

Shifting Attitudes Toward English Learning Among Rural High School Students: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze changes in attitudes of high school students in rural areas towards learning English using a qualitative descriptive approach through literature study. Students' attitudes towards English are an important aspect in successful learning, which is influenced by pedagogical, social, and emotional factors. Through an analysis of various academic literature sources, this study found that students' attitudes tend to change positively over time when supported by a communicative, contextually relevant learning approach, and involving the use of interesting media. The results also indicate that more self-confidence, teacher support, peer interaction, and support of family collectively increased students' motivation of learning English. Those students with low socioeconomic status had the most positive changes in attitudes in inclusive and supportive learning environments. The study highlights that learning attitudes are dynamic and impacted by an interconnected combination of internal and external influences. For these reasons, developing educational policies and teaching strategies that take into account the affective side are crucial to developing the success of English learning in rural Indonesia.

Keywords: Learning attitudes, English, rural students, literature study, secondary education.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization and information-based society, proficiency in the English language is an extremely valuable and strategic skill. English is no longer considered as a subject in school, but is viewed as a global means of communication spanning geographical, professional and cultural divides (Crystal, 2019; Kirkpatrick, 2020). In the context of international communication English has been used as a *Lingua franca*, that is, a connecting language between countries, and has provided access to exchange information, science, technology and culture, between countries (Nguyen & Hamid, 2021). Therefore, English language proficiency is an important opener, in many aspects of modern life; from higher education, the world of work and international forums.

In Indonesia, English is officially relegated to a foreign language, not as a second language as in some other countries. Nevertheless, the position of English in the national education system remains very strategic. The Indonesian government has integrated English learning into the secondary education curriculum as part of an effort to prepare the younger generation to face global competition (Hamied et al., 2018). The Merdeka Curriculum that has begun to be introduced also places foreign language skills, especially English, as one aspect of literacy that needs to be developed from elementary and secondary education levels. This integration shows that learning English is not only important in an academic context, but also as social and economic capital in the future.

However, although education policies have affirmed the importance of English, the reality of its implementation in various regions of Indonesia still shows quite significant gaps. One of the most striking forms of shadow occurs between urban and rural areas. Schools in urban areas generally have better access to quality teachers, modern learning facilities, and digital resources that support foreign language learning.

In contrast, schools in rural areas are still struggling with limited infrastructure, a lack of competent teachers in teaching English, and minimal access to adequate learning media (Suryanto, 2018; Murtiningsih, 2020; Rahmah & Widodo, 2022).

These situations generate inequality in the quality of English education. Consequently, there are typically practical gaps for students that impede their development of English language competencies. Moreover, it is the structural barriers that impact learners' psychological aspects of learning specifically on their attitudes toward English. In Second Language learning theory, attitude is understood as a psychological construct which encapsulates a person's feelings, beliefs, and behavioral tendencies towards an object, in this particular case foreign language learning (Dörnyei, 2019; Alrabai, 2020). A student with a positive attitude toward English is generally based on a high level of motivation, an intention to be an active participant in the learning process and positive learning results. At the other end of the spectrum, a negative attitude may induce feelings of anxiety, avoidance of learning experiences, and can often lead to emotional detachment from the foreign language learning process (Visser, 2022).

In the rural context of Indonesia, previous studies found that the attitudes of students in English Language Learning were more negative than students in urban communities. Students expressed low interest in learning, very little confidence in using English, and a notion that English is something difficult, foreign, and even irrelevant to their everyday lives. (Yulia, 2019; Priyatno et al., 2022) Several of the contributing factors to the development of this negative attitude included tedium in teaching style and methods used; monotonous and non-contextual lessons, lack of opportunities to practice real communication in English, and lack of support from their immediate environment, parents, and the community (Rahmah & Widodo, 2022). What is interesting to note is that attitude is not a static variable. In many psychopedagogical studies, attitudes are said to be dynamic and contextual, which can change over time depending on learning experiences, social interactions, and learning environment conditions (Piniel & Csizér, 2015). Therefore, understanding changes in students' attitudes towards English requires an approach that not only describes current conditions but also tracks changes that occur gradually. In this case, a longitudinal approach is relevant because it allows researchers to capture the process of attitude development more accurately and holistically. Longitudinal studies differ from cross-sectional approaches because they observe respondents over a period of time so that they can see shifts in attitudes and the factors that cause them (Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Sun & Gao, 2020; Teng & Wang, 2021). Unfortunately, longitudinal studies in English language learning in Indonesia, especially those focused on rural contexts, are still very limited. Most of the available studies only use one-time data (snapshots) which do not provide an in-depth picture of students' attitude development (Rahman, 2021; Rosmalina & Hermagustiana, 2023). On the other hand, several studies that have tried to examine the factors that influence English learning attitudes have also not sufficiently explained how these factors interact and change over time (Hamied et al., 2018; Fatimah & Widodo, 2019). This limitation poses a gap in the literature, and in particular, the understanding of learning attitudes in resource-poor contexts. This is where the importance of literature review as a method somewhat refills the need for systematic synthesis of knowledge. Using a literature review as a methodology can allow researchers to visually catalog and examine the various the findings of prior studies, as well as catalog specific patterns or trends in changes of attitude of students toward English, in addition to the common variables that have been located in rural learning contexts. Because literature review uses a descriptive qualitative

