# English proficiency gaps between local and transmigrant students: A sociolinguistic case study

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**Abstract**
*This study explores the disparity in English language proficiency between local and transmigrant students at STIES Mitra Karya Bekasi through a sociolinguistic lens. A qualitative case study approach was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to gather comprehensive data. The findings reveal that local students demonstrate stronger English language skills compared to their transmigrant counterparts. This gap is influenced by differences in educational backgrounds, unequal access to learning resources, and psychological factors such as self-confidence. To address these challenges, the study recommends several strategies, including supplementary language classes, peer tutoring programs, contextualized English instruction, public speaking training, and the implementation of inclusive institutional policies. These interventions aim to bridge the language gap and foster a more equitable and supportive academic environment for all students. The study highlights the urgent need for adaptive pedagogical approaches in multilingual and multicultural higher education settings. It contributes significantly to the fields of sociolinguistics and multicultural education policy by offering practical insights into promoting linguistic equity and inclusion in academic institutions.*

*Keywords: English language; proficiency gap; local students; transmigrant students; sociolinguistics; multicultural education*

## INTRODUCTION

English, as the global lingua franca, has become an indispensable skill in modern higher education and professional spheres (Nemes, 2024; Wahyuningsih & Ziyana Untsa, 2023). Its strategic role in academic publishing, international communication, and global workforce mobility positions English language proficiency as a core competency for all university students (Abbas et al., 2021; Moshtari & Safarpour, 2024; Naghdipour, 2021). In the Indonesian academic context, the growing integration of English within higher education demands institutional readiness and student competence to meet the challenges of educational globalization (Ali, 2021; Kusumaputri et al., 2021). Although English is formally introduced as early as primary school, university-level proficiency remains inadequate. This disparity often stems from geographic and infrastructural

inequalities in access to quality education, highlighting the role of social and economic factors beyond curricular implementation (Kumar et al., 2024; Mishra, 2023).

Bekasi, a rapidly industrializing urban center in West Java, exemplifies a sociocultural environment shaped by global interactions through industry, media, and technology (Novia, 2024; Purwani Setyaningrum et al., 2024). Students raised in such urban settings generally have greater exposure to English from an early age via private institutions, digital content, and cross-cultural communication (Farhansyah et al., 2023; Huseynova et al., 2024; Nursyam et al., 2024; Rufaidah et al., 2023). This early exposure correlates positively with improved speaking and vocabulary skills, giving urban students a significant advantage in English-based academic contexts and international learning environments. Conversely, students from regions with limited exposure face pronounced linguistic challenges, necessitating a deeper investigation into how environmental factors shape linguistic competence in higher education.

Students originating from transmigrant or remote regions often struggle to acquire academic English due to limited access to quality resources and a lack of qualified educators (Tania, 2025). Hidayati (2018) notes that students from marginalized areas experience heightened anxiety in learning English, particularly in oral communication. Psychological barriers such as low self-confidence and social pressure further hinder their academic performance. Some students even struggle with basic pronunciation and sentence construction, leading to social exclusion within classrooms that should ideally be inclusive and collaborative. This study therefore centers their experiences to illuminate underlying disparities often overlooked in formal academic assessments (Andrian, 2022; Hidayati, 2018; Ningsih et al., 2017; Simson Supardi et al., n.d.).

Despite a standardized national English curriculum, learning outcomes vary significantly across student groups, reflecting systemic failure to accommodate local contexts and student-specific needs (Agus Santosa, 2017; Noviarini, 2025; Rachmawati & Fibriyani, 2018). Uniform pedagogical approaches have unintentionally deepened the divide among learners, particularly disadvantaging those from rural or economically challenged backgrounds (Alya Audria & Zaitun Qamariah, 2023; Gore et al., 2022; Khulel, 2021; Munir et al., 2023). This study critically examines these homogeneous practices and advocates for contextual, student-centered pedagogies as the foundation for a more equitable educational system. The research aims to contribute to curriculum reform that is adaptive and responsive to student diversity.

In the broader framework of higher education internationalization, institutions are expected to foster inclusive academic environments that promote equitable English language development. Yet, many universities lack comprehensive strategies to address student diversity. Conventional English training programs often neglect students with low baseline proficiency, resulting in disengagement and academic exclusion. This study therefore promotes a shift toward empowering all students through participatory and empathetic learning practices.

