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TALES OF INDIGENOUS STUDENTS IN CENTRAL KALIMANTAN: NARRATIVE INQUIRY ON ENGLISH LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: Learning experience is an integral factor of language perception construction. Having a positive experience is more likely to construct a positive perception of the language. English students in Universitas Palangka Raya are indigenous people in Kalimantan who comes from different parts of Central Kalimantan. These students experienced learning processes that are highly influenced by the condition of the school, the teachers, and their environment. This study aims to understand the indigenous students' learning experiences in Central Kalimantan to explore the construction process of their perception of English throughout these experiences. This study involved five English education students. We conducted a conversational interview to collect the participants' stories of their learning experiences. We found that all of the participants chose English education study program because they were interested in the language. These interests are built through their language learning experience. Even if the students reported school and classroom environments as the biggest factor of their negative experience of English, they still found interest in English through usage in their lives such as hobbies and communication.

Keywords: *indigenous people, learning experience, perception construction*

INTRODUCTION

Language learning experience is an integral factor in shaping how students perceive and understand a language. Classroom activities, teaching media, and interactions between teachers and students form the core of what students experience daily at school. Beyond these, other experiences such as watching movies, listening to songs, playing games, and attending additional English classes after school also play a significant role in the learning process. These experiences are crucial because they provide students with the knowledge and information they need to construct their understanding of English. As Vygotsky (1978) argues, learning is a socially mediated process, where individuals develop understanding through their interactions with others and their environment. This perspective underscores the importance of considering not only formal educational settings but also the broader social and cultural contexts in which learning occurs.

Perception and knowledge are not constructed in isolation but are deeply influenced by social interaction. Students' understanding of English is shaped by their engagement with teachers, classmates, learning materials, and the methods and media used in the classroom. For example, the way teachers present lessons, the materials they choose, and the dynamics of peer

interactions all contribute to how students internalize the language (Norton, 2013). This social constructivist perspective highlights the importance of interaction in the learning process, particularly for indigenous students whose cultural and social contexts differ significantly from mainstream educational settings. Research by Lantolf and Thorne (2006) further supports this view, emphasizing that language learning is a collaborative process that occurs through meaningful social engagement.

Students' learning experiences are closely tied to their interactions with their worlds. These interactions include not only formal classroom settings but also informal environments such as their homes, communities, and digital spaces. For instance, watching English-language movies or listening to English songs can significantly influence how students perceive the language (Duff, 2019). For indigenous students, these interactions are often shaped by their unique cultural practices and traditions, which can either support or challenge their English learning journey. A study by Riestenberg and Sherris (2018) on indigenous language learners in Latin America found that students who were able to integrate their cultural knowledge with formal language instruction demonstrated greater motivation and proficiency. Understanding these interactions is essential for creating a holistic view of their learning experiences.

Indigenous students, particularly those in Central Kalimantan, live in educational settings that are markedly different from those of their urban counterparts. These settings are often characterized by limited access to resources, such as qualified teachers, up-to-date learning materials, and technological infrastructure (Kirkpatrick, 2012). These constraints can create unique challenges in their English learning journey, making it essential to explore how these students navigate their educational environments. A study by Zein (2017) on English language education in Indonesia highlights the disparities in resource allocation between urban and rural areas, which disproportionately affect indigenous communities. Despite these challenges, indigenous students often demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability in their learning processes.

Despite these challenges, indigenous students bring rich cultural knowledge and resilience to their learning experiences. Their cultural backgrounds can serve as valuable assets in the language acquisition process, providing them with unique perspectives and strengths. Research by Gay (2010) emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive teaching practices that leverage students' cultural backgrounds to foster positive learning outcomes. For example, incorporating traditional storytelling or local folklore into English lessons can make the learning process more engaging and relevant for indigenous students. By understanding and incorporating these cultural elements, educators can create more inclusive and effective learning environments.

