

Informal teaching and learning of English in secondary schools: EFL students' perspectives

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Abstract

As Indonesia becomes increasingly integrated into the global economy, English proficiency is essential for both educational and professional opportunities. However, traditional classroom instruction often prioritizes grammar and writing, resulting in limited development of students' speaking and listening skills. This study investigates students' perceptions of informal English learning through their participation in the English Club at SMPN 14 Malang. Informal learning environments offer a dynamic setting for practicing English through discussions, storytelling, and interactive activities, thereby fostering both confidence and fluency. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the study gathered data from 20 students using open-ended questionnaires to explore their experiences. The findings reveal that students value the club's relaxed atmosphere, interactive learning methods, and social elements, all of which contribute to increased motivation and language acquisition. Nevertheless, some students report difficulties with public speaking, group dynamics, and the pacing of activities. Recommendations for improvement include incorporating more film-based sessions and maintaining a fun, low-pressure learning environment. This study underscores the role of informal learning in complementing formal instruction and provides insights for educators seeking to design more engaging English language experiences.

Keywords: *English club; English education; informal learning; language acquisition; student perceptions*

INTRODUCTION

In the context of increasing global interconnectedness, English proficiency has become an essential skill for students to access broader educational, social, and future professional opportunities. However, in many Indonesian secondary schools, English learning still tends to emphasize formal classroom instruction that focuses heavily on grammar, vocabulary memorization, and written exercises. While these components are important, they often provide limited opportunities for students to practice authentic communication, especially in speaking and listening. As a result, many students experience difficulties in using English confidently in real-life situations, despite having studied the language as a compulsory school subject.

This condition is also evident among students at SMPN 14 Malang. Although English is part of the formal curriculum, students still face challenges in developing practical communicative competence. Limited exposure to English outside the classroom, low confidence in speaking, and anxiety when performing in front of others contribute to the gap between classroom learning and actual language use. At the same time, students need learning spaces that are more flexible, interactive, and emotionally supportive so that they can engage with English in a more natural and meaningful way.

To respond to this need, the English Club at SMPN 14 Malang serves as an informal learning space that complements formal instruction. Through activities such as discussions, storytelling, games, presentations, music, and film viewing, the club creates a more relaxed environment where students can practice English without excessive pressure. This setting encourages participation, strengthens peer interaction, and helps students build confidence and motivation. Nevertheless, some challenges remain, including students' discomfort with public speaking, differences in participation during group work, and the pacing of certain activities. Therefore, it is important to examine students' perspectives on this informal learning experience in order to understand its strengths, identify areas for improvement, and generate insights for developing more engaging and responsive English learning programs in secondary schools.

As Indonesia becomes increasingly integrated into the global economy, English proficiency has become essential for both educational and professional advancement. However, traditional classroom instruction at the secondary level tends to focus primarily on grammar and writing, often at the expense of speaking and listening skills. Given that English is not commonly used in daily life, many students experience difficulties with fluency and confidence in real-world communication (Rao, 2024). This gap highlights the need for alternative learning approaches that provide students with more exposure to practical language use.

To address these challenges, informal learning spaces like English Clubs offer an engaging environment where students practice through discussions, debates, storytelling, and games. Atmojo (2022) found that informal learning creates an immersive English-speaking setting that enhances learners' confidence, promotes enjoyment, provides access to freely available resources, and supports flexible learning schedules. Similarly, a study by Lutfiana et al. (2021) highlights the benefits of informal English learning via platforms like YouTube, particularly in improving pronunciation, intonation, and expressiveness. These activities encourage spontaneous language use, strengthen communicative competence, and help students develop greater fluency and confidence, thereby making language acquisition more dynamic and effective.

How students feel about their learning greatly influences their motivation and interest in learning English. Marsenda wrote in 1925 that students' perceptions play a key role in language learning, as it affects how they understand and engage with the material. Their learning is influenced by both internal factors (motivation, confidence, and past experiences) and external factors (teaching methods and available resources). Many students prefer learning through conversation and interaction rather than rigid textbook lessons, as it allows them to use the language more freely in a relaxed setting without the fear of making mistakes.

