

The Urge to learn English: Breaking the Stigma of English as Bahasa Kafir (Infidel Language)

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The Urge to learn English: Breaking the Stigma of English as *Bahasa Kafir* (Infidel Language)

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Abstract: English is often considered a "Bahasa Kafir" or infidel language and is associated with Western values conflicted with certain religious beliefs. This literature research explores the origins of this stigma and why English is perceived as such. This article aims to break the stigma associated with English by analyzing cultural, historical, and religious contexts. Through a literature review, researchers highlight the importance of understanding that language is a universal communication tool not tied to a particular religion or culture. In contrast, English has values that transcend cultural and religious boundaries. Although such stigma can hinder access to educational and professional opportunities, a deeper understanding of English can broaden our view of the world, open the door to cross-cultural collaboration, and promote a deeper understanding of human diversity. Therefore, examining why English is considered a "Bahasa kafir" can provide valuable insight into how cultural biases and prejudices can influence how people think and interact.

Keywords: Stigma, English language, Bahasa kafir, Infidel language

INTRODUCTION

Stigma is a concept that has long been a subject of interest in social studies and psychology. According to Goffman (1963:3), 'stigma' describes 'the situation of an individual falling short of complete social acceptance'. Foucault (1976:65) sees "Stigma, then, is the way we group people into categories of normal and abnormal, "Stigma is a concept that has long been a subject of interest in social studies and psychology. According to Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman (1963:3), 'stigma' describes 'the situation of an individual falling short of complete social acceptance'. Foucault (1976:65) sees "Stigma, then, is the way we group people into categories of normal and abnormal." At the same time, Zola (1972:487) states, "Stigma is a phenomenon in which individuals with attributes highly disfavoured by their society are rejected due to these attributes. In a social context, stigma refers to a negative mark or label attached to a particular individual or group, often resulting in discrimination or exclusion from society. This phenomenon can occur in various aspects of life, including intercultural relations and perceptions of language.

Muslims, especially in English language learning contexts, face various forms of stigma. Intersectional stigma in Muslim communities involves complex relationships between race/ethnicity, gender, class, religion, and health status (Çiftçi et al., 2013). Concerns have been raised about the impact of learning English on Muslim youth (Elyas, 2014). Muslim women can respond to stigma through compensation and circumvention, such as working hard to resist stigma and avoiding detrimental situations (Weichselbaumer, 2019). Stigma based on religious

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group membership can influence Muslims' affiliation with the dominant society and their religious group (Stojkow, 2019).

The perceived influence of English on Islamic identity and values among Muslim students varies. Many students do not feel the effects on their identity and values (Jailani et al., 2020). Internalized stigma negatively influences attitudes and intentions to seek psychological help among Western Muslims (Zia & Mackenzie, 2024). Stigma against Muslims can come from both non-Muslims and other Muslims (Casey, 2017). The stigma of mental illness and treatment in Muslim immigrant communities is deeply rooted (Amri & Bemak, 2013).

In English language teaching, integrating Islamic values is essential to maintaining religious values among Muslim teachers and students (Irawan, 2020). English is widely used among Muslims, with millions of people using it as a first or second language, leading to more Islamic books published in English (Hasan, 2014). The emergence of English in Muslim countries has raised concerns about potential cultural influence (Alsolami, 2020). The English used in Pakistan is said to reflect Islamic values and South Asian Islamic sensitivities (Mahboob, 2009). Muslims, especially Muslim women, navigate collective stigmatization and attempt to combat anti-Islamic stigma (Ryan, 2011). The experience of stigma can strengthen a shared sense of in-group minority identity among Muslim women (Chapman, 2016). Overall, the stigma faced by Muslims concerning English is diverse, impacting various aspects of their identity, values, and interactions in society.

In Indonesia, one of the prominent stigmas is the perception that English is a "Bahasa kafir". This stigma reflects the belief that English is a symbol of Western culture that is at odds with dominant religious values in Indonesia. While these views may emerge in various contexts, including political, educational, and cultural discussions, it is essential to understand the origins and implications of this stigma. The stigmatization reflects social and cultural complexity and dynamics in Indonesia. Historically, Western culture, including the English language, has been associated with colonialism and cultural hegemony that suppressed local identities and beliefs. This influence fosters the perception that English symbolizes Western cultural dominance, which conflicts with local and religious values.

