



# CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS TO INDIGENOUS LEARNERS: A NARRATIVE INVESTIGATION

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## ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this narrative investigation was to explore and understand the challenges Indigenous learners faced in acquiring English language skills. For In this study, three (3) participants were selected: one primary teacher, one lower grades teacher representing grades 1-3, and one higher grades teacher representing grades 4-6 from Kiblawan North District of Davao del Sur. Teachers were selected based on their role in instructing Indigenous students in English language skills, with preference given to those who had worked closely with Indigenous learners and had experience using culturally responsive teaching methods for more than three (3) years. The research design for this study was narrative research, which focused on exploring and interpreting the lived experiences of individuals. In this context, the study examined the experiences of Indigenous learners and/or their teachers in acquiring and teaching English language skills. The study illuminated a range of challenges teachers faced when teaching English language skills to Indigenous learners, particularly within formal educational settings. Teachers frequently reported difficulties stemming from cultural and linguistic mismatches between the standardized curriculum and the lived experiences of Indigenous students. These cultural language barriers created disengagement, misunderstandings, and reduced motivation among learners. The findings underscored the disconnect between the dominant language of instruction English and the Indigenous languages and identities that students brought into the classroom. This was especially significant under the lens of culturally relevant pedagogy theory, which emphasized the importance of affirming students' cultural identities in order to enhance learning outcomes.

**KEYWORDS:** Challenges, Teaching, English Language Skills, Indigenous Learners, Narrative Investigation

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching English language skills to indigenous learners in Kiblawan, Davao del Sur presents several challenges. One major issue is the language barrier, as many indigenous students speak their native languages and dialects, which can hinder their ability to grasp English concepts. Teachers often face difficulties in addressing the diverse linguistic backgrounds of these students, making it challenging to develop effective teaching strategies. Additionally, cultural differences and limited exposure to English outside the classroom further complicate language acquisition. There may also be a lack of resources tailored to the specific needs of indigenous learners, such as culturally relevant materials and trained educators who understand the unique challenges faced by these students.

Indigenous communities in Indonesia often possess rich linguistic and cultural traditions that may contrast with the dominant educational paradigms, which primarily prioritize standard English proficiency. Linguistic diversity, cultural identity, socioeconomic status, and historical marginalization can significantly impact these learners' engagement and success in English language acquisition. Additionally, the transition from a first language, often rooted in a distinct cultural framework, to a second language like English can create feelings of disconnection and affect learners' confidence and motivation (Rachmawati & Prasetyo, 2019).

Further, indigenous learners in Bolivia face significant challenges in acquiring the English language, rooted in linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic factors. Bolivia is home to a diverse range of indigenous languages, including Quechua, Aymara, and Guarani, which are structurally distinct from English, complicating language acquisition. These languages often do not have the same syntactic or phonetic structures as English, which creates additional barriers in both comprehension and production of the language (Tovar, 2023). Despite recent efforts to promote bilingual education in indigenous communities, the focus is often on Spanish rather than indigenous languages, leaving many learners with limited opportunities to develop bilingual fluency in both Spanish and their native languages, let alone English (Villarroel, 2022). This linguistic gap makes it difficult for indigenous students to engage fully with English-language curricula, as they may not have the foundational language skills in Spanish or their indigenous language to support English learning (Adams, 2020).

Additionally, the socio-economic marginalization of indigenous populations in Bolivia further exacerbates these challenges. Many indigenous communities live in rural or remote areas where access to quality education,



including English language instruction, is limited (Agbo, 2021). This geographic isolation, combined with lower levels of investment in indigenous education, results in a lack of qualified teachers, inadequate learning resources, and few opportunities for immersive English experiences outside of formal education (Tovar, 2023).

However, indigenous learners in Malaysia face several challenges in acquiring the English language, primarily due to linguistic and cultural factors. Malaysia is home to a variety of indigenous languages, such as Iban, Kadazan, and Orang Asli languages, which are often linguistically distant from English. These indigenous languages lack the grammatical structures and vocabulary of English, which makes learning English particularly difficult for these students (Pillai & Mahalingam, 2023). Moreover, most indigenous learners speak their native languages at home and in their communities, while English is often introduced as a second or third language in schools. As a result, students frequently experience difficulties with English pronunciation, comprehension, and writing, which are further compounded by their limited exposure to English outside of the classroom (Tharumaraj & Ramasamy, 2022).

