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ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN NON-FORMAL SETTINGS: A CASE STUDY OF INDONESIAN CHILDREN IN A SANGGAR BELAJAR IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how children learn English in a non-formal learning setting, specifically in a *sanggar belajar* attended by children of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. The study aims to examine the learning processes, strategies and interactions that support learning, as well as the challenges faced by the students. A qualitative case study design was employed, with data collected through participant observation during a 40-minute teaching session and a semi-structured interview with the *sanggar belajar* teacher. The findings reveal that children learn English through imitation, interaction, active participation, and contextual use of language. Instructional strategies such as repetition, questioning, and simple dialogue practice were found to support students' engagement and learning. However, the learning process is constrained by limited exposure to English, low confidence, varied proficiency levels, and restricted learning resources. These challenges are closely related to the students' marginalized background as children of migrant workers, which affects their access to educational opportunities. The study concludes that English language learning in this context is not only a cognitive process but also a socially situated experience shaped by inequality and access. The findings suggest the need for adaptive teaching strategies, increased language exposure, and greater support for non-formal educational initiatives serving marginalized communities.

Keywords: English Language Learning, Non-formal education, Marginalized children

INTRODUCTION

English has become a crucial global language that plays an important role in education, communication, and access to wider opportunities, making early English learning increasingly emphasized for young learners. Research highlights that early exposure to a foreign language can support cognitive development and improve learners' communicative competence over time (Brown, 2007; Nunan, 2003). However, access to quality English education is not equally distributed, particularly for children living in marginalized or transnational communities, such as those of migrant workers, who often face structural and institutional barriers to formal schooling. Learning English can access better opportunities, such as improved job prospects, enhanced social mobility, and greater social integration, including easier access to services and increased chances in the workplace (Hassan, 2024; Husain & Nehal, 2024; Rudiantoro & Da Silva, 2025). In such contexts, alternative educational spaces, including community-based and informal learning environments, emerge as

important sites where children can continue their learning despite limited resources and support. These informal settings, while lacking the structure of formal education, provide flexible and socially situated opportunities for language learning, allowing children to engage with English in ways that are shaped by their immediate environment and lived experiences (Wenger, 1998).

Non-formal learning refers to educational processes that occur outside formal school systems but are still organized and structured to meet specific learning objectives, often characterized by flexible arrangements, learner-centered interactions, and context-based activities shaped by community needs (Atkinson, 2022; Yasunaga, 2014). In contrast to formal classrooms, non-formal learning environments tend to emphasize participation, social interaction, and experiential learning, which are central to how knowledge is constructed (Wenger, 1998). One example of such an environment is *sanggar belajar*, a community-based learning space that provides educational support for children who may have limited access to formal schooling (Multazam et al., 2025). These spaces are typically organized by volunteers or community members and often operate with minimal resources, mixed-age groups, and varying levels of learner proficiency (Sukaton et al., 2022). Despite these constraints, *sanggar belajar* offer meaningful opportunities for language learning, as children engage in collaborative activities and real-life communication practices that support their understanding and use of English in socially relevant ways.

Indonesian children living in Malaysia, particularly those whose parents are migrant workers, often experience significant challenges in accessing formal education due to legal, economic, and social constraints. In response to these limitations, community-based initiatives such as *sanggar belajar* play a crucial role in providing alternative learning opportunities. One such example is Sanggar Belajar, located in Gombak Utara, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where children of Indonesian migrant workers gather to receive basic education in a non-formal setting. This *sanggar belajar* is part of Non-Formal Education (PNF) under the auspices of the Community Learning Activity Center (PKBM) of the Indonesian Embassy (KBRI) in Kuala Lumpur. These children often come from families employed in low-skilled sectors, which can limit their access to public schooling and educational resources. As a result, *sanggar belajar* become essential spaces not only for academic learning but also for maintaining cultural identity and fostering a sense of community, while supporting children's development, including their ability to learn English in a context shaped by mobility and marginalization.

