Exploring Students' Experiences in Learning English Through English Club Activity at SMK Negeri 7 Pinrang

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Abstract
This study investigated students' experiences in learning English through English Club activities at SMKN 7 Pinrang. It aimed to explore how participation in such extracurricular programs contributed to students' English language development, particularly in speaking skills, and to identify both the benefits and challenges they encountered. By focusing on the English Club, the research sought to highlight the role of interactive, collaborative, and enjoyable learning environments in supporting language proficiency and personal growth. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to capture the participants' lived experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight members of the English Club, classroom observations during regular and special sessions, and document analysis, including the club's syllabus and photographic records of activities. Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns and themes emerging from the data, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. The findings revealed that students experienced increased confidence, improved speaking fluency, and stronger peer relationships through their involvement in English Club activities. Benefits included enhanced vocabulary, creativity, and motivation, while challenges involved schedule conflicts, inconsistent attendance, and occasional drops in enthusiasm. Overall, the study concluded that the English Club played a significant role in fostering students' English language skills while also contributing to their personal development and collaborative learning abilities.

Keywords: Students' experiences, English Club, speaking skills, phenomenology.

INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian government has emphasized the importance of developing 21st-century competencies, with English proficiency recognized as one of the most crucial skills (Kemendikbud, 2021). Under the Kurikulum Merdeka, students are encouraged to become independent learners who are capable of competing in a global environment. One initiative that supports this vision is the integration of extracurricular programs, including English Clubs, into school activities. These programs are reinforced by Permendikbud No. 62 of 2014, which highlights the significance of non-formal education in developing students' potential. English Clubs provide a less rigid and more student-centered environment for practicing English (Madina & Sidabutar, 2024). This informal setting complements classroom instruction by offering students additional opportunities for language exposure.

English Clubs have been widely implemented in schools as platforms to support English communication, particularly speaking skills. Unlike formal lessons that often prioritize grammar and examinations, English Club activities encourage more natural and practical use of the language (Richards, 2015). Through activities such as debates, drama, storytelling, and games, students develop both their linguistic abilities and motivation (Harmer, 2015). These activities not only enhance fluency but also build students' confidence in speaking English in public settings (Seong et al., 2019). Furthermore, they create a social learning atmosphere in which students can learn collaboratively. Consequently, English Clubs are considered effective tools for enhancing communicative competence (Wahyuniati et al., 2020).

Despite their potential benefits, English Clubs are not equally effective in all school contexts. Some schools organize them with clear objectives, structured schedules, and dedicated facilitators, while others lack planning, consistency, or institutional support (Madina & Sidabutar, 2024). This inconsistency often arises from differences in available resources, teacher engagement, and student motivation. In some cases, English Clubs are conducted merely to fulfill administrative requirements, which reduces their educational impact. Such circumstances lead to unequal experiences for students and diminish the role of the club in language learning. Therefore, the success of English Clubs depends heavily on how they are organized, facilitated, and maintained within schools.

This issue becomes more significant in vocational schools where communication skills are essential for students' future professional careers. Vocational students are expected to use English in various contexts such as job interviews, workplace interactions, and customer service (Maming et al., 2024). However, many vocational students do not specialize in English, making them in need of less formal but engaging learning environments. English Clubs can address this gap by providing practical speaking opportunities beyond the curriculum. Through simulations of real-life situations and social learning processes, students acquire relevant and functional language skills (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Hence, the role of English

Clubs in vocational education deserves more attention from both researchers and educators.

From a psychological perspective, English Clubs also offer important benefits for learners. Research by Astari and Hadi (2022) indicates that such clubs reduce speaking anxiety and foster self-confidence through informal learning. Similarly, Seong et al. (2019) emphasize that students gain fluency and vocabulary more effectively in peer-driven and relaxed environments. However, the impact is not uniform across all participants, as some students continue to face challenges such as self-doubt, irregular attendance, and insufficient facilitator support (Lestari & Mahmud, 2020). These obstacles can limit the overall effectiveness of the English Club experience for certain learners. For this reason, further research is needed to investigate the factors that support or hinder student development within this extracurricular context.

