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Language Immersion Programme: An Analysis of Indonesian Students' Reflections on Learning Experiences at a Malaysian International University

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ABSTRACT

English Immersive Programmes offer learners an authentic exposure to the target language. Malaysia offers a culturally familiar ESL environment for learners of English from non-native neighbouring countries. The study examines the reflections of a group of high school students from Sumatra who participated in a two-week language immersion programme at an international university in Malaysia. The language programme was designed to integrate both indoor and outdoor activities into the learning process. A total of twelve journals were collected and analysed using Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis. Learning, Emotional Journey, and Cultural Encounters were identified as the main themes, with Language as a sub-theme of Learning. The findings affirm the role of immersion on all four language skills and suggest that reflective journaling can foster learners' development in language learning. To assist students in future programmes, a comprehensive needs analysis prior to implementation is essential, allowing suitable courses and activities to be designed and offered.

KEYWORDS: Thematic Analysis; English Immersion Programme (EIP); Second Language Acquisition (SLA); Formal Learning; Informal Learning

Introduction

Language immersion programmes aim to improve students' language skills by providing intense and consistent exposure to the target language through classroom instruction, daily interaction, and cultural activities. Immersion enables students to experience language in real-life contexts, accelerating their learning process. This also motivates them to improve, as they are surrounded by people who speak the language. This is supported by research showing that English-only policies can effectively enhance students' speaking fluency and motivation to use the language (Iliana Putri & Gopal, 2021).

Several studies have been conducted on English Immersion Programme (EIP). Baker and Wright (2021) examined the use of English as the medium of instruction in the classroom as a tool for both academic and social interaction. Lenker and Rhodes (2017) explained that a one-way immersion programme, such as English immersion, is designed for students to learn English. Teachers must, therefore, be competent to teach students in their second language for the programme to succeed. Since English is a second language in Malaysia, a one-way immersion programme appears attractive to the Diniyyah Putri students, a prestigious Indonesian girls' boarding school in Padang Panjang, Sumatra, who want to study English in Malaysia. They have requested the Department of English Language and Literature (DELL) at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) to conduct a two-week immersion program for their students. The programme includes classroom instruction and field study. The goal is to improve all four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) while studying in Malaysia.

Besides Indonesia's proximity to Malaysia, another important reason for selecting Malaysia, particularly IIUM, is its culture and religion. Generally, the Muslims in Malaysia live in an Islamic environment where Muslim women wear the headscarves, *halal* eateries are widespread, and *surau* or prayer rooms are widely available, as Islam is deeply ingrained in the lives of the Malay Muslims. Considering the students are still underage, having the same religious background as the Malay majority reassures parents or guardians that their children are still within the confines of Islam and, therefore, able to practise their religion with ease. These same factors also attract students from other Muslim countries to learn English in Malaysia.

English language students face many challenges in acquiring the four language skills. Among these, speaking skills are considered the most difficult skill to master, as they facilitate communication and the exchange of ideas (Nunan, 1991). Moreover, speaking remains essential in reading, writing, and listening classes as teachers need to communicate with students in the classroom. Lacking fluency leads to challenges that hinder students' ability to communicate effectively and confidently. Even though many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners have completed secondary education, Nunan explained that speaking still poses difficulty for many of them. This is because teachers tend to focus more on grammar instruction and writing, with not much emphasis on speaking. Some students often feel hesitant to engage in dialogue with native speakers or even with their peers due to limited vocabulary and pronunciation difficulties. Since language classes are often academic and teacher-oriented, this can lead to problems for students in expressing themselves in English. They may be academically strong but poor in social interactions. Students' commitment to the immersion programme, in addition to the quality of the programme and the length of time spent in the

immersive environment, are some factors that determine the success of EIP. Participating in an immersion programme can significantly improve students' language proficiency regardless of the programme duration.

This motivated the Diniyyah Putri boarding school to approach IIUM, notably DELL, for a two-week immersion programme to enhance their students' English language skills. This, in turn, motivated the DELL researchers to examine the students' reflections on their English language experience in the immersive programme by focusing on their writing fluency through journal writing.

Literature Review

Language immersion programmes have been found to be successful in promoting second language learning and cultural diversity. They provide learners in EFL and ESL courses with exposure to English in and out of the classroom. This review explores immersion-based learning by focusing on four thematic elements: language acquisition, benefits of immersion programmes, their cultural and social impact, and reflective journaling. It also identifies a critical gap in the current research, which is the lack of studies on short-term immersion experiences in English as a Second Language (ESL) environments from the perspective of student reflections.