The learning experiences of indigenous students are often influenced by the interplay between their traditional cultural values and the formal education system. This interplay can create both opportunities and challenges in their English learning journey. For example, while traditional storytelling practices may enhance their narrative skills, the lack of alignment between their cultural practices and the school curriculum may hinder their engagement with formal English instruction (McCarty, 2013). A study by López-Gopar (2016) on indigenous students in Mexico found that when schools recognized and integrated students' cultural practices, students were more likely to develop positive attitudes toward language learning. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for developing teaching strategies that are both culturally relevant and educationally effective.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of narrative inquiry in uncovering the lived experiences of individuals, particularly in educational contexts. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that narrative inquiry allows researchers to capture the voices and stories of participants, providing rich insights into their experiences and perceptions. This approach is particularly valuable for understanding the experiences of indigenous students, whose stories are often underrepresented in mainstream educational research. By focusing on their narratives, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities these students face in their English learning journeys.

This study aims to understand and retell the learning experiences of indigenous students in Central Kalimantan, focusing on how these experiences shape their perception of English. By employing narrative inquiry, this research seeks to capture the voices and stories of these students, shedding light on the challenges they face and the strategies they employ in their English learning journey. Through this exploration, the study hopes to contribute to the broader discourse on inclusive and equitable education. The findings of this research can provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers seeking to create more effective and culturally responsive language learning environments.

Understanding the learning experiences and perceptions of indigenous students is crucial for educators. Such understanding can inform the development of teaching strategies that are culturally responsive and effective in fostering positive perceptions of English. Research by Zein (2017) highlights the need for language policies and practices that are tailored to the unique needs of indigenous learners, ensuring that they have access to equitable and meaningful educational opportunities. For example, professional development programs for teachers working in indigenous communities can help them better understand and address the specific challenges these students face.

Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the development of a more inclusive and equitable education system that recognizes and values the unique experiences and perspectives of indigenous students. By exploring their stories and experiences, this research aims to provide insights that can help educators design learning processes that effectively construct knowledge and positive perceptions of English among indigenous students. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the ability to communicate in English is more important than ever. Ensuring that indigenous students have access to quality English education is not only a matter of equity but also a step toward empowering them to participate fully in the global community.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a Narrative Inquiry approach, which is qualitative in nature. The choice of Narrative Inquiry is motivated by its strength in capturing and narratively reporting the lived experiences and personal stories of individuals. The objective of this study is to explore and understand these experiences deeply by presenting the findings and discussion in a narrative format. This methodology allows for a rich, detailed exposition of the subjects' stories. This is in line with Creswell & Creswell (2022) that stated narrative research is a qualitative strategy in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives. This information is then often retold or re-storied by the researcher into a narrative chronology.

The participants in this study comprised five English language education students from various areas within the Central Kalimantan Province. They are from Kota Palangka Raya (two

students), Pulang Pisau Regency (one student), and Katingan Regency (two students). Students from Pulang Pisau and Katingan Regency studied at schools in remote areas, more than 100 kilometers from Kota Palangka Raya as the capital city of Central Kalimantan Province. These students were selected to provide diverse perspectives and experiences regarding their educational journeys and interactions.

Data was collected through conversational interviews focusing on their language learning experiences and how they perceived these learning processes. This method was chosen to create a comfortable and open environment where participants could freely share their stories and experiences. The conversational interview format facilitated an in-depth exploration of the participants' narratives, providing a comprehensive understanding of their personal and educational experiences.

The analysis of the collected narratives was conducted using a deductive method. This approach allowed the researchers to systematically analyze the data, identifying key themes and patterns that emerged from the participants' stories. By employing a deductive method, the study was able to focus on specific research questions while still allowing for the richness and depth of the narratives to be fully appreciated.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this narrative inquiry research reveal two distinct pathways in the formation of their perceptions of English: one characterized by positive perceptions and the other by negative perceptions. These pathways are shaped by the interplay of experiences, attitudes, and outcomes, which are deeply rooted in the students' unique cultural, social, and educational contexts. Through their narratives, we gain a nuanced understanding of how their learning experiences have influenced their perceptions of English, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities they face in their language learning journeys.

Pathway 1: Positive Perceptions of English

Positive perceptions of English emerge when students encounter engaging experiences, develop proactive attitudes, and achieve meaningful outcomes. These elements create a self-reinforcing cycle of enthusiasm and success, which is evident in the narratives of three of the five participants. Their stories highlight the transformative power of supportive environments, intrinsic motivation, and tangible achievements in shaping their positive perceptions of English.