approach, it can also provide a rich interpretation of the meaning of the attitudes of the students as can be interpreted in the results of previously completed research.

Additionally, in this literature review, it is important to consider both internal and external factors affecting changes in students' attitudes. Internal factors include psychological dimensions such as motivation, self-efficacy, anxiety, and interest in a foreign language. Dörnyei (2019) stated that motivation is a decisive factor in language learning and is determined by goal orientation, value given to success in learning, and belief in one's own abilities. Students who have a high degree of self-efficacy are likely to be more positive in dealing with the challenges of learning English. Low self-efficacy, however, can lead students to give up easily, and find it difficult to take risks in speaking or writing in a foreign language (Ushioda, 2017). Conversely, outside factors include teacher support, teaching style, curriculum, engaged pupils with peers, and family as well as community support. As highlighted in findings by Wuryandani & Rachmijati (2023), the communicative teaching strategy that has a local context focus, and is responsive to student's expressed needs, leads to a stronger levels of positive attitudes toward learning English. Teacher support is not just in terms of materials but also includes, an understanding and empathetic attitude, psychological encouragement and creating a safe environment to practice. Outside of the school environment the role of parents and other community members in motivating and adding value to English language learning has proved to consolidate student's confidence in using English – (Sasmoko et al., 2020; Dewi et al., 2022).

This literature review is also expected to provide an overview of the relationship between rural socio-economic structures and students' attitudes towards foreign languages. In societies with low literacy rates and limited access to global information, English is often viewed as something “distant”, exclusive, and even irrelevant. This is a major challenge in building a progressive learning orientation. Therefore, a synthesis of existing studies will help develop a richer theoretical understanding of how local contexts shape the dynamics of English learning attitudes.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze various previous studies that discuss changes in students' attitudes towards English learning in rural areas. Through a descriptive qualitative approach and literature study data collection techniques, this study will compile a comprehensive picture of the factors that influence students' attitudes, the direction of changes in these attitudes over time, and their implications for the development of more contextual and inclusive English language learning strategies. The results of this study are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of learning models that are sensitive to rural conditions, as well as provide practical recommendations for teachers, policy makers, and curriculum developers in improving the quality and relevance of English language learning in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure a transparent and systematic literature selection process.

The literature search was conducted using four academic databases: Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and Garuda. The search employed combinations of the following keywords: “student attitudes toward English learning,” “EFL learners in rural schools,”

“English education in Indonesian high schools,” and “factors influencing language attitudes.”

The initial search yielded 156 records. After removing duplicate publications (n = 28), 128 articles remained for title and abstract screening. During this stage, 73 articles were excluded because they did not focus on English learning attitudes, rural contexts, or secondary school students.

The remaining 55 articles were assessed for full-text eligibility. A further 32 articles were excluded because they did not provide sufficient empirical evidence, focused on university students, or lacked relevance to the research objectives.

As a result, only 23 studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis.

Inclusion Criteria

The selection of studies was guided by predetermined inclusion criteria. First, the studies had to examine students' attitudes toward English language learning as a primary or substantial research focus. Second, the participants had to be secondary school or high school students. Third, the studies were required to be conducted in rural or semi-rural educational settings to ensure contextual relevance. Fourth, only publications issued between 2013 and 2023 were considered. Fifth, the review included empirical research reported in peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, theses, dissertations, and research reports. Finally, only studies with accessible full-text versions were retained for detailed analysis and synthesis.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded from the review if they did not meet the predefined eligibility requirements. Specifically, research focusing on university students, adult learners, or other populations outside the secondary school level was excluded. Studies examining languages other than English were also removed.

Furthermore, non-empirical publications—including opinion pieces, editorials, book reviews, and other non-research documents—were not included. Articles that did not treat learner attitudes as a primary or substantial research variable were excluded from the synthesis. Publications without accessible full-text versions were omitted because their methodology and findings could not be adequately assessed. Finally, duplicate publications identified during the database search process were removed prior to the full-text review stage.