Language Acquisition in Immersive Contexts

Immersion programmes enhance learners' proficiency by embedding them in environments where the target language is consistently used. Vygotsky (1978) considered social interaction the core of language development, which is the basis of the communicative approach in education. Taking the discussion a step further, Kang (2005) highlighted the role of learners' willingness to participate in communication in their use of a second language. Martinsen (2011) found that learning a language is very robust within authentic social contexts. Similarly, Cook (2011) maintained that when learners are situated in genuine situations, they tend to absorb language more naturally, which indicates the advantage of learning through immersion. Such shared views emphasise the experiential contribution that EIPs can make. The input learners receive from English speakers, their intention to communicate, and the context of acquisition all work together in the language learning process. EIPs support learners in becoming proficient and confident language users by providing a real-world context for communication.

Benefits of English Immersion Programmes (EIPs)

An increasing number of studies indicate the contribution of EIPs in facilitating language acquisition. Within the Indonesian context, Pratiwi (2023) reported significant gains in learners' vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation as a result of intensive instruction. Immersion-oriented school students also felt they developed language more quickly than peers in regular school settings (Hutabarat, 2023). Similarly, a study by Liu, Hu, and Peng (2017) also indicated that Chinese university students made gains in all four language domains after a short-term immersion learning experience.

Cultural and Social Impact of Immersion

Immersion programmes also cultivate intercultural awareness and social sensitivity. Block and Vidaurre (2019) found that dual-language immersion students exhibited more positive attitudes toward multiculturalism than their mainstream peers. Kijima (2019) found that Japanese students in immersion were able to form intercultural tolerance while retaining a strong sense of their cultural identity. These researchers argue that immersion not only contributes to language proficiency but also influences the development of cognitive and social skills.

Reflective Journaling as a Pedagogical Tool

Journaling serves as a powerful tool for documenting learners' emotional and cognitive responses. Hyers (2018) advocates the use of diaries as a means to document personal reflection. This enables students to externalise their thoughts on paper, which other means of data collection, like interviews, could not capture. In an immersion setting, journaling provides students with an outlet to process their experiences, track their development, and foster self-awareness as they adapt to new languages and cultures.

Critical Gap in Existing Research

Although much research has been conducted on immersion programmes, little has focused on short-term immersion programmes in ESL settings from the perspectives of students' reflection. Many of these studies are concerned with longer-term impact or institutional perspectives, while the emotive and experiential aspects of learning that are captured in learner journaling are largely neglected. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the reflections of 12 Indonesian students on their 2-week experience in an English immersion programme in Malaysia, focusing on how they perceived and responded to language immersion in a culturally familiar ESL environment.

From the review, the value of learning experiences, the effectiveness of short-term programmes, and the inclusion of reflective journals to grasp learners' experiences and learning can be identified. These insights informed the current study on how Indonesian learners approached language and culture in an intensive two-week language immersion programme in Malaysia. Their journal writings contain insights into the linguistic, social, and affective aspects of immersion.

Although immersion programmes are generally conducted in the native language country for reasons that have been discussed, research on immersion programmes conducted in ESL/EFL countries has not been sufficiently studied. This motivated the researchers to examine the students' reflections on their English language experience in a two-week language immersive programme that was conducted at IIUM and taught by in-house instructors. The study is guided by the following single research question:

1. What are the Diniyyah Putri students' reflections on the English language experience in the immersive programme?

Method

The data in this qualitative research was collected from a group of Diniyyah Putri High School students from Bukit Tinggi, Sumatra, who underwent a two-week language immersion programme. The programme aimed to combine formal learning with experiential language exposure and cultural experiences in order to develop their language competence and communicative skills.

The programme's basic structure included daily English-medium classes that covered subjects such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening, as well as excursions. Over a period of two weeks, classes were designed to be conducted in the morning, emphasising the four language skills. The lessons or activities were mainly indoor but highly interactive and student-centred. These proficiency lessons are designed to improve their English skills and increase their cultural awareness. Classroom instructions began daily from 8.30 am to noon. Their day then continued from 2 pm to 4.30 pm with afternoon excursions and indoor activities. ISTAC library, Ilham Gallery, and the University Language Institute's resource centre were some places of interest the students visited. All 30 students, between 16 and 17 years old, attended the classes and excursions with the guidance of four facilitators. The primary instructors for the language classes were from DELL, with backgrounds in linguistics and literature, and two were English proficiency teachers who were pursuing their PhDs.

In this study, students were instructed and encouraged to write a journal entry at the end of each day to reflect on the day's classes, excursions, and their general observations. The journal must be written in English and should be no longer than half a page. At the end of the two weeks, only 12 journal entries were collected. Guest, Namey and Chen (2020) found that data saturation is often reached with around 10-12 participants in a homogenous population. Hennik and Kaiser (2022) also reported similar findings, where data saturation was achieved with fewer participants, in this case between 9 and 17. This shows that 12 journal entries are sufficient for qualitative data analysis in this study.

The paper is wholly qualitative, as the findings were not reduced to numerical data. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, with adaptations to suit the corpus-based nature and its focus on participant reflection and cultural discourse.

