



TELLING THEIR STORIES: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO RURAL STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of rural students in learning English through a narrative inquiry approach. Although national initiatives aim to improve English proficiency, rural learners in Indonesia still face persistent barriers that hinder equitable access to language education. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and reflective journals involving selected secondary school students from rural areas. Findings indicate two key challenges: limited access to learning resources and a lack of socioeconomic and family support. Students reported inadequate materials, restricted technological access, and minimal parental involvement. Despite these difficulties, many participants demonstrated agentic behaviors, forming peer groups, using mobile apps, and interacting with English content via social media to enhance their language learning. These strategies reflect their resilience and proactive engagement. The study highlights the importance of providing holistic, context-sensitive educational support for rural learners. By amplifying student voices, it offers insights for educators and policymakers to design inclusive and empowering English learning environments that respond to the unique challenges of rural contexts

INTRODUCTION

English as a global lingua franca plays an essential role in providing access to information, knowledge, and job opportunities across various sectors (Richards, 2015). In Indonesia, English has become an integral part of the national education curriculum. However, there remains a significant disparity in English education quality between urban and rural areas (Stroupe, 2024).

Students in rural Indonesia face multidimensional challenges in learning English. Limited educational resources, a shortage of qualified teachers, inadequate learning facilities, and socio-cultural barriers all contribute to the low proficiency levels among rural students (Sugianto, 2021; Mambu & Kurniawan, 2023). Moreover, the lack of authentic exposure to the English language in daily life leaves rural students feeling isolated from real-world language use (Andewi & Putri, 2025).

Although technology could offer solutions through online and blended learning models, studies by Sugianto (2021) show that implementing blended learning in rural schools faces significant technical barriers, such as unstable internet connections and low digital literacy among both teachers and students. Furthermore, local social and cultural contexts influence students' attitudes toward English. Research by Mambu and Kurniawan (2023) found that some students in West Kalimantan perceive English as a language that feels "distant" from their identities, leading to resistance or a lack of motivation to engage in learning. This highlights the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of how students' language learning experiences are shaped by their personal narratives and sociocultural contexts.

Research Gap

Most existing studies have primarily focused on teachers' perspectives or adopted quantitative approaches that tend to generalize findings (Wijayanti & Sulisty, 2022). However, few studies have explored the subjective experiences of rural students through narrative inquiry in the field of English language education in Indonesia. Understanding students' stories and personal experiences is crucial for designing more contextual and meaningful learning interventions. Narrative inquiry allows researchers to examine how students make sense of the challenges they face and the coping strategies they develop during their language learning journeys. For example, Andewi and Putri (2025) used narrative inquiry to explore urban students' experiences of using English outside the classroom. Their findings revealed that real-life use of English helped enhance students' confidence and communication skills. However, similar studies have not been widely conducted in rural contexts, where structural and cultural challenges present different dynamics.

Research Aims

This study aims to explore the English language learning experiences of high school students in rural Indonesia through a narrative inquiry approach. By examining students' personal stories, this research seeks to uncover the challenges they face, the dynamics of their learning motivation, and the coping strategies they develop in response to limited resources and socio-cultural barriers.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the development of educational policies that are more sensitive to the needs of rural students, as well as to promote inclusive and context-based practices in English language teaching. Additionally, this research seeks to enrich the body of literature on narrative inquiry in the field of ELT in Indonesia.

Gaps in Studies Focusing on Rural Students' Narratives

The following summary highlights key limitations in existing research:

Study Focus	Topic & Method	Limitation
Sugianto (2021)	Rural teacher, Blended learning, Narrative inquiry.	Teacher-focused, not student-focused.
Mambu & Kurniawan (2023)	Students from underdeveloped regions, Critical narrative inquiry.	Geographically limited, not senior high school.
Wardah & Triyoga (2024)	Urban university students. Digital storytelling.	Urban context and higher education.
Andewi & Putri (2025)	Urban university students. English use outside the classroom.	Not contextualized for rural areas, Similar methodology.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore the lived experiences of rural high school students learning English. Narrative inquiry is ideal for understanding how individuals construct meaning within their

sociocultural contexts, enabling deep exploration of personal stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Xu & Connelly, 2010). It foregrounds temporality (story over time), sociality (relationship and context), and place (location), all essential in interpreting rural students' experiences. According to Puspitasari (2024), narrative inquiry requires ongoing collaboration between the researcher and participants, fostering reflective and relational meaning-making.

