ENGLISH PROFICIENCY TESTS IN INDONESIAN UNIVERSITY ADMISSION: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF EQUITY AND CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examined the use of English-language proficiency tests, such as the TOEFL and IELTS, as gatekeeping tools for university admissions in Indonesia. While these tests serve as standardised indicators of academic readiness, their widespread application raises concerns about fairness, accessibility, and sociocultural implications, especially for students in rural areas. Grounded in sociocultural theories of language, identity, and power, and informed by contemporary research on language assessment and educational equity, this qualitative inquiry used critical autoethnography, reflective narratives, and critical analysis to explore two main focuses of the issue: why English proficiency tests are used as entrance requirements in a country where English is not the medium of daily communication, and how these tests affect students' identities and opportunities. Findings showed that these tests often function beyond linguistic evaluation—symbolising institutional prestige, perpetuating social inequalities, and constructing identity hierarchies among students. The investigation is further enriched by contemporary research on language assessment and educational equity, which provides a framework for understanding how these tests may inadvertently perpetuate social inequalities and limit opportunities for certain student groups. The paper concludes by recommending inclusive language policies and enhanced access to language learning in rural Indonesia.

KEYWORDS: *English Proficiency Test, Language Identity, Educational Equity, Indonesian Higher Education*

INTRODUCTION

Language proficiency tests, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), have become increasingly popular as gatekeepers in the global world (Bakri, 2023; Roza, 2023). Those tests have the power to assess someone's capability to serve as a gateway into educational sectors, such as university enrollment. In the Indonesian context, these tests have been widely used as requirements for entering universities (Netta & Trisnawati, 2019). It can be seen on the websites of many universities that offer such tests as admission prerequisites. However, since universities set out these tests to examine and assess whether someone is qualified for a course, it is still debatable about the

necessity and appropriateness on social dimensions and policies of the tests (McNamara & Rovers, 2006), especially for students who use English as a foreign language, such as those in Indonesia. Hence, despite the tests' effectiveness, critical concerns may arise regarding the fairness and appropriateness of these language proficiency tests in Indonesia.

On the one hand, some researchers believe that such language proficiency tests benefit students who want to pursue higher degrees in universities. For instance, Bagheridoust et al. (2023) argue that language proficiency tests, such as TOEFL and IELTS, assess students' academic capabilities in ways that benefit their academic life. In other words, the test typically consists of questions about the educational environment that might benefit test-takers in their university selection. Furthermore, since the test is valid and reliable, it can measure students more objectively, as noted by Johnson and Tweedie (2021). For this reason, using the test would seem practical and more efficient for assessing many students in a single test to gain university entrance.

On the other hand, despite these tests' usefulness, other researchers believe there are some effects beyond the instruction of the language testing. In her book, Shohamy (2001) highlights the impact of the test on individuals' lives and the motivations behind policymakers and educational institutions' use of the test in education and society. Furthermore, Shohamy (2013) believes that tests are tools that have power and impact on political, educational, economic, and ideological issues in humanity. In other words, in the higher education sector, such a test uses its "power" to determine whether someone can be admitted to that particular university. Another issue might be the gap created by the test results. There is a gap that contributes to racial disparities and discrimination among students in the determination of language test scores, particularly in reading comprehension and vocabulary assessments. Empirical evidence indicates that racial and ethnic minority students are significantly more likely to experience reading difficulties than their majority peers (Morgan & Hu, 2025). In addition, ethnic minority students tend to receive lower English grades, a pattern closely associated with stereotyping in assessment practices (Burn et al., 2024). Such disparities are further reinforced by language assessment frameworks grounded in monolingual norms, which systematically disadvantage multilingual learners (Dotzel et al., 2021; Deng & Budiman, 2024).

