English Language Acquisition Challenges and Opportunities in Junior High Schools in Lampung, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the language learning factors: challenges and opportunities in the acquisition of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) among junior high school learners in Lampung, Indonesia. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, it involved 120 eighth-grade students from three public schools and utilized proficiency assessments, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews with students and teachers. Quantitative results indicated moderate proficiency, with significant weaknesses in speaking fluency and listening comprehension. Meanwhile, qualitative data revealed that grammar-focused instruction, limited English exposure, and learner anxiety were key obstacles to effective acquisition. Thematic analysis identified three major issues: the predominance of traditional teaching methods, low student confidence in communicative tasks, and limited engagement with English-language media. These findings underscore the need for more communicative and enriching classroom practices and learner-centered approaches. The study offers context-specific pedagogical recommendations and highlights directions for future research in similar EFL settings.

INTRODUCTION

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) plays a vital role in Indonesia's national education system, particularly at the junior high school level. As globalization continues to influence economic, academic, and technological domains, the ability to use English effectively has become increasingly important for students. It is not only essential for academic achievement and future employment but also necessary for engaging with digital content and international communication platforms. Consequently, research has emphasized the growing importance of English proficiency among young learners, especially in low-resource contexts where access to global knowledge is expanding (Kukulska-Hulme, Giri, Dawadi, Devkota, & Gaved, 2023; Kumar, 2023).

To respond to this demand, the Indonesian government has introduced several curriculum reforms, including the Kurikulum Merdeka. This policy encourages more flexible, student-centered learning and promotes the development of communicative competence. However, the implementation of such reforms remains uneven across the country. Although urban schools may have greater access to training and resources, many semi-urban and rural schools still rely on conventional instructional practices. As a result, there is a persistent gap between curriculum expectations and classroom realities (Lestari, Sudarwati, & Astuti, 2021; Sulistiyo, 2016).

In particular, Lampung Province provides a meaningful context for exploring these issues. The province, located in southern Sumatra, is characterized by linguistic diversity, with Bahasa Indonesia and local dialects serving as the primary means of communication. In this environment, English is rarely used outside of formal classroom settings. Therefore, students often perceive English as merely a school subject rather than a practical communication tool. Moreover, classroom instruction in this region is still largely influenced by the grammar-translation method, which prioritizes structural accuracy and translation exercises over interactive language use. Consequently, while students may perform adequately on written assessments, they frequently encounter difficulties in developing oral fluency and listening comprehension (Sulistiyo, 2016; Astuti, 2021).

To understand the challenges of language learning in such contexts, it is important to consider the theoretical perspectives that guide second language acquisition. For instance, Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) suggests that learners acquire language when they are exposed to input that is slightly above their current level of competence. In addition, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) emphasizes the role of social interaction and scaffolding in facilitating cognitive development, including language learning. Furthermore, Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996) highlights the benefits of negotiated meaning during communication, while Swain's

Output Hypothesis (1985) stresses that producing language through speaking and writing allows learners to identify and address their linguistic gaps. Collectively, these theories underscore that effective language learning is supported by meaningful input, interaction, and opportunities for output in authentic contexts.

In addition to instructional factors, learner-related variables also influence English language acquisition. Recent studies in Indonesia have found that the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) under the *Kurikulum Merdeka* has improved student engagement in some settings. However, this improvement often depends on the availability of trained teachers and supportive classroom environments (Ramadhani, Nidi, & Zahra, 2024). Furthermore, affective factors such as speaking anxiety, emotional regulation, gender, and self-regulated learning strategies play a significant role in shaping student performance, especially in oral communication tasks (Apridayani, Han, & Waluyo, 2023; Marpaung & Fithriani, 2023). These findings suggest that language acquisition must be viewed as a multifaceted process influenced by both external instructional conditions and internal psychological factors.

Given this background, the present study seeks to examine how junior high school students in Lampung acquire English and what factors affect their learning process. The study aims to explore not only students' current proficiency levels but also the instructional practices of their teachers and the learners' own perceptions of their English learning experience. By adopting a mixed-methods approach and drawing on both theoretical and empirical insights, this research provides a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities faced by EFL learners in regional Indonesian contexts. Furthermore, it offers practical implications for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to improve the quality of English language education in similar settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition

Research on second language acquisition (SLA) has consistently emphasized the dynamic relationship among input, interaction, and output in the development of linguistic competence. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) explains that language acquisition takes place when learners are exposed to comprehensible input that is slightly above their current level of proficiency (i plus one). However, many classroom environments do not provide this kind of input, especially when instruction concentrates more on grammar exercises than on meaningful communication (Richards and Rodgers, 2014).

