



# Heritage Language Attrition among Gen Z in Aceh Indonesia

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Manuscript ID:  
BIJ-SPL1-Jan26-ES-093

Subject: English

Received : 30.09.2025

Accepted : 05.01.2026

Published : 22.01.2026

DOI: 10.64938/bijsi.v10si1.26.jan093

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## Abstract

*This study investigates the attrition of the Acehnese heritage language among Generation Z in Aceh, focusing on speaking proficiency, domains of use, attitudes, and influencing factors. Employing a mixed-methods design with questionnaires and interviews, the study found that most participants reported low to moderate speaking ability, with stronger comprehension than production. Acehnese remains in limited use at home, in marketplaces, and in community events, but is rarely employed in schools, universities, or digital spaces. Attitudes revealed ambivalence: while many participants acknowledged Acehnese as important for cultural identity and intergenerational connection, they also associated it with low prestige, embarrassment, and impracticality compared to Indonesian. The analysis identified four main factors driving attrition: the dominance of Indonesian in education, parental language ideologies, peer and digital culture, and personal insecurities. These findings highlight an urgent need for revitalisation efforts that engage families, schools, and digital platforms to raise the prestige of Acehnese among youth.*

**Keywords:** heritage language, Acehnese, Generation Z, language attrition, cultural identity

## Introduction

Language is more than just a tool for communication. It carries cultural and historical values, and is therefore a core part of cultural identity. When a language is passed down from one generation to the next, cultural knowledge, traditions, and a shared sense of belonging are also transmitted. Heritage languages are not only about words and grammar but also about who we are and where we come from. As language and culture are inseparable, when the language is under threat, it is not only the language that is lost, but also part of the culture, history, and identity of its speakers (Fishman, 1991; Crystal, 2000).

Speaking is usually the first skill to decline when heritage languages are no longer used in daily life. As Montrul (2016) noted, speaking tends to

erode more rapidly than listening or reading, while De Bot and Weltens (1991) explained that without practice, speakers may lose access to vocabulary and fluency. This has been observed in many multilingual settings, including Indonesia, one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world. According to the Indonesian Language Agency (Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, 2022), the country is home to over 718 local languages, yet more than 11 have already gone extinct and over 200 are endangered.

Acehnese is one of the languages considered at risk. Once a dominant medium in family, religious, and community life, it is now experiencing significant decline, especially among younger generations. Earlier studies show that Indonesian is becoming the default in schools and public life,



while Acehnese is increasingly limited to older speakers within families (Al-Auwal, 2017; Aziz et al., 2021). Parental language ideology also plays a strong role. When parents choose to pass their vernacular language, the children are influenced by it, and vice versa (Maria Ulfa & Chairuddin, 2018). These patterns are not unique to Aceh. For example, Sagimin (2024) found similar trends of language shift among students at Pamulang University, while Yuliana and Yanti (2023) reported ambivalent attitudes toward heritage languages among Chinese Indonesians in Jakarta.

At the same time, broader cultural forces shape language practices. Research on Baduy youth showed that even in communities with strong indigenous traditions, younger speakers increasingly prefer Indonesian in public and digital contexts (Kurniawan et al., *in press*). Digital culture also contributes to these shifts. As Irianto and Malik (2025) observed, social media reinforces the dominance of Indonesian and English while promoting slang and informal registers that sideline local languages. Together, these pressures suggest that youth identity in Indonesia is being reshaped in ways that place heritage languages at a disadvantage.

Although some young people in Aceh still understand Acehnese, many no longer feel confident or comfortable speaking it. Previous research has noted the general decline of Acehnese (Aziz et al., 2021), but less is known about how well Generation Z, those born between 1997 and 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), who have grown up with formal education, digital media, and changing family practices, can actually speak the language and whether they still want to. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing specifically on spoken Acehnese among Generation Z. It is guided by four research questions:

1. How well can Generation Z in Aceh speak Acehnese as their heritage language?
2. In which contexts do they still use the language?
3. What are their attitudes toward speaking Acehnese?
4. What factors encourage them to stop using the language?

By focusing on young people's ability and willingness to speak Acehnese, this study provides a deeper understanding of how heritage languages are being lost, not only in theory but in the day-to-day lives of real people. It also highlights the urgent need for action from educators, policymakers, and communities to revitalise Acehnese before it becomes a largely passive cultural marker.