Furthermore, in addition to those concerns, another potentially controversial issue may arise regarding access to learning. In Indonesia, it is believed that the imbalance in access to English education for rural populations is a concern for Indonesian students (Sidauruk et al., 2025), while in the city, people can access English learning opportunities. In contrast, rural populations often face difficulties and limited access to

English learning, particularly in learning TOEFL and IELTS, which seem unfamiliar, as Judijanto (2025) argues. Judijanto (2025) describes that the everyday contexts and situations in the teaching learning process, such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of teaching materials, inadequate facilities and infrastructures, and low salary or incentive for teachers, appear to be the problems that have detrimental implications in accomplishing students' achievement in learning English, especially in rural areas. Moreover, it is also evident that the lack of teacher competencies and the ineffectiveness of teachers' instructional approaches in teaching English remain significant obstacles to achieving satisfaction with English language learning in Indonesia (Laila et al., 2023; Sidauruk et al., 2025).

However, despite those concerns, questions may arise about how and why English-language proficiency tests have generally been used to enroll all students in universities in Indonesia. Hence, based on the clarifications and explanations above, this issue is significant because it occurs in the field of educational policy in Indonesian circumstances. Furthermore, as students from rural areas, the writers also experienced unfair treatment, especially regarding the use of TOEFL and IELTS tests to assess our qualifications when seeking admission to major universities in Indonesia. The tests quickly evaluated and judged the "advanced-level skills" and indicated whether we were suitable (applicable) for "being" and "becoming" a member of the university.

Therefore, under those circumstances, the writers discuss two significant questions in this study. The first question is why English-language proficiency tests (TOEFL & IELTS) have been used as a university entrance requirement in Indonesia, given that Indonesians do not use English daily. The second question is how those tests affect Indonesian people when they attempt to apply to university. In this study, the writers elaborated on those two questions by connecting the concepts of language, culture, identity, and difference using the language proficiency test in Indonesia. This study adopted a critical lens, drawing upon sociocultural theories of language, identity, and power to dissect the underlying assumptions and potential biases embedded within these standardised assessments (Badhe et al., 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW

LANGUAGE TESTING AND EDUCATIONAL GATEKEEPING

Language testing has long been used to establish academic readiness; however, it often serves a broader purpose. McNamara and Roever (2006) state that standardised examinations are socio-political instruments disguised as impartial evaluative tools. The TOEFL and IELTS are used to measure English proficiency and to determine entry into higher education in Indonesia. This is consistent with global trends in which standardised assessments serve as "filters" in educational systems, selecting qualified

candidates for advanced study.

In classic literature, Shohamy (2001) and McNamara (2000) highlighted that language tests carry latent functions: legitimising institutional authority and reproducing existing social hierarchies. In Indonesia, the reliance on TOEFL and IELTS reflects an institutional desire to align with global benchmarks, but it risks excluding students who lack access to quality English education. These practices reinforce what Bourdieu would term "cultural capital," privileging those from urban, resource-rich backgrounds. Moreover, Bolanos et al. (2024) contend that high-stakes language tests in Southeast Asia exacerbate socioeconomic disparities by favouring students who receive private language instruction. In this sense, Zhao et al. (2025) further demonstrate that these tests often serve as a primary gateway to elite academic institutions, effectively functioning as a gatekeeping mechanism that extends beyond language competence to social selection.

Using standardised language tests as gatekeeping mechanisms in higher education is a complex issue, fraught with both practical considerations and ethical dilemmas. English proficiency tests, such as TOEFL and IELTS, are often perceived as objective measures of a student's ability to succeed in an academic environment where English is the primary language of instruction (Rachmawaty et al., 2020). However, relying solely on these tests as the primary criterion for admission can be problematic, particularly in contexts where English is not the language of daily communication (Astuti & Revianti, 2023). While intended to assess communicative competence, language proficiency tests often inadvertently measure test-taking skills and familiarity with specific testing formats, potentially disadvantaging students from diverse educational backgrounds who may not have had equal access to test preparation resources. The ethical implications of using language tests for gatekeeping are significant, particularly when these tests are employed to control and manipulate stakeholders rather than provide genuine information about proficiency levels; research on assessment ethics emphasizes the need for fairness, transparency, and stakeholder involvement in testing practices (Azizi & Ismail, 2023; Gao & Liu, 2023). It is essential to acknowledge that passing a language proficiency test does not necessarily indicate possessing the full range of academic language skills required for success at the university level, particularly for articulating and exchanging ideas effectively in dynamic classroom settings (Tavares, 2019). Standard assessments can result in the negligence of a valid assessment of language learners' abilities.