Narrative inquiry allows the researcher to capture students' voices and experiences as storied lives (Clandinin, 2018). For rural students, whose challenges often remain underrepresented in mainstream educational research, narrative inquiry provides a methodological space where their personal histories, emotions, and identities can be expressed. Unlike experimental or large-scale survey approaches, narrative inquiry honors the complexity of individual experiences within the constraints and affordances of their local contexts (Mambu & Kurniawan, 2023). As such, this approach is particularly well-suited to revealing how rural learners negotiate structural disadvantages while cultivating resilience and agency.

Narrative inquiry supports an ethically responsive and relational approach to data collection and interpretation. The process is inherently collaborative; the researcher does not extract data from participants but co-constructs stories with them over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This dialogic engagement fosters mutual trust, essential when working with students in vulnerable educational contexts, such as those in remote rural areas. Through this design, the researcher not only documents language learning challenges but also helps participants reflect on and reframe their experiences, contributing to their own meaning-making processes and potentially enhancing their educational agency (Xu & Connelly, 2010; Puspitasari, 2024).

Participants

Participants are selected through purposive sampling to ensure richness and relevance. The criteria include:

- students in grades 10–12 at a rural East Java high school,
- actively engaged in English classes,
- willing to share detailed personal narratives.

A total of 6–8 students is chosen to balance narrative richness and manageability. Similar sample sizes were successfully used by Sugianto (2021)

and Ainussamsi et al. (2021). Diversity within the sample gender, English proficiency, socioeconomic background will be sought to capture multiple perspectives and enrich the data.

Purposive sampling is particularly appropriate for narrative inquiry because it emphasizes information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). The goal is not to generalize findings statistically, but to provide deep insight into the experiences of those most capable of illuminating the phenomenon under study. In the context of this research, students who are motivated to tell their stories and reflect meaningfully on their English learning journeys are prioritized, as they can offer nuanced accounts of the challenges and opportunities within rural educational settings.

Additionally, the decision to focus on senior high school students stems from the developmental appropriateness of this age group for reflective storytelling.

Data Collection

To ensure data triangulation and trustworthiness, three complementary methods are employed: semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and classroom observations.

1. Semi-structured interviews (60–90 minutes each) serve as the primary method for collecting rich, detailed narratives. The interviews use open-ended questions and narrative prompts such as “Tell me about your experiences learning English in your village” to encourage participants to share their stories freely. This flexible format allows the researcher to probe deeper into emergent themes and follow participants’ storytelling flow, which is crucial for capturing the nuances of their lived experiences (Ainussamsi et al., 2021). Audio recordings ensure data accuracy, and field notes document non-verbal cues and contextual details, enriching the interpretative process.

2. Reflective journals are collected weekly over a 4 to 6-week period, providing participants space to reflect independently on their ongoing English learning experiences. This method captures temporal changes in emotions, attitudes, and challenges, supporting the narrative inquiry’s emphasis on temporality (Xu & Connelly, 2010). Journals empower participants as co-constructors of knowledge, offering spontaneous insights beyond the interview setting. Feedback from the researcher on journal entries fosters ongoing dialogue, which deepens the reflective process (Wardah & Triyoga, 2024).

3. Classroom observations involve four 60-minute sessions, audio-recorded and supplemented by detailed notes on interaction patterns, instructional methods, and participant engagement. Observations contextualize narrative data, allowing the researcher to witness firsthand the teaching-learning environment and social dynamics shaping rural students' English learning. This helps triangulate participants' subjective accounts with observable behaviors, enhancing data credibility (Sugianto, 2021).