The Communicative Method, Cooperative Learning, Competency-Based Approach, and Community Language Learning are popular methods for students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). These approaches emphasize interaction and real-life language use, aligning with the concept of informal learning, where students can practice English naturally without rigid rules. In contrast, methods like the Lecturing Method, Grammar-Translation Method, Direct Method, and Task-Based Method rely heavily on memorization and structured exercises, which can hinder students' confidence in speaking. Therefore, non-formal learning spaces, such as English Clubs,

are crucial for supplementing formal education, as they offer students more opportunities to use the language in practical and enjoyable ways.

Being part of an English Club creates a supportive environment where students can practice speaking naturally and build fluency through informal interactions. Holandyah et al. (2023) found that English Clubs provide students with opportunities to engage in conversations, presentations, debates, other speaking activities, fostering confidence and peer support. Students benefit from friendship, encouragement, vocabulary development, and constructive feedback, making language practice more enjoyable. Additionally, informal settings allow students to explore their interests, such as storytelling or music, leading to a more personalized and motivating learning experience.

This research focuses on SMPN 14 Malang, where many students struggle with practical English communication despite it being a mandatory subject. They often feel that formal classroom methods don't adequately prepare them for real-world language use. The school's English Club provides a valuable opportunity for informal practice in a supportive environment. However, it's crucial to assess how students perceive their involvement in these extracurricular programs and whether they find them helpful for their language development.

The problem statement of this study highlights the importance of English proficiency among students at SMPN 14 Malang, considering the increasing demand for multilingual skills in today's globalized world. Although English is a mandatory subject, students frequently encounter difficulties in applying their knowledge in real-life situations due to the limitations of conventional teaching methods and the lack of engaging learning alternatives. This study aims to explore students' perceptions of informal English learning through participation in the English Club and how this experience influences their language acquisition. Specifically, it seeks to identify the benefits and drawbacks of informal learning environments and how students respond to different instructional approaches. By analyzing students' perspectives, this study intends to provide insights into the effective integration of informal learning strategies into secondary school English education. Understanding students' experiences can help educators and policymakers develop innovative methods to enhance language learning and better prepare students for academic and professional challenges in the future.

METHODS

A qualitative description method was used to find out how students in secondary schools felt about learning and teaching English informally, with a focus on their experiences in the English Club. Participants fill out an open-ended questionnaire through Google Forms that asks them to describe what they like and dislike about the English Club, as well as their general thoughts and ideas for how to make it better.

Pre-Activity

Hello! Thank you for joining the English Club.

We would like to hear your thoughts about the activities. Please answer the following questions honestly and in as much detail as you can. There are no right or wrong answers, we're just interested in your experience and suggestions to help improve the English Club in the future.

Your responses will be kept confidential and used only for research purposes.

1. What aspects of the English Club activities do you enjoy the most? Why?

Your answer _____

2. Are there any parts of the English Club sessions that you find less enjoyable or challenging? Please describe them.

Your answer _____

3. In your opinion, how has the English Club helped you improve your English skills?

Your answer _____

Figure 1. Pre-Test Questionnaire

Twenty students took part as described in Table 1. The participants were chosen through purposive sampling to make sure that the views were diverse and useful. Before collecting data, the respondents were given letters of consent and they could withdraw anytime. The responses are analyzed by identifying recurring patterns and organizing them into meaningful groups related to informal English learning (Saldana, 2015). Data reduction, coding, and analysis are used to understand students' views on the English Club as a relaxed learning environment. The responses are cross-checked for consistency and different perspectives. This approach provides a clearer understanding of student engagement in learning English outside of school, highlighting what works well and what could be improved in extracurricular language programs.