Gatekeeping also manifests in the repeated retake policies that financially burden students. Hamid (2016) critiques how IELTS retake policies disadvantage economically marginalised students. A single failed attempt can delay university admission or

scholarship applications, thereby prolonging cycles of inequality. In rural Indonesian contexts, where test centres are scarce, this gatekeeping function becomes more pronounced, creating both financial and geographic barriers. Moreover, Shohamy (2013) conceptualises these tests as instruments of "language policy in action." By institutionalising test requirements, universities participate in a hidden curriculum that dictates which linguistic identities are valued and marginalised. This covert gatekeeping aligns with global academic norms but contradicts local linguistic realities, where English is often perceived as a foreign rather than a second language.

LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND INSTITUTIONAL PRESTIGE

Adopting English language proficiency tests as university entrance requirements often extends beyond mere linguistic evaluation, serving as a symbolic marker of institutional prestige and a means of differentiating institutions in a competitive academic landscape. In many countries, universities seek to enhance their international reputation by attracting students with high English proficiency, thereby positioning themselves as globally competitive institutions. However, this emphasis on English proficiency can inadvertently create a stratified system within higher education, wherein institutions with more demanding language prerequisites are often perceived as more elite, potentially overshadowing institutions with more inclusive admissions frameworks that may prioritise other valuable attributes or potential in students. When language and culture are not considered in tests, it could measure other domains, resulting in a biased assessment (Shultz & Englert, 2021).

Since language reflects institutional and cultural values, it is not a neutral medium. Kramsch (1998) contends that the formation of meaning and identity is intricately linked to language use. In this case, Indonesian universities implicitly support a global academic culture that associates English proficiency with intellectual legitimacy and modernity by making the TOEFL and IELTS entrance exams mandatory. This projecting institutional prestige is the strategic goal of this alignment. A university's reputation and image are crucial for attracting and keeping students, as research has shown that a positive institutional image significantly influences students' decisions to enroll and fosters loyalty among current students (Elista & Mayasari, 2024; Zhu & Kerdpitak, 2024). Indonesian universities express to potential domestic and international students that they meet "world-class" standards by requiring international test scores. Universities are positioned competitively in regional and global education markets through this prestige narrative, with both academic and economic implications.

The cultural dimensions of language assessment further complicate the issue, as standardised tests may not adequately account for students' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The concept of "appropriate and sophisticated academic English"

can be particularly problematic, as it often reflects the norms and expectations of native English speakers, potentially disadvantaging students with different linguistic styles or communication strategies. This can lead to a situation where students are judged not only on their language proficiency but also on their ability to conform to specific cultural norms and expectations (Cormier et al., 2022). Additionally, students may struggle to express themselves due to time constraints when responding to questions and comments during class discussions. The international student's English-language competency can predict their adjustment to a new international context, including their ability to relate to the local academic community (Tavares, 2019).

This policy has a significant cultural component. Universities establish a cultural hierarchy in which English-speaking students are symbolically positioned as more capable or prestigious by placing greater value on English proficiency. Furthermore, local universities often emulate the methods of prestigious international institutions to acquire legitimacy, without considering local educational disparities. It influences scholarship requirements, admissions procedures, and even graduates' career paths, sustaining a cycle in which success and legitimacy in Indonesian higher education are sustained. According to Galindo-Domínguez & Bezanilla (2025), universities are increasingly using these scores to appeal to international accreditation bodies despite the persistence of domestic inequities. As a result, inclusivity is sacrificed to preserve institutional prestige.