Observations conducted at SMKN 7 Pinrang revealed a wide range of English Club activities, including English Camp, scrabble competitions, singing performances, and weekly games. Many students participated actively and demonstrated enthusiasm during group-based activities. Several students also reported that the club helped them gain confidence in speaking while building friendships with peers who shared similar learning interests. Nevertheless, the use of English during these sessions was often inconsistent, as students sometimes switched to Indonesian when facing difficulties. This suggests that while engagement levels were high, challenges in vocabulary and confidence persisted. Such findings reflect both the strengths and limitations of the English Club at SMKN 7 Pinrang.

Although some previous studies have investigated English Club participation, many have primarily focused on student perceptions rather than measurable language outcomes. For example, Badarudin (2024) examined students' emotional and behavioral attitudes toward English Club activities. While these studies provide valuable insights into motivation, they often neglect to address the long-term influence of participation on speaking competence. There remains a gap in understanding the direct relationship between extracurricular engagement and communicative skills. This gap is particularly critical in vocational schools where students require English for functional and professional purposes (Maming et al., 2024). Thus, research should move beyond perception-based approaches and examine students' actual learning experiences.

The absence of such research underscores the need to explore how students experience English language learning through extracurricular programs like English Clubs. Since not all students benefit equally, their personal reflections can highlight which practices are most effective and which challenges persist. A phenomenological approach is especially appropriate for this aim, as it focuses on lived experiences rather than general assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By analyzing students' narratives, researchers can uncover practical insights into successful and less effective aspects of English Club participation. These insights can contribute to

program improvement and the development of more inclusive language learning strategies. As a result, English Club initiatives can be enhanced based on evidence-driven practices rather than assumptions.

This study aims to fill the existing gap by investigating the experiences of English Club participants at SMKN 7 Pinrang through a phenomenological lens. Specifically, it explores how students perceive their progress in speaking, the challenges they encounter, and the factors that support their learning. The research also analyzes the influence of peer interactions, activity types, and facilitator roles on students' language development. Data will be collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis to obtain a comprehensive understanding. The findings are expected to inform teachers, school administrators, and policymakers about the role of extracurricular programs in enhancing speaking skills. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the improvement of English Club programs, particularly in the context of vocational education.

RESEARCH METHOD

Participant

The participants of this study consisted of eight students from SMKN 7 Pinrang who were active members of the English Club. They were selected using purposive sampling, which is commonly applied in qualitative research to ensure that participants meet specific criteria relevant to the study (Patton, 2015). The main consideration was that these students had been involved in English Club activities for at least one semester, so they could share meaningful experiences. The group included both male and female students from different grades to provide a variety of perspectives. This diversity allowed the researcher to capture broader insights into students' challenges and progress in speaking English. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in reporting their responses.

Course Description

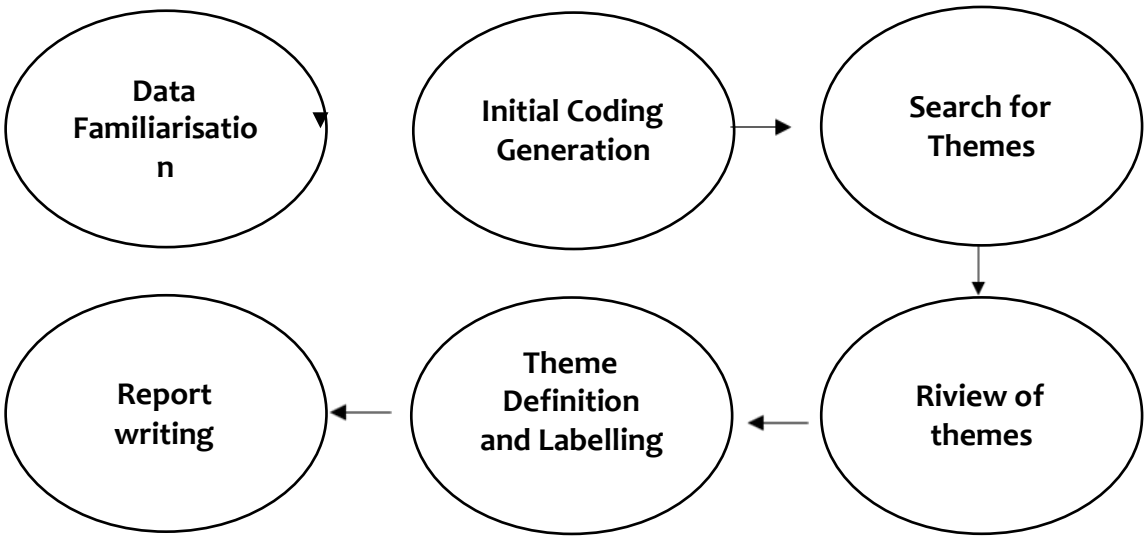
This research employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore students' lived experiences in learning English through English Club activities. Phenomenology was chosen because it focuses on describing and interpreting the meaning of experiences as lived by individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The design enabled the researcher to capture students' reflections, emotions, and personal insights regarding the role of the English Club in their speaking development. Unlike quantitative methods, which emphasize measurement and hypothesis testing, phenomenology seeks to understand meanings deeply rooted in participants' narratives. Through this method, the study aimed to reveal both the benefits and the difficulties that students encountered during English Club participation. Therefore, the phenomenological approach was considered most appropriate to achieve the objectives of this research.

