



HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' CULTURAL SCHEMAS OF 'ENGLISH' IN MAGEK, WEST SUMATRA

Salsabila Fitri

2003salsabilafitri@gmail.com

UIN Imam Bonjol Padang

Nofel Nofiadri

nofelnofiadri@uinib.ac.id

UIN Imam Bonjol Padang

Renggi Vrika

renggivrika.FAH@uinib.ac.id

UIN Imam Bonjol Padang

Abstract

The intensity of global contact across cultures and nations in this digital age has increased the functionality of English language as the medium of intercultural communication. This study tries to reveal high school students' cultural schemas of 'English' in a Minangkabau speech community of West Sumatra. A semi-structured interview was used to gather data from twenty participants. Each participant was interviewed for almost one hour using Minangkabau language. Thematic analysis was applied in the data analyzing process. This study finds four cultural schemas of 'English' that indicate the conceptualization of English language is the result of formal institutional interactions of the society and the success of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach at secondary education. However, the existing schemas also reveal unachievable learning outcomes based on national curriculum expectation for the aspects of critical thinking and academic function of English language.

Keywords:

Cultural conceptualization, Cultural schemas, Minangkabau culture, Teaching English for Foreign Language.

A. INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language for students who live in the interior of Sumatra Island, where the community strongly upholds traditional identity as matrilineal Minangkabau people, could be viewed as somewhat of an enigma. Provincial government officials and Minangkabau traditional leaders continuously campaign for the revitalization of traditional values and practices (Efison, 2023). Meanwhile, the Ministry of Elementary and Secondary Education urges schools and teachers to implement Indonesia's vision for Indonesia Gold 2045 by introducing the internationalization of education, adopting the PISA and STEM education system (Saefuddin, 2024). In order to reach this goal, the Ministry of Education issued Regulation number 13 year 2025, which obligates the English language to be taught from elementary level and improves the quality of learning experience at the secondary level by building collaboration with international education systems (Uly, 2025). School students and English Teachers who use Minang language for everyday social purposes in Magek, a village in Agam Regency in West Sumatra, are the objects of the both authorities. The situation obviously challenges the way they perceive foreign languages and accentuates their native culture.

Cultural schemas contribute to students' achievement and behavior in learning English. Cultural schemes are widely understood as cultural experiences that form mental frameworks influencing how individuals interpret and understand any objects around them (Sharifian, 2017). Students who have a better understanding of English language cultural schemas have a more positive attitude toward learning the language (Hamarai, 2021). Hamarai's study also states that alignment of cultural schemas in learning materials can improve students' reading comprehension and attitude toward English as a foreign language. More accurate cultural schemas in the English language help students in Iraq to improve their communication skills using this foreign language (Ali & Mousa, 2022). Meanwhile, Safari (2024) found that students' linguistic and cognitive competence in Iran was improved by their understanding of cultural schemas of the target language, especially in understanding the implied meaning and social context of the language use. Gao (2021) found that in Shanghai, students who are able to balance their cultural identities with the target language tend to have higher learning motivation and show better communication skills as well. Students' interaction with the target language that shapes their perception, behavior, and attitude toward the language influences their learning motivation and achievement significantly (see Pitchard, 1990; Al Sharoufi, 2019; Bensalah, 2020). Most of the studies infer that cultural schemas of the English

language and the culture it contains predispose English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' achievement.

A society's cultural cognition is influenced by the continuous interaction of individuals in their society (Palmer, 1996). Palmer further explains that an image of something, for example, a concept such as 'English,' is conceptualized in a certain time and space as the emergence of interaction with that matter, and the image later influences individuals to perceive the image and control their behavior toward the image. Sharifian (2017) suggests that cultural cognition can be observed by cultural conceptualization that is embedded through language and linguistic expressions that are in the form of cultural categories, cultural schemas, and cultural metaphors. The dynamic interaction in a society potentially influences the cultural conceptualization of something in the sphere of time and space, especially for intensive interaction with the outside world of a speech community (a group of people who speak the same language or a similar way of speaking (Lyons, 1970; Yule, 2019)). Thus, a speech community may have heterogeneous conceptions of a single concept.

