

SOCIAL ENCLOSURE AND L2 ENGLISH ATTRITION IN ACEHNESE RETURNEES

Fatayatul Hanani Safrul 1 ✉, Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh

Safrul Muluk 2, Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh

✉ 230203165@student.ar-raniry.ac.id

Abstract: This study examines the phenomenon of social enclosure and its relationship with second language (L2) English attrition among Acehnese returnees. Social enclosure refers to the limited interaction within close-knit local communities, which may reduce opportunities for sustained use of English after returning from abroad or other English-speaking environments. The research aims to analyze how reduced exposure, shifting social networks, and reintegration into local linguistic contexts contribute to the decline of English proficiency. A qualitative approach was employed, involving in-depth interviews and language use observations among Acehnese individuals who had previously acquired English as a second language. The findings reveal that strong reliance on the local language, minimal communicative need for English, and sociocultural adaptation significantly accelerate language attrition. Additionally, identity realignment and community expectations further discourage the active use of English in daily interactions. The study highlights the importance of maintaining language practice environments and supportive communities to mitigate L2 attrition. These findings contribute to broader discussions on language maintenance, sociolinguistics, and post-mobility language dynamics in multilingual societies.

Keywords: *Social enclosure, language attrition, English as a second language, Acehnese returnees, sociolinguistics*

INTRODUCTION

Second language (L2) attrition is a complex phenomenon defined as the non-pathological decline of a previously learned language to a lower level of proficiency. While most Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research focuses on how languages are learned, studying how they are forgotten or "attrited" is also important for understanding bilingualism. For returnees who grew up in an English-speaking countries, returning to Indonesia is a "linguistic shock". They move from a high English immersion environment to an environment where English is not use in daily life. Research shows that this attrition can happen quickly. Fajri (2023) stated that in children, lexical and grammatical losses can begin almost immediately after the primary source of input disappears, with significant functional loss occurring within 7 months.

In the Indonesian environment, the main challenge for returnees is not just a lack of formal education, but also the loss of an active language community. Tracy-Ventura et al. (2025) Believe that while attrition is frequently considered to happen once formal instruction ends, the trajectory of loss is actually influenced by the intensity of continuous L2 use. However, for many returnees in Aceh, "continued use" is complicated by something known as Social Enclosure. Social enclosure refers to the extent to which a person's social network is linguistically homogeneous, effectively enclosing the individual within the dominant local language (Indonesian or Acehnese) while excluding the L2 English.

Sociocultural challenges in Indonesia create a "societal wall" that stigmatizes the use of English in public. Returnees frequently encounter the "sok Inggris" (acting English) attitude, which interprets natural proficiency as an attempt to "show off," as elitism, or as a lack of nationalism. Such negative social feedback labels English use as a "illegitimate mode of communication" (Skujins, 2017), creating a high-anxiety environment in which returnees are hesitant to talk for fear of making grammatical mistakes or being viewed as

arrogant (Amiruddin, 2022) This pressure raises the mental effort required for retrieval, eventually leading to psycholinguistic loss.

Akram et al. (2023) says that cultural isolation and a lack of social support become the key causes of attrition. To prevent slander and maintain relationships, returnees frequently abandon English in favor of local standards (Skujins, 2017). Suharmoko et al. (2025) stated that preservation depends on conscious Language Maintenance Efforts (LMEs), such as private "self-talk" and digital immersion through platforms like YouTube or Roblox.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The Nature of Language Attrition

Language attrition is the natural drop in L2 proficiency due to decreased use, excluding loss caused by neurological abnormalities or disorders such as dementia (Gallo, et al., 2021). For this study, the process is considered First Language (L1) attrition in an L2 environment (Sari, 2021), where the formerly dominant English is displaced by the rapidly developing Indonesian L2/new L1. Research constantly shows that attrition has a disproportionate effect on productive skills (speaking and writing) and lexical knowledge (Jessner, Oberhofer, & Megens, 2021; Sari, 2021) . It is attributed to basic psycholinguistic systems where attrition shows as "impaired access to language in memory" (Jessner, Oberhofer, & Megens, 2021), rather than irreversible loss. The decline is often first perceived as "less efficient processing" or an increase in mental effort required for spontaneous speech (Gallo, et al., 2021).

