

From Languages to Life Skills: What Students Think, What Digital Learning Needs

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Abstract

This study examines students' attitudes toward learning three language subjects—Indonesian, Arabic, and English—within a multilingual educational context. Utilizing a descriptive quantitative approach, data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to students from five elementary schools and three junior high schools. The results indicate that Indonesian is the most favored and perceived as the easiest subject, with 92.3% of students expressing a positive attitude and 80.8% identifying it as the least difficult. In contrast, Arabic was viewed as the most challenging and least preferred, with 57.7% of students reporting difficulties, particularly in vocabulary comprehension and oral expression. English occupied an intermediate position, with students citing challenges such as unfamiliar vocabulary, pronunciation issues, and anxiety about speaking. Despite these differences, the majority of students acknowledged the importance of language learning for future opportunities and effective communication. These findings emphasize the need to develop targeted digital learning resources that address language-specific challenges while incorporating meaningful, life-skill-oriented activities to support both cognitive and communicative development.

1. Introduction

In today's increasingly globalized and digitally connected world, language proficiency is widely recognized as a cornerstone of students' academic success and personal growth. As argued by Cenoz and Gorter (2020), multilingualism can enhance cognitive flexibility and global competence. In the Indonesian education system, students typically study three main language subjects: Indonesian, Arabic, and English. Indonesian is the national language and the medium of instruction, Arabic is introduced primarily for religious purposes, and English serves as a gateway to international communication and access to global knowledge.

Language attitudes, students' feelings, beliefs, and predispositions toward language learning - play a critical role in shaping academic outcomes (Liu & Thompson, 2021). Despite curriculum mandates, many students struggle to engage with language subjects due to low motivation, anxiety, or lack of perceived relevance. These affective factors must be carefully considered in pedagogical planning. Furthermore, language learning environments are evolving rapidly due to the integration of digital technologies. As emphasized by Godwin-Jones (2021), digital tools not only facilitate content delivery but also support interaction, collaboration, and learner autonomy. However, the success of such integration depends heavily on how students perceive and respond to these new learning modes.

Students' preferences and challenges in language learning vary significantly across linguistic subjects. Research by Rahmawati et al. (2022) found that students viewed Indonesian as easier and more practical than Arabic or English, which were often seen as more demanding. These perceptions are influenced by various factors such as teaching methods, learning materials, and classroom experiences. Early exposure to multiple languages is known to benefit cognitive development and intercultural competence (Nguyen & Boers, 2020). For primary and junior secondary students in

Indonesia, this multilingual setup offers both opportunities and challenges. While some students thrive in such environments, others may experience confusion or overload.

The Indonesian government has encouraged the use of digital platforms in schools, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift has created an urgent need to evaluate how students interact with digital resources across different language subjects. Studies such as those by Yunita and Indriani (2023) highlight the benefits of multimedia content in engaging young learners. At the same time, concerns remain regarding students' readiness to use digital tools effectively. Digital inequality, limited access, and varying levels of digital literacy must be addressed to ensure equitable learning opportunities (Kusuma & Wulandari, 2021).

Language teachers play a crucial role in fostering positive attitudes. Teacher enthusiasm, clarity, and feedback can significantly shape how students perceive a language. Research by Al-Ali and Ismail (2022) shows that students tend to be more motivated when they feel supported by their instructors. Moreover, according to Wang and Derakhshan (2021), learner-centered approaches that consider students' emotions and preferences can significantly improve motivation and performance. Hence, understanding students' attitudes toward language subjects can provide useful guidance for instructional design.

The integration of character education and 21st-century skills into language instruction has become increasingly important. Character values such as empathy, responsibility, and collaboration can be nurtured through language learning, particularly when combined with project-based and reflective activities (Utami & Hartono, 2023). Furthermore, assessment methods are also evolving to match the demands of digital and character-based education. Alternative assessments like digital portfolios, peer evaluations, and narrative reflections are gaining popularity for capturing students' progress more holistically (Setiawan, 2020).