Several previous studies have examined learning activities in *sanggar belajar* and other non-formal education contexts; however, they tend to focus on different aspects rather than the actual language learning process. For instance, a study conducted in Malang on community service at Sanggar Belajar Cakrawangsa emphasized improving volunteer teachers' English competence and pedagogy through training programs (Sukaton et al., 2022). Similarly, research on non-formal English education in a Master of English course highlighted its role in enhancing students' speaking ability across various educational levels (Danial et al., 2023). Another study in Kuala Lumpur involving Indonesian migrant children in a *sanggar belajar* analyzed factors influencing students' interest in learning English, such as motivation and sociocultural identity (Mustikawati & Syafii, 2025). In addition, a program at PPWNI Klang, Malaysia, concentrated on increasing students' motivation and educational aspirations through structured assistance (Subekti et al., 2023), while a study in Kampung Inggris Kebumen investigated the effectiveness of non-formal education in improving

speaking skills through specific teaching methods (Rahayu, 2020). Although these studies contribute valuable insights into motivation, teaching strategies, and program outcomes, limited research has specifically explored how children learn English within *sanggar belajar* which is a marginalized community, particularly in terms of their learning processes, interactions, and challenges in a non-formal, community-based setting.

This study aims to explore how Indonesian children learn English in a non-formal learning setting, specifically in a *sanggar belajar* environment in Malaysia. It focuses on understanding the processes through which young learners acquire English during community-based instruction, including how they engage with learning activities, interact with peers and teachers, and respond to the given materials. In addition, the study seeks to identify the strategies and forms of interaction that support their language development, as well as the challenges they encounter due to the limitations of the informal context. By examining these aspects, this study intends to provide a deeper insight into English language learning in marginalized and community-driven educational settings, contributing to the broader discussion of language learning beyond formal classrooms. Therefore, based on the background presented above, this study proposes the following research questions:

1. How do children learn English in a *sanggar belajar* (non-formal learning setting)?
2. What strategies and interactions support children's English language learning in this context?
3. What challenges do children face when learning English in a *sanggar belajar*?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study design to explore how Indonesian children learn English in a non-formal learning setting. A case study approach is considered appropriate as it allows an in-depth understanding of language learning processes within a specific and real-life context, particularly in a *sanggar belajar* environment where learning is shaped by social interaction and limited resources.

The research was conducted at Sanggar Belajar, located in Gombak Utara, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The participants of this study were children of Indonesian migrant workers who attended the learning session. They were categorized as young learners with diverse levels of English proficiency, reflecting the typical characteristics of learners in non-formal educational settings.

This study employed participant observation and semi-structured interviews as data collection techniques. The researcher acted as a participant-observer during the teaching session, allowing direct involvement in the learning process while observing students' interactions and responses. In addition, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the *sanggar belajar* teacher to gain further insights into students' learning behaviors, challenges, and the learning context. These methods enabled data triangulation to enhance the credibility of the findings.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis began with organizing and reviewing the observation notes, followed by coding relevant data related to students' learning processes, interactions, and challenges. The codes were then grouped into broader themes, which were interpreted to answer the research questions and to provide a deeper understanding of how English learning occurs in this context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Children's English Language Learning Processes in a Sanggar Belajar

The findings of this study are based on data collected through participant observation during a 40-minute teaching session and a semi-structured interview with the sanggar belajar teacher. As a participant-observer, the researcher was directly involved in the teaching process, which allowed close observation of students' responses, interactions, and engagement during the lesson. The interview data further supported and enriched the observational findings by providing additional insights into students' learning habits and challenges.

The observation revealed that children primarily learned English through imitation and repetition. During the session, the researcher introduced simple question phrases such as "What is your name?" and "How are you?", and students were asked to repeat them several times. Most students followed the pronunciation by listening carefully and repeating both individually and in groups. This pattern was also confirmed by the teacher, who explained that students in the sanggar belajar are generally accustomed to learning through repetition due to their limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

In addition, interaction played a significant role in the learning process. The teaching session involved frequent question-and-answer exchanges between the teacher and students, as well as peer interaction through simple dialogue practice. Students practiced asking and answering questions with their classmates, which created opportunities for meaningful communication. The interview data supported this finding, as the teacher noted that students tend to learn more effectively when they are actively engaged in speaking activities rather than only listening.

The findings also show that active participation and practice contributed to students' learning. Several students volunteered to answer questions or perform short dialogues in front of the class, while others participated when prompted. Through repeated practice, students gradually became more confident in using English expressions. According to the teacher, such participation is important in helping students overcome fear and build confidence, especially in a non-formal learning environment.

Furthermore, the learning process was supported by the use of contextual and meaningful language. The phrases taught during the session were related to everyday communication, such as greetings and self-introduction, making them easier for students to understand and apply. The teacher emphasized in the interview that connecting lessons to students' daily experiences helps them remember and use English more effectively.