## Methods

To examine the state of spoken Acehnese among Gen Z, this study employed a mixed-methods design combining questionnaires and interviews. Sixty participants aged 13-25 were selected through purposive sampling from urban and semi-urban areas of Aceh (Banda Aceh, Lhokseumawe, Sigli). The sample was designed to reflect variation in schooling, family language practices, and exposure to Acehnese.

The questionnaire measured self-reported speaking proficiency (5-point Likert scale), frequency of use across domains (home, school, marketplace, religious settings, online), attitudes toward Acehnese (e.g., pride, embarrassment, practicality), and family background. Based on responses, half of the participants were selected for semi-structured interviews exploring personal language histories, social influences, and factors shaping attrition.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were transcribed and coded thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) analysis model to provide context for statistical patterns. For confidentiality, participants were anonymised with codes combining participant number, gender, and age (e.g., P04-F/18 = Participant 4, female, age 18).

## Results

### Self-Assessed Speaking Proficiency in Acehnese

To capture participants' perception of their own ability to speak Acehnese, the study employed a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very low, 5 = very high). The distribution of responses is presented in Table 1 below.



**Table 1 Self-assessed Speaking Proficiency in Acehnese (n = 60)**

Proficiency Level	Frequency	Percentage
Very Low (1)	10	16.67%
Low (2)	23	38.33%
Moderate (3)	15	25%
High (4)	8	13.33%
Very High (5)	4	6.67%

The table shows that a majority of participants placed themselves in the low to moderate categories (63.33%), while only a small fraction (20%) reported high or very high ability. This suggests a general decline in spoken Acehnese proficiency among Gen Z respondents. These patterns were further reinforced by their interview results, in which they reported stronger comprehension than speaking, as follows:

- (1) *“Saya ngerti kalau orang ngomong (Aceh), tapi ga bisa balas.”* (P04-F/18) [I can understand when people speak Acehnese, but I cannot respond (using the same language).]
- (2) *“Ngerti tapi gak berapa pande. Mamak bapak ngomong Aceh, tapi sama kami ngomong bahasa Indonesia.”* (P11-M/20) [I understand it, but I am not very good at it. My parents communicate with each other using Acehnese, but with us (the children), they use Indonesian.]
- (3) *“Ya, saya orang Aceh. Tapi gak lancar-lancar kali soalnya di rumah atau sama kawan, ngomongnya bahasa Indonesia.”*

[Yes, I am Acehnese, but I am not very fluent (in Acehnese) because both at home and with my friends, I use Indonesian.]

These excerpts highlight four recurring issues: (1) participants often understand Acehnese but struggle to respond in the same language, (2) generational differences, where parents may use Acehnese with each other but switch to Indonesian with their children, (3) a disconnect between identity and language, as being Acehnese does not necessarily mean being able to speak the heritage language, and (4) reduced transmission, since some parents deliberately choose Indonesian at home,

limiting opportunities for children to develop Acehnese proficiency.

#### **Domains of Heritage Language Use among Acehnese Gen Z**

To examine where Acehnese as a heritage language is still actively spoken, participants were asked to report the frequency of use in various social settings. Their responses are presented in Table 2 below.

**Table 2 Frequency of Heritage Language Use across Domains among Acehnese Gen Z (n = 60)**

Domain	Regular Use	Occasional Use	Rare/ Never Use
Home	20%	25%	55%
Community events	17.5%	40%	42.5%
Marketplace	20%	50%	30%
School/university	5%	10%	85%
Online/social media	2.5%	20%	77.5%

Table 2 highlight clear contrasts in Acehnese use across domains among Gen Z. At home and in the marketplace, the language maintains some vitality, with around 20% reporting regular use and a sizable proportion using it occasionally. Community events also show moderate occasional use (40%), though fewer use it regularly. In contrast, schools and universities represent the sharpest decline, with 85% rarely or never using Acehnese and only 15% reporting any use at all. A similar pattern emerges in online and social media spaces, where only 2.5% use it regularly and over three-quarters (77.5%) rarely or never use it. These findings suggest that while Acehnese persists in certain traditional and informal domains, its role is severely diminished in formal and digital contexts. These excerpts illustrate these patterns:

- (4) *“Di rumah sama nenek ngomong Aceh, soalnya nenek ga bisa bahasa Indonesia. Kalo sama ortu Indonesia.”* (P07-F/16)

(At home with my grandmother, I speak Acehnese because she cannot speak Indonesian, but with my parents, I use Indonesian.)