1. *The activation Threshold Hypothesis (ATH)*

This framework explains that misuse causes the neural retrieval barrier for linguistic things to increase (Jessner, Oberhofer, & Megens, 2021) . This rise results in slower and more effortful access. The subjective impression of this increased effort is regarded an early and accurate indication of psycholinguistic decline, requiring qualitative study alongside objective measures (Jessner, Oberhofer, & Megens, 2021).

B. Extralinguistics Factors and Language Maintenance Efforts (LMEs)

Attrition outcomes are heavily influenced by extralinguistic factors, the environment, attitude, and social factors, as maintenance is a socio-cultural endeavor (Jessner, Oberhofer, & Megens, 2021). LMEs are intentional, conscious strategies used to counteract loss (Khasanah, Widiati, Tresnadewi, & Wulyan, 2024). They include the language use element (real use or reactivation) and the linguistic confirmation factor (explicit renewal of knowledge). Individual characteristics, especially investment, influence long-term LMEs (Noar, 2024), which are described as the individual's complex social background and many desires linked to a preferred life path (Noar, 2024). This investment is articulated through the pursuit of an "Imagined Future" (Nabilla, 2023), such as securing better employment or educational prospects (Suharmoko, Syamsudarni, Rahman, Hasbullah, & Dabamona, 2025) . The effort invested in LME often functions as a psychological defense mechanism (Noar, 2024) against the emotional distress that would arise from failing to realize these aspirational goals (Noar, 2024; Nabilla, 2023).

Qualitative studies on attrition in Indonesia reveal a significant difference in the utility of LMEs:

1. *Low utility*

The factor of social interaction has been discovered to have relatively low predictive potential for long-term foreign language loss (Khasanah, Widiati, Tresnadewi, & Wulyan, 2024)

2. *High Utility*

In contrast, strategies having a significant negative link with attrition are often discrete, conscious compensatory efforts: Academic Activity, Literacy Activity, and Entertainment (e.g., viewing English movies, consuming digital media) (Khasanah, Widiati, Tresnadewi, & Wulyan, 2024) . This implies that high effort, deliberate maintenance activities are required to recover lost natural input (Jessner, Oberhofer, & Megens, 2021)

C. Social Enclosure

Social Enclosure is the structural concept of the negative environment: a social network where L1 (Indonesian) is the only communication medium (Sari, 2021) . This structural barrier gets worse by widespread negative cultural views towards public L2 use (Suharmoko, Syamsudarni, Rahman, Hasbullah, & Dabamona, 2025).

Societal sentiment often interprets public English use as "showing off" or uses derogatory terms like "local bule" (Suharmoko, Syamsudarni, Rahman, Hasbullah, & Dabamona, 2025). This social pressure creates a cognitive and emotional block, leading students to experience embarrassment and forcing them to employ the dominant L1 even in social circumstances, actively contributing to L1 attrition (Akram, Khan, & Mufti, 2023) . A high level of enclosure reduces opportunities for real interaction and makes external, social LMEs ineffectual (Khasanah, Widiati, Tresnadewi, & Wulyan, 2024) , driving maintenance efforts into private domains.

D. Previous Studies

Research focusing on children returning from immersion environments confirms the extreme vulnerability of their L2 skills following an input shift (Sari, 2021). Language loss in this population has been reported to develop swiftly, with first signs occasionally apparent around 6 months (Tracy-Ventura, Huensch, Katz, & Mitchell, 2025) and total loss of active language ability possible within 7 months in some young subjects (Fajri, 2023) . The loss typically impacts active skills, lexical items, and grammar (Sari, 2021) . Additionally, research have highlighted that the skill level of the parent (or caregiver) and the decrease of the first language input, combined with the immediate increase in the second language input, are the key cause variables in quick attrition (Fajri, 2023).

Recent qualitative research on Indonesian families that returned home after temporarily lived abroad provide direct evidence of context-specific LMEs that parallel the proposed taxonomy:

1. *Embedded/Private Maintenance*

Parents use English as the main language for daily communication at home, sometimes applying strict rules like "no English no service" (Suharmoko, Syamsudarni, Rahman, Hasbullah, & Dabamona, 2025)

2. *Digital/Virtual Maintenance*

Families provide significant English exposure through digital technology, such as watching YouTube videos and playing online games (e.g., Roblox)

(Suharmoko et al., 2025). Technology is a main method for gaining real language exposure while avoiding geographical limits (Suharmoko, Syamsudarni, Rahman, Hasbullah,

& Dabamona, 2025)