The novelty of this research lies in its sociolinguistic exploration of English proficiency gaps between local and transmigrant students within an industrial urban context. It examines how social, cultural, and environmental factors influence students' experiences and perceptions of English learning in higher education. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on cognitive or outcome-based metrics, this research delves into the emotional, social, and identity-related dimensions of academic language use. Centering on students' lived experiences, the study offers a more holistic understanding of English language disparities in multicultural academic settings. The findings aim to inform higher education policy reforms that prioritize inclusivity and linguistic justice, enabling institutions to bridge language gaps and cultivate more equitable and transformative academic spaces.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design to explore in depth the disparities in English language proficiency between local and transmigrant university students within an industrial urban context. The selection of participants was carried out purposively, involving 10 local students and 10 transmigrant students who met the criteria of active participation in English-language courses and originated from distinctly different socio-geographic backgrounds. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, participant observation in classrooms and academic activities, and documentation of English-language grades and assignments. A triangulation strategy was employed to ensure the validity of the data, by cross-verifying the findings obtained from the three aforementioned techniques. The data collected is descriptive in nature and aims to capture the underlying meanings behind students' personal and social experiences.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, comprising three key stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction began at the outset of data collection, wherein relevant information was sorted in alignment with the study's focal concerns. Data display was conducted through the organization of narrative accounts, thematic tables, and interview quotations to identify recurring patterns and emerging themes. Conclusion drawing was carried out in iterative stages and verified through triangulation and member checking to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the findings. This analytical process was repeated until a comprehensive understanding was reached regarding the dynamics of English language learning among both student groups.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
### Result
### *Disparities in English language proficiency between Local and Transmigrant Students*

The findings of this study reveal a significant gap in English language proficiency between local and transmigrant students at STIES Mitra Karya Bekasi. Local students generally exhibit stronger competencies, particularly in speaking and writing skills. They tend to be more active in classroom discussions, demonstrate higher confidence during presentations, and are capable of constructing more complex English sentence structures. In contrast, transmigrant students are typically more passive, and in oral tasks, they frequently resort to using the Indonesian language.

One local student commented, "I've been taking English courses since junior high school and often use English on social media, so I don't feel too stiff during classes." (Interview, ML-04). This statement illustrates how early exposure to English learning and regular use in daily life contribute positively to confidence and language mastery.

Additional interviews with other local students revealed that family environment also plays a significant role in English language development. One student noted, "At home, my older sibling often teaches me English, especially now with so many films and YouTube videos that help with learning. So when I entered college, it wasn't a big shock." (Interview, ML-06). Documentation of English assignment scores showed that ML-06 earned the highest mark in the group presentation task, scoring 92 out of 100. Classroom observation further confirmed that ML-06 actively contributed to discussions in English, even when the subject matter was abstract. These findings reinforce the notion that familial support and access to informal learning resources are critical determinants of English language success among local students.

On the other hand, transmigrant students face more substantial challenges. One respondent shared, "I only started learning English seriously in college. Back in my village, it wasn't really taught, so I still get confused when I have to speak or write at length." (Interview, MT-02). The lack of prior learning experience poses a significant barrier to adapting to the academic demands of higher education.

Follow-up interviews with other transmigrant students highlighted infrastructural limitations as a major contributing factor. "In my area, even getting an internet signal was difficult, let alone learning from YouTube or joining online courses. That's why I feel left behind compared to friends from the city," explained one student (Interview, MT-07). Grade records show that MT-07 scored 68 on the final English exam. Observations indicate that during group discussions, MT-07 tended to remain passive and often delegated presentation responsibilities to peers.

In conclusion, the disparity in English language proficiency between local and transmigrant students is shaped by several factors, including prior educational background, family support, access to technology, and previous learning environments. Local students benefit from a more supportive context and broader access to English-language learning media, while transmigrant students face structural barriers that hinder their optimal language development.

### *Contributing factors to the disparity in English language proficiency*

Through in-depth interviews, grade documentation, and participatory classroom observation, this study identifies several primary factors contributing to the disparity in English language proficiency between local and transmigrant students at STIES Mitra Karya Bekasi.