Additionally, the view that English is a "Bahasa kafir" also reflects uncertainty and concern about the impact of globalization on national culture and identity. Due to the opening of global markets and the penetration of Western culture through media and technology, many people feel that external influences threaten traditional values and local identity. In a religious context, the stigmatization of English can also be considered the impact of a narrow interpretation of religious teachings. Some may think using or learning English can be seen as

betrayal or distancing oneself from religious values. A rigid view of language reinforces this view as a religious identity; for example, Arabic is considered more holy or noble than other languages.

However, the stigma of the English language does not reflect the reality of the world's complexity today. Language is a neutral medium not affiliated with any religion or culture. Learning English does not go against religious values or cultural identity. On the contrary, in this era, English is an indispensable skill that opens the door to educational, career, and cross-cultural communication opportunities. Through this literature research, the origins, implications, and ways to overcome the stigma of English as a "Bahasa kafir" in Indonesia will be explored further. By understanding the social, cultural, and religious dynamics that shape these perceptions, effective strategies to promote inclusion, dialogue, and cross-cultural understanding in society can be developed.

METHOD OF STUDY

This research uses a library research method which involves analysis of relevant literature related to the stigma against the English language." This method allows researchers to investigate various theories, concepts, findings, and approaches in previous research on stigma and related topics. It also allows the researcher to construct a comprehensive understanding of the stigma of the English language from various perspectives, including sociological, psychological, anthropological, and linguistic viewpoints. By analyzing existing literature, trends, key findings, and gaps in knowledge that require further exploration are identified, and deep insight into existing conceptual frameworks and how this stigma can be explained through various theoretical viewpoints. This allows researchers to understand better the complexities of the stigma and the factors that influence it.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The origins of the stigma of English as a "Bahasa kafir"

Previous research on the stigma against English as a "Bahasa kafir" provides valuable insight into the origins, impact, and efforts to overcome this stigma. For example, Goffman (1963) explored the concept of stigma as a situation in which individuals are denied full social acceptance. Another study by Foucault (1976) highlights how stigma helps categorize people as normal and abnormal in society. In addition, Zola's (1972) research emphasized how stigma creates rejection of individuals with attributes disfavoured by society.

The origin of the English word "stigma," which refers to a "mark" or "mark of humiliation," can be traced to Ancient Greek. The word "stigma" refers to a mark that indicates

a person's particular status or identity in society, for example, the mark on a slave or a soldier. This word use has evolved into the broader concept of negative judgments or stereotypes of individuals or groups.

In Indonesia, there is a complex interaction between attitudes towards English among different groups, particularly Indonesian Muslims. Research shows that English teachers in Indonesia generally have a good attitude toward English (Saiful & Widodo, 2018). Additionally, Indonesian students have been found to have positive attitudes towards learning English as a global language, although with a tendency towards a native speaker-oriented approach ("Students' motivation and attitudes towards learning English as a global language: Perspectives from Indonesia and Malaysia", 2022). The stigma of English as a "Bahasa kafir" in Indonesia has complex roots and is closely related to this country's social, cultural, and political dynamics. Here are some factors that may contribute to the formation of this stigma:

1. Influence of Colonialism: The history of colonialism in Indonesia, especially by the Dutch and British, has left a deep imprint on the perception of foreign languages, including English. During the colonial period, European languages, including English, were used as administrative and communication tools by colonial governments, which may have led to negative associations with these languages among indigenous people.
2. Development of Nationalism: The process of forming Indonesian national identity also impacts perceptions of the English language. The Indonesian language was elevated during the struggle for independence as a national unity and identity symbol. In contrast, foreign languages, such as English, may be considered a symbol of the colonial period and Western cultural hegemony.
3. Religious Dynamics: Indonesia is a country with a majority Muslim population, and religious views can influence perceptions of the English language. In a religious context, some people may view English as a symbol of Western culture that is contrary to Islamic values or even considered infidel that is incompatible with Muslim identity.

The influence of Islamic values on foreign language teaching in Indonesia is very significant, especially considering the country's status as the largest Muslim-majority country in the world (Madkur & Albantani, 2018). Islamic-based educational institutions have contributed to the importance of Arabic as a language in Indonesia (Nurbaiti et al., 2020). Maintaining Islamic values while teaching English is vital in Indonesian educational environments, such as Islamic boarding schools, to preserve cultural identity and promote English language proficiency (Umam, 2014).

Globalization and the Influence of Western Culture

The invasion of Western culture through mass media, films, music, and technology has strengthened the perception that English is a language associated with Western lifestyles and values. Especially in conservative circles, this Western cultural influence may be seen as a threat to traditional values and local identity.

