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UNPACKING MULTILINGUAL INDONESIAN ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENGLISH AND ITS PROMISES

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Abstract
Issues regarding attitudes and perceptions about English and its cultural politics have been widely and significantly reported in literature. As an international language, English signifies multiple and complex benefits and challenges. This paper aims to extend the discussion by interrogating students' attitudes and unpack their views towards promises of English in Indonesian Islamic higher education (HE) settings. Participants in this study were undergraduate English Literature students who had engaged with the introductory principles of (Critical) Applied Linguistics (CPL). Data was collected through questionnaires (with closed and open-ended questions) from 58 participants, 19 males and 39 females, and semi-structured interviews with four students. The findings elucidated different views on varieties of English as students showed a quite moderate view of varieties of English from non-inner circle countries instead of treating them as something deficient. Dependency on native speakers' English variety, however, seems to be negotiated in that the participants view intelligibility as more important in communication than, for instance, correctness. Moreover, students in the present study view speaking English with a local accent as something acceptable. Although not absolutely certain, they still presume that having competence in English can offer better hope in their future.

Keywords: ELT, Indonesian Islamic higher education, multilingual student, promise of English

Introduction
Following the pursuit of international participation in the global arena, many countries, especially in the non-English-speaking West, have reformulated their language-in-education policy to favour English as an essential part of such a reform (Kirkpatrick, 2014). English is introduced as a compulsory subject in schools, as a medium of instruction for some courses, especially STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), or as a medium of communication in government sectors. Such a shift is documented in Nepal (Sah & Li, 2018), Brunei (McLellan, 2020),

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Malaysia (Hashim & Leitner, 2014), and Indonesia (Coleman, 2016; Musthafa et al., 2018). On the one hand, language-in-education policy reform that favours English exerts positive impacts on the growth of citizens' English language competence, which can further lead to social and economic returns. On the other hand, such a reform also entrenches the hegemonic power, currency, and status of English in the respective countries.

The rationale behind such a language policy reform is not always uniform from one country to another. There are often global, national, and sometimes very context-specific factors that contribute to and enable such a reform. Nonetheless, literature consistently records an aspiration and hope for English as an enabling vehicle—a linguistic capital that is believed to open more doors to economic markets and mobilities (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Bourdieu, 1991; O'Regan, 2021). English is often associated as a liberating tool for socio-economic disadvantages (Irham et al., 2022; Zacharias, 2013) or as crucial asset for entering competitive global economic markets (Irham, 2023a; Ricento, 2015). This condition has resulted in the valorisation of English currency, increasing demand for English competence, the massive spread of English Language Teaching (ELT) industry, and the commoditization as well as exploitation of English (Chowdhury & Phan, 2014; Phan, 2017).

In the Indonesian context, English maintains its hegemonic status as a desirable language to comprehend. It is indexed by, among others, the implementation of English subject at schools and campuses, higher demand for English teachers, EMI policy in some public and private universities, and mushrooming English courses that help sustain its position (Coleman, 2016; Dardjowidjodo, 2000). Some scholars have investigated the cultural politics of English in light of the aforementioned domains. For example, using Linguistic Imperialism (LI), Sugiharto (2015) scrutinizes the prevalent English hegemonic force in the EMI program administered by international pilot project state-run schools in Indonesia. He argues that English is both stirred by foreign forces and embraced from within by the participating parties in the enactment of international schools. This resonates with Zacharias' (2013) findings on the perpetuation of English dominance in the so-called international standard schools. It is also worth highlighting that the adamant perception of EMI as offering benefits of comprehension in both content subjects and competence in English often results in undesirable outcomes; not only are students psychologically burdened, they are vulnerable to gain no significant improvement in either English or content subjects (Floris, 2013; Irham & Wahyudi, 2023; Sah & Li, 2018).