In addition, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) emphasizes that social interaction and guided support, often referred to as scaffolding, are essential for the development of higher mental functions, including language. Within classroom settings, peer dialogue and collaborative learning create valuable opportunities for

learners to internalize new language structures. Furthermore, Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996) suggests that when learners participate in meaningful communication and negotiate meaning in real time, they become more capable of recognizing linguistic gaps and making self-corrections.

Moreover, Swain's Output Hypothesis (1985) extends the framework by highlighting the critical role of language production. According to Swain, speaking and writing function not only as results of learning but also as important processes for cognitive and linguistic development. Through producing language, learners can test their assumptions, identify errors, and refine their grammar and vocabulary more effectively. More recently, developments in second language acquisition theory have highlighted the increasing role of digital media in language learning. For instance, Shadiev, Hwang, and Huang (2017) reviewed studies showing that online resources such as video platforms, language learning applications, and digital games offer meaningful exposure to authentic language, particularly for students in areas with limited educational resources. These tools also foster learner independence and facilitate interaction outside of the traditional classroom setting.

National and Regional Contexts in EFL Learning

At the national level, empirical studies in Indonesia have consistently pointed to structural and pedagogical challenges in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, especially at the junior high school level. For instance, Sulistiyo (2016) observed that although students often perform well on grammar-based assessments, they continue to struggle with communicative language use. Similarly, Astuti (2021) reported that students in Central Java demonstrated low oral fluency and limited listening comprehension, even after several years of formal English education. These issues are largely attributed to oversized classrooms, limited instructional time, and insufficient teaching resources, all of which hinder teachers' ability to adopt communicative teaching strategies effectively.

Furthermore, previous studies by Poedjiastutie, Akhyar, Hidayati, and Gasmi (2018) as well as Alwasilah (2013) identified a persistent gap between curriculum objectives and actual classroom practices. While national education reforms have emphasized the importance of communicative competence, outdated instructional models continue to dominate due to limited opportunities for professional development and systemic resistance to change. These challenges are especially evident in semi-urban and rural schools, where students have minimal access to authentic English input and real-life exposure to the language. Nevertheless, many schools in regions such as Lampung continue to face significant barriers due to inadequate infrastructure, exam-focused instruction, and predominantly teacher-centered approaches. These structural limitations hinder the effective incorporation of communicative and digital learning tools into classroom practices, thereby reducing students' opportunities to develop language skills in a comprehensive and integrated manner.

Factors Affecting EFL Acquisition

Drawing on both theoretical perspectives and empirical studies, it is evident that EFL acquisition is shaped by a range of interrelated factors. One of the most critical is instructional methodology; grammar-oriented teaching often limits students' opportunities to engage in authentic and meaningful language use (Brown & Lee, 2015). Moreover, affective variables such as anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation significantly influence students' willingness to participate in communication (Dörnyei, 2014; Horwitz, 2020). Recent research further confirms that speaking anxiety and low self-efficacy remain ongoing challenges for Indonesian junior high school learners (Marpaung & Fithriani, 2023).

Language input also plays a critical role in second language development. Renandya (2013) and Richards and Rodgers (2014) emphasize that learners need frequent and sustained exposure to authentic English, both in formal educational settings and through informal interactions. However, in many semi-rural areas, such opportunities are limited. English is rarely spoken outside the classroom, and teachers often do not consistently model English during instruction. In addition, sociocultural factors such as the dominant use of Bahasa Indonesia and regional dialects further reduce students' access to English in their home and community environments (Aziz, Yusuf, and Menalisa, 2020). Although numerous studies have investigated EFL learning in urban or higher education contexts, relatively little attention has been given to junior high school students in semi-urban areas such as Lampung. Furthermore, much of the existing literature tends to focus on test outcomes or instructional barriers, often overlooking learners' perspectives and actual classroom practices. There is also a noticeable lack of mixed-method research that can holistically examine both the cognitive and sociocultural aspects of language acquisition.

