification and heritage language are. The studies I found were conducted concerning immigrants in the US setting. Brown (2009) discussed how Korean students did not feel secure to express themselves due to negative stereotypes towards their ethnicity. Therefore, their heritage language was also endangered as there was not enough room for them to express it. Lei (2013) on the other hand identified that heritage language learning could facilitate positive ethnic identification by the second generation of Chinese Americans. However,

learning and the use of heritage language does not necessarily lead to homogeneous ethnic identity. Those Chinese American youngsters were exposed to multilingual and multicultural environments. Their diverse experiences helped develop their overlapping or (even) conflicting identities, which could be often very hard for them to step out of that identity dilemma. Besides, their selection of language and participation in a community, therefore, was not set and static but fluent and conditional, because they adjust themselves in a multilingual and multiethnic culture to specific social, economic and political circumstances. In a quantitative study, it was also found that there is a positive relationship between Chinese heritage language proficiency and ethnic identity, as there was also a positive and strong relationship between self-esteem and ethnic identity (Yu, 2015).

## METHOD

This study adopts qualitative methodology as it tries to describe a phenomenon on the languages are spoken among some Indonesian students and how their languages affect their views on their identities. Due to the availability of access, the participants of this study were the students of a boarding academy. They were also members of the academy's English club, students in the second and fourth years of study.

The data for this study were collected through paper-based questionnaires distributed to 30 students, aged between 19 – 24 years old. Of the 30, 29 returned, and 27 were considered acceptable to be used as the source of the data.

The questionnaire comprises of 2 parts. The first part was open-ended questions on the languages they speak. The second part is close ended, on personal and communal identity. The latter part was adapted from a pre-made questionnaire (Cheek & Briggs, 2013).

The results of the questionnaires were tallied and tabulated using Microsoft Excel 2010, a simple user-friendly data processing tool. For further insight, 4 of the 27 participants were chosen to participate in a semi-structured interview. They were chosen based on their responses to the questionnaires. The 4 interviews were transcribed and used as an additional technique to support or to clarify the findings of the questionnaire.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### A. Languages and Self-Identification

Indonesian as the national language and English as the international language has overruled the local languages in Indonesia. Most of the students participating in this study reported speaking 2 to 3 languages. The languages they speak ranging from Indonesian, English, and local languages. Most of the respondents claimed Indonesian to be their first language, and only 3 claimed to acquire their local languages (Melayu, Balinese, and Javanese) as their mother tongue. In the second language, English has gained more attention. Only 3 participants admitted their local languages (Sundanese and Palembangnese) to be their second languages. Another 4 participants stated their local languages as their third languages, respectively Bataknesse, Makassarrese, and Javanese. English was more like a language learned at school as a subject or occasionally practiced at home with their parents. Indonesian was mainly used in the daily interaction and English used in classrooms or when interacting with fellow members of the English club, or as they put it on the questionnaire: to speak with certain people.

**Table 1:**  
**Languages spoken**

Languages	First	Second	Third
Indonesian	24	0	0
English	0	21	6
Local language	3	3	4
Other foreign languages	0	1	4

In addition to this finding, most of the respondents were not so keen in learning or acquiring their local (heritage) language. Most of them wanted to learn and acquire better English and or other foreign languages, like Mandarin, Korean, German, or Japanese. This statement is in contrast to their answers on whether their heritage/local languages should be preserved; they all agreed that those languages should be maintained. They didn't speak the language and did not think they wanted to learn the language. The answer could have occurred because they thought it would be an ideal answer to such questions. This finding confirmed Budianta's (2007) claim that Indonesian



has become the most important identity for the Indonesians of various ethnic groups.