Students' voices are essential for creating responsive and inclusive curricula. Collecting feedback through questionnaires, interviews, or learning analytics can offer educators a clearer picture of students' needs. This is supported by recent findings from Sari and Pramudibyanto (2022), who emphasized the value of participatory curriculum development. In conclusion, exploring students' attitudes toward Indonesian, Arabic, and English is vital for designing educational experiences that support academic, social, and personal development. As digital learning continues to expand, understanding students' voices can help educators bridge gaps in motivation, equity, and effectiveness.

2. Method

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design to investigate students' attitudes toward learning Indonesian, Arabic, and English. The research was conducted in 2025, involving 26 students selected through random sampling from five different elementary schools and three different junior secondary schools in Indonesia. The use of random sampling ensured that the data represented diverse student backgrounds and school contexts. Quantitative descriptive design was chosen because it allows the researcher to measure, describe, and analyze trends, opinions, and patterns based on numerical data (Creswell & Creswell, 2020; Bhandari, 2023). This approach is particularly effective in educational studies that seek to evaluate learners' perceptions through measurable indicators.

Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire developed specifically for this research, consisting of multiple-choice items with four options labeled A, B, C, and D. This format allowed for consistent responses and facilitated quantitative analysis of the students' preferences, feelings, and attitudes. The use of multiple-choice options in language attitude surveys is a common practice in educational research (Zhou et al., 2021; Kim & Lim, 2022), as it supports the collection of standardized data that is easy to interpret statistically. Each response was later converted into percentages to determine the dominant patterns among the students' answers.

The questionnaire focused on enjoyment, perceived usefulness, and difficulty of Indonesian, Arabic, and English. Furthermore, to ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument, the questionnaire was reviewed and tested in a pilot study before distribution. The questionnaire focused on three dimensions: (1) students' interest and enjoyment in learning the languages, (2)

perceived difficulty of each language, and (3) the relevance of language learning to their lives. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in the form of frequency distributions and percentage comparisons to provide a clear visual of students' preferences across the three language subjects.

The results were interpreted to draw meaningful conclusions about student attitudes toward language learning, with special attention given to differences in perception among the three subjects. While the sample size was relatively small, the use of randomized participant selection and well-designed measurement tools increased the credibility of the findings. Such methodological rigor aligns with best practices in educational language research (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2021; Alrabai, 2022). Furthermore, the integration of statistical summaries (percentages per response choice) helped provide a snapshot of dominant trends, which is crucial for designing targeted interventions in language instruction. As argued by Rahimi and Zhang (2022), understanding learners' attitudes through empirical and statistically grounded analysis plays a vital role in improving curriculum design, teacher strategies, and student engagement.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study regarding students' attitudes toward learning Indonesian, Arabic, and English within multilingual classroom contexts. It outlines students' language preferences, perceived levels of difficulty, and their motivations for liking or disliking each language subject. These perspectives were derived from a questionnaire administered to students and are analyzed to reveal emerging patterns and implications. Furthermore, the discussion incorporates relevant theories and recent scholarly works in the areas of language acquisition, language anxiety, and digital learning to contextualize the data and strengthen the interpretation of the results.

3.1. Indonesian

The findings reveal that Indonesian is perceived as the most favored and accessible language subject among students, with 92.3% expressing a liking for it and 80.8% identifying it as the easiest to learn. This strong preference may be attributed to the students' immersion in Indonesian as their first or dominant language, aligning with Krashen's (1982) theory of comprehensible input, which emphasizes that language acquisition occurs most effectively when learners are exposed to language they can easily understand. Since Indonesian is the medium of everyday communication and instruction in most Indonesian schools, students likely receive abundant comprehensible input in this language, facilitating vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension. The familiarity with cultural contexts, idiomatic expressions, and sentence structures also likely contributes to their comfort level, reducing cognitive load during the learning process (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). In contrast, languages such as Arabic and English may present greater cognitive demands due to unfamiliar orthographic systems, grammar rules, and limited exposure.