However, variations in students' responses were observed during the session. Some students were able to respond quickly and confidently, while others relied on peer support or repeated after the group. A few students appeared shy or hesitant to participate actively. The teacher explained that these differences are common, as students have varying levels of prior exposure to English and different levels of confidence.

The findings show that children learn English through imitation, interaction, active participation, and contextual use within a non-formal setting. This supports previous research on non-formal English education, such as the study conducted in Kampung Inggris Kebumen, which found that language acquisition is facilitated through repeated exposure and communicative practice, particularly in speaking activities (Rahayu, 2020). However, while that study emphasized structured methods such as the Direct Method and Audio-

Lingual Method, the present study reveals that learning in a sanggar belajar occurs in a more flexible and socially driven manner, without reliance on formalized teaching approaches. In addition, unlike the study on non-formal English courses aimed at improving speaking ability across educational levels, this study highlights the spontaneous and interaction-based nature of learning among young learners in a marginalized setting. Therefore, this study extends previous findings by demonstrating that language learning in sanggar belajar is not only shaped by instructional techniques but also by social interaction and contextual relevance.

The conclusion is children in the sanggar belajar learn English through a combination of imitation, interaction, active participation, and contextual use. The integration of observation and interview data highlights that the non-formal and socially interactive environment plays a crucial role in shaping how students engage with and learn the English language.

Strategies and Interactions Supporting Children's English Language Learning in a Sanggar Belajar

The findings related to the second research question reveal that several instructional strategies and interaction patterns supported children's English language learning in the sanggar belajar. Based on participant observation and the semi-structured interview with the teacher, the learning process was facilitated through simple, interactive, and student-centered approaches that suited the non-formal context.

One of the main strategies observed was the use of repetition and modeling. The teacher introduced English phrases by clearly modeling pronunciation and asking students to repeat them multiple times. This strategy helped students become familiar with the sound and structure of the language. The teacher confirmed in the interview that repetition is commonly used because students have limited exposure to English, making it necessary to reinforce learning through repeated practice.

Another important strategy was the use of questioning techniques. The teacher actively engaged students by asking simple and direct questions, such as "What is your name?" and "How are you?", encouraging them to respond using the target language. This approach created opportunities for students to practice speaking in a guided manner. The teacher explained that questioning helps check students' understanding while also encouraging them to use English actively.

In terms of interaction, both teacher-student and student-student interactions played a significant role. Teacher-student interaction was evident in guided exchanges where the teacher prompted and supported students' responses. Meanwhile, student-student interaction occurred when learners practiced dialogues with their peers. These peer interactions allowed students to learn collaboratively and support each other, especially for those who were less confident. The teacher noted that peer practice is effective in making students feel more comfortable and less anxious when using English.

Additionally, the use of simple and contextualized materials supported the learning process. The lesson focused on everyday expressions that were relevant to students' lives, making it easier for them to understand and apply the language. Although the learning resources were limited, the teacher maximized the use of oral activities and direct interaction to maintain students' engagement.

Furthermore, the learning environment itself contributed to the effectiveness of these strategies. The non-formal setting created a relaxed and less pressured atmosphere, which

encouraged students to participate more freely. The teacher highlighted that creating a supportive and enjoyable environment is essential for maintaining students' motivation and involvement in learning activities.

The strategies identified in this study, including repetition, questioning, and interactive dialogue, are consistent with findings from previous studies that emphasize the importance of active engagement in language learning. For example, the study on community service at Sanggar Belajar Cakrawangsa focused on improving teachers' pedagogical competence, highlighting the role of effective teaching strategies in supporting student learning (Sukaton et al., 2022). While that study centered on teacher development, the present study provides a complementary perspective by showing how such strategies are implemented in practice and how they directly influence students' engagement. Furthermore, the use of interactive and supportive learning environments aligns with the findings from the PPWNI Klang program, which demonstrated that interactive activities and collaborative learning can enhance student motivation and participation (Subekti et al., 2023). However, this study goes beyond motivation by illustrating how these strategies and interactions specifically facilitate language learning processes, particularly in enabling students to practice and use English in meaningful ways within a non-formal context.

The findings indicate that children's English language learning in the sanggar belajar is supported by a combination of repetition, questioning, interactive practices, and a supportive learning environment. These strategies and interactions work together to facilitate students' engagement and help them develop basic English communication skills in a non-formal context.