After determining the research design and method, it was necessary to establish the procedures for analyzing the data collected. In qualitative research, data analysis is a critical process that organizes and interprets large amounts of

information obtained from interviews, observations, and documents. This study adopted the thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which is widely used to identify patterns of meaning in qualitative data. The six stages of thematic analysis include data familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, theme reviewing, theme defining, and report writing. These phases ensured that findings were not only systematic but also firmly grounded in participants' actual experiences.

The steps of thematic analysis are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Thematic Analysis



As the initial stage, data familiarization was conducted by repeatedly reading interview transcripts and observation notes to gain an overall understanding. Next, initial codes were generated to highlight relevant parts of the data, such as expressions of increased confidence or speaking anxiety. These codes were then organized into broader candidate themes like "speaking development" or "peer support." In the reviewing phase, overlapping themes were refined, while weak ones were discarded to maintain coherence. Each theme was clearly defined and labeled to capture its meaning in relation to the research objectives. Finally, the findings were reported with participant quotations to strengthen validity and ensure authenticity.

Instruments

The first instrument in this study was the semi-structured interview, which was adapted and modified from Badarudin's (2024) undergraduate thesis that explored English Club members' perceptions at SMA Negeri 2 Palu. Semi-structured interviews were considered appropriate because they allowed the researcher to explore students' lived experiences in depth while still following a guided framework (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Patton, 2015). The interview guide included questions related to students' motivation for joining the club, the activities they participated in, the difficulties they faced, and the progress they perceived in speaking English. Additional probing questions were asked to clarify participants' responses or encourage deeper reflection. With participants' consent, the interviews were

recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. By adapting this instrument from a prior study, the researcher ensured the questions were relevant to the context of English Club activities while being adjusted to the needs of vocational students.

The second instrument was observation, which was adapted from the approach used in Badarudin's (2024) study and guided by the principles of Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018). A non-participant observation method was employed to capture students' natural engagement during English Club activities without influencing their behavior. The observations were conducted during sessions such as debates, games, English Camp, and storytelling, focusing on indicators like confidence, fluency, vocabulary use, peer interaction, and responsiveness to facilitators. Field notes were taken systematically to record both verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication, such as gestures, facial expressions, and group dynamics. This instrument was chosen because it allowed the researcher to directly witness authentic learning processes that might not be fully revealed in interviews. By adapting the observation technique from previous research, this study ensured that the method remained consistent with established practices while contextualized for the setting of SMKN 7 Pinrang.

The third instrument was document analysis, which was adapted from the framework suggested by Denzin and Lincoln (2018) and Creswell (2018). The documents examined included activity schedules, attendance lists, student reflections, and facilitator notes related to the English Club. These records provided essential background on the organization and frequency of activities, student participation patterns, and the institutional support behind the program. For example, attendance records offered insight into students' consistency, while written reflections revealed personal progress and challenges in speaking English. The use of multiple documents ensured that findings from interviews and observations were supported with concrete evidence. By adapting this instrument from qualitative research guidelines, the researcher could strengthen the credibility of the study and achieve triangulation of data sources.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that students' experiences in joining the English Club were influenced by a variety of motivations, both intrinsic and extrinsic. One participant stated, *"I was interested in joining because I wanted to increase my knowledge in English"* (Student 1, Interview, May 2025), showing a strong academic drive. Another emphasized the general importance of mastering foreign languages, saying, *"It would be very useful if we could learn a foreign language"* (Student 2, Interview, May 2025). For others, career preparation was a motivating factor, as one expressed, *"When we apply for a job, if we can speak English, we will definitely be prioritized"* (Student 4, Interview, May 2025). Observations during the recruitment confirmed this enthusiasm, as many students eagerly registered and mentors' documentation showed that promotion activities successfully attracted new members each semester. These results indicate that students' motivation to join was

not only for immediate language learning but also for long-term educational and professional goals.