Step 1: Familiarisation

The first phase involved familiarising the twelve reflective journals written by high school students from Sumatra who participated in a two-week English immersion programme at the International Islamic University Malaysia. The researchers read the journal entries several times to gain a holistic understanding of the students' linguistic choices, emotional tone, and experiential narratives. They noted the students' recurring lexical patterns, affective expressions, and cultural references. This phase laid the groundwork for systematic coding.

Step 2: Generating initial codes (Coding)

During this phase, the researchers identified features that emerged repeatedly across the data. These features were then coded into categories relevant to the research question. For example, sentences such as “*I wanted to improve my English*” were coded as Language/Learning, “*I felt nervous at first*” as Feelings/Emotions, and “*We sampled various food at the food court*” as Food/Culture. These codes were not fixed; they were subject to change as more data was collected and new features emerged. Coding was performed manually and verified by an inter-coder to ensure consistency and traceability.

Step 3: Searching for themes (Generating themes)

In this phase, researchers collated the codes into potential themes that can be organised into themes and sub-themes. For example, codes related to emotional responses (e.g. anxiety, excitement, pride) could form a major theme, such as Emotional Journey, with a sub-theme like Confidence.

Step 4: Reviewing themes

Themes were reviewed, and overlapping codes were reassigned or merged where necessary. For example, “*I felt proud when I gave a speech*” was initially coded under Emotion, but upon review, it was also associated with Learning due to its academic context. This iterative process ensured thematic robustness and alignment with the study's research question.

Step 5: Defining and naming themes

Each theme was constructed in terms of its discursive and cultural importance. The theme Learning included experiences of growth in academics, in language, and in reflection on oneself. In addition, Emotional Journey was highlighted as their emotional reactions to cross-cultural experiences. Cultural Encounters, on the other hand, offered students the learning experience on local social practices, hospitality and everyday culture of Malaysia. Collectively, they provided a rich personal and cultural transformation.

Step 6: Producing the report (Writing up)

In the final phase of analysis, the themes and sub-themes were presented in the Results section. Each theme was described briefly, followed by excerpts from the students' journal entries. These excerpts provided insights into their personal goals, aspirations, emotional experiences, and motivation, which are integral to understanding the impact of a language immersion programme.

Results

This section presents a discussion of the findings by answering the research question. After the researchers familiarise themselves with the students' writing, a few codes were generated using the coding in Step 5. They are identified and discussed below.

Table 1. Emergent Themes/Sub-themes and Representative Quotes from Students' Journals

Themes/ Sub-theme	Description	Representative Quotes
1. Learning (theme)	Students expressed academic goals, personal growth, and informal cultural observations during the programme	1. <i>"I learned a lot of skills after studying at IIUM for a week."</i> 2. <i>"I joined this programme because I want to have the skills to read and write also speak English."</i> 3. <i>"I feel very honoured to study here and excited."</i> 4. <i>"I will study hard for the faculty I want to be in and be the students in IIUM."</i>
1.1 Language (sub- theme)	Students were motivated to improve proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and pronunciation, and showed awareness of language limitations.	1. <i>"I hope my English will be more better than before."</i> 2. <i>"I hope I will have a better accent."</i> 3. <i>"I want to use English in my daily life."</i> 4. <i>"I want to be good at English."</i> 5. <i>"I joined this programme because I want to have the skills to read and write also speak English."</i>
2. Emotional Journey (theme)	Students described how they felt during the programme i.e. excited, nervous, happy, and even a little sad to leave. Their reflections show emotional growth and personal connection to the experience.	1. <i>"I feel very happy and excited to study here."</i> 2. <i>"I feel excited, nervous, and afraid about many things."</i> 3. <i>"I really miss this place if I go to the country."</i> 4. <i>"I am glad to be here and enjoy living at this university."</i> 5. <i>"I am happy to be here and sad the day will come."</i>
3. Cultural Encounters (theme)	Students reflected on interpersonal warmth, hospitality, and culinary experiences. They described meaningful interactions with locals and expressed appreciation for Malaysian food as a gateway to cultural understanding.	1. <i>"People at here walking very fast."</i> 2. <i>"People at here very kind and have beautiful smill (*smile), friendly."</i> 3. <i>"Everyone is ok and kind and friendly."</i> 4. <i>"Many people, even they are alone, are kind-hearted."</i> 5. <i>"All teacher here are friendly and no pressure."</i> 6. <i>"I like food Malaysia."</i> 7. <i>"Food great test (*taste)."</i> 8. <i>"When I go back, I hope to be better and be able to eat food of every flavour."</i>

Discussion

Table 1 presents Learning as the main theme with Language as its sub-theme. This is followed by two other themes, which are Emotional Journey and Cultural Encounters. All themes and sub-themes were identified through thematic analysis of students' journals. These reflections highlight the pedagogical value of immersive programmes in ESL settings, specifically for learners from EFL contexts.