Other studies highlight teachers' and students' perceptions of English in ELT practices. For example, Floris (2013), focusing on English course institutions, investigates English teachers' perceptions of English as an International Language (EIL). She finds that English native speakers (ENS) are preferred as the ideal English teacher, especially in teaching speaking skills, because they are perceived as standard role models. Her findings thus reflect native speakerism permeating in the under-researched context (Canagarajah & Said, 2011; Holliday, 2018). The similar outcome is also found in Ubaidillah's (2018) study on pre-service English teachers. He demonstrates that ENS are desired to teach speaking and pronunciation. Likewise, English teaching materials from the West receive more trust than those from local publishers. Put differently, this idealization of NES

shapes non-native English teachers as less desirable and often perceived as illegitimate. This condition illuminates (un)conscious dependency towards Inner Circle English and knowledge from the West and thus creates disciplinary power (Foucault 1980; see also Wahyudi & Chusna, 2018) as if ~~O~~thers are deficient, inferior, and incapable.

Irham (2023a) examines students' experiences of learning English in a remote bilingual *pesantren* – Islamic boarding school, using autobiographies. He argues that the English language teaching practices tend to be performed with mediocrity. Nevertheless, such mediocre ELT practices enable participating students to gain the power for transformation (see Phan, 2017 for more detailed discussion about transformative mediocrity). On a different research site, Farah and Sukarma (2020) investigate Indonesian Muslim students' motivation to study English. They elucidate that their respondents desire English in that it is perceived as important for job, career, and *dakwa*—spreading Islamic values through preaching. Farid and Lamb (2020), who investigate students' motivation to learn English in *pesantren*, also demonstrate a similar outcome as students embrace English for *dakwa*.

This paper does not aim to undermine the contribution and importance of English. English has also enabled some people to gain transformative power and become empowered (Irham, 2023b; Irham & Wahyudi, 2023; Phan 2017). However, with regard to English in ELT contexts, what should be noticed from earlier studies is the dearth of taking informants with sufficient understanding of critically-informed English language studies such as English as an International Language (EIL) or English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). The lack or limited understanding towards growth and dynamic development of English in academia often contributes to the positive association between English and Western-based ELT resources (Gao, 2017; Wahyudi, 2021b). Wahyudi (2021b) has advocated for the negotiation of teaching materials in his (critical) applied linguistic courses and has brought works related to applied linguistics which are informed by post-colonial or post-structural world views. His attempts to facilitate students with those critical works are reported to be essential in altering students' positioning towards the domination of English in the context of ELT.

By examining undergraduate English Literature students who have been equipped with introductory principles of (Critical) Applied Linguistics (CPL) such as binary opposition and unequal power relations of native vs. non-native speakers, multilingual intelligibility, and linguistic imperialism, this paper aims to further interrogate these students' attitudes towards English and unpack their views towards the promises of English. In addition, it is expected to add insights and nuances to Wahyudi's (2021b) critical autoethnographic work in strategically using readings and formulating questions in the middle and final test to provide students with more spaces to share their reflective notes and to advocate their views towards English language. Understanding views of students who have been introduced to key arguments in CPL may offer complex and nuanced positioning. While students may feel empowered and be open to localities as reported in Wahyudi (2021b), they may showcase ambivalence as what this paper will elaborate. Their perspectives are essential for challenging dominant native speakerism in ELT and supporting the call for ELF or EIL teaching (Musthafa et al., 2018; Zein, 2018), as both could provide significant benefits for multilingual speakers of English (Ishikawa, 2018; Wahyudi, 2021a, 2021b).

English language teaching in Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions

Numerous studies in regard with the attitude and perception of English have been conducted particularly in non-English speaking countries contexts (Jenkins, 2006; Mairi, 2016). Jenkins (2006) explored the perceptions of students, in the context of Japan, on variances in English output, specifically focusing on the transition from British English to non-native forms. Her findings revealed that students exhibited a preference for a native English accent and that non-native accents were not as favored. The accented English is subject to negative evaluation. Mairi (2016) who compared the perceptions of Indonesian and Japanese lecturers also found the similar trend.