Interpretation of Education

English is also often associated with modern and quality education, especially in higher education institutions. For some people, using English in an educational context may be seen as rejecting the traditional education system or even as an act that betrays religious values. Additionally, the impact of English on language use in Indonesia has prompted discussions regarding reclassifying English as an “auxiliary” language and not simply a “foreign” language due to its significant contribution to Indonesian (Lowenberg, 1991; Lauder, 2008). Indonesian students have shown positive attitudes towards English and Indonesian, indicating differences in perspectives on language attitudes (Paradewari & Mbato, 1998). In addition, integrating Indonesian into English teaching has become an exciting topic, and students generally agree on the importance of combining the two languages in the classroom (Saputra & Asirah, 2022; Officialni, 2019).

Cultural factors: The role of religious values and beliefs in shaping perceptions

The stigma against English as a "Bahasa kafir" is a phenomenon that reflects the complexity of cultural values and religious beliefs in certain societies. Negative perceptions of English are often caused by the perception that this language symbolizes modernity, secularism, and even Western influences contrary to traditional religious values. This research will explore the cultural factors that shape this stigma and consider the influence of social and religious values in its formation.

1. Cultural and Historical Context

The stigma against the English language is often rooted in a particular society's cultural and historical context. For example, in some countries with a long history of religious influence, English is often seen as a threat to cultural and religious identity. Within traditional values and strong religious beliefs, English can be considered an act that undermines or threatens highly upheld social and religious norms. In highly religious societies, using English can threaten cultural and religious integrity. This language is often seen as a tool for spreading secularist values that conflict with religious teachings.

- a) Cultural Identity: Strong cultural values can be essential in forming a stigma against English. Using English in contexts that violate or threaten cultural identity can create a strong stigma against the language.
- b) Patriotism: Patriotic values can also reinforce the stigma against the English language. In highly nationalist societies, using English may be considered an act contrary to loyalty to one's country or culture.
- c) Divinity of Language: In some religious beliefs, language has spiritual and sacred value. Using English in contexts considered incompatible with specific religious values can be considered an insult to religion itself.
- d) Religion and Modernity: In some cases, the belief that English symbolizes modernity and secularism conflicts with religious values emphasizing tradition and adherence to religious teachings. This can create a stigma against English as a ³⁷ language that does not conform to religious values.

The stigma surrounding the English language has often been the subject of controversial debate. Some communities may see the use of English as a symbol of progress and inclusiveness, while others may view it as a threat to their cultural and religious identity. ³⁹ Discussion of the role of cultural values and religious beliefs in forming stigma is essential for understanding complex social dynamics in various societies.

Impact on Society

The stigma against English has had a significant impact on Indonesian society. This phenomenon affects individuals personally and impacts social, cultural, and economic dynamics at the community level. Discrimination against individuals who speak English or identify with Western culture can hinder their access to education, employment, and health services, leading to intercultural tensions in society.

Additionally, this stigma can also create an imbalance of power and privilege, with individuals who speak English or identify with Western culture often advantaged, while those who do not experience exclusion and marginalization. In globalization and modernization, where English is often considered the key to success in work and modern life, stigma against this language can become a severe obstacle to developing an inclusive and just society in Indonesia.

1. Historical context: The influence of colonialism and globalization on perceptions of the English language

The history of colonialism and globalization significantly forms the stigma against the English language. The influence of the period of colonialism, where English was often

introduced and adopted as an official language by colonial countries, and globalization, which expanded the use of English as the world's lingua franca, have formed negative perceptions of this language in several cultural and religious contexts.

2. The Influence of Colonialism

The period of colonialism, in which European colonial powers and imperialists introduced their languages to colonial territories, significantly impacted the perception of English. In many countries, the use of English is considered a symbol of colonialism and cultural domination that is contrary to local and religious values. As a colonizer's language, English has often become a symbol of cultural and political domination in many world regions. Its use can be seen as linguistic colonization that degrades and destroys indigenous cultural identity."

3. Influence of Globalization

Globalization has expanded the use of English as a language of international communication in various fields, such as trade, technology, and media. While this has increased global accessibility and connectivity, it has also given rise to linguistic power imbalances between languages, with English dominating many contexts. Globalization has increased the dominance of English as the world's lingua franca. Its widespread use in commerce, technology, and mass media has created polarization among other languages, and in some cases, created a stigma against English as a symbol of globalization that threatens local cultural identity."

