

## ENGLISH LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF GENERATION Z HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN INDONESIA: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

<sup>#1</sup>Nazar Hasby, <sup>\*2</sup>Natalina Asi, <sup>\*3</sup>Indra Perdana, <sup>\*4</sup>Lailatul Kodriyah, <sup>\*5</sup>Neneng Islamiah, <sup>\*6</sup>Fitra Ramadani, <sup>\*7</sup>Alna Triskaya Angrum, <sup>\*8</sup>Lailatun Najmiah

<sup>#1</sup>English Teacher, English Language Education Program, Universitas Palangka Raya, Indonesia

<sup>\*2</sup>English Lecturer, English Language Education Program, Universitas Palangka Raya, Indonesia

<sup>\*3</sup>English Lecturer, English Language Education Program, Universitas Palangka Raya, Indonesia

<sup>\*4</sup>English Lecturer, English Language Education Program, Universitas Islam Kalimantan Muhammad Arsyad Al-Banjari Banjarmasin, Indonesia

<sup>\*5</sup>English Lecturer, English Language Education Program, Universitas Islam Kalimantan Muhammad Arsyad Al-Banjari Banjarmasin, Indonesia

<sup>\*6</sup>English Lecturer, English Language Education Program, Universitas Islam Kalimantan Muhammad Arsyad Al-Banjari Banjarmasin, Indonesia

<sup>\*7</sup>English Lecturer, English Language Education Program, Universitas Islam Kalimantan Muhammad Arsyad Al-Banjari Banjarmasin, Indonesia

<sup>\*8</sup>English Lecturer, English Language Education Program, Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Kalimantan Selatan, Indonesia

Corresponding Authors Email: [academicnazar7@gmail.com](mailto:academicnazar7@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACTS

This research explored the English learning experiences of Generation Z students in Indonesia using a narrative inquiry approach. Amidst the rapid advancement of digital technology, it was important to understand how Generation Z, born in the digital era, interacted with English language learning. This research aimed to explore students' perceptions, challenges, and lived experiences in learning English to contribute to developing more relevant teaching practices. A qualitative research design was applied by collecting personal narratives from five purposively selected students. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective writing tasks, then thematically analyzed to identify patterns and individual perspectives. The findings of this research identified four main themes: (1) a preference for informal digital platforms, such as social media and learning apps; (2) emotional changes related to self-confidence and peer comparison; (3) the role of teacher support and classroom environment in enhancing motivation; and (4) a growing view of English as a practical skill that was more important than mere academic achievement. The findings illustrated the dynamic relationship between personal motivation, socio-cultural influences, and technological engagement in shaping students' language learning journeys. The research concluded that recognizing and integrating students' narratives in teaching practices could increase learner engagement, encourage independence, and support more adaptive and empathic teaching strategies. These findings' implications were highly relevant for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers to align English language teaching with the values and realities of Generation Z students.

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## INTRODUCTION

Generation Z, which includes individuals born between 1997 and 2012, is a generation that grew up amidst the rapid development of digital technology (Hinduan et al. 2020; Hendrastomo & Januarti, 2023). As digital natives, they have tremendous access to information through social media and various other digital platforms. In Indonesia, Generation Z students are between 15 and 19 years old, which is the age group that is in the middle stage of secondary education, especially in their last year of high school. In the process of learning English, although technology can provide many conveniences, Generation Z students face several challenges, mainly related to public speaking anxiety and difficulties in understanding formal vocabulary that is often different from the everyday language they encounter on social media (Liu & Li, 2024; Hidayat, 2024).

As a mention by Jalaluddin & Ki (2024) students find it challenging to relate classroom English learning to the way they communicate in the digital world. Onjewu et al. (2024) mentioned that Gen Z has also experienced a paradigm shift in the way they communicate compared to previous generations because advances in information technology and media globalization have changed their language style. The high speed of information and fast content consumption patterns are also major challenges for students learning English. Hastini et al. (2020) found that students prefer interactive and engaging content, such as short videos and games, over long lectures. Hernandez (2021) Learning methods that are considered boring often make them lose interest and motivation to learn.