The literature indicates that for students in rural areas, attitudes toward English learning are mostly ambivalent to negative and are highly influenced by the lack of resources, limited teaching approaches and low attention to the use of the target language outside the classroom (Rahmah & Widodo, 2022; Yulia, 2019; Priyatno et al., 2022). Several studies demonstrated that rural students frequently consider English to be a difficult subject and not applicable to their daily life (Suryanto, 2018). In rural areas, there is also a significant lack of teachers with sufficient pedagogical and professional competence to teach a foreign language (Murtiningsih, 2020; Hamied et al., 2018).

The data analysis for this study adopted a content analysis approach. Content analysis is a systematic way to identify patterns, meanings and tendencies in the text being analyzed (Krippendorff, 2013). The analysis step consists of data reduction, which by implication makes selections of information from each literature that fit the research focus. A categorization phase was also done, which grouped data with similar themes or themes with similar problem foci, such as changes in motivation, attitudes towards English teachers, or perceptions of language difficulties.

This analysis will create a narrative synthesis, and from this researchers can map the changes in student attitudes over time from the results of the previous studies (Miles & Huberman, 2014). The data from the analysis confirmed that student attitudes towards learning English in rural areas were significantly influenced by a combination of the social environment, pedagogical practices, and family economic circumstances (Kusumawardani et al., 2023; Rosmalina & Hermagustiana, 2023).

In some respects, students from families where their parents had higher formal education levels were inclined to develop positive attitudes towards English because of the expectations and associated support from their home environments (Alrabai, 2020). On the other hand, students become bored and lose motivation to learn when teachers employ non communicative and grammar – oriented teaching (Nurkamto, 2020; Kustiawati).

To ensure the methodological rigor and reliability of the reviewed studies, a quality assessment procedure was conducted before the final synthesis stage. Each selected study was evaluated using six quality criteria: (1) clearly stated research objectives, (2) appropriate research design, (3) adequate description of participants, (4) transparent data collection procedures, (5) clearly explained data analysis methods, and (6) findings supported by sufficient evidence.

Each criterion was assessed using a three-point scale: Yes (1 point), indicating that the criterion was fully met; Partially (0.5 points), indicating that the criterion was only partially addressed; and No (0 points), indicating that the criterion was not met. The maximum possible quality score for each study was six points.

To maintain the credibility and trustworthiness of the review, only studies achieving at least 70% of the maximum score (4.2 out of 6 points) were retained for the final analysis. Studies scoring below this threshold were excluded because they did not provide sufficient methodological quality or reporting transparency. This assessment process helped ensure that the findings synthesized in the review were derived from reliable and well-documented empirical research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Themes Emerging from the Reviewed Literature

The analysis of the 23 selected studies revealed six major themes related to the development of rural high school students' attitudes toward English learning. Across the reviewed literature, attitudes were consistently described as dynamic rather than fixed. The studies showed that students' attitudes could improve, decline, or fluctuate depending on their learning experiences, instructional practices, social environments, and personal beliefs. The six themes identified were: (1) longitudinal changes in language learning attitudes, (2) affective dimensions in students' learning experiences, (3) the shift from traditional to communicative teaching approaches, (4) self-efficacy and attitude development, (5) gender and socioeconomic influences, and (6) emotional ecology and social support.

1. Longitudinal Changes in Language Learning Attitudes

Several studies reviewed in this research reported that students' attitudes toward English learning changed over time. Teng and Wang (2021) and Henry and Thorsen (2018) found that positive attitudes gradually developed when students experienced meaningful learning activities and perceived progress in their language abilities. Although rural schools often face challenges such as limited resources and restricted exposure to English,

the literature suggests that sustained instructional support can foster more positive attitudes toward language learning.

The reviewed studies also indicated that attitude development was closely associated with the quality of classroom experiences. For example, Putri et al. (2023) reported that project-based activities and collaborative learning increased students' engagement and reduced learning anxiety. These findings suggest that changes in attitudes are influenced not only by learners' internal characteristics but also by the learning opportunities provided by teachers and schools.

These findings indicate that students' attitudes toward English learning are dynamic and continually shaped by their learning experiences. Positive classroom experiences, supportive teaching practices, and meaningful learning activities contribute to more favorable attitudes, while negative experiences may hinder students' engagement. This is consistent with Dörnyei's (2019) argument that language attitudes and motivation evolve over time as learners interact with their educational environment and accumulate learning experiences.