1. *Positive Experiences: The Catalyst for Engagement and Enjoyment*

Positive experiences act as the foundation of constructive perceptions, offering students opportunities to engage with English in enjoyable and meaningful ways. For the participants who developed positive perceptions, these experiences often began in the classroom, where teachers employed dynamic and interactive teaching methods. One participant, whom we will refer to as *Ayu*, shared how her teacher's creative approach made English lessons memorable and engaging:

> "*Our teacher would start the class with songs and end with games. It felt like the language came alive, and I looked forward to every lesson. I remember*

> *one time we acted out a scene from a movie, and I was so excited to practice my lines. It didn't feel like learning; it felt like playing.*" (Ayu)

Ayu's narrative underscores the importance of teacher creativity in fostering a positive learning environment (Heidari-Shahreza, 2024; Dewaele et al., 2018). By incorporating songs, games, and role-playing activities, her teacher transformed the classroom into a space where students could experience English as a living, dynamic language rather than a static set of rules to memorize.

Another participant, *Budi*, highlighted the role of media in enriching his learning experiences. He described how watching movie clips and analyzing them in class not only improved his vocabulary but also made learning exciting:

> "*Watching movie scenes and guessing what would happen next not only improved my vocabulary but also made learning exciting. It felt like I was part of the story, and I wanted to understand every word.*" (Budi)

Budi's experience aligns with Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, which emphasizes the importance of comprehensible and engaging input in language acquisition. By integrating media into the curriculum, Budi's teacher provided him with contextualized and meaningful exposure to English, which enhanced his linguistic competence and sparked his curiosity.

Outside the classroom, supportive environments also played a pivotal role in shaping positive perceptions (King & Fogle, 2017; Lanza, 2021). For *Citra*, her family's encouragement was instrumental in fostering her interest in English. She recalled how her father would name everyday objects in English and ask her to repeat after him, turning language learning into a playful and interactive experience:

> "*My father would name everyday objects in English and ask me to repeat after him. It was like a game we played, and it made me curious about the language. He would also bring home English storybooks and read them with me before bed. Those moments made me feel close to the language.*" (Citra)

Citra's narrative illustrates how family involvement can create a nurturing environment that supports language learning. By integrating English into everyday activities, her father made the language feel accessible and relevant, fostering her curiosity and motivation.

Peers also contributed to positive experiences by fostering collaborative learning (Swain & Watanabe, 2013; Dörnyei & Munir, 2019). *Dewi*, another participant, described how group projects and shared interests in English media helped her connect with the language in social contexts:

> "*My friends and I would watch English movies together and discuss them afterward. We also formed a study group where we practiced speaking and helped each other with homework. It felt like we were learning together, and that made it more fun.*" (Dewi)

Dewi's experience highlights the social dimension of language learning, where peer interactions can create a sense of community and shared purpose. By collaborating with her friends, Dewi not only improved her language skills but also developed a sense of belonging and mutual support.

2. Positive Attitudes: Proactivity and Intrinsic Motivation

Positive experiences fostered proactive attitudes among the participants, as they took ownership of their learning and sought additional exposure to English. *Ayu,* for example, described how she began using language apps and reading English novels on her own after being inspired by her teacher's engaging lessons:

> "*I started using a language app to practice vocabulary every day. I also began reading English novels, even though they were challenging at first. It felt empowering to improve on my own, and I wanted to keep learning more.*" (Ayu)

Ayu's proactive attitude reflects the principles of self-regulated learning, as described by Zimmerman and Schunk (2020). By setting her own goals and monitoring her progress, Ayu demonstrated a high level of autonomy and motivation, which are key factors in sustaining language learning efforts.

For *Budi*, learning English was closely tied to his personal goals. He aspired to pursue higher education abroad and saw English as a gateway to achieving his dreams:

> "*I chose English because I wanted to study engineering in Australia. I knew I needed to be fluent to succeed, so I worked hard to improve my skills. Every time I learned a new word or phrase, I felt one step closer to my goal.*" (Budi)

Budi's narrative aligns with Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2021) L2 Motivational Self System, which emphasizes the role of vision and goal orientation in motivating language learners. By connecting his English learning to his long-term aspirations, Budi was able to maintain a high level of motivation and persistence.

