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HOW DO SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY INFLUENCE INDIGENOUS YOUTH'S PERCEPTIONS OF ENGLISH?

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article history:	The increasing dominance of English in academic and social settings has significant implications for Indigenous youth, where language use
Received January 15, 2025 Revised February 27, 2025	in both community and school environments influences their opportunities for success and their cultural identity. This study aims to
Accepted March 12, 2025	examine the impact of English proficiency on the cultural identity and language use of Indigenous youth in La Trinidad, a town in the
Keywords:	Benguet province, Philippines, focusing on how English affects their academic achievement, social interactions, and relationships with their
English as a dominant; Indigenous youth; Language; Phenomenological research; Philippines.	community. Through qualitative interviews with nine Indigenous youth, the study explores their experiences with English and Indigenous languages in daily life, school, and extracurricular activities. The findings show that while English is valued for academic success and social mobility, its dominance leads to the marginalization of Indigenous languages, causing cultural disconnection and generational divides. It is concluded that the promotion of English proficiency, though beneficial in many ways, threatens the survival of Indigenous languages and cultural heritage. To address these challenges, it is recommended that bilingual or multilingual educational programs be introduced in schools and communities to support both English language development and the preservation of Indigenous languages, ensuring that cultural identity is maintained alongside academic and professional advancement.
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1. INTRODUCTION

A lingua franca is a language used across a large geographical area for broader communication, typically bridging people who speak different languages (Luczaj et al., 2022). Today, English serves as the dominant global lingua franca, often referred to as a bridge language, common language, or trade language. Its accessibility and widespread usage have reinforced its status as essential for accessing education, work, and culture (Hossain, 2024). Furthermore, its central role in business, technology, and media underscores its global dominance. However, this prevalence contributes to phenomena like partial bilingualism, where non-native speakers may understand English but struggle with fluency in their native language. Partial bilingualism, as

defined by Benet-Martínez and Haritatos (2019), refers to the ability to understand but not speak a language fluently, presenting both opportunities and challenges. While English provides opportunities for educational and professional advancement, it frequently results in the reduced use of Indigenous languages, leading to challenges in preserving cultural identity.

Many heritage speakers—especially youth—understand their Indigenous languages but face difficulty speaking them fluently, influenced by the dominance of global languages like English or Mandarin (Kim & Park, 2020). This linguistic shift often disconnects individuals from their cultural heritage, as they struggle to engage with traditional practices that depend on their mother tongue (Zhang & Mi, 2019). For example, in Malaysia, Malay youth express a desire to preserve their heritage languages, but societal pressures to adopt dominant languages often lead to imbalanced bilingualism, creating tensions around their sense of belonging (Rokiah & Zainuddin, 2020). Similarly, Taiwan's partial English immersion programs have been shown to marginalize native languages, emphasizing the tension between global language integration and the retention of local culture (Huang & Chen, 2022). These examples highlight the broader societal factors that shape linguistic identity and cultural continuity (Chen & Wang, 2021).

The family, school, and community play pivotal roles in shaping linguistic and cultural identities. In the community context, children are exposed to various societal interactions that influence language development. Social interactions and environmental factors can significantly impact how children acquire language, with society playing a crucial role in shaping this process (Paradis & Jia, 2017). Besides, the school environment also influences language development, as positive social interactions can enhance language proficiency (Wang, 2023; Bushati et al., 2023). Early introduction to English in school is often effective, even if children are not yet fully capable, as their natural curiosity aids in language acquisition (Muklis et al., 2020). Studies by Girl et al. (2022) have shown that language exposure significantly influences children's learning abilities. In terms of technology, tools like multimodal presentation systems (MPS) and interactive whiteboards (IWB) have proven beneficial for English vocabulary learning (Kuo et al., 2015). However, Sukrutrit (2023) noted that the learning mode plays a crucial role, with face-to-face instruction proving more effective for language speaking skills compared to online learning.