First, differences in educational background emerged as a key determinant. Local students generally come from schools equipped with more adequate English learning facilities and greater access to language courses. One local student stated:

*"During senior high school, I participated in a bilingual program and joined an English extracurricular club, so I was already used to listening and speaking in English." (Interview, ML-03).*

In stark contrast, a transmigrant student described a much less supportive environment:

*"Back in my school, the English teacher was often absent, and even when present, the lessons were limited to textbook reading. We never had speaking practice." (Interview, MT-05).*

Second, exposure to English outside the classroom significantly influenced students' language development. Local students were more frequently exposed to English-language content via social media, films, and various online platforms, enhancing their vocabulary acquisition and daily usage. One student (ML-01) noted:

*"I often watch videos from abroad, and sometimes learn from English TikToks or podcasts. It really helps expand my vocabulary."*

Conversely, MT-06 shared the limitations faced in their hometown:

*"Back in my area, the internet signal was weak, so it was rare for me to access YouTube or download learning apps."*

Third, psychological factors such as self-confidence played a substantial role. Transmigrant students exhibited high levels of anxiety and hesitation when asked to speak in English. Classroom observations showed that they often avoided eye contact with instructors during Q&A sessions and remained silent during group discussions that required English communication. MT-03 expressed:

*"I'm afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at, so I'd rather stay quiet when asked to speak in English."*

In contrast, local students appeared more confident, even when making errors. This suggests that previous exposure and supportive environments positively shape students' willingness to participate.

Fourth, family support and social environment were influential. Local students often received encouragement from their families to master English, viewing it as essential for academic and career advancement. ML-05 stated:

*"My mom always said that nowadays, everything requires English. So from a young age, I was told to take courses and watch foreign movies."*

Transmigrant students, on the other hand, were typically burdened with socioeconomic adjustments, prioritizing part-time work or family responsibilities over language learning. As MT-04 described:

*"My family prioritizes me getting a part-time job or helping out at home, not learning English. So I barely have time to study more."*

Documented English grades further confirm this divide: local students averaged above 80, while transmigrant students scored between 60 and 75. Observations across three English class sessions revealed that local students accounted for approximately 80% of total classroom interactions, compared to only 20% from transmigrant students.

In conclusion, the disparity in English language proficiency between these two student groups is not solely rooted in academic factors. Rather, it is shaped by a complex interplay of environmental, psychological, and social dimensions. Therefore, comprehensive institutional interventions are necessary to foster an inclusive learning environment and promote equitable English language development for all students.

### Institutional strategies to address the proficiency gap

Based on the research findings, several strategies can be implemented by STIES Mitra Karya Bekasi to mitigate the English language proficiency gap between local and transmigrant students.

First, the establishment of *bridging classes* is essential for students with limited foundational English skills. Transmigrant students responded positively to this initiative. *"If the campus could provide additional classes or peer tutoring, I'd definitely join. I really want to be as fluent as my friends who speak English well." (Interview, MT-07).*

Documented academic records also reveal that the majority of students scoring below 70 in English had never participated in any formal English language courses. These bridging classes should focus on developing practical competencies, such as basic conversation skills and reading comprehension.

Second, the implementation of a *peer tutoring* model presents a promising strategy. Proficient local students could be engaged as peer tutors for their transmigrant counterparts. Observations of mixed-group interactions indicate that transmigrant students were more active and confident when collaborating with supportive local peers. As one student noted:

*"I don't mind helping my friends; it actually helps me practice too. Sometimes I understand better when I'm explaining it to someone else." (Interview, ML-05).*

Third, the application of *contextualized learning* that links English material to real-life student experiences is crucial. MT-04 emphasized:

*"If the English lessons are related to everyday situations, I understand them faster. But when it's too theoretical, I get confused."*

This observation is reinforced by the English lecturer's notes, which recorded a notable increase in classroom engagement when lessons incorporated relatable content, such as role-playing shopping dialogues or job interview scenarios.

Fourth, *public speaking training* and English workshops aimed at enhancing self-confidence are greatly needed. Several transmigrant students reported that their nervousness stemmed not from a lack of knowledge, but from a fear of being judged. *"I actually know what to say, but when I have to speak in public, I blank out. Maybe if I practiced more often, I'd feel more confident." (Interview, MT-02).*

By offering such training regularly, the institution can help students develop both formal and informal speaking skills in a supportive environment.

