Dedikasi: Jurnal Pengabdian Pendidikan dan Teknologi Masyarakat
e-ISSN: 2987–8233, p-ISSN: 3025–2695
Volume 4 Nomor 2 Tahun 2026
Website: *https://dedikasi.net/index.php/dedikasi* Halaman: 429 - 433

Language Choice Among University Students in a Multilingual Society : A Study at Universitas Pahlawan Tuanku Tambusai

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Kata Kunci:
Pilihan Bahasa, Masyarakat Multilingual, Mahasiswa, Sosiolinguistik, Bahasa Ocu, Bahasa Indonesia

Abstrak

Pilihan bahasa mencerminkan bagaimana penutur memilih bahasa berdasarkan konteks sosial. Di Universitas Pahlawan Tuanku Tambusai, mahasiswa umumnya menggunakan bahasa Indonesia, Ocu, dan Inggris. Penelitian kualitatif deskriptif ini menganalisis pilihan bahasa mahasiswa beserta faktor pemengaruhnya. Data dikumpulkan dari sepuluh mahasiswa melalui Google Forms dan dianalisis melalui reduksi, penyajian data, serta penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahasa Indonesia mendominasi ranah akademik formal seperti perkuliahan dan diskusi. Bahasa Ocu digunakan pada interaksi informal antarmahasiswa asal Kampar untuk menjaga identitas budaya dan keakraban. Bahasa Inggris hadir terutama dalam kelas bahasa, presentasi, dan istilah teknis. Faktor utama pemengaruh meliputi lawan tutur, latar tempat, tujuan komunikasi, dan identitas budaya. Kesimpulannya, mahasiswa menunjukkan fleksibilitas berkomunikasi dengan menyesuaikan bahasa sesuai konteks, yang mencerminkan dinamika interaksi multilingual dalam mendukung komunikasi akademik sekaligus pelestarian budaya.

Keyword:
Language Choice, Multilingual Society, University Students, Sociolinguistics, Ocu Language

Abstract

Language choice reflects how speakers select languages based on social contexts. At Universitas Pahlawan Tuanku Tambusai, students regularly use Indonesian, Ocu, and English. This descriptive qualitative study examines students' language choices and influencing factors. Data were collected from ten students via Google Forms and analyzed through data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. Results indicate Indonesian dominates formal academic contexts like lectures and classroom discussions. Ocu is primarily used in informal settings among Kampar students to maintain cultural identity and social ties. English appears mainly during language classes, presentations, and technical terminology use. Key influencing factors include interlocutors, settings, purpose, and cultural background. In conclusion, students show communicative flexibility by adapting their language use to specific contexts, illustrating dynamic multilingual interactions that balance effective academic communication with cultural preservation.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is recognized as one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world. Hundreds of regional languages are spoken alongside Indonesian, which functions as the national and official language. In addition, the increasing influence of globalization, technological development, and international education has encouraged the use of English in various educational and professional settings. Consequently, many Indonesians grow up in multilingual environments where they regularly alternate between Indonesian, regional languages, and English according to different social situations.

University students represent a unique multilingual community because they come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. During their academic life, students interact with lecturers, classmates, administrative staff, and the surrounding community in various communication settings. These interactions require them to continuously determine which language is the most appropriate to use. For example, Indonesian is generally used during lectures and official campus activities, while regional languages are often spoken among close friends who share the same cultural background. English is commonly used in language courses, academic presentations, and discussions involving international references.

Universitas Pahlawan Tuanku Tambusai reflects this multilingual environment. The university accommodates students from different districts and provinces, particularly from Riau, where linguistic diversity is part of everyday life. Among students, three languages are frequently encountered in daily

e-ISSN: 2987–8233
p-ISSN: 3025–2695

communication: Indonesian, Ocu, and English. Indonesian functions as the primary language for academic communication. Ocu, as one of the regional languages widely spoken in Kampar Regency, is commonly used among students who share the same regional identity. English is primarily used in academic contexts, especially in English language classes, presentations, and when discussing international academic materials.

The coexistence of these three languages creates interesting sociolinguistic phenomena. Students often switch between languages according to the people they are talking to, the location of the conversation, the level of formality, and the purpose of communication. This demonstrates that language choice is not random but influenced by various social and cultural factors. Understanding these patterns is important because language choice reflects how multilingual speakers negotiate identity, maintain social relationships, and adapt to different communication contexts.

Several sociolinguists have explained that language choice is influenced by social variables. Holmes (2022) argues that speakers choose different languages depending on the participants, setting, topic, and function of communication. Similarly, Wardhaugh and Fuller (2021) state that multilingual speakers naturally select languages that they consider most appropriate for particular situations. These perspectives indicate that language choice is closely connected to social interaction rather than merely linguistic ability.

Although language choice has been widely discussed in sociolinguistic research, studies focusing specifically on students at Universitas Pahlawan Tuanku Tambusai remain limited. Most previous studies have examined multilingual communication in larger universities or urban communities. Therefore, investigating language choice among students at Universitas Pahlawan Tuanku Tambusai is expected to provide a clearer understanding of multilingual communication practices within the local academic context, particularly regarding the use of Indonesian, Ocu, and English.