ACCESS AND EQUITY IN RURAL EDUCATION

The imposition of English-language proficiency tests as a prerequisite for university admission raises significant concerns about access and equity, particularly for students from rural or underserved communities. These students often face systemic barriers to accessing quality English-language instruction, test-preparation resources, and exposure to diverse linguistic environments. Monolingual assessment policies, which prioritise a single language of evaluation, can disproportionately affect students from multilingual backgrounds, potentially skewing test results and creating unfair disadvantages in educational opportunities (Backer et al., 2017). This is evident in classrooms, which are more likely to consist of children with similarly low proficiency and sometimes limited linguistic diversity (Washington-Nortey et al., 2022). Limited infrastructure, under-resourced schools, and a shortage of qualified English language teachers compound the challenges students face in rural areas. As a result, English learners in rural areas require access to learning resources and a communicative environment for language practice beyond the school context (Pham, 2021). Consequently, these students may not have the same opportunities to develop the requisite English proficiency as their urban counterparts, thus

perpetuating a cycle of educational inequality. Moreover, the cultural relevance of the curriculum and teaching materials can be a significant barrier for rural students, as standardised curricula developed in urban centres may not adequately reflect these students' lived experiences and cultural contexts (Holguín & Morales, 2016). These disparities in academic outcomes are further exacerbated by the uneven distribution of educational opportunities, which places rural students at a distinct disadvantage due to systemic inequities in resource allocation and access to quality instruction.

Considering the challenges, it is essential to explore alternative assessment methods that are more culturally responsive, context-sensitive, and tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of students from rural areas. Therefore, it is essential to design educational programs that incorporate culturally relevant content and pedagogy, tailored to the experiences of rural students, and equip teachers with the skills and knowledge to effectively support students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Badhe et al., 2025). Approaches tailored to local contexts, such as developing relevant learning materials and training for parents, can improve learners' literacy skills in rural areas (Hasniyati et al., 2024).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a critical, autoethnographic, and reflective qualitative approach to investigate the complex interplay among language testing, identity formation, and equitable access within the specific context of Indonesian higher education (Ricklefs, 2021). By situating the writers' lived experiences as rural students navigating the high-stakes landscape of English language proficiency tests at the forefront of the inquiry, this study aimed to provide a nuanced, deeply contextualised understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by students from marginalised backgrounds (Qutoshi, 2015). This methodological choice aligns with the principles of critical autoethnography, which emphasise connecting personal narratives to broader sociocultural and institutional structures, thereby enabling a more holistic and reflexive analysis (Tavares, 2019). The study employed critical discourse analysis of relevant educational policies and academic literature to expose the underlying power dynamics and ideological assumptions that influence language testing practices and their impact on student identity (Tai, 2023). Through this multifaceted approach, the study seeks to contribute to a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape in Indonesia, where language proficiency is often a gatekeeper to academic and professional opportunities.

The thematic analysis of policy documents and test requirements from major Indonesian universities constituted another crucial data source, providing a macro-

level perspective on the prevailing language testing policies and their implications for student access (Fadilah et al., 2023). This document analysis was complemented by a thorough review of recent scholarly literature from prominent journals in the field, such as Frontiers in Education, MDPI, and Elsevier, which provides a theoretical framework for interpreting the empirical findings and situating the study within the broader academic conversation. The data underwent a thematic coding process, intending to identify recurrent patterns, themes, and underlying meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By integrating diverse data sources and analytical techniques, this study provided a nuanced understanding of the complex relationships among language testing, identity, and access in the Indonesian context, offering valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers alike. The data analysis was structured around two overarching categories; the first category, focusing on the symbolic and institutional functions of English tests, explored how these tests operate as gatekeepers to higher education and employment opportunities, while also examining how they shape perceptions of linguistic competence and academic success. The second category, centred on social identity construction and markers of difference, explored how language testing experiences contributed to the formation of student identities, highlighting the role of language proficiency in shaping social hierarchies and reinforcing existing inequalities (Pill & Harding, 2013). The data collection process involved gathering relevant studies from academic databases, such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and ScienceDirect, and systematically synthesising literature reviews to explore research gaps and emerging trends (Ramadilla et al., 2025). The goal was to demonstrate how individual experiences related to broader social and institutional systems (Ashraf et al., 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE AND THE LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TEST