The activities conducted in the English Club were another crucial aspect that shaped students' learning experiences. Students consistently described how the structured programs, such as speeches, storytelling, Scrabble, and English Camp, allowed them to practice their skills in engaging ways. One student explained, *"We practiced speaking in front of others while being guided by the mentor, and that really helped"* (Student 1, Interview, May 2025). Another added, *"When we played Scrabble, we never knew what words we would come up with, and that increased my vocabulary"* (Student 2, Interview, May 2025). In addition, several participants highlighted how English movies made learning easier, such as one saying, *"It was easier to memorize vocabulary because I could hear and see it in the film"* (Student 5, Interview, May 2025). These accounts align with observations and mentor records, which confirmed that activities were carefully designed to combine practice, entertainment, and systematic learning.

The overall atmosphere of the English Club was also highlighted as fun, enjoyable, and supportive, which created a positive emotional environment for learning. Students often described the meetings as exciting, with one participant saying, *"It was fun, really fun"* (Student 3, Interview, May 2025), while another added, *"It was enjoyable because of the games we played"* (Student 5, Interview, May 2025). A different student highlighted the emotional aspect, stating, *"I felt happy and joyful when joining the activities"* (Student 8, Interview, May 2025). Others emphasized the balance between learning and play, such as one comment, *"It was not just studying, but also playing while learning"* (Student 2, Interview, May 2025). Observations during English Camp confirmed that students were highly enthusiastic, often laughing and actively participating in group tasks. These findings show that the club's enjoyable atmosphere reduced anxiety and fostered confidence, supporting Krashen's (1982) idea that a low affective filter enhances language acquisition.

The role of the mentor was frequently mentioned by students as a central factor in sustaining the English Club's activities. One participant explained, *"Without the mentor, the organization would not be able to run well"* (Student 1, Interview, May 2025), showing the importance of guidance. Another added, *"She gives us advice, discipline, and teaches us what we need"* (Student 4, Interview, May 2025), emphasizing her supportive role. Motivation was also highlighted, as a student said, *"Because she accompanied us, she gave us encouragement and motivation"* (Student 5, Interview, May 2025). Observations confirmed that the mentor prepared syllabi and organized activities each semester, ensuring both structure and consistency. These findings align with Vygotsky's (1978) scaffolding theory, which underscores the importance of teacher support in helping learners progress within their zone of proximal development.

The benefits of English Club participation were strongly reflected in students' improved speaking fluency and confidence. Many participants admitted that their

ability to speak English increased over time, as one explained, *"I can trust myself more to speak in English now"* (Student 2, Interview, May 2025). Another emphasized growth in self-assurance, *"Before, I was not confident at all, but after joining, I became more confident"* (Student 7, Interview, May 2025). Progress was also gradual, as another admitted, *"I am not yet very fluent, but there is improvement"* (Student 1, Interview, May 2025). Observations confirmed that students increasingly used English during debates and storytelling sessions, even though hesitation was still noticeable. These findings support previous research by Rahmawati (2021) and Yanti & Sulistyo (2018), who found that English Clubs enhance students' fluency and confidence by providing authentic opportunities to speak.

Despite these positive outcomes, students also faced several challenges that affected their participation in the club. One student described time management issues, saying, *"It is difficult to manage time between classroom lessons and English Club"* (Student 1, Interview, May 2025). Another expressed similar struggles, *"Sometimes the schedule conflicts with other organizations or activities"* (Student 2, Interview, May 2025). Distance was another barrier, as one explained, *"Transportation is a problem because it is twelve kilometers away"* (Student 3, Interview, May 2025). Observations confirmed that attendance was sometimes inconsistent, particularly when students had overlapping school commitments. The mentor also noted, *"Their enthusiasm decreased at times, but their progress in speaking was still good"* (Mentor, Interview, May 2025). These challenges reveal that although English Club provided benefits, external factors limited consistent participation.