To address these gaps, this study integrates proficiency assessments, classroom observations, and interviews with both teachers and students. Grounded in contemporary second language acquisition theories, it seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how junior high school learners in regional Indonesia acquire English. It examines how instructional practices, contextual factors, and learner-related variables collectively influence the language learning process.

METHOD

Design and Samples

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023) to investigate English language acquisition among junior high school students in Lampung, Indonesia. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, the research aimed to capture a comprehensive view of learner proficiency, instructional strategies, and the broader contextual learning setting. The study was

conducted in three public junior high schools located in Bandar Lampung and its surrounding suburban areas. These schools were selected based on their accessibility, administrative approval, and their representativeness of typical semi-urban educational settings in Indonesia. A total of 120 eighth-grade students (aged 13–14) participated in the quantitative phase. For the qualitative component, six English teachers and 15 students (five from each school) were chosen through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) to reflect diverse achievement levels and classroom engagement. All student participants had received at least four years of formal English instruction. Ethical clearance was obtained from school authorities before data collection, and written consent was secured from principals, teachers, students, and their parents.

Instrument and Procedure

To ensure comprehensive data collection, the study utilized three primary instruments: a language proficiency test, structured classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. The language proficiency test was adapted from the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) and contextualized to align with the sociolinguistic environment of Indonesian junior high school learners. It assessed five key skill areas: grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, listening, and basic writing. The test consisted of 60 multiple-choice items and was administered in a paper-based format within a 60-minute timeframe. To enhance accessibility, localized vocabulary and culturally relevant content were integrated, and instructions were provided in Bahasa Indonesia. Content validity was confirmed through expert review by two TEFL specialists, while a pilot study involving 30 students from a comparable school context yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81, indicating high internal consistency.

To enhance interpretability, test scores were mapped onto CEFR-aligned proficiency levels, ranging from Pre-Beginner (Below A1) to Advanced (B2). This classification enabled a more nuanced understanding of students' relative competencies and instructional needs.

Table 1. Proficiency Level Classification Based on OPT Score

Score Range	Proficiency Level	CEFR Equivalent	Indicator
85–100	Advanced	B2	Understands extended discourse, expresses abstract ideas, and participates in academic discussions.
70–84	Upper-Intermediate	B1+	Handles communication in familiar settings, describes experiences, and comprehends complex instructions.
55–69	Intermediate	B1	Manages routine tasks, understands main ideas in familiar contexts, and expresses opinions with support.

Score Range	Proficiency Level	CEFR Equivalent	Indicator
40–54	Elementary	A2	Understands frequently used expressions, engages in simple exchanges, and responds to direct questions.
25–39	Beginner	A1	Recognizes and uses basic expressions for immediate needs and simple personal information.
Below 25	Pre-Beginner / Novice	Below A1	Possesses minimal language ability and requires foundational language support.

Source: Adapted from CEFR descriptors and Oxford Placement Test guidelines

In addition to the proficiency test, classroom observations were conducted during three English lessons (each lasting approximately 40 minutes) at each participating school. A structured observation rubric was employed to capture key elements such as instructional strategies, teacher–student interactions, use of the target language, learner engagement, and the presence of communicative activities. The rubric was developed based on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles (Richards & Rodgers, 2014) and was validated through peer review by two experienced English language teaching (ELT) practitioners. Observational data were systematically recorded and supplemented with reflective notes written by the researcher following each session.

Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both teachers and students to gain deeper insights into classroom practices, language learning experiences, and affective dimensions such as anxiety and motivation. All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and later transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Teacher interviews focused on curriculum implementation, perceived challenges in applying communicative teaching methods, and access to instructional resources. Student interviews explored individual learning strategies, self-confidence in using English, and exposure to the language outside the school environment.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the language proficiency test were first analyzed using descriptive statistics to examine overall performance trends. This included calculating the mean scores, standard deviations, and the percentage of students falling within specific proficiency bands across each language skill. To explore potential group differences, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether proficiency scores varied significantly by school or gender. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 26.

