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Learning English under Conditions of Constraint: Student Narratives from the Kei Islands

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ABSTRACT

This narrative-informed qualitative study examines how students in the Kei Islands describe learning English under restricted educational and technological access. The reported corpus comprised in-depth interviews, classroom observations, field notes, and researcher reflective journals. The available accounts were read for temporal movement, social and material conditions, and evaluative meaning, and were then compared across narratives. Three interconnected storylines were developed: interrupted beginnings and uneven exposure to English; literacy opportunities narrowed by scarce print and digital resources; and linguistic uncertainty accumulating into fear and silence. The findings do not establish that limited resources caused low English proficiency. They show how students perceived discontinuous instruction, unavailable books and devices, difficulty with the language of schooling, and anticipated failure as mutually reinforcing constraints on participation. The study contributes a situated account of how structural inequality becomes lived and affective in an archipelagic learning context. It recommends continuity of English instruction, multilingual and locally meaningful materials, offline and shared-device options, and low-risk participation structures. Because the source record does not preserve essential participant, procedural, and ethics details, those items require author verification before journal submission.

Keywords: English literacy; narrative inquiry; rural language education; digital inequality; learner agency; Kei Islands

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INTRODUCTION

English literacy is not simply an individual stock of vocabulary, grammar, reading, and writing skills. It is also a situated opportunity to encounter texts, receive instruction, use material and digital resources, and participate without being positioned as incapable. Research on identity and language learning shows that access to valued language practices is structured by social relationships, material conditions, and learners' changing sense of what participation makes possible (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton & Toohey, 2011). This perspective is especially important in geographically dispersed settings, where formal curriculum expectations may be shared nationally while the conditions for meeting them remain uneven.

Rural Indonesian research demonstrates that motivation and effort cannot be interpreted apart from opportunity structures. Lamb (2012) found marked contextual differences in young Indonesians' motivation to learn English across metropolitan, provincial, and rural settings, while Lamb (2013) showed that rural learners could value English and exert effort even when school provision, household support, and learning resources constrained their agency. Official education statistics for Maluku provide an important regional context, but aggregate indicators cannot explain how students experience English learning in particular islands, schools, and classrooms (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Maluku, 2024).

The digital dimension adds another layer. A lack of devices or connectivity is a first-order barrier, but educational inequality also concerns whether available technology can be used for meaningful learning. Digital literacy includes technical, cognitive, and social-emotional dimensions rather than device ownership alone (Ng, 2012). Reviews of the digital divide distinguish inequalities in access, use, skills, support, and outcomes (Lythreatis et al., 2022). A recent systematic review of rural schools likewise shows that technology integration depends on interacting conditions at policy, school, teacher, and learner levels; providing a device without infrastructure, training, and pedagogical fit is insufficient (Mustafa et al., 2024).

Language repertoires must also be handled carefully. In the Kei Islands, a student may use a local language, Indonesian as a language of schooling, and English as a foreign language. Difficulty with Indonesian therefore should not automatically be labeled weak first-language literacy or treated as a direct cause of English difficulty. Cross-linguistic research finds that relations among oral language, decoding, phonological awareness, and reading comprehension vary by domain, age, writing system, and instructional context (Melby-Lervag & Lervag, 2011). A multilingual account asks which resources students can mobilize and how teaching connects them, rather than imposing a simple deficit hierarchy.

Affective experience is similarly contextual. Language anxiety is associated with achievement and participation across studies, but the relation is heterogeneous and does not by itself establish a one-way causal pathway (Teimouri et al., 2019). Speaking anxiety can be shaped by anticipated evaluation and interactional demands (Woodrow, 2006), and unwillingness to communicate can co-occur with anxiety even among learners who wish to learn (Liu & Jackson, 2008). In under-resourced contexts, fear and silence may therefore be responses to accumulated histories of limited exposure, not stable personal traits.

Narrative inquiry is well suited to examining this accumulation because it treats learners' stories as accounts of lived and imagined experience across time and place (Barkhuizen, 2011, 2014). Existing work identifies rural inequalities and language anxiety, but less is known about how students in an archipelagic Indonesian setting connect discontinuous instruction, scarce learning resources, linguistic uncertainty, and classroom participation in their own accounts. This study addresses that gap through two questions: (1) How do students narrate their encounters with English literacy across their educational histories and present learning environments? (2) How do material, linguistic, and affective conditions interact in their accounts of English participation?