- (5) “*Mamak sering ngomong bahasa Aceh, tapi saya jawabnya pake bahasa Indonesia.*” (P15-M/22) [My mother often speak Acehnese, but I responded using Indonesian.]
- (6) “*Paling pas pigi pasar atau acara-acara kampong aja ngomong Aceh dikit-dikit. Itu pun gak pas-pas kali.*” [Maybe only at the market or village events I speak Acehnese, but it is not very fluent.]
- (7) “*Di sosmed gak pernah pake bahasa Aceh. Seringnya bahasa Indonesia atau Inggris biar gaul.*” (P19-M/20). [I never use Acehnese on social media. I often use Indonesian or English to be cool.]

The excerpts confirmed the statistical trend that Acehnese is losing ground across domains. At home, use often depends on older family members, with many Gen Z defaulting to Indonesian when speaking with parents or siblings. In peer and educational contexts, Indonesian dominates, while Acehnese is perceived as impractical. Occasional use in

marketplaces or village ceremonies shows that Acehnese still survives in traditional community spaces, but even there, it is often limited or mixed. Finally, the stigma expressed by P19-M/20 demonstrates that in digital spaces, Acehnese is seen as low prestige, less ‘cool’, and incompatible with youth identity. Overall, Gen Z rarely use Acehnese across settings, and even in the home, once its strongest domain, usage is steadily eroding.

#### **Acehnese Gen Z's Attitudes toward Speaking Heritage Language**

Beyond proficiency and usage, participants' attitudes play a crucial role in determining whether Acehnese will be maintained or abandoned. Attitudes were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) on several statements regarding pride, loyalty, usefulness, and emotional connection to speaking Acehnese. Their responses are summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3 Attitudes toward Speaking Acehnese among Gen Z (n = 60)**

No.	Statement	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree/Strongly Disagree (%)
1.	I am proud to speak Acehnese in public.	20%	30%	50%
2.	Speaking Acehnese is important for maintaining my cultural identity.	62%	20%	18%
3.	Being able to speak Acehnese is useful in daily life.	45%	30%	25%
4.	I feel embarrassed when I speak Acehnese.	40%	40%	20%
5.	Indonesian is more practical than Acehnese.	70%	15%	15%
6.	I want to pass Acehnese to my future children to avoid language extinction.	40%	20%	40%
7.	Using Acehnese makes me feel connected to older generations.	58%	27%	15%

The most striking features of Table 3 are the contradictory attitudes Gen Z hold toward Acehnese. On one hand, a clear majority recognize its cultural value: 62% believe speaking Acehnese is important for maintaining identity, and 58% feel it connects them to older generations. Similarly, 40% express a desire to pass the language on to their children.

On the other hand, public use is weak, with only 20% proud to speak Acehnese in public, while half openly disagree. This is reinforced by 40% admitting

they feel embarrassed when speaking Acehnese, and 70% agreeing that Indonesian is more practical.

What is particularly interesting is the tension between ideology and practice: many Gen Z acknowledge Acehnese as culturally significant and even useful, yet social pressure, embarrassment, and the dominance of Indonesian undermine its active use. This mix of pride, embarrassment, and practicality concerns highlights the fragile status of Acehnese among younger speakers. Even one



participant stated that Acehnese language maintenance is the responsibility of linguists, implying this should not be their task. Excerpts from interviews illustrate these conditions:

(8) *“Bukan enggak mau, tapi kadang diketawain.”* (P09-F/17). [It's not that I don't want (to speak Acehnese), but when I do, (my friends) laugh at me.]

(9) *“Ya, bahasa Aceh perlu dilestarikan, tapi menurut saya ini tugas ahli bahasa.”* (P12-M/21). [Yes, Acehnese needs to be preserved, but I think this is the duty of linguists.]

(10) *“Kalo udah kenak bahasa Inggris kek keren aja gitu. Tapi kalo bahasa Aceh entah kenapa agak kurang.”*, [It sounds cool when you use English. If you use Acehnese, it's somehow (the opposite).]

### Factors Influencing Attrition

From the analysis, several key factors that shaped the declining use of Acehnese among Gen Z were identified and categorised into four main themes: education, parental ideology, peer and digital culture, and personal insecurity. Table 4 summarises these factors with representative trends.

**Table 4 Factors Influencing Heritage Language Attrition among Gen Z in Aceh (n = 60)**

Factor	Description	Representative Pattern/Theme
Education	Indonesian is the sole medium of instruction in schools and universities, limiting exposure to Acehnese.	85% reported never using Acehnese in class or with teachers.
Parental ideology	Some parents discourage Acehnese, believing Indonesian signals education and upward mobility.	40% said their parents speak Indonesian with them at home.
Peer & digital culture	Friends, social media, and online games reinforce Indonesian/English dominance; Acehnese seen as “uncool.”	77.5% never use Acehnese online.
Personal insecurity	Fear of mistakes and ridicule reduces willingness to speak Acehnese in front of peers.	40% admitted feeling embarrassed or shy when speaking.