This study specifically aims to delineate the cultural conceptualization of 'English' for high school students in the Magek speech community. The conceptualization of English as a foreign language is essential for determining and deciding the materials and methods used in the classroom teaching process. Previous studies have implicitly shown that relationship, but the explanation for how English was conceptualized in a specific speech community in terms of a paradoxical context has not yet been explored. In detail, it helps teachers to design lesson plans and strategies that utilize the cognitive aspect of individuals who learn a foreign language. This study focuses on the cultural schemas of 'English' for individuals in specific cohorts in a speech community in which English is both a school subject and the language of a specific domain for global and digital interaction.

Exploring cultural schemas as part of cultural conceptualization means to reveal the mental model of a specific cultural group of a particular concept, in this case, that of 'English.' The revelation significantly informs the building block of cognition of the society in question, and the results help specific bodies to organize, interpret, and communicate information (Strauss & Quinn, 1997; Sharifian, 2011, 2017). The existence of cultural schemas of 'English' among high school students in Magek provides insight into how the community of a specific cohort perceives English and how the model of the behavior they might exhibit toward English. The result will be beneficial for educators and curriculum designers in evaluating current teaching practices since learning itself is generally a cognitive process.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

A descriptive qualitative design was used in this research. It begins with assumptions and interpretative or theoretical frameworks that guide the study to find an understanding, the meaning given by individuals or groups to a social or human phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A descriptive qualitative approach is used not only to find and identify, but also to analyze and interpret high school students' cultural schemas on 'English' in the Magek speech community in Agam Regency, West Sumatra, Indonesia. The community of the Kamang Magek district has a social life that is closely related to Minangkabau traditions and culture. In daily life, the Minangkabau local language is the main means of communication, both in the family environment, the market, and various social activities. This language is widely used in various contexts, from conversations between traders and buyers in the market, interactions between neighbors, discussions at school, to the performance of customary and general community activities. Besides using their native regional language, the Magek community also occasionally uses the national language, Indonesian, as a second language. Situations where it is generally used are during formal public events and quite often in schools. Especially in schools, students learn English as a mandatory subject in the national academic curriculum. In this context, students here are referred to as English foreign language learners.

The researcher interviewed 20 students, all of whom were born and grew up in Magek. Participant selection was not limited by school location, so students attending secondary school both within and outside the Magek area were able to be included as respondents. The main consideration in selecting participants was the similarity of their social and cultural backgrounds, which is that they grew up and interacted in their daily lives in Magek. Therefore, the data obtained from the interviews, expected to describe the students' experiences, perspectives, and concepts related to the English language, which are influenced by the social and cultural environment where they live. Each participant was interviewed for 45-60 minutes by asking for oral consent prior to the interview. Data was analyzed based on the Association-Interpretation analysis suggested by Sharifian (2008). Interview scripts were collected and analyzed using thematic analysis, and from this emerged the representation of cultural schemas of 'English'.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Magek is a village where the majority of the population works in the agricultural sector; thus, it is an agrarian community that relies on farming as its primary economic source. Additionally, the people of Magek continue to uphold and preserve

Minangkabau cultural values in their daily lives. This makes Magek an ideal place to study the relationship between culture and education within Minangkabau society.

In communicating, the Magek people use Minang language as the main language. *Bahasa Minangkabau* or Minangnese is an Austronesian language spoken by the Minangkabau of West Sumatra, the western part of Riau, South Aceh Regency, the northern part of Bengkulu, Jambi, and also in several cities throughout Indonesia by Minangkabau who have migrated (Nadra et.al., 2008). This language is used when they interact with fellow locals, such as in traditional activities, family gatherings, greetings, transactions in the market, and so on. It can be said that Minang is the mother tongue that has been taught since birth. The use of Minangkabau language is a reflection of cultural identity and community pride in ancestral heritage. In addition, Indonesian as a second language is also often used, such as when interacting with non-local people at formal events, school, or in academic activities. Usually, these two languages are used together, depending on the listener or interlocutor.

The findings in this study are solely based on the interviews conducted in Minang language. The presentation of data is organized based on the theme and descending order of responses. Cultural schemas of 'English' found among high school students in Magek are as follows:

a. English as a Means of Communication

The functionality of a foreign language as the medium of intercultural communication has emerged as a major concept that students in Magek conveyed during the interview. They said that English helps them to mingle and access international information, as listed below.

