



How Do Generation Z EFL Learners Perceive English As a Marker of Identity and Social Status? A Critical Language Awareness Perspective

INFO PENULIS

Munawaroh
Muhammad Azim Islamic Institute Jambi,
Indonesia
moonawaroh.moon@gmail.com
085368978425

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Abstrak

Bahasa Inggris tidak lagi hanya dipandang sebagai media komunikasi global, tetapi juga sebagai sumber daya sosial yang membentuk identitas, status sosial, dan hubungan kekuasaan. Di era digital, Generasi Z berinteraksi secara luas dengan bahasa Inggris melalui pendidikan formal, media sosial, dan berbagai platform global, memungkinkan bahasa tersebut memperoleh makna di luar fungsi komunikatifnya. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana pembelajar Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL) Generasi Z menafsirkan bahasa Inggris sebagai simbol status sosial, penanda identitas, dan faktor yang terkait dengan kekuasaan dan ketidaksetaraan sosial. Pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus digunakan. Partisipan adalah mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di Institut Islam Muhammad Azim di Jambi, yang dipilih melalui pengambilan sampel bertujuan. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terbuka dan wawancara semi-terstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik yang didasarkan pada perspektif Kesadaran Bahasa Kritis (Critical Language Awareness/CLA). Temuan menunjukkan bahwa partisipan memandang bahasa Inggris sebagai bentuk modal simbolik yang terkait dengan kecerdasan, prestasi pendidikan, profesionalisme, dan peluang untuk mobilitas sosial ke atas. Bahasa Inggris juga dipahami sebagai penanda identitas yang penting, mencerminkan pengalaman, aspirasi, dan rasa memiliki para pembelajar terhadap komunitas global dan digital. Selain itu, para peserta menunjukkan kesadaran kritis terhadap implikasi sosial dari kemampuan berbahasa Inggris, menyadari bahwa akses yang tidak setara terhadap pendidikan, sumber belajar, dan fasilitas teknologi dapat berkontribusi pada ketidaksetaraan sosial. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa bahasa Inggris berfungsi tidak hanya sebagai sistem linguistik tetapi juga sebagai praktik sosial yang terkait erat dengan konstruksi identitas, prestise, dan hubungan kekuasaan. Oleh karena itu, pendidikan bahasa Inggris harus mendorong kesadaran kritis, inklusivitas, dan akses yang adil terhadap kesempatan belajar sehingga bahasa Inggris dapat berfungsi sebagai sarana pemberdayaan daripada pengucilan sosial.

Kata kunci: Kesadaran Bahasa Kritis; Generasi Z; Identitas, Status Sosial; Pembelajar EFL

Abstract

English is no longer viewed solely as a medium of global communication but also as a social resource that shapes identity, social status, and power relations. In the digital era, Generation Z interacts extensively with English through formal education, social media, and various global platforms, allowing the language to acquire meanings beyond its communicative function. This study aims to explore how Generation Z English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners interpret English as a symbol of social status, a marker of identity, and a factor related to power and social inequality. A qualitative approach with a case study design was employed. The participants were students of the English Language Education Study Program at the Muhammad Azim Islamic Institute in Jambi, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis informed by the perspective of Critical Language Awareness (CLA). The findings indicate that participants perceive English as a form of symbolic capital associated with intelligence, educational achievement, professionalism, and opportunities for upward social mobility. English is also understood as an important marker of identity, reflecting learners' experiences, aspirations, and sense of belonging to global and digital communities. In addition, participants demonstrated critical awareness of the social implications of English language proficiency, recognizing that unequal access to education, learning resources, and technological facilities can contribute to social inequality. The study concludes that English functions not only as a linguistic system but also as a social practice closely connected to identity construction, prestige, and power relations. Therefore, English language education should promote critical awareness, inclusivity, and equitable access to learning opportunities so that English can serve as a means of empowerment rather than social exclusion.