Another significant challenge is the socio-economic disparity between indigenous and non-indigenous populations in Malaysia. Many indigenous students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, which limits their access to supplementary language learning materials, private tuition, or opportunities to practice English in real-world settings. This economic gap results in a lower quality of education for indigenous learners, who often face overcrowded classrooms and underqualified teachers, particularly in rural schools (Pillai & Mahalingam, 2023). Furthermore, the national education system places heavy emphasis on Bahasa Malaysia and English, while indigenous languages and cultures are often marginalized, leading to a lack of cultural relevance in the English curriculum for indigenous students.

Seemingly, indigenous learners in Bataan, Philippines face several challenges in acquiring the English language, primarily due to linguistic, socioeconomic, and educational barriers. Many indigenous communities in Bataan, such as the Aeta, speak their native languages, which are linguistically distinct from both Filipino and English, making language acquisition particularly difficult. The gap between indigenous languages and English in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and phonetics adds complexity to the learning process (Ramos, 2022). Furthermore, indigenous learners often have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, as their communities are typically rural, with limited access to resources such as books, internet, or English-speaking environments (Diaz, 2023; Ramos, 2022).

In the same way, indigenous learners in Butuan City, Philippines face significant challenges in acquiring the English language, primarily due to linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic factors. Many indigenous groups in the region, such as the Manobo and Higaonon, speak native languages that are vastly different from both Filipino and English, creating a substantial linguistic barrier to learning English (Torres, 2022). These languages often lack the same vocabulary and syntactic structures as English, making it difficult for learners to grasp English grammar and pronunciation. Moreover, indigenous learners in Butuan City, particularly those from rural areas, have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, as their communities predominantly use their native languages in daily life, and there is a lack of access to English-language resources (Carandang & Herrera, 2023).

Apparently, indigenous learners in Surigao City, Philippines, encounter significant challenges in acquiring the English language, largely due to linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic factors. Indigenous groups such as the Manobo and the Mamanwa in Surigao City often speak languages that are structurally and lexically distinct from both Filipino and English, creating a substantial barrier to English language learning (Santos & Dizon, 2023). The lack of exposure to English in their communities, where native languages dominate daily communication, further complicates their ability to practice and reinforce English outside of school (Castro, 2022). Moreover, many indigenous learners come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, with limited access to educational resources, such as English-language books, technology, or qualified teachers (Santos & Dizon, 2023).

Moreover, indigenous learners in Kiblawan, Davao del Sur, Philippines, face several challenges in acquiring the English language, particularly due to linguistic, socio-economic, and educational barriers. Indigenous groups such as the B'laan and Tagabawa, who predominantly speak their native languages, struggle with the linguistic differences between English and their mother tongues, which complicates vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, and grammar (Alonzo & Ramos, 2023). The lack of exposure to English outside the classroom, as most interactions within their communities are in their indigenous languages, further limits their language development (Pineda & Villanueva, 2022).

Additionally, many indigenous learners in Kiblawan come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, where resources such as books, internet access, and extracurricular language programs are scarce, further hindering their ability to practice English (Alonzo & Ramos, 2023). This socioeconomic marginalization, coupled with under-resourced schools, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient teacher training in English, creates significant barriers for indigenous learners, resulting in lower proficiency and engagement with the language (Pineda & Villanueva, 2022).



## LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges in teaching English to Indigenous learners has increasingly highlighted the complex interplay of linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic factors that affect language acquisition (Bishop & Glynn, 2021). One of the key challenges is the linguistic gap between Indigenous languages and English. Many Indigenous learners grow up speaking their native languages, which often differ significantly in structure and phonology from English (O'Donnell et al., 2020).

Indigenous languages are typically oral and have unique syntactic patterns, which can create difficulties when students transition to written English (Hinton, 2020). This linguistic distance, coupled with limited bilingual education programs, often results in language barriers that hinder the development of literacy and fluency in English (Parsons et al., 2022). Moreover, code-switching between Indigenous languages and English in the classroom can complicate English learning, as students may struggle to distinguish between the two languages when it comes to academic contexts (Blair & Flett, 2020; Carter, 2020; Clemens & Young, 2022; Christensen, 2020).