1. *Bahasa yang digunakan untuak ka lua negri, bia bisa **bagawua** jo urang lua negri, mampamudah **ngecek** jo urang lua nagari.*" (SYF)
(The language that we use for going abroad helps us **socialize** with people abroad, and the language also helps us **to speak** with people out there.)
2.*bisa untuak komunikasi jo negara lain, tu **mangecek** jo urang-urang asing.* (MLS)
([we] can use the language to communicate with people from other countries, or to **speak** with foreigners].

3. *Misalno wak pai ka lua nagari, wak **ngecek** jo urang tu kalo wak ndak pandai bahasa inggris tu baa caro no wak ka mananyo, kok salah alamaik.* (PR)
(For example, if we go abroad, we **talk** to the people there, if we can't speak English, how can we ask something if we get lost.)
4. *Kalo **pai main** wak kan, ndak canggung wak pai surang lai do. Kalo sobok wak jo bule kan lai bisa wak **ngecek**. Komunikasi yang baik.* (BL)
(If we **go on holiday**, we don't feel awkward if we go alone. When we meet with foreigners, we can **speak** to them. Having good communication.)
5. *Untuak **interaksi** jo urang lua. Kalo misalno **jalan-jalan ka lua negri**.* (GT)
(For **interaction** with foreigners. For example, when **traveling abroad**.)

Almost all participants expressed that English is a medium to talk (*mangecek*) with people abroad, or they conceptualize it as a means of communication. Examples (1), (2), (3), and (5) explicitly express that English has a relation to the context of using the language outside of their area or outside of the Indonesian context. They did not clearly state which country they would go to, and they did not mention the specific purposes of using English in communication with people in different countries. In general, English for them is conceptualized as a language that is used for communication when they travel to other countries. The fact is, Magek's geographical location is not far from Bukittinggi, a city with famous tourism destinations where many foreign tourists come to visit (example 4). Owing to, most of the participants have a conception that English could be used to communicate with foreigners from other countries.

The cultural schema of English from the examples above can be stated as ENGLISH AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION. This schema is derived from the fundamental function of language as a medium of human communication that emphasizes communication with the outside world and with people from different nationalities. This mental representation is constructed by the way this cohort interacts with English in their everyday interactions, which primarily takes place in their village. The lives of most high school students in Minangkabau are spent in the

village which dictates that their digital interaction with social media is also dominated using local languages or Indonesian language. Therefore, English is conceptualized as a language that is normally used on the basis of movement away from the native land.

b. English as a subject of study

A second and strongly reported schema of 'English' was the conception that English is perceived as a subject of study.

1. *...yang **diajaan** ka awak jadi awak **mangarati** lo jo baso negara lain.*
(HP)
(The one it **was taught** to us, so we can **understand** other countries' languages.)
2. *Bahasa inggris ko yang **mampalajari bahasa baru** gitu kak a, yang **diajarkan** di sekolah.* (SR)
(English is like the one we learn to **study new languages**, which is **taught** at school.)
3. *Kalo menurut Wulan, bahasa inggris tu kayak yahh... **ampia samo sabaleh, duo baleh jo matematik.** Baraja no ndak di buek asik, baraja bahasa inggris hanyo tulisanno klo kayak iko masuak an rumus. Jadi **ampia samo jo MTK nampak no, kak.*** (WL)
(In Wulan's opinion, English is like, well.... **almost the same as mathematics**. Learning it isn't fun; learning English is just writing. If it's like this, put this formula in. So it's almost the same as mathematics, it seems.)
4. *...yang **wak pelajari di sekolah.** Yo samo kayak **mato pelajaran** umum.*
(FD)
(...which **we learn at school**. Just like general **subjects**)
5. ***mempelajari** bahasa baru, kak. Baraja bahasa inggris. Yang **diaajaan di sekolah**"* (SR)
(**Learning** a new language, kak (term of respect towards an older person). Learning English. The one **taught** in school.)

6. ...*bahasa no tu diajarkan disekolah, untuak manambah ilmu wawasan.* (MS)

(The language **taught** at school. To increase knowledge.)