Keywords: Critical Language Awareness; Generation Z; Identity, Social Status; EFL Learners

A. Introduction

English is no longer understood solely as a tool for global communication, but as a symbolic resource that contributes to the formation of social identity and individual position in society. In the digital era, Generation Z is growing up in an environment highly connected to global information flows through social media, digital platforms, and English-dominated popular culture (Kamalova, 2025). Intense exposure to English-language content encourages the emergence of new linguistic practices, such as code-switching, the use of English vocabulary in everyday conversation, and language mixing in digital communication (Warriner, 2016). This phenomenon demonstrates that English has become part of the lifestyle of the younger generation, as well as a means of projecting self-image, building social affiliations, and gaining recognition in social spaces in the digital age.

In the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL), English is often associated with the process of negotiating identity and constructing social meaning (Prakaianurat & Kangkun, 2024). Various studies show that learning and using English can influence how learners view themselves, build social identities, and develop affiliations with the global community (Rahaman, 2025). Generation Z as a group that grew up amidst high access to global content not only uses English in the classroom, but also in social media, entertainment, social networks, and various other digital activities (Masita & Rihlasyita, 2025). These conditions allow English to be interpreted not only as linguistic competence, but also as a symbol of modernity, academic prestige, social mobility and cultural capital that is valuable in life (Li, 2020). Therefore, this study focuses on the case of Generation Z EFL learners who are currently or have been learning English and actively interact in digital environments to understand how they interpret English as a symbol of identity and social status.

From a Critical Language Awareness (CLA) perspective, language is not merely a neutral medium of communication but a social practice closely connected to ideology, power relations, and social inequality (Fairclough, 2014). Fairclough argues that language functions as a mechanism through which social meanings, identities, and power structures are produced and

reproduced within society. In this regard, English can be understood not only as a linguistic resource but also as a form of symbolic capital that may provide access to educational opportunities, social prestige, and participation in global networks. The increasing visibility of English in digital spaces, social media interactions, and popular culture may contribute to the construction of social distinctions among young people. Consequently, learners' engagement with English is not simply a matter of language acquisition; it also involves negotiating social identities and positioning themselves within existing social hierarchies. Applying a Critical Language Awareness perspective allows this study to examine how Generation Z EFL learners understand the social meanings attached to English and how these meanings may reflect broader issues of power, privilege, and social differentiation in contemporary society.

The study of identity in English language learning has developed rapidly in the fields of applied linguistics and language education. Most research focuses on the relationship between learner identity, learning motivation, language investment, and language competency achievement (Darvin, 2016; Darvin & Norton, 2023; Fan et al., 2025). Other research also highlight the role of social media in forming EFL learners identity (Asmi et al., 2022; Darvin & Norton, 2015; Luring et al., 2023). However, studies specifically investigating how Generation Z EFL learners interpret English as both a marker of identity and a symbol of social status are still relatively limited, particularly in the context of Indonesian society, which is increasingly exposed to digital culture. Most studies still position English as a means of communication or a tool for enhancing academic competence, while ideological dimensions related to power relations, social prestige, symbolic recognition, and the potential for social inequality that emerges through English use have not been explored in depth through a critical analysis perspective. Furthermore, only a limited number of studies have examined these issues through the lens of Critical Language Awareness (Fairclough, 1992), which emphasizes how language practices are shaped by and contribute to broader ideological and social structures. Therefore, a critical investigation is needed to understand how Generation Z EFL learners construct meanings of English within contemporary digital and social contexts.

Based on this gap, this study seeks to answer the main question: How do Generation Z EFL learners interpret English as a marker of identity and social status? To answer this question, this study explores learners' experiences, perceptions, and perspectives regarding the role of English in the formation of self-identity, social recognition, and perceived social and academic opportunities. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the construction of English meaning from the perspective of Generation Z EFL learners, identify the use of English in social identity formation, and reveal how English functions as a symbol of prestige and social differentiation in the context of contemporary society.

This case is important to study because Generation Z is the generation that interacts most intensely with English through digital technology, social media, and various global platforms. In these conditions, English has the potential to function not only as a means of communication, but also as a symbol that influences identity formation, social recognition, and opportunities for social mobility. Understanding how EFL learners interpret English can provide deeper insights into the relationship between language, ideology, power, and social stratification in the context of language education. In addition to enriching the study of identity in EFL learning, the findings of this study are expected to provide a critical perspective on the position of English in Indonesian society and serve as a basis for teachers and policymakers to develop English language learning that is more reflective, inclusive, and relevant to the social realities of Generation Z.

B. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was selected because the research sought to gain an in-depth understanding of how Generation Z English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners construct and interpret the meanings of English as a marker of identity and social status within their academic, social, and digital lives. A case study design enabled the researcher to explore in detail the experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes developed by participants within a particular social context.

The participants of this study were undergraduate students enrolled in the English Language Education Study Program at the Muhammad Azim Islamic Institute in Jambi. Participants were

selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the objectives of the study. The selection criteria included: (1) belonging to Generation Z, (2) having experience learning English as a foreign language, and (3) being exposed to or actively using English in academic, social, and digital contexts.

Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The research instruments consisted of a series of questions designed to elicit participants' perceptions, experiences, and perspectives regarding the meanings attached to the English language. The use of open-ended questions enabled participants to express their views freely and provide rich descriptions grounded in their lived experiences.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data through repeated reading, (2) generating initial codes, (3) organizing codes into potential themes, (4) reviewing and refining themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the analytical report. The analysis was conducted inductively while incorporating a critical perspective to examine how English was positioned within participants' narratives as a symbol of identity, prestige, power, and social status.

C. Results and Discussion

1. English as a Symbol of Social Status

Language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a social resource that can represent a person's position and value in society. In the context of learning English as a Foreign Language, English language proficiency is often associated with various positive social attributes, such as intelligence, a good education, professionalism, and success. This condition causes English to acquire meanings that go beyond its communicative function and transform into symbols that can influence how individuals are perceived in social environments (Purba et al., 2025). For Generation Z EFL learners living in the era of globalization and digital connectivity, English is viewed not only as an academic skill but also as a social asset that contributes to self-image and social recognition.

Research findings indicate that this meaning also emerges in the experiences and perceptions of informants. They perceive that individuals with good English skills tend to receive more positive evaluations than those who do not. This perception suggests that English has acquired a certain symbolic value related to prestige and social status. Thus, English proficiency is understood not only as a linguistic ability but also as an indicator used by society to construct and assess one's social position. This meaning then became a dominant theme in informants' narratives regarding the role of English in their lives.

Generation Z EFL learners interpret English not only as a means of global communication but also as a symbol of social status that carries prestige value in society. This meaning is evident in how informants describe individuals with good English skills. Society views people who are fluent in English as intelligent and possessing high intelligence (Interview, NL, 20 May 2026). This perception confirms the association between English language proficiency and positive social attributes. In this context, English is no longer understood as a linguistic skill, but rather as an indicator used by society to assess an individual's quality. English proficiency becomes a symbol representing intelligence, modernity, and competence, thus allowing its speakers to gain higher social recognition than those who do not (Fadhli & Hidayat, 2024).

This perception was reinforced by informants who stated that people who are fluent in English are often seen as *"orang yang bisa bahasa inggris biasanya pintar, orang sukses, pasti sekolahnya bagus"* (Interview, PDA, 20 May, 2026). This statement shows that English has undergone a process of social symbolization, namely when linguistic competence is no longer assessed solely on its communicative function, but also based on the social meaning attached to it by society. In the informants' narratives, English language skills become a marker that distinguishes individuals from other social groups because it is associated with better education, access to global resources, and opportunities for broader social mobility (Sumilih et al., 2024). Thus, English is perceived as an attribute reflecting a person's personal and social qualities, so that individuals who master it tend to receive higher recognition and respect in their social environment.

A skill or resource will have social value when it is recognized and valued by society as something valuable. In the context of this research, English functions as symbolic capital because its mastery confers a certain social legitimacy on an individual. When English proficiency is associated with intelligence, success, and high education, the language becomes not only a means of communication but also a mechanism of social differentiation that distinguishes individuals based on their possession of certain linguistic resources (Wiandari & Meutia, 2021).

From a critical language awareness perspective, this situation demonstrates that language operates within broader power relations, where the value of a language is shaped by social ideologies that link it to prestige, status, and access to greater opportunities. Therefore, the respect accorded to English speakers does not stem entirely from linguistic ability itself, but rather from the social values collectively constructed and reproduced within society.