The extended data collection period also builds rapport between the researcher and participants, facilitating openness and honesty in storytelling. Repeated interactions enable participants to revisit and elaborate on their narratives, resulting in richer, more reflective data. This iterative process aligns with the relational and temporal dimensions of narrative inquiry, highlighting how stories evolve over time and in response to ongoing reflection (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Puspitasari, 2024).

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study follows a rigorous and iterative process designed to preserve the narrative integrity of participants' stories while identifying common themes. Initially, all interview and observation recordings are transcribed verbatim to capture participants' exact words, pauses, and emotions. This transcription process is crucial in narrative inquiry, as every nuance may carry significant meaning (Polkinghorne, 1995). The researcher then engages in narrative smoothing or restorying, reorganizing raw data into coherent, chronological stories that reflect participants' experiences holistically (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This step maintains the narrative's temporal flow, emphasizing how experiences develop over time.

These are rooted in qualitative standards articulated by Lincoln & Guba (1985) and demonstrated in contemporary narrative inquiry studies in Indonesian contexts.

Component	Key Features
Design	Qualitative narrative inquiry (focus: temporality, sociality, place)
Participants	6–8 purposively chosen rural high school students, Diverse backgrounds, Voices captured in-depth.

Data Collection	Semi-structured interviews, Reflective journals. Classroom observations (Triangulation enhances narrative richness).
Analysis	Transcription → smoothing → thematic coding → restorying → cross-case analysis; member checking & audit trail ensure rigor.
Ethics	Informed consent, Confidentiality, Voluntary participation, and Secure data storage.
Trustworthiness	Credibility, dependability, and confirmability were demonstrated via prolonged engagement, audit trail, Flexible practices, and thick description.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Limited Access to Learning Resources

Limited access to learning resources remains one of the most pressing challenges encountered by rural students in their English language learning journey. From the participants' stories, it became clear that many rural schools still struggle with a shortage of basic educational materials—ranging from essential textbooks to audio-visual aids and current learning content that are often easily found in urban settings. This lack of resources does more than just hinder the learning process; it isolates students from the wider linguistic environment they are trying to access. As Nurhasanah et al. (2019) note, disparities in resource availability between rural and urban schools significantly affect the overall quality of education and, consequently, students' language acquisition outcomes.

Students in these areas are often left with outdated or minimal materials, limiting their exposure to authentic English language input. This limited exposure can directly impact their ability to develop listening, reading, and speaking skills in meaningful ways. In many cases, students expressed frustration over the monotony of their learning experience, describing it as repetitive and disconnected from real-world language use. In addition to the lack of printed materials, technological infrastructure or the lack thereof presents an even deeper divide. Many participants shared experiences of having limited or no access to digital devices such as smartphones, computers, or stable internet

connections. In today's learning landscape, these tools are no longer optional; they are integral. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this gap was felt even more strongly. While some students transitioned to online platforms, many rural learners were left behind, unable to attend virtual classes or access online learning resources (Sari & Nugroho, 2021). This digital exclusion not only limited their access to rich English content but also deprived them of opportunities for independent learning and interaction with English language communities outside their immediate surroundings.

The consequences of this resource scarcity go further than academic limitations they also deeply influence student motivation and emotional engagement. Without access to varied and stimulating materials, learning English can begin to feel like a routine obligation rather than an engaging process. As observed by Wardah and Triyoga (2024), learners who are repeatedly exposed to the same limited content may begin to feel demotivated and lose confidence in their language abilities. This cycle, where limited resources lead to disinterest, reducing effort and achievement, can be difficult to break.

Institutional and technological barriers are only part of the story; students' home environments and family situations equally shape how they experience English learning.