Research by Huong & Nguyen (2023) shows that active engagement in learning contributes to better understanding, making it essential to explore approaches that better suit their learning preferences. Social and academic pressures can significantly affect Generation Z students' learning motivation. Sudirman et al. (2024) points out that many students feel pressured to do well in school and meet parental expectations, which often results in anxiety. Ma et al. (2022) confirms that prolonged stress can affect students' ability to absorb learning materials, including English. By understanding these pressures, educators can better support students in learning.

Finally, a lack of emotional and academic support in the school environment often hinders students' learning process. Huong Xuan & Nguyen, (2023) revealed that students who need more support from teachers or peers tend to feel alienated and less motivated. Therefore, it is essential to show that by listening to students' voices and creating an inclusive environment, educators can overcome these challenges and improve Generation Z students' English learning experience.

However, although technology offers a variety of conveniences, the learning experience of Generation Z is not without challenges. One of the most frequently reported obstacles is anxiety about public speaking and difficulty in understanding formal vocabulary. Public speaking anxiety, often known as *foreign language anxiety*, can hinder students' active involvement in English language learning, especially in live communication situations such as presentations or class discussions (Liu & Li, 2024). In addition, difficulties connecting formal language with colloquial language that they encounter on social media or learning applications also worsen their understanding of the academic vocabulary needed in an educational context (Teuku Azhari, 2024; Hidayat, 2024).

On the other hand, motivation is also an important element in their learning process. Although technology and social media can enrich the learning experience, many students feel

trapped in the difference between informal communication in the digital world and the need to master formal language in an academic context. In addition, challenges related to social and academic pressures, such as parental expectations and pressure to excel, often reduce their motivation to learn (Djamdjuri et al., 2024).

While many previous studies examine English language learning for Generation Z globally, few examine their experiences using the narrative inquiry approach, especially in the Indonesian context. This research aims to fill that gap by exploring Indonesian Generation Z students' challenges in learning English. One of the main objectives of this study is to explore how integrating technology in English learning affects motivation and formal vocabulary acquisition, as well as how social support from peers and family can reduce anxiety and increase their engagement in the learning process.

In addition, technology provides many opportunities for students to enrich their learning experience, psychological barriers, such as speaking anxiety, often prevent students from being active in language learning. This is the primary focus of this study, which uses a narrative inquiry approach to delve deeper into students' personal experiences of these challenges. This approach allows us to better understand how Generation Z students overcome their emotional barriers and how technology can support or exacerbate these challenges.

Many studies have examined the influence of technology on English language learning. However, few have used a narrative inquiry approach to capture the personal experiences of Generation Z students in Indonesia. Therefore, this research aims to provide new insights into how technology affects the English learning process among Indonesian students.

This research seeks to answer several main research questions: (1) How is the English learning experience of Generation Z high school students related to technology and social media? (2) What challenges do Generation Z high school students face in learning English, regarding using technology and social media? (3) What factors motivate Generation Z high school students in learning English, from social support, future expectations, or using learning apps and social media?

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Research Design

This research used a qualitative design with a narrative inquiry approach to explore the English learning experiences of Generation Z students in Indonesia. Narrative inquiry was chosen because this approach allowed researchers to understand students' personal experiences in depth and explore the meanings they gave to English learning. This approach enabled researchers to identify key themes in students' experiences and understand how they overcame challenges in English language learning. Narrative inquiry was considered more appropriate than other qualitative methods, such as phenomenology, because it focused on individuals' life stories and experiences, providing deeper insights into the social and emotional contexts that influenced language learning.

This method also allowed researchers to collect data through narratives or stories told by participants, which provided a clearer picture of the context, challenges, and motivations Generation Z students face in English language learning. Narrative inquiry allowed researchers to view language learning as a cognitive activity and an experience influenced by emotional, social, and technological factors around them.

### Population and Sample

The population in this research was Generation Z students enrolled in high school in Indonesia. The research sample consisted of five 12th-grade students from a high school in Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan, selected through purposive sampling. The sample was chosen based on several criteria: (1) 12th-grade students who had been studying English for several

years, (2) students with sufficient English proficiency based on their average class grades, and (3) students willing to participate in the study and share their experiences openly.

Five participants were selected to ensure sufficient depth and richness of data, even though this number was relatively small. A small sample size could be considered adequate in narrative inquiry because this research aimed to obtain deep and rich narratives, not statistical generalizations. Data saturation was achieved when similar themes emerged repeatedly in the interviews, indicating that the sample size was sufficient to explore relevant experiences.