Based on these considerations, this study investigates the language choice of students at Universitas Pahlawan Tuanku Tambusai in a multilingual society. The study focuses on identifying the languages most frequently used by students, describing the situations in which each language is used, and analyzing the factors that influence students' language choices in their daily communication.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to investigate language choice among university students in a multilingual society. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to explore how students choose languages in different communication contexts and to understand the social factors influencing their language choices. Rather than testing hypotheses, this research sought to provide a detailed description of language use among students at Universitas Pahlawan Tuanku Tambusai.

The research was conducted at Universitas Pahlawan Tuanku Tambusai, Bangkinang, Riau, Indonesia. The participants consisted of ten students from different study programs and semesters. They were selected using purposive sampling, as they met the criteria of actively participating in academic and social interactions on campus and using more than one language in their daily communication.

The primary data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed using Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended and closed-ended questions regarding students' use of Indonesian, Ocu, and English in different communication situations. The questions also explored the reasons behind their language choices and the factors influencing their language use.

After all responses had been collected, the data were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis procedures proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During the data reduction process, responses that were incomplete or irrelevant to the research objectives were excluded from further analysis. The remaining responses were then categorized according to language use, communication situations, and factors affecting language choice.

To ensure the credibility of the findings, the researcher carefully reviewed all participants' responses and compared similar patterns across respondents. The results were then interpreted based on sociolinguistic theories concerning language choice in multilingual communities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Characteristics of the Participants

The study involved ten students of Universitas Pahlawan Tuanku Tambusai who voluntarily participated by completing the online questionnaire. The participants came from different study programs and regional backgrounds, creating a multilingual environment suitable for investigating language choice. Although the

e-ISSN: 2987–8233
p-ISSN: 3025–2695

participants had different linguistic backgrounds, all of them reported using more than one language in their daily communication. The three languages most frequently mentioned were Indonesian, Ocu, and English. This finding indicates that multilingual communication is a common phenomenon among students at Universitas Pahlawan Tuanku Tambusai.

Language Choice among Students

The questionnaire results reveal that Indonesian is the language most frequently used by students in formal and academic situations. Almost all participants reported using Indonesian during classroom discussions, presentations, communication with lecturers, and official campus activities. One participant (R1) stated: "Saya menggunakan Bahasa Indonesia ketika berbicara dengan dosen dan saat mengikuti perkuliahan karena semua orang dapat memahaminya." Similarly, another participant (R4) explained: "Bahasa Indonesia lebih sering digunakan ketika berdiskusi di kelas agar komunikasi berjalan dengan baik." These responses indicate that Indonesian functions as the primary language of academic communication at Universitas Pahlawan Tuanku Tambusai.

The Use of Ocu Language

Besides Indonesian, Ocu remains an important language among students, particularly those originating from Kampar Regency. The participants explained that Ocu is mainly used during informal conversations with friends who share the same regional background. Participant R3 commented: "Saya menggunakan Bahasa Ocu ketika berbicara dengan teman sesama Kampar karena terasa lebih akrab." Participant R7 also stated: "Kalau sedang bercanda dengan teman dekat, saya lebih nyaman menggunakan Bahasa Ocu." These findings suggest that Ocu functions as a marker of solidarity and cultural identity. Students use the language not only because they understand it but also because it strengthens interpersonal relationships within their social groups.

The Use of English

Compared with Indonesian and Ocu, English is used less frequently. Most participants indicated that English is mainly used in academic situations, especially during English courses, classroom presentations, reading journal articles, and using technical or academic vocabulary. Participant R2 stated: "Bahasa Inggris biasanya digunakan saat presentasi atau ketika mata ku Bahasa Inggris." Participant R9 explained: "Saya memakai Bahasa Inggris ketika membaca jurnal atau menggunakan istilah tertentu dalam tugas kuliah." These responses demonstrate that English has a functional role in supporting students' academic development rather than everyday social interaction.

Factors Influencing Language Choice

Analysis of the questionnaire responses identified four major factors influencing students' language choice.

Interlocutor

The person with whom students communicate strongly influences language selection. Participants reported using Indonesian with lecturers and students from different regions, while Ocu is preferred when speaking with fellow Kampar students.

Communication Setting

Formal situations encourage the use of Indonesian because it is considered appropriate and widely understood. In contrast, informal situations provide greater freedom to use Ocu.

Purpose of Communication

Students select languages according to their communication goals. Indonesian is preferred for academic discussions, Ocu for casual conversations, and English for educational activities requiring international terminology.

Cultural Identity

Several participants emphasized that speaking Ocu allows them to preserve their cultural identity and maintain close relationships with people from the same region.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that language choice among students at Universitas Pahlawan Tuanku Tambusai is a dynamic sociolinguistic phenomenon influenced by various social and communicative factors. The participants reported using three primary languages—Indonesian, Ocu, and English—in different situations depending on the interlocutor, setting, and purpose of communication. These findings support the

e-ISSN: 2987–8233
p-ISSN: 3025–2695

sociolinguistic perspective that multilingual speakers do not select languages randomly but adjust their language use according to the social context in which communication occurs.