To improve English speaking and writing proficiency, collaboration among teachers, students, and the government is essential, particularly in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting. Bilingual schools and language programs can play a critical role in language acquisition (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). However, such initiatives require substantial investment and careful planning (Awadh & Trainer, 2015), including highly competent teachers (Sasum & Weeks, 2018). Effective teaching stems from teachers' passion for creating a positive learning environment and meeting student needs, which leads to better outcomes (Cole & Feng, 2015; Dunifa, 2023; Sada et al., 2023). However, not all countries prioritize English equally—some continue to uphold their first languages (L1) for cultural and national identity reasons (Sepyanda, 2017).

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In the Philippines, one of the largest English-speaking nations globally, English serves as a primary medium of instruction and is widely used in commerce and law (Cabigon, 2015). While English is prioritized, this focus sometimes comes at the expense of Indigenous languages, creating a disconnection for some individuals who struggle to fully engage with their cultural heritage in the classroom. Under the K to 12 Basic Education Curriculum, the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program was introduced in 2012 to improve educational outcomes by using Indigenous languages in the early grades (Grades 1–3). This policy aims to promote cultural identity and linguistic diversity (Department of Education, 2016; Rola, 2017; Hernandez & Duguiang, 2019), reflecting the government's effort to preserve Indigenous languages. However, challenges such as resource limitations, inadequate teacher training, and the lack of instructional materials have hindered its effectiveness. As a result, some educational authorities have reverted to using Filipino and English as the primary languages of instruction, undermining efforts to preserve linguistic diversity and Indigenous identity (Purcia & Castante, 2023).

Moreover, the family remains a critical factor in language development. The role of mothers, who are often the primary caregivers, significantly influences early language exposure (Humeidat, 2018). Family language policies—such as those shaped by translanguaging practices—can foster multilingual competence and emotional wellbeing (Karpava, 2022). Family interactions, home reading practices, and exposure to language through media like television or YouTube are also crucial for children's language acquisition (Gonzalez-Barrero et al., 2020; Muklis et al., 2020). In bilingual households, parents may inadvertently expose children more to dominant languages, affecting language transmission (Gonzalez-Barrero et al., 2020). Lastly, socioeconomic status (SES) plays a significant role in language acquisition, as it encompasses factors like parental education, occupation, family income, and home language use (Azim & Jufrizal, 2020; Malabonga, 2016). Research by Pelila and Ayao-ao (2024) suggests that even when families experience migration or varying socioeconomic conditions, their familiarity with their first language remains relatively stable, highlighting the complexity of linguistic transmission in diverse contexts.

Based on the reviewed literature, studies about language in Indigenous communities, family language policies, and how family interactions affect a child's language growth consistently point out important factors that shape this development (Iwaniec, 2018; Walczak et al., 2017; Aziz et al., 2020; Cornelio & De Castro, 2016; Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino, 2018; Cohen & Wickens, 2015; Ali, 2017; Chairuddin, 2018; Khawaja, 2021). While research has looked at the wider community and school influences (Bushati et al., 2023; Cole & Feng, 2015; Dunifa, 2023; Girl et al., 2022; Sada et al., 2023; Sepyanda, 2017; Sukrutrit, 2023), it is important to include the real-life experiences of those directly impacted in the documentation process. While research has looked at how the community and schools affect language use, it's important to include the real-life experiences of people who are directly impacted in the document additional factors within

community and school settings that contribute to the preference for English as a dominant language among some members of Indigenous groups.