The Impact of the Stigma of English as an "Infidel Language"

Colonialism and globalization have contributed to the formation of a stigma against English as a "Bahasa kafir". In many societies that have a colonial history or are under the pressure of globalization, English is often seen as a symbol of modernity, secularism, and even religious oppression. In some highly religious societies, English is often perceived as a language that undermines religious values and local traditions. Its use can be seen as an act that threatens religious integrity."

Social and psychological impact: How this stigma affects individuals and Society

The stigma of the English language had a significant social and psychological impact on individuals and society. This phenomenon not only creates restrictions in cross-cultural communication but also affects the psychological well-being of individuals and social dynamics in society. On an individual level, the stigma can lead to decreased psychological well-being. Individuals who use English may feel inferior or devalue themselves because of the stigma attached to the language. This can lead to higher levels of stress, anxiety, and

depression. It can create internal conflict in individuals, threatening their identity and psychological well-being.” The stigma against English can also threaten an individual's cultural and religious identity. For those who care deeply about cultural and religious values, the use of English in contexts deemed "pagan" can create identity conflicts. This can result in feelings of isolation and difficulty maintaining a strong cultural and religious identity.

This stigma creates social divisions between those who speak the language and those who do not. This can lead to the formation of groups that are isolated from each other, hinder cross-cultural communication, and disrupt social harmony. Efforts to overcome the stigma are critical to promoting equality, inclusivity, and diversity in society. Education about the values of inclusivity, respect for linguistic diversity, and intercultural dialogue can help reduce this stigma (Hasan, 2012). In an increasingly connected era of globalization, it is essential to understand English. However, a commonly used international language should not be misconstrued as a symbol of oppression or rejection of specific cultural and religious values. By understanding and respecting linguistic and cultural diversity, society can create an inclusive and harmonious environment for all individuals.

The stigma had significant societal implications. The impacts include individual identity conflicts, intercultural tensions, and reduced psychological well-being. Understanding the implications of this stigma is essential for developing practical coping efforts and promoting cultural inclusivity.

1. Restricted access to educational and professional opportunities

Restrictions on access to education and professional opportunities due to stigma are frequent in affected communities. This stigma can lead to discrimination against English-speaking individuals, preventing them from obtaining a proper education and access to equal professional opportunities. For example, in some countries, using English in specific religious contexts can limit individuals' access to educational institutions and better career opportunities (Gupta, 2018). Thus, the need to be aware of the negative impact of the stigma in hindering individuals' access to educational and professional opportunities is critical. Addressing this stigma through education, advocacy, and inclusive policies can help create a more just and equal environment for all individuals.

2. Influences on cultural identity and psychological well-being

The stigma against English as a “Bahasa kafir” has a significant impact on the cultural identity and psychological well-being of affected individuals. This stigma can give rise to identity conflicts, making individuals feel alienated from their culture and religious beliefs

(Said, 1978). Additionally, the use of English in contexts that are considered “pagan” can lead to decreased psychological well-being, such as stress, anxiety, and depression.

The Role of Media and Pop Culture in Reinforcing or Reducing Stigma

The role of the media and pop culture in reinforcing or reducing the stigma is very important in shaping society's perception of language. Mass media and popular culture have great power in shaping public opinion and influencing attitudes towards various social and cultural issues, including stigma against language. Mass media can reinforce the stigma through negative or stereotypical representations in television programs, films, or online media. For example, in some contexts, English is often associated with Western culture, which is contrary to specific traditional and religious values, and the media can reinforce these negative associations.

On the other hand, media and pop culture can also play a role in reducing the stigma against English by promoting messages of inclusion, tolerance, and respect for linguistic diversity. Through positive representations of the use of English in contexts that respect local cultural and religious values, the media can help change people's perceptions of this language. Thus, the importance of the role of media and pop culture in overcoming the stigma cannot be ignored. Efforts to promote more inclusive and positive representations of the English language in mass media and popular culture can help reduce this stigma and build a more tolerant and open society to cultural and linguistic diversity.

Overcoming Stigma and Prejudice

Overcoming the stigma and prejudice against English requires bold and inclusive steps in an increasingly connected global society. With awareness of its negative impacts, promoting respect for linguistic and cultural diversity can help build a more tolerant and inclusive environment.