Although the demographics of the participants, such as gender, age, and socioeconomic background, were not explicitly validated, these differences were still reflected in their narratives, providing a diverse picture of their learning experiences.

Table 1  
Demographic Information of The Participants

Participants	Gender	Age
A	Female	19 <sup>th</sup>
B	Female	18 <sup>th</sup>
C	Female	18 <sup>th</sup>
D	Male	18 <sup>th</sup>
E	Male	19 <sup>th</sup>

## Instruments

The main instruments used in this research were semi-structured interviews and reflective writing assignments. Semi-structured interviews allowed researchers to explore students' experiences with open-ended questions, while providing flexibility to explore topics that arose during the conversation. Interview guides were developed to explore four main themes: (1) their experiences of learning English, (2) the challenges they faced, (3) the role of technology in language learning, and (4) the factors that motivated them to learn English. Before the primary interviews, the interview instrument was piloted with two participants who were not involved in the main study to ensure the clarity and relevance of the questions.

In addition to the interviews, participants were asked to write a reflective assignment about their experiences learning English, which provided an additional dimension in understanding their feelings and thoughts about the learning process.

## Data Analysis

The data analysis in this research employed a thematic approach aimed at identifying and grouping recurring ideas within participants' narratives. The process was iterative and unfolded through several stages to ensure depth and accuracy.

Initially, the researchers engaged in repeated readings of the transcribed interviews and reflective writing assignments to develop a thorough understanding of each participant's experience. Through this immersion in the data, key elements of the narratives began to emerge. The next phase involved coding significant portions of the data that reflected participants' challenges, motivations, learning experiences, and use of technology. These codes helped highlight recurring patterns and laid the groundwork for identifying broader themes. Following the coding process, the researchers grouped related codes into overarching themes. For instance, experiences with public speaking difficulties and the use of language learning applications surfaced as distinct themes based on commonalities in the participants' accounts. With these themes identified, the researchers reconstructed individual and collective narratives to portray a comprehensive story of students' experiences in learning English. These narratives were enriched with direct quotations from participants, ensuring that their voices remained authentic and central to the study.

To enhance the validity and credibility of the findings, techniques such as peer debriefing and member checking were employed. Peer debriefing involved discussions with colleagues experienced in qualitative research, who reviewed the emerging findings and offered constructive feedback. Member checking was conducted by reaching out to participants to confirm whether the identified themes accurately reflected their experiences.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Research Findings

#### 1. Preferences for Digital Platforms

One of the main findings of this research was Generation Z students' preference for using digital platforms in English language learning. Participants indicated they preferred language learning applications and social media to conventional learning methods such as textbooks or face-to-face classes. This aligns with (Hernandez, 2021), who stated that Generation Z students prefer interactive learning methods that allow them to learn independently using technology. For example, Participant A (19 years old) revealed, "I prefer to learn English through apps like Duolingo because I can learn anytime and anywhere." This shows that Gen Z students, who grew up amid technological advances, prefer platforms that offer time flexibility and easy access to learning materials. Participant B (18 years old) added, "I find it easier to understand new vocabulary through learning videos on YouTube than by just reading textbooks." This finding highlights how video-based media has become a highly valued tool for students in language learning, allowing them to see the context of language use directly and more practically.

Technology, through learning applications and digital platforms, is considered a primary source for obtaining information and interacting with English. Participant C (18 years old) explained, "I often use Instagram to search for English-language content, whether about daily life or language learning tips." This illustrates that social media has become an integral part of the daily lives of Generation Z students, not only as a means of entertainment but also for language learning.

In addition, Participant D (19 years old) stated, "I learn English more often through podcasts on Spotify or YouTube because I can learn while doing other activities, without having to sit still." This finding shows how access to English-language content directly and in an audio-visual format is an effective strategy for students to develop their language skills outside the classroom.

#### 2. Anxiety About Speaking in Public

Another significant finding was anxiety about speaking, which emerged as a major challenge for many participants in learning English. Anxiety when speaking, also known as Foreign Language Anxiety, is a significant obstacle for most students when speaking in public. This study confirms Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which states that anxiety can increase the affective filter that blocks the reception of language input necessary for language mastery. Participant E (19 years old) revealed, "I feel very anxious when speaking in front of my friends, afraid that I will make mistakes and they will laugh." This anxiety not only affects their speaking ability but also causes them to be more reluctant to engage in English conversations, even though they have adequate language knowledge.