2. METHOD

Through snowball sampling, we selected nine participants, aged 18 to 25, from diverse cultural backgrounds to understand why they favor English over their native language. We enrolled all participants in a higher education institution in La Trinidad, Benguet, which provided a common context for their experiences. Below we present a map of respondents in La Trinidad, Benguet, in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Map of respondents in La Trinidad, Benguet

The analysis process followed several specific steps. First, after transcribing the interview data, the researchers familiarized themselves with it by reading the transcripts multiple times to fully understand the content. Initial codes were then generated by highlighting significant phrases and segments that were relevant to the research question, focusing on recurring patterns in language use and experiences. These initial codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes, which were continually reviewed and refined to ensure alignment with the data and accurate representation of the participants' perspectives. The themes were then defined and named clearly to reflect the key patterns in the participants' use of English as their dominant language. Finally, we wrote up the findings in a coherent narrative that directly addressed the research questions, providing a detailed understanding of the youth's experiences. The final themes identified in the study were both the boosts and setbacks of using English as a dominant language. The boosts included greater opportunities in education and employment, as English proficiency was considered a valuable skill in these domains. On the other hand, the setbacks revolved around challenges in maintaining cultural ties and difficulties in communicating with older generations who preferred Indigenous languages.

Lastly, we followed ethical guidelines for phenomenological research (Allen & Wiles, 2016) by using tree names as pseudonyms to protect participants' identities. This

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approach maintains respect and avoids dehumanization by using contextually relevant identifiers. All written information and interview recordings were confidentially handled by the researchers. In this study, the researchers withheld any sensitive information from the respondents. To avoid dehumanizing the participants, the researchers used code names, specifically the names of trees, in place of their real names. This technique is especially important in a phenomenological study that seeks to explore and respect individual experiences (Allen & Wiles, 2016). Using meaningful pseudonyms, like names of trees, follows recommendations from research that encourages using respectful and relevant names instead of numbers in qualitative studies, particularly to keep a human touch. Written information and interview recordings were solely used by the researchers to analyze the necessary data. All information from the interviews was handled with the utmost confidentiality.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Boosts of Speaking English in the Community and School

In both community and school settings, participants overwhelmingly preferred using English over their native languages, largely because of its perceived ability to open up opportunities for connection and improved services. English proficiency was viewed as a bridge to social mobility, helping Indigenous youth form relationships that extend beyond their immediate communities. Acacia's experience highlights this social connection, especially during school-related competitions: "*The people I've met who share similar experiences or thoughts about the language are usually those I encounter during competitions. I believe that's where most of my network outside of school is.*" This observation underscores how English serves as a social bridge, enabling individuals to build networks that surpass ethnic or linguistic boundaries, which can be critical for personal and professional growth.

Additionally, the impact of English on service interactions was noted by Mahogany, who observed, "I usually notice when we go out, like when we eat in restaurants, when you speak in English, the servers will treat us better... better service in general." This observation implies that people often perceive English as a symbol of higher education and social status, leading to preferential treatment in public areas. Narra shared a similar experience, noting that in Manila, speaking English led to more favorable interactions with service staff: "I noticed that when you speak English in Manila, you get better treatment from service crews compared to when you speak Tagalog." These reflections are in line with research by Rokiah and Zainuddin (2020), which explored how societal attitudes toward English influence the opportunities and experiences of speakers, often favoring those fluent in the language.

Peer interaction was also instrumental in normalizing the use of English. Narra recalled how she and her playmates fluidly alternated between English and Tagalog while playing: "We often switched between English and Tagalog while playing, and it felt natural to communicate in both languages." This highlights how bilingual communication became a part of their social fabric, helping participants navigate multiple linguistic codes within their peer groups. Molave added, "It's wonderful that

we get to speak in English," demonstrating how peer affirmation played a key role in reinforcing English usage. Tanguile's observation of his linguistic journey further emphasizes how English often replaced Indigenous languages in early education: "Some of my friends shared the same experience of speaking English throughout elementary school and only learned Ilocano/Filipino in high school or college." This delay in exposure to heritage languages indicates how immersion in English from an early age can marginalize Indigenous languages, even in culturally rich communities.