The construction of English as a symbol of social status seems inseparable from its position as a global language with strategic value in various sectors of contemporary life. When explaining the meaning of English to themselves, several informants described it as a tool for connecting with the world, the primary language of globalization, science, and international business (*Interview*, ZM, 20 May, 2026). These statements indicate that informants view English not simply as a language skill, but as a medium that provides access to a variety of valuable global resources. From the informants' perspective, English proficiency enables individuals to acquire broader information, access quality education, and participate in academic and professional networks that transcend local boundaries. Thus, English is perceived as an instrument that can enhance an individual's opportunities for social, economic, and academic gain.

These statements indicate that the prestige value attached to English is constructed through the relationship between language proficiency and access to various forms of capital valued in society. When English is viewed as a means to obtain better education, more promising jobs, and connectedness to the global community, individuals who master it tend to be perceived as having greater capacities and opportunities than those who do not (Saragih, 2018). In these conditions, it shows that English functions as a form of linguistic capital that can be converted into social, cultural and economic capital.

Meanwhile, from a critical language awareness perspective, this perception shows how the dominance of English in the realm of education, science and the global job market has formed the belief that mastery of English is a prerequisite for achieving social mobility. Consequently, the value of English derives not only from its communicative function, but also from the social ideology that associates it with progress, success, and higher social position (Li, 2020). Therefore, the prestige of English in informants' narratives can be understood as a result of social construction that positions the language as a strategic resource in contemporary global society. Fairclough (2014) argues that language functions as a social practice through which ideologies are produced and reproduced. In this context, the association between English proficiency and qualities such as intelligence, success, and professionalism reflects the operation of language ideology. These meanings are not inherent in English itself but are socially constructed through dominant discourses that position English as a prestigious and valuable resource in contemporary society.

This view of English and social status is evident in one informant's statement that English serves to broaden horizons and improve future job opportunities (*Interview*, DS, 21 Mei, 2026). This statement demonstrates that the informants view English not merely as a means of communication, but also as a resource that can provide tangible benefits in academic and professional life.

The informants' statements above indicate that English is viewed as a means that enables individuals to gain access to broader opportunities compared to those who do not speak it. For the informants, English proficiency is related to the ability to access information, improve the quality of education, and increase opportunities for obtaining better employment. Thus, English is perceived as an asset that can support social mobility and expand an individual's possibilities for future achievement (Darvin & Norton, 2015). This statement demonstrates that the informants view English not merely as a means of communication, but also as a resource that can provide tangible benefits in academic and professional life.

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the informants, English proficiency is related to the ability to access information, improve the quality of education, and increase opportunities for obtaining better employment. Thus, English is perceived as an asset that can support social mobility and expand an individual's possibilities for future achievement (Purba et al., 2025). The dominance of English in education, science, and the global job market has fostered the belief that English proficiency is crucial for social success. Consequently, English has gained high prestige and is positioned as a strategic resource that can enhance an individual's position in society.

This is reinforced by the view that learning English from an early age can result in better cognitive skills and memory (*Interview*, MA, 17 May, 2026). This statement indicates that informants view English not only as a communication skill but also as a tool that contributes to the development of an individual's cognitive capacity. Furthermore, English is a crucial skill required in education and the workplace. Therefore, English proficiency is a competency that can support one's success in facing academic and professional demands.

The statement above indicates that informants construct a close relationship between English language proficiency, intelligence, and success. However, this relationship is not solely based on the linguistic aspects of English itself. Informants tend to view English as a tool that allows individuals to gain broader access to knowledge, education, and career opportunities. Therefore, individuals who master English are perceived as having greater intellectual capacity and greater readiness to adapt to future demands (Fadhli & Hidayat, 2024). In other words, perceptions of intelligence do not arise from the ability to use English alone, but rather from the various social and academic advantages associated with mastery of the language.

Thus, English has acquired symbolic value that goes beyond its communicative function. From a symbolic capital perspective, attributes such as intelligence, competence, and success are often attributed to individuals who possess valuable resources in society (Asmi et al., 2022). In the context of this research, English is one such resource because it is associated with access to quality education, global knowledge, and broader professional opportunities. Consequently, English proficiency is seen as an indicator of a person's intellectual competence.