2. Affective Dimensions in Students' Learning Experiences

The reviewed literature consistently highlighted the importance of emotional factors in shaping students' attitudes toward English. Several studies reported that students initially experienced anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low confidence when learning English. However, these negative feelings often diminished when students participated in enjoyable and supportive learning activities.

For instance, Syafira and Afrita (2022) found that the use of video-based instruction, language games, and group discussions created a more positive learning atmosphere. Similarly, Teng and Wang (2021) reported that greater emotional engagement in classroom activities was associated with increased motivation and more favorable attitudes toward English learning. These findings suggest that affective experiences play a crucial role in the development of positive language learning attitudes.

The reviewed studies suggest that emotions strongly influence students' attitudes toward English learning. While many students initially feel anxious or lack confidence, positive learning experiences can gradually improve their attitudes. Engaging activities, supportive teachers, and enjoyable classroom environments help increase motivation and reduce anxiety (Syafira & Afrita, 2022; Teng & Wang, 2021). These findings indicate that emotional support is an important factor in fostering positive attitudes toward English learning, particularly in rural contexts.

3. The Shift from Traditional to Communicative Teaching Approaches

Another recurring theme in the reviewed studies was the influence of teaching methodology. Several studies reported that students tended to develop more positive attitudes when teachers adopted communicative and learner-centered approaches rather than traditional grammar-focused instruction.

The reviewed studies suggest that teaching methodology plays an important role in shaping students' attitudes toward English learning. Students generally showed more positive attitudes when teachers used communicative and learner-centered approaches instead of traditional grammar-based instruction. Dörnyei (2019) argued that communicative activities promote meaningful interaction and reduce learners' anxiety. Similarly, Rosmalina and Hermagustiana (2023) found that communicative language teaching increased students' participation and willingness to use English in rural

classrooms. These findings indicate that interactive and meaningful teaching approaches can help foster more positive attitudes toward English learning.

4. Self-Efficacy and Attitude Development

The literature also emphasized the role of self-efficacy in shaping students' attitudes. Across several studies, students who experienced academic success, even through small achievements, tended to develop greater confidence and more positive perceptions of English learning.

Bandura (1997) argued that successful learning experiences strengthen learners' beliefs in their capabilities. Consistent with this perspective, Alrabai (2020) reported that supportive learning environments helped students overcome initial negative attitudes and gradually develop confidence in their language abilities. These findings suggest that positive attitudes are more likely to emerge when students perceive themselves as capable learners.

5. Gender and Socioeconomic Influences

Several studies identified gender and socioeconomic background as factors influencing students' attitudes toward English. Paradewari and Mbato (2018) found that female students generally demonstrated more stable positive attitudes, partly due to stronger academic aspirations and future-oriented goals.

The literature also indicated that students from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds often began with lower levels of motivation and confidence. However, studies by Sun and Gao (2020) and Rahmah and Widodo (2022) reported that these students showed substantial attitudinal improvement when provided with supportive teaching practices and individualized attention. This finding highlights the importance of context-responsive instruction in reducing educational disparities.

6. Emotional Ecology and Social Support

The final theme concerned the influence of social relationships and emotional support. Across the reviewed studies, supportive interactions with teachers, peers, and family members were consistently associated with more positive attitudes toward English learning.

Mustafa (2018) and Wuryandani and Rachmijati (2023) reported that students responded positively to teachers who created welcoming classroom environments and provided constructive feedback. Peer collaboration also contributed to increased confidence and engagement. In addition, parental encouragement, even when parents were not directly involved in language learning, was found to strengthen students' commitment to studying English (Fatimah & Widodo, 2019).

Overall, the reviewed literature suggests that students' attitudes toward English learning in rural high schools are shaped by a complex interaction of pedagogical, emotional, social, and contextual factors. Rather than remaining stable, attitudes develop over time through learners' experiences both inside and outside the classroom.

Discussion

This literature review demonstrates that students' attitudes toward English learning in rural high schools are dynamic and shaped by a combination of pedagogical, emotional, and social factors. The reviewed studies indicate that positive attitudes are more likely to develop when students experience engaging and communicative learning activities, receive supportive feedback, and feel emotionally connected to the learning process.

The findings also highlight the importance of self-efficacy, teacher support, peer relationships, and family involvement in fostering positive attitudes toward English. Despite challenges such as limited resources and exposure to English, rural students can develop favorable attitudes when provided with meaningful and contextually relevant learning experiences.

This study contributes to the understanding of attitude development in rural EFL contexts by synthesizing evidence from previous research. The findings suggest that efforts to improve English education in rural areas should focus not only on resources and curriculum but also on creating supportive, inclusive, and learner-centered learning environments.

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