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design and Narrative Orientation

The study adopted an interpretive, narrative-informed qualitative design. In language education, narrative research concerns the stories learners and teachers talk about lived and imagined experience, while recognizing that narrative may function as data, a mode of analysis, or a form of representation (Barkhuizen, 2014). The present design combined attention to the internal movement of individual excerpts with comparison across accounts. This approach is consistent with narrative knowledge, in which experience is interpreted through both narrative and paradigmatic modes rather than reduced to decontextualized topic counts (Barkhuizen, 2011; Polkinghorne, 1995).

Setting, Participants, and Recruitment

The participants were six second-semester undergraduate students enrolled in the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Doktor Husni Ingratubun Tual, Tual, Maluku, Indonesia. They were selected through purposive sampling based on their experiences of learning English under conditions of limited educational resources or technological access. The inclusion criteria were: (1) being an active second-semester student in the English Language Education Study Program; (2) having relevant experience with the phenomenon under investigation; and (3) being willing to describe their English-learning experiences.

The researcher had an existing lecturer–student relationship with the participants. This relationship provided contextual familiarity with the participants' learning environment but also introduced a potential power imbalance. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study, and that their

decision would not affect their grades, academic standing, or relationship with the university. Participants' identities were protected using the codes P1–P6.

Data Generation

Data were generated through individual in-depth interviews, classroom observations, field notes, and a researcher reflective journal. Data collection was conducted on March 1, 2026, at Universitas Doktor Husni Ingratubun Tual, Tual, Maluku, Indonesia. Each of the six participants took part in one face-to-face interview conducted in a classroom for approximately 20 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian and explored the participants' previous exposure to English instruction, access to English-language books and digital technology, language-related difficulties, fear of using English, and participation in English-learning activities. With the participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed into Indonesian by the researcher. Each transcript was checked against its corresponding recording to ensure accuracy before being read repeatedly and coded manually. Classroom observations, field notes, and the researcher's reflective journal were used to contextualize the interview data and support the interpretation of participants' accounts. After the preliminary analysis, the preliminary findings were presented to all six participants for member checking, allowing them to confirm, clarify, correct, or expand the researcher's interpretations before the analysis was finalized.

Narrative and Cross-Narrative Analysis

The Indonesian interview transcripts were analyzed manually by the researcher using a narrative-informed, two-level analytical procedure. First, each of the six transcripts was read repeatedly to understand the participant's account as a whole and identify its temporal orientation, significant learning experiences, complicating conditions, evaluative statements, emotional responses, and reported consequences for participation in English-learning activities. These narrative elements were treated as sensitizing concepts rather than as a rigid Labovian framework because some accounts did not contain all the components of a complete narrative. Second, the codes and accounts were compared across the six participants to identify recurring and contrasting patterns connecting their previous access to English instruction, present learning conditions, and anticipated classroom participation. Restorying and cross-narrative comparison were used to preserve the temporal and contextual relationships within the participants' experiences (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1995). Repeated reading and manual coding resulted in three cross-narrative storylines: (1) interrupted beginnings and uneven exposure to English; (2) literacy opportunities constrained by limited print and digital resources; and (3) linguistic uncertainty developing into fear and reduced classroom participation. Quotations were traced to their original Indonesian transcripts to ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in the participants' accounts. For reporting purposes, the six participants were assigned the anonymized identifiers P1–P6, with each identifier consistently referring to the same participant. Each quotation was matched with its original transcript to determine the appropriate participant identifier; therefore, the previous labels E1–E6 were not automatically treated as identifiers for six different participants.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

The trustworthiness of the study was supported through data-source comparison and member checking. Interpretations developed from the interview transcripts were considered alongside classroom observations, field notes, and the researcher's reflective journal to provide contextual support and identify consistency or variation across the available evidence. After the preliminary analysis had been completed, the preliminary findings were presented to all six participants, who were invited to confirm whether the interpretations accurately represented their experiences and intended meanings and to provide corrections, clarifications, or additional information. Their feedback was considered when finalizing the analysis. The researcher also acknowledged an existing lecturer–student relationship with the participants. Although this insider position provided contextual familiarity with their learning environment, the difference in institutional authority could have influenced the participants' willingness to participate and express critical or negative experiences. This power relationship and its possible influence on data generation and interpretation are therefore recognized as methodological and reflexive considerations. The reporting of the study was also

informed by relevant qualitative-quality principles and interview-reporting criteria (Tong et al., 2007; Tracy, 2010).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The available accounts formed three interconnected storylines rather than six independent deficits. Read together, they moved from an uneven history of access, through a present learning ecology with scarce print and digital resources, toward affective and participatory consequences. Table 1 summarizes the evidence and the limits placed on each claim.