1. *English Language Tests as the "Printed" Language to Respond to Globalisation*

Hall (1997a) defines language as the medium that produces and exchanges meanings that work through the system of representation. This representation system then treats language as a practical means of expressing ideas, concepts, and thoughts, whether spoken, written, or conveyed through body language (Hall, 1997b). From this explanation, it can be seen that the production of written language, such as books or newspapers, is considered a part of representing a particular language in expressing its ideas. To put it another way, according to Kramsch (1998), language uses symbols or signs to convey meanings, and these symbols and signs are not only spoken but also written, namely, as text or printed language. In this case, Kramsch (1998) points out that "the notion of text views a stretch of written language as the product of an

identifiable authorial intention, and its relation to its context of culture as fixed and stable" (p. 57). That is to say, in this intention, the "printed" language is the product used to represent its language based on its authors' expected meaning. In this sense, we can relate that the language test is the "product" of language and culture.

Concerning English language tests such as the TOEFL and IELTS, based on the explanations above, these language tests serve as representations utilised in the educational sector to assess someone's language proficiency (Trisnawati & Netta, 2020). In this view, the TOEFL and IELTS tests are the "printed" tests used to evaluate people's proficiency in English for university enrollment (Netta & Trisnawati, 2019). Moreover, since these tests are used globally, they become the standard procedure and requirement for predicting people's abilities for future test use. In this essence, McNamara (2000) asserts that "a language test is a procedure for gathering evidence of general or specific language abilities from performance on tasks designed to provide a basis for predictions about individual's use of those abilities in real world context" (p. 11). Those tests interpret and control someone's performance and his readiness to be appropriate in entering education. In other words, those language proficiency tests are the "product" of language representation that has a robust control in people's lives including in pursuing educational level (McNamara, 2000).

Furthermore, in relation to "why" the tests have been used in universities, Jenkins (2014) asserts that the use of TOEFL and IELTS in entry-level university tests implicitly reveals the strategies by which higher education responds to globalisation. According to Scott (2000), there are three fundamental reasons why universities encounter globalisation. Firstly, "because of the university's close identification with the promulgation of national cultures; second, because of the standardisation of teaching through the impact of communication and information technology, and the emergence of global research cultures and networks; and third, because global markets have undermined high public expenditure welfare states on which universities depended for the bulk of their income" (p. 5-6). Based on these three fundamental challenges, the university has decided to introduce language tests as one way to address globalisation in academic performance.

In addition, through those language tests, the university's mission is for its academics and students to compete and challenge globalisation in the use of the English language (Kuswanto, 2025). In that case, not only does it reflect on students' academic performance in general, but it also impacts the university's global competitiveness. Therefore, since language is the medium for interpreting meanings (Hall, 1997b), the use of TOEFL and IELTS tests in university entrance could be seen as wielding "political power" (Shohamy, 2001) and as a powerful device to enforce and challenge

globalisation.