In the context of Indonesia, there is a range of research related to perceptions of English, which encompass many topics such as attitudes and perceptions (Dewi, 2017; Lee et al., 2018; Mairi, 2016), as well as critical pedagogy and power relations (Mambu, 2019). Studies by Lee et al. (2018) and Mairi (2016) which involved students and pre-service teachers as the participants revealed a favorable disposition towards English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). The participants held the belief that positioning English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) or as an International Language, rather than as a foreign Language, can offer more advantages to individuals who are multilingual learners. This is due to the fact that ELF places a stronger emphasis on mutual intelligibility rather than strict adherence to prescriptive rules of accuracy. The utilization of Inner Circle English as the primary linguistic resources and the ubiquitous dictation in Indonesian English education environment has been extensively discussed in the works of Manara (2013) and Zein (2019). However, Dewi (2017) presented findings that contradicted the prevailing views on this matter. The findings of her study indicated that Indonesian English educators exhibit a preference for instructing their pupils in American or British English, despite their awareness of the existence of other English varieties. This preference can be attributed to the greater accessibility of American and British English materials compared to resources pertaining to other English varieties.

More recently, Irham et al. (2022) examined English language teachers' perceptions of English in the context of an Indonesian Islamic university. They demonstrated that English teachers had ambivalent views towards English from the Inner Circle as they acknowledged the easy access to materials and resources for teaching. At the same time, these teacher-participants also acknowledged the importance of accommodating ELF views into their classroom teaching practices to destabilize Inner Circle English which they found, to some extent, haunting during and surrounding their academic institution. Other studies have brought notions of critical and anti-mainstream ELT research in Indonesian Islamic universities. Being aware of the very context of Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia, which encouraged the integration as well as negotiation of Western values and Islam, Muhalim (2023) examined how English language teachers viewed religious values, in his case Islamic values, in relation to their ELT teaching. He argued that teaching approaches or methods that were inspired or influenced by religious beliefs had the potential to effectively challenge prevailing English ideologies and the entrenched dogmas they propagate. Likewise, Wahyudi (2021b) navigated and brought applied linguistic research which was informed by critical paradigms as well as post-structuralism into his class and facilitated students with

these materials to inform, invite, and critically rethink and revisit the dominant English and ELT teaching practices.

This paper aims to substantiate and investigate further how students, who have been informed by notions, works, and knowledge of (Critical) Applied Linguistics, position themselves and view English and other varieties of English. It also attempts to unpack their attitudes towards and promises of English beyond the classroom contexts

Method

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach in terms of the method of inquiry. Following Creswell, (2014), mixed-methods refer to the use of at least one quantitative and one qualitative method, respectively, to collect, analyze, and report findings. It also aligns with Johnson's et al.'s (2007) definition of mixed-methods as a combination of "elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, and inference techniques) for the broad purpose of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration." (p. 123). The use of this method is aimed at providing more rigorous and credible data sources, examinations, and interpretations of understudied phenomena.

The quantitative data was collected through questionnaires (with closed and open questions), while the qualitative data were gathered from semi-structured interviews. The online questionnaires, using Google Documents, were used and distributed to two cohorts of students who, at the time of data collection, were at the end of their sixth and eighth semesters. These students majored in English Literature at one of the State Islamic universities in East Java, Indonesia. By the end of the questionnaire, we asked respondents to put their email and contact number should they be willing to participate in semi-structured interviews. We only chose students who enrolled in Applied Linguistic courses in the even semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. This course was chosen because it was in this course that they were exposed, as reported by student-participants, to critical readings such as Canagarajah and Said's (2011) *Linguistic imperialism*, Cenoz and Gorter's (2017) *Minority languages and sustainable translanguaging: Threat or opportunity?*, and Pennycook's (2000) *English, politics, and ideology: From colonial celebration to postcolonial performativity*, among others. These readings were informed by critical post-structural theories which were therefore relevant for investigating the inquiry formulated in this study.