In addition to linguistic challenges, there is a pervasive cultural disconnect between the mainstream education system and Indigenous worldviews and learning styles. Indigenous learners often come from communities that prioritize community-based learning, experiential knowledge, and oral traditions over the individualistic and formalized structure of mainstream schooling (McCarty & Lee, 2022). These cultural differences can make it difficult for students to engage with traditional English language instruction, which is often designed with a Western pedagogical framework that does not account for Indigenous values or learning practices (Baker, 2021).

Studies have shown that Indigenous students are more likely to succeed in learning environments that respect and integrate their cultural perspectives, yet the lack of culturally relevant teaching resources or curricula remains a significant barrier (McCarty et al., 2021). This disconnect not only affects English language acquisition but also contributes to higher dropout rates and disengagement from schooling among Indigenous students (Laliberte et al., 2022).

A related challenge in teaching English to Indigenous learners is the lack of teacher preparedness and professional development in culturally responsive teaching practices. Many teachers in mainstream schools are not adequately trained to address the linguistic and cultural needs of Indigenous students (Hinton & Hale, 2021). A study by O'Donnell et al. (2020) found that teachers often lack awareness of the specific challenges faced by Indigenous learners, including the need for differentiated instruction, the incorporation of students' native languages, and the application of culturally relevant pedagogical strategies.

Moreover, professional development programs rarely focus on Indigenous issues, leaving educators without the tools they need to foster an inclusive and supportive environment (Hinton, 2021). Teachers' insufficient understanding of Indigenous students' experiences can result in misinterpretation of their needs, underestimation of their potential, and the reinforcement of stereotypes, all of which can impede the success of English language instruction (Baker, 2021).

Seemingly, socio-economic and systemic barriers significantly impact the ability of Indigenous learners to develop English language skills. Indigenous communities are disproportionately affected by poverty, limited access to educational resources, and inadequate infrastructure, which can directly hinder students' academic success (Laliberte et al., 2022; Bovenschen & Marlow, 2020; Cohen, et al. 2018). A report by the Canadian Education Association (2020) found that schools serving Indigenous students often face challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, outdated materials, and limited access to technology, all of which can impede language learning.

Finally, socio-economic factors such as housing instability, lack of transportation, and food insecurity create further obstacles for Indigenous students in maintaining consistent attendance and engagement in school (Parsons et al., 2022; Brady & Williams, 2022; Dwyer, 2021; Canagarajah, 2020).

## Research Questions

1. What challenges do teachers face in teaching English language skills among Indigenous learners within formal educational settings?
2. What strategies do teachers employ to navigate their challenges in teaching English to Indigenous learners?
3. What role do educational insights play as experienced by the teachers in addressing or exacerbating Indigenous learners' challenges in acquiring English language skills?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The research design for this study was narrative research, which focused on exploring and interpreting the lived experiences of individuals. In this context, the study examined the experiences of Indigenous learners and/or their teachers in acquiring and teaching English language skills. Narrative research was particularly well-suited for this kind of inquiry because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of personal stories, social contexts, and individual perspectives.



The primary focus of the study was on gathering and analyzing personal stories to explore participants' lived experiences. The design centered on purposively selecting individuals who could provide meaningful insights into the research questions. For example, in exploring the challenges faced by Indigenous learners in acquiring English language skills, the researcher selected Indigenous students and teachers as participants.

### Research Participants

For In this study, three (3) participants were selected: one primary teacher, one lower grades teacher representing grades 1-3, and one higher grades teacher representing grades 4-6 from Kiblawan North District of Davao del Sur. Teachers were selected based on their role in instructing Indigenous students in English language skills, with preference given to those who had worked closely with Indigenous learners and had experience using culturally responsive teaching methods for more than three (3) years.

These participants took part in semi-structured interviews, where they were asked to share their personal narratives. Additionally, participant observation was used as a supplementary instrument, particularly in classroom settings, to capture real-time experiences of teaching and learning. This approach enabled the collection of rich, detailed data on the teachers' experiences and perspectives. As Creswell (2019) suggested, this sample size was appropriate, as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of each participant's story, while still providing sufficient diversity to encompass a range of experiences.

### Research Instrument

In narrative research, the primary research instrument was typically the researcher themselves, as they engaged directly with participants to collect and analyze stories. The most common method of data collection was through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility while ensuring that key topics were covered. The interview guide, developed around the central research questions, included open-ended prompts that encouraged participants to share their personal experiences and reflections.