Table 1. Cross-Narrative Storylines and Bounded Analytic Claims

Storyline	Evidence	Bounded analytic claim
Interrupted beginnings	E1: sporadic or absent English instruction	Students narrated an uneven instructional history that restricted opportunities to build familiarity over time.
Scarce texts and digital access	E2: no English books; E3: no personal device or computer familiarity	Literacy opportunities were constrained by the combined availability and usability of print and digital resources.
Uncertainty, fear, and silence	E4: difficulty with Indonesian; E5: fear of English print; E6: silence during presentation	Linguistic uncertainty and anticipated failure were narrated as barriers to participation; proficiency and causality were not measured.

Interrupted Beginnings and an Uneven Literacy Trajectory

The first storyline located current difficulty in an interrupted educational history. English did not appear as a continuously available subject; it entered late and through teachers whose presence was described as sporadic. This temporal framing matters because the account did not present the learner as simply unable. It presented a learner asked to engage with English after limited opportunities to build familiarity.

E1: "I never learned English in elementary or junior high school. Even in high school, it was rare, with teachers only coming a few times."

The excerpt establishes orientation and complication: the educational sequence contained long periods without English and only intermittent provision later. The bounded claim is therefore about continuity of opportunity, not a measured literacy level. The account suggests that later classroom demands were encountered without the instructional history those demands presupposed.

Literacy Opportunities Narrowed by Scarce Texts and Digital Access

The second storyline shifted from instructional continuity to the material ecology of learning. Print resources were described as unavailable beyond the classroom, and digital participation was constrained by both device ownership and operational familiarity. These were not separate obstacles: together they narrowed the routes through which students could encounter English, practice independently, or complete technology-mediated tasks.

E2: "There are no bookstores here. The school library also does not have English books."

E3: "I don't have a cell phone, and I don't know how to use a computer. When I have online assignments, I don't know what to do."

E2 describes an environment in which classroom textbooks may become the main or only print input. E3 adds a digital conversion problem: an online assignment assumes access to a device and enough familiarity to act on the task. The data do not demonstrate how common these conditions were, nor whether every participant lacked access. They show how particular students experienced resource scarcity as a restriction on literacy activity.

Linguistic Uncertainty Accumulated into Fear and Silence

The third storyline connected difficulty with the language of schooling to emotional distance from English and reduced classroom participation. The movement across the excerpts was evaluative: uncertainty was narrated not only as difficulty understanding text but also as anticipation of failure.

E4: "I still get confused with Indonesian. Let alone English."

E5: "When I see English writing, I feel afraid because I don't know what it means."

E6: "Sometimes when I am asked to give a presentation in English, I prefer to remain silent because I don't know what to say."

E4 should not be read as proof of weak first-language literacy because the participant's full language repertoire and language of initial literacy were not documented. E5 shows that English print had acquired an anticipatory emotional meaning, while E6 locates that meaning in a public performance context. Silence was therefore intelligible as a protective response when the learner lacked words, rehearsal, or confidence. The evidence supports a claim about perceived difficulty and participation; it does not establish a clinical anxiety condition or a causal effect on proficiency.

Discussion

Access as an Accumulated Opportunity Structure

The findings extend a binary notion of access. The students' accounts combined continuity of instruction, availability of texts, ownership and usability of technology, and opportunities to participate. This pattern aligns with rural Indonesian research showing that learner agency is enabled or constrained by resources across school, household, and community levels (Lamb, 2012, 2013). It also supports digital-divide research that distinguishes possession from meaningful use and outcomes (Lythreatis et al., 2022; Ng, 2012). In rural schools, technology integration requires coordinated infrastructure, leadership, teacher preparation, and learner support rather than device distribution alone (Mustafa et al., 2024).

The contribution of the Kei Islands accounts is temporal. Limited instruction in earlier schooling became part of how later demands were understood. A library without English materials and an online task without an accessible device were not isolated events; they reinforced a history in which English appeared intermittently and often through requirements that exceeded available support.

Anxiety, Investment, and the Right to Participate

Fear and silence should not be treated as evidence that students lacked motivation. Meta-analytic research associates second-language anxiety with achievement, but effects vary and causal direction cannot be assumed from interview accounts (Teimouri et al., 2019). Woodrow (2006) shows that speaking anxiety is shaped by communicative situations, and Liu and Jackson (2008) demonstrate that unwillingness to communicate can coexist with a desire to learn. In the present case, fear followed narrated histories of unfamiliarity and insufficient support.