Curiosity and enjoyment also played a significant role in shaping the participants' attitudes. *Citra* described how learning English felt like a rewarding challenge, where each new word or phrase unlocked a new puzzle:

"*Each new word I learned felt like unlocking a puzzle. It made me want to keep exploring the language. I would write down new words in a notebook and try to use them in sentences. It was like a game, and I loved it.*" (Citra)

Citra's enthusiasm reflects the intrinsic motivation that Deci and Ryan (1985) identify as a key driver of sustained learning. By framing language learning as a rewarding and enjoyable activity, Citra was able to maintain her curiosity and engagement over time.

3. Positive Outcomes: Confidence and Competence

Positive experiences and attitudes culminated in tangible achievements, reinforcing the participants' belief in their abilities. *Ayu*, for example, shared how her consistent practice with language apps and novels improved her grammar and vocabulary:

> "*I noticed that my grammar was getting better, and I could understand more complex sentences. It felt amazing to see my progress, and it made me want to keep learning.*" (Ayu)

Ayu's improved skills not only boosted her confidence but also motivated her to continue engaging with English. This positive feedback loop is consistent with Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, which posits that successful experiences enhance learners' belief in their capabilities, motivating them to tackle more complex challenges.

For *Budi*, academic success was a significant milestone that reinforced his positive perception of English. He recalled winning a storytelling contest in high school, which he described as a turning point in his language learning journey:

> "*Winning the storytelling contest was a turning point for me. It showed me that I could express myself in English and be understood. After that, I felt more confident speaking in front of others, and I started participating in more competitions.*" (Budi)

Budi's achievement not only validated his efforts but also strengthened his connection to the language. By integrating English into his daily routines through media, conversations, and hobbies, Budi was able to solidify his positive perceptions and build a lifelong relationship with the language.

Pathway 2: Negative Perceptions of English

In contrast to the positive pathways, negative perceptions of English develop when students encounter disengaging experiences, adopt avoidance-driven attitudes, and experience unsatisfactory outcomes. These elements reinforce each other, creating a cycle of frustration and disconnection. The narratives of the remaining two participants, *Eko* and *Fani*, illustrate how negative experiences and attitudes can hinder language learning and perpetuate negative perceptions.

1. Negative Experiences: Barriers and Disengagement

For *Eko*, early encounters with English were marked by uninspiring and alienating experiences. He described how his teacher's reliance on rote memorization and textbook-based methods failed to create meaningful connections with the language:

> "*Our teacher would just give us long lists of grammar rules to memorize without explaining why they mattered. It made English feel pointless, like we were just repeating words without understanding them.*" (Eko)

Eko's experience reflects the limitations of traditional teaching methods, which often prioritize form over meaning and fail to engage students in meaningful interaction (Ellis et al., 2020). As Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests, such disengaging experiences can raise affective barriers (Wu, 2023), making it difficult for students to internalize the language.

Fani, another participant, faced additional challenges due to inconsistent teaching quality and a lack of resources in her rural school. She shared how her teacher's frequent absences and lack of engagement left her feeling neglected and unmotivated:

> "*Our teacher rarely showed up to class, and when they did, they just handed us assignments. It felt like they didn't care if we learned or not. I didn't have any books or materials to practice at home, so I just gave up.*" (Fani)

Fani's narrative highlights the impact of environmental factors on language learning. Without access to supportive resources or role models, students like Fani are often left to navigate their learning journeys alone, which can lead to disengagement and frustration (Bietenbeck et al., 2023; Ogawa, 2021).

2. *Negative Attitudes: Avoidance and Disinterest*

Negative experiences often lead students to develop avoidance-driven attitudes, as they seek to minimize their exposure to the language (Hiver et al., 2024). *Eko*, for example, admitted to neglecting his English assignments and relying on shortcuts to complete tasks:

> "*I never tried to do my English homework properly. I'd just copy from my friends because I didn't see the point. It felt like a waste of time, and I didn't think I would ever need English in my life.*" (Eko)

Eko's avoidance behavior reflects the lack of relevance and motivation that often accompanies negative experiences. Without a clear sense of purpose or connection to the language, students like Eko are unlikely to invest effort in their learning (Pinner, 2016).