One of the most significant findings is that Indonesian functions as the dominant language in formal communication. Almost all participants stated that they use Indonesian when interacting with lecturers, participating in classroom discussions, presenting assignments, and communicating with students from different regional backgrounds. As the national and official language of Indonesia, Indonesian serves as a common language that facilitates effective communication among speakers from diverse linguistic communities.

This finding is consistent with Holmes (2022), who explains that speakers tend to select a language that is mutually understood by all participants in a conversation. In multilingual societies, the national language often becomes the preferred choice in formal settings because it promotes clarity, equality, and mutual understanding. Similarly, Wardhaugh and Fuller (2021) argue that language choice is strongly influenced by the social roles of speakers and listeners. Since lecturers hold higher social and academic status, students naturally choose Indonesian as a respectful and appropriate medium of communication.

Besides Indonesian, the findings reveal that Ocu remains an important language in students' informal interactions. Students from Kampar reported that they frequently use Ocu when communicating with friends who share the same regional background. They explained that speaking Ocu creates a sense of familiarity, solidarity, and emotional closeness. Rather than merely functioning as a communication tool, Ocu represents their cultural identity and local heritage.

This phenomenon supports Fishman's theory of language domains, which suggests that language use varies according to social domains such as family, friendship, education, and religion. In the friendship domain, speakers often prefer their mother tongue because it strengthens interpersonal relationships and reflects shared cultural values. The participants' responses indicate that Ocu continues to function as an important marker of regional identity despite the dominance of Indonesian in academic contexts.

Another important finding concerns the use of English. Unlike Indonesian and Ocu, English is used only in specific academic contexts. Participants reported using English during English language courses, classroom presentations, reading international journals, and employing technical or academic terminology. This suggests that English functions primarily as an educational language rather than as a language of everyday communication.

The limited use of English can be explained by the educational environment of the university. Although students recognize the importance of English for academic and professional development, they still rely on Indonesian and Ocu for most daily interactions. This finding is consistent with Yule (2020), who states that multilingual speakers often assign different functions to different languages depending on their communicative needs.

The study also identifies several factors influencing language choice. Among these, the interlocutor appears to be the most influential factor. Students consistently adjust their language according to the person they are speaking with. Indonesian is preferred when communicating with lecturers or students from different regions, while Ocu is used among friends from Kampar. This demonstrates students' awareness of appropriate language use in different social relationships.

The communication setting also plays a crucial role. Formal academic environments encourage students to use Indonesian because it is considered more professional and respectful. Conversely, informal settings such as cafeterias, student lounges, and campus gathering places provide greater flexibility, allowing students to communicate in Ocu without concern for formal language norms.

Another important factor is the purpose of communication. Participants reported selecting different languages depending on whether they were discussing academic matters, social activities, or personal issues. Indonesian is generally chosen for educational purposes, Ocu for casual conversations, and English for learning activities involving international materials. These findings suggest that students possess a high degree of communicative competence, enabling them to choose the most appropriate language according to their communicative goals.

Finally, cultural identity strongly influences language choice. Several participants emphasized that speaking Ocu is a way of preserving their regional language and expressing pride in their cultural background. In multilingual communities, regional languages are not only communication tools but also symbols of identity and belonging. Maintaining the use of Ocu among university students contributes to preserving local linguistic heritage while promoting cultural diversity within higher education.

e-ISSN: 2987–8233
p-ISSN: 3025–2695

Overall, the findings indicate that multilingualism among students at Universitas Pahlawan Tuanku Tambusai enriches campus communication rather than creating barriers. Students demonstrate the ability to move flexibly between Indonesian, Ocu, and English according to different communication needs. Their language choices reflect not only linguistic competence but also sensitivity to social norms, cultural identity, and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, language choice among university students can be understood as a dynamic sociolinguistic practice shaped by both individual preferences and the broader multilingual environment.

CONCLUSION

This study examined language choice among students at Universitas Pahlawan Tuanku Tambusai in a multilingual society. The findings indicate that students regularly use three languages Indonesian, Ocu, and English in different communication contexts. Indonesian is the dominant language in formal and academic situations because it serves as the official language of instruction and communication. Ocu is mainly used in informal interactions among students from Kampar, reflecting solidarity and cultural identity. English is primarily used in academic contexts, particularly during English courses, presentations, and when accessing international academic resources.

The study also found that students' language choice is influenced by four main factors: interlocutors, communication settings, communication purposes, and cultural identity. These factors encourage students to select the most appropriate language according to each communication context. In conclusion, language choice among students at Universitas Pahlawan Tuanku Tambusai illustrates the dynamic nature of multilingual communication. The ability to alternate between Indonesian, Ocu, and English demonstrates students' linguistic competence while also supporting effective communication and the preservation of local cultural identity. Future studies are recommended to involve a larger number of participants and compare language choice across different universities to obtain a broader understanding of multilingual practices in Indonesian higher education.

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