



Social Enclosure and L2 English Attrition in Acehese Returnees

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Abstract: This study examines the phenomenon of social enclosure and its relationship with second language (L2) English attrition among Acehese 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 Acehese 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, acehese returnees, sociolinguistics.

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INTRODUCTION

Second language (L2) attrition represents a highly complex linguistic phenomenon, theoretically defined as the non-pathological decline of a previously learned language to a lower level of proficiency. While the vast majority of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research traditionally privileges the mechanisms of language acquisition, investigating how languages are forgotten or "attrited" is equally critical for a comprehensive understanding of bilingualism and the cognitive architecture of multi-competent speakers. For returnees who spent their formative years in English-speaking countries, returning to Indonesia frequently triggers a profound "linguistic shock." They transition abruptly from a high English immersion environment to a sociolinguistic landscape where English is virtually absent from daily, spontaneous communication. Extant literature demonstrates that this attrition process can accelerate rapidly under specific shifting input conditions.

Empirically, in children, lexical and grammatical losses can begin almost immediately after the primary source of target language input disappears, with significant functional loss manifesting within a critical window of seven months.

Within the Indonesian domestic environment, the primary challenge confronting returnees extends far beyond the mere absence of formal instruction; it fundamentally concerns the absolute loss of an active, supportive language community. It is widely argued that while attrition is frequently conceptualised as a natural consequence of terminating formal instruction, the actual trajectory of language loss is dynamically mediated by the intensity and consistency of continuous L2 use. However, for many returnees situated in specific regional contexts such as Aceh, the capacity for "continued use" is severely complicated by the structural phenomenon of social enclosure. Social enclosure denotes the structural extent to which an individual's immediate social network is linguistically homogeneous, effectively enclosing the returnee within the dominant local languages—either Indonesian or Acehnese—while systematically excluding the L2 English. This environmental barrier is deeply compounded by pervasive sociocultural challenges that construct a "societal wall," effectively stigmatising the public use of English. Returnees frequently encounter the derogatory "sok Inggris" (acting English) attitude, a societal sentiment that misinterprets natural linguistic proficiency as an ostentatious attempt to show off, an expression of elitism, or even a deficiency in nationalistic pride. Such negative social feedback explicitly labels public English use as an illegitimate mode of communication, creating a high-anxiety environment wherein returnees become deeply hesitant to speak due to a heightened fear of making grammatical errors or being socially ostracised as arrogant. Under the framework of the Activation Threshold Hypothesis (ATH), this severe socio-emotional pressure substantially elevates the neural retrieval barrier for linguistic items, increasing the mental effort required for spontaneous lexical retrieval and eventually accelerating psycholinguistic loss through less efficient processing.

Consequently, cultural isolation and the stark lack of localized social support emerge as the primary catalysts for language attrition. To preempt social friction, prevent slander, and maintain interpersonal relationships within the community, returnees frequently abandon English in favor of dominant local standards. Under these constrained conditions, language preservation becomes entirely dependent on highly conscious, deliberate Language Maintenance Efforts (LMEs). These LMEs constitute intentional, strategic endeavors encompassing both language use elements for active reactivation and linguistic confirmation factors for the explicit renewal of knowledge. Individual investment, rooted in a person's complex social background and desires, heavily shapes these long-term efforts, which are frequently articulated through the pursuit of an "imagined future," such as securing superior global employment or educational prospects. In this light, the intense effort invested in private LMEs often functions as a critical psychological defense mechanism against the emotional distress associated with failing to realize these aspirational, future-oriented goals.

Qualitative evidence examining attrition dynamics in Indonesia reveals a significant divergence in the utility and efficacy of various LME strategies. Interestingly, public social interaction has been discovered to possess relatively low predictive potential for counteracting long-term foreign language loss, primarily because a high level of social enclosure reduces opportunities for genuine interaction and renders external, social LMEs largely ineffectual. In contrast, discrete, high-effort, and conscious compensatory efforts exhibit a powerful negative correlation with attrition. These include private academic activities, literacy activities, and digital entertainment immersion—such as private self-talk, watching English videos on YouTube, or navigating online gaming platforms like Roblox. This distinct dichotomy implies that highly deliberate, self-directed maintenance activities are absolutely mandatory to structurally compensate for the sudden loss of natural, localized linguistic input.

Previous empirical investigations focusing on child returnees from immersion environments confirm the extreme vulnerability of productive skills (speaking and writing), lexical knowledge, and grammatical control following an abrupt input shift. While early signs of psycholinguistic decline occasionally appear around six months, total active language loss can occur within seven months, heavily driven by the linguistic proficiency of the caregiver and the rapid displacement of the formerly dominant English by the newly developing Indonesian L2 or re-established L1. Recent qualitative studies provide direct evidence of these context-specific LMEs within Indonesian domestic spaces. Parents frequently enforce embedded or private maintenance strategies at home, sometimes applying strict rules such as "no English, no service." When local geographical and social limits prevent authentic interaction, families aggressively pivot toward virtual maintenance through digital technology, or maintain external network maintenance by sustaining communication with peers in the host country via video calls and digital chat services. Driven by the affective factors model, parental conviction regarding the paramount importance of English for their children's future education and global careers remains the foundational driver determining these compensatory LME tactics. By critically examining these intersecting dynamics within a highly enclosed sociolinguistic environment, this study aims to bridge the empirical gap regarding how psycholinguistic attrition under the Activation Threshold Hypothesis is mediated by the socio-cultural realities of social enclosure and individual language maintenance efforts.