Fifth, the formation of an *English Club* or informal discussion groups is also a vital avenue for creating an inclusive learning community. Extracurricular activity documentation shows that past English club participation was limited to a small group of local students. With a more relaxed approach and engaging activities, such clubs could attract broader student involvement. One local student suggested: *"If the club activities were more relaxed like watching English movies together and discussing them I think more students would join." (Interview, ML-06).*

In conclusion, strengthening English language capacity requires more than curricular intervention. It must be supported by institutional policies that are inclusive, participatory, and sustainable. Collaborative efforts among lecturers, students, and campus administrators are vital to fostering an academic environment that ensures equitable access and comprehensive language skill development for all learners.

## Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a significant gap in English language proficiency between local and transmigrant students at STIES Mitra Karya Bekasi. Local students generally demonstrate stronger abilities, particularly in speaking and writing skills. This advantage is largely attributed to their educational background and a more supportive learning environment, such as access to language courses, frequent use of English-based social media, and regular exposure to English-language content. These results align with findings that non-formal English exposure, such as through digital media, significantly contributes to language development (Meleshko, 2022). Moreover, previous experience and habitual use of English provide local students with a competitive edge in academic settings.

In contrast, transmigrant students exhibit considerable limitations in their English skills, including pronunciation, sentence construction, and oral expression. Most of these students come from regions with limited access to English learning facilities, and many only began studying the language seriously upon entering higher education. This finding is in line with research showing that students from underdeveloped areas tend to have lower English proficiency due to inadequate educational infrastructure and limited access

to technology (Berliana et al., 2024). In this context, geographic disparity and educational inequality are fundamental causes of the existing proficiency gap. Transmigrant students often prioritize social and economic adaptation over English language acquisition.

Psychological factors also play a crucial role in widening this gap. Transmigrant students often struggle with low self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, and a tendency to avoid tasks that require active English communication. In contrast, local students accustomed to English exposure tend to display greater self-assurance in discussions and presentations. This finding supports research showing a strong correlation between self-confidence and oral English proficiency, where low self-confidence can hinder language acquisition due to students' reluctance to practice (Alam et al., 2021).

In response to this disparity, the institution plays a critical role in providing inclusive and sustainable learning support strategies. Bridging classes, peer tutoring programs, and public speaking workshops are among the recommended approaches to support transmigrant students' language development. This is supported by a study showing that peer tutoring effectively enhances both confidence and speaking skills in less confident learners (Anam, 2020). Additionally, contextual teaching strategies that connect learning materials to everyday life have been shown to increase student engagement and comprehension (Utami et al., 2023). Thus, teaching policies and methodologies must be tailored to the diverse backgrounds and needs of students.

Overall, this study provides significant insights into the issue of language education disparities in higher education. The findings not only reflect the conditions at STIES Mitra Karya Bekasi but also resonate with similar realities faced by many other institutions serving students from diverse social and geographic backgrounds. With appropriate strategies, higher education institutions can serve as agents of change in promoting equity in English language learning. This study supports the view that equitable access to language education is essential for developing a globally competitive human resource base (Chemulwo & Ali, 2019). Therefore, implementing policies grounded in the actual needs of students is a vital step toward fostering an inclusive and transformative academic environment.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the gap in English language proficiency between local and transmigrant students at STIES Mitra Karya Bekasi is influenced by a combination of structural and psychological factors. Educational background, access to learning resources, and social environmental support play a significant role in shaping students' language competence. Local students exhibit higher levels of English proficiency, largely due to more consistent and early exposure to the language. In contrast, transmigrant students face considerable limitations arising from geographical barriers, lack of adequate learning facilities, and low self-confidence in language practice.

Higher education institutions hold a strategic responsibility in addressing this disparity by implementing inclusive and adaptive approaches to language instruction. Targeted interventions tailored to students' diverse backgrounds are essential in narrowing the proficiency gap. With appropriate support, it is expected that an equitable academic environment can be established, one that accommodates the linguistic needs of all students fairly and effectively.

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