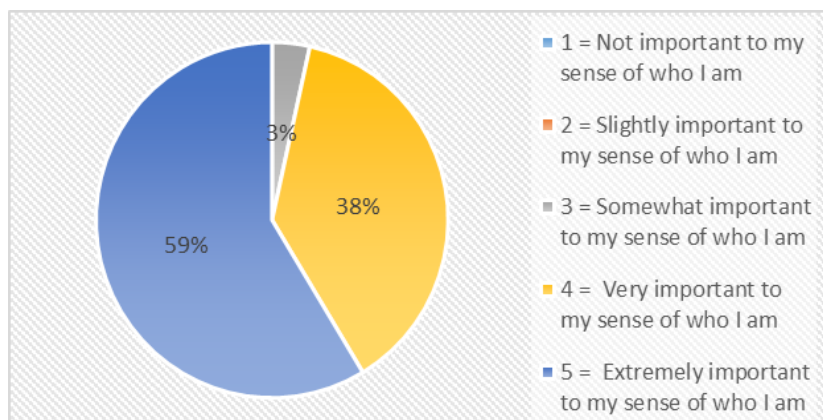
However, Komang (a pseudonym), whose first language was her local language insisted on heritage language maintenance. She thought everyone should maintain their local languages to preserve cultural diversity in Indonesia. She denoted that language was one of the unique features of cultures, besides the dances and the songs. The role of the parents at home was significant in her case. Despite being able to speak in English and other foreign languages, her parents trained their children to speak in their local language at home first, before other languages. She was proud of her ethnicity, as well as being able to communicate with people from different ethnic groups or foreigners.

There are two main approaches to the understanding of ethnic phenomena (Regmi, 2003). The primordialist approach considers common descent as the more important factor. The other approach is situational/subjective/instrumental. It emphasizes the members' perception of being different from others and its implications to the present status and the understanding of contemporary reality, but there are no final answers.

When asked about ethnicity, interesting answers came out. Indonesians used to adopt the patrilineal system. Yet, instead of having 11 different groups, there were only 10 ethnic groups claimed by the respondents. From one of my interviewees, Neneng (a pseudonym) stated that she even put Sunda as her ethnic group because her friend said that her ethnicity should follow her mother's. Even though her name sounded Sunda, she was not sure if she was Sundanese. Should she be allowed to choose, she preferred to identify herself as a Jakartan, where she lived, rather than a Sundanese. Steven (a pseudonym), another interviewee, was even more confused when asked about his ethnicity. He was not sure. He said he thought he was a Javanese because he lived in Jakarta, a city geographically located on Java Island. To them, ethnicity was more like a locality; the place they belong to, as it was also shown in their response to the part of the questionnaire, where they were asked on their collective and individual identity.

Different from what Hofstede claimed of Indonesian to be collectivist ("Hofstede Insights," n.d.), my young respondents showed more confidence at the personal level of identity than a collective one. The claim might be false or there might be a shift in culture dimensions of Indonesian (Mangundjaya, 2013). The following charts help explain the phenomenon.

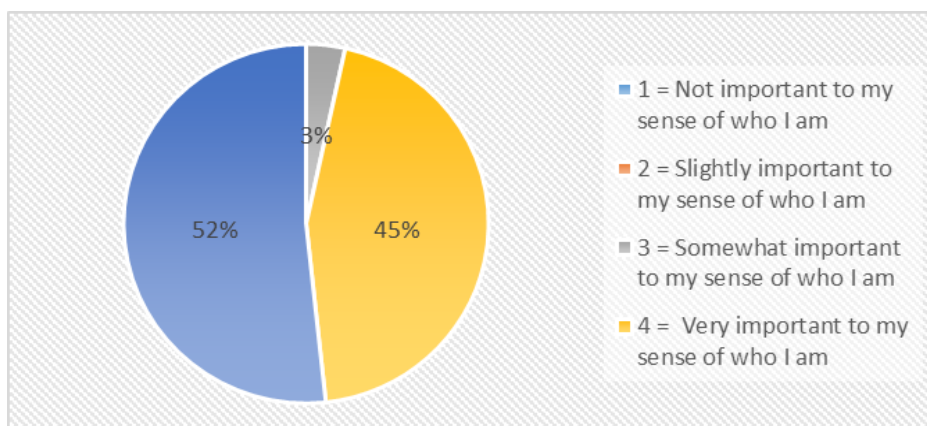




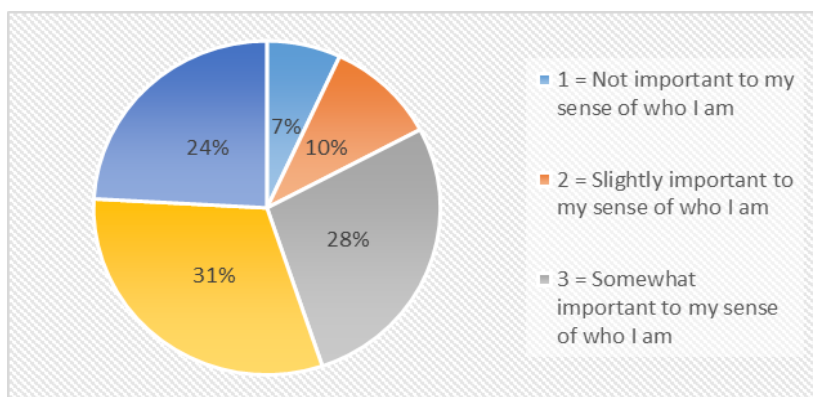
**Chart 1:**  
**Personal values and moral standards**

Their responses to statements related to their identity, of who they were, ranged from somewhat to extremely important, with the majority in the extremely important area. The responses have more varieties at the collective identity level.