The table shows that attrition is not caused by a single factor but by the interaction of structural, social, and psychological pressures. Schools and universities create environments where Indonesian is the practical option, while some parents consciously prioritise Indonesian at home. Among peers, Acehnese is rarely used, especially in digital spaces where youth identity is negotiated. Finally, individual insecurities about fluency further discourage use. Collectively, these factors reinforce one another, making Indonesian the default and Acehnese the exception.

### Interpretation and Discussion

The findings of this study confirmed that the Acehnese language among Generation Z is undergoing a clear process of attrition, particularly in productive skills and in high-prestige domains of use.

These results resonate with previous research on heritage language loss, while also extending it by providing concrete evidence from the everyday experiences of young people in Aceh.

Consistent with Montrul's (2016) claim that speaking is often the first skill to erode, and De Bot and Weltens' (1991) observation that productive abilities regress faster than receptive ones, participants in this study reported stronger comprehension than speaking. The excerpts revealed that many youths could understand Acehnese but struggled to respond fluently, often defaulting to Indonesian. This imbalance between receptive and productive skills is a hallmark of heritage language attrition, suggesting that Acehnese is increasingly moving toward passive competence among Gen Z speakers.



The results also echo Fishman's (1991) theory of "domain shrinkage," where a threatened language becomes confined to limited contexts. While Acehnese is still spoken in homes, community settings, and occasionally in marketplaces, its use has diminished significantly in schools, universities, and especially online platforms. Even the home domain, traditionally the strongest base for transmission, showed decline, with nearly half of participants using Acehnese only occasionally or not at all. This finding aligns with earlier studies (Al-Auwal, 2017; Aziz et al., 2021) that documented the retreat of Acehnese in family communication. It suggests that the intergenerational chain, which is essential for language maintenance, is becoming fragile.

Furthermore, the study uncovered ambivalent attitudes toward Acehnese. While many participants recognised it as a marker of identity and a link to older generations, few felt pride in speaking it publicly. Embarrassment, fear of ridicule, and perceptions of Acehnese as "rural", "tacky", or "uncool" were recurring themes. These attitudes confirmed Crystal's (2000) warning that when a language loses prestige, it is not only linguistic competence that erodes, but also the cultural confidence to use it. The contrast between symbolic loyalty and practical avoidance illustrates a wider tension in heritage language communities: young people may value the language in principle, but still choose not to use it in daily practice.

Several external pressures further accelerate attrition. Indonesian dominates educational institutions, which provide little to no space for Acehnese use, reinforcing its low prestige. Parental ideologies also play a role, with some families not encouraging their children to speak vernacular language, leading to decreased proficiency among the youths, echoing findings by Maria Ulfa and Chairuddin (2018) on parental influence. Peer networks and digital spaces, which are central to Gen Z identity, are overwhelmingly oriented toward Indonesian and English, leaving Acehnese socially marginal. Together, these pressures create a cycle where reduced domains of use, declining proficiency, and negative attitudes reinforce one another.

While previous research has noted the general decline of Acehnese (Aziz et al., 2021), this study contributes new insights by focusing specifically on Generation Z and their spoken abilities. It shows that attrition is not only a matter of reduced use, but also of psychological and identity-related factors, such as embarrassment and lack of confidence.

The results highlight that sustaining Acehnese among Gen Z requires action at multiple levels. Families should maintain daily use at home, schools can raise prestige by including Acehnese in cultural or extracurricular activities, and digital spaces offer opportunities to make the language relevant for youth. Policymakers, meanwhile, should align revitalisation programs with the realities of urban Gen Z, where attrition is most severe.

## Conclusion

This study shows that spoken Acehnese among Generation Z is in decline, with most participants demonstrating stronger comprehension than speaking ability. Use is confined to limited settings such as homes and marketplaces, while schools, universities, and digital spaces remain dominated by Indonesian. Although many of them value Acehnese for identity, embarrassment and low prestige reduce actual use. Education, parental ideology, peer influence, and digital culture together reinforce attrition. Findings are based on three urban areas in Aceh, which may not capture the full picture. Future studies should include more cities and rural areas and test revitalisation strategies through schools, families, and digital media to raise both competence and pride in using Acehnese.

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