Qualitative data, including classroom observation notes and interview transcripts, were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2023) six-phase approach. The analysis began with familiarization and open coding, followed by axial coding to identify relationships among data categories. From this process, three key themes emerged: (1) the availability of language input, (2) affective factors affecting student participation, and (3) instructional practices that shape language use. To improve the credibility of the findings, triangulation was applied by comparing results from the proficiency tests, observations, and interviews. Trustworthiness was further supported through member checking with two teachers, and inter-rater reliability was verified by independently coding 25% of the data, resulting in an agreement rate of 89%.

Despite the strengths of its mixed-methods design, this study had several limitations. The sample was restricted to eighth-grade students from public junior high schools in Lampung, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other educational settings such as private, Islamic, or urban schools. Additionally, although the adapted Oxford Placement Test (OPT) offered a reliable overview of overall proficiency, it did not provide detailed CEFR-aligned results for specific language skills (e.g., separate benchmarks for listening and reading). This limited the precision of diagnostic insights. Nevertheless, the study offers valuable, context-specific perspectives on the challenges and patterns of English language acquisition among young learners in semi-urban Indonesian contexts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the study's integrated findings, combining insights from quantitative test results, classroom observations, and interviews with both students and teachers. The discussion is organized around three key dimensions: learners' English proficiency levels, the instructional and environmental contexts, and learners' perceptions and affective experiences. Each aspect is analyzed through the lens of relevant theoretical frameworks and supported by empirical literature, to draw out meaningful educational implications.

Learners' Proficiency in English

The adapted Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered to 120 eighth-grade students to evaluate their overall English language proficiency. As summarized in Table 1, the results indicate generally low performance across assessed domains, with particularly weak outcomes in listening comprehension and grammar accuracy.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of English Proficiency (N = 120)

No	Skills Area	Mean Score	SD	% Scoring Below 50%
1	Grammar	46.2	11.5	58%
2	Vocabulary	52.4	10.8	39%

3	Reading	56.9	13.2	33%
4	Listening	43.1	14.7	67%
5	Writing (Short Essay)	47.6	12.1	54%
	Overall Score	**49.2**	10.9	**62%**

Only 15% of the students scored above 60%, indicating that most learners demonstrated low to moderate levels of English proficiency. Among the tested skills, listening and grammar posed the greatest challenges, with more than half of the students performing below the expected standard. These outcomes are consistent with earlier studies in Indonesia (Hidayati, 2012; Astuti, 2021), which similarly found that junior high school students often struggle to comprehend spoken English and to use it effectively in real communicative situations. The results suggest that students may not be receiving adequate exposure to meaningful input or sufficient opportunities for active language use in the classroom. Therefore, these findings highlight the importance of adopting more communicative and engaging teaching strategies that support the development of both receptive and productive language skills.

In addition, a one-way ANOVA showed no significant differences in English proficiency among students from the three participating schools ($F(2,117) = 1.87$, $p = .16$). This indicates that students across the schools demonstrated similar levels of English achievement. Although the schools varied in location and administration, teaching methods and learning environments appeared to be relatively consistent. This suggests a common pattern in English instruction in semi-urban areas of Indonesia. From a theoretical perspective, Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) helps explain these findings. When students do not receive sufficient meaningful and comprehensible input, particularly in listening, their ability to acquire the language naturally may be hindered. Swain's Output Hypothesis (1985) also emphasizes that students need frequent opportunities to produce language through speaking and writing. Without these opportunities, their language development may become stagnant. These theories underline the need for teaching practices that offer both rich input and meaningful output to support effective language learning.

Instructional Practices and Environmental Factors

From the observational data, classroom practices across the three schools revealed a predominantly traditional pedagogical model. Most English classes were teacher-fronted, emphasizing grammatical explanations and translation-based activities. In addition, the use of English was minimal, often limited to textbook readings or isolated phrases. Moreover, Bahasa Indonesia dominated classroom interaction, accounting for approximately 80 percent of teacher-student exchanges. These observations suggest that students are rarely exposed to English as a language of instruction, which may contribute to their limited communicative proficiency.

Moreover, no integration of audiovisual or technological tools was observed in the classrooms, and listening activities were often omitted or substituted with teacher-led narration. These practices indicate a substantial lack of authentic language input and limited opportunities for interactive learning. As a result, the instructional approach observed contrasts sharply with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), both of which emphasize the importance of meaningful dialogue, scaffolding, and social interaction in supporting effective language development.