METHODS

Research Design

This study will employ a qualitative approach utilizing a comparative multiple case study design. The qualitative method is highly necessary for gathering full life narratives and deeply understanding the subjective experiences of attrition, such as increased mental effort and processing inefficiency, which represent critical yet subjective indications of psycholinguistic decline (Gallo et al., 2021). The comparative structure serves as the methodological foundation for identifying explanatory elements within the data. Specifically, it allows the study to systematically compare the social contexts, Language Maintenance Efforts (LMEs), and longitudinal results of L2 Maintainers against L2 Attriters. This rigorous comparison is critical for identifying how systematic differences in Social Enclosure contribute to divergent proficiency outcomes over time (Tracy-Ventura et al., 2025).

Participants

The population for this study consists of young adults in Indonesia who experienced early childhood immersion in an English-speaking country and subsequently returned to a non-English-speaking domestic environment. Specifically, the population is defined by individuals who have lived abroad in an English-speaking environment between the ages of 2 and 10, returned to Indonesia around the age of 6 to 10, and are currently aged 20 to 22 years. This age distribution provides a sufficient, long-term timeline after return to accurately determine long-term L2 maintenance or attrition patterns. Purposive sampling will be used as the main method for selecting participants who meet these strict population criteria. This deliberate approach ensures the selection of individuals with the necessary specific lived experiences to provide rich, highly relevant data on childhood L2 attrition and maintenance (Akram et al., 2023).

The most important step in the sampling process is the purposeful selection and categorization of the two core case groups based on an objective L2 proficiency assessment. The first group comprises L2 Maintainers, who are individuals displaying clear empirical evidence of sustained, low attrition in L2 proficiency. The second group comprises L2 Attriters, defined as individuals exhibiting a significant decline or high attrition in their L2 proficiency. The study will consist of a minimum of one person per

group (L2 Maintainers and L2 Attriters), leveraging the core principles of a Multiple Case Study design to allow for robust comparative analysis while fully preserving the requisite depth required for a high-quality qualitative inquiry (Tracy-Ventura et al., 2025).

Data Collection

This study's data is collected using two supporting methodologies, both of which are carefully aimed at acquiring relevant personal narratives as well as the essential measurable metrics for the comparative case study. Individual semi-structured interviews serve as the primary approach for collecting 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 et al., 2023). The semi-structured format allows the researcher to operate within a guiding framework of preset questions while simultaneously investigating spontaneous, highly detailed narratives. The goal is to reveal broad and complex life narratives centered on three major areas, namely social network assessment to quantify social enclosure, detailed language maintenance efforts (LMEs), and affective narratives about individual investment and imagined futures (Nabilla, 2023). These narratives serve as the absolute foundation for rich, contextualized qualitative findings.

Complementing the qualitative data, the Communicative Self-Rating Scale (CSRS) serves as a quantitative categorization instrument. Participants will complete this standardized self-assessment scale based on real-world L2 communicative tasks. The resulting numerical score provides a quick, highly reliable measure of the participant's perceived L2 proficiency. This score constitutes the primary metric used to classify individuals into either the L2 Maintainer (high score) or L2 Attriter (low score) case groups for the subsequent cross-case analysis.

Data Analysis

Narrative analysis will be the primary qualitative method utilized for interpreting the interview transcripts. This approach focuses closely 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 several specific lenses. First, through story structure and framing, the study will analyze how participants construct their journey, focusing on plot points, turning points such as repatriation or crucial LME failures, and the use of specific linguistic devices that signal affect and evaluation (Noar, 2024). Second, identity construction will be examined to see how participants articulate their relationship with the L2, specifically focusing on the construction of their investment and imagined futures, or lack thereof, which reveals the motivational drivers and the perceived subjective value of the L2. Third, psycholinguistic signals will be extracted by identifying narrative segments where participants describe the subjective feeling of loss or increased mental effort (Jessner et al., 2021; Gallo et al., 2021). These narratives serve as crucial early qualitative evidence of psycholinguistic decline preceding overt behavioral attrition. Finally, the sociolinguistic environment will be analyzed by 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).

Mixed-Data Synthesis and Cross-Case Comparison

The final stage of the analysis represents a significant methodological step in which all data sources are integrated to meet the study's core 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 solid theoretical foundation for categorizing individuals as Maintainers or Attriters and for assessing their absolute LME efforts. Following this, each individual case will be given its own full, comprehensive profile. This profile combines their quantitative measurements with their in-depth narrative analysis conclusions.

The complete narrative profiles and quantitative data will be carefully compared between the L2 Maintainer Group and the L2 Attriter Group. This study explicitly uses narrative structures—explaining the how and why of their L2 journey—to robustly explain the systematic disparity in quantitative scores, which represent the what of their proficiency and usage. The synthesis focuses intensely on the explanatory value of characteristics such as identity, investment, and the perceived structural importance of social enclosure in predicting long-term L2 outcomes.

RESULTS

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.

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).

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).

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)

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)

DISCUSSION

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).

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)

The role of Social Enclosure and Linguistic Homogeneity

The Acehnese 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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