An investment perspective further shifts interpretation from individual deficiency to the conditions under which learners are accorded or refused opportunities to speak (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Remaining silent during an English presentation may protect a learner from public failure when task demands, language resources, and rehearsal opportunities are misaligned. Pedagogy should therefore change the participation conditions, not merely exhort students to be confident.

Multilingual Literacy without Deficit Assumptions

The statement about confusion in Indonesian requires particular caution. Indonesian may be an additional language rather than the participant's first language, and the study did not document when or how literacy developed across languages. Cross-linguistic evidence shows variable relationships across oral language, decoding, phonological awareness, and comprehension (Melby-Lervag & Lervag, 2011). The finding therefore supports a need for language-responsive scaffolding, not the conclusion that a weak mother tongue directly caused weak English.

A multilingual approach can use local languages and Indonesian to support meaning-making while learners develop English. Translanguaging and codemeshing research demonstrates that multilingual resources can be strategically integrated into literacy work rather than excluded as interference (Canagarajah, 2011). In the Kei context, locally grounded stories, bilingual glosses, oral retelling, and gradual movement into English can make literacy tasks more accessible without lowering intellectual expectations.

What the Narrative Lens Adds

Narrative inquiry adds more than vivid quotation. It shows how students connect earlier schooling, present material conditions, emotions, and imagined participation across time (Barkhuizen, 2011, 2014). The analytic proposition developed here is that discontinuous instruction and restricted print-digital access can accumulate into unfamiliarity; when public English tasks then assume prior familiarity, uncertainty may be experienced as fear and silence. This proposition is context-sensitive and transferable through reasoned comparison, not statistically generalizable.

At the same time, the available excerpts are too short and insufficiently linked to individual participants to support full biographical restorying. The article therefore reports cross-narrative storylines and explicitly limits claims. A stronger final manuscript should reconnect excerpts to complete participant narratives, including turning points, responses, supports, and future aspirations.

Pedagogical and Institutional Implications

First, schools and local authorities should prioritize continuity. Where permanent English staffing is difficult, clustered teacher support, scheduled inter-island mentoring, and carefully sequenced offline modules can reduce repeated curricular restarts. Initial diagnostic conversations should establish students' prior exposure without treating unfamiliarity as inability.

Second, literacy provision should pair print and low-bandwidth options. Short English texts based on local people, places, livelihoods, and environmental knowledge can be distributed in printed form and as small downloadable files. Shared devices can support listening and rereading when materials remain usable offline; no essential task should assume personal smartphone ownership or stable connectivity.

Third, teaching should mobilize students' full language repertoires. Oral discussion in a local language or Indonesian, bilingual vocabulary support, visual sequencing, and collaborative retelling can build conceptual access before independent English production. Fourth, participation should be scaffolded through private rehearsal, pair work, choral reading, choice of oral or written response, and brief supported presentations. These structures lower public risk while creating repeated opportunities to speak.

Finally, resource planning should be locality-specific. Schools should document teacher continuity, English holdings, device availability, connectivity by learning space, and student access outside school. The goal is not a technology inventory but a map of whether students can actually complete literacy activities.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study's evidentiary limits are substantial. The source record did not preserve the sample composition, educational level, recruitment process, data-collection schedule, interview language and duration, observation corpus, analytic responsibilities, researcher-participant relationships, or formal ethics information. The six excerpts were not linked to stable participant identifiers, and original-language versions and translation procedures were unavailable. The study also included no independent measure of English reading, writing, speaking, or overall proficiency. Claims are therefore restricted to reported experiences and perceived participation constraints.

Future research should collect longitudinal narratives that connect earlier schooling, current literacy practices, and imagined futures for the same participants. Full narrative interviews could be combined with classroom observations, literacy diaries, reading or writing artifacts, and device-access maps. Comparative cases across islands and educational levels could examine how teacher continuity, multilingual pedagogy, print access, and offline digital support alter participation over time.

CONCLUSION

Students' accounts from the Kei Islands show that English literacy cannot be understood apart from the conditions that make learning possible. Interrupted instruction, scarce English texts, limited device access, difficulty with the language of schooling, and public performance demands were narrated as an accumulating pathway toward unfamiliarity, fear, and silence. The data do not prove that these conditions caused low English proficiency, nor do they justify labeling students as unmotivated or linguistically deficient. They show how access becomes lived experience. A credible response combines continuity of instruction, multilingual and locally meaningful materials, offline

and shared-device provision, and low-risk opportunities to participate. Narrative inquiry makes these relationships visible, but the manuscript must complete its participant, procedural, reflexive, and ethics reporting before submission.

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