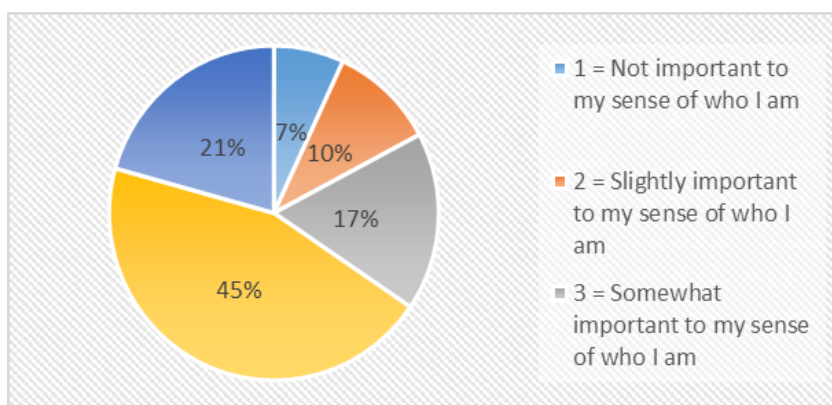
To some of them, race and ethnic background were not important at all. The place where they lived and were raised was even more important to their identity than their ethnic background. This could be the reason why most of my respondents stated that they were Betawi or Javanese because they lived in Jakarta. And it has not been related to any local/heritage languages.



**Chart 2:**  
**Personal self-evaluation/opinion**



**Chart 3:**  
**Race and ethnic background**



**Chart 4:**  
**Places where they were raised and lived**

In the questionnaire, Steven wrote that he spoke 2 languages: Indonesian and English. From the interview, I learned that he could speak 4 languages, adding 2 local languages (of Chinese origin) such as Konghu and Hokkien. These two Chinese origin languages have been acknowledged as Indonesian heritage languages (“Peta Bahasa,” n.d.). However, to Steven, they were family languages. Konghu was used to communicate within the family, and his mother spoke in Hokkien to his father. He thought those languages had no relation to any ethnicities. Again, he preferred to be identified as a Jakartan.

*Jadi ketika ditanya dari suku apa, (Steven) bingung harus jawab suku apa. Namun ketika ditanya (Steven) orang mana, (Steven) orang Jakarta.*

*Jika ditanya “who are you?” jawabannya “saya (Steven), orang Jakarta, keturunan Tionghoa, bisa bahasa Konghu dan Hokkien”. Identitas yang paling penting untuk saat ini bagi (Steven) adalah orang Jakarta. Lahir, besar dan tinggal di Jakarta. (Steven, 20 y.o)*

**Table 2:**  
**Claimed ethnic groups**

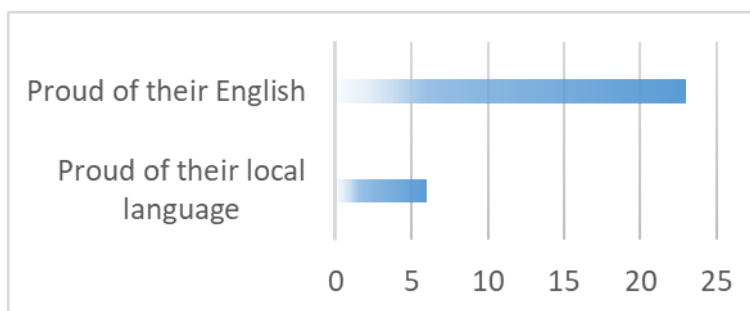
Father	11 groups: Manadonese, Balinese, Bataknese, Betawi, Riau, Javanese, Padang, Papuan, Palembangnese, Melayu, Minangnese
Mother	14 groups: Manadonese, Minangnese, Bataknese, Betawi, Sundanese, Riau, Javanese, Melayu, Palembangnese, Bugis, Balinese, Banjarese, Sumatran, Makassarese
Self-identified	10 groups: Manadonese, Balinese, Bataknese, Betawi, Javanese, Palembangnese, Melayu, Sundanese, Makassarese, Papuan.