Fani, on the other hand, redirected her focus to more appealing subjects and activities, such as learning Korean through K-pop and dramas:

> "*I was more interested in learning Korean because it felt connected to the shows and music I loved. English just seemed boring and irrelevant to my life. I didn't see why I should bother with it.*" (Fani)

Fani's narrative illustrates how negative experiences can lead students to disengage from English and seek alternative forms of language learning that feel more meaningful and enjoyable (Darvin & Norton, 2017). This shift in focus reflects the importance of aligning language learning with students' interests and cultural contexts.

3. *Negative Outcomes: Frustration and Stagnation*

Negative experiences and attitudes often lead to poor learning outcomes, which further reinforce students' struggles and diminish their confidence (Solhi, 2024). *Eko*, for example,

described his difficulties in understanding grammar and forming sentences, which left him feeling inadequate and anxious:

> "*I get so nervous whenever I have to speak English. I know my grammar is weak, and I'm scared of being judged. It's like I'm stuck in a cycle where I can't improve no matter how hard I try.*" (Eko)

Eko's struggles reflect the debilitating effects of language anxiety, as described by MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012). Without positive reinforcement or meaningful opportunities for improvement, students like Eko are likely to remain trapped in a cycle of frustration and stagnation.

Fani also experienced repeated failures in her English exams, which deepened her sense of alienation from the language:

> "*I failed my English exam because I couldn't understand the questions. It made me feel like I'd never be good at this language. I just stopped trying after that.*" (Fani)

Fani's narrative highlights the cyclical nature of negative pathways, where poor outcomes reinforce negative perceptions and limit students' growth (De Castella et al., 2013; Chamani et al., 2023). Without targeted interventions to address disengagement and rebuild confidence, students like Fani are unlikely to break free from this cycle.

Comparative Analysis of Pathways

The contrasting pathways underscore the importance of creating supportive and engaging learning environments. Positive pathways thrive on dynamic exposure and proactive attitudes, while negative pathways require targeted interventions to address disengagement and provide meaningful opportunities for improvement. By understanding the factors that shape these pathways, educators can design more effective and inclusive language learning experiences that empower all students to succeed.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

1. *Dynamic and Interactive Exposure*: Teachers should prioritize interactive and contextual learning methods, integrating technology and multimedia tools to enhance engagement. Recent studies (Godwin-Jones, 2018; Persson and Nouri, 2018) demonstrate how digital platforms create immersive environments that connect language learning to real-world contexts.
2. *Fostering Intrinsic Motivation*: Programs should focus on cultivating learners' intrinsic motivation and self-regulation through goal-setting and vision-building. Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2021) framework provides actionable strategies for motivating learners and aligning their efforts with personal aspirations.

Targeted Intervention for Negative Pathways: Addressing disengagement early can prevent learners from becoming trapped in cycles of frustration. Strategies such as personalized

support, constructive feedback, and celebrating small achievements can help rebuild confidence and foster positive perceptions (MacIntyre and Gregersen, 2012; Spolsky, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights how the learning experiences of indigenous students in Central Kalimantan shape their perceptions of English, revealing two distinct pathways: positive and negative. Positive perceptions emerge from engaging classroom activities, supportive environments, and intrinsic motivation, where creative teaching methods, family encouragement, and peer collaboration foster interest and confidence. These students often achieve tangible success, driven by personal goals and curiosity. Conversely, negative perceptions stem from disengaging experiences, uninspiring teaching, and limited resources, leading to avoidance, disinterest, and poor outcomes. Without meaningful connections to the language, these students struggle to see its relevance, resulting in frustration and stagnation.

The findings emphasize the need for interactive, culturally responsive teaching that leverages technology and aligns with students' interests and goals. Early interventions and personalized support can help shift negative perceptions, while fostering intrinsic motivation and celebrating small achievements can build confidence. Ensuring equitable access to quality English education is essential for empowering indigenous students to thrive in an interconnected world.

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