There were about 65 students in total who attended this course. 30 of them were already in the eight semesters, while other 35 students were at the end of the sixth semester when the data was collected. This number was reasonable in that this course was not an obligatory but an elective subject. We managed to receive responses from 58 participants, 19 males and 39 females were. They had different L1, ranging from Javanese (n= 30), Madurese (n=13), Indonesian (n= 8), and Sasak (n= 7).

Among 58 respondents, there were only a small number of students who demonstrated their interest in the face-to-face interviews. We understood that covid-19 situation at that time might affect their decision to participate or not in the interview. We then managed to interview four students (HN, SA, UZ, and RA, all pseudonyms) who were recruited voluntarily based on their given consent when

they filled out the questionnaire. During the interview, which lasted for about 15–25 minutes, all participants agreed to use Indonesian to help them express their opinions in a smooth manner and avoid potential misunderstandings if a foreign language like English is used (Wahyudi & Chusna, 2018). The interview data was translated into English by the researchers and was presented in this paper when discussing relevant findings. The data from both the questionnaire and interview were respectively analyzed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017), which we found helpful to examine emerging meanings or themes generated from both quantitative and qualitative data collection stages.

Findings and Discussion

Students' attitudes towards English

As a part of open-ended questions, participants were asked to share their opinion about English and other varieties of English, such as Singlish, Indian English, or Malay English. They elucidated a rather positive association with English, as they viewed it as *important*, *powerful*, and (may have the ability to) uplift social status. On the other hand, other varieties of English were viewed in a relatively wide range of ways, from *unique*, *different* from *UK or US accents*, to a *proof of diversity* as they are *just variety* of English. Although their view on English was to some extent similar to those in Farah and Sukarma's (2020) and Ubaidillah's (2018) studies, students in our study showed a rather moderate view on varieties of English in that these varieties were not treated as a deficit entity. In the following table, we present some of students' response to some of our open-ended questions regarding English.

Table 1. Students' perception on English and other varieties of English

I think English is ….	Frequency	I think other varieties of English, for example Singlish, Indian English, or Malay English, is …	Frequency
International language	11	Just variety	14
Important	8	Unique	10
Difficult but challenging	5	Typical characteristics of one country	6
Cool	4	A proof of diversity	3
Powerful	2	A variety that should be accepted	2
Can uplift social status	2	Different accent from UK or US	2

English has been promoted as an international and global language important for securing jobs worldwide. This discourse is evident, kicking, and circulated from one medium to another, from one teaching source to even other teaching practices (Gao, 2017; Wahyudi, 2021b). The data above illustrated that the promotion of English as a global and international language had, to some degree, helped shape students' views of English as an important and powerful tool. However, unlike those positive meanings of English, other varieties of English did not seem to have such an equal positive association. There was no response that indicated prominent role of English varieties from other circles, nor were there rosy promises of, for instance, mastering Malay English, compared to English from the Inner Circle

variety. O'regan (2021) has commented that the values attached to English are not a matter of the language per se but are also associated with the political and economic power of the country where the language is originated (Irham, 2023a). Although relatively lower, responses that denoted English as *powerful* and *can uplift social status* might be closely related to the status of English as a global lingua franca, commonly identified by its use in business and other international corporate matters (Chowdhury & Phan, 2014; Sah & Li, 2018). In the interview, RA argued

> *Yeah, I think it is important, and it has a powerful impact on our lives. It is now the international language that is used by many people for business, education, and others. Besides. it is also necessary if we want to work for an international*. (RA, 9/08/2021)

Aside from its international valorization, English was also regarded as a "cool" language. HN said that she felt awesome that she could use and speak English.

> *I don't know it just like cool to be able to speak English or to see people speaking in English* (HN, 9/08/2021)

Given the superior features of English and that other varieties of English do not possess and the Inner Circle's attachment to English, students' attitudes toward English can be characterized as colonial celebration (Pennycook, 2000). The metaphorical association of English as a "cool" language might reflect the crystallized perception and positive association of English varieties from the Inner Circle countries such as the UK or the US (Irham, 2023a; Wahyudi, 2021a). When further asked specifically about which accent they wanted to acquire when speaking English, 46% preferred the US, while another 27% considered that accent was not essential (see Figure 1 and 2). Moreover, such a colonial celebration position was also confirmed by their response to feel impressed and proud for colleagues who were able to speak English like natives.