For example, in this study on Indigenous learners' challenges in acquiring English, questions included: "Can you describe a memorable experience you had learning English?" or "What challenges do you face in expressing yourself in English?" The semi-structured nature of these interviews gave participants the freedom to guide the conversation, making the instrument adaptable to each individual's story while ensuring consistency in data collection across participants.

In addition to interviews, personal narratives or written accounts served as valuable research instruments, especially when participants were encouraged to share their stories through other mediums such as journals, essays, or oral storytelling. These narratives provided further depth and context to the data gathered in interviews.

Participant observation was also used as a supplementary instrument, particularly in classroom settings, to capture real-time experiences of learning or teaching. The research instrument, in this case, was not limited to structured tools but extended to creating a safe, open environment where participants felt comfortable sharing their stories. This approach enabled the researcher to gather rich, qualitative data for narrative analysis. Ultimately, the combination of these instruments allowed the researcher to fully capture the complexity of participants' lived experiences.

### Data Analysis

Environmental triangulation was employed in this study to enrich the understanding of the challenges encountered by teachers in this context. Environmental triangulation involved gathering data from various settings or environments to explore how different factors or contexts influenced the research phenomenon.

**Classroom Environment:** Observations were conducted in the classroom setting, where the interaction between teachers and Indigenous learners was directly studied. This environment provided valuable insights into how physical space, teaching materials, and classroom dynamics influenced the teaching and learning of English. Factors such as classroom layout, availability of resources, and the cultural responsiveness of the teaching environment were considered as part of the triangulation process.

**Cultural and Community Contexts:** The broader socio-cultural environment of Indigenous communities was considered as part of the study. Teachers' experiences and challenges were shaped by community factors such as language barriers, cultural differences, and the role of the local community in supporting or hindering English language learning. Understanding these environmental aspects added depth to the analysis of challenges faced by teachers in the classroom.

**School Environment:** The school's institutional environment including school policies, administrative support, and professional development opportunities was another important factor. Observations and discussions revealed how the school environment either supported or created challenges for teachers in teaching English to Indigenous learners, providing further context to the teachers' narratives.

By triangulating these different environmental settings the classroom, the broader cultural and community context, and the institutional setting this study gained a more holistic understanding of the factors that shaped the challenges





in teaching English language skills to Indigenous learners. This approach revealed how environmental elements interacted and influenced teachers' experiences and practices in real-world settings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Implications

The study illuminated a range of challenges teachers faced when teaching English language skills to Indigenous learners, particularly within formal educational settings. Teachers frequently reported difficulties stemming from cultural and linguistic mismatches between the standardized curriculum and the lived experiences of Indigenous students. These cultural language barriers created disengagement, misunderstandings, and reduced motivation among learners. The findings underscored the disconnect between the dominant language of instruction English and the Indigenous languages and identities that students brought into the classroom. This was especially significant under the lens of culturally relevant pedagogy theory, which emphasized the importance of affirming students' cultural identities in order to enhance learning outcomes.

In alignment with social constructivism theory, the study revealed that Indigenous learners often struggled because their ways of knowing and learning were not reflected in mainstream educational approaches. Teachers noted that conventional teaching methods did not align with Indigenous students' communal and oral traditions. As a result, language instruction often failed to resonate with learners, limiting their ability to fully engage in classroom activities. These findings suggested that the lack of culturally contextualized learning environments hindered students' ability to construct meaning from their educational experiences, thus impeding their English language acquisition.

To respond to these challenges, teachers adopted a variety of adaptive strategies aimed at creating more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments. These strategies included incorporating Indigenous stories and knowledge systems into English lessons, using visual and experiential learning methods, and fostering strong relationships with students and their communities. These approaches were grounded in the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy, as teachers made intentional efforts to connect curriculum content with students' cultural identities. Teachers who employed such methods observed increased engagement and language development, highlighting the potential of culturally responsive teaching to mitigate linguistic and cultural barriers.

Translanguaging theory played a crucial role in understanding how teachers leveraged students' home languages as assets rather than obstacles. Several educators encouraged students to use their Indigenous languages alongside English during classroom discussions and writing tasks, allowing them to draw on their full linguistic repertoires. This practice not only facilitated comprehension and participation but also reinforced students' cultural identities. The findings demonstrated that translanguaging could serve as a powerful pedagogical tool to bridge the gap between Indigenous languages and English, particularly in multilingual classrooms.