3. *External Network Maintenance*

Maintaining friendships and communication with friends in the host country (e.g., Australia) through video calls and chat services is a crucial strategy to ensure regular, authentic language use and receive language feedback (Suharmoko, Syamsudarni, Rahman, Hasbullah, & Dabamona, 2025)

According to the affective factors model, parental belief in the importance of English for their children's future, particularly for education and work opportunities, is the main factor determining their compensatory LME tactics (Suharmoko, Syamsudarni, Rahman, Hasbullah, & Dabamona,

2025)

METHODS

A. Research Design

This study will employ a qualitative approach, comparative multiple case study design. The qualitative method is necessary for gathering full life narratives and subjective experiences of attrition, such as increased mental effort and processing inefficiency, which are important but subjective indications of psycholinguistic decline (Gallo, et al., 2021). The comparative structure is the methodological foundation for identifying explanatory elements. It allows the study to systematically compare the social contexts, Language Maintenance Efforts (LMEs), and longitudinal results of L2 Maintainers to L2 Attriters. This comparison is critical for identifying how differences in Social Enclosure contribute to different proficiency outcomes over time (Tracy-Ventura, Huensch, Katz, & Mitchell, 2025)

B. Participants

1. *Population*

The population for this study consists of young adults in Indonesia who experienced early childhood immersion in an English-speaking country followed and then returned to a non-English-speaking environment. Specifically, the population is defined by individuals who have lived abroad in an English-speaking environment between the ages 2-10. Have returned to Indonesia around the age of 6-10 and are currently aged 20 to 22 years, Providing a sufficient time after return to determine long-term L2 maintenance or attrition patterns.

2. *Sampling*

Purposive sampling will be used as the main method for selecting participants who meet the criteria of the population. This approach ensures the selection of individuals with the necessary specific experience to provide rich, relevant data on childhood L2 attrition and maintenance (Akram, Khan, & Mufti, 2023).

The most important step in the sampling process is the purposeful selection and categorization of the two core case groups based on objective L2 proficiency assessment.

- a. **L2 Maintainers:** Individuals displaying evidence of sustained, low attrition in L2 proficiency.
- b. **L2 Attriters:** Individuals exhibiting significant decline or high attrition in L2 proficiency.

The study will consist of a minimum of one person per group (L2 Maintainers and L2 Attriters), using the principles of a Multiple Case Study design to allow for comparative analysis while preserving the requisite depth for qualitative inquiry (Tracy-Ventura, Huensch, Katz, & Mitchell, 2025)

C. Data Collection

This study's data is collected using two supporting methodologies, all of which are aimed at acquiring relevant narratives as well as the essential measurable metrics for the comparative case study.

1. *Individual Semi-Structured Interviews (Primary Data)*

Semi-structured interviews is the main approach for collecting primary, in-depth qualitative data. This one-on-one approach is methodologically important for investigating the complex, sensitive, and longitudinal experiences of L2 maintenance and attrition (Akram, Khan, & Mufti, 2023). The semi-structured approach allows the researcher to operate within a guiding framework of preset questions while simultaneously investigating spontaneous, detailed narratives. The goal is to reveal broad and complex life narratives centered on three major areas: social network assessment (to quantify social enclosure), detailed language maintenance efforts (LMEs), and affective narratives about investment and imagined futures (Nabilla, 2023). These narratives will serve as the foundation for rich, contextualized qualitative findings.

2. *Communicative Self-Rating Scale (CSRS)*

The CSRS serves as a quantitative categorization instrument. Participants will complete a standardized self-assessment scale based on real-world L2 communicative tasks. The resulting numerical score provides a quick, reliable measure of the participant's perceived L2 proficiency. This score is the primary metric used to classify individuals into the L2 Maintainer (high score) and L2 Attriter (low score) case groups for the comparative analysis.