From a critical language awareness perspective, the above findings emphasize how language ideology works to shape social perceptions. The dominance of English in education, science, technology, and the global job market has fostered the belief that individuals who master English have an advantage over those who do not. This belief is then reproduced in society, so that English is perceived not only as a means of communication but also as a symbol of intelligence, professionalism, and readiness to face the modern world. Thus, the relationship between English and intelligence that emerges in the informants' narratives reflects a social and ideological construct rather than an inherent relationship between English and an individual's intellectual ability (Rahman et al., 2025).

In addition to generating symbolic prestige, English is seen by informants as a resource that provides tangible benefits in academic and professional life. One informant stated that "*belajar bahasa inggris itu bias dapat pekerjaan bagus*" (*Interview*, NL, 20 May, 2026). This statement demonstrates that English is perceived not only as a means of communication, but also as a skill that can boost self-confidence and open access to various educational and employment opportunities. The belief that English speakers are more intelligent, educated, and successful reflects what Fairclough (2014) describes as the ideological effects of language. Such perceptions have become normalized within society and are often accepted as common sense. As a result, English proficiency is not evaluated solely as a linguistic skill but as a marker of personal worth and social competence.

The statement above demonstrates that English is viewed as an asset that provides social, academic, and professional benefits. These benefits include not only the ability to communicate with a wider audience but also the ability to access valuable resources, such as scientific information, educational opportunities, and broader social networks (Lauring et al., 2023). English language proficiency is a tool that can enhance an individual's capacity to participate in various academic and professional activities. Therefore, English is viewed as an investment capable of generating various forms of future benefits. This perception also explains why individuals who master English often receive higher social respect, as they are perceived to have access to opportunities not always available to everyone.

Every individual can gain social benefits through the possession of certain resources recognized as valuable in society. In the context of this research, English language proficiency functions as cultural capital because it provides access to socially valued knowledge, education, and competencies. At the same time, this proficiency can also be converted into social capital through expanding social networks, professional relationships, and connecting with the global community (Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2021). Thus, English not only has linguistic value but also social value, enabling individuals to gain various advantages in academic and professional life.

The social value of English is formed through its dominance in various strategic domains, such as higher education, science, technology, and the global job market. When access to important resources is largely mediated through English, mastery of the language becomes a form of privilege that can elevate an individual's position in society. Consequently, the greater the benefits derived from English proficiency, the higher the social value attached to the language (Rahman et al., 2025). Thus, English not only has linguistic value but also social value, enabling individuals to gain various advantages in academic and professional life.

The social value of English is formed through its dominance in various strategic domains, such as higher education, science, technology, and the global job market. When access to important resources is largely mediated through English, mastery of the language is a form of privilege that can elevate an individual's position in society. Consequently, the greater the benefits derived from English proficiency, the higher the social value attached to the language (Suizo, 2024).

Generation Z EFL learners perceive English as part of their identity, reflecting their background, experiences, and position within the broader social environment. For informants, English use not only demonstrates linguistic ability but also serves as a means to project self-image, build affiliation with the global community, and affirm the identity they wish to present to others. This meaning is evident in the way informants connect English to their learning experiences, social environments, and activities in digital spaces, thus functioning as a marker of identity that is continuously constructed and negotiated through various everyday language practices (Darvin, 2016).

These findings are affirmative and place language as a reflection of personal and social characteristics. One informant stated that English can reflect a person's identity because language reflects a person's experience, education, interests and social environment (*Interview*, PDA, 20 May, 2026). This statement indicates that the informant views language as more than just a means of communication; it is understood as a representation of one's life journey and social background. In other words, an individual's choice of language contains information about their learning experiences, access to education, and the social environment in which they interact.

A similar view was expressed by one informant, stating that language is not just a means of communication but also a reflection of one's identity (*Interview*, ZM, 20 May, 2026). This statement indicates an awareness that language use has a symbolic dimension related to the formation of social identity. In this context, English language skills not only demonstrate linguistic competence but also serve as a means of representing oneself as an individual connected to the global world. English use can reflect certain values, orientations, and aspirations that one wishes to convey to one's social environment. This finding suggests that identity is not viewed as something fixed, but rather constructed and negotiated through the linguistic practices individuals engage in in their daily lives (Darvin & Norton, 2015). This finding aligns with Fairclough's (2014) view that identities are discursively constructed through social interaction. The use of English enables learners to position themselves within particular social groups and communities while simultaneously expressing values, aspirations, and affiliations associated with global culture. Therefore, identity is continuously negotiated through language practices rather than existing as a fixed personal characteristic.