In addition, students' positive attitudes toward Indonesian may also be explained by lower levels of language anxiety compared to foreign languages. Horwitz et al. (1986) note that language anxiety plays a crucial role in foreign language learning outcomes, often impeding speaking and reading performance. The fact that students encounter Indonesian daily minimizes the novelty and stress associated with learning it in a classroom setting. The absence of performance-related anxiety allows for greater engagement, especially in productive skills such as reading and writing stories, which 34.6% of students indicated as enjoyable activities. According to Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), learners tend to be more motivated and perform better when they feel emotionally secure and when the language resonates with their identity. Furthermore, the impact of teacher enthusiasm—as reported by 11.5% of respondents—demonstrates the significant influence of instructional style on students' emotional and cognitive responses to language learning (Mercer & Gkonou, 2017).

These findings present meaningful directions for digital learning interventions targeting less familiar languages like Arabic and English. While Indonesian benefits from naturalistic exposure, EFL and AFL learners may require more structured and emotionally supportive learning environments. Digital platforms, if designed with sensitivity to learner preferences and anxiety levels, can offer this support through interactive story-based learning, vocabulary scaffolding, and low-stakes formative

assessments (Sun & Yang, 2015). Incorporating culturally relevant themes and learner-centered content can emulate the sense of familiarity and comfort found in Indonesian language classrooms. Moreover, features such as voice-narrated texts and personalized vocabulary review may increase comprehensibility, echoing the principles of comprehensible input and reducing the fear of failure. In sum, understanding students' experiences with Indonesian provides a foundation for designing more effective and engaging digital strategies for Arabic and English language acquisition.

3.2. English

English occupied a middle position between Arabic and Indonesian in terms of students' preferences and perceived difficulty. Although only 7.7% of students identified English as their favorite language subject, a substantial 34.6% reported disliking it. This negative perception was also reflected in the responses concerning difficulty, where just 7.7% considered English the easiest language, while an equal 34.6% labeled it the most difficult. Such findings are consistent with previous research indicating that students' attitudes toward English are often shaped by both internal factors (e.g., anxiety, self-efficacy) and external factors (e.g., teaching style, exposure to English) (Alrabai, 2020; Erarslan, 2021). The students' difficulties were primarily centered on vocabulary unfamiliarity (42.3%), mispronunciation (26.9%), and fear of speaking mistakes (23.1%). These challenges mirror common barriers in EFL learning contexts, where vocabulary acquisition and speaking anxiety frequently inhibit active participation (Shaaban & Hamoud, 2021; Tsou & Wang, 2022).

Interestingly, despite the challenges, some students expressed positive reasons for liking English, pointing to the critical role of motivation in language learning. The majority (76.9%) mentioned that a fun and supportive teacher made learning enjoyable, suggesting that teacher affect and classroom environment significantly influence learners' engagement (Wang & Derakhshan, 2021). Others (11.5%) stated that their interest stemmed from a desire to communicate with foreigners or to understand English media, such as music and movies. These responses emphasize that learners are increasingly driven by instrumental and integrative motivations in today's globalized world (Ushioda, 2020). Accordingly, digital learning resources must be designed to tap into these authentic motivational factors. For instance, incorporating subtitled media, real-life dialogue simulations, or pronunciation tools can help bridge the gap between learner interest and proficiency barriers (Zou et al., 2022). When students perceive content as relevant to their personal aspirations and identity, they are more likely to engage in meaningful language use.

To address the reported challenges effectively, educational technology should be aligned with pedagogical strategies that reduce cognitive overload and promote learner autonomy. Tools such as AI-based pronunciation feedback, gamified vocabulary platforms, and safe speaking practice environments (e.g., voice chatbots or dialogue simulations) can lower speaking anxiety and promote active language use (Zhang & Warschauer, 2024). Additionally, content personalization and adaptive learning technologies have been shown to increase learner confidence and retention by catering to individual progress and needs (Chen et al., 2023). In line with this, English learning in Islamic educational settings can benefit from contextually integrated resources, such as digital storybooks or thematic lessons combining English with religious or cultural values. As students in this study demonstrated an openness to learning English when it was delivered in enjoyable and meaningful formats, it becomes essential for future curriculum developers and educators to co-design digital solutions that are both engaging and pedagogically sound (Li & Hafner, 2021). Ultimately, promoting a positive emotional climate, scaffolding linguistic input, and integrating authentic content may significantly enhance English language learning outcomes among young EFL learners.