1. Raising awareness: The importance of education and open dialogue. Raising awareness about the stigma is essential in promoting cultural inclusivity and diversity. Comprehensive education about the negative impacts of this stigma, along with open dialogue involving various stakeholders, can help change public perceptions. With a better understanding, we can build a more tolerant society that appreciates diversity in language and culture.
2. Promotion of inclusive values: Building a supportive and empathetic environment. Promoting inclusive values is essential in creating a supportive and empathetic environment regarding the stigma against English as a "Bahasa kafir". This involves building awareness about the importance of respect for linguistic and cultural diversity. Practical steps such as introducing educational programs that promote understanding,

tolerance, and empathy and creating space for open dialogue and guidance can help reduce this stigma. Inclusive education that includes cultural and linguistic diversity material in the school curriculum can provide a solid foundation for future generations to understand and appreciate differences. In addition, using media and online platforms to promote positive representations of English in a context that respects local cultural and religious values can help gradually change people's perceptions. These steps help overcome stigma and reinforce diversity as a force that enriches society. Thus, by building a supportive and empathetic environment, we can create an inclusive society that values differences and celebrates diversity in all aspects of life.

3. Encouraging cross-cultural cooperation: Building bridges for better understanding. Encouraging cross-cultural collaboration is critical to building bridges to better understand the stigma surrounding English. Intercultural collaboration can open the door to dialogue and mutual understanding between various social groups. Initiatives such as cultural exchanges, cross-cultural seminars, and volunteer programs that involve active participation from various levels of society can help strengthen intercultural relations and ease tensions that may arise due to stigma. Through direct interactions with individuals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, we can better understand their perspectives and break down existing stereotypes. Additionally, creating a platform to share stories and experiences about how such stigma impacts the daily lives of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds can help build solidarity and empathy. By encouraging cross-cultural collaboration, we can build strong networks to support individuals affected by stigma and strengthen the spirit of inclusion in society.

The importance of overcoming stigma and prejudice in promoting inclusion and diversity

Stigma creates social divisions and intercultural tensions and prevents individuals from having equal access to educational and professional opportunities. By addressing this stigma through education, open dialogue, and promoting inclusive values, we can build a supportive environment for all individuals. Strengthening awareness of the value of cultural and linguistic diversity and encouraging openness and empathy will help create a more inclusive society that values and celebrates differences as an enriching force. Removing the stigma and prejudice against English can open the door to deeper dialogue, collaboration, and better understanding between various social groups. This is an essential step toward a more just, harmonious, and connected society where everyone can develop and contribute equally.

Implications for society and future research directions

The stigma against English as a "Bahasa kafir" had far-reaching societal implications. Restricted access to education and professional opportunities, identity conflicts, and intercultural tensions are some of the impacts that can be felt. More in-depth research into the origins and consequences of this stigma is needed in the future. Additionally, focusing on effective intervention strategies, such as inclusive education, advocacy, and promotion of diversity values, is essential to address this stigma effectively. By directing research and action in this direction, we can create a more tolerant, inclusive, and globally connected society.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This article elaborates that the stigma against English as an "infidel language" exerts a significantly negative impact on the motivation and academic achievement of learners within certain communities. The analysis reveals that this stigma primarily stems from historical and cultural perceptions that regard English as a threat to local identity. Furthermore, the study identifies that integrating local cultural and religious values into the English curriculum can effectively mitigate this stigma. The support of educational institutions, governmental bodies, and community leaders is paramount in fostering positive perceptions of English language learning.

The findings indicate that an inclusive and culturally sensitive educational approach enhances student motivation to learn English, thereby expanding their access to global opportunities. Educational strategies that incorporate local values not only bolster the acceptance of English but also reinforce students' cultural identities. The research advocates for the development of curricula by government and educational institutions that merge local and global values, alongside providing cultural and religious sensitivity training for educators.

Nevertheless, this study acknowledges several limitations, such as its restricted geographic scope and relatively brief duration. Consequently, longitudinal studies and interdisciplinary approaches across diverse geographic and cultural contexts are recommended to yield a more profound and comprehensive understanding. Further research should also investigate the influence of media and technology in shaping perceptions of English, and assess the effectiveness of various intervention programs.

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended to formulate and implement educational policies that endorse inclusive and culturally sensitive English learning. Additionally, public awareness campaigns should be initiated to alter negative perceptions regarding the English language. Collaboration with community and educational leaders is crucial to advocate for positive English language learning. By adopting these measures, it is anticipated that the stigma

against English will be alleviated, thereby motivating more individuals to learn English and unlocking broader opportunities for them in various facets of life in the era of globalization.

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