This identity construction became even more apparent when informants explained the context of English use in everyday life. Most respondents admitted to using English not only in academic activities but also in activities related to the consumption of global culture. Several informants confirmed that they use English when watching films, listening to music, playing games, reading international articles, and interacting with English-language digital content (*Interview*, DS, 20 May, 2026). This statement shows how English become as a of Social media practice that connects individuals with the wider global community. Through these activities,

English serves as a means of constructing an identity as an individual open to international knowledge, culture, and information.

In addition to serving as a marker of self-identity, research data also shows that English plays a crucial role in the formation of Generation Z's digital identity. All informants admitted to using English outside of class, particularly on social media. This use varies, from writing captions and creating stories, uploading content, using popular English terms, to interacting with users from other countries. One informant stated that he uses English on social media because "*Lebih mudah baginya untuk mengekspresikan diri dan mengikuti tren global*" (Interview, DS, 20 May, 2026). This statement demonstrates that English is used as a symbolic resource to construct a particular self-image in the digital space. The use of English on social media is not solely aimed at conveying messages, but also at projecting an identity that is modern, global, and relevant to the emerging digital culture.

This practice demonstrates that the digital space has become an important arena for Generation Z to construct and display their identities. In this context, English serves as a symbolic marker of membership in a global community that transcends geographical and local cultural boundaries. The use of English on social media allows individuals to demonstrate affiliation with global popular culture, expand their social networks, and construct a self-image that aligns with the identity they wish to project to a digital audience (Soh et al., 2024). From Fairclough's perspective, digital communication constitutes an important site of discourse where identities are constructed and displayed. Through the strategic use of English in social media, Generation Z learners participate in broader global discourses and actively shape how they wish to be perceived by others in digital spaces.

From a critical perspective, these findings show that identity is not formed naturally, but is constructed through linguistic practices that take place in a particular social context. English becomes a symbolic resource that enables Generation Z EFL learners to negotiate their self-identity, both in academic environments and digital spaces. The ability to use English provides an opportunity for individuals to present themselves as part of the global community, while demonstrating certain characteristics such as openness to international culture, academic orientation, and readiness to face the global world. Thus, English not only functions as a communication tool, but also as an identity marker that reflects the experiences, aspirations and social position of Generation Z EFL learners in contemporary society.

2. Language, Power, and Social Inequality

While English is often viewed as a resource that provides various academic, social, and professional advantages, the inherent value of the language cannot be separated from the power relations at work in society. As a dominant language in various strategic domains, such as higher education, science, technology, and the global job market, English holds a privileged position compared to other languages. This condition means that English language proficiency functions not only as a linguistic competence but also as a social resource that can influence an individual's access to various valuable opportunities and resources (Wang et al., 2026).

From a critical language awareness perspective, language is not viewed as a neutral means of communication, but rather as a social practice closely linked to the distribution of power and opportunity in society. When a language gains high economic, academic, and social value, individuals who master it tend to have greater advantages than those without similar access. As a result, language can function as a mechanism that not only opens up opportunities for social mobility but also reproduces existing social inequalities (Popay et al., 2021). The research findings indicate that awareness of the relationship between English, access to resources, and social inequality also emerged in the informants' narratives. This critical awareness is reflected in their views on the potential of English to create social status differences within society.

Although most informants viewed English as a skill that provides various academic and professional advantages, the research data demonstrates a critical awareness that English proficiency also has the potential to create social inequality within society. This was emphasized by one informant, who stated that "the use of English can create real social inequality" (Interview, NL, 20 May, 2026). This statement indicates that the informants do not view English as a neutral skill, but rather as a social resource whose distribution is uneven. This awareness is important because it indicates that Generation Z EFL learners are able to see the connection between

language proficiency and one's social position in society. This view is reinforced by several informants' explanations of unequal access to English language learning.

"Not everyone has access to education, especially English-language education. Usually, we have to take extra English courses or attend expensive schools to get a good quality of English language education." (Interview, ZM, 17 May, 2026).