2. *Language Proficiency Test as the University's Prestigious Culture*

To analyse how language testing relates to the concept of culture, it is necessary to examine how Hall and Kramsch define culture. According to Hall (1997a), culture is about shared meanings, and it is the key to representing values and meanings when people share the same understandings. Moreover, Kramsch (1998) argues that through culture, people can interact with others and identify themselves as members of the same group by sharing common beliefs and values. Furthermore, in this regard, Kramsch (1998) emphasises that these common attitudes can be observed in people's interactions in institutions such as schools, workplaces, and families. Based on Hall's and Kramsch's ideas about the notion of culture, it can be inferred that the use of TOEFL and IELTS tests in universities is the "culture" created by the university. Then, it has been shared with all university members to view, understand, and value the tests people must take to be part of the university. Consequently, based on these views and perspectives, each university has established its own "cultural norm" by determining the minimum score for each test. For example, prospective students who want to enter elite universities may achieve a TOEFL score of 550 or an IELTS score of 6.5. Hence, by attaining those test scores, individuals can be considered members of a particular "university's culture", namely "students".

In addition, in the Indonesian context, it can be argued that the following reason "why" those tests are becoming popular and a trend in university entrance examinations is to show that the university has a good reputation and prestige in society. In this sense, the concept of "university's culture" above impacts the university's image and reputation, as well as its implications for prospective students in choosing that particular university (Effah, 2020). For example, Bandung Institute of Technology (one of the most popular universities in Indonesia) sets a minimum admission score. Prospective students must achieve a score of 500 on the TOEFL or 6.0 on the IELTS, which some people assume is a high score for Indonesian students. Since higher test scores imply that the university has a strong image and reputation, they further indicate that it is prestigious and may attract people to apply and study there. The creation of positive institutional images has become a key strategic practice for universities aiming to build positive values in communities and signal that they are ideal places for learning; research shows that university branding and image strategies significantly influence student perceptions and choice decisions (Luckyardi et al., 2023; Kharisma & Haryono, 2025). Therefore, "the cultural norm" of the university's standard score suggests that language proficiency tests are used to imply that the university is prestigious and reputable.

Furthermore, despite its belief in the university's reputation, another reason for using English-language proficiency tests is to gauge bureaucrats' interest (Shohamy, 2001). Since the rise of the global market in the educational sector, competitiveness among universities has intensified through the pursuit of *"world-class"* status, a concept that strongly attracts governments and university bureaucrats alike as a strategic policy goal (Hazelkorn, 2015). Within this competitive landscape, academic excellence functions as a key indicator of institutional popularity and legitimacy, often measured through global rankings, research output, and international reputation (Marginson, 2016). For example, since one of the academic excellence indicators is the university's obligation to publish in multiple journals, the language used in journal publishing must be English. This is a strong reason why many elite universities score highly on language tests when recruiting new students, regardless of their major or the knowledge they will acquire. In the long run, they aim to ensure that their students understand English and can utilise it to "internationalise" their institutions by publishing international journals.

Nevertheless, since the "language is the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives" (Kramsch, 1998, p. 3), in this sense, the use of language proficiency tests as the "printed" language might construct new understandings in sharing meanings among universities. This suggests that the way "elite universities" use language testing to enhance their reputation may shape perceptions among other "standard or local universities" when evaluating the tests. In fact, in Indonesia, various universities have begun to adopt the same regulations, recognising that it can enhance their status. Yet they do not have the same capacities and qualities as a top university. Under those circumstances, this concept aligns with Kramsch's (1998) claim that "language embodies cultural reality" (p. 3). The TOEFL and IELTS tests convey different meanings that reflect cultural beliefs and values, shaping social perspectives among various individuals. Over time, the dominance of high-stakes English language tests such as TOEFL and IELTS contributes to the emergence of what may be described as a *dependency culture*, in which individuals and institutions increasingly align themselves with linguistic norms and cultural values perceived as globally superior (Tenzin & Lee, 2022). Rather than functioning solely as neutral measures of proficiency, these tests reinforce hierarchies that privilege Western models of English and encourage the marginalization of local languages and identities, thereby fostering cultural dependence and symbolic subordination (Fleming & Shinjee, 2022; Anwar et al., 2025). In this sense, the "local" universities begin to follow and adopt the "elite" universities' cultural norms to demonstrate that they have the same prestige and pride.