Western media, particularly through cartoons and movies, also played a significant role in shaping language habits and cultural identities. Molave shared how he and his peers mimicked characters from Western cartoons: "We tend to redo a scene from cartoon movies, which are usually Western. We even mimic the accents. We even mimic the accents. This imitation of Western accents and expressions highlights the pervasive influence of English-language media on both language acquisition and identity formation. Alder supported this idea, explaining that watching cartoons, especially in English, played a significant role in his language development: "*I got to grow up watching cartoons, and most cartoons helped influence my decisions in life.*" Tanguile emphasized the importance of digital content in fostering English literacy, noting, "*I also learned how to read from the Internet*," pointing to the overwhelming presence of English-language content online. These experiences align with research by Huang and Chen (2022), which argues that the dominance of English-language media contributes to the marginalization of Indigenous languages by promoting global cultural norms over local traditions.

Participants consistently emphasized the necessity of English in daily life. Molave noted, "I encounter people who speak the language, and knowing it is a must." Similarly, Alder observed, "Most of the lessons were in English, and I felt that if I didn't get used to speaking it, I would fall behind." These insights reveal how institutional prioritization of English, particularly in educational contexts, creates a climate where fluency is essential for academic success. Early exposure to English, as Acacia shared, provided a smoother transition into higher education: "Personally, for me, I think it was a smart move for my grandfather to practice speaking English with me. It made the transition easy from elementary to high school to college." Her statement demonstrates that early language development in English can buffer students from later challenges in grammar, writing, and academic performance. This sentiment was echoed by Mahogany, who observed that teachers tended to offer me many opportunities when I speak because they know that I can speak in English."

English proficiency also facilitated success in extracurricular activities. Mahogany reflected, "*I was also speaking in English, which led me to join organizations related to public speaking and debate.*" However, these achievements often came at the cost of cultural involvement. Narra noted that her participation in English-language events sometimes pulled her away from cultural school programs, presenting English as both a tool for empowerment and a source of cultural detachment. This tension between academic success and cultural identity is a recurring theme, as English-language

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activities are often considered prestigious, while cultural programs are sometimes perceived as secondary.

Beyond academic and social benefits, English skills provided participants with practical advantages. Tanguile explained, "Being good at writing helps with formal letter writing; being good at listening makes learning easier because of how much English content there is on the internet." This feature highlights the utility of English proficiency not only in academic settings but also in accessing broader resources and opportunities. Falcata noted similar benefits: "Using English as my primary language in elementary school helped me write articles for the school publication." The reinforcement of English through both school and home environments contributed to this linguistic preference. Acacia shared that her school frequently encouraged the use of English during competitions: "During elementary, I'm often in competitions, and I had to use English." Mahogany concurred, saying, "We received encouragement to speak in English during elementary school." Institutional pressures and familial reinforcement demonstrate the cultivation of English as a necessary skill for academic and social success.

Therefore, although people saw English as a gateway to opportunities, its dominance also led to some inequities. Alder observed, "*I think the hesitation comes from the fear of being misunderstood or judged*." This fear often prevented students who were less proficient in English from fully participating, contributing to anxiety and underperformance. The pressure to conform to English-speaking norms, particularly in academic contexts, may inadvertently leave behind those who struggle with it, especially if they come from households where Indigenous languages are more commonly spoken. This situation highlights the need for educational systems to support bilingualism, ensuring that proficiency in English does not come at the cost of cultural and linguistic identity.

Setbacks of Speaking English in the Community and School

The dominance of English in both academic and professional spheres has significantly shaped the language choices of Indigenous youth in La Trinidad, Benguet. While English is frequently viewed as a tool for academic success, professional advancement, and social mobility, it also carries notable setbacks, particularly regarding cultural preservation and community integration.