Table 1. Participant coding

No	Participants	Code
1.	Student 1	S1
2.	Student 2	S2
3.	Student 3	S3
4.	Student 4	S4
5.	Student 5	S5
6.	Student 6	S6
7.	Student 7	S7
8.	Student 8	S8
9.	Student 9	S9
10.	Student 10	S10
11.	Student 11	S11
12.	Student 12	S12
13.	Student 13	S13
14.	Student 14	S14
15.	Student 15	S15
16.	Student 16	S16
17.	Student 17	S17
18.	Student 18	S18
19.	Student 19	S19
20.	Student 20	S20

The implementation of this study was conducted through three main stages: preparation, implementation, and evaluation. These stages were designed to ensure that the data collection process ran systematically and that the findings accurately reflected students' perspectives on informal English teaching and learning in the English Club at SMPN 14 Malang.

Preparation stage

At the preparation stage, the researchers first identified the focus of the study, namely students' perspectives on informal English learning through participation in the English Club. After determining the research focus, the researchers reviewed relevant literature on informal language learning, English Clubs, student perceptions, and foreign language learning motivation. This stage also involved designing research instruments in the form of an open-ended questionnaire distributed through Google Forms. The questionnaire was developed to explore students' likes, dislikes, impressions, and suggestions regarding the English Club activities. In addition, the researchers selected the participants purposively to ensure that the respondents were active members who could provide relevant and meaningful information. Before the data collection process began, informed consent was obtained from the participants, and they were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time.

Implementation stage

At the implementation stage, the researchers distributed the open-ended questionnaire to 20 students participating in the English Club at SMPN 14 Malang. The questionnaire was used to collect qualitative data regarding the students' experiences in joining informal English learning activities outside the formal classroom setting. The students were asked to describe their opinions about the activities, the teaching methods, the learning atmosphere, the role of mentors, and the challenges they encountered during the program. The implementation process focused on capturing students' authentic voices and personal reflections on how the English Club contributed to their English learning. The responses obtained from the participants were then compiled and prepared for analysis.

Evaluation stage

At the evaluation stage, the collected data were analyzed qualitatively by identifying recurring patterns, key themes, and meaningful categories related to students' perceptions of the English Club. The analysis included data reduction, coding, categorization, and interpretation of responses in order to generate a comprehensive understanding of the students' experiences. The researchers examined both positive and negative responses to evaluate the strengths and limitations of the English Club as an informal learning environment. This stage also aimed to identify students' suggestions for future improvement, such as the inclusion of more interactive and enjoyable activities. Through this evaluation process, the study was able to assess the overall contribution of the English Club in supporting students' confidence, motivation, and communicative competence in English learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' preferences in the English club

Students' responses suggest that the English Club functions not only as a space for language development, but also as a supportive and enjoyable environment that encourages active participation. In contrast to traditional classroom settings, often characterized by textbook-based instruction and fixed lesson plans, the English Club offers a more flexible and student-centered approach. Many students expressed appreciation for the diverse range of activities provided, including quizzes, presentations, music-based listening tasks, and film screenings.

Pertemuan Kesepuluh

(Kelas 8 dan 9)

(Jumat, 30 Agustus 2024)

A. Tujuan Pembelajaran

Peserta didik mampu memahami ciri, fungsi, struktur, dan jenis Narrative Text dan mempraktekkannya dengan membuat Narrative Text sederhana.

B. Kegiatan Pembelajaran

No	Proses Pembelajaran	Kegiatan Pembelajaran
1.	Materi	Narrative Text
2.	Pembahasan	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Siswa belajar pengertian, ciri-ciri, fungsi, struktur, serta jenis-jenis <i>Narrative Text</i>. siswa juga akan belajar bagaimana membuat teks secara efektif. 2. Siswa memilih jenis <i>Narrative Text</i> dan membuat contoh singkat sebanyak 1 paragraf. 3. Siswa mengumpulkan teks naratif kepada pengajar. Pengajar memilih 2 di antara semua, untuk dibaca di depan kelas. 4. Di akhir pembelajaran, siswa akan bermain game <i>Watch a Movie and Fill in the Blank in Dialogue</i>.