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TEST CONSTRUCT'S IDENTITY AND MARKS DIFFERENCE

In response to the second question about "how" the influence of language testing

manifests, this second session will examine the impact of English language proficiency tests on identity construction and the marking of differences within communities.

1. *Language Proficiency Test as Social Identity*

Regarding identity concepts, Woodward (1997a) and Hall (1990) proposed the theories of essentialism and non-essentialism to define identity. While the essentialism concept refers to someone's fixed, unchanging, and permanent identity, the non-essentialist perspective views that someone's identity is fluid and changing over time (Woodward, 1997a; Hall, 1990). With this intention, both theories can be linked and defined in different dimensions, as identity can also be maintained in social and cultural contexts (Woodward, 1997b). However, the question arises about the connection between language proficiency tests and an individual's identity. McNamara & Rovers (2006) primarily state that "language acts socially as a marker of identity, and as linguistic identity is shared among members of a speech community, language tests can be used as a procedure for identification and classification of individuals in terms of relevant social categories" (p. 149). Language proficiency tests may serve to identify and classify individuals into different classes or statuses based on other people's perceptions. In the same manner, according to Riley (2007, as cited in Clark, 2013), in the social sense, identity is the mark of quality that people associate with and ascribe to other individuals.

To gain further insights into how language proficiency tests relate to the transformation of someone's identity, the writers would reflect on our personal experiences of starting higher education studies. We came from a rural area where only a small percentage of people went to university. One reason is that most favourite universities in the city required an English language test, such as the TOEFL, as an entry requirement. It is one of the complex tests that students in remote areas must pass, as we still lack access to English-language learning. Moreover, the TOEFL and IELTS tests were not familiar to us in the context of students in rural areas. Among many students who graduated from our senior high schools in the village; we were able to continue studying at university because we "passed" the TOEFL test. As a result, the test had changed our lives and altered others' perceptions of our qualifications. As Hall (1990) argues, identity is fluid, a process that never finishes and constantly changes in human beings. At that point, when we "passed" the test, our identity changed from a villager to a "student" at a university. In addition, Clark (2013) asserts that identity is sometimes characterised and attributed to a person by other people. In this sense, people in our villages have then classified us as well-educated, thoughtful, and wise because our status changed since we completed higher education, owing to that test.

Furthermore, the concepts of "becoming" and "being" can be understood as processes of transforming and changing someone's identity across other domains and positions (Hall, 1990; Bright, 2017). In this regard, upon graduating from the university, we were offered a position as a staff member in the education faculty. In comparison, this job was far better than those of our friends who did not study at university, as they were working as farmers and fishermen in the village. Again, due to the test, we had the opportunity to study at a university and worked as staff members in the university. It indicates that the influence of the test has transformed our identity from "being" a university student to "becoming" a worker with a well-paid job, which is different from those of other people in the village.

Correspondingly, another critical point regarding the test's influence on our social identity occurred when we received a scholarship to study in Australia. Since the entry requirement for international students is a 6.5 IELTS score, the test again becomes the gatekeeper to furthering our education. When we passed the test and received our letter of acceptance (LoA) from the university, our identity transformed again into "becoming" a student, in this sense, as an international student in Australia. Additionally, when the Dean of our faculty learned that we had received the scholarship to study abroad, the Dean informed us that we would be hired as a prospective lecturer at the university upon our return from Australia and graduation. Hence, when we return to our university, our identity will transform again into "becoming" a lecturer. This experience illustrates how a particular language test can construct and determine someone's identity, ranging from that of some villagers to a student, a well-paid worker, an international student, and a lecturer. It is a strong indication that someone's identity is unfixed, changeable, and fluid, as it is a product that transforms through the process (Hall, 1990).