A recurring theme among participants was the perception of English as the language of professionalism. Many expressed admiration for its formal use, associating it with intelligence and academic achievement. Acacia, for example, remarked, "*I think I've admired how formal and professional the conversation was*," reflecting how societal portrayals of English as a symbol of professionalism influence its adoption among young people. Pine echoed this sentiment, noting that his ability to speak English fluently often led to admiration: "People are shocked and amazed that I can actually speak convincingly in English." This incident demonstrates how English has become a marker of social status, further alienating Indigenous languages, which are often viewed as less prestigious or even obsolete in formal settings. However, this societal preference for English is not without its drawbacks. As English takes precedence, the cultural significance of Indigenous languages diminishes, leading to a disconnection from heritage. Some participants shared experiences of social exclusion or discomfort when using their native languages. Narra's painful experience of being teased by her uncles for speaking English highlights how language choices can create rifts within families and communities. Similarly, Bamboo's reflection on his inability to speak Kankanaey, despite growing up in a family that spoke it, illustrates the generational divide and loss of language proficiency (Pelila & Ayao-ao, 2024). These experiences show how the prioritization of English can lead to emotional and social isolation, making it harder for Indigenous youth to connect with their cultural roots.

Moreover, language choices in the community can foster stereotypes and divisions. Mahogany's comment, "(The) English language divides society, with speakers being stereotyped as snobs or trying too hard," emphasizes how the use of English can perpetuate social divides (Walker & Crawford, 2024). These divides, based on language, contribute to an environment where Indigenous languages are further marginalized. As Mahogany observed, he occasionally switches to speaking English, even with Kankanaey speakers, to evade ridicule for his accent (Walker & Crawford, 2024). This dynamic reflects the social capital tied to language, where English is positioned at the top of the hierarchy, creating tensions and divisions within Indigenous communities.

The pressure to conform to the linguistic expectations of wider society also impacts social interactions. Narra's admission that she avoids certain community members due to her limited proficiency in Ibaloy reflects how the lack of fluency in a native language can lead to exclusion within one's own community. Alder and Falcata's experiences further exemplify this, as their limited knowledge of Indigenous languages created barriers to socializing and nurturing relationships. The emotional and social costs of these language barriers are evident, as individuals feel disconnected from their cultural heritage and community identity.

Despite these challenges, participants clearly desire to reconcile the benefits of English proficiency with the preservation of their cultural languages. Falcata's suggestion for more programs using Ilocano or Kankanaey in schools illustrates the potential for bilingual education to foster a balance between cultural preservation and modern success (Zarei & Tagadiad, 2024). The desire for a more inclusive educational system that values both Indigenous languages and English is critical in creating a more culturally resilient environment. By integrating Indigenous languages into the curriculum, schools can help ensure that youth retain their linguistic heritage while benefiting from the academic and professional advantages that English provides. Finally, the tension between English proficiency and Indigenous language preservation highlights the complex relationship between global communication and heritage continuity. While English offers undeniable advantages, its dominance threatens the survival of Indigenous languages and the cultural identities tied to them.

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4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that English plays a significant role in the academic success, professional advancement, and social mobility of Indigenous youth in La Trinidad, Benguet. The youth perceive English as a tool for accessing better educational opportunities, social networks, and extracurricular success. However, this preference comes with setbacks. The dominance of English marginalizes Indigenous languages, leading to their reduced use in schools, communities, and homes. Furthermore, societal pressures, stereotypes, and fear of judgment discourage the use of native languages, causing cultural disconnection and generational divides. The conclusion from these setbacks is clear: while English fosters success, it simultaneously weakens the cultural ties of Indigenous youth by diminishing the use of their native languages. This creates a tension between global communication and cultural preservation. To mitigate these setbacks, it is essential to create environments where both English and Indigenous languages can thrive. Schools should adopt bilingual or multilingual programs that integrate Indigenous languages alongside English. Communities and schools must also support language preservation through cultural activities, storytelling, and regular use of native tongues to promote pride and belonging. Future research should explore how language preferences evolve and develop strategies to ensure that the benefits of English do not come at the cost of cultural heritage. This approach ensures a balanced relationship between language proficiency and cultural preservation, supporting the resilience of Indigenous identities in an increasingly globalized world.

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