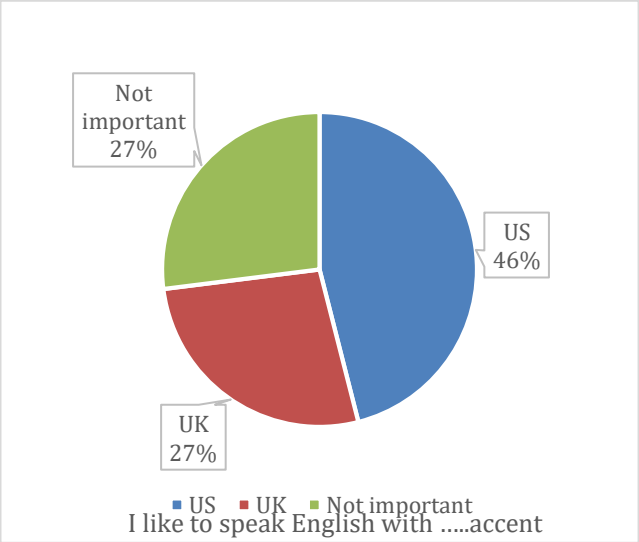


Figure 1. Preferred accent in speaking English

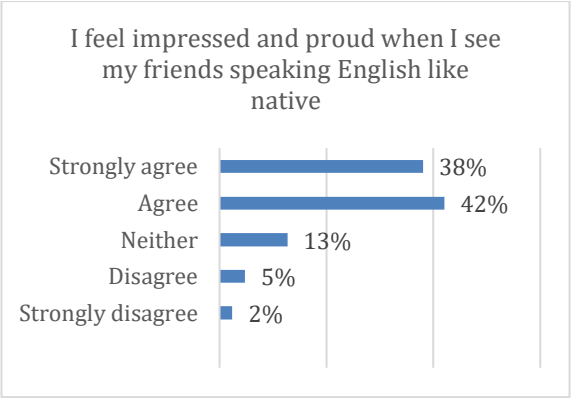


Figure 2. Preferred accent of friends'' speaking English

During the interview with UZ and ZA, they demonstrated that having the ability to speak English with a US or British accent often received more compliments.

> *It is just that people will see us and be like, Wow, you speak English like a native. There is a sense of pride in that sense that my effort in studying English is appreciated.* (ZA, 13/08/2021)

> *I prefer the US accent because it is easier. ….. I think it is amazing when I see a friend who can speak English with a US accent. The teachers tend to give good scores, perhaps if we speak like natives.* (UZ, 13/08/2021)

Unlike other informants, however, RA argued that it was not important to speak English with any accent as long as it was understandable. RA seemed to gain awareness of the EIL or ELF concept as she considered mutual intelligibility more important than nativeness.

> *To me, which accent to use is not important. The point is our interlocutor can understand what we say. I have experienced to talk with native, with the way how I speak English (she highlighted that her English is not like native), and it is no problem. They still understand.* (RA, 9/08/2021)

UZ's and ZA's comments resonated with the privileges of acquiring native-like English competence (Irham et al., 2022) that they might receive due to, consciously or not, the remaining deeply-rooted native speakerism ideology in Indonesian ELT practice (Coleman, 2016; Sugiharto, 2015). Wahyudi (2021a) argues that gatekeepers of English, such as English teachers and policymakers in Indonesia, still subscribe to this confronted ideology, although there has been a strong call for ELF, for instance, and growing interest in multilingualism as well as in critical approaches in ELT (Zein, 2018).

To further interrogate their positioning towards English and other varieties of English, we asked them to share their impressions when they noticed friends speaking English with a local accent. The question was made open so that we could gather the number varieties of responses from students. As seen in the table below (Table 2), their perception towards the incorporation of local accents in speaking was consistent with their view on varieties of English (see Table 1). Their classroom

seems to have helped them gain awareness of other varieties of English and thus tend to be more moderate, situating them as important but less desired (Irham, 2023b).