Figure 2. Teaching materials for English Club

These multimodal activities promote learner engagement and accommodate various learning styles, making the process of acquiring English skills more meaningful and enjoyable (Teng, 2019). Importantly, students noted that practicing English in a relaxed, low-pressure context allowed them to develop greater confidence and fluency in speaking and listening. Informal learning spaces such as these have been shown to reduce affective barriers and foster a sense of autonomy and motivation among language learners (Mulyono et al., 2024; Meliyani et al., 2022).

A key strength of the English Club experience is the opportunity for students to build social connections while developing their language skills. Many participants reported that learning alongside friends fostered a sense of comfort and belonging, which contributed to greater motivation and willingness to participate in English activities. Peer interaction was seen as both emotionally supportive and intellectually stimulating, allowing students to practice speaking without fear of judgment. This aligns with previous research indicating that peer-based environments can reduce anxiety and enhance engagement in second language learning (Wang et al., 2021; Peng, 2025). In addition to peer relationships, students emphasized the role of mentors and instructors in shaping a positive learning environment. The approachable and empathetic nature of the facilitators contributed to students' sense of safety and enjoyment during club activities. Several participants highlighted the instructors' enthusiasm, clarity, and ability to design interactive and accessible lessons. This instructional style not only made the sessions more enjoyable but also helped boost learners' confidence, a key factor in effective language acquisition (Bhatti & Aldubaikhi, 2023).

These findings are consistent with research on informal language learning environments. Holandyah et al., (2023) found that English-speaking clubs enhance students' language proficiency by engaging them in interactive activities like storytelling, debates, and discussions, which encourage active participation. Similarly, Atmojo (2022) emphasized that informal learning settings allow students to practice English without fear of making mistakes, making it easier for them to gain confidence in using the language. This aligns with the students' preferences, as they enjoy learning in a setting that feels more relaxed and natural.

Excerpt 1

"An exciting learning system such as quizzes, presentations, listening to songs, watching films, etc." (S1)

"I like that I can meet new friends." (Seru karena banyak temannya.). (S2)

"The mentors are really friendly and fun." (Mentornya menyenangkan.). (S3)

"Because the extracurricular is fun and not too heavy." (Karena ekstrakurhnya seru dan nggak berat.). (S4)

Overall, the students' responses suggest that they highly value the English Club's supportive and engaging learning environment. The combination of interactive activities, peer collaboration, and encouraging mentors contributes to a positive atmosphere that facilitates effective language learning. Such features not only support the development of speaking and listening skills but also reduce anxiety and increase students' willingness to communicate.



Figure 3. English Club session

This finding is consistent with recent research highlighting the significance of emotionally safe and socially rich environments in promoting second language acquisition (Dewaele et al., 2020). When learners perceive the environment as non-threatening and enjoyable, they are more likely to participate actively and take linguistic risks, which are crucial for language development.

Students' dislike opinions on the English club

While the overall response to the English Club was positive, several students identified specific aspects they found challenging. The most frequently cited difficulty was public speaking, particularly when required to present in front of peers or engage in structured debates. For many, speaking in a second language triggered feelings of nervousness and self-consciousness, a phenomenon widely associated with foreign language anxiety (Dewaele et al., 2020). Anxiety can inhibit learners' willingness to participate and negatively affect their communicative competence. Group work also emerged as a concern for some students, particularly those who prefer individual tasks or feel uncomfortable navigating group dynamics. Mismatches between group members' learning styles, motivation levels, or participation tendencies can lead to frustration or disengagement (Mittelmeier et al., 2018). These findings highlight the need for thoughtful scaffolding in informal learning environments, ensuring that tasks are adaptable to diverse learner needs and emotional readiness.

Additionally, some students noted that the pace of the lessons was occasionally too fast, making it challenging to fully absorb the material.

POST-TEACHING

1 = sangat tidak setuju
2 = tidak setuju
3 = setuju
4 = sangat setuju

Tutor selalu mengecek pemahaman saya terhadap materi *

1 2 3 4

sangat tidak setuju sangat setuju

Tutor mengulangi hal hal yang belum dipahami dengan baik *

1 2 3 4

sangat tidak setuju sangat setuju

Tutor memberikan pekerjaan rumah *

1 2 3 4

sangat tidak setuju sangat setuju

Figure 4. Post-test questionnaire

This suggests that while interactive and engaging lessons are valued, a few students may have difficulty keeping up with the speed. Others mentioned feeling sleepy during the sessions, which could indicate that the timing or structure of the lessons didn't always maintain everyone's interest. However, it's worth noting that most students did not have significant complaints about the club, and many specifically mentioned that there was nothing they disliked about it.

These findings are consistent with Tseng (2021), who found that while students enjoy interactive learning, they may struggle with certain teaching methods, especially when they feel pressured to perform in front of others. Furthermore, research by Marsenda (2025) highlights that students' learning preferences vary, and those who lack confidence in their language skills may find group-based learning or debates particularly challenging. Understanding these concerns can help improve the learning experience by offering alternative activities or adjusting teaching methods to better accommodate all students.

Excerpt 2

"Speaking in front of the class." (Waktu berbicara di depan kelas.) (S5)

"Sometimes the material is delivered too fast." (Terkadang penyampaian materi terlalu cepat.) (S6,7,8,9,10)

"Debate, group work." (Debate, berkelompok.) (S11)

Overall, feedback suggests that slowing the lesson pace, offering more speaking opportunities, and providing alternatives for students uncomfortable with public speaking could make the English Club more inclusive and enjoyable. While most students had few complaints, these adjustments could enhance the experience for all.

Students' impressions of the English club

Most students had a great experience in the English Club, describing it as fun, exciting, and an excellent place to learn English. Many appreciated the teaching style, which was interactive and different from regular classes, making lessons more enjoyable. Some even called the club their comfort place which boosted their confidence and happiness. This highlights that the club not only helps improve English skills but also fosters a supportive and welcoming environment.



Figure 5. Storytelling activities

Students also enjoyed the variety of activities in the club, such as games, discussions, storytelling, and watching films. These activities made learning fun and less stressful. Many students praised the teachers and mentors for being kind, patient, and supportive, which helped them feel more comfortable. As a result, students gained confidence in speaking English and were no longer afraid of making mistakes.

This matches what Holandyah et al. (2023) found in their research. They said that students learn better when they are in a friendly and supportive environment where they feel safe to practice English. Marsenda (2025) also said that when students have fun learning, they feel more motivated and want to use English more in daily life. If students enjoy their learning experience, they will be more active and confident in using the language.

Excerpt 3

"Epic, very sigma, 10/10 would come back." (Epik banget sangat sigma 10/10 would come back.) (S12)

"English Club is like my fourth comfort thing. I love it because the teaching is patient and very fun." (English club adalah tempat ternyaman no 4. Suka banget soalnya kalo ngajar itu sabar dan seru.) (S13)

"It expands my knowledge and sharpens my English skills." (Memperluas wawasan, mempertajam skill dalam bahasa Inggris.) (S15)

In summary, the English Club provided a relaxed, engaging environment that supported students' language development. Positive learner responses highlight its role in boosting confidence, motivation, and communicative competence. These findings underscore the potential of informal learning spaces as valuable complements to formal language instruction.

Students' suggestions for the future of the English club

Students provided several suggestions for enhancing the English Club experience, with a focus on increasing engagement, enjoyment, and accessibility. Many participants recommended incorporating more interactive elements, particularly film-viewing sessions, which they perceived as both enjoyable and effective for improving listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (Pattemore et al., 2024). Several students also emphasized the importance of maintaining a low-pressure environment, expressing a preference for reduced homework and fewer performance-based tasks. This aligns with findings by Dewaele et al. (2020), who argue that emotionally supportive settings reduce foreign language anxiety and promote greater learner participation. In addition, students expressed appreciation for the current teaching approach and stressed the need to preserve the club's interactive and motivating atmosphere even in the event of changes in facilitation. These preferences highlight the importance of designing informal language learning

spaces that are both emotionally safe and pedagogically responsive (Lee et al., 2024; Safeer et al., 2024).

These suggestions align with findings from previous studies on informal language learning. Atmojo (2022) found that informal learning spaces that integrate entertainment-based methods, such as watching films and engaging in fun activities, significantly enhance students' motivation and willingness to practice English. Similarly, Lutfiana et al. (2021) discovered that media exposure, particularly through films and YouTube videos, helps students improve their listening, pronunciation, and comprehension skills in a way that feels natural and engaging. By making learning enjoyable, students are more likely to participate actively and feel encouraged to use English in real-life situations without the fear of making mistakes. This approach is particularly valuable in an environment where English is not commonly spoken outside the classroom, as it provides students with more exposure to the language in an immersive yet relaxed setting.

Several students specifically requested more film-watching sessions, believing that this activity helps them learn English in a more engaging way. The students expressed as recorded on excerpt 4 as follows.

Excerpt 4

"Watch more films instead of studying materials." (Banyakin nonton film aja daripada materi) (S16)

"Please add more film-watching activities because they are fun." (Aktivitas liat film lebih banyak soalnya seru.). (S17)

"Hopefully, there won't be any homework." (Semoga gak ada tugas.). (S18)

Beyond activity-based suggestions, many students also provided words of encouragement for the club and its instructors. One student emphasized personal growth through English learning, toward the club and toward the teacher. It is described on excerpt 5 in the following.

Excerpt 5

"Always strive to be the best version of yourself by continuously learning and practicing English." (Jadilah versi terbaik dari dirimu dengan terus belajar dan berlatih bahasa Inggris.). (S19)

"Hopefully, the English Club will continue to grow, and more students will join. Even if different people are teaching, I hope the teaching style remains the same." (Semoga untuk kedepannya English Club bisa lebih asik dan seru, lebih banyak yang join, dan juga banyak hal-hal yang menyenangkan kedepannya.). (S20)

"I hope this extracurricular activity can attract more members." (Kami harap kegiatan ekstrakurikuler ini makin banyak anggotanya). (S1,2,3,4,5)

Overall, the findings indicate that students place high value on the English Club's engaging and low-anxiety learning environment. While they expressed satisfaction with the current teaching approach, many suggested the integration of more media-based activities, particularly film-viewing sessions, which they found both enjoyable and pedagogically effective (Pattemore et al., 2024). Additionally, several students recommended minimizing rigid or performance-based assignments to maintain the club's relaxed and motivating atmosphere, an aspect strongly linked to reduced language anxiety and increased learner engagement (Dewaele et al., 2020). Their suggestions underscore a strong sense of ownership and appreciation for the program and its facilitators, highlighting the need to preserve a supportive, interactive, and emotionally responsive learning space in future iterations (Lee & Kim, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The study reveals that students find informal teaching and learning, particularly in English Clubs, to be an effective and enjoyable way to improve their language skills. They value the relaxed, stress-free atmosphere, which allows them to practice speaking without the fear of making mistakes. Interactive activities, peer support, and real-world communication opportunities enhance their confidence and motivation. However, some students still face challenges with speaking skills and adapting to the unstructured format of informal learning. Despite these challenges, students often view informal learning as a valuable supplement to formal education, offering a more enjoyable and stress-free approach to language acquisition.

To improve informal learning, English Clubs should incorporate a blend of structured and flexible activities to accommodate various learning styles. Encouraging teamwork and supporting shy students to feel more comfortable can enhance participation. Teachers and group leaders can also provide constructive feedback to aid student improvement. Future research could explore the long-term benefits of informal learning, its integration with formal lessons, and how online tools can support it. Additionally, studying students from diverse backgrounds could help educators develop more effective programs tailored to their needs.

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