Anxiety about speaking also reduces participants' motivation to practice speaking in English. Participant D (19 years old) added, "When asked to speak, I feel tense and anxious, so I prefer to remain silent and avoid speaking."

This finding emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive and pressure-free environment to help students reduce their speaking anxiety. Although technology provides



various opportunities for interactive English learning, speaking anxiety remains a challenge that must be overcome for students to develop optimally.

### **3. The Role of Social Support in English Learning**

Social support from family and peers is critical in increasing students' self-confidence and motivation in learning English. Participant A (19) stated, "My mother always supports me, which makes me feel more prepared for English exams." This support gives them a sense of security and comfort, allowing them to confidently face challenges in learning English.

These findings indicate that social support is important for academic motivation and instrumental in reducing speaking anxiety. Participant B (18 years old) shared, "When my friends support me and we study together, I feel more confident." Emotional support from family and peers enables students to stay motivated and continue learning despite facing difficulties or anxiety in the English learning process.

### **4. The Influence of Social Media in Language Learning**

Social media also plays a significant role in supporting students' English language learning. Participant C (18 years old) revealed, "Instagram and TikTok help me learn English in a relaxed way; I find it easier to learn through short videos." This shows that social media can serve as an informal learning tool that helps students learn English in a more relaxed and stress-free environment.

Students utilize digital platforms to access English-language content that is more relevant to their daily lives. Participant E (19 years old) added, "I use TikTok to watch English tutorial videos, and I feel more comfortable learning that way." Social media allows students to practice language in real-life situations, reducing the anxiety that usually arises in face-to-face interactions and allowing them to experiment with language.

## **Discussion**

This research shows that digital platforms are critical in English language learning for Generation Z students. This finding aligns with research by (Pichler et al., 2021), which shows that Generation Z prefers to use flexible digital platforms and can access learning content independently. Most students in this study also reported their preference for language learning apps and social media to develop their language skills. Participant A (19 years old) revealed, "I prefer to learn English through apps like Duolingo because I can learn anytime and anywhere." These findings confirm that Generation Z students are more likely to choose technology-based learning methods over traditional methods. As suggested by (Hinduan et al., 2020) Generation Z is the most digitally connected generation, which allows them to learn more interactively through digital platforms. However, although technology provides easy access, some students struggle to integrate language learning with digital communication. For example, Participant B (18 years old) stated, "I find it easier to understand new vocabulary through learning videos on YouTube than just reading textbooks." This suggests that digitally-based learning videos effectively improve students' vocabulary comprehension, which is important in language learning.

In addition to the preference for technology, speaking anxiety has also emerged as a significant obstacle in English language learning. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) suggests that anxiety can increase the affective filter, which blocks the reception of language input necessary for effective language acquisition. This research supports such findings, with many participants reporting their anxiety when asked to speak in front of friends or class. Participant E (19 years old) revealed, "I feel very anxious speaking in front of my friends, afraid that I will make mistakes and they will laugh." This anxiety relates directly to Krashen's theory, which emphasizes the importance of self-confidence and anxiety reduction to enable students to receive language input more effectively. This is also reinforced by (Fauzi et al.,

2024), who found that English speaking anxiety negatively affects students' motivation and achievement. Therefore, it is important for language teaching to create a supportive environment and reduce social pressure, allowing students to speak without fear.

This research also found that social support from family and peers increases students' motivation and confidence in learning English. Participant A (19) stated, "My mom always supports me, making me feel more prepared for the English exam." This social support gives students a sense of security and being supported, which enables them to overcome language learning challenges. Social support is also important in reducing speaking anxiety. Participant B (18 years old) mentioned, "When my friends give me support and study together, I feel more confident." This finding aligns with research by (Rahmah et al., 2024), who stated that emotional support can help students reduce anxiety and increase their engagement in language learning.