3.3. Arabic

The findings indicate that Arabic posed the most significant learning challenge for the students compared to Indonesian and English. Over half of the participants (57.7%) reported disliking Arabic, and the same percentage regarded it as the most difficult language subject. Vocabulary comprehension was the most cited difficulty (53.8%), followed by lack of exposure to listening and speaking activities (38.5%). These challenges align with the literature that emphasizes the cognitive demands of Arabic due to its unique script, phonology, and root-pattern morphological system (Alhaisoni & Rahman, 2020; Alyousef, 2022). Moreover, limited opportunities for oral interaction in Arabic outside religious contexts hinder students' active use of the language, which is crucial for skill

development (Mahmoud, 2021). The difficulties students faced, particularly with listening and speaking, reinforce the need for language instruction that incorporates authentic oral input and repetitive vocabulary exposure.

Despite these challenges, it is noteworthy that more than half of the students (53.8%) still expressed a liking for Arabic due to its spiritual significance as the language of the Qur'an. Religious motivation plays a significant role in sustaining interest in Arabic, especially in Islamic education contexts (Al-Salman & Haider, 2023). This affective dimension suggests that Arabic instruction should leverage students' intrinsic connection to religion to enhance motivation and contextual relevance. For instance, integrating Qur'anic expressions and meaningful religious narratives can create a more emotionally engaging learning experience (Al-Jarf, 2022). Furthermore, the teacher's role remains vital, with 42.3% of students appreciating their Arabic teacher's teaching style. This is consistent with findings by Alzamil and Altalhab (2023), who assert that teacher clarity, support, and culturally responsive pedagogy greatly influence learner engagement in Arabic as a second or foreign language.

Given these findings, effective Arabic language instruction in digital or blended environments should be multimodal and learner-centered. It must include interactive features such as visual glossaries, voice-activated pronunciation guides, gamified vocabulary tasks, and digital stories rooted in religious or everyday contexts. These tools reduce cognitive load and support gradual acquisition of complex structures while maintaining learner motivation (Khamkhien, 2023; Shaalan & El-Bakry, 2022). Moreover, scaffolding listening and speaking through repeated exposure and supportive feedback is essential for building communicative competence (Hamouda, 2020). As only a small proportion of students (7.7%) reported having no difficulty learning Arabic, instructional strategies should address a broad spectrum of learners' proficiency levels and learning styles. Tailoring content based on students' linguistic backgrounds, goals, and religious-cultural values will likely improve outcomes and foster more positive attitudes toward Arabic learning.

3.4. The value of languages & discussions

The findings of this study point toward a strategic framework for designing digital language learning tools that accommodate students' preferences, challenges, and goals across Indonesian, Arabic, and English. Indonesian, perceived by most students as the easiest and most favored subject, presents an opportunity to strengthen foundational literacy through creative and interactive methods. Digital platforms can capitalize on this by offering story-building applications, context-rich quizzes, and vocabulary-expansion games that reinforce reading and writing in an enjoyable and self-paced format. Previous research shows that the integration of gamified learning in mother-tongue instruction enhances learner motivation and achievement, particularly when the content is localized and relevant (Huang & Soman, 2013; Alemi et al., 2010). Thus, materials designed for Indonesian language learning should sustain and expand students' interest through visually engaging formats that promote comprehension and writing fluency. Additionally, the use of animated characters or storytelling avatars may enrich narrative skills and provide culturally appropriate scaffolding, increasing students' ownership of the learning process.