This finding may suggest that providing students with sufficient knowledge of EIL, ELF, and counter discourse from Critical Applied Linguistics can help raise students' awareness and critical positioning towards English. It corroborates Wahyudi's (2021b) argument that to detach from native speakerism and dependency on the West, teachers and students should have sufficient awareness and criticality to negotiate and appropriate ELT for the benefits of multilingual speakers with English. Through negotiating critical instructional activities to activate agency, Wahyudi (2021b) exemplifies his successful effort to encourage and raise students' critical awareness of latent linguistic imperialism in ELT so that they can shift from colonial celebration to post-colonial performativity (Pennycook, 2000).

Table 2. Students' impression on local accent in speaking English

When my friend(s) speak English with local accent, I feel …..	Frequency
Feel the same as when I speak in English	12
Just normal	10
That's okay	9
Appreciate their effort	5
Happy	2

Promises of English language competence

Inspired by other studies related to imagined promises of English competence (see Sah & Li, 2018; Zacharias, 2013) and the valorisation of English as a *linguistic capital* (Bourdieu, 1991), participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire about the potential benefits of English for job vacancies and socio-economic conditions (closed questions). The data demonstrated that more than half of the participants believed that English competence could open more chances for job deployment. However, it is also worth highlighting that 40 % (21% neither agree nor disagree, and 19% disagree) of them elucidate contradictory positioning, as demonstrated in Figure 3. It may also indicate there is uncertainty as to whether English competence can open more doors for vacancies.

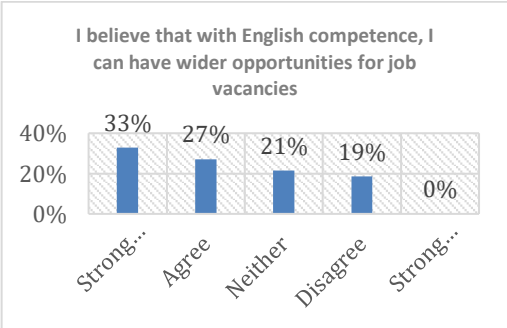


Figure 3. Students' response on promise of English

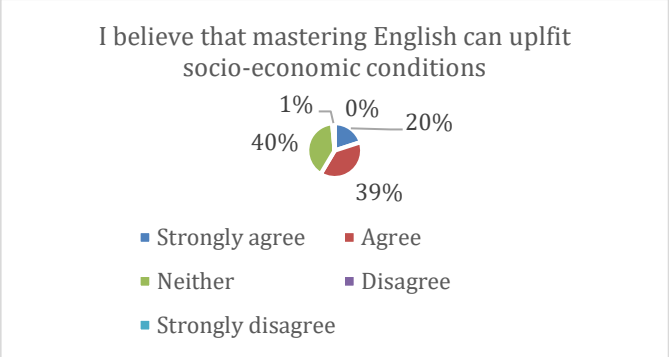


Figure 4. Students' response on English and economic return

A similar result was also found for the second question on promises of English as to whether it could uplift socio-economic conditions. More than 60% of participants agreed (agree and strongly agree) that English was helpful for improving socio-economic status. Nonetheless, the data also demonstrated that nearly half of the participants were not sure about this promise, as indicated by their responses as neither agrees 40%, agree 39%, or disagrees 1% (see Figure 4).

In the interview, RA, ZA, and UZ shared different opinions about this matter.