The fact that most of them thought that the place where they lived (and were raised) played a more important role in shaping their collective identity has also shown in how they grouped themselves living the dormitory-life: birds of the same feathers flock together. Yet, the feathers discussed here were not the race or ethnic group background, but the place where they came from.

Instead of grouping based on their being Sundanese, Bataknese, or Javanese (this would have been an extremely large group), Mollucas, or Madurese, they flocked with the students from the same place. They had Lampung team, Bandung team, Bekasi, Borneo, and so on.

## **B. Attitudes towards Heritage Languages**

Although they claimed themselves to belong to a certain group of ethnicities, it did not always mean that they speak the local language. In practice, most of them were not aware that the languages were heritage to preserve. The contrast of how they feel about the languages is shown in the chart below:



**Chart 5:**  
**Reasons for having an ethnicity group**

Participants who did not speak their local languages stated that they wanted to acquire other foreign languages. They had no intention to acquire nor to learn about any local languages. As the opposite, respondents who spoke their local languages stated that they were proud of their local languages stated that they wanted to be better in their local languages.

*Kalau orang Indonesia tidak bisa berbahasa Indonesia akan menurunkan nilainya. Namun untuk orang daerah yang tidak menguasai bahasa daerahnya itu tidak mengurangi nilainya. (Neneng, 19 y.o)*

She thought that Indonesian people must be able to speak Indonesian, if not they would devalue themselves. However, it is not a problem if people can't speak their local languages. Your value would be the same. Despite claiming to be able to speak in 5 different languages, she ranked her Sundanese to be her fourth language, after Indonesian, English, and Korean.

All my respondents were proud of Indonesian, as shown in the above chart. However, most of them were looking forward to global communities and interactions. Instead of wanting to add local languages to their language repertoire, they wanted to learn more foreign languages, like Japanese, Mandarin, Korean, German, Dutch, French, Arabic, or Spanish.

English is still the most favorable language to learn among these students. Learning of English in Indonesia, especially for the youth, is like what (Crystal, 2006) describes the learning of English in Japan. Young children cannot avoid being exposed to English in such domains as advertising, television, the internet, and pop music, and inevitably develop a considerable passive knowledge of (some domains of) English.