These statements indicate that English language proficiency is determined not only by individual motivation but also by the availability of social and economic resources that support the learning process. Thus, individuals from more advantaged environments have a greater chance of mastering English than those with limited access. Fairclough (1992) emphasizes that language is closely connected to power relations. When access to English learning is unevenly distributed, language proficiency may become a mechanism through which existing social inequalities are reproduced. In this situation, English functions not only as a resource for social mobility but also as a marker that differentiates individuals according to their access to educational and economic resources.

These findings indicate that English can function as a mechanism of social differentiation. When English language proficiency is associated with intelligence, higher education, and success, individuals with such competencies tend to receive greater social recognition (Rehbein, 2018). Conversely, groups that do not have equal access to English learning may face limitations in obtaining similar academic and professional opportunities. In this context, English functions as a form of capital that can reinforce differences in social position between individuals (Zhang et al., 2025).

Interestingly, this awareness of potential inequality was accompanied by critical reflections from informants on their English language learning practices. Therefore, it is important to emphasize a more contextual, inclusive, and relatable approach to everyday life. One informant suggested that educators use digital media and materials relevant to Generation Z, make learning more interactive, and provide opportunities for all students to actively participate (Interview, PDA, 17 May, 2026). This statement indicates that the informant recognizes the need for learning strategies that are not solely oriented toward language mastery but also consider the diversity of students' social backgrounds.

This view can be interpreted as a form of critical awareness of the importance of equal access to language education. For the informant, effective English learning involves more than just teaching language structure, but also creating a learning space that allows all students equal opportunities to develop their competencies (Darvin & Norton, 2023). The use of digital media, authentic materials, and approaches that are relevant to the lives of Generation Z are seen as efforts to reduce learning barriers that may have been felt by some students (Qureshi et al., 2018). Thus, English language learning not only serves as a means of improving linguistic competence but also as an instrument that can expand access to and participation in education.

English occupies a paradoxical position. On the one hand, English is seen as a means of social mobility, opening access to education, information, and broader employment opportunities. However, on the other hand, English proficiency also has the potential to reproduce social inequality when access to learning is unequally available. Language, educational access, and social opportunities are social practices intertwined with power relations in society. Therefore, the results of this study indicate that efforts to improve English language competence need to be accompanied by more inclusive learning policies and practices so that English does not become a source of social exclusion but rather a means of empowerment accessible to all groups in society.

Overall, the findings can be understood through Fairclough's (2014) Critical Language Awareness framework, which views language as a social practice embedded in ideology and power relations. The meanings attached to English by Generation Z EFL learners are not merely individual perceptions but are shaped by broader social discourses that position English as a symbol of intelligence, prestige, global connectedness, and opportunity. At the same time, these discourses contribute to the construction of social differences because access to English is unevenly distributed across social groups. Therefore, English functions simultaneously as a resource for identity construction, a marker of social status, and a mechanism through which existing power relations and social inequalities may be reproduced.

D. Conclusion

Generation Z EFL learners view English not only as a global communication tool but also as a social resource connoting identity, prestige, and power. English is perceived as a social status symbol representing intelligence, education, professionalism, and opportunities for social mobility. Mastery of English is considered to provide access to a variety of valuable academic, economic, and social resources, thus leading individuals to greater social recognition and respect. Beyond its role as a symbol of social status, English serves as a marker of identity. Generation Z EFL learners use English to represent themselves, build affiliations with the global community, and project their identities in the digital space. The use of English in social media, popular culture consumption, and other digital activities demonstrates that linguistic identity is constructed and negotiated through various linguistic practices that occur in everyday life.

Furthermore, this study uncovered a critical awareness of the relationship between English, power, and social inequality. Informants recognized that access to English language learning is not equally available to all individuals, influenced by economic factors, educational quality, social environment, and access to technology. As a result, English has the potential to become a source of social differentiation that reinforces unequal access to education and social opportunities. Through a critical language awareness perspective, this research emphasizes that English is not simply a linguistic system, but rather a social practice related to identity, social status, and power relations. Therefore, English language learning needs to be developed in a more critical, inclusive, and equitable manner so that it can become a means of empowerment for all learners.

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