The overall discussion of the findings highlights that English Club activities offered students both linguistic and psychological benefits, while also presenting practical challenges. The club provided a supportive environment that reduced anxiety, encouraged motivation, and strengthened confidence, which aligns with Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis. The activities, such as speeches, storytelling, and debates, reflected principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) by emphasizing authentic speaking practice. Students' personal growth was also evident, as they became more motivated to engage with English outside the classroom, such as through movies or online communication, consistent with Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory. However, issues of time, distance, and competing responsibilities highlight the need for more flexible structures to sustain engagement. Overall, the findings suggest that English Clubs play an essential role in supporting students' interlanguage development by providing meaningful opportunities for practice, collaboration, and confidence-building.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research that emphasizes the importance of English Clubs in enhancing students' language learning. Astari and Hadi (2022) found that English Clubs in Indonesia create a relaxed and enjoyable environment, which motivates learners and reduces their speaking anxiety. This was also reflected in the current study, where students described the

atmosphere as fun, supportive, and interactive, leading to greater willingness to use English. Similarly, Wahyuniati et al. (2020) concluded that extracurricular language programs promote self-directed learning, a finding mirrored in the students' strategies such as watching English movies and practicing with peers. These similarities demonstrate that the English Club at SMKN 7 Pinrang aligns with broader trends in extracurricular language learning, particularly in fostering confidence and independence. Therefore, the present study strengthens the argument that English Clubs are effective platforms for integrating formal and informal learning experiences.

At the same time, the challenges faced by students in this study reflect structural and contextual issues also reported in previous research. Yanti and Sulistyo (2018) highlighted that logistical difficulties and time constraints often hinder students' full participation in extracurricular programs, which is consistent with the reports of conflicting schedules and distance barriers in this study. Unlike Rahmawati (2021), who emphasized limited facilities as a primary challenge, this study shows that vocational students experienced time management and transportation as more critical obstacles. These differences highlight that the context of vocational schools requires particular attention to flexible scheduling and supportive infrastructure. Nevertheless, the persistence of students despite these challenges reflects resilience and motivation, confirming the importance of providing continuous institutional support. This finding suggests that strengthening organizational and logistical support systems could maximize the benefits of English Clubs for vocational learners.

The discussion highlights that English Clubs serve as dynamic learning spaces that combine language practice, social interaction, and personal growth. The positive experiences of students in SMKN 7 Pinrang reflect broader evidence that English Clubs reduce anxiety, foster fluency, and enhance motivation through meaningful and interactive activities. The role of the mentor was also confirmed as essential in sustaining both academic and affective growth, consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) scaffolding theory. At the same time, challenges such as time management, distance, and competing responsibilities must be addressed to ensure more consistent participation. By linking these findings to established theories and prior research, the study contributes to understanding how extracurricular programs can support interlanguage development in vocational school contexts. Thus, English Clubs can be considered as complementary spaces that not only enhance linguistic competence but also prepare students for broader social and professional communication needs.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that students experienced English learning in the club as engaging, supportive, and beneficial for both personal and linguistic development. Activities such as speeches, storytelling, language games, English

movie sessions, and English Camps provided varied opportunities for authentic language use. The collaborative nature of the club fostered peer support, increased confidence, and encouraged active participation in communication. These experiences align with experiential and communicative learning principles, enabling students to develop not only speaking skills but also social skills and self-esteem. Moreover, the vocational school context shaped students' experiences by linking English skills with career aspirations, making their participation goal-oriented. Overall, the English Club served as a platform for meaningful practice that extended beyond formal classroom learning.

Participation in the English Club resulted in several benefits, including improved speaking fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary use, and sentence construction, alongside reduced language anxiety and enhanced motivation. Students also developed greater autonomy, demonstrating initiative in using English outside the club. Nevertheless, challenges such as schedule conflicts, transportation difficulties, inconsistent attendance, and varying levels of engagement affected the program's overall effectiveness. These challenges were particularly pronounced in the vocational school context, where students often balance academic requirements with internships or part-time jobs. Despite these constraints, the benefits of the English Club strongly outweigh the challenges, although strategic adjustments are needed to enhance accessibility and inclusivity.

In conclusion, English Clubs play a pivotal role in enhancing speaking skills, boosting confidence, and fostering social interaction in EFL contexts, particularly within vocational high schools. The combination of student-centered activities and a supportive environment creates an effective platform for experiential language learning. However, the sustainability and inclusivity of such programs depend on addressing logistical and motivational challenges. By aligning activities with students' academic and career needs, English Clubs have the potential to serve not only as language learning communities but also as developmental hubs that prepare learners for future professional and social engagement.

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