2. *Language Proficiency Test as the Marker of Difference*

Before analysing the influence of language proficiency tests as markers of difference, it is imperative to explore the concept of difference, which has become a concern and plays a vital role in determining whether someone is "us" or "them". According to Hall (1997c), differences are ambivalent and can be interpreted in both positive and negative ways. On the one hand, Hall (1997c) reveals that difference is essential because it creates and produces meanings in social identities, such as diversity. For example, through this positive concept of "difference", people can respect and appreciate "others" as diversity and variety of other people, despite their different ethnics, races, and religions. On the other hand, the concept of difference can be negative, as it may lead to threats, dangers, and aggression toward the "Others" (Hall, 1997c). As an example, the ideas of racism, stereotypes, violence, and fierceness might occur when

someone refuses "otherness" as a member of the groups and believes that their group is better than "the other". Hence, in this sense, the notion of difference can be construed in both positive and negative implications.

Nevertheless, the question may arise about how difference works and how people differentiate between "self" and "them". In this context, Woodward (1997b) proposed a classificatory system as the principle that distinguishes community social differences. This classification system then functions as a marker of difference by including and excluding people within their social communities, such as us/them, insider/outsider, and self/other. For example, the story above indicates that "the score" of the test marks the difference between our identity and that of our friends who did not pass the test to enter university. Since we tend to view differences as a negative notion (Bright, 2017), one implication of the test is that it identifies someone as "success" or "failure" (Shohamy, 1992). The tests are used for "surveillance, quantification and classification" (Shohamy, 1992, p. 334). In other words, since our identity has changed and we have acquired a "new status", we have also been excluded from our communities due to differences between us.

In the context of university students in Indonesia, since TOEFL and IELTS have been used to "mark" individuals, indicating whether they are capable of entering major universities, these tests influence categorisation as "prestige" or "low standard" students when entering universities. In other words, one impact of using the tests is that they discriminate against people entering the educational level (Shohamy, 2001; Jenks & Phillips, 1998). For instance, in the test, people tend to classify someone as well-educated and intelligent if they graduated from "elite" universities, and they will be judged as "common" students if they graduated from "standard" universities. Furthermore, Shohamy (2001) argues that language testing is a product of political and social ideologies that shape individuals' lives. According to Shohamy (2001), tests function as devices for categorising individuals into good/bad, smart/stupid, rich/poor, and exclusive/ordinary.

CONCLUSIONS

The concepts of language, culture, identity, and difference should be considered when using the English language proficiency test as a university entrance requirement in Indonesia. As this study examined two significant questions, the first explored the reasons for using the test by drawing on language and culture theories. It indicates that, based on the explanations above, the connection between language and language testing is that the test represents the English language, which becomes a "printed" language, facilitating the sharing of meanings in response to globalisation in the

educational sector. Furthermore, since the test itself establishes the "cultural norm" of test scores, universities begin to use it to enhance their prestige, image, and reputation, among other benefits. Moreover, conducting the test is one of the bureaucrats' missions in promoting their campus as a "world-class" university. Correspondingly, the second question explored the test's impact on individuals. On the one hand, the test successfully constructs one's identity since identity can change and transform through the process. On the other hand, because the test creates a gap between "success" and "failure", it classifies and marks differences among individuals in society.

It is undeniable that language testing is essential for both students and universities in Indonesia. Not only does it boost competition and raise the university's global reputation, but it also encourages students to strive to achieve their dreams of studying at the best university. Nonetheless, some challenges, such as limited access to English instruction in rural areas, which create unfairness in the test and a financial burden, should be considered to ensure the effective use of the TOEFL or IELTS as a university entrance examination in the Indonesian context. Regarding English access, not all Indonesian students have the opportunity to learn English, especially in remote areas. Furthermore, students in rural areas are often unfamiliar with the TOEFL and IELTS tests, which limits their opportunities to compete with students in urban areas. Therefore, as a suggestion, the government and the university's agents should collaborate to provide adequate information and access to learning about these tests, ensuring that the tests are fair for all students in Indonesia. Moreover, given the high cost of the test, I believe the government should subsidise student testing, whether partially or entirely, and provide an evaluation to improve English learning in Indonesia, enabling Indonesian students to compete globally.

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