Additionally, inconsistent curriculum implementation and limited resources were evident across the observed schools. Teachers reported insufficient access to multimedia tools and a lack of professional development in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodologies, echoing concerns highlighted in previous national studies (Sulistiyo, 2016). Consequently, the current instructional environment does not support the essential conditions for effective second language acquisition, as outlined in Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996), which emphasizes the role of meaningful interaction in promoting language development.

Learners' Affective and Sociocultural Dimensions

Complementing the classroom data, student interviews provided deeper insights into their language learning experiences. Learners expressed significant anxiety about speaking English, primarily due to fear of making grammatical errors. This apprehension hindered their willingness to participate in classroom discussions and oral tasks. These findings are in line with Dörnyei's (2014) concept of the affective filter, where emotional barriers obstruct language processing and output. Furthermore, the interviews indicated that students have minimal exposure to English beyond the classroom. English is rarely used at home or in the community. However, some students reported engaging with English through digital platforms, such as YouTube videos and English-subtitled games. These learners often demonstrated better vocabulary retention and more positive attitudes toward English learning. Teachers similarly highlighted motivational challenges and a heavy academic load that prioritizes examination outcomes over communicative competence. Moreover, the sociocultural perception of English as an academic subject rather than a practical communication tool further detaches learners from authentic usage opportunities, limiting their acquisition pathways.

Toward a Contextualized Perspective on EFL Acquisition

Synthesizing the quantitative and qualitative findings reveals a comprehensive yet concerning picture of English language acquisition in semi-urban Indonesian schools. The consistently low performance in listening and oral proficiency is tightly linked to classroom environments that lack authentic input and student interaction. The reliance on traditional, teacher-directed methods, along with systemic issues like insufficient resources and training, constrains the shift toward communicative pedagogy. Simultaneously, students' affective challenges,

particularly anxiety and low confidence, interact with these environmental constraints, compounding their difficulty in acquiring English. Nevertheless, the data also reveal potential entry points for reform. Learners' digital habits and interest in media-based content could serve as informal learning channels that reinforce vocabulary and listening skills.

To address these challenges, a localized strategy is required, one that integrates digital media, reduces affective barriers, and provides teacher support for CLT practices. Such an approach would better align with SLA theories and address the socio-instructional realities of semi-urban contexts like Lampung. In conclusion, EFL acquisition in this setting is shaped not only by instructional practices but also by emotional, technological, and cultural factors. Future interventions must therefore be multifaceted, combining curricular innovation, teacher development, and learner empowerment to create more effective and inclusive language learning environments.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated English language acquisition among junior high school students in Lampung, Indonesia, through a convergent mixed-methods approach. The findings reveal a prevailing pattern of low to moderate proficiency among learners, with pronounced weaknesses in listening comprehension and oral expression. These limitations are linked to an instructional environment dominated by grammatical translation methods, minimal exposure to authentic English input, and affective challenges such as speaking anxiety and low learner confidence. Observational data confirmed the prevalence of teacher-centered pedagogy, a lack of multimodal input, and negligible use of English as a medium of communication. Interviews further highlighted systemic issues, including limited teacher training, constrained instructional time, and inadequate resources, particularly within the semi-urban context. Notably, learners with exposure to English through informal digital platforms demonstrated comparatively stronger vocabulary development and confidence, suggesting the value of incidental learning outside formal instruction.

To address these multidimensional challenges, this study underscores the urgency of pedagogical transformation grounded in second language acquisition theory. Teachers should be supported in adopting input-rich, communicative language teaching approaches that incorporate digital and audiovisual materials accessible in resource-constrained contexts. Activities such as role plays, peer discussions, and media-based storytelling can lower affective barriers and foster learner output in meaningful ways. At the same time, professional development initiatives should be contextually responsive, equipping educators with practical strategies for promoting learner interaction and autonomy within the constraints of large classrooms and exam-driven curricula.

Furthermore, educational stakeholders must ensure greater coherence between curricular policy and classroom practice. National initiatives aimed at fostering communicative competence should be complemented by equitable resource distribution and capacity-building at the school level. Context-sensitive projects that connect classroom learning with learners' digital habits, such as video journals or English content engagement logs, can enhance relevance and motivation. Ultimately, effective language acquisition requires an integrated effort that bridges cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions of learning, supported by responsive teaching practices and enabling institutional structures.

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