D. Data Analysis

1. *Narrative Analysis*

This will be the primary qualitative method for interpreting the interview transcripts. This approach focuses on the structure, content, and performance of the participants' personal stories, particularly their language biographies (Nabilla, 2023; Fajri, 2023). The analysis will be guided by the following objectives:

- a. **Story Structure and Framing:** Analyzing *how* participants construct their journey, focusing on plot points, turning points (e.g.,

repatriation, crucial LME failures), and the use of linguistic devices that signal affect and evaluation (Noar, 2024)

- b. Identity Construction: Examining how participants articulate their relationship with the L2, specifically focusing on the construction of their Investment and Imagined Futures (or lack thereof). This reveals the motivational drivers and the perceived subjective value of the L2.
- c. Psycholinguistic Signals: Identifying narrative segments where participants describe the subjective feeling of loss or increased mental effort (Jessner, Oberhofer, & Megens, 2021; Gallo, et al., 2021). These narratives serve as early qualitative evidence of psycholinguistic decline preceding overt behavioral attrition.
- d. Sociolinguistic Environment: Identifying how the narratives frame the concept of Social Enclosure, determining whether the participant recounts their social environment as a barrier or a resource for L2 maintenance (Sari, 2021)

2. *Mixed-Data Synthesis and Cross-Case Comparison*

The final stage is a significant methodological step in which all data sources are integrated to meet the study's comparative objective.

The Communicative Self-Rating Scale (CSRS) numerical scores will be combined with the Focused Language Use Log's aggregated numerical data on L2 use. These measurements provide a theoretical foundation for categorizing individuals as Maintainers or Attriters and for assessing LME efforts. Each case will be given its own full profile. This profile combines their quantitative measurements with their in-depth narrative analysis conclusions.

The whole narrative profiles and quantitative data will be carefully compared between the L2 Maintainer Group and the L2 Attriter Group. This study use narrative structures (the how and why of their L2 journey) to explain the disparity in quantitative scores (what of their proficiency and usage). The synthesis focuses on the explanatory value of characteristics such as identity, investment, and the perceived importance of social enclosure in predicting long-term L2 outcomes.

RESULTS

A. Findings

The data collected from Participant 1 (JF) and Participant 2 (NA) show two completely different reactions to the "linguistic shock" of returning to Indonesia. While both participants returned as children after years of living in English-speaking countries such as Australia, the difference in their current proficiency scores (23 vs. 17 on the CSRS) is attributable to their interactions with their social environments and their personal maintenance efforts.

1. Initial Return and Linguistic Identity

Upon arrival in Aceh, both participants experienced linguistic difficulty. JF said that speaking English felt "normal" and that she was mostly not concerned about what

others thought as a child. However, she stated that neither Indonesian nor English felt like his "main" language at the time, meaning a condition of balanced but probably unstable bilingualism. It is typical among children who return before their teens, as their linguistic systems are not yet fully established (Sari, 2021; Fajri, 2023). Meanwhile, NA defined English as her "main" language upon her return and expressed an important internal shift in which she not only talked but also "thought in English" during her early years in Indonesia. Despite its initial dominance, NF eventually experienced significant attrition, showing that early dominance cannot guarantee long-term stability if later input is insufficient (Fajri, 2023).

2. The long-term progress of proficiency

The progress after returning shows a significant difference in how individuals manage their internal activation thresholds. JF described her English abilities as progressively improving over the last decade, explaining this to a constant input of new vocabulary through various internet sources. She strongly denied that speaking English has become slower or more difficult over time, showing that her frequent and recent use of English has kept her retrieval thresholds low (Jessner, Oberhofer, & Megens, 2021). In contrast, NF thought of her current English as feeling "slower" and requiring much "more effort" to use. She described a period of development during her boarding school years, particularly in grammar and structure, but this formal academic growth did not translate into long-term communicative ability once she left the boarding school. This is consistent with research showing that formal training can improve specific understanding, but without regular communication, the cognitive ability to spontaneously recover language decreases (Khasanah, Widiati, Tresnadewi, & Wulyan, 2024).

3. Understanding the social environment and stigma

The social environment in Aceh plays a significant role in shaping participants' linguistic behavior associated with the "sok bule" label. JF described a "hostile" high school environment in which her English teacher and classmates would "stare" and "side-eye" her, expecting her to be the only participant in class. She saw this not as an excuse to stop speaking English, but as a challenge to educate herself in structural grammar in order to maintain her status and meet expectations. Despite the lack of a supportive social group, he maintained his L2 identity through determination. NA's experience with social stigma was more harmful, as being called "sok bule" by elementary and high school classmates made her feel "embarrassed and sad," causing her to stop speaking English in order to maintain relationships with others. This active suppression significantly increased her L2 activation threshold, making future recovery more challenging and reflecting high levels of anxiety (Amiruddin, 2022; Akram, Khan, & Mufti, 2023)