Challenges Faced by Children in Learning English in a Sanggar Belajar

The findings indicate that the challenges experienced by children in learning English in the sanggar belajar are closely connected to their position as part of a marginalized migrant community. Based on participant observation and the semi-structured interview with the teacher, these challenges are not only pedagogical but also shaped by broader social and structural conditions, including limited access to formal education, restricted exposure to English, and socio-economic constraints.

One of the most significant challenges is students' limited exposure to English, which is strongly influenced by their social environment. During the observation, many students struggled to understand and respond to simple English questions without repeated modeling and guidance. This reliance on imitation suggests that their opportunities to encounter and use English are minimal. The teacher explained that, as children of migrant workers, they rarely have access to English learning outside the sanggar belajar, which limits their language development and retention. This reflects how marginalization can restrict access to linguistic resources and learning opportunities.

Another challenge relates to students' confidence and participation, which are also shaped by their social context. Some students appeared hesitant to speak, avoided direct responses, or relied on group repetition rather than individual answers. This lack of confidence can be linked to limited prior learning experiences and a lack of supportive environments where they can freely practice English. The teacher noted that many students are not accustomed to expressing themselves in English, which affects their willingness to participate actively in learning activities.

In addition, the variation in students' proficiency levels reflects unequal educational backgrounds, a common characteristic of marginalized communities. The observation showed noticeable differences in students' ability to follow instructions and respond to questions, making it challenging to implement a uniform teaching approach. The teacher confirmed that these differences are influenced by inconsistent access to education, as some children may have attended school intermittently while others rely solely on informal learning spaces like the *sanggar belajar*.

Furthermore, the constraints of the non-formal learning environment are closely tied to the marginalized condition of the community. Limited teaching materials, short instructional time, and the absence of a structured curriculum were evident during the session. These limitations are not merely technical issues but are rooted in broader socio-economic factors that affect the availability of educational resources. Despite these challenges, the *sanggar belajar* serves as a crucial space that attempts to bridge the educational gap experienced by these children.

The challenges identified in this study—limited exposure to English, low confidence, varied proficiency levels, and resource constraints—are closely related to the marginalized background of the learners. These findings are in line with the study conducted in a *sanggar belajar* in Kuala Lumpur, which identified internal motivation, external support, and sociocultural identity as key factors influencing students' interest in learning English (Mustikawati & Syafii, 2025). While that study focused on interest, the present study reveals how these factors translate into actual challenges in the learning process, particularly in terms of confidence and participation. In addition, the findings resonate with the study on non-formal English education in Indonesia, which highlighted that limited exposure to English in formal settings can hinder language development (Danial et al., 2023). However, this study extends that argument by showing that, for marginalized migrant children, such limitations are even more pronounced due to restricted access to educational resources and learning opportunities. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by emphasizing that challenges in language learning are not only individual or pedagogical issues but are deeply rooted in broader social and structural inequalities.

In the conclusion is the challenges faced by children in learning English cannot be separated from their marginalized social context. Limited exposure, low confidence, diverse proficiency levels, and resource constraints are all interconnected and shaped by their position as children of migrant workers. This highlights the need to understand language learning not only as a cognitive process but also as a socially situated experience influenced by issues of access, inequality, and marginalization.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that children in a *sanggar belajar* learn English through a combination of imitation, interaction, active participation, and contextual use, which are shaped by the flexible and socially driven nature of the non-formal learning environment. The findings also show that simple and interactive teaching strategies, such as repetition and questioning, play an important role in supporting students' engagement and participation. However, the learning process is influenced by several challenges, including limited exposure to English, low confidence, varied proficiency levels, and restricted learning resources. These challenges are closely related to the students' marginalized background as children of

Indonesian migrant workers, which affects their access to consistent and quality educational opportunities.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that educators and volunteers in *sanggar belajar* adopt more adaptive and interactive teaching strategies that accommodate mixed-ability learners and encourage active participation. Providing more frequent exposure to English through regular practice and communicative activities may also help improve students' confidence and language development. Additionally, support from communities and relevant stakeholders is needed to enhance learning facilities and provide sustainable educational programs for marginalized children. Future research is suggested to explore longer-term learning processes or to involve more participants in order to gain a broader understanding of English language learning in similar non-formal and marginalized contexts.

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