Participants can experience and perceive English as a school subject. Starting from junior high school, English is compulsory and their perception of it may be similar to other subjects, such as mathematics (examples 8 and 9). The Curriculum mandated by the Ministry of Education sets out expectations for what students should learn (examples 6, 7, 10 & 11). The standard high school curriculum requires students to take a credit of English in each semester for one and a half hours per lesson. The learning outcomes of the English subject presupposes students to have competence both in knowledge and skill to use English functionally. However, the excerpts from this study reveal that students express mostly at its knowledge component.

At this point, another schema is ENGLISH AS A SUBJECT. A school curriculum that contains English as a compulsory subject becomes a social interaction force that makes English as part of students' cognition. Their interaction institutionally brings English as the formal knowledge and parts of education in general. This process strongly imposes this subject into a form of cultural cognition even at the level of knowledge; they do not believe that English is a tool of cultural practices for its original conception as a foreign language.

c. English as a Foreign Language

For a number of participants, they conceptualize that English is a language that originated abroad. The following are the participants' statements:

1. *Bahasa lua nagari, kak. Bahasa yang acok urang lua pakai. Urang-urang bule, gitu-gitu aa, urang lua, urang singapur, australi, amerika.* (PR)
(A foreign language. The language **used by foreigners**, foreign people from Singapore, Australia, America)
2. *Bahasa lua kak, bahasa dari negara lua.* (AR)
(“It’s a foreign language, a language from **foreign country**.)
3. *Bahasa lua, bahasa lua nagari, kak.* (HP)
(A foreign language, **a foreign language**, Kak ((term of respect for an older person.))

4. *Bahaso no kan **bahaso lua** kak, jadi (wak) paham lo negeri lua tu jadi bisa lo kok wak nio kalua nagari.* (FD)

(This language is **a foreign language**. So, if we understand the foreign country, we can also go if we want to go abroad.)

Participants recognize that the English language belongs to people from outside of their culture. They mentioned some countries that they believe use that language (example 12 & 13). English is perceived as a language that has correlation with the people of a specific region; participants use the word *outside* (*lua*) to indicate the image of English and the use of word *bule* (tourists) to make association with the people who use that language. Participants do not clearly mention English as an identity of a specific culture because English in fact is a lingua franca and it does not mean that tourists who speak English do not mean they belong to that cultural identity, as implied in example (14) and (15).

A schema that can be elicited from the examples above is ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE. Society in general exposes English as a foreign language and one obvious evidence is the abbreviation of EFL itself. This term is a formal and fit label for English and this implies that this language does not belong to a nation or nations but other cultural groups. For neighboring countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Philippines, English is identified as a second language, and this status also influences the attitude and behaviors of their administration and society. However, the majority of Minangkabau people's conceptualization of English as a language focuses on language as a spoken one; it means the word 'language' has an association with spoken language in which the written form is conceptualized differently. It is obvious that Minangkabau linguistic landscapes are full of English phrases and labels. This evidence shows that these people are familiar with English in their linguistic landscapes; however, English is still considered a foreign language.

d. English as a professional language

Some participants expressed that English is an important tool in the economic sphere, particularly in the workplace, international careers, and skill development.

1. *Kalau misalkan awak mandaftar **karajo** tu kek no di nanyo no. Pandai bahasa inggris atau indak, kayak bapaluang bana, gitu.* (GT)

(For example, if you apply **for a job**, they will ask you questions. Whether you are proficient in English or not, there are a lot of opportunities.)

2. ...*tu ciek lai kan kalau **misalno ka karajo** atau ndak wak mangecek jo bule atau karajo kalua nagari kan, tu **paralu bana jo (bahasa inggris)** di akak kan. Bahasa Inggris ko.* (FR)

(...it's also necessary if, for example, you **work** or interact with foreigners or work abroad, English is **really necessary**, right? English.)

3. ...***paralu bana**. Bisa untuak karir, bisa untuak skill, untuak **karajo di bidang internasional** lah, migrasi. Hmm... bisa jadi guide, kak"* (ZM)

(It's **necessary**. It can be for your career, for your skills, for **working in the international field**, migration, hmm... could be a guide.)