Socioeconomic and Family Support Challenges

Socioeconomic status significantly influences rural students' ability to learn English effectively. Many participants narrated how financial limitations restricted their access to additional learning supports such as private tutoring, English courses, or even basic school supplies like notebooks and dictionaries. This lack of economic resources creates disparities in educational opportunities, as wealthier urban students can afford supplementary learning aids that enhance language acquisition (Lestari & Wahyudi, 2020). The inability to invest in such supports often results in rural students falling behind their peers in mastering English skills, further widening the achievement gap.

Aside from financial constraints, family support—or the absence of it—plays a pivotal role in shaping students' English learning experiences. Some participants described receiving little encouragement or practical help with English homework at home, often because their family members also had limited

education or English proficiency (Putra & Dewi, 2022). Without a supportive linguistic environment at home, students may struggle with confidence and miss out on valuable opportunities to practice the language outside of school. On the other hand, those whose families valued education and actively encouraged their learning tended to demonstrate greater motivation and resilience, underscoring the powerful influence of familial attitudes on student success.

Adding to this complexity, many rural families place higher importance on immediate economic survival than on long-term educational goals. Several students shared experiences of being expected to help with household responsibilities or agricultural labor, which left them with limited time and energy to focus on their studies (Wardah & Triyoga, 2024). These practical demands often interfere with regular language practice and contribute to physical and mental fatigue, ultimately slowing their learning progress. Such realities highlight the need to approach English education in rural areas with sensitivity to students' daily obligations and home environments.

Reconnecting Findings with Previous Narratives and Implications

The findings support and extend existing literature on rural language education challenges in Indonesia. Similar to Nurhasanah et al. (2019) and Sari & Nugroho (2021), this study confirms that resource scarcity and socioeconomic factors are key barriers. However, the narrative approach enriches understanding by highlighting the lived emotional and psychological impacts often overlooked in quantitative studies.

For educational practitioners, the findings underscore the necessity of context-sensitive interventions that address both material and affective needs. Policy-makers should consider improving infrastructure and providing financial assistance to rural learners, while teachers should be trained in affective pedagogies to foster supportive classroom climates.

These findings demonstrate the value of narrative inquiry in capturing the nuanced realities of rural students' English learning, offering rich insights that might otherwise remain invisible in more traditional studies.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study explored the lived experiences of rural students in learning English through a narrative inquiry approach, uncovering a rich tapestry of

challenges and coping strategies. The findings highlight that limited access to learning resources and socioeconomic constraints, including lack of family support, significantly shape the English learning journeys of rural students. These factors, often intertwined, create systemic obstacles that not only hinder language acquisition but also impact students' motivation, confidence, and future aspirations.

At the same time, the research reveals an encouraging picture of student resilience and agency. Despite facing considerable constraints, many rural students exhibit a strong determination to learn English by developing creative coping strategies, fostering self-directed learning habits, and building supportive peer networks. Their proactive engagement reflects the importance of promoting agentic learning environments, where students are empowered to take ownership of their educational experiences (Reeve, 2013). Such resilience, though remarkable, should not be viewed as a substitute for systemic support; rather, it underscores the need for targeted interventions that recognize and amplify students' strengths while addressing the structural inequities they face.

The study also reinforces the importance of creating supportive, low-anxiety classroom environments, as emotional and psychological barriers emerged as significant inhibitors of language learning. Teachers play a crucial role in this process by fostering positive relationships, encouraging linguistic risk-taking, and promoting a growth mindset. Equally important is the involvement of families and local communities in supporting language learning, particularly in rural contexts where school resources are often insufficient.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that improving infrastructure, expanding access to digital resources, and providing teacher training in affective pedagogies are critical steps toward enhancing English learning outcomes in rural areas. Moreover, community-based initiatives and cross-sector partnerships can play a valuable role in bridging resource gaps and fostering inclusive learning environments.

In conclusion, while rural students face a complex array of challenges in learning English, their stories also reflect remarkable resilience and potential. By listening to these narratives and responding with informed, empathetic interventions, educators, policy-makers, and community stakeholders can

contribute to a more equitable and empowering language learning landscape for rural learners across Indonesia and beyond.

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