In contrast, Arabic language learning requires targeted support to address the specific challenges reported by students—namely, vocabulary load, unfamiliar pronunciation patterns, and its perceived difficulty, with 57.7% of respondents identifying it as the most challenging. To address these, digital tools must integrate multisensory scaffolding through audio, visual, and kinesthetic elements. Interactive flashcards with native-speaker audio, visual glossaries that include both Modern Standard Arabic and Qur'anic expressions, and grammar-based games could lower cognitive barriers and enhance learner engagement. This aligns with Mayer's (2009) cognitive theory of multimedia learning, which posits that dual coding of information through words and visuals promotes deeper understanding. Moreover, because Arabic is often associated with religious identity and Islamic studies, incorporating verses, *adab* (Islamic etiquette), and Qur'anic vocabulary into digital content not only increases relevance but also fosters intrinsic motivation. For English, where pronunciation issues and speaking anxiety were reported as primary difficulties, platforms should include speech recognition tools, subtitled multimedia content such as animated videos and songs, and AI-powered chatbots that provide a non-threatening space for practice. Research by Godwin-Jones (2019) and Derwing & Munro (2015) supports the notion that technology-enhanced speaking tools and input-rich environments can build oral fluency and reduce language anxiety, particularly

among young learners. Thus, developing digital learning resources grounded in the linguistic and affective needs of students can create more responsive and effective language education pathways across all three languages.

Across all language subjects, a substantial portion of students (46.2%) recognized the value of language learning for their future, while 42.3% viewed it as essential for effective communication. These responses reflect an awareness among learners that language proficiency extends beyond classroom assessments to real-world applications. Accordingly, digital learning tools designed for English, Arabic, and Indonesian instruction should incorporate life-skill-based tasks such as email writing, digital storytelling, greeting etiquette, and brief oral presentations. These elements align with the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, which emphasizes language use in authentic contexts (Richards, 2006). When digital platforms provide simulated environments or interactive activities that mirror real-life language use, learners are better prepared for social and professional interactions. This approach is particularly beneficial in multilingual environments like Indonesia, where learners must switch between languages depending on context, making functional fluency an important instructional goal.

Furthermore, the integration of life skills into digital platforms resonates with the broader goals of 21st-century education, which emphasizes collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking (Griffin, McGaw, & Care, 2012). Digital tools that embed these competencies within language tasks promote not only linguistic competence but also learner autonomy and confidence. For instance, tasks like composing messages or introducing oneself in different languages may reduce foreign language anxiety by providing low-risk, familiar contexts that foster learner engagement. As Warschauer and Healey (1998) assert, technology-enhanced language learning is most effective when it is learner-centered, task-based, and embedded within meaningful communicative goals. Additionally, Nguyen and Boers (2020) found that students who practiced life-skill-oriented speaking and writing tasks in digital environments developed stronger communicative competence and higher motivation compared to those engaged in traditional grammar-translation tasks. Thus, drawing from students' stated motivations and expectations, educators and developers can build digital platforms that serve both linguistic and practical purposes, equipping learners for diverse communicative challenges in both local and global settings.

Finally, digital platforms should emphasize personalization and accessibility—allowing learners to progress at their own pace and revisit difficult content repeatedly. Considering that many students enjoy learning when the teacher is fun and engaging, the tone and interface of digital content must be friendly, visually appealing, and encouraging—mimicking that positive teacher-student interaction in virtual form.

3.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the integration of multilingual language learning - Indonesian, Arabic, and English - should not only address students' cognitive needs but also promote the development of life skills through meaningful, real-world communication tasks. The survey findings indicate that while students generally prefer Indonesian due to its familiarity and ease, Arabic and English pose significant challenges, particularly in vocabulary acquisition and oral expression. These difficulties may be mitigated through the implementation of tailored digital features such as voice recognition, interactive media, and chatbot simulations. Furthermore, embedding essential life skills; such as self-introduction, email writing, polite conversation, and task-based language use across all language areas can enhance practical competence and learner engagement. To maximize effectiveness, digital learning platforms should prioritize visual appeal, interactivity, and learner autonomy, while providing guided, teacher-like support to foster an enjoyable and impactful multilingual learning experience.

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