A small number of students from the pool of participants indicate that English has an association with the need for career development. They believe that English mastery could increase opportunities for job appointments (example 16). Another excerpt informs that the ability to use English is significant for supporting future occupations especially in other countries (example 17). Other participants, as exemplified in example 18, believe that English proficiency will give them a chance to anticipate career opportunities especially in sectors that involve foreign affairs. The need for English skills in the professional domain is well recognized by most people since many corporations or stakeholders require such additional skills that are not limited to national institutions.

A cultural schema that is derived from the example above is ENGLISH AS A PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE. The majority of Minangkabau people, especially those who live in cities such as Bukittinggi, Padang and Payakumbuh, perceive that fluency in English leads to more opportunities for job seekers. This might be a reason for the widespread availability of English courses and training in those cities. Parents in those areas, including Magek, which is close to Bukittinggi, have a positive opinion of English and are of the view that English language skills will support a better future for their children. In fact, now in this digital age, English language competency will increase their chances of getting a better job and improving their professional work path. In other words, by linking English to the world of work, participants

demonstrate an awareness of its instrumental role in enhancing employability and enabling effective communication in multicultural environments.

This study attempts to trace cultural schemas of high school students in Magek, West Sumatra, on the conceptualization of 'English' and finds four cultural schemas based on the interview excerpts. They are ENGLISH AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION, ENGLISH AS A SUBJECT, ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE, and ENGLISH AS A PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE. The first schema alludes to the status of English in its role as a lingua franca in global communication. It looks similar to the third schema, but the third one implies more to cultural identity of a nation. The other schemas are associated with educational advancement and professional institutions in which language is the object of learning and the object of administration.

A speech community naturally contains heterogenous cultural conceptualizations (Sharifian, 2017). The concepts that are manifested by various linguistic features are shared among the community; eventually people may have different conceptions on a similar concept. The pattern of interaction in different domains will contribute to the conceptualization of students in Magek. Those four schemas were acquired by them as a result of social practices that involve language, and it is possible that one student does not possess all four schemas. He or she may have one or two of the schemas in society. In general, the schemas reflect the process of conceptualization that was formed by formal interaction with formal institutions such as school, course, or mass media, with the basis of oral interface. This process becomes possible as the nature of Minangkabau culture retains a strong oral tradition and voluntary migration (Hadler, 2008).

Cultural cognition of Minangkabau people in general is influenced by three domains that are traditionalism, modernism, and Islamism (see Nofiadri, et.al., 2024). It appears that the cultural schemas of students in Magek on the conception of English is constructed by the modern interaction of the society, in which the institutions named above relate to education and profession. Considering their age, the students in this study were taught according to the Communicative Language Teaching method (CLT), in which there is an emphasis on the functional aspect of English as a medium to communicate. In contrast, current university students in Minangkabau preserve the schema of ENGLISH AS GRAMMAR because their secondary school learning spanned a time when the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) was in effect (Vrika, et.al., 2025). This difference indicates the success of CLT

in framing the teaching and learning process at schools in Magek, or other places in West Sumatra.

This study has elucidated the existing cultural schemas of English for students in Magek, which are likely to mirror neighboring villages. However, these schemas do not fulfill one of the requirements of the national curriculum: students' learning outcomes are not only for communicative purposes but also for intercultural competence in various media and for facilitating critical thinking. Teachers or instructors of English in formal sectors need to ensure that English is not limited to oral practical interaction but also provide more exposure to written English, such as for reading and writing. In addition, the cultural aspect of English as a foreign language that indicates the identity of several English-speaking nations should be included in learning sequences. The study from Gao (2021) and Safari (2024) that incorporates intercultural communication and identity aspects into language teaching shows better performance of their students.

Cultural schemas as part of cultural conceptualization represent cultural cognition of a speech community (Palmer, 1996; Sharifian, 2017). The dynamic nature of the schemas influences the way society perceives something, and the image will control the communal behavior. The rapid development of digital technologies significantly affects the use of English and local cultures. To face this global penetration, schools and curriculum evaluators should allocate English learning content with cultural identity and critical thinking by introducing English as a medium for global academic knowledge. Students in Magek and elsewhere should perceive English as a medium for academic tradition and a way to improve global communication.

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