In addition to formal digital platforms such as language learning apps, social media is an important part of the language learning process. Participant C (18 years old) revealed, "Instagram and TikTok help me learn English casually, I find it easier to learn through short videos." It shows that social media is effective in supporting informal learning (Sharimova & Wilson, 2022; Kusuma et al., 2024; Alamsyah, 2023). As explained by (Syahira et al., 2024), social media allows students to learn in a more relaxed context, reducing academic pressure and allowing them to practice English in everyday situations more relevant to their lives. Therefore, social media is a means of entertainment and an effective language learning tool.

One of the unexpected findings was the preference for traditional learning methods, even though many Generation Z students prefer using technology. Participant D (19 years old) stated, "Although digital apps help, I prefer to learn through traditional methods like face-to-face classes because I feel more focused." This finding suggests a contradiction between the preference for technology and the need for direct social interaction in language learning. This leads to a debate about cultural barriers or limited access to technology that may limit the adoption of digital methods in some contexts. Reza & Tinggogoy (2022) point out that despite technology being an effective tool in learning, access limitations or cultural preferences still affect the way students choose to learn.

Based on these findings, there are some practical implications for educators in supporting English language learning for Generation Z students. The use of digital platforms is essential in creating interactive and flexible learning. However, paying attention to aspects of students' self-confidence and social support that can help them overcome speaking anxiety is also necessary. Participant D (19 years old) stated, "I feel more comfortable speaking if I have friends who support me." Therefore, technology-based approaches should be combined with face-to-face learning methods that prioritize social support in the learning process. By creating a supportive and inclusive environment, teachers can help students feel more confident in using English in formal and informal contexts. The findings in this study show that digital platforms greatly influence Generation Z students' English learning. However, challenges such as speaking anxiety and preference for traditional methods remain. This research shows that combining technology with face-to-face approaches is important to create a more personalized and supportive learning experience for students.

While these findings provide meaningful guidance for educators, it is important to consider the study's limitations when interpreting the results. This study had several limitations, most notably the small sample size of only five participants and its focus on a single school in Banjarmasin. These factors may have constrained the diversity of perspectives represented, particularly given the wide range of socioeconomic contexts found outside the research setting. The demographic homogeneity of the participants should therefore be acknowledged as a limitation. Nevertheless, the study offers valuable insights into the English learning experiences of Indonesian Generation Z students. By addressing factors such as social

support and speaking anxiety, and by leveraging social media as a learning tool, educators can better tailor their approaches to align with the unique characteristics of this generation.

## CONCLUSION

This research explored Indonesian Generation Z students' English language learning experiences in the context of growing digitalization. The main findings show that digital platforms play a crucial role in students' English learning, with apps such as Duolingo and YouTube being essential tools for independent and flexible language skill development. However, while technology provides many advantages, students still face significant challenges, particularly regarding speaking anxiety and difficulty understanding formal vocabulary that does not always match the colloquial language they encounter on social media.

One of the main contributions of this research is a deeper understanding of how social support from family and peers can increase students' motivation in learning English. This support strengthens students' confidence in overcoming speaking anxiety and encourages them to stay actively engaged in language learning. For example, most participants revealed that they felt more encouraged and confident thanks to the support from those closest to them, which shows the importance of emotional support in the context of learning.

However, while technology serves as a helpful tool, the findings of this study also show that many students remain more comfortable with traditional learning methods, such as face-to-face classes, which provide them with direct social interaction and in-person academic support. These findings highlight the importance of a more holistic approach to learning, which combines technology with traditional teaching methods, to create a more comprehensive and adaptive learning experience for Generation Z students.

These findings highlight the need for policymakers and educators to adopt more personalized learning approaches that effectively blend technology with traditional teaching methods to enhance the English language learning process. Given the significant role of social support, educators should also address students' speaking anxiety by fostering a supportive and encouraging learning environment. Such an environment can help students build confidence and become more comfortable speaking English.

However, this study has certain limitations. The small sample size and the focus on a single school reduce the generalizability of the results. To strengthen and validate these findings, future research should involve larger, more diverse samples. Additionally, conducting longitudinal studies on digital access among students in both urban and rural areas could offer valuable insights into how disparities in technology access influence language learning outcomes.

Further investigation into regional differences in access to technology and their effects on students' language proficiency is also essential. Such research would support the development of more equitable and inclusive education policies that ensure all students have the opportunity to succeed in language learning, regardless of their geographic or socioeconomic background.

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