Teachers also reflected on how their own educational insights and experiences shaped their ability to navigate the complexities of teaching English to Indigenous learners. Many teachers expressed that their understanding of Indigenous cultures evolved over time through direct engagement with communities, ongoing professional development, and self-reflection. These insights enabled them to challenge deficit perspectives and adopt more holistic and empathetic approaches to teaching.

Despite these policy-related obstacles, the study highlighted the agency and resilience of teachers who continued to advocate for culturally inclusive practices. Teachers who understood the value of community engagement and Indigenous knowledge systems worked to create micro-environments of inclusion within their classrooms. These efforts were a testament to the principles of social constructivism and culturally relevant pedagogy, which emphasize the importance of learner-centered, contextually grounded instruction. The study suggested that supporting teachers in these efforts could lead to more equitable educational outcomes for Indigenous learners.

In conclusion, the implications of the study pointed to the need for systemic change at both the classroom and policy levels. While individual teachers demonstrated innovative and culturally respectful strategies to overcome challenges, the structural limitations of the education system continued to hinder progress. The study called for the integration of culturally relevant, identity-affirming, and linguistically inclusive practices into mainstream education policy. By embracing the theoretical insights of culturally relevant pedagogy, social constructivism, translanguaging, and identity theory, educators and policymakers alike could contribute to a more just and effective learning environment for Indigenous students.

### Future Directions

Building upon the findings and implications of this study, it is essential to outline future directions that can further support the teaching and learning of English language skills among Indigenous learners. These directions aim to address the multifaceted needs of key stakeholders including Indigenous students, Indigenous teachers, school administrators, the Indigenous community, and future researchers by promoting culturally sustaining practices, policy reform, and inclusive educational frameworks. The following recommendations highlight areas where continued inquiry and collaborative action can contribute to more equitable and effective language education outcomes.



**Indigenous Students.** Future research should explore the development of learning environments that actively center Indigenous students' voices, identities, and languages. There is a need to co-create English language learning materials that integrate Indigenous knowledge systems, storytelling traditions, and cultural practices. By engaging Indigenous students in participatory curriculum design and assessment processes, future studies can help identify teaching approaches that resonate more deeply with their lived experiences. This direction not only aims to improve language acquisition but also to affirm student identity and agency within formal education systems.

**Indigenous Teachers.** For Indigenous teachers, future research could investigate how their unique cultural knowledge, bilingual skills, and lived experiences can be further supported and utilized in English language instruction. Studies might examine how professional development programs can be tailored specifically to empower Indigenous educators to integrate translanguaging and culturally relevant pedagogy more effectively. Furthermore, future directions should focus on creating leadership pipelines for Indigenous teachers, allowing them to shape curriculum development and educational policies from within the system.

**School Administrators.** Future research should delve into the role of school administrators in fostering culturally inclusive and linguistically responsive environments. Studies might explore how leadership training programs can equip administrators with a deeper understanding of Indigenous epistemologies and the practical applications of culturally relevant frameworks. Additionally, future directions may include the development of school-wide policies that support translanguaging practices, community engagement, and curriculum flexibility, ensuring administrative support aligns with the needs of Indigenous learners and their educators.

**Indigenous Community.** Engaging the Indigenous community as co-educators and cultural custodians is a critical area for future research. Scholars should explore collaborative models where Elders, parents, and local leaders play an integral role in shaping the English language curriculum and school culture. Research might also examine how community-based educational initiatives, such as language camps or intergenerational storytelling projects, contribute to students' English proficiency while strengthening cultural identity. This direction promotes an inclusive model of education that values and incorporates community knowledge.

**Future Researchers.** Future researchers are encouraged to employ decolonizing methodologies and participatory action research to more authentically capture the voices and experiences of Indigenous learners and educators. Longitudinal studies could investigate the sustained impact of culturally responsive teaching strategies and translanguaging on student achievement and well-being. Moreover, interdisciplinary research that bridges education, linguistics, and Indigenous studies may offer richer insights into how to dismantle structural barriers and reimagine English language education through an Indigenous lens.

Thus, the proposed future directions emphasize the importance of a collective and culturally responsive approach to addressing the challenges in teaching English to Indigenous learners. By centering Indigenous voices, empowering educators, fostering supportive leadership, engaging communities, and guiding future research through decolonizing and inclusive lenses, meaningful and lasting improvements in language education can be achieved. These pathways offer the potential to transform educational systems into spaces that not only support language acquisition but also honor and sustain Indigenous identities, languages, and ways of knowing.

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