4. Private Language Maintenance Efforts (LMEs)

The differences in long-term outcomes are explained by the participants' private maintenance practices. JF develops a complex digital "third space" that resembles an English immersion setting by emphasizing synchronous interaction and voice chat. She focused on online games with voice chat to communicate with international players, a highly effective method for maintaining fluency and confidence (Suharmoko, Syamsudarni, Rahman, Hasbullah, & Dabamona, 2025). Besides that, she spent time "narrative consuming" by watching complex documentaries and used "self-talk," or

internal monologue, in English as a consistent practice strategy to maintain low activation thresholds (Jessner, Oberhofer, & Megens, 2021). In contrast, NF used more passive and receptive methods, such as listening to music, opening YouTube, and watching foreign films with English subtitles. While these activities helped her understand, they did not require her to actively produce words. According to research, productive abilities are the first and fastest to decrease when a language is not actively used, and passive use is frequently insufficient to preserve spontaneous speech (Sari, 2021; Khasanah, Widiati, Tresnadewi, & Wulyan, 2024)

B. DISCUSSION

1. The inadequacy of Academic Environments for Returnees

A significant finding in this study is that the boarding school atmosphere failed to prevent NA attrition. Although the school required English and helped her improve her grammar, it was more of an "instructed" setting than an "immersion" environment. According to research, school-learned abilities are generally less permanent than those gained through immersion because they lack the emotional and social depth needed for foundational development (Jessner, Oberhofer, & Megens, 2021). For NA, once the social requirement ended, she lacked the personal choice to maintain productive maintenance. In contrast, JF's self-taught method in a challenging environment shows that individual choice and extracurricular activities, such as online gaming, are more predictive of long-term retention than formal education (Khasanah, Widiati, Tresnadewi, & Wulyan, 2024).

2. Identity, Investment, and the "Imagined Future"

The participants' "Imagined Futures" served as the motivation behind their individual journeys. JF sees English as a foundation of her identity and believes that abandoning it will "change who I am," indicating a strong identity-based attachment to the language (Noar, 2024). This high level of investment motivated her to look for out challenging maintenance tasks despite social pressure (Suharmoko, Syamsudarni, Rahman, Hasbullah, & Dabamona, 2025). NA also acknowledged the need of English for her future engineering profession, but her investment appeared to be more practical than personal. Her relationship to English was tied to a professional aim rather than a core sense of self, making it more easily suppressed when faced with the social stress of the "sok bule" label. (Noar, 2024; Akram, Khan, & Mufti, 2023)

3. The role of Social Enclosure and Linguistic Homogeneity

The Acehese environment functions as a "high enclosure" system, deliberately discouraging bilingual identification (Sari, 2021). The data show that the "sok Inggris" stigma serves as a social regulator that helps keep groups homogeneous. NF cooperated with this requirement by maintaining local relationships, whereas JF avoided it through digital globalization. This means that returnees in linguistically homogeneous environments such as Aceh face a significant challenge in resisting societal pressure rather than simple forgetting (Akram, Khan, & Mufti, 2023). The increase in activation thresholds is a psychological consequence of the sociolinguistic decision to adapt to the local monolingual norm (Gallo, et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

Conclusions from this multi-case study show that L2 English attrition among Acehnese returnees is primarily due to retrieval failure rather than to total representational loss. The personal perception of being "slower" or "rusty" suggests that, while language representations are still in the mental lexicon, they have become unavailable due to increased activation thresholds caused by use. This shows that even experienced speakers can suffer from functional deterioration if brain stimulation for language retrieval is not maintained by regular and frequent use.

The "Maintenance Gap" between the two participants can be explained by the level or lack of constructive involvement. Active participation in language maintenance, such as voice-chat games or internal monologues, is an important defense mechanism against the "societal barrier" of social isolation. Passive intake of music or subtitles is insufficient to maintain the spontaneous producing skills required for near-native fluency. This emphasizes the significance of individual action and the development of digital "imagined communities" which help returnees to overcome local physical and cultural limitations.

In addition, being adaptive to social stigma appears to be an important linguistic skill for returnees in the Indonesian environment. Being able to deal with terms like "local bule" or "sok Inggris" without becoming silent is crucial for long-term memory. Those who prioritize social peace over language preservation are more likely to suffer significant attrition as a result of their decision to assimilate. Finally, maintaining immersion-level proficiency in a high-enclosure environment requires a significant identity-based commitment in a "imagined future" in which the second language is fundamental for maintaining a sense of self and global achievement.

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