> *Now I work as a content writer, and I find that English skills are very important. But whether English can improve economic status, I'm not that sure. I think it is good for social status because sometimes people look at and appreciate our English skills more.* (RA, 9/08/2021)

> *As I know now, many jobs require English. Also, maybe English can be considered for a job or position promotion. So yes, I think it can help improve socio-economic status.* (ZA, 13/08/2021)

> *If we can work for an international company and get paid in dollars, of course the salary is far higher than working for a local company with an IDR salary. And to work there, we need English. I think it is still related: English competence and our future fate.* (UZ, 13/08/2021)

Their responses, to one extent, explicated that promises of English did exist out there, although they did not elaborate further as to how such acquisition of English competence might guarantee success outside the classroom and secure economic advantages. As for RA, she realized the importance of English in her current job and viewed it as a privilege because it was her English competence that enabled her to be appreciated and valued. However, she was not sure whether English could also give her privileges due to the economic situation. On the other hand, ZA and UZ perceived English as a helpful tool for upgrading socio-economic status given the high demand for English in job vacancies and potential employment in the international company. Though to some extent it might be true (Li, 2021), they do not realize that the number of vacancies that require English competence is rather small, and success in the workplace does not necessarily correspond to having competence in English (Kubota, 2011; Ricento, 2015). Students' comments also mark the necessity of English language skills in the recent globalized world and showcase subtle negotiation upon the promotion of English benefits. Their

subscription to the perceived benefits of English seems to shape their view that English competence is a password for success. Kubota (2011), however, has elucidated that having competence in English per se does not guarantee one's success in the workplace. Ricento (2015, p. 37) further adds that job vacancies that require English language competence are "small compared to the number of workers seeking for jobs worldwide".

To that end, even though the participants may have sufficient understanding of such unequal power relations in English and ELT from courses or readings in CPL they have enrolled in, it does not seem sufficient to detach from the shadow of English hegemony, the inner circle of English in particular. At least, their encounter to some introductory principles of CPL that challenge native-speakerism has helped them develop a moderate and tolerant view towards other varieties of English, correctness, and native-likeness. These three ideas have predominantly haunted English language education in Indonesian contexts (Irham et al., 2022; Irham, 2023a, 2022, Sugiharto, 2015; Wahyudi, 2021a, 2021b). Nevertheless, promises and the valorisation of English appear too robust to resist, and thus, students in the present study still hold strong hopes for the benefits of English outside classrooms. There might be some factors influencing this perception including but not limited to, for instance, the fact that English has been and seems to be until the long future, used in diverse domains for diverse purposes. Nevertheless, competence of English does not always correspond to the attainment of socio-economic benefits, as it often intertwines with complex components instead of linguistic aspects alone.

However, this argument does not aim to neglect the social and cultural benefits that English language competence may have impacted and been helpful for individual transformations (Phan, 2017). It is instead to emphasize that the contribution of English to one's success, or failure, may be different in degree, space, and time. Therefore, teaching English should not be viewed monolithically but should be situated and understood within complex socio-political relations (Sah & Li, 2018; Wahyudi, 2021b). It is also further to substantiate Wahyudi's (2021b) finding and reaffirm the importance of critically-informed works, English teachers' awareness and persistent commitment, and students' willingness to welcome alternative understanding in regard to English language domination in teaching (and research).

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that participants' background knowledge related to power, currency, and the status of English may influence their attitudes and perceptions. Informants in this study who have engaged introductory key notions of (Critical) Applied Linguistics elicited different views on English from other circles, as they showed a quite moderate view instead of treating them as something deficit, negative, or undesired. Moreover, although some responses still highlight the domination of and pride towards English variety of the inner circle English, dependency on the native speakers' English, which is marked with the preference of inner circle English accent, seems to be negotiated as the participant regards intelligibility as more important in communication. Moreover, they also view speaking English with a local accent as something acceptable, as the linguistic reality of multilingual speakers.

In regard to the promises of English, however, the participants still believe that having abilities in English can offer better hope for their future. They are convinced that English is important to improve economic status because some job vacancies require English language competence, although previous studies state otherwise. It is also advisable that, to detach from native speakers' regime and dependency, all stakeholders in ELT—teachers, students, and policymakers—be able to activate agency and appropriate knowledge from the West for the benefits of multilingual speakers with English. The *trans-*, critical pedagogy, or decolonialization (Sah & Fang, 2024) movement in ELT can be considered and further endorsed as they are potential for accommodating more dialogic space for ELT practices.

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