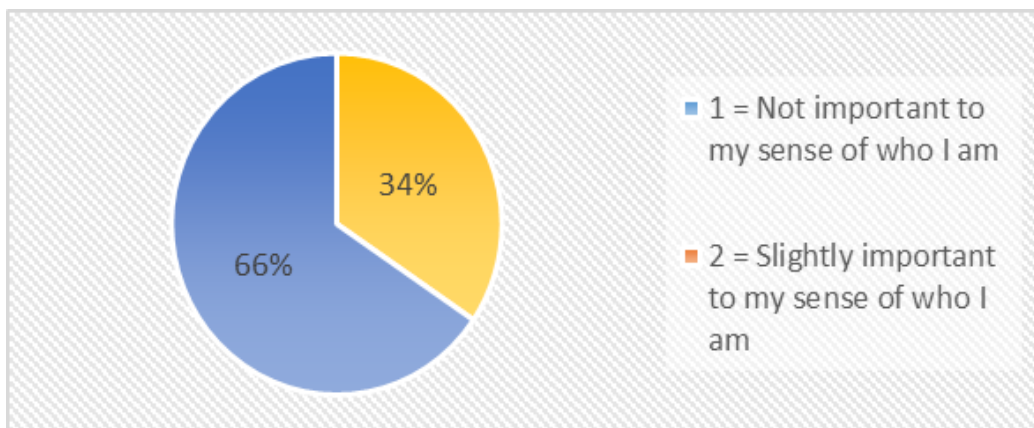


Chart 6:  
Pride to be an Indonesian citizen

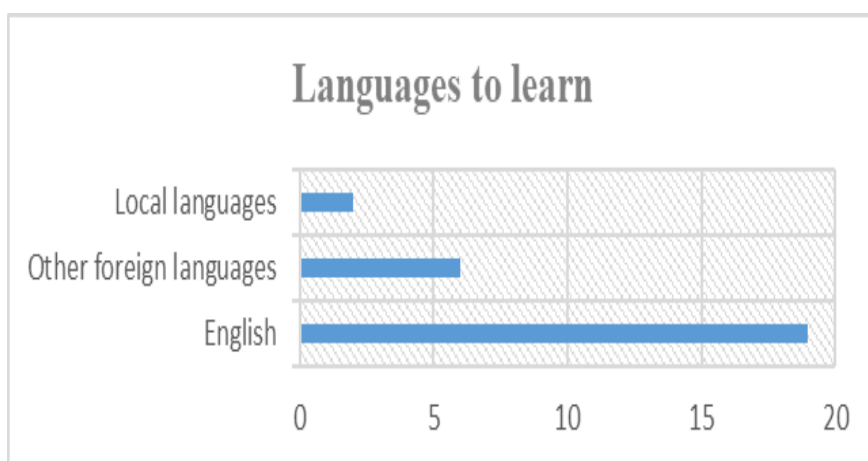
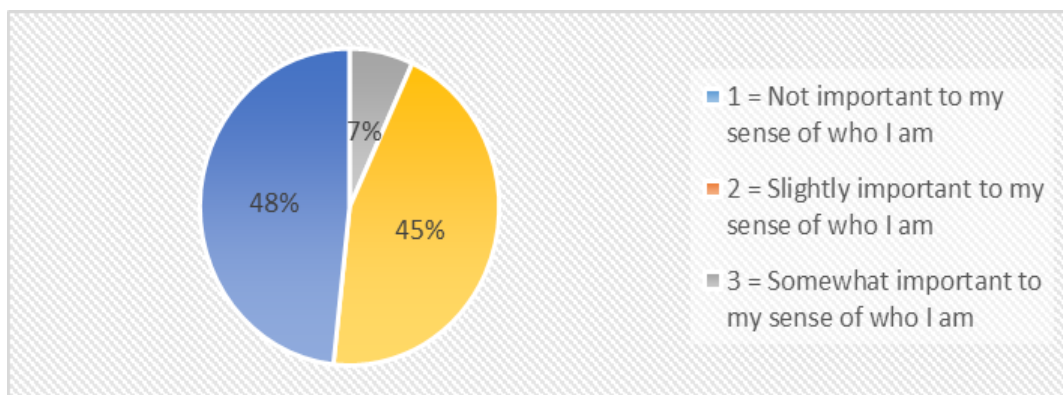


Chart 7:  
Languages to learn

There is an increased awareness of English vocabulary through the assimilation of loanwords into Japanese. And the popularity of English motivates a degree of spontaneous active (often non-standard) use, both in speech and writing, as when children (or adults) imitate discourse exchanges they have encountered in English-language films or make use of idiomatic expressions they have seen in Internet interactions. With the development of technology, the chance of learning English outside formal education increases. It is up to the people whether they want to use it or not.



**Chart 8:**  
**Being students who can speak English**

In addition to identity, being able to speak a foreign language, like English, gives a new identity. It distinguishes those who can speak English from those who can't. Those who speak English belong to a different group than those who do not. This is the identity they want to show. In Indonesia, mutual intelligibility and the need for identity go hand-in-hand; the difference in the need for identity is not on showing Indonesian accent, but on showing the ability to speak English (Rini, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

This study was initially aimed to find out how Indonesian youngsters see themselves as Indonesian as well as a member of their ethnic groups, related to the languages they speak. However, the findings as gathered from the questionnaires and interviews have led this to a slightly different direction, heritage language and the identification of their ethnicities. About the languages they speak, most respondents claimed that they can speak 2-3 languages. These languages included Indonesian as the first language, English as the second, and local languages as the third language. Indonesian was mostly used in all kinds of settings and for different purposes. English and the local languages were used in closed communities, within the family, or with friends from the same ethnic groups.

Most of them thought that it was of importance to maintain their local languages, but they mostly used Indonesian to interact in their communities. Even in the family, only a few of them are practicing the local language.



Participants with the ability to speak in their local language felt more confident in stating their ethnic identity. There was also a lead to confusion of their ethnic identities, for those few who can't speak any local language. As shown on the graphs, most of them thought the place where they lived was very important to who they were.

They are proud Indonesian, but they wanted to acquire English and other foreign languages, like Japanese, Korean, or German because they want to be a part of global communities. This includes being part of the global coverage of social media. These youths are proud Indonesians, with their Indonesian languages. However, as predicted by Rini (2014), among other languages in Indonesia, English will still be a more important foreign language. This study added that apparently English is even more important than any local languages in Indonesia.

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