Learning

The theme of Learning revealed students' motivation to enhance their language proficiency. These reflections on Learning highlight the pedagogical value of an immersive programme in an ESL setting. In addition to their motivation, the Indonesian students' receptiveness to new academic and cultural experiences was one of the outcomes they revealed. This aligns with Liu, Hu and Peng (2017), who observed that short-term immersion fosters improvement in all four language skills and boosts learner confidence. The combination of classroom instruction and informal excursions supports Martinsen's (2011) claim that contextual exposure enhances linguistic development.

Language

Language, a sub-theme of Learning, emerged as one of the reasons the students participated in this immersion programme. It emphasised students' concerns about speaking fluently, pronunciation, and the everyday use of English. The representative quotes reveal students' strong desire to boost their reading, writing, and speaking skills. For them, using English daily in academic and social settings is essential. They were concerned with their proficiency in all four skills and yearned to enhance their language learning. The students' focus on fluency and daily use of English is consistent with the finding that English-only environments, like the immersion programme, provide valuable exposure that can significantly improve speaking and listening skills (Iliana Putri & Gopal, 2021).

The journal entries show that students are concerned with the four language skills, including pronunciation. Cook (2011) asserts that authentic contexts encourage learners to internalise language more naturally. For example, sentence 2 suggests that accent is a crucial aspect of English pronunciation. Indonesian pronunciation patterns might influence how they pronounce certain English sounds, leading to difficulties with vowel distinctions or consonant clusters. In expressing a desire for accent improvement so they can be understood more easily, they might face challenges due to ingrained L1 pronunciation habits.

Learners must understand that L1 interference is a normal and natural part of language learning. Since Indonesia is an EFL country, the students were very enthusiastic about improving their English. Sentences 1, 3, 4, and 5 indicate that they aspired to be better than they were before joining the immersion programme. Although instances of L1 interference were noted, such as "*more better*," this error is common among developing EFL learners. It can be addressed through guided corrective feedback and opportunities for naturalistic practice. Some students were concerned with their reading and writing skills and yearned to improve them, while others desired to use English daily. Their main concern was to acquire all four English language skills. This was the students' primary motivation for joining the immersive programme.

Emotional Journey

The students' emotions were reflected in their expression of happiness and excitement when joining the classes. Sentence 3 expresses the students' excitement and anxiety before the

commencement of classes, which is a normal reaction to a new experience. Their relief upon finding friendly instructors demonstrates the crucial role the right environment plays in language learning. Being in a friendly classroom atmosphere minimises the impact of L1 interference, allowing students to gain confidence and to experiment without feeling threatened.

Cultural Encounters

Beyond formal instruction, the students engaged in informal learning through observation and cultural experiences. In one journal entry, they claimed that “*Malaysians walk very fast, friendly, and kind-hearted.*” This perception reflects their initial cultural observations. This positive experience could be attributed to their visit to KLCC, one of the popular tourist sites in Malaysia. While these observations are positive, it is important to note that generalisations about the entire population can be misleading. These initial thoughts about Malaysians are not final; further interaction and cultural immersion would provide a better understanding.

Another experience they cherished was sampling Malaysian local cuisine. Food is a strong cultural marker, and exploring local dishes can provide valuable insights into their history, traditions, and values. This experience can also be a source of language learning as students encounter new vocabulary related to food and dining. Their enjoyment in sampling diverse food inspires them to explore new flavours upon returning home. Sampling a country's cuisine is a significant learning experience.

Collectively, these themes illustrate how short-term immersion programmes develop language skills as well as emotional resilience, intercultural sensitivity, and learner autonomy. The students' reflections reveal that language learning is firmly embedded in affective and social aspects as well as cultural familiarity, such as shared religious practices and culinary experiences. By integrating formal instruction with experiential learning, the programme created a holistic environment where students could explore language as both a communicative tool and a cultural bridge. These findings suggest the importance of designing immersion programmes that reflect and adapt to learners' backgrounds, aspirations, and emotional needs.

Conclusion

This study examined the reflections of Diniyyah Putri students on a two-week English immersion programme organised by the Department of English Language and Literature at the International Islamic University Malaysia. Thematic analysis of twelve journal articles revealed that the students were positive about the programme, demonstrating enthusiasm, adaptability, and motivation in their journal writing. The themes affirmed that immersion programmes, when situated in linguistically and culturally familiar environments, can meaningfully support language acquisition and learner confidence.

The findings indicated that the students benefited from the programme in various ways. However, to ensure the success of future programmes, a needs analysis must be conducted to allow organisers to tailor lessons and activities to participants' linguistic proficiency, learning goals, and cultural expectations. Customising the programme based on these insights can